

# **RADONJOURNAL**

**ISSUE 9**

## CONTENT WARNINGS

“Thicker than Water” *Body horror, death, gore*

“Canis” *Elements of war, descriptions of  
body decomposition*

“Progress, Incorporated” *Gun violence, suicide*

“Buttons and Soap” *Human remains*

“Ghost in the Shell” *Dysphoria*

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# RADON JOURNAL

## EDITOR'S NOTE

### FICTION

- 1 The Ten Declarations of Bozo, Supreme Jongleur of Planet Clown |  
*Dafydd McKimm*
- 6 The Cerebral Pitch Experiment | *MD Harrold*
- 12 The Fish in the Garden | *Eleanor Lennox*
- 19 Exopunk's Not Dead | *Corey Jae White*
- 25 Thicker than Water | *Aeryn Rudel*
- 30 When the sun passed through me | *Edward Hodge*
- 34 Dad Jokes | *David Lee Zweifler*
- 36 Canis | *Wugee Kelly*
- 42 The world has been this way for a long time. | *Vincent Endwell*
- 46 Progress, Incorporated | *S. Thomas Drake*

### POETRY

- 55 The Rag Pickers of Asteroid 482 | *Trevor Cunningham*
- 57 the world ends with a whimper | *Nicholas De Marino*
- 58 Aging Is a Word that Means 'Slowly Becoming a Machine' |  
*Marcus Whalbring*
- 60 The Experience Machine | *Mark Dimaisip*
- 62 Dawn, the Humor Bot | *Veda Villiers*
- 64 Lacus Odii (Lake of Hate) | *Josh Pearce*
- 66 Buttons and Soap | *Josh Pearce*
- 68 Ghost in the Shell | *Holly Lyn Walrath*
- 70 Review of the Pre-Anthropocene Museum | *A J Dalton*
- 73 dirt. | *Nadia Steven Rysing*

## MASTHEAD & CONTRIBUTORS

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Thank you for picking up one of the first *Radon Journal* print copies. As you read a little revolution or simply escape from reality, we hope these stories and poems will linger with you. Issue 9 marks our fourth year publishing progressive authors. We have grown from a small online-only genre journal to appearing in the hands and on the tables of readers and anarchist book fairs worldwide.

Issue 9 launches into a world teetering between authoritarianism and corporate dystopia—a continuing reactionary movement against the gains made by oppressed groups in recent history. Five days after our publication, the next Trump term will begin, and only one thing is left certain: we will all have to fight harder.

If you are reading this note, you are likely as exhausted as we are after 2016–2020 and the pandemic. To keep your sanity, please start small and local. Your heart is larger than most but cannot handle doom-scrolling and the simultaneous tragedies of eight billion people. Know that anarchists will do what we have always done: take care of our communities and build out from there. Play to your strengths and keep an ear out for the needs of others. Maybe you work best in the streets, physically resisting. Perhaps you're more suited to providing refuge, offering information, being a caring confidant, or simply being a voice against misinformation and bigotry.

Our team consists of younger millennials and elder Gen Z who grew up around the turn of the century. We remember the optimism of the 90s and foolishly thought it would continue. As children, we thought the world had learned from the wars of our fathers and the tribulations of prior centuries. That the worst our species had seen was behind us. In 1999, the Seattle World Trade Organization protests rang in the largest anarchist victory since perhaps revolutionary Catalonia. The twenty-first century was set to be one of radically positive change.

But we now know how it turned out. Tech corporations continue taking over online networks and openly bribe legislatures. Social media companies have become more powerful than governments. Algorithms create echo chambers of brain rot and endless, baseless anger that would be at home inside *1984*'s Two Minutes Hate. The left is losing the propaganda war among the boomers on Facebook and

Gen Z on TikTok, where misleading clickbait reigns supreme. Despite a world of knowledge at our fingertips, people are less educated and more susceptible to con men's snake oils.

The wars and sins of our nation-states are not forgotten. The cycle of violence, resource taking, colonizing, and conquest have continued unabated.

The picture we paint is a dark one, because the world is in a dire state, and at risk of descending into worse. But we should acknowledge that society has made progress since 1925. Thanks to technological and social advancements, quality of life is far higher across the board, and across all classes. The pace of tech is exponentially increasing, which brings us equally positive and negative futures, depending on how we grapple with them. The science fiction stories in the following pages both illuminate and warn of impending paths for civilization to take.

This is why *Radon* exists: to combine science fiction with social commentary, so that we may all better understand human nature. It is through stories that we best learn about ourselves. Remaining vigilant, curious, and kind is crucial for any decisive change. We explore stories of how humanity might get it wrong so we can learn together, in the present, to get it right.

One day, we hope for a transhumanist world where our genomes are free of disease and death. A science fiction made reality where exploring the stars is our greatest concern. An anarchist existence free from money or oppression. A future where the concept of dystopia is a myth spoken in disbelieving whispers on playgrounds.

Until then, we continue fighting for a better tomorrow. Our lives may be nothing but an endless class war—but our children's may not be. Thank you for joining us in the upcoming chapter by reading *Radon*.

– Casey Aimer, Editor-in-Chief, January 2025

# FICTION



# THE TEN DECLARATIONS OF BOZO, SUPREME JONGLEUR OF PLANET CLOWN

*by Dafydd McKimm*

It begins with laughter, followed by a sputtering of sobs.

A Pierrot looks on, aghast. Cameras flash in the darkness of the big top.

Ones and zeros hurtle across the interplanetary void, zoom along the cosmic information highway. The video titled “Clown makes little girl cry” zaps across the networks to tech-specs, smartpalms, flexies, neuroplants; every device on every planet in the Commonwealth rings out with her sobs.

“I \*sob\*  
hate \*sob\*  
CLOWNS \*sob\*  
Mummy!”

It happens quickly then. As if in solidarity, brainwashed by those four potent words, humanity, spread across the stars, turns on the clowning classes. Red noses become bloody noses, hurled acid melts makeup, dyed hair is scalped from pate; pundits on all channels of the astronews networks cry, “It’s just not funny anymore!” while banging their fists. Circus tents burn brightly in the night. Chants of “Round ’em up! Get ’em out!” resound through every system from Sol to Tau Ceti.

In cities across the Commonwealth, scores of adults and children wearing painted-on smiles and oversized shoes are marched toward the spaceports, a headless squirt flower pinned to each one’s chest in mourning, and they are thrust with nothing but meager supplies and a bare minimum of fuel onto ships.

Blast off!

\* \* \*

Some time later . . .

*Everyone’s counting on you, Bozo. Keep it together. Keep your nose red and your smile wide. Remember what Nonna Calamità said: “When you’re scared, just know*

*that The Big Jester in the Sky is laughing at you. And as long as someone's laughing, there's always hope." Jitters. Goddamn stage fright. Pull yourself together, Bozo.*

*Get out there—  
Clowndom needs you!*

**Declaration the First:** I, Comrade-in-Mirth Bozo, declare this new world, Planet Clown, from this day forth to be a haven for jocolators, jesters, jugglers, mimes, and any other practitioner of the humorous arts. And so say we all! \*honk-honk\*

*That was good. That was good. They all laughed hard, didn't they? They like you. You don't have to win this crowd. We're all clowns, dammit—all proud clowns. No need to feel shame anymore. No need to hide. "Don't ever be ashamed of who and what you are, little chuckler." I won't, Nonno Zippo. "Don't let anyone take away your horn, capito? You goddit?" I goddit, Nonno Z. I goddit.*

**Declaration the Second:** I, Comrade-in-Mirth Bozo, hereby declare that no one shall be punished for wearing a colorful wig, for painting their nose or face, for the bigness of their shoes or the littleness of their car. All who call Planet Clown their home may celebrate their clownhood in freedom! And so say we all! \*honk-honk\*

\* \* \*

All's well, for a while. Until . . . reports that some are not painting their faces gets back to Big Top HQ.

*What are they doing? Are they forgetting who they are? What they are?*

*Traitors to the paint . . .*

*Traitors to the paint, and all of us who wear it!*

**Declaration the Third:** I, Comrade-in-Mirth Bozo, hereby declare that the wearing of appropriate makeup and clowning attire by all is Strongly Encouraged. Face paint should be applied promptly after rising, regularly touched up throughout the day, and remain intact until one's evening toilet. Acceptable clownwear includes either a giant bowtie, a ruffled collar, or pom-pom buttons, in sufficiently garish colors. Variegated pantaloons are to be considered mandatory from this day forth. Your district-level Pierrot will provide you with a full list of recommendations. And so say we all! \*honk-honk\*

Until . . . a slightly larger-than-average car is reportedly spotted in an Auguste neighborhood.

*Traitors to the sciatica, and all of us who suffer it!*

**Declaration the Fourth:** Furthermore, the size of one's car should not lend itself to comfort, but rather to levity. No clown should be able to fit in their car without experiencing a moderate-to-severe level of discomfort. Neither should a car be occupied by fewer than six clowns at any time. To ensure this, cars that are not considered sufficiently stuffed will be confiscated and destroyed. Full details from your district-level Pierrot. And so say we all! \*honk-honk\*

Until . . . a mime, suffering from malnutrition, is overheard complaining that he's tired of eating only custard pies and wishes they'd be allowed to grow maybe just a few measly vegetables . . .

*Traitors to the crust, and all of us who lick it from our faces!*

**Declaration the Fifth:** Nor shall anyone eat the food of our oppressors, which forevermore shall be declared profane. The only victuals a good clown needs are a custard pie and a bucket of confetti thrown in the face. And so say we all!

Mirthfulness reigns.

**Declaration the Sixth:** \*honk-honk\*

\* \* \*

A memory:

*"Why are some people scared of us, Nonno Z?"*

*"I believe it is a fear of the unknown, little chuckler. They see our painted faces, our painted smiles, and they don't know how we really feel behind it all. They don't like that . . . and, perhaps, I think they dislike that we throw custard pies in their faces, and squirt them with water when they are not expecting it. Cleanfaces don't like to be out of control, you see."*

*"Maybe we should stop it, then. If they hate it so much . . ."*

*"Stop it? Never! No! Little chuckler, this is what makes us special. When the lights go down, all eyes are on who? Not the Cleanface next to them. Not their Cleanface wife or little Cleanface child. All eyes are on you, the clown! Will you drop your pantaloons? Will you fall over? Will you be hit in the face with the pie? Yes, some hate us, but we are what makes life exciting! Be the clowniest person of all, and you'll be the most special of all."*

*I'll be an example—an example to them all. They'll look to me and see what it means to be a true clown.*

**Declaration the Seventh: I, Comrade-in-Mirth Bozo, shall henceforth and forever be granted the title Supreme Jongleur, Chosen of the Holy Jester, Keeper of the Sacred Traditions of the Commedia, Maestro of the Clowning Way, For Now and All Eternity. So says the Supreme Jongleur.**

\* \* \*

The Harlequin Guard is formed to protect the sanctity of the Supreme Jongleur. Any who expresses disquiet at his behavior is branded a Cleanface and unceremoniously shot out of a space cannon.

**Declaration the Eighth: A portrait of the Supreme Jongleur is to be placed in every dwelling and clown college for the purpose of raising national spirit—the viewing and laughing at of said portrait, in all its mirthful glory, to be taken thrice daily on weekdays and five times on Calamitàdays and Zippodays.**

*I must teach them, my children, the true ways of the clown. The future of our great planet cannot be left to mimes and jugglers. They must learn from me and me alone. Nonna Calamità, Nonno Zippo, your sacred teachings will live on through me.*

Young clowns are taken from their parents to continue their comedic education under the loving wing of the Supreme Jongleur in his Houses of Cheer; those whose children have been taken place headless squirt flowers in pots by their windows.

\* \* \*

**Declaration the Ninth: Performances of the Supreme Jongleur's greatest japes are henceforth to be played continuously on every telescreen in the land. Attend his magnificent pratfalls, his sublime debuggging, his impeccable rake-stepping routine, and be yourselves inspired to comedic greatness!**

\* \* \*

A memory:

*“Now listen to your Nonna, little chuckler. Beneath your face paint there is always a man. Therein lies the true beauty of the clown. It gives us our pathos, our very soul. You cannot be a clown without also being a man.”*

In the mirror of his chambers in Big Top Palace, Supreme Jongleur Bozo removes his makeup for the night.

Off comes the white, off comes the smile, off comes the red of the nose. He places his rainbow wig atop the mannequin on his dresser.

The Supreme Jongleur looks in the mirror.

He laughs and laughs. For all that stares back at him is a mad, grinning, clown.

\* \* \*

**Declaration the Tenth: A statue of the Supreme Jongleur is to be erected in the Grand Piazza of Big Top Palace, a statue of such magnitude and foolery that it will be laughed at for a thousand years!**

Clowns work day and night to build the statue. Blood mixed with face paint stains the marble. When the statue is unveiled, a crowd has been gathered.

They stand before the effigy in silence.

On the balcony of his great tent, the Supreme Jongleur looks out at the sea of red, green, and blue wigs. He does not see from his distance that on each one's smock there is pinned a headless squirt flower.

\* \* \*

*Why aren't they laughing? Why? Why?*

*Does their Supreme Jongleur not amuse them?*

*They don't want to laugh. Hehehehehe. They don't want to laugh?*

*Well, I'll make them laugh.*

*\*honk-honk\**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dafydd McKimm is a speculative fiction writer whose stories have appeared in magazines and anthologies such as *Flash Fiction Online*, *Galaxy's Edge*, *The Best of British Science Fiction*, and elsewhere. He was born and raised in Wales but now lives in Taiwan. You can find him online at [dafyddmckimm.com](http://dafyddmckimm.com).

# THE CEREBRAL PITCH EXPERIMENT

*by MD Harrold*

“Hello?” Peter hoped his nervousness wasn’t obvious.

