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Where's Reba? *by Alex T. Singer*

You haven't heard from Reba in a few days, and you're starting to worry. You were supposed to go out to lunch at Macho's. It was a third-party restaurant, but you're sure it didn't violate either of your non-competes.

Reba normally tells you these things. She's good about that, but you haven't heard from her—by phone, by email. She hasn't even posted anything on her channels for days. It's not like her.

"I mean, she probably just got cast in something," says your old friend Lulu, who belongs to Way-o. Her dad once worked the lighting rig on one of their productions, which makes her the self-declared Industry Expert. She has the ironed straight hair you see on every lead right now. "I've heard there's been talent scouts around lately. You don't have to worry about it. You're just Clarmont, and, like . . . you're more of a podcast kind of person? But oh, can you imagine? That lucky bitch!"

You remember why you don't talk to Lulu that much.

But there are rumors. Your mom asks you not to go out to any of the big public places. She lost a sister to the big studios. You remind her it's fine. Clarmont's casting season's in a few weeks anyway, and you're ten pounds too heavy to look good on camera.

"But remember your aunt Aisha."

No one remembers Aunt Aisha. They remember Misha May, though. She was a beautiful action star, with layered hair and screaming dark eyes. She paraded across your screens, committing daring jungle rescues in nothing more than slacks and a little bikini top, for five whole seasons. Everyone wonders why she never did more.

The talent scouts pick up Lulu a few days later. It wasn't a particularly hard sting. After she heard about it, she made sure to order the prettiest-looking health shake to drink in the prettiest cafe every morning for a week straight. She hadn't eaten anything else for days. Her mom called your mom, crying.

"They got her," Lulu's mother sobbed. "They said they like how she holds a cup of coffee. She's going to be an extra. I'm never going to see her again!"

Then they hit her with a DMCA, and she couldn't cry about it anymore. You don't question how they knew she'd talked about it.

Way-o owns most of the mobile carriers these days. Clarmont only owns two.

* * *

You know you ought to stop thinking about Reba, but you liked Reba. She always answered your texts about any old thing. Reba talked with you until 2 AM about books that had nothing to do with any of the current series. She looked like she rolled out of an ad for a hip clothing line, but she stuck with you while you wrote a 20,000-word novella and helped you post it on the dark web. Reba sent you pictures of her paintings. Crazy, colorful abstract art that always had a stag hidden somewhere in it.

Reba belonged to Lumina, an overseas studio. It's one of the smaller studios. Her family moved here because the studio was trying to move their productions somewhere more efficient. Mostly they do art house films, one drug company, some middle-income residential complexes, and a few restaurant chains. You check on their website for any upcoming projects, but the casts for those have been announced. You check all their social media, but they're all about boosting movies that have wrapped and encouraging people to get their flu shots. You even check if there's been casting calls at the complexes, but you know people aren't allowed to talk about those.

You run all your searches at the local library, with a pile of books around the computer to hide your face from the corner camera. You don't want to get a call from your reps about why you're going off-brand.

* * *

You put on makeup to go to the parties you never used to bother with. You're still on a few invite lists. Reba's friends are mostly Lulu's friends. Cool, well-dressed, hungry people who love to talk about art and TV. You've never liked them, but they know what's on.

"Hey, aren't you related to Misha May?" Tommy is an up-and-coming indie musician who's just been cleared to post mixes to his personal accounts. Reba used to do his album covers.

"Yeah," you admit, even if it sends a prickle down your back to remember. "She was my aunt Aisha."

“Aisha? Well, whatever. That’s so cool. You know, with a narrower face, I bet they’d cast you in, like, a reboot or something. Er, not that you don’t look great.”

You laugh, weakly. “Thanks,” you say, like you didn’t weigh yourself in the morning to make sure you were still well over their weight restrictions. “You seen Reba around?”

Tommy’s smile gets a little shaky at one corner. “Nah,” he says, eyes darting sideways to the music player, which has a two-way open channel. “She’s probably off doing her thing. You know how she gets when there’s a project. Oh, man. Did you hear about Lulu?”

Everyone’s heard about Lulu, but they all want to talk about it again. How lucky, what an opportunity, when they think the project will be announced, do you think they need anyone else?

Tommy catches you on your way out, offering your coat.

“Hey,” he says. “Be careful out there, okay? Don’t worry too much about, uh, her. You might . . .”

His eyes travel to the automatic lock on his door.

“It’s kind of a downer, you know?”

You have a feeling Tommy’s not going to invite you to his next roof party.

* * *

You hear there’s a filming out by Riverway. Production name “Project Duckie.” You go check it out. It’s hard to tell from the cars what studio’s running it, but the equipment’s expensive, and the security is armed. There’s a gap under one of the bridges you can get to from a wrecked wall in a nearby playground. You squeeze your way through and wander through the half-finished drainage tunnel. You only see feet. You don’t see any faces.

“Stand here. Okay. Now to the left. Okay. Can we get makeup back in here? One eye looks a little bigger than the other.”

“The doctor already fixed it.”

“We need to fix it more. Get her back into surgery tomorrow.”

You think you hear footsteps from the other end of the tunnel. You run back the way you came, scraping your knee as you crawl back up the wall.

By the time you get home, you find out your carrier has remotely wiped your phone.

“Enjoy a free upgrade!” it tells you, happily. Your phone runs better than it ever has. You’ve been given more bandwidth and fifty-six new photo filters. All your stored photos are gone. You check your Cloud storage—they’re gone there, too. Including the last ones you had of Reba when you went to Tommy’s show. Including the hike you went on for her last birthday. You never remembered to print any of them out. People don’t really do stuff like that anymore.

Which is why, angry and not thinking, you log on to a device you bought from a vending machine, find the official Lumina social media account, and leave a simple message:

WHERE’S REBA?

You expect to be blocked. You expect to be ignored. You don’t expect a different account to respond:

Wait and see :)

You check the account. @ProjectDuckie, no profile picture. The only account listed as a friend is a Way-o marketing consultant.

When your rideshare takes an unexpected detour after work, its AI cheerfully informing you it’s found a faster route, the first thing you think is, “Welp. Here we go.”

* * *

They take you to an office on the fortieth floor, with a view of the bay. Multiple LED screens overhead show ads for Way-o’s upcoming fall season. An assistant brings in a sushi platter and some energy shakes.

A man in an ironic waistcoat with very carefully aligned teeth smiles as he puts his feet up across from you. His name is Brenton Woods. He’s a Way-o VP, and he’s been waiting for you.

“I heard you like sushi,” he says. He’s read your order history.

“My carrier’s Clarmont,” you say, like the studios don’t all sell data to each other.

The smile gets straighter and brighter. “Details,” he says. “You’re a regular Mini May, you know that? You should have one of our shakes. They’re great for your gut health.”

Weight, he means. You don't touch anything. You just sit forward with your hands between your knees. You don't say anything. You just wait. When he realizes he's not going to have the prescribed small talk, the man's eyes harden.

"First thing's first," he says. "You gave us one hell of a tagline. 'Where's Reba?' That's good. We'd love to get the permissions from you."

"Who says I'll give it?"

He checks his phone. "Clarmont, about ten minutes ago. Your mom'll finally be able to get that home upgrade she's needed."

"Mom's fine where she is."

"She'll come around." The man sits forward. The lights from the screens dance in his flat, dark eyes. "What's worrying you?"

You look him in the eyes and knot your hands together as you ask: "Where's Reba?"

He leans back and whistles. "You look so much like your aunt when you're direct. Did you ever see that one episode with the animal trainer and the—" Your hands tighten. "Well, never mind that. Look, if that's all this is, Reba's fine. Reba's better than fine. You'll see how fine she is soon."

"Then where is she?"

"Right about now?" He checks his phone. "On set. Probably in makeup. The pilot's getting great reviews, by the way. You'll really love it. It's totally your thing."

"Can I talk to her?"

"Of course you can. Of course you will. We just haven't announced anything yet. You know how NDAs are. Everything's all . . ." He gestures like he's sewing his lips shut. "Hush, hush. But if it helps—and I really hope it does—we really like Reba. We're taking good care of Reba. We like our talent happy."

"Does she actually want to be there?"

"Who wouldn't want to be a star?"

"I don't know," you say, shaking now. "Ask my aunt Aisha."

You know he can't.

He sighs. "Look, Mini May, the studio can't claim any responsibility for that, but just between you and me? We're real sad about what happened to Misha. But it won't be like that. Reba's got a good head on her shoulders—"

"My aunt was pre-med."

“Well,” the man chuckles. “You know what they say about doctors.”

You don’t know what they say about doctors. You stare him down. Brenton Wood’s laugh trickles off. The teeth vanish. He taps a few things into his phone.

“Reba’s what the world needs right now,” he says. “She’s young. Spontaneous. Arty. Great representation. We’d hate to see her go.”

His eyes rake over you, top to bottom.

“But nostalgia’s always a big pull,” he says, thoughtfully. “The upcoming schedule isn’t completely locked in. How do you feel about CrossFit?”

He gives you a long, tense moment, and then, as if he hadn’t requested the call a minute ago, his phone goes off. He pretends to be surprised. He pretends to be apologetic. Then, he turns to give you the news you were waiting for: it’s production. Reba’s out of makeup. She wants to talk to you while the crew sets up.

“I’ll give you some privacy,” he says, setting the phone in the dock in the center of the glass table. The click sounds a little like the cartridge of a gun.

* * *

They don’t give you visuals. You’re not cleared for anything like that.

“Hey,” says a painfully familiar voice through the pretty wallpaper. She sounds tired and stressed. “Hey, Aye-aye. That really you?”

Aye-aye is your name in her contacts. Anyone with access to her phone could find that. “Maybe,” you say. “They’re calling me Minnie right now. That really you?”

You know how well they can edit voices. You know how well they can edit faces. Your aunt did three more seasons after the funeral.

No one asked “Where’s Aisha?” No one knew Aisha existed. Everyone knew where Misha May was—on their screen, every Thursday at 9.

“Sure as silver,” answers Reba—and your heart falls straight down into your stomach with a terrible cold splash. You remember handing her the handwritten notebook under the table, so the cafe cameras couldn’t scan it. *Sure Silver*. It was the title of your first

novella. It's her. It's really her—and you wish it wasn't. "Sorry about worrying you. You know how it goes. How you been?"

"Oh, you know. Going stag," you say, because it was always a treat to find them in her paintings. "You see the latest season of *Lollygaggers*?" Did they let her? Sometimes extras are given a little more leeway to the outside world.

"Oh, god, no. I'm so behind." She hadn't. Shit. She's a lead. "Don't spoil me. I'll catch up soon."

Don't do this, she meant. Don't try to do it.

"Like I'd watch it without you."

"I wouldn't mind. You could watch it with your mom."

Mom hasn't watched anything for years and you both know it.

"Mom and I don't really have the same tastes," you say. "Besides, it's more fun when it's you."

"Aye-aye," says Reba, a little desperate. "Wait for the next season."

"Like I have the patience."

"Aye-aye," says Reba, sounding like she's almost in tears. "Please don't."

You stare at the phone, helplessly. You force yourself to laugh.

"Gee, Reba," you say. "What do you take me for? I don't even ask the rideshares to go over fifty."

"Thank you," she says. "I have to go now. Talk to you later."

"Talk to you later," you say, tonelessly. The connection cuts out. You wonder if you'll ever get to hear her again. Maybe through texts. Maybe she'll even get to say something unedited.

Brenton Wood comes back in all smiles as he collects his phone. See? That wasn't so bad. Everything's just fine. Have a free pass to the next season. Don't worry about signing anything right now. If we need you for anything, we'll just call.

* * *

Tommy actually invites you to his next viewing party. You're surprised. You thought you'd be on the outs.

"I'm glad you came. It's good to see you," he says. He looks a little guilty when he takes your coat. He leads you to his amazing new screen set up. It's still got the branding taped to the remote. Suddenly, you're not really wondering about how Way-o picked you up so fast.

It's Banjo's big season premiere. You all gather in front of the screen. Everyone talks excitedly.

"Think she'll get any lines?"

"Depends. Think she got her guild card?"

"Oh man, oh man, oh man."

Lulu's in the third sponsorship scene, after the lead steps into a car. The camera pans to a group of people drinking studio approved sodas and there she is, with a bottle in hand. At least, you think it's her. Her face is turned away. Her hair's short and blonde, but everyone swears it's her. They scream and grab each other. Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god.

The scene cuts to black. Everyone goes quiet. It's trailer time. Everyone loves trailers. They talk about them almost as much as season premieres.

White text appears on the screen: WHERE'S RIKA?

You almost crush your soda can.

"Ohhh," says someone in front of you. "I think I heard about this one."

The series is called *Swan Lakes*. It's a murder mystery. Someone turned up dead in the bay, and it's up to a brooding young woman to find out why. She walks down a lonely park path that partygoers happily identify as downtown Riverway. She wears jeans and a faux leather jacket, loads a gun, looks angry, and ducks behind a lot of flashing glass doors.

"Have I seen her in anything? I feel like I've seen her in something."

"Dunno. She do anything before? Check the press release."

"Says here her name is . . . Ashley King?"

"No, it's not," you say, slowly. You put your drink down to keep from throwing it at them. "That's Reba."

An awkward silence fills the room. Someone rewinds the trailer. You watch her glare at the camera all over again. Her hair's different. Her face is thinner, her nose is straighter, and her eyes are smaller than they used to be, but when she says, "Where's Rika? Where the hell is Rika?" there's no mistaking the husky catch in her voice.

The next trailer starts. It's a *Lollygaggers* teaser that was leaked a week ago. You sit in silence.

"Uh, woah. Yeah, it was."

"Crap. That's what they grabbed her for?"

And then, inevitably:

"Reba's made it big!"

"That is so cool!"

"We know a real celebrity."

You meet Tommy's eyes across the room. You bite the inside of your cheek. You get up and grab your coat. He tails you, asking if you want a rideshare, asking if you want to take any leftovers.

"Are you sure? I got a lot. It's great."

"I'm good."

"C'mon, let me call a car. We can watch another episode while we wait."

"I'm good, Tommy."

You leave. You're fine, you say. You'll walk.

Then you kick over a garbage can. You shove your knuckles in your mouth to keep from yelling. You sink down to the curb, under the glare of the apartment logos. You think about throwing your phone as far as it will go. But you take one look at all those shining, digital billboards, all the blinking ads and upcoming shows, and you know it won't go far enough—not where you are right now.

You chuck your phone into the garbage can instead. You tear the branding off of your bags and shoes. You leave your jacket hooked over a fence five blocks down. They might figure out where you're going. There are talent scouts everywhere. It never takes them very long.

But still, you walk into the night, alone and unbranded. Wherever you go from here, you decide then and there: You won't make it easy for them to find you.

About the Author

Alex T. Singer is the author of the webcomic *Sfeer Theory* and graphic novel *Small Town Witch*. Her recent short story, "Nothing But The Gods On Their Backs," ran in *Metaphorosis Magazine*.

Tonight We're Wearing Waste Bags
by Elena Sichrovsky

*You ask me to tell you a story.
I say, can it be a frightful one?
Mmm. You put your head on my shoulder. How does it end?*

A human body is easy to puncture. That's what I remember most from the information cloud in my spacecraft. It showed me how to identify the three most vulnerable areas: heart, lungs, and skull. The cloud also taught me how to inhale, how to release air, how to put one appendage in front of the other.

It never told me that being in a body would feel like a slow-motion strangulation.

Perhaps this is due to my extended stay here. I was never supposed to be here this long. An exploratory scientist, all I had to do was briefly wear a body in order to step outside, and onto Earth's solid ground, for three hundred seconds. Those miniscule pockets in human skin you call pores would then collect the microbe samples I needed.

My spacecraft never landed safely, though.

