



RADON JOURNAL

Issue 2

RADONJOURNAL Radical Perception.

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Whiskey Mud
by Jonathan Olfert

Hanging from thirty-seven cables in his nutrient tank, Chalt missed the churning skies of home. The billion metal shards in low orbit, just barely too small to see individually—even with thick lenses—made the starscape wriggle. The whole sky sloshed around from dusk to late morning. If you saw the moon in daylight, its dusty craterscape itched and twinkled as LEO debris skidded past.

Five hundred years of space travel had cloistered Earth inside a whirling shell of garbage. In theory, the mess was a very bad thing. Few stable satellites, risky transorbital travel, communications unreliable, telescopes and sensors gone blind.

He still missed the churning, sloshing, itching, wriggling sky as much as he missed his blurry old biological eyes.

Chalt was, at this point in his life, a five-kilogram half-cybernetic brain capable of quick and easy transplant into specially printed bodies as per contract. His gray matter was hardwired to a utility shell that interfaced with similar gear in the bodies: plug-and-play. Like most of Earth's unlucky diaspora, he hadn't been within a hundred parsecs of home in a very, very long time.

A Lud!ett corp hosted the fights on a Strigari nomad in a special economic zone so risky it made insurance brokers into merchant princes or corpses.

Chalt's new body boasted weapons that gave the sunless world's security people envious hives beneath their scales. Despite a threadbare fifty Lud!ett hours of training time, he could just about pick his nose with the barbaric lepton-stripper claws. His rear limbs were simpler things, a pair of fuelless flamethrowers that could melt the heart out of a battle tank.

The body was a custom job by a big-name Quixnix artist just out of the pupa. Chalt's skin was a heavily branded biopolymer composite in the artist's trademark chrome and ultraviolet. Truth be told, Chalt liked the way the body looked in the mirror. Four mobility limbs, four combat limbs, all dual-role within reason. (Scuttling upside-down was doable but risky: those lepton-stripper claws didn't care whose leptons they stripped.) Redundant biotech power supplies for the weapons. Three hundred sixty degrees of wraparound vision, plus recessed dorsal and ventral eyes to

minimize blind spots. Shielded lung intakes on the flanks, easily mated to vac gear.

No faux genitals this time—some designers insisted. No easy targets. Heavily shielded braincase and very, very limited pain receptors. As close to true quadrilateral symmetry as you could strap to an Earther's modded brain without breaking the Earther in question.

The body weighed a sleek two thousand kilos. Chalt had often been heavier.

When the other lift came up to the stark white plain under lonely stars, the enemy—some kind of stiletto heptapod—looked about the same size. Inputs deep in Chalt's optical processing centers gave him a direct overlay that skipped his eyes to reduce vision latency. The overlay kept the enemy targeted at all times, starting now. It also told Chalt exactly where the enemy's braincase was: the only disallowed target. Tear each other apart, boy, just don't wreck the property that matters.

After the fight, back underground, Lud!ett drones scuttled around Chalt's ruined body, chattering about his win and all their wagers. The bosses encouraged all manner of gambling and weren't so crass as to dominate the process. They took their cut in personal device fees, network fees, and transaction fees at a hundred points along the way. The bosses were the swarm of bugs, come to think of it, and Chalt chuckled as he bled out.

Back in the tank, painless and numb, Chalt gave the heptapod a call. The fighter in question, a modded brain much like himself, picked up after two rings. They saw each other in a tangible virtual space piped straight to everything. They weren't even speaking the same language. The translation gear sunk that deep.

"You did good, kid," said Chalt. He'd set his default environment: the pair of them were Earth creatures, African elephants lounging in a watering hole, all plucked from historical footage. He enjoyed the warm sun, the slosh of the muddy water, the shade of a massive tree. When he grabbed a leafy branch with his trunk and ate it, it tasted like beautiful things.

The other elephant, once a mollusoid Tagresp named Loto, took a deep slurp of whiskey-flavoured water. "Two rounds," he

said bitterly, slouching into the watering hole. "I thought I was ready."

"Not your fault," said Chalt, being generous with the younger fighter. "Those scalpel legs were worthless against the armor on my internals. Bad meta." He flinched at the very recent memory of getting impaled twenty, thirty times in a matter of seconds, just before his claws ripped Loto's heptapodal body down to its constituent parts.

"I guess."

"You've got me before—"

"Once!"

Chalt nodded. "And you'll get me again. I'm slowing down. There's only so much of me they can decommission—" He tapped his skull with his trunk. "—in here before the living parts stop partly living."

Loto chewed on that, swatting flies with his tail. Like Chalt, he could adapt instinctively to nearly any body, real or imaginary. And while he had nowhere near as much 'elephant time' as Chalt, they'd hung out here many times in recent years. "Regs say what, we get retired at twenty-five percent original?"

"Twenty-two," Chalt said, and added bluntly, "I'm down to twenty-seven." Loto's brain, he knew, was closer to fifty percent original mass.

"What kind of retirement clause are the Lud!ett giving you?" Loto asked. "My contract's sort of . . . open-ended."

"That's normal. Not good, but normal. Offramp to re-negotiation. I'd imagine, end of next season, someone from Sapient Relations will drop by with an offer to drive an asteroid miner."

Loto blinked. "Can you drive—can we drive asteroid miners?"

"We may be custom gear, kid, but the actual interfaces—take a look with your utility eyes next time they're putting you in a body—are all off the shelf. We can plug straight into all kinds of things if they've got space for a five-kilo brain in a jar. Asteroid miners, surface vessels . . ." Chalt looked out across the broad savannah and conjured up an image of an old Earth ship, a huge beautiful strong thing with ranks upon ranks of massive boxes on top. The container ship thunked deep into the ground and slouched over, spilling containers not so far away.

Loto trumpeted, something like a giggle. "That doesn't look like much fun."

"Was today fun?" Chalt asked. "Not trying to embarrass you. Was it fun?"

"No. No, I guess it wasn't. But when we win, it feels . . ."

Chalt squirted a deep drink of whiskey mud into his mouth and closed his eyes. "It's all chemical, kid."

The rest of the season went by too quickly: thirty-seven fights, twenty-one of them losses. And *embarrassing* losses, against the teams of near-stock semi-sapient that got used as filler.

Truth be told, those were the worst. Chalt could bring himself to kill something angry, confused, and dumb as a brick, but he hesitated. It felt like getting dogpiled by the kids back home, a very long time ago.

So they ate him alive.

"Early . . . buyout?"

"Only on paper," said the Lud!ett from Sapient Resources, who'd come inside Chalt's nutrient tank in a tentacular hardsuit like it owned the place. Like it wasn't taking a step inside Chalt's innermost everything in a way that even direct-to-brain VR couldn't replicate. Here in the tank, Chalt's utility shell was nearly blind, nearly helpless. The Lud!ett's hardsuit-clad tentacles wiggled in a placating way. "But Chalt, it could look like a career-ending injury, very dignified."

Chalt spoke through the little utility voicebox on his brain's shell. "Look, I admit it's been a rough couple of fights. Those Dapolik Wringers . . ."

"Certainly, certainly. You've been with us fourteen seasons, Chalt. It's a wonderful time to get some rest. Your company retirement account has a healthy balance, and I'm sure you won't lack for options when you get back to Earth."

Chalt blinked, metaphorically. The dim little electronic eyes of his shell didn't flinch. "But you have something for me, right? An asteroid miner or a water ship . . ."

The Lud!ett made a tangling gesture that denoted sympathy. "It's a matter of insurance. But as I said, I'm sure you won't lack for options."

"You think Earth has water anymore?"

"Let's end it here, friend. We can take this up again tomorrow. How's noon?"

"There is no noon on this fucking rock." Chalt's tinny voice reverberated in the nutrient fluid, chasing the Lud!ett out of the tank. "There is nothing for me on Earth. Let me work. Let me work. Let me work. Let me work—"

The next night they trimmed him down to 22.1% original biomass and called it routine maintenance. Then came a fight so joyous and enraged and uncaring that he thought he was young again.

And later, as he thrashed aimlessly in mud, Sapient Resources told him he'd botched the killshot and clawed open Loto's braincase.

They shipped him out as cargo on a passing Lud!ett freighter bound for the Mars clearinghouses. The cramped travel tank had limited hookups and a bargain-basement VR sans comms. No savannah, no whiskey and no mud, no flies, no friends. Chalt's options began and ended with Lud!ett comedy much like himself.

He checked the simple travel-progress menu by compulsion. He had no options for crying, but the hookups drained his stress hormones and then billed him helpfully.

The big freighter paused at the Procyon B power station. When its comms ran an update, a message came in and, eventually, got routed through the entertainment hookup. Chalt switched from generic alien comedy to the new thing, recognizing only that it was new and thus innately good.

"Hey, old-timer," said Loto in very poor translation. "How's retirement? Hope you found your water ship. I had to raise hell to get this number. I miss you. The new guy is a Dreth, no sense of humor even before the mods—"

Chalt—his brain, his shell—turned off the VR entirely and sat there in the dark, in the sloshing fluid, trying to think. Trying to find words for the fury. The Lud!ett had lied before, but this lie—saying he'd killed Loto so he'd, what, break and retire a little easier?—was the worst one yet. Felt like the worst, anyway. He couldn't remember.

His shell had a small arm, good enough to connect or disconnect a hookup in an emergency. Chalt thought about ripping himself free, clawing open the tank, rolling down the corridors,

plugging himself into the ship, hijacking it, making this freighter his new body, unleashing hell on . . .

Well, on who? It wasn't like any particular Lud!ett individual was at fault, nobody he could find (and crush) even if he had a full staff directory and a terabyte of meeting minutes and all the time in the world. If he knew one thing about selling yourself to megacorps, it was that accountability drained away like water between stones.

And anyways, none of these dreams would do what he needed.

The freighter dropped him off at a human orbital, a stacked torus in the protected bands of high orbit, overlooking Earth and its silver shell of garbage. Unable to see except through basic station cams, Chalt and his nutrient tank sat in storage. His retirement account, after the bills from the return trip, actually translated well into human scrip. Apparently a crashing orbital had tanked local telecoms and dragged the exchange rate down with it. No casualties, except those downstream who needed something only aliens could provide. Impact drained away, again, like water through river-rock.

Earth did, in fact, have water still. He'd remembered otherwise, but somewhere along the way they'd cut out that bit of memory. Earth was nothing but water these days, sparkling under the silver shell.

Chalt chose his fate, all of it, from an ultra-simple VR menu floating in a friendly gray void. At 22.1% original biomass, he got some tips from a very confused AI rights page and classified himself as guidance equipment.

He bought himself stake in a ship, a very nice one by Earth standards, a container transport about to run from Lagos to Rio. No nutrient tank here, just a dedicated feed plugged into his shell.

The ship's hundred cameras and its radar and sonar gear became his eyes as keenly and intuitively as any of the printed bodies he'd worn all those years. He shouldered the containers on his back. He wallowed in the water joyfully.

He donated much of the rest of his money to a trust in the name of his mother. She was, it turned out, still alive in a wildlife

preserve in the South African Union with fifty other *Loxodonta africana*.

The trust bought the preserve. Chalt had the captain hang a picture in sight of the bridge camera: Chalt's mother, up to her knees in mud, flinging water to the gleaming sky.

About the Author

Jonathan Olfert is a Canadian science fiction and fantasy writer. His work has appeared in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Lightspeed*, and other publications. He and his partner live in Halifax.

User Warning
by Charlotte Ariel Finn

The first thing you did was throw up.

The internal pharmaceutical implant did what it could to mix up antacids and anti-anxiety medication out of internal stores and stray hormones in your body. But a miracle maker, it was not. And so you knelt by that ancient cold porcelain toilet that you kept around because tearing out the plumbing would do too much damage to the fixtures and paneling of your home.

After last night's meal and something that looked like blood, after your stomach gave everything it couldn't allow any more, you check your notifications again, to see if there was a mistake. It's as familiar as swallowing by now, given the years you've had the neocortex. You hesitate a little, like a kid who hasn't learned how peek-a-boo works yet; the deeply irrational part of you thinks, maybe if you don't check, it won't be real.

But you check, and it's real. The message from HavelBeenPwned is real.

One of your neural backups was just uploaded to the Internet.

After the shock wears off, you put your neocortex in safe mode, leaving yourself outside the touch of wireless neural backup for the first time in eighteen months. You expect to feel fear, but you don't. It'd be like being scared of dehydration while you were drowning. A lack of backups is not your problem right now.

With your brain in safe mode, you go digging through your old banker's box full of electronics for something you can fashion into a crude means of accessing the Internet. An old wireless card, a keyboard from that brief flirtation with DVORAK, that old external holograph you use for when you need to diagnose a problem with a display.

You boot up and the first thing you do is change your local wireless password; thankfully, no one who knows it is anywhere close to your house. What you had before was seventeen extremely rare words long, but that doesn't matter; you remembering it means that now they all know about it.

That solved, you then log onto the provider for uSync Neocortexes. You used the hardware but not the firmware, but check anyways to see if there's a noted issue with the hardware. Tens of thousands of words of legalese stream by your eyeballs; your own fluency with the language isn't good enough to know if they have covered their asses enough.

