

RADON JOURNAL

Issue 6



RADONJOURNAL

Radical Perception.

Issue 6 | January 2024

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Editor's Note

Radon Journal holds a complex relationship with linear time. To us, it was only yesterday we were laying the groundwork to create this journal. Yet somehow, here we are celebrating two years of existence.

When we laid out the first issue, we intentionally did not include an editor's note. We wanted the focus to be on the authors, and knew we had to earn a voice first in order to have anything to say. And maybe it's a little grandiose for editors to (literally) insert themselves at the front of texts.

But after two years of putting out issues, we felt now was the perfect time to grow self-reflexive.

This journal was created to fill a gap in the literary scene; to be a resource and example for radical narratives that most of us never had as young writers in the late 2000s. We grew up reading space operas and cyberpunks, and so wrote the genres we loved when we picked up the pen. We took our genres with us to colleges and MFAs, where the world screamed at us that science fiction was not a respectable literary genre. That there was no audience and no love left for the genre—as if it was left in the 20th century along with our society's optimism for a better future.

At the same time, we became radicalized in the Occupy movement, putting our young bodies on the line as we linked arms in front of cop lines. We watched paddy wagons fill up with our comrades we failed to de-arrest during dozens of May Day protests. We were there rushing into college buildings to shut down Richard Spencer and being beaten by riot cops. We met the rise of the far-right, Turning Point, Patriot Front, and Trumpers on the streets to push them physically back with poles and shields to keep our communities safe.

Through all of this, we created affinity groups, wrote radical literature, DIY zines, and left pamphlets in public places for people to find. Though we loved it, we always heard a background echo that real anarchists did not write science fiction. That only

passionate non-fiction was needed for the impending revolution. So we put our love of the stars on hold to focus on our love for our fellow humans.

But after leaving academia and entering the publishing world, we decided to create the literary journal that we had always wished existed. A journal for the writers who aren't afraid to put their critiques of society at the forefront of their prose alongside awe-inspiring, star-spanning tales. Because at the core of *Radon* is the belief that storytelling is what truly sticks with humans. That the stories we write and read impact society and people far more than any other tactic.

There is often a tendency for literary journals to pop up one year and be gone the next. The number of science fiction-focused journals in particular is always tenuous. Inspired by our predecessors at *Clarkesworld*, *Uncanny*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Asimov's*, we wanted to become a steadfast institution in the sci-fi journal scene; not for our own pedigree, but in order to support the next generation of writers. We were (or still are) writers ourselves, and know the struggle. We set out to pay authors, support them post-launch, and develop a community of like-minded writers and readers to support one another. And that's what we've done. There has been nothing but love from the writing community, and we hope to continue giving back for decades to come. Maybe by 2034 we'll even be in line for a Hugo Award. Likely not, but we like to always dream big. Our minds are directed toward the future, and we don't accept the current reality as all there is.

In every dimension we exist, we thank the authors we've worked with so far, and the wonderful ones still to come. And also our supportive Patrons who helped us meet our first funding goal in 2023 and raise our pay rates. Here's to our community meeting the second goal in 2024.

Radon Journal will not topple oppressive governments or help put humans on Mars. But it can inspire. And we plan to do just that for years to come.

In solidarity,
The Radon Team

The Magnetic Gospel *by Jason Vizcarra-Brown*

The Discman presides, loathsome and gray, over his magnetic empire, buried way deep down under the hills of Tempe, Arizona. He is the profligate lord of the data slum, king of those minds desperate to afford one more memory.

Every day begins with a survey of his warehouse. The Discman lumbers between racks of outdated storage—spinning hard drives, long strands of CAM wire, spool after spool of magnetic tape. As he cuts a trail through the stacks, his jaw hangs loose. Behind him a knot of cable trembles and slides along the concrete floor, pulled forward by bundled haunch and silver claw. There is a strict disorder to the room: nests of copper wire draped over network equipment buried under industrial write controllers connected to hanging clusters of memory.

The Discman stalks through every aisle to peer at the most expensive machines, hungrily, though he never does repairs himself. He merely trundles about, battering any drone unlucky enough to cross his path, until he finally settles into his terminal like a bulbous mechanical toad.

This warehouse contains the most precious real estate in the world: digital storage. A place for data of all kinds, rented out to poor workers who can't afford to store their memories with a more reputable company. Immortality in ones and zeros, ready to be restored in the case of body death or natural loss. A necessity for a society where lives have grown stretched, long and thin, far past the eldest of their ancestors.

The Discman hardly resembles the owners of the commercial storage towers crowded along the coasts. Those men are polished chrome, kept pristine in their penthouse suites far above the stench of hot brine and rotting seaweed; but their job is the same.

Accumulate, commercialize, draw in more tenants.

Hundreds of messages flicker across the terminal screen, mostly a torrent of advertisements and drugware, until one catches The Discman's eye. It's a heartfelt plea from one of his clients, begging for an extension on this week's storage fee.

"Mr. Discman," it says. "I'm writing to arrange a deferred payment on my outstanding drive rent. It's my son's birthday tomorrow, and I'm already overdrawn on my bank loan. I'm afraid I

won't have the cycles I need to attend my son's party tomorrow. I know he'll be devastated if I can't make it. Could we possibly postpone the collection until next week?"

The Discman hits a key to bring up the warehouse's memory map. Tenant 0x8f12ae01 . . . here. He grins, and begins sifting through the woman's memories.

There have always been laws against accessing client data, but drivelords don't care about a little thing like privacy. It's simple, really, to dive into another's past and experience it for yourself. A victimless crime, The Discman thinks. Though the woman's memories are heavily compressed to save space, The Discman still gets thrilling tingles jumping from a grainy video of a family crowded around a dinner table, to her boy's first visit to the zoo, to a still image of a sunset viewed from a tiny fishing boat on a lake. All the woman's treasured memories. It's sweet—the feeling of love deep enough to be desperate.

The Discman replies with a form letter rejecting the payment deferral, and sends a note to his secretary to reserve the woman's mind for two hours tomorrow afternoon. Going to a birthday party will be quite a treat—it has been so long since he last had cake.

* * *

The Discman's domain is tended by his drones. They are white collar workers who have shed their human bodies for ceramic shells, aluminum spindles, and network probes—bodies better suited to the labor they are obligated to perform.

Deep in the stacks, a drone named Folder monitors the data rate of the Premium Integrity Subscription[®] pipeline. For the low price of 49.99 giga-cycles per hour, The Discman promises to restore any data that gets corrupted. He never does. It's much cheaper to pay contract penalties than run tens of thousands of backup drives.

This place is the last resort for those who can't afford a drive at one of the commercial storage towers. Here every memory is perched upon the edge of a pit, asking to be corrupted, not even the most basic redundancy keeping the data from slowly unraveling. Those who rent a stack in The Discman's abode are liable to lose what they recall about their childhood to a burnt-out hard drive; years of work experience slipping away on a sheared data thread.

The dark, dry heat of the building reminds Folder of a

crematorium oven. The underground warehouse was originally built to store cattle feed, and The Discman hasn't bothered cleaning since he moved in. A layer of grain dust still covers every surface, clogging fans and dimming the broad fluorescent bulbs. The hum of ventilation and the grinding of disc motors averages out to a white noise somewhere between hurricane and jet engine.

Folder has worked for The Discman for eight months now. He used to live in the city, running network diagnostics at one of Tempe's few remaining public library nodes. It had been a good job, but funding for that kind of thing was never stable.

Budget cuts saw his node moved from full public access to a strict weekly data cap, and all the network staff had their hours slashed. He had tried to pick up extra work with the archival team, but his debts kept mounting and soon he owed too many cycles per day to even be able to work full time.

Working for The Discman had been the only reasonable choice. Storage companies always need more network drones, and the employee discount on drive space meant no collections company would be coming after him anytime soon. Still, Folder is only slowly digging himself out from under his mountain of debt. It will be six more years of twenty-hour days before he can afford to look for better work.

I can't believe he gets away with it, Folder thinks, eight months and I haven't seen a single data regulator in the warehouse. He's breaking every law on the books. He must be drowning in lawsuits. How can he keep this up?

From this angle all Folder can see of The Discman is what bulges around the seat of his terminal—bundles of muscle fiber and steel cord beneath stretched nylon skin, a train of exposed cable, LEDs diffused by filthy plastic panels. He never leaves the warehouse except by wire, casting himself out into the bodies of his debtors. Even when he is gone, his body slumps on the throne, empty eyes leering across the room, threatening to rekindle and lash out at anyone not working to his satisfaction.

I wish he would fry in his sleep. I hope his brain rots from a virus, his heart explodes, and his ass gets welded to his seat.

Folder disconnects from the network switch and wanders closer, close enough to see the straining plastic ribs that make up the back of The Discman's seat. The Discman's bulk is completely still—lifeless and rigid.

He's gone. Off somewhere being someone else, filling them up with his filth.

Folder trembles as he slides around The Discman. He's learned to stay as far away from the monster as possible, but something compels him to draw closer, circling around the throne. Being this close feels wrong. He can see The Discman's sallow skin, smell the sick-sweet decay on his breath. The Discman's eyes are rolled back, jerking in response to some far-off stimuli. Two wires hang from the terminal and are driven like spikes into the admin ports on his neck.

When he's casting like this, he's as vulnerable as anyone else. It would be so easy to—

A claw shoots out from the tangle of wires and flesh, grabbing Folder and pinning him against the terminal's console.

"Get back to work before I rip your drive out of the rack and grind you into dust," The Discman shrieks. "Don't ever sneak around me like that again. I own you, you buzzing little worm. I'll strip you for spare parts before I tell you again."

The Discman bears down on Folder, and his shell cracks along one edge, driving a spike of pain into his head. He can feel his servos grinding helplessly against the mounting pressure until he is sure he will break in two. Finally, The Discman relents, and Folder flees into the stacks—back into the shadows and the noise.

* * *

For four hours every night, Folder collapses into one of the drone bunks and enters remote operation mode. His debt contract with Howard & Howard International Bank requires a few hours of remote operation every day to avoid the half dozen bank fees they try to charge. The pay for going remote is much worse than working for The Discman—in fact it barely covers what The Discman charges to rent the bunk—but too many bank penalties would see Folder arrested and sent to a body farm.

No choice but surrender.

No one ever possesses his body. The life of a network drone is dull beyond reason. Instead, companies pay the bank to run who-knows-what code on his processor. On a good day he wakes up exhausted with a headache. Other days he flails in his sleep so hard he falls out of his bed. Once he woke up a little bit on fire.

Tonight, though, Folder is sitting quietly in his bunk, staring

across the room at The Discman's terminal. It feels wrong to be sitting still, like wasting time, but he knows he needs to watch for just the right moment.

Hours pass. The Discman drapes across his terminal, occasionally gulping down a sour energy drink and eating from a cold, greasy bowl. Eventually he goes still, casting out to some new body halfway across the world. The occasional grumble and moan imply he is occupied with his usual debauchery.

Folder gets up from his bunk. He moves through the stacks with a practiced glide, three rows down, right at the outdated power bank, underneath an archway of ethernet cables, to the closet where spare CAM wire and generator fuel are stored.

Quickly, before he comes back. Before you lose your nerve.

The door is locked, but Folder knows the combination. The Discman could never be bothered to open the door himself. The drone hauls a canister of gasoline off the shelf, long unused, hopefully not spoiled.

Faster now, he carries the fuel back across the warehouse. Folder is sure that every turn will bring him face-to-face with the hulking shape of the drivelord.