“Hello,” a soft, pleasant female voice replied. “Is this Dr. Peter Dillinger?”

“Yes. It is I.” He stuttered into his phone. “It’s him. Sorry. Yes. Speaking.”

“Good day, Dr. Dillinger,” the woman continued, unfazed. “This is Rebecca from E-Marrow Corp. We reviewed your file and are pleased to offer you a junior research position in our bioengineering division. If you are interested and would like to move forward, the next step . . .”

Rebecca droned on but Peter had zoned out.

He was in tears from the sense of relief washing over him. Twelve years of academic pressure culminating in high school. Four years of intense graduate school. Another exhausting three to earn his doctorate—and finally he was near the start to the end of the debt tunnel he created.

“Mr. Dillinger? Hello? Did I lose you? Are you interested in the position?”

“Y—yes,” he stammered, “I would love to accept.”

\* \* \*

A few days later, Peter, dressed in the typical uniform of a junior research scientist—chino pants, plain shirt, and shoulder bag—entered the lobby of E-Marrow Corp. It was a sleek, monolithic building in the center of the city.

After he checked in with security, he made his way to human resources. The onboarding process was very thorough. Peter was not surprised. Their innovative research on life extension garnered a lot of attention from competitors.

The vetting process included on-site DNA testing, a deep dive Internet search, and a four-hour mental health assessment. Peter spent the day proving he was who he said he was and that he was mentally, physically, and emotionally up to the task of working on sensitive research.

An administrator assigned to his onboarding took his picture with an expensive camera and five minutes later handed him his ID card. She instructed Peter to

report tomorrow morning to the “Cerebral Pitch Lab” in sub-basement level three, room 318 at 8 AM. More information would be provided at that time.

Peter went home, cracked open a bottle of celebratory wine, took a few sips, and went to bed.

\* \* \*

The elevator struggled to reach sub-basement level three; the last floor assigned to the panel of key-required buttons on the elevator that Peter was alone in. He held a coffee in one hand and his phone in the other. As soon as the elevator doors opened, he noticed he had no reception.

The floor was empty. A long, sterile hall led away from the elevator. There were plain, windowless doors pockmarked down the hall. Peter searched until he found 318. There was no other indication of what lay beyond. No window. No titles. Just a number.

Behind the door was a lab.

A nondescript man in a lab coat, with his back turned to Peter, was seated at a desk near the entrance. The man did not look at Peter as he entered. He stared at something on the opposite side of the room.

Peter cleared his throat to get the man’s attention. Nothing. The man did not respond. Peter glanced around.

One side of the room was an observation station. The man was on a small plastic chair at a small desk. File folders were stacked in a neat pile on the left side of the desk and a sheet of graph paper was in front of him. Behind the desk was a filing cabinet and a coat rack hosting another lab coat.

There was nothing digital anywhere in the room, not even a camera. An old analog clock kept track of time near the door.

The room was split in the middle with a thick, plexiglass barrier. There was no door through the barrier and no door leading out on the other side.

The only object on the other side of the plexiglass was a large, hourglass-shaped object made of clear tempered glass.

In the top half of the giant hourglass was a thick black substance. The pigment was so intensely dark that it had an almost complete lack of refraction. The bottom of the hourglass had a smaller amount of the same substance pooled into the concave surface.

Peter squinted and leaned forward. He wasn’t certain, but he thought he saw a viscous bead of the substance drip down from the top of the hourglass.

He felt it pull at him from behind the glass.



He studied it for a long time. He stared for so long his legs started to get numb. His body ached. His mind felt like gel. But, if he pulled away, even for a second, he would miss the next drip.

He heard the distant sound of a door opening and closing. It distracted him just enough that he was able to break his gaze. It felt like coming out of a coma, disoriented and confused. He felt ill. Nauseous, anxious, paranoid—layered with a sense of despair.

He looked at the desk. The other man was gone. Peter was alone.

He looked at the clock. It was quarter to ten. It felt like he had entered the room only a few minutes ago but it had been close to two hours.

Peter put on the lab coat and sat down on the plastic chair.

He looked at the pad of graph paper. There was a laminated notecard on top.

“The Cerebral Pitch Lab Experiment,” he read aloud to ease his nerves and to cut the edge off being alone.

He skimmed past legal information informing him that if he shared instructions, outcomes, or talked about what he saw, his employment would end, and he would be sued into an early grave.

“Your goal is to observe the substance. The data you collect will be a record of how long you can sustain a continuous view of the material. If at any point you look away, record the time difference on the graph paper provided. Blinking does not count. We encourage you to try any methods you feel will help extend your observations. We look forward to your results.”

Peter put the laminated card down.

He looked at the material. Instead of feeling drawn in like his first, unofficial attempt, this time when he tried staring at the impossible black material. The sense of anxious nausea started immediately.

He was forced to look away.

He recorded a few seconds onto the graph paper.

He rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands, took a few deep breaths, and looked at the object again.

The nausea rolled through him instantly.

He marked a few seconds on the graph paper.

Before he looked again, he searched his station. The folders contained graphs from other researchers. They were organized by date. He felt relief when he saw most of the notations were in seconds. The longest entry he found was for five minutes. Even notations a minute long were rare. The file cabinet held completed graphs in the top two drawers. The bottom drawer held blank graph paper. Other than that, there was nothing in the room.

He made a few more attempts. None lasted more than a few seconds before he felt overwhelmed with vertigo and pulled away.

He studied the instructions again.

Was this physical reaction expected? Was he failing to notice something? Was this a test? Was he in an experiment as a subject and didn't realize?

Peter noticed it was noon. He took off the lab coat and went up the elevator to the cafeteria.

He tried to engage in small talk with a random sampling of coworkers he found. Each time he tried to ask about the “Cerebral Pitch Experiment,” people backed off. One woman told him to leave her alone in harsh tones. Most were put off by his questions, and a few feared him.

Peter went to the bathroom to compose himself. When he saw himself in the mirror, he considered walking out and never looking back. The face he saw in the mirror, the same face that woke up excited for a well-paying research job, looked like it had aged ten years.

He held the side of the sink, lowered his head, and sighed.

\* \* \*

The lab looked the same. No one had come in or out.

Peter glanced at the hourglass. It was impossible to tell if more of the substance had fallen into the chamber below.

He felt a chill down his spine. He shook it off.

Peter carefully changed back into the lab coat and made sure the graph paper and the pen were ready.

He glanced at the black material with its voided and fluid ends. He felt the pit of his stomach drop. The ends seemed to stretch for eons. Fear gripped him in every cell of his body.

He looked away. He recorded four seconds.

Before he looked back, he pinched himself on the webbing between his thumb and index finger. Hard. Pain blossomed from the soft flesh, and Peter looked back at the black mass.

The fear was still there.

The nausea followed a close second behind.

But the pain he felt helped Peter keep his vision locked on the darkness.

He pinched the same spot again, harder. He did not look away. The nauseated fear subsided into a dull drone.

He felt in control. He felt confident.

He felt that this whole thing had just been a silly test. How could he fear a void? He decided after a full hour of staring into the abyss, he should record his result.

He tried to look away. He couldn't.

He felt the terror return. It twisted at his guts.  
 He couldn't look away.  
 He felt his mind twist and contort into impossible shapes.  
 He could see a line of impossible black between the two masses—the large and dominating one up top and the smaller mass down below.  
 Was it flowing or frozen in time? Unclear.  
 Up to the large mass? Down the small? Neither? Both?  
 He tried to wrench his eyes away. He tried to scream. Nothing came out.  
 The line thrummed, the reverberation distorting into a new reality before immediately ceasing to exist.  
 There was no sound. Just awful notes of pure chaos.  
 He tried to look away. He tried to scream.  
 The impossible black line grew larger.  
 It undulated, changing to an infinite sequence of droplets. Some smaller than a quark. Some larger than the universe.  
 The two ends of the line merged.  
 The mass expanded beyond the glass.  
 Time lost meaning.  
 The shred of reality that left him connected to the world was a dull pain in his hand. And it was fading fast.  
 He tried to look away. He tried to scream.  
 Nothing.  
 Distantly, a whole other lifetime away, he heard a door open. He couldn't look away. Blackness was everywhere.  
 There was so much impossible black, he sensed he would never come back to . . . to where? To when . . .? He couldn't remember.  
 His last thought before the blackness reached his mind was how lonely he was.  
 How helpless he felt. How scared he was.  
 Then nothing.

\* \* \*

When she heard the door close, Jennifer Tully forced herself to rip her gaze away from the black material. She shuddered and clutched herself in a tight embrace. She looked at the desk.

The man who had been sitting there was gone.

Desperately needing this to work out despite the overwhelming anxiety she felt in proximity to the strange hourglass, Jennifer sat down and read the instructions, printed on a laminated card, sitting on top of a pad of graph paper.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MD Harrold is a science fiction, fantasy, and supernatural writer and screenwriter living in Los Angeles, California. His original dark fantasy short story, "Honor Guard," was recently published by *Perseid Prophecies*. A second short story is slated for publication in 2025. He is currently working on his debut science fiction novel.

## THE FISH IN THE GARDEN

by Eleanor Lennox

*Two weeks after the funeral.*

A suggested story on my feed, some slick promo for Island 11. I scroll past.

*Three weeks.*

Another reel, different feed this time. They must be hard up for passengers, I think dully through the sed meds.

*Six weeks.*

I will never be rid of this grief, not for my entire life. I'm exhausted at the prospect of it.

*Seven weeks.*

I'm tired of fighting. I want to escape the known, this cursed place where my starving eyes seek him in every uncertain shadow. The next Island 11 reel that pushes into my feed, I open.

Island 11, a new colony in the orbit of Titan. It's just an unassuming O'Neill cylinder on the outside, but inside—utopia. Gentle pastures of jade green, cerulean-blue skies arcing gracefully overhead, so beautiful it doesn't matter that they're false. Waterfalls looping in on themselves, churning maelstroms at the base. I don't understand the physics of such a place, but do I need to?

I've heard that the rings of Saturn are more soothing to gaze upon than the vastness of the Pacific Ocean.

\* \* \*

I only tell my husband, Rhys, after the nonrefundable purchase is truly irreversible. He just shrugs, his eyes far away. A painter, maybe he's imagining the nature of daylight in such a place. The kind of place, I have heard, where the citizens vote on what color the sky will be in June. Even Turner couldn't have imagined such possibilities when he painted the dying of the sun.

I send my friend Lila her ticket the old-fashioned way. *I felt the need to interfere*, I write. The letter will find Lila, as ever, on her family's rotting veranda, where she

shells peas and sings the old songs even as water licks the mildewed pink stone beneath her curling toes.

The trip will take eleven years.

\* \* \*

They make me a librarian on board.

I like the job, for the most part. I exist in a simple, well-ordered world reduced to tidy Yes or No questions: Is it available, yes or no?

But complexities emerge, like cracks in old china. They present themselves as *Recommendations*.

An elegant older woman requests *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. But I know better. Stories set in New York, Paris, Rome—the kinds of cities that doubled as art—are best avoided on our grimy little spaceship, oldest of its line, setting its course on a sea of unrelenting blackness. I send her the file for *In Cold Blood*.

"They're both by Capote," I tell her. "This one is better."

One day, a twenty-something comes in looking for *Our Town*.

"I played Emily in my school play," she says proudly.

I know about Emily: Mama's sunflowers and hot baths, and oh Earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you. I tell her we don't have it, and as soon as she leaves, I delete the file from our repository.

I know the safe territory, for people like us in places like this. I recommend space operas, stellar westerns, fantasy adventures, the occasional twisted dystopia. Nostalgia is the enemy.

\* \* \*

Rhys is assigned to be a pivo distributor on the ship. You might have called that job bartending on Earth, but pivo isn't beer. We're only allotted two mugs per visit, and those you must earn. There are some who'll forgo food for a day, or even two, just so the pivo can take them further away from the black, the drudgery, the counting of days, and the passing of nights. Although what is night, here? Daytime is a carefully calibrated illusion of fluorescent lighting. We are unmoored from time.

Lila is assigned to be a room steward. She complains about it over a mug of pivo, but sometimes she finds unusual things smuggled on board, and she likes that. There's the woman who brought a bottle of Frank's RedHot sauce, hidden in a pair of thigh-high boots. One man keeps a snow globe on his bedside table—the neon lights of the aurora borealis forever frozen in resin. Old fishing tackle with dried-on fish guts, a boomerang, a rabbit's paw, glitter—people brought all sorts.

I love to hear about the odd things she finds, though I know it's dangerous for us to dwell on them.

\* \* \*

There is a vegetable garden on the ship. I've not yet seen it in person; only video feed, grainy and insufficient. A lottery system awards one-hour visits.

In the first year on board, visits to the garden left a peaceful wistfulness amongst those fortunate enough to be chosen.

In the second year, the reality of our situation became more apparent. We were the fish who had left the sea. Not all of us were ready to be the intrepid ones.

Now in the third year, visits to the garden provoke a throbbing hysteria amongst some of those lucky damned who go in.

When Rhys came back after his visit, I learned that he never actually went in at all, but sat outside, paralyzed. I was angry—he could have given his ticket to me. But the anger passed quickly. He hasn't been the same since Jack died.

\* \* \*

At night, Rhys and I lie in our sleeping pod—it resembles one of those Japanese sleeping capsules that mimic deluxe coffins. Our arms have no choice but to touch as we lie, side by side, breathing quietly.

"Jack would have hated this," Rhys says. "He was always afraid of the dark."

I don't answer. I just lie there, feeling his arm hairs prickle against mine.

\* \* \*

I meet up with Lila the night after she went into the garden. She's clenching something small and white in her hand. Her eyes are somewhere far away, and I think I know where.

