RADON JOURNAL

ISSUE 10

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RADON JOURNAL

FICTION

POETRY

MASTHEAD & SUPPORTERS

IF THE WORLD IS ENDING, WHY PRETEND?

by Megan Cartwright

The day the bees died we stopped lying.
I held your breath in my hands, brittle
as tiger-striped bodies beneath bare feet.
Teetering on toe-tops, we kissed amid corpses.

You slipped banded cadavers into pockets,
each husk-crunch our stolen moment.
We greeted the world's end helium-high,
swollen lips stretched vinyl—smiling.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Megan Cartwright (she/her) is an Australian author and literature teacher. Her poetry has featured in publications including *Contemporary Verse 2*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, and *Island Magazine*. She was the 2024 recipient of Deakin University's Matthew Rocca Poetry Prize and is the winner of the 2025 Tina Kane Emergent Writer Award.

SOMATOPHOBIA

by Eoin Nordman

That morning, I held Adam's hand and told him the world wasn't so bad. He said it was hell and that he pitied our daughter. I put my lips to his cheek and rubbed his broad shoulders, telling him things would get better. That the slow march to autocratic oligarchy was like a sine chart and that the wave always swung in the opposite direction.

It was Tuesday. We'd both called in sick because Sophie was actually sick, asleep upstairs in her room.

Adam was already drunk, or maybe still drunk. I took the vodka pint from his shaking hand and sipped, even though I hated vodka, because I wanted him to know I felt what he felt. That I needed to dull that edge, too.

Outside, a car alarm blared and cut off suddenly. The neighbor's dog whined. Through the window, Mrs. Miller paced on her porch, rubbing her temples, cursing. Jessica, her daughter and Sophie's closest friend, sat on the steps, head down, earbuds in, oblivious to her mother's distress.

Adam ripped the vodka from my fist. "Ever wonder if we've crossed a line? One we can't come back from?"

Adam's blue eyes were bloodshot, and he looked at me like he always had: like I was a baby who knew nothing but how to seek comfort. And his gaze held this mixed aura that I hated, this blend of contempt, pity, and love. I wanted to slam him against the wall and kiss him until his teeth hurt.

Instead, I took back the pint. "Does it matter? By the time we see a line, we're already past it."

I turned away, flicking through my phone. The usual: news clips, doom scrolling, desperate people trying to explain the latest political disaster.

One thing stood out. A handful of accounts mentioning lightheadedness and dizziness. Floaters in their vision.

I ignored it. Sipped the pint.

Adam went upstairs for a shower.

The news played in the background. Our usual Tuesday night program. I wasn't paying attention until the anchor, Simone Clark, mentioned the symptoms.

On screen, underneath her talking head, one word appeared in white font on a red banner:

Somatophobia.

"Doctors in Boston report an outbreak of Somatophobia, a condition causing an extreme, irrational aversion to the human body. Much like arachnophobia, it triggers panic, nausea, and dissociation in response to flesh, both one's own and others'. Severe cases involve profound disconnection, with patients describing their bodies as grotesque or alien. For more, we go now to Derrick Null at Olax Health Center."

The TV became a split screen. Derrick stood in a hospital ward, his eyes dilated. His face twisted in a scowl. He lurched forward and hacked.

"Derrick?" asked Simone.

Derrick convulsed, then vomited. The hallway feed glitched and went black.

"Holy shit," I muttered.

"We . . . we appear to have lost Derrick. We'll try to—" Her voice caught. She gazed at the camera. Then held her hand before her face like she was inspecting a dollar under a light.

"Are you . . . seeing this?" she whispered. Then dry heaved. The camera flipped to the floor. Screams ripped through the studio.

"Jesus Christ." I flipped off the TV.

Silence.

"Adam?" I called.

For a split second, I expected his voice from upstairs, casual, maybe amused: *Coming, Booshka, just a sec.* Instead, there was only the buzzing of appliances. Then, Sophie's shriek.

"Sophie?" I yelled.

"Dad!" she shouted. "Dad, what's happening?"

Guttural yelps exploded from somewhere above me. Then coughing, and a thunderous crash.

I closed my eyes. Dotting lights played across my retina like the afterimage of a dying star.

"Sophie, shut your eyes!"

Screams erupted from our neighbors. The world howled as one, a terrified thrum.

"Dad, I'm scared."

"Keep your eyes shut!"

Upstairs, Sophie retched. Something smelled of sour garbage.

"Adam!"

My skin fell slack. My tongue, a limp piece of meat, twitched in my mouth.

I slowly opened my eyes and looked at my hand. There was no difference between fingers, tendons, veins, and fat. My skin sagged, shifted like wet dough. I could sense my blood slithering beneath, like insects crawling under rice paper. I was a machine of nerves and rot, stretching and tightening with each breath. My stomach lurched. I barely had time to turn before vomit spewed onto the black of the TV screen.

When the vomit slid to the floor, I saw my reflection—and joined the pained chorus.

* * *

That first day we sat in darkness, eyes shut tight, trying to forget our bodies—the heat of our breath, the pulse in our veins, the weight of our skin.

Sophie clawed at her arms, scratching until she bled. We shouted until our voices gave out, but she didn't stop until she collapsed, whimpering in the corner.

Outside, the world howled. Neighbors screaming in sync, as if the whole block was one living, suffering thing.

We whispered theories in the dark on how it spread so fast. A virus? Radiation? Or something worse, more *deliberate?* The question itched at the back of our minds, a dull drone beneath the terror.

Sophie's voice cut through chaos, shrill with panic. "What's happening?" she asked, again and again.

Adam and I argued in strained whispers—what to say, how to keep her calm—but all we landed on was:

"Keep your eyes closed, honey. It'll be all right."

We moved like shadows, opening our eyes just long enough to grope for food: dead-ahead stares, avoiding our bodies, the sight of them, the reminder. Every accidental brush sent nausea curling through us.

Eating was horrible for Adam. He gagged with every bite. Sophie, shivering in the corner, whispered, "Don't think about it. Just eat." I forced down mouthfuls, tasting blood, trying to meditate my way out of my skin.

Nights were the worst. The house echoed with choked sobs, the sick thrum of blood in my ears. On the third night, Adam found whiskey. We drank it all. Even Sophie. It was the first time she stopped shaking.

And all this time, between the gut-wrenching fear and worry, the nausea and insomnia, I wrestled with what this awful thing meant. The silent death of touch. The loss of every subtle, tactile moment between me and the ones I loved. I would never again kiss Sophie goodnight, never smooth back her hair, or wipe away her tears. I could not hold her when she was afraid, could not reassure her with the simplest, most human comfort: warmth against warmth.

And Adam.

Over fifteen years we had never lost our passion for each other—sure, it had changed. But we fucked, often enough. That intimacy was more than just desire. It was a tethering, a way of anchoring ourselves in each other.

And perhaps that was the strangest part of this disease. My longing, it never left me. The need for touch, for closeness. It remained, ever-present and gnawing. But what good was hunger in a world where the feast had turned to rot?

* * *

Ten days into our waking nightmare there was a knock at our door.

Adam got it. He stood and with his arms firmly against his sides, walked with his head upright toward the door. Once there, he shut his eyes and opened it.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Clemons," a man's voice began. It was deep, serious. "We recognize the distress you and your family have experienced. As representatives of the United States government, we are here to ease the horrific burden of The Psychological Event."

"Uh," said Adam.

"Yes," a woman said. "In partnership with Olax Co., we have developed tools to assist those affected by The Psychological Event. How many people occupy this household?"

"Three," said Adam. "Can one of you tell me what the fuck—"

"Here you go, sir," said the man. There was a clatter.

"Sir," said the woman. "Here, let me help you."

Then came a faint buzzing, like an overheated laptop.

"Oh," said Adam. "Wow."

"We have a lot more people to help," said the man. "It seems you understand."

"Yeah," said Adam, his voice cracking. "Thank you. Holy shit. Thank you."

* * *

The Olax glasses stabilized our perception. We'd gone from perpetual horror to a grim simulation of normalcy. The glasses made it so that our appendages appeared as innocuous blobs, shrouded extensions of our consciousness. Sophie and Adam, once writhing monsters, now appeared as blurred shapes. Colorful and soft.

We could move through our days, talk, eat, even smile—but the old awareness lingered. A faint pressure at the back of the mind, the trace memory of loose flesh and sloshing blood. We lived on the thin line between knowing and forgetting, our nerves shot, knees bouncing with the effort of pretending.

Still, we functioned. Better than before. We walked around, eyes open, play-acting that the world hadn't putrefied—until the glasses slipped.

Then—bone chilling screams.

Sophie, after she'd curdled our blood, looked at me. We'd pushed her glasses back firmly against her face, careful to avoid touching. "It's okay, baby," I said.

"But . . . it's all still *there*," she sobbed. "Underneath."

She was right. It wasn't simply the unmediated sight. To touch, even behind the crutch of our glasses, was to risk remembering the sick wriggling skin, the feel of decomposing matter inside our stomachs. Once, half-asleep, I'd reached for Adam, my hand brushing his shoulder. He stiffened, exhaled. I gagged, letting my hand drop to my side, bile rising in my throat.

After that, we stopped trying. Reaching out to touch, to comfort. Instead, we avoided one another. The glasses were a thin veneer, nothing but a small bandage on a disemboweled corpse.

* * *

Within a week, the Olax glasses were upgraded to feed us entertainment, sanitized and seamless. Old memories—edited and optimized—felt comforting, even as reality decayed. When we weren't watching augmented TV or scrolling through social media with our eyeballs, advertisements played. At first, we hated the constant barrage. But soon we barely noticed it. In fact, I found myself humming the jingles. Sophie did, too. I even caught her whispering an Olax ad in her sleep.

While Sophie and I drowned out the horror of The Psychological Event, Adam devoured news clips and articles detailing the crumbling world outside. At night in bed, a pillow between us so that our disgusting forms wouldn't collide, he'd relay the stories he'd read. Mass suicides, hospital patients abandoned in dark rooms, entire countries falling into chaos, authoritarianism.

"And Olax Co.," he said. "I saw they're working on some new product. They say it's bigger than the glasses. A full reality, not just augmentation. Total immersion." He shook the blue outline of his head. "Fuckin' weird, right? How fast they responded to all this. The glasses, the updates, now this immersion system."

I half-listened, my mind drifting back to a video of a monkey spinning a basketball on its finger. "They're a tech giant. They probably had the prototypes sitting around. Just convenient timing."

He cleared his throat. "Yeah. I don't know."

I shrugged. Right then, I didn't care about Olax, the news, or the wider world.

What I needed was solace in mindlessness. Whenever that numb feeling cracked, despair seeped in. That the world had ended. That it had ended in such a way I might never again feel the comfort of my husband.

"Tom, you all right?" he asked, still reading his article.

"Yes," I lied, my eyes wet.

Once, he would have pressed his forehead to mine, his breath warm against my skin.

But in this world, we sat in silence. Completely separate. Disgusted by the thought.

* * *

Days passed in a stupor. The world had stopped. Our jobs, frozen. Everything closed. We sat around in the glasses. Waiting for rations deliveries and government orders for whatever came next.

Olax ads polluted the backdrop of our lives. Words in fragments, their meaning only half clear: *Surrender to the OlaxVerse. Find peace.* Or: *Choose freedom. Choose escape.* A piano droning over the sanitized copy. The longer we steeped in it, the harder it was to remember what had come before.

From time to time, emergency broadcasts interrupted our digital haze. The president at a podium promising solutions, apologizing for rations shortages, military overreach.

At first, our neighborhood still clung to its routine. Colorful blobs walked dogs. Waved from porches. Gossiped on lawns. Then, at night, we began to notice vans with Olax graphics carrying large black objects out of neighboring homes.

We all reacted to this new world in our own ways. Some fought to preserve calm. The constant distractions of the glasses, Mrs. Miller's endless rearranging of her living room, Mr. Miller's meticulous pruning of his yard. But others couldn't ignore the horror.

Our neighbor David one morning woke the whole block: *Pigs for the slaughter,* he shouted, over and over. His wife, Sara, whimpered, begging him to stop, but he kept at it until he collapsed into a ball on their lawn, gasping.

The next day their house was empty.

Over time, fewer and fewer neighbors walked the streets. We knocked on doors. Waited. Listened. Sometimes, we heard the hum of a TV left on. A dog barking inside. A baby crying.

Occasionally, Sophie would ask about Jessica.

I lied, said the Millers were keeping to themselves. But I'd seen the dark windows, the empty swing set in their backyard, and felt the force of the changing world—like a sand mandala blown apart, beautiful patterns scattered to the wind. I met Sophie's gaze, her outline trembling, and felt a pang for the world we'd lost. The one where two little girls could laugh without fear.

Then, one night, we put Sophie to bed and walked across the street to the Millers' house. They'd invited the neighborhood, or what was left of it, over for a dinner party.

* * *

"We're doing it," said Mrs. Miller, adjusting her projector twice, pulsing limbs smoothing out whatever clothing she wore beneath the glasses. "I can't handle another slip. Not when there's a way out."

Mr. Miller crossed his purple arms, then uncrossed them, glancing at the throbbing light. "You all should consider it."

They'd paid the access amount and decided to Affirm the Olax way. We all got the ads:

Shed that gross old skin and come to Heaven. Enter the OlaxVerse. Escape The Psychological Event forever.

"That's what we wanted to talk to y'all about," said Mrs. Miller, her eyes darting to the wall, where a family photo—the blurred outline of Jessica at six, missing her front teeth, hugging a Labrador—had slipped slightly out of its frame, the corner bent, the glass smudged. She flinched and looked away.

In my Olax glasses, she appeared as a red outline: sharp, glowing.