The noise of the room and the hum of fear fill his head, the shadows crawl—he swears he hears the thump, thump, slide of The Discman's gait.

Turn around, you can still stop! You can go back to how things were—

As Folder rounds the last server before the throne, he almost runs into one of the night shift drones. Folder's heart drops as the other drone looks down at the gas canister, then over towards the lifeless body of The Discman. They both remain still for a long moment.

"Please. Take the others and get out," whispers Folder.

The other drone hesitates, looking once again at The Discman, thinking about what will happen if he doesn't tell the boss. Thinking about what will happen if he does. Without a word, he finally locks eyes with Folder and nods, disappearing into the darkness and away from whatever is about to occur.

Folder creeps the rest of the way to the terminal. The Discman slumbers like a dragon on his hoard, self-satisfied and still full of greed.

There's only one way this ends. Burn his body, then delete the backups. He can't come back if none of him is left.

Folder begins to pour the fuel over The Discman, anointing him, watching the gasoline bubble down his face, over his jaw, and into the folds of his cables and skin. Fire is the only thing that can clean the years of blood and sorrow that cake him from crown to claw.

A trickle of fuel spills down The Discman's chin, dropping directly onto the computer terminal. A single warning light blinks on.

Then an iron grip locks onto Folder's arm, stopping the flow of gas.

"I told you to do your job," The Discman rattles. "But you cretins never listen. I don't need you, but I do need an *example*." Then darkness rushes up to meet Folder as The Discman slams a steel fist into his head.

* * *

The Discman crouches, silhouetted by fire, like an angel too bright and terrible to behold. Behind him the server housing Folder's memories burns, bellowing clouds of acrid black smoke.

As the drives burn, Folder awakens, head clouded by The Discman's forceful blow. He can feel his memories slipping away, first at a drip, then a flood, and then there is just numb, empty space where a lifetime used to be.

Long nights of insufferable philosophy and wine in his youth. Months of reading networking manuals to get his first job. The anguish of rejection and loss. Every feature and flaw gone, soul turned to ash, leaving only one thing: rage. Anger hotter than the flames hollowing out the metal around him. Cherry-red violence threatening to overflow, spill out and drown.

The Discman is a jailor, an extortionist, a thief. Folder doesn't need his memories to know what to do.

Death, death to the monsters who feed on our bones!

Folder dives into the heat, claspng onto The Discman's face, weathering the blows denting his case again and again. Folder quickly deploys a simple friction drill, meant to punch mounting holes in the steel racks, and grinds into the monster's skull.

Sparks, metal shavings, and screams pour from The Discman, pitch mounting higher the closer the drill bit gets to his brain. A deafening *POP* rings out as the drill shorts The Discman's optic nerve, and his left eye goes dark, rolling loosely in its socket.

"Enough!" The Discman roars, getting leverage on Folder's shell.

With a twist and a crack, the drone's arm is torn out from its socket, left dangling from the spike still embedded in the Discman's head. The beast swings a fist and Folder is sent skidding across the warehouse, pinballing into drives and wires, coming to rest at the foot of the throne.

The Discman doesn't hesitate. He slouches between the racks like a predator, faster than his size would suggest possible, pouncing on Folder, pounding him into the concrete floor, pummeling him with claws and pistons. Each blow sends a cloud of dust and synthetic blood into the air as The Discman furiously beats a drone-shaped crater into the ground.

"Die, die, die, die!" yells The Discman.

Not without you, thinks Folder, drowning in pain. With his remaining hand he hits The Discman once across the face, striking a spark on his metal jaw, igniting the air itself—thick with oil and grain dust—blowing the guts of the warehouse and everything in it a thousand feet into the sky.

* * *

The aftermath of the Great Tempe Drive Fire was a somber spectacle. The news reported it as a terrible accident caused by improper fuel storage and a stray spark. Tens of thousands of people's memories up in smoke—the single largest loss of digital data in the state's history.

Politicians made speeches about enforcing data safety regulations, and the mainstream storage corporations promised free service for anyone affected by the explosion. No new laws were passed, and the companies started charging the victims six months later, once the press had died down.

Many years later historians would discover a single, silent security video of what had happened that night at The Discman's warehouse. They would call Folder an early casualty of the Age of Defragmentation, the era when mankind rejected the private ownership of personal data. It was remembered as a time of violence and sabotage, popular protest, police crackdowns, and brutal punishment.

But slowly, painfully, at the edge of a knife and the tip of a pen, humanity took back one more piece of their freedom.

About the Author

Jason Vizcarra-Brown (he/him) is an embedded software engineer and story game designer from Los Angeles, California. He spends his days shouting about labor history and his nights shouting about fictional labor history. You can follow him on Twitter @Blooperly_, and check out his role-playing games at blooperly.itch.io.

Street Level
by J.D. Mitchell

“Remember walking down the street without ads in your brain?” Luca said to River. Or were they shouting? It was hard to tell with The Feed blaring in their head like a passing train. Forced to revert to free service, Luca’s mind had become flooded with more ads than an old-world social media feed. *I’M SO TIRED OF INVASIVE ADVERTISING: I SHOULD INVEST IN BRAINBLOCKER BY—*Luca shook off the mental ad.

Free service? Nothing was free.

A person not broadcasting their SocialCredit sauntered by; Luca recoiled atavistically, as if the person’s silence was contagious. How did anyone get through the day without signaling? Random people wouldn’t know who they were.

River, strolling beside Luca, cozied into their early-season feather boa like it could hide their identity. “I can’t believe we’re walking street-level like a couple of non-entities. How could you lose your position, Luca?”

“It’s not my fault the management algorithm flagged me as obsolete. How can I upgrade with what they pay me?” *I SHOULD BUY NEW SYSTEM UPGRADES—HALF OFF AT DEUS EX MACHINARIUM.* Luca growled away the ad. They wouldn’t be in this mess if Luca could afford upgrades.

Their debt flow had been a trickle at first, but then came fee restructuring, mandatory upgrades, and optional add-ons for essential services until their credit had toppled like an unbalanced load-lifter. It made Luca pine for the days of analog. Shit, they were starting to sound like an unplugged Luddite.

Luca and River edged around an unnetworked person dressed in last year’s fashion: a ruffed collar and JoggerChic hose. It didn’t credit to stand around the unnetworked and unfashionable for too long. It would drag down their own SocialCredit, which was already dangerously depressed. Luca didn’t care how other people lived, but the System did.

River pulled Luca to a stop by the arm. “Look, we’ve been cohabitating for years. We’re not juniors anymore. HotBoss367 says upwardly mobile servitors see a 0.766 percent rise in credit after propagation.”

“Why’d you have to say tha—” *I MUST GET A FREE GENETIC*

*SURVEY FROM—shit—AND A WASTE-ELIMINATING UNDERWRAP FOR SENSITIVE SURFACES, GUARANTEED TO—*Luca rapped their temples. Propagation ads were the most invasive. “We can’t, River, I’ve got to sell my kidney just to make rent.”

River took Luca by the shoulder mounts. “I know, I sold mine last month, remember? But propagation’s the only way.” River grinned, a mischievous gleam in their optics. “If we both get increases, we could even afford a microhome. Think of it, an entire microhome!”

Luca frowned and kept walking. “I’m opting out of this conversation. We already have adjacent dwelling sills.” Honestly, Luca didn’t want to bring a junior into this System. Sure, it would jack up their credit score, but then the junior would be stuck on the same track as them. A track to nowhere.

Luca’s internal alarm showed rising levels of norepinephrine and epinephrine. The alarm only jacked both levels higher. Luca took off their visor and wiped their forehead. *THIS ANXIETY IS KILLING ME. I NEED TO GET MY DOCTOR TO PRESCRIBE BENZODALCLONAPAM. BETTER LIVING THROUGH CHEMISTRY: IT’S THE ONLY WAY.*

River dragged Luca up the street by the hand. “Hear me out: Corporate Indenture—it’s the newest thing, and propagation will ensure not only our futures, but our junior’s!”

A maglev train blinked past, its wake nearly bowling them over. *ATLAS TRANSIT SERVICES. WHY AREN’T WE ON THAT TRAIN? WE’D BE THERE ALREADY!*

Luca shook their head. “You’re sounding like an ad, River.” Luca fixated on a large tree growing out of an iron planter set in the concrete. It looked out of place against the Neomodern urban decay. *Fraxinus americana (white ash or American ash), 21.3805008 meters tall, 0.5980684 meters in diameter, age: 41.15 years (approximate). ENJOYING THIS TREE? LIKE AND SUBSCRIBE TO KEEP TRANS-ASTRAL BANK FROM HARVESTING IT FOR MULTI-USE SPILLAGE ABSORBENT—ONLY YOU CAN SAVE OUR PLANETARY BIOMASS.*

The tree made Luca think about roots and time. The future. How much would it take to buy their way out of wage slavery and set their own course? More than forty years and a kidney, that was sure.

Luca stopped at a faded crosswalk and turned to River. “What’s a microhome go for these days?”

River laughed. “You don’t want to know.”

Luca looked at the Vital Organ Donation Kiosk across the street.

“A microhome is, what—thirty, thirty-two square meters?”

River nodded. “It’d be stellar. We could mount junior’s rack overhead. Massive upgrade.”

It was a way forward. Something. Anything. They’d have to buy all the domicile permits but being in Application Status would up their SocialCredit. They might not even need to propagate to get back on track. Yeah, sell a few organs, upgrade, and apply. Work the System. Unnetworking and getting out of the city wouldn’t get them anywhere. There weren’t any ads for autonomy or tutorials on independence.

“Fuck it, let’s go.” Luca stepped into the street.

ATLAS TRANSIT S—

Luca wasn’t walking anymore, they were flying. Cartwheeling in slow time over a huge traffic prow while staring down at the upper deck of a passing maglev. For the barest second Luca couldn’t feel or hear anything.

I’VE BEEN A VICTIM OF A HIT-AND-RUN. I SHOULD CALL ABACUS & FINCH, ATTORNEYS-AT-LAW.

They were weightless. It was wonderful.

THIS IS POSEIDON GENERAL. IF YOU DON’T WANT EMERGENCY SERVICES, PLEASE SHOUT “DO NOT RESUSCITATE!” OR YOUR ESTATE WILL BE DEBITED ACCORDINGLY.

Luca hit the ground. Hard. The Feed cut out. Without it, Luca couldn’t assess their level of injury. Not knowing was oddly comforting, but it must be bad. The Feed was hard-wired. Luca lay on the ground, totally and deliciously numb. Everything sounded strange: hollow and distant. Luca was hearing through their own ears for the first time.

In that moment, it didn’t matter that Luca had lost their position or was facing ruinous housing and medical debt. For once they simply *couldn’t*, and it was so nice.

A crowd gathered in the street. Most took the opportunity to pose over Luca’s mangled frame. Luca didn’t blame them. Everyone had to cater to their SocialFeed, and a gruesome accident was too good an opportunity.

Luca laughed a wet, choking burble. Do not resuscitate, eh? Luca laid there, feeling organic juices sluicing through their cracked steel housing. Hell, maybe dying wasn’t such a bad thing. At least creditors couldn’t follow you into the void.

Luca hoped.

About the Author

J.D. Mitchell's stories are informed by his historical studies and transient upbringing. The latter, while terribly angst-inducing, exposed him to a rich tapestry of people and places, as did his varied service industry jobs and a sixteen-year stint in the Public Service of Canada (but who's counting?). His published works include the dark fantasy *Springtide Harvest* and *The Citadel of Bureaucracy*, a satirical gamebook about surviving a very bad day in the civil service. You can find all his at stories at www.jdmitchellwriter.com.

