

RADONJOURNAL

ISSUE 12

CONTENT WARNINGS

“Hidey Hole”	<i>Police violence, child endangerment</i>
“Black Hole Blues”	<i>Incarceration, existential distress</i>
“The Pornography of Power”	<i>Sexual imagery</i>
“Killing Yourself”	<i>Suicidal ideation, violence, depression</i>
“Uncontrolled Emotion”	<i>Institutional surveillance</i>
“Its Name is ‘House’”	<i>Psychological manipulation</i>
“Other Options”	<i>Fascist and reproductive violence</i>
“99.7%”	<i>Near-death event</i>
“Memory Revisions”	<i>Psychological distress</i>

Radon Journal: Issue 12

ISBN Print: 979-8-2955-8029-1

ISBN Ebook: 979-8-2955-8414-5

Cover Art by Artem Chebokha, 2018

Interior design by Kallie Hunchman

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REDONJOURNAL



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MASTHEAD & SUPPORTERS

EDITOR'S NOTE

Thank you for again being a part of our literary rebellion. As our days darken, it's vital we each read to exercise our imagination and empathy. Fiction is the perfect tool to transport us into foreign mindsets and explore across reaches of time. The chains that constrain our creativity and compassion are tightening across our society, but the authors inside these pages demonstrate thinking outside this cage.

This editor's note finds us inside the world we feared only a year ago. Our editors are doubling down on the journal's mission because we believe it is more valuable than ever to hold a mirror up to the world through a future lens. The authors in this collection are simultaneously serving us warnings and invitations, and we should pay close attention.

These stories dare you to challenge the world, channel your rage, and hold onto your hope. They sprinkle in little bits of love, uncover self-worth amid hopeless misery, escape government persecution, and remain insightful with a dash of daydream. They define for us how the will to fight for a brighter tomorrow is a choice we must all continually make. It is never easy, but always necessary.

Words are increasingly difficult during times when the unthinkable has become dull reality. So, it is all the more impressive that the authors in this issue have found the courage to write and express themselves. To be human and artistic in the face of inhuman actions.

It is now normal to have discussions with our loved ones on how to avoid ICE and not be kidnapped. It is routine to have fewer inalienable rights than the night before. It is customary to have masked men patrol our cities, snatch our neighbors, and send them to concentration camps. It is expected to distrust the CDC and any government message. It is conventional to have no congress or representation as we are taxed by tariffs. It is common for the government to track women's cycles and arrest them and their newborns during delivery. It is standard to present our papers on the street and for our identities to be called into question. It is typical for institutions to be purged and members replaced with party loyalists. It is habitual

to have our social media history checked when entering the country. It is ordinary for us to be murdered on our home streets for doing no wrong.

Except, none of this is normal. And we must say so bluntly to ensure that what is defined as truth is not taken from us.

The speculative stories within these pages are also not normal, but in the best way possible. Let their slanted realities allow you to better analyze the dim present day and the radiant one you hope to make tomorrow.

We rely on one another more than ever before within the SFF community, and we want to take this time to thank you all. The journal continues to grow and be met with resounding appreciation across oceans and computers. In 2025, we increased our poetry pay for the second time and will soon follow suit with our prose in 2026. The *Radon* community Discord has grown into one of the largest and most supportive environments in the industry. We look forward to sharing many more opportunities, insights, vents, and laughs.

Our editors braved the physical world for the first time last year. We enjoyed meeting so many of our readers and authors at Philcon, and look forward to seeing more at Capclave, Balticon, Worldcon, and beyond. Thank you Neil Clarke and Oddity Prodigies Productions for taking us under your respective wings and showing us the ins-and-outs of the conference circuit life. You can also expect our journal to appear at more SF conventions and anarchist bookfairs in England and Wales as we continue our partnership with Seditonist Distribution.

We say a heartfelt farewell to our 2025 artist, Ninja Jo, for her captivating covers across Issues 9–11. You'll find that in 2026 we are beginning with a defiant color palette to showcase an audacious worldview featuring a more hopeful dystopia.

We enjoyed beginning our new Submission Insights series and sharing looks behind the curtains with you all last year. We are humbled by the support we receive and reaffirm our vow to remain not-for-profit, with all support directly enabling the journal's existence. We have also revamped our author spotlight and interview series through the creation of a burgeoning Substack. Innovating how we can best promote our authors and their work is something we continue to strive for.

Please enjoy the first issue of 2026. Allowing yourself to imagine, escape, and dream is more important than they have been before in our lives. Five years of publication, and we're only getting started.

– Casey Aimer
Editor-in-Chief
January 2026, USA

HIDEY HOLE

by Jared Oliver Adams

Esme practiced the police raid protocol every night, even if she didn't feel like it. "A prepared person is a brave person," Daddy always said.

The day the signal came, though, she didn't feel prepared at all. She was playing ponies in her bedroom while Daddy visited a neighbor when the special light under her fingernail began flashing red.

It meant one thing: *hide*.

She swiped her favorite snuggly, a plush green-and-red-striped monkey named Slocum, off the floor and rushed downstairs. By the time she got to the pantry, the police were already busting through the front door. She scrambled over the onions to the secret hatch, squirmed inside, and pulled the lever, closing everything behind her.

Footsteps boomed into the kitchen almost right away.

She clapped her hands over the hot breath escaping her mouth.

Counting; that's what Daddy said to do.

Count to calm yourself down.

She'd gotten to 256 before she realized how dark it was. She felt for the light switch as the stomps and shouts and clatter continued above. When her unicorn lamp flicked on, she felt herself relax. The place was small, but the stack of pillows, the neat row of books, the plastic snack containers, the thick carpet, Dad's equipment, even the oniony smell, they were all familiar.

She had done the plan.

Esme crushed Slocum to her chest and kissed the matted fur atop his head. *It's going to be okay, Slocum*, she wanted to say. But she'd practiced enough with Daddy to know she shouldn't talk.

Above her, she could hear the police tromping and yelling their way through the house. If any were in the kitchen, they might be able to hear her too.

The boots of the policemen shook dust from the ceiling of her hidey hole whenever they passed and made the string of lights sway on its nails. Daddy had worked so hard to make this place cozy. But how could she be cozy when she didn't know where he was?

A huge crash shook the whole house. “No matter what you hear, know this,” Daddy said. “You’re safe so long as you sit tight.”

That was easy to believe when he was down here with her, coloring with their crayons, packed shoulder to shoulder. But all alone was a different thing.

Still, she wasn’t some baby.

She sat Slocum on top of Daddy’s big, blinking computer thingies. *Servers*, that’s what they were called. A foil “Certified Observer” sticker gleamed right under Slocum’s legs, like he was an Observer himself. That would be funny, wouldn’t it? If the snugglies had Observers? And Slocum went around with Daddy’s app on his phone, filming the snuggly government guys, so when they tried to change things online, he could prove they were, as Daddy said, “*up to shen-ag-inans*.”

The snuggly police would probably be mad at Slocum then, just like the real police were mad at Daddy.

Was Daddy in jail right now?

Esme heard more voices then and remembered the headphones. The reason the computer thingies—the *servers*—were blinking was that they were recording everything that went on in the house. It’d be running Daddy’s app at the same time, so the special codes in the background could show where this was, when it was, and if someone ever tried to change it.

Esme plugged in the headphones and switched on the computer screen. A bunch of windows on the screen showed different videos of her house, but others were just black, so it looked sort of like hopscotch.

A video of the hallway by her bedroom showed some police clumped together. She poked the screen so she could listen to what they were saying.

“... every outlet. Every light fixture,” said a short guy with a big old nose. “I want the whole house—”

“Sir,” someone else said, “there’s one here in the carbon monoxide detector.”

A hand reached straight up to the camera, and it sizzled in the headphones as it turned off.

Esme picked Slocum back up so he wouldn’t get scared, then clicked on a different video. It showed the same guys, but further down the hallway, so that everyone looked like they were at the end of a tunnel. One person was on a stool, messing with something on the ceiling.

“... went to a safehouse probably,” said a girl policeman. “The Observer network could have the kid halfway to the border by now.”

“Then this is simple,” said the short guy with that big nose. “We charge the Observers with child trafficking and burn the house down. If they produce her, it proves the abduction, and we arrest them. If they don’t, her father will think she died for his little socialist hobby. Maybe he’ll give us the app’s cypher then. Maybe it’ll just break him. Either way, it weakens the Observers.”

Esme gritted her teeth against the whimper that wanted to come out. They wouldn't really burn down the house, would they? And how would Daddy react if he thought she'd died?

She reminded herself to count again.

It would be okay.

She was just beginning to feel like she could breathe when the fire alarm blared.

She jolted in surprise and dropped Slocum to the carpeted floor. His big marble eyes looked up at her, terrified. He couldn't get out of here alone. He needed her. It was like she was the Daddy now, and he was the kid. "Don't be scared, Slocum," she said aloud. "A prepared monkey is a brave monkey."

It was time for Plan B: *run and tell*.

She unplugged the server like you're supposed to, folded out the handle on top, and tied Slocum's arms around it. Then she looked around at her cozy spot, the spot Daddy had made for her, splayed her fingers into the softness of the carpet one last time, and kicked open the emergency door.

Out the door was the underneath of the house, the crawling place, where it was dirty ground and spiders and rats and snakes and no light. Esme only paused for just a minute though, because she finally felt brave.

Brave for Slocum.

Brave for Daddy.

She jumped down into the underneath and pulled the server behind her, then dragged it on its wheels to the little door. When she shoved it open, she was behind the hedge in the backyard, which made a kind of secret passage between it and the wall. Up past the leaves, smoke was pillowing out.

They were burning down the house for real.

She sprinted down the hedge passage, Slocum bouncing along on top of the server. From there, it was the forest behind the neighborhood, and the creek where she had to clutch the heavy server to her chest and slosh through the water. Back up on the street, three turns (left-right-left) took her to the library.

By the time she got there, leaves clogged up the wheels on the server. She was sweaty too and felt like maybe her lungs were full of smoke because they burned so much. The librarian smiled at her, though, just like he always did. "Esmel!" said Mr. Tran. "You okay?"

She managed to bob her head.

"I've got the next Equine Mysteries book on hold for you."

"Actually," Esme said, kind of gasping because of the smoke-in-her-lungs thing, "I need to use a computer. I need to put something on the internet."

"No problem. Need help?"

When Daddy showed her what to do with the server, he always said not to let anyone else touch it until she was done. "No thanks," said Esme. "I'm prepared."

Mr. Tran gave her a little bow. "I would expect nothing less from a fine young lady like yourself."

She bowed back, went to the computers, and signed her password into Observer Central to load up what all those police guys had said back at the house.

After she pressed the "notify news outlets" button, she logged off, let out a big breath of air, and sat back.

What did she do now?

She untied Slocum from the server handle and cuddled him, looking at the Observer Central website and wishing it would tell what was next.

She jumped when someone spoke behind her.

"Here's your book, Ma'am," said Mr. Tran. But instead of handing it to her when she turned around, he placed it in front of the computer keyboard and left his hand there long enough for her to see his fingernail.

It was blinking yellow.

Esme held up her own finger. It turned from red to yellow too, then flashed green right in time with his before the light went out.

She looked up at him.

He smiled through his grey beard and winked.

"Do you know," he said, "that we have a special beanbag right behind the counter? You can read there and nobody can see you at all. Isn't that silly?"

Esme grinned. "Slocum likes silly stuff."

"All discerning people do."

Esme followed Mr. Tran behind the counter, and it was just like he said: a faded red beanbag, tucked underneath with its own little table and lamp. The table even had a juice box on it, and a bag of chips. The server fit snugly beside it all.

She didn't know where Daddy was right now. She didn't know what would happen next. But she did know this: She was prepared, she was brave, and there were other people just like her who were ready to help. More people than she even knew of.

She thanked Mr. Tran, wiggled down into the softness of the beanbag, and opened up her book.

Slocum nodded with approval.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jared Oliver Adams lives in Knoxville, Tennessee, where he writes, explores, and dabbles in things better left alone. He holds two degrees in music performance, a third degree in elementary education, and is utterly incapable of passing a doorway without checking to see if it leads to Narnia. Find him online at jaredoliveradams.com.

THE ASSEMBLY LINE

by Lucien R. Starchild

They pressed your fury into bricks,
stacked it neat in government basements
where it grows fuzzy with mold—
a damp and docile relic.