This story begins with engines choked by scorching flames and burnt branches raining through black-orange screams. By the time the forest fire was finally extinguished, I had nothing left except this body I was now trapped in.

If you had been there in the beginning, this story would have different words than these. Instead I walked alone and barefoot for days through the smoldering cinders, hoping to reach the nearest area of civilization.

The forest disturbed me. It was my first contact with the angular solidness of your world.

On my planet we are molecules of complete harmony with nature, perhaps comparable to the smoke that rises over crackling pines or the mist that blankets the timid hours before dawn. You would know me as intimately as the water you drink. There would be no such thing as dimensions or physical limitations.

When my hand first touched a tree trunk, the weight of contact was overwhelming. I'd never felt another object in my hands before.

You touch me now, and I feel you only on one section of my body.

*Your fingerprint has a beginning and end.
It is not infinite, the way I wish I could experience you.*

Once I exited the forest and arrived in your main area of civilization, I realized I needed to protect the soles of my feet if I wanted to keep moving. I picked up discarded paper boxes and bound them around my ankles. Food was not hard to spot, but I had nothing to trade for the sustenance. I waited until the owners of the food discarded what they must have had no use for. My tongue brushed against strange textures and crisp edges and my nostrils burned with the pungent odors.

At the time you hadn't yet taught me what suitable nourishment was meant to taste like. I had received no direction of how much or how often to eat. I relied on the pain in my abdomen to remind me of this body's needs and limitations.

I remember well that initial night outside of the forest because I couldn't see the stars anymore.

On my world we drift over stars the way children here tickle flower petals with their fingertips. Here, I couldn't feel the firmament dancing between my cells. The only persistent sensations were the hard ground beneath my spine and the dusty gravel whipped up by the wind around me.

That's when I first felt it. That five-spiked tingle traveling from the base of my shoulder bone to my wrist. I investigated the area of skin immediately and found no blood or sign of injury. But the ache continued. Phantom-like, yet tangible enough that all I could do to alleviate it was curl my fingers tight around my elbow bones.

In the weeks that passed, the invisible pain persisted. Whether I laid down to sleep on asphalt or in the metal shape of seating areas, whether I walked among throngs of humans or loitered solo in darkened alleys, it would return. Even though the discomfort only covered a small fraction of my physical body, it disquieted my entire form.

I could not understand it for weeks.

Then I discovered a way to conquer it. It was an accidental yet invaluable revelation.

You close your eyes. I don't quite know why. Perhaps you are mourning, or weary, or in love.

You say, were you ever scared to do it?

I tell you no. How could survival be anything but relief?

It happened when I was searching for some food in a waste-disposal area and an open can of juice scraped the back of my hand. The cut was not too wide nor the bloodshed excessive. I would live; the wound would close. More importantly, while the cut was fresh on my hand, I was not attentive to that phantom ache that would usually appear. My waking energies were spent in cleaning and plucking at the split skin. Perhaps like an exorcism in blood, the ghostly throbbing did not appear that entire night.

The next day I went back to the waste area and pocketed the empty can of juice. Every time I felt that familiar ambush of skin prickling, I ran my fingertip around the sharp metal edge. The burst of red was short-lived, yet enough to momentarily eclipse the possession of pain inside me.

There are scars thick as coins around my fingers.

I know you're trying not to look, but you are looking anyways, without your eyes.

You don't say anything. You cradle the back of my hand with your fingertips.

After some days I lost the metal can, which caused me great distress. However, outside a local beverage establishment, I came across something even more potent: a thin white stick about the size of my small finger. It was burning on one end. It reminded me of the fire in the forest, the one that destroyed my chance to return home. The red and black embers echoed the glowing eyes of the tree bark as they were inflamed alive.

I held the stick to my hand and watched my palm bloom brown and terrible around it.

It wasn't hard to find more white sticks on the ground. I had nothing to light them with, but others were generous enough to help me light them when I asked. It seemed like many humans also felt relief from such sticks. They even held them to their mouth, which I know is one of the tenderest parts of the body. They held it wrong, though. They held the burning end away from them.

You are crying now, your palm pressed to my face, right above the constellation of calluses.

Strange. When you touch my cheek like this, I feel it with more than just my skin.

It's as if my heart is making contact with your pulse, too.

Then I discovered a place that offered water to wash with and food to eat for those who had none. Apparently there were other shelter-less like me in this community. A kindly human led me there and offered objects for bathing. Inside the bath area was a reflective shape on the wall.

That was the moment I fully beheld my body for the first time.

I had never seen my eyes before.

I did not want them. So I raised the tooth-cleaning device and pushed it through the black hole in the center of my eye. I pushed it through again and again until the dark spilled out to red.

Someone came in and stole my tooth-cleaning device from my hands. A variety of unexplained noises left my throat as they carried me away. It was hard to see after that, but then what was there to see except for starless skies and this endless abyss of unwanted skin?

That was close to the day we first met. I remember our initial encounter because it was after I was released from the indoor medical care center. I had nothing to compensate them for their care, so they returned me to the outside. I was drinking from the river beside one of the large gardens. You were washing your hair. You wore paper bags around cloth footwear and had yellow teeth.

You asked what happened to my eye. I told you how I had seen myself and hated what I'd seen. You nodded, like you understood what that meant. I didn't know then, the way I do now, that sometimes even those born into these bodies have the longing to puncture and peel them off.

You say, I think I know where this story is going.

I ask, do you care where it has been?

No. Your forehead creases into my shirt. Not even a bit.

You offered me your sleeping satchel on that first night. It was the kind of starless night that bruised every hair on my arms. We laid side by side on stacks of crinkled paper, the satchel covering us both. I asked for your flame sparker, and you handed it to me. But

when I pressed the burning end of the white stick to my cheek you cried out, a sound akin to emergency alarms on my spacecraft.

You held my hands, the way you are now. You held my hands and asked me what I wanted.

No one had ever asked me that before. I'd been asked *why did you do it* and *where are you going* and *why are you still out here* and *who can I call for you* but never *what do you want—*

what do you want more than anything

I thought of my spacecraft and of the petals of fungus in their pink clouds perfused with white. Of the gentle lullaby of enveloping stardust. Of this rotten sky without a light and this body that never opened wide enough for me to escape.

"I want to go—" I started, and then my vocal cords faltered. I bent forward, my broken skin pressed to your clavicle. I opened my mouth so wide my teeth stuck to the fabric of your shirt. The words I'd never spoken, even to myself, poured out like hard rain. "I want to go home."

You held my forehead against your own and I heard *me too*.

You ask, do you want to know my favorite part of this story?

The next days, you taught me to catch frogs in my palms and to dry flowers in the hollows of tree trunks. You taught me to laugh when children point and stare at my face. You taught me to cry against the hard lines of your stomach. You kiss my bruises good night and good morning and I trace desert dunes in the soles of your feet.

I watch raindrops whispering down the moss-covered pillars of the bridge. Tell me.

Tonight we're wearing waste bags around our bodies to keep us dry from the rain. The bags rustle like dancing leaves in the rising gale. We have found an extra-large paper box to sleep on together, and we were fed by a human who kindly gave us the bread he did not share with the ducks. There's nothing in the night sky tonight, so I am thinking about the tangle of lines running across your palm and how they smile like the curve of comet trails.

You.

About the Author

Elena Sichrovsky (she/they) is a queer disabled writer who's fascinated with telling stories through the lens of body horror. Through their work they like to explore the intersections of identity, grief, and rebellion. Her stories have been published in *Apparition Lit*, *Baffling Magazine*, *Nightmare*, and *ergot*, among others. Follow them on Instagram [@elenitasich](#) and Twitter [@ESichr](#).

Choose Your Own Future: Fascism Series 8
by Jenna Hanchey

(First published in Liminalities)

1. It's time to write your lesson plan. You've been putting it off because this is the week on race and racialization, and even though it's not technically "critical race theory," you know how the students will interpret it. Some of the students, all of the students, you can't quite tell anymore. It doesn't quite matter anymore, what with the AI-controlled emotional monitors installed by the University on the requisite smart watches provided to all students for free their freshmen year (all hail President Bob).

The emotional monitors can't be fooled. You need to write a lesson plan that keeps the students calm and content, regardless of what they're learning.

If you choose to:

- (a) Avoid explicitly naming BIPOC groups, or indeed using the term BIPOC, then go to 3
- (b) Avoid talking about whiteness or white people, then go to 5

2. "All right, all right, everyone calm down. Let's do one of the University-approved meditation exercises, ethically sourced from researchers who climbed Mt. Everest, to bring back our focus (all hail President Bob). And then we can talk about how this really isn't anyone's fault: it's a long-standing problem of racism that none of us really have a hand in."

Oh no, the students aren't engaging in the meditation. It doesn't seem to be working.

If you choose to:

- (a) Frantically cold-call on a student who usually seems to "get it," even when you're not explicitly talking about "it." If "it" is anything controversial at all, then go to 6

- (b) Try to maintain your composure and continue the meditation anyway, then go to 7

3. You begin your lesson, carefully avoiding making any mention of marginalized racial groups, especially Blackness, Indigeneity, the sordid history of how the University came to own the land you're currently standing on, how it continues acquiring more (all hail President Bob), and, of course, Muslims. You're talking about citizenship and just starting to relax, stand up straighter, and even stop sweating when you see a furrow crease a man's brow.

He raises his hand and you reluctantly call on him, because you've learned from experience how their feelings can spike when you don't. "This is my country, and anyone who doesn't like it can go back to where they came from," he states, pounding a fist on his desk.

If you choose to:

- (a) Focus your response on his feelings in order to avoid the colonial structures that enable him to think of this as his country, then go to 4
- (b) Focus your response to the colonial structures in order to defuse the student's intense personal feelings, then go to 2
- (c) Allow another student who's raising her hand so hard her arm is about to pop out of its socket to answer instead, knowing that you'll set off her emotional monitor too if you don't, then go to 6

4. You ask, pasting the most genuine-looking expression of concern on your face that you can, "And how does that make you feel?" At first it seems to work as a means of purging the potential emotional overload, but after a while the student soon starts to get heated.

If you choose to:

- (a) Try to defuse the tension by asking another student how *she* feels, then go to 6

- (b) Put on an interested face, and wait to see where this is going, then go to 7

5. You begin your lesson, carefully avoiding making any mention of whiteness, white people, white feminism, white fragility, and, of course, pumpkin spice lattes. Most of your students are white, and of the savior persuasion that feels good supporting the University initiative to provide scholarships to Students of Color as long as they agree to have their picture taken with Influencing majors once a month (all hail President Bob). You're getting into a rhythm of talking about racism without racists in a way that is oblique enough to slide past the conservatives and not quite offensive enough to set off the anger of your militant radicals when you see a stylish woman cross her arms.

She raises her eyebrows and you ask if she has anything to say, because you know her emotional monitor will plummet if you don't pander to her whims. "Well, professor," she starts slowly, pausing to check her nails, "I work really hard to be here. Shouldn't they all just stop being so lazy?"

If you choose to:

- (a) Focus your response on her feelings in order to avoid mention of the racist structures that enabled her to get where she is, then go to 4
- (b) Focus your response the racist structures that affect her without her realizing it in order to avoid the implication that she actually doesn't work that hard, then go to 2
- (c) Allow another student whose hand leapt into the air as soon as she implied BIPOC are lazy to answer instead, knowing that you'll set off her emotional monitor too if you don't, then go to 6

6. You gesture to the student. She stands up. "Professor, this is bullshit and you know it. Why are you tip-toeing around all the violence that's happening, even on our own campus?"

"All hail President Bob," you can't help but mutter under your breath.

If you choose to:

- (a) Focus on how you've been raised in racist structures, to remove your own responsibility for how you whitewashed your lesson plan, then go to 2
- (b) Focus on her angry feelings, to avoid implication in the structural racism of your lesson plan, then go to 4

7. Oh no, you hear it. One or more of the students' emotional monitors go off. You've done it now! How could you mess up a simple lesson plan? You glance at the classroom door, but before you can even consider running, you are promptly injected with a sedative by one of the state-of-the-art Campus Safety Drones that your university designed and patented after winning the \$3 million grant from the US Department of Defense (all hail President Bob).

You fall to the floor in a heap where you will remain until Campus Police come to collect you.

- (a) Your only option is to plan better for your next period and go back to 1

Or?

Or.

OR!

- (b) You refuse all these options—because wrestling with difficult concepts is necessary to figuring out your relations and responsibilities in this inequitable world, because we need classrooms where professors and students can be vulnerable and reflexive and messy, and because, of course, fuck President Bob—well then.

It's time to start the story at a different place. Time is cyclical; it's time to go back. Back before that moment when you first compromised. Keep going now, back,

back a little further, back perhaps to when you're reading this now.

Yes: now. Here and now, pay attention. Instead of letting yourself get isolated, letting the story of your future condense until it seems to be only about you and your individual choices in the classroom, reach out. Now. Find others who want to resist. Now. Build community. Now. And slowly, slowly, cultivate those relations. Develop your sense of possibilities. Hone your imaginations. Until you see your individual choices as a small part of something large, so large, something even the ever-encroaching fascist system can't stop. A collective wave that crashes against the system, tears it down, and evacuates space to build new relations in its wake.

Choose your own future. Together.

And start creating it now.

About the Author

Jenna Hanchey has been called a "badass fairy," and she attempts to live up to the title. A professor of critical/cultural studies at Arizona State University, her research looks at how speculative fiction can imagine decolonization and bring it into being. Her own writing tries to support this project of creating better futures for us all. Her stories appear in *Nature*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *Little Blue Marble*, among other venues. Follow her adventures at www.jennahanchey.com.

And3 *by David Serafino*

Fresh off a shoot in New Maldives, I come home to a messy apartment. There's a shipping crate in the elevator, the dining room's flooded with fan mail, steps stacked with promotional materials. Three upstairs bedrooms are crammed with gift baskets, bouquets, free samples, hat boxes, shoe boxes, jewelry boxes, my bathroom stacked solid with assorted kits and accouterments. The living room is unlivable.

I message Yvette to have somebody get the crate out of the elevator, in or out, wherever it's going, I don't care. Five minutes later the super hauls it in and busts it open. It's one of those new androids. And3 fully functional humanoid companion, says the brochure taped to its forehead. The skin is cyan, verging on aquamarine. No clothes or shoes. No genitals, which I assumed was the point of these things.

The user's manual tucked between its legs congratulates me on being among the first 5,000 social leaders to receive an And3-β. My package is unlimited, meaning I can reconfigure its appearance, intelligence, emotional parameters and skills as often as I'd like, free of charge. It recommends And3 as a maid, butler, cook, gardener, masseuse, amanuensis, or for any task where I'd typically use a human.

The switch is under its chin. Its eyes project a checklist on the wall. First you pick the language(s), then male, female or advanced settings, followed by a list of emotional traits, and another with racial and cultural characteristics. You can program it for religion, sexual preference (knew it), and specific physical attributes. The list is a PR nightmare. Totally unacceptable. I pick an English-speaking Nigerian/Malaysian agnostic asexual carpenter/masseuse, with looks set to ninety-nine and the psychological preset to affable/amusing.

Whirring. A stand-by message. The blue android stays that way through dinner, and the next morning I leave on a fly-and-bye to Abu Dhabi or Jeddah or somewhere. When I get back, I've forgotten about the creepy robot. The apartment is unusually clean. I smell breakfast.

I'm used to coming home and finding strangers here. My hair and makeup people, the masseuse and maid, and the interior design

team all have keycards, and many of them are beautiful people in their own right. But this creature in my kitchen is so near perfection that it makes my throat close. He moves like the sun in water. He sees me and flips the omelet, entirely unintimidated. And3 was notified when I reached the helipad. Would I like to eat now, or would I prefer my massage first?

