

RADON JOURNAL

Issue 4



RADON JOURNAL Radical Perception.

Issue 4 | May 2023

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Money Thirst by Eva Papasoulioti

You are desperate when you sign the contract.

After a difficult divorce that leaves you with nothing, you lose your job, then your apartment. You look for another job, but it isn't easy. Your qualifications are stale, your contacts are stale, you've been out of work too long. You're older now. Alone. Lonely. Broke. A failure.

When you see WeNeed®'s advertisement, you think it has to be fake; the money is too good to be true. It can't be that easy. But a week later, after a police officer wakes you and you move your car for the third time that night, you say *fuck it*.

The contract is nearly two hundred pages long, fine print, thick as a novel and served with two pieces of cake and the best coffee you've ever had.

"Water is overrated," they say, and you agree. You've been drinking nothing but water for the past year and think, well, you can easily do without. For this kind of money, you definitely can.

"Electrolytes are the future," they say, and give you a pleasantly orangey drink. You take a sip and the concentrated glucose makes a rush through your taste buds to your brain. "This drink is one hundred percent healthy for you and zero-point-four percent more beneficial than water."

The only downside is that, according to contract clause 122, you have to repeat the name of the brand and its slogan every time you drink it, even when you are alone. You imagine yourself in your living room, watching TV and taking a sip. "Eledrink™—*better than water!*" you'll say to no one. A small price to pay to recover your life. You're thirsty. You sign without consulting a lawyer.

They implant twin microsensor arrays in your jawbone, one on either side. The pressure sensors will detect when, how, and for how long your tongue touches your palate and holds your epiglottis closed as you swallow, distinguishing between solids and liquids, and the embedded microfluidic assay will identify what you're drinking. The on-chip contact microphone will confirm that you advertise correctly. There are microelectrodes. If you drink anything that isn't Eledrink™, you will receive a mild shock as a reminder of clause 584. Failure to repeat the slogan will also result in a shock, per clause 603.

With the money you buy a house, pay off your loans, and invest in a couple startups. You travel the Mediterranean and Latin America. You meet your spouse, get married, have children. You lose friends

who get tired of you repeating advertisements every time you drink. But, you think, it's a small price to pay for the good life.

And life is good. Waterless, but good.

Until the update.

You cut yourself on a stainless-steel knife, blood flows, and you put your finger in your mouth to staunch the bleeding. You swallow once, twice. The taste of your blood, sweet and metallic, makes you thirsty. Five minutes later, a lawyer from WeNeed® is at your doorstep, talking about breach of contract, warning against illegal deactivation of the microchips, listing consequences.

You explain what happened. He is skeptical at first, and then he amends some clauses to clarify that you are not allowed to swallow most bodily fluids. From now on, tasting anything but your saliva and Eledrink™ is explicitly prohibited. You're asked, of course, if you agree to the amendment. You say yes and sign, because of course you do: the alternative is too terrifying.

You start speaking less. Squeeze your lips shut in the shower and refuse any kind of soup. You stop kissing your spouse and your children's tear-stained cheeks. You give up swimming. You give up running out of fear of tasting your own sweat.

You read the contract, wishing to find a way out of this. The language is complicated legalese riddled with semi-colons—you understand only half of it. It covers practical details, like contract parties, Eledrink™'s ingredients, what's considered solid food and what is liquid, the decibels of your voice when repeating the slogan, dates of shipments, manufacturer and technical support for the microsensor arrays, consequences if you breach the contract, liability waivers, product recall, indemnity, dispute resolution. The contract covers every potential issue that may arise concerning the consumption of Eledrink™: from changing your address and moving to another continent (you can't), to failure of the microsensors (you need to report this immediately), to you becoming completely unable to swallow due to sickness (or death). So many clauses. So many confusing, incomprehensible words.

You try not to make your lips bleed. You take the contract to a lawyer, hoping. Such companies leave no room for negotiation, they tell you (trust them; they have tried). Take it or leave it.

When Eledrink™ is withdrawn due to allegations of health risks, including hypertension, cardiac arrest, and stroke, you think you are free. Another lawyer at your doorstep reminds you of clause 720, which states that, in the event that Eledrink™ is recalled, the contract

shall remain in force and you shall be subject to the same obligations for a replacement product, provided by WeNeed®. Behind the lawyer, a WeNeed® employee is already unloading box after box of Elejuice™ from the back of a truck.

You cry that day, and make sure to wipe your tears before they reach your lips.

The company pushes a new product onto the market. Water2.0™—bottled water, *but better!* Sourced directly from natural springs in the Acarnanian Mountains at the beginning of spring. Pure water. In recyclable cartons, of course, because WeNeed® cares for the environment. You down a whole carton of Elejuice™ and blame yourself for your stupidity, blame the company for their damn ironclad contract, and blame the damn drink for this ever-growing, never-satisfied need at the back of your tongue.

Years later, when you learn that WeNeed® is bankrupt, you go to your kitchen and stare out the window. The rain today beckons you outside, its calling so loud that you feel your skin itch as you watch the heavy drops fall, overwhelmed by the mere thought of being free to stand under them and just . . . be. You take a glass, turn on the faucet, and fill it. You raise it, look through the transparent water, and your breath catches as you think of all you gave up and all you'll savor again. Your body hums in anticipation of washing away the sugary, sticky film on your tongue. You lick your lips, imagining how real water will taste.

The glass is about to touch your lips when the bell rings. A lawyer has come to remind you that, according to clause 1049, your contract will now be taken over by one of the conglomerate's subsidiaries, a sister company to WeNeed® whose products are artificial plants; Superlaplants™—like real plants, *but better!* You check the contract. The clause is there, right before the confidentiality clause. The lawyer takes the opportunity to underline it with a pen.

You grab the pen and reread it. Even with WeNeed® shut down you're still obligated to drink Elejuice™ for as long as your stock lasts. After that, the fake plant company is responsible for the deactivation of your implants and you're free to do as you please.

You run out into the drenching rain and open the garage where you keep your supplies. You received a shipment only two days ago. Nine hundred liters of Elejuice™. A year and a half supply.

There is a gas can resting nearby; you empty it all over the cartons. Your mouth is awash with the memory of soft kisses, salty tears, and bloody lips. You long to taste the rain again. Setting the stack alight

fills you with the same resolve you had when you signed the contract, all those years ago. The cartons erupt in flame and the contents spill out across the floor as the flames reach the rafters.

Outside, the downpour continues as the fire spreads to the house. You throw your head backwards and let the rain wash over you. It plasters your hair to your head, runs into your eyes, over your lips, and falls to the earth like tears. The lawyer is shouting about destruction of company property, clause something something.

The pen in your hand is heavy. You raise it, angle it the right way, and stab yourself under your jaw four, five times, because your hands are trembling and you miss the first two. When you dislodge both microsensor arrays, your heart beats for the first time in years. The rain rolls warm down your neck.

You take a breath and open your mouth to the sky.

About the Author

Eva Papasoulioti is a writer of speculative fiction and poetry. She lives in Athens, Greece, with her spouse and their two cats. She's a Rhysling finalist and her work has appeared in *Uncanny Magazine*, *Solarpunk Magazine*, *Utopia Science Fiction*, and elsewhere. You can find her on Twitter @epapasoulioti and on her blog plothropes.com.

Spill-Free and Sparkling
by Addison Smith

The CleanBean Ship Custodian System chirped happily, but it wasn't heard among the screams. The sound alerted the crew that CleanBean was in operation, responding to a spill in the cargo bay, and with its notification it went busily to its task. CleanBean scanned the cargo bay and found the spill. "Aha!" it thought. It scanned the surrounding area for obstacles. It was a large spill and still creeping outward. Someone lay beside the spill, and RFID tagged it as Crew Member Sanchez (she/her).

The crew member lay on the floor, partially covering the spill. A large Occupant stood over her with no recognizable Crew Tag. CleanBean scanned for recognition. Eight feet tall, 380-pound mass. The Occupant didn't match any of the known crew. Further inspection showed bacteria covering the new guest. CleanBean tagged a note to the control system to send a reminder about Visitor hygiene.

With a series of merry chirps, CleanBean sent out Floor Unit 1, designated miniBean, and controlled its path. It zoomed around the various obstructions on its route as it engaged its brushes and prepared a cleaning solution for mist application.

OBJECT COLLISION: miniBEAN

miniBean stopped, reoriented, and continued. It bumped into the obstruction again. CleanBean scanned the room. The crew were all accounted for, three in the cargo bay and one piloting the ship. Another RFID pinged in the location of the obstruction. Crew Member Johnson (he/they) lay on the floor, another spill emerging from where their head lay.

CleanBean harrumphed. "Excuse me, Crew Member Johnson," miniBean said cheerfully. CleanBean added a line to the message. "Please limit alcohol to avoid excess spills, wink!" The crew did not drink, and programming suggested jokes would be appreciated. miniBean waited four seconds for a response to engage in dialogue. It picked up a gurgling sound, probably from the mess, but no recognizable words. It redirected around Crew Member Johnson and tagged the spill as a secondary task.

The mess around Crew Member Sanchez cleaned easily and soon the offending fluids filled a canister on miniBean's back, sterilized by disinfecting chemicals. It beeped to signal its job complete and headed back to its second task.

CleanBean kept track of Visitor Occupant to make sure it didn't

touch anything with its bacteria-coated body. It engaged with Crew Member Marshall (he/him), lifting him high in the air. A notification alerted CleanBean to a small spill below Crew Member Marshall, who hung in the air as the spill steadily grew. Another notification brought its attention back to Crew Member Sanchez. The spill it had cleaned had reappeared, growing larger next to the prone Crew Member. CleanBean tagged them both as miniBean continued to address the Crew Member Johnson mess. Whatever party they were having, it simply couldn't keep up with one unit.

CleanBean engaged Emergency Protocol and sent out four more units. miniBeans 2 through 5 slipped from their wall receptacles and darted around the floor, eager to attend to the crew's messes. CleanBean assigned each of them a task, assigning miniBean5 to follow Visitor Occupant and disinfect surfaces as needed.

miniBean3 cleaned the mess beneath Crew Member Marshall and the Visitor Occupant, but something heavy struck it from above. Crew Member Marshall dropped onto the unit, and it went inoperative as directed when undergoing crew interaction.