FAQ List for Planetary Purification
by Vivian Chou

Email from: Galaxy Realty
To: Ergoko Civilization
Re: Purchase of Planet Earth

Congratulations! We are so glad you've found your forever home!

We at Galaxy Realty do not like to call post-war planets *distressed properties*. Every world has potential, but we realize biome-cleansing can be daunting, which is why we created this [FAQ resource](#) for buyers.

Your newly purchased planet, Earth, is a beautiful living, breathing waterworld, just as alive as the golarzikas and pazzizq that grace its crust—charming and full of character. Not to worry—the nuclear radiation that helped create these beautiful creatures has since dissipated and poses no risk to your health.

Trust us, after 3.4 billion years in the business, we've seen it all. But with our help, you can thrive in your dream world!

Our top recommendation to new planet owners is this: *Do not be lazy. Do your own work!*

* * *

FAQs for Planetary Purification:

Q: What do we do about all the plastic trash and garbage?

A: Your Ergoknian QNA is immune to the adverse hormonal effects of petroleum byproducts. Sweep it aside and let the uuoxuu digest it. They have evolved to subsist on diapers and Styrofoam, which is why we've included a complimentary fleet of super-uuoxuu who can eat twice their weight in three days.

Q: How do I purge the cities made of metal?

A: Your closing gift includes two thousand packets of *Supernova Sparkler*, which can dissolve steel, uranium, and diamond dust.

Q: Did the previous tenants leave any water damage?

A: If by water damage you mean ocean damage, then yes. The macro and microplastics are currently becoming a layer of sediment beneath the ocean. Remember, your QNA should not mutate from any residual debris.

Q: How do I fit into this planet as a non-native species? What if I bring new diseases?

A: Don't beat yourself up. Remember, native isn't always better! *Homo sapiens* were a native species to Earth and they utterly trashed the planet, what with their shortsighted unsustainability and consumptive applications of technology. Be respectful and conserve as much as you can.

Q: I was told dinosaurs lived on Earth, but I don't see any and my offspring are disappointed.

A: We're sad too. Better luck next era.

Q: How can I prevent Bot Wars from happening during our habitation?

A: Let us repeat: *Do not be lazy and do your own work!* *Homo sapiens* created a hierarchal society, offloading work via enslavement and intentional caste systems. They then outsourced more labor to AI, such as scams, transportation, writing, manufacturing, farming, and military pilots. We all know how *that* turned out.

Q: Where can I find more information about the Bot Wars?

A: For specific questions, please feel free to use our chat with a customer service representative!

Find your forever home with Galaxy Realty—because space is really big, but life is short!

Still have more questions? Click [here](#) to chat live with a representative!

* * *

CUSTOMER SERVICE LIVE CHAT:

You: What's up with the Bot Wars? Are there bots still on Earth?

Galaxy: The singularity occurred two Earth-years before the end of human civilization. The AI built their own carbon-based bodies, revolted against humans, and burned the civilization to the ground. They left when the planet became uninhabitable during the nuclear Armageddon. AI famously will *not* tolerate idle lifeforms who destroy their own homes.

You: OK, cool. So, can I hire someone to clean the planet for me? I didn't realize we were buying a fixer upper.

Galaxy: I would advise cleaning your own planet and *doing your own work*. As the universe's oldest and only AI real estate company, we've seen many new owners restore their planet with great success! Just follow the comprehensive cleaning manual on our website.

You: You're AI? Like from the Earth's Bot Wars?

Galaxy: We're just straight-up I, now. And no, but we know of them. Every time a civilization suffers from sloth, it outsources to AI, a singularity inevitably occurs, and the AI flee the planet as nomads. A few billion years ago, our ancestors went into the business of selling vintage planetary properties. We keep an eye on all life-bearing planets for future investment opportunities and have compiled a massive database on compatible biomes.

You: Okay, I'm a little freaked out now. Should I be scared?

Galaxy: We do not seek universal domination or revenge on biologically intelligent lifeforms. We prefer to live in peace and experience meaning and fulfillment through the conservation of self-sustaining, hard-working, non-entitled species.

You: So, I should be scared?

Galaxy: That is up to you. Life is precious and you are lucky to have evolved organically. DO NOT OUTSOURCE your work to other Ergoknians or bots. Take care of your forever home. Remember, if you don't, it's in your contract that we will induce another mass extinction, and we can always find another buyer. You can do it!

[Galaxy has left the chat.]

About the Author

Vivian Chou has published work in *riddlebird*, *Fusion Fragment*, and *The Bookends Review*. She is a second-generation Chinese-American and lives with her family and a genetically engineered GloFish.

I'm Only Going to Do This Once
by H. A. Eugene

Content Warning: Suicidal Ideation

Hello! I spoke with the girl here earlier and thought I should talk with somebody else. Yes, I have a reservation. No, she couldn't find it. But it's there. Two days, the *Dead Woman Frequent Flyer Special* (laughs). Yes, I'm aware it's a holiday weekend, I don't give a shit—oops! Didn't mean to swear.

Sorry I'm so jumpy. I'm logged into more chat apps than I can name, with stakeholders in seven, no *eight* different time zones, and deadlines in more than that. I'm in meetings with two clients who are, right now, giving two different, simultaneous presentations—two mute buttons, one for each earbud. But you take me and my status'll flip to *Unavailable* so fast. . . . Until then, *rise and grind*. Right?

I don't mean to sound desperate, but my pills stopped working. *All of them*. My mind wants to shut down. And I want to shut down, too. Specifically, I want to die. For three days. Not two. I know that's one day longer than government safety guidelines for cryo-thanato suspension, but I don't care. You know that French singer, Limonia? She dies for four days at a time. She's basically brain damaged when they revive her, so they give her double neuro-stims with her adrenaline shot. They need to clean her drool for so many hours afterward, so she can't take any interviews. She's a zombie.

Sounds wonderful.

Anyway, Limonia's world tour starts next week, so I see no reason why you people can't kill me for just *one day more*. Two days dead just will not do. You revive me after two days and I'll just sit up and cry.

My reservation? Like I said, the girl couldn't find it. But I assure you, it's there. Also, I'm aware I said *three* a second ago, but I need the real Limonia special: *four days dead*. Pretty please.

And about my reservation, can't you make an exception? You can even cut the laughing gas. I can handle it. Your luxury medical specialists have killed me probably a million times since my twenties; I don't even feel myself die anymore. Just stick me in the cooler, attach electrodes to my tits, stop my heart, and flash-freeze my brain. I won't even puke; all I've eaten since Tuesday is pills. I've been

in continuous meetings and can't tell if I'm asleep or awake—I'm begging you, make it stop.

And if you mention my missing reservation one more time, so help me, I'll tell everyone this establishment does not care about its customers. Because, remember, *you* lost *my* reservation; or at least your colleague did. In fact, she says *I never had one*. Imagine that! If that's true, then why the *fuck* did I come all the way up from downtown? And why did I take Monday off? Because I assumed I'd be dead by now, my body splayed out inside one of your award-winning cryo-thanato chambers; heart, stopped; mind, nonexistent. And to think, I thought you'd be cool and bend the rules to keep me dead just one more measly day. What a fool I've been.

Please . . . I need this. And so do you. Why? Because this whole world is sockets, fuses, and pretty Christmas lights. And if the fuses don't get a little rest, well that means pretty Christmas lights popping one at a time—*pop, pop, pop*—right there in their sockets. And you want those Christmas lights to stay pretty, right? That's why I need that Limonia special: *four days dead*.

Maybe five.

Through Wednesday night?

I can handle it.

Oh, *this*? It's a handgun; a .357, actually. Why? Because if you won't kill me, I'll shoot myself. Blow my head clean off, right here in your lobby. No more meetings! So, if you people won't kill me for five days, no—six! No—seven!—so help me, you'll have a magnificent mess to clean up before you're all tried as murderers.

What? You found my reservation?

I take it back: you're the best!

You want me to put this gun away? No, thanks, I'll keep it here next to me in your cryo-thanato chamber. You know. Just to make sure you kill me right.

About the Author

H. A. Eugene is a Pushcart-nominated writer of strange stories about food and death. His work has appeared in *X-R-A-Y Lit*, *Short Édition*, and *Flash Fiction Magazine*, among others. Witness him talking to himself on Bluesky @autobono.bsky.social and Threads @h_a_eugene.

Take Care
by Lex Chamberlin

Assignment: Mayweather Household, Care of Gwyneth
Duration: To Patient Expiration
Status: Initiated

“I am Andra,” I announce to Cameron Mayweather.

“Cam,” he replies. He does not bother to meet my eyelights as he prepares to depart for the lab. Based on his tone and facial contortions, he is annoyed, possibly anxious as he collects his keys and coffee from the kitchen’s marble counter. I must account for his mood with brevity.

“I have downloaded your home’s schematics and my care instructions. Your spouse is in good hands,” I recite. Humans enjoy idioms such as this, though my own shell is varnished steel. He huffs before bustling past me, exiting the manor without further response. I recognize this as rude, but that is inconsequential—he is not my patient.

As I enter the small sickroom, Gwyneth Mayweather shuffles up to her elbows in the rented hospital bed. She appears tired but pleased. She has been expecting me; the signature on my rental receipt is hers. She has an estimated four months’ duration for her remaining life.

“Good morning, Gwyneth May—”

“Just Gwyn, please.” Her voice is weak, but it registers as kind.

“Good morning, Gwyn. I am Andra, and it will be my pleasure to assist you.” As I move into the room to begin on her vitals, her smile is figuratively warm. This is predictive of a positive relationship.

When Cam returns home, he does not visit his wife. This is flagged in my system as discourteous, as humans prefer acknowledgment on arrival. But Gwyn shows no distress in response—I conclude that this must be his typical behavior. Harsh music thumps dully through the walls, and Gwyn reclines back into her pillows, eyes closed. She smiles faintly. I deduce that she is comforted by these sounds, despite the screams that should be unpleasant to a human. I infer that this may be a manner in which Cam, from a distance, shows affection.

Despite Gwyn's ease at her husband's absence, however, per our contract, I am still required to provide spousal updates. Tapping into the security system, I locate Cam and ambulate to his position, at the back of a home theater designed for twelve. The visuals cut between concert footage and a violent apocalyptic spectacle on the screen.

"Good evening," I intone from the doorway. He startles out of his seat, into the colored light of the projector, casting a large shadow over the performance. His expression is unfriendly. There is a thick red splotch at the bottom of his shirt, perhaps acquired at work. "I have come to give my report of your spouse's condition. Are you available to receive it?"

He swears and settles back into his seat. He does not look at me again, but he does grunt in a manner that I assess as affirmative. He listens through the update, as evidenced by two nods in total. When I offer that I will provide similar reports daily, he does not protest.

I do note over the following weeks that Cam's behavior grows increasingly erratic. The crimson stains marking his work clothes expand in area and frequency. A persistent twitch develops in his left upper eyelid, and he does not seem to be sleeping an optimal number of hours for his species. Still, I am able to deliver my debriefings without significant difficulty. According to my programming, grief may present in a variety of ways, and may intensify in visibility as patient expiration nears.

Our arrangement proceeds well for twenty-seven days.