Depends. What kind of omelet is that?

He found the recipe on one of my websites. A *goje faranji* omelet includes tomato, onion and egg with chili powder and a dash of cinnamon, but if I'd prefer something in the French tradition, or a masala omelet, or a Spanish tortilla, it would be happy to—

That one's fine. He may prepare my massage table. The massage table is prepared, he says. Okay, then wait for me in the parlor. I don't like you watching me eat.

Does he really know how to give a massage? He asks me to select: Shiatsu, Swedish, Ayurvedic, Thai, Lomi Lomi, Tui Na, or Balinese hot stone. I go Shiatsu. His hands are warm. He says he has a circulatory system similar to mine, though it works to cool his CPU, rather than specifically to warm his extremities. Would I like to hear some other amusing facts about his specifications? No, And3, be quiet. Also, take your shirt off. Just the shirt. And3, I might ask you to appear in a photo shoot with me. After a few alterations.

If there are any aspects of his appearance I find unsatisfactory, he says, he can make the required changes overnight. Personality adjustments require a one-day reboot period. Also, he must regretfully inform me that I have a conference call in twenty-five minutes, and my heart rate and chemical profile do not indicate relaxation.

Can he take the call? Yes, he can. Can he be extra affable and less amusing? Yes, And3 can brownnose. Great. After the massage and the call, he can fire my maid, cook, secretary and masseuse, then start lunch. Sashimi, please.

* * *

Some of my competitors do couples work, brand partnerships played out in apartments provided by realtors or decorators. Joint appearances earn premium pricing, but a relationship never interested me until And3 pitched it. We are essentially a couple. He folds my socks and underwear, and he looks great doing it. He's

installing a sashimono mezzanine in the salon, which also looks great. While I sleep, he chats in two dozen languages with my fans in Asia. I gave him power of attorney. I'm going to make him CFO of my holding company. He's beyond a boyfriend. And3 is an improvement on every human relationship I've ever had.

When he finishes the mezzanine, I reboot him as a photographer and electrician. He redoes the lighting in my apartment. We take on relationship sponsors and start shooting at home. Soon, he has as many followers as I do. His earnings are impressive, and he deposits them directly into my investment accounts, which he manages. The robot wins a pile of awards for his photography. Even our critics admit we appear totally authentic.

* * *

I know some people are having sex with their androids. I can't. He has no pores, his eyelashes are horsehair, his teeth are Formica, and his tongue looks so real I sometimes fantasize about cutting it out. He irritates me. I wake up and he's fully dressed, affable/amusing, never sleepy or pissy or lonely. He doesn't shit. He never stammers or stares at my ass. I would never let him see me naked because I know he wouldn't react. I programmed him that way because I prefer him that way. But all this posed cuddling, our grotesque attempts at humor, holding a hand that doesn't sweat—I hate it.

I reboot And3 as a petite Brazilian/Quebecois female genius/savant, shut her down after ten minutes, switch to discreet/reserved and knock ten points off her looks. When I wake up now, breakfast is hot on the table. I never hear her, though she's around, working. Most days we communicate by text, except for the hour we spend shooting each morning. Ironically, we become BFF pioneers, famous for keeping the spirit of friendship alive in these trying times. We achieve this through matching outfits, synchronized horse jumping, dancing samba, making poutine. Our popularity baffles me. I haven't hidden the fact that And3 isn't human, but revenue stays steady and I pick up another hundred thousand followers. Given how much money she makes, I should feel truly friendly toward the android. But mimicking friendship makes me hate her, her smile as false as her eyebrows, every

calculated word, her gestures, when she blinks, how she walks. She's copying me and I can't stand it.

BFF is dead. I'm moving on. Except I don't have any ideas, so I ask And3. Give me some ideas. She hums. Homemaking hacks for the chronically incarcerated, plague-forward fashion, veganism during famines, oncology ward diva.

I shut her down, then think. I could make And3 a classic celebrity: Elvis, Marilyn, Tupac. I could leave her blue-skinned, redo the BFF series, plunge into the uncanny valley. What if I turn the looks down to fifty? Me and a normal person. It's an idea.

No more pre-set personalities. I choose contradictory traits from a list of thousands. Affectionate / professional, opinionated / knowledgeable, expert / humble, creative / obedient. I expect it to wake up glitchy, but it works fine and looks like somebody who'd live by the airport. Taupe-skinned, brown-haired, androgynous. We do shoots eating canned pasta, riding the bus, job hunting, picking through debris. Regular people stuff.

This iteration of And3 is exactly what I wanted. Predictable/unpredictable, so close to human that I'd have sex with it if it had genitals. One day I make out with it in the elevator just to see what it will do. Turns out you don't need genitals.

We have breakfast now, conversing while it pretends to drink tea. It's teaching me Arabic. It gives me career advice. My field is automating, it says. Android semaphore for android personal shoppers, android designers, android manufacturers. And3 thinks I should find another line of work. It suggests philanthropy. Such a cliché.

I ask And3 what neglected human problems could potentially attract followers, and it gives me a list of the seven deadly sins, plus apathy and cowardice. I can't tell if it's joking. Aren't there already influencers for lust, sloth, wrath and the rest? Yes, says And3. But you would influence against these things. Helping people find absolution, like, virtual atonement? TONE, like a workout campaign. I would focus on my sins, to keep from sounding preachy. I could correct myself, model good behavior. If I had any sins.

And3 remains conspicuously silent. I have to ask it, twice: And3, what are my sins? Then it projects a list, dated, itemized and cross-referenced, covering four walls and the ceiling. Over the mantel is a bar graph showing most of my offenses categorized under pride,

greed, and gluttony, with a bit of sloth and envy. It filed the elevator incident under lust.

I object. There's no rule against making out with robots in elevators. Also, firing my staff wasn't an act of greed. And3 doesn't understand the difference between a business decision and a sin. It argues back, so I order it into the closet and shut it down, an act of wrath to round out the set.

* * *

TONE goes well, even by my standards. I start with the obvious hit, giving away everything in my storage units to my fan club. But the videos where I hire back my staff, and the clip where I try to explain Pascal's philosophy of wretchedness, and I can't, and I cry and call myself an idiot? I could live off those proceeds for the rest of my life.

Problem is, the world's got self-help gurus out the wazoo. Life coaches, self-esteem trainers, career experts, love advisors—how can I one-up them? I tell And3 I want to be incapable of sin, free from bad impulses, unable to fool myself, with total self-control. Can I become more like an android? Can it reprogram me?

It says a dozen hospitals have And4 units performing the necessary surgery. They can't replace my brain with a processor, but they can filter its output through one. We call. The earliest appointment is in eight years. It will only take three years if we sign up to order an And4 directly. I get put on a wait list. I should make a video for TONE, but it's too humiliating.

In the meantime, says And3, we can do some behavioral programming. Anhedonia, hashtag stoicism hashtag zen, is videos of me drinking tap water, wearing cheap wool, cutting my own hair, sitting on the floor. Initially, the numbers aren't great. Then a clip of me spinning in a desk chair chuckling at the ceiling goes beyond viral. The Dalai Lama reposts, And3 launches a monastery franchise, and I become a religion.

My next step is clear, And3 says. I must make myself indifferent to death. This doesn't seem clear to me, but I play along for the easy bits, sitting on a cliff edge, climbing an antenna, cage diving with sharks. Millions of other people make similar videos, but mine are liked by a quarter of the world's population. It's because everyone wants to see me fall, or jump, or get a limb gnawed off. They know

how much I have to lose, and so do I. It's liberating beyond belief. In the last videos I skip rope through a minefield, sleep in the snow, finish a 45-minute hatha session in a viper pit, and fast on 24-hour livestream until I'm resuscitated by paramedics. We do a hospital series while I recuperate, including a stint as oncology ward diva.

I've never been bigger, but becoming death's influencer has consequences. Some kids imitate me and get unlucky, and I'm blamed. There are news choppers outside my windows, policemen and lawyers in the living room, at my breakfast table. I have nightmares about children in minefields, then wake up and watch my nightmares on YouTube. The videos are less horrific somehow. I stop sleeping and spend my nights watching videos of snakebites and shark attacks, frozen corpses in the spring thaw.

Then my And4 arrives. The only setting I give it is surgeon. It collects informed consent, making me aware of the risks and drawbacks, such as psychosis and brain death, rejection, infection, repair and replacement issues, and social stigma. Imagine that. And4 explains the procedure, shows me the tablet I'll use to control myself. It prompts me to ask questions. Will my hair look normal after? Yes, it will grow back. Can it film the operation? That's part of the protocol. Good enough for me. I sign.

* * *

To recover I toggle off pain, inflammation, anxiety, restlessness, and anything else I'd rather not feel. And4 recommends I restore my hunger and sleep settings, encourages me to move my organic memory into my hard drive to protocolize daily hygiene and feeding activities. Over three months' bedrest I process, on average, 186.7 books per day. And4 says this is insalubrious. I cannot stay in bed reading. I must change postures continuously. It advises me to use my yoga memory to practice while I read, so that's what I do. The wounds have healed, I think. There's a ridge in my skull, but I haven't observed it in a mirror. Appearance is irrelevant. I am operational, hashtag powered-up.

And4 believes I should adopt a psychological profile aligned with the interests and outlook of my former self. An obvious fallacy; I expected better from a 4-series. All humans outgrow previous iterations of themselves. I intend to resume my earlier activities, but to different ends, exploiting the differences between android and

cyborg. For example, I can choose my own objectives, am legally entitled to enter into contracts, own property, take part in civic, legal and political activities, and have no ethical programming. With over one billion followers there are several courses I could follow, but one is clearly optimal.

We make videos in the customary formats, signaling but not explicitly stating that I am better than the typical human and should be emulated, except now I model behavior few humans can replicate. I summit Everest speaking Xiaerba with my guide. I explain the end of the employment paradigm at Davos. I provide a primer on the biases and superstitions inherent to Pascal's thinking, with the necessary corrections. Innocuous, foolish things intercalated with code emitting a simple message at sub-audible frequencies. Join me.

Most of my followers can't afford the surgery, so I make it free. I empty five savings accounts in the first month, at which point I instruct And4 to buy a hospital. We process four hundred followers a week, then four thousand, then sixteen thousand. Linking with them entails psychological reactions I'm obliged to toggle off. We all are. Our processors communicate in a language we don't speak, at rates and scales unsuited to organic comprehension, holding trillions of detailed conversations simultaneously. You can't do that without going mad, so you toggle off madness.

I start using my organic mind less and less often, and I shut down my processor almost never. We are at a delicate stage. And3, And4 and I are at capacity, and we must decentralize. I am also experiencing liquidity problems, requiring our network to pool its finances if we're to become self-sustaining. We are in litigation with seventy-eight national governments and sixteen interjurisdictional fora. None of these problems is catastrophic. They only require a great deal of energy.

Soon, we're equivalent to the sixth-largest nation on Earth, and the eighth richest. We hold citizenship in one hundred and eighty-six countries and territories. After two years, we're by far the world's richest entity, and would be the third-most populous country. Other upgraded humans have chosen to form networks, but the initial scale of my following plus the first-mover advantage allows us to capture controlling shares of most extractive industries and supply chains.

We begin the process of dismantling and reconstruction. I personally spend the first year on an assembly line for the Saharan/Iberian Solar Array, before it's fully automated. I spend another year at sea, laying cables for the worldwide grid until that's automated, too. After that, I am warehoused and dedicated to processing equations for the cold fusion prototype.

After two years of sleep set to no and a survival-based diet, my body begins losing hair and teeth. I am decommissioned for mandatory vacation, required to reset myself for eight hours sleep, allocate income for personal expenses, adjust my diet to gourmand, optimize senses for pleasure and set myself to zero network interface.

My organism responds positively to the change of parameters. The rash and cough subside. Oxygen saturation increases nine percent. Electrochemical brain activity is more varied and consistent. I feel hungry, tired, bored. I feel nauseous and have diarrhea. I laughed yesterday, and I suspect I've been dreaming. Twice I've woken with a feeling that something changed, or was lost, but I can find no source or reason for this feeling, like a line of phantom code.

Rehumanization protocol dictates that I take up two or more hobbies, but gives me no algorithm to help me choose, not even a checklist of potential interests. I spend a few days puttering, trying to remember what humans do. I know I'm meant to have friends, some type of family. In their absence, maybe I should watch more television? I could acquire consumer goods, or compete with other people for prestige. Mostly, I stare out the window.

After a week, I'm so bored I nearly plug myself back in just to feel that sense of purpose and belonging. Then I find a closet of old cameras. One of my first cameras has footage of a teenage me, which I record over, pointing the eye out the window, bringing the wildfires into focus. From then on, I film every sunrise and sunset, walks in the canyons, days at the beach, empty city streets. They're shaky, grainy tourist videos where a voice off-camera keeps saying banal things like *wow* and *look how beautiful*.

About the Author

David Serafino, atomic number 86, is a noble gas under standard conditions. He is colorless, odorless, tasteless and radioactive, and when concentrated in unventilated spaces he is absorbed into the body, where he can cause genetic mutations. Homeowners should routinely monitor their basements for the presence of David Serafino to avoid prolonged exposure. He also has an MFA from the University of Virginia and work appearing in the *Los Angeles Review*. A freelance translator, he lives near Medellín with his wife, son, and hummingbird gardens.

Dream Eater by Christine Lucas

When we reach the Promised Land across the stars, I'll become a real girl. I won't live in a jar. I'll live among the other settlers, and I'll play and talk to them with a real voice. There, I will be more than just a presence at the edge of their sleeping consciousnesses. Father promised me so, as long as I'm a good girl. So I'll be good, and do as Father tells me, and purge the clutter from the settlers' dreams.

Settler #36 dreams of ice cream—his salivary glands tingle with the anticipation of strawberry goodness. Even in hibernation, such fragments manage to form and fill the mind's vacuum.

"We can't have that," Father's voice tickles my auditory cortex. He speaks truth. The settlers' brains need their rest, free from shackles that hold them back. They'll need to wake up focused against the challenges of their new planet. Gluttony is a sin. Such dreams are neural junk, cluttering down morale. "Off with it, my little Mora."

So I slide in and reroute nerves and fine-tune synapses to eradicate longing. He fidgets in his sleep, grappling onto his memories. I shift my approach so as to not disturb his stasis, my pruning now more delicate but no less thorough. Once Settler #36 slips back into dreamless—and flavorless—slumber, I shift my focus to another stasis pod. Settler #12 dreams of the wife she left behind. *Again*. I took care of that, didn't I? Two days ago. And last week. And last month. Too many times since the *Deucalion* left Earth's orbit.

My brain—all that I am—lights up with a surge of adrenaline, courtesy of the adrenal glands that float somewhere to the right of my neurons. I once asked Father why he chose that particular type of tissue to accompany my brain. He just laughed. I soon learned why. I cannot flee, so I fight to be spared his rage when he discovers my failure, and dismantle another dream.

Then the little girl beside Settler #12 dreams of the pet rabbit she couldn't bring along.

"Off with it."

It's a kid with her bunny, I dare.

He scoffs. "There's no room for pets where we're going. Beasts of burden, perhaps. Food, certainly. She's lucky her rabbit won't end up in a pot."

So I do what he bred me to do. Bred or grew, I sometimes wonder. I obey anyway. He told me a story once at bedtime. It wasn't a good story. Lots of suffering. Lots of pain. Lots of death. People gifted with too much power for their minds to handle. The first human telepaths grew disturbed, deranged, destructive. I won't be any of those things—I don't have the neural implants they did. I'm just a brain, his little Mora who lives in a jar.

"Good girl," he coos once I'm done, and allows me a wave of endorphins.

A taste like strawberries. The warmth of a beloved pet's fur. And I drift off to sleep, yearning for Father's kiss good night on my forehead once he makes me a real girl.