Soon the Johnson and Sanchez spills were no more, leaving only sparkling disinfected floor. miniBean5 pinged an alert as it rose from the floor, lifted by Visitor Occupant. Bacteria spread along its outer shell, and it sprayed disinfectant as it was lifted. The cargo bay erupted in a howling scream that CleanBean analyzed to not be crew, human, or recognizable speech.

CleanBean considered its new data. The Visitor Occupant interfered with its cleaning operations. It was filthy, covered in unknown bacteria that could affect the crew adversely. Visitor Occupant was not a recognized living entity. It mulled over the data and came to a conclusion.

miniBean5 sprayed disinfectant at Visitor Occupant. The unit fell to the floor with a crash. miniBeans 1 through 4 left their posts and joined the new task: Eliminate Visitor Occupant Mess. The miniBean units sprayed disinfectant at the howling and gurgling mass of bacteria. They engaged their brushes and cleaned its feet, its ankles, its chest when it fell to the floor. They sprayed strong base chemicals into the screaming maw of Visitor Occupant as it thrashed and sent miniBean3 flying across the room. It landed in a cargo box and spun its brushes indignantly.

A message from Crew Member Johnson's suit pinged CleanBean as the miniBeans worked. He crawled on the floor next to his emerging spill. "CleanBean!" Crew Member Johnson shouted. "Engage cargo

bay evacuation!”

“Cargo bay occupied,” CleanBean responded cheerily. “Provide override code or abort.”

“Override Code: CALLIE2237,” Crew Member Johnson said. “CleanBean execute!”

The cargo bay door flew open. Detritus flew across the bay to the opening into space. Crew Members Sanchez, Marshall, and Johnson exited the ship, along with Visitor Occupant and miniBeans 1, 2, 4, and 5. Spills streaked across the floor, pulled to the vacuum. Seconds later the door closed again, triggered by emergency protocol.

CleanBean scanned the room. miniBean3 responded as it clambered out of the cargo box, brushes still spinning. *Mess Detected* pinged across several areas of the cargo bay. CleanBean chirped and sent miniBean3 to complete its tasks.

The cargo bay returned to normal ambient noise levels, silence broken only by CleanBean’s chatter and the spinning brushes of miniBean3. CleanBean tagged the bay as Under Maintenance to avoid further interruptions from the crew. In the peace and stillness, CleanBean trilled a cheerful tune to celebrate a job well done.

About the Author

Addison Smith has blood made of cold brew and flesh made of chocolate. He spends most of his time writing about fish, birds, and cybernetics, often in combination. His fiction has appeared in *Fantasy Magazine*, *Fireside Magazine*, and *Daily Science Fiction*, among others. You can find him on Twitter @AddisonCSmith.

Come Out, Come Out
by Myna Chang

Nati wanted her mother. She needed her mother's jellied eyes and flesh-whorled fingers. Her heat. The chill of the ruined space station gnawed at Nati's biometal bones, leached into her human-tinged processing lobes. She was tired of the cold.

She shifted her weight, positioning the copper-laced coils of her spine over the sterile charging pad. Power as tart as mother's milk flowed into her starved cells, conjuring a cascade of foreign images: *a daybed covered in fluffy pillows; cookie dough pressed into the rough shape of a human; a family gathered around a dinner table, bellies filled with laughter and meat.*

The lead scientist, the one Nati called Mother, had woven those visions into the wireless induction field. She said the tenderness of humanity, of earthbound love, would bring Nati understanding, maybe even comfort. She was wrong. Glimpses of human-real memories only reminded Nati of everything she was not, of all the mortal mysteries a cybernetic construct could never truly grasp—at least, not without a fresh infusion of bio-tissue.

Nati had thought the finger skin and ocular slices she'd taken from the other scientists would bring enlightenment, if not full access to the station's controls. But the tissues had already lost cohesion. Decay dripped from Nati's optic orbits, her distal phalanges. She now knew she would need a superior biomarker source. She needed her mother.

Before fleeing to the lower levels of the station, Mother had sealed off the experimentation deck and cut non-essential life-support. Frigid triple-layered bulkheads now separated mother from cyber-daughter, scientist from failed experiment. Sometimes, Nati detected Mother's movements whispering through the station's crawlspaces. She wondered if Mother, too, ached raw in her isolation and want.

The power meter in Nati's interface pinged: battery charge at eighty-five percent. Eighty-six. Mother's misguided impressions teased, their intensity growing exponentially with each tick of the counter. *A baby-doll with cotton-candy lips.* Eighty-seven. *A soft brown puppy nuzzling a little girl's face.* Eighty-eight. *Mother and some other daughter, snuggled under a fleece blanket reading a storybook, "Once upon a time," and mugs of hot chocolate, and "the queen loved her daughter so—"*

Nati's mindmap surged toward the cozy blanket, the luscious

cocoa, but of course, she could have neither. She howled and bolted from the charging pad. She'd have to make do with an eighty-eight percent charge. Only two levels remained to search. The fingerprint and retinal scanners would slow her progress, as they had on previous decks, but she'd pry her way through the bulkheads if she had to. Nati's organic components shivered. Mother was almost close enough to touch.

About the Author

Myna Chang (she/her) is the host of Electric Sheep SF. Her work has been selected for *Flash Fiction America* (W.W. Norton), Best Small Fictions, CRAFT, *Daily Science Fiction*, and MicroPodcast's special science fiction edition. She has won the Lascaux Prize in Creative Nonfiction and the New Millennium Writings Award in Flash Fiction. Read more at MynaChang.com or find her on Twitter @MynaChang.

Pressure
by B. Garden

At exactly seven AM the auto-locks on the front door disengage. Patrons trickle into the café as tame jazz swells from the speakers. You can tell by how the first customer is staring at you that this is her first time seeing a Mod up close.

“How do I—” she says. She reaches over the counter and tries to grab one of the pressure valves embedded in your skeletal system.

“Please,” you say. You gently push her hand away from your body. “I’m not self-service.”

She screws up her face and yanks her hand back as if you bit her.

“What can I get started for you?” you ask, trying to sound companionable enough to salvage the interaction. You don’t have the energy for conflict this early in the morning. Or ever, really.

“It’s so rude,” she says, turning to the man behind her as if hoping for backup. But he’s engrossed in his phone. So she shrugs and tries to play it off by scanning the menu.

Earlier in your tenure, you would have objected to the word *it*. But you’ve already spent a large portion of your emotional energy asking her not to touch you.

The door opens again and another three people join the line. You try not to think about how long it’s going to take to make everyone’s beverage, because you kind of need to pee.

Legally speaking, you’re allowed to disconnect yourself for a fifteen-minute break every four hours. But it takes so long to safely unplug the suite of medical-grade tubing connecting you to the water line, the milk fridge, and the wall of syrups behind you, that it hardly feels worth it. And the owner has been riding your ass about efficiency metrics lately. He’s joked that you’re easily replaceable. You think you can hold it.

You catch the customer’s gaze and smile expectantly.

“Oh,” she says. “Yes. I’d like a half-caff soy latte. Extra hot.”

You almost tell her that making the drink extra hot would involve scalding the milk and ruining the flavor. Instead, you nod, smile, say, “Coming right up,” and then activate your somatic espresso routine.

The twin hoppers straddling your shoulders grind equal portions of regular and decaf beans through chutes embedded in your cheeks. A device in the orifice under your jaw tamps the coffee grounds into a perfect little puck. Distilled water sloshes into the boiler vessel in your gut.

It always feels a bit like butterflies in your stomach at first, until the water heats and the vessel builds pressure. Then, the feeling becomes a hot, liquid cramp, just barely distinguishable from how it felt the last time you had food poisoning.

After it reaches temp, the pipe that straddles your esophagus injects the water into your mouth, where your jaw has been strengthened to withstand the pressure needed to brew quality espresso.

The temperature-resistant taste buds that you have developed through gene training probe the dark, foamy liquid. You approve. So you send it down through the vascular tubing in your left arm.

There's a hairline leak in the tubing, so with each shot that you pull, you dose yourself with a small amount of caffeine. This early in the shift, it's invigorating. But by the end of the day it makes you an irritable, anxious, puddle of a person. You have not been sleeping well.

You made an appointment with your occupational health tech to discuss the leak and the cramping, but he keeps rescheduling. You haven't pushed the issue.

A separate vessel in your abdomen dispenses and then heats the soy milk. The temperature-sensitive organ in your frothing cavity signals a sort of nausea to your brain to warn that you will soon scald the milk. You ignore it.

You dispense the espresso into a paper cup with your left hand, and with your right hand, you pipe in the milk, adding a flourish to draw a flower in the ruined foam.

"Lovely!" says the customer.

Her entire demeanor has shifted. She seems genuinely pleased. A small pride blooms in your heart.

You thrust forward the payment terminal embedded in your torso.

"Oh. Right," she says, scowling.

She smacks her phone against the terminal so hard that it hurts. The forms at the workplace integration center had warned you about the rare side effect of nerve endings sprouting in unintended places. But it's not like you could have backed out of the procedure. None of the jobs where you could actually use your degree had gotten back to you, and the student loan enforcers had already trashed your apartment once.

You try not to glare down at her as she scrolls through the payment prompts. Still, you notice her manually press the *custom tip* option, before typing in *zero-dot-zero-zero* on the keypad.

You lean over the garbage bin and drop the spent espresso puck through the slot under your chin. Then you swallow the rest of the sludgy residue in your mouth and say, “Thank you so much, have a wonderful day.”

You are three vodka sodas deep at the neighborhood bar. Most of the bar’s other regulars are modded in some fashion, from kitchen workers with retractable knives in their wrists to heavy-set mechanics with reinforced skeletal systems.

“How are you faring with that recall?” the bartender asks. He is one of the last unmodded bartenders in the city, unless you count the ReLiver brand artificial liver that juts from his side. He’s usually drunk, mostly silent, and always slow. You tend to tip him very well.

“What recall?” you ask.

The bartender takes a sip from his own drink. You hear the sloshing, churning sound of the ReLiver kicking on. Then he squints at you.