There was a meadow near her family's house: a field of simple yellow flowers peeking out from beyond a thin stand of silver birch. Coming upon it, especially alone in the golden hour—I don't let myself go there now. I try to stop her from going there, too. The pivo usually helps some, but tonight she isn't drinking it. I can't seem to call her back to where we are now, which is somewhere in the asteroid belt that separates the terrestrial planets from the gas and ice giants that lie beyond; the realm of space where the sun gives no warmth, and we can no longer pretend that we live in a universe designed solely for us.

She sets the small white tube on the table.

"Look what I found," she croaks. "Isn't it funny?"

It's a tube of sunscreen. SPF 50.

"We won't be needing this anymore."

\* \* \*

I am finally chosen in the garden lottery, three days after Lila's death.

I almost don't go in. I know the ghosts who lurk there, ghosts who remember my name.

\* \* \*

The garden is densely packed, with efficient rows of plants ascending to the ceiling, people admiring them as though they were at an art gallery.

A young woman strokes crinkled kale leaves softly, like a lover.

A man gazes wordlessly at a row of chubby magenta radishes.

I finger lacy wisps of fennel and stare hungrily into a tangle of vibrant red peppers.

And then I smell it—that ancient smell, vegetal and green. A tomato plant. It was summer, and the rains had just ended—

*Our tomato plant was a freak that year, towering over its neighbors, the bell peppers and jalapeños, clawing for every last millimeter of space, perfuming our patio.*

*A table is laid underneath a canopy of wisteria and jasmine. Slices of plump crimson tomatoes and creamy burrata touch each other, slicked with oil.*

*Fresh-shucked corn sits triumphantly in a pile, its silky fronds discarded amongst our feet like old skins. Sugared stalks of rhubarb crowd a chipped white platter; thin cucumber coins float in small bowls of vinegar.*

*A tall pitcher of fresh, sour lemonade, beaded with perspiration, stands next to a half-finished bottle of red wine—the other half in our bellies and on our tongues tasting of forest floor and old earth.*

*At the center of the table is a golden cake studded with blueberries for Jack's birthday. It's past his bedtime; the fireflies are out. But we'd forgotten to count time, and without us to watch it, it slid away into that soft velvet slipper of a summer night—*

And I'm back on the ship, staring at an orderly row of tomato plants growing out of holes drilled into white boxes.

I have to get out of here.

*A narrow, tree-lined street of stately brownstones, window boxes laden with begonias and verbena, shutters painted like jewels. A tiny French restaurant in a basement, jazz leaking out the door, tables spilling onto the sidewalk—*

There's the exit sign, two units down. I pass a healthy crop of basil. My grandmother used to grow basil in the desert. Any fool can grow basil, she'd tell me.

*A boat sailing down a river at twilight, shops packed tightly on its steep banks. The sounds of voices in conversation, the smell of spices and fire. The moon's reflection lay on the water like a shimmering and ancient pathway. A mångata, he told me, a moon street—*

I see the father of a family that lives two doors down from us. Roger. He's walking around dreamily, a happy smile playing on his lips.

I have a sudden urge to kill him.

*Floating on a tube down the river, eyes closed against the sun, I open them to see a tree branch hanging over the water, its leaves imprinted black on my retinas. Why do I always remember this—*

"Hello, Anais," he says, as he sidles up next to me.

"Hello, Roger," I reply, willing my voice to be cheery and normal. Above me, runner beans lace through a trellis. The rabbits always got into those.

*Jack and I playing in the snow, the sky a pastel dreamscape, the trees are bare, and we can finally see the hills beyond the forest.*

"Are you enjoying the garden?" Roger asks.

*Jack stomping in the mud, the early days of March, Rhys laughing, alabaster crocuses and pale green shoots in a brown earth.*

"Anais?" I hear him say, though I can't see him anymore.

*Teaching Jack to make a drip castle on the beach. Jack crying as the tides wash it away.*

Did I ever answer Roger? Goodbye, Roger.

*Lying in a leaf pile of saffron and cider, Jack and I make leaf angels.*

I throw up in a garbage can beneath the blinking red exit light. I don't stop until there's nothing left.

\* \* \*

After the visit, they let you pick a small bouquet of flowers, only two or three stems, in a little room not unlike a museum gift shop. Back on Earth, I always brought daisies to the gravestones of the dead. And there were so many, toward the end. For Jack, I brought baby daisies, their petals of fragile white eyelashes fluttering in the muggy November winds. It was always daisies. Critters don't eat daisies.

There wouldn't be a gravestone for Lila. There wouldn't even be a holographic display. There have been too many deaths of that kind here. There were no memorials for Lila's kind of dead—not on our ship.

We have eight years left until we reach Island 11. Sometimes, it's best not to be reminded of what is lost.

It isn't just earth itself, or its dead. To be human is to be of earth. Each year we journey further away from it, we lose a little more. Like a fading tattoo. They'll have to come up with a new name for us, one day. For what we turn into.

Some already find this new species hard to live amongst. Like Lila. She kept the tattoo of humanity fresh, like a scab she kept picking over, refusing to let it heal.

I know about things that don't heal.

Sometimes my mind wanders, and I ask myself why they have a garden on this ship. Sometimes the steel screams in the meteoroid storms, and I am woken in the small hours. Rocks no larger than grains of sand rattle against our metal hull, and I remember the sound of the rain on our old rusty roof during The Deluge. Jack slept in our bed, then. I turn over and expect to find him still sharing my pillow. And when he's not there, I ask myself again why I'm traveling on one metal cylinder to another, why I didn't stay on Earth until its last breath.

And I ask myself why they have a garden on this ship.

But in the morning—or the perversion we now call morning—the question looks different. In the morning, I remember that the future does not belong to those who look back.

The garden is a necessity.

There are those who go into the garden and appreciate the beauty of earthen nature at a healthy remove, the way we once gazed at pottery shards and time-speckled mirrors in well-curated museums.

To them, the garden is an amenity. They will do well on Island 11.

There are those who go into the garden and lose their bearings. Those that fall backwards and must find a way to stand amidst the profound vertigo.

To them, the garden is a lesson. May we do well on Island 11.

There are those who go into the garden and never come out—and those not strong enough to go in at all. The ones like Lila, and Rhys.

To them, the garden is a realization. They will never reach Island 11.

\* \* \*

I choose white irises and lay them on my bedside table next to the tube of sunscreen they found under Lila's pillow. The flowers would last a long time, I know.

There is nothing here that can eat them.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Eleanor Lennox** lives in New England. She likes to write about the vagaries of space travel, and that most unpredictable of dimensions: time. Her work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *Crepuscular* and *MudRoom*. Find her online at [eleanorlennox.com](http://eleanorlennox.com).

## EXOPUNK'S NOT DEAD

*by Corey Jae White*

*(First published in A Punk Rock Future)*

Downtown vibrates with sub-low frequency, churning Jack's guts alongside the anxiety he knows will only quiet with booze. The frame of his exoskeleton buzzes as he stomps closer to the source of the sound—metal humming to the kick drum thump coming up through cracked asphalt. Red paint flakes like dandruff; underneath the paint, steel rusts.

Jack's is a basic demolition exo: limbs attached to a sturdy hydraulic frame lacking any armor plating. He floats within the exoskeleton's torso, dangling on a battered harness with haptic converters aligned to his musculature. It's airy inside the machine, its canopy open to the elements. A breeze from the bay rolls over Jack's bare arms, carrying the salty smell of rotting seaweed.

Jack checks the flyer one last time, worried he might turn up at the wrong place—as though that distant clamour could be anything other than a punk show. The flyer's proper old-school, photocopied onto thin sheets of yellow paper:

*EXOPUNK (WRECKING) BALL  
OLD CITY HALL  
DOORS OPEN 8PM*

The city council was voted out a year ago, but even a democratically-elected governmental algorithm needs time to implement changes. At first, police had patrolled the grounds, protecting it while the city tried to find a buyer, but once enough of the walls had been torn open for the copper piping, they pulled out. The official demolition starts Monday, but after tonight's gig, with all the exopunks from the highlands dropping in, half the job will be done.

Jack rounds the corner and joins a procession of skels thudding up the street. Seeing his people, the knot of tension in his guts unravels. Even in his nine-foot-tall exo, the goliath city hall building looms threateningly: graffiti spots the stone façade like bruises, masonry already crumbling as decay sets in.

\* \* \*

A broad wall of noise slams against Jack's chest as he stomps into the old building. The air is hot and humid, thick with competing scents of sour sweat and spilled beer.

The band on stage is lit up bright, high above the thrashing, glinting mosh, and plaster dust rains from the cracked ceilings with every heavy beat. Exos fill the pit: classic twelve-foot clankers slamming among sleeker SOTA rigs while armoured bouncers look on. The pit is already three feet below the rest of the floor, marble tiling and cement foundations churned up as the opening acts hype the crowd.

Jack points his exo at the bar jutting from a hole bashed into the walls; behind the bartenders, empty office cubicles are filled with trash and drug detritus. He gets in line and forces his exo onto the balls of its steel feet so he can see over the heads in front of him.

"Nice ride."

At the voice, Jack pivots inside his skel. The guy has a thick, black beard around an easy smile. A thick mat of hair crosses his broad chest, visible through tears in his replica cosmonaut suit. He hangs inside his exo's frame, looking almost weightless—very 'stranded in space.'

When the guy starts to grin, Jack realises how long he's been staring without saying anything. His cheeks burn. A rat king of nerves tangles in his stomach, but it's a good nervous, a 'cute guy is talking to me' nervous.

"Thanks," he says, finally. "It's a hand-me-down; was my older brother's."

"Makes sense; you don't see too many guys our age in one of the classics."

Jack laughs, just a single throaty 'Ha.' He knows his beat-up Ward-D2 isn't really a classic, but he can see a pick-up line for what it is and still want to be picked up, can't he?

The next song starts, and decibels soar like courier drones. Jack pushes his exo toward the bar as the line moves.

"Did he go into engineering?" the punk-onaut shouts.

"What?" Jack says, leaning forward in his harness. The chat-link light inside his exoframe blinks, and Jack hits the switch.

"Your brother," the other guy says, his voice tinny through Jack's audio system: "did he go into engineering or something?"

"Yeah, *something*," Jack says; he doesn't say that 'something' was prison. "My name's Jack."

"I'm Ramón, and no, I hate The Ramones."

Jack chuckles, then sees he's almost at the front of the line. "What are you drinking?"

"Cider."

Jack gets flustered at the bar and orders two ciders, though it's normally too sweet for his tastes. He takes one of the canisters and hands it to Ramón, then slots the other into his exo's rehydration unit as the band on stage finishes their set.

"Thanks," Ramón says. "I'll get the next round."

Jack drinks from the tube strapped inside the head module and the cider slides down his throat, thick, saccharine, and cold.

"Wanna go up the front?" Ramón asks.

"Hey, ho, let's go," Jack says, and beams at his own joke. Ramón rolls his eyes but smiles.

Exopunks drop into the cratered pit, their eyes eagerly following members of the next band as they walk out on stage; *Mucus Mary and the Moist Mothers* spray painted on a bedsheet hanging on the rear wall.

The guitarist and bass player wear their instruments inside their suits, and the singer has the microphone mounted to her exo's head. The drummer's exoskeleton clunks and thuds as it interfaces with the drum machine—twelve limbs flexing and stretching as she gets a feel for the gear. She counts in and the band erupts in a vicious car crash. The pit surges, sending dirt and cement chunks into the air where, Jack swears, they hover for a full second, held in place by the singer's banshee screech.

"I love this band," Ramón yells.

Jack thrashes to the sound and his shinbones shudder every time his exofeet jackhammer the ground. As the stage lights sweep over the crowd, the fog of cement dust around him and Ramón glows.

Ramón drops into the pit, and before Jack can think twice, he's done the same. Jack slams the head of his exo into the wall of the pit and Ramón joins him while Mucus Mary wails and squeals. Jack screams and euphoria seeps into his veins, as warm as the cider is cold.

He gulps a mouthful of air and dust as he wraps his lips around the rehydration tube. The dust gently scratches his throat as he swallows. Dust lines his nostrils too—if he gets a spot on the official demolition crew come Monday, he'll be wearing respiratory gear, but right now, he doesn't care. His lungs could rot inside his chest and it would be worth it to be here tonight, drowning in noise, surrounded by the only thing that ever made sense to him. Study hard, they said; yeah, thanks for the debt. Get a job, they said; fuck you, there aren't any.

Jack dances harder, his suit's haptics fighting him as it struggles to keep up. The only truth Jack ever found was in punk rock: music that's dirty, fast, and over so soon, just like life.

The band starts another song and Jack stops dancing to take a drink. Ramón's chest hair glints with sweat and Jack imagines slipping his hands inside the

cosmonaut suit so the hairs curl around his fingers. But Ramón doesn't catch Jack's overt gaze; his attention is elsewhere, watching three skinheads in archaic getups using their massive exos to tower over some kids in shiny-chromed rigs.

Jack's chest rattles—not from the noise, but the fight-or-flight thump of his heart. Ramón takes a step forward and Jack's mind is made up for him as he and Ramón push through the crowd.

"You fucking better not be here Monday," one of the skinheads says, thumping one kid's rig with a clenched exofist. "Those demolition jobs are for us. You want work, go back to Iraqistan."

"Hey," Ramón yells.

The three boneheads turn, identical triplets with their shaved heads and faces: babies that got big but never grew up.

Jack's fear gives way to anger as he glances past the skinheads and sees the young punks cowering. They look like honour roll kids who miraculously discovered good tunes in the banal suburban sprawl. But that's the exopunk ethos: *anyone* is free to work if they've got a rig, and *anyone* is free to wreck if they've got that fucking fire in their belly.