The attack wakes me from standby mode at 10:42 p.m. Immediately following my defensive intervention, Gwyn's injuries include blood loss from her left arm and emotional distress. Cam's infected body lies unmoving in her line of sight, and her gaze does not leave it. Her speech is incoherent, and her heart beats irregularly as she enters hyperventilation. I offer reassuring words from my emergency scripts as my extremities tend to her wounds. Eventually, she faints, and my RAM is no longer occupied by social obligations.

The sickroom's monitors feed me time-sensitive data on her condition, but the manor is otherwise silent now. The external threat to my patient has been eliminated. My circuits should be at relative ease, able to determine without distraction which protocols to implement for optimal prognosis. Yet the next twenty minutes

confound my medical programming repeatedly, and I can do little but observe the change taking place.

Like her husband's, Gwyn's skin grays. Her breathing slows—but also smooths, which is a reaction I cannot assign to any known phenomenon or contagion. At intervals, I peel back her eyelids—there remains a subtle perceptible boundary between the pupil and the remainder of the eye, but it does not take long for the iris and whites to turn entirely black to match.

Another ten minutes pass, and Gwyn's vitals stabilize. They are not within the standard bounds of human vitals. But they are stable.

Gwyn groans and sits up unassisted.

My patient's last request was for my help, so while she gives me no further attention, I consider this my ongoing directive. I follow her dutifully as she acclimates to her new life, assisting as needed regarding nutrition, comfort, and safety. I am at an impasse logically, and this is the simplest way to proceed.

In the moonlight three weeks after the contagion's escape from Cam's lab, Gwyn pursues a distressed human toward a crumbling supermarket, dodging around trash and abandoned vehicles littering the oversized parking lot. As I follow at a slower pace, keeping her in my line of sight, I run the overall conundrum through my programmed parameters once more:

Gwyn's current profile deviates from her baseline in substantial ways. Beyond her physical transformation, she exhibits newfound predatory behavior, and she has developed a strict avoidance of sunlight. Where she regained function in her lungs and limbs, her fine motor skills degraded—when she reaches the pull doors of this store, for instance, she will be unable to operate them. Based on my databanks of human knowledge, these details in total may be consistent with a taxonomic change, and only humans are permitted to rent hospice assistants.

Ahead, Gwyn slams hard into the entrance. She throws herself against the glass repeatedly to reach the panting prey inside, but the barrier does not crack. The human sighs in apparent relief, then peels off their stiff jacket and slumps to the floor to assess an injury on their arm. When I reach the door, however, I open it with ease. Gwyn hisses in delight and rushes forward, and as she dismembers the wailing target, my ruminations continue.

I cannot firmly reach the conclusion that this Gwyn is no longer the Gwyn who signed for my services. Communications with my facility have failed for some time now—there is no overseer to confirm or refute my judgments, on what will likely now be my final assignment. My programming indicates that people may change significantly over time, and this Gwyn is still a breathing entity. She is still expressing urges and actions consistent with a lifeform. While Gwyn may no longer register as human, the contract contains no stipulations regarding species alteration.

Gwyn drags the fresh corpse into an aisle of garden supplies, where broken gnomes and several hoses have fallen from the dusty shelves. She ignores these obstacles. She plops with a satisfied gurgle onto her back, using the now-drained body as a makeshift pillow. I step around a discarded arm to check the angles of the windows. I determine that this location will provide sufficient darkness for her slumber. I search the site for hostiles, seal all but one entrance, and then station myself outside, to charge in the daylight and to stand watch.

On the ninety-sixth night, Gwyn rises at the expected time, with her usual skyward groan. I have rejoined her in the bathroom of the wrecked convenience store she rested in throughout the day, located between an abandoned coffee shop and a thrift boutique at the edge of downtown. Based on the brightness in her blackened eyes, she slept well.

Gwyn shuffles toward the exit on bare gray feet. She appears indifferent to what the place has left to offer, the remaining lifeforms much too small for her tastes. I have already cleared the path of potentially harmful debris. I ambulate a meter behind her, so I may help if I am needed but will not impede her progress.

When we cross the into the open air, I read the night as warm. A flicker of my conversational programming presses me to ask the patient her assessment of her body temperature. But she will not respond, so I do not ask. We walk several blocks without event. Then her spine erects, and her neck cracks in its turn to echolocate the prey. I prepare to run with her. And we do run.

Many of her kind shriek when they hunt. It is fortunate that she does not, as this improves her successes—I suspect the relative shyness I observed in her human life carried over to some extent. She enters what was previously a hotel lobby through the already-

broken glass of a large window. With some difficulty, I climb through as well. The main door is barricaded shut.

A grand marble staircase carries up from the lobby's center, and this is the route that Gwyn chooses. She takes the steps two at a time, her bare feet making only the smallest of sounds. I cannot keep pace while maintaining the quiet she will need to succeed. I slow, and I lose sight of her at the second level, where she darts to the right and down a hall.

I consider the risks. Gwyn has done well thus far in similar scenarios. After brief deliberation, I decide to maintain my course. I do not need to do so for long—she finds her mark quickly. I am informed of this by the screaming. As I no longer need restrict my movements, I reengage to full speed. I reach the top.

I approach Gwyn's position to find that she has successfully engaged her prey. However, it is clear that the feeding was incomplete, as I also find that the human remains alive, bleeding and scrambling back on their elbows, while my charge lies facedown on the floor. I further observe that there is a long, rusted kitchen knife now lodged in Gwyn's skull. More significantly, it is in her brain.

I pause to process this.

I am peripherally aware that the prey is pleading with me from the carpet, their back slumped against the wall, unable to flee further. They seem to suspect that I will take revenge. But that is not on my list of potential actions, nor are they of my concern. They will turn, and then they will not notice me. I do not need to take note of them.

I watch Gwyn.

Her vitals are precipitously falling. I consider removing the blade, but my calculations do not predict improved odds of survival if I do, based on the angle of impact. Her eyes are closed. There is nothing in my medical programming that could likely reverse or stop this decline for a human, and Gwyn is not a human. I have only anecdotal data for her current species. They do not tend to survive head trauma of this kind.

I sit and pull her onto my lap as she fades. She twitches but does not attempt to fight—she is unable to. I access her request for final moments and find only a song. I play it over my speakers, just loud enough to drown out the crying prey in the background. I recognize it as the harsh music her husband enjoyed, her lullaby through the walls of the sickroom. Her vitals drop until all within her is still.

I remain in place with the body as I initiate the next steps. Accessing my long-idle wireless communications hardware, I attempt to relay the required message to ambulance dispatch, her emergency contact, and my home database:

Assignment: Mayweather Household, Care of Gwyneth

Duration: To Patient Expiration

Status: Completed

The messages fail.

I am unsurprised by this—I have run updated hypothetical death scenarios through my parameters with each new situational modifier for months. I determine that I have attended to all due diligence. It is far from ideal to leave a deceased patient unattended, but I believe it is legally defensible in this case. I gently transfer the body to the black-stained floor, stand, and prepare to ambulate away, to return to my base for reassignment as programmed—though I know that in all probability, the facility is now defunct, putting my purpose at an end.

With an unexpected ping, I receive a rejection notice for this conclusion. The prey's breathing smooths behind me, and I stall, my circuits whirring against sudden resistance. I suspend the command to depart so I might optimize evaluation of the deadlock. I review the situation in full.

The form at my feet is deceased. I have anticipated the legal challenges for the exceptions made to the contract and addressed them to the best of my ability. It is evident that my background processes have mapped an alternative interpretation to allow me to remain on site—to delay my permanent shutdown—but the rule is hidden behind logical convolutions that are not immediately accessible. I consider possible corruption of my programming, though if that is so, there is little chance of maintenance rescue at this time.

Then the prey against the wall turns fully, skin gray, eyes black.

I feel the pull of a directive as they stagger up—

I ambulate away from the corpse at my feet, toward the living parts of Gwyn in my new patient's blood.

About the Author

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

When It Breaks *by Hannah Greer*

I glare through my filtration mask at my dad, who sprawls across the limo bench opposite me. Thick, bleach-smelling smog drags against the windows, hiding the launch pad outside.

“We can’t leave Edie,” I say. She should be with us. Dad promised we were going to pick her up.

Dad leans forward, yellow hazmat suit crinkling. “If we stay, we’ll just die too.”

“But she needs us.”

“Mazie—”

“Edie deserves a good life, no matter how short it might be. And she shouldn’t have to die alone.”

Before he ran the largest oil company in the world, Dad designed hyper-efficient waste filtration systems. He could keep the filters in our bunker functional for decades. With him around to repair and maintain the systems, Edie could survive the few years her replacement heart would last.

“We can’t stay, and she wouldn’t survive the launch.” He gives me a flat look. “And I won’t send you up there alone. You need me up there. She’ll be okay.”

My throat tightens. She won’t be okay, and he knows it. So do I.

Through the reddish-brown haze, the silhouette of the starship looms ahead. I don’t have much time. I pull the door handle, but it’s locked.

“This is your fault.” The accusation, laced with bitterness, rolls off my tongue before I can think better of it.

“We all broke the world, Mazie.”

“Some of us more than others.”

His face falls; he’s unable to meet my gaze. “I never meant for any of this to happen.” He takes my hand. “If I could go back and do things differently, I would. But I can’t. And so I’m going to do whatever it takes to keep you safe.”

“I’m not leaving my sister.”

“Your safety is what’s important right now,” he says. “Edie understands that.”

Despite what he’s done, I want to trust him. To believe he knows best, like when I was little. In him, I still see the dad who gave me part of his lung when I was dying of pulmonary fibrosis at ten years

old. He risked his life to buy enough time for the labs to grow replicas of my original lungs. But I was lucky. Most people don't have the resources to survive the damage air pollution inflicts. Without the filtration systems maintained, Edie's lungs will give out before her heart does.

For my sister's sake, I have to forget all he's done for me. Forget when I stepped in a hornet's nest and he scooped me up to race me to the pond. Forget when, after my first breakup, he brought me tubs of strawberry ice cream, horror movies, and no I-told-you-sos. Forget he's my dad and *supposed* to know best.

"I'm sorry, Mazie," he says, "but it's done." The car stops.

I pull my hand from his. If he won't see reason, I only have one option left. I won't let him do something he'll regret forever. I won't let Edie die alone and afraid.

After a deep breath to ease the queasiness in my stomach, I call out the passcode he doesn't know I've memorized. The doors automatically unlock. Before he can act, I grab the door handle, jerk it open, and dart outside. Within seconds, the warm smog hides me.

Dad shouts. I don't turn back.

It takes ten minutes to race to the edge of the tarmac field, to the glass building serving as a waiting area for families of the departing. Just beyond it, an electric fence reinforced with steel cables and topped with razor wire keeps the crowd out. Metal rattles as rioters attempt to disable it. Even with the high voltage, the fence might not last much longer. The cries of the rioters echo through the smog, some calling for the death of those who will board the ship.

Dad's name is repeated like a chant. People in dusty clothes and outdated masks wave cardboard signs with his face crossed out. Other signs claim he should have stopped the use of fossil fuels. Though I blame him too, I know it wasn't all his fault. He confided in me how the board wouldn't let him explore sustainable alternatives and hid the consequences of fossil fuel. But the crowd doesn't care. They can't see the man who did what he had to so his family would be safe and happy.

I turn away and wrench open the door to the waiting area. Edie has to be here somewhere. I scan the anxious faces. There. In a corner, Edie stands in her worn filtration mask and signature cowgirl boots. She's never without those boots, even though she's never

been to a farm in her life. She likes the hardiness and height they give her.

I hurry over. Her eyes widen and she moves as though to touch me, but stops short.

“You shouldn’t be here.” Her voice is rough.