"We believe we should all Affirm," said Mr. Miller, his purple outline shivering, cloudy-amethyst fingers clenching and unclenching at his sides. He glanced again at the mercurial projector, then at his wife, as if searching for a cue. "We've all felt the terror, before the glasses and even after—when they slip."

"It's truly awful," added Mrs. Miller, glancing in his direction, a hint of resentment flaring in the digital aura around her silhouette. "A horror."

"It is," said Mr. Miller. "But it doesn't have to be."

Mrs. Miller flipped off the light switch. The projector vibrated, illuminating the wall.

"Those who haven't seen, this is where we're headed."

"Consider it," said Mr. Miller, his voice calm, the practiced edge of a salesman.

Piano music began playing. Upbeat, propulsive. Then, Olax—the same ad Sophie had whispered in her sleep:

In the OlaxVerse, life doesn't have to be scary. We can all choose.

A figure stood inside a glowing sphere, eyes closed, body limp. The screen flickered and their face faded—pixel by pixel—until there was nothing left.

Surrender your form and become free. In our state-of-the-art simulation your consciousness determines what you see AND how you appear.

The same figure now stood in a field of yellow flowers, its grey body stretched, becoming an emerald dragon, scales glistening.

Take a deep breath, relax. We, here at Olax, have developed your ultimate solution to The Psychological Event.

The screen cut to a futuristic cityscape. Neon lights, flying cars. Various avatars with big, demented grins on their faces.

Trade in your glasses for the life you were always meant to have—

Mr. Miller switched on the lights. The projector's pulse died. The room was silent, except for the new-age drone of the Olax piano still looping in the background.

We sat there, staring at the frozen image on the wall. Grinning avatars, neon skies.

Adam's jaw clenched. "When you Affirm . . . what happens to the bodies?"

Mr. Miller adjusted his glasses. "They're . . . taken care of."

The small crowd murmured.

"And Jessica?" Adam's voice cracked. He looked past them at the family photos. "She's just a kid."

"She is," Mr. Miller said gently. "Just not *here* anymore."

Mrs. Miller cut in. "We all need to realize that these . . . things." She gestured vaguely at her body. "Aren't *us* anymore."

"Not us?" Adam's voice rose. "Jesus Christ. Then what are we?"

"You want to live in constant fear when you can leave it behind?" Mrs. Miller shot back. "Stay here if you want, Adam. While you're busy clinging to your pride, your daughter's suffering." She exhaled sharply. "Jessica isn't suffering. She's *free*."

I pictured Jessica and Sophie playing in our backyard, their bodies strangely beautiful in the light of memory.

Adam shook his head. "So that's it? You just uploaded her? Like a damn PDF?"

"She's safe now," Mr. Miller murmured, his purple form pulsating in my glasses. "Just try to understand."

I imagined the three of us in Olax's machine, three cartoons with empty smiles. Would those digital echoes have anything real left inside?

Mrs. Miller scanned the room with glowing wet eyes.

"We'd like for you all to come, too," she said.

The thought of Sophie cowering and shivering after a slip flashed through my mind. It had happened that morning—she'd collapsed into a yellow blur against her bedroom wall, Olax filter muffling her screams. All I could do was speak to her from behind a veil. Our separation was absolute. We were already digital phantoms, unable to touch, unable to see each other as we truly were. Maybe, in this other world, I could hold her again. Maybe, in there, whatever was left of her wouldn't be afraid.

I glanced at Adam, then looked at the floor. "How do we Affirm?"

Adam glared at me, his eyes shimmering blue.

"Thomas," he said. "*Really?*"

I shook my head. For a moment, I pictured us in college, lips grazing in the quiet dark, a time when the weight of our bodies had meant something beautiful rather than something monstrous.

"Just sign here," said Mrs. Miller. The Olax piano continued droning in the background.

I reached for the clipboard.

The ad continued, on a loop: *Choose Freedom. Choose Escape.*

Adam pleaded. His voice broke. Something about Sophie, about trying, about hope.

Out of the corner of my glasses, I saw his hand twitch.

But he never touched me. Never reached for my arm.

And I knew he never would.

Not in this world. Not in these bodies.

I signed.

Adam's breath caught.

I watched his blue shadow on the wall, a hunched outline, then felt the cold weight of my choice settle into my bones.

That night, I took the pillow between us and dropped it to the floor. Adam sighed, a low, defeated sound. I was forcing him to confront the space between us, the silent repulsion that could only be bridged in the OlaxVerse.

We lay in the dark, bodies edging away from each other, shrinking like nightcrawlers in the sun.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eoin Nordman is a writer from Michigan who now lives in Berkeley, CA. His work explores themes of existentialism, identity, and disconnection through speculative fiction and magical realism. He writes weird stories about broken people navigating broken worlds, often blurring the line between the surreal and the painfully real. His work has appeared in *Maudlin House*.

THE PALMS OF MY HANDS ARE COVERED IN EYES

by Mercury Sunderland

the palms of my hands are
covered in eyes. unblinking.
from even my basic privacy
there they are staring at me. i

tread down hallways
that spiral & spin

gravity has lost meaning
what used to be floor
becomes wall becomes ceiling

at night i hear the crash
of buildings that fall. i
stagger & my deviated
brain stretches itself.

sugar coats eyesight
the package warns me
not to drive anywhere.

i stagger & struggle
what i wish to forget
will not leave my hands

so i find solace
in the stacks of weed butter
frozen in my freezer

created by my drug counselor uncle

syrupy drinks
with a hint of adult

packages of sweets
with a certain ingredient

is reality so bad
that i must escape it so often

in the center of me
finds the coursing black hole

wishing to swallow
what world i have left

is it really so bad
that i exist
in this world
that doesn't want me here—

the palms of my hands are
covered in eyes. unblinking.
from even my basic privacy
there they are staring at me. i

chew & swallow.
i consume.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mercury Sunderland (he/him) is an autistic, gay, trans man from Seattle. He's been published by University of Amsterdam's *Writer's Block*, UC Davis' *Open Ceilings*, UC Riverside's *Santa Ana River Review*, and also UC Santa *Barbara's Spectrum*.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR REWILDING THE WASTELAND

by Emma Burnett

I.

Line up. Jostle for a seat on the packed bus. Sit in it uncomfortably as the bus drives deep into the night, deep into the forest. Wonder if it's the size of a city or a state or a continent.

Keep your eyes down. Try not to make eye contact with the neatly planted rows.

Disembark.

Stand around. Wait. Don't talk to your neighbors. Don't ask why they're here.

Half-listen to the recording that comes out of the speaker on the wall. Hang your head like everyone else. Sigh deeply. Pretend there were other choices you could have made. That wouldn't have led you to this.

II.

Sit in an office. Sign the paperwork. Ten years, fifteen. An extra five for all the air miles. Minus one for all the Veganuaries. As few years as the court allows. More, if you want to look like a martyr. Tick the 'more' box. Hope that you will barely notice the passing of time. Believe that everyone will be cut loose at the end.

Stagger into a changing room. Ignore the smell of fear and sweat.

Strip off. Pack everything tidily into a bag. Pack the bag tidily into a box. Put a name on the box. Everything in due process.

Don't look at your neighbors.

III.

Walk into the room, just large enough for the cot and the equipment. Don't look at the equipment. Don't flinch at the dirt underfoot.

Try not to wince as they insert a stent. Try not to dry heave at the color of the liquid in the bag dripping into you. Lie with your arms above your head. Lie still on the table.

Lie rigid on the table.

Shudder as your skin hardens. Cry out as your fingertips split. Glance to the side. Catch a glimpse of your arm. Whimper softly. Wonder if your voice will remain at the end of this. Wonder if your eyes will.

Ride a sudden wave of nostalgia for the bits of your body you always hated. Wonder what was so wrong with your legs, your stomach, your butt, your hair. Wish you could still sob as it all changes. Feel the liquid diffuse into the roots at your feet, the leaves on your hands. Transpire saltless tears.

Silently pray that you'll get all those parts back.

IV.

Feel yourself compressed as the rigid bodies are stacked around you, on you. Signal stress. Drop leaves. Signal relief as the pressure is released, as one by one they are lifted off, transplanted. Strain your eyes to watch as they are inserted into the ground. Feel the pressure of the robotic arms as they transfer you.

Stand upright in the new grove, eyes wide in the bright sunlight. Glance at your neighbors. See them glance at you. Wonder why your eyes are the only things that still function. Curl your root. Do not transmit.

Transpire.

Stand quiet but for the rustling of leaves in the wind. Feel the vibrations. The rustles and the occasional creak, the occasional groan, as the wind whips through the stand, as buses rumble past.

Soak up the sun. Soak up the carbon. Stand in an inhospitable wasteland, and do a good deed. Atone for your past. Ten years. Twenty. More. Pay off your debts. Pay off your penalty. Pay it forward.

Taste in your roots a shared question. Together in stands, wonder how you will know when your time has been served. Wonder how anyone knows. How anyone is released. How anyone could ask. Exchange a shared unease.

Watch buses come down new paths. Watch people avert their eyes. Watch as the forest continues to grow.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emma Burnett is a researcher and writer. She has had stories in *Nature: Futures*, *Mythaxis*, *Northern Gravy*, *Apex*, *Radon*, *Utopia*, *MetaStellar*, *Milk Candy Review*,

Roi Fainéant, *JAKE*, and more. You can find her on Twitter and Bluesky @ slashnburnett or emmaburnett.uk.

THE ONEIROMANTIC SHEEP

by Frank Baird Hughes

We clatter along the black hardpath, land bright under the morning light of the star. The paddocks we leave behind are grazed down to nubs. The pleasure of fresh meadows and the company of other sheep await. We pass first through this hot country, uneasy at the urine of predators.

* * *

The flock and their shepherds were halfway to the Christmas-feast when the coyotl trotted out of the late afternoon haze and onto the old motorway. Low and slinky, they fanned out around the lead rams and Samuel, who was standing point of balance to push the flock forward. He called back to warn Min, his apprentice and granddaughter.

Min walked forward toward the coyotl, keeping herself between them and the sheep.

The rams huffed. In the long-ago, Samuel figured, their ancestors would have fled. But the terraformer had long since changed Avunculus, the living things on it, and their relations.

The coyotl edged closer, issuing yips and mutter-talk, their yellow lantern eyes big and hopeful. Some walked on two hind legs, others on all fours. A female with six swollen dugs extended a hand tipped with long slender fingers. In the other, held low and against her waist, she gripped a kitchen knife scavenged from some midden. Her face was hollow and sad.

Min yelled, windmilling her arms. The coyotl paused, heads tilted.

Samuel sighed and raised his shotgun, ancient but able to fulfill the basic function. The storms that came off the orange star over a century ago had ruined gauss guns, nerve inducers, and all other electronic weaponry. But anyone whose great-grandparents had squirreled away one of the old, loud troublemakers held advantage on the road.

Wearing big, obsequious grins that split their chimeric faces in two, the coyotl moved off to beg or steal dinner elsewhere. Samuel said, “Mmm hmm,” long and

loud, locking gazes with the female as she slunk away. The coyotl melted into the badlands.

The rams lifted their foreheads and butted each other in a congratulatory show of martial prowess.

Min softened her spine and exhaled.. “Are they gone for real, you think?”

“Yeah.” Samuel scowled. “But who told you to move up front?”

“Wanted them to have a better look. They remember people they meet on the highway, right?”

“They remember the gun. The one in my hands. You, they don’t know from a rabbit.”

Min drew her mouth tight but kept quiet. Showing a bit of self-control.

They got moving. After a bit, Min said, “That one had pups.”

“Yep. Glad I didn’t have to leave them without a mom, I suppose.”

“I’m surprised we haven’t seen patrols out of Station Abbey yet.”

Samuel grunted. “Amateurs, and it shows. If we’d held Christmas-feast back home as usual, we’d have made sure the roads were clear.”

Min smirked, just a little.

“And the yelling,” Samuel continued. “You have to remember to speak calmly. Sheep can’t understand your words outside the dreamwork, but they pick up tone and body language just fine.”

“They really creep me out. Unnatural.”

She meant the coyotl, Samuel hoped. She didn’t really have as much bond with the sheep as he would have liked in an apprentice and heir.

They continued without incident, though yipping pierced the night. Once in sight of Station Abbey they stopped to bury the gun near the rusted megafaunal wreckage of an airplane. Whatever their purpose, firearms in settlement were immediate and irrevocable grounds for being expelled from the great exchange, the cashless, anarchic economy of people and things whose only edicts were set by the machine intelligence that resided within and behind the spacetime locus of the planet Avunculus itself.

Better to arm up in between towns, though.

Samuel and Min and the flock left home on Monday and arrived at the Christmas-feast on Thursday. They joined the influx of travelers—pigs, chickens, goats, a few horses, and their human representatives.

* * *

Our shepherds lead us through the crowds toward a patch of dirt for us to lie on. We move to the green forb pastures. The ewes, though too few, are coming into estrus, and the flock that lives here holds ground already. We hold many kinship ties with this flock as we encounter each other year over year. Our level of inbreeding is higher than optimal, and we should not mate with our double cousins and half-siblings. We chafe and chuff, waiting for the other flocks to arrive.

* * *

Samuel’s flock went its own way, baaing a path through the multispecies throng. The ewes were cycling and would soon engage the rams. Mate selection was their call, but Samuel hoped they’d give the flock out of Oslo Station a look over when they showed up. Some nice wool on those rams.

“I’m off to work a trade with one of those chicken-brokers,” said Min. “Make the omelet I’ve been craving all year.”

“Maybe think bigger than breakfast if you’re going to bother coming here,” said Samuel, shaking his head. “Use points on the wool to set us all up back home.”

“I was kidding about the omelet, boss. I’ll be back.” Min craned her neck as if sighting something and loped off.