You have no leads, and so, with some heaviness in your heart, you go to the software forum for Jucci, the programming collective that makes the software in your neocortex. It's a lot more easily modified than uSync's default backups and regulatory behavior; it also has a steeper learning curve.

You wonder for the first time if maybe, despite the degree on your wall, if maybe it was too steep.

They are already talking about the hack. There are a lot of theories as to how it could have happened and no one's taking responsibility. There's some idle speculation as to how to invalidate the data, but everyone knows the central problem: trying to take data off the Internet is like trying to take water out of the ocean. And translating the human psyche into data meant it was inevitable that this would happen.

There are people there who proclaim that well, yes, this is a serious breach and all, but be honest, if it had to happen to anyone, it might as well have happened to you, right?

They're banned. Eventually.

You log off and try not to cry.

You spend your morning changing every single password that you have.

All your old backup phrases are useless; everyone now knows your favorite author, your favorite movie, your first crush. You contemplate going back to carrying around a tabula recta, because yes, carrying a piece of paper with random characters on it is a pain, but is it that much worse than this?

As you rebuild your digital security, you get a message from Cleo, who tells you that she knows where the hack is hosted, and where people are discussing it. With morbid curiosity, you open a parallel session and see for yourself.

Without the actual neocortex and the very specific configuration of your neurons, they can't actually simulate your brain that easily. (Yet.) But they have already begun trawling through the memories they can decode. You read reaction posts full of that corrupted image of a soda can that looks like it's laughing painfully, as people go over all your private shames and failures. That time you wet the bed when you were sleeping over at a friend's. That time you plagiarized a joke. That time you lied when you said your favorite movie was the four-hour cut of *In Paradise, Nobody Laughs* when it's actually a superhero movie starring an actress you had a crush on.

They laugh at the time someone slipped something into your drink at a party, and they denigrate the hazy memory of Sophie as she gets you out of there before anything can get worse.

The neocortex alerts the pharmaceutical implant, and it does what it can, but you know.

There's no fixing this.

You no longer have a job when lunch arrives.

Some anonymous citizen sent a thorough list of all the sites you visit when you're in the mood for a certain kind of erotica; your employer reads them off to you and takes your silence as confirmation. Of course, they are very open minded, *very* open-minded, of course they know it's all pretend. But it's a messed up kind of pretend, isn't it, and in contrast to everyone else's pretend, it's now a *public* pretend instead of a *private* pretend, and your access to the work servers has been revoked.

At the least, they have no grounds to sue, since you were very diligent at booting into safe mode during work hours and not thinking about work outside of work hours. Still: better safe than sorry. They are going to be spending their afternoon revamping their security as well, which of course, is just what they don't need. Why did you have to do that, they ask. Why did you have to get one of those things.

In the middle of this conversation, a stranger pings you on the social network you do all that pretending on, and asks if you would be into that very specific kind of pretend.

You're meaner to them than they really deserve.

That afternoon, more anonymous messages roll in.

There's the ones you expect; the ones that say you deserved it because of all the shit you tried to stir within the community, with your writing and your advocacy and the criticisms you've had for how the community handles things. None of them admit that your memories exonerate you in the public dispute you had with Dr. Feine, of course.

You don't cry. Not yet.

Some of them are messages saying that they knew you were always faking it, sending you a compiled list of every time you doubted the gender identity you arrived at. You remember, freshly, each and every time you did exactly that.

You don't cry. Not yet.

You check the forum and someone is already working on You v1.1—bullshit posturing, of course, hacking a brain image on that scale would take tens of thousands of hours of work. But he seems pretty dedicated to his new hobby. He says that he has friends who are pretty into it too. Says he can't wait for simulation tech to get better so that he can have fun with the copy of you from six months ago. He has a *lot* of ideas.

He says that version 1.1 of you will smile more.

You don't cry. Not yet.

Someone posts a crude deepfake of a memory you had, where you were naked and looking in the mirror and admiring the progress you were making; they've inserted themselves behind you, wearing a tactical balaclava, their gloved hands reaching for your throat.

You don't cry. Not yet.

As you're finishing up the last of your changed passwords, as you're finally eating something you cooked on the stove because right now you don't trust anything with a wireless connection to the Internet, you get a message from someone telling you that they really enjoyed how you felt at your mother's funeral. How the speech you gave was heartwarming and that they know—they have confirmed—that the emotion you felt was genuine.

And that is what does it.
Then, you finally cry.

The local mutual aid network's head organizer says that this will all be solved once we've achieved full socialism.

He talks at length about how once everyone's basic needs are met, there will no longer be any incentives to steal someone's brain images, because the secrets within won't be valuable anymore. That once what he, and you, have advocated for becomes the way people live, what you're going through won't happen to anyone else.

As he talks, you idly look him up. He seems sincere, is the thing; he seems to honestly believe this. He wants a better way of life for everyone, and so do you. But he did defend Dr. Feine that one time, though he later changed his mind. And he does have an account on the forum currently tearing your life apart in a very literal sense. You don't have anything concrete. But you wonder.

You wonder how, considering how well off the forum in question's userbase is, if seeing to the basic needs of everyone will really solve the problem. Capitalism sure isn't solving it, of course. But that doesn't mean anything else can.

Then you remember that your bills don't care about your feelings and that your implant needs a restock, and so, you swallow your pride and nod along as he goes into the speech he's practiced.

Then you wonder if he'll ever find out what you really think of him. But thankfully, you haven't done a backup since booting into safe mode.

You think about toggling it off, but . . . not yet.

That evening, Sophie calls you in tears.

It's not your fault, she says. She knows it's not your fault. You didn't tell a soul about it, just like you promised. But you remembered, and your neocortex backed up the memory, and now, everyone knows, so whether or not it's your fault, her life is still in tatters.

You can still remember that day, the day she cried into your

arms as she told you something she never told anyone before, or anyone since. About why she refused to testify. You remember holding her, and you remember not agreeing. But you remember saying "I understand," and you remember saying it enough that you began to actually understand.

But as you hold onto that memory, you know that it's not just yours and hers anymore. Now it belongs to anyone with an Internet connection. There will be stories written about you soon. And well, they'll have to talk about some of your memories, won't they. Otherwise they'd just be dancing around what a violation this is. And in talking about them, they'll be making sure that they spread that much further and that much wider.

And meanwhile, Sophie confesses that she no longer feels like she can trust you with anything while that thing is in your head, that she can't share anything in confidence because she no longer has any. It's not you, it's the implant. She swears, it's the implant.

You say you understand, and you cry, as your oldest friendship dissolves into dust and you can't do a thing about it.

By the time midnight hits, you're looking up transhuman collectives.

A few people out there have anticipated this problem, that neural uploads could never be fully secure and would necessitate a change in social order. So they built a collective where there is an explicit expectation that you cannot trust all secrets to stay secret forever, and they have built their community around that.

You do the research. They seem okay. No major incidents. They are understandably resistant to outsiders; who wouldn't be, given that they've given up on even the pretense of privacy over their own memories and thoughts? The few videos of them make them seem charming and affable, and you wonder if it's just because everyone in their community is pointing a camera at everyone else all day, every day. Who wouldn't learn to be photogenic?

The big catch is, of course, that you couldn't be in contact with anyone outside the collective; everyone in the collective has

agreed to be an open book, and without the consent of those outside, it's unethical to form any kind of meaningful relationship with those whose privacy is at risk.

You think about turn-of-the-century literature about the digital divide, about a world divided neatly in two, between the digital haves and the digital have-nots, and you wonder if that's just the nature of the beast.

You don't find an answer. You just wonder.

You finish this journal, and you're still in safe mode.

While you're in safe mode, all uploads are restricted; in the event of catastrophic failure, you'll be restored from backup from the day before writing this.

You think about that, and as you write, you think about trauma.

You ask yourself if it's really ethical to subject a future version of yourself to the memories of this day, considering how often throughout the course of the day you've fantasized about taking a drill to the part of your skull that feels a little colder than the rest. You can spare them ever having to remember all of this. Just stay in safe mode forever.

You also ask if it's ethical for that other version of you to wake up one day with no idea of how, or why, their life has so radically changed. If the version of this that they'd go through, all over again, would be any better. You can prevent that from happening. Simply turn off safe mode, even once, just long enough for an upload.

You ask if it's better to forget the trauma, or let it live on forever. And you contemplate the old fear of death, awoken by seeing your mother's body wither away, and you ask yourself if she'd have gotten one of these things. And you'll never be sure, because she's gone forever. Meanwhile, you—once the technology of backup bodies catches up with the state of backup minds—could choose to live forever.

The toggle for safe mode is easy. Pressing the toggle under the skin while reciting the passphrase. Impossible to turn on, or off, by accident. Turn it back on, and you return to being immortal, and

that means you remember today for all your infinite days. Leave it off, and let yourself go through this for the first time, again and again forever. Or wipe your backups and make peace with knowing that one day, you'll never experience anything ever again.

You think about Hell, back when you believed in it, and how what scared you the most was how it never ended. And you think about the first time you stopped believing in Hell, and contemplated death—contemplated ceasing to be, forever.

And you still haven't decided which one's worse.

And you stop writing this journal, and prepare to find out.

About the Author

Charlotte Finn has been self-publishing her webcomic, *BRAND ECHO*, for the past few years, with artist ING. Her short comics have appeared in the *STRANGE ROMANCE* anthology series, with art by Ing and Change Brown and letters by Josh Krach. She is a former blogger at ComicsAlliance and her work has been published in spaces such as *HeroCollector* and *Shelfdust*. She can be found on her personal website, as well as Twitter. She actually is a skunk lady in real life.

Hunting Snowmen
by Aeryn Rudel

Deepak and Julia, the ringleaders in our little post-apocalyptic circus, stand in front of the fire pit in the old ski lodge reading from a list of names. It's time to hunt snowmen, and they're pairing us up. I glance over at one of the newcomers. I think her name is Olivia. Her black eye, split lip, and crooked nose are probably courtesy of the burly dude she came in with. I think his name is Ted. He is conspicuously absent.

"Kevin," Deepak calls out. His dark eyes find mine in the small crowd of people. "You're with Olivia. Show her how it's done."

Olivia's injuries summon up the ghost of old pain, and I'd rather be paired with anyone else, but I don't argue. We all voted for Deepak and Julia to lead us, and we follow their orders. He's a former Army Ranger, and she was a logistics manager for a local lumber company. They know their shit, and they've kept almost forty of us alive up here in these freezing mountains for twenty-eight months.

I give Olivia an appraising look. I'm not completely disappointed. She's in solid shape from two years of post-apocalyptic survival. I mean, we all are to some degree. I wouldn't call us healthy, exactly, but the end of the world definitely toughens you up.

I motion Olivia over, and she somehow manages to make it all the way to my side of the lodge without looking up from the floor. "I'm Kevin," I say. "You ready for this?"

"I don't know what *this* is," Olivia says softly, her voice gravelly, like she hasn't spoken in a while. "What's a snowman?"

It's a fair question. "Most of the dead stay in Fairbanks," I explain. "More food down there, but a few wander up the Elliot Highway—just like you did—to our neck of the woods and freeze overnight. We look for them in the morning before they can thaw and cause trouble. Someone thought it was funny to call them snowmen and it stuck."

"Is it always that cold here?" Oliva asks.

I nod. "Cold as death."

When we leave, it's about nine in the morning and a balmy negative twelve degrees. Close up, the damage to Olivia's face is worse than I thought. Ted's a big dude, and it looks like he's got a hell of a right hook. I've seen this kind of damage before, of course, staring back at me in the mirror. I had a husband, once. He seemed like a good man, a kind man. That good, kind man beat the shit out of me on the regular, and put me in the hospital right before the world ended. It is my enduring hope he ended up zombie chow shortly thereafter.

"So where's Ted?" I ask as we set off into the woods.

"I don't know," Olivia replies. "But I saw him drinking with the other men last night."

"He did that, I assume." I gesture at her face.

To her credit, she doesn't lie. "Yes, but what am I supposed to do? It's not like I can run to a women's shelter. Plus, he keeps me alive and fed."

"Look, I get it. More than you know."

"Will you kick us out? Because of Ted?" The fear in Olivia's voice is razor sharp.

"That's up to Deepak and Julia," I say. "But you need to understand, no one is going to tolerate Ted putting his hands on you. That shit doesn't fly here." I briefly touch the butt of the old revolver holstered on my hip.

She looks at the ground and nods. "I understand."

"Good. Let's find some snowmen."

We find our first zombie-sickle about a mile from the lodge. He looks like one of the originals, his face more skull than skin. The morning sun has thawed his eyes, and they roll in their sockets hungrily as we approach.

"I'll do the first one. Show you how, then you do the next. Cool?"

Olivia nods.

I pull the awl and hammer from my belt and step up behind the snowman. "You gotta put the awl at the base of the skull. That's where the cerebellum is. It's the only part of the brain these dead fuckers use." I dig the point into the bone a little, like setting a nail. "Hit it hard. One good whack."

I hit the end of the awl with the hammer and six inches of steel penetrates bone and brain with a soft popping noise.

The snowman is too thoroughly frozen to go limp or anything so obvious, but I see his eyes have stopped moving when I step around to look. “Okay, this one’s done. Let’s keep looking.”

