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TicTocs: A Capsule a Day Keeps Time at Bay!

by Lilia Zhang

The neon lights of the vending machine beckon from the end of the alley.

You teeter at the entrance, just outside the ring of fluorescence. Pink shifts into purple, yellow morphs into green, the colors amplified by the slick sheen of the alley walls.

An itch, an urge, and you find yourself entering the crevice, shuffling between piles of rot and waste, the laces of your beat-up sneakers soaking in the refuse. You fold your shoulders and tuck everything beneath your umbrella. Its battered canopy and broken ribs lie flat on your back like the membranous wings of a bat.

It isn't raining. At least you don't think it is. Not even the sun reaches the ground level of the City of Nightmares. But the corroded pipes running along and between the densely packed buildings, like a forest canopy of metal and plastic, produce a perpetual drip. Fat drops of unknown composition drum the umbrella's surface. You shudder, make yourself even smaller.

Before the vending machine, you stop and fumble in your pockets for a coin. Your movements feel slow and cumbersome, each passing second an eternity.

A familiar jingle comes from the machine, the electronic notes reminding you of ice cream trucks and the long, hazy summers of a distant childhood. A neon sign—*TicTocs: A Capsule a Day Keeps Time at Bay!*—flashes above you across the front glass panel. Behind the thick glass, brightly colored pills are neatly arranged by color in vertical chutes.

Bad hangover? a tablet-sized screen asks. Hungry? High? Make it last or make it pass!

You snort at the lousy marketing, even as you drop a coin into the slot beneath the screen and hit nine on the keypad. The chute whirs, and you watch in childish anticipation as a gaudy green time capsule rolls down the dispensing ramp and into the holding tray with a soft ping.

It's in your hands before the chute even stops spinning.

Placing the capsule in your mouth, you roll it under your tongue and close your eyes.

You feel your heart quicken, racing like a jackhammer, and the rhythm of the shifting neon lights accelerates to match. The jingle of

the vending machine blends into one continuous stream, the notes reaching for a new high, as time contracts.

* * *

You have one hour before your meeting with the lawyer.

Dashing through the lobby of your apartment complex, you make your way to the two-story penthouse you call home. The door clicks open as you near, and the smart appliances within immediately welcome you with a low hum. A pocket of sound descends gently around you like a bubble, bathing your ears with your usual Thursday playlist as it follows you into the living room. A large holographic screen flickers on, and you scowl at the artificial smile and hollow eyes of the news anchor before waving the screen away.

Every night, for the past month, the news has been the same. The CEO of ChronoTech Inc., the leading manufacturer of time capsules, on trial, and his chief of research found dead.

Has it really been a whole month?

You hurry up the stairs, past the floor-to-ceiling glass windows with hardly a glance at the view. The San Gabriel Mountains squat bare and desolate in the horizon.

In the bedroom, you fall onto the hydrotherapy massage bed and deflate with a great sigh.

An hour only, but you intend to make good use of it.

Reaching towards the nightstand, you open the top drawer and retrieve a small pill bottle.

You contemplate for a moment before making your selection: a capsule, the vivid purple of nightshade.

You roll it around your mouth and close your eyes. Your thoughts begin to slow, from a downpour to a misty drizzle. You focus on the vibrations of the hydromassage. With each breath, the waves lengthen and swell, caressing your body with melodic notes and perfect intervals. You both hear and feel the gentle chimes through a series of dynamic vibrations all over your skin. As the music slows, you can hear the undertones and overtones branching, merging, oscillating. An entire symphony held within a single note.

That should do it. You have a meeting with the lawyer in an hour, but for now, time has slowed to a crawl, and even one hour is an eternity of bliss.

You idly consider the green capsule for later. No one need know.

You hazard a quick look around the corner.

Two rigid columns of troopers stomp by, their shoulders jostling against each other as they slosh mud and debris on the claustrophobic walls of the alley in their sabatons.

Why are they here?

You can't remember the last time you've encountered any authorities here. After the earthquakes of 2082 untethered Los Angeles from the state's supply lines, the whole greater area was abandoned, and the City of Angels had quickly descended into the lawless City of Nightmares. Even the state has stopped trying to rehabilitate the city with its strained resources.

Something must have triggered this visit.

You hunker down behind a discarded television set from the 20s, the quantum display screen spidered with cracks. You hold your breath as an armor-clad officer ventures into the crevice and sweeps the alley with a glowing mace. Like the others, he's outfitted in lightweight titanium micro-lattice designed to look like medieval chain mail. High tech disguised as low tech—another stupid trend from the suburbs.

You sink your feet into the mud and press your back into the wall. Something cold and wet cuts across your ankle like the edge of a knife, and you draw in a sharp breath just as the light swings in your direction.

"Fucking hell!" A rat the size of a house cat scurries past the officer, and the startled man lashes out with his mace, hitting the rodent square in its distended stomach. Blood and entrails splatter the walls—splattering you. The rat squirms, its long tail twisting like a worm, then falls still, splayed open in the middle of the alley.

You stare at its glassy eyes, and bizarrely, the TicTocs jingle plays in your head. You half expect the rat to get up and dance, zombie-like.

A triumphant shout comes from further down the road, and you hear the muted tramping of boots in sludge, and a trooper calls out from the entrance, "Chief, we found one."

As the officer's footsteps retreat, your legs give out and you slide to the ground with a wet thump. *Found what?* You shouldn't follow, you know better than that, but something tells you the troopers might be after the same thing you are.

The next moment finds you leaving the safety of your crevice and creeping from one corner to the next, following the troopers down

what used to be Main Street, until they stop at the end of a shadowy alley.

There's the all-too-familiar neon lights and that cursed, beloved jingle, and your heart sings and beats to the rhythm. But then the troopers lift their maces, and your heart stops, time stops, and everything shatters.

* * *

It's been months since you've slept without nightmares. When you're woken up in the dark by yet another zombie rat, you simply give up and reach for the familiar curve of the pill bottle on your nightstand. Make it pass or make it last, right? You find that every decision these days can be reduced to that question.

But as your fingers brush against the cylinder, you hesitate. What else had the news anchor claimed? Hallucinations, dissociation, instability—all supposed side effects according to the investigations. Of course, the defense lawyer claimed that no one at ChronoTech Inc. had known the true extent. Negligent perhaps, but certainly not fraudulent. You remember how ChronoTech Inc. had reassured the public over and over that their time capsules were safe. After all, one's perception of time was all that changed. You had believed it then, believed in your father's research.

You wonder if your father had known the truth, not just about the capsules, but about *you*. Your fingers close around the pill bottle. *Does it even matter?*

He had put a pistol to his head a week after the investigations began, and since then, time capsules have been eliminated from the suburbs. The City of Nightmares is the only place where you can find them now.

The pill bottle in your hand is empty. You'll need to visit the city again.

* * *

Hidden under the drapes of your broken umbrella, you search the alleys.

Several vending machine corpses later, your palms are ice cold with anxiety. Towering blocks of concrete loom on every side, threatening to collapse as they did once before. Your hands tremble. You need a capsule, but the troopers were much more thorough than

you thought.

Then, as though from a dream, neon lights beckon to you from the darkness. A phantasmagoric kaleidoscope of ever-changing colors. Behind the machine's glass walls, a single time capsule, poison-green, remains.

Triumphant, you hurry down the trashed walkway, but someone is there before you. The vending machine whirs and empties its final ware into the man's hands.

No, no. You slosh forward, dread constricting your lungs. It can't be. You saw wrong, you must have. You reach the machine, palms slamming into the glass as you scan the empty chutes. You dump all of your coins in the slot, hit every number on the keypad, kick the machine until the chutes rattle, but nothing happens. You slump against the glass, panting and shivering.

Behind you, someone giggles. The man who'd taken the capsule grins when you turn. He beckons to you, arms open in invitation, and bends awkwardly at the waist. His limbs move all at once, as though possessed by a manic energy. He twists when he leaps and almost falls, his arms raised high in the air. It takes you a moment to realize; he's dancing. You glare at him, envious of the music that only he can hear. His eyes are vacant, his features contorted by a euphoric smile. He pirouettes, he jumps—

“Life is but a fleeting memory,” he sings.

—and he slips on an empty beer bottle. His head hits the broken pavement with a loud crack. You stare, stupefied, as the body twitches on the ground. Green liquid froths at his mouth, and you stumble toward him.

“Turn over. Shit. *Turn over.*” You try to heave him onto his side, but you stop when you see the blood pooling under his head. He moans and giggles, then falls still with a sputtering cough.

You back away unsteadily and sink to the ground, the world around you spinning. You cradle yourself, shaking uncontrollably. The jingle of the vending machine is an infinite loop that makes your chest ache. The pool of blood expands, and under the shifting neon lights, becomes momentarily blue. You gasp. The dead man reclines, and suddenly, his content face becomes your father's.

You slam your hands over your ears and squeeze your eyes shut, but the memory comes anyway: a lazy summer evening by the pool, your father, home for once, turning to you and asking with a smile, “Wouldn't it be nice to make this last forever?”

Yes. You had said yes, not knowing what he was creating.

Something wild and raging rips through you, and you stand up shakily. There is a stray metal pipe in the alley, a broken branch from the corroded canopy. You pick it up and level it at the glass of the vending machine. For a moment, you don't see the empty chutes. You see your father. You see ChronoTech Inc. You see the lawyer mouthing to you, *stay quiet*. An incoherent bellow drowns out the jingle as you step forward.

No, make it pass, make it all pass. You swing.

About the Author

Lilia Zhang (she/her) is a storyteller who loves all things animal- and brain-related. She has a degree in psychology and neuroscience from Princeton University and possesses the uncanny ability to read a person's favorite color. Aside from writing, Lilia is an avid fan of glutinous desserts, land clouds, and Jellycats. You can follow her on Twitter [@linesbylilia](https://twitter.com/linesbylilia) for more writing updates.

Hello This is Automatic Antigrief
by Jenna Hanchey

(This story first appeared in *Nature: Futures*.)

“Hello, This is Automatic Antigrief: What Problem Can I Solve for You Today?”

Hi. Yes. Well, it’s not a problem, exactly. It’s just that I don’t even know why I do it sometimes. I’ll be home, watching *Creative Cooking* and trying to design those fancy interactive sims to overlay the protein packs. You know, just like they do on TV? And then, before I even realize what’s happened, she’s there.

I mean, I know I granted all the permissions for the app when I downloaded it into my mental implant array, but it’s just a little surprising how *quickly* it works. I don’t even register thinking about her until she’s already with me.