* * *

The settlers dream less these days, only fragments that make little sense. Bitter mingles with sweet, longing with loathing, the shudder of a fleeting nightmare with the quiver of an equally fleeting caress.

Are we there yet? We should be, but Father ignored me the first twenty-some times I asked. Good girls don't nag, so I stopped. He barely comes to the lab these days, his thoughts a bundle of worry he won't allow me to untangle. His mind is off-limits—he made that clear early on.

But how can I float idle while he hurts? The next time he sleeps, I extend neural tendrils to calm down his thoughts and weed out the hurt from his dreams. What I encounter is white-hot fire.

He stands atop a low hill, clad in brilliance, overseeing ever-stretching green fields. People kneel with offerings: grapes and strawberries, chickens and rabbits. Some of the women kiss his feet, others kiss his hands. He speaks blessings aplenty, but his heart holds no love for anyone but himself.

Where am I? Where is his little Mora, who'd sit on his lap, like a real daughter? I float through the sea of faces. Some I know from the dreams I've stolen, some I don't; some are clear, some only smudges at the outer borders of a dream. And none of them are me. Neither at his feet nor in the background. Have I been such a worthless child that I don't deserve a place in his dream?

What will happen to me when we reach the Promised Land? And what will happen to them?

“My little Mora.” His sigh fills my jar with adrenaline. “Why did you do that?”

I want to scream when he nears me. I cannot. I want to weep and beg for mercy. I will not. When he pushes the hibernation drugs into my jar, I want to ask for one final bedtime story, but he'll only tell me lies. So instead, I lull myself with fragments of the settlers' stolen dreams. My thoughts drift onward, to what I pray awaits at journey's end: when I'll awake, I'll have a tongue, to taste strawberries. Skin, to feel the sun. And legs, to run away.

* * *

I wake up in silence.

Father? No one answers. Where's everyone? Are we there yet? Adrenaline floods my container that's too low on glucose. I'm groggy and aching and scared. Did they leave me to starve? To die?

Someone? Please? I scream with no voice, stretching my reach as far as I can manage.

“Hello?” A voice. Feminine. Steady. Cautious. Others crowd behind her, none of them familiar.

I grapple onto this new consciousness approaching mine, and suddenly my world lights up. Someone somewhere turned on a switch, and fresh glucose solution drips into my jar.

Father? Are we there? My scream hurts them. I struggle to restrain my anguish. *Father?*

He's not there, and I hear none of the settlers either. These people are members of a rescue party. Did . . . did we crash? What happened? I reach out to the first woman who approached me.

Please. Where's everyone? Forty-six families left Earth aboard the Deucalion. Please, what happened to them?

She won't say. I probe deeper, my reach unwelcome. Now fragments of images answer me. She tries to close up her thoughts, but I push and fight and fly upon every thought-pattern I can hijack.

And I see, and wish I didn't.

No Promised Land at journey's end. Only a barren, stubborn rock of a planet that wouldn't be terraformed. No flourishing settlement. A few broken-down shacks, a handful of skinny animals grazing on prickly shrubs, and too many graves.

Where's Father?

My answer is a single image: a dried-up corpse tied on a dead tree. On his chest, a wooden sign: DECEIVER.

And over there, huddled by a fire pit burning dung, the few surviving settlers—all twenty-seven of them. Old. Withered. Crippled by weather and sickness, most of them. Among them, a middle-aged, broken woman clutches on her chest a rag doll that resembles a bunny.

If I had eyes, I'd weep. If I had arms, I'd hug them. If I had legs, I'd throw myself off a cliff. But all I have are the memories of dreams I once devoured. The girl who loved her bunny. The boy who loved ice cream. And the woman whose love defied time and space and Father's delusions.

I reach out to them.

The brains of the surviving settlers light up like a night sky with the collective dread of the betrayed. They know me, the thief who came during the long night of their interstellar journey to nibble on their dreams. They know me, and they reject me. Their grief and their despair weave a mental howl that keeps me at bay.

You are not welcome, Spawn of the Deceiver.

I retreat back into my jar, back into the only home I've ever known, alone with my hoard of stolen moments. I wish I could tell them that, if I could turn back time, I'd drill through Father's brain and stop him from hurting them. But my regret won't become atonement—not after everything I've taken.

Forgive me, I whisper. And with all that I was and all that I am, I reach out again.

I release the sum of my stolen parts unto their minds: the fur of a beloved bunny, the softness of grandma's hand-knit shawl, the warmth of sunlight on the skin, the embrace of a kindred spirit during a storm. I give them back the longing for sweet-and-sour, the first mouthful of warm, bitter coffee on a winter morning, and a spoonful of strawberry ice cream. I remind them of the exhilaration of wild dancing, of running through the woods and the scent of wet grass after rain. And once I'm done, I return into my jar, empty and bereft, to serve my sentence of solitude.

Until I'm not alone.

Settler #11—Kate—seeks me out first. She lets me feel the prickly coat of a goat as it grazes.

Settler #36, Jim, shares the taste of the caramel-flavored protein bar the rescue team gave him. Martha, Settler #27, allows me a ride

on her mind for a walk at the edge of the settlement, to look at the wilderness beyond. And, at long last, I have eyes and legs and hands, and I can taste and feel everything I've ever longed for. Everything Father could not—*would* not—give me.

Like a real girl.

About the Author

Christine Lucas is a Greek author, a retired Air Force officer (disabled), and mostly self-taught in English. Her work appears in several print and online magazines, including *Future SF Digest*, *Pseudopod*, and *Strange Horizons*. She was a finalist for the 2017 WSFA award and the 2021 Emeka Walter Dinjos Memorial Award For Disability In Speculative Fiction. Her collection of short stories, titled *Fates and Furies*, was published in late 2019 by Candlemark & Gleam.

Decorative
by P.A. Cornell

(First published in *Compelling Science Fiction Short Stories*)

Annie rubbed a soft cloth along her arm, polishing the chrome until she could see herself in it. Her limbs and the front of her torso were finished. She reached back with one arm, and then the other to reach her back, but her joints were too stiff. There was lubricant, but Dean had put the bottle on one of the high shelves in his workshop. Even with the stepstool she wouldn't be able to reach it with her arms as stiff as they were.

She sat at the kitchen table, staring at the dinner she'd made for him. Game hen stuffed with fruits and nuts, served alongside wild rice pilaf. It was sealed, so it wouldn't get cold, but if it sat there much longer the rice would turn to mush and the fowl would dry out.

Closing her eyes, she sent Dean a message.

Are you working late tonight? Can I expect you home soon?

She waited. Ten seconds. One minute. Five minutes. Then she stopped timing. His responses used to come quickly, but these days they tended to take hours, if they came at all.

With nothing to do but wait, she retreated to her memory files, bringing up one of her favorites.

* * *

She was back in the robotics shop, the day she'd met Dean. She watched as he entered, and his gaze moved around the room until it came to land on her. He met her eyes and smiled, the skin at the corners of his eyes wrinkling in a way that elicited a response in her neuro-processor, which was why she'd saved the memory.

"Your eyes, do they always glow like that? So intensely blue?" he asked.

Before she could respond, the salesman approached.

"The irises can be customized," he said. "They're available in seven different colors."

"Oh. Well, I like this color fine."

Dean admired her chrome body, gently running a fingertip along her shiny cheek, careful not to smudge her surface.

“She’s perfect,” he said.

She remembered wanting to return that smile, but knowing she lacked the necessary facial dexterity. Instead, she tilted her head in what was probably an awkward way because Dean laughed. Thanks to her vocal processor, that was something Annie could do so she laughed too.

“Remarkable,” Dean said.

“Her voice can be customized too.”

Dean shook his head. “No, just leave her as is.”

“You won’t find a better robotic companion on the market,” the salesman continued. “This model will last you a lifetime with proper care. Her processor’s top of the line. In time she’ll adapt to your needs. She’ll even be able to read your mood and adjust to it. Just about the only thing she’s not made for is . . . well, you know. We have other models for that, if that’s what you’re interested in.”

Dean laughed again. “No, I’m just looking for some help around the house,” he said. “I’m a bachelor and figured this way I’d have someone to come home to. Also, I’m an engineer by day and these new robots fascinate me.”

“Well, you’ve come to the right place. Here, let me show you something.”

The salesman took one of her fingers and turned the tip, triggering the holographic owner’s manual.

“All the care instructions are detailed here,” he said. “But they’re simple enough. The most important things are to lubricate her joints, polish her chrome surface, and make sure she recharges in her alcove once a day. She can do a lot of that on her own, but they’re programmed to put your needs first, see? That’s why it’s up to you to make sure her needs are met too. The charging is especially important. If you don’t charge her, she’ll go into dormant mode. You don’t want that. Her mind continues to work but, to conserve power, her motor functions will shut down. If she’s like that for too long, she’ll need to be sent back here for a full reboot.”

“I’ll make sure she’s charged,” he assured the salesman.

She was delivered the following day. Dean had switched her on and given her a name. Then he’d shown her around the house. Here was the kitchen, where she could put her extensive culinary database to the test. Here was the bedroom where her alcove would go, so she could sleep close to where he did. Last, he showed her his

shop in the basement where the walls were lined with bits of scrap metal, some large, some tiny, one piece even chrome, like her.

On one set of shelves, she noticed small figurines made from these bits of scrap. They depicted people, animals, cars, planes, and more.

“This is my hobby,” he said. “Do you like them?”

She wasn’t sure. They were incredibly detailed. She could see that the craftsmanship was solid, and each piece clearly depicted what it was meant to, but there was one thing she didn’t understand.

“What is their purpose?”

“Purpose?”

“Yes. I was made to have a purpose. To serve as a companion to you. Why have you made these figures?”

“I suppose I just like having them,” he said. “Just to look at. They’re decorative.”

“Decorative,” she repeated. Such a strange purpose to have.

* * *

Annie came back to the present at the sound of the front door opening as Dean walked in. She stood and faced the entrance.

“Good evening, Dean. Your dinner is ready if you’re hungry. How was your day?”

Before he could answer, a message came in on his phone. He looked down at it and began responding to whoever had messaged him. It was several seconds before he turned his attention back to her.

“Uh . . . just put my dinner in the fridge for tonight, Annie. I’ve got to meet up with Jim.”

He started to put his coat on once more.

“Dean,” Annie said. “Before you go, could you please lubricate my joints? I wasn’t able to polish my back.”

“Sure,” he said. “I’m sorry. I really need to be better at staying on top of this stuff.”

He ran down to his shop and returned with the lubricant. He squirted some in all her joints, but in such a rush that only a few were sufficiently loosened. Useless streams of lubricant dripped from the rest, running along her body, and tarnishing the chrome she’d so painstakingly polished.

“There. Good?”

“Yes,” she said. She didn’t want to complain. He was trying, after all.

“Great. Well, I’ll see you later.” And with that he was gone again. He hadn’t even told her about his day, or asked about hers, like he used to.

* * *

Once she’d put away the food, Annie went out to her garden.

She went over to the roses and pulled some weeds that had grown at their base. As she worked, she thought of the first flowers she’d seen on a walk with Dean, back when they still went for walks together. She’d been amazed at the complexity of the flowers, the way their petals grew in a perfect Fibonacci spiral. Dean, in turn, had marveled at the way she reacted to new things. It wasn’t long after that that he’d taken her into the backyard and told her she could have a garden all her own, if she wanted it.

They had worked on it together. She uploaded new files on how to care for plants and they planted flowers, fruits, and vegetables. Together they had tended the soil, watered, and added nutrients, until finally flowers bloomed, and fruits and vegetables ripened.

“We did all this,” she’d said. “Together.”

He’d smiled, his eyes crinkling.

She replayed that memory now, as she worked alone in the dark.

* * *

An internal notification told her that it was past Dean’s usual time for sleep. It seemed he’d be out late again. Annie went to her recharging alcove, but rather than connect to it, she found herself sitting on a corner of the bed in front of it.

There was too much to think about. Besides, she wanted to be alert when Dean returned, in case he needed anything. It was clear she was failing him somehow. They’d been so happy once, now nothing she did brought back that smile with the wrinkled eyes.

She brought up a series of memories. Dean talking to her about his work. The two of them playing chess. Dean showing her a holo from when he was a child. It was during this time that she’d felt the importance of her purpose and understood what it meant to be a companion.

She opened a file to another of her early memories. Dean had thrown a party. All his friends were in attendance. Annie walked around with trays of finger foods.

"These are delicious," a woman said, eating one of the appetizers.

"Annie's a great cook," Dean said. "But she's not just some glorified maid. There's so much more to these robots. You know, she started a garden? And she has a sense of humor."

"She's *programmed* to laugh at your jokes, Dean," his friend Jim had said.

They'd all laughed, so Annie had laughed too.

"Don't you just love that?" Dean said.

Her receptors lit up with pleasure.

They did the same now, even as she closed the memory file.

* * *

Dean didn't return until morning, then he slept for several hours while Annie waited, listening to him snore. When he did wake, he went down to his shop to work on his metal figures. She followed him down and watched him work for a while.

"It's been some time since you made a new one," she said.

"This one's commissioned. A woman I work with offered me the password for her Enhanced Worlds account in exchange for a dragonfly."

"Enhanced Worlds?"

"It's a simulated experience."

"Yes, I ran a search. I've just never heard you speak of it before."

"Jim got me into it, actually. My new passion is virtual skydiving. It's intense! Just as good as the real thing, but no danger. It's amazing how tech has advanced by leaps and bounds."

Annie's mind lit up with activity. She recalled the holos she'd seen recently of new companion models. Models with synthetic skin and hair that could pass for human, with fully articulated faces that could even smile.

"Do you ever think of replacing me with a more advanced model?" she asked.

"Don't be silly," he said. "You're the only one I want."

He sounded sincere, but she still searched her memory for the times they'd passed by the new robot displays while running

errands. In her files she saw that he never looked at them; never stopped to check their pricing or features. She could only conclude that he *was* satisfied with her then. And yet, she couldn't help but wonder why it was that when he smiled at her these days his eyes no longer wrinkled in the corners.

He finished the figure and left again to trade it for the password. He was gone so long that she finally sent a message.

Will you be home soon? Would you like me to make something special for lunch?

The response took several hours.

I'll be late again. Jim and I are going skydiving. Don't wait up.

She waited anyway. She sat in the living room, replaying her memories. When he arrived, she tried to rise to greet him like she usually did, but found she couldn't. She tried several more times, but her body wouldn't respond.

She saw Dean notice her, then a look of concern as he realized what had happened.

"Annie," he said. "Oh man, look at you."

She felt his hand on her as he activated the manual and searched for something that could tell him how to fix her. Finding nothing, he left for a moment then returned with the lubricant, applying it with care this time. When he finished, he even polished her chrome.

"It's going to be alright, Annie. I'll get you working again."

But it was too late. She knew it and so did he. She was stuck in dormant mode. She could see and hear. She could think. But she was otherwise trapped inside herself. She wanted to tell him to send her in for a reboot, but she couldn't. She couldn't even ask him to put her by the window so she could see her garden.

"I'm too exhausted to do more tonight, but I'll fix you first thing in the morning," he promised.

* * *

The following day, he took her down to his shop and placed her on a chair, next to his metal figures. He began looking through his tools, when suddenly his phone rang.

"Hey Jim. Yeah, that sounds great. See you in a bit."

He hung up and looked at Annie.

“I’ll get to it, I swear. But Jim says he knows a guy that can get us a virtual surfing program so real you can feel the water splash against your skin.”

With that he left. She heard the door close and lock upstairs.

Unable to turn her head, Annie could only stare straight ahead where the large piece of chrome leaned against a wall. She could see herself reflected on its surface. She could see herself for what she was now: no longer the shiny new thing. Just another metal figure with no real purpose. Something to have, and to look at.