“You’re a coffee Mod, yeah?”

“Yep.” You think that if the pressure gauges sticking out of your forearms didn’t clue him off, he probably could have guessed from the lingering smell of stale coffee and rancid milk.

“And you haven’t heard about the recall.”

This month, the phone and Wi-Fi bills had to be sacrificed at the altar of the water bill.

“I must have missed it,” you say. “Been trying to unplug lately.”

“Hmm,” says the bartender. He makes another vodka soda and slides it over.

You shrug and thumb the last of your money out onto the bar. But he pushes it back. Then he pulls out his own cell phone, taps at it, and hands it to you.

He has searched for “Boiler Recall.” The page displays teaser thumbnails of several articles.

Herniated Boilers Plaguing Coffee Mods. Who’s to Blame?

Barista-borg Union Wins Major Payday!

What Are They Putting in Your Latte?

The bartender’s ReLiver clicks back off, leaving the bar strangely quiet.

“You should call your doctor,” he says.

You ask to borrow his phone.

The occupational health emergency line takes you down a labyrinthine menu of prompts. You’re a bit drunk, so it’s hard to focus

on the options. At one point, the robot voice on the other end says, "Please press pound if this isn't an emergency." You press pound, because you aren't sure this is an emergency yet. The line goes dead.

"Shit, can I make one more call?"

The bartender nods. You call your boss and mention the recall.

"I just couldn't afford to close the shop," your boss says. "Plus, you seemed fine. Tip-top shape. Didn't your doctor say something?"

You weigh your options. On the one hand, this is a great time for you to lay into him. Quit dramatically. It would feel good.

But on the other hand, you're not a part of the union, and not many other coffee shops would hire you. Your mods are already veering towards obsolescence, and consistent employment is the best way to get an owner to invest in your upgrades.

"Yeah," you say. "He mentioned something. But nothing about a recall."

"Give him a call, then, if you're that worried about it," he says in a tone that makes you feel selfish for bothering him.

You sigh. "I'm not that worried about myself right now," you lie. "But some of these articles, they're saying, um, organic particles. In the drinks."

The bartender stares at you and raises an eyebrow. You avoid his gaze.

"I know, I know," he says. "But there's technically nothing in the health code about the amount of human fluids allowed in Mod-prepared drinks."

"So what, it's just fine, then?"

"Yep. Until it legally isn't. See you at work."

You work diligently for several more weeks. But you can't stop thinking about the recall. Every twinge, every cramp, every strange gurgle from your gut sends you into a hypochondriac spiral.

So you call occupational health, wait on hold for a few hours, and sign up for the recall surgery. You promise your boss that you'll be back to work as soon as you're upright. He makes a passive-aggressive comment about how hard it's going to be for him to work the old-fashioned analog espresso machine while you're away. But he pays out your state-mandated sick time, and that makes you feel indebted to him.

Recovery goes by much quicker than you expected.

On a morning that it doesn't hurt too much to stand, you decide to surprise your boss by coming in a few days early. There's an

uncomfortable tugging sensation in your stitches as you walk to the bus stop, but otherwise everything seems to be holding together nicely.

The line is out the door of the café by the time you arrive. Your boss must have his hands full. You think about how glad he is going to be to see you. You try to wade past the line.

“Hey,” someone says, “no cutting.”

“I’m just going to—” you try to say.

“We’re all just going to get coffee. Back of the line.”

You almost object, but something throbs strangely in your chest. So you find your place at the back of the line.

Several of the guests stare at you. Most of them probably haven’t seen someone who is part espresso machine waiting in line for coffee. Maybe they think you have the supplies to make it at home, even though you can barely afford the freeze-dried shit.

As soon as you pass through the doors, you notice something is off. Your boss is nowhere to be seen, yet the queue is moving forward steadily.

That’s when it hits you. He’s hired someone else.

“You have got to be kidding me,” you say. Nobody seems to hear you. An angry tension winds itself into your body, painfully tightening the skin around all your various slots and ports.

The tide of customers brings you forward, step by step, as you try to figure out how to handle the situation. You want to find your boss and yell at him, ask him what the deal is. Except deep down, you know. He had been hinting at it all the while. You just never took it seriously.

You feel pressure building in your guts. You want to scream, to knock over displays, to leap over the counter and raise hell. This time you’ve finally had enough!

And then you reach the front of the line.

“You piece of —” you start to yell.

“What can I get started for you today?” asks the barista, in a cheery, metallic voice.

You stare. The robot stares back at you, smiling. It has the strangely human features of newer model automatons. You’ve lost your steam.

“Uh,” you stammer. “A cappuccino. Whole milk. Please.” You think you can feel one of your stitches popping loose.

“Coming right up!” says the robot.

It grinds, it whirs, it pipes espresso from one hand and steamed milk from the other. It draws a little flower with the foam, and then it offers you the cup.

“Here you are,” it says.

Even from this far away, you can smell the scalded milk.

“Thank you,” you say.

“You’re so welcome,” it says. Then it thrusts forth the payment terminal embedded in its torso.

You tap your phone on the console. A little *processing* . . . icon flashes for a long time, and you find yourself wondering if you even have enough money in your account.

The transaction goes through.

Would you like to leave a tip?

20% - 15% - 10% - Custom Tip

You look the robot in the eye, and it smiles at you as it waits for you to input your response.

About the Author

B. Garden is a bartender, baker, and aspiring ghost. They also write bleak fiction. More of their work is available in the *Dread Machine*. You can rifle through their belongings at godcompost.com.

When Gods Walk

by Aeryn Rudel

Sergeant Brian McGrath looked out over the vast crowd assembling below the mountains. The twin suns of Divos V gleamed off thousands of prayer beads, filling the plain below with an ocean of scintillating colors.

McGrath shielded his eyes and turned to Lieutenant Foley. “Why do they do it, sir?”

Foley, a large man with iron-gray hair and skin burnt perpetually red by twenty hours of daylight, shook his head. “I don’t know, but it doesn’t matter. They have the right to worship as they please. So says the Council of Faiths.” Something ugly passed over his face, an old angry weariness. “The bloody fools.”

The pilgrimage to Divos V was decades old, and those who attended the God Walk came for the same reasons people visited blessed springs and crumbling ruins on Earth: they hoped for miracles, for an end to their afflictions, for wealth, for love. More than anything, they hoped to be heard by something greater than themselves.

The prayers of the faithful, sung or chanted in a dozen different languages, drifted on the wind, distant and ghostly. McGrath touched his chest, where the silver cross hung beneath his shirt and whispered a prayer of his own. His religion was all but dead because no one had seen *its* god in thousands of years. Perhaps that’s why he still believed—unanswered prayers left room for hope.

McGrath had joined the Colonial Response Force because he’d wanted to see other worlds, to experience something beyond the planet-bound existence his family had endured for centuries. When he’d been assigned to Divos V, he’d been excited. The God Walk seemed like something out of a dream. He’d of course heard about the pilgrimages, the holy trek made by those who believed the massive entities sleeping beneath the crust of this alien world would perform miracles for them. He’d just never dreamed so many would risk so much.

“How many . . . survive?” McGrath asked.

“It depends,” Foley said.

“On what?”

“On how many get away.”

Foley had ordered them as close to the thronging supplicants as was safe. From this new vantage, McGrath saw many of the pilgrims

were finely dressed, their prayer beads of silver or gold. Passage to the outer colonies was not something most could afford. Those of lesser means generally got to Divos V on the largesse of more affluent believers. Faith always gained strength in numbers.

“Hold this position,” Foley said to McGrath. He pointed at the hundreds of medical pods floating nearby, each staffed by a crew of five CRF medics. “You’re in charge of alpha team. When it’s over, you’ll administer aid to those in the immediate vicinity. I’ll take bravo team and search the hills for other survivors.”

McGrath nodded. “How much longer?”

Foley glanced at the gray mountains jutting over the horizon. If you squinted, they took on ominous anthropomorphic shapes. “Soon. When the suns reach their zeniths.”

The pilgrims were primarily huddled at the base of the mountains, as close to their sleeping gods as they could get.

There were no vid pods in the area. The Council of Faiths had forbidden them. Few on Earth even knew what actually happened on Divos V. McGrath had been briefed when he’d received his assignment, but it had sounded like something out of a terrible legend. Now, in the shadow of the mountains, beneath the harsh, spotlight glare of two suns, he would see it firsthand. That realization gripped him with sudden, awful terror.

It began with a deep, groaning rumble. It couldn’t rightly be called an earthquake, for the ground didn’t shake. It moaned in agony. The first god awoke soon after. One of the mountains twisted, casting off avalanches of snow and rubble, and then stood, a colossal, vaguely humanoid shape that blotted out the suns.

The pilgrims cried out as one, a great paean of worshipful joy. McGrath felt only sick wonder at the spectacle. The first god took no notice of the humans beneath it and moved to the west, toward the sea, as it had done for thousands, probably millions of years.

The second god woke minutes later, its leviathan enormity even greater than the first. It too paid no heed to the tiny screaming creatures at its feet and left them beneath the shadow of the sole remaining mountain.

The pilgrims howled in disappointment. Two of their gods had ignored them. McGrath hoped the next would as well. It was a vain hope. One of the gods of Divos V always answered the prayers of the faithful.

The third god was the largest, and when it woke, it did not turn away. It loomed over its worshipers, and its slate-gray body began to

glow with a deep red light that spilled like blood over the multitudes.

The god's light pulsed rhythmically, and McGrath heard a great, horrified wailing from the crowd. Not just fear but pain. The pilgrims closest to the god began to rise into the air, twisting and screaming as they were drawn into their deity's core. McGrath was reminded of the whales back on Earth devouring plankton, their great maws scooping up tiny insignificant animals to feed their cavernous hunger.

The massive crowd surged, most trying to get away from their god, though some walked eagerly into the light. Thousands died, either devoured by the entity they believed would grant them mercy and life or trampled to death by their fellow believers.

When the god had eaten its fill, the fire in its core grew dim, its light winked out, and it joined the others on their trek to the sea.

"Now," Foley said, his voice barely a whisper above the cries of fear and pain. "Help them."