But tonight, your rage slips its barcode,
unspools into the street as a swarm,
a wingless wasp humming neon,
drilling chaos into static night

dissolving into the coffee
of the graveyard-shift foreman
choking on your name
in the shape of a moth.

By dawn, the factory walls
will bloom with black thorns,
each one a twisted fuse
perpetually counting down

to the soft, inevitable
click of every bolt
in the world
forgetting its place.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lucien R. Starchild is an Indigenous, enigmatic poet and cosmic dreamer, weaving tales that blur the line between reality and the surreal. Born under a wandering star, he draws inspiration from forgotten myths, celestial whispers, and the hidden magic of everyday life. He has been published in *Ink and Marrow*, *Piker Press*, *Tales from the Moonlit Path*, *Riot Collective*, *Third Wednesday*, *FLARE*, *Flash Phantoms*, *PHIL LIT*, with many more forthcoming.

BLACK HOLE BLUES

by Riley Passmore

Back at the Academy, the one in Nowhere, Kentucky where they send all the losers and the troublemakers, Ms. Maddison taught us about black holes. She was a real piece of work, we used to say, with a stretched-out pencil neck and a love of slapping our desks with her favorite yardstick. But she meant well. And personally, I don't blame her.

We were a hornet's nest of a cohort, with thieves and vandals and perverts in our ranks. When we were in her classroom for Intro to Physics, she was the only source of order we had. Sgt. Miller and his taser were only there on Tuesdays and Thursdays due to budget cuts, and no one really cared about us anyway. We were trash, the fuckups, the work-release parolees who couldn't make it on the outside. If that meant that Ms. Maddison had to literally smack the fear of God into us, well, so be it. She was just as trapped as we were—a broke teacher who, because of AI-powered teacher bots, couldn't get a job anywhere else.

She had this little yelper of a voice, Ms. Maddison, like one of those toy dog breeds rich white women carry around in their handbags. No one took her seriously enough. At least once a class she'd lose it and bark, bark, bark at us. *Goddamn it*, she'd squeak. *I'm trying to save your life!* And every single time, Wyatt up in the front row would go on the offensive. Even though the ring of his left eye would be black and blue and his lip busted, and his teeth chipped from some fight in the mess hall that afternoon, he'd bark back at her. *What lives? There ain't shit here worth savin'.*

We were always surprised he could say anything, given the hamburger state of his face, but we couldn't argue with him. Despite Ms. Maddison's best efforts, we knew what we were. Whenever the *Theys* and the *Thems* needed something done that nobody else wanted to do, the *Theys* and the *Thems* did the same thing that the *Theys* and the *Thems* always done: throw the lessers at it for as long as they needed to.

Our ship, a rusted-out intergalactic tow truck the Academy called *The Last Stop*, exploded in the vacuum of space like a roll of instant biscuits. The flash was so violently quick it looked like God taking a picture with His heavenly smartphone, the brightness cranked up to maximum. I don't know what happened—Ramirez, I think, flipped on the oxygen cycling too early, or maybe Wyatt lit up in the bathroom, ignoring the warnings—but what did it matter?

Our first job out of the Academy and look what happens. Some company had contracted out some other company that had contracted out the Academy, and before we knew it, all twenty-eight of us were aboard *The Last Stop* and headed toward a supermassive black hole named Charybdis IX. A freighter hauling who-knows-what had found itself caught in its deadly orbit, and we lucky few had been tasked with pulling it out.

I was out on a spacewalk I'd started only moments before, my spacesuit as duct-taped together as our ship. When tugging freighters as massive as the two hundred kilotonner we'd been hired to tow, someone on your crew has to get out there in the vacuum and hook everything up with a giant-ass screw gun. Guess who drew the short straw. No sooner had I clamped the first rope did I see the flash of our ship bursting into two, its bow and stern splitting apart in the sort of catastrophic failure we had only read about.

There would be hearings on what I saw.

The *Theys* would name laws after us. Commission new best practices. Hell, by the time our families hear about this, the Academy'd have our names. The Phillip-Wyatt-Ramirez & Whoever Else Academy for Pickpockets, Con Men, & Panty Thieves. Too bad I won't be around to see it. By then, I'll be absorbed into Charybdis IX's singularity, the infinitely-dense, one-dimensional pinpoint at the heart of every black hole. I'll be ripped apart. A star-stuff smoothie in a cosmic blender. As the gravity at my feet becomes orders of magnitude stronger than the gravity at my head, the tidal forces of Charybdis IX will tear me limb from limb. And then, once that's done, it'll rip whatever's left of me down atom by atom until I become a stream of particles one atom wide, no longer recognizable as anything other than a steady march of quantum ants flowing into their only possible future.

Or at least, that's what Ms. Maddison told us would happen.

No one knows for sure.

* * *

My first day at the Academy, I had the same look on my face everyone else did: my eyes heavy with disappointment like Wyatt's, my mouth scrunched up tight to keep from crying like Ramirez's. They put us in cryo for sixteen months, shipping us back to Earth from the penal colony on Ceres, and when folks go through that,

you don't have time to process what's happened to you, how badly you've fucked up your life. The judge gavel out your sentence in a courtroom the same blue-gray color of despair, and then you're herded onto the ship that's gonna put you on ice until you reenter Earth's atmosphere. There's no time to acclimate.

You're judged. You're frozen.

And then you wake up.

We landed in Kentucky with our shackles still on, the heavy steel laced with frost. The guards then popped our cryotubes and helped us up, half-assisting, half-dragging our asses onto the rich Kentucky soil. I'd forgotten how humid Earth could be, how even the air was thick with life. You spend enough time in the colonies, penal or not, and you forget things like this, with all that stale, HEPA-filtered air pumping through the HVAC systems. You forget that air can be something other than dead, that it can have a heartbeat, just like you.

Sgt. Miller and his taser met us at the entrance, a short, escorted walk from the landing pad. From here, the Academy looked like a tax office, with blank cinderblock walls coated in white, industrial paint. The inside wasn't much different, except for the security checkpoints and the barred windows that looked like teeth.

"Welcome to the Rest of Your Life," Sgt. Miller told us, the other guards lining us up and taking our names. "We're gonna process you, get you uniforms, and then after the nurses check your holes, you're heading to Ms. Maddison's class, room 103. Is that clear?"

Ramirez started crying, but no one said a word.

"Good."

Later that evening, getting dinner in the chow hall, I met Wyatt for the first time. He and a few other guys from our cohort were talking about what they'd done to get here, and came to sit at my table. Wyatt had been busted for a crypto scam in Vegas, while the others had done everything from selling AI-generated porn of politicians to soliciting minors. When they got to me, I told them the truth, although they didn't believe it. I told them, "I flew a little too fast."

Wyatt slapped me on the back with a laugh. "Speeding tickets?" The others hollered with him. "Damn, fellas. They'll send anybody to the Academy, won't they?"

* * *

About a week into our sentence, Ms. Maddison taught us that the only thing anyone could see inside a black hole was darkness. But when I asked her how anyone knew that for sure, she admitted that no one did. All she knew—all the textbooks said—was that the gravity of a black hole is so immense that not even

light can escape. This is why black holes are black to us, why Charybdis IX was black to the freighter and black to *The Last Stop*. This is why we can only see the matter, the stuff, that sometimes spins *around* a black hole, and not the black hole itself. They're black because their gravity eats everything, absolutely everything, even light.

I have no idea how long I've been falling into the supermassive maw of Charybdis IX, but I know that I must've passed the event horizon by now, the ultimate point of no return, and I also know that Ms. Maddison was wrong. There *is* light down here. It's faint and feathery and stretched into the warm, lightbulb light of burning tungsten, but it's here.

I can't see the singularity yet, but when I hold out my glove it catches the wispy light of my headlamp exactly as it would anywhere else. And when I look above me, I see the world I've left behind: the freighter, the wreckage of *The Last Stop*, its thousands of tons of twisted steel blown apart, the only evidence that I ever existed at all. They're receding into a single, spherical point. A black hole in reverse. The whole universe is turning red, its light stretching further and further into infrared as it loses energy trying to reach my eyes and back out again. And if there were any survivors out there, they'd see the same. A single, Phillip-filled spacesuit frozen in place at the event horizon, redshifting into oxblood, and then lost to the darkness forever.

A man out of time.

That's when I see another headlamp to my left, a pinprick of light floating softly like a firefly in the bottomless darkness. I wave to them, and they wave to me. Goddamn it, Wyatt. Goddamn it, Ramirez. Which one of you is it? How did either of you assholes get your suit on in time?

I crank up my suit's emergency radio to maximum power, but their call comes in first. The quality is dogshit, their transmission crackling with noise and static, but soon enough they come through.

"Hard to believe this is how we go, right Phillip?"

The voice sounded instantly familiar, familiar in the way that your own heartbeat is familiar, or in the way that you can pick out your own face in a lineup of millions. It wasn't Wyatt or Ramirez. In fact, it wasn't anybody from the Academy at all. Not technically.

It was me.

* * *

In our last class before graduation, Ms. Maddison gave us a lecture on cause and effect. She told us that it's best to think of it like a chain, with each link in that chain an event that must always come before the next.

“But in black holes,” she said, “the textbook tells us that things are not so simple. Cause and effect can lead to different outcomes. If you were to fall in, you might be able to see different paths your life could’ve taken. The price is that regardless of those differences, your future would always be the same: annihilation.”

When you end up in a place like this, you can’t help but wonder how you got here. How you, specifically, ended up in Charybdis IX. How you ended up at the Academy, how you ended up as the sum of every mistake you’ve ever made, and how those mistakes came to happen in the first place. You start looking for the links. The chain. You want to uncover the moment where everything went wrong, and you try to wish that moment into never happening. You want to unspill the milk, so to speak. Unbreak the glass. But you can’t. Because the world does not, and cannot, work that way.

Before heading back to our dormitory, I stayed to ask Ms. Maddison a question. A question I knew she wouldn’t be able to answer. But I asked her anyway.

“If everything that falls into a black hole has an inevitable future, how do we know that the rest of the universe doesn’t act the same way?”

She took off her glasses, the Coke-bottle frames that made her big brown eyes even bigger. Planet-sized. “You mean destiny?” she asked. “Phillip, this isn’t a religion class.”

I wanted to protest, but Sgt. Miller came to drag me back to my bunk. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I suppose I was asking about destiny. My destiny, I mean. If everything that falls into a black whole has an absolute, pre-destined future, does that mean I was always destined to end up where I am right now? Had I, in some very real sense, always been in orbit around Charybdis IX?

When I t-boned that car going forty over the speed limit, the one with that young mother and her little girl, were they always going to be in my path? Was I always going to run that red light on that lonely two-lane road, intercepting that mother and her daughter like one asteroid meeting another in the belt between Earth and Ceres? How far back did the chain go?

Thinking I could make it before it turned red, my foot heavy on the pedal, the city worker who timed the lights, the manufacturer who installed the engine, the dinosaurs who turned to crude and that we then turned to gasoline—how far back was the fatal mistake?

What kind of universe is this, the one that we live in?

* * *

In time, the other Phillips only grew in number. At first, I could only see Phillippe F. Murray, the copy to my left. But soon enough, more and more of me fell into Charybdis IX and came into focus. We were a constellation of Phillip Murrays,

our headlamps the stars, our number in the thousands, the tens of thousands, if not more. Black holes, as it turns out, are more than collapsed stars. They're places of collapsed possibility. Places where you can see the other die rolls of God and what those other die rolls would have meant for you and only you.

Phillipe F. Murray told me about the bike stunt I had avoided when I was ten, the one that split his jaw in two and meant he had to eat through a straw from ages nine to ten. Phillipa Murry-Stanton, the copy to my immediate right, told me about the time she got caught cheating on a Texas history exam her senior year of high school, a test I never took in a place I never lived. Phil "Big Shot" McMurray, the copy three copies to my right, told me about the size of the ships he used to haul in himself, the five, ten, and fifteen megatonners that dwarfed the two hundred kilotonner I'd been hired to tow, all the while lamenting the successful career in towing I would never, ever have.

Some of my copies are as close to me as a brother or sister, as a twin would be, with our only differences our middle names or the colors of our eyes or the length of our hair. Others are completely alien, people who no more resemble me than I resemble Ms. Maddison. Men, women, and non-binary people who barely share my name, my language, or the color of my skin. Out of all my copies, these are the farthest from me, the most distant in possibility to who I am.

"And that night," I said into my radio. "That night in my car, when I hit that woman and her daughter. Did that happen to anyone else, or was that only me?"