Samuel rolled his eyes skyward and walked the handcart over to the pitch set aside for herders. Moving aside ointments and tools, he retrieved the tent. It was Earth-made, at a level of material science no longer possible in the backwaters of planet Avunculus. Airy and weightless, the fabric cooled you on the hottest day and kept you toasty in a blizzard. It fell into a shrinking category of old Earth artifacts that still worked after the century of geomagnetic storms that had destroyed electrical grids and shut down anything drawing power from them. Tech like the tent was straight out of an enchantment story about a lost fairy kingdom. A description, Samuel supposed, that fit old Earth well.

Tent was up. Minerva had not returned. Annoying, that.

Despite the noises of merriment and carousing coming off the market-town, he settled into his bedroll, supping on the morning’s fava beans with stiff flatbread. He prepared a cup of tea brewed from desert firmoss, a plant variant quickened long ago by the terraforming machine as a way for humans to enter into a semiotic frame with other species. Sipping on an earthen mug of desert firmoss tea, he unwrapped a book of old Earth mythology that he’d traded for at last-year’s Christmas-feast. The text had crossed the years wearing a fortified binding that smelled faintly sweet. Finding a position his sciatica liked, he read about Odysseus and the cyclops until he drank the tea down to the dregs.

* * *

The sheep as a conversational being does not exist outside of talking to humans. The godplanet changed this world so that sheep and humans and clover could live on it together. And to be able to speak to us, humans must also consume a plant.

Our shepherd sleeps. The human dreaming calls the flock into being.

* * *

The alkaloids in the desert firmoss tea opened Samuel's mind. A second presence entered, the collective consciousness of the flock. It manifested as Torpy, an old wether. Dead now for twenty-five years, the castrated male had ended life as a flock elder.

"Entering interface mode. Where is the flock from Oslo Station?" Torpy asked. Except it didn't really say the words to produce the voice in Samuel's head. Rather, it grunted with a low rumble, hoofed the ground, and tilted its head.

"They're coming. Everyone's coming to the Christmas-feast at Station Abbey this year."

"Not many ewes here. The rams are upset." The wether chewed its cud, snorted twice, and farted.

"Give it some time. The Christmas-feast was moved last minute on account of Station Abbey putting up most of the feastwealth in November—" Samuel broke off, knowing the sheep didn't understand or care about the details of human economics. "Look, Torpy, folks have to make travel arrangements. Can you tell me how many ewes have already mated and conceived? Make output percentage."

Torpy's voice stiffened into a machine cadence. "Of ewes of reproductive age and condition, fifteen percent are mated, and five percent are now pregnant."

"Oh no. Try to wait. The lambs' health depends on you mating with the flock out of Oslo Station."

"Correct. The inbreeding coefficient for this flock is currently thirteen hundredths."

"Well, Oslo Station will be here soon." Samuel hoped this was true. "I'll be around tomorrow to look at vitals. Maybe some high nutrient treats for our expecting ewes."

"We've also several with hooves that need attention after the hardpath."

"I just had the farrier out!"

"Hardpath is unkind to our hooves. You will see to our needs?"

Samuel sighed. "I always do."

* * *

Impatient, impatient, the rams and ewes sing. Sheep begin surreptitious liaisons by ones and twos. The wethers say to wait; weak lambs will hurt the flock.

"This is outside our control," they say. They are lost to lust.

The wethers enter council. "This mating situation is unprecedented. In the times ago, rams and ewes come to us."

Torpy speaks now. "The human elder Samuel explains this: The humans move the Christmas-feast. What should he do?"

"Plan ahead. That is what humans say they do for us."

"When he can no longer walk, who will negotiate trades of wool? Medical care? Pastures? The human elder Samuel is old. He sires none that live."

"He has a younger, the human Minerva."

"He doesn't think she is mature enough."

"And she mates with a stranger who smells of other flocks."

"Other flocks? Perhaps we should meet this new shepherd!"

"Perhaps we should think to seasons ahead."

One hundred percent of the wethers agree.

* * *

Samuel wanted to raise a traveler's mug of light Christmas beer to cut the heat of the day. He rose and walked north toward the brewers' district.

Passing the cheesemongers, Samuel saw Minerva in conversation with a man. The man had the fair, sunburned features one often saw on Oslo Stationers. That village had been established by settlers from Earth's northern climes, quite unlike this part of Avunculus, even with its milder orange star.

Casting an irritated glance at Minerva, who was probably arranging some liaison, Samuel passed without approaching and soon inserted himself into the maze of drinkeries, where he soon found the beer he sought, produced by a sentient yeast. They soon reached an arrangement—a few thousandths of a point on the flock's expected wool harvest for two mugs of beer—and the brewer-broker poured Samuel a draught of the yeast's fermented waste.

* * *

The flock from Oslo Station has arrived. We feel it edging at our senses, just outside our organs of perception. Something diverts them around our pasture.

An offer in the night. A hastily assembled manifestation to answer the call. It is the stranger the human Minerva has mated with. He smells of rye grass and loam. Oslo Station.

"Hello, hello," he says. He smells younger, healthier than the human Samuel.

"Stranger," we say.

"My name is Haaken."

"You are a shepherd," we say, interest in the tilts of our heads. "You smell of sheep."

"Yes. I brought the flock from my home in Oslo Station."

"Where are they? Why do they not come?"

"It is not safe. The last-minute change of the Christmas-feast left Station Abbey unprepared to secure the roads south of here. There are too many coyotl about."

"Why not bring them to the pasture? No coyotl ever intrudes."

"I left them somewhere safe outside of town. They, too, are eager to mate, but I hope to first arrange a good liaison on their behalf. Bring them into the settlement and they might not be willing to wait."

"We can relate."

"I could take you to meet them."

We stomp our hooves at that. "We never pasture outside settlement. We never travel far without the human Samuel."

"I have been meeting with his apprentice and granddaughter," Haaken the shepherd says. "She says he'll agree to my proposal."

We study humans year over year and know something of their ways, so we ask the new human this: "And what do you offer the human Samuel?"

"I have promised him medicines for worms. Tools for hoof care. I want fine lambs in my flock as well. Is he your master? Do you work for him?"

We show our foreheads at that insult.

Some of us have the skittish feeling that comes before the storm. But some of us want the mating season underway. Some of us are curious what other humans might offer.

It is strange to make an introduction this way. But the count is taken. Seventy-two percent of the wethers agree we should visit the Oslo Station flock. Eighteen percent opine that the human deceives. Ten abstain. But all note that the flock from Oslo Station is present-but-not-here.

We have decided.

* * *

Something pinged at his consciousness, and Samuel came to in the dark. While it existed, the market-town never entirely stilled or slept, but the crowd-roar outside had died down into the hubbub of smaller roving groups of revelers and drunks and dealmakers. That was not what had awoken Samuel. He felt an urge to move, to crowd close to others, and flee some danger.

An alien biology was using his mind to articulate its desires. No, not alien—it was the sheep, whose wills and wants had come to overlap his over the years of herding—but they entered all the same from some place outside him, outside his evolutionary lineage. The machine that had shaped the planet so that humans could live there had bent many points of congruence among living things to make this possible. When Samuel drank the firmoss tea at bedtime to take meetings with the flock, it promoted lucid dreaming and the cross-species articulation of neurologies. The sheep's emotional state was panic rounding the curvature of his mind across its horizon.

The sheep were calling out: lost.

Pausing to slide on his shoes, Samuel leaned over and shook his apprentice's tent. "Minerva, wake up!"

Min poked her head out, squinting, eyes red, hair tufted. "What's wrong, boss?"

"Need you to help look for the sheep."

"Didn't they take themselves to the pastures?" Min asked, sleepy confusion and concern battling for dominance on her face.

"Did last I looked. Now they're somewhere else."

"Alright, I'm coming." The apprentice ducked back in the tent to get dressed.

Samuel called to her. "Where's your friend?"

Min re-emerged, buttoning a flannel jacket against the night chill. "*Haaken* had to go check his flock. What makes you think something's wrong?"

"Got that feeling like when lambs are too far. Except a thousand times stronger. What did your friend say he was doing?"

"Not sure. We were out with some fellas from down Manhattan Station. Then he said he had to go."

"You reckon he knows his business, your friend?"

Min nodded firmly. "Oh, yes. He just needs to put together his own flock." Her mouth made a bow, sour and tight, and she added, "His master won't let him though."

Samuel knew the shepherd out of Oslo Station from Christmas-feasts past. "Old Erna's not one for promoting her apprentices."

"She wants to keep him working until she's ready to retire. Probably the day before her funeral."

Samuel nodded. "Ambitious then."

"He says he just wants a fair chance."

Samuel ignored that. He said instead, "Haven't seen Erna yet, have we?"

Then they reached the paddock. It was empty.

* * *

We make passage through the night. Some of us nap while walking but most are awake, watchful. Two rams lead. The human stands behind our point of balance to drive us forward. The flock moves off the hardpath and onto the trail toward the wastes. Grazing in that country will occur near water sources or not at all. The smell of water and sheep drifts faint upon the breeze. Through it winds a scent of predator, fresh.

* * *

"We're wasting time," said Samuel to his apprentice. "I'm going to show you something. Hop in there and bring me a handful of dirt."

"Dirt?"

"Yeah, the stuff they stand on. And make sure it's dirt our sheep have trodden."

Min made a wobbly attempt to leap the fence but thought better and used the gate. After some consideration inside the paddock, she scraped together a small handful of rocky soil.

"Be sure to get the turds, too!" said Samuel. Min walked over to Samuel, gripfull of pasture dirt held before her. Samuel held out his hand. Min tipped her hand to let it pour into Samuel's. "Now watch." Samuel squatted. "See what I do with my fingers. I'm making them into an antenna."

"What's that?" she asked.

"Way of calling up the godplanet. Goes back to when settlers of old could talk to it directly. Now I'm going to toss the dirt and see what happens." Samuel cast his hand. The sand, clay, bits of rock, and sheep pellets scattered in an arc across the paddock gate apron. They seemed to hang in space, each in its own consideration of where to land, then fell together with a patter like rain.

Min stood, agape.

"This is a map," said Samuel.

She closed her mouth, cocked her head. "Really?"

"Yeah, really." Samuel brushed his hands against his jerkin. "Look. The turds fell here. What do you think that means?"

Min furrowed her brow. "Those are the sheep?"

"Very good! You can call that copromancy. Godplanet gave us that to read each other better. What of the gravel and bits of quarry rubbish here?"

"Are those . . . rocks?"

Samuel sighed. "The bluffs. The sheep are moving toward them. The red dust that fell here is Station Abbey. The gray line is the road."

After a long pause. "You think the sheep have left the road."

"Indeed. Or were taken from it."

"But there's no water. Might be bobcats or coyotl prowling. Why would they go there?"

"That's what I mean to find out." Samuel rose, looking down at his apprentice until she stood as well. "Let's gear up then. Water, ration. Star rises soon. We'll pick up the other thing where I left it."

They made quick time out of town to the spot where Samuel had buried the shotgun. Min put Samuel's folding shovel to work and soon retrieved a scuffed plastic storage container. Samuel dusted the lid clean, then popped it off and retrieved the shotgun. He broke it to give it a looksee the way his ma had taught him. Clean, two shells loaded, safety on. Ready to go.

* * *

In the drylands, our wethers meet with those of Oslo Station, and we learn a thing: The human Haaken drove them out of Oslo Station in the night, the way as he did us. Their shepherd did not accompany them and none have heard her voice in many days. They distrust the human Haaken but 61% of them feel he knows this country better than they. Better than us as well.

In the distance, blurry figures astride the path. We cannot see them, but we know the scent of fur and dust and predator wafting over. The coyotl from before.

The human Haaken approaches. He has a tool we do not recognize. He thrusts it into an ewe, slicing her open.

The rams charge forward.

* * *

They made good time off the road. The flocksign was all but reading itself out loud: fresh-turned dirt to the side of the trail, tufts of wool stuck against a tumbleweed. A couple of hours into the hike, they picked up the baaing of the flock itself.

"Careful," said Samuel as they turned a bend set against a low bluff. "Could be our man climbed up there and is waiting to drop a rock on us."

"Which man?" asked Min, a little heated-sounding.

"Whatever man's got the—" They both stopped at the sight of blood drips that led off the path into the bush.

"Aw, crap," said Samuel. In the distance, staccato yips and a mournful howl. Samuel unslung the shotgun and doubled his pace.

* * *

The human Haaken is blocked from the ewe. He points the coyotl toward her. The coyotl shove and screech forward. We panic and flee. This triggers something in the coyotl. We run. The air is full of bloodsmell. We are bitten, bleeding.

It is hard to think and speak when we are scattered and frightened.

They corner three rams. A fatal mistake! They fight back against the coyotl, driving them under hoof and horn. A coyotl squeals blood. The others retreat. We defend us. Not the human Haaken. No shepherd-protector he, stumbling back on two unsteady feet, face twisted and dark stain spreading across his chest, arm pressed to neck.

* * *

So intent was Samuel on reading flocksign that he missed a faint scuffing of dust across the path. His foot hit the dust, and a fine wire sprang up to cut deep across both legs at the shin. He crumpled. Legs twisted. Waiting for the pain to come to rest. When it did, he yelped.

Min, who'd been working hard at keeping up with the old man, stopped short.

A silhouette slid between them and the mid-morning sun.

"Hello again," said Haaken. Hard to hear his words. Hard to make him out in the backlight of the orange star. Haaken stretched a hand in their general direction. He was holding his shoulder with the other, as if he'd slept wrong.

Samuel had fallen atop the shotgun, concealing it from view. He tensed the muscles in his core and shoulders, ready to roll over and bring the gun to bear.

Haaken swayed a little. Then he plopped down fast, landing upright on his butt. He sat there with his legs splayed across the grit. In his outstretched hand, a long knife, a monomolecular blade. It fell to his side and, though the monoblade was presumably functional, requiring no electronics, Haaken made no effort to recover it. He wore an ancient Earth surplus t-shirt soaked in blood down the left side.