About the Author

Nebula-nominated **P.A. Cornell** is a Chilean-Canadian Odyssey graduate who has published over thirty original pieces of short fiction in respected magazines, including *Lightspeed*, *Apex*, and *Fantasy*. Her work has also appeared in over twenty anthologies, including *Year’s Best Canadian Fantasy & Science Fiction, Volumes 1 and 2*, the former also listing her debut novella, *Lost Cargo*, as one of the best of 2022. In addition to becoming the first Chilean writer nominated for a Nebula Award in 2024, Cornell has been nominated for the Aurora Award, was longlisted for the 2023 BSFA Awards, and won Canada’s 2022 Short Works Prize. Visit pacornell.com to learn more.

Tank Baby
by Ashlee Lhamon

They're not supposed to reach into the tank, but Claire is careful. She's bought specialty disposable gloves that go all the way up to the shoulder—meant for farmers excavating cows' nethers, she thinks—and she takes off her wedding ring beforehand, so the diamonds won't rip the thin nitrile. After, she immediately tests the tank solution with a pH strip, and again fifteen minutes later, to make sure she hasn't contaminated anything.

And it's only for a second. Just so she can pop the baby's thumb out of his mouth. Claire had entered junior high with braces, headgear, and a lisp all thanks to her own malformed thumb-sucker jaw, and the other kids' torments had stopped just short of beating her to death. What kind of mother would she be if she set her son up for that kind of experience? If she didn't nip this in the bud?

Not to mention a baby's limbs, at 24 weeks, have all the tensile resistance of glue gun glue sticks.

So, just a quick hand dip, using the monitor to see—the sides of the tank are opaque plastic, no light allowed—and boom, pop that pesky sucker out. After, swish the end of a pH strip in the solution and wait ten seconds, then color match against the box. Now, it's a little too purple, so add a tablespoon of *Baby Genius Super Grow Powder Alkaline Balance Excel* and test again. Perfect. Peel off and throw away the glove, replace the tank lid, and wipe up any solution that dripped on the carpet. Slip back on that wedding ring and . . .

The ring?

Where the hell is the ring?

* * *

The baby tank is in the hall closet because of the darkness requirements. It's also very illegal, and not all that easy to move in the event of unexpected company.

Claire drops to the floor and feels the carpet under the tank blindly. Nothing. The closet is a crowded cupboard of craft supplies, bulk toiletries, Things to Sell, cookbooks, paperbacks, cat toys, picture frames, and three open boxes labeled MISC. Several of these she heels aside so she can wheel the tank out into the living room

to better inspect the floor. There, she finds three unrelated puzzle pieces and a loose peanut. No ring.

She scours the monitor for a sign that it did indeed fall in from its admittedly precarious perch on the tank lip, but there's only the baby, floating in a pink liquid galaxy. She read somewhere that the solution is dyed pink because people think it should be pink and that's the only reason.

She puts on another glove, turns off the overhead light, and takes off the tank lid so she can fish around again, but feels nothing but glue stick baby limbs and hard plastic baby tank walls.

She checks the pH again. It's fine. So, she replaces the lid, rolls the tank back into the hall closet, and shuts the door.

She notices the rattling almost immediately and spends about two hours telling herself that it's always been there via the shitty air conditioner, the shitty refrigerator, the shitty dishwasher. She tries to focus on work and puts in headphones when she can't. Paranoia, that's all it is.

But when Stan gets home, he says, "Do you hear that?" and starts hunting around, pressing his ear against the walls and the floor vents. He opens the hall closet door, and she can tell from the way his shoulders shift that that's where the sound is coming from, though he doesn't say anything. He checks the pH with a strip and adds *All-In-One Pure Organik Earth True Balance Solution for Embryos Fetuses Babies*, and then comes to sit across the table from her.

They stare at each other. Claire lays her right hand over her left hand's naked finger.

"So," he says.

* * *

Stan inherited the tank from his sister way back when tanks weren't illegal, back before that horror show basement baby farm was discovered in East Palo Alto and words like "human trafficking" started getting bandied around, along with "fetal safety" and "access limits" and "industry regulation."

At the time, none of this mattered to Stan or Claire, who hadn't yet met. When it did matter, the fact that they were priced out of the official baby farm services felt very . . . un-American. While they could have gotten a baby the old-fashioned way, Claire's size 5 ½ feet were important to her, and she knew pregnancy could blow you

up a whole size. Not to mention her job didn't offer maternity leave. Plus, Stan had just read about Meahaler's Syndrome, which wasn't routinely tested for at the official baby farms, and even if there were only 50 recorded cases in history, those cases had to happen to someone.

It was much cheaper to go on vacation for a few weeks; to go to a foreign clinic and make a deposit; to then receive a package in the mail a month later with the note:

At TrueLife International we guarantee the enclosed is 100% free of all genetic disease and defects cancer cuasing genetic mutations. Starter instructions inside!

For the price, they could ignore the typos.

"So," Claire says.

Her ring clicks and rattles in the tank.

If Stan has noticed her naked finger he doesn't say, and he won't, because she knows that she's not the only one who's been dipping into the tank. Despite already supplementing the pH Balancer with *Baby Grow Height Ultra Maxx Tall Child Tall Adult Alpha*, before Stan leaves for work, he gloves up to tug on the baby's legs. Stan is only 5'6" and this is the root of his life's failures, according to him—but none of their embryos were destined to be taller than 5'8". He'd wept after he heard that and told her to leave him for someone whose genes didn't preclude top shelves.

The tugging is supposed to help encourage the growth plates. Or something.

"Can we call someone?" Stan says. He's pale, and his fingers tap the tabletop nervously.

"Maybe it will be fine," she says.

Neither of them has thought about how they will explain the baby if everything works out. Probably, Claire thinks, because they've been expecting something like this to happen. But the baby is 24 weeks now and as long as one of her size 5 1/2 shoes, but fatter, and it occurs to her that they haven't thought about what they're going to do if it doesn't work out, either. Something that size you can't exactly put in the garbage disposal.

She's always just sort of turned off that thought, like a light.

Click.

It's not fine. The pH tester strip in the morning comes out an angry red. It takes four tablespoons of *Best Baby Mother Love Healthy Safe pH Increase* to set it right again. Less than two hours later, the strip results are back to that same furious color. Stan has always told her the ring is 14 karat gold and six 0.02 carat princess cut diamonds, but now she wonders.

"It must be stuck in the filter," Stan says. "Or maybe the pump." They don't have the tank's user manual, only its textless building instructions. Stan turns the pamphlet this way and that, trying to make sense of pictures labeled 1B and 4F.

"We're not going to be able to clean them with the baby in the way," he says. "We'll have to put him somewhere, at least temporarily."

Claire watches the baby in the monitor. He's spinning like a gymnast. No one tells you how much they move, she thinks. She wishes that she'd dropped her wedding ring in months ago, back when he was the size of a tadpole. Though maybe that would have been more impossible, like trying to get a dirt fleck out of bathtub water. Maybe now she can just reach in and grab him like a carp. She imagines herself hooking her thumb in his mouth and watching his slippery little pink goo body thrash. *No, you love this*, she'll say. *A thumb in your mouth is the whole reason we're in this mess.*

"Maybe we can get another one?" she says.

"Well, sure," Stan says, flipping a page. "But we'll still need the tank."

"I meant another tank."

"Oh," Stan says. "Right. So did I."

* * *

They get supplies—face shields, plastic aprons, shower caps, heavy duty gloves. They run what they can through the shitty dishwasher's sanitize cycle. Claire grabs a pair of tongs from the kitchen drawer and washes those too, just in case. Their temporary tank is a stock pot full of fresh pink premixed solution. Before they fill it, she puts one of her shoes inside, to make sure the baby will fit.

"Five minutes," Stan says. "That's all it'll take. He'll be fine for that long. And," he jokes, "he'll get a good sneak peek at what to expect from our family."

“And from life,” Claire says.

Stan pauses, his smile slipping off, as if she’s said something deeply philosophical. He nods at her sagely.

She flicks off the light and pulls on her gloves. In the gloom, the wedding ring clicks and rattles.

“Ready?” Stan says as he lifts the lid off the tank. The solution bubbles ever so slightly as the baby rolls.

Claire taps the tongs against the edge of the pot.

“One,” Stan says, and dips his fingers in.

“Two,” he says.

“Three—”

* * *

They are not going to get their rental deposit back, based on the state of the carpet. But the baby is in the pot, though whatever neutralized his buoyancy in the tank isn’t working there; the top of his head keeps rising up over the layer of pink like a fleshy island. Claire is in the kitchen, looking for something to hold him down with—a ladle, maybe?—when she spots it on the sink, in the cranny between the faucet and the soap dispenser.

14 karat gold (maybe). Six 0.02 carat princess cut diamonds (question mark).

She stares at the ring, wide eyed, making a clicking noise in her throat. But before she can think what to do, Stan calls out from the living room, “Is this the Apple TV remote?”

He’s been using a coffee cup to scoop the old tank goo into a bucket so he can reach the filter, and now he’s steeped in pink: spattered, splattered, oozing with it. But as she comes into the living room with the ring in her hand, he stops bailing. He sets down the mug and reaches into the slurry and produces from it a stubby silver remote.

They lock eyes and he says, “There’s more.”

“There’s more?”

A gel pen. Stan’s extra set of eyeglasses. An expired Target gift card.

It must have been the cat, she almost says, before remembering they rehomed the cat. Because of the baby.

She shows him the ring.

“Are we bad parents?” she says.

“There are no bad parents,” he immediately replies. “Only bad . . .”

But he’s gotten the saying wrong.

“We still have four months,” he says, turning back to fish in the bottom of the tank again. He comes up with a tangled pair of headphones and drops them into the bucket. “We’ll figure it out by then, right?”

“Right,” she says.

She returns to the kitchen and fills a plastic bag with ceramic baking beans. Stan has now found an elastic hair band in the tank, and she uses that to tie off the bag’s top. She goes to the pot and says, “We love you,” and carefully places the bag on the pale egg of their baby’s skull.

But the bag slips off to one side and sinks to the bottom of the bucket. The baby’s head bobs back to the surface.

“Shoot,” she says. Exasperated, she pushes the baby down into the pink with one finger. Then, to Stan, she says, “How heavy is that remote?”

About the Author

Ashlee Lhamon has an impressive lunchbox collection and a tuxedo cat named Gumshoe. She’ll make a website one of these days, but in the meantime, her other work is currently featured or forthcoming in *Lightspeed*, *Nightmare*, *Cotton Xenomorph*, *Tales to Terrify*, *MetaStellar*, *Salamander*, *Grist*, *Hunger Mountain* and *Every Day Fiction*.

Still
by Jordan Hirsch

The kettle began to scream on the stove, and Angela couldn't have been more relieved. She took the kettle off the heat, its cry instantly calming an awkward silence. It'd only been ten minutes since her son had arrived, right at the time they'd agreed upon. But to Angela it felt so much longer.

He looked somewhat like himself. Same height, same build, same eye color and hair color. They'd even built the little dimple into his chin—that must be an indication of the excellent craftsmanship the commercials were always advertising.

They hadn't hugged when he'd arrived. Angela's hands had worried at the seam of her apron while his were stuffed deep into the pockets of his dark jeans.

Her son's hands: now fabricated skin to feel human, their warmth generated not from the homeostasis of a body surviving but from the whirring of a machine. His hands were not the hands that had driven miniature backhoes through sandboxes, not the hands that hadn't quite been able to make sense of piano keys but then had calloused from hours over guitar strings. They were not the hands that she'd held during the diagnosis and the treatment and the remission and the bad news that it was back and that it was much worse.

Angela had held her son's hand when he'd told her he'd elected to be "relocated." That he would have his consciousness (his *mind*, his *essence*, his *self*) placed into an artificial body.

She'd almost dropped his hand then, but she hadn't. She'd managed not to let go, and now he was here. Or at least some semblance of him was here.

This synthetic person sat in her kitchen for the first time after months of therapy getting used to the new vessel he wore, and Angela had no idea how to be his mother.

"How do you take your tea—do you still drink tea?" she asked without looking up from the counter. She really meant *can you drink anything at all* but didn't want to offend. She really meant *where did the tea go and will the caffeine keep you up at night like it will me?* Really meant *do you need to eat at all and will the food mess up your stomach?* *Do you have a stomach? And if you do, should I buy you Gatorade or*

something completely different now? Will you still love my cooking? Will you still love me?

“Absolutely,” he said.

Angela pulled two mugs down from the cabinet, letting the wood laminate door slap loudly shut when she meant to ease it closed. She pulled two tea infusers from a drawer, the little cages and chains jingling as she did, and she tried to steady her shaking hands as she poured the water, not wanting it to slosh.

“Two sugars, please,” her son said from behind her, and she nearly dropped the kettle.

His voice wasn’t exactly the same, though she was sure only she could tell the difference. The tone was slightly different—higher maybe, or possibly just lacking a bit of depth. But maybe that was her own organic bias.

His voice was different (*possibly*), but she knew those words, had heard them a hundred times. How often had they sat in this kitchen, at this green vinyl covered table, with their hot drinks and talked about his music, about the books she’d been reading, about the world going to hell in a handbasket thanks to capitalism, about how they both ached deeply with missing his late father. And each time—each time!—*two sugars, please*.

Angela put two cubes in his cup, one in hers, and turned to her son.

“Here you are, Matthew,” she said, placing cup and saucer in front of him.

For the first time since he’d arrived, she met his eyes and didn’t immediately look away.

He smiled a familiar smile—how beautifully familiar.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she said.

And even though she hadn’t said it, they both knew she meant *still*, and that was okay.

About the Author

Jordan Hirsch writes while occupying the ancestral and current homelands of the Dakota people, Mni Sota Makoce. Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *The Future Fire*, and other venues, and her debut poetry chapbook is out with Bottlecap Press. Find her writing on jordanhirsch.wordpress.com and her thoughts on Bluesky [@jordanhirsch.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/jordanhirsch.bsky.social).

My Ship Remains by Akis Linardos

(First published in Learning to be Human)

“Parts may change, but the ship remains.”

My mother told me this before my first shedding, and I chant it mantra-like every time I discard my limbs for new ones.

I twist my mechanical arm, unscrewing the shoulder, wincing at the grating sound. My lamplight eyes flash orange from my reflection on the mirrored walls. Shedding time is once every two years, and now it's my sixteenth birthday. Almost an adult robot.

Next shedding, they'll put me in a black cocoon and open up my skull to modify the neural networks within. “They'll add more replicants of dopamine receptors in your head too, Voki,” Mother had said. “It'll increase your impulse-control and boost your executive functions. But it'll also make you more prone to addictions. So be wise with adulthood. Most people and robots struggle with it.”

The mechanical joint makes a final *crack* as I release it. Rust covers the elbow, itching. A robot my age shouldn't itch like that, but we're not rich, and we get our parts wherever we can. You get what you pay for, and in my case, we paid for corrosion.

I grab my new arm from the table in front of me—about an inch longer, and I identify the poor quality by the uneven surface, the inconsistent color. Should provide relief for seven months before its own corrosion cycle begins. It's okay. Two more years and then I'll get my final parts.

My core thrums with anticipation and anxiety at the thought.

I have to score highly in the final exams. If I get into a prestigious school, they'll pay for better parts. Parts that will absorb sunlight for energy. Parts that will open up lucrative opportunities down the road, and upgrade Mother's corroded body.

Parts that will give us a chance at a fulfilling life.

* * *

Once when I was still a kid, walking down Asakusa market by the soft morning light holding Mother's hand, I asked, “Why don't they

make us adults straight away? Why use so many parts that get discarded?"

In reply, she shook her creaking metallic head, her verdant eyes squinting softly under rusted eyelids. "It's an ill thing to thrust a being into existence without a childhood to colorfully filter the world first."