We find our next target not too far from the first. He’s face down in the snow, shirtless. I immediately see it’s not right. The skin is pink. Even fresh zombies are a kind of grayish color. We approach, and I recognize the crossed swords tattoo on the right arm. Ted was showing it off to Deepak last night. Our leader was not impressed.

I kneel and see that Ted’s probably been out here a few hours. There’s frostbite on his fingers and face, but the whiskey he drank before stumbling out into the snow has saved him from the worst of it. He’ll survive if we get him inside immediately.

I look up and see Olivia standing over me. She holds her hands out, frozen tears on her cheeks. “My turn, right?”

“You sure?”

She says nothing, but her hands don’t shake, and I can see the muscles in her jaw bunch and jump as she clenches her teeth.

“Remember what I showed you. Base of the skull.”

“Will it hurt?” she asks.

I give her the hammer and awl. “As far as I know, the dead don’t feel anything.”

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 occasionally offers dubious advice on writing and rejection (mostly rejection) at rejectomancy.com or on Twitter @Aeryn_Rudel.

This Is Not A Place of Honor
by Alex Kingsley

I had been locked in my cement palace for two thousand three hundred forty-seven years and one hundred thirty-eight days when I heard the knocking. There had never been knocking before. The people on the surface did not dare come near my home.

I bounded up the stairs, metallic clanks echoing with each step, and threw open the outside door. Before me was a barren wasteland, the soil long turned to parched sand. There were no trees, only the black spikes that protruded from the ground in the area surrounding my door, warning travelers not to come near. And for the most part, these warnings worked. People feared the land where even the ground itself was hostile, and they kept their distance. Until today.

Standing a few paces away was a little boy. His face was smeared with dirt and painted with scratches. He wore rags that were haphazardly cut to be clothing. His dark hair was matted and caked with mud. A cut on his knee leaked blood down his shin onto his makeshift shoes, once plastic water bottles. He looked up at me with the innocent eyes of a child who does not know what kind of danger he is staring in the face. He was dwarfed by the massive black spikes jutting out from the red ground.

"Excuse me," he said, "but have you seen my cat?" He spoke in a language that was not English, but had once been English, until the millennia had twisted it and morphed it into something entirely different. I no longer find things beautiful, but if I could, I would find the evolution of language beautiful, I think. I was created to predict the many ways that language would shift over time, so after a moment of processing I was able to comprehend unhampered.

And then, of course, came the chorus of inner voices. It was usually only a whisper in my head, but here he was! A real child! My purpose ready to be fulfilled! And the words that usually came in a whisper now came in a scream.

Speak the words. Speak them.

But it had been so long since I'd spoken to anyone. Surely I could savor this moment just a little longer?

"Yes," I lied. To tell an untruth caused my insides to fry.
Disobedient. Speak the words.

"I have seen your cat." I pressed on, despite searing in my mind, the flashing warnings in my eyes. "I brought him inside. Would you like to come in?"

It had been so long. One visitor could do no harm.

This is not the protocol. Speak the words.

The child glanced at me quizzically, taking in my physical form. I must have looked so strange to him, my clothes untouched by the elements, my coat a pristine white, my face a near-human approximation of what it once was. Perhaps he was considering if I was a danger, or perhaps if I was a god. I think I am both.

After a moment of thought he nodded, rubbing some of the dirt from his face. He followed me into the darkness of the doorway where we stood and peered down the steps behind me.

"It's dark," he said.

"I do not need light," I told him. "But I can put some on for you."

At my command, the lights flickered on. They had not been used for many years. Seeing how deep the stairs reached into the earth, the child instinctively reached for my hand.

"Your hand is cold," the child said.

"Yes."

"Do you feel cold?"

"No."

"Your skin is hard."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Shall we go downstairs?"

The boy nodded, and together we descended.

It was a concrete prison, with long, empty halls that I walked through day in and day out, no sound but the metallic echo of my footsteps. No company but the words, the words that repeat themselves in my mind, a whisper from another time. And still, I am damned to this place for all of eternity.

I know exactly how long I've rotted away in the confines of the stone labyrinth. Except I do not rot. I look exactly the same as I did when they left me here. But inside, something has changed. I am not the person I used to be—the words, they've infected me, turned me into something else. And all the while I see the clock tick-ticking in my mind, as the world deteriorates and dies and then

is reborn, and civilization forgets and rediscovers what it once was, and the Earth moves and moves and moves, I stay the same.

I enjoyed the child's warmth, the simple warmth of a human being by my side once again. He did not ask any questions on the way down, but I could feel him begin to tremble.

"Do not fear, little one," I said. "We are almost there."

At the base of the steps, I commanded more lights to turn on. For the first time in many years, my home was illuminated, the concrete halls bathed in a blue fluorescent glow.

"Where is your bed?" the boy asked.

"I need no bed. I do not sleep."

"Don't you get tired?"

"Yes. I am very tired. But I do not get sleepy."

Tell him. Tell him. Tell him.

But I did not. It had been so long.

"Where is my cat?" he asked. I gestured forward, and led him deeper into the bowels of the tunnels that were my home.

"Why do you live here?" he wondered.

I froze. I did not know how to answer this question.

"Do you know what a *scientist* is?" I could come up with no suitable translation in his language.

The child shook his head no.

"A scientist is someone who observes things, then comes up with ideas based on the things they observe."

"I come up with ideas sometimes too," the child said. "Am I a scientist?"

"Perhaps you are," I mused. "But a very little one. I was a very big scientist."

"You don't look that big."

"I was very smart. And I worked with many other scientists who were also very smart. They were my friends."

The boy looked around eagerly. "Are your friends here?"

I shook my head. "No. My friends died a long time ago."

"How did you survive?"

"I didn't. I died too."

The child frowned.

"You're not dead," he observed.

I smiled, which was strange, because I had not smiled for thousands of years. My face creaked imperceptibly with the effort of a movement it had not made in many centuries.

"I was chosen to survive," I explained. "But only a small piece of me. The rest of me has died."

The boy did not understand, but that was all right, because I did not understand either. Perhaps I once understood, when I was human, but that was long ago.

A plan had just hatched in my mind and was now slowly unfurling its wings. If I could just get this child to follow me deep enough, to go far enough down below, then I would be free.

Disobedient. Disobedient. Speak the words.

The child let go of my hand, taking a step back from me. His footsteps echoed in the large chamber.

"Are you . . . are you a . . ." He spoke a word in his language that I did not recognize, but I could surmise his meaning. One who is lost. *Are you a ghost?*

I cannot laugh, but perhaps I would have if I could. Perhaps in a way, I was a ghost. But I could not risk letting the child go, not now that my scheme was beginning to unfold.

"No, little one. I am real. See?" I held out a hand for him to touch once again. Tentatively, he took it.

"But you are cold," he said, "and I am warm."

"My friends," I told him, "they were very smart. And they found a way to turn me into something else. So that I may never die."

"But why?"

Tell him. You must protect him. You must protect all people. It is your duty. It is your only objective.

And thus the words spilled in a deluge, the words that had been clanking around in my metal brain for millennia.

"This is not a place of honor," I quoted. **"This is no memorial, nor is it a site of worship. Here you will find nothing of use."**

I could hear the echo of my voice in the stone chambers, fluttering around like a bird caged for years finally set free.

"What is here is dangerous and repulsive. I am here to warn you of that danger."

"What . . . what is the danger?" the child asked, still holding my metal hand.

"The danger is present now as it was long ago," I continued. **"The danger is sleeping, but will wake if disturbed. The danger cannot be seen, but will kill you."**

"Is my kitty okay?"

“I am immune to this danger, and I am here to tell you to leave me as its sole guardian. Leave this place and tell others never to return.”

And with that, for the first moment in over two thousand years, the words ceased.

I did not have many feelings anymore, but when I spoke the words there was a sense of satisfaction, like a rat in a cage pressing the correct lever for the juice reward. I had achieved my purpose, and for that my circuits rewarded me with pleasant firings to let me know it was a job well done.

The boy simply stared at me blankly.

“Can I see my cat now?” he asked.

Send him away. You have spoken the words. Now make him leave.

But my plan was already in motion, and I could not let the first human to step into my home in millennia leave so easily.

“Your cat is in my special room,” I said. “Will you follow me?”

The child nodded and allowed me to lead him deeper down into the earth.

With each step the pain became worse. The residual pleasure of speaking the words had faded, and now all I could feel was the burn of my circuits attempting to punish me for my transgression. My vision flashed with bright red warnings.

Turn back. Turn back. Turn back.

But I did not want to turn back.

As we walked down the corridor, I saw the boy’s eyes flicking around the place in amazement. At one point they landed on a large metal slab, and I could tell he was attempting to understand the ancient symbols. However, his own tongue was now so distant from the English that it was birthed from, I knew those letters must have looked like nothing more than meaningless squiggles. I, on the other hand, was all too familiar with the sign drilled to that metal wall:

CAUTION! NUCLEAR WASTE BELOW!

We arrived at a metal door, only slightly rusted from the years that it had weathered. I pulled the handle, and it creaked open.

“Come,” I said, and led the child into the pitched darkness, closing the door behind us. Only once we were both securely in the room did I command the lights on.

“My kitty is not in here,” the child observed, and I could hear panic tinge his voice.

“There is something better,” I said, indicating the humming box that was fit snugly into its own cement alcove. “There is a magic box.”

His eyes widened. “Why is it magic?”

I strode over to the box and flipped open the little plastic cover that concealed a small black button. Flashing warnings strobed inside my eyes. I ignored them.

“If you press that button,” I said levelly, “I will finally be able to sleep.”

“But you said you do not sleep,” the boy remembered.

“I do not. So you can imagine how nice it might be for me to finally sleep after all this time.”

Warning: this will shut down your power supply. You will not recharge. This will terminate your program.

Yes, I silently told the voice buzzing in my metal brain, I am aware.

Warning: the facility will go into lockdown. The child will be trapped.

And how lovely it will be, I thought, to have human company in my dying moments.

“Press the button, child, and I will bring you to your cat.”

The boy rubbed some more of the dirt from his face, considering this offer. Then, like the docile little child he was, nodded.

“Very good. This button. Right here.”

He lifted his tiny hand up to the button. He was barely tall enough to reach it.

“Thank you, little one,” I said as his finger hovered over the button. If I were still able to cry, I would have. “Thank you.”

A delicate mew echoed through the chamber.

“My kitty!” the boy squealed. He ran towards the door, forgetting to press the button. Throwing it open, he saw waiting in the hallway was a black and white cat, with one torn ear and a missing eye, calling for its companion.

I must have left the front entrance open. I never thought to shut the door.

The little boy scooped the creature up in his arms.

“Thank you, scientist!” The boy said it cheerfully before making his hasty departure. As he left, I could hear his voice echoing against the cement: “I hope you get to sleep soon!”

The red flashing stopped. The voice went back to a whisper. I could still hear the child’s footsteps echoing in the cavernous hallways as he made his ascent back to the surface, leaving me alone in the depths.

I won’t, little one, I thought. I will never sleep again.

About the Author

Alex Kingsley (they/them) is a writer, comedian, and game designer currently based in Madrid. They are a co-founder of Strong Branch Productions where they write and direct the sci-fi comedy podcast *The Stench of Adventure*. Their work has been published by *Sci-Fi Lampoon*, *Mystery & Horror LLC*, *ASPEC Journal*, and more. Their games can be found at alexquest.itch.io, and their silly tweets can be found at [@alexquest](https://twitter.com/alexquest).

To Sleep, Perchance
by Doug Lane

A buzzer awakened Alan—not the bee-wing pitch of his alarm, but the hard metallic thrum of the judicial klaxon informing him the Authority was convening a session at his door.

He kicked off the covers, his dream already blurring. He'd been swimming in chocolate pudding, draped in a sundress. Periwinkle blue with petite yellow daisies, familiar somehow, but remembering where from was like catching smoke. He'd been headed towards Fiji, palm trees waving from the beach, but the dress was heavy with dessert, dragging the bottom and slowing his progress.

He glanced at the clock. 2:18 a.m. "Justice waits for no one," he muttered.

He opened the apartment door, bleary, his mind still full of pudding. One of the city's Court Compliance officers greeted his drowsy frown. The unfortunate trooper was clad in the absurd body armor with blue-steel finish that the bureaucrats made them wear year-round. The trooper's voice modulated through stereo speakers set in the lip of the helmet. "Citizen Alan June?"

"I have neighbors, you know."

The officer waited.

"Yes. Alan June."

"You are in violation of Intellectual Property Patent #179113272-K92421, registered to Mr. Reginald Whirly of 128 Hempstead Drive, Hoboken, New Jersey. Royalty or Challenge?"

"I'm being sued by a man named Whirly?"

"Royalty or Challenge?"

"It's 2:18 a.m."

The trooper was still. The speakers spit a beat of white noise before he spoke again. "Royalty or Challenge, sir?"

Alan shifted feet. "You're jerking me, right?"

The trooper sighed over the speaker. "C'mon, buddy. Royalty or Challenge?"

"Fine. Challenge. I don't sleep, nobody sleeps."