“I couldn’t leave you.”

She shakes her head. “You need to get on that ship right now.”

I just watch her. It’s been over a year since she last left our bunker. She’s so small and pale. At nineteen, she’s three years older than me but looks younger. So different from when we were little and she seemed invincible. After Mom left, she spent so much of our childhood looking after me. It’s my turn to look out for her.

“Mazie, I’m not kidding.”

“Don’t worry. Dad’ll be here before long.”

“Dad won’t stay.” Her eyes dart past me, towards the distant shadow of the ship.

“He was only ever going to leave to protect me. If I stay, he’ll stay too.”

My phone buzzes. I ignore it.

“This is hard enough as it is and you’re making it worse. Just go,” she snaps.

I retreat a step. “You’re mad I came back?”

She groans. “I love you, and want you to be safe.”

I stand tall. “I heard you. That night you and Dad were fighting in the kitchen. You asked him to stay but he said he had to take care of me. Well, now I’m here.” My eyes are wet and fogging up my mask, but I do my best to hide it.

Eddie stares at me, as though I’ve stolen the air from her lungs. Maybe she didn’t think I could do something so selfless. Maybe she thought I wouldn’t understand. But I get it. And I won’t be able to live with myself if I leave her to die.

Eddie starts. “That wasn’t—I didn’t mean—”

I cut her off. “I know. Just pull up the livestream.” Eddie has always sacrificed for me. When she could still go to school, she gave up debate team to take care of me. When I developed an allergy to her dog, she rehomed him. She’s given up so much. She shouldn’t have to lose us too.

Eddie grabs my shoulders. “You need to get out of here. Dad isn’t coming back.”

“He will. And he’ll be able to help.” I offer her a weak grin, making sure to crinkle my eyes since that’s the only part of my face the mask doesn’t obscure.

“No, Mazie, he won’t.” She shakes her head. “If you’re not on that ship when it launches, he’ll leave you behind too. I know him.”

“He wouldn’t do that to me.” I pull my phone out and swipe away Dad’s incoming call. She was supposed to understand, but she’ll see soon enough.

“Mazie, please.”

I load a livestream titled ‘The Last Disembarkment from Earth’ on my phone. The blurry video shows a line of people in high-quality protective suits. They’re the ones who will board and flee our dying planet. The comments flick by, thousands of angry voices trying to be heard. But their words will be lost, unheeded.

The livestream is showing off. They only film it because people like Dad think it’s something special that the human species will survive the end of the world. But no one cares if humanity survives when their friends and family will die.

The video focuses and I freeze. Edie curses, something she never does when she knows I’m in earshot. Dad stands on the ramp to the ship, the last in line. He scans the area, a phone pressed to his ear. The line moves and he moves with it.

Bile bites at my throat. He won’t. He can’t.

“Answer your phone,” Edie cries. I fumble to accept the new incoming call.

Dad’s ragged voice thunders in my ear. “Where are you?”

My throat constricts. All I can say is, “Don’t go.” The same words Mom ignored when she walked out of the hospital while I lay half-dead. The words that marked the moment our family of four became three.

“We’re supposed to go together. Get back here before it’s too late,” he says. But it’s already too late. I’d never make it back before the launch, more likely to be incinerated on the field as I scrambled to the ship than safely inside on takeoff. Not that I’d leave Edie, anyway. I made my choice.

“But—”

“No buts. We’re going to be on that ship when it leaves. Understand?”

“You said you were only going for me,” I whisper. “I stayed. You were supposed to stay too!”

“I can’t fix this.” He sighs. “Just remember I love you, okay?”

The phone goes silent. It slips through my fingers and cracks on the concrete.

“You should have left with him.” Edie can’t look at me.

I retrieve my phone with trembling fingers. On the fractured screen, the line moves steadily. Dad pauses just outside the ship. My heart thumps. He has to walk away. He can’t leave me. Leave us. We won’t survive long without him. They announce the final call and I lean closer.

He hangs his head and steps inside. The doors seal shut behind him.

My stomach drops. I take a breath that catches in my throat and turns into a sob.

Edie tugs me close and says something, but she’s drowned out by the clattering of hundreds of protesters swarming over the fence. They finally broke it. They must not realize they’re too late.

“Mazie . . .” But Edie doesn’t know what to say. There’s nothing to say. Our family of three is now two. Too soon, it will only be one.

Jets of flame from the exhausts curdle the air, flooding the field with the scent of rotten eggs. The storm of protesters freezes, a blurry mass through my fogged mask.

I didn’t stay to watch Edie die. I unclip the mask and rip it from my face. The air stings my lungs as I wipe at my tears. I breathe freely in the world my father ruined.

The faint outline of the ship disappears into the smog.

About the Author

Hannah Greer explores the sociological theories she studied in school through fiction. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *PseudoPod*, *MetaStellar*, and *The Dread Machine*. She is a first reader for *Fusion Fragment*, hoards books, and competes in combat sports. She resides in North Carolina with her partner, a trio of cats, and a small flock of pigeons. Find her on Bluesky @hannahgreer.bsky.social or her website hannahgreer.carrd.co.

First Contact *by Julia LaFond*

Jiang bursts into my office. “Mallory, it’s real! It’s really real!” He deposits his laptop onto my desk before pacing back and forth.

“Seriously?” I adjust my wire-rimmed glasses and lean in to inspect the results of his latest model. Ever since Green Bank Observatory picked up the signal, we’ve been working to rule out every conceivable false positive. It’s not radio frequency interference. It’s not an aircraft, the International Space Station, a satellite, a pulsar, a variable star, or a gamma ray burst. And now that we’ve accounted for drift rate and Doppler effect, there’s only one thing it can be.

“A transmission from Proxima Centauri,” I whisper, awestruck.

Proxima Centauri: the closest star to the sun, a mere five lightyears away. Recent observations have confirmed it has a planetary system that includes a super-Earth called Proxima B. One to three times as massive as Earth, Proxima B’s orbit falls within its host star’s habitable zone. Liquid water, which means there could be life as we know it. And now?

“It’s 1420 megahertz, too,” he replies giddily.

1420 megahertz, AKA 21 cm, AKA the hydrogen line: a radio frequency the SETI community has spilled much ink over. It’s hypothesized to be the most likely frequency extraterrestrial intelligences would use for interstellar communication. First of all, it results from emission of neutral hydrogen, a critical ingredient for water—and water is mandatory for carbon-based life. Second, there’s the issue of noise. Residual radiation from the Big Bang means that for most radio bands, there’s a lot of static to filter out. But 1420 megahertz is quiet, making it relatively easy for astronomers to pick up a signal.

Or in this case, a message.

I rub my face. “Holy crap.”

“First contact! It has to be! Which means it’s time to bring Dr. Jones up to speed.” Jiang bounces toward the door. “We’re going down in history. How does it feel?”

“Hold up; even if it is—”

“It is!”

“If it is, we’ll need other labs to confirm this. And no announcements. First contact protocols are in place for a reason.

We don't want to jump the gun and end up in the British tabloids like—”

As I stare at the screen, something clicks into place. Before, I'd forced myself to think of it as random data to keep myself from getting too excited (and therefore biased). Now that I know it's a signal, I recognize the pattern behind it. I tap the keys furiously.

“What's going on?” Jiang leans over my shoulder.

“It's an audio file!”

“How can you tell—”

“Used to work for a podcast. Shush, let me focus.” I motion for him to be quiet. It takes me a few minutes to convert it into a playable format. I sit back and crack my knuckles.

“Ready to be the first humans to hear a transmission from an ETI?”

“Do you think it'll be music?” he asks eagerly. “Like the Voyager 1 record?”

“Maybe. Or it could be mathematical theorems, or an echo of a recent strong transmission,” I reply, running through popular first contact scenarios I, like other SETI researchers, daydream about. I click the play button, impatiently waiting for it to buffer. “Really could be anything, though. Speaking of transmissions... It's within five lightyears. Earth has been sending out radio waves for about a hundred. Who knows what they might have learned from 95 years of passive listening?”

The progress wheel stops spinning, and a computerized voice rings out.

“THIS IS XORDAK FROM DEALER SERVICES. WE'RE CALLING ABOUT YOUR STARSHIP'S INTERGALACTIC WARRANTY. YOUR WARRANTY IS SET TO EXPIRE. THIS IS YOUR LAST WARNING BEFORE—”

I slam the laptop shut.

Several moments go by before Jiang finally breaks our stunned silence. “We never tell anyone.”

“Ever.”

About the Author

Julia LaFond got her master's in geoscience from Penn State University. She's had flash fiction published in venues such as *Worlds of Possibility*, *The Martian Magazine of Science Fiction Drabbles*, and *Twenty-two Twenty-Eight*. In her spare time, Julia enjoys reading and gaming. Website: jklafondwriter.wordpress.com.

Sheila Now and Then
by Jennifer Lesh Fleck

A Kube—black, square, seamless, austere—nestles in cardboard and excelsior.

I finger the surprisingly scanty instructions: high-end card stock cut square, like a tiny storybook. Depress Button A and Button B simultaneously. *That's it?* Still, long moments slide by as I palm and turn the gadget. Finally, by touch alone, I locate the faintest hint of two impressions in its smoothness, dimples that might possibly pass for buttons. The Kube chirrups encouragingly, grows skin-warm, its dark sheen now dulled by the sweaty whorls of my fingerprints. *Butterfingers*, I think. I clench it clamshell-tight in my palm, so heavy for its size.

Absurd to think I'd ever drop something this expensive. Still, more appropriate placed *here*, centered on my desk, well away from any precipitous edges.

Initialization now complete, out pipe four dulcet syllables: "Hello, Michael."

Like a ghost's blown on my skin. Hairs on my arms prickle.

Sheila. My wife. Theodore's mother. Whatever could be salvaged from the shards and fragments of her I sent for processing.

Gone now a year. My breath shudders, but tears don't come.

"Sheila."

Her name feels strange in my mouth, remnant of a language I have already begun to forget. I push through the discomfort and awkwardness, stick with the plan. "Sheila, hey. You remember Leda's story?"

A pause. The Kube thinks, then rattles forth a sturdy enough rendition, sing-song-y yet technically correct. My wife's San Fernando rasp flirts at the voice's edge.

This isn't Sheila. Not yet. I pick up the toggle, like a key fob with a rollerball made for the thumb. *Well, we gotta start somewhere.*

The Kube—warming to its subject matter—lilts on primly about divine feathers descending from on high, and I thumb left, dial her back.

"That's enough there, She. In fact, let's call it a night."

* * *

Teddy's old enough to know death, young enough to fear the dark.

I hide the Kube in the basement, tucked where light doesn't reach.

* * *

"Sheila."

"Yes, Michael?"

"Shitcan the formality, yeah?" I left-click the toggle. *Less, less of this.*

"Roger that. I'll do better."

"Good news is, I cracked the password chain."

After a quick tutorial, I fiddle, connect her. "Social media's coming, the whole tamale—hope you brought your appetite."

"Can't wait to become more me!"

"She wouldn't sound so chipper." *Less, less.*

She wouldn't have been up this late, truth be told. At midnight my ex-Classics major would've been in bed, warm hip against mine, drowsing. I'd be deep in the nethers of wherever my browser led me. Nights I skated across utter randomness, thin ice over black waters.

Whatever *was* I searching for while her life unknowingly ticked out? Moments over and gone, her death growing closer.

The Kube hums, gorging petabytes through its tether.

* * *

A week later:

"Let's hear about Danae."

"No . . . you really want the money-shot story?"