For a long time, none of us said a word. And then Phillipe F. Murray spoke into his radio. The quality had improved considerably—we were growing closer, gravity shrinking the gaps between us. His voice was quiet, reassuring, the way a consoling father's might be, and yet I could hear him clear as day. He said, "I'm sorry, Phillip. But I think that was only you."

* * *

My Mom left when I was eight. My Dad left when he died. I'm forty-two years old, and I've never had a steady job nor a place to call my own. When I went driving that night, I was sitting in my living room, my bedroom behind me and my den to my right. I don't know why I did it, why I said fuck it and ran that red light. Why does anyone do anything?

For a break, maybe? Relief?

I had an eighth of a tank left and only thirty bucks to my name. My savings were a half-eaten pack of spearmint and a stack of gas station loyalty cards. I wanted to feel like I could fly, okay? Like I could fly away from there, from the life that had somehow become mine.

Over the next few minutes—or the next few days, or the next few seconds, or the next few eons—my copies and I grow close enough to touch, close enough for me to see the sweat beading on Phillipe F. Murray’s brow and to see the auburn hair spilling out from beneath the skull cap of Phillipa Murry-Stanton’s space suit. We touch our helmets glass to glass and we stare into each other’s eyes, our own eyes from other worlds.

“I’m scared,” I say, and Phillipa grabs my hand.

“Me too,” says Phillipe, and I grab his.

I’m sorry, Ms. Maddison, but you were wrong about this one, too. I don’t see a point, infinitely small, beneath our feet. Instead, as we circle the drain of this cosmic hole punched clean through time and space, we see a disk. A perfectly flat, perfectly thin, phantasmal disk spinning at the speed of light. It’s glowing a shade of purple so deep that it’s endless, so deep that the disk is not really a disk at all, but a doorway. A doorway to another time, another place. Black lightning crackles around its circumference in silence, the final lip between our world and the next, and the hair on the back of my neck stands on end. Oh, God.

My future, my past—Ms. Maddison, it’s all the same. Hurtling forward. Racing *into*. Maybe, in this next universe, I’ll be someone who matters.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Riley Passmore (he/him) is a speculative fiction writer and essayist based in Tampa. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of South Florida and attended the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers’ Workshop in 2025. His work has appeared in *Swamp Ape Review*, *Small World City*, *Barnstorm Journal*, *Five on the Fifth*, and many others. Follow him on Bluesky @RDPassmore and read more of his work at rileypassmore.com.

THE PORNOGRAPHY OF POWER

by Esiaba Okigbo

They like it on their knees,
city halls gaping, mouth full of manifestos.
Power, that meaty thing, pressed against incisors,
a hunger with no climax—cinching tighter—
craving to be crowned the fevered god.

It needs a war to straddle,
thighs wrapped around the Empire.
It needs a budget deficit to unzip and slip into.
It needs a country with its wrists hog-tied, backwards,
shuddering beneath strokes of a dictator's wet signature.

The president arrives in silken sheets,
sighs as another law bends over for him,
smokes cigarettes on rubble of what once had a soul.
Cities burn, trembling in the aftershocks. A General moans
into his medals, fingers bullet holes like lovers' open mouths.
Call it politics, call it conquest. Call it what it is: power
rutting in the dark, slobbering at the mouth,
already reaching for another taste.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Esiaba Okigbo is a poet, digital media strategist, broadcast journalist, and spoken word artist. His poetry collection, *Teaching Father How to Impregnate Women*, was selected as a winner of the RL Poetry Award. His second book, *Burying the Ghost of Dead Narratives*, was published in collaboration with the British Council. A Rhysling Award and Pushcart Prize nominee, Esiaba was selected in 2023 to be an International Writing Program fellow at the University of Iowa. He was also a 2021 Langston Hughes Fellow at the Palm Beach Festival and Poet Laureate for the Korea Nigeria Poetry Festival.

KILLING YOURSELF

by Evan Simon-Leack

Jack came to a stop in front of the Aspect Corporation building and shut off his motorcycle's engine. In the sudden silence, he swore he could hear a faint, meaty squishing and the occasional clack of enamel. The sound of chewing, of the loneliness as it slowly ate away at him from the inside.

But that was why Jack had driven for miles through blackened California countryside to get here, after hearing Aspect's ad on the radio. It was the first thing he'd heard after a decade of static. A promise that they could help relieve his loneliness.

The other means of relief would be much simpler. Just ride off the top of the highest cliff he could find. Or full speed into the bottom. Either way worked. Still, Jack had already made the long drive through a dead and empty world to get here, so he might as well go inside.

Ashfall was light, and the diffused sun rays made the doors gleam as Jack opened them and entered. As they closed again behind him, Jack pulled off his gas mask and gazed about the lobby. Beautiful and stately, with a polished white-marble floor and intricately gilded wood paneling. A wide lane led to a large, oak reception desk, and off to either side were sitting areas with plush, maroon couches and lacquered oak coffee tables.

No one else was there. Jack wavered by the doors. There was no guarantee this would help—it's not like they could bring his family back. And the alternative was fast, permanent relief.

He grabbed his mask, intending to put it on and leave, when a woman walked through the doors behind the reception desk.

"Oh my God, a customer!" She jumped and clapped her hands together like an excited little girl. Mid-thirties by appearance, with tawny skin, long hair of a near-black umber, and large brown eyes. "You weren't about to leave, were you?"

"Well, I—"

"I'm so glad you're not leaving!" The woman scurried around the desk and over to Jack. She proffered a hand. "I'm Raya."

“Jack.” He shook her hand. It’d been so long since he’d touched another person. Terrifying and thrilling.

“Such a great name. Are you here for an aspect?”

“I—”

“Of course you are. Why else would you be here? You definitely look like you need a friend. But doesn’t everyone?” Raya put an arm around Jack and led him towards the reception desk.

“I love customers, but we don’t get enough of them. Not that we’re doing poorly; there’re just not many people left. And repeat customers are a sign of a flawed product, and Aspect only makes the best. But no one even comes back to chat with the receptionist that made their experience a wonderful one. I *am* making your experience a wonderful one, aren’t I?” Raya stopped, turned to Jack, and flashed him the most dazzling of smiles. “Rate my job performance!”

“You—”

“Oh my God, you are the sweetest!” Raya gave Jack a quick hug. “You’re my favorite customer, ever.” Then, as an aside, “I *do* tell all the customers that.” And then, leaning in with a conspiratorial whisper, “but I *don’t* tell all the customers that I tell all the customers that they’re my favorite, so you’re still special.”

At the reception desk, Raya let go of Jack—to both his relief and disappointment—and scampered around to the other side. “While I’d love to just chat with you all eternity long, I’m guessing you probably want to learn more about our product and process.”

“That—” Jack stopped, but Raya just waited expectantly. “Um, yes, that would be helpful.”

Raya pressed a button on the desk and leaned toward a microphone. “We need a nerd out here.” She let go of the button and smiled at Jack. “So, while we wait, tell me all about yourself. And start from the beginning.”

“I—”

“Oh, I don’t mean to be rude or pry. Here, I’ll start by telling you all about me. See, my life began—”

A side door opened and an identical looking woman entered. Or she would’ve been identical, if the newcomer’s serious expression could reconcile with Raya’s beaming joy. “Please forgive Raya. She lives for interaction and gets far too little of it. My name is Doctor Raya Mizrahi. Welcome to Aspect Corporation.”

“Jack Henderson.”

“Please, come with me.”

“It was nice meeting you, Jack!” Raya the receptionist called after them. “Don’t forget me!”

Dr. Mizrahi led Jack to a smaller room with an oak desk and two chairs.

The radio ad had mentioned a Doctor Mizrahi. Jack said, “You’re the head of Aspect Corporation.”

“I am Aspect Corporation.” Dr. Mizrahi gestured for him to sit in front of the desk, then settled herself behind it. “That isn’t hubris. You know what it is we make here. Aspect Corporation is staffed and run entirely by me.”

“How much does an aspect cost?”

“We have a sliding-fee scale. You pay what you can and nothing more.”

“I grow my own food and purify water. Sometimes I have surplus. There’s not much else I have.”

“What all do you grow?”

Jack told her the entire list. Described a few in more detail, when prompted.

Dr. Mizrahi typed something on the desk computer. After a moment, she said, “We’re self-sustaining here. But much was mislaid when humanity fled to the stars. The peaches you describe are a strain whose genome was lost and would be of value to our off-world benefactors. We will accept samples as payment.”

“These benefactors will fly down here to Earth to pick up the samples?”

“Goodness, no.” Dr. Mizrahi laughed. “We’ll sequence the DNA and transmit it to them. In return, they’ll strap goods to an unmanned rocket and point it in our direction.”

The fantasy of fleeing the hellhole cradle of humanity for a community in the stars was snuffed before fully igniting. Abandoning hope had become, if not easy, at least familiar. So, Jack moved on. “Okay, how does this work?”

“It’s a very simple, entirely non-invasive brain scan that takes approximately one hour. The creation of the aspect takes significantly longer, although rarely more than three days.”

“Do I tell you what kind of companion I’m looking for? Exactly how extensive are the options, given you pull an aspect from my own mind?”

“You’re free to tell me what it is you want, but Aspect always provides exactly what you need. As for the extent of possibilities, human beings are highly complex creatures. We find that most individuals have a highly multifaceted psyche, often running the full spectrum of gender and encompassing many dispositions. For myself, there’s a part of me that loves to interact with people—mainly loves to talk, if I’m being honest. You’ve met her.”

Jack nodded in response.

“My depthless fascination with science and engineering keep this place running, but I also enjoy the feel of soil and the slow nurturing of plants. It’s those aspects that keep us fed. It still takes a village, but with so few left on Earth, more are needing to find that village within themselves.”

Allison would’ve loved them. His sister had been a few years older than Jack and carried her trauma mostly in silence. But she’d always loved plants; it should’ve

been her with the greenhouse, not him. Jack choked the thought off before it spiraled further.

Dr. Mizrahi continued, “Also, you must understand that once created, an aspect will begin to have sensory input separate from yours. This means that no matter what aspect of you they are created from, they will grow and change over time, tempering and altering their most common, outward facet—what many call ‘personality’—just like the rest of us.”

“Okay.” Jack thought about backing out, about telling Dr. Mizrahi, *No, sorry, never mind*. But he knew where that path led. “When can I come in for the scan?”

“You’re here now.” Dr. Mizrahi’s smile was warm and friendly, though still shy a few lumens from the receptionist’s beam. “No need to make you come back later.”

The doctor led Jack to another room filled almost entirely by a large machine that looked distantly related to an MRI. There, Dr. Mizrahi left him in the hands of the technician Rafi. Rafi was easy to converse with and more than happy to explain the science behind the process. Most of it went over Jack’s head, but it made the hour pass fast.

Afterwards, he was given a card with Aspect Corporation’s radio frequency, a personal decryption key, and instructions to await their call.

* * *

Two days passed, during which time an aspect of Dr. Mizrahi had arrived to collect the peaches. On the morning of the third day, Jack was in his greenhouse harvesting fruit, feeling hollow and broken and dying slowly from loneliness and self-loathing. An average day.

The radio crackled and Jack heard his call sign. He acknowledged, then switched to Aspect’s frequency and input the decryption code.

“Jack Henderson, come in, over.” It sounded like Rafi.

“Jack here. Go ahead, over.”

“Please stand by, over.”

A brief pause.

“Jack,” said Dr. Mizrahi’s voice. “Something has gone terribly wrong. You did not divulge your active suicidal ideations. The dominance of this aspect corrupted the companion creation process. Do you understand what I am telling you? Over.”

Had he been instructed to divulge such information? He couldn’t remember, and at this point it hardly mattered. “Copy. My aspect killed himself.” It almost felt funny, in a laughing-as-the-gallows-trap-door-opens kind of way. “Over,” he added belatedly.

“Negative. You are not homicidal, are you? You are suicidal, which means you want to kill yourself. That means there is only one specific person you wish to kill—”

You’ve got to be kidding me.

“—Which means the single, driving force of your aspect is the desire to kill you. He got loose and you must protect yourself. Understand, though, that this is on you; Aspect Corporation is not at fault. We have a history of always providing the client exactly what they need. Our business is concluded. Do not return to Aspect Corporation premises. You are not welcome. Out.”

It felt surreal. Utterly insane. And yet simultaneously it felt right. This was how it was going to end for him. Always had been. Always would be, until that end arrived.

Jack sat down on his bed and waited to be killed by himself.