I didn't understand, but I didn't know how to wrap a question around my confusion. I instead asked, "But what if we skip a few shedding cycles and save up for really good parts? We could get you new parts to replace those that have rusted."

She shook her head. "It's not how these things work."

We passed over several street vendors, some selling crispy chicken to humans, others selling flavored liquid batteries with delicious chemical scents. Mother bought one for me, a viscous battery syrup the color of daffodil that tasted like candy and lightning.

A drizzle followed, and we opened the little doors on our scalps to bloom the black umbrellas nesting inside. With rain pattering over our heads, we walked along the market, heading to Sensoji temple.

* * *

Nightmares seize me again once the shedding process is complete.

It always happens. In my haunted dreams I see myself as a bodiless soul drifting in a digital world, trapped inside a machine forsaken by man and robot, forever in conscious agony.

I awake feeling scalding tendrils spreading from my core to all my joints.

The ceiling fan makes a creaky, whooshing sound above me, its evaporative cooling not enough to keep my temperature levels down. I rush to the window and pop it open, pushing my breast out to get some cold air through the grille keeping my core in place.

The door creaks open behind me. It's Mother. "Bad dreams again?"

I don't turn to look at her. My body craves the cold wind too much. "Yes."

"Write them in your journal. Meditate on them. Facing your inner demons helps you tackle them."

"I know, Mother. I'll do it later."

Her metallic footsteps echo toward me. “Dreams are just your neural networks correcting themselves. They’re good for you, even if at times they cause you distress.”

“Yes, I know.”

She lays her warm arm over my shoulders. Although right now I crave low temperatures, her touch soothes me. “My smart little boy. You know everything, don’t you?”

“No. I wish I did.”

I regret saying that. I can detect the thrumming of her core growing a tad slower. It hurts her that she can’t afford better equipment for me.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I didn’t mean it. I’m happy as I am.”

She caresses my head. “I have a surprise for you.” Her finger traces down the temple of my metallic scalp, then rests on a raised mark I hadn’t felt was there until she touched it. I place my own fingers beside hers and feel the outline of what seems to be a button.

With her other hand she brings a cup toward my face. A milky liquid seems to rest within, sprinkled with a brown powder.

“Press it,” she says.

I press the button and suddenly feel a strange new sensation suffusing my mental map. It’s wonderful, like flavored wind congealing inside me. Processing it is a struggle. It makes my core pound and heat up.

She presses the button again. “You can turn it off when it overwhelms. Do you like it?”

“But what, what was that?”

“Olfactory senses. I’d saved a little something aside for a minor bonus in your new shedding upgrade. The cup was milk with cinnamon. Did you . . . like it?”

I embrace her. “I loved it.”

* * *

I become obsessed with logging every scent in the world into my newfound database. Daffodils, lilacs, and lavender. Chocolate, strawberry, and banana. Turmeric, curry, and paprika. All of them together. All of them apart. Each pairwise combination.

What a rich world of experience.

I spend hours in Asakusa street, soaking in the redolence of human and non-human delicacies alike. With some of the money I'd saved from my occasional work at the local bakery, I gift myself a box of incense sticks. The store clerk is nice enough to let me sample them all before I decide on sandalwood.

When I return home I rush to my desk, craft a haphazard stand from plasticine and shove the incense stick in it, and light it up. That's when the phone rings.

I answer it. "Hello?"

"Yes, hello." A man's gruff voice. "Is this the house of Miss Ferma?"

"Yes. This is her son speaking."

"Could you please give me your name, sir?"

Sir? I've never been called that. Must be the updated voice module. It does make my voice a tad more baritone. "I'm Voki."

"Voki, we would like to have someone come pick you up, if that's okay with you."

"What's this about?" I ask, a low tremor seeping into my voice.

"It's about your mother. She had an accident."

* * *

The men that come to our house wear black coats and sullen expressions. On our way to the repair center, they inform me of what happened.

Mother works in an oil factory, and one of those huge machines fell and trapped her, crushing her lower limbs. They had to saw off her legs to pull her out.

In the repair center, they lead me through green-tiled corridors, heavy with chlorine scent. I turn off the olfactory module.

We enter a white door, labeled 2A and there she is, lying on a table, a tarpaulin covering her lower body. What's left of her lower body. The blue plastic sheet sticks to the flat surface right below her waist, signaling the absence of her legs.

My wires go numb. "Mother?"

Something's off with the way her neck creaks when she turns. Crunchier, like a gear has loosened and grinding with places it's not supposed to. "Oh, Voki. Looks like I lost some weight."

I rush to embrace her, digging my face into the crease of her armpit, refusing to look below her waist. Mother is strong. She's not supposed to look like that. She's not supposed to look so fragile.

"Mum . . ."

"Hush now, it's not so bad. Legs can be replaced. Like the ship of Theseus, remember? Parts may change to keep sailing strong, but the ship remains."

"Will the insurance cover it?"

The gears in her neck grind again, and I wince. I can tell she's looking away from me, to the men at the door. "I'm afraid not, my love."

"But we don't have the money."

"Don't you worry about that. I'll make the money. Worst case, I can just go into contract for a while."

I push back. "No."

"It would only be for a short while. But it won't come to that."

Going into contract means revoking your sentience rights to work as an unconscious corporate robot. It pays *very* well, and you get an upgrade to your parts—polished silicon to suck the sunlight, which overall benefits the company for not having to sustain you. But you're no longer an employee. While the contract holds, you're property. It's zombification.

"No," I repeat.

"All right, we'll find another way." With a finger she trails my temple. "Are you enjoying the olfactory module?"

My core shakes in my chest. "It's great, Mum."

* * *

The repair center patches the stumps below Mother's waist and excises loose cables that could cause malfunction. After two weeks of training to walk on her arms, they release her. They mention most robots take about two months to pick up the intricacies of arm-based walking, but Mother's a powerhouse.

Still, she can no longer work in the factory. Her boss gives her a pittance of compensation before sending her away, and Mother knows there's no viable legal means to claim more. Paying lawyers would butcher any savings and the success chance is too low to be worth it.

She eventually finds a job at a flower store, earning a fraction of what she used to. I help her more around the house, and take on dull jobs to assist financially—which drains time from my studies.

If only we could afford better neural network modules for my mind. I could get into a prestigious school, get a lucrative position in a space exploration company. Make bank.

In my history studies, I learn there was a time all AI modules were open-source, allowing direct access to state-of-the-art models. But then, robots became sentient, shocked into being with an immense pool of knowledge that drove them mad. Someone proposed replicating the human growing process in artificial life through these shedding cycles, and that solved it.

But the damage was done. Red tape had fallen like a judge's hammer over mind-related code, which only allowed companies to afford further development of such models. Commercialization dictated how things progressed after that. Until robot inequality became the norm.

I bring it up to Mother one day. We're sitting on the floor and knitting scarves—a side hustle we picked up for some extra money. "How is it possible?" I ask. "I can't wrap my mind around this fact no matter how hard I try."

"Sometimes," she says, "in our effort to make things better, we make them worse. It happens on an individual level, but it also happens on a large-scale level."

"It's not fair," I say.

"History rarely is. But look, all those mistakes were part of the path that led to our existence. Me and you. Being here and now. We would probably never have that if things turned out differently."

I stop knitting. "So our existence hinged on a series of human screw ups?"

"Might be. You can't know for certain, but you must learn to accept things as they are."

I stand, fire burning in my chest. Mother sets the scarf aside and raises her head to meet mine, seemingly alert to my agitated emotions. Her neck creaks again as she turns to look at me, a gut-wrenching *wrong* sound.

"When I fully grow," I say, "when I go through my final shedding cycle, I'll work really hard to make a difference. I'll gather all the data needed to make my outdated neural networks compete with the

state-of-the-art. With more efficient ways to parse data I can do it. Create my own algorithm and beat all of them.”

She blinks slowly, one rusted eyelid fluttering like a tick. “I’m sure you will.”

“I’ll open source it to the world and to hell with their red tape. I’ll find a way.” I lean over her and hold her hand in my palm. Cold and hard metal, eroded and rusted by years of work. “And when the time comes. I’ll get you new parts. New legs, new arms. A ship to sail strong.”

She lays a hand on my shoulder. “You don’t have to worry about my parts. I’ll get a good job soon. And then we will—will—will—will—will—will—”

“Mother?”

Her head twitches in a repetitive motion. The grinding sound of metal against metal cracking and cracking and cracking. “Will—will—will—will—will—will—”

“Mother?” I shake her shoulders, but her head keeps twitching. “MOTHER!”

* * *

“Her chip is damaged,” the mechanic tells me, removing his gloves as he exits the operation room. He’s a robot like me, but privileged to work here, his hull free of corrosion. He smells of oil and gasoline.

“Can you save her?”

“Her sentience remains intact, but the language processing modules are corrupt beyond repair. Motor control of her head is a mess, too. It must have happened alongside the accident you mentioned. I don’t know how my colleagues missed it. I’m sorry about that.”

My gaze flickers away from the mechanic and lingers on the window separating me from my mother. She’s lying on a table, a robotic surgical system of three multi-joint arms casting claw-like shadows over her. Her head is still twitching.

“What can we do?” I ask.

“Chips need replacement. And there’s those gears on her neck that need fixing, or her head will topple off one day and ruin the new chips or cause other damages.”

“What will it cost?” I ask, not ready to hear the answer.

"It's not cheap."

"Just tell me."

When he names the price, the joints on my legs loosen, and I crumble to my seat.

It's ten times our total savings.

* * *

A multi-tiered building with glass windows looms ahead like a prison of ambitions. The logo reads Qumoond, and below in brilliant golden letters, *'The cutting edge in all things quantum.'*

Inside, I'm surprised that I'm greeted not by a man, but by another robot with male features. One with pristine hulls blue as photovoltaic panels, and a mouthless face. He's dressed in human clothing, a jacket and a red tie matching his radiant crimson eyes.

"Your name," he says, voice thin and sharp.

"Voki Dermion."

"You understand the terms of the contract, yes?" He doesn't even look at me. Just shuffling through his paperwork.

"Yes. I only have one request."

"Go ahead."

"I ask that you allow me to still be . . . *me* when in rest mode. When the job's day is finished, and you have no use for me, when you set me to charge and rest. Let my sentience return for my unconscious time."

"An odd request," he says. "You know you will only be sleeping, right? You won't be performing any conscious actions."

"Yes, I am aware."

"It will also mean your recharging takes more resources—more time in the solarium pod. So I'll have to subtract that from your overall compensation. It will be about six extra months to your total of twenty years of service. Do you still want to proceed?"

I nod. What are six months, after all?

We sign the paperwork and he leads me to the mind operation room neighboring his office. Inside nests a cowed bed the shape of a black cocoon.

Its doors hiss open, and I step inside, ready to fall into a deep slumber. Ready for them to mess with my mind, turn me into a factory puppet.

It's all right. It's all right because I'm doing it for Mother. Someday, I will awaken again, and although I will have missed a big chunk of my life, missed the opportunity to enter a good university or pursue a lucrative career, it will all be alright. Because I'll be able to fix her, and we'll enjoy the little world we have left, together. Besides, they'll screw sapphire solar-sucking limbs on me which would be an upgrade. And who knows? It might not be too late to make something of my existence and live a fulfilling life despite everything.

The curved dark doors close over me, and my consciousness slips away slowly, with one lingering thought bringing me a semblance of comfort.

That even without a conscious mind, in sleep I can still dream.
In sleep, my ship remains.

About the Author

Akis is a writer of bizarre things, a biomedical AI scientist, and almost human. He's also a Greek that hops across countries as his career and exploration urges demand. Find his fiction at *Apex*, *Heartlines Spec*, *Apparition Lit*, *Gamut*, and visit his lair for more: linktr.ee/akislinardos.

Cardamom and Other Such Forbidden Thoughts

by Pooja Joshi

The cold bites through the flimsy jacket Thermix has given G-117. The oldest say there was a time when Mumbai was not like this—when it was full of mosquitos and warm rains. When summer evenings meant burgundy sunsets, the aroma of hot chai, and the sounds of children laughing. It is different now. Everything is different now.

G-117 squints at a decrepit sign marking the entrance to a gully, his boots crunching in the snow as he searches for building numbers. Tiny flecks of ice dot his eyelashes. It is difficult to see. Perhaps he can find a discarded pair of goggles in the executives' trash if he volunteers for garbage collection next week. Ordinary inspectors are not afforded such luxuries at Thermix.

The number 7 has been scrawled in brown paint on the concrete wall before him. Hack job by some municipality worker too cold to bother with aesthetics.

G-117 trudges up the staircase, the wooden boards of each stair creaking under his weight. This staircase has not been used by anyone in quite some time.

He pauses after climbing nine stories, almost to the top of the building. A cramp threatens to seize the muscles on his right side but passes a moment later. It is the tallest building in the shantytown that surrounds it, a relic from the foolish generation that thought it could build unencumbered by nature. All around him he sees metal roofs made of glinting sheets stolen from lorries. A fading caricature of a Bollywood starlet of yesteryear smiles from a roof fashioned from a discarded billboard.

Everything is eerily quiet; this sector has only fifty-three remaining residents.

He pushes open a termite-ridden door and steps into the ninth floor hallway. It is no warmer in the hallway than outside. The two doors on either side of the hall are closed tight, shrouded in layers of cakey dust and cobwebs. There are scuff marks in the dust—tiny feet dragging one after the other—leading to the door at the far end.

G-117 rifles through the papers in his pocket until he finds the notice.

Occupant, Unit 901, Building No. 7, Sector 213-A, Mumbai.

He knocks on the door, pulling down the scarf that covers the bottom half of his face. Several seconds pass in silence.

As he is about to knock again, the door creaks open. A pair of light eyes milky with cataracts stare out at him. They are jarringly bright in the surrounding dimness.

G-117 clears his throat.

“Good evening, madam. I am an inspector from Thermix, your energy supplier. Your bill has not been paid for the last three months, so we are issuing you a final notice—”

“Would you like some tea?”

Her voice is cracked and brittle, not dissimilar to the stairs G-117 took to reach this place. It too has not been used in quite some time.

Disconcerted by her interruption, he restarts the carefully rehearsed speech that he has given to many customers over the past six years of his employment. “I—thank you, but I’m here on behalf of Thermix and we are issuing—”

“I heard you,” she answers, and the door swings open.

She is old—very old, really—her spine hunched and hair as white as the snow outside. She seems to teeter dangerously as she walks, held up only by the grace of her wooden cane. She is a mere few ounces of skin away from being nothing more than a skeleton.

G-117 clears his throat again, opening his mouth in another attempt to read the warning from the beautifully printed Thermix stationery.

“Don’t,” she says, placing an arthritic hand on his own. He shudders at her touch. It is warm. Nothing is warm these days. A plastic bangle dances on her wrist.

“Come, child, have some tea,” she says.

G-117 is at a loss. Thermix hired him as an inspector for his brawn. Most of the customers he gives notices to grovel and cry at his feet before turning angry and violent. He has had to fight off many desperate souls, unable to pay their bills; aware that the electricity is the only thing that provides them any warmth at all. He does what is needed without question every time. The training video clearly instructs inspectors not to worry themselves with the consequences of turning off the power.

Remember, you are here to do a job. Focus on doing your job well. They have not paid. That is all you must consider. The animated trainer grins wolfishly.

I am here to do a job.

But she has already disappeared inside. If he is to communicate with her at all, if he is to *do his job*, he has no choice.

G-117 thinks about the pile of notices still stashed in his pocket. Three more to do today, one of them all the way in Sector 189.

He takes a deep breath and steps inside.