"You got bit?" asked Samuel.

"Yes. Stabbed, too." Haaken indicated his left side then pointed at Samuel's legs. "Those tripline cuts are bleeding pretty badly."

"You set those?"

"Not me. Them." Haaken motioned vaguely to the badlands.

"They didn't think the sheep you offered them was enough?" The story was about told now, Samuel figured. Haaken had run off with old Erna's flock. Had he left her past retirement and all other concerns? Seemed possible, even likely. Haaken had planned a flockjacking to build his numbers. Came to the Christmas-feast but couldn't bring whatever sheep he'd gotten away with into the settlement lest they blab about their missing shepherd. Negotiated with the coyotl for safe passage: Here, have a couple of sheep. But the coyotl had wanted them all.

"Something like that," said the blond man.

Samuel rocked up onto one side. Dry season and hot out, but he felt cool and dizzy.

Haaken had stopped talking—maybe he'd died having said enough. But then he staggered up, still gripping the knife in one blood-slicked hand.

"It's not like I can go home," he said, his words dressed up as reasonable explanation. He advanced on them.

Min bent and yanked up the shotgun, socked it against her shoulder,, and pulled the trigger. Despite the aching laceration across his legs, Samuel winced away from the blast. Haaken staggered back and plopped down, his mouth making a loose circle. Slowly, he sank down to face the sky.

"Did you just miss?" said Samuel.

"Well, yeah, but I meant to scare him. So not really." Min trotted over, training the empty shotgun on Haaken while she retrieved the monoblade. She came back. "I think he's down anyway."

Min dropped the gun. Samuel bit back his correction of her mistreatment of a weapon. As gently as she could, Min propped Samuel's legs up on his pack. She had a careful, sure touch gained from handling sick livestock, but as she tied off two touniquets, Samuel felt little, which was worrisome.

"I'll run back to Station Abbey to get help, grandpa," she said. Samuel motioned to his ears and she repeated herself, louder. Min hitched the straps on her pack then ditched the entire thing. She looked at Haaken once but didn't approach.

"Sure," said Samuel. "Before you go, help me set up here."

"What else do you need?"

"Get my medicine bag."

Minerva nodded and eased the black nylon pouch off Samuel's waist. She set it alongside the monoblade and the shotgun. She looked at the old man pushed small into the dust and her eyes welled up, blurring the scene. She wiped away the tears. "I'll run fast. Please be okay, grandpa." She kissed the top of his head and took off back to the road, coltish legs propelling her back to the Christmas-feast.

Samuel yelled out, "Hurry up!" but it came out too hoarse and quiet to be heard. Samuel shook his head. Dumb Minerva for thinking she could run there and back in time. Samuel couldn't deny, however, that his apprentice, his

granddaughter, had kept calm in a crisis. And, of the three humans, she was the only one not lying on the ground.

He chewed the desert firmoss and forced himself to swallow. He was exhausted and the noon sun had narrowed down to an orange sliver that just cut the black. Not much time now if he was going to do it. Samuel fumbled a devil's trumpet out of the pouch into his mouth. Then another. And a third. Powerful hallucinogen where it grew on Avunculus. Maybe enough to kill a full-grown ram. Or a man. But when you had to do a thing, best to see it through.

If this worked, he'd be in a strange position for a shepherd, no doubt about that. Maybe he'd stay put awhile then retire to whatever came after. Then, unlike old Erna, he'd let his apprentice have her turn. But not just yet.

Sheep were gathering just over that rise where the blond man had left them. Samuel rose. His body looked crooked, discarded on the dustpack.

Time to manage the flock.

* * *

"Interfacing."

"Run medical diagnostic. On me."

"You suffer a traumatic injury. And organ failure from something grazed."

"Body's worn out. Thought I could join you for a while. Continue living the pastoral life, you know?"

"This flock network is not appropriate for storage of human consciousness."

"Oh. Well."

"Entering council." Torpy fades away to just a voice. "Ninety-two percent of us believe we can slow the organ failure and blood loss in your body while you remain with us temporarily."

"I did not know you could do medicine."

"This action uses your body's own responses. It does not stop or alter the cause of your injuries. It is also a technique we have developed without your direction."

"Oh. I see."

"Eighty-eight percent of us believe it is a foolish choice to follow the human Haaken here. Ninety-two percent of us would like to express appreciation for your herding and an apology for what is happening to you. But one hundred percent of us would like you to note that while many sheep die every year, no sheep would presume to live on inside your mind."

"So noted. And thank you."

* * *

Samuel fell back across the distance, and landed hard, thrashing.

"Grandpa, stop! It's okay, you're safe."

"Oh, good." Samuel tried to open his eyes, but his lids felt leaden and gummed shut. Everything felt numb, but something held his body from below. A bed. An antiseptic smell suffused the room.

"Don't move too much, grandpa. You've got a lot of stitches."

"The flock make it back?"

A long silence. "I'm fine. Just a little sore and sunburned."

"Minerva. Thank you. Sorry." Samuel tried to scoot upwards, so he could see better, but nothing happened. His body felt off somehow, different.

"Why can't I open my eyes?"

"Doctors said the medical bugs will affect your vision and movement. It'll wear off."

"Am I going to like what I see when that happens?"

A pause. "They had to work to save your right leg. They have good microbiota here. You'll probably be walking again well before next Christmas-feast."

"When you get a chance, thank the flock for me, too. I might be off the firmoss for a while."

"I'd guess they're busy now with the Oslo Station flock. But after . . . they'd probably understand fine if you gave them some apples or alfalfa hay."

"Good idea, Minerva. I'll let you set up the trades. But . . ."

"But?"

"Last bit of advice, and then I'll shut up. You really should make it both. Ripe apples and alfalfa hay. And lots of it."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Frank Baird Hughes is a Philadelphia public school teacher and former (current?) anthropologist. He writes science fiction and fantasy stories about life and unlife reinventing one another. You can find him on Bluesky @cultureworrier and at frankbairdhughes.com.

MANNEQUIN MOM

by Rebecca O'Bern

My mom decided when I was ten
she was different from other moms.
The year after nana died, she dropped
therapy, then traded herself in for a
replica of her body, fully equipped

with a new consciousness and self,
backed up and downloaded in a brand
new fiberglass and plastic frame. It
was cool at first, getting a new mom,
but she started pouring wine

into my cereal as toys gathered dust.
We played croquet only one time
for Mother's Day, shooting balls
with mallets until our fingers bled
—well, my fingers bled. More perks:

all her spare parts and plastic doohickeys
which I wasn't allowed to tinker with.
Not having a stomach anymore helped
keep her figure, she said. Good for her.
In fact, my mom is still alive, if you can

call it that—she says the software updates
from the manufacturer really do help,
more than the antidepressants ever did.
She's finally feeling like herself again.
I look up and squeeze her plastic hand.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca O'Bern is a writer published in *Notre Dame Review*, *Whale Road Review*, *Barely South Review*, *Buddhist Poetry Review*, *Storm Cellar*, *Connecticut Review*, and elsewhere. A recipient of the Leslie Leeds Poetry Prize, she's also received honors from UCONN and Arts Café Mystic. Find her on Twitter @rebeccaobern.

TERMINAL LUCIDITY

by Julian Quaglia

Angelo Torres set down the micro-drill, leaned back, and examined his work. Aside from the blood trickling out of the old woman's skull, she looked perfectly at peace.

He grabbed a cotton pad and wiped away the crimson trail.

"That's the last one," he said, watching her vitals sift across the monitor. No jumps, no dips. Nice and steady. He dabbed at the wound until the blood ran dry, then he tossed the soiled pad away and peeled off his gloves.

To her son's credit, he did not shy away. Angelo turned, saw a medley of curiosity and grief writhing over the man's face. "Dave, if you need—"

He shook his head.

"The next part can be . . . unsettling," Angelo said. "I don't know if you want to see her—"

"I'm fine," he said. "Really."

Angelo nodded. Doing his best to mask a grimace, he stood from the bedside stool and shifted his weight to his left leg. The covers were still bunched up by the waist of the anaesthetized woman, a blemish on this little display of serenity. He folded them neatly beneath her emaciated neck and stepped back. Every box had been checked.

He turned to the prototype and pulled it close. It didn't exactly inspire confidence—he knew that. A cold metal chassis crowded by buttons and screens, a tangle of coiled wires, and a high-voltage warning to boot. He'd seen the narrowed eyes, the clenching jaw as he wheeled it across the hardwood. He'd felt Dave's cynicism, his skepticism—his regret.

And he'd fed off of it.

Angelo unraveled the wires with the patience of an old farmer mending a barbed fence. He slipped his hands inside a fresh pair of latex gloves, fastened the wire to a tiny electrode needle, and steadied it before the tiny hole.

Then, he pushed.

He pushed, and he pushed, and he did not stop pushing until he felt the squishy reverberation of cerebral paydirt. One by one, he slid the electrode needles into her brain until her withering face became a canvas of slithering silicone.

"Will all those wires be sticking out of her during the—" Dave paused.

"The lucidity phase? I'm afraid so."

Angelo rolled back on his stool, typed a few prompts into the prototype's input terminal. Screens flashed. The noisy *whir* of the fan picked up. He looked up at Dave. "Are you ready?"

Dave closed his eyes, exhaled through pursed lips. "Yeah."

"Very well," Angelo said. "Gather the family."

Dave left the room. Angelo combed a sweaty hand through his thinning hair, leaned in close to the woman's ear. "Come on, Gloria." He watched the shallow rise and fall of her chest.

Dave led the family in through the door—kids first, ushered by the protective hands of their parents. A young girl started to cry. A boy covered his eyes. The adults grimaced, reproachful eyes flickering from Dave, to Gloria, to the prototype. They staggered forward, gathering around the foot of the bed in a haphazard semicircle.

Angelo gazed across the crowd. "The speed and emotional clarity of the re-animation can be striking. We typically see anywhere from three to eight minutes of lucidity—don't feel rushed, but don't be too greedy with your time, either."

He swallowed, finger hovering above the activation button.

"Okay—here we go."

Down it came. A finely-tuned surge of electricity rippled out of the machine, through the wires, and across the woman's brain. Her eyes sprang open, clear as a polished mirror, and her pupils swelled.

"Dave!" She looked around, lips quivering. "I'm so happy to see you!"

"Mom!"

A chorus of voices spilled out.

"Grandma!"

"Oh my God!"

"Hello! Hello!"

The family bunched and closed around the bed. Arms reached out; hands touched. Tears flowed.

Angelo stood, squirmed back, and made his way around the bustling throng of happiness. It was not his to embrace. He was not welcomed, nor did he seek such welcome. His elation lay at some distant point in the future. There was no date, no appointment marked in his calendar, but the moment *would* come. Seeking refuge on a couch in the main foyer, he threw his head back, took a deep breath, and wrestled with the urge to pull out a cigarette.

The moment would come, he told himself, closing his eyes and sinking into the soft, plush cushions.

"Dr. Torres?"

Startled, he looked up into Dave's bloodshot eyes. The commotion in the other room had settled into a quiet symphony of soft whispers. The family was still, arms wrapped around each other. She had died, then.

"I—I can't thank you enough."

Angelo grimaced and drew himself upright. "Honored to have helped, my friend." He exhaled. "Now—"

"I mean, just . . . you should've seen her, doctor. I haven't seen her like that in—God, I can't even remember."

"Remarkable, isn't it? Now, Dave, when it comes to—"

Dave took a long, deep breath and squeezed his palms into his eyes. "It's a miracle. Really."

Miracle? The word cut him, unsteadied him. "That's certainly one way to look at it." He pressed his palms into his tired eyes. "Now, as we discussed, your deposit covers transportation and set up. Successful lucidity is an extra thirteen-fifty."

"Oh, yes, yes, of course." Dave pulled out his phone and tapped, swiped, tapped.

Angelo's eyes rested on his own device, awaiting the familiar chime and the glorious, green memo that shot dopamine into his brain like a cold beer in the blistering heat.

Ching!

There was no further business to conduct. Angelo lurched forward, trying to harness his momentum to get to his feet, but the couch seemed to grab onto his sweater with strong, invisible hands. "Dave, give me a hand, will you?"

Dave helped him up. The family dispersed. He removed the needles from the woman's scalp and powered down the prototype. The chassis was warm under his hand, and he let the fan rumble a little while longer. Inside, inscribed across a microchip in a series of ones and zeros, lay a cache of data more precious than any sum of money.

The grind in his hip had softened to an ache. The prototype felt lighter, too. He lugged it out of the house, down the street and around the corner, where he'd stashed the rusting hunk of metal that got him from point A to point B.

* * *

"Flossie?"

Angelo deposited the cumbersome prototype against the wall and shuffled to the bathroom. "Florence? I'm home!"

No response—no surprise, and no matter, either. He called out over his shoulder while rummaging through the medicine cabinet. "Long day, Flossie. *Long* day." He grabbed the bottle of anti-inflammatories and spun the top off. "I can't wait for Corey to come back. Kid's a pain in the ass"—he popped a pill and swallowed—"but he carries the equipment."

The pain in his hip paled against the rumble of his stomach. "Just grabbing a bite," he said. "I'll be right in." The kitchen was spotless, but the fridge was desolate. He pulled out some meat and cheese treading just above expiration with one hand, and grabbed the mustard with the other. Muffled melodies floated down the hallway, ghostly pleas to hurry up and come relax. He slapped the sandwich together, tossed it on a plate, and cracked open a beer.

The bedroom was bathed in the warm glow of the setting sun. Angelo brushed past the foot of the bed and plopped down in the rocking chair by the window with a heaving sigh. Washing down stale bread with cheap beer, he stared into his wife's empty eyes. He regaled her with the story of another day, with problems met and problems solved, with thoughts that would have otherwise sunk from conscious to subconscious—as if the stroke had not stolen her faculties, but merely obscured them.