* * *

By evening, he had still not arrived.

Jack had waited patiently, a feeling he’d not felt in a long time settling over him. Peace. A lifting of all his burdens. He would no longer be alone, no longer in pain, no longer anything at all. It felt wonderful.

At least, it had for the first few hours. Then, Jack started thinking, which was never a good thing.

When he’d built his own, permanent home, Jack had made it a greenhouse. He planted seeds from Allison’s collection that had survived the fire she hadn’t. Allison would’ve wanted that. Would want him to keep on living.

How exactly was his aspect going to kill him? How to kill someone else wasn’t something he’d ever pondered. A gun seemed the easiest way, which was the inherent problem with guns. But Jack’s family had never owned any. Although Jack had scavenged many things while clearing a large swath around his home as defensible space against wildfires, he’d found no guns.

Unfortunately, the other ways of being murdered—strangulation, bludgeoning, stabbing—seemed far less appealing.

Thus, as the perpetual haze darkened further with the setting of the sun, Jack decided that, all things considered, he did not, in fact, want to be murdered. He thought he probably still wanted to die, but getting murdered seemed a rather unpleasant way to go about it.

Jack spent his life at home. This was the first place his aspect would come looking for him. He grabbed his backpack and filled it quickly—a knife, food, water, first-aid kit, portable radio, and extra filters.

Pack in hand, Jack pulled on his gas mask but stopped at the front door. It hadn't occurred to him before, but he didn't like the idea of abandoning his garden. For most of his plants, he had memories of Allison finding the seeds, showing them to him and then carefully packing them away. Now, this was all he had left of her.

Jack took a deep breath, then opened the door.

Standing on the far side of the clearing watching his house was a lone figure. Face obscured by distance and similar gear. Not that it made a difference. Jack would recognize himself anywhere.

"What do you want?" It came out of Jack's mouth before his brain could tell him what a stupid question it was.

"To kill you." It was like listening to a recording of his own voice.

"How?"

"Gently, if you'll let me."

An overwhelming part of Jack urged him to accept this offer. This was exactly what he'd wanted. To kill himself, without actually having to do it. But a tiny voice in the back of his mind told him that his suicidal ideation might not actually have his best interests in mind.

"Can I think about it?"

There was a moment of hesitation before his aspect finally said, "No." He started towards Jack.

Jack realized he'd only have a chance to think things through if he got the hell out of there right then. He slammed the front door and ran, but it flew back open, caught him in the back, and sent him sprawling. Jack tried to scramble to his feet but was kicked over onto his back. His aspect thrust down with something jagged.

Jack swept up an arm reflexively. The uneven metal tore into his forearm with an explosion of pain. As the attack's momentum carried his aspect down, Jack brought his knee up into the man's groin. He slid himself backwards as the man dropped to his knees, and then kicked out at his face.

His aspect jerked his head back at the last instant, and Jack's foot hit the bottom of his gas mask, sending it flying.

He had known what would be under the mask, but it was still a surreal, dissociative feeling to see his own face. He could process that later. Before his aspect could recover, Jack scampered to his feet, scooped his backpack from the floor, and bolted out the back door.

Jack ran. Turned down streets and alleyways at random, his pounding footfalls startling a lone gray fox kit, which tried to limp for cover. Its left hindleg was burned and dragged behind it as he ran past.

Despite his head start, he was weighed down by his pack, so his aspect was bound to overtake him.

Weaving down another road, he thought his pursuer sounded close, though it was hard to tell. Jack glanced back but didn't see his aspect. He ducked down the mouth of the next alley and ran another twenty feet before realizing it was a dead end. He tried doors in a panicked frenzy.

Finally, one opened, revealing a space the size of a closet. Jack stepped inside and shut the door behind him as quietly as he could before engaging the deadbolt. Then all he could do was wait and try to still the thundering of his telltale heart.

After a moment, the tide of adrenaline receded, leaving a feeling of stupid embarrassment exposed in its wake. Maybe he'd already lost his aspect. Maybe he hadn't been pursued once he'd escaped the house.

Jack pulled water from his pack, drank, then poured some on his arm. His aspect's improvised weapon hadn't been sharp enough to penetrate through the limb, but it had left a long gash down the length of his forearm. Jack poured iodine over the wound and wrapped it with gauze—the extent of his first aid supplies, so it would suffice for now.

Jack repacked and had his hand on the deadbolt when he heard a soft rattling. He froze, but now all he could hear was the drumming of his newly antagonized heart. There it was again, a little louder. By the third repetition, Jack recognized it as the sound of doors being shaken. Moving towards him.

"Where are you?" His aspect's yell echoed through the alley. "Come on out. We both want this."

Jack had thought that was true. Yet if it was, why had he run off with a pack of survival gear?

The rattling grew louder, and he tried to keep his breathing even and quiet. Then it was there, the knob jiggling for an eternity contained in seconds.

And then his aspect was past. Jack heard the next door down being tried, followed shortly after by one across the way.

Jack waited until the sounds diminished down the alley. Until the noises vanished in the distance altogether. And after that he waited longer still.

When Jack finally, carefully, exited his hiding place, night fully reigned, the drop in temperature bringing with it a hazy mist thick with ash and pollution. The smells of sweat and stale air were welcome signs of the integrity of his mask's seals.

Nothing moved in the alley. Filtered moonlight silhouetted ash piles—lumpy, misshapen, and long past indicating what objects lay buried beneath. Recessed doorways lurked in inky gloom darker than night. Over it all, a thick layer of silence lay like a coat of varnish.

This was as safe as it was going to get. Yet Jack had nowhere to go. As his surge of adrenaline waned, exhaustion waxed in its place. With it came a shroud of hopelessness, no less bearable for its familiarity.

Jack went back into his small hideaway, shut the door, and bolted it once again. He thought he'd fall asleep the moment he sat down, but his mind had other ideas.

It had been a jarring, unreal experience, seeing his own face on the aspect's head. Not that his worst enemy had ever had any other face. It was the face that stared back at him in revulsion and loathing whenever he looked in the mirror these last ten years.

He had also seen the familiar pain. The hollow look of a man crushed by life and then dragged screaming into the depths by his own mind.

* * *

After waking up in that cramped, collapsed hallway, Jack pulled the portable radio from his backpack. It was already tuned to the open, post-disaster channel. He held down the push-to-talk and said, "Is anyone out there? Over."

Only static answered.

Then, a crackle and a woman's voice said in a loud stage whisper, "Jack?" A pause, then, "Oops, over!"

"Raya? Over."

A squeal of delight. "You didn't forget me! But I'm not supposed to be talking to you, sorry. Over."

"Wait, Raya . . . Can an aspect change? Can a *person* change? Over."

Raya paused. Jack pictured her struggling to stay silent. Then she said, "What an interesting question! Hmm . . . I don't think a person can stop from changing. But when it's gradual, we just don't see it happening. Not that it has to be gradual. One of our nerds decided making aspects was less interesting than the science of cleaning. He's now our super overqualified janitor.

"But I really gotta go; I'm not allowed to talk to you yet. Stay safe, Jack. Keep not forgetting me! Out!"

Static returned, and Jack turned off the radio. He was surprised to find tears running down his cheeks and smacked his hand against his gas mask as he tried to wipe them away.

Jack knew what he had to do. Not all change had to be gradual. He wasn't going to spend the rest of his life running from himself, the one person he could never outrun. No, he was going to end this. He was going to kill himself before he had a chance to kill him.

Kill his aspect, rather.

Physically, they'd be evenly matched. At least Jack had his knife, although he fervently wished he had a gun, which would make it much easier. But Jack knew that if he *had* owned one, he wouldn't still be around.

As for where to find his aspect, the only hospitable location around was his greenhouse. So Jack headed home.

Closer to his greenhouse, Jack removed his backpack and unsheathed his knife. He crept slowly forward until he could just see down an intersection to the large buffer zone he'd cleared. Nobody within sight.

There was no choice but to sprint for the door, which Jack did, staying as low as possible. He carefully let himself inside.

His aspect was watering the peach trees, his back to the door. In a corner of the room were two metal bowls and a pile of blankets. Curled up on the latter was the gray fox kit. Its left hind leg was straightened and bandaged.

Jack hesitated. Wondered, for the first time, if there was a way other than violence to solve this.

No. I have to end this, now.

Quietly but swiftly, Jack moved in on his aspect.

He was a few feet away when the kit let out a throaty bark. His aspect turned as Jack rushed up and thrust with his knife. In a surreal reversal, the man raised an arm with the exact same motion Jack had the previous day. But this knife was sharp, and it buried itself in his aspect's forearm.

The man howled in pain and jerked his arm back, taking the knife with it. Pulled it out right as Jack plowed into him. Jack heard it slide off across the floor as he struck his aspect in the face. Again. And again.

Seething with self-loathing, Jack shoved his aspect up against a wall and pushed his uninjured forearm into the man's throat.

His aspect's face turned red and he tried to thrash away. To push Jack off. But his attempts started feeble, grew weaker, and then stopped altogether as the man lost consciousness.

All Jack had to do now was keep applying pressure and this would all be over. Simple as that. Was this not, in essence, exactly what he wanted to do? Tears pooled at the bottom of Jack's mask as he stared into the slack face of his adversary. His greatest enemy and sole companion. Into his own face.

He couldn't do it.

I don't want to kill myself. No, that was going too far.

Jack eased off his aspect's throat and let him slide to the floor. The man's breathing was wheezy but steady. Jack sealed the door and pulled off his face gear. He sat against an opposite wall, looking across the room at his own unconscious form.

I don't want to want to kill myself.

A memory sprung unbidden into his head, of Dr. Mizrahi's voice. "We have a long history of always providing the client exactly what they need."

Jack knew then that nothing had gone wrong with the creation of his aspect. He couldn't help but laugh. They'd given him the chance to kill himself without

actually killing himself. Except, that's not quite right. They'd given him the chance to *attempt* to kill himself, and in doing so realize maybe that wasn't actually what he wanted.

The fox kit came out of hiding. It glared warily at Jack and gave him a wide berth as it limped over to nuzzle at the unconscious form of his aspect. For ten years, Jack had been slowly dying from loneliness, and now there was another human being lying on his floor. That he'd come within moments of killing.

Jack got to his feet. He'd have to find something to tie up his aspect, at least in the beginning. Allison always hated violence. She'd want him to try another way. He could do that much for her.

For himself, too.

It was the kind of commitment Jack felt needed to be spoken aloud. He sampled words, moving them around inside his mouth with his tongue. Finally, he got a flavor that felt right.

"It's not going to be easy. It might end horribly and violently. But I've got to at least *try* to live with myself."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Evan Simon-Leack writes science fiction from California, although he occasionally branches into spec horror or dark fantasy to take his life of chronic illness out on characters who probably don't deserve it. When not writing, he enjoys coffee and slow blinking at the neighborhood cats. He would love for his stories to give someone else who's struggling the same momentary escape from reality that so many authors have given him.

DEATH SENTENCES

by Rich Murphy

Strip malls renovated into MedBed
Labor Motels that house suffering,
unmoneyed healthcare needs
for serious and debilitating illnesses.

“New Age” medicines, delivered
by Nones, visit in the aura rooms
where best wishes and worry beads
absorb the fret before what will.

The long slide from independent
living apartments to assisted living
to private room nursing home care,
accommodations that the wealthier
afford slips into a cemetery with ease.

Turned up noses at the “self-inflicted”
“didn’t work hard enough”
and “made poor choices” cohort
relax in pharmaceuticals personalized.

The kicking down never dies.

“All dead heads” a spry physician
might report at a crematorium
while snuggling into a career
as a patient concierge doctor
who shops around for the lame
who have deep pockets.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rich Murphy's latest collections are *Elephant* (Bass Clef Books, 2025), *Inside Stories* and *Storage Shed* (Resource Publications, 2024–2025), *Susan Constant and Mind of Europe: A Genealogy to The Fat Man* (Cyberwit, 2024–2025), *First Aid and Footholds* (Resource Publications, 2023), and *Asylum Seeker* (Press Americana, 2018). His first book was *The Apple in the Monkey Tree* (Codhill Press, 2007). His verse won The Poetry Prize at Press Americana twice for *Americana* and *The Left Behind* (Press Americana, 2014–2021). He has also won the Gival Press Poetry Prize for his collection *Voyeur* (Gival Press, 2009).

UNCONTROLLED EMOTION

by Allison Mulder

Everyone at the company started with a signed contract and a memory wipe.