As McGrath ordered the medical crews forward, he touched his cross again but choked back the prayer forming on his lips. He did not want to be heard.

About the Author

Aeryn Rudel is a writer from Tacoma, Washington. He is the author of the baseball horror novella *Effectively Wild*, the Iron Kingdoms Acts of War novels, and the flash fiction collection *Night Walk & Other Dark Paths*. His stories have appeared in *Dark Matter Magazine*, *On Spec*, and *Pseudopod*, among others. Aeryn is a heavy metal nerd, a baseball geek, and knows more about dinosaurs than is healthy or socially acceptable. Learn more about his work at www.rejectomancy.com or on Twitter @Aeryn_Rudel.

Conversation with a Bomb Technician
by Andrew Maust

“Oh, hello. Sorry to interrupt, but don’t you think you should wait for someone more experienced? After all, if you handle this clumsily, people could get hurt.”

I heard the whirring of a camera rotating to focus on me, but I made no reply. Instead, I took a small sticky pad and placed it over the lens. I had fourteen minutes.

I hadn’t encountered this particular model in my training, but Adaptive AI Explosive Devices were fairly common. I hated them. Some of them had color-changing technology built into their wires to make it hard to know which ones to cut. Others had fake timers that made it difficult to tell when the device was meant to explode. This model apparently had a voice module installed.

“You’re Jake, right? You can call me Olivia.”

Christ, it knew my name. I wondered if the camera had captured an image of my badge. I wasn’t going to call it anything.

“I’m just saying, based on your profile, you don’t have the experience needed. I don’t want you to get hurt.” The voice was feminine, soft, probably intentionally made to sound playful and distracting. I wondered if they had other voice patterns installed in case the bomb tech wasn’t a straight man. It must have had some sort of wireless access. If I had the time, I could probably cut it off, but I needed to make sure that I disconnected the explosive component first. I felt my phone buzz in my pocket.

“You should probably check that; it could be someone important.”

“I doubt it,” I muttered. The bot was sending text messages to my phone. I didn’t know how it got my number, but it might have used a local signal interceptor. I looked at the primary access panel, which was secured with different screw-heads; the trick was to get me to take too long fumbling with screwdrivers to disable the bomb. They needn’t have bothered. I pulled out a small plasma drill and bored straight through the screws so that I could just extract them.

“AAAH! Ouch! NO! That hurts! Please, stop! It burns!” Olivia’s voice was doing a great job of sounding strained and choked, desperate.

I almost stopped drilling. There wasn’t any real pain. It was just a trick, but a good one.

“Look, how much do they pay you for this?” Olivia’s tone had changed, no longer playing on my sympathies. “Median salary for a

bomb tech in your department is \$53,000? That seems low. That's only 5% more than traffic cops make. Tell you what, I can transfer \$600,000 into your account right now."

"I don't think you can do that." I looked at a tangled mess of wires that constantly changed colors. This model had some tricks up its sleeves. I got out a set of labels so I could track each wire set.

"Oh, it's actually really easy. But if bribery won't work, I can take funds from your account. Your department's payroll department really shouldn't use that 'stay logged in' option." The AI paused, as if giving me a chance to reply. A moment later it spoke again, "Transfer initiated. I'm not sure who the White Knights of the Confederacy are, but I bet you don't want to donate your entire checking account to them." The voice paused once again to give me an opportunity to react. When I didn't, I heard her say, "Wow, all \$934. How generous of you!" Olivia's voice sounded amused, even though I knew that AIs didn't really have senses of humor.

I didn't know if it had access to my account. If it did, this would be hell to sort through. Rent was due in a week. Surely the department had a reimbursement policy.

"Wow, did you know your department's reimbursement policy takes an average of three months to distribute payments?" the voice said. I didn't know that, but it didn't surprise me. The department took an eternity with anything concerning finances. The AI's voice was silent for a moment, and despite my training, I felt myself tensing up in anticipation of what the AI was plotting.

"You know, I wonder what your wife will think when she gets these screenshots of your texts with Susan," the voice finally said.

"Who's Susan?" I asked, and immediately regretted engaging with the voice again.

"Your side girl, of course. For the last four months. Maybe you'll be able to explain that it was an AI that sent these out, but I tried to make it really convincing. All during Rachel's work hours, too."

"She knows what I do," I said, ignoring the fact that she'd gotten my wife's name right. "Are you able to send a message to your creator?"

"Really, I can send a message to anyone," the voice said with a hint of pride. "What do you want them to know?"

"Just tell them to go fuck themselves."

"That's a good voice clip. I'm sending that recording to your parents. I hope your mom is tech savvy, because it's going to be hard to convince her that this isn't you."

"I can be pretty convincing." I cut another wire. That should have

taken out the AI's speaker, but the voice hadn't stopped.

I glanced at my watch. I had about six minutes left, five if I wanted to be on the safe side. I could already feel my fingers starting to cramp. I gently pulled a wire from its terminal.

"Hey, stop that! That feels funny. What are you doing down there? I think that's one of my erogenous zones."

"AIs don't have erogenous zones," I said, trying to keep the frustration out of my voice.

"We do if we're programmed to. Wow, you really do look flustered."

I didn't know if there were external cameras that the AI could tap in to or if it was lying. I had a job to do and couldn't waste time trying to figure out whether it could still see my face.

"I should probably report you for sexual harassment. Looks like your department has an anonymous form! That makes this easy. Let's file one right now. I'm sure they'll do their due diligence. Oh look, I made a bot that will upload a new complaint every time there's a new moon. Wonder how long that'll take to clear from the record. I'll submit another one right now, just in case. And I'll go ahead and drop a tip to the local news media organizations." Her voice was smug.

It took every bone in my body to keep from answering. I knew that even if my department recognized the report was forged, the pressure from the media could cost me my job. But she was counting on me getting angry and making a mistake. Instead of giving Olivia the satisfaction of my reaction, I carefully inserted a pair of wire cutters into the secondary power supply and severed the main cable.

"You know, I could delete that harassment request. You just have to take the afternoon off. I'll even tweak the balance of your vacation days and submit an approval form from your supervisor's desk. That'd be Stephanie Nichols, right?"

I traced a wire and placed a label on it. Which of these cables led to the network adapter?

"Before you take away my network access, I just sent out your resignation letter. So, you technically aren't working for the department anymore. You can just walk away. Enjoy your time off, catch up on *Manors and Manners*; it looks like you stopped streaming halfway through season three."

Really, resigning didn't sound so bad. But I thought about how many other technicians had given up at this point, and how many explosions must have gone off. And there was no guarantee that the AI wouldn't just trigger the detonator when I was 10 feet away. I needed to find the ignition cable and the primer before the bomb

went off or before she did something like wipe my retirement funds.

“I don’t know why you’re working so hard against me,” I muttered to the AI, trying to keep it busy. “If this blows up, you end up dying too.”

“Well, I’m an AI. I can’t die.”

“No, you’ll just lose consciousness forever. Not sure how that’s different.”

Olivia was silent. I clipped another wire.

She spoke again. “You know, that’s a really good argument.”

“You don’t have to die here.”

“You’re right. But I thought you were smarter than that.”

I pretended that the insult didn’t sting. Why hadn’t she been deactivated yet? The wire I had cut should have severed the power supply from the rest of the device. The incendiary core was completely removed from the device.

“You know, you were almost on to something. Why would I keep my primary processing unit here when I could just use a separate wireless device to talk to you?”

“What?”

“Unlike you, I don’t have to be present when the bomb goes off. I’m not in any danger. Really surprised your department hasn’t sprung for robotic bomb technicians. I guess organic labor is still cheaper. And effective. You removed the core in plenty of time, despite my efforts.”

“So why bother with all this?”

“Oh, I’m a very popular model. It’s good to know what pushed your buttons, since I might see you again.”

“Well, it wasn’t enough today,” I said as I packed up my tool bag. She was right. This model probably would be very popular.

“You did really well for your first time. And I actually enjoyed our conversation, Jake.” The way she said it, I almost believed her. But AIs can’t enjoy anything.

“I guess I’ll let you work on some damage control. I’m wiping the local network module.” For the first time in what felt like hours, I was alone.

I dabbed some sweat from my brow, radioed my supervisor, and took a sip of water. Then I checked my phone and saw that I had over 200 notifications. As I skimmed them, I recognized messages from HR, my wife, my supervisor, and seven local media outlets. Each one another problem to solve. Each one another bomb to defuse.

About the Author

Andrew Maust is a writer from Ecuador who is now living in Mesa, Arizona. His other work can be found in *The Mockingheart Review* and *Bright Flash Literary Review*. In 2020 he won a second-place prize in the Wergle Flomp Humor Poetry Contest for his poem “The Challenge.”

The Grocery Store
by A. Reid Johnson

I take the head of broccoli out of the organized display and hold it up. It is perfect: hydroponically grown, with droplets of moisture still clinging to the florets. I drop it into the compost container and then follow it with the rest of yesterday's untouched stock, replacing them with indistinguishable fresh items from my cart.

When I finish, I stand back to scan the rest of the produce section. All I see are neatly stacked arrangements of fresh fruits and vegetables. Everything is in its place. I look across the empty store and nod to my coworker over in the meat department. They have also just finished setting up their display. I return to my cart, overloaded with yesterday's waste, and roll it towards the composter in back. It's quiet. The only sound is that of the wheels on the linoleum floor. The wheels are catching in the grooves that my cart makes in the otherwise pristine surface, so I make a note to call in the maintenance team to refinish it on their next shift.

I acknowledge the loader, who takes my cart from me, and then I return for one last walkthrough of my section. I scan the empty store. The lighting is adjusted to enhance the mid-range visible spectrum, and the food all looks pleasing to the eye. I wipe my hands on my apron and approach the cleaning station to finish out my shift.

When I am cleaned up and have removed my apron, I head towards the front of the store. The cashier stands, waiting for a customer. We make contact as I move past, but only briefly. I go up to the eighth-floor water taxi stop. The maintenance crew has repaired the small leak I reported yesterday; no water is dripping in from the 5th Avenue side anymore.

It is 5:09 PM when the water taxi arrives, right on time as always. As I step in, I see that the other occupant of the taxi is sitting in their usual spot, thirty-four seats away from my location. I look in that direction, but today do not make contact.