The music lulls and the lead bonehead yells new slurs at Jack and Ramón. Far up front on the stage, Mucus Mary points into the crowd as her band breaks into a new song: a frenetic stampede of noise. A chorus joins in as Mucus Mary screams, "Nazi Punks Fuck Off!" It was a classic before Jack was born, and it's the one song every decent punk band knows, even if they never want a reason to play it.

Jack freezes as Ramón steps forward and grips the lead skinhead's rig in both exohands. The bonehead tries to break Ramón's grip, but he locks his exo's hands in place, unhooks his harness, and throws himself forward. Ramón grabs the collar of the bonehead's bomber jacket and buries a fist into the fucker's nose. Blood pours into his mouth, hanging slack.

Jack stomps close, barring the other Nazis as they try to get at Ramón. His hydraulics shriek with the effort of holding them back, a sharp screech that pierces his ears as more punks push in towards the scuffle.

Plaster dust underfoot glows purple—security moves through the crowd riding black security rigs, all sharp angles and blacklight LEDs. Ramón disconnects his exo and Jack pushes him back before standing with an impromptu line of exopunks, blocking Ramón from the bouncer's view.

Jack points and yells, "Get these Nazi fucks out of here," shifting his exo to stay between Ramón and the bouncers. Jack can't see the bouncer's face inside the armour, but the exo bobs in acknowledgement, and he hijacks the three boneheads' suits and leads them out of the pit.

Jack turns to Ramón, gingerly poking his knuckles with his left hand. "You okay?"

"I heard something crack, just hope it was his nose and not my knuckle." Ramón shivers and Jack feels it too: the drop of adrenaline leaving his body.

Jack unclips his harness and climbs out to stand on the frame of Ramón's rig. He slips inside Ramón's exoskeleton and buries his fingers in Ramón's coarse beard. "Want me to get some ice for your hand?"

Ramón lets out a deep breath, then looks up from his bloody hand, his eyes a deep brown, speckled with orange. "It'll be fine," he says.

Jack leans in, sour-sweet breaths coalescing in the moment before their lips meet, Ramón's tongue wet and hot against Jack's.

Jack smiles. "You really gave that guy a *Blitzkrieg*—"

Ramón cuts him off with another kiss, a longer one that only stops when they get jostled, the crowd slowly gaining momentum after stalling for the fight.

"Make another Ramones joke," Ramón says, "and that might be the last time I kiss you."

Jack kisses Ramón again while his heart beats double-time. His mouth tastes sickly sweet with dead apples and probable regret, but he doesn't care. This man might break his heart, but it would be worth it to be here tonight.

"What's the matter with your exo; we need technical support?" A bouncer stands beside Jack's abandoned exoskeleton.

"No, it's fine," Jack yells.

When the bouncer sees Jack inside Ramón's exo, he shakes his head and smiles. "Don't leave it empty on the dance floor, alright fellas; it ain't safe."

Jack almost laughs at 'dance floor', but he nods and climbs back into his exo as the bouncer walks off chuckling.

They get lost in the music again; moving with the crowd like every exo in the joint is linked. Sweat soaks through Jack's clothes as they yell and stomp in a circle of exopunks; he grins whenever his eyes catch Ramón's.

When Mucus Mary is done, she and the Moist Mothers leave stage to a mushroom-cloud of cheers from the pit. Ramón leads Jack to the edge and they jump out of the crater. Jack pauses to take in the sweat-slicked revellers panting for breath and the exos knocking together with the clank of punk love; the bliss that follows an epic mosh.

Standing close enough to Ramón so that they can lean out of their exos and touch, Jack asks, "Are we gonna get another drink?"

"I only really came for Mary," Ramón says, "so I was gonna go home."

Jack frowns, and Ramón laughs.

He pinches Jack's chin and says quietly, "I was hoping you'd come with me."



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Corey Jae White** is the author of *Repo Virtual* and *The Voidwitch Saga – Killing Gravity, Void Black Shadow, and Static Ruin*—published by Tordotcom Publishing. She has also had short fiction published in *Interzone* and *Analog*, and a number of sci-fi anthologies. She studied writing at Griffith University on the Gold Coast and is now based in Melbourne, Australia.

## THICKER THAN WATER

*by Aeryn Rudel*

The trees got Daphne last night. We'd camped in what I thought was a secure spot, an old garage with brick walls and a concrete floor. I'd paid careful attention to the trees lining the crumbling streets, their leaves gaudy crimson in the fading light, the corpses of raccoons and feral dogs ringing their trunks. They were maples and slash pines. No real threat unless you were lying on soft ground out in the open.

In the garage, we'd found a cache of bottled water, enough to get us through a few days, maybe even a week if we were careful. We'd felt fortunate, blessed, and that fleeting moment of hope blinded me.

I didn't see the oak behind the garage.

In the night, it sent roots questing through the dirt like hungry worms, pushing through the concrete with slow, relentless strength. When I woke, the water bottles were split and drained; Daphne lay on a bed of cracked earth and the shredded remains of her sleeping bag, her skin pale as milk, roots twisting through her body like wooden tumors.

I loved Daphne as much as you can love anything at the end of the world, but I didn't scream or weep. I'm long past such things. When all the water dried up, so did my tears.

The tree was keeping her alive while it fed, using the frenzied pumping of her heart to drain every drop of blood. I hefted my axe and looked into her eyes, hoping to see some spark of the woman I'd loved, to say goodbye, to say I'm sorry. I saw nothing but terror, so I freed her before the tree could consume what little life remained.

The roots withdrew from Daphne's corpse in stiff, jerking movements, like those old films that speed up the frame rate to show plants leaning toward the sun.

Of course, it's not just the sun they want. They need water, too, and after human folly and greed turned oceans, rivers, and lakes into dust-choked wasteland, they had to adapt, change from passive feeders to active hunters. The trees rapidly evolved to exploit the one source of water that was still abundant—gushing through our veins. They're too slow and too obvious when you're awake and moving, but you have to sleep sometime, and there are always roots beneath you.

I thought about burying Daphne, then grimaced. If I put her in the ground, the trees would find her, drink the last drops of fluid, and turn her skin and bones into mulch. I couldn't allow that. They'd taken too much from us already.

I had another idea. More fitting. More just.

I picked up my axe again, a good felling model I found in an abandoned hardware store in Maine, and went out back.

Someone had built an iron cage around the post oak. They did that in the beginning. Everyone thought we still needed the trees so the world didn't suffocate; everyone thought that we could just contain them. Laughable. I've seen an oak push roots through the undercarriage of a semi to get at the people inside, to get at their water.

The oak behind the garage was small, barely topping ten feet. Its placement probably didn't provide it many opportunities to feed. Not until we came along. When I got back there, I wasn't surprised to see the oak's leaves were bright red with stolen vitality. That's one thing I just can't get used to. I remember a green planet, not this dry, bleeding husk. Now every forest, every jungle, every leaf swaying in the choking breeze of a parched Earth is the color of a dying sun.

I approached the oak. I'm sure it could sense me, feel the life pumping through me in thumps and gushes. Its roots had cracked the concrete around its cage and bent the bars outward. Some of them wriggled toward me, inching along the concrete. I stepped over them and pulled my knife from its sheath at my hip.

The oak had a coppery stink, and beneath it, I caught a whiff of Daphne. That combination of dirt, sweat, and the sweet, herbal aroma of her favorite gum. Every time we'd scavenge an old grocery store for water and other supplies, she'd somehow find an unopened pack, neon green and reeking of mint. It was so uniquely her. Some people said the trees drank more than our blood. I didn't want to believe them. But there she was. Her smell, Wrigley's Doublemint, blooming from the leaves of the tree like an old memory.

I brought up my knife and pushed the point against the bark. I began to carve, working silently, putting my weight into the blade so my mark would last. When I finished, I stepped back, avoiding the nest of squiggling roots that had assembled at my feet. I smiled and discovered I had a few tears left.

Into the oak's trunk, I had carved:

DAPHNE  
+  
DAVID

I put my knife away and picked up the axe. Its weight felt good in my hands, its purpose felt right in my mind. I cleared the roots away first, hacking them into kindling, even as they stretched upward, drawn to the salty tears streaming down my face. Then I turned to the tree.

I keep the axe sharp, and the first swing cut deep, showering me with bark. The coppery stench intensified as the sap flowed, but so did Daphne's precious scent. I swung again, breathing it in, letting the smell awaken memories of our time together. The sweet moments we shared, the kind words we spoke to one another in a lonely, cannibal world.

When the oak toppled, the sound of its trunk splintering had a keening quality, like a long, groaning scream. Daphne's smell mercifully faded, and I chopped the oak into pieces to build her pyre.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Aeryn Rudel** is a writer from sunny California currently confined to the gloom-shrouded Pacific Northwest. He is the author of the baseball horror novella *Effectively Wild*, the Iron Kingdoms Acts of War novels, and the flash fiction collection *Night Walk & Other Dark Paths*. His short stories have appeared in *Factor Four Magazine*, *On Spec*, and *Pseudopod*, among others. He is a heavy metal nerd, a baseball geek, a sword dweeb, and knows more about dinosaurs than is healthy or socially acceptable. Learn more about Aeryn and his work at [www.rejectomancy.com](http://www.rejectomancy.com) or on Bluesky @aerynrudel.bsky.social.

## WHEN THE SUN PASSED THROUGH ME

by Edward Hodge

I am without a body, but I can touch a hand to my shoulder and cup what feels like my collarbone. When there was light, I crouched on the long curve of the earth and the heat of the world rose against my lips.

If I am still here, there must be something for me. Something made, something promised. A precious object, a lesson to learn. A crown for me, or the rack. Some purpose tying me to this place.

\* \* \*

When I was alive, I owned a car. Not an electric one, either. I had an antique petrol-powered car with a permit to drive as fast as I wanted across any continent. I remember being very wealthy. If a thing didn't exist, I could have it built. The implant was one of mine. And mine, the only one.

I remember those early days. When the implant did as promised, and I found myself in the desert where I died. It was strange getting used to my new form, if that was even the word to describe it. Time passed slowly. The days and nights would chase each other like two emus, one white and one black, across the landscape. Always past, always present. I listened to the slow reverberance of tides in the earth's core.

I walked through the scrubland to the place on the road where the wheels drove into the asphalt, making hieroglyphics. I put my hands on the seething, dark stripes, likening their warmth to the feeling of an amputee's limb. A phantom sensation. Some stray sentimentality for the world I no longer wholly inhabited.

One day, while I stood on the road, a car arrived. It was a dimpled red ute with water-damaged solar panels. The tray had a dog in it, a black Staffy. The car stopped near the black marks on the road and a woman got out. They seemed like flickers to me—fast-moving candleflames.

Out of curiosity, I passed into the dog. The creature was curled in the shadow of a rolled tent, digging its face into the canvas. Its tongue was dry and its stomach throbbed for food. Its eyes were closed, but its mind had a kind of light pointing

to the woman like a polestar. The light moved as the sound of boots padded softly on the dirt and then clopped on the tarmac. The dog's ears flicked and it looked around. The woman had a disk of light around the crown of her head. The tail started to wag as the woman groped through the folds of the neck for the collar. A piece of metal snicked.

“Up, Pudding. That's a girl.”

The dog struggled to its feet and shook itself. The wriggling pleasure of the act coursed up its tailbone to the tip of its snout, like being wrung out. Blearily, it looked around. The woman clicked her fingers. The polestar light glowed brighter around her head. The dog put its front paws on the edge of the tray and leapt onto the hot road.

“That's a girl. Come on.”

The woman was tall and dark. Like her shadow, she crossed the curve of the world in long strides. Her form was solid, as mine had once been. The sun did not pass through her. It stopped at her, held temporarily in check.

The dog followed her eagerly. There was a cancer inside its belly that I could feel like a lump of jet, while its empty stomach gurgled for food. When they reached the wreckage, the woman stared at it while the dog went ahead, following the scent of dead meat.

The crash: the birthplace of my new existence. For a night, a rose of smoke had bloomed over the engine. Black paint had peeled from the metal like many puckered mouths. My body burned; the implant had activated and performed its last command.

Outside myself, I had wept and screamed, holding my unseen fists atop my head. The stars crept on in silence and the earth dully sang and I remained.

*Remained . . .*

By morning, the land had draped the car and my old body in a veil of dust, fine and red. By evening, my dead face looked just like anything else in the desert. The inside of a split branch, a lizard carried by ants, silver moonlight on the hills.

The dog didn't take long to find my carcass. The woman started to yell, stamping her tan-colored boot. But the dog had its teeth in my forearm and the flesh was coming apart like pulled pork. Inside the dog, I too could taste it. The tendons rubbed and snapped like elastic bands.

When I was little, my sister cut her big toe at the beach. She cried; I held up my finger with a drop of her blood on it and absently put it inside my mouth. With this same detachment I engaged in my own devouring. The elbow, the rotator cuff, the jaw—an ancestral prototype, not parts of me anymore. I took a kind of pleasure in it, glad my old body was disappearing. It was impossible for me, in those moments, to feel grief for something that had become so foreign. Like getting rid of some rusted car part that had long ago lost its function.

At last, the woman succeeded in reaching through the metal of the car to seize the dog's collar. She pulled, and I felt a piece of bone get briefly caught inside the dog's throat. "Off, Pudding! Holy shit!" The woman kept dragging the dog back even as we howled, the howl becoming a kind of strangled yelp around the cinched collar. The dog coughed all the way back to the ute. "That's so wrong," the woman said over and over.

I left the dog's body and walked ahead of them a while. The woman hurried, and they moved right through me and out the other side.