As if, somehow, she was listening.

He wracked his mind for something else to say, not quite ready to submit to silence. "Loving the outfit tonight, Flossie." Something had to be getting through. Somewhere, deep in the recesses of her mind.

"Nora always goes above and beyond, doesn't she? Even cleaned the kitchen before she left." He brought the beer to his lips. "Worth every penny, I'd say."

He waited for a response—a grunt, a gesture, a shift of the eyes. But she just lay, staring, staring.

The music stopped. He set the plate on the bedside table and swapped the record for another—the next in a long, revolving cycle. She'd given music her life; maybe music could give it back. He leaned closer and clutched her hand, half expecting her to squeeze back. "We're almost there, Florence. The money is steady. The research is good. I just need a little more data, a little more time. I promise."

He guided her hand back down to the mattress. He leaned back, and before he could decide whether to make the long trip to his side of the bed, sleep was upon him.

* * *

Angelo limped through the bustling plaza, dodging impudent people and impatient drivers. The cane had been right there by the door, same spot it always

was, but he could never convince himself to grab the damn thing—could never permit the notion that he needed it.

And how quickly a simple admission could spiral into defeat.

He walked up to Closure, Inc. and frowned. His darling was falling into disrepair. The windows needed a good clean, the flowers were all but dead. The bus bench signs had helped, but rent depended on foot traffic. He'd have to squeeze time in somewhere to—

The light in the back room was on. He swung the door open and hurried inside. "Corey?" he yelled, doing his best to conceal the desperation in his tone.

"Back here!"

Angelo tossed his keys on the reception counter, flicked on the *OPEN* light in the window. The hip was feeling better already. He walked to the back and found his assistant feeding the rats.

Corey looked up, then motioned to boxes spilling out of the closet and papers strewn across the laboratory benches. "This what happens when I'm not around?"

Angelo shrugged. "The flowers need you more than the rats. Good trip?"

"Yeah. Much needed."

Angelo looked at the laptop propped open on the desk. "What are you working on?"

"Just going over the cases you had while I was gone." He slid back into his chair and kicked his feet up beside his laptop.

"Mm." Angelo pressed his lips together and skulked to the coffee maker.

"Any problems hauling that thing around?"

Angelo poured the boiling coffee into his mug. "Oh—no, no. The usual." He added some cream, tore open a packet of sugar, and dumped it in. He stirred—waiting.

"Ange?" The grating of chair legs against the floor, footsteps.

Here it comes.

"You ran Terminal Lucidity on a stroke patient?"

He discarded the spoon, faced his partner. "I did. Corey, we've been through this."

"Ange, it's only been approved for degenerative condit—"

"Degenerative conditions, I know. So, what, we're going to leave this whole subset of the population locked away in their mental prisons? Leave these grieving families without recourse? You should've seen these people, Corey. Tears and kumbaya all around."

"That's great," Corey said. "But they're not getting what they think they're getting."

"They sign the waivers—"

"Those are just covering your ass. You're selling them something the prototype *can't do.*"

Angelo waved him off.

"People are paying big money for a lucid experience. They want—" he groped for airborne words. "They want recognition. *Real* recognition. The gamma wave activity in traumatic inj—"

"Are you explaining to me how my own protocol works? Did you forget whose name was at the top of your thesis paper?"

"Ange, if they knew they were only getting surface-level recognition—"

Angelo slammed his mug down, sending speckles of coffee across the counter. "Please, they're so caught up that they don't even know the difference!" He shook his head. "If I was ever braindead in a hospital bed, I'd hope you'd have enough heart to send me off with a bang."

"Do you hear yourself? We're scientists, man."

"Oh! Excuse me; you were gone so long, I forgot you were the arbiter of all moral questions. Were you thinking about this while you were riding the waves, *man?*"

Corey rolled his eyes. "Come on, Ange."

Angelo advanced on him. "No. You know what? This is the problem with your generation. There's no gray area. There's no room for relativism. It's all black or white, moral or immoral. You don't have to think about keeping the lights on, you don't have to think about mortality, you don't have to think about—" He cut himself off. Flushed, he turned his back to Corey and grabbed his mug with a trembling hand.

"Think about what?"

"Nothing."

"Listen," Corey said. "I don't need to know. But if we're going to move forward together, we need to sit down and hash this out. We're making headway, Ange. We just need to be patient."

"Headway?" Angelo turned and laughed. "Poking and prodding around in rat brains gets us nowhere. We need real-time, human data. Every one of these patients brings us one step closer to solving this puzzle. I'm sure if these people *could* consent to that, they would."

Corey stared at him like he'd been asked to conceal a murder. "You're treating these people like guinea pigs."

Angelo blew on the coffee, took a sip. "Corey, *I* have final say around here. If you don't like it, there's the door." He turned to make another pot—it was going to be one of those days—and heard an incredulous laugh behind him.

"So much for gray area."

Angelo whipped around and glared at him. *And your mother? If you could have had one more conversation—*

The words rolled into his mouth, but the chime of the front door stilled his tongue. He turned to face the prospective customer with a professional mask glued to his face.

A wiry man staggered in, eyes down, hands busy with a dusty, dirty cap.

"Hello, my friend," Angelo said. "What can we do for you?"

The man took another step forward. He glanced up, and Angelo saw that he'd been crying.

"I need—my partner, she—"

His gaze fell back to the hat in his hands.

Corey stood up and walked around the counter. "Sir, why don't you have a seat? Do you want some water?"

The man obliged. He downed the cup of water, and his trembling lips parted. "My partner—she's not talking. It's like, she's there, but her mind's all locked up. I need to get in. I need to get in there, you know?" Lines rippled across his forehead, tugged at his eyes. "Can you help me get in there?"

Corey took the empty cup from his hands. "It depends—"

"—But I think we can," Angelo said, shrugging off Corey's silent protest. "What happened to your partner?"

The man swallowed. "Car accident. Doctors did all they could."

Angelo nodded. "I see. And her current level of function?"

"She can move if I help her. But, it's like she's in a fog, you know? Like, she's looking, but she's not *seeing*. You know?"

"Sir, can you give us a minute?" said Corey. He ushered Angelo to the back room with a glare and a jerk of the head.

Angelo smiled at the man. "One moment." The fabricated warmth crumbled on the turn of his heel; he marched to the back with vitriol bubbling in his throat.

"Ange, no."

"You're going to let this wretched soul walk out of here?"

"You're seeing green."

"And you're blind."

"Angelo!" He took a deep breath, mashed his palms against his eyes. "*Car. Accident.* Trauma, hemorrhaging—" He shot a finger toward the thinly drawn blinds. "You heard the guy. He needs information. A bright smile won't cut it this time."

"Listen," Angelo said. "I will make very clear the limitations. The risk, the cost, all of it."

"The limitation is that it *won't work*."

"Success, in this case, is subjective." Angelo turned and headed for the door.

"Ange, I won't go with you on this one," Corey said.

Angelo paused and sighed. "A shame."

* * *

Angelo parked on the side of a street ridden with potholes, surrounded by dead trees and graffiti. He would have thought twice about leaving his car here, had it been worth more than his shoes.

The heat was unbearable. Sweat trickled down Angelo's forehead, but the sun would not relent. Muttering and cursing, he lugged the prototype out of his car and hauled it up to the apartment's shabby front doors. The anti-inflammatories might as well have been candy.

He sagged against the wall of the elevator cabin, chest heaving, droplets of sweat detonating against the bleached carpet. Up it went, all the way to floor eighty-nine. The stairwell doors lurched open. He stepped out into the dimly lit hall, dragged the prototype to the end of it, and rapped his knuckles on 89B.

The apartment door flung open, and—what was his name? Ritchie? *Riley*—looked him up and down. "She's back here. C'mon." No sooner had the guy opened the front door than he ran down the hall and vanished behind the corner.

Angelo coughed, clutching the doorframe with one hand and gesticulating with the other, trying to spare his lungs. "Got any water?" he managed. Riley paced back, peered outside the front door, and all but yanked him inside. "Riley," he said. "It's hot, and I'm old. Please, a moment."

Riley's face twitched. He looked—pale. Sweaty and pale. He motioned to the couch.

It was low.

Very low.

Angelo felt the heat rising into his cheeks. "A chair, if you don't mind."

Riley jerked his head sideways.

"Bad hip," he mumbled.

The bastard really huffed, as if he'd just been asked for the shirt off his back. But he fetched a chair and a glass of water. Angelo sat down and leaned forward, sucking air through his nostrils and wiping his brow. He took the glass out of his jittery hands, and the water went down smooth.

"You going to be all right, old man?" Riley said.

"I'll be fine."

A phone rang in the other room. Riley about jumped through his skin before stiffening. "I need to take that," he said. "And then we need to go."

The reprieve did precious little for the thudding in Angelo's chest. This was not the same man who'd staggered into his store hours earlier.

He took a deep breath and wrinkled his nose at the scent of rotting food. The windows were closed; the blinds were shut. Junk was piled in the corner. The laminate table was wiped conspicuously clean.

He swallowed, and the saliva all but scraped against his still arid throat. The empty glass of water stared back at him, but he dared not ask for another. He fumbled around in his pocket and pulled out his phone.

Hey. I was completely wrong. I need you here, ASAP. 188 Hyperion Road, Suite 89B.

"*No*—wait-wait-wait!" Riley's muted ravings filtered in from the other room, indecipherable.

He could leave. Right now. The door was mere feet away; he could grab the prototype, lug it to the elevator—

A loud crash rang out from the other room. His heart jumped in his chest. Some primitive instinct glued him to his chair.

He pulled out his phone. No response. A shadow fell over him, and he froze.

"I'm tired of waiting, old man. Let's go."

To hell with this. "Go get her ready. Here—" He retrieved an isopropyl pad from his pocket. "I need her scalp to be clean."

Riley shook his head, motioned to the back room. "No. Get up, I'll grab your shit."

"*No*—wait, that's not necessary—"

Angelo pulled out his phone and typed with little regard for legibility, imploring Corey to hurry as the prototype rumbled past him. He shoved his phone in his pocket and, stealing one last glance at the front door, followed his livelihood down the darkened hall.

Inside the bedroom, fear dissolved into familiarity. There was a sickly-looking woman, illuminated by the dim glow of an overhead bulb, staring past him like a baby transfixed by a lightshow. The prototype sat beside her, and every button was an invitation. In this tiny sliver of chaos, there was order. The woman and the machine were a match; all he had to do was bring them together.

He took his seat by the edge of the bed and got to work. Once the anesthetics were flowing and her eyelids hung heavy, he pulled out the micro-drill and laid out the assortment of needle electrodes. He turned, raised his drill to the woman's face—and froze.

He lowered the drill and inched closer. A tiny hole, rimmed by thick, red scarring, sat just above her temple.

"You said it was a car accident," he said, running his finger over the wound.

"It—it was."

Angelo faced him. "I've studied brain damage for forty years. I know what a gunshot wound looks like."

"What's the difference?"

"What's the *difference*?"

Riley threw his hands up. "I couldn't take her to a doctor! You gotta help her, man. You need to get me in there." There was that pleading tone again.

Angelo closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Listen, how about I return your deposit, you take her to the hospital, and we go our separate ways? Gunshot wounds, they—"

"No. *No.* You told me you could help." Riley stepped forward, scowling down at him. His shaking hands curled into fists. "You *told* me."

"I didn't promise you anything. This—I mean, this changes things."

Riley paced around the room, dragging his hands across his face and burrowing them in his slick, dark hair. He mashed his eyes into his palms, clenched his teeth, and—stopped. He straightened up and fixed Angelo with a dark, icy glare.

"Are you fucking with me?"

"No," Angelo said. "I'm just—"

Riley settled his hand against something poking up from his belt, hidden beneath the folds of his baggy shirt. "Don't fuck with me, man."

Angelo threw his hands out in front. "Okay, okay. Just—calm down, okay? I will try. I'll try."

He turned to the anaesthetized woman, limp and indifferent to the drama unfolding around her. Riley's coarse, ragged breaths were crawling down his neck. He picked up the drill with a trembling hand and tried to steady it before her head.

He made more holes in her skull, then he pushed the needle electrodes through, one by one. Not perfect, but under the circumstances, acceptable.

"Okay. What now?" Riley said, hovering over his shoulder like a specter.

Angelo tuned the machine. "We try." It was impossible to say which memories would be hovering near the surface, but she would be happy. Of that, he made certain. He just hoped it was enough.

"Starting the procedure—now."

A surge of electricity. Her eyes fluttered open; her lips twitched into a smile.

"Riley," she whispered.

"Elsie!" He dropped to his knees and took her hands. "Elsie, Elsie; oh God, oh thank-you-thank-you-thank-you—" His head flopped down in her lap.

Tears welled up in Elsie's eyes. "I'm so happy to see you!"

Angelo felt his stomach starting to unclench, felt the sensation returning to his limbs.

"Elsie." —Riley looked up into her eyes— "Where's the money?"

"What?"

"Where's the money, Elsie? Where's the money you stashed?"

"It's—it's—"

Angelo held his breath.

"It's so *good* to see you again."

His stomach twisted up into a cold, hard pit and sunk into oblivion.

"They're going to kill us, Elsie!" He arched up, grabbed her by the shoulders. "Where's the money? Think!"

"I—I—" She was shaking; her big eyes darted around the room, looking for an answer, looking for help, landing on Angelo and growing wider still.

She faced Riley and whispered, "I missed you." His hands fell to her lap, and his head crumpled atop them. "Aren't you happy to see me?"

Angelo backed up slowly. He groped along the wall for the doorframe.