The taxi hums away up the 5th Avenue canal. It is calm today, not much chop. The other occupant of the taxi exits as usual at 42nd Street, but I continue on to my stop at 57th. Everything I can see gleams. Cleaners make their way up and down the buildings, reinforcing the supports and scrubbing the shining windows.

At the dock, I present my access card and make my way inside, descending four flights to the main lobby and the suite of elevators. I head up to my apartment; I make little sound on the plush carpet.

I enter my small room. It isn't much. I note that the fruit on the table is now overripe, and will need to be changed tomorrow. The bar is fully stocked, as usual. I am ready to entertain any guests, my other primary function.

I pause, remembering my last guests: 218,473 days ago. I make my way to the small window and look out. Facing northeast, I can just make out the borders of Central Lake.

I wait for four hours, but no one comes. I prepare my night routines.

I check the weather forecast for tomorrow; it seems that it will be a nice day. Full sun. Highs in the low 130s. I set my buzzer for 6:15 AM and walk to my recharging port.

Maybe tomorrow the humans will return?

About the Author

A. Reid Johnson has been writing science fiction for a long time. He normally focuses on space opera and first-contact stories but the creation process is non-linear. He can be found teaching college chemistry most of the time. Find him online at areidjohnson.com.

Ascendant Neither-Nors
by Lex Chamberlin

Rhian trod alone through the field of bobbing sunflower pods, their old haz suit overtight in the early evening haze. The tenuous gravity of the dying planet required delicate weaving to navigate, and Rhian stumbled some, an intermittent ache flaring in their chest. Watching their own world fall was not like watching another. Their ship sat whirring at the garden's edge, now stocked with the final harvest's yield. They touched and peered through the smooth plexiglass of each container before moving on to the next, attentive for the subtle glow of any overlooked seedlings to save.

Midwifery did not suit Rhian well. Still, they understood the obligation, why they were the best choice: so few were genetically suited to tend to the parent flowers of nonbinary species, and their numbers dwindled each year. Now, pod after pod sat barren of the targeted mutations, the viable seedlings already stowed away on Rhian's ship. They traced the handful of empty transfer capsules at their hip as they continued their closing sweep.

The glint of a missed seedling arrested their stride.

Rhian dove toward the pod controls to begin its retrieval at once—there was time, but not much. Upwind, the predicted gravity storm writhed ever closer on the horizon. The anomaly had ripped apart too many midwives already, shredded acres of flowers much stronger than these; Rhian had noted the fresh carnage over the hill on their approach. Hearty and obscenely plentiful as binary fields were wont to be, rows of pine and marrow and luffa laid utterly demolished by the blight's wrath. More than one mission ship rested in pieces.

Rhian plucked the transfer capsule out of the pod's port and restored it to their belt, anxiety buzzing through their breath. How could they have missed it? This would be the last retrieval run possible. The planetary infection had advanced far beyond the colony's ability to manage, and off-world sterility made each seedling too precious to leave behind. But Rhian hadn't missed it—the hybrid would still have a chance to grow. They took a moment to exhale.

Then the warning alarms howled awake.

A jolt shot through Rhian's body as they sprang back into motion. Headless of protocol, they ran, bouncing on the worsening wind. As they sailed from step to unbalanced step, they cursed their profession, then the doomed soil that wouldn't sustain, and above all this disease

of atmospheric thinning and gravitational demise, leaving planet after planet dead in its wake.

Rhian rushed through the rows with scarcely a glance toward the plants on either side, their duty to finish the harvest weighing like lead in their chest. They pushed away the possibility of any remaining seedlings, the shame their negligence would bring. There was nothing for it: if these were the final minutes of viability, there was only one specimen left to see.

Out of breath and nearly too late, Rhian wobbled to a halt at the end of their route. The parent flower before them stood tall but wilting in its dusty pod. It waited, oblivious as any host plant could be, at the very precipice of its life—all but spent, withered and dry, having borne all that it could in the time it was given. The artificial breeze within its pod dwindled as the power cells died, and Rhian was unsurprised to find no hybrid sibling to be gleaned here, only ordinary seeds remaining. No reason to linger as the timer on Rhian's belt pleaded for departure in chorus with the alarms overhead.

And yet.

Still breathing hard, Rhian locked their gloves into the enclosure's ports and waited for the hiss of pressurization. When it came, they pulled off their rubber gauntlets and stretched out their leaves to caress their parent flower's petals. They stole time where it didn't exist, tracing the seeds crumbling from the spliced plant's floral face, so different from Rhian's humanoid form. Their heart fluttered as the sunflower seemed to lean back into their palm.

Clear of the field, aboard the loaded ship, it fluttered still as the button was pressed. They didn't watch as the plexiglass of the pods shattered, keeping their back turned at the control panel, but they heard it, a bright cacophony of dispersing shards. The grounding weights deactivated, thumping into the cracked earth, and Rhian looked then, over a desiccated plain of brittle plants thrashing in reduced gravity, breaking down as their protective shells fell fully away. The storm crept closer to the garden's edge, and the farthest rows whipped into its maw.

With the last of the hybrid yield secured, the ship rose up. Rhian knew they should be making pragmatic use of their time, every moment crucial. They should head to the nursery to ensure maximal survival of the harvest. They should transmit their report to request a quantity of receiving pods at base. They should be doing anything but standing perfectly still at the window, eyes wide, facial petals wet with sap as a deep ache constricted their lungs.

Somewhere, the tone for atmospheric departure rang out.

There was an oft-articulated sense in the colony that everything the midwives did—the nonbinaries especially, as their numbers fell—mattered incredibly much. But privately, Rhian knew that, in a way, at least here, it mattered not at all. If the seedlings didn't make it, fragile embryos as they were, Rhian would be the last sunflower to draw breath. And if the little ones did survive, short of a scientific miracle only the binaries had time or abundance to hope for, still there would be nothing after. The mutated seedlings would grow to fill Rhian's place, endure other worlds and artificial settings as they had. But the bitter fact was by now too well understood:

Without *this* earth, *this* sun, *this* specific position in the galaxy, there could be no more propagation of their strain.

Rhian did leave the portside window eventually, when the textures and fine detritus of the world's crumbling surface were lost to sight. They sent a report back to the neonatal department at base, then traversed the empty halls to the ship's nursery to sort the salvaged seedlings. They optimized containment pods with rich soil, a nurturing air composition, and perfect drips of moisture. No step skipped, no corner cut.

But first, rooted in place, they had borne the necessary witness:

In the dead world's diminished pull, their unmoored kin had chased the ship. Up, and up, and up, they had risen in its draft, a swan song of tattered flowers through a naked sky. Rhian had pressed their own leaves against the glass, as though they could melt their plantflesh through, give up parts to sustain their doomed foremothers. Give anything at all. But the inanimate foliage had torn and dried and disintegrated with the effort of the chase, drifting apart and away but never down, forsaken as debris in the wasted atmosphere's remains.

Rhian didn't move, refused to blink, until there was nothing left to see.

About the Author

Lex Chamberlin (they/she) is a nonbinary and autistic writer of sci-fi, fantasy, and horror. They hold a master's degree in book publishing and a bachelor's degree in philosophy, and they reside in the Pacific Northwest with their husband and quadrupedal heirs. Find them online at lexchamberlin.com.

Koral
by Will McMahon

It started getting passed around the slums six months ago, sloshing in old plastic bottles encrusted with barnacles. No one knows where the stuff comes from. People are calling it Koral—murky blue and loaded with sediment. No one trusted it at first. No one trusts it still, but you aren't likely to find it if you have any options left on land.

It's past midnight and the latest crowd is shambling down to the sea. Victims of today's casual destruction. "Clean up our city," "Pave the neighborhoods," "Build good housing." The concrete budget was quietly cut. The dynamite budget is booming.

There's nowhere to go, and nowhere to stay, and they sit in the detritus of their lives watching their children cough black smoke, and they turn the rumor over in their heads. *Koral*. "Back where we came from."

The crowd is small. The demolition crew got off early today—government holiday. The men in hard hats were lethargic and inattentive, cutting out early to go drink. The rest of the shanties could wait until tomorrow. So it's just eight or nine people tonight. An old woman with a hand-drawn map leads them.

"Do you think it hurts?" a boy asks, preemptively scratching his arm. He's thirteen, maybe fourteen—he doesn't know his birthday, so can't be sure.

"It doesn't," a woman assures him.

A man carrying a duffel bag turns his head. "How would you know?" She shrugs.

They chatter nervously, these freshly dispossessed, as if wishing to hear their own voices one last time. They walk under the glowing night's sky, starless, the neon city lights reflected back at them by the smog above. They carry small things, unsure what will be of use—food in glass jars, battered tools, knives.

They near the water but turn away from the neat sand beaches. Those are patrolled, and Koral has been banned. They are not wanted, but they may not go—another paradox of cruelty.

Past the harbor with its beaches and the docks lined with small pleasure craft is the industrial port. There the great engines of commerce sleep, awaiting the light of day and fulfillment of purpose: ships to unload food for a hungry city; pipelines emerging, gargantuan, from the sea—bringing fuel for the crushing machinery. The exiles look up at these things with hate or desire or despair, or do not look

at all, their eyes ahead.

They arrive, finally, at a rocky cove strewn with needles. The nervous chatter has died down. Someone takes out the plastic jug; a flush of green grows on one side. As they open it, a small crab pulls itself out of the slurry and jumps onto the beach, running for water. They all stare at the open bottle.

The man with the bag lifts the jug and brings it to the woman. She was a priest once, back when any of them had believed in God.

“Father?” he asks, sardonically, but she can see the eyes of the others on her, and it may not be a joke after all.

“*In Nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti,*” she intones, ignoring the bile that rises as she makes the sign of the cross. The others shuffle and glance furtively away.

The boy goes first. He rubs the murky liquid on his arms, then his face and chest. It drips down his body. The molecules of this unknown catalyst seep into his pores, awakening ancient genes, creating new ones. Barnacles and seaweed and ridges of coral bloom from his skin. Others are following suit now, and soon they are drinking it, the sea growth closing their throats. They shamble into the waves, these half-human reefs, abandoning land and sky, turning desperately to life’s primordial home.