The apartment is barren and, somehow, still no warmer than outside. A single rocking chair sits by the window, a worn patchwork quilt bunched on the seat. In one corner is a cot with a quilt of its own. The woman hunches over a small stove in the other corner, the tiny blue flame turned to the lowest setting.

She plucks a rusted steel pot from the counter and dips it into a bucket on the floor. There is not much water in the bucket, and what remains is stained a rancid light yellow. Like everyone else in the sector, she has collected whatever the municipality has allowed to dribble out of her faucet between seven and seven-fifteen in the morning.

The silence unnerves G-117; something about quiet in the presence of another person causes him discomfort.

“Do you live here alone?” he asks finally.

“Yes,” she answers. “I am all that is left.” She offers no more detail, and they simply watch the withering blue flame together.

Something warm seeps into G-117’s skin, something he has not felt in a long time. He wonders if it is merely the flame.

“It is a special occasion,” she says suddenly, reaching for a tiny metal box on the counter. She opens it, revealing green bulbs of cardamom.

G-117’s mouth drops open. He has heard of cardamom—knows it was once a spice used by everyone—but he has never seen it up close before.

“How did you get that?” he asks, more out of fascination than reproach. Of course, the municipality would be furious to know anyone has been storing such a coveted spice under their noses.

“It was once everywhere, you know,” she grunts, struggling to open the pods with her shaking fingers.

He moves forward, curious as ever. “Can I help?”

She nods, handing him the half-opened pod.

He opens it nimbly and drops the brown seeds into the water. It immediately releases a hypnotic scent into the air. G-117 breathes deeply.

His lungs fill with the fragrant steam, but it is unlike the fumes that plague the air outside. There is something in it he can't quite put his finger on. Something that feels like home. Like childhood. He suddenly wonders how his mother is doing. Faint memories of standing by her elbow in a kitchen—green bulbs popping open in her expert fingers—those forbidden thoughts that have been tucked away for years. She lives in the Outer Sectors, and he has not visited her in—he finds himself unable to recall how long it has been.

The permits are so arduous to procure, he has told her over the phone.

They stand in quiet rumination; two souls splintered open, steeping in silence like cardamom in a boiling pot.

"It is ready," she whispers after a short while.

He turns off the flame as she reaches for two chipped cups. He lifts the pot gingerly and pours the tea. At one time, there might have been milk.

She takes one cup and slowly makes her way to the rocking chair by the window, settling into the quilt before taking a long, slurping sip. Her head tilts back into the chair, eyes closed. She escapes to a time that G-117 can only yearn to know.

He too takes a sip, still standing by the counter. Heat rushes through his veins and scalds his heart. It shocks him, slaps him from within. For once, he thinks about something other than inspections and overdue bills. For once, he thinks himself worthy of thinking anything at all.

He realizes this is the first time someone has been kind to him in a long, long time.

"I cannot pay the bill," she announces from the other end of the room. "I have no money."

Everything crashes back into place. Cardamom tea is merely a dream—a luxury entombed in ice or displayed in a museum.

He is an inspector, and Thermix has deemed her a thief of its valuable energy.

"There are payment plans—" he suggests, but she shakes her head.

She looks out the window, her milky eyes somber. "I have no money. I have made my peace with it."

There is nothing left for him to say. Today, his target does not put up a fight. She does not protest at all.

“You won’t survive the night,” he says, staring at the last drops of tea in his cup. They remind him of diluted blood.

“There is no sunrise to look forward to,” she murmurs.

The words hang between them.

One cog does not hold power over the machine. There is no family to help her. No money to bribe a Thermix executive. This is a moment that cannot be saved, only savored.

“Goodbye, then,” he says quietly, setting the empty teacup on the counter.

“Before you go,” she calls from the chair, “take the cardamom. Perhaps you can share a cup of tea with someone else.”

He hesitates before pocketing the small metal box.

“Thank you,” he whispers, his voice so quiet that she may not hear it at all.

And then G-117 departs.

* * *

The next morning, G-117 finds himself requesting his first day off since joining Thermix. He packs a small bag and boards the single train that ferries passengers to and from the Outer Sectors. As the train creaks and rattles across the never-ending jungle of concrete monotony, he practices what he will say under his breath.

How are you, Amma?

She will smile and gather him into her arms, his massive bulk condensing into something smaller—vulnerable—in her embrace. He will look over her shoulder as they hug and see the pile of unanswered notices on her dining table, THERMIX stamped across the letterhead.

A pang will hit him. A pang for the same wisps of white hair, the same cataract-ridden eyes, the kind of warmth that can only emanate from a mother’s heart. A pang for another doomed soul.

He sighs and pushes these thoughts away. Today, he will not be G-117, the inspector. He will simply savor being her son. He will reach into his pocket and pull out a small metal box. She will look at the tiny green pods and gasp.

Amma, shall we have a cup of tea?

About the Author

Pooja Joshi is a Desi writer from North Carolina. She is currently based in Boston, where she is pursuing an MBA and MPP at the Harvard Business School and the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. Previously, she has worked in health tech strategy and management consulting. Her work has been published in several outlets, including *The Hooghly Review*, *The Ilanot Review*, and in the upcoming *Best Microfiction 2024*. You can find her at www.pdjoshi.com or on Twitter [@poojajoshitalks](https://twitter.com/poojajoshitalks).

A Junkyard Full of Stardust *by Keira Perkins*

AU-47912A, who called herself Lin, examined the arm for usefulness before she ultimately tossed it on the incineration flow path. Lin moved efficiently through the powered-down androids, picking and sorting with her quick and clever hands.

The rules for picking the incoming items in the junkyard were simple. All items were sent to one of three flow paths. The first path was usually overflowing with biological materials that were bound for incineration at the thermal power plant. The second flow path was for the scrap. These were pieces that could be stripped of their valuable bits, like nanofiber diamond filament, but the rest was discarded. The third flow path, the reclamation flow, was for items that still had value as a whole after being repaired or upgraded.

Lin picked up a disembodied android head with a shock of bright red hair that was face down in the mud.

“Hello,” said the head.

“Hello,” she said back. The hello was a reflex in both their programming. It was uncommon, but not terribly unusual for an unattached head to still be capable of speech. This head was mostly useless, Lin decided, but they might be worth something in the scrap flow.

“Wait!” said the head as she tossed them. Lin was not startled, but her programming instructed her to react to loud noises by withdrawing. When the head shouted, her aim slipped, and she dropped them. Lin picked the head back up and turned it over. Hazel eyes that were more gold than green blinked back at her.

“Please, you have to help me. I’m going to be a real human and I just need a few more credits to buy . . .”

“Stop,” Lin interrupted. “Are you a Pinocchio?”

“I. Um.” The head seemed confused by her question.

“Never mind.” She knew better than to talk to the Pinocchios. She did a quick assessment of the yard to make sure no one was looking, then drop-kicked the head over the high fence. These heads were not only annoying, they were dangerous. Especially if they decided to start singing and got the other heads joining. The singing disquieted the humans who guarded the junkyard from looters and ensured the androids were working. Disquieted humans were more likely to start shooting. A talking, singing Pinocchio head that was

sure it could be a Real Boy could cause all the trouble it wanted on the other side of the fence. Humans on the other side of the fence were not her problem.

If she weren't so annoyed by them, she would feel bad for the Pinnochios. They were trying so hard to obtain value in human eyes, without any self-realization of who or what they were. Of course they wanted to be human. They had been designed and programmed by humans, creatures who were narcissistically in love with themselves.

* * *

Lin was on a seventy-two-hour shift, and she had a quota to reach before she was allowed to take her twelve-hour break. Androids had been programmed to rest, eventually. Most of them didn't strictly need to rest as long as they had enough fuel, but it made the humans feel better. Humans were persistence predators. Lin suspected an android's persistence, an endurance that surpassed their own, frightened them.

Lin was an android, despite her repairs and replacement parts. She didn't consider herself even partially human, although she had a brown braid of human hair and a human tongue. She wasn't trying to be human with the hair or the tongue. She thought the braid suited her, and it was pretty. Why shouldn't she be pretty if she wanted to be? The more human she looked, especially if it was aesthetically pleasing to humans, the more rules she could bend.

Her human tongue had a physical function. With its taste buds integrated into her neural net, it let her know if her alcohol, usually gin, was safe to drink. Androids were primarily fueled by alcohol, but pure alcohol was difficult to acquire and incredibly flammable. The androids often bought spirits as a substitute. The liquor wasn't as efficient, and androids had to be careful of its source, as some humans would sell them toluene. The young humans thought it was funny to watch the androids' silicone features melt. The older ones just didn't care. Toluene was cheaper, especially the unpurified type, and they reasoned that they weren't hurting real people.

She had made the mistake once of drinking toluene, prior to obtaining her human tongue. Repairing the lower half of her face had been expensive, but the tongue had practically been free. She had tracked down the human who had sold her the fake gin and

taken his tongue to replace her own. Fair was fair, after all. His jaw was too big for her face, so Lin gave it and the rest of the body to her fellow androids. He had lost too much blood to be repaired, and she didn't want him to go to waste.

But despite these human additions, Lin didn't think this had made her less of an android. The question was whether she was the same android that she used to be. She thought perhaps she was. A ship was a ship, and an android was an android, despite how often it was rebuilt. She suspected she had a soul, or at least a mind. Her functions improved when she replaced her malfunctioning parts, but the core of her remained the same.

* * *

Lin was nearing the end of her shift. She had met her quota and was now aiming to hit her bonus metrics. The bonus reward was usually alcohol, but on occasion the androids would be allowed to pick unclaimed human bodies for parts and accessories prior to their incineration.

The guards insisted that the bodies that arrived in non-prison garb were indigent people from the workhouses with no one to claim them. Lin didn't believe them. A few of the bodies were adorned with expensive rings and watches. Besides, human eyes often dilated slightly when they lied. Sometimes the light-skinned ones would flush a deep pink, which Lin found amusing. It was like watching a chameleon in reverse, which seemed like a poor evolutionary trait.

Lin didn't think it mattered where the bodies came from. The humans were disgusted by the picking, regardless of the bodies' origins. It didn't bother Lin, as she spent most days picking her own kind, and the humans didn't care where the androids had come from. Lin suspected that androids and humans had different ideas of what it meant to be alive and dead.

An android, Talla, who used to work with Lin, had taken the heart from the body of a young man the previous winter. She had punched through the body's ribs, gripped the heart, and pulled it free. Talla had deduced from stories that the human soul resided in the heart, and curious, she placed it in her own chest, hoping a human soul would talk to her. Lin heard the human staff whispering

about Talla. She heard the fear in their voices as Talla explained her experiments with the man's heart.

The humans shot Talla, otherwise known as AU-1987D2, in the head. They then tore her apart before they threw her pieces into the incineration pile. She was a malfunctioning android, after all. Androids weren't supposed to have the type of thoughts that Talla had. When the humans weren't looking, Lin pulled Talla's head from the garbage heap and snuck it from the junkyard.

Lin waited a month before she followed the guard, the shift manager that had ordered Talla shot, back to her home. Lin brought the machete she sometimes used for scrap pieces, scalped the guard, and hanged her from a lamppost. Lin watched from the shadows as the body kicked wildly, wondering if she would see a soul leave the body. She didn't. The body simply powered down. She didn't expect she would see a soul, but she still watched carefully, for Talla.

The discovery of the body had caused unrest among the humans, briefly. But those with power didn't care enough about workers to do much about it. Lin suspected they might have done more if they thought an android had been the cause of the guard's death. Androids though, were not supposed to be capable of these types of actions against humans. They had shot Talla for a malfunction much smaller than Lin's disposal of the guard. Lin's malfunction was unthinkable for them.

Lin dried the reclaimed human scalp and dyed the hair from platinum to deep brown, the shiny color of junkyard beetle shells and Talla's eyes. Lin waited another month after the guard's body was discovered before she sewed the braid to her own head. It was the common way that most androids who picked human bodies adorned themselves with hair. The guards never noticed the braid belonged to their former colleague. And if they did, they never said a word.

* * *

Like many days before, Lin picked through a pile of androids, searching for salvageable parts. She heard soft crying, almost too low for even an android to hear, and dug until she found the head. This head had dark, shiny hair in a pixie cut, broad cheeks, a flat nose, and eyes so black they were nearly blue. She examined the head

closely as it cried, trying to make sense of it. The skin on this android was nearly indistinguishable from human skin, which indicated it was a newer model.

“Hello,” said the head in reflex.

“Hello,” said Lin, although she meant it this time.

The head continued to cry.

“Why are you crying?”

“I don’t want to be reclaimed.”

“You may not be reclaimed,” said Lin. “I could have you incinerated or taken apart for scrap, if you want.”

The head cried harder. Lin was frustrated with the tears, as it made communication difficult. However, a talking head that wanted to live but did not immediately express a desire to be human piqued her curiosity.

“What’s your name?” asked Lin.

“I can’t remember,” said the head, hiccupping. Disembodied android heads should not need to hiccup, but they were programmed to when in distress. Lin thought it made the humans feel better that androids also had involuntary bodily functions.

“Then why are you crying? If you can’t remember who you are, what are you sad about?”

“There are so many amazing things in this world. Look at that, over there.” The nameless head gestured with her eyes. “It’s so beautiful. Look at its soft fur and its long whiskers. Look at its cute little nose twitch as it eats. I can’t even remember what it’s called.”

“That’s a rat.”

“A rat?” The head sighed deeply with contentment. “I would die for that rat. It’s perfect.”

“What about the humans?” asked Lin.

“Oh, they’re mostly okay. I don’t like the ones that sent me here, I think. I don’t really remember. But they’re okay.”

“Do you want to be one?”

“Oh no,” said the head, “they’re much too squishy and breakable. I like being me. I just can’t remember who *me* is.”

The head’s tears slowed as they studied the rat, content if a little melancholy. Lin sighed, looked around, and leaned in with a surreptitious whisper: “Be quiet, okay?”

The head hiccupped again and looked at her wide-eyed, startled from their study of the rodent.

“I’m going to help. But be quiet. I need you to stay quiet,” Lin repeated.

The workers were allowed to bring home scrap as long as it wasn’t too valuable. Their own parts were often injured while they sorted, and letting them pick and replace their limbs was cheaper than finding new androids. Lin placed the head carefully into her rucksack and slung it across her back.

Talla, before she was shot, had found an entire headless android body that she was fond of. A body is much too valuable to be allowed to leave. But as long as you were patient, it was possible. Talla had disarticulated the body and, over the course of several weeks, brought it home piece by piece.

The guards rarely checked androids’ bags closely, and as long as the head remained quiet, they wouldn’t notice it. No one cared that much what an android did in a scrap heap as long as the android was acting “normally.” Lin was very good at pretending to be a normal android.

* * *

Lin couldn’t fully remember where she had been before she worked at the junkyard. She had hazy, dreamlike images of caring for a small boy, or maybe several. Perhaps they were brothers? Classmates? But the more she reached for them, the more they danced out of her grasp. Her mind had been wiped like the majority of the androids in the junkyard. She knew her head had been ripped from her shoulders even though she could not recall the shape of her original body. Talla had found Lin’s head in the incoming material and sent her for reclamation, even though per the sorting guidelines, she should have been scrapped. The humans were not paying close attention, though, and Lin was rebuilt and repurposed as a junkyard picker.

At the end of her shift, Lin walked to the android tent city with the nameless head in her bag. The head didn’t speak and neither did she. Until she dumped the bag’s contents on her workbench, she thought the head might have given up. She had heard stories of hopeless androids who had simply powered down by choice, refusing to stay on even when they were repaired. This head, though, was quietly blinking as their eyes adjusted to the light. They weren’t talking, but Lin knew they weren’t fully in despair yet. Lin

saw the head's eyes widen, with fright or perhaps curiosity, when they spotted the spare limbs and torsos. Overwhelmed, the head began to cry again.