"Again." Riley lifted his head, fixed his reddening eyes on him. "Try it again!" Angelo felt the frame, turned, and ran. He looked over his shoulder—and bashed his shin into something hard.

A blinding pain surged through his leg as he crumpled to the ground. He crawled to the door. "Help!" he cried. He looked back—right into the barrel of a gun.

"Wait!" Angelo held his hand over his face as if it were coated in Kevlar.

"We're dead," Riley said. "You fucked us!" His finger trembled against the trigger.

"How much do you need?" Angelo said, squirming back from the barrel.

"What?"

"I can get you the money, just don't shoot!"

The door burst open behind him.

A shot rang out.

His world shook and spun. His vision went blurry, and then it dropped out.

"Ange!"

The sound of two bodies smashing into each other, dropping and rolling and struggling, but he couldn't pin any of it down, because he was vaguely aware of the bullet in his head, and the noises were distant, and receding, and small . . .

He felt it all slipping away, and he clutched on as tight as he could to the name—his wife's name—fluttering through that black, empty void.

* * *

There was a spark.

He felt the flow of electricity dancing between his ears. Warm, cozy vibrations filled the space that was, moments ago, vacant.

Had he—died? No. If he were dead—then—then what was this?

He groped for a memory, some relic or touchstone that could lend credence to one theory or disrepute another.

"Angelo?"

Angelo—ah, yes! His name. Angelo Torres.

Wait. Who had said that? Right! There must be an entire world out there. He just had to let it in. Color and flowers and light and—people! A tickle of excitement coursed through him.

He opened his eyes and blinked the blurry world into clarity.

His heart dropped, just a little.

He was in a bed with white, sterile sheets and walls to match. Tubes hung down from noisy monitors and slithered into his skin. There were no windows. Just harsh, fluorescent lights. A man with short blond hair and a friendly smile stood at the foot of his bed, resting his hand on some monstrous device. Its wiry arms crawled up the bed, terminating somewhere around—

His head?

He squinted hard at the man, sharpening his contours.

"Do you remember me?" the man said.

Oh, yes! Sure he did. But how? From where?

"It's Corey."

Right! That's it. "Cody—yes, hello!"

Something flashed across the man's face. He glanced down, just for a moment. And then he swallowed, and the little spasm had gone. "I've got someone here to see you."

Another visitor! Well, wasn't that just—

The man stepped aside. Behind him, hooked up to the same ridiculous machine, was a woman in a wheelchair. Her eyes beamed, and she cupped her hands over her mouth.

"Florence!"

He was so happy to see her.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julian Quaglia has been enthralled with science fiction ever since he booted up *Starcraft* for the first time. He started writing during the COVID lockdown. He lives in Calgary, Alberta, with his partner and two cats.

DISPOSAL-NOMICS

by Spencer Keene

Techno-landfills litter the landscape
like glitched hills, rusted mecha-junk
mountains strewn with makeshift
toe-stones & dumpy bot burners.

Nary an eye bats at acres of refuse,
garbage-yard scenes of obsolescence
planned, tar-oiled testaments to
capitalists' ravenous waste.

Sheet metal shacks stand in shadows
of gaudy billboards, ads erected
by glad-handing men who under-
stand irony as a posh new ore.

Time wears debris fields down
into plains of flattened alloy,
meadows of copper inhabited
by humans whose veins run
with elbow grease & steam.

Hope is a retired relic, discarded
in cash-fueled fires lit to light
Smith's slumber-less furnace,
endless supplies of beef tallow
candles & greenback cigars.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Spencer Keene (he/him) is a writer and lawyer from Vancouver, BC. His poetry and short fiction have appeared in a variety of print and digital publications, including *SAD Magazine*, *Sea to Sky Review*, *Star*Line*, and *Candlelit Chronicles*. Find more of Spencer's work at spencerkeene.ca.

CINNAMON

by Hayden Waller

It was February when we found her. A Wednesday night, if memory serves.

I was hanging out with my brother Sean in his room. We had *Korn Live* in the DVD player, and Sean was smacking the side of the TV whenever it started to go fuzzy, which was about a couple times a song.

"Fucking stupid-ass piece of shit," he grumbled, grinding his teeth.

"How much would it cost to get a new one?" I said.

He turned his head, looked at me like *what a dumb question*. "Not cheap."

"I have forty dollars saved from my birthday money."

"And what? You're offering to pitch in?"

"Yeah."

He exhaled slowly. The screen went scrambly again and he hit it with an open palm. "Thanks, Ash, but that's not your job."

Sometimes Sean let me smoke cigarettes with him in his room. He used to steal them from our dad because he wasn't old enough to buy them himself yet. But he got caught doing that a while back, so after that Sean got them off a guy called Jay-Mo at the woodshop he works at on the weekends.

I liked the way it made me feel. Not the smoking—getting to hang out with my brother. Whenever his friends were around, he pretended I didn't exist, which I guess made sense since I was three years younger than him. Just his fat, annoying little sister. But when it was just the two of us, he let me hang out on the edge of his bed while he sat in the La-Z-Boy. We ate toaster pastries and watched movies and we blew our smoke through a toilet paper tube stuffed with dryer sheets that we passed back and forth so the smell didn't get out under the door.

It was nice.

One thing about Sean's room was that he liked to keep the window open at night, even in the winter. Since the window was pretty much right behind the TV, you caught these glimpses of yourself moving in the glass. These glances always managed to pull my focus on account of what if there's someone in the yard? But it was always just one of us, shifting our weight around or taking a drag off a cig.

Except this one Wednesday night in February.

Right around the halfway point of the Korn DVD, I caught a flash of movement that definitely came from outside. My heart went into high gear and I looked over at Sean. His eyes were already searching my face, wide with surprise like *did you see it too*?

"The heck was that?" I said.

Sean rocketed up out of the chair and stuck his head out the window.

I stood up after him, craning my neck but struggling to look over the rounded hump of his back. "What do you see? What do you see?"

"Oh shit!" he said, pointing. "There's something—"

I put my hands on his shoulders and pulled myself up to my tippy toes, just managing to catch a flash of something pale and white slipping into the sagebrush past where the lawn ends.

"It's some kind of fucked-up possum," Sean said. "All white and bloated and shit."

I didn't think we had possums out where we were. But if Sean said we did, then he was probably right.

"Should we go see what it was?" I said.

Sean turned around, looked at me like *what the hell are you talking about*.

"You know, like, what if it's sick or something?"

"How you gonna help a sick possum?"

"I dunno," I admitted, sad.

Sean saw the look on my face and snorted. He pulled away from the window and put a knee on the cushion of the La-Z-Boy. He reached down between the armrest and the wall and pulled up a hammer from the floor. An old antique one, with a mallet-like head and a thick wooden handle. The one he likes to flip and catch in the air while he watches baseball.

"Fine," he said. "But I'm bringing this."

* * *

Dad hardly noticed us as we shuffled through the living room on our way to the back door. He was firmly planted in his chair, watching *Cops*, chuckling as four officers tackled a homeless man to the ground. It wasn't until he heard the metallic scrape and stutter of the broken sliding glass door that he said anything to us.

"Your mom'll be back soon," he grunted.

"Okay, and?" Sean shot back.

"Be back in time to help her unload the groceries, or I'll tan your damn hide."

We stepped out onto the weathered, sagging porch, and I wished immediately that I'd put on a jacket. It was freezing. I hugged my bare arms to my chest and shivered, watching my breath slip out like fog through my chattering teeth.

"What are you, cold?" Sean jeered.

"No," I said. A lie.

He led the way across the lawn, crunching through the top layer of frosted snow with each step. I followed in his tracks to keep the snow from spilling over the tops of my shoes. As we came up on the edge of the property where the BLM land started and the grass gave way to the sagebrush, we heard something:

Rustling, just on the other side of the brush line, followed by a wet guttural bleat.

Grrrrrllllgrrraaaahhh!

Both of us stopped.

I'd never heard anything like it, and judging from the look on Sean's face, neither had he. He gripped the hammer tight and I fell back behind him, making sure as much of his body as possible was between me and the possum.

Sean took a cautious step forward. Then another. He stepped around the sage and peered behind it. Suddenly my brother was cussing and I was screaming and both of us were scrambling to get away.

"What?" I huffed. "What is it?"

"Fuck! I dunno!" Sean whisper-shouted.

I sensed an opportunity to impress Sean with my bravery and took it. With careful steps I approached the bush and peered around. What I saw took my breath away.

There was something there, wriggling around on the ground and grunting in distress. We hadn't brought a flashlight, but even from the faint light of the moon I could tell right away this was no possum. This was something different. Like, *different* different. It looked similar to one of those fat grubs people find under the bark of dead trees, all pale and fleshy and tube-like—only this thing was the size of a small dog.

It had stubby little caterpillar legs along the length of its body and this little scrunched-up face with two big, glassy eyes and a mouth with thick rubbery lips wrapped over little nub-like teeth. It curled into a defensive ball and peered up at us as if begging for mercy.

"I'm gonna kill it," Sean barked, taking a step forward and raising the hammer into the air.

"No, don't!" I shouted, grabbing his arm.

I won't lie—just looking at the thing made me sick. All bloated and hairy, with that wrinkly little face. Even so, I was overcome with the urge to protect it. Dad and Sean always talk about animals like they deserve to die—or at least like it's our God-given right to kill them. That way of thinking always made me flinch.

Sean stared down at the creature, the tension in his body slowly uncoiling, and let the hammer fall to his side. "That thing ain't right, I can tell you that much."

I knelt down and reached out my hand. It shrank away. "It's okay," I cooed to it. "It's okay." The creature groaned in terror when I stroked its pale flesh. But when it realized I was not going to hurt it, it started to settle down a little.

"Ew, don't touch it," Sean said. "Fucker probably has all kinds of diseases and shit."

"Let's take it inside," I said.

Sean gawked. "Are you joking?"

I continued petting it. "No, I'm serious. I think it's cold and scared. I wanna help it."

"And how the hell are you gonna get it past Dad?"

I bit my lip, thought about it for a second. "We wrap it in something and then just carry it right in. What's he gonna do?"

Sean scratched his leg with the hammer and sighed. He took off his shirt and tossed it down to me. "Fine. But I ain't gonna be the one taking care of it."

* * *

Dad did a double take when we trudged back in through the sliding glass door. I can't imagine what went through his head as he watched Sean come in from the winter cold with his shirt off, belly hanging over the top of his jeans, with me behind him holding a swaddled bundle in my arms like a baby.

He screwed up his face, eyes little dots behind the lenses of his glasses. "Now, what in the Sam Hill am I looking at here?"

"Snake nest," I blurted.

Sean turned slowly and gave me a look like *are you crazy*.

Dad squinted his eyes even more. "What?"

"Nothing in it," I added. "We just thought it looked cool."

"I don't give one lick if there's nothing in it or not," Dad said. "You ain't bringing no goddamn snake nest into my house!"

"Come on, Ash," Sean said. A defiant frown grew on his face as he ignored Dad's order and started through the living room anyway. I followed close behind him.

"Hey!" Dad hollered as we scurried past. We ignored him and kept on walking.

He'd be pissed, but it wasn't like he was going to come after us. Or at least not right away. Dad is big enough that he doesn't get up from his chair more than he absolutely has to. So we knew we had some time before he came to chew us out. At least until his next bathroom break.

At the end of the hall, I ran headlong into Sean when he stopped suddenly in front of the door to his room. The creature in my arms let out a phlegmy groan.

"No way," Sean whispered. "Not my room."

I nodded and opened the door to my own room instead. He followed me in, closed the door behind himself, and folded his arms across his chest. I set my bundle down on the floor and looked up at him for approval. He gave me a quick nod, and I gently unwrapped his shirt so we could get a better look at the thing in the light.

It squirmed and writhed like the grub it was, its tubes and organs and whatnot visible through its pale skin. I had to fight the urge to recoil. It was disgusting. But at the same time, I couldn't help but giggle when it rolled up onto its feet and started waddling around my room, trying to burrow under the piles of clothes on the floor.

"It's a fucking alien, you know," Sean said matter-of-factly.

My heart fluttered in my chest. "What? You really think so?"

"Ash, just look at it. I mean, what the hell else would it be? You ever heard of anything that looks like . . ." He gestured at the creature. ". . . That?"

"No," I admitted.

And when I thought about it, it made sense. That it *was* an alien, I mean. After all, I'd always had a feeling that I was going to be someone important. That important things were going to happen to me. And then bam, just like that, I now had a dang alien in my room. It all tracked, as far as I was concerned.

"It needs a name," I decided. "And some food."

Sean left and came back a minute later with a quarter jug of orange juice and a box of cinnamon toaster pastries. He unwrapped a pair from the silver foil and handed them over.

"What about Fuglord?" he said.

"What?"

"For its name. Cause it's the lord of fucking ugly."

I frowned. "We're not calling her Fuglord."

"Her? How do you know it's a her?"

"Just a feeling."

I set one of the toaster pastries down on the floor beside her and tried to coax her to turn around. It took her a while to notice it, but when she finally did, she whipped around and leaned down close to inspect it. A pair of antennae unfurled from some hidden compartment in her face and danced over the cinnamon icing, leaving a gel-like residue behind. Then, with a throaty gurgle, she wrapped her lips around the whole thing and inhaled it like a vacuum.

"Disgusting," Sean groaned.

"Look, she loves it!" I giggled. "I'm gonna call her Cinnamon."

I handed her the second toaster pastry, which she greedily took from my hand and inhaled just as quickly as the first. Then offered her some orange juice. Sean

never came any closer, but eventually he did at least sit down cross-legged on the floor and hang out with me for a while as we watched Cinnamon explore my room.

"This is insane," he said at some point, shaking his head in disbelief. "I mean, what the hell are we doing here?"

"We're taking care of a creature in need," I said.

Sean snorted. "We ought to put it out of its misery."