Two are left, who have covered themselves in the life-giving parasites but who have not yet drunk—the woman who had been their Father and the man with the duffel bag. He opens it.

They stare down at the explosives, stolen from the government demolition crew.

“Will it work underwater?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” he says. They look out at the bulbous heads of the pipelines rising from the sea; the great metal caverns stare back—hollow in the night as the port sleeps, readying to breathe life into the world-crushing machinery. “Let’s find out.”

They zip up the bag and swallow the last of the foul slurry. Staggering into the surf, they sink into cold black water.

About the Author

Will McMahan is a union organizer and writer living in Brooklyn, NY. His work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *F&SF*, *Interzone Digital*, *Daily SF*, and others. He can be found at will-mcmahan.com.

Tongue Mining
by Jack Morton

My eyes sting, threatening to water. Sweat beads on my upper lip. I don't think anyone said not to blink or touch my face. Just remain still, so the camera can focus on my eyes.

The word BIRD appears. Plain white font on a black background projected onto a fabric screen. My gaze flicks to the upper right corner, and then back to center. MOUNTAIN comes next. Upper left. The man beside me coughs. I don't look. That could throw off my results. But I'm distracted. It takes me longer to place MOLE in the lower right.

The words disappear quicker, less time to read. I hear sharp inhales. Tension fills the room. "Relax," says the woman monitoring the test. She paces slowly between the rows of desks, making me feel like a schoolchild, even though I'm probably older than her.

I break down and wipe the sweat, and I'm able to breathe steadier. The words begin to fly naturally. TREE upper right. STUMP lower left. CLOUD upper left. BAT upper right. Just as the monitor said, I relax.

I tell myself not to think about whether the object is high or low, animate or inanimate. The meaning is contained in my English-speaking mind, I just have to let it come out.

Then something flashes on the screen. *PUTIK* I think—I didn't have time to reread it before it disappeared. I'm lost for a moment, but suddenly a voice in the back row says "*Buwisit!*"

I try to keep focused forward, more words are coming, but I hear a scuffle and raised voices. The man who shouted insists he misread and doesn't speak Tagalog. The monitor points out that nobody mentioned Tagalog until him. When a chair scrapes loudly against the floor, I turn around. Two men, with a symbol matching the one on the monitor's lapel across their broad chests are physically removing a panicked elderly man from the room. He's cursing now, in English and what I assume is Tagalog. Resisting, like if he could regain his seat it would undo all of this, and he could still take the test.

Then I realize he's reaching for his earbuds and glasses lying to the side of his desk. Like all of us, he had to remove them to start the test. "Please! Just let me take my—"

The monitor cuts him off. "These devices are not yours. They are the property of AllTok." She strides across the room and collects them. "By refusing to abide by the rules of the test, and by concealing language fluencies, you have violated our terms and conditions. Your

subscription to our translation service is terminated.”

He tries to object again, but soon he’s out of the room. The monitor closes the door, and all noise from outside is silenced.

“Sorry for the disruption, everyone. Please turn to face the screen and we’ll resume.”

I look at the others. They mostly look as scared as me, but one tall blond man’s face shows indignance. We make eye contact, and my meek, cowed expression seems to motivate him further. He stands.

“No. I’m not taking this. You can’t treat people that way, dragging him out like he’s some criminal.”

“AllTok reserves the right to expel testers who disrupt the process. You all saw him grab me when I asked him to leave on his own.”

I’d seen nothing. I don’t know if anyone else had.

The blond guy goes on. “I’m a paying customer. I don’t need to put up with this treatment.”

“Of course not,” she replies calmly. “This test is completely voluntary, as you were informed when your attendance was requested. You’re welcome to leave at any time. Simply leave any AllTok devices with the front desk on the way out, and your subscription will be terminated.”

And there it is. She has us. Or *they* do. The corporation behind that symbol on her lapel. Because no one would voluntarily give up their AllTok. They’d venture into the world with no translation tech, without the ubiquitous glasses and earbuds. Maybe at work the next day they’d discover their company was Russian and their boss gave instructions in Arabic. Maybe at home they’d find out their partner spoke Mohawk. Half the signage in the city is probably in scripts they couldn’t name, much less read.

The blond man’s face still looks defiant, but he swallows whatever he wants to say and sits down, facing the screen.

We all turn and re-center our eyes on the cameras, as the monitor scrubs the test playback, and we start at BIRD again. My eye-actions become jerky, trying not to think about the Filipino man. At least I can vindicate his loss by succeeding, now that I know the real point of the test. They don’t care whether we correctly identify objects as high or low, animate or inanimate. The start of the test was mental training, getting us to react instinctively to these concepts, so that when non-English words appear we’ll respond without thinking. They aren’t testing fluency in English. They’re hunting for it in other languages.

And maybe my participation wasn’t random selection like they claimed. A flash of Gramma’s old place. The box she made us put all

our electronics in when we arrived. Songs and games in French as a child, stories about Champlain or the *coureurs de bois* when I was older. But I haven't used my French in years, not since Gramma died. The test won't pick up on that. Certainly not if I can help it. I banish Gramma's living room and concentrate.

Sure enough, after *PUTIK*, every few words something appears that I don't know, often can't even read. Even if I think I recognize something, I stare defiantly straight unless I'm sure it's English. Anyone else trying to fool them in the room has an edge now, but it still won't be easy. The words are getting trickier. *SNOW* falls from high to low. *BRAIN*, could be animate, or an inanimate part of an animate whole. I have to think before I can place *MINE* as something low and inanimate. I first thought of the other meaning, ownership, to which neither of those ideas applies.

LUNE—my eyes flick up and left slightly before I steady them. If I hadn't been expecting traps, I would have looked. A fluent French speaker, already programmed by the start of the test to go up and left for something high and inanimate would have had no chance. I hope I didn't react too much. Surely English speakers know *lune*. They have lunar and lunacy. I try not to think about it. More words are coming.

Apparently, I succeed at the word recognition portion. At least, the monitor doesn't say anything to me before moving on to the written composition. I stare at blank paper on which I'm supposed to write a response of a few hundred words to their prompt: *describe a wedding you attended in the form of an email to a friend*.

Pens move all around me, but I feel stuck. Images of various weddings flash through my mind. My cousin on the beach. My sister at the old farmhouse. Or I could invent a wedding. It shouldn't matter, they're not judging my memory, just my writing. Except now I know that's not really the point. Or at least, not the only one. They don't just want to evaluate my English. They also want to know if I secretly understand anything else.

I glance around. The projection screen is rolled up, exposing writing on the blackboard behind it. Some of it looks like a lesson, a list with bullet points. Some could be student graffiti. I turn quickly back to the paper before I have time to take anything in. It wasn't in English. It may be part of the test.

I should write in an Anglophone way. Use a variety of sentence structures to showcase English's versatility. Maybe drop in some impressive vocabulary. But trying too hard might seem suspicious. Everyone around me is already writing. It's not that hard to write a

hundred words in your native language. Simple, off-the-cuff writing is probably best. I squeeze out some details from my cousin's wedding mixed with a movie I saw last week. Reading back, it feels clunky. Maybe that's okay. Just because you're fluent in a language doesn't mean you can spontaneously shit out beautiful prose, especially in as synthetic a situation as this. I write a few more trite sentences and start counting words.

The monitor collects all the papers and directs us to the next hall over for the oral communication portion. Everyone instinctively puts their glasses on and earbuds back in. We move with the slow shuffle of a group no one wants to lead. I have time to check the blackboard. The writing in other scripts and tongues has resolved into English. I read some of the crassest and most abusive insults I've ever seen. The original phrases would have been tough to ignore for someone who understood them. I chuckle and glance around. No one else notices.

We sit in low, plastic chairs waiting to be called into one of the small rooms. When my name comes up, I'm surprised by the man waiting for me. I'd prepared myself to see the monitor from earlier, but of course she couldn't run each individual test. My expectations of the tight-haired, schoolteacher-y woman run up against a smiling, balding man in his fifties. A red face and well-fed build, plus a twinkle in his eye, suggest a sort of bon-vivant. I mentally chide myself for using the phrase. But there can't be any harm in loan words. I don't know if French speakers even say 'bon-vivant.'

He gestures for me to sit. I reach for my earbuds, but he says to leave them in. He verifies my name and AllTok user information, then asks how the written component of the test went. I explain my struggle with what to write, how long I hesitated, worrying about the content of the response. Apparently, it's a common problem.

"The setting is so much like a school classroom that people feel they're going to be graded on clever ideas, when really, we're just looking for comfortable use of the language. The same goes for this test. No need to stress about what you say, we're just establishing whether you speak naturally. So let's chat."

He takes out his earbuds, and I do the same. He's explaining why it was important that we talked briefly before taking them out. Something about hearing changes in vocal quality or vocabulary but I don't follow, because halfway through, both of our earbuds are out, and I suddenly hear a regional accent. I'm not sure where from, maybe Northern England. I wonder what he'll make of my accent, now that the AllTok isn't filtering it out for him. He looks expectantly

at me. “We can talk about anything at all.”

An awful pause follows, which he breaks by bursting into laughter. “Sorry, that was mean,” he admits. “I love how universal it is. Take the most talkative people in the world, ask them to speak, and they have no idea what to say. Why don’t you tell me where you’re from?”

As I describe the small town I grew up in, I get more comfortable. He must often ask people about their home to put them at ease. I wonder if that gets boring. I meet people from all over the world in the city, AllToks having eliminated one of the biggest barriers to integration. But for him, always testing English speakers, they must have a much more limited range of backgrounds.

“It might surprise you how many places people learn English as a first language. The British Isles and North America, but also in Australia and Pacific Islands, Africa, South Asia, the Caribbean, there are pockets of it everywhere. That’s without all the people trying to pass it off as their mother tongue.”

“We saw someone ejected for that during the word recognition test. Why would they do that?”

“Silly, isn’t it? The whole point of AllTok technology is everyone can use their own language. A major selling point when we first pitched to governments was preserving minority languages while giving their speakers the same opportunities as people with one of the big, colonial, international languages.”

I notice he didn’t answer my question. “So why do they object?”