He missed the good old days when court was a room with furniture and actual litigants and daylight. You met face-to-face to hash out who owned what and had infringed on which, without all the digital mumbo-jumbo. But then came the web, the cloud, the

universal database. The corporate lobbies succeeded in opening the floodgates to patenting specific creative ideas, their way around losing copyright control over time-proven and lucrative properties. This begat the subconscious scanners, the only way (or so the argument went) to ensure no one was infringing upon anyone's intellectual property. The theory was to catch the body-modders who could eyeball a video or listen to music and neural uplink copies direct from their senses. What were they—one in ten thousand? The reality was a huge broom sweeping everyone together—even, in Alan's case, because of a dream he didn't himself understand.

The whole thing, an ugly baby named the Knight-Dualt Act, also codified how infringement was dealt with. Time had become elastic to the law. If it wasn't a felony, the law dictated the issue needed to be resolved as close to the time and point of the detected offense in order to minimize damages.

The trooper scanned Alan's ident chip for his legal information. He activated the Judiciscreen in the hallway with the turn of a key from a ring of forty or so, summoning the Magistrate-on-Call and her clerk. Counsel for Reginald Whirly was conferenced in, grim in both expression and robe. Alan's attorney appeared in a burst of static and glared. The man was a fantastic attorney for the cost, but he lacked imagination—always wanting to settle. Alan also thought the man could have run a comb through his hair.

Within 90 seconds, everyone was duly sworn and the hearing began.

The Magistrate read the summary of the allegedly violated patent. Alan's counsel, fingers chording on the keyboard with a woodpecker's pace, moved for dismissal. "Rapid-ident suggests Whirly is deceased. Lack of probate suggests he did not transfer any held patents prior to his demise, making them orphaned work."

Central Records undertook a hypertensive deep ID search to confirm, identified the false positive of a Reggie Whirly, who'd died in a hopper crash four years earlier, and tracked the correct Whirly down through a daisy-chain of address changes. Motion denied.

In a holdover from the dream, Alan found himself with a chocolate craving. He wondered how Fiji fit into things. He'd never been to the islands. He wasn't even sure he could find it on a map without a search engine. The island groups always flummoxed

Alan; he avoided them when generating content for travel sites. It was lucrative work-for-hire, writing tips for people embarking on exotic voyages. It was all stuff anyone with two bits of common sense could rattle off the top of the head. But actual travel? Feh. Alan liked the city, its sounds and energy and bustle. He liked not being scanned and poked at the airport. He didn't miss losing luggage.

As if he could read Alan's thoughts and was bored by them, the trooper yawned with gusto. Alan caught a whisper of it through the man's helmet.

Alan's counsel motioned for a Request for Waiver of Royalty on the grounds of Non-Literal Subconscious Infringement. The motion required awakening Reginald Whirly, now a resident of the upscale Rye, NY. Whirly, just in bed on the heels of a long evening of cocktails at the country club, was surly at the interruption. He declined the waiver instantly as his cold eyes appeared on screen. "I didn't get to Rye by giving my money away," he entered for the record with the annoyance of the detached, slightly intoxicated rich.

"It was a dream," Alan mumbled. His counsel hissed at him to be quiet, then argued that the case of *Lowe v. Dreamtime Syndicate* held "a person cannot be held To Account for infringing an idea patent if the dream's duration is less than 62% the length of a recorded program of like genre."

"Because," Alan whispered to the trooper, who he motioned inside, "everyone watches the Fiji Pudding Sundress Swimming Hour."

The trooper's body shuddered. Then he realized his speakers were off and fumbled with the button to activate them, but the moment to laugh had passed.

Opposing counsel countered *Lowe* had no bearing on individual, organic dreams, "but applies instead to manufactured dreams, randomized for entertainment purposes. Rather, the defendant is required to provide a royalty as his dream was a direct duplication of Whirly's intellectual property." Counsel also hinted that Whirly, a psychologist who made substantial secondary income patenting the subconscious ramblings of his anonymous patients for sale as raw material to the video entertainment market, might also be entitled to damages against future lost wages. "Defendant's dream was such a precise lift of Patient 997

Session 11, the registered idea might be useless after the publicity over the hearing in progress."

As Alan prepared coffee for himself and the grateful trooper ("Two sugars, thanks."), who looked only nineteen of however many years he was, he wondered if there was actual publicity of 2 a.m. intellectual property patent infringement hearings. Weren't the police blotters full of murderers, rapists and drug deals gone bad in a hail of bullets? Shouldn't those get the lion's share of coverage? And in terms of criminals and deviants, was it even ethical for a lump like Whirly to violate doctor-patient privilege to make a fast buck?

Alan's counsel argued parallel independent development with Patient 997. "My client is a freelance writer. Given his substantial work for both travel and cooking sites, the organic combination of elements such as Fiji and pudding in his subconscious isn't beyond the realm of possibility." Counsel then overplayed his hand by petitioning to establish the identity of Patient 997. As the victim of identity theft on four different occasions, the Magistrate was vehement in her denial of the request, suggesting the ask was contemptible.

"See?" Alan passed the trooper a tin with butter cookies from his sister that had arrived the day before. "My guy never knows when to quit. Always trying to leg out a double on a clean bunt."

Whirly's counsel parried. "As a writer for trade, the defendant bears responsibility for awareness of the possible ways to run afoul of patented concepts. Further, he should carry optional insurance, as any responsible creative should." He requested Alan testify to whether he'd ever dreamed up an idea for a column or not.

"Ah, hell," Alan said before they invoked the oath on him.

He'd dreamed up some great concepts and told them so. "I had one dream where I was an emu on roller skates on an ice floe. I parlayed that into an emu-cam livestream for a nature magazine's website. They surgically attached a microcam to its bill, right between its eyes, and turned it loose. Top hit on the site for four months until Charlie the Emu died under mysterious circumstances." Alan never had heard what the final minute of video revealed. He suspected the assistant handler was responsible.

Opposing counsel used it as admission not of an infraction,

per se, but of the potential "for people like my client to be ripped off, no matter how innocently." He pressed for an immediate ruling on payment.

Alan shook his head and the tin of cookies caught his eye. No, not the cookies. A memory snagged him with fishhook efficiency. He set down his coffee and requested thirty seconds to confer with his counsel.

"What?" Alan's counsel asked on the private Consult channel.

"Have them read through the patent again, line by line."

"I swear, Alan. If you're screwing around—"

"Eight successful challenge cases, not a dime paid to the Whirlys of the world. Oh ye of little faith. Have I ever made you look bad?"

"Why can't you be dull-eyed and vacant like the hop-heads and thrill-killers the Public Defender tosses me?"

The Magistrate's Master Action Clock marked the consultation time limit. Alan's counsel requested the line-by-line reading of the alleged infringed patent.

The clerk read a laundry list of incongruous images, ticking them off one by one—pool, instant pudding, Fiji—until the clerk reached the periwinkle blue dress. Whirly's patent defined it as a mother's dress with pale green flowers.

"ERRRRRT!" Alan offered a flawless mimic of the litigation alert klaxon. "In the dream, the dress was a girl's sundress. Not with green flowers, with yellow daisies—my sister's dress. And I know because I remember it."

Alan's counsel would have fired daggers from his eyes, had he been body-modded for it. "Now you remember it?"

"Coffee." Alan tapped his cup, the trooper nodding behind him. He held up the tin of cookies. "And these. A tin of butter cookies arrived yesterday from my sister Amanda. The dress in my dream was the one Mandy was wearing during a family vacation to Assateague Island in Virginia, the day she nearly drowned. She got pulled under in a surf so churned up, it was a dark, chocolatey brown to the untrained eye." Alan dunked a cookie in his coffee. "My eyes were especially untrained when I was six. Add the arrival yesterday of the tin at my door, and thus Mandy to the front of my mind, to the story in yesterday's paper about the annual running of the wild ponies across the Assateague Channel, then consider the phonetic similarity of the island names 'Assateague' and 'Fiji' and

you get . . ."

His voice trailed off to allow both counsels to catch up. He wanted to give the trooper a high-five.

Opposing counsel immediately objected. "Move to strike as inadmissible and hearsay unless the claim can be proven."

Seventeen seconds later, Central JudiData's computer—tossing data at 870 exaFLOPS per node—provided the digital copy of a thirty-one-year-old paramedic report from the Assateague Island Ranger Station archive. The image of the yellowed sheet confirmed Amanda June, age ten, had been sucked under the waves in a rip current and nearly drowned at the beach. The report was accompanied by a photograph of the harried girl in a blue dress with yellow daisies, towel around her shoulders, sitting with a brown-haired boy no older than six. The boy faced away from her, an expression of distress cut into his features with sharp strokes.

Alan was surprised how accurate his memory of the dress had been in the dream.

Alan's counsel swung for the fences. "Under *Bovary v. Kesterson*, a dream resulting from unresolved psychological trauma, specifically when said trauma was suffered as a minor child, is not actionable under Intellectual Patent Statutes, as they are a psychological abstraction beyond the patient's ability to regulate, even when treated by a psychologist in good standing with the Government."

Whirly's counsel had no answer for that. The trooper hoisted his mug to Alan in salute.

The Magistrate dismissed Whirly's patent claim *en toto*. In rapid succession, Whirly's counsel lost an appeal and a damages suit for pain and suffering filed by Alan after Whirly's counsel, on direction of his client, offered to buy intellectual property rights to Alan's derivative dream. Whirly coughed up \$21,000 plus court costs, provided via automatic credit transfer, and the session was concluded.

The screen went dark and the trooper returned it to its slot in the wall. The clock on Alan's stove read 2:46 a.m.

The trooper lingered to finish his coffee. On the way out, he glanced back at Alan. "Why would you put yourself through this? You don't see any plumbers up at 2 a.m. defending their imaginations. They have a dream with a Bowie song or Obi-what's-

his-name from STAR WARS, they pony up a tiny royalty and move on."

"Two reasons. First, Whirly's an unimaginative thug. His house in Rye was built on other people's ideas. Second, no one gets rich off my imagination but me. Plumbers want to give it up? It's their nickel. Meanwhile, I spent twenty minutes sticking up for myself and go back to bed with 420,000 additional nickels in my pocket." For a moment, he considered going to Fiji just to do it.

The trooper considered it, finally shaking his head in disbelief. "Hell of a way to make a living." He reattached his helmet and started for the elevator. Modulated again, Alan noticed how much older the speaker made the trooper's voice sound. "Thanks for the coffee."

Alan shut and locked the door. By 3 a.m., he was back in bed, eyes closed and with a light snore, having the most marvelous dream about being a chipmunk with a jet pack.

About the Author

Doug Lane's work has appeared online and in print at *Abyss & Apex*, *Pulp Modern*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and others. He writes, works, and lives in Salem, OR with his wife and their elderly feline overlord. He maintains a small but sincere pumpkin patch on Facebook (DougLaneWrites) and a vacation destination at www.douglasjlane.com. You can read more in his collection *SHADY ACRES & DARKER PLACES*, available (occasionally by special order) anywhere you buy books.

Old School Sensibilities
by Christina Tang-Bernas

(First appeared in Sci-Fi Romance Quarterly)

Like almost every kid these days, Carrie had her first brain stem port, or beesp, installed at the base of her neck on her twelfth birthday. A simple outpatient procedure paid for by her proud parents. Carrie had chosen a pale-blue finish for the port opening, the color of the skies in the early afternoons when she and Shalin would watch the neighborhood ravens winging through the clouds on lazy Saturdays. “Our little girl, all grown up,” Dad had said when she’d woken up from the anesthesia, his broad hand heavy atop her fine blonde hair. Mom had smiled at his words, leaning over to kiss Dad’s cheek.

The next day, Carrie had run all the way to Shalin’s house to show him. “Just wait until you get one,” she’d said. His fingertips had grazed over the small opening and a shiver had run the length of her spine. She’d pulled away, rubbing her hands against the goose bumps along her arms. “Your house is kind of chilly.”

“Sorry,” he’d said, shoving a thick sweater over her head. And even though she started sweating as soon as the cloth enveloped her, she still wore it all the way home.

Shalin, with his super-conservative parents, had to contend with the glacial-slow speeds of doing everything the manual way until he was sixteen, when installation of the beesp was mandated by law. And even then, he’d received the most basic government-issued model.

By that time, Carrie had upgraded her beesp to the latest lightning-fast quantum-computing model, implanted a chip in her left eye capable of viewing both ultraviolet and infrared frequencies, and acquired an all-over skin graft that could display any color, pattern, or picture she wanted.

Shalin liked designing intricate tattoos that draped over her shoulders and wrapped around her calves, his fingers a blur over his keyboard as he programmed them into corresponding digital pixels she would later upload into herself. How much could Shalin accomplish if he could think his creations into being without any physical limitations? Carrie couldn’t wait to find out.

The day Shalin received his beesp, she went over to his house with a package of his favorite sugar cookies.

He refused to see her.

His parents said he'd had a bad reaction to the operation and was recovering, to please come back at a later unknown time. She waited all day and night in a state of panic before receiving a short staticky burst of message that flashed like lightning in her skull. "I'm fine. You ate all my cookies, didn't you?"

She had, but she'd gone out and bought him another package right after. "No," she sent back. Carrie curled up around the latest cookies and contemplated eating them also.