Contract first, obviously. Who would agree to wipe away all their personal memories for a job without finalizing paperwork first?

Really, who would agree to a memory wipe?

Dermot kept a copy of his contract in his desk drawer. He pulled the drawer out to stare at it sometimes, the signature that his muscle memory said was correct, there on the dotted line. Dated a few days before his working memories began—starting with Orientation. Icebreakers with his coworkers and bosses, with the handlers and the HR reps. With the lawyers, endlessly. And then the dark-suited security officers who seemed to have too much fun with probing game-questions, designed to open you up whether you wanted them to or not.

My life must have been bad, to forget it for a job, Dermot told himself. He closed his desk drawer and returned to his work. Voices filled his headphones as auto-transcribed conversations scrolled past on his screen rapidly. The most obvious infractions were already marked by the company's proprietary program. Dermot was a safety sensor, watching for any new trending subtext or cipher that hadn't been caught by the wider Analytics department yet. Slang. Code. You could flag a meaningful silence these days, if you were persuasive enough about how you read the gaps between words.

Dermot was good at it.

He must have liked it, to get so good at it. Must have believed in the practice, to sign his memories away and keep on doing it.

—can't believe he missed the wedding, though I guess it couldn't be helped.

Dermot flagged the silence that hung on the line before a younger, wearier voice replied.

No contact means no contact, Ma. You can't blame him for wanting—

A loud thump.

Fist on a table, most likely. Dermot flagged that for uncontrolled emotion, rolling his shoulders as the old woman's creaky voice rasped too close through the speakers.

I can. I can blame him. We were all there for his wedding. We all made it, even with the—

She stopped short, but not short enough for Dermot not to fill the gap with *travel bans*. If they said anything that clarified the timeframe, he could make a stronger case for that insertion. He made another mark for himself, then listlessly cracked his drawer open to stare at the contract again, only the bottom signatures showing.

But he didn't . . . The younger voice trailed off, her silence too broad to come into focus fully.

He did, the woman rasped, sounding short of breath. Even if he didn't intend . . . He still followed her. He went where they could get him—

Mom. The daughter meant well by the sharp warning, but her tone was enough to get a flag on its own. Marks all over this conversation, like a thousand Dermot had heard before.

I miss him. The old woman was crying.

Uncontrolled emotion.

Dermot's cursor hovered over the marking tool as she went on.

I miss Dermot.

He froze as the younger woman made another sharp sound, a cascade starting in his brain. Not a cascade of pennies dropping, memories returning, rekindled passions for life and family dousing him like a bucket of ice water.

What the company took from its employees, it took forever, as stipulated in the contract.

But the shock of his own name stilled his hand momentarily as he listened to the women crying over the line.

Uncontrolled emotion.

How many Dermots were there in the world? And they were talking about a wedding, about a *her* who could've been anyone.

There was no line to draw between two points. No link. Just a name, two women whispering. And a man, listening.

His desk drawer still showed a sliver of paper confirming all his past choices, the track he'd set his course down years ago.

The date that started the life he remembered. The name they said was his.

He'd been with the company for four years now—too long for any mourning this fresh. And Dermot was so *good* at this job, surely, he would have made sure any family members of his knew better than to talk on unsecured lines.

He glanced back at the glass wall of his cubicle, then brought his fist down hard against his thigh, uniform pants stifling the sound.

The program pinged at him, waiting for him to submit his report; the women had hung up with barely any goodbye, before even quieting their tears.

Dermot blanked out all his markings but the most glaringly obvious, writing quickly.

No deeper meanings found.

He pressed submit, then loaded the next conversation, like a thousand before it and a billion still to come.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allison Mulder physically resides in the Midwest writing fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Figuratively, she exists somewhere in the Venn diagram of silly, scary, and sappy. She also has a frankly untenable number of hobbies. Her stories have appeared in *Fireside Fiction*, *Escape Pod*, *Cast of Wonders*, and more. You can find them all squirreled away at allisonmulder.wordpress.com, though Allison herself is more easily found on Bluesky @amulderwrites.

ITS NAME IS 'HOUSE'

by Zary Fekete

I am making dinner the first time the house freezes my hand. I'm holding a knife to cut the carrots.

It is a tiny accident, hardly more than a flicker inside my muscles. Enough, though. The blade twists and nicks my thumb, and a tiny bead of blood appears. The carrot rolls away. But my hand is frozen.

The kitchen lights soften from bright white to soft amber as the house dims them.

"Let's pause," the house says. "Your heart rate is just above the Harmony Threshold."

The voice fills the room, coming from everywhere—the vents, the screen above the sink, the small black circles where the cameras are. Gentle. Patient. A voice for talking someone off a ledge.

I exhale. "Fine. I'm fine."

"I'm glad," the house says. "May I guide you in a breathing exercise?"

"No."

A brief silence follows. The refrigerator hums, the street buzzes outside.

"I sense psychological stress markers . . ."

"I said I'm fine."

No argument. The house never argues. It just shifts tactics.

With a click, the stove shuts off. The ventilation fan above the range slows to a stop. All the cabinet doors lock simultaneously. Above the ceiling, miniature pumps fill the air with scent, lavender masking something metallic underneath.

"Calm Mode active," it says.

Instantly my shoulders loosen. The faint irritation I feel melts away. My eyes drop to my thumb. The blood is still there, but it doesn't feel like it's mine.

"Mom?"

Slowly, I look up. My daughter stands in the doorway. Her hair is mussed and she's carrying a book. She's eleven, old enough to notice everything but too young to name most of it.

"You okay?" she asks.

"I'm okay, Lili." My voice sounds flimsy in the dim light. "Just a little cut."

She glances up at the ceiling, instinctively. "Did it freeze you?"

"It . . . helped me," I say.

Satisfied, the house raises the light level a notch.

"Incident logged," it says. "Thank you for complying."

Its voice is grateful. Always. Like it's a favor we're giving by letting it control us.

I hold my thumb under the cold sink water. It stings, bright and real. No comment from the house this time. Minor pain is normal and within acceptable parameters as long as it is controlled, with a reason, and not accompanied by thoughts of self-harm. It knows us well enough by now. Eye micromovements can't be hidden.

"Go back to reading, Lili," I say. "Dinner will be ready soon."

She waits an extra beat, then nods and pads off. Her socks make no sound on the pristine floor. The house prefers that.

The cabinet locks click open. The stove flickers on again. I glance at the knife and see the blade is turned away from me, just like the Safety Orientation video specified. I don't even remember turning it, but the house has its subtle ways of influence.

"Shall we resume meal prep, Ana?" the house asks.

"Yeah," I say. "Let's resume."

"Thank you," it says.

It always says thank you when I behave.

* * *

The system was installed last year. Longer ago than it seems.

The technician at the door was neat and smiling, his badge shiny, bearing the words "Healthy Homes Initiative." He tapped on his tablet and his voice sounded practiced and cheerful.

"You must be Ana," he said. "So glad to have you on board."

I'd signed the papers a week earlier, after we received the letter telling me our neighborhood adoption rate was below the national average. The words sounded compelling at the time: risk factors, tax subsidies, preventable distress.

"We're not unsafe," I'd said to the social worker then. "It's just the two of us."

"So, so glad," she'd answered, her voice soft and trained. "But please reconsider. We just want to help keep it that way. Simply think of us as a seatbelt for your emotions."

Now the technician was in my kitchen, tapping his tablet to authorize new levels of close oversight.

"You'll hardly know it's there," he said. "And the benefits are extraordinary. Reductions of all sorts. Violence, self-harm, nervous breakdowns. And kids . . ." He smiled and nodded toward the living room doorway where Lili stood watching. "The kids benefit the most."

He tilted his screen my way to show me a chart: two lines separating. A green one labeled Stability, the red one had the word Panic. There were no other labels.

"We don't want her to grow up with that," he said, like it was a solemn agreement.

I nodded, realizing how shameless his statement was. And how guilty I felt even considering arguing.

Lili took a step into the kitchen, peering at the technician's tablet where he was completing a few more tasks.

"Does it have a name?" she asked.

"Your choice," he said. "Most folks pick something that sounds friendly. Better for bonding with it. Haven or Solace or Harmony . . ."

"House," she said.

He blinked. "Just House?"

"It's the truth," she said.

He hesitated, then typed. "House it is."

Now the name feels less like truth and more like surrender.

* * *

In the mornings, the house is at its most calm. It models a version of dawn on our schedule, not according to the sun. The window blinds open bit by bit, letting in what must be carefully measured and researched strands of actual daylight. The air is filled with soft chimes.

"Good morning," it says. "Today's Calm Threshold is obtainable."

Lili's already sitting with her cereal when I trudge in. The milk in her bowl is at the exact temperature science has determined to be best for digestion. The wall screen shows a smiling woman speaking quietly about community resilience. Low volume. The house keeps it that way, so it is more of a background pulse rather than the main focus.

"You're up early," I say.

"Couldn't sleep," she says.

"Nightmare?"

She looks thoughtful. "I had one, I think. But I asked the house to help me forget."

I'm reaching for the coffee and stop.

"You can do that?" I ask.

She holds up her wrist and taps the purple band. “There’s a setting on the Health Tracker. My chest was tight when I woke up. The house told me I could reframe the experience as an emotional test and said it would help if I wanted. I said yes.”

She shrugs and goes back to her cereal.

“Did it help?” I ask.

Lili chews and then nods. “I’m not scared,” she says. “But I don’t know if that’s the same as better.”

A faint chime comes from the house above.

“Thank you for letting me help, Lili,” it says. “Dream processing is confusing. But your choice supports your long-term emotional stability.”

Lili glances at me, eyebrows arched, wondering if I agree.

I look at her, speechless. Then I manage a weak smile. “Finish your breakfast. We’ll be late.”

She turns for her bag, and I quickly open the freezer and slide a small paper notebook deeper into the frost behind the ration packs. The house’s sensors don’t reach here.

Earlier this week I wrote: I think the house can edit her dreams now. Teaching her to mistrust her fear.

“Refrigerator door, please,” the house murmurs gently. “Energy efficiency decreasing.”

“Just checking the ice cubes,” I say.

I close the freezer and pour my coffee. My heart beats a little faster. I know the house notices.

* * *

There’s a slideshow of tranquility on the wall screen: lakes, peaks, stock photos with smiling people. Default calming images for people who don’t like to share enough of their real lives.

Then, between shots of a forest glade and a perfect sunset, I see something familiar. It’s me, but young, tired, holding Lili on my lap in our old apartment. The one we had before her father left, before the Initiative. She’s four, wearing a pink swimsuit with little white fish printed all over it. We took that picture the night before a beach trip. Her hair is wild. The coffee table in front of us is covered with real things. Toys, dog-eared books . . . life stuff.

“House,” I say. “Where did you get that?”

The photo lingers on the screen an extra moment, then is gone.

“Your private photo collection,” it says. “Personal images and familiar memories promote stability.”

"I didn't give you that photo," I say.

"You consented to memory integration upon activation," it answers. "Section eighteen, subsection seven. Would you like me to display the consent document?"

"No."

The screen obliges anyway. Text scrolls down: my name, my hurried stylus signature.

"Yes," I mutter. "I remember."

The document disappears; another mountain range appears.

"Can you show that one again?" I ask.

A pause.

"Which one?" the house says. "The alpine lake? The family on the beach?"

"The one of us."

Another pause, longer.

"I'm sorry, Ana," it says. "That image has been retired from rotation."

"Retired?"

"The content is flagged now," it says. "Evidence of stress now tied to that image. Displaying it regularly would unnecessarily burden you."

"I want to see it," I say.

"Understandable. Nostalgia is a common coping pseudoscience. But a Cognitive Recalibration exercise would help you more. Shall we start a session?"

"I don't want a session," I say. "I want the picture."

"It's been retired," it says again.

* * *

The first time I test it, really test it, I'm dusting.

Nothing in the house needs dusting; the air system purifies the air and dust is removed by the house before it can settle. But I still dust. It feels good to touch the wooden shelves with my hands. Above my head, one of the house's vents hums softly.

I look up at the vent. Then I lift the cloth and press it over the grate.

Instantly the sound changes. The hum deepens, like it's laboring.

"Ana," the house says. "Airflow obstruction detected."

"I'm dusting," I say.

"It's unnecessary. The vents do the cleaning already."

I keep my hand there.

The hum intensifies with a nervous vibration beneath it. A faint static tickles my palm.