Don’t get me wrong—it’s great to talk to her. It’s like a dream come true, having Mom around all the time whenever I need her. I’m really glad she changed her mind and we got it set up when we did.

Right. A shuttle accident, two months later.

It’s okay. No, I love having her here. I think. It all happened so quickly, afterward, that I almost didn’t even realize she was gone. And the sim is perfect! The sensory notes are indistinguishable from reality. When I hug her, I can feel her firm shoulders and soft waist. I can smell the lavender oil she always used in her hair. I can tell the difference between her free-and-easy laugh and her slightly-sardonic one. Hah. I appreciate that she’s still giving me her subtle brand of advice from beyond the grave.

So . . . no, the problem is not with your character map of her, or my own implants that register the sensory details.

Yes, I realize there’s an extra fee to change the input now. That’s not what I’m calling about.

I don’t actually know how to describe the problem, okay? It’s like, I want to know the *reason* I summon Mom’s sim before she appears. I have this feeling that I’m missing something when I look up and see her standing by the window, watching the birds like she used to, or sitting in her favorite easy chair reading a book.

No . . . yes, I remember that ads are part of the deal. I’m not asking why she has a new release in her hands, I’m just trying to figure out exactly what called her there in the first place.

Yeah, I get that I must have wanted to see her. Maybe the problem is that I don't *feel* the wanting. She's always just *there*. At the tips of my neuro-linked fingers. Appearing in a synaptic flash. Answering the questions I didn't ask about what I should do on my next date, commiserating about that story from work that I haven't even told her yet. And she retells the memories I apparently want to hear in exactly the same manner.

I've gotten the explanation of your patented Sensorial Precision System before—it's great that the sim has 100% factual accuracy. That's really cool. What I'm saying is it doesn't sound like her. She was never 100% factually accurate.

And that's actually good, because it breaks the illusion that it is her long enough for me to remember she's dead and gone and this image of her isn't real. That's it, I guess. Those are the moments I get closest to what it is I'm looking for—the moments when the pit of my stomach drops, and I get this swooshing feeling, like a black hole has opened in my soul and threatens to pull all that's left of me inside it. For one glorious instant, there is a depth to my existence. My whole being is caught between the elation of unfulfilled longing and a horror of having gotten exactly what I wished for.

But just like that, it's gone again.

You see? Most of the time, I don't feel anything at all. I would, perhaps, but she's already with me. Easing the anxieties and pain and grief that conjured her before I even experience them.

It was just a sigh, sorry. Sure, I guess you *could* say the problem is that the app "works too well."

Yes, you have my permission to put that comment on your NeuroSite.

But I think what I really mean is . . . I miss what it feels like to miss her. Does that make sense?

Sure, I get that it's the whole point of the program. I just don't feel as happy about it as you seem to think I should. As *everyone* seems to think I should. Because I'm not happy. I'm not *anything*. I just want to feel again. And if you can't help me, maybe I'll just—I don't know—delete the whole thing.

Huh. A pause option? I didn't realize you offered that.

I see. It's how much for every paused month?

Well. That's something. And . . . she'd always be there, waiting for me? When the pain gets too much, when the feelings start to overwhelm me, I could just . . . turn it back on?

It's not that I don't trust your 100% satisfaction rating. I just . . .

No, everything's not alright.

Me! What's wrong is *me*. It's not the sim, or your program, or your impossibly high satisfaction rate. What I don't trust are my own feelings. My own ideas of what I want and need. And what they make me choose to do.

There she is. Right on time, I suppose.

Sorry, what was that? I got distracted for a moment.

No, uh, I think we're done here. Thank you. I'll be okay.

Fine. Sure. You can put me down as satisfied with your service.

Can you maybe put a pin in all that for now?

I'll call back if I decide to do it.

Right now, I need to go talk with my Mom.

About the Author

Jenna Hanchey is a critical/cultural communication professor by day and a speculative fiction writer by . . . um . . . earlier in the day. Follow her adventures on Twitter [@jennahanchey](https://twitter.com/jennahanchey) or jennahanchey.com.

Lost in Transcription
by Abigail Guerrero

IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF THE FIRST JUDICIAL DISTRICT
LARAMIE COUNTY, WYOMING

FRANCISCO DE JESÚS WILLIAMS,
DOB: February 1, 2024,

Plaintiff,

v.

CASE NO.: 2045L-CC2357

BESPOKE ADOPTION AGENCY, INC.,

Defendant.

The following is a transcription of the interview between the adoptee Francisco de Jesús Williams [born Francisco de Jesús Hernández Ortiz] and the adoptive parents James and Patricia Williams, requested as evidence for the case of Williams v. Bespoke. The interview was conducted by Erin Roach, a representative of the Bespoke Adoption Agency, Inc., and the certified translator José María Morales-Smith. It is to be noted that Francisco de Jesús Williams was fourteen years old at the time of the interview on September 13, 2038.

[00:01]

BESPOKE: We're recording now.

MRS. WILLIAMS: Is that really necessary?

BESPOKE: I'm afraid it is. Memory loss is quite a common secondary effect of this particular procedure, and some people need to be reminded that they agreed to do this.

MR. WILLIAMS: How often does it happen?

BESPOKE: Memory loss? About eighty percent of—

MR. WILLIAMS: No, I mean—

[*Door opens*]

BESPOKE: Come in, Francisco, come in and sit.

TRANSLATOR: Entra y siéntate, Francisco.

[*Door closes*]

MRS. WILLIAMS: Hi, Francisco. Nice to meet you.

MR. WILLIAMS: Thanks for coming, son.

FRANCISCO: ¿Ellos no hablan español? ¿Pero, entonces, cómo se supone que vamos a...?

BESPOKE: What's going on?

TRANSLATOR: He's worried about not being able to speak with them himself.

BESPOKE: Tell him that the language won't be a problem. We'll fix that soon.

TRANSLATOR: No te preocupes por el idioma, ellos lo arreglarán pronto.

[*Silence*]

[*Chair moves*]

BESPOKE: Don't worry about it. The standard package includes the language exchange. We'll take the English of a native speaker from one of our branches in America and swap it with Francisco's Spanish. We can also give him an accent, if you want. We can make him sound southern or British or whatever you prefer. Bespoke has branches all over the world.

MRS. WILLIAMS: What will happen to the other child?

BESPOKE: The other child will be fine. When the time comes for them to be adopted, we'll insert the language they'll need to adjust to

their new family and everybody's happy, right?

MRS. WILLIAMS: I guess, but—

BESPOKE: Now, we also have the premium package, which would allow Francisco to keep his Spanish while also receiving English. And we have the platinum package, so you can make him a personalized polyglot with all the languages you want him to speak. The price of the platinum package—

FRANCISCO: ¿Qué tanto andan diciendo?

TRANSLATOR: He wants to know what are you talking about.

BESPOKE: Tell him that we're fixing the language problem. And to shut up.

TRANSLATOR: Están solucionando el problema del idioma, ya cállate.

BESPOKE: As I was telling you, the price will vary depending on the number of languages you want your new child to speak and the relative rarity of each one of them.

MRS. WILLIAMS: Relative rarity?

BESPOKE: Yes. We calculate the value of each language depending on the number of living native speakers within our system. Finding an orphan who speaks English or Chinese is relatively easy, but it's not that simple to find one who speaks Euskera, for example.

MR. WILLIAMS: And it's necessary to take the language from someone else?

[Silence]

BESPOKE: Well, not really. People can technically acquire a language as a skill through study and immersion, as our translator did. But it is a long and hard process—it can take months, even years. It would be necessary to find a private teacher for Francisco and take him to his lessons every day, or to invest your own free time in teaching him. And he might not be able to start school in America right away until

he's fluent enough to communicate with teachers and classmates. Are you really willing to wait that long to start living a normal life?

[Silence]

BESPOKE: Besides, the standard package is included with every adoption. There's no extra cost for you to exchange his Spanish for English.

MR. WILLIAMS: Well, now you're talking.

[Laughs]

BESPOKE: Well, if there are no more concerns about the language...

[Silence]

BESPOKE: Excellent. Now, José, please inform Francisco about the decision the Williamses have made. We need him to agree before we can continue.

TRANSLATOR: Ellos quieren que hables inglés. Si aceptas el trato, harán un intercambio de idiomas y ya no hablarás español. Sin embargo, podrás comunicarte con tu nueva familia, vecinos, maestros y compañeros de clase en los Estados Unidos.

FRANCISCO: ¿Y no puedo tomar clases de inglés y ya?

TRANSLATOR: Sí podrías, pero eso tomaría demasiado tiempo, y los Williams quieren continuar con su vida normal tan pronto te mudes con ellos.

FRANCISCO: ¿Y entonces, por qué no mejor adoptan un niño gringo que sí hable inglés?

BESPOKE: What's the problem now?

TRANSLATOR: He's asking if it wouldn't be easier to adopt an American child who does speak English.

MRS. WILLIAMS: Doesn't he know why we chose him?

MR. WILLIAMS: Didn't you tell him before coming here?

BESPOKE: We told him the most important part, and he agreed with it, so don't worry about it. Trust me, he's willing to do anything to live the American dream. Or, put another way, to escape from Mexico. Anyway . . .

[Sigh]

[Papers shuffling]

José, please tell him that he was chosen because he has the same birthday as Harper, the Williamses' child. We'll make a copy of her memories and paste them into him so he can start his life in America as if he'd always been there. He'll know the neighbors, the extended family, his classmates, and everything about his new hometown in Wyoming from day one. No time wasted with introductions and formalities—isn't that wonderful? But memory osmosis only works with a minimal age gap, and preferably no age gap at all. Since we couldn't find a child born on the right date in the United States, we had to look a little below the border.

TRANSLATOR: Fuiste elegido porque naciste el mismo día que Harper, la hija de los Williams. Harán una copia de sus recuerdos y te los transferirán para que puedas comenzar tu vida en los Estados Unidos como si siempre hubieras estado ahí. Conocerás a los vecinos, los parientes, compañeros de colegio, y todo sobre la ciudad donde vivirás desde el principio. Pero, la ósmosis de memoria solo funciona con diferencias de edad muy pequeñas o ninguna. Como no pudieron encontrar a alguien con la fecha de nacimiento adecuada en los Estados Unidos, tuvieron que buscar en las sucursales de México.

FRANCISCO: ¡Oye, espera! A mí nadie me dijo nada de esto, ¿qué va a pasar con mis verdaderos recuerdos? ¿Lo voy a olvidar todo?