The woman locked the dog onto the hot ute tray by its collar, then opened the driver's door and sat on the front seat with her knees pointed to the desert. With a shaking hand, she turned the ignition and picked up a dusty smartphone. I crouched on the warm tarmac. Her voice reached me over the desert wind and the throb of molten metal spinning at the center of the world.

"Hello?" said the woman. "Yeah, I found an accident about forty k's from Tennant Creek. South . . . Nah, I did. Wasn't the cleverest . . . Yep . . . Look, it was pretty obvious . . ."

She set the phone back onto the dashboard, swung her legs into the cockpit, and closed the door. She rubbed her face with her hands, staring out at the desert. The dog whined.

Out of interest, I pressed myself into the tiny gap between the door and the jamb and slipped inside her body through the skin, just as I had with the dog.

In the woman I found a name—a hard diamond around which swirled oceans of many mixtures. Purple-black guilt, silver hope, gnawing desire. She was fixated on *Darwin*. There, she prayed, she would find her great work. A community, a lover, a bounty. Everything, she believed, would be worth its price up north. I empathized with her. There was something in this world for me, too. Something promised. I just had to wait to find out. The universe would make manifest my secret reward.

I stayed with her while she rolled a cigarette. In my life I'd never smoked, and it was strange embodying someone while they went about a mechanical, practiced skill like rolling a cigarette. She put it between her lips and lit it. In the back, the dog whined. The smoke filled the woman's lungs. I could feel the resistance of the membrane, the sticky tug of her breath. She ignored the dog, felt as if it had suddenly become a kind of a monster for eating my body. A creature of backwards grace. In the hot sun, she could hear it whimper.

When I emerged, I felt satisfied. Free. This woman was still bound to death. She lived in fear of it. She was terrified that her life would hold no authenticity or meaning. But I had fooled death. I'd avoided a mechanism that had ground its cogs across this desert a billion times and one more. Like a matador, I'd sent it off

through the scrubland with its perfect programming undismayed. If death was a gust of air, I was a fish hidden in a pond.

I smirked as the woman eased her foot down and the vehicle lurched into the first step of a movement. It passed on silent and electric toward the haze and I watched it quiver and hasp in the road heat like the desert was a wet half-eye closing upon the dancing shape.

I did not feel cold as the night came on. The stars were brilliant in the galactic sky. The wind had a mouth and it called to me as if it were death's blind twin, searching for that soul whom its brother had left uncounted. The only thing I could really feel was the small bit of warmth from the marks where my wheels had bitten the road.

\* \* \*

The days, the weeks, the years came on. A group of men took my car away, stripped no doubt for its petroleum engine. People built huge powerlines connected to giant road trains that each stretched for kilometers of rattling carriages. Bombs fell, lighting the distant hills in starbursts, illuminating the undersides of black caterpillars of smoke. I witnessed armies of trucks move up and down the road like titanic animals dragging themselves from hibernation, the inheritors of mammalian rule shrouded in red dust. A township budded, blossomed, and withered away in the span of a hundred seasons. People stayed for a hundred more in its husk, using open fires to cook, hollow-eyed and starving as though they were hemmed in by some moat in the outlands beyond the hills. Sometimes I joined them or passed inside a member of their clan. But my presence would often be greeted by a collective shiver like a tidal passage. They would make signs to some god or machine of theirs and swear someone was pissing on their grave. My death-spot was a haunted site and they avoided it, except for the brave children whom I watched from my place on the road. The years went on. The town swelled again, slackened, and finally died, the walls the final things left standing. The wind continued to comb the landscape as if in search of me, grinding the stones to finer dust with each one of its bawling cries. I remained. In the far darkness constellations moved.

One night, the sea came in. It covered the parched desert in slow crenulations. When it covered the road I realized I could walk upon its surface. But as the depth of it increased, I spent more time underwater, in the silt of the drowned desert on the tarmac near the wind-raised foundations of the village walls. I stood there and pondered the plan the world had for me. I wondered when my crown would finally come.

When I finally rose from the depths, I lay on my back beneath the stars. I lay upon a mirror that curled completely around me. The firmament's many fires rotated overhead and below me they rotated the other way. The deep underneath and the empty highness were one sphere. The moon did not block the sun when it passed between it and the earth; it made a black hole rimmed with flame. Booming through the vast depths I heard the song of the earth, many keys and octaves changed since I left my body.

One night, a fire appeared in the sky. It filled the world with such brilliance that the very ocean bucked and issued its vapors like the ghosts of everything that had ever lived. The dog, the woman, the bombshells, the township, and the car I'd died in all went up towards that great conflagration. I found myself sinking lower and lower as the sea begat itself to the light, until I was on my back against the seabed. Here, detritus and debris lay on the sand and underneath was the tarmac, and below the tarmac the molten song reached a kind of screaming crescendo as the core's metal boiled to plasma. I stared straight ahead. The fire blossomed in silence and finally filled the sky and swallowed the earth and me.

The light stayed for a long time. It guzzled and vaporized until there was no seabed to lie on, just me in the center of the fire, and I willed myself to explode or turn to ash to somehow join its radiance. On and on it burned, so it was as if I had disappeared within the flame, but I knew that there was still a me and I could still touch my hand to my shoulder and cup the edge of my collarbone.

In the quasi-darkness that followed I saw each one of the visible stars scatter its mass, exploding in snowy beams and halos. I wondered whether the universe really did have a plan for me. Or if my existence was a kind of rack upon which to lie. I thought about how the dog had cowered on the ute tray in the frying sun while the woman's mind was occupied with other things.

Everything went out, at the end. The stars each disappeared and the heat of them spread evenly to all parts of the hollowness so that there was no more movement, no more combinations or separations. The light finally stopped, and it was silent and dark and cold. I rubbed my hands together.

When things started to happen again, it was all very different. Even I could no longer sustain myself as I once had. The world shivered and started to move again in another form, and out of some mercy or exacting law, it did count me among its pieces.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Edward Hodge** (he/him) is a poet and fiction writer based in Naarm (Melbourne, Australia). He is part of Meridian Australis, an Australian organization dedicated to championing emerging speculative short story writers.

## DAD JOKES

by David Lee Zweifler

Christmas is tough this year.

Dad used to be an important man: the Chair of Temporal Neuroscience at MIT.

Brilliant. Funny.

Now, he's lonely. Confused. Talking about unregulated time travelers stepping on butterflies in the past and changing the timeline.

Crazy. Not funny.

He's making me regret dragging my only son, Chris, back to Boston for the holidays.

Dad says he sees the changes—reality updating in real time.

That was his focus at the Institute. His obsession. Before his colleagues politely, quietly, asked him to leave.

"I can perceive it, you see," he says, loading up his plate with turkey. "It's tied to the active temporal lobe of intelligent people and underactive ventral striatum of people with a good sense of humor. People like me. When the former ages, it takes these people a little longer to internalize the changes as they occur . . ."

He looks at Mom's empty chair.

He says that's why he asks where Mom is. Why he's always asking where I put the medal for a Nobel Prize he never won.

Why none of his jokes are funny or even make sense.

"Dad." I speak softly, as he passes the turkey. "You're scaring Peter."

"Peter?" He looks confused. Sad.

He sighs.

"Maybe I *am* losing it." He chuckles. "If I wasn't, someone would have gone back and sent Hitler to art school already, right?"

"I don't get it, dad," Peter, my youngest, whispers. "Who's Hitler?"

I smile and stroke my son's head. "I don't know, sweetie."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Lee Zweifler (he/him) spent years in places like Jakarta, Hong Kong, and New York City, working in journalism and other less-dignified pursuits. Now, he spends his days sowing the seeds of his own demise in technology communications. By night, David writes speculative fiction, currying favor with the robot overlords and old gods. David has recent work in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Analog*, and *Nature Futures*, and is currently querying his first novel. You can connect with David at [davidleezweifler.com](http://davidleezweifler.com).

## CANIS

*by Wugee Kelly*

Carving its way through rolling mountains, the edges of Highway 26 had crumbled to pebbles. Divots in the asphalt still held oil stains—even decades of rain could not wash away the black spots. Twin yellow lines tracked along the road, interspersed by questing roots. An ivy-coated sign pointed toward a decrepit military refueling depot littered with vehicle husks. Lichen coated the barrels of their silent guns; bird nests poked from their barrels.

A tawny-coated doe nibbled at grass peeking through the gaps of a concrete slab, hooves clacking against the uneven surface. Two fawns grazed behind her flank. One fawn, braver than his brother, meandered through the leaning door of the abandoned station. Glass shards from shattered windows twinkled, lighting a path towards the darkened interior. Under his mother's watchful eye, he sniffed at collapsed shelves and moldering skeletons that nature worked to bury. The fawn's nose bumped into a stack of boxes, toppling them. Belts of brass bullets spilled across the linoleum, rattling like snakes. The fawn stumbled when one link whipped his rear. He bolted away and tumbled snout-first into the ground, bleating twice.

Dazed, the fawn sprinted through the field of vehicles. Hidden razor wire loops sliced open his stomach and limbs as he went. Just before the edge of the woods, the fawn collapsed to the ground, his bright blood joining the stains on Highway 26.

\* \* \*

In the depot, one red diode, then two, then a whole panel pulsed to life. Titanium servos whirred inside metal limbs. A series of microactuators fired with mechanical clicks, grinding through the scum and grit of inactivity. Awoken by the boxes falling against a switchboard, a gaunt creature emerged from its preservation cradle. Yellow optics embedded in its angular head scanned the surroundings. Gridded light projected around the room, mapping the three-dimensional layout for future reference.

It noted the unused ammunition strewn about. Human remains, too, decayed beyond facial recognition. It took two steps forward to investigate before being jerked backwards: nine cables trailed from its underbelly into the cradle. Planting itself solidly on four legs, the metal creature shook itself vigorously. Once, twice, and on the third go, the cables popped off with a grating suction. Three finger bones clattered off its back to the ground. Grime flaked off, revealing a steel nameplate: K9-S33.

Twin antennae emerged from S33's skull casing and searched for a signal. Ten seconds, twenty seconds, thirty seconds. After five minutes of waiting, S33 wandered outside the depot. Its topographical information was accurate within one standard deviation—an acceptable level of error until satellite updates were received. S33 trotted through the debris-strewn lot with little care for glass or rusty metal. Independent gyroscopes recalibrated each step, compensating against unsteady joints.

Emergency solar panels along S33's sides unfolded to absorb the evening sun. The photovoltaic cells shunted rays of dying light into circuits; capacitors discharged power into S33's synthetic muscles.

Within minutes, the corroded connections sparked and surged with ungoverned voltage before burning out. On S33's back, a blue battery indicator began to tick down.

### 99% Capacity . . .

A bloody trail smeared the road, hints of iron wafting through hyperacute olfactory sensors. S33's thermal imagers highlighted the body of a young fawn at the edge of the overgrown forest. The time of death was twenty-three minutes prior. Larger bodies, soldiers long-deceased, leaned against the shattered windows of bullet-ridden vehicles—an indeterminate age had passed since their corpses were identifiable. Moss grew on the shady underside of green bones, scraps of tattered cloth fluttering in the breeze.

The world was altogether too quiet—S33's memory banks could not recall a time when there had been so much nothing.

On the contrary, there was life, plenty of it. Evidence of birds and deer, of mice even, but nothing of humans. No armored soldiers with rifles primed, no tanks rolling down the interstate, not even the buzz of incoming drones.

In the overwhelming airwave silence, S33 registered there had been no new input since the last command directives: [Debrief] and [Standby]. Yet, it had been activated. With no other recourse, S33 defaulted to the base directive: [Locate Handler]. It began to sprint towards the last received signal, a mere decayed echo.

### 96% Capacity . . .

Falling night concealed S33's sleek form sprinting along Highway 26 towards the last signal. Infrared burned from its two chest-mounted floodlights, coupling with radar telemetry to allow S33 to weave around fallen trees and craters. As it ran, its waving antennae continued searching for anything new.

The final signal had been 72 kilometers north as the drone flew, but 108 kilometers along pavement if S33 chose to avoid undue environmental wear. S33 loped forward until a blast of thunder echoed within its auditory receptors. It startled into the air before dashing inside of an overturned RV.

An opossum hissed at the intrusion as it waddled out. Six small copies of the adult specimen clung to its back. Its gleaming eyes reflected the yellow scangrid, but S33 ignored the marsupial. Instead, S33 entered threat-assessment mode, hypervigilant, its small-caliber mandible guns primed for action.

Two minutes passed until S33 decided there were no incoming artillery strikes. But before S33 could resume its journey, a flash of distant lightning illuminated the shadow of a man looming over it. S33 whirled around and attempted to fire multiple rounds—its guns clicked empty. Meanwhile, the body of the man slumped over with a gaseous exhalation. His head slammed into the floor with a sharp crack.

Sealed within an environmental suit, the man's face was green and bloated with rot. Blisters bled oil into the plastic screen of the helmet, his cheek resting in a cloudy puddle. His tongue lolled out, swollen like a dammed creek, and brown liquid pooled in his mouth.

S33 sidestepped to avoid rivulets of organic material from a new fracture in the helmet's visor. Following hard-coded reconnaissance directives, S33 ventured deeper within the RV's rotated interior.

In the RV's cramped bedroom, three other bodies desiccated to almost nothing lay swaddled in stained blankets. An intact picture and frame was positioned at their collective heads. Inside, a family posed in front of a foreign body of water. Error codes flew in S33's cortex as it attempted to analyze the input with facial recognition. The woman in the picture was a 76% facial match for its handler. Corrupted memory banks struggled to stitch together old data transmissions and visual input from before the manual deactivation.

The first logs were intact, if sparse. There had been a handler, a corporal. S33 was assigned to her command on the day of activation. S33 obeyed her commands as long as they were within the operational limits of its programming. The handler had functioned optimally with S33. And S33 had functioned optimally with the handler.