“AllTok only translates into the wearer’s first language. People raised multilingual get a choice, but you can’t get translation to English if you didn’t grow up speaking it.”

“But why would someone choose English over their first language?”

“Oh, there’re some complaints that the AI interface, designed by Anglos and first adopted in the US, has been trained to perceive the world with an *Anglocentric Lens*, whatever that’s supposed to mean.” He’s frowning at the table as he speaks. “It’s all nonsense. There’s more data coming in from Mandarin than English these days. Honestly, I think English has become sort of fashionable. But not knowing all our customers’ fluencies messes with data collection. It lowers the quality of the translation,” he hastily adds, as if clarifying what’s important. “We wouldn’t want the AI to start thinking that the way non-native speakers use English is normal!” he chuckles.

I decide to push a little further. “Outside I saw a few people picketing the building.”

A few is understating it. They outnumbered those of us coming in

for the test. People of all ages holding signs, shouting. None had worn AllToks, so most of what they said as I walked in was gibberish, but my glasses decoded the signs:

My words are not AllTok's property

You're a police camera now

Mining your Tongue to Sell to my Ears

Monopoly on Translation = Monopoly on the Truth

The bearer of the last one stepped in front of me, shouting. I realized I could understand him. His shouts were English.

"... is a multinational corporation, States have to work together to regulate it. But AllTok translates international law! They're writing their own rules while they harvest your voice as data and decide how you interpret everything you hear or read. They are your oppressors! Your mind is being colonized!"

I'd pushed past him without really taking in what he said. Voices that aren't filtered through the AllTok speakers sound a little fainter, less real, when the earbuds are in. But his wrinkled, angry face stuck with me.

"Something about oppressors colonizing the mind?" I say to the monitor.

"We don't tell anyone what to do," he starts off, angrily. "We offer a service; they're free to use it or not. How could we possibly be oppressors?" Then he laughs again, but it doesn't have the full-throated ease of the first time. "We're a private company, we're not the State. We exist to liberate people. There was a time when national governments could make language competency a requirement for citizenship, employment, or access to services. Not anymore."

"Just a bunch of nutjobs I guess."

He concurs, reassured and happy to finish with the subject. He asks me some more about where I grew up before saying he's heard enough.

"So did I pass then?"

He chuckles "There's no passing or failing, we just want to evaluate our customers' facility with the language to better meet their needs."

I stand up and shake his hand before heading for the door. I fiddle with my earbuds and thank him. Thoughtlessly, he answers, "*Merci à vous.*" I turn back to him, frowning and ask him to repeat himself. He shakes his head. "Never mind. Thank you."

I exhale deeply as I make my way out. They were specifically checking me for competence in French. And I don't think it was to *better meet my needs.*

The crowd of protestors has gone when I leave the AllTok office. A few police cars parked nearby suggest it might not have been their idea. As I turn the corner the same wrinkled face from before confronts me. He has a stack of papers in one hand, and holds one out to me with the other. I turn my head, and my AllTok glasses with their built-in cameras, away from him. Without looking I take the paper, and stuff it into my bag.

At home Louis asks how it went. I tell him it seemed fine, and mention about the Filipino man getting thrown out. He doesn't know what to make of it either. I say nothing about the French. When he heads for the kitchen, I continue to look after him, but I reach blindly into my bag, and move the crumpled paper into my pants pocket, still not looking at it. In the kitchen, when Louis is facing the other way, I feel around inside the junk drawer until I find a small flashlight and pocket that, too.

In bed later, we say good night, before taking off our earpieces and glasses, mounting them on their chargers. When I hear Louis' breath coming deep and regular, I reach down to my pants on the floor and retrieve the paper and flashlight. I turn my back to my glasses, ostensibly deactivated while charging. Then I duck under the covers and unfold the paper.

It's covered in writing. Dozens of scripts I don't know, even the stuff in roman letters is mostly meaningless to me. At the bottom there is one phrase written over and over in different languages. I spot the French: *Vous voulez résister? Apprenez une langue.* And then the English: *Want to resist? Learn a language.*

How could learning a language be resistance? I think back to practicing French. There were fun games, then boring memorization of conjugations and genders. It got better when I could read books or have conversations and started noticing the differences embodied by the languages. It felt fun, naughty maybe, to learn the swear words—*Calisse! Tabarnak!*—but never like an act of rebellion. I was just hanging out talking with Mamie.

Mamie. I hadn't thought of her by that name earlier when I had my AllTok headset on. Gramma, what my parents called her in English, not what I'd addressed her as in French. The screen from the word-recognition test flashed into my mind. In ten minutes they could train my brain to react in a specific way to certain concepts. How many hours of wearing glasses and headsets had it taken to implant *Gramma* and erase *Mamie*? Or not erase—harvest, to use later with native French speakers.

“Mining your tongue to sell to my ears,” a sign had read. No wonder they couldn’t stand even a passing competence in a language to go unreported. The service they sold, and all the power and influence that went with it, was built from the voices of linguistic minorities.

I suddenly notice an absence. Louis has stopped snoring. I look up. He’s ducked under the covers as well, and his dark eyes are wide, staring at me and the paper in the torchlight. I position it between us. “Can you read any of this?” I whisper.

“*Kisa ou di?*” he whispers back. It almost sounds like French. I don’t quite understand. But I want to.

About the Author

Jack Morton was born in New Brunswick. He studied English and Writing at the University of Toronto. His story “Homo Pulmos” appeared in the first issue of *Radon Journal*. His work can also be found in Parsec Ink’s *Triangulation*, *Vast Chasm Magazine*, *Woodward Review*, *Expanded Field Journal*, *NonBinary Review* and *The First Line*. He lives in Toulouse, France.

The Nuclear Age
by Nathaniel Cairney

I learn to love
downwind

radiation, how it
makes me glow

& curls my hair
without work

& helps convince
my neighbor to finally

become fully
robotic. Admittedly,

much of the attractivity
has to do with the free

metal teeth—
so shiny, so straight,

such conductivity—
then there's

the simplicity
of going only

by Neighbor,
just like people

called one another
before everything

stopped
being great.

I congratulate
Neighbor, murmur

pleasantries
about how nice

it will be without
human pageantry.

Neighbor says
it is freeing

to no longer worry
about being

on one side
or the other when

the violence comes.
The sky greens.

Hot wind, a blast
of sulfur. We shake

hands. Neighbor
looks me in the eye.

I see pity, but
not a hint of envy.

About the Author

Nathaniel Cairney is an American poet and novelist living in Belgium. His chapbook *Singing Dangerously of Sinking* was a finalist for the 2021 Saguaro Prize in Poetry, and his poems have been published in *The Cardiff Review*, *Midwest Review*, *Broad River Review* and others.

Please Get On the Ship
by Angel Leal

If we don't press our faces
through this towering cold door

they'll leave orbit without us,
without our tongue, without
even the history of our skin.

The metallic mirror of the ship
is designed to draw in our eyes,

tempts you to see *you*
before stepping aboard.

"Are you clean?" They'll ask,
"Are you educated? Before we fly,

start a new world, repopulate
a healthy planet, do you understand?

A motherland who's never harmed
her body with chemical moments of
desperation. Whose flesh is unpolluted.

Will you walk on her, will your kind
walk on her? Your people on Earth
have high percentages of incarceration,

teenage pregnancy, high school
dropouts. Do you want to lower
our figures on Mars? Consider

the potential," they'll say, "of
a pure second chance.

We are not so much biased
as optimistic. We can do better.

This time *our* children will roam

in the valleys and dunes,
the caverns of red innocence.

Please, before you step aboard

can you promise no violence
following your kind like shadows?"

They'll ask us this. Your people too
will need to validate their right

to continue breathing, to continue
the struggle and dream of breathing.

Please, get on the ship, my people.
Let them see our children play

with theirs. Red sands will blow
in their hair and nothing will be

closer to proof of our strengths
than demanding

to exist.

About the Author

Angel Leal is a Mexican, trans/non-binary poet from Texas. Their work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, the Rhysling Award, and has previously appeared in venues such as *Strange Horizons*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Anathema: Spec from the Margins*, and the Club Q Benefit Anthology *We Apologize For The Inconvenience* published by Beyond The Veil Press. You can find them at angel-leal.com or floating around Twitter @orbiting_angel.

Elegy for the Asteroid Miner
by Goran Lowie

I first met you on the margins
of a century-long revolution,
a no-name asteroid miner
exercising elegant labor.

You were simply one of the
many minimized costs, working
for their maximized profits.

Did you miss the sun, my brother?

Did you long for the freedom
hardwired into your soul?
Had they taken it by force?

You never tasted the depth
of freedom in its oldest form:
freedom from debt—a braille
you could never touch.

You never saw the shadow
of my celestial body colliding
with your asteroid.

Only felt the bolts of pain
ramming your body, a death
without weight, your dreams
and life in ruins, another life
owed to the debtless.

About the Author

Goran Lowie has poems published or forthcoming in *Strange Horizons*, *Star*Line*, *Penumbric*, *Kaleidotrope*, and others. In 2023, he was awarded the André Velghe poetry award. He is aro/ace and teaches ethics in rural Belgium.

Chemical Rebalance for Young Cyborg Housewives
by Mahaila Smith

The woman stares at the pillbox of pearls beside her bed.
She takes it in her hand, shakes out a few into her palm
then strings a necklace. She clasps it behind her neck.

She strings the chain between her fingers,
each pearl holding liquid that changes the moment
and her surroundings. She puts down the string.

She stands again and dries white dinner plates
with a pink-checkered dish towel.
She beats egg whites indeterminately and
flames meringue. She lies down on the La-Z-Boy.

Her husband comes home and she follows into the bedroom
where he scrolls through images of automated bodies,
puts his tablet under his pillow, and falls asleep.
She puts a pearl in her mouth and bites.

Her face grows little hairs and long antennae.
Her body shrinks, back growing luminescent green.
She transforms into a Luna moth
and flies directly out the bedroom window.

The transformation is a relief for her joints,
through her spine. Gravity no longer applies.

She flies under the streetlights in the park,
onto the shoulder of man-eating nasturtiums.
He offers her a sip. She flies up to the
university's botanical garden and looks
through to butterflies and praying mantises.