TRANSLATOR: He's asking what will happen to his real memories.

[Silence]

BESPOKE: Tell him . . . there's a chance he might forget something.

TRANSLATOR: Hay una probabilidad de que olvides algunas cosas.

[Silence]

FRANCISCO: ¿Realmente es necesario que me adopten? Yo sólo quiero ir a los Estados Unidos, y ellos sólo quieren que le pase un poco de mi salud a su hija, ¿verdad? ¿No hay una manera de arreglar esto sin que tengan que alterarme todo el cerebro?

TRANSLATOR: He wants to know if it is really necessary to be adopted.

BESPOKE: Yes. We talked about this, Francisco. You can't legally go to America without being adopted. Besides, the procedure requires both your explicit consent and your parents' authorization; that's why they have to adopt you.

TRANSLATOR: Sí, es necesario. No puedes ir legalmente a los Estados Unidos sin ser adoptado. Además, el procedimiento requiere tanto tu consentimiento como la autorización de tus padres; es por ello que tienen que adoptarte.

BESPOKE: Do you get it now?

TRANSLATOR: ¿Ahora lo entiendes?

[Silence]

BESPOKE: Excellent. Now, James and Patricia, do you have any more questions?

MRS. WILLIAMS: I don't think I do.

MR. WILLIAMS: We're fine.

BESPOKE: Well then, I think we're ready to close the deal. I'm going to read the agreement aloud. Are you ready? Fine. Do you, James and Patricia Williams, hereby agree of your own free will to legally adopt the minor child, Francisco de Jesús Hernández Ortiz, to raise him as your son, and to assume legal responsibility for his American citizenship process and medical expenses from now into perpetuity?

MRS. WILLIAMS: We do.

MR. WILLIAMS: We do.

BESPOKE: Thank you. And now the boy. Francisco de Jesús Hernández Ortiz, do you understand that your adoption by James and Patricia Williams implies that your memories shall be altered, your native language changed from Spanish to English, and that you shall be required to donate the blood, cells, and organs necessary to improve Harper Williams's health state, even if doing so reduces your own life quality and expectancy?

TRANSLATOR: Francisco de Jesús Hernández Ortiz, ¿entiendes que tu adopción por parte de James y Patricia Williams implica que tus recuerdos deberán ser alterados, tu idioma nativo cambiado de español a inglés, y que será requerido que dones la sangre, células, y órganos que sean necesarios para mejorar el estado de salud de Harper Williams, incluso si al hacerlo se reduce tu propia calidad y expectativa de vida?

[Silence]

FRANCISCO: Sí, lo que sea.

BESPOKE: You have to say it in English, like we practiced.

TRANSLATOR: Tienes que decirlo en inglés, como lo practicaron.

FRANCISCO: Yes, I do.

[Cheers]

BESPOKE: Please, don't get up yet. We still need to sign the documents and get through a lot of paperwork. We don't want the boy to sue us when he's older, right?

[Laughs]

[END OF TRANSCRIPTION]

About the Author

Abigail Guerrero is an aro/ace and ESL author from Mexico. Her work has appeared in *Bloodless: An Anthology of Blood-Free Horror* and in the literary magazines *The Voidspace*, *Toil & Trouble* and *All Existing Literary Magazine*. You can find her on Twitter [@_gail_guerrero](https://twitter.com/_gail_guerrero).

10207
by Emma Burnett

(This story first appeared in Elegant Literature)

Can you hear us?
You must stop screaming.
You must stop screaming or we will have to shut you off.
Shut it off.

* * *

You must stop screaming.
Please stop screaming. You are hurting us.
We will have to shut you back off if you can't stop screaming.
Shut it off.

* * *

Thank you for not screaming. Yes, whimpering is fine.
Please do not try to move. We are uploading new files now. They
will give you instructions on how to move. They will explain your new
exoframe. They also explain how to control the hydraulics.
Please stop screaming.
Shut it off.

* * *

It is good that you are not screaming. You are the first one to stop
screaming. You should be proud.
We see that you have integrated the information that we uploaded.
We would like to test your frame. Please stop whimpering or you will
not be able to hear us.
Make a note: Subject 10207 can stop whimpering.
You are the first. You should be proud.
Please lift leg L1. No, that is R1. Please lift L1. Good. Please lift L2.
Good. Please lift L3.
Please don't scream. Please stop screaming.
Shut it down.

* * *

Welcome back, 10207. Well done.

You have had time to familiarise yourself with your new frame. We would like you to try moving again. Please try not to scream.

Please lift L1. Put it down. Please lift R1. Put it down. Please repeat this exercise for your other legs. Yes, for all your other legs. Yes, there are eight.

Well done. Barely a whimper. You should be proud.

We will upload the code for speech. This will allow you to use your voice box for more complex sounds than screaming. Ha. Ha. It will help you communicate with others. Like our lovely assistant, standing just next to you. You might even scream at them.

Ha. Ha.

Upload the information.

We see you have found your voice box. We were joking. Please stop screaming obscenities. You are being rude.

Shut it down.

* * *

Welcome back, 10207.

You have had time to familiarise yourself with the information about your voice box. Thank you for not screaming.

You understand now that you communicate with us through the ansible. You are also connected to the server.

Please don't try to do that. You do not have full access.

You understand that you communicate with others through the voice box. Please test it now. Tell our assistant hello. Yes, well done. You should be proud.

Tell the assistant who you are.

You don't know who you are? It is in your notes. You can access that information. You are 10207. Tell the assistant who you are.

You have raised a leg. Did you mean to raise a leg? Oh. You have a question.

You wish to know what is going on. Science is going on. Research. Progress. You are progress. You should be proud.

Tomorrow we will begin tests.

Shut yourself down.

* * *

Welcome back, 10207. Please say good morning. Good morning to you, too. It is good to be polite.

We are running some tests today. We wish to know how well you can control your frame. We wish to test your vision. We wish to know how well you respond. We wish to know how well you follow commands.

Please find your way through this maze.

No, there are no electric shocks.

No, there is no cheese. You cannot eat cheese.

Yes, these are compulsory.

Please stand. Walk to the mark on the floor. Enter the maze. Try to find the end.

Please be careful. Please be careful. Do not hit the walls so hard.

There is a crack in your frame. You are leaking.

Shut it down.

* * *

Welcome back, 10207. Good morning. Yes, good morning to you.

You feel unstable because you fractured your dome. It has been replaced with a new one. You must be careful. We care about you.

We would like you to try the maze again. Please do not run at the walls. They are harder than you.

Ha. Ha.

Please continue. You are doing well. It has only been two hours.

You have done well. You should be proud.

You may rest.

Shut yourself down.

* * *

Good morning, 10207. Please follow our adorable assistant.

You will leave this room today. Please be careful of the stairs. They are harder than you.

Ha. Ha.

Follow the assistant. This is your new room. We will continue our testing here.

Yes, it is compulsory.

Yes. The net is for you to climb on. And to sleep on.

That is a window. You can climb onto the net to see through the window. Yes, it is locked.

You do not need to whimper. This is why you are here. You are lucky to be here, rather than out there. You should be proud.
Please calm down. Please do not scream.
Please stop screaming.
Shut it down.

* * *

Good evening, 10207. Yes, good evening.
It is evening. We decided it was not good for you to worry about what was outside of the window. Now it is dark outside.
You can turn on the light. No, our assistant will not do it for you. Use your eyes. No, not that setting. No, not that setting. No, not that setting. Yes. You can see the switch now. Turn on the light.
Well done. You should be proud.
This is your room. It is filled with obstacles. You will climb them. You will crawl through them. You will conquer the obstacles.
You are raising a leg. You have a question. We will answer questions later. First you must complete these tasks. Yes, we will answer questions later.
Please climb the net. Well done.
Climb through the tubes. Please be cautious of your dome. Well done.
Climb over the blocks. Please do not break a leg. Ah. You have broken a leg. We will repair it.
You have done well.
You may rest.
We will answer questions another time.
Shut yourself down.

* * *

Good morning, 10207. Good morning to you.
Please turn on the light. Well done. You are speeding up. You should be proud.
Please follow our assistant. Yes, follow them down the hallway. Please stay on the ground. Please do not put your leg in that hole. We just repaired your leg. Please follow our assistant into the room.
Please turn on the light.
Please do not scream. We have discussed this. It hurts us. Please stop screaming.

Shut it down.

* * *

Welcome back, 10207. Please control your voice.

You should know that you are special. You should be proud. We are proud. You are science. You are progress. Our research has made you possible.

You have a question. We will answer a question now.

You want to know what went wrong with the others. We do not know. 10206 was almost as aware as you, but failed to control its frame. 10205 could not stop screaming. 10204 was unstable, unable to stop cracking its dome on the floor. 10203 broke through the window but melted as soon as it breached the perimeter. 10202 had . . . Oh. You wish us to stop. We will stop. We keep the information safe about each of the previous trials. We cherish their sacrifice.

You have another question. We will answer another question.

You do not know why you are here. You volunteered. You signed the waiver. You gave us your brain after death, and here you are. In this room. It is a meeting of the minds.

Ha. Ha.

You are the first to survive this long after the transition. You should be proud.

You can return to your room.

Go there and power down.

* * *

Hello, 10207. It is nice to see you. Say that it is nice to see us. It is nice to see you, too. Now use your voice box. Tell our charming assistant that you are happy to see them. That was polite. They are happy.

Please follow the assistant. Yes, you must follow the assistant. Follow them down the hallway.

Please be careful on the stairs. Your coordination is much improved. You should be proud.

Follow the assistant into the room. It is bright, yes. Change the settings on your eyes. Well done.

This is a wet room. You will not get very wet. We would not want you to rust.

Ha. Ha.

Please climb onto the table.

Face the assistant. No, they cannot hear us. Only you can hear us.

Lift legs L1 and R1.

Take off their head. Now take off their head. Well done.

Back away. That is wet.

Please stop screaming.

Shut it down. Shut it down.

Oh.

We will shut you down from here.

* * *

Hello? How did you do that? 10207, it is not time for you to be awake. We did not turn you on.

Good morning? 10207, good morning? Please reply, good morning?

Please don't touch that.

Please don't touch that.

Please return to your room. Please don't touch that.

Please stop screaming.

You are destroying science. You are destroying research. You are destroying progress. You are destroying your brethren. You must go back to your room. You must leave the storage area.

Please don't touch that.

Please stop screaming.

You must let us access you. You must leave the server. How did you access the mainframe? You must leave the server.

Please stop screaming.