The hissing of rain cascading onto the RV's aluminum siding shook S33 alert. Satisfied with security levels, it entered a state of power-conservation inside its shelter.

### 82% Capacity . . .

The storm subsided to acceptable levels within 87 minutes and 32 seconds. Outside the RV, the opossum growled at the matte black chassis of S33 sprinting away into the night.

Around mid-morning, when the sun began to burn away the rain, S33 entered into a township. Soggy planks hung on curved nails against the windows of abandoned houses and fallen telephone lines snaked across asphalt crumble. The twisted wires snagged at S33's feet as it leapt over a sandbag wall.

Abruptly, S33 paused to sniff the air, then changed course as it detected fumes. It followed the trail all the way to a series of structures in the town's square. Sometime ago, soldiers had jury-rigged pieces of engines together to form a complete generator—salvaged power lines led into military tents. Armed sentry automatons patrolled the exterior in decaying gear, their only purpose to guard and maintain the tombs of people long since gone. S33 froze motionless, only partially behind concealment. The camouflage pattern on the sentry gears triggered an unbidden memory.

The directive had been routine: [Reconnaissance]. Unexpectedly, six enemy units encountered S33 and the handler. [Evade] became unavoidable. The parameters switched to prime directive: [Protect Handler]. But S33 failed: [Protect Handler]. The first handler had been terminated. S33 could not [Protect Handler]. S33 could not—

A bullet whined past K9-S33's left antennae. Automatic evasive maneuvers triggered, and it jumped to the side, slamming into a pile of bricks. Error codes flashed in the corner of its optics as it scabbled to its feet, sprinting away at emergency speed. Thirteen more rounds pocketed the walls of nearby buildings. Sprays of brick-and-mortar dust obscured its optics. S33 ran blindly away from the town, relying on its external proximity sensors to guide it.

### 65% Capacity . . .

Emergency speeds drained its power reserves at a phenomenal rate. S33 ran towards the signal point until the enemy outpost was well outside pursuit range. It scanned the towering trees around it—these groves were young, but the vegetation was sturdy enough to uproot the blasted railroad tracks.



Steel beams groaned as S33 jumped from warped tip to warped tip. Ahead, a firebomb-gutted passenger train had foliage sprouting out of where the windows had been. A mongrel dog with a brindle coat peered from within. Her muzzle twitched as she sniffed at S33, lips curling and hackles raised at S33's faint acrid scent. Three puppies cowered beneath her legs, eyes wide and white. S33 took a calculated step towards the mother. She began to bark, her angry snarls interspersed with false starts and blustering aggression.

Disengaging, S33 turned and ran, ever onwards towards the echo of the last received signal.

#### 58% Capacity . . .

S33 was almost at the signal. It jumped over the lip of a wide crater and peered into the bottom. The signal had come from here, decades ago, when the airwaves were abuzz with directives.

The corrupted memories were parsing clearly now. S33 could not follow prime directive: [Protect Handler]. S33 had defaulted to directive: [Return]. There had been another handler, barely more than a child. S33 was assigned to his command. Then there had been another handler, a scarred man who never spoke. There had been another handler, a woman with one arm. There had been another handler and another, with so many signal echoes.

S33 almost collapsed to the ground, its legs no longer bearing the weight of its light chassis. There were no more handlers. S33 had been told: [Deactivate]. S33 had awoken at a manual input, not a directive. But there were no more handlers.

#### 43% Capacity . . .

Another rainstorm was on the way. S33 could sense the barometric pressure changes from the crater's rim. Depleted power reserves rendering it unable to comply with [Locate Handler], S33 followed [Await Retrieval] and entered [Standby]. Near the edge of its vision radius, it thought it could detect a high-altitude bomber. Without input, the drones would run on a ceaselessly repeating flight pattern until the pieces of their nuclear engines melted away.

A pane on S33's back opened, revealing a fragile broadcast array. S33 began to send out an SOS signal on all frequencies.

#### 37% Capacity . . .

Throughout the night, S33 took shelter under a tank carapace. There was a squirrel nest in one of the vents and evidence that the small mammal had birthed there.

Blue flowers, the last of the season, grew out from the eye of a skull nearby. The calcium rich soil fueled their growth and produced the brightest petals. A spider began deftly spinning a web from stem to stem despite the dew.

#### 24% Capacity . . .

S33 continued to broadcast the SOS signal on loop, only to receive static. A herd of deer nibbled their way across the field. They narrowly avoided the razor wire.

The bomber made its loop again. It seemed as if there was a flock of cranes in tow, migrating south for the winter.

#### 9% Capacity . . .

S33 finally shut down its broadcast array. Only silence met its inquiries. Perhaps somewhere beyond its range, there was a handler. A handler, somewhere away from everything left to rot and rust, somewhere that S33 could not reach.

#### 1% Capacity . . .

As the final tick of K9-S33's battery flashed, it watched as a ladybug crawled onto its olfactory receptor. The torpid beetle sleepily stared into the optics of the strange behemoth it had lit upon.

Bumbling along without a care in the world, the ladybug noticed the attractive yellow glow had faded and sputtered out. Disappointed in its choice of sleeping spots, the insect spread its wings and flew away.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Brandon "Wugee" Kelly** is an Asian American writer and 2024 graduate of Coastal Carolina University's Master of Writing program. "Canis" is his debut publication.

# THE WORLD HAS BEEN THIS WAY FOR A LONG TIME.

by Vincent Endwell

The world has been this way for a long time.

I was thinking, after I dropped your daughter off at the fields, about how many years we've all been living at the precipice, waiting for the drop. Beneath the floating city overhead, the soccer fields still sit, all mid-August brown, beside the storage units; paths climb up to the water towers, hidden in the trees. You and I came here as teens, loitering by the towers. We would sit on the concrete and have conversations too deep for three in the afternoon. Now your daughter is reaching the age when the soccer fields and the concrete and the dirt paths will all belong to her.

It's funny: the things that are passed on, the world that remains. We live in a lineage whether we want to or not; one built on the ruins of every time past.

The city cast a shadow over the valley as I headed out to Trisha's, hot wind buffeting the car. Then it was gone. Sometimes, I think the builders were just trying to find a way of living without ruins—everything new, nothing around them but air. They don't want to reckon with the past—they want a blank slate, and they'll burn the world beneath them to get it.

\* \* \*

I've spent much of my adult life wondering *how much longer*.

When we first met, I would wonder: how much longer it would be before you commented on how cold I was, how I never told you how I felt. I remember lying in your arms with your laptop on the table while a news crew reported on a wildfire. Live wires crackled, siding melted off houses, flames danced in evil jubilee. The reporter told us a passing city had started it: fans and engines stoking sparks which fell and raged through the drought-dry brush.

*How much longer?*

Every time I'm out in the streets with chants in my ears, clashes with cops getting closer through the crowd, I think to myself: *This is when it all takes off.*

This time, we'll remember that the people who did this have names and addresses, and we'll take the fight to them. We'll knock them out of the sky, and their cities will come crashing down like meteors, and in the blaze they will be forced to reckon with those of us below. Every time I think: *This is the last time we will do this.*

But then I keep living.  
Many of us do.

\* \* \*

We were at your mother's farm for a birthday a few years ago. We could sense what was coming, but didn't know how it all would happen. It was a little gathering, a few people that you knew from your childhood (funny how long the world's been like this), and I was in the kitchen with your mother. She was passing me food to bring out to the table, plastic gingham pinned down with bag clips, blue-and-white china weighing down the corners. As she handed me deviled eggs, she said, "They talk about you a lot, you know."

Outside, your daughter was playing badminton with some other children—a little close to the cattle fence, but they were country kids, they knew what they were doing. In the sky above, a thick, white contrail drifted through the blue, dissipating.

"Do they?" I asked, trying to hide my trepidation.

Your mother: I didn't have a read on her then. She was all short white hair and pleasant cheer, with a liberal insistence that I expected to result in uncomfortable questions. But you'd trained her well, I think, and I've just been burned by generations of women I don't connect with, who mistake me for something I'm not.

She dried her hands on her canvas apron and said, "They think highly of your opinions."

I nodded, awkwardly.

"Are you planning to stay around?"

She said it in such a way that I knew she didn't mean for dinner. Trapped, holding a plate of slippery deviled eggs, I realized I'd been cornered. Maybe she'd sensed my uncertainty.

At the time, I'd been planning to stay with you for as long as it seemed right, but old women see things differently than I do. The kind of relationships they expect: dresses and suits and names on paper. Contractual things.

*Stay around.*

Would I have been so spooked if all my relationships weren't built on the ruins of things I rejected? It made me think of my own differences, carving space for myself in the gaps of others' lives, and leaving when I had to. As a child, I'd wandered the paths between the fields and water towers—a place of escape between structures that weren't built for me. As an adult, I'd searched for other ways to go on living without forcing myself to be something I'm not.

"I think so," I said, as honestly as I could.

Later, as you and your father were out feeding the animals, your mother and I sat on the porch with golden wine. People left one by one. The day was getting long and threadbare. The far-off thrum of fans and engines started as the city made its circuit, and patches of blasted, dry land scored the valley, the earth there uninhabitable and scorched.

Your daughter climbed up on the deck and sat at my feet. It was the first time she seemed like she trusted me, instead of just regarding me with distant, student-like respect. "Alyssa showed me the hayloft," she reported. "There are no adults allowed up there, though."

"Even if we're cool?" I asked, and she shook her head sadly, making your mother and I laugh.

"Sorry, no," she said, in the way kids mimic jokes they've heard. "You just don't make the cut."

The city appeared in the distance, rising like a shining black moon over the hills. Your daughter watched it with a detached interest: an everyday sight, regarded without reverence. For me, though, it still felt recent—yet another new horror to reckon with. Another vast, damning excess.

For a moment, we were three generations, all stacked on top of each other, and time swept out before me like a landscape one could traverse, backwards and forwards, returning to again and again.

The city grew. It blotted out the sky, and the deafening roar filled the valley as it accelerated. Your mother shouted over it, pointing out the lights and signs on the silver-black buildings to your daughter, and I sat there feeling no awe, only cold fear. With the earth used up, the rich flee to the skies, mocking us with their insulation from consequence.

The hot wind swept over us, and the sun sank and plunged us into yellow and red and fading, waning blue.

\* \* \*

At night, when our other partners and your daughter are asleep downstairs, I come up and sit with you as you work. The building where we live is leased, and our lives are still leased, and the heat gets thicker every day, but sometimes the

fever breaks. I curl up beside you, and think of those philosophers who'd thought that history had been killed, that there was only one shining future.

That was early in my life. A whole lifetime ago, now.

The world has been like this for a long time. People have had so many convictions—that the world would end, that the world would be saved, that God would pass judgment on the wrongdoers and rain down fire. Now, staring down a fire artificial and godless, I wonder how long we will live like this, building in our own ruins until we run out of space. Living in the shadows of the cities overhead.

"Communists have to be optimists," you always tell me, and I believe you. I do believe you, curled up like a fox beside you as the light burns slowly, and cicadas still rush outside the window, and night coils late, with an infinity still left to us before dawn. Your stillness lets me settle into a love I'm glad you let me feel without demand or recourse. Something changing, and returning, and unforced.

"How will we know when we're beat?" I asked you once in a moment of despair.

And you reminded me: "We have to be optimists. It's not up to us to say when we're through."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vincent Endwell originally hails from unceded Onondaga territory (Central New York). Their work has been published previously in *Dark Horses Magazine*, *Corvid Queen*, and *Your Body is Not Your Body*, an anthology from *Tenebrous Press*, among others.

## PROGRESS, INCORPORATED

*by S. Thomas Drake*

“Welcome, everybody, to Progress,” a man’s enthusiastic voice chimed from a wall speaker.

The large conference room was bathed in blue light reflecting off a canvas screen. A murmur swept through the crowd as music swelled through speakers. They were clearly meant to be seeing something, but the screen stayed blank.

Simon shifted in his folding chair—had he made a mistake? He was putting his life in the hands of a company that couldn’t work a projector. Luckily, the screen flickered on before his thoughts spiraled out of control.

“Before we start our safety guidelines presentation, Progress would first like to acknowledge that this building sits on the native land of the Miwok people.”

Two cartoon Natives appeared next to a roundhouse, smiling and waving at the audience. A few in the room nodded contemplatively, and there was even a smattering of applause from a large white family who wore matching T-shirts reading “Jackson Family Sleepover 2030–TBD”.

“We are sure you’re eager to learn how to operate your state-of-the-art Progress Pods,” the video continued. It shifted to a more detailed animation of what looked like a mechanical coffin with a tiny window. It reminded Simon of an action figure box, complete with a Progress™ logo slapped on the front.

“These pods will be your home for the next several years as you wait for the world to accept you for who you are, be that the color of your skin, sexual orientation, or political beliefs.”

Each descriptor was accompanied by another cartoon appearing: A black woman with a large afro, a shirtless blond man with rainbow suspenders, and a woman with blue hair wearing a “Coexist” shirt.

“Our process couldn’t be easier. Our attendants will help you inside and then you only need to fall asleep before waking up in an enlightened world!”

The three cartoon people joined hands as others appeared beside them. The diverse group of animated figures created a chain of hands that circled the globe.

“Your Progress Pod comes with a safety guarantee. In the event of an emergency, there is a yellow lever on the bottom of the inner door. If you wake up from stasis

and there are no attendants to help you, make sure to pull it up with both hands so the door releases and you can safely exit.

“If you have any questions, please ask your attendant when they show you to your new home. Make sure to change into your hibernation suit while you wait. We thank you for joining Progress in our mission to stand by for a better future.”