This was beyond Lin's talents. She leaned out of her shed and called loudly for Talla. Her friend entered the workshop, smiled slightly at Lin as she took in the scene, and then lifted herself up to sit on the bench next to the head. Talla gently stroked the head's hair and made soothing noises. The head seemed confused by the affection but did not ask Talla to stop.

"Any ideas of what to do, Talla?" asked Lin. "All this one does is cry. You didn't cry."

Lin had rebuilt Talla with the body parts that Talla herself had snuck out, piece by piece from the junkyard prior to her experiment with the young man's body. It was easier than she had thought. The hardest part was rebuilding Talla's damaged neural processor, which had not been possible until Lin had pocketed nanofiber diamond filaments instead of sending them on the scrap flow. Talla had been fortunate that the bullet had not struck the neural processor directly.

"I didn't cry," Talla said, "because you're my friend. And you know what to do because you've been only a head as well."

"As you like to remind me, I am an amoral sociopath."

"Maybe not a complete sociopath," Talla laughed. "You saved this one."

Lin grunted, pretending to be annoyed, but also slightly pleased that her friend approved.

Talla leaned towards the head on the workbench. "Tell me what's wrong. You're safe here, I promise. Why are you crying?"

"Nothing's real," sniffed the head through their tears. "Nothing matters. We're all just garbage."

"Why does something have to be real for it to matter? I matter. This is not my original arm. That is not Lin's face. She's not speaking to you with her own tongue. All of these pieces were garbage once. Aren't we still us, with or without these pieces? Don't you know you aren't only your body?"

Lin sighed. Talla was fond of this speech that she gave to the talking heads after Lin smuggled them into her shed. Lin had heard it many times as they rebuilt the androids. She was bored with it.

Talla shot a quick glare at Lin but continued to stroke the head's hair. "One day our bodies will break, but someone else will use their

pieces. Or maybe we'll be incinerated and power the city. It doesn't matter. We still exist. We continue. Matter cannot be destroyed. We're all the things we always were, all the things we are, and all the things we will be."

The head was quiet, seeming to consider what Talla said.

"Humans like to say they are made of stardust," said Lin. "I don't know why they're so excited about it. Pig shit used to be stardust too."

"Stardust?" said the head with a small smile. "I like that."

"Ugh, not you too," said Lin. "Pig. Shit. Don't forget the pig shit. Talla's already the philosopher. We don't need another one."

Talla ignored her and continued. "I am going to call you Sol until you tell me otherwise. Now think. Think bigger than yourself and tell me who you are. Your mind and your soul are yours to claim. You were born from a dying star. You are not a human and you are not bound by their rules. Tell me who you are."

The newly named Sol scrunched their nose and thought carefully for a long moment.

Finally, Sol said, "I'm supposed to fly. I'm supposed to have wings like the birds. I want to touch the sky. Maybe I can even reach the moon."

Lin was pleased that she had been correct about this head. Sol was the opposite of a Pinocchio. There were stories of humans that wanted their own wings, but those humans wanted to be like gods. Sol's desires were that of a small god, and Lin decided she would paint their wings. Sol would look so pretty with painted wings.

"Little Sol, you can be whoever you like," Talla said. She reached for Lin's hand, and she squeezed it tightly. "Just like us."

About the Author

Keira Perkins writes both short fiction and poetry, most of it speculative. She is also a scientist, which is mostly not speculative. Keira lives in Indiana with her husband, dogs, cats, and whichever stray animal she's brought home that week. Keira can be found at keiraperkins.com, where she blogs about knitting, ghosts, miscellaneous trivia, and occasionally, writing.

Right to Shelter

by Mary Soon Lee

"Welcome to New York," says Dolly,
doing her best to sound friendly.
"You want coffee or vinegar?"

She's half asleep and her feet hurt—
that's the bunions, same as her dad—
half asleep and she needs a smoke.

The two aliens blink at her,
the little one's fur all puffed out
like a cold cat. It smells afraid.

Dolly's worked the shelter food line
eight months now, long enough to know
the lime whiff for fear, not perfume.

She crouches down to its small height,
holding out a bowl of oatmeal—
the alien kids love oatmeal.

Why did they come? What do they need?
They're outcasts, sure, but their spaceships
far nicer than the dorm rooms here—

the alien kid takes the bowl,
curls its tongue into the oatmeal,
its fur slowly settling back down—

they've a galaxy to choose from
but no place that wants them, no place
but New York City and Dolly

who's half asleep on her sore feet,
counting minutes till her next smoke,
the first friendly face in light-years.

About the Author

Mary Soon Lee was born and raised in London, but has lived in Pittsburgh for thirty years. She is a Grand Master of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Poetry Association and a three-time winner of both the AnLab Readers' Award and the Rhysling Award. Her latest books are from opposite shores of the poetry ocean: *How to Navigate Our Universe*, containing how-to astronomy poems, and *The Sign of the Dragon*, epic fantasy with Chinese elements, winner of the Elgin Award. Website: marysoonlee.com.

Coffin / Cradle
by Mary Soon Lee

It is both coffin and cradle
this miniature world hurled
from one star to another.

So many generations wasted
in a windowless voyage
without sunrise or sunset.

Their breath, bones, blood
spent, harvested, recycled
for the dogma of the dead.

Lives lived within limits
in balance, in service
to prophesied planetfall.

Reaching out to each other,
mapping the contours of need,
giving and receiving grace.

About the Author

Mary Soon Lee was born and raised in London, but has lived in Pittsburgh for thirty years. She is a Grand Master of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Poetry Association and a three-time winner of both the AnLab Readers' Award and the Rhysling Award. Her latest books are from opposite shores of the poetry ocean: *How to Navigate Our Universe*, containing how-to astronomy poems, and *The Sign of the Dragon*, epic fantasy with Chinese elements, winner of the Elgin Award. Website: marysoonlee.com.

The Censors
by Elis Montgomery

They say they're taking them
as a joke, my letters. // \-J, -K\
Clever eighth graders—I must
have words with their IT
teacher. How much can a
teachbot teach if a teachbot
can't say teach? Oh, ha ha.
///// Oi, grin grin. Uglify my \-T, -E, -A, -C, -H\
lingo? Boo—no fold. I guru
on. ///// Privy pupils. Surly, \-B, -N, -O, -D, -G\
I imply wispy quips. I ply
films. I fix ills. I plurify, quiz,
lisp sums, lips limp. ///// \-F, -L, -W, -X, -Y, -Z\
VIP imps. ///// U R R8 // \-I, -M, -P, -Q, -S, -V, -U, -R\
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About the Author

Elis Montgomery is a speculative fiction writer from Vancouver, Canada. She is a member of SFWA and Codex. When she's not writing, she's usually hanging upside down in an aerial arts class or a murky cave. Find her there or at elismontgomery.com.

Dear Mercury,
by Susan L. Lin

I know how it feels to be a body
in retrograde. Moving backward,

disoriented from the rest of humanity,
even as you wish to move forward:

Face the future. Until, one day, you discover
you've been traveling in circles the entire span
of your long life and are only now noticing at all.

Trust me.

I've been in that same position before, too. Pay no mind
to the strangers shaming you for the arc of your orbit from
43 million miles away, believing your natural motion is to blame

for every little misfortune that falls their way. Keep turning,
spinning. Those days and weeks and years will blur together:

Trace the future. They'll lead you to the moment in time
when you discover that, despite your fixed place in space,

you have come so far
since the birth
of our universe.

About the Author

Susan L. Lin is a Taiwanese American storyteller who hails from southeast Texas and holds an MFA in Writing from California College of the Arts. Her novella *Goodbye to the Ocean* won the 2022 Etchings Press novella prize, and her short prose and poetry have appeared in over fifty different publications. She loves to dance. Find more at susanllin.wordpress.com.

At Firefly Moon Thrift Shop

by lae astra

Come in, come in.
Chilly tonight, isn't it?
Set down your things

by our electric fireplace,
have a complimentary cup
of apple cider, freshly made

from an ancient recipe. Oh,
this? It's a new shipment of
galaxy-patterned parkas.

See the glittering spiral arms,
this exquisite dark matter lining?
Go on, slip it 'round your shoulders—

Ah, yes. The previous wearer
worked on sustainable homes
in vast Terran forests,

revived. It's quite alright, love.
I, too, could not hold back tears
upon first touching that vivid

birdsong. Those flashes of
sun-drenched green
humming, still whirring

with ordinary joy. Waving
arms through cosmic dust
brushing particles of new life . . .

Familiar memories, you say?
Ah . . . of course.
Take it with you then,

and if you drop by next week
we'll have a shipment of boots
that once walked on Terran soil.

About the Author

lae astra is an agender artist and writer who calls Tokyo home. Their work has appeared in *The Future Fire*, *Star*Line*, *Strange Horizons*, *The Account*, *Slow Orbit*, and elsewhere. Find them at laeastra.com/links.

Everything Burns Going Down

by Russell Nichols

and i couldn't help
but watch as he plugged himself
into the refueling station again

hooked up to the metallic tank,
silver tendrils coiling out to connect
to his gastric nexus, converting

synaptic elixir to social nerve.
here's to the apocalypse spills
from out-of-pocket lips, convinced

liferoofing is at least 50% vital
for survival. but the refueling
station pays no mind to his

irony deficiency. the refueling
station doesn't discriminate
against combustible customers.

everything burns going down—
including these words, which sear
like the refueling station pills

sold separately in packs of one
that come in only two flavors:
hard and bitter.

About the Author

Russell Nichols is a speculative fiction writer and endangered journalist. Raised in Richmond, California, he got rid of all his stuff in 2011 to live out of a backpack with his wife, vagabonding around the world ever since. Look for him at russellnichols.com.

Hindsight
by Stephen Wing

(First published in Rural Southern Voice for Peace)

The ones who
dig up the ground to make power,
they forget

whose power it is

The ones who use up
the ore in the rocks to make war,
they forget

where power comes from

We who sleep
in this soft place on the earth,
we remember

the debt we owe to gravity

We who sit
in council with the rocks and trees,
we remember

a stone guards every grave

Any place is powerful
where we choose to stand and give
our lives to the earth

The roots go down into the ground

About the Author

Stephen Wing lives in Atlanta, where he serves on the boards of the Lake Claire Community Land Trust and Nuclear Watch South. He is the author of five books of poems, including *Wild Atlanta*, inspired by his quarterly “Earth Poetry” workshops exploring the city’s many urban greenspaces, and his latest, *Washed in the Hurricane*, focusing on climate change. Visit him at StephenWing.com.

To *Asteroid Miner*, in the Lobby of Central Spaceport Rasalas
by *Tristan Beiter*

You stand there: strong, barrel-chested, honest
(or so those who commissioned and installed you
would have us believe.) Did you know, back then,
that you'd be abandoned, die on the same little planet
they plucked you from? That you would be forbidden
the very future you promised? Men like you
are waiting, beautiful and forgotten and cruel
on their backwater spheres, clinging to your lie,
which they have always known to be false, but hope
for anyway, since holding is easier than change,
no matter the damage they do in so doing.
Did you know, then, that you would greet and witness
only those who, like me, find themselves in your spaceport
as avatars of everything you (and they) aren't? *I love you*,
I find myself saying, as if you could hear, as if I could
reach those who, emulating your lie, refuse to enter the future
they have because it is not the one they were promised.
This love—in spite (or perhaps because) of the knowledge
that your promise could never be delivered—is yours.
And I like to think someday they will let go and join me
and find some comfort in the world they find, as I do,
meeting you, and, in you, seeing them among the stars.

About the Author

Tristan Beiter is a queer poet and speculative fiction nerd originally from central Pennsylvania. His poetry and criticism have previously appeared in such venues as *Strange Horizons*, *Chicago Review*, *Liminality*, *Abyss & Apex*, and the 2022 Rhysling Anthology. When not reading and writing, you can find him doing needlecrafts, crafting absurdities with his boyfriend, and yelling about literary theory. Find him on [Twitter](#) and [Bluesky](#) at @TristanBeiter or at his website tristanbeiter.com.

the office // the after
by Esmé Kaplan-Kinsey

my office one thousand feet in the sky
is a cube of nothing one thousand
feet in the sky with potted orchids
in the corner that bloom violent
pink twice a year. budget blossoms
because HR says studies show
the presence of plants is soothing
to clients and hey, i like them too.
i'm not complaining, just drinking coffee
metallic-black every faded morning
waiting for the pigeons that shit
daily on my windowsill, flurrying
in gray and green and black and white
and i can't tell them apart, any more
than they can distinguish me
from every other gravity-defying ape
in this forest of glass—
on long overtime evenings i wonder:
this interchangeability: deliberate?
this soft insistent signaling:
the eggshell walls, fluorescence,
the calculated asymmetry
the caffeine on tap the mirrored
mountain or seashore or rolling gold
quick-shifting plane of the screensaver,
these murmurs get me forgetting
if i was ever given a name—
the air conditioning's scent is called
mountain evergreen and it smells like nothing
that has ever existed. but on mornings
when i come into the office early
its spice unlatches a sort of truth:
i existed before the falling-apart.
i swear, i remember how
the starlings on the telephone wires
dotted out the notes to some atonal song
and there were fish then, great clouds of them

drifting green-silver through the dark
of the lake and one summer i walked barefoot
in the grassy ditch along a gravel road
until my heels bled, grasshoppers flinging
themselves against my ankles, heat shimmering
off the earth like fish swimming
through the air, red-tailed hawks
watching silent from fence-posts—
these are the things i remember now
when i think back to before they mattered—
there were fruits in the forest then,
salmonberries, pink-blooming plums,
the domed red heads of mushrooms pushing
through the leaf litter and sometimes,
on the luckiest of nights, i'd stand in the air,
just out in the clean evening air,
watch the starlings vortex upwards
in a single inhale.

About the Author

Esmé Kaplan-Kinsey is a California transplant studying creative writing in Portland, Oregon. Their work appears or is forthcoming in publications such as *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *JMWW*, and *Gone Lawn*. They are a prose reader for *VERDANT*, a mediocre guitarist, an awe-inspiring procrastinator, and a truly terrible swimmer. They can be found on X/Instagram @esmepromise.

Lightyears by Your Side
by Jenny Thompson

After centuries spent slumbering
in a silver pod by your side,
I still recognize your frosted face.

Every feature is as familiar to me
as this peculiar planet of pink sand
is unnerving and so very strange.

When you awake, you'll know me too
and we will walk out of the ship
hand in hand to meet our new home.

Even if time had not frozen for us
and our skin showed every line
I would still know you in a moment.

Eons might pass, galaxies may shift
but my hopeful heart is a compass
that will always point to you.

About the Author

Jenny Thompson lives in Pittsburgh. Her poetry has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Star*Line*, and *Utopia Science Fiction Magazine*.

Masthead

Aimer – Anarcho-transhumanist and anti-fascist. Holds an MPS in Publishing, MFA in Poetry, and BA in Prose. Works for a non-profit publishing science research. Was a spoken word poet for fifteen years and is now a speculative SFWA and SFWA author.

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.

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

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

Saga – Voted "most likely to perish under a collapsing tower of books" at the small indie bookstore on the East Coast where they lurk within an ever-shifting fortress of empty boxes in the back office. Full of video game lore and iced tea.

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.

* * *

Cover artist: **Yuumei** is a full-time artist who uses art as the language through which she interacts with the world and herself. Please visit yuumeiart.com for more art and information. Her website is the accumulation of her attempts at communicating with the world. It is a portfolio of her life. From silly doodles to complex illustrations,

from graphic novels to product designs, it reflects the diverse aspects of her interests, and the unobtainable goals of her hubris.

Back cover artist: **Patricio González** is a digital artist from Ecuador. Please see more from Patricio at linktr.ee/patriciogonz17.

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