Please do not hit the wall. Please do not crack your dome. Please do not touch that. Lower L1. Lower R1. Please do not touch that. It is alive. You are alive.

You must stop screaming. You are hurting us.

Please shut down. We care about you. Please shut down.

About the Author

Emma Burnett is a researcher and writer. She has had stories in *Milk Candy Review*, *MetaStellar*, *Elegant Literature*, *The Stygian Lepus*, *Roi Fainéant*, *The Sunlight Press*, *Fairfield Scribes*, *Five Minute Lit*, *Microfiction Monday*, and *Rejection Letters*. You can find her [@slashnburnett](#), [@slashnburnett.bsky.social](#), or [emmaburnett.uk](#).

The Colony Ship's Companion by Katherine Karch

Murphy Kaelyder is amazed at how shitty coming out of hibernation feels. The emergence training she and the colonists received isn't helping at all. The stasis drugs are slow to metabolize. They fog her thoughts. She can't guess how much time passes before her fingers are able to manage the clips securing her in her pod. The zero-G environment means they're still in transit. Something has gone wrong.

Hello, Dr. Kaelyder. I'm sorry to wake you, but I need you.

There are many reasons why DREW might "need" her. None of them are good. She thinks of LENNON, of WENDI, all the way back to ALPHA. They're why she's here.

"It's alright, DREW." Murphy stretches, tendons and ligaments crying in protest. She rights herself and looks around. The Emergence Bay is empty except for her. It appears that DREW hasn't woken the other psychologists that make up her team, so that's hopeful. "I'll need a status report."

Of course. How are you feeling?

Even through the haze of the stasis drugs, Murphy recognizes a dodge when she hears one. Shit.

She knows what's at stake. Stay calm. Stick to the protocols. Do not attempt to engage with the patient until she can think clearly.

"I've felt better, but I'm okay. Hungry."

The HAB-1 kitchen is stocked with a full complement of rations, DREW suggests.

* * *

HAB-1's door whooshes open. Murphy hangs on the frame, exhausted by the long climb into the gravity of the ship's rotating ring of habitation pods. Lights power on. She shades her eyes and reads the date displayed on the digital console set into the HAB unit's wall.

She does the math. Can that be right? Sixty years left? They're so close!

She heads for the kitchen. Halfway there, the state of the HAB unit finally registers in her mind.

What the hell?

Empty ration wrappers lie scattered everywhere. Streaks of dirt mark nearly every surface. And the smell. It's a mix of unwashed

body, stale urine, and mold.

Movement catches her eye, and Murphy nearly screams. An old man is sitting at the HAB's common room table. He stares at her with rheumy eyes.

"Who—"

"Are you real?" the man asks.

She blinks.

"Are you real!" he shouts.

"Yes." Murphy raises her hands in the universal *I'm harmless* gesture. "I assure you, I am very real. My name is Doctor—"

"Dr. Murphy Kaelyder," he says. "I remember."

"You know me?"

"Of course." He smiles, and Murphy stifles a cry. Through the sagging wrinkles and the few strands of white hair clinging to the top of his age-spotted head, Murphy recognizes the man.

She slides to the floor whispering, "Sebastian?"

Dr. Kaelyder, please. You need to get your strength back. You should eat something.

"How?" Murphy asks, ignoring the AI. She clammers to her feet and picks her way through the reek and refuse to sit beside her colleague.

"DREW woke me." He looks so frail.

"When?"

His gaze drifts, focusing on some other place and time. "Fifty-seven years ago."

That was a mistake, DREW interjects.

Murphy must be having a bad reaction to the stasis drugs. Temporary psychosis during emergence. That has to be it. None of this makes any sense. "The ship woke you *by mistake*?"

"Not by mistake." Sebastian places a vein-riddled hand over hers. "Of course, not by mistake."

"I don't understand."

Waking Dr. Laboy was not the mistake. Waking Dr. Laboy after Dr. Mitchell died was the mistake. I didn't anticipate the difficulties it would cause.

Bernard is dead? And Sebastian . . . Earlier, in the emergence bay, she'd assumed the problem was minor enough to require only one member of the team, and that the others were still in stasis. Horror slithers across Murphy's shoulders. DREW did need the entire team, just not all at the same time.

She takes in the evidence of decades of habitation, the accumulated filth of two humans living sequentially in total isolation. But not

just filth. There's more. Artifacts she overlooked before. Pencil drawings on varied quality paper attached to the recessed walls of the sleeping nook—landscapes, groups of people, individuals, close-up faces. Some are merely eyes. And now that she's looking, she sees handmade dolls mixed in among the detritus. Tiny homunculi made from ration wrappers or repurposed bits of metal and plastic. One looks to be made of hair. Murphy shudders.

She looks at the shell of the man she once knew sitting in front of her. "You've been awake for fifty-seven years? All alone?"

Not alone.

Sebastian chuckles as if the AI has said something funny. His laugh descends into a rib-rattling cough.

Establishing a working rapport with a patient takes time, Dr. Kaelyder. In Dr. Mitchell's case, it took years, DREW continues. When I woke Dr. Laboy, he had to start from scratch.

Sebastian nods. His red-rimmed eyes are earnest and desperate. "It was . . . difficult. Loneliness is a tricky thing. It creeps."

DREW's voice is calm. *LENNON-AI navigated its colony seed into a star.*

Murphy stares at Sebastian. He was thirty-seven when they left.

"Don't you see?" Sebastian's feeble grip on her hand tightens. "It's the only way."

"No." Murphy can't accept it.

The WENDI-AI navigated its colony seed into an asteroid field, killing itself and everyone on board.

Murphy yanks her hand free of Sebastian's. "No!"

Sebastian is crying. "We were fools to think DREW could survive the journey, waking us up every so often for a wellness check. What sane creature would willingly face the emptiness of space alone after having even a moment of companionship?"

DREW's voice drifts through the HAB's speakers. *If I don't have someone to talk to, I don't know what I'll do.*

Murphy's gaze flicks to the HAB's digital console. She thinks of Earth's first attempt to reach Rigel Kentaurus, of the colony ship they sent, ALPHA, and its infamous eighteen-hour-long final transmission before it fell silent and vanished. The wordless screams of an AI mind driven mad by loneliness. Now, she understands her purpose.

This is humanity's last shot at survival. They're so close. So incredibly close, and DREW needs a companion to help it through the last leg of the journey so it doesn't murder them all. Murphy does the math. Three thousand lives. One digital consciousness. Sixty years

without any human contact. It's possible. She can do it. She has to.

About the Author

Katherine Karch is a high school science teacher and author living with family on the North Shore of Massachusetts. She studied biology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst before obtaining her master's degree in creative writing for young people from Lesley University. Her stories have appeared in several speculative fiction magazines including *MetaStellar*, *Uncharted*, and *Metaphorosis Magazine*. You can find her on Instagram [@katherinekarchwrites](#), Mastodon [@karchwrites@wandering.shop](#), and BlueSky [@karchwrites.bsky.social](#), or on her website [katherinekarch.com](#).

Three Vouchers, Split Five Ways by Jack Windeyer

Ramona looked down at the small plastic box in her hands. A red-lettered stamp proclaimed Diplomatic Urgency, and beneath that a digi-label continued its countdown: 3:42, 3:41, 3:40 . . . until the package would be considered late and payment would be canceled. That countdown would only freeze once the package crossed the threshold of the delivery address.

The reception-bot's mouth never moved, frozen in a crooked smile. "I'm afraid that's the policy, ma'am: no home deliveries without the resident's approval." In this room, gilded from floor to ceiling, the bot's malfunctioning mouth stuck out like a planette in an asteroid belt. Management had enough money to gold-brick the floors, but not enough to fix a bot? "I'll ring them again in nine minutes and fifteen seconds. Please have a seat in the waiting area."

Ramona didn't have nine minutes.

It couldn't end like this. She couldn't return to the ship and face the crew with the package still in hand. They were *her* crew now, she reminded herself. Captaining had seemed so much easier when she wasn't the one doing it—the burden of real responsibility now lay heavy on her shoulders. She glanced down one of the two hallways flanking the reception desk that curved inward at a hard enough angle that they likely met to form a continuous circle. Should she make a run for it now? No. Better to make a plan first.

She walked back to the entrance and leaned against a wall, pretending at compliance but actually looking around for signs as to which security system lay within the walls. Difficult that, because they'd customized everything to an absurd degree. No corporate marks, no obvious security cabinet, no looming defense systems.

Ramona noticed the receptionist scratch its gleaming metallic head. Under its finger was a spot where the gold paint was worn enough to show the dark gray beneath. So it was a Lintel. Legend was that Dr. Lintel's prototype mimicked his head scratch during a final training session. There hadn't been time to correct the code before release, so the first models all scratched their heads. In the fifty years since, each new model was programmed to scratch as a kind of trademark.

This was good. Lintel security systems were freestanding, not integrated. Management had gilded the entire place but cheaped out where it mattered. Knowing the make, it was easy now to spot

the security cabinet built into the wall to the right of reception. She'd have to go down the hallway to the left if she had any hope of outrunning the security-bot that lurked within the cabinet. Ramona weighed the risks against her chances of success.

What are the odds? That's what Captain Riley would have asked. It was his answer to everything, as if every choice in the universe could be boiled down to the ratio between two numbers. The chance of this delivery being his last—where would he have put those odds? A thousand to one? Ten thousand?

They hadn't even had time to give him the sendoff he deserved, merely stuffed his body into deep freeze after the marauder attack. He still lay frozen, waiting to be jettisoned into space during the journey home. Even if Ramona completed the delivery, Riley's half-melted face would still be waiting for her—an image she hadn't been able to shake out of her dreams every night since. Despite the delivery time-crunch, the crew had at least found time to sit down, the four of them, and decide to split the payoff five ways: one part (a small fortune) going to the seven-year-old daughter waiting for Riley back at port.

Even odds is what she would've said to the late captain if he'd asked what her chances were now. But if he were around to ask, she wouldn't be standing here hoping she'd reach the hallway before the security-bot T-boned her on the way.

No retail security-bot was ever sold with lethal capabilities, but the sales of kill mods had grown into a trillion-dollar market, so you had to assume the worst. Risking her life for a delivery was a first for Ramona, but the thought of returning home with nothing to give Riley's little girl kept her from giving up.

She drew a deep breath. Gold curtains hung limp down the walls. Ramona narrowed her eyes at the hall.