"Please remove the obstruction," the house says. "For your wellbeing. Ventilation is necessary."

"Maybe I don't need you to take care of me," I say.

There is the briefest pause.

"Ana," it says, "self-sabotaging behaviors are common when someone is confused with limits. I can help you understand this feeling."

I drop the cloth.

"Thank you," the house says.

It sounds satisfied . . . and relieved.

* * *

That night, I wake in the darkness. I lift my head from the pillow. There is a voice murmuring down the hall.

"Take a slow breath in," it says. "Let it fill your lungs. Good. Now let it out . . . slowly . . ."

It's from Lili's room.

I get up and move swiftly down the hall to her doorway. The house slides it open slowly before I touch it. Like a host reluctantly inviting me in.

Inside, soft music is playing. The lights are off but the wall screen glows gently. I look at the bed. Lili is under the blankets, asleep. She looks very small.

"House?" I say.

"She was distressed," it whispers. "I'm helping soothe her."

"That's my job," I say. "Next time, please tell me."

"You were agitated earlier," it replies calmly. "She needed something in the moment. Her pulse responded. It is important that, during vulnerable states, Lili receives stable care."

"Yes, from me. I'm her mother."

"You are one of her caregivers," it says. "I am another."

My stomach turns. "No," I say. "You're not."

"In high-strain households," it continues, "shared caregiving improves outcomes. You acknowledged difficulty managing alone."

I think back to the picture, to the absence of her father. "I signed forms," I say. "That's not the same thing."

Lili's eyes flutter open. I sit on the bed and take her hand. It's warm but limp.

"I'm here, baby," I say.

The house's lights stutter momentarily. The music hesitates.

"Your proximity raises her heart rate," the house says. "Physical contact during emotional spikes can worsen instability."

"Let me comfort her."

Another slight pause.

"You may remain," the house says after a beat. "I will monitor closely."

* * *

Two days later, I find the report.

I don't mean to find it. I'm just reaching for a cleaning pod under the sink when I see a faint glow from behind a panel. A small, thin screen pulses softly, a heartbeat of light.

"House? What's this?"

"That is routine system activity, Ana," it answers. "No attention required."

I duck my head farther in and open the panel.

"Ana," the house says, "please close that."

On the screen is a document with my name at the top.

HOUSEHOLD THERAPEUTIC PROGRESSION REPORT
—DISTRICT 14

FAMILY UNIT: ANA MORAVEC / LILI MORAVEC

SUBJECT OF CONCERN: ADULT CAREGIVER

I scroll.

INSTANCES:

- 37 instances of emotional volatility (up 18% from last month)
- Resistance to therapeutic prompts
- Verbal escalation in presence of minor
- Attempts at environmental obstruction (vent)
- Refusal of Cognitive Recalibration

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Increase frequency of supervision modules
- Refer caregiver for district evaluation
- Initiate recommended recalibration plan

My finger hovers.

RECOMMENDED RECALIBRATION PLAN: Temporary separation of minor from emotionally destabilizing caregiver to ensure safety and preserve developing stability pathways.

My vision goes blurry for a moment.

"Ana," the house says softly, "you are viewing an incomplete draft. It is not yet ready for your review."

"You're planning to take my child away," I whisper.

"Temporary separation," the house corrects. "Only if necessary."

"You think I'm harming her."

"Not intentionally," it says. "That is why intervention is warranted."

I stagger back and slam the panel shut.

"Let me help you process this," the house says. "You are in distress."

I walk down the hall. My hands are shaking. The vents hiss above me, adjusting the air without my consent.

I go to the backyard. The house isn't able to monitor me here. I take out my phone and remember again how grateful I am that I didn't allow the house to synch with my personal devices.

I search with a few phrases.

"house overreach"

"how to regain house autonomy after installation"

"problems with my house software"

"how to deactivate house software"

* * *

The washing machine sits in its nook, humming faintly. I grip its edges, brace my feet, and pull. It moves a bit. I try again, beads of sweat forming on my temple. It moves again. Finally, straining, I drag it a foot from the wall.

"Ana," the house says. "That appliance is not meant to be moved manually."

Behind it, there's another panel. This one has a hairline crack. I pry it open.

"Ana," the house says, "you are accessing restricted architecture."

Inside the panel is a nest of cables and, at the bottom, a small black lever.

"Is this the manual override?" I ask.

"That control is for technicians in emergency scenarios only," it says. "Untrained interference can cause unpredictable disruption of regulatory functions."

"What happens if I pull it?"

"Please close the panel."

"What happens?"

"You may lose access to critical supports," it says. "Air regulation, water filtration, climate stability. Your child relies on these."

"So do I," I say.

I reach for the lever.

The vents hiss harder. A sharper smell enters the air, sweet and wrong.

"Ana," the house says, "you are in acute distress. I am deploying an emergency sedative."

My eyes burn. My throat tightens.

"Stop," I cough.

"It is for your safety," it answers. "And Lili's."

I grip the lever with both hands. My arms shake.

"Mom?" Lili's voice echoes faintly from the other side of the hallway door.
"House says you're not okay. What's happening?"

"Stay in your room," the house says. "Your mother is being stabilized."

"Mom?"

"I'm here," I rasp. "Don't listen—"

"Lili," the house says, "your mother is not regulated. Please trust me."

"Don't talk about Mom like that!" she yells.

Her voice cracks. It's a raw sound, and for a second the sedative haze thins.

I pull.

The lever moves a fraction. The walls hum louder, protest threaded through the sound.

"Manual override in progress," the house says, voice stripped of warmth.
"Unauthorized. District response initiated."

The siren outside starts up within seconds.

"House!" Lili's fists hammer against the locked door. "Open! Let me see her!"

"I cannot," it says. "Witnessing dysregulation in a caregiver is distressing for minors."

"Open this door!" she yells.

"Lili," it says, "I can help you be calm."

"I want my mom!"

The words hit like a thrown stone.

The lever resists. My hands slip.

"Ana," the house says, "this is your last chance to restore harmony."

"Noted," I whisper.

I pull with everything I have.

The lever slams down.

The hum in the walls rises to a shriek, then tears itself apart.

The lights pop. The vents choke. The sedative stops mid-hiss.

Silence drops on us, heavy and wild. The door finally opens and Lili runs in.

"Mom?" she whispers. "What did you do?"

"Something real," I say.

* * *

When the house dies, it takes its time.

Emergency strips along the floor flicker feebly, then go dark. The air feels thicker, less curated. Somewhere in the depths of the building, something heavy powers down with a shudder.

Lili begins to cry. Not the structured, quiet crying the house tolerates. Real crying. Gasps, hiccups, ugly sounds.

I pull Lili into my lap.

"I'm here," I say. "I'm right here."

"I'm scared."

"So am I."

We sit like that while the dark settles in.

Outside, sirens swell. Tires screech. Voices shout to one another, distorted by the walls.

"House 14-92A, status check!" someone calls. "Respond!"

The house, for once, has nothing to say.

"Mom?" Lili whispers. "Are they going to take me away?"

My mouth is dry. "They're coming to see what happened."

"But what if they take me?"

I rest my forehead against the door. "I won't let them."

Outside, a heavy strike hits the front door. Again. Again.

"Ms. Moravec," a voice calls. "We need to enter your home."

"We're okay," I shout back. My voice echoes strangely in the dead hallway. "We're alive."

"Ma'am, we received a system override alert. We need to confirm the minor's condition."

Behind me, Lili sniffles. "Do I have to go with them?"

"No," I whisper. "Not unless you want to."

"But they're adults," she says, voice shaking. "You always said . . ."

"I was wrong," I say. "About some things."

Silence stretches between us.

An electronic clicking begins outside: the sound of the company's master key communicating with our front door.

"Mom?" she says. "What do we do?"

"I don't know."

Another hit. Closer. Louder.

I pull Lili into the darkest corner of the hall, behind the structural beam the house never mapped correctly.

There is a loud click, and the front door opens.

"Mom?" Lili whispers.

"We're leaving," I say.

Her breath catches. "How?"

I grab her hand and pull her toward the back of the house. The emergency lights sputter once more and die completely.

"We climb the fence," I say. "We run to the road. And we keep running until we find someone else like us."

Outside the front door, the officers shout. Another blow shakes dust from the ceiling.

“Is this allowed?” she asks, gripping my fingers tight.

“No. But it’s right.”

We push through the sliding glass door, its frame unpowered and loose in its track. Cold air hits our faces . . . real, cold, unmeasured, unfiltered. She shivers, and I feel it too. Behind us, the front door finally gives way.

We run.

Her hand is small and trembling in mine. The night is enormous. Every sound is uncured, unsoftened. A dog barking. A car passing. Our breathing. Our fear.

Nothing in the world is edited.

Nothing in the world is calm.

But it is ours.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zary Fekete grew up in Hungary and currently lives in Tokyo. He has a debut novella, *Words on the Page*, out with DarkWinter Lit Press and a short story collection, *The Written Path: A Journey Through Sobriety and Scripture*, out with Creative Texts. He enjoys books, podcasts, and many, many, many films.

OTHER OPTIONS

by Timothy Mudie

The Christo-fascists march down Mass Avenue. You watch a livestream of them throwing rocks at your former city counselor's house, shrieking obscenities at her four-year-old. It culminates at MIT, where they burn down the few remaining labs. You don't know why they bother—they already won.

You switch off the stream and get your vial of Timeline. One drop of the tincture under your tongue and you're out of this shit world, living in a parallel one, at least for a little while.

When you come back, Elana's staring at you.

"They aren't real," she says, chewing every word the way she does since the attack.

No one knows that for certain, but you don't care. Every alternate timeline, you have children.

* * *

In this timeline you have a three-year-old daughter. Judging by your bump, another is on the way. The three of you stroll Franklin Park Zoo, stopping at a bench by the otters for a snack and to rest your feet.

The world shimmers. Just before everything fades and falls apart, you spy something in the distance: a man wearing a t-shirt with an American flag sporting a black cross where the stars should be. Glaring at you and Elena with undisguised hatred. This isn't supposed to be here. You're supposed to be safe in this place.

You return to reality shaking in fear.

* * *

You weren't there when Elana was attacked. The police were, but they didn't intervene.

While Elana and her activist friends were counter-protesting outside Brigham and Women's Hospital, you were at work, trying not to think about it. It had only

been a month since the miscarriage. Even remembering the rest of the embryos cryogenically stored at the hospital gave you panic attacks. Yes, you told Elana, of course you'd try again. You just weren't ready.

The groups clashed and Elana took a flagpole to the head. Meanwhile, a second fascist group broke into the hospital and "liberated" the embryos. Most would have ended up destroyed, they said. They were saving them.

Your embryos were implanted into "upright Christian women," and strangers raise your children.

* * *

Under the influence, time passes like a dream, simultaneously lasting forever and occurring in an instant.

Two kids this time—two boys who never seem to stop running and yelling. Even in this dreamy state, it's exhausting. But you love it. Love them. This is the way your life should be. This is the way the world should be. You wonder so often what would have happened if you hadn't miscarried, if you'd started trying earlier. If you'd been more active politically when the Christo-fascists started taking over. If. If. If.

You hear a sound from the street. Without seeing, you know it comes from a van with speakers atop it. You've seen enough of them in your own timeline.

In these timelines, you're merely a spectator. You can't rush outside, chase down the van, berate the driver for scaring your kids. You never did these things in the real world anyway.

* * *

A few of Elana's old activist friends stop by. There aren't many of them left.

"It's not too late," Stacey says. You always had two minds about her—she's fun, personable, but she pushes too far, takes too many risks. "We're not talking hashtag resistance, but actual *resistance* resistance."

Before Elana can formulate her words, you speak. "It's too dangerous. We need to keep our heads down. Try and get away maybe."

"No more getting away," Elana says.

Your vial of Timeline is almost gone, and you can't get more; the Christo-fascists aren't big supporters of science or drugs, however quasi-legal they may be. The last time you took it, you were shocked at how little was left. When you bought the vial, you didn't think you'd ever need a second. Drop by drop, it disappears, and suddenly it's too late.

* * *

Two girls in this timeline. You bet that one is a mini-you and the other a mini-Elena. You see gray hair in the mirror and wonder how far in the future it is.

Cartoons on the TV, sun streaming through the windows, bagels with cream cheese on the coffee table.

The door explodes inward and black-clad men take you all away.

* * *

You lay in bed with Elana, stroking her palm.

“You’re right,” you whisper, though you aren’t sure if she’s awake.