"What misery? She's doing great."

We both looked over at Cinnamon just in time to see her pop out from a pile of clothes and look around, one of my bras draped over her head. I giggled and glanced over at Sean. He folded his arms and looked away.

* * *

Mom forced me to go to school the next morning because she could tell I was lying about being sick. It was torture—leaving Cinnamon alone in my room like that without anyone there to make she didn't get into any mischief and got enough to eat. I had a stomachache the entire day from all the worrying and could barely eat my lunch, even though it was pizza day and they had out the big pump jugs of ranch.

The day dragged on endlessly. When I finally made it to fifth period, I spent the entire time glued to the clock, bouncing my leg and counting down the minutes until three-thirty when the bell would ring and I'd be free. Mr. Benson was droning on and on about something really boring and all I could do was visualize the exact motions required to shove all my papers and books into my backpack and rush out the door with maximum speed. With five minutes left before the bell, Mr. Benson began handing back last week's quizzes. When he set my paper on my desk, he leaned down and whispered in my ear for me to please stay after class.

I still don't know why I did. If I had run out the door with the bell, maybe none of what came next would have happened. But I stayed, and sat through five excruciating minutes of:

I'm worried about your grade in this class, Ashley.

Are you getting the support you need at home?

Do your parents know how close you are to failing this class?

"Yeah, uh huh, okay, Mr. Benson," I said. "But I really gotta go."

He sighed and told me to have a nice afternoon. I thanked him and turned around and sprinted out the door as fast as I could, racing down the hall and shouldering my way through the front doors. But I was too late— bus nineteen was already driving away without me.

This meant I'd have to take the five, which wouldn't come for another ten minutes. Plus, the five took half an hour longer to get to my stop than the nineteen, which meant I'd be getting home around four-thirty. That would leave me barely fifteen minutes before Dad got home from work to fix any of the problems Cinnamon might have caused while alone and unmonitored all day.

But I had no choice. So I waited. I ground my teeth and paced back and forth. Mercifully, the bus eventually came.

* * *

Dad's car was home already.

"It's gonna be fine," I told myself.

I sprinted up the driveway, then barreled into the house and made a beeline for my room, shedding my backpack in the hallway along the way. When I threw open the door to my room I felt like the Terminator, scanning for any sign of movement. When nothing registered, I dropped to my knees and started digging through the piles of clothes on the floor. But I found no sign of Cinnamon. I peered under the bed. Nothing. I tore my closet apart like a crazy person and still there was no sign of her.

"No way she got out. No way!"

I inspected my door for any signs of damage, but there was nothing. Not so much as a scratch along the bottom, so there was no way she chewed her way out. She certainly couldn't reach the handle, even if she knew how to use it, so she must still be in here somewhere.

I panicked, giving my room a second scan, and it wasn't until about halfway through that I looked out my bedroom window and saw them outside. Dad and Sean—standing shoulder to shoulder out in the sage.

What are they doing, I thought. But then I saw the hammer in Sean's hand and I knew.

I was already holding back tears as I threw open the sliding glass door and ran across the lawn. Sean noticed me first, tapped Dad's chest with the back of his hand, and nodded in my direction.

"She's home," I heard Sean mutter.

Dad turned to face me, still out of breath from his trip across the lawn.

"Now, Ashley—" he started.

"Freakin' move!" I shouldered my way past them and fell to my knees as soon as I saw Cinnamon's mangled body there in the blood-spattered snow. She was so thoroughly ground up that I remember thinking she looked like a pile of raw hamburger.

"You killed her!" I sobbed, dizzy and nauseous.

I looked at the hammer in Sean's hand, blood still dripping off the gore-slicked head. He moved it behind his back and when I looked up at his face he turned away, unable to meet my eyes.

"You lied to me," Dad said.

I threw a finger toward Sean. "Well, he did, too!"

"Yeah, but he came clean about it."

The edges of my vision started to darken, and I felt a sudden urge to flee. To get as far away from the horror of the moment as I could. So I stood up, chest heaving between sobs, and started running back to the house.

"Ash!" Sean shouted after me when I was halfway across the lawn.

I stopped and turned around, dragging the back of my hand under my eyes.

"He's just trying to teach us a lesson."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hayden Waller is a science communicator with a PhD in evolutionary biology. His speculative fiction is centered around class, ecological anxiety, and the surreal cracks in everyday life. His Pushcart-nominated stories have appeared in *Interzone*, *Honeyguide*, and a handful of various anthologies.

DRY CLEANING / ALTERATIONS

by M.C. Childs

Snow or Sun, on 2nd and Starlight, the sign spins.
Jackets or shorts, there is always laundry.

Inside, the garment carousel spins dark suits, phosphorescent
white shirts, a color wheel of dresses in cellophane.

The wrinkled man behind the counter
who has been there since the dinosaurs

takes your wrinkled clothes, your wine stains,
your embarrassments, drops them down a chute,

gives you a smile, a wink, a hint of ataraxia,
gives you a nine-digit number on a rectangle of paper.

The exiled Altairian knows his buttons—
knows your inseam, your hindarm seam

but tailors and their covert couture
are shunned in most of the Milky Way.

Alterations of sapients' germlines—letting in,
letting out pleats, folds, tucks—

requires informed consent, but tailors judge
that their judgment of fit and finesse is best.

The tailor knows the town that doesn't know him.
He mends and amends your dirty laundry,

makes his cuts, his stitchings and starching,
balances proportions, lines, essences.

There is nothing like putting on a fresh-pressed shirt.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M.C. Childs' poetry has won awards from the SFPA and appeared in multiple magazines. Professor Childs is the author of the award-winning urban design books *Foresight and Design*, *The Zeon Files: Art and Design of Historic Route 66 Signs*, *Urban Composition*, and *Squares: A Public Space Design Guide*.

MEND YOUR BROKEN BOW

AND AIM IT AT THE SKY

by Steve Wheat

Stop staring, tapping, cooing at dark
rectangles devoid of light.

When I was nine, it blew past Cat 6,
the water and sky birthing Category 7.

You cannot text today, cannot surf
the web, cannot post a meme.

The panhandle was abandoned even before
it flooded.

Collect your screens. Someone will
paddle to the charger, return with
the dirge of the world.

The sea had only to kiss the water table.
All water touched by saltwater is saltwater.

Let your toes curl into the fresh skin
of the land, awash and overgrown.

The whole Caribbean emptied, every port, like
the candy wounds of a piñata.

Ignore the footprints, tire tracks,
Wikipedia entries, farewell posts,
suitcases left open where they fell.

When we left, we could sail over homes in the
Bahamas without touching the roofs.

Imagine objects you find have been left for
you, and pour your purpose into them.

So much was leftover, floating, like a giant
bathtub filled with toys.

See the ghosts of our past—inflict the
firehose of their desires upon their
lush lawns, already watered.

And America never opened its doors, but forgot to
lock its second-floor windows.

But do not blame the dead, even if they
knew better.

The last things they built in South Florida were
warning signs: Keep out.

Meet them in the halls of your mind. Let
them guide you from the bogs
of their failures and into the slipstreams of
their contrition.

When we arrived, all of the dry Cubans had
already left.

Do not begrudge the storm for surging,
the equatorial waters for breathing life into
your nightmares.

Snake meat is pre-flavored with Adobo, from wet kitchens they slithered through.

Be wind.

Never had I seen my parents so alive as when they got the fan boat working.

Find the cracks left between the
burn scars of Miami and Tampa,
flow into them.

We ran it up the River 95 to hunt eels in Lake Epcot.

Cool yourself in the shadows of the old
world, warm yourself with the building of
the new one.

We salted them on spokes of a cell tower shaped like a child's drawing of a tree.

The land shrinks, you don't have to.

In Cape Canaveral we slalomed missile row rockets, water-covered to their cones.

If they call you trespasser, break into their
hearts, show their sluice your kayak made
through the root maze of mangroves.

I wonder if we ever leave the planet again, how many will want to go?

The world didn't break in a day, neither
will you.

From the top of Hobe Mountain, the world looks painted with a fresh coat of ocean.

The routes did not close, they changed,
grew or sunk or swelled or froze or were
hidden away—by centuries of growth,
by quarterly earnings, by international
agreements signed on the corpses of trees.

Language struggles with its lost inventions, like paper folded on itself too many times.

Make a bonfire of the past's
promises, the unmade can be
remade.

All these changes, but from the moon, they all probably just look a little more blue.

Write your name on the world in the
curlicue of cloud.

Swim, sail, or run, I will cross this borderless world, leaving water for sky.

When you share your path with others,
they'll call it civilization.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Wheat has been an itinerant English teacher across continents and has settled in the San Francisco Bay Area to work on renewable energy and de-carbonization. He previously taught fiction and poetry at the San Francisco Writer's Studio and his pieces have recently appeared in *OnSpec* and *Star*Line*, as well as pieces published in Issue 8 of *Radon Journal* that were nominated for a Pushcart and Rhysling Award in 2024.

INTO THE BLUE

by Jacob Baugher

1.

I'm doing this for you. At least, that's what I tell myself. I hate flying, but you wanted the full experience.

I stole the Munin memory machine from the lockbox at the nurse's station, knocked the "Code Blue" button on the wall, and disappeared into the commotion.

I'm risking a lot—my job, a fine, potential jail time if they prosecute it right—and the hormone prep I've swallowed will communicate that to you when you receive this memory.

That's okay. It'll add to the thrill.

I take a cab downtown to the Inner Harbor, try to breathe deeply to give you all the things we take for granted but you haven't experienced in years. Baltimore's furious traffic, salty air blowing warmly off the Chesapeake crowded with gulls, garbage, and arrogant hover-cabs tearing through the lower atmosphere touting fares I'll never be able to afford. Historic tall ships bob along Pratt Street in the cool shadows of blind skyscrapers.

I cross Gay Street, rubberneck over my shoulder, checking for a tail. Police? Security? Human Resources? I'm not sure which would be worse.

Abuse of hospital resources.

Smuggling medical contraband.

Insurance fraud.

No one is following me, just the dense commuters heading out to a late lunch or early happy hour, but the accusations swirl through my consciousness. I try to push them away. That sort of stress isn't what you'd be feeling on your way to the leisure district.

I have four hours until the next memory tech arrives. Enough time to fulfill our agreement and get the box back to the nurse's station. Hopefully.

Ahead, beyond the lonely tower of the Baltimore Trade Center, a banner reads CHESAPEAKE VINTAGE FLIGHTS & EXTREME EXPERIENCES superimposed over an old military bomber.

A young college student presents me with a packet of papers. I sign the waiver, get in line. A hover-car floats on pontoons cheerily in the easy surf. We start boarding a few at a time. My legs are unsteady on the slowly rolling dock, or maybe it's just nerves.

Flight anxiety is no joke. It's not just the heights; it's the loss of control. The total surrender to a stranger's competence. I'd rather be gripping the throttle while we plunge to a fiery death than helplessly watch the ground speed toward me from a window seat on the wing. I am aware of the irony of this, that I'm about to jump headfirst out of a plane tethered to a stranger, but the line is moving now. I don't give myself enough time to think. I let the line make the decision for me, clamber into the hover-car, and shut the door.

I'm doing this for you.

2.

I met you on a Friday.

I'd just finished up in the Palliative Care Center with my last patient: an old man who thought he was supposed to be a rockstar. His family tried to be cool about it, but they weren't thrilled about their dad's memories being altered. They humored him, though, provided photos, medical records, fake tour dates at massive arenas.

Some people write whole novels and watch the movie play out in their heads as their bodies shut down. Take their last rattling breath playing to a crowd of 50,000. Do all the things they'd been too poor or scared or unlucky enough to do in their actual lives, all for the low, low, cost of $30,000—before insurance, of course.

I try not to think about that part. Instead, I focus on the good I can do: giving the gift of fulfilled dreams. Even if they are technically lies.

You were in the rec room on the 147th floor, staring out the window at the Chesapeake. A checkerboard sat untouched next to a glass of thickened orange juice and a scoop of grey-green meat that smelled like onions and lamb. There were tears in your blue eyes. The yellow tag fastened around your wrist marked you as an early-stage dementia patient.

Something about you made me stop. Maybe it was the way you tilted your head to one side as you watched the flight traffic, or how you drummed your fingers in a stuttering rhythm on your wheelchair's armrest. Always in motion, as if stopping was ceding ground to death.

Or maybe it was just the cut and color of your hair. You reminded me of my grandmother, who cried as a stranger saw her off into the lonely dark. I often wondered what she would have chosen as her last memory, if she'd had the time.

"Hi there," I said. "I'm Eli."

"Florence was just leaving," a voice said from behind me. Your nurse unlocked your wheelchair. "Your oxygen is back in your room."

"I don't want to go." Your voice was feeble, shaky. "I want to watch the boats." You pointed at the bay, past lanes of hover-cars clogging the atmosphere, to a flotilla of sailboats congregating out past the breakwaters.

"I'll take her back when she's finished." I flashed my hospital badge and checked your wristband. "Room 14721?"

The nurse muttered an affirmative and left to help another patient.

I pulled up a plastic chair. "Do you mind if I sit with you?"

You said nothing. The sailboats bobbed in the choppy water far below.

"Did you sail?" I asked.

"I don't belong here," you said, after a moment. "I'm not sick."

Your breath rattled in your chest. Walking pneumonia, on top of it all.

"Of course not."

You shook your head. I offered you my hand, and you took it.

We spent the rest of the hour together, talking. I told you about my partner Alan, the medical program I was applying to at Hopkins, the trip to Ireland we took last summer. You told me about how you grew up in Western Pennsylvania on the shores of a small algae-covered lake with a yellow lab. How your ancestors built the railroads, how you married a Navy man.

"Never marry a Navy man, Eli," you said.

"I'm sure I won't," I said, chuckling.