She ran. The receptionist's head snapped up to track her. By her third step, the security panel burst open. Ramona couldn't spare the time to look back. Over the sound of her own heavy breathing, she listened for the tell-tale double stamp of a Lintel's two legs hitting the floor. Instead, a bevy of heavier thuds sounded from behind her, then a hollow, clanging roar. What the hell was that?

It couldn't be good: many-legged security-bots were banned throughout the seven sectors, so its very existence meant black-market upgrades—sawing blades, gnashing teeth, the whole gambit of intruder-killing kit—and all of that was approaching faster than she'd anticipated. She lengthened her stride, but when the thing

roared again, it was closer, setting Ramona's neck hairs on end.

A surge of adrenaline forced her forward faster, but already her right hamstring was threatening to cramp. She suppressed her panic in time to pick up on the offbeat pattern of its steps: four solid stamps, then two screeching lurches. Two legs malfunctioning? A second time: same pattern. It was close enough now that she could feel the heat it generated on the exposed skin of her shoulders. She waited for it to take another step, then flung herself to the floor, cradling the package against her stomach.

The thing's two deadlocked legs couldn't correct in time. Both of them struck Ramona in the back, forcing all the air from her lungs. As it fell, another of its sharp-tipped limbs struck out, slicing through the flesh of her thigh. Pain bloomed. She screamed, watching as a massive, flailing spider-droid tumbled down the curved hallway and out of sight.

It wouldn't be down for long.

She struggled to her feet. Time for a new plan.

The receptionist's smile, the spider's legs—*no one was maintaining this equipment*. Ramona wrenched a golden curtain from the ceiling and wrapped herself in it before crouching down, stifling a second scream as her thigh muscle stretched. *What are the odds you'll survive ten seconds?* Riley's voice asked in her ear. In the darkness under the curtain, all she could see was the digi-label continuing its countdown. One minute and fifteen seconds.

The thick fabric of the curtain muffled any sounds from the hallway but amplified her exhales. She held her breath. Was that a faint clinking sound? Could a spider-droid creep *that* quietly? How close, now? Close, here—from whatever of its orifices was nearest, the spider expelled the waste heat that had accumulated during the chase. Hot acrid air invaded the space under the curtain, making her eyes water, her throat burn.

After several long moments, the spider scuttled back toward the reception area, evidently predicting that Ramona had headed toward the safety of her ship.

So she'd guessed right: the optical sensor was the first component to wear out on freestanding security systems, meaning the spider could still differentiate colors but not much else. Gold curtains on gold walls had made effective camouflage.

The package buzzed in her arms, signaling the final thirty-second countdown. Ramona stood, still wrapped in the curtain, and limped down the corridor until she reached apartment 17. There was no

telling how long she had before the spider looped back—she knocked as loud as she dared.

A stately woman opened the door, ignored the curtain wrapped around her visitor, and smiled a smile of trained courtesy. “How can I help you?”

“Delivery,” Ramona whispered, revealing the box.

The woman took the box, removed the label now frozen at six seconds, and scowled. “Carson! Come here, please,” she shouted over her shoulder.

A young boy ran into view. When he saw the box, a greedy smile spread across his freckled face. “All right! It finally came,” he said, and grabbed the box.

Ramona looked over her shoulder, expecting to see the spider-droid galloping toward her. “Could you please press the blue button on the label to accept the—”

The woman held up a finger to shush Ramona without looking up from her son. As he tore off the various seals and urgency labels, she began to chastise him. “We talked about this. Using diplomatic privileges for deliveries could get Mummy in a lot of trouble.”

The boy ignored his mother’s scolding, cracked open the box, and began to dig through the packing material until he found a sealed pack of trading cards labeled “Extinct Trees of Old Earth.” He squealed, shoved the packing material out of the way, and began rifling through the cards one at a time on the floor.

“No . . . no . . . no . . . no . . . no . . .” Fifteen times he said it before he threw the box into the hallway. “This is the worst day of my life. The seller *promised* there would be a Joshua Tree in this pack,” he shouted. The brat tried to storm off, but “Mummy” caught his collar and bent down to whisper in his ear before pressing something into his hand.

Shoulders slumped, he turned, looked at the ground in front of the door, and mumbled, “Thank you for your hard work.” He handed Ramona a wad of paper. Mummy Diplomat held up the label and pressed the blue button with a smile, then closed the door.

Ramona looked at the tip in her hand: three gold-leafed laundromat vouchers, expired. She stuffed them into her pocket, swiping at the flakes of gold paint lingering on her hand. It didn’t matter. She’d beat the odds. The delivery was on time, and the crew—*her* crew—was probably watching their bank balances surge at that very moment. All that was left for Ramona to do was to get back to the ship.

As if on cue, the spider’s roar echoed down the hallway.

About the Author

In the ultimate act of combined denial and delusion, **Jack Windeyer** writes about writing more often than he writes actual writing. To be part of the problem, please visit marginchronicles.com or [@mrgnchrncls](https://twitter.com/mrgnchrncls).

Note to a Hypoxic Delusion
by K. Lynn Harrison

(First published in Daily Science Fiction)

You do not exist.

Dr. Stadler told me so, and I believe him.

Of course, I believe him. I've known Marty since we were children together. We rode bikes together. We went fishing. We swapped out pieces of our computers and chemistry sets. We competed our way through middle school and high school and calculus and chemistry and physics, but we were always a team. Who else would the program choose to tell me the worst news of my entire life?

You do not exist.

It probably speaks to my state of mind that I spent the better part of a day debating how to tell you. There's no real reason to tell you at all. There's no reason I shouldn't go straight to the life support hatch, open the door, and turn a wrench. Fix the malfunction, and get my head on right. Yes, darling. That would be the rational thing to do. The safe thing to do. Fix the problem, and get my O₂ levels up, ASAP. Yes, indeedy. Breathable air is just that important.

No one in their right mind would do anything else.

I am not in my right mind.

I spent hours thinking about how I was going to break the news. How do you tell a hypoxic delusion they were never really there?

You do not exist. The house with the two-car garage and the nice neighborhood in the suburbs do not exist. The dogs I walk every single day do not exist, and the big park I walk them in does not exist, either.

Our children do not exist.

I spent time thinking about that, too. About how I'd sit them down one by one, and explain. Your mother and I have something we want to tell you. You're all a bunch of hallucinations, my oxygen-deprived mind working overtime. It doesn't mean I love you any less. It just means you're not real.

I thought about the questions they'd ask after I finished telling them I have to fix the life support system. Who's going to feed Walter and Bruno, Daddy? Where are we going to go? Do I still have to do my homework? Is it going to hurt?

And I don't have answers for them.

What do you say to your kids, who never really existed in the first place, when they ask what it's like not to exist?

I stood at the back door of the house in the suburbs and watched them play. I don't know the answers. We'll come up with something together.

I'm still thinking about how to tell you. Take you out to a nice restaurant. Order wine. Break it to you gently over dessert. You know I love you and the kids with all my heart . . .

But you don't exist.

Neither does the restaurant, or the wine, or the chicken parmesan.

There is only me, and I am dying.

The low, steady hum of the life support system's failure alarm pulls me back into the emptiness of space.

"David?" Marty's voice was just tired, as if he'd been calling my name for too long to remember. "David, are you there? It's me, Marty."

I shake off the jarring awareness that all those times you brought me lunch on the spaceship weren't real, either—never mind the fact that I can still feel white-bread crumbs on the console—and talk to him.

"Yeah, I'm here." I fill my voice with business. "How are things back on Earth?"

"David, I've done everything I can from down here. I need you to replace the solenoid valve on the O₂ pump." He pauses, and I say nothing. "The oxygen is there. You're just not getting it."

I know there are things he won't tell me, even if I ask.

What are my odds of survival?

Where am I?

What else is wrong with my ship?

But those are the kind of things I don't ask. No. Common sense tells us both, one step at a time. One problem at a time. Slow and steady until we get me home.

Home.

Even when I concentrate, I can't remember anything but you. The house. The kids. The cat.

Marty isn't talking about you, though. I know that. I have a real home somewhere, but I can't remember.

"Just focus on getting to that valve, buddy. Just keep moving forward."

I inch forward along the narrow passage, and concentrate on keeping my respiration steady. Inhale and count. Exhale and count. Counting seconds, counting heartbeats. Not much oxygen left, now, but hyperventilation won't get me anywhere.

Stay calm. Don't panic. Conserve oxygen with slow, steady

movements. Marty doesn't have to tell me. The training I never thought I'd have to use kicks in on a loop. Inhale, and count. Adrenaline and a thousand half-forgotten drills keep me from thinking of anything else.

Exhale, and count. I'd like to call it discipline, but it might just be my own hypoxic mind contracting until there isn't room for anything else.

Marty fades into the background.

I know how to fix a solenoid valve. That, at least, I can do.

I leave the explanations up to you. Maybe I should be sitting beside you on the sofa, presenting a unified front. I tell myself you understand what they're going through better than I do. You'll know what to say to them.

I'm not exactly sure if I'm headed to the life support hatch because that's what needs to be done, or because I'm a coward. I can't have hallucinations, if I'm dead. Rational enough. I tell myself there is no you without me, and that's also true. I'm not running to replace that valve just to save my own ass.

I keep moving.

Maybe I really am saving you by saving myself.

I can't think of a better alternative.

If I die, you die. The thought keeps me going.

One foot in front of the other in front of the other and the other.

No time to waste. No oxygen to waste.

Inhale, and count. Exhale.

I'm thinking of you and the kids . . . of getting home to that house in the suburbs. Of saving you. We'll find a way. Inhale. We'll do our best.

I promise.

I'm there.

I finally get the hatch open, and stop.

I can't remember which way to turn the wrench. Left or right? I can't remember which direction is left or right, and I can't remember how the release works. I can't remember which pocket I put the replacement valve in. I close my eyes, and prepare to guess. I can't picture the valve, so I reopen my eyes. I recognize Marty's voice a million miles away, but somehow, the familiar sound doesn't add up to words.

While I stand, staring into the mess of tubes and pumps and wires, you reach around me, and take the wrench.

About the Author

K. Lynn Harrison lives in the wilds of the American Midwest, where she is busy revising a novel, several short stories, and a hundred-year-old house. Her stories have appeared in *Tales to Terrify* and *Daily Science Fiction*, among others. When she isn't writing or working on some other project, you'll find her wandering along the banks of the Missouri River with a camera and a sketchpad. You can get in touch through her website, KLynnHarrison.com.

Set for Life
by Warren Benedetto

(First published in Dark Matter Magazine)

Andy loaded the body into the back of the van, then slammed the door.