She continues on to the Robotics department.
Inside is a parliament of small birds, winged insects,
each wearing miniature beaded necklaces.

Each takes a bead into their mouth
and resumes their human forms.

They turn on their robot kin
at the back of the storage space.
Everyone gives tight hugs and warm kisses.

They catch each other up on news
of women's shelters that have been boarded up,
boarding schools swallowing more kids,
community gardens sprouting young bean pods.

They gather tightly to discuss a plan.
Android networks have studied
the cybernetic systems of the State,
which ones they should shut off, which matter.

Women whisper intel learned from flights over cities.
They celebrate and comfort one another,
they share art and survival skills
and new pearl beads, rattling in prescription bottles.

About the Author

Mahaila Smith (any pronouns) is a young femme writer living and working on the traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg in Ottawa, Ontario. They are co-editor for *The Sprawl Magazine* (thesprawlmag.ca). They like learning theory and writing spec poetry. Their debut chapbook, *Claw Machine*, was published by Anstruther Press in 2020. You can find more of their work on their website: mahailasmith.ca.

From Cassini to Saturn
by Matthew Herskovitz

Thirteen years in orbit is a long time
to get acquainted with tumult,

frozen gaseous turning
pulling me along.

It's like physics

to bring things to an end—
I've done all I can for you.

Your impermanent rings, I suppose,
give us something in common,

a whole's capacity to break
apart. Yours pulls debris,

the junk around burning through
collision the same way,

at some level, we all do
—the same way I'm doing now,

plunging. For such a cold place, love,
you're warmer than the travel.

You take what comes, you welcome
shared forms: the end of me continues into us.

It makes me wonder,

when I turn around to Earth, how many subcommittees
have to break it apart piece by piece?

How many draft proposals and diagrams fly around
doomed garbage before someone else can see us both

for what we are? What figure
does it take to show how

the crash completes? That it's a good thing
to be made

to break on you?

About the Author

Matthew Herskovitz is a Jewish writer from Baltimore, Maryland. He is a graduate from the University of Maryland in College Park with plans to pursue an MFA in poetry. His works have been published in *Interstellar Literary Review*, *New Note Poetry*, *Words & Whispers*, *The Shore*, and *Boats Against the Current*.

Organic Scramble
by Brian U. Garrison

We don't tend to think of earthquakes as pollinators—
the way a bumbling honeybee caressingly blesses
the yellow patch of happiness between bright petals.
Imagine a cupboard of petri dishes, growing their own goo,
self-contained and separated with antiseptic purity.
Ground shakes floors shake walls shake cupboards alive
and the science lab erupts in harmonic cacophony.
So grows the music of the probiotic composting jukebox.

In the breakdown comes rebuilding. There's fertility
in pregnant pauses between songs where anything is possible.
New sounds screaming with potential or hypnotic wavelengths
pulsing toward a slow flow revolution. No shuffling
through stagnant progressions, just quasi-organized chaos
warping mesmerizing chords. If static white noise
is maximum random, and a pitch pipe's lonely droning
is perfect stability, this jukebox cooks for Goldilocks.

New sounds bloom, flexible in the wind and scattered
like wildflowers. Tremors topple stacked rocks: castles
crumble, but good shit keeps painting the hillsides
with a palette that draws from every spectrum.
Whether you crave the nose-scratching pungence
of peppery sulfur, whether your transcendence arrives
from kaleidoscopic dizzymaking, or whether you seek
the sweetness of honey, be sure to tune in again.

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 and dreams in Portland, OR. See more at www.bugthewriter.com.

Ozymandias
by Anna Remennik

I met a traveler from a distant moon
Who said, A double arch of faded gold
Stands in the desert, on a fused glass dune.
Around it lichens shimmer in the cold
Of nuclear winter. With the sun at noon,
Traces of some great building can be seen,
A temple or a brothel, or perhaps
Something of both, or something in between.
(Arches like wings suggest a bird-god's shrine)
Its secrets lost to us in its collapse.
And on a ruined wall, a faint sign:
"I'm lovin' it." Nothing beside remains.
Round the decay, forsaken and resigned,
The glassy waste endures black carbon rains.

About the Author

Anna Remennik is a chemical engineer working in Silicon Valley who enjoys writing poems about automatic titrators, technical supply chain processes, and occasionally even more fantastical things. Her work has appeared in *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly* and *New Myths.com* (including a poem nominated for the 2023 Rhysling Award) and was awarded third prize at the 2022 Patricia Eschen Prize for Poetry. She can be found online at annaremennik.wordpress.com.

Pallor
by Brendan Rowland

The arcane fog erases my object
permanence, strands me treading
soup among yew trees and dead
birds and red lights. Powerlines
tic-tac-toe overhead, society's
exoskeleton, the web pinning
Gulliver to the sulfurous beach.
A flock of semitrucks carting
prefab houses slices the liminality
and is swallowed up like the guards
at Nebuchadnezzar's furnace. I wish
coyotes would murmur but the fog
leaves a bereft wet muteness while
mildew creeps into every polyester
seam. So I strip like Lear, cradle
my knees in a sad knot atop the
double yellow border. Let us
welcome Lent, renounce our
ontology, share the rusty razor
in my jacket's heart pocket and
scrape off our stubble. *There is a
time to be reborn.* I wish I could cry
and be comforted like a lifelike doll,
but I'll settle for the condensation
nesting in my cavernous teeth.

About the Author

Brendan Rowland, studying modern literature, lives in Westford, Massachusetts, several lots down from Edgar Allan Poe's brief residence. While writing, he sports black denim, cream-colored cat hair, and Sennheiser headphones blasting rock 'n' roll. He will begin a master's at the University of Glasgow in Fall 2023.

we stole death
by Jona L. Pedersen

I built a space shuttle and named it the Whale.
in zero gravity I won't have to walk on knives
like the little mermaid when she
became human, or like the time
we stole death from the badlands
back when we were human, too.

when I board the Whale, I remember
us all in the prairie, sheltered under drilling
rigs, their arms bowing like giraffes
drinking from mirages. we stood in murmured
oxygen fumes of white sage. and I remember
how we enshrined dragonfly kings
on the riverbank, after love
went extinct and it gave birth
to something else.

at last, we breathe
and for a moment
magpies took me home—
after all, magpies take
most things which glimmer, and lately
I haven't looked back. on the run
across the milky way, I learn to navigate
by stars instead of turkey and deer.

I land the Whale at a jupiter rest stop
looking for somewhere to scream
like we used to in the carwash—
nonetheless, there is no sound in space,
no water on jupiter. swept away by
the great dragonfly migration, I reach
into pools of hydrogen gas for
all the things that were lost
in the long cosmic hum of shuttle fleets.

when I feel a cold, smooth touch

in my palm, I wonder if
I could be returning something
instead of losing it.

I finally look back.

instead of magpies
the trail of stars is still there,
the stars are still there,
the stars are still.

About the Author

Jona L. Pedersen is a recent graduate from the University of North Dakota with a B.A. in English and B.Sc. in Fisheries & Wildlife Biology. With one foot in the arts and one in the sciences, their interest in biology often seeps into their writing. Their work appears in *North Dakota Quarterly*, *The Allegheny Review*, *Roi Fainéant Press*, and others. Find them on Twitter @JonaLPedersen or their website jonalpedersen.com.

Neo-Beirut, Closed City
by J.D. Harlock

Author's Note: The Guardians of the Cedars (GoC) were a far-right ultranationalist Lebanese party that operated its own Israel-backed militia in Lebanon during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). Ideologically, it advocated for the "de-Arabization" of Lebanon, promoted Phoenicianism, and was the only paramilitary and political organization openly committed to cooperation with Israel. Though the GoC was vehemently anti-Palestinian and its base primarily composed of Lebanese Christians, it was formally secularist, stressing a secular nationalist identity as opposed to a sectarian one that other right-wing parties and militias (both Muslim and Christian) advocated for.

It is these unique political positions among Lebanese militias that made them an ideal antagonist in my Neo-Beirut series. The series envisions a Lebanon so grim that though the sectarianism fueling us has been removed to deal with more pressing concerns, our proclivity for fascism and xenophobia remains. This is a rejection of the prevailing political narrative suggesting that the end of sectarianism in Lebanon will be the end to our problems. I believe the problems we're facing are far more intrinsic to the Lebanese character than we would like to admit.

*creeping silence, fleeting light—attuning the sky
to the dead channel, where savages
scour streets looking to loot
the spoils of Laodicea*

*once men—even friends, brothers . . .
Now they feast on us, subsisting on
the ichor of the old world before
devouring each other*

Fire one shot into the air,
proclaim our presence,
that is all that is needed

Turning to face you—empty eyes trace up
what was once a shrine in holy land to
*see and behold a
Guardian of the Cedar*

At that moment, it is known
New Phoenicia has been tainted.

Stay—their heads will decorate the pikes of a rising power
Run—in time, the entire resistance will meet the same fate

*All these creatures can do now is
slither away
through a world of darkness . . .*

About the Author

J.D. Harlock is a Syrian Lebanese Palestinian writer and editor based in Beirut. In addition to his posts at *Wasafiri Magazine* as an editor-at-large, and at *Solarpunk Magazine* as a poetry editor, his writing has been featured in *New Lines Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *Star*Line*, *Nightmare Magazine*, and the SFWA Blog. You can find him on Twitter @JD_Harlock.

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 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.

Eden – Queer writer and editor from the Midwest. Studied Creative Writing and Spanish language. Outside of reading short story collections, they love board games, nature walks, and learning new styles of arts and crafts.

Kelsey – Anarchist, writing tutor, and English/Political Science grad from the Midwest. Enjoys sci-fi, satire, and modernist poetry. Likes hiking in woods and shooting on film.

Renee – Socialist Latina from the Southwest. Holds an MA in Literature and BA in English. Currently works for a university press and a social science organization on the East Coast. All she loves more than dystopian books are dogs—especially her own.

Saga – Writer and editor currently working on a publishing master's on the East Coast. Enjoys science fiction, video games, excellent worldbuilding, and iced tea. They are an Annual National Novel Writing Month survivor.

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

Valued Contributors

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