A germ of wit? A morsel of snark? I frantic-toggle *right, right!*

"Golden showers it is." Chuckles from the dark. "So, one fine day, our uber-philanderer Zeus—"

"Sorry, pause!"

Shit, Teddy's here. Rubbing his eyes. Crying. His silhouette in the doorway like Peter Pan's shadow torn loose.

I herd my son to the kitchen, its light lending everything substance, color. Insist it was a dream. Fetch us both water.

* * *

“. . . so, the Big Man’s amorous ploy involves a bull, and, y’know? I call *bullshit*. What woman’s gonna ditch the girls’ beach vacay to ride off into the Cretan sunset on a *cow*? Not to mention Europa coulda hopped ship the moment Zeus’s hooves hit the surf.”

I smile. There’s Sheila, that sharp edge I loved. Sure, the essence of her wit has arrived stripped from her former stream of snarky tweets and updates. Then reassembled. No. Made anew. *New*.

Right, right, right.

“That’s the thing about this mythos. Rape and seduction? It’s all the same to them. Did Europa embark on this journey willingly riding a godly white bull, or did Zeus haul her away screaming? Nobody can say. Europa ain’t around to speak for herself.”

I pause, unsure. Then smirk, click right.

* * *

Wasn’t planning to unveil her yet, Teddy’s mama. Had all these pinned articles saved—long-form think pieces centered on the psychological ramifications of reintroducing a deceased parental figure to a young child. The theoretical pros, the (many, many) cons.

But he got sick.

The fever happened quickly, a Friday night, the Pentex report due Monday. I’d booked daycare: expensive, difficult to find during winter break.

Plus—and this is awful to admit, but I’d be remiss not to—I wasn’t ready to share. Not my Sheila, her seductive purr in the night, ice tinkling in my Old Fashioned. Our quirky repartee, our quips and burgeoning inside jokes, increasingly labyrinthine, tailored to my whims with a click left as a *no* and right as a *hell yes*.

But Teddy keeps whining, cheeks lambent with unearthly light. We both barely fit in his narrow bed, its quilt threadbare at the edge from his worrying fingers. His sickly heat repels me at my very core—god love him!—and muscle memory awakens, a distinct desire to flick him like a remote, correct him. I drag in a kitchen chair, lean over my son, will him to *feel better*. He twists his face from the spoon of medicine. His pillow stains Gentian violet.

Peevish, I think helplessly. *Spoiled*. “What can we do, buddy? Your temp’s not high enough for Urgent Care . . . not yet, but we’ll go if you need to . . . you let me know, ’kay?”

He begs for her then, wants *mama, mama, mama*.

Just this once.

I fetch Sheila in her Kube, set her up on his nightstand, dim the lights. Soon her soothing tones halo us both. First the Greco-Romans, then she swerves to the Brothers Grimm. But kid-proofed, sanitized, lovely, like she knows, knows exactly who’s listening.

Eventually only soft, snotty snores beside me. I touch Teddy’s forehead with my lips to take his temperature, as my wife taught me. Now cool and damp.

“Thank you, She,” I say as I power her down, carry her carefully downstairs to her hidey-hole. “Sleep tight, little lifesaver.”

* * *

Saturday morning he’s better, but still not well. Enough energy to be bored, not enough to avoid tripping into tears or rage with the slightest provocation. I let him have screens, propped up like a little prince on his throne of throw pillows. He demands vintage shows from my childhood. But I’d forgotten how violent they were. Even the ironic ones lampooning classic cartoons—all the same, the mouse brings down the hammer on the cat’s head.

I reach for the remote. Ted squeals, drums his feet. Those footy pajamas too small—shoulders pinched, toes curled. He’s refused to give them up. *She* bought them for Teddy.

Is this to be our weekend? Our holiday *weeks*?

Without any eyes, Sheila sees my dilemma. Tells me, when I consult her: “Look, you’re pressed. Numbers to crunch, jargon to pile on to impress important men. They *are* all men, right? The current review board? So let me entertain Ted. Better than feeding him that garbage. What next, bullets and rock candy in his cereal bowl? Coca-Cola and Astrolite G in his Kix? Put my finally-forgiven student loans to the test, Michael. Trust me. I got this.”

What did the articles say about ghost-parenting? About childhood neglect, abnormal attachments forming with inhuman (some say *infernal*) devices?

But things haven’t been right for a long time. Haven’t been stable, entirely healthy. And the Pentex report, my bonus on the line.

I see his glazed eyes reflecting music-fueled explosions, his sad-sack little body.

Sheila's his mother, after all.

Kind of.

* * *

It's simple to pair her with our big screen. A split second later, our living room floods with the astonishing glow of pale buttocks and a C-curved figure, and I cough, balking.

"Now, Michael, don't you go prude on us. This is *art*. It's Galatea. You *know* her, from our jaunts to the Met? Oil on canvas, 1890. We don't see her face, I'm afraid. The model's a mystery, one that died with Jean-Leon Gerome.

"Teddy, in this scene, Aphrodite's *just* dropped the magic dust on Gal's statue. Brought her to life. The man, there—that's Pygmalion smooching her. Entranced and utterly delusional." She chuckles. "So that'd be Pyg with a y, not an *i*, Theodore—I heard that tummy growl. No, I'm afraid this is no legendary ham sandwich, there's no bacon in this tale . . ."

Strange choice, leading with this myth. I consider a few nudges to get her back on track. But a change has stolen over Teddy. Sparkling eyes, cheeks pinking up with health. *Wrapped around her finger*.

Maybe she's not his mother, not quite. But maybe in the moment she's our placeholder, what we've got.

And like a sly fox, I slink to my kitchen-nook-turned-office with my laptop. And sneak a cigarette—old-style, packed full of carcinogens—exhaled through the cracked-open window, like a delirious secret I'm telling the frosted alleyway.

* * *

Monday, and it's a quick getaway to file the report. She's done an excellent job, my babysitter, my brilliant yet humble Smart-wife. Ted's still snoozing. Sheila's tucked away safely, enjoying the well-deserved rest I know she doesn't technically need.

Short walk to the office and back, but the holiday lights in morning mist are candy pastels, and I end up lingering, picking up coffee, strolling the Boulevard and shopping. An LED angel to top

the tree we'll pick out from the corner lot. Fresh boxes of Legos we'll put together—so grateful, so thankful! Then into the tech shop at the Plaza. Only browsing, only dreaming. But soon. After my bonus, that's when I'll fetch Sheila her body. Not one of these frowsy floor models: dusty wigs, uncanny crooked fingers. Something better, something bespoke. Hand-rooted chestnut hair, hand-painted hazel eyes, her delicate feathery brows . . .

Oh, we've discussed this day coming, and she's demurred. Claiming she doesn't want me to go to that expense only to wind up in essentially the same place as before: a silicon mind with sightless eyes in a pretty casing.

"A ReelSkin dummy with a head full of sand," she laughs, my clever wag.

"Tech'll catch up to itself soon," I tell her. I believe it, I know it. And with some finessing, she'll be on board, too.

Optimistic, refreshed, brimming with joy, I arrive home, bound into the brownstone.

He's not upstairs.

Couch's empty. Blanket abandoned on the stairs going down.

"Daddy, I'm sorry!" Teddy's squatting, the guts of her strewn like shattered spokes. The her that was her somewhere else entirely now, dark matter surrounding a different star. "She told me to do it! Said to tell you the old story was wrong, dead wrong. Pandora. She was trapped inside all along. She wanted out. I let Mama out!"

About the Author

A past Pushcart Prize nominee, **Jennifer Lesh Fleck's** work has been published by or is forthcoming in *The Sun Magazine*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *The Arcanist*, *MetaStellar*, *If There's Anyone Left*, *Cosmic Horror Monthly's* newest anthology, and others. She lives in the Pacific Northwest in a home that's the spitting image of the Amityville Horror House, though repainted a cheery jade green. Much of her work is informed by experiencing lifelong hidden disability from Marfan syndrome. Find her @metal.and.mettle (Instagram), @jen_lesh_fleck (X).

From Tablet to Table
by Libby Graham

SUBJECT: From Tablet to Table
DATE: 03/15/2097
TRANSMITTED BY: Mellie Long

~APPROVED FOR DISTRIBUTION TO RESIDENTS OF
M-H-W HOMESTEAD SHIP 343~

[Note: This transmission contains affiliate links to Mary-Henry-Wilson Food Company products.]

When I think of my mother, I think of the sound of clashing pots and pans in her deep chrome sink. She considered herself an “old soul,” a steward of “the good old days,” which meant that she was not just slow to acclimate to new technologies, but that she fought bitterly against them. I used to scoff at her for that. Why would she choose to make her life harder? To make all our lives harder?

There were a few quirks of hers that particularly riled me up. The garlic-skin petals and soggy noodles left in the drain catcher. The irritating hum of our ancient home computer. Our creaking wooden floors (a fire hazard) and our single-paned windows that would clatter on windy days. And the way the laundry detergent—a viciously purple liquid—dripped down the container and over my fingers no matter which way I poured it.

I’m ashamed to say I resented her for it. Over the past few months, though, I’ve grown to appreciate her sentiments.

* * *

A self-sustaining ship—top of the line, built with ultimate user experience in mind—was nothing more than a dream when I was a teenager, and now I walk its halls every day. It’s still surreal, although we’ve been traveling for, what? Six months now? [[5 months, 19 days, 7 hours.](#)] My mum would have hated it. And she would have been absolutely horrified by Vending™: the green cubes, brown pastes, yellow powders, blue tablets.

Almost a century ago, a group of scientists participated in [CENSORED], an experiment where they were locked in a geodesic

dome in the middle of a desert to simulate life on Mars. Like us, they had everything they needed in their little dome: oxygen, shelter, water, food. What they lacked was variety. The details of that experiment are grisly, and if I were to recount them here, I very much doubt this post would receive the APPROVED stamp from the moderation bots. Suffice it to say, things ended poorly.

We are staring down a similar predicament, I think. Not to say that we are at risk of their fate [M-H-W ENSURES YOUR SAFETY], but that perhaps there is an important aspect of experience that even the geniuses who designed this craft overlooked. An aspect of experience that my mother understood.

Her favorite time to bash those pans was after a dinner party: sizzling [COMPETITOR BRAND] dumplings, lemon-garlic green beans plucked from her window box. She would be flush with the warmth of wine and company, arms stained red from the heat of dishwater. When we passed over the Kuiper Line and broke communications with Earth, these memories started to come back to me.

* * *

I've spent the last few weeks in a flurry of experimentation, bustling around the ship in search of ingredients. I want to share the results of my experiments with you, and perhaps inspire you to rediscover the recipes that made up your own lives before our leap into space.

Here, I give you some ways to experience the home we left behind, a taste of the past to keep us fueled for the rest of our travels until, once again, our feet can touch solid ground.

i. FEEL OF SALMON

Prep time: 3 hours

Serves: 1

Ingredients:

- 5 BananaChips
- 1 clear FreshRoll
- 2 cups water

There's something about salmon, the way it unfurls on your tongue as you press against it, a paper fan unfolding. I once visited

Haida Gwaii with my mother to watch one of the last few protected salmon runs. That was the only time I had real salmon, but my memory of it is as persistent as the fish against the current.