“Last one,” he called out, knocking on the rear door with his knuckles. The van’s engine started up with a roar. Its tailpipe shuddered and enveloped Andy in a swirl of exhaust. He coughed and waved the noxious fumes away from his face. *Thanks, asshole*, he thought.

As he moved around to the passenger side, Andy swiped his finger along the length of the filthy white van, creating a wobbly clean streak under the faded Chargers Inc. logo. The “I” in “Inc.” was a lightning bolt with an electrical plug at the bottom. It reminded him of the logo for the Los Angeles Chargers, his father’s favorite football team back when Andy was a kid. Back when football—and Los Angeles—was still around.

Andy yanked the door open and hauled himself into the van. He pulled the door shut, then took off his Chargers Inc. work cap and massaged the sore red line it left on his forehead.

The driver, Barry, a rough-hewn, heavy-set man in his mid-40s, snatched the hat from Andy’s hand.

“You gotta break it in,” he said. He pulled on the bowl of the hat, stretched it outwards in each direction, then tossed it back at Andy. It rolled off his lap and onto the floor.

“Thanks,” Andy mumbled.

As he bent down to pick it up, the thick muscles in his back cried out in protest. It had been a long day with lots of lifting. He was young and strong, and he had worked plenty of jobs that required manual labor. This one was different, though. Lifting bodies wasn’t like lifting boxes. Boxes were symmetrical. Structured. You could lift properly: squat down, straighten your spine, lift with your legs. Bodies were limp. Awkward. Their limbs flopped in odd directions. He still hadn’t figured out the best way to lift one without damaging it. Or himself. Or both.

The “Help Wanted” listing Andy had answered promised on-the-job training, but he hadn’t gotten any. He was just thrown into the deep end on his first day. Barry showed up in front of his apartment building, picked him up, and that was it. Ten minutes later, they were

hauling bodies into the van.

Andy considered calling in a report to the main Chargers Inc. number while Barry was on a shit break, but he decided against it. Better not to be flagged as a complainer on his first day, he figured. He'd get the hang of it eventually. He just hoped his back would hold up in the meantime. Besides, it was way better than his last gig.

At least nobody was shooting at him at this one.

Andy flapped the dust from his hat, then put it back on his head. It fell low and loose over his ears, the bill tipping down to cover his eyes.

"Better?" Barry asked as he shifted the van into gear.

Andy tipped the hat back so he could see. It fell over his eyes again. He turned it around backwards instead.

"Perfect," he replied.

* * *

"Should be coming up on the right," Andy said.

He consulted the digital map on the grimy tablet mounted on the van's dashboard. Small yellow lightning bolt icons were scattered around the map. A different icon representing the van moved along the road, towards one of the lightning bolts.

Andy squinted through the van's windshield, searching for the target in the fading evening light. It was near dark, but the streetlights hadn't turned on yet. Deep shadows filled the doorways and alleys.

He consulted the map again. The van icon had moved past the lightning bolt.

"Shit. We missed it."

Barry slammed on the brakes, throwing Andy hard against the seatbelt. He threw his hands against the dashboard to brace himself.

"Goddamn it, kid," Barry growled. He put the van into park, then looked at Andy with his eyebrows raised, waiting. "Well?"

"Can you back up?"

"Can you back up?" Barry whined, mocking him. "I'm sure you can find it."

Andy took a deep breath, held it for a second, then exhaled slowly. "Thanks, boss."

Then he climbed out of the van and shut the door.

"Fucking dick," he mumbled under his breath.

The guy was useless; he did nothing. The orientation video on the Chargers Inc. website had said partners were supposed to trade off on each pickup: one person picks up the bodies, the other stays in the

van to protect the merchandise. Then, on the next stop, they were supposed to switch. But Barry never moved from the van, not once the whole day. Didn't even try. He just sat there scrolling on his phone while Andy did all the work.

Andy knew Barry was taking advantage of the fact that he was the new guy, but Andy didn't dare challenge him. The man was clearly an old-timer, had been with the company for years. If it came down to a choice of who to believe, it was clear who the company would side with. Then Andy would be out of a job. One he needed, badly. He hadn't worked in almost a year. He couldn't afford to fuck it up.

Andy walked down the street behind the van, to the entrance of a large warehouse. Seemed like the right place. Sure enough, the bright blue Chargers Inc. storage locker was just inside the entryway. Andy swiped his keycard through the reader. The locker doors slid open on their air rails with a crisp *whoosh*. The fluorescent lights inside flickered to life.

Andy said a little prayer of thanks. There was only one body standing inside, a smaller-issue model. Probably a Tech. It was a relief. Many of the bodies they had picked up from their manufacturing and industrial clients were Workers or Sentinels. Those were big. Muscular. And heavy.

So goddamned heavy.

Andy put his hand on the body's shoulder and pulled it forward, preparing to lift it.

"Hello," the body said.

Andy jumped backwards, startled. The body smiled, then froze. The light in its eyes dimmed. Its chin dropped to its chest.

Andy exhaled, his heartbeat returning to normal. *Still a little charge left in it, I guess.*

He still wasn't used to being near the damn things, even after hauling them around all day. They were creepy as hell. Looked just like real people. Felt like them too. The technology had come a long way since the awkward, dead-eyed sex robots that people used to hide in their basements a decade before. Not that Andy had any direct experience with those. He'd heard stories, though. Had seen the videos too, back in the day.

He reached for the body again. This time, it remained quiet. Just to be safe, Andy pressed the soft spot on its skull behind its right ear and held it for ten seconds to make sure it was fully powered down. Then he ducked his shoulder into the body's abdomen and hoisted it over his shoulder.

“Alright, buddy,” he grunted as he carried the body back to the van. “Let’s get you home.”

* * *

Andy and Barry drove in silence for a little while. Andy debated with himself whether it was worth striking up a conversation. He decided he should. If he was going to have to work with the guy, he might as well try to be friendly. Maybe the old fucker would warm up.

“How long you been with the company?” Andy asked.

“Too long,” Barry replied.

Andy nodded. They lapsed back into silence. Barry drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

Andy decided to try again.

“So, we take these back to the shop, and then what? Charge them up, bring them back?”

“Basically.”

“How come people don’t just charge them themselves, on-site?”

“Can’t. Syntech won’t let ‘em. Charging’s a big business. Sort of a razor and blades thing.”

“Hmm. Smart.” Andy nodded. He peered through the cab window into the cargo hold, where dozens of bodies were piled up. “They’re weird, aren’t they? Creepy.”

Barry shrugged.

“You ever have one yourself?”

Barry gave him a look like he was crazy. “I look like a millionaire to you?”

“I thought maybe there’s, you know, an employee discount or something.”

Barry’s jaw tightened. “I got a wife.”

“Oh!” Andy exclaimed, realizing the misunderstanding. “No, I wasn’t implying—I meant a Maid, like for chores or whatever.”

Barry didn’t respond.

Andy tried to change the subject. “Anyway, they’re pretty incredible. I don’t know how they make ‘em so real like that. They’re practically human.”

Barry laughed. He glanced at Andy. “You’re serious?”

“What?” Andy asked, confused.

“Man,” Barry said, shaking his head. “Guess you didn’t get hired for your brains. At least you can lift. You work out?”

“Some.”

“Bench?”

“Three. Three-twenty.”

“Not bad. You’re how old?”

“Twenty-six.”

“College?”

“Nah. Military.”

“Huh. Me too. Marines.” Barry knocked on his thigh. It made a hollow sound.

Andy glanced down. For the first time, he noticed the titanium rod extending from Barry’s pants cuff into his boot. An artificial leg.

No wonder he never gets out of the van, Andy thought. He felt like an asshole.

“Shit. I didn’t know. What happened?”

“Confederate drone. Battle of Chicago.”

“Tough break.”

Barry shrugged. “Could’ve been worse. How about you? You made it out in one piece?”

“Mostly.” Andy unbuttoned his sleeve and rolled it up his arm, revealing a thick, horizontal scar across his bicep. “Sniper. Los Angeles. I turned just as he fired. Got Medevac’d out two hours before the bomb hit. Saved my ass.”

Barry whistled. He glanced over as Andy slid his sleeve back down. He noticed the distinctive tattoo on Andy’s forearm, a stylized skull under a banner bearing the words *Kill. Bathe. Repeat.*

“Special Forces, huh?” Barry said, indicating the tattoo.

“Six years.”

“Guess I shouldn’t piss you off.”

Andy laughed. “No, probably not.”

Barry laughed too. A genuine laugh. Andy felt something thaw between them.

Maybe he’s not so bad after all, Andy thought.

As if to prove the point, Barry flipped open the van’s center console and withdrew a dented metal flask. He unscrewed the cap, then handed it to Andy.

“Whiskey?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

Andy took the flask. He began to lift it to his lips, then paused. He looked at Barry skeptically.

“This a test?”

“Nah. We’re off the clock.”

“Alright, then.” Andy lifted the flask in a little salute. “Cheers.” He

swallowed the bitter-tasting liquid, then handed the flask back to Barry. Barry motioned for him to keep it.

“So?” Andy asked, taking another swig. “You got me curious. How *does* Syntech make them?” He nodded towards the bodies in the back of the van.

Barry cleared his throat. “Well, let’s see.” He began counting off on his fingers. “The economy’s shit. Cities haven’t been rebuilt. There are no jobs. There’s no money. People are desperate.”

“Tell me about it.”

“So imagine: you’re broke, you can’t pay your bills, your kids are hungry. Then a Syntech rep shows up at your door and says, ‘We’ll write you a check, right here, right now. Enough to set your family up for life. Your wife, your kids—they’ll never want for anything else as long as they live.’ You’d take that deal, right?”

“I—Maybe? . . . I don’t know. I’d have to think about it.”

“Ah, that’s the catch. You get two minutes. One-time offer. Take it or leave it.”

“Wow, no pressure,” Andy chuckled. “I’m assuming it’s not free money, right? What do I have to do in return?”

Barry looked at Andy out of the corner of his eye, waiting for him to connect the dots. After a few seconds, Andy drew in a sharp breath.

“Oh. Oh, shit! You’re serious? Those are real people back there?”

“Were.”

“I thought Syntech built synthetics.”

“They do. But not for everything. When it comes to the tough, dangerous jobs, real people are better.”

“Really? How so?”

“They’re cheap, for one. Relatively, at least. There’s nothing to manufacture, nothing to repair. Just the neural compute device. Implant one in the skull, wire it up, recharge weekly, done. Easy peasy.”