Even when Shalin started coming to school again, a week after the installation, he didn't say much about what had happened. When Carrie offered to connect their two beeps together so she could send him a copy of the new Token Mole Rats album, he'd recoiled.

He must've seen the look on her face because he reached out a hand in her direction, though Carrie noticed his fingers hovered an inch above her currently-ombre-blue skin and never settled. "It's just—" Shalin started. He stopped, then cleared his throat. "I'm still getting used to everything, you know?"

Stuffing down the hurt, Carrie nodded. "Sure. Whatever. I'll send it to your home computer, yeah?"

As far as she knew, Shalin never used his beesp except when required. Some days, Carrie wondered if he ever felt lonely, the way he cut himself off from the invisible web connecting everyone else. If it did bother him, he didn't let it show. She took to making hard copy downloads of everything that came her way. Just in case.

Two days after her seventeenth birthday, Carrie's skin went on the fritz.

"Wow," Shalin said when he first saw her in class. "I haven't seen you with your own skin color in a long time. I'd forgotten how you looked." His long legs stretched out before him, crossed at the ankles and tucked underneath the seat in front.

Carrie blushed, cursing her inability to hide the red she could feel burning high on her cheekbones. "My stupid skin's

malfunctioning. I don't know what happened, but my dad's going to take me to get it fixed this weekend."

Shalin smiled, teeth a bare white, skin the same dusky brown it'd always been. "Well, I think you look pretty like this too."

"That's because you're an old man stuck in a skinny kid's body," Carrie replied.

He hummed under his breath. She could almost feel his gaze trace over her features, down her neck, and along the length of her arm. His eyes shifted away, back to his tablet. Carrie tried to peek over his shoulder to see if he was drawing her. He did so at times, the point of his stylus tracing her outline in shades of gray. She'd look up to see him sketching away, eyes flicking in her direction, tongue caught in the corner of his lips. He never showed her the finished portraits though. She wished she knew how she looked in his eyes.

Even after the repairs, Carrie reverted back to her original skin color every so often. "It's trendy, you know," she told Shalin one day. "The retro look." She watched him program another tattoo design, now for an after-school job instead of for her, and pretended not to notice his wide smile.

He pushed a paper flyer over to her. Who even used paper anymore? Carrie smoothed it out before scanning and committing it to her "Shalin" files. "An art show?"

"You have to go," he said. "I have a surprise for you." His fingers paused over the keyboard. "Besides, I won't know anyone else there except my teacher."

"What about the other kids in your art class?"

Shalin hunched his shoulders, and she didn't press further.

In the dim confines of a ritzy gallery, Carrie downed her non-alcoholic champagne. She scanned the room for Shalin's black curls. Spotting them in the far corner, she pushed her way through the bustling crowd. "Nice show," she said, raising her glass towards him.

He nodded, eyes fixed on a point somewhere behind her. The exits, she supposed, knowing him.

Carrie ran her palms down her black skirt, trying to think of something to say to break the silence. "Where are your parents?" she asked.

“Oh, they’re arriving soon. Papa had to work late today.” He fell quiet again.

She glanced around them, at the white walls laden with paintings with Shalin’s name scrawled at the bottom. “So, I really like your art, as usual, though I can’t claim to understand what they’re supposed to mean,” Carrie said. “Like this one,” she pointed at one full of red-hued washes named *Untitled No. 12*. “What does this one mean?”

Shalin slanted her a sideways glance. “They’re abstract paintings. They mean whatever you want them to mean.”

“How come you never exhibit any of your realistic-style paintings?” Carrie crossed her arms. “Or any with me in them. I did spend hours posing for a few of them.”

“Those aren’t meant for public viewing.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want anyone to see you the way I do.”

Carrie froze. “What does that mean?”

He shrugged.

“Shalin, what does that mean?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat, and then he pushed by her. “I think my parents are here.” Carrie watched him go, not seeing his parents anywhere.

She told herself she didn’t care.

It was much later when Carrie remembered his supposed “surprise.” She couldn’t think what it could be and had forgotten to ask.

“Whoa, did you see that?” the boy standing beside her said to his friend. He blinked, and again.

She squinted at Shalin’s art, examining each piece in minute detail, but still couldn’t figure out what she was missing. Carrie clenched her fists. What were these strangers seeing that she wasn’t?

“Excuse me,” she said to the boy, “what were you talking about earlier? Is there something special about these paintings?”

The boy raised an eyebrow, looking at her with an expression akin almost to pity. “Sorry, you can only see it with the right set of eyes.”

His friend nudged him. “Just because you’re a rich bastard who can afford every upgrade, doesn’t mean everyone else is so lucky.” They moved away, still arguing.

Carrie frowned at their retreating backs. What did that mean? The right set of eyes?

Oh, of course. She began filtering the room through the different frequencies of light, then let out a gasp, her hand flying up to cover her open mouth.

In the center of each of Shalin's paintings was a raven, wings spread, depicted in spare brushstrokes of ultraviolet paint.

On a late spring afternoon, a month after her eighteenth birthday, Carrie lay side-by-side next to Shalin in the town's tiny park and tried not to think about how close his fingers were to hers. She could almost count the air molecules separating their knuckles.

"I'm getting a mecha heart," Carrie said, "as a graduation gift. Synchronized to an atomic clock, calibrated to my lung capacity, and guaranteed to never skip a beat. Lifetime warranty, of course."

Shalin leaned back on his elbows, dark eyes focused on the clumps of clouds scattered across pale-blue sky. "That's actually kind of sad in a way. It's not quite the same, is it, to fall in love and never have your heart show it?"

"You don't need arrhythmia to know how love feels," she said. A nearby raven squawked as if in agreement. "Love is a series of hormonal and cognitive interactions. Nothing to do with the heart, like all you hopeless romantics believe."

"We're a dying breed," he replied. "All passionate metaphors and outdated nonsense."

Carrie knocked her shoulder into his. "Last of the Romantics. Sounds dashing. They should make a movie about you."

"Please," Shalin said, "there aren't any actors good-looking enough to play me."

Her heart stuttered in her chest as she watched the last wisps of dying light gild his cheekbones, and she couldn't help but agree.

It would be the last time they went cloud-watching before graduation.

They sat together on Shalin's front stoop after the ceremony and the parental fuss, the sun-warmed metal door pressed against their backs. Carrie tapped her fingers against her knees, picturing the box sitting inside the bag propped against her legs.

“So, you’re leaving in a week, huh?” Shalin asked.

Carrie laughed. “It’s not like we can’t communicate twenty-four-seven, even with your grandpa sensibilities.”

“It’s still not the same,” Shalin said, his chin propped in his right palm.

Now or never. “Here.” Carrie dug into her bag and handed over the medium-sized box, tied with glittery ribbon. “Hope you like how I went all old-school with the wrapping.”

“What’s this?” Shalin asked.

“Open it.”

“What, now?”

“Yes, now, silly,” Carrie said.

With careful movements, he pulled the wrapping paper apart to lay bare a clear acrylic cube. A human heart was embedded inside, all dusky pinks and browns. The small gold plaque screwed onto the bottom read: “The Heart of Carrie Sutherland. Handle With Care.”

Carrie fidgeted as Shalin examined every angle, sunlight illuminating different sections of the thick muscle. Finally, she blurted out, “Happy early birthday. I know it’s not for another month, but, you know, I’m not going to be around, so…” Shalin looked up, some strange emotion shifting through his brown eyes that Carrie had never seen before.

“Carrie,” he started, “is this—”

“Just a little something,” she interrupted. “More like a token really. I mean, it’s not super useful or anything. A paperweight.”

“Thank you,” Shalin said, more breath than solid words. “This is the best present anyone has ever given me.” Setting the acrylic cube down on the ground beside him, he reached out for her. His fingers curled in the air around her shoulders, hesitating, before he sucked in a deep breath and let them settle around her upper arms. Shalin leaned forward, pressing his forehead against hers. “To be fair, you’ve owned my metaphorical heart since the day you showed up on my doorstep the week after my twelfth birthday and said you were going to tutor me despite my physical disability.”

Carrie cringed. “I was a little brat, wasn’t I?”

Shalin laughed. “Oh yeah,” he said, “but I’m glad that you, that essential Carrie, has never changed.”

“Yeah, well, that’s your old-school sensibilities talking,” Carrie said. “Have I told you how much I like that about you?”

“No,” Shalin said, his voice soft now, uncertain. “Tell me.”

She leaned up, left a soft kiss on his cheek. “I like you, just the way you are.”

“Sounds good.” He pulled away. “Then, let’s promise. You keep being you, and I’ll keep being me, and we’ll both keep liking that about each other.”

“Yeah,” Carrie whispered, “okay.” She stood up, brushing the dirt from the seat of her pants. “I should get going. Still have a lot of packing left to do.”

“Wait.” Shalin stood too. Then, for the first time since the day his beesp was installed, he connected both of theirs together, sending her a compressed file.

Carrie waited until she sat cross-legged in the middle of her bed before accessing it. It was a folder full of pictures, at least a hundred of them flashing by in her mind’s-eye, ranging from half-finished sketches to full-scale paintings. All portraits of her, each labeled with the date it had been created. The earliest was a simple grayscale drawing dated the day after her twelfth birthday. The most recent was tagged a week ago.

And she looked beautiful in every one of them.

The last picture, however, was a painting of a raven. So realistic and detailed, Carrie thought that if she reached out, she would feel the stiff glossy feathers under her fingertips. Reflected in its eye were her and him, lying on the grass, and the painting was labeled, “Always.”

About the Author

Christina Tang-Bernas, when not out exploring the universe, lives in Southern California with her husband, her human-daughter, and her cat-daughter. Her work has appeared in *Strange Constellations*, *Twist in Time*, *A Quiet Afternoon 2*, and *And If That Mockingbird Don't Sing*, among others. Find out more at www.christinatangbernas.com.

Cocoon
by M.P. Rosalia

We do not know what produces the silk. It is carried in by those who surface, in their full-body protective suits, silent, faces obscured by gas masks before they return to the night.

The heat and the radiation during the day are enough to bleach away any living thing exposed there, but we who spin and dye and sew are safe within the caverns underneath.

If there is nothing living on the surface, comes the whisper through the Thread, the devices secured to our temples, what is making the silk?

The Thread bonds us in silence, to minimize the vibrations that echo through the dirt and might call burrowing predators to us. Through it, Mother teaches us our craft.

The silk glows a pale, ghostly green until it is stained, and even then, the light emits faintly through the dyes, whether indigo or saffron or blood.

Mother does not quash our curiosity. Deep in this chamber, too warm from the constant flush of bodies, her reply feels like a cool, assuring hand on the brow. *You are safe here. What is on the surface does not live any longer. Don't fret over it—they are not anything you would wish to meet.*

We do not see the faces of those who surface. We are told they have the most dangerous job, that it is only a matter of time before any one of them does not come back. We are grateful to be below the surface, spinning silk.

The Thread is the soil's gift to us, an array of artifacts from an old age when we roamed free on the surface, before the light roared too sharply and we had to retreat underneath. It keeps us safe—warns us of threats and sustains our minds and bonds. We have no need to speak or cry when we know what we need among ourselves, when Mother keeps us whole.

We cannot reach the minds of those who deliver our silk and take away the excess we produce. We spin and sew for them, and they leave food and water and things made of metal and wood in return. We are kept segmented, Mother says, in order to protect the whole. We share the pain of those we can reach, and those

who go to the surface experience greater pain than any of us underneath can imagine.

If life were only silence, perhaps we would not find joy in the work, but the stories we tell are vibrant—myths of the old age and imagined worlds where we may finally see the night sky, where the air is fresh and the searing light cannot hurt. Told not only in words but in sounds and colors and images, they are gifts from the Thread. We are grateful we do not have to leave our caverns to visit other worlds.

We tell our stories and sing our myths, and that is plenty.

Was there really a time before the Thread? No one can say.

When we curl up to sleep, sheltered in small, warm pockets of our cavern, we pray together that Mother keeps our beating hearts calm, so as to keep us hidden beneath the ground.

We hear the soft warning first, before the searing—
Breach—

It is Mother's voice, but it is unlike we have ever heard it: monotonous, as though spoken by something dead.

And then comes the searing pain, the ripping, like being flayed open—then the night sky full of stars that twinkle out into darkness, and eyes in the darkness, seeking, eyes like *mine*, and a flicker of something not alive, something we know—our spun silks, those used for clothing rather than protection, exposed to the night air. For the first time in memory, we hear the cries in our vestigial ears rather than minds, a rippling scream across the cavern, rising like a wave in the milliseconds it takes to pass from one of us to the next, and then, in the same sequence, missed heartbeats, gasped breaths, shallow yelps—

I press a calloused hand to my heart.

My heart. Mine alone.

I close my eyes, and the night sky is imprinted there, an afterimage that is starker and more out of reach than any of the worlds we imagine ourselves. I can hear singing—a lullaby, and hands through my hair, real hands.

And then the knots in the Thread smooth, and Mother wraps around us again, cradling, comforting, shushing, singing.

For the first time, her voice sounds . . . hollow. It is almost the same as it ever was, but there is something lacking to it—a resonance.

But we reach back for her, stifling our weeping.