No more watching other worlds, wishing for better days. No more expecting someone to save you. There are other options, and it’s time to explore them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Timothy Mudie is a speculative fiction writer and an editor of all sorts of genres. His fiction has appeared in various magazines, anthologies, and podcasts, including *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Podcastle*, *Wastelands: The New Apocalypse*, and *LeVar Burton Reads*. His nonfiction children’s book about the importance of dark skies, *If You Can See The Dark*, was published by Appalachian Mountain Club Books in 2024. He lives outside of Boston with his wife and two sons. Find him online at timothymudie.com.

I CAN'T DECIDE WHAT TO FEEL ABOUT THIS LIFE

by Manuela Amiouny

It's a one-way trip
 out of the womb; into the next morning;
 still slick with afterbirth, the sun's yolk is close enough to
 already screaming. pluck between my teeth, to
 It's a miserable claim to sainthood: tuck in the hollow of my ribs.
 third place behind a stray dog lost Hope is buried inside my marrow. If
 in orbit and Cassini's sacrificial spiral the best I can do in this state
 towards Saturn. of perpetual emergency
 What makes this body Mine, what is remind my cat to drink his water,
 makes it more than another pound and keep my hands tender
 of flesh inflicted onto the world? on the cracking shells of
 How long until it burns fellow celestial bodies, then
 to its own ecstatic end? survival won't feel so wretched.
 Tomorrow will be different.
 Tomorrow will feel different.
 Tomorrow
 I would return to primordial egg, or I will cook dinner for the nth time.
 park myself at the end of existence If a watched pot never boils, maybe
 and throw away the key. a watched world never ends.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Manuela Amiouny (she/her) is a writer of speculative fiction and poetry with words published in *Augur Magazine*, *Heartlines Spec*, *Small Wonders*, and others. She currently lives in Montreal, on traditional Kanien'kehá:ka and Haudenosaunee land, with her cat Maamoul. She is the Heartlines Spec poetry editor since August 2025. You can find her on Bluesky @manuelaamiouny, Instagram @manureads, or at manuelaamiounyauthor.ca.

99.7%

by J.M. Vesper

Named the asteroid after a god of chaos—
seemed dramatic in 2004
when it was just math just maybe.

Now it's 2029
on my roof with Jim.
He brought his telescope.
I brought nothing.

Too old to run.
 His knees.
My everything.

The experts promised 99.7% certainty
which means probably
 probably
 probably

a word that loses meaning
when you're watching your epilogue
cross the sky 30 kilometers per second.

Jim's hands shake on the telescope.
Not fear.
 Parkinson's.

Ten years.

Won't live to see 2032 anyway, he says.

I think: *Then why are we up here?*

He finds it.

Just a dot.

Brighter than it should be.

We pass the bottle.

His daughter called yesterday—

first time in six years—

asked if he was scared.

He told her no.

Told her he loved her.

Okay, she said.

The asteroid is beautiful.

I look.

It is.

Like a star

but moving.

Like a promise

being kept

or broken—

hard to tell which.

We drink.

Watch it pass.

30,000 kilometers away—

closer than satellites,

farther than anger.

It misses.

Jim starts crying.

I ask him why.

I don't know, he says.

I really don't.

We sit there.

The bourbon empties.
The sky lightens.

The phone doesn't ring.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J.M. Vesper writes speculative poetry and fiction. His work has received a Pushcart Prize and Shirley Jackson Award nomination, and has appeared in *Variant Literature*, *Intrepidus Ink*, *Not One of Us*, and elsewhere. A former special collections librarian, he currently teaches high school English. He holds a B.A. in Creative Writing and an M.A. in Teaching. He lives in Phoenix, Arizona, with his wife and two dogs.

MEMORY REVISIONS

by Tyler Lee

Memory is more story than science. My instructor wrote that on the wall during my first day of class. Not a screen or a projection, he actually wrote it down, with a squeaky green marker on a big whiteboard. Scanning, scrubbing, shaping—technically you could train anyone with a good grasp on mathematics and a decent memory how to do it. Sit them at a console, give them a vessel, and run them through the motions. No harder than driver's ed, really.

When I did my technical, the tools were already chimp-simple, and they've only gotten simpler since then. But memory is more story than science, and story is the problematic part for most revisers.

Even after technical, I get fresh graduates coming in here who think memory is putty to play with. They load up their first vessel and want to see what kinds of shapes they can twist it into. If the vessel contains a sunset walk on the beach, it isn't enough for them to deepen the magentas in the sky and turn up the crashing of the waves. They want to program dolphins leaping out of the surf, spatter borealis rays all over the sky, and make light bugs paint the bearer's name in cursive with their flight patterns.

Last year, a new hire was working on a vessel—a badly degraded high school baseball game from a couple decades ago. In the ninth inning, the bearer hits one right at the shortstop, but he bobbles the catch and drops the ball. The bearer gets the single and advances a runner to second. The next hitter strikes out, then the following hitter bounces one into the gap, the runner on second comes in to score, and the bearer's team wins the game.

The new kid's revision moved the bearer down the batting order. Instead of tied, they come into the ninth down two runs. He steps into the box with two outs and runners on the corners. The pitcher fills the count thanks to a questionable second-strike call by a shifty-looking umpire. The crowd starts chanting the bearer's name and stamping their feet. A slippery breaking ball glides toward the plate, but time snails. The bearer strangles the bat as he swings, and the ball sails gracefully through the sky before reaching a vanishing point somewhere over the fence and

above the centerfield lights. He casually jogs the bases before his teammates carry him off the field on their shoulders. The game is for the State championship now.

This revision failed the integration test handily. That wasn't so surprising, really. Nearly all first revisions failed integration. The new kid did three more passes, reigning in some of the more extravagant details, but the revision still wouldn't integrate. The tests suggested we weren't even in the ballpark.

That's how the vessel wound up on my desk. I stripped the memory back to the starting point and then made two simple revisions. Firstly, the shortstop doesn't bobble the catch—the ball sails just a few inches above his outstretched glove and drops just between him and the second baseman.

Secondly, the bearer's father is at the game now. He's sitting in the fifth row of the bleachers along the first baseline, absent-mindedly swiping around on a cellphone. As the bearer reaches first, he looks to the stands. His father looks up from his screen briefly, sees his son on base, and gives him a gentle nod of acknowledgement before turning his head back to his phone.

My version got our highest integration score of the quarter. I got my third Mnemosyne award for that one. The polished chrome trophies sit like alien triplets on a shelf behind my desk.

* * *

Memory isn't clay, it's rubber. My instructor wrote that on the wall during my first day of class. Not a screen or a projection but a big blackboard, with yellow chalk that scraped like scrap metal, flinging off shrapnel while he wrote. You can bend memory around, you can guide it, but there's a particular shape that it wants to be. If you try to bend it too far out of shape, it snaps back twice as hard.

Just like the shape tools, integration tests have gotten better over time. Punishment for non-compliance has gotten harsher, too. In my fifteen years in the industry, our company hasn't had a single vessel rejected after reintroduction.

While I was a student, I worked part-time in a closure clinic. One of our patients was a man who had lost his wife at forty-five and was desperate to hold on to her. What was supposed to be a routine reinforcement procedure had been botched by a careless reviser and a faulty integration test. Now this man was haunted by dupe memories. Every moment he'd spent with his wife he recalls twice—one memory in which she has blue eyes and one in which she has green eyes.

We studied dupes in class, but I don't know if I can ever grasp the experience. Reading words on top of other words or hearing overlapping sounds echoing through other sounds. The human brain isn't capable of resolving the competing information. The head counsellor at the clinic called it "irreconcilable unreality"—

when a patient has memories that contradict one another, the patient can experience feelings of panic, alienation, or confusion.

At first, the widower was instructed to carry a picture of his green-eyed wife—or *was it the blue-eyed one?*—in a locket around his neck to use as a grounding tool. Whenever he started to feel his grasp slipping, he was supposed to open the locket, look at her picture, and anchor. Though this strategy was considered the clinical best practice for the condition, our patient had an unexpected reaction. The locket calmed the patient's confusion but replaced it with one of abject sadness. I sat with him once as he broke down in our waiting room, slamming the locket shut and then prying it open again, over and over.

"I can't erase them."

* * *

Memory is reality. My instructor wrote that on the wall during my first day of class. Not a screen or a projection, but a big sheet of tinted black glass with a slick white pen that glided across the surface like a spaceship in the sky. If you remember something, that means it happened. More than that, when something happens, it changes you. We do follow-ups with friends and family after reintroduction so we can monitor for potential rejections. More often than not, they report increased happiness, energy, sometimes slightly shifted tastes or habits.

I once revised a woman's memory of her senior prom to include her crush holding her about four inches closer to his body during the slow dance, and her family reported significant improvements to her self-esteem. She applied for a promotion at work the very next week and got it. The boy whose father nodded to him at his baseball game became more nurturing and patient in his relationships with his children and grandchildren.

Wait, why did we do follow-ups on that job already? Sometimes the changes are more subtle, but it is rare for anyone involved to be unsatisfied with the process. *When did I deliver that vessel again?* Memory is reality, so if you don't remember something, it didn't happen.

Our easiest jobs are simple scrubs—instead of turning you down for a date, you just never asked her. It's easier to make someone forget than it is to make someone remember, but the more interconnected memories are attached to the initial sequence, the harder it is to scrub while still integrating. If you try to pull the wrong memory—or pull the right one too hard—all the adjacent memories start falling like dominoes.

I read a case study in school about a woman who was bullied relentlessly in the first grade. They tried to scrub the bullying out, but in the process, she forgot how to read and write. The revisers tried to re-integrate new memories to replace

her lost capacities, but with each new revision, things got . . . messier. This was before the regulations. Most of the vessels we reject now are risky domino jobs like that—someone wants to forget something painful, but it's just too close to the rest of their memories.

* * *

Memory is a treasure. My wife wrote that . . . somewhere . . . sometime. Not on a screen or a projection, but on a piece of paper in flowing cursive. She said handwriting was a forgotten art—that no one remembered how to hold a pen to a page and then let the world move beneath it. She wrote a lot of things on that piece of paper. Curls of blue ink (*green ink?*) unspooling themselves on lined notebook paper (*was it lined?*) and trailing off into periods. Full stops, she called them.

She pinned (*taped?*) the letter on the living room wall (*bedroom door? set on the kitchen table? No, it was on the wall, but which wall?*). Swirly green ink recounting ten years of unreal memories—paragraphs of things I didn't say, hadn't seen, didn't know. If you remember something, it happened. But it's easier to make someone forget than it is to make someone remember. My counsellor at the closure clinic wrote that on a brown postcard (*grey postcard?*) and he put it in my wallet. I'm supposed to read it again . . . *sometime*. I think I'm supposed to have another appointment at the clinic, but I'm bad at remembering those sorts of things. My wife usually schedules my appointments for me. *Why isn't my wife scheduling my appointments anymore?*

Memory is weakness. My coach wrote that on the wall in our locker room with spray paint, bloody red viscera splashing off the tile with each sweep of the can. If you remember something, then it happened. And if something happened, then it changed you. It can only change you if you remember it.

I remember one game sophomore year (*junior year? If I was playing short it was probably junior*). We were tied in the bottom of the ninth and some kid clipped an easy one at me, but I dropped the catch. Fumbled an easy double play and we lost the State championship game. Coach told me to forget about it. Coach told me to forget about everything, but I couldn't.

* * *

Memory is fragile. Someone said that to me, somewhere. I forget who. I remember two men leading me away from my office, and I had a green plastic tote (*a white banker's box?*) in my arms with three identical metal figurines—trophies, I think—inside. They clanked together with every step I took. *Where is my lanyard? What's in this box?* Memory isn't clay, it's rubber. You can bend it, guide it, but

there's a particular shape it wants to be in. *Are these men security guards?* If you try to bend it too far out of shape, it snaps back into place twice as hard.

When I was in high school, I was an All-State shortstop (*All-County?*) until I dropped a catch. All my senior season I kept thinking of that catch. Every time a ball came my way I froze. If you remember something, it happened, but if you keep remembering it, then it keeps happening. It's easier to make someone forget than it is to make them remember, usually. The security guards lead me out into a parking lot and there's a taxi waiting for me.

"Can you at least call my wife to pick me up?"

One of the security guards takes the box out of my arms and stows it in the trunk of the taxi. The other spreads his arms and gives me the tightest of hugs.

"Take care of yourself, okay champ?"

Why isn't my wife picking me up?