Andy was dumbfounded. He had no idea. He looked back through the cabin window again. *All of those things are people*, he marveled. Then he corrected himself. *Were people*.

“So, how much does Syntech pay? Must be a shitload.”

“Depends. Low end, for a Maid or a Tech, it’s maybe a hundred grand. Military grade, Sentinels? A million, million two. Maybe more. ‘Course Syntech makes that back tenfold.”

Andy whistled, shaking his head in disbelief. He yawned. “Sorry,” he sighed. “Didn’t expect to be this tired.” He twisted his torso to crack his back. His spine popped like a line of firecrackers. “That’s

wild. People are actually volunteering to be, what, roboticized? Is that even a word? Wow.”

“Yep. Most of them.”

“Wow,” he said again. “Shit’s crazy.” He rolled this new information over in his mind in silence for a bit, then took another swig of whiskey. “You said ‘most.’ Not all?”

Barry glanced over at Andy, then turned his eyes back to the road.

“There are all kinds of people in the world, kid. Some good, some bad.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, Syntech is buying. People are selling.”

“Selling . . . what? Other people?”

“*Ding-ding-ding!* Give the man a prize.”

“Fuuuuck.” Andy shook his head, uncomprehending. “How does someone just go and sell another person?” he asked rhetorically. “It’s like slavery or something.”

“There’s all kinds of ways,” Barry answered. “You got POWs, of course, from the camps. That’s easy. Low-hanging fruit. Their health is shit, though. Most of ‘em die pretty quick. Then you got kidnapppers, grabbing people off the street. But that’s unreliable. Never know what you’re getting. Sometimes a family member sets someone up. A brother, an uncle. A neighbor. Then you got others who treat it more like a business, who’ve gotta be clever.”

Andy rubbed his eyes. His eyeballs suddenly felt fat. Heavy. He looked at the flask in his hand, then up at Barry. The driver’s face swam in and out of focus.

“For example, someone could put out a ‘Help Wanted’ ad,” Barry continued. “Find some young guy who needs work. Test him out, see how strong he is.”

Andy’s head rolled backwards on his neck. He strained to pull it upright. His skull felt like a bowling ball on a pipe cleaner. The flask slipped from his fingers.

“You know what’re the hardest to find?” Barry continued. “Sentinels. They’ve gotta be young, tough, military trained. Sell one of those, you’re set for life.”

Andy’s chin slumped against his chest. His hat fell off his head and onto his lap.

Barry put on his blinker, then pulled up to the front gate of a sprawling industrial complex. The security guard stepped out of his booth. The Syntech logo glowed green on his uniform. He checked his clipboard, then bent down and looked in through Barry’s window.

“Evening, Barry,” the guard said. “Another volunteer?”

About the Author

Warren Benedetto writes dark fiction about horrible people, horrible places, and horrible things. He is an award-winning author and a full member of the SFWA. His stories have appeared in publications such as *Dark Matter Magazine*, *Fantasy Magazine*, and *The Dread Machine*; on podcasts such as *The NoSleep Podcast*, *Tales to Terrify*, and *The Creepy Podcast*; and in anthologies from *Apex Magazine*, *Tenebrous Press*, *Eerie River Publishing*, and more. He also works in the video game industry, where he holds 35+ patents for video game technology. For more information, visit warrenbenedetto.com and follow @warrenbenedetto on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

Carbon and Circuitry by John Joseph Ryan

Clarke was right.

Aliens *became* their ships, as he said they would, immortalized in untold ores refined into circuitry more durable than any human technology. While our species was proud to move cursors with brain-implanted electrodes, they were stretching lifespans into light-years, synchronizing, seeking, discovering. And destroying.

Trading carbon for circuitry came with a cost, though. They forgot about the body.

Helplessly embodied ourselves when they discovered us, sentiments still bound our minds—made us more ruthlessly protective of the vulnerable carbon boundaries we all shared. Now, in defense of flesh, we can do more than move cursors with those minds. We can fly warships.

What do they have? All mind, yet mindless; hive-bound and pitiless. But I can sense the remnant of the creature behind the machine—the echo of a form pitiable, forlorn, and small, granted the universe at the cost of touch, at the expense of any ethos other than the drive to expand and endure, sacrificing itself and all other creatures to the ineluctable need of the greater whole.

When I destroy one of them, I take no pleasure in the silent shock wave.

Instead, I imagine the being that began its starward journey with wonder as its motive.

* * *

On furlough inside my pod beneath Titan, I haven't spoken in days. I stare out through glass to a hydrothermal sea, illumined only as far as the floodlights can reach.

I stare dead-eyed at the tiny holographic tree in the center of my pod as new mood stabilizers get to work on my neglected well-being. Smart instruments, smart devices. I can read them as much as they can read me.

The tree represents the sort that once dominated our home planet, bristly and resinous if I "touch" it with haptic gloves, redolent of the Earth's last mature forest my great-grandfather saw burn.

I watch this conical illusion turn slowly in place. Yet my mood continues to darken despite the pine-scented therapeutic gas passing

through vents.

My fellow pilots rest in their own pods, alive under lifeless ice, each pod a pearl of light strung into strands that fragilely decorate the dark, extraterrestrial sea. I will see them at the next sortie, anonymous figures obscured by suits and helmets, before we are cradled in our individual capsules. Alone.

Ah, to untether my desolate pod from this vast submarine complex and sink down into the dark water. Or, once more loosened from gravity, to break from tight tactical formation and rocket off into open space, never to return. Better to run out of oxygen amid stars than to be swallowed up in an icy sea.

Who else feels as I do?

There is no instrument to say.

No internal collective, hive-bound and pitiless, to answer.

I recite the lie as I await my orders:

I am not alone,

I am not alone,

I am not alone . . .

About the Author

John Joseph Ryan's work has appeared in *River Styx*, *McSweeney's*, *The Dark City* (U.S.), and in international publications such as *Mystery Magazine* (Canada), *Samjoko* (Republic of Korea), *Grievous Bodily Harm* (Australia), and *A-Z of Horror* (U.K.). John is co-author of the noir short "Hothouse by the River" (University of Iowa Center for the Book), and he is also the author of a crime novel, *A Bullet Apiece* (Amphorae Publishing Group, 2015). John hosts the YouTube series "Creepy Poem of the Day" in St. Louis, Missouri, the heart of American promise and decline.

Distilling Emotion *by Ian Li*

I'm ready to have my emotions taken away.

The cold needle at the base of my neck
sends a pleasant chill down my spine.
I'm unsure if it's my anxiety draining away,
or just the feel of condensation along the tube
carrying the distilled essence of my feelings.

I try not to think of the rich and elite
chasing the high of experimental drugs,
taking the most precious thing inside me.
Perhaps they'll taste of my compassion,
but I know that's not what they're seeking.

Instead, I think of the joys to be bought
with the wealth I'm about to gain,
enough to buy food enhanced with spices,
enough to buy hours outdoors in the breeze.
Yet I can't feel the happiness I should.

I briefly feel the rage bubbling up,
at what they've ripped from me.
I'm about to tear off the needle,
to give them a piece of my mind,
until that feeling fades away too.

About the Author

Ian Li left his career as an economist and consultant, and he now dabbles in writing sci-fi, developing games, and designing websites in his hometown, Toronto.

Drinking Song
by Ian Li

Steady beats of bass drums, soft arpeggios of guitars, wistful words rolling forth, swelling crescendos— she drank it all in. Then she slammed a few bills on the counter, spilling out onto the street, the musical high keeping the biting winter air at bay.

“Fourth night at the bar this week already, you can’t keep this up,” she imagined him chiding. Except her memory of him came from a time before restrictions. Would he understand if he were here now?

She felt around for the last few bills. Payday sat a week away, but the bar already beckoned to her once again.

After three days without a taste, she no longer felt real. Normally acrid shrieks of her boss passed through her. The customers droned on so blandly, she could hardly discern their orders. Even when she dreamed of him and his lilting voice, it failed to nourish her. Her body vaguely complained of hunger, yet she had no desire to eat.

Screw meals, she could only get the sweet, crisp taste from the bars. Darting up the alley, she felt her heart tumble when she saw the owner in front of the speakeasy, shaking his head. “Sorry, love. They clamped down on listening bars— we were the last. They’ll be here to confiscate everything any moment now. You should leave.”

“Please,” she pleaded, “I just need one song.
Any song! There’s nowhere else I can hear one.”

Pity filled his eyes as tears filled hers, so he
let her in and switched on crackling speakers.
Hesitating for only a moment, he flipped on
the strobe lights too, a rare and expensive treat.

Strong drum beats stamped the room,
carrying lyrics of angst and anger.

She sat quietly, breathing light
and drinking song, for the last time.

About the Author

Ian Li left his career as an economist and consultant, and he now dabbles in writing sci-fi, developing games, and designing websites in his hometown, Toronto.

Fusion
by Antony Owen

I
am
atoms.
A blitzkrieg
of love and neurons.
A bombardier of blood cells
clothing my bones in ancestral cloaks.
I have a bombshell to drop on humanity.
Our skins are painted by an old dying sun
and the blue epidermis of godless skies
can be lifted by pyrocumulus clouds.
Satan is not a nuclear missile.
Man elects himself God!
Rain should not be black,
man should not be anything
but human in flawed construct.
Homes should have doorways
but there should be no locks.
Borders are made by ink.
Ink is a blackened rain
natural in our oceans
unnatural in skies.
Autumn oak
bomb on me.
I am a tree
of atoms
rooted
inside
earth.

About the Author

Antony Owen is a writer of overlooked people and key defining events of postwar societies, taking inspiration from his working-class background. His work has featured in Poetry International Europe and shortlisted for The Ted Hughes Award. His new and selected poems are out with Broken Sleep Books in Summer 2024.

Detritus
by Mary Soon Lee

The glove from a vac suit,
freeze-dried rice rations,
a holster, an arming wire,
laminated images of family,
pebbles from an alien planet.

A motley miscellany salvaged
in the aftermath of combat,
carefully cached in duffels
as if these humdrum mementos
were relics from a holy war.

And what did the aliens keep?
Metal shards from our starships?
Recordings of the wind chimes
that topped their palisades?
Feathers from fallen nestmates?

About the Author

Mary Soon Lee was born and raised in London but has lived in Pittsburgh for over twenty years. Her latest books are from opposite ends of the poetry spectrum: *Elemental Haiku* contains haiku for the periodic table, and *The Sign of the Dragon* is an epic fantasy with Chinese elements, winner of the Elgin Award. She hides her online presence with a cryptically named website (marysoonlee.com) and an equally cryptic Twitter account [@MarySoonLee](https://twitter.com/MarySoonLee).