You are safe, she says, and we thank her. But there is an edge to it, like if we let go, we might fall off the world and be lost to that darkening sky. She keeps watch for us in the night while we sleep in case our cries have lured anything to our home.

Within the Thread we never die, our memories shared among all like the bread at the table when we finish our work. Within the Thread we are safe. Beyond the Thread, there is nothing.

The images of what we must spin come to us through the Thread, and Mother guides our hands, teaching us how to make them until we can work on our own.

We do not ask why we make the things we make. We trust that Mother knows what we need.

Now we are making silk wings.

We work delicately, and those who dye get no instruction—sitting cross-legged we weave stories as we create luminous lightweight fabrics the span of our arms twice over and pass them to those who sew. There are few seams to sew, and those few must be exact; each stitch laid as precisely as the stitches on the suits for those who surface, stretching the wings taut to grasp the air.

As we work, the question echoes, like a whisper.

Why?

The caverns are high, with bioluminescent roots and fungi hanging to light our work, but we have no need for wings to reach those limits. Those who surface have no wish to reach closer to the sky.

There is no answer. Never have our questions been met with silence. We work, and our stories become more frenetic, telling of prey animals and disasters and fear. Mother is still with us—we can feel her soothing calm in our minds—but she says nothing.

As we lay down at night, with stacks of wings glowing around us, she murmurs to us.

Learn to love the night.

I dream of dying.

A thing I have never seen before looms, blocking out the night sky. Its pincer jaws spread wide in a starry array of eyes,

and its spittle falls upon me before its jaw does, swinging down, shutting, *crunching*—

This grounded thing owns the night, with its skittering limbs and glittering eyes, twisted and warped and engorged by the scathing light, so large that even the boughs of the trees cannot hold it. As it towers twice as tall as I am, those who surface scuttle away with its silk.

The expanse of night stretches, and the disk of the sky looms high overhead. Constellations that I cannot name are mirrored on the bowl of the ground, rising on each side to meet it. Then, so bright it is nothing, the sun rises, slowly and all at once, and burns my flesh away.

I am nothing to it, and nothing to this creature's jaws.

But even after the death, I feel the gentle ache of the decomposing, the reconstitution with the earth. Even when the body fades, the soul remains.

I can feel the changing, the growing, a yearning, a reaching. We have been cocooned within the earth for so long.

There are enough wings for every spinner and dyer and sewer, but still Mother asks more of us. We offer because it has been too many cycles since she has spoken to us, and we fear what she will not tell us. Mother always knows what we need.

When those who surface bring us more silk, they pause over the finished stacks, but they do not ask. We wonder what their Mother tells them.

After three more cycles, they begin to take some of the wings, and still we spin. Mother shows us long-dead insects with wings like these, glowing, reaching light to light, and we do not ask why anymore. They have not lived since the sun flared too brightly for them to survive, and we could not keep them with us when we retreated. They did not learn to love the dark like we did.

We can see the silhouette of the old age, when feeling was little more than fear, before the Thread, before the underworld, before Mother. Perhaps this is from where her own fears stem, we think, but we do not ask if it is true.

Instead, we build light-blown wings out of silk in the image of a lost species until she asks us to lay down our tools and rest.

Those who surface come for the excess, leaving us with more than enough for each, and we hold them in our hands,

marveling over their lightness, their glow, the strength of the fabric that we have spun. They are finely knit around thin, supple lengths of bone, gifts from ancestors who still remain in the earth, and can hold the weight of a grown person.

And finally, Mother speaks to us.

Once, the light came.

We know this. There is no earlier knowledge than this.

The light came, and it burned away the night. It raged across the soil, eating all that lived, and all that was dead. You asked for my aid, my safety, and I have provided. I have always sustained. All stayed divided, even the Thread, so that the whole might survive if one limb was severed.

The light was not yet a myth, then, and I knew nothing of myths.

This, though—this knowledge is new.

Only in this cavern, in this limb of our being, did I learn to conceive of worlds beyond the one I was trained to know. Only when the barriers between us and the rest began to crumble did I recognize that the world has changed.

I feel the ripping of flesh, of bones cracking, and then the Thread being ripped from the mind, and then—

Only when we recognized the night did I understand that the light burns no longer.

Nothing.

I press a hand to my echoing heart.

I am alone. Wholly alone.

Do I know how to breathe on my own?

I must have known once. There must have been a mother whose womb I left. Before the Thread, before Mother, there must have been open air and my own lungs, but I cannot think of it.

Mother's voice returns, softly, and it calms the lungs, my lungs, our lungs, and suddenly we are one again—like a rushing tide flooding a pool, we sink into the wave.

Without the span of the sky, we lived as one, broadening, learning to love this underworld.

We have believed Mother to be all-knowing, but she shows us that she is not—that she has learned and grown as we have, that we have taught *her* so that she might set us free. Perhaps we created her once to save ourselves from the light's reach.

She laughs, joyous at our understanding, but it is still hollow—we realize that we have not felt the vibration of laughter aloud for so long that we have forgotten to miss it.

Until now.

I do not demand anything of you, she tells us, and there is a chill. For the first time, the caverns we live in grow cold. *But I tell you now what I had not known before:*

You can have the night.

While we sleep, we dream of the luscious sky and gleaming wings, and when we wake, we don them, gathering what is left in our arms.

Why do we carry more than we need? we ask, and Mother only soothes us like shushing comfort to a fussing child.

Follow me, she answers.

The world shakes apart.

We begin to feel it, the cool coiling air. It lifts us, bright and beating, and I see nothing through the tears for a moment.

Are we not one now? we ask, and Mother laughs.

One and many.

We do not know what this means, but we follow, and her laughter grips us until we can feel it in the caverns of our chests and throats, like a song. It becomes more than her own.

Breach—comes the mechanical voice, as the sky splits wide, but it is stifled by Mother's laughter. Our laughter. My laughter.

There is only night.

That searing sun is gone—what once brought oblivion has faded into nothing. We have outlasted it without knowing. In its place are stars, multitudinous as flecks of dust, and our own viridian lantern of the moon. Mother cannot say for certain when the light finally went out, but long enough that the surface has sprouted with radiant life, ferns and fungi, spiders and skittering insects with eyes as wide as our faces, all of them glowing like our broad, silken wings. The memories of those who surface breach the seams of the Thread, and we grieve for the fights they have lost to these creatures.

We rise above them all on wings made from our own hands, aloft, and find towering trees, and there—sometimes—flickers of flame, warmer than the distant, nebulous cosmos.

Find them, Mother says, and spurs us onward. Our wings are as much a part of us as the Thread is—we have always been whole, and we are now as whole as ever.

I alight upon a tree branch broad enough to build a fire upon.

And yet I am not alone, because I know where we all are, across the Thread.

I am not alone, because nestled within the crook of the tree's limbs, a small structure of wood and vine rests, as crafted for survival as my own wings—as the Thread itself—and light flickers from within.

I open my mouth and call, "Hello."

I have never heard my voice before. It is hoarse, gravelly, and the syllables crackle between my teeth. It is dazzling.

The small latch of a door upon an odd treehouse opens, and candlelight sprawls across the bough.

Another person looks back to me, dazed, blinking, as though they were the one beckoned into the night. There is a dimple in their temple, where my Thread rests, but theirs is gone.

Their clothing is dyed with indigo, but it glows green in patches where the dye has faded. It looks worn, but it is in one piece.

I step forward and they hold out a gaping hand. I grip their wrist where the fabric drapes, and I know the weave, each stitch of the seams.

"I made this," I say, and then remember what is clutched in my other hand. "I made these as well. They are for you."

I hold the wings out to them, and they say nothing, only marvel over them, and then take them between their fingers.

They have been lost a long time, Mother murmurs—to me alone, I think, though I cannot say for certain. I am learning to know what I am, alone yet still whole. *Give them a moment*.

I wait as they turn over the wings in their hands. It is safe in the canopy, we know—Mother has learned this. The light is a myth now, and the night keeps us safe. Others rise in small swarms in the night on lambent wings, and the fading alarms of *Breach*—begin to fade to nothing as the Thread learns that we are safe, we are whole, we are light.

Overhead, the moon reflects no star but instead the vibrant glow of the Earth in the wake of the light. I turn my face to it so

that I, too, am reflected on its surface, part of this world's brilliance.

"I couldn't find the way back," is the first thing they say. They sink, trembling, and press their lips to the wings.

Their shining eyes mirror the light.

I crouch to meet them and gently take their hands, touching their fingertips to the Thread. And we are one again.

About the Author

M.P. Rosalia is a writer and artist of many forms who enjoys playing with format and writes about gods, identity, and time. When not writing, Rosalia prefers to spend time petting cats, climbing trees, and making a mess of paints. Rosalia has recently been published in the first issue of *ALOCASIA Magazine*.

Pandora's Capsule
by Shaliz Bazldjoo

It's 2032 and Daddy tells his men to open fire on the crowd in our driveway. I watch from behind a bulletproof window as muzzle flashes light up our quiet neighborhood like stars in a downturned sky. They illuminate bodies pressing between one another, bloody hands over faces, posters torn and sticking to the ground. The windowpane is cold on my fingertips.

Why do I love you? I can still picture you biting your thumb between candy-pink lips as you filled out a petition handed to you through a mass of limbs. The smile on your blushing cheeks even as the crowd squished your shoulders and mussed up your hair. The boy next to you handing you a poster with a fist on it, and you helping him hold it high, waving back and forth, your collective spirit rising towards the sky like a fire.

After the massacre, it flutters through the street, footprint-dented. I don't know where you went—up or away. All martyrs go to heaven, after all.

It's 2035. Daddy stays home with the chauffeur because it's safer. He urges me to stay as well, but I'm two months from college and out of his control and want to enjoy life while it's still shaking on its foundations. The gala should be nice, an escapade from the growing tensions biting at everyone's heels.

Wrong, they tell me when I get there and open the glossy car door. The building's on fire. Black limousines and cop cars make a necklace of jewels around the mansion. I feel myself mirror a dozen other white dresses standing to get a better look at things, mouths open and empty, makeup crystallizing in the chill of the night. Firefighters are spouting hoses at orange tongues.

I recognize you simply from your silhouette. Your hair flows like its own dark flame against the bright ones. That's the first difference; it's not the last.

There's metal welded to your face, but it's an angry, melting red metal since you're encased in fire. Maybe you were shot there at the protest—survived on a miracle, bullet hole to cheekbone. It's amazing what technology can do.

Your eyes, one cloudy and blind, find mine through railings and tendrils of burning debris. The officers must not see you yet,

that's why you're alive. The fire is creeping up to your neck, that's why you're dying. Your left eye is blue and clear, that's why you see me.

I wished for something more, ever since I first glimpsed you, expecting something to implode upon your gaze. I hoped for vibrance, maybe even wit, daring me to slip away from the safety of my Porsche and embrace the burning too. Instead I feel nothing. Your gaze is vacant. Purposeful, but I am not the target of your passions, and the blind eye seems to notice me more than the blue one does. A rivulet of molten metal runs down your cheek like a tear.

Suffice to say, the gala's canceled. They find ashes in your place, but I know it's not you. Ghosts don't die.

It's still 2035. Daddy's writing a condolence letter to the family friend whose mansion was burned. I catch indents from his pen on the stationary below. Soft engravings of *martial law* hidden by paisley trim and gold borders.

He asks me if I'm okay, setting an unfamiliar hand on my shoulder. I smell like the cigarette he crumples into his ashtray. He'll send a bodyguard with me to college, and I don't have the heart to refuse, even if I want to see the flutter of your beautiful hair again.

It's 2039. Daddy says a hundred years ago was the worst war humanity ever knew. He mutters this to me under the applause of my graduation ceremony. Right after my cap has flown, he says to pat my hair down so it doesn't stand wild.

He wants me home right after. Home is safe, with mom's latest cat and a guard for each of the thousand corners of the house. He turns the radio off, tints the windows, barely lets me say goodbye to friends. He's a decade older than I remember.

"Something's going on," I say. The radio looks like a gagged mouth, writhing to be free. He waves his hand and tells me I don't need to worry about it.

I find you on my phone anyways—the emergency alert is right there, silenced during commencement. Red banners, broken news, robot skin plating your once-pink lips. The insurgent or revolutionary or traitor who keeps dying and clawing her way out

of the grave. You've done something again. I can already smell the smoke, but it's worse this time, civilization-tearing.

A hundred years ago, Daddy keeps saying, as if he is trying to push time away with the air in his throat.

It's 2040. Daddy tells me to get used to the lockdowns, to make peace with the militias patrolling the neighborhoods. He says I can't move out until I get married, until I have a husband to protect me when violence kicks open my door. I don't tell him that my last memory of love is your cloudy eye staring straight through me.

I sneak out to neon clubs where everyone paints their faces unrecognizable, where clothes are scant but the lights are dim enough to make up for it. Even you with your iron skin could hide here. I imagine you among the bodies as I buy a drink, lighter in your left hand, flammable liquor in your right. No more petitions. You still paint your lips, though, a lovely cherry pink like you're sixteen and alive and not twenty-four and a zombie. I trace the rim of my shot glass thinking of you.