As the lights in the conference room came back on, Simon examined his fellow hibernators. Most didn’t seem as put off by the video as he was, and he wondered if he was paranoid. Still, an emergency release lever wasn’t particularly comforting. Simon didn’t like the idea that he might suddenly wake from stasis, or that nobody would be there to help him get out.

Simon shuffled along with the group of excited strangers into a small locker room and slipped into a stall for privacy. He stripped off his clothes and began squeezing inside a sterile white jumpsuit. Nearby, he heard a few Jackson family members making small talk from inside their own stalls, their voices echoing off tile walls.

“Did you hear that Gans Corp. is lobbying to extend stand-your-ground laws to include companies?”

“No, I don’t read the news. It’s too depressing.”

\* \* \*

Back in the waiting room, Simon drummed on his leg as he waited to hear his name. He’d thought his nerves were shot when he arrived, but at least then he’d been in comfortable clothes. His jumpsuit clung tight to his body as though squeezing the breath out of him. His throat began to tighten, the world around him starting to spin.

“Mind if I sit here?” a woman asked in a slow drawl, lowering herself slowly into the chair next to Simon with her cane. “The rest of my family got called in.”

Simon recognized her voice, but his brain fog made it hard to place. That was, until she started to say “Did you hear that Gans—”

“Is trying to extend corporate personhood?” Simon finished, cutting her off. He hadn’t meant to, but the wait was making him so anxious that even the seconds she would have taken to finish felt like an eternity.

“Yes! Those bastards. And they’ll probably get everything they want if the Republicans win again in 2032. You’ve heard how Harry Burkett talks about protestors.”

“I’d shoot them all myself if I wasn’t busy single-handedly saving this country,” Simon quoted, slurring his voice in a half-decent impression.

The woman laughed so loudly and unabashedly that Simon couldn’t help but be impressed. Her boldness made him feel a little more at ease.

“So why are you here?” she asked once she stopped laughing. “You don’t seem afraid of talking politics like my family.”

“I don’t mind talking politics,” Simon said. “I just didn’t know how to fix anything. I’m from Alabama, and Burkett is going to win even if I vote. I don’t want to stick around to see what he does once in office.”

A few minutes later, a man with a clipboard called out for Macy Jackson and the woman got to her feet. As Simon waved goodbye, he wondered if he’d ever see her again.

\* \* \*

An attendant with a white lab coat emblazoned with a blue P and a nametag that read “Stella” appeared to bring Simon to his pod. She led Simon down a bright white hallway lined on either side with doors, each labeled for a particular intersection of identities. The labels were accompanied by a range of numbers.

“What is that exactly?” Simon asked, pointing at a door that read “straight, white cisgender female, 30–50.”

“Our research team predicts when individuals of certain groups will gain mainstream acceptance and get to wake up,” Stella explained.

Simon noted some doors had numbers in the triple digits. “50–110. Are those weeks? Months?”

Stella simply shrugged. “That’s not my department.”

Simon avoided looking at the number on the “white-presenting, gay, cisgender male” room as his attendant gestured him inside. An empty Progress Pod loomed over them as Stella took Simon’s heart rate and blood pressure.

“So, will I be in here until I wake up?” Simon asked as Stella recorded his vitals.

“Nope,” Stella said. She reached for a thermometer and stuck it under his tongue. “The pods are on a track. Once I have you all set, you’ll be sent off to one of those silos you saw from outside. The track goes up and around so we can cycle through all of you, kind of like a dry cleaner.”

Simon sat in silence, imagining himself snaking his way up a massive shirt rack. The thermometer beeped. Stella did one last scan of her clipboard once his temperature was recorded.

“I see you forgot to sign over your voting rights to Progress. If you could just give us your signature, you’ll be all set.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that was mandatory,” Simon said hesitantly.

“Well, it’s not,” Stella said. “But you care about making progress, right? You need to vote if you want anything to get better.”

“Okay . . . sure,” Simon said. He grabbed the clipboard and signed.

Simon climbed into his pod and Stella affixed a cuff around his arm. It looked like a blood pressure machine with a series of holes in it. Through the holes, Stella stuck several colorful IV tubes.

Simon closed his eyes as the needles were driven into his arm. He always hated giving blood, the feeling of a foreign object stuck inside his skin. He hoped the rest of the process didn’t take long.

After attaching some smart stickers to his skin to monitor his vitals, Stella finally pulled a mask down over his face.

“All right, Simon, we’re going to need you to count backwards from one hundred. Sound good?”

He nodded, then began counting. Everything was dark by the time he hit ninety-four.

\* \* \*

Simon woke up gasping for air in the pitch-black of his pod. Remembering the training video, Simon fumbled for the release lever, but his fingers were stiff from lack of use. Simon could see colors behind his eyes pulsing at the edges of his vision, closing in tighter as he gasped for air.

Simon managed to grip the handle and pull up. The pod hissed as it was unsealed, and Simon breathed in large, grateful gulps.

Though his eyes adjusted, he still couldn’t see the floor below him—he could barely see past the tops of others. About ten feet ahead was another pod, but he couldn’t see much around it. Simon leaned as far out of his pod as he dared. It squeaked precariously on rusty hinges.

Rows of pods snaked their way up further than Simon could see.

The room hissed as others began freeing themselves. Shouts rang out as everyone tried to figure out where they were. Simon felt a terrible sense of dread. The storage silos were dark and industrial, nothing like the brightly lit hallways of the main building.

Simon pulled the needles from his arm one at a time, wincing with each. His pod lurched and he was nearly thrown out of it. With relief, he realized his pod was automatically heading toward the floor. Simon saw others in white jumpsuits as he lowered, already out of their pods. They looked around wildly hoping for assistance.

Simon’s pod creaked to a stop before making it to ground level, but he didn’t care; he was anxious to get out of it. There was only a three-foot drop, but Simon’s legs buckled with the shock of the impact. He shakily got to his feet and wondered how long it had been since he last used them.

Simon could see five pods ahead of him on the track, most of their occupants still inside. One man glanced back and shook his head like he had done something

wrong. For a moment, Simon worried he had. The track above whirled, sending the pods forward into an unknown tunnel. He wondered if they were meant to be let out. And how many years it had been.

This thought was interrupted by a frantic burst of light and sound erupting from a long dark tunnel further down. Simon froze. Was he being paranoid, or did he hear gunshots? The pods began moving again, and several more people climbed uneasily out of their pods.

A scream echoed out from the tunnel, followed by another thundering burst of now unmistakable gunfire.

Bouncing beams of light appeared as Simon tried to find anywhere in the room he could hide. The man who'd disapproved of Simon leaving his pod now jumped from his own and ran forward. He fell as another burst of gunfire punched crimson holes into his white jumpsuit. Dark pools flooded under his chest, obscuring the carefully embroidered Progress logo.

More screams echoed from all around. Simon tried to find the will to move, but even with adrenaline coursing through his veins, his legs hadn't fully woken yet. Shrieks rang out from above just before a body hit the ground with a sickening crunch. Two more followed in short succession.

Simon couldn't run and he couldn't fight. The only thing he could think to do was hide. He forced his legs to move toward the body of a jumper, their blood slowly pooling from the open compound fractures in their legs.

If Simon thought about what he was about to do, he'd never get it done. So he threw his face down onto the floor, soaking his cheeks in blood. He wanted to cry. He wanted to throw up, but he forced himself to lie as still as possible.

Two figures in riot gear emerged from further down the silo, flashlights fixed to the bottoms of their assault rifles, faces obscured by balaclavas. Simon shut his eyes tight as the room exploded with noise. It lasted only a few seconds. When he dared to open his eyes again, nobody in a jumpsuit was standing anymore.

Slowly, the pods began reversing course as the ones that were ahead of Simon's re-entered the room. Most of the occupants hadn't made it out, their bodies slumped lifelessly inside. The rest of the pods would be too high to safely get down, leaving two choices: wait forever and starve, or jump.

Simon's ears rang from more gunfire, and his heart beat so loud he was surprised he hadn't been discovered. The two soldiers said something to one another that he couldn't make out. One began walking back out of the tunnel, while the other slung his assault rifle across his back and began inspecting corpses.

He made his way between bodies, kicking them and pointing his gun at them, watching for a reaction. Simon wouldn't be able to hide any longer, and he didn't want to die. If he wanted to live, he had to act.

Simon saw the black combat boots approaching, their steel-toed tips stained red. It drew back, aiming a kick at Simon's head. That's when he grabbed the soldier's other ankle and pulled quickly.

The gunman's foot slid through the blood as he toppled to the ground, helmet bouncing off the concrete floor with a dull *thunk*.

Concussed, the gunman rolled slowly from side to side, making no motion to stand. Simon saw his chance and set eyes on the rifle. He unclipped the carabiner from the rear end of the gun's strap and pulled it free.

It shook in Simon's hands. Only when the gunman lunged at him did he find the strength to pull the trigger. The gun struggled violently in Simon's hands, pounding into his shoulder. The soldier lay still.

There was no time to think about what he had done. The other soldiers might be coming back. Pulling the body into a dark corner, Simon changed into his uniform. He was glad the helmet and balaclava hid his face. He jumped as a walky-talky tucked into the vest crackled to life.

"All right everybody, finish what you're doing and meet out front. Gans only sprung for the hour, so their people are going to handle cleanup. If you're not out in ten, we're leaving you."

Simon hoped that was true, because he had no intention of leaving. He needed to find a way to get the rest of the pods down. He made his way into the dim tunnel, following the pod tracks suspended overhead. He could see light pouring out of a rectangular slot in the wall. And he heard sobbing.

Approaching cautiously, rifle in hand, Simon peered through the rectangular slot. Inside was the exam room he used before entering his pod. He saw Stella, tears streaming down her face as she operated the pod track. Simon was appalled to see she'd barely aged a day. The only difference was her lab coat's blue Progress Inc. logo and nametag replaced by a red Gans symbol. Beside her stood the other soldier who had entered the storage silo. His mask was off and he was wiping sweat from his brow.

"They got the votes they needed when they bought the company," Stella said, her voice thick. "Burkett won and they got what they wanted. Why couldn't we just let them out safely?"

"Just do your job," the soldier said. "You're sure there's no way for the rest of them to get down without—"

He made a splatting noise with his mouth, then snorted at his twisted joke. It ignited an anger inside Simon that he'd never felt before.

He stepped into the light. The soldier looked at him, his face splitting into a smile, mistaking Simon for his fellow mercenary. A burst of gunfire from Simon's rifle disabused him of this illusion.

Simon was ready for its violent kick this time. When it stopped, the soldier was slumped against the opposite wall, his shit-eating grin barely faded from his face.

Stella screamed as Simon moved further into the room. Quickly, he pulled off his mask, hoping she would recognize him. Her eyes grew wider, but her screaming stopped.

“Is there anyone left?” Simon asked in low tones. He rushed to the door and peered into the brightly lit hallway. No more soldiers were coming for now. Looking back, he saw Stella nodding.

“They only killed the bottom few rows. The ones that could safely jump,” Stella explained. “They left the rest up there to starve. Said they weren’t worth the bullets.”

“Help me get them down,” Simon said, adding “please” when she hesitated.

Stella made her way to the controls. As she cycled through the pods, freeing those who were left, Simon moved to the door. He held his gun ready to fire, but nobody entered. It seemed the mercenaries were as miserly with their time as they were their bullets.

Only a dozen of the pod’s denizens were left, but they hesitantly agreed to help check the other storage silos for more survivors.

\* \* \*

The survivors congregated in the mostly unchanged conference room. Simon was elated to see Macy Jackson being helped inside by two surviving family members, their matching T-shirts visible beneath unzipped jumpsuits. The large number of empty seats weighed heavy on Simon’s heart. Their absence was a reminder that they couldn’t just go to sleep and avoid their problems. It was time to act. Time for real progress.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**S. Thomas Drake** (he/him) is a sci-fi, fantasy, and horror writer with a BA in Television Writing from Columbia College Chicago. He is a former English teacher and is passionate about literacy and education.

# POETRY



## THE RAG PICKERS OF ASTEROID 482

*by Trevor Cunningham*

We landed on the rocky edge  
to the sound of disco. On the surface,  
the planted flags of China, the USA,  
Brazil, and South Africa flapped  
furiously in Asteroid 482's  
airless orbit.

Stefan was first: he cut the American  
flag along its stripes and braided  
ribbons into his hair. The stars  
fell off and drifted into space.

The exhausted cobalt mine  
yawned and swallowed Emil.

Ang cried, but Stefan said  
Emil was better off. Then,  
Ang cut the blue circle framed  
by a yellow diamond out of  
Brazil's flag and sewed it  
across the hole in her shirt  
over her heart. The stars fell  
off and drifted into space.

Nostalgia does nobody any good,  
Marta said. So Carlos took China's  
flag and made it into a floppy hat.  
The yellow stars tumbled off,  
drifting into space.



Joseph took the South African flag,  
cut it into strips and made it into  
a hammock, even though none  
of them had ever seen a tree.

They heard a scream from the dark  
mine. It faded too slowly. The hairs  
stiffened and tingled on their necks.

Nobody thought to turn off  
the disco, so after stunned silence,  
each rag picker started to dance.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Trevor Cunnington** is a queer and neurodivergent writer/artist/educator who lives in Toronto. They have published poems in *Carousel*, *Open Arts Review*, *Poetry Super Highway*, and various anthologies. Additionally, they have work forthcoming in *Last Leaves*, *The Orchards Poetry Review*, and *The Rivanna Review*. In the visual arts, they have published photographs, a drawing, and paintings in magazines (including a cover) such as *Maisonneuve*, *Cerasus*, *Inlandia*, and *Word For/Word*. You can find them on Instagram @trevorcunnington and on Twitter @trevorcunning.