You tried to laugh along with me, but it quickly devolved into wheezing coughs.

"Your badge," you said when you composed yourself, "it's blue. I haven't seen that one yet."

"You shouldn't have. I work in palliative care. Memory division."

"Oh." The wrinkles deepened around your eyes. "You're who my children keep telling me about. They have it all planned out—one last Christmas dinner. Did they put you up to this?"

"No," I said. "You just seemed like you needed a friend."

"A friend," you repeated. Silence stretched between us. "How does it work? The machine, I mean?"

"With the right tools, the Munin machine can generate passable imitations of most experiences."

"Tools?"

"We call them Minute Particulars. Little details that lend credulity to generated experiences," I explained. "If you wanted to live life as a movie star, we'd commission a graphic designer to fabricate film posters as a reference, have an author or a family member write out a proposed narrative of your life, and maybe

even a screenwriter to provide a few sample scripts. Then we match the experiences with the correct neurotransmitters to make it feel tangible."

You shook your head. "What if I don't want an imitation?"

"What, then?"

"I want something real. Something I've never done. I want the pure, unadulterated experience. I want to live it."

"Soliciting existent memories is more complicated, not to mention more stressful on the recipient's body," I said. "It's not something any insurance I've ever seen would cover. But what would you pick if you could?"

Outside, hover-cars zipped between the skyscrapers that groped the polluted sky. The high-altitude freighters above painted white trails against the blue.

"Freedom," you said, "To sail off into forever on my own terms."

Your hands were shaking on the tablecloth, purple veins standing out under bruised skin. A leisure aircraft wailed by, rattled the cheap plates and cutlery on our table, headed out over the sailboats. Two figures plummeted from it, black specks against the sky, until parachutes opened, and they glided out of sight on the gentle breeze.

You raised a crooked finger, pointed to the leisure craft vanishing in the distance. A bright smile cracked your worn face. "Something like that."

3.

The hover-car takes us to an airfield outside the city. We're each assigned an instructor and a number. I, somehow, end up first in line and get the first pick of the aircraft. According to my instructor, most dives are done via a modified hover-car. There are lines and lines of them, all sleek and shiny in the sunlight. There are other planes too, and, at the end of the line, the ancient B-17 bomber from the logo on the banner downtown.

"That one."

The old warplane is army green with four engines that go *brrrt* like gatling guns and leak smoke into the sky. I strap into the navigator's chair, listen while the pilot chatters over the headset about how his great-great-great-grand-whoever flew this plane during the second World War. The instructor lounges idly at the communication relay.

I hook up to my contraband Munin machine—courtesy of Cigna Specialty Insurance's finest extortion division—then dig the two-way IV into my arm and don the immersion goggles. They suck on the skin around my eyes. A bit of blood leaks up the medical tubing. I flush it with saline. The memory machine gurgles and whirrs. My blood travels up the tube to a black box attached to my hip where my biometrics are paired with the sensory experience captured by the goggles. I

grab a syringe of hormone blanks from the pouch on my waist and plug it into the IV port. We rumble onto the runway.

I wonder how it will feel for you to be embodied in my skin after living in your own for so long. That's what this is, after all. No generative AI bullshit. No filter between me and you. We will be one flesh, if only temporarily. The thought is both intimate and unpleasant.

The hormone blanks burn at takeoff, reading my body's endocrine system and recording adrenaline, serotonin, norepinephrine. The plane bumps and jolts in the turbulence. I try not to let my blossoming flight anxiety ruin your new memory. Instead, I pretend to be brave and unstrap my safety belt, grasp the support rail, and ask the pilot if I can sit in the gunner's seat beneath the plane's nose.

He grins. "The chin turret? Hell yeah."

Baltimore drops away too fast through the glass dome. I wish for solid ground, but we're past the point of return.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, barely felt over the engine vibrations. I dig it out. HARBOR GENERAL HOSPITAL flashes across the screen. I send whoever it is to voicemail, watch as the service's speech-to-text types out the message:

ELI RIVERA: REPORT TO CHIEF OF MEDICINE BEFORE BEGINNING NEXT SHIFT. UNION REP WILL BE PRESENT.

4.

Your youngest son was supposed to visit. After our first meeting in the rec room, we planned the conversation. The advanced directive was clear; the family had agreed upon your last image: a "perfect" holiday dinner from fifty years ago, back when your children were still young and the world was simpler. A nice memory by any metric, but the past feels less rosy when no one visits for months on end. Your pneumonia wasn't getting worse, but it certainly wasn't getting better. If we were going to change the directive, it had to be now.

On the day, we waited for him in your room. Your oxygen machine hummed quietly behind the bed. I'd brought you a little plane and plastic parachute army man to match the poster on your wall: Baltimore from 10,000 feet—the image that, we hoped, would be one of your last.

Your son arrived, a walking high-and-tight haircut. Ex-military, or wanted to be. Bootlicker extraordinaire. He breezed into the room in a black suit, black tie, black shoes, black aviators.

"Who are you?" He wasn't looking at me, but the question was directed to me.

"Eli Rivera," I said. "I'm—"

"Are they treating you alright, Mom?" Then, before you could answer, "Nurse, we'd like some privacy."

"Sir," I said, "Your mother asked me to be here for this meeting. I'm a memory tech from palliative care."

"Meeting?" Your son looked from me, to you, back to me. "Oh no. Mom, no. Not again. We've been over this. The family decided. It's what everyone wants."

"It's what you want, Evan."

"Eugene," he corrected you, then turned to me. "She's not in her right mind. How can she possibly make this decision?"

"She can't, legally," I said. "She's asked me to help her petition for a new memory—a donated memory."

"Donated?"

"As opposed to generated."

Eugene took off his sunglasses. "I don't understand. Mom, don't you want to spend your last moments with your family?"

"I wish this room had a window," you said, breath catching, eyes drifting back to the skydiving poster on the wall.

"If you'll just hear her out, I'm sure it would mean a lot," I said. "May I speak with you out in the hall?"

Eugene blew out a breath. "Fine."

"Look," I said when we made it outside, "this actually isn't atypical. Many patients change their minds about what they want as death approaches. We don't usually need the executor to sign off on that."

"So why are we having this conversation?" He checked his phone.

"Florence wants a donated memory. Typically, they're much more intense than the generated ones, and more expensive."

Eugene ran a hand through his hair. "We've already paid out through the estate. Anything that's left over is for us; my mother was very clear about that."

"I understand. That's why I'm volunteering to do it for free."

Eugene just stared at me, then narrowed his eyes. "Why would you possibly do that?"

I didn't really want to get into it with him, but sometimes vulnerability fosters vulnerability. "My grandmother died last year," I said. "I couldn't be there for her. It's the least I could do to honor her memory."

"What is it? What memory?"

So much for vulnerability.

"She's set on skydiving."

Eugene actually snorted. "Wait, you're serious? Will that hurt her?"

"There is a risk associated, which is why you have to sign off. It'll feel real to her. The adrenaline alone could put her in cardiac arrest."

"That's assisted suicide."

"It's not. She wouldn't have access to the memory until her last hours anyway. The morphine we administer to keep her airways open will keep her comfortable."

"I just don't understand," Eugene said. He ran his hands through his hair again. His phone buzzed. He dug it out of his pocket and sent it to voicemail. "My mother is a family woman. This—" he gestured through the doorway to the poster on the wall, "—this isn't who she is. She wants to be with us."

"But it won't *be* you." The words came out before I could stop them. "It'll be our A.I.'s best impression of you. If you can't be bothered to be here on her deathbed, then why should she bother with *any* version of you?"

That was the wrong thing to say.

"You know what?" Eugene said, "Fuck you, buddy. We're done. What's your supervisor's name? I'm lodging a complaint with him and with the medical board."

"Sir—"

"I said we're done."

I gave him the information, then went on my break. I sat in the rec room, at the table where we first met, breathing hard. I watched the boats. Eventually, I made my way back to your room. Eugene was gone. You had unrolled the army man's parachute and were throwing it up to the ceiling, weakly, watching him tumble down to your lap. You looked up when I walked in.

"Let's do it anyway," you said.

5.

"Altitude," the pilot says over the headset.

"Finally," the instructor mutters.

I clamber out of the chin turret, follow him to the modified bomb bay: a narrow catwalk terminating at the jump platform. The plane bucks like an unbroken horse. I grab another round of hormone blanks from my pack, feeding them into the IV. Each patch of turbulence sends little jolts down to my toes. I try to control my breathing. Your heart is old, but there's only so much you can do when you're about to plunge into the blue.

The instructor clips his harness to mine. The pilot yells something from the cockpit, lost to the thunderous engines.

I think about you, the conversations we've had since our first meeting over checkers and pureed meals. How, when the pneumonia progressed to pleural effusion and eventually sepsis, I sat on your hospital bed and held your hand, skin purple and paper thin. I was with you the day they put you on the vent.

You asked, "How did we end up here, Jimmy?"

I don't know who Jimmy is, and the tears in your eyes made it easy not to ask. It didn't matter. I could be Jimmy for you.

"It's going to be okay," I said.

"We're going to intubate now," a doctor said from the doorway. You clutched my hand, hard, surprising me with your strength.

"Will you stay with me?" you asked.

"Pulse is getting tachy," the nurse said. "Pulse-ox at eighty-one percent."

"It's time." The doctor pulled on a pair of gloves.

"Florence, I'll stay with you," I said. "Don't worry about anything."

The plane's engines jolt me out of the reverie. We hit the Chesapeake and land gives way to water. Nerves zap down my spine in giddy bursts. The bay doors whine open, exposing the circle of the world below. The Inner Harbor, Ravens' stadium, Fort Mckinley. The wind tears at my hair.

"Ready?" The instructor's breath is hot against my ear.

"Ready."

Together, we plunge into open air.

* * *

We touch down in a field adjacent to the airport after a parachute ride that feels too short for how high we were. Another hover-car idles nearby. I clamber in, wait for it to fill with divers still shaky with adrenaline. On the way back, the flight is smooth in comparison to the old warplane. I inspect the Munin machine for damage, eject the memory cartridge, and place it in the backpack the skydiving service provides.

The original plan was that I'd wait a day, sneak in before my next shift to give you your memory. Things have changed—my phone, safe in the bag they'd provided, had two more missed calls from the hospital: one from my boss, the other from HR. Doesn't take a genius to figure out what they want, but I'm not going to make it easy.

Fortunately, my badge still works, for now. I take an express elevator to your floor and reach your room without incident.

Readouts and machines flutter and beep. This morning, you were quiet, still, as you should be in your sedation. I offered to make the call myself to your family and let them know it was time. None of them picked up, save for Eugene's secretary, who merely told me her boss's wishes were expressed in the medical directive the hospital had on file.

"Any idea who Jimmy is?" I asked her.

"No," she said.

Medical noise fills the silence now—the asthmatic cycling of your vent's whisper valve, the stuttering beeps marking your thready pulse, echoed a moment later from the monitor at the nurse's station down the hall.

I'm glad I can be here for you. We all should have someone.

"Hey, Florence, it's Jimmy. I wanted to say that I—" my voice breaks, breath catching in my throat. I tried again, "I wanted to say I love you. I'm sorry for the times I've hurt you. Thank you for the times that were good. Please forgive me for the times that were bad."

I squeeze your hand.

"Okay. Here we go."

I set up the Munin machine on the plastic table beside your bed, plug the memory cartridge into your IV, and initiate the countdown. A small monitor flickers to life on the wall. Baltimore, the plane, the pilot, the instructor, me, legs shaking as the plane taxis to the runway, fades into view.

Words flash across the screen: <Ready first hormone dose. 5 . . . 4 . . . >

I wait until the appropriate time, press the plunger.

The machines flatline.

And your brain swallows the sky.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jacob Baugher is a writer, musician, and an assistant editor for *Flash Fiction Online*. Originally from Baltimore, Maryland, he earned his MFA in fiction from Seton Hill University and taught creative writing and composition at a small university in the Ohio Valley. Currently, he works for the public library system and plays in a progressive emo band called Cokeworks. You can find his work in *Incensepunk Magazine, Black Hare Press, Radon Journal,* and forthcoming from *Flash Fiction Online*.

IMPORTANT ENOUGH TO BOMB

by Thomas Behan

Their power is up there, but what
is important, important enough
to bomb, resides down here. I
am down here, and it's good
to know I matter. That I
am what is the matter.

These bombings tell me I am
not yet finished scaring them.
Prima facie proof of my power.
I hide in my subterrain where
they imagine seeds of their
destruction growing hydroponically
in rooms of my own manufactured
sun. Because they now own the
shining original and stand closer
than I to its radiating blessings.

Every day soon after their sun rises
I hear them again reminding me
they think they are losing and
it's still worth millions more
of their precious dollars
to deliver new bombs
upon me—then night sweeps
bombers from the sky and I begin
wondering if I have lost at last. In the
morning, again, they remind me I have not.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas Behan is a writer living in Northern Virginia. His work has been published in *Isele Magazine, Cinnabar Moth Literary Collections,* and in The George Washington University Press. His literary fiction short story "Symbiosis" was published in Secant Publishing's anthology titled *Best Stories on the Human Impact of Climate Change*, and that story was nominated for the Secant Publishing Prize. He has also published a short story collection through Alien Buddha Press.

MASTHEAD

Ninja Jo

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FRONT AND BACK COVER ARTIST

Katerina (a.k.a. Ninja Jo) is a freelance artist born in Ukraine. She works in digital and traditional materials such as watercolor, ink, and oil. She has more than twenty years of experience in traditional art and over ten years in digital. Subjects of her paintings are usually robots, different science fiction scenes, dark, or cyberpunk. Before she became a full-time artist, she worked as a photographer. Photos are still her second favorite thing after painting. Find more at linktr.ee/NinjaJo.

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