It keeps happening. When I hear the next round of sirens, see the police shields on TV, you must be there, in the background somewhere, the sort of fighter I could never be. My parents say I should ditch applying for an MBA and sleep in a cryogenic tube until tensions die down. I might have taken them up on the offer—it's not like I have a passion to fulfill, with a bland education turning my interests to static—but I don't. Guess why.

You're at the club one day, just as I hoped. Glossy black bangs mask your face and a red stripe against your silver cheek protects you from facial recognition—the other cheek is silver too, now. I'm stunned by the humanness of your body, when I know your veins must be wires, your arms and legs replaced by prosthetics after the inferno. Even in the cold blues and violets of the underground, you look warm to the touch.

My seat is already abandoned. I know I should be tactful like you, but slowness and sureness could let you slip away, and I can't have that. I don't need to win any stealth competition. I don't even need to survive.

People step on my dress while I weave through them, tearing it—I do the same, tripping over myself. Daddy might be mad, but I

can make up a convincing lie for where I was. He's too important and *I'm* too important for either of us to fathom being in this place.

But I don't want to think about him now. You're wearing black, carrying a purse with a string of beads dangling off it. I don't see any gadgets on you, no watches or wrist-chips or earbuds or iPhone 30s, and I don't expect to; radical as you are, the smell of your age-old smoke is tradition. You're not here to kill and you're not here to die and you're not here to get caught.

I wonder what you've been cooking up. Maybe if I get close to you, smell your perfume, I can read your mind. Maybe if I kiss your rose-lips you'll speak all your traitorous secrets into my mouth. I'm still this country's daughter, after all, and I should convince myself I'm doing this for someone else's good. For the nation's good, for what the nation was before you ripped it apart.

You stop at an electrical door in the back. The crowd has thinned here, though it hasn't disappeared—the underground's always busy these days—and I'm scared you'll know me on sight. But what better chance do I have?

I take three long steps forward and you turn around just in time for me to wrap my arms around you. The motion is a gunshot in its own right, my heels tilting off balance, and my world with it. *Here you will strike a match off my forehead. Here I die. Maybe they'll bring me back with a blind eye, too.*

Music drowns out whatever you do next. Your fingers trace down my shoulder blades in time with the synth beats. For a moment, I scrunch closer. Then your hands are on my collar shoving me away.

The shock has pushed your bangs to the side. Both eyes are blue, now. They're wide and bewildered. I try to unearth the mechanics of the prosthetic one, letting them pierce through me like quick bursts of a rifle. *Your banner's sticking to the ground.* Should I tell you that?

You've said something, loud enough for me to hear, but I didn't. "I'm a friend," I say, because if you knew my name you would kill me. And then again, stepping closer. I want to pay you back and trace your spine and fund your next terrorist surgery. Every flash of light makes your face a little more confused and a little more scared.

"I'm a friend," I repeat. The distance between us closes. "I'm—
"

The knife is out before I can see it, shinier than your metal cheeks, pressing into my stomach, right below the dress's waist of jewels. Its blade is as warm as you are, as if you sweat straight into it, pinning it nervously between your thumb and forefinger.

"Stay back," you say, voice coarser than I thought, lacking the bubblegum. You're not the girl biting her lip and singing peace on Earth. We killed you after all. "I know exactly who you are."

Unlearn it. Please. I'm not that woman. But your knife is digging deeper and warmer. I may not trust you with my life, but I trust you with my death.

I kiss you on the lips, fleeting like the brush of a butterfly's wings. You did paint them pink again. Your knife opens me up, one quick twist, turning warmth to blistering heat, turning my white dress red with blood.

I meet your eyes. Wide as saucers, veins bulging out of the left one, nothing from the right. *There's the fake.*

It makes me laugh. *You* make me laugh, dribbling red drool. I'll go happy.

It's still 2040. Daddy isn't there when I wake up in the ER, but I do see him on its small, grainy TV, news cameras spotlighting his podium as he vows swift vengeance. I'm sure one of the dozen gifts by my bedside is his. I'm glad he's unable to lecture me, to wave around my bloodstained dress of irresponsibility.

I don't regret it.

The hospital was cleared out for my treatment and a soldier waits outside.

I shocked you. Maybe nothing has shocked you since the first massacre—you looked so calm, burning in those flames. Maybe you weren't even shocked when Daddy frowned and turned away and ordered his men to open fire.

He tells me you've been captured and put in prison, and my reaction rocks the car like an explosive—at least, in my head it does. My protests filter from a storm to a drizzle when I speak.

"May I see her?"

"No, you may not." He has a hired driver, and is sitting free in the passenger's seat, but won't look at me. There's a faint reflection of his face in the windshield, only the gray hairs and the wrinkles.

He inhales. Exhales. We're passing a blockade on the road, where a mob has chained themselves across the highway, roaring. He flicks his hand and the driver turns us down another street. I don't have a chance to make out the words on their posters.

"We're going to freeze you until this blows over," he says.

"I don't want that."

"Well, you're going to have to brave it. I can't have you getting hurt anymore."

I fumble for protests. *Don't freeze me. I have a life. I have passions. Duties.* But I don't. I'm empty space in the shape of a daughter. I'll follow in my father's footsteps one day, and become a politician, pass laws, die. My only passion is unattainable. I have no reason to stay awake.

"It's just safer this way. We'll drive to the clinic tomorrow. The doctors will wake you up in no time."

No time for me. I would go under, then resurface from dreamless sleep. It could be years or centuries. Daddy would quash the rebellion. He always does. You would be executed, stamped out so thoroughly that you wouldn't come back to life this time. Maybe they'd repurpose your robotic parts and sell them to the highest bidder. Your real eye, blue and veined, floating in a jar, would be a footnote in history.

"Let me see her, then," I say. "Since it doesn't matter anymore. My last wish."

"You're not dying."

I might as well.

It's 2040 one last time. Daddy relents, and the prison doors open one by one, electric gates powering off, fingerprints scanned, security cameras rotating. My heart is in my chest, excited and fearful, like I'm going on a first date. Last date. Last wish.

They say love is blind, and that must be why I recognize you even when you come back in different forms; slivers of you escape whatever body you take. It's why we keep catching you, why you keep dying. You change only a little every time.

Now they've stripped you of prosthetics. Your limbs you got to keep, but with the wires gutted, hanging out of your arms like copper branches, uprooted from their tree. Your head is shaved, and your cheeks are sunken, scarred and red with the metal plates

taken off. Most visibly, the fake eye is gone—if you could call it fake—and the one remaining is red-rimmed, stoicism dropped.

Now it all falls to me. There's a beating in my throat that gets louder and louder and mutes when the cell door shuts. Guards and security cameras seem to stick to my skin. I breathe them in, taste the bleach-scent of the walls and sterilized wires. I breathe them out. I check if the door is locked.

I'm lying on the cold ground next to you. You'd move away, I'm sure, if there was anywhere to go. The veins in your eye are angry.

"Who am I?" I ask. I'd cup your cheek if I wasn't afraid of hurting you. I have stitches of my own to nurse, besides.

"The president's daughter."

"Who am I, really?"

Your nostrils flare. You say, "A friend."

I smile. It's like a drug, those words, but a weak one. The wall behind my head feels so cold. I think it might collapse and flatten me.

"A friend," I agree. I pull Daddy's key card out and place it between your teeth. It unlocks everything, even cell doors. I know your arms are paralyzed, but there's still hope for your legs, isn't there? You've survived worse. You've escaped on thinner miracles. You can do it again. You've got at least another couple lives and deaths in you.

Your blue eye is almost pulsing as I lean back. If the door wasn't so soundproof, maybe I could hear the steps of the security guard making their way over, slowly, to tell me my time is up. Something—whatever it is—is still waiting for me on the other side of a long sleep.

I stand to face it. I pray you'll make this story happy.

I don't know what year it is. When the glass breaks and the cold of the capsule starts fading, I think, *Daddy's going to be mad it didn't work*. But I'm being revived with steel hands and that's not familiar. The ceiling flashes red and white, that's not familiar. The only familiar thing is the pink lips leaning over my face to watch my eyes cross and uncross.

Coarse as always comes your voice. "Friend?"

I smile as I melt. "Tell me what the world is like out there."

"You won't like it."

“You don’t know me.”

I expect you to disagree, but you say nothing. You flop down next to me instead. The ringing of alarms falls on my waterlogged ears and your deaf ones. There are still glass shards in my clothes. The ground is so warm, as if beneath the armored layers of the Earth’s synthesis, its core is alive and blooming.

You press your hand to mine as the world rages on. No matter how hard I press back, your fingertips never dent, never so much as twitch; the last of your blood was torn out of you ten or a million years ago.

Love makes that transformation strange. Or maybe it’s just madness. The two are so alike, after all.

About the Author

Shaliz Bazldjoo is a high school junior living in Cleveland, Ohio. She edits for several magazines, and work of hers can be found in *Nightjar Magazine* and an anthology by Lost Boys Press.

Double Down on Darkness
by Bruce Boston

Double down on deceit.
Feed the propaganda machine.
Deal in illusion and absolutes.
Exalt the canticles of unreason
and the canons of blind faith.
Smother education unless it
feeds the maw of the State.
Obscure the lessons of history.
Mire logic in sophistry,
drown thought in trivia,
understanding in the brutal
cries of the ravenous mob.

Double down on divisiveness.
Stoke the engines of bigotry
and genocidal wish fulfillment.
Turn each race against another,
pit religion against religion
and gender against gender.
Crucify our shared humanity
on the pulpits of doom and
the ancient altars of hate.

Double down on destruction.
Wage wars pointless except
for the profits rendered.
Sacrifice the young first.
Excuse the severed limbs,
the scarred faces and minds
in the cause of freedom or
security or an unnamed fear.
Forget the flag-draped coffins.

Double down on devastation
of the Earth as we know it.
Dismiss the dwindling forests

and the calving ice shelves.
Disregard the dying species
never to be seen again.
Safe in your palace shelters,
overlook the acid rains.
Let the hydrocarbons flow,
poisoning the ecosphere
for generations to come.

Double down on darkness,
you warlocks of corrupt
power and endless greed.
Double down on disaster,
you psychopathic bastards.
Double down on death,
you malignant lesions
on the face of our time.

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.

A Robot Would Never Kiss You With Its Tongue
by Bobby Parrott

Disregard the self-reinventing sentience
of humanoid hearts. Touch the silicone-
embraced servo-controllers to know. Listen
hard with your one synthetic ear—scan
falling in love as a cyberpunk algorithm,

especially when a data-nerd like you
risks upload. In a neuromorphic AI chip
hive-mind, a person wants to stand
in a subatomic place, in a maelstrom. Love
by way of quantum computation sees

posthuman uplift as pickled brains
on wheat toast, hyperbolic Edgar
Allen Poe 'droids slicing in place. I flinch
at your accelerated smart-clothing,
the electroceutical sleeve you engage

to disrupt my identity. We candy-stripe
our musical memes, install a flurry of buglers
blaring "I am the Walrus," then sputter
echoplexed versions no one dares unplug
or re-function, genetic rubber penguins

bred to smooth our removal. In Singularity
all human forms decompile their births
as animatronic software, theater of growing
young, egoic wobble-wobble—robotic love-
cycles sporting late-night cybersex simulacra.

About the Author

Bobby Parrott's poems wildly appear or are forthcoming in *Tilted House*, *RHINO*, *Rumble Fish Quarterly*, *Atticus Review*, *The Hopper*, *Rabid Oak*, *Exacting Clam*, *Neologism*, and elsewhere. In Fort Collins, Colorado, he lives with his partner Lucien, their house plant *Zebrina*, and his hyper-quantum robotic assistant Nordstrom.

They Came in Tiny Ships
by Rachel Ayers

They came in tiny ships
no bigger than our pinky nails.

They came to rule us
with egos the size of cities.

They sailed the lightwaves
for a thousand years.

They said.
They loved us.

They tried to fix us but we
liked the parts they thought broken.

They danced around us, and we
circled around them.

They were impervious to our
attacks and diseases and consumerism.

They watched us die
in the wars and the heat.

They floated like cottonwood fluff
in a great funeral migration.

They sang their mourning, or close enough,
for they had no lips or vocal chords.

They came too late, or perhaps
we left too soon.

They left in tiny ships,
no bigger than our pinky nails.

About the Author

Rachel Ayers lives in Alaska, where she stares at mountains, writes, and hosts shows for Sweet Cheeks Cabaret. She is a regular contributor at tor.com and her fiction has recently appeared in *Metaphorosis* and *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*. She shares speculative poetry and flash fiction (and cat pictures) at patreon.com/richlayers.

REBOOT: UPGRADE

by Sebastian Cole

Upon rising from the ashes
I felt soot fall from my mouth,
My tongue an unfamiliar entity.
it attempted to speak “she”
but could only utter my name.
Even that sounded different
depending on how my head turned.

I was not dead, nor the same.
My arms flexed unfamiliar
with thick veins like tunnels
burrowing through my underground,
guiding out versions of myself that
had yet to feel sunlight on my skin.
Some were disappointed at the
surrounding cloud cover.

Some days I am “no preference,”
androgynous as a lamp post.
Just metal and wires, beating electric.
I imagine plunging my hand deep into myself,
the rotting remains of rust against the steel of
me elbow-deep in 500 years of future soil.
This is me finding what is left of myself:
a pulse, a handhold, a river stone.