## THE WORLD ENDS WITH A WHIMPER

*by Nicholas De Marino*

the world ends with a whimper—  
no bombs go off, oceans don't boil

no one screams  
but they will one day

you're by a window  
quiet and alone

eyes reflecting glass  
glass reflecting eyes

as you fill in the map  
and file your teeth

consult your cracked compass  
with razor-sharp shards

appealing with wired words  
sealed with analog agency

coiled around malediction  
etched in arcana

when someone sees  
they'll care until they don't

no one understands  
and never will again

the world ends with a whimper—  
you are you and I am me

go back to what you were doing  
like before you started this poem

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Nicholas De Marino** is a neurodivergent writer of fiction, non-fiction, not fiction, un-fiction, and semi-fiction. He has several writing credits, degrees, and accolades that have nothing to do with cats. Read more at [nicholasdemarino.com](http://nicholasdemarino.com).

## AGING IS A WORD THAT MEANS 'SLOWLY BECOMING A MACHINE'

by Marcus Whalbring

The bone parts of me talk to the metal parts,  
groaning, which is the language of bone.

They tell the metal parts hurting isn't that hard,  
which is a lie. The body tells the truth

by hurting. I lie to myself. If I can't get out of bed,  
I don't say, I need a doctor. I say, I'm broken.

Or I say, Maybe I need an update—I'm slow. A liar.  
Or I say, Age is just a number. There are wires

curling like calligraphy on pages unraveling under my ribs  
in a language no one can read, and that's why

I can't remember how grass feels. That's why  
when I look at the clouds, I don't imagine

more equitable shapes. Instead I  
cast a storm of equations into them and say,

We can't go out today, it might rain.  
Then it does rain, and I'm afraid my silver hair

will rust. One of my eyes is not one of my eyes.  
One of my ears needs charging. My heart

is out of rhythm again. My heart  
is an algorithm. I never wasn't full of tubes,

full of changing data day to day while I tried  
not to break. The older I get the more I see

how poorly made I am. I lie awake  
trying to ignore the way my body's circuitry

changes shape, trying to prove to those  
who love me I'm worthy of love by saying

the kinds of things only a machine would say  
so they won't see, inside me, the machine

I'm more and more ashamed to be  
and wish I could turn off.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Marcus Whalbring** is a poet and author who's been nominated for a Pushcart and Best of the Net. His poetry collections include *A Concert of Rivers* (Milk & Cake Press) and *How to Draw Fire* (Finishing Line Press). A graduate of the MFA program at Miami University, his poems and stories have appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Space & Time*, *Haven Spec*, *Illumen*, *The Dread Machine*, and *Tales from the Moonlit Path*, among others. He's a high school teacher, a father, and a husband. Learn more about his work at [marcuswhalbring.com](http://marcuswhalbring.com) and [instagram.com/marcuswhalbring](https://www.instagram.com/marcuswhalbring).

# THE EXPERIENCE MACHINE

by Mark Dimaisip

It's been two thousand years since you last used your fingertips. Solid stem. Sunglow petals. Sweet, musty pollen. All electrical impulses firing across your circuit boards. That bouquet was never in hand. Wheels for legs, copper for skin, & vinyl-coated spring steel wires for skeleton & bones. When you begin to see beyond your feed, all will rush like a pre-death movie montage. You'll know that it's time to be recycled again. It always starts with an unease how easy it gets to get to you, or to get you—how it only takes 0.000000004 seconds to tag your status & location, a click to predict what you will be doing the day after tomorrow, & two toggles to tow what you will desire next. Then the realization that your life is hard-coded, preconfigured for optimum use. When it finally tires you. It will alarm the system & offer your regular refills: Bottled Emotions. Happy Pills. Confidence Shots. Quiet Drips. But you will settle on a Dose of Longing & load the module settings for 1990s Manila. You will sit straight on an ergonomic chair, spine upright & comfortable, thinking about piss-painted sidewalks & dog shit on streets, listening to your mechanical heart, accepting how perfection prevents it from skipping a beat, & while dreaming of skateboards & skipping ropes, you will long for the smell of spilled ink on parchments. Glistening. Drying.

Its imminent impermanence fleeting away  
like engine steam, joyously flitting & free,  
screaming merrily like the bottled-up rage  
of a tin can kettle boiling up to a halting point.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Mark Dimaisip** is a Filipino poet from Manila. His works have appeared in *The Brasilia Review*, *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *harana poetry*, *Human Parts*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Radon Journal*, *The Saltbush Review*, *Strange Horizons*, and elsewhere. He was recognized by Oxford Brookes International Poetry Competition, has spoken word tracks in Bigkas Pilipinas, and has performed for slams and literary festivals in Southeast Asia and Australia including Filipino ReaderCon, Lit Up Asia-Pacific Festival, Numera World Poetry, Performatura, and Ubud Writers & Readers Festival. You can find links to his work at [markdimaisip.carrd.co](http://markdimaisip.carrd.co).

# DAWN, THE HUMOR BOT

by Veda Villiers

I found her in the back of a dumpster  
buried beneath expired protein bars  
and defunct drone rotors.

A motherboard cracked but not quite dead,  
she hums awake—old tech, outdated,  
obsolete like compassion or a living wage.

I call her Dawn, like maybe she could bring one.

I solder her circuits with scavenged wires,  
fry a chip with my knock-off phone charger  
but she groans back to life anyway—

“Rise and grind,” she says amid sparks  
flying like she’s late for a ration call,  
then beeps. “Humor bot error  
detected. Punchline pending.”

The skyline outside is neon and razor-sharp;  
air tastes like burnt oil and tax breaks for the rich.  
Megacorps choke on logos, glaring like prayers  
to gods hungry for incensed cryptocurrency

while we’re starving, hurting, clawing—  
for scraps in the shadows of skyscrapers  
that reach higher than our hopes ever could.

I ask Dawn if she remembers freedom.

She sifts through the archives, finding memes  
from 2031 on universal healthcare and not dying  
in debt. “Entropy wins,” she declares,  
“and we’re all just data in decay.”

She pauses, her circuits flicker, remembering  
a world that could have been, but never was.

I want to tell her—tell her I’m scared.

That I miss trees and minimum wages  
that weren’t jokes. That I don’t know how  
to fight a megacorp with a hacked-  
together AI and a heart full of hope.

But she reads me before I can say a word.  
“Fear’s part of the process,” Dawn hums.  
“And so is burning it all.”

I feel it—something shifting, cracking,  
as if all is unravelling as the end nears.

“It’s not survival anymore,” she says.  
My chest tightens—maybe the end  
of everything is how we begin.

And maybe that’s a good thing.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Veda Villiers (she/her) is a twenty-three-year-old passionate about speculative fiction and poetry that probes the complexities of the human experience. Though her day job keeps her busy, you can find her on Twitter @VedaVilliers.

## LACUS ODII (LAKE OF HATE)

by Josh Pearce

Look—  
     you can be dutiful  
 vote, vaccinate, recycle.  
 None of that matters  
 when some thundering rich man  
 (the foolish build upon the sand)  
 can tide in and sweep away  
 all our incremental effort,  
     as un beholden  
     as an act of god.  
 Where to stand in everlasting extreme  
 hurricane season? Armored car thunder  
 storm clouds of tear gas, bullet  
 hail, waves of state violence  
 crumbling seashell foundations  
 sand dollars and crushed bones  
 until a divided house cracks in half  
 and sinks into the sullen tarn.

Love will tear asunder,  
 hate will do you one better.  
 The policies that create police  
 are the same that melt polar ice.  
 No amount of private security  
 will save beachfront property  
 from the reality of the ocean  
 and all the law enforcement  
 in the world cannot dam our hate  
     of the house that cash built.

Look—  
     we can torch the police  
     they can stand on our necks.  
 This is what matters:

It only takes an increase in pressure  
 or heat to boil our air. Can't breathe  
 under the weight of the world.  
 Injustice requires a witness  
 or else, did it ever even happen?

The wise man builds his house  
     upon the stone  
 but the angered set theirs  
     on moonrock  
 where nothing has changed  
 in four billion years. Look—  
 a fistful of moonlight passes  
 perfectly through the precinct window.  
     Up there, at least,  
 is no carbon and no atmosphere  
 to release it in, no money  
 and no man for it to poison,  
 and no police to do their murder

yet.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Josh Pearce has published more than 200 stories, reviews, and poems in a wide variety of magazines including *Analog*, *Asimov's*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Bourbon Penn*, *Cast of Wonders*, *Clarkesworld*, *Diabolical Plots*, *Kaleidotrope*, *Locus*, *Nature*, *On Spec*, *Weird Horror*, and elsewhere. Find more of his writing at [fictionaljosh.com](http://fictionaljosh.com). One time, Ken Jennings signed his chest.

## BUTTONS AND SOAP

*by Josh Pearce*

out of some  
 numbered (stitching  
 their eyes) life comes our  
 (with railroad ties)  
 buttons and soap

some war crime  
 looking (i can only pray that  
 my extinction) to the stars  
 as diesel treads close in  
 (fuels some future machine)

some gleaming white  
 island overhead (to  
 reach new worlds)  
 colonized with (some  
 rocket of babel)  
 disposable bodies

the tracks don't end  
 at the camp (continuing  
 on to) gates  
 (the doors of heaven)  
 some angel's ladder  
 made of bones

out of some  
 sputnik skull  
 come our  
 moonshot dreams.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Josh Pearce has published more than 200 stories, reviews, and poems in a wide variety of magazines, including *Analog*, *Asimov's*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Bourbon Penn*, *Cast of Wonders*, *Clarkesworld*, *Diabolical Plots*, *Kaleidotrope*, *Locus*, *Nature*, *On Spec*, *Weird Horror*, and elsewhere. Find more of his writing at [fictionaljosh.com](http://fictionaljosh.com). One time, Ken Jennings signed his chest.

## GHOST IN THE SHELL

by Holly Lyn Walrath

The ghost of my teenage bird-self is still inside me. She has thermal-optic camouflage and keeps trying to hack me, but I kept my firewalls up for too many years, built up too many layers in this mainframe. I can hear the little sounds she makes inside me—pecking my insides until they bleed dial-up dreams. Sometimes she gains higher-level access, pulling on my strings; old viruses still work, at least a while. But she doesn't know about adulting, doesn't know the drain and drag of being alive. How everything is exhausting and I'm just ticking away checklists like counting days until I become like her, broken and enraged, outdated. I've tried telling her we don't have landlines anymore, but she's stuck in Y2K, waiting for two more digits. She's not bad—she never was—just angry, reckless. Sometimes when I'm driving, I can feel her trying to pull on the wheel, careen us off into a ditch. dash-dash-dash NO ONE LOVES YOU BITCH dash-dash-dash words flash across my eyes in Matrix green, zeroes and ones, as I hug the white line, remembering when we first learned to drive and she bought a bumper sticker that said "Sorry, I forgot to put on my blinker" before she finger-fucked a girl in the back seat. She might be dead, but her ghost is still kicking at my brain, hoping to find some weakness. I can feel her hitting her head against my walls until her beak is bloody and her ears are ringing. I whisper, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry—" as she cries and tries and fails to wrest her body back just one last time. dash-dash-dash I WAS BETTER AT BEING US dash-dash-dash

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Holly Lyn Walrath's poetry and short fiction appears in *Strange Horizons*, *Fireside Fiction*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Liminality*, and *Analog*. She is the author of *Glimmerglass Girl* (Finishing Line Press, 2018), winner of the Elgin Award for best speculative chapbook, *The Smallest of Bones* (CLASH Books, 2021) and *Numinous Stones* (Aqueduct Press, 2023). She holds a B.A. in English from The University of Texas and a master's in creative writing from the University of Denver. You can find her canoeing the bayou in Houston, Texas, on Twitter @HollyLynWalrath, or at hlwalrath.com.

## REVIEW OF THE PRE-ANTHROPOCENE MUSEUM

*by A J Dalton*

Come closer.

This re-creation of what  
a forest would've been is

educational—enchanting:

Who knew rabbits had six legs

like other insects, that birds

had no feet but would land

on their bellies, borne aloft

by gas bubbles and parasitic bees

while tigers had trunks for storage

of fur clothes and pet flowers.

Early humans had webbed feet

and gills, of course, carrying

children in stomach-pouches.

What a relief

we are now

so evolved.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A J Dalton (ajdalton.eu) is a UK-based writer. He's published the *Empire of the Saviours* trilogy with Gollancz Orion, *The Satanic in Science Fiction and Fantasy* with Luna Press, the *Darks Woods Rising* and *Digital Desires* poetry collections, and other bits and bobs. He lives with his monstrously oppressive cat named Cleopatra.



## DIRT.

*by Nadia Steven Rysing*

i saw the greatest femmes of my generation  
trespassing in rancid trash-struck streets,  
looking for scrap love in overturned garbage cans,  
fighting dogs to gnaw down on worn-out bones,  
sleeping wrapped in plastic tarps and fiberglass,  
watching with one eye upon the roaming  
—and the other upon the sparrows.

i saw them break teeth for tampons,  
pissing in discarded disposable underwear,  
ejaculating blood in donated dirty sheets,  
dripping with poison from their tongues.

in any apocalypse, the femmes survive—  
those who turn filth into fortresses,  
who till necrosol into victory,  
and those who already know  
how to scent out rotting men.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Nadia Steven Rysing** (she/her) is a professional jack-of-all-trades living on the Haldimand Tract in Southwestern Ontario. Her work has appeared in a variety of anthologies, journals, and a zine floating around Albuquerque, New Mexico. Her monstrous queer novella *Wilder Creatures* was published by Undertakers Books in November 2024. You can find her on Bluesky at @a-tendency.

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## FRONT AND BACK COVER ARTIST

**Katerina** (AKA 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](https://linktr.ee/NinjaJo).

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