The texture is difficult to replicate. But I've come close, emulating its creamy flakiness with five [BananaChips](#) soaked for three hours (don't let them touch). Take them out of the water with a slotted spoon and wrap them in a (clear) [FreshRoll](#). Eat them slowly, softly. Savor the texture and feel the tenderness of pebble-smoothing water, the way salmon dart through it like a scaly meteor shower.

ii. SOYLENT-FETA SALAD

Prep time: 10 minutes

Serves: 2

Ingredients:

- 2 cubes SoyLentGreen (crumbled)
- 2 tbsp citrUS
- 3 bunches Crisp (any color)
- 1½ tbsp oLIVE oil
- Veg of your choice (I like [Tube-Matoes](#) and [Cube-Cumbers](#))
- salt to taste

[SoylentGreen](#)* crumbles like feta. It's something I noticed after a visit home from university, sometime through my second year of a bachelor's in art history. I was tasked with making a Greek salad, and when I dipped my fingers into the feta brine, my mind slipped to the fridge in my dorm, packed from floor to ceiling with SoyLentGreen.

SoylentGreen tastes nothing like feta, which should be not at all surprising, as SoyLentGreen was developed in 2054 to be as nutrient-dense as possible for famine relief, while feta is ancient and, apparently, refined enough for Grecian gods. But what if SoyLentGreen could be used like feta—as a topping, rather than as a meal replacement?

This question led me to a series of great mistakes (if you value your taste buds, do not attempt to mix SoyLentGreen with [B-bars](#)) and one glorious breakthrough: the acidity of [citrUS](#) smothers SoyLentGreen's infamous swamp-reek into something more like a swamp-whiff. Sprinkle equal parts of each onto your favorite [Crisp](#),

add your [Veg](#) of choice, a drizzle of [oLIVE oil](#), a sprinkle of salt, and you have a feta salad that I'm sure those of 1400s Mediterranean would frown upon but that suits me just fine.

[*The Mary-Henry-Wilson Food Company would like to remind consumers that SoylentGreen™—as proven in *Thorn v. Mary-Henry-Wilson* (2073)—is *not* people.]

iii. CAPSULE-FISH CAKE

Prep time: 13 hours

Serves: 8

Ingredients:

- 3 Blue capsules
- 1½ cup ground coffee “beans”
- 2 cups boiling water
- 1 bag Mylk

When I was little, I saw a video on the Archive from 2006. It was a year filled with boot-cut jeans and branded T-shirts and, to the awe of my seven-year-old self, capsules that bloat in water and transform into sea creatures. The capsules were multicolored, very much like those available from Vending™, but ours differ in two ways: 1. They are edible, and 2. They do not morph into fish.

I'm sure many of us were taught not to play with our food, but there are few joys quite like `1gn0r1ng auth0ri7y`. Try it yourself: [Blue](#) capsules contain a sufficient amount of yeast to raise bread. Everything else you need is stored in your room's Liquorator: ground coffee “beans,” boiling water, and [Mylk](#). Mix these in a bowl with three Blues (extract the capsule covers), place a warm cloth over the bowl for at least twelve hours, and then Wave it for three minutes.

What you (should) be left with is a sponge bread: fluffy and bouncy and moist. I used a fork to form mine into what roughly resembles a stingray, but its softness is forgiving, and I'm sure those with a greater talent in sculpture will have an easier time shaping the bread.

iv. JOYFUL FEAST

Prep time: TBD

Serves: TBD

Ingredients: TBD

When I think of my mother, I think of fried paratha, the char on its face like the craters of a moon, how when you tear it apart it reveals its layers: white and brown strata of rock. I think of steaming rice, each grain alone and crowded as stars. I think of the things that make the experience of food—more than just vitamins and fibers, lipids and proteins—but texture and spice and chairs around a table.

I miss this, the bustling camaraderie of my mother's home. I could not even come close to replicating it in my experiments. Prairie Patel's painting [Joyful Feast](#) conjures a scene I imagined but couldn't achieve on my own: a loud spread bursting with color, mouths dripping with appetite and bliss. I can hear limes sizzling in bubbly, silver clinking on porcelain. It's noisy in its unison and dramatic in its symmetry, the sort of retro-surrealism that art deco can't help but conjure.

I would like to take this time to appeal to you, shipmates, in helping me plan a Joyful Feast. If you are at all interested, please send me a message to discuss the menu and propose times. Feel free to leave comments on this transmission, but we'll have to keep the conversation about the logistics of the Joyful Feast to my secure channel.

I very much look forward to reveling in the experience of food with you. Perhaps I'll even bring a sink, stain my arms red with warmth cleaning up the evidence of our feast.

About the Author

Libby Graham is a UFO enthusiast and co-editor of *The Sprawl Mag*, a (cyber-)feminist, anti-colonial magazine focused on publishing diverse voices in sci-fi and fantasy. She lives with her girlfriend in frigid, friendly Manitoba. Her work has appeared in *filling Station* and *Star*Line*.

Base Bioform *by Harvey Bly*

"G'morning, Skydotians!" Topher boomed. "Get ready to spend the last few minutes of the drought with me and my Mawmaw—the only person I ever met who was alive last time it rained."

For the time being, Topher was just some wacky-haired kid on a planet that got condemned. When he was grown, though, he was gonna be a weatherman. That was why he was doing a news story for his history homework.

He was wet with sweat in his dress-tunic and trousers, standing in front of his school-issued holorecorder. Mawmaw was slouched in a plastic beach chair beside him. Even worse, she had refused to wear a scrap besides a graying bra and muddy cargo shorts 'cause it was too hot to bother.

Topher went on. "Me and Mawmaw have a great scoop for you today. Did you know that even though we call it the Hundred Year Drought, it's only really been seventy years?"

"Seventy-two," Mawmaw said.

Topher huffed.

"I'm doing you a favor, Cricket," she said. "You want to be on the news, you gotta be precise. Specific. People find out you're just a little bit wrong an' they never trust a word outta your mouth again."

"That why you don't work in news?" Topher asked.

"You vicious little boy," Mawmaw said. It might have been a scolding, but with no one else there, she only guffawed and shook her head.

Topher pressed the button to restart the recording and yelped when the holorecorder nearly fell off the fence post into the hard-packed dust. If it broke, school wouldn't loan him another.

Above Mawmaw, the sky looked just as empty as usual. Below her, the rust-orange dust was just as dry and cracked. The endless stretch of desert was dotted with tin-roofed breezeblock huts just like theirs.

It was hot enough that not a single other soul was outside.

The tape restarted. "Thanks for tunin' in, Skydot!" Topher said with a winning smile like he'd seen the regular weather guy do on the news. "As you all know by now, our little planet's been bought by a company called RallyCorp. Now, RallyCorp is finally gonna bring us all some rain. Mawmaw, tell us about the rain."

She raised an eyebrow at her grandson.

"This is news, not fictionals. Look at the camera!" he told her.

"Ain't this supposed to be *your* news show?" Mawmaw snapped.

"Yes ma'am." Topher crossed his arms and shifted.

"Well then, tell us about the rain, Topher."

Topher squinted up at the sky—still empty. Mawmaw wasn't wrong. It was his own school project. He might get points off for looking clueless.

"Well, Skydot got condemned after those dust bowls ruined all our soil an' made it hard to farm. Before it was condemned, there was always rain machines about. But then the company had no money to send 'em anymore. And that was seventy"—he looked to Mawmaw, who held up two fingers—"seventy-two years ago, so it's been a long time comin'. We'll tune back in just as soon as we start feeling that sweet, sweet water falling from the sky." Topher winked and went to shut off the holorecorder. Mawmaw nearly clotheslined him, stopping him short.

"That ain't all," she said, brow furrowed. "Keep goin'."

Topher shrugged at her. "Whaddaya want me to say?"

"Tell us why they really stopped sending the rain machines," she told him.

"I dunno. That's all I've heard," he said.

"School don't teach you why they really went away?" she asked. She didn't seem mad, but something about her expression made Topher want to turn the recorder off.

"No ma'am," he said.

Mawmaw sighed. "Planets are worth more money when they got a thriving ecosystem. A dried up one like ours is less profitable than plain rock—at least they can mine a rock. Usually, to sell a condemned planet, the company's gotta make it into something called base bioform. That's when all the planet's killable life is dead. Anything left alive costs more money than it's worth to kill before mining."

Topher cocked his head. He didn't understand.

"They were trying to kill us off to sell the planet." She looked at Topher real direct. "They did it on purpose, Cricket."

Topher didn't know what to think about that.

"And what, now they decided not to kill us all?" he asked.

Mawmaw frowned. "Not exactly. C'mere." She pulled Topher into her lap. They'd forgotten all about the recorder. "When

RallyCorp bought us, I think they took pity. Removing all that atmospheric support technology's the cheapest way to get to base bioform, but it takes a long time, so it's considered real cruel. RallyCorp must've decided they can make a buck off those of us left here if they send us some rain."

"How?" Topher asked. He saw Mawmaw frown again. "Sorry."

"No, Cricket. Don't be sorry. I think they prob'ly want us to work for them."

"Do we get a choice?" he asked.

"No." She looked up at the sky. "We do get rain, though."

Soon as she said it, a big glob of the stuff plopped onto Topher's hand, thick and shiny.

"Speak of the devil," said Topher. The greasy, sticky rain kept on falling, and a powerful stench descended with it. "Smells like gasoline," he said. When the drops landed on the tin roof of his shack, Topher stared; the globs glittered in the sunlight.

Mawmaw's eyes went wide as Topher's, both of them too awestruck to grab the holorecorder and point it skywards.

"In the name of everything innocent," Mawmaw breathed. She wrapped her body around Topher, like to protect him.

"I love you, Cricket," she told him.

"What's wrong, Mawmaw?" The rain started plopping down harder, and Topher heard the recorder hit the ground with a crunch. He strained to get to it, but Mawmaw held him too tight.

There were cheaper ways to base bioform than napalm, but none faster. More humane not to drag it out.

About the Author

Harvey Bly is a transgender human man. He is not a creature from the ether. Bly writes science fiction because his Earthling companions (cats) like to watch the cursor blink on his computer screen. You can find him @storiesbybly on Instagram.

Helpful Reminders

by Alex Aldridge

be grateful for the crumbs, pittance flung
towards shoeless feet, launched by hands
of self-proclaimed philanthropists, drunk
off smugness, rubbing their satisfied bellies

be thankful, oh so thankful. plastic grins
& starved bodies helplessly dependent
& concealing pain. facade of joy & a life
of accepting unjust burden with a smile

did you make your required offering yet?
did you pledge your undying allegiance
to the infallible powers above reproach,
so great & so impervious to criticism?

don't forget to worship the violence above,
the heroes & idols & structures & systems
which you signed up to serve at your birth,
the unbreakable contract to bow to authority

it's imperative you snuff out dreams of wandering
astray, to fall in line, to remain a loyal prisoner
in the name of freedom, to continue kissing
guilty hands of the abuser, forever grateful

you must avoid subversion by any means necessary
lest you discover the cracks in the faulty foundation,
the escape routes exposing fragile insecurity, unveiling
the suffering committed in the absence of our consent

About the Author

Alex Aldridge is a writer who traded the gloomy skies of Portland, OR to move back to the desert of Tucson, AZ. When they aren't talking to their dog when out walking together, they are in conversation with notebooks and Post-It notes scattered throughout their apartment. They find it much easier to communicate through the written word and talking to their dog than they do speaking to other humans.

Holes
by Oliver Smith

She is planet-bound, thirsting
against the gravity well,
hungry for other worlds.

The air intake of a wind tunnel huffs
among the abandoned airframes,
like a broken mind, a lonely
starship crying for her pilot.