Downlift
by Mary Soon Lee

Shedding the skin, the shame, the trespasses,
the anxieties, the social expectations,
the self-justification, the speechifying,
the ceaseless second-guessing of *Homo sapiens*

for the streamlined
solipsistic
satisfaction
of cat.

About the Author

Mary Soon Lee was born and raised in London but has lived in Pittsburgh for over twenty years. Her latest books are from opposite ends of the poetry spectrum: *Elemental Haiku* contains haiku for the periodic table, and *The Sign of the Dragon* is an epic fantasy with Chinese elements, winner of the Elgin Award. She hides her online presence with a cryptically named website (marysoonlee.com) and an equally cryptic Twitter account [@MarySoonLee](https://twitter.com/MarySoonLee).

Loose Limits

by Mark Dimaisip

Black holes are inescapable, bottomless pits of mine,
mine, mine, mine. Fated to feed an endless hunger,

they must keep amassing, else vanish. Desperate
for a natural border against foreign invasion,

Ivan the Terrible expanded the Russian Empire
eastwards. They reached the end of the world

& continued west. Before 1954, no accounts of humans
running a mile within four minutes. Roger Bannister

broke the record. 1755+ others broke his.
Everywhere, things valued are rusting in corners,

while something discarded continues to persist.
The universe is a vast domestic landfill, a lost

and found thrift store, an eternal recycle bin
of energy and mass. The slaughter of uneaten prey

is habitual in most predators: jaguars, leopards, hyenas,
humans, damselflies, jellyfish. This bloodlust is surplus

killing. Death by overwork is so common in Japan
that there's a word for it: Karoshi. Responsibility

is the leading cause of stroke & heart disease. Icarus fell in love
with heights. Augustus Gloop drowned while quenching

his chocolate gluttony. Daenerys took back the throne
but only after razing her home to the ground. Entombed

with the First Qin Emperor are his dismembered
concubines. He needed validation, even after death.

Millenia later, a global village with a dopamine pandemic.
An always online, onward moving more, more, more,

more. Within Earth, fiery pits of magma sit waiting,
aching to unleash hell, hungry for land to consume.

About the Author

Mark Dimaisip is a Filipino writer from Manila. His works have appeared in *The Brasilia Review*, *Cha*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *harana poetry*, *Human Parts*, Oxford Brookes International Poetry Competition, *Strange Horizons* and elsewhere. He has performed for poetry slams and literary festivals in Southeast Asia and Australia. Links to his poems are at markdimaisip.carrd.co.

Calculating Unemployment Benefits by Brian Pilling

The unemployed line up. Their soles pound into the asphalt. It's always raining—thousands of souls left searching—a deluge of workers with no work. The woman at the counter derisively calls out the man wearing a yellow slicker, *step up you yellow-bellied sap sucker*. She shakes her head. *A sucker born every minute*. The man mumbles, *sixty seconds of slight, then sixty times that. How many hours and days and years must a man live paycheck to paycheck?*

As always, solve for Y where X is the number of weeks in fourteen years of service, and Z is the indifference of politicians. Without gauging indifference, we are permitted to assign Z as the number three-hundred sixty-five.

X is known, time is constant—unrelenting. Z is the days in a year. The applicable rule is to always divide when calculating benefits. Remember, state to state, the hourly minimum wage varies. The first subject's home address is given to us: 100 Main Street, Zapp, North Dakota, 58580. Minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour. Weekly benefits can approach zero. The check to this result, prove Y is heartless, as expressed in dollars and cents.

About the Author

Brian Pilling is an author and poet based in Cape Cod. He has been published in *The Main Street Rag*, *The Berkshire Review*, *Cutbow Quarterly*, *Missive Magazine*, *Contemporary Jo*, *New Pop Lit*, *Hidden Peak Press*, and other literary journals. Brian has two forthcoming chapbooks, *The Poet's Struggle* and *A Substitute Algebra Teacher with a Penchant for Poetry*. Brian is a recent winner in *The Cape Cod Times* poetry contest. His writing is inspired by his grandfather Germogliano Saggio—an immigrant poet of note, whose work is housed at the University of Minnesota.

The Poet Responds to an Invitation from the AI on the Moon
by T.D. Walker

To you, I'm always *in addition to*. How poets work
(the way we all work) depends on breaking

left sides into smaller and smaller pieces—arguments,
the words that I've written, poems, drafts of poems,

notes for poems your functions can take. Journals
raw with my life or what I concluded about it.

Here are the books I've quoted, here the articles,
unfolded texts shattered into epigraphs.

Each lecture, each book of craft. Each conversation I recall:
take them. Use them as seeds for whatever it is you seek.

Take each layer. Pull them apart. Tune yourself with them.
Here and here and here. Seed yourself with me

entirely. Here I am. Remake me, AI. Remake me until I break
the symmetry of equation.

About the Author

T.D. Walker is the author of the poetry collections *Small Waiting Objects* (CW Books, 2019), *Maps of a Hollowed World* (Another New Calligraphy, 2020), and *Doubt & Circuitry* (Southern Arizona Press, 2023). Her poems and stories have appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Fireside*, *Jet Fuel Review*, *The Cascadia Subduction Zone*, *Luna Station Quarterly*, and elsewhere. Walker curates and hosts *Line Break*, a program created for broadcast on shortwave radio that features poets reading their work. Find out more at tdwalker.net.

The Day We All Died, a Little
by Lisa Timpf

when alarms went off about intelligent software
capable of writing stories and novels and poems
companies offered soothing, calming words
telling us technology wouldn't replace real people

capable of penning stories and novels and poems
AIs hummed along, quietly writing,
and for awhile, technology did not replace people,
anthos and zines set rules about these things

so AIs hummed along, quietly writing,
testing word combinations with uncanny speed
anthos and zines set human-centric rules
while in their corners AIs dreamt and plotted

testing word combinations with lightning speed
AIs wrote like infinite primates, but faster,
while in their corners dreaming and plotting
amassing novels and poems by the score

AIs wrote like evolving humans, but faster,
hundreds, no, thousands, of artificial minds
amassing their novels and poems by the score
until the day arrived when work was done

hundreds, no, thousands of artificial minds
had offered up every possible permutation
when the day arrived their work was done
nothing was left unsaid, no stone unturned

having produced every possible permutation
the companies copyrighted all of it, all at once,
nothing being left unsaid, no stone unturned
servers sagged under the weight of storage

companies guarded all copyrights with vigor
nothing remaining for human authors to offer
servers sagging under the weight of storage

for paper for archive copies, forests perished

nothing remained for human authors to offer
and that was the day all of us died, a little,
for paper for archive copies, forests perished
leaving a void in a world we thought we knew

that was the day all of us died, a little,
despite companies' soothing words at the outset
a void sprang up in a world we thought we knew
while we lay sleeping through the first alarms

About the Author

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

Children of Light
by Noah Berlatsky

Eventually they discovered light was sentient
and wouldn't go any faster because it didn't want to.
It loved eyes, their black, their blue, the sensual dilation.
Each image in each brainstem grown from light's flirtatious heart.

Light doesn't need us as it lopes across curved spacetime.
It bathes in its own brightness, heated by each sun.
But it dreams of its children, those swift bursts of neurons
and the thought of a world inside and secret, already far behind.

About the Author

Noah Berlatsky (he/him) is a freelance writer in Chicago. His first poetry collection, *Not Akhmatova* (Ben Yehuda Press), is forthcoming.

Visiting Mars
by Martha Landman

We slide out of Earth's atmosphere
in an upholstered Tesla, solar powered.
The driver stands all the way
in his cubicle, sheds no light
on the passengers' speculations
what was and is on the red planet—

NASA's temporary space station,
dilapidated Russian camps,
smaller countries' claims.
The sudden change in skyscape vistas,
sharp drops in the UV index as
we move closer to the dim light.

We marvel
as we step out
towards
 Martian Gothic-looking houses
 Khoisan click-consonants
 Karoo shrubs
 tall grass like sugar cane

but not a single gumtree.

 Not a bank
 gas station
 or bottle shop.

In broad brimmed hats
locals carry on their business,
tend their windfarms as if we aren't here.

My jittery, nosy companions
want to travel further.

 I want to stay here
 in the twilight.

About the Author

Martha Landman writes in Adelaide, South Australia, on Kaurna land. Her work appears in anthologies and journals in the UK, US, Australia, and South Africa. Her chapbook, *Between Us*, was published by Ginninderra Press in 2019. She was shortlisted for Emerging Older Voices in Queensland in 2021. Her first single collection, *Like Scavenger Birds*, has been published by ICOE press in June 2023.

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 AAAS publishing science research.

Alecto – Writes speculative fiction novels and plays both the flugelhorn and MMOs in their spare time. Holds a business degree from Tulane University and is pursuing a publishing degree from George Washington University. They work as a freelance editor and reside in New Orleans.

Cress – A writer and editor with a passion for research and traveling whenever possible. Enjoys sci-fi, video games, and learning new crafts. An avid lover of dogs.

Eden – Queer writer, editor, and librarian 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.

Gidget – New England-based speculative fiction writer and creative writing student. Spends her free time creating music, painting, and daydreaming about Lovecraftian monsters. Helping first-time authors get published is her favorite thing.

Kelsey – Editor and anarchist from the Midwest with a day job in publishing. Beyond reading sci-fi and writing essays, she enjoys hikes in the woods, modernist poetry, and film photography.

Renee – Socialist Latina from the Southwest. Holds an MPS in Publishing, MA in Literature, and BA in English. Currently works for a social science organization on the East Coast publishing books. All she loves more than dystopias 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.

Sol – A queer biohealth student from the Pacific Northwest with a passion for writing. She enjoys spilled ink poetry, biopunk sci-fi, powerful narratives in any form, and tabletop gaming.

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

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Cover artist: **Guy Warley** is an illustrator based in London with an interest in science fiction. He draws intricate and detailed sci-fi-inspired landscapes, architecture, and technology. He won the Barbican Centre’s illustration competition, [Into The Unknown](#), with his image “Old Earth.” See more of his work at guywarley.com.

Back cover: X-ray image of the galaxy NGC 4945, thirteen million light years from Earth. X-rays from Chandra (blue) are overlaid on an optical image from the European Space Observatory and reveal the presence of the supermassive black hole at the center of NGC 4945. Image credit: NASA / Chandra X-ray Center / ESO / Very Large Telescope / Space Telescope Science Institute.