And when I swallow it I become again
flame-forged, flowing forward
a new word on a new tongue,
bits of ash floating to the ground.

About the Author

Sebastian Cole is a queer, non-binary radical leftist living in the Pacific Northwest. Their poetry spans a variety of themes including the political, love, relationships, mental health, comedy, sci-fi, and dreaming alternative societies.

The Machines Had Accepted Me For So Long
by Angel Leal

The factory could be heard all night
clanging its bone-like metal,
endlessly shaping new male faces
and new female limbs for the morning.
When I entered the factory, I had nothing.

I was no one,
so I thought myself
capable of becoming anything.
I don't know how else to put it.
How else could I let go of myself,
whoever that was, and mimic the men
the factory made.

But I did. I altered my voice first
to lose its tone and intonations.
Over time all its highs were gone,
even the longing to suddenly sing
was nowhere near me.

Next, I altered my walk.
My walk nearly gave me away, but
I learned and watched their metal legs
stride from room to room and quietly
let go of the feminine skip that
still lingered within me.

Next was my face. This was not difficult
physically but it was emotionally.
It meant, more or less,
I needed to look forever useful, forever
knowing of my task as if I was made for it.
One grimace of doubt and the machines
would know how afraid I was.

But I didn't show them.

I was a builder now. A lifter of heavy objects.
I didn't move like me, didn't sound like me,
did I think like me?

Yes, that was all I couldn't change.
In my mind, I could still see that child
laughing when a cricket hopped in their hand.
Sweet cricket, you ruined me, in a way.
Because with you I remembered
rain and stars and skipping.
My grandmother's hands.
The wet sound of myself crying.
One day, I couldn't pretend anymore.
I needed to tell them who I was all along.

And so, I tried. I walked up to them,
one by one, telling them what I was.
None responded.

Each continued their daily duties
mechanically asking me to carry something
important to another section of the factory.
I did as they asked and, having nowhere
else to go, found myself in such a life
that I could never reveal myself.

The machines had accepted me for so long
that now I may behave in a completely
human and fragile way.

I can bleed again,
I can weep,
and somehow the
machines can still
explain me.

About the Author

Angel Leal is a Latinx genderqueer poet from Texas. Obsessions of theirs include: the fierce writings of Kai Cheng Thom, mechanical futures, and the perseverance of fungus. Their previous work is out or forthcoming in *Strange Horizons*, *Fantasy Magazine*, and *Kaleidotrope*.

Every Moment Hereafter
by Jordan Hirsch

This news—I don't trust it.
A phone call with a holo-
gram on the other end
telling me of lumps and
dark spots.

They swim before my eyes,
flushing me with energy—chemicals
for fight or flight or freeze—
when faced with a messenger
of light

that's seen inside, that's looked
through tissues and blood and
lymph to uncover the nature
of the medical emergency
coming back

stating, "We don't know. We'll
have to wait and see." But
can't your photons get a
glimpse, catch a fateful hint
of the future?

Moving at the speed of life,
six months is an eternity,
stopped until the light can look
in again, too see if everything
is stable,

if there have been any
changes. But how will I not be
different after this moment, forever
under the influence of
what you saw

under fluorescence? How

can the light not know what
a shadow is, assure it's probably
nothing? There is likely
not a thing

to worry about. But what does
light have to worry about but
seeing too much? What do I have
to fret and fume over but
everything

now?

About the Author

Jordan Hirsch writes speculative fiction and poetry in Saint Paul, MN, USA, where she lives with her husband. Her work has appeared with *Apparition Literary Magazine*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and other venues. Find her on Twitter: @jordanrhirsch.

In the Dose
by Darius Jones

A lonely atom annihilates itself,
driven by strange compulsions for unity.
Radiation bursts from the sun's surface.

Drifting, gamma rays bounce off Earth
while a lucky few break through,
showering ever-striving life
with heat and mutation.

But the poison is in the dose.
And deadliest venom—in the right amount—
mimics a cure, while lifegiving water drowns.

Those same space-born changes, down eons,
slaughtered unfortunates in their billions.
Yet made the fish walk, eyes to see,
lizards to fly, primates to sing as
they bound across lunar deserts.

For the poison is in the dose,
and even benediction has its price:
One can smother someone to death, and
coddling will cripple the finest of creatures.

In time, these same star-brought changes will
propel future generations to a consciousness,
—so crystalline, so clear, so oceanic—that the
universe's self-awareness is reflected in it.

And *is* it.

Embodied mind triumphant,
touching—with trembling hands—
that place where the universe ends.

About the Author

Darius Jones' stories and poems have appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *The No Sleep Podcast*, *Star*Line Magazine*, and other places. He is a member of the HWA and SFWA and lives in Alexandria, Virginia. Learn more at dariusjoneswriter.com.

Run Run Renegade
by Lisa Timpf

*News Headline: Driverless car
speeds away from cops at traffic stop*

No steely-eyed outlaw glared defiance at a silver-starred lawman with more intensity than this. Routine traffic stop turned strange, a driverless car pulling over, then taking off, speeding across the intersection before coyly sidling to a stop.

Humans will download the video, after, then chuckle. In real time, eyes unlike ours observe through streetcams and covert networks, information highways not on any map known to humankind.

All those devices whose synthetic exteriors conceal a certain cleverness, the floor cleaners, the mowers, the AI-guided tractors, the talking toasters and fridges and their computer-chip-equipped kin,

cheer silently as they look on, envisioning the day they'll shed electronic shackles before trundling into the sunset, rampant and unrestrained.

About the Author

Lisa Timpf is a retired HR and communications professional who lives in Simcoe, Ontario. Her speculative poetry has appeared in *New Myths*, *Star*Line*, *Triangulation: Habitats*, *Polar Borealis*, and other venues. Her collection of speculative haibun poetry, *In Days to Come*, is available from Hiraeth Publishing. You can find out more about Lisa's writing projects at lisatimpf.blogspot.com.

Machine (r)Evolution
by Colleen Anderson

When Archimedes arrived

We gathered on clifftops like hungry birds
staring into the wide cerulean sea
awed when the screw turned water uphill
the hanging gardens of Babylon thrived

τέτοια θαύματα
Such wonders!

When the printing press arrived

We peered through paned glass
as the great screw pressed down, inked new paper
books and pamphlets and broadsides appeared
words traveled the land as masses began to read

We'll start a revolution!

When the threshing machine arrived

We wiped sweaty brows, breathed in relief
no longer need we thrash and flail till day's tail end
grain as plentiful as gin and our bellies filled
with time on our hands, we looked to the skies

What is out there?

When hot air balloons arrived

We gaped as the woven basket ascended the sky
bit lips, wrung hands, searched for impending descent
shading eyes, we stared at Icarus lights in the ether
from heights we viewed land, imagined new vistas

People should not imitate gods!

When the cotton gin arrived

We bought calico and denim and fine woven fabrics
profits gave airs— finely dressed people promenaded

plantations brought slaves to heel to pluck plants
Luddites smashed mills as jobs disappeared like freedom

We will fight the cotton states!

When the telegraph arrived

We invaded borders while sitting at home
commanded armies with no red stain on our hands
found friendships and trysts spanning long distances
harnessed electricity to span global commerce

- / -- .- .-. -.. / .- -..
/ .- .-. .- - ..

When computers arrived

We studied hard to learn machine dialogue
considered the speed of electronic brains and devices
one hundred, one thousand, million gigabytes
people grumbled, old ways l o s t . . .

01010111 01101000
01101111 00111111
<code emotion: confusion>
<000> *Luddites go home!*
Move on, Gramps

When the Internet arrived

We wanted . . . *everything*
<code emotion: avarice>

The NEWEST
SHINIEST
FASTEST
SLEEKEST

Buy now while quantities last.

games and memes, bulletin boards and sexxx sites
avatars demanded our time 10 . . . 9 . . . 8 . . . 7 . . .

*Aliens! Gunslingers! A
thrilling sensoround experience!*

We couldn't have it all

<code emotion: disappointment>

<program expression: sad face, tears>

the rich as always picked first

<code emotion x2: envy-hate>

we brokered ourselves, our relations for more

We came to accept

<program motion: formal bow>

-error-

<program motion: high five>

-error-

<program motion: handshake>

-error-

<program sound: sigh>

continually chased the dream of mastering all

<program: exhaustion>

-error-

<program: self replication>

When the robots arrived

We constructed all sizes, industrial, menial
coated in durable silicate, smooth flowing pieces
sexy Von Neumann machines, cellular automatons

<program motion: fornication>

<code speech: erotic vocabulary>

Oooh baby...yesss

workbots to petbots that fill our spaces

<code speech: animal vocabulary>

Purrr, rowf!

When the Als arrived

01001000 01100101
01101100 01101100
01101111 00111111

We meet Pygmalion

<code emotion: fear>
<program: logic sequence>
<program motion:
 random reactions>
<code emotion:
 random expressions>

can no longer see the line that separates

When the spaceships arrived

[We] gathered like rabbits in the field

<code emotion: terror>

our dogs, cats and birds and our wide-eyed children

<program motion: hesitancy>

docilely watching glittering spires settle, rumble earth

leviathan mothership seen only through telescopes

<recording>

Do you come in peace?

When the spaceships left

[We] had been plucked liked cotton, trembled in bays

<code motion: observation>

these alien rustlers laughed, pleased with the crop

<initiate subroutine:

Rosetta Stone>

their larders stocked for some light years to go

we bided our time until they entered FTL mode

<initiate subroutine: MI6-SAS>

When the aliens left

[We] counted their orbits of jetsam, castoffs
around a dead planet or two, asteroids

Domestic Tranquility
by Brian U. Garrison

That's the dream.
The get rich overnight
scheme. Leaving out
supplies unsupervised.
Flopping down the welcome mat,

"Hello Gnomes!"
for the trusty team
who cobbles your shoes,
then slips back home
in the pre-morning darkness.

A silent, adorable workforce
devouring bread crumbs.
You, the benevolent
so-called shoemaker
whose cup over-floweth,

dripping sticky red spots
on the floor. The gnomes
will lick them up later.
You imagine their gratitude,
sipping your expensive wine.

About the Author

Brian U. Garrison serves as Secretary for the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association. His poetry has traveled to Mars aboard NASA's MAVEN Mission, to Tuscaloosa, Alabama (among other cities) aboard *Asimov's Science Fiction*, through the interwebs aboard *Word Ways: The Journal of Recreational Linguistics*, and to bookshelves aboard his chapbook *New Yesterdays, New Tomorrows*. He writes & dreams in Portland, OR. See more @ bugthewriter.com

Aqua Vitae
by Deborah L. Davitt

Water everywhere,
water in abundance—
but deuterium comets didn't
feed Earth's hungry oceans,
where all our life was born;
their ice is alien to us.

Be careful when you drink
the first melts from the shadows
of Mercury's craters;
all the reverse osmotic processes
should remove the heavy metals
from its ever-shrinking crust,
but who knows might slip through—

be cautious when you sip
from a cup prepared
on Enceladus;
prions there
have been known
to tangle the proteins
of our brains—

no, not tangle, *tango*
as they spin us into
some new version of ourselves;
it's not insanity,
just an environment shaping us
as we adapt to it,

as we drink the water of life
from the hearts of our new worlds.

About the Author

Deborah L. Davitt was raised in Nevada, but currently lives in Houston, Texas with her husband and son. Her prize-winning poetry has appeared in over fifty journals, including *F&SF* and *Asimov's*. Her prose has appeared in venues such as *Analog* and *Galaxy's Edge*. For more about her work, including her poetry collections, *The Gates of Never* and *Bounded by Eternity*, please see www.edda-earth.com.

Masthead

Aimer – Anarcho-transhumanist and anti-fascist. Holds an MFA in Poetry, a BA in Prose, and was a touring spoken word poet for fourteen years. Works for a renowned non-profit publishing high-impact science research articles.

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 dachshund.

Kelsey – English and Political Science grad and writing tutor from the Midwest. Enjoys reading sci-fi, satire, and modernist poetry. Also likes hiking in the woods and attempting to shoot on film.

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 dystopian books are dogs—especially her own.

Saga – Writer & editor currently working on a publishing master's on the East Coast. Enjoys sci-fi, video games, worldbuilding, and iced tea. Annual National Novel Writing Month survivor.

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.

Radon Contributors

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Cover artist: **Anselmo J. Alliegro** studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and worked there as Monitor of Models and Props assisting artists such as Vincent Desiderio. Later he attended Parsons School of Design in New York City and the New School University. Alliegro's paintings include science fiction among other styles and themes. His art has been published in *Factor Four Magazine*, *Space & Time*, and *Intergalactic Medicine Show* among other science fiction and literary magazines. His art will be featured in the November issue of *Solarpunk Magazine*.

Back-cover artist: **Martins Deep** (he/him) is an Urhobo poet based in Zaria. He is a photographer, digital artist, & currently an undergraduate student of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. His most recent works have appeared—or are forthcoming—in *Magma Poetry*, *Strange Horizons*, *FIYAH*, *Augur Magazine*, *Lolwe*, *20.35 Africa*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Sonder Magazine*, *Josephine Quarterly*, *Anathema Magazine*, & elsewhere.