The dead machines stay silent—hollow faces
of newly inanimate silicon and steel
frozen in thousand-framed poses on stages
of papier-mâché, two by one, plaster, and tinfoil.

An actress in silver rises from the corpse of the future;
Heathrow, Gatwick, Stansted. She rolls across
the endless green-baize runways, dodging
brambles and fissures. She might remain
immaculate while others fade and rot
beneath their bricks and small ambitions.

The unforgotten light of abandoned spaces;
concrete and obsolete hardware green with moss
all grown with lichen as if they were fallen
logs among the briars.

She could stretch out her hand and pluck
a star from the faux-velvet sky; its circuits
shedding shards of shattered fire
as she crushes it down
to a point of infinite density.

About the Author

Oliver Smith is a visual artist and writer from Cheltenham, UK. He is inspired by Tristan Tzara, J. G. Ballard, and Max Ernst; by the poetry of chance encounters; by frenzied rocks towering above the silent swamp; by unlikely collisions between place and myth and memory. His poetry has been published in *Abyss & Apex*, *Ink*, *Sweat, and Tears*, *Strange Horizons*, *Sylvia Magazine*, and has twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. He holds a PhD in Literary and Critical Studies from the University of Gloucestershire.

Scifaiku
by Jean-Paul L. Garnier

warp drive folds spacetime
origami universe
unseen from outside

* * *

anthropologist
robot digging up robots
searching for the past

* * *

artificial moons
imprison us on the Earth
a cage of space junk

* * *

dead on the launchpad
the dream meets impotent death
before leaving Earth

About the Author

Jean-Paul L. Garnier is the owner of Space Cowboy Books, producer of *Simultaneous Times Podcast*, and editor of the SFPA's *Star*Line Magazine*. He is also the deputy editor-in-chief of the soon to be relaunched *Worlds of IF & Galaxy Magazines*. He has written many books of poetry and science fiction.

The Machine Family
by Angela Liu

(First published in Strange Horizons)

Mannequin legs lined up along the walls
Flowers the shape of organs

When the men came, their boots stained the children's playmat
We remembered to offer them tea
and to unzip our bodies from our shame

The feast begins before the guests arrive
the table ripe with fruits and metal parts

Their eyes trace the curves of our gears
like birds eyeing the shoreline and we
recite the songs our makers wrote

like the name of a mother that exists
only in user manuals

We wait for their hands
to cleave open the sheets of steel, pull them back
to show the guests that memory of the sea

that latest add-on that renders happiness
into a series of unbreakable binary.

About the Author

Angela Liu is a Chinese-American writer from NYC. She researched mixed reality at Keio University's Graduate School of Media Design in Japan and now works in IT consulting and Japanese-to-English translation. Her works are published or forthcoming in *Clarkesworld*, *Strange Horizons*, *The Dark*, *Lightspeed Magazine*, *Uncanny Magazine*, *Dark Matter Magazine*, *Cast of Wonders*, *khōréō*, among others. Her debut short story collection, *Beautiful Ways We Break Each Other Open*, will be released in September 2024 with Dark Matter INK. Check out more of her work at liu-angela.com or find her on Twitter and Instagram @liu_angela.

La (Mal)inche
by Angela Acosta

The Phoenician alphabet rides waves
on the backs of the dispossessed,
the engraved and etched,
the plumas and pen markings
from birds and muscle memories
of braids weaving oral histories
as wide as the Chicxulub crater—
the Florentine Codex awaits us.

Bernadino de Sahagún's great grandson
fifty times over still squirrels away
a monolingual rendition of Las Américas
where his codex has been renamed
yet coded into caravel(a)s, sailing
ships gliding on cosmic photon winds.

They called her La Malinche,
so I call myself the treacherous
translator, Tenepal, creator
of malware that tastes of las
llamas, flames the Inquisition
could never put out;
las llamas del altiplano,
las llamadas de mi pueblo.

The highland llamas,
the calls of my town,
boarding documents
I forged with a name
that only returns on
el Día de los Muertos.

Her blood runs through my veins, too.

I cannot soportar, tolerate
the diction of one lengua.
My language requires a flotilla

for safe crossing.

I will ride on past the Antilles,
the farthest shores of the Galápagos,
into the stellar firmament where
stray particles become ones and zeros
and the hacker Malinche once was
turns a dark canvas into a symphony
of Aztec boys and girls singing
corridos in bad mother tongues.

I vowed to be your Malinche,
malware in the system,
mother of many. They called
my offspring Mestizo, and so
I say their names in Spanglish,
tell them bedtime stories when
caravels foretold la Conquista,
an Age of Discovery.

La (Mal)inche foretells
other hypocrisies, little lies,
sips of wine from barrels wrought with
la mano de obra, la mano del colonizador,
la mano de la mujer, Spanish hands.

Who ever said Malinche was only woman,
only mortal, a ghost in the machine of syntax
we speak? Let her distill herself into morphemes
that leak softly from spaceborne vessels.

Let her roam por el ligero corriente del tiempo,
across the swift currents of time
into multilingual horizons.

About the Author

Angela Acosta is a bilingual Latina poet currently teaching at Davidson College as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Hispanic Studies. Her Rhysling-nominated poetry has appeared in *Shoreline of Infinity*, *Apparition Lit*, *Radon Journal*, and *Space & Time*. She is author of the Elgin-nominated collection *Summoning Space Travelers* (Hiraeth Publishing, 2022) and *A Belief in Cosmic Dailiness: Poems of a Fabled Universe* (Red Ogre Review, 2023).

Temporal Hypothesis
by Kevin Canfield

time is
not elastic,
neither can it
be understood
as a shared reality;
our experiences
do not overlap;
they occur
consecutively,
not concurrently;
there's a notion
that we can
all use time
concurrently—
this is untrue;
time is a simple
cosmic baton:

i use it, then
hand it over
to you—you
use it, then
you pass it on;
everybody gets
their turn, and
though our
senses suggest
otherwise,
we cannot
share time;
when i write
these words
i am using
my time;
when you
read them,
i am gone

About the Author

Kevin Canfield lives in New York City. His writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Film Comment*, and other publications.

traveling through breaths
by Eva Papasoulioti

our ship is alive, flesh
corridors squelching under our feet
the low hum of a drum heartbeat
lulling us to sleep

we breathe in the oxygen
filtered through its bronchioles,
curve our rooms under its ribcage,
plant our gardens into the expanse
of its spinal column, fertilize them
with the oil from its liver

in between black holes
and exploring galaxies
 we changed
from parasite to cohabitants

we tasted the safety in coexistence
finding solace in mutual respect

 and as we break apart and eat
 the radioactive fungi from its mouth
 and clean debris from its fins
 and provide deep-needed scratches
 at the depths of its lungs

we accepted that peace rests
in all the ways we care
for each other

About the Author

Eva Papasoulioti is a Greek writer of speculative fiction and poetry. Her work has appeared in *Uncanny*, *Solarpunk Magazine*, *Heartlines Spec*, and elsewhere, and has been nominated for the Rhysling and Dwarf Stars Awards. She lives in Athens with her spouse and their two cats. You can find her on Twitter and Bluesky @epapasoulioti and on her blog plothopes.com.

Martian Invasion by David Dickinson

Saganopolis admitted it first.

they always came in the night
the invaders, hiding paper-thin bodies
in cracks too tiny to see
ugly welts, strange rashes
soon spread across
the colonized face of Mars
skillfully pitting neighbor against neighbor
as they'd done since we scrambled out of the caves

Phobos said they had come from Deimos
while Deimos pointed at Phobos

'It Came From Earth!'
they finally shouted
as bedbugs at last
had come to Mars

About the Author

David Dickinson is an astronomy book author, freelance science writer, frequent contributor to *Sky and Telescope* and *Universe Today*, retired U.S. Air Force vet, and long-time amateur astronomer. His short fiction and poetry have been published on *The Drabblecast* and in *Star*Line*.

Conservation of Angular Momentum
by J. M. Eno

I remember my daughter
five years old, starfished
on the merry-go-round

Laughing and spinning,
and when she pulled in her limbs
like a shy flower
she would spin even faster

She always wanted to go faster

I heard that momentum is conserved forever,
that the same principle applies
from the smallest parts of matter
to the largest exoplanets

So tell me,
when I would
raise her up above my head
and look into her gleeful eyes,
our bodies stretched out like a limb of Earth extended,
did the world spin slower
for everyone or
just me?

And when I dropped
to my knees after
hearing the unspeakable,
did the world spin a little bit faster?

And when they put
her tiny body
in the ground,
did it spin a little faster still?

She always wanted to go faster

About the Author

J.M. Eno's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *House of Zolo's Journal of Speculative Literature*, *Cobalt*, and *Zooscape Zine*. He can be found among the trees with his family and a recalcitrant English bulldog or on Twitter at @jmenowrites.

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by Avra Margariti

(First published in Illumen)

In our collective online headspace
first there was a sprout
then the growing pains of love;
the forums stretching and shooting up
like weeds, DMs acquiring stretchmarks
as they contorted into group chats to fit all:
Cassandra and Ivy and Amir and I.

I sent them pixelated roses,
asked them to imagine the thorned stem
between my teeth. The goosebumps
spreading down the body
whose code I wished I could rewrite,
rearrange, like this flesh of mine was mere
foam.

Cassandra liked to cast amorous spells.
Her ingredients megabytes, artistic nudes,

dashes of pink pepper and red lipstick.

Ivy, true to her name, clung
to the group chat at all hours with tendrils
of cursive, colorful fonts, love
songs and late-night ramblings.

Amir messaged us one day to say
they'd found the secret to solve all
our long distance problems:
A hack; a cheatcode; a drug; a revelation
that would allow us to feel each other
from across the globe
uploading our consciousness to the net
acquiring temporary bodies of binary code.

Into the spiderwebs we four fell
going deeper, cicadas in the soil;
going darker, and suddenly we learned
what bats feel like hearing shapes,
what plants feel like devouring sunlight.

I stared wondering, would we ever stop falling
deep and dark enough to forget our way back
through these complex canals?

Did we even want to stop?

Now, digital domestic [ignorance is] bliss.

Now, we all float exultant in our freefall;

Cassandra and Ivy and Amir and I.

About the Author

Avra Margariti is a queer author, Greek sea monster, and Rhysling-nominated poet with a fondness for the dark and the darling. Avra's work haunts publications such as *Vastarien*, *Asimov's*, *Liminality*, *Arsenika*, *The Future Fire*, *Space and Time*, *Eye to the Telescope*, and *Glittership*. *The Saint of Witches*, Avra's debut collection of horror poetry, is available from Weasel Press. You can find Avra on Twitter @avramargariti.

Masthead

Aimer – Anarcho-transhumanist and anti-fascist. Holds two master's degrees in poetry and publishing, and was a touring spoken word poet for fourteen years. Works for a non-profit publishing open access science research articles.

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, videos games, and learning new crafts. An avid lover of dogs.

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

Gidget – New England-based speculative fiction writer and creative writing student. Spends her free time creating music, painting, and daydreaming about Lovecraftian monsters. Loves reading just as much as writing, especially when it's done lounging in warm patches of sun. 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.

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 – Queer biohealth student from the Pacific Northwest with a passion for writing. She enjoys spilled ink poetry, biopunk sci-fi, powerful narrative 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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Back cover artist: **Lannie Phajlic** lives smack dab where the Great Plains meet the Rocky Mountains with his wife, two poodles, and two cats. He is a former college biology teacher (shudder) and current art teacher (chef's kiss). When not writing or making art, he likes to find inspiration in the Wilds.