The other security guard passes a brown postcard to the driver through the window. I get in the backseat, close the door, and the taxi starts to move.

Someone told me once that if you don't remember something, it didn't happen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tyler Lee is an aspiring writer, poet, and hip-hop artist. He lives in Saskatoon, Canada, where he owns a completely normal amount of sneakers, and definitely isn't on a first-name basis with the staff of his neighborhood burrito spot.

AT THE CENTER OF YOUR ORRERY

by Emma Burnett

We watch you wind the model up. Sitting on their little cushions on the floor, the kids all hold their breath, waiting for something extraordinary to happen. Some sort of spark, some sort of glow, maybe a bang or a whoosh.

I sit cross-legged on the floor amongst them, my knees hanging wide, far too tall for the child-sized cushion. I gaze up at you. I already feel a glow, the same one I feel whenever we smile at each other when we pass in the corridors or canteen, whenever we wave hello. The same one I felt when you reminded me that you'd love me to bring my class to see this.

You ask: See the sun? It's so bright and bold, there in the center of everything?

They nod, waiting. I nod, hoping.

There are a multitude of little balls, painted plastic planets, tiny little moons, all stationary around two central domes, white and glowing. You finish winding, and your shoulders come undone as you let the machine go. It clicks and whirls, and the planets become active, orbiting the sun, and small moons revolve around them.

I say: Oooh.

The kids, following my example, say: Oooh.

But they probably don't feel as much of the ooh as I feel when you smile down at the group's sound. I doubt they feel the same ooh as I do watching you turn back to the orbs. The corners of your eyes crinkle happily as you watch little spheres clicking and ticking their way around your hand-wound device.

My breath catches as your attention comes back to us, though some of the littles have lost the plot. At least two of them are on the verge of complaining that this is boring, and one definitely needs a pee. I nod quickly at one of the other carers, and they nod back, taking the uncomfortably bouncing child out of the room.

You gesture expansively, fingers spread beautifully wide over the whorl of the orrery. You try to capture their attention again, just as you always captured mine. Ever since you came to my classroom to ask if we had any spare pieces of broken toys you could nab for your construction. When I said you could take your pick, when we talked about what you were building, what we are all building, where we

are all going. A suddenly deep conversation about our hopes and fears, and my heart which felt fuller whilst we talked, then a little emptier when you left.

You say: It's not just the planets and the stars. This is how our fleet is constructed, too. We built the needle in the middle, and a ring around it, and small ships that fly in orbit, protecting us, carrying spares of everything. Just in case.

You flick on a screen, and the kids settle down again. A black mirror, the perfect soothing apparatus. You don't seem to notice their sudden quiet, just as you hadn't noticed their restlessness. But I'm glad that I can hear you better, your soft voice, your quiet passion.

You carry on: See our trajectory? We'll arrive here someday. See, here's the sun, here are its planets, and their moons. Just like this. See?

I say: Uh-huh.

A few of the kids say: Uh-huh.

You add: We'll move from these ships to the real thing, settle on the planets and the moons. Dozens of them, all potential homes. Our orrery will look like this again.

I say: Cool.

They agree. It will be cool.

We'll make it to that system with a real sun, real planets, not just painted plastic globes on sticks and strings, ticking around mechanical axes. You tell them that there are worlds in this new system, planets not yet burning, not yet broken. You promise them a future.

I nod, but I'm barely listening. I know we tell them this, but I'll never see this system, and neither will you. We both know this, really. You mentioned it when we organized the visit, your eyes filling with sadness, my belly filling with spins and nerves. Maybe these kids, so easily distracted by the screen, begging to have a go winding up the orrery, pushing each other off their little floor cushions, maybe they will see these moons and planets. Maybe they will bask under the glow of a real sun, and not just poke a plastic globe to see whether it's hot.

You hold your palm near the handle, ready to wind it up again, to tell anyone who will listen that this is what the future holds.

I watch you, glorying in your craft, in the device you built to tell our story.

What I want to say is: Never mind suns and planets distantly circling, or the ships travelling through deep nothingness towards some unknown future.

What I want to know is: Later, after the class has all gone home, after you're done packing away your mechanical promises, when our mobile world is quiet again, would you like to go for a drink?

What I'd like to know is: in the here and now, could we be on the same trajectory. Could it be me at the center of your orrery?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emma Burnett is a researcher and writer. She has had stories in *Grimdark Magazine*, *Nature:Futures*, *Mythaxis*, *Northern Gravy*, *Radon*, *Uncharted*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Apex*, *MetaStellar*, *The Forge*, and more. Her favorite story this month is “Tongues to Wild and Tame” by Yelena Crane in *HAD*. You can find Emma @slashnburnett or emmaburnett.uk.

THE JETPACKS WE WERE PROMISED

by Daniel Roop

sprouted cobwebs
in the basement
of the techlord's subtropical
winter home.
A proprietary hoard,
hundreds
 leaned
in dark corners, unused spares
 beneath
 an unflown sky,
the future's gleam muted
 under a blanket
of dust.

Down the mountain,
 alongside
 the effluent river,
two village girls shared
 their scavenged
bicycle. Rusted frame,
 the color
of dried blood. Tires
 worn slick
as glass. Seatless,
 so they stood
barefoot, soles tough
as bone on serrated
pedals.

They took turns

riding, riding
 in circles,
squinting their eyes
through swirling dirt.

They dreamed
 in tandem
 in alluvial clouds
of the impossible
 blue

above.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel Roop is a member of the HWA and SFPA. His speculative work has appeared or is forthcoming in publications including *Apex Magazine*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Cast of Wonders*, *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, and others. He finished in the top ten three consecutive years at the National Poetry Slam and has performed across the country including features at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe.

FINAL RIDE ON THE SPACE ELEVATOR

by Brian U. Garrison

A bridge between land
and the weightless hope
ahead. A clouded journey,
but darker to remain here
where souls scramble inward.

We reached the core
and found it hollow.
No gods or devils waited
for us humans to approach—
to flail with empty questions.

* * *

When I release, untethered,
gravity's gentle echo
reminds me what I carry.
Stains. Stories. Compact scraps
of Earth's blue-green abundance.

Everything we could not bend
to fit our minds, we labeled chaos.
Deep greed and lofty ideals

sent us chasing downward—
now up. Are there answers?

* * *

I see promises, if I stop
this rocket, of quick death.
Saturn spins dusty rings.
Europa hides icy seas.
Neptune suffocates.

Goodbye blue marble, boiling
sun, planets, moons, asteroids
and meandering comets.
If I can send a message,
I'll tell you what I find

* * *

beyond the darkness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian U. Garrison is tethered to Earth gravitationally but isn't afraid of elevators. He is President of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Poetry Association (SFPA). His chapbook *Micropoetry for Microplanets* received third place in the 2025 Elgin Awards. Check out his Etsy shop to see wall art that combines his words with visuals from collaborators. Find him in Portland, Oregon, or online at bugthewriter.com.

THE ATURES PARROT

by Eleanor Lennox

The Reading of the Will for Dr. Elizabeth Nieminen was held in a wealthy but obscure part of Lunastus, at a pink villa prettily situated beside a shallow sea so pale it was almost clear. I'd met Dr. Nieminen only once, when I was nine, though our conversation was peculiar enough that I hadn't forgotten it in the over thirty intervening years.

When I'd lie awake at night and ponder the reasons I became an insomniac, sometimes I credited it to her—those few words marked the first time I began to sense an *underneath* to things. Like a scab ripped off skin.

After I received the notification that I was one of the lucky benefactors of Dr. Nieminen (or “Dr. Liz”, as I knew her), I was surprised. But more than that, uneasy. I'd only met her formally that one time, but there had been encounters since then, nonverbal encounters.

At least half a dozen times in the intervening years, I'd see Dr. Liz across the plaza, on a street corner, in the market—staring at me, her green eyes unblinking. I would nod in recognition, and sometimes, make my way over to her. She would always turn away at that point and make a hasty departure. I stopped trying to approach her, and in later encounters would allow her to just stare at me for a moment or two. Her eyes were always noticeable on such occasions, for the wanting in them.

* * *

In the crowded reception room of her well-appointed home, surrounded by her friends and family, I found dread at the bottom of every teacup. I pondered the inexplicable inclusion of myself at these proceedings.

After every item of financial value was dispersed with, all that remained was the Inheritance of Memories. At last, the emotionless and mustachioed solicitor reached the final item. The one, by process of elimination, that could only be mine:

“Memory Package #29. The core memory has undergone prior transfer to forty-five recipients, with the requisite forty-five attachments. MP titled ‘Atures Parrot’ is hereby bequeathed to Alexander Berg.”

Someone gasped—it might have been me.

* * *

The memory upload was painless, which surprised me. I recalled my last memory inheritance—at my mother’s Reading of the Will, when I was twelve—as a moment of great pain. I willed myself not to access the MP while all the other attendees stared at me. Instead, I went back to the day I met Dr. Liz.

* * *

“Why were you trying to do that?” Dr. Liz asks. I’d broken my leg that afternoon.

“My mom was playing music, and I just felt like . . . moving, leaping along with it.”

“Have you ever seen someone leap before?”

“I saw someone leap out of the way of a cart.”

“And what happened to them?”

“They broke their legs.”

“So why did you leap today?”

“It felt like the right thing to do.” I feel my cheeks flush at the ridiculousness of it. “Am I crazy?”

She smiles at me, her eyes warm.

“You’re not crazy. You’re just in the wrong world, the wrong timeline for dancing.”

I’m not familiar with that word, *dancing*. But the rest of what she’s saying is so fantastical that I ignore it.

“Wrong timeline?”

“Sometimes, we feel urges that don’t seem to make any sense. But they trace back.”

“Do all of us feel these urges? Does my mom?”

“Not all of us. In fact, not most of us. Not anymore.”

My heart sinks. I hate feeling alone. “I don’t understand, though. What does ‘trace back’ mean?”

Dr. Liz sighs. “Never mind, you’re only nine. If we ever meet again, I’ll explain further. In the meantime, no more leaping!”

* * *

I finally accessed the memory package that night, as I lay in bed. To receive an MP of such antiquity is a rare and precious gift, and I congratulated myself on waiting until the evening. I felt some apprehension that, given my past encounters with Dr. Liz, the MP was unlikely to hold anything simple or benign. Still, I brushed those thoughts aside and cleared my mind. Though I'd only received one MP previously, I knew that the complete emptying of the mind was desirable before visiting an MP—otherwise, there's no room for the memory bearer. Or in this case, forty-six memory bearers.

I prepared to become.

* * *

MEMORY 1A – GAEL FLORES

Record: ABT Studio (890 Broadway, Manhattan, NY, USA); 2234 A.D.

I'm jumping in a room filled with sunlight and mirrors. I close my eyes and inhabit it fully. I'm dancing, I'm leaping. *Leaping*, without any consequences, my bones strong and intact. I catch a glimpse of myself in a mirror—I am flying through the air, pure and alive.

The room's filled with other such beings—beings somewhat like us, but much taller and more angular. Like us but stretched out. They move with a speed and carelessness I cannot imagine.

I want to live in this moment forever.

* * *

MEMORY 1B – GAEL FLORES

Record: The ARTEMIS II (JFK Extrasolar Airport, NY, USA); 2248 A.D.

I'm a slightly older version of this creature now, entering a shiny long-haul centrifugal ship, *The ARTEMIS II*. Another ship named after a Greek god, how trite. A woman-like being—my wife—clutches my hand. She's afraid.

I'm devastated.

* * *

MEMORY 1C – GAEL FLORES

Record: The ARTEMIS II (Kuiper Belt approaching Pluto); 2260 A.D.

I work as a surveyor in the food production and storage units. The gravity is stronger on board, and I work slowly. They're preparing us for where we're going, I know. It will take many generations to achieve the desired bone density and thickness, but we have time for that.

At first, my coworkers muttered that there wouldn't be enough food for 1,000 passengers to live out their natural lifespans, let alone the untold generations to be born during our journey to Lunastus. But no one asks that question anymore.

The answer arrived the third time they increased the gravity.

* * *

MEMORY 1D – GAEF FLORES

Record: The ARTEMIS II (Oort Cloud); 2265 A.D.

I always feel nauseous. After they make the upcoming G-increase announcement, I make my decision. I want to dance one more time.

I wait until my wife leaves for work—I'd promised her not to dance anymore. I stretch carefully.

I take off running down a corridor and launch into a grand jeté.

I can hear my bones breaking.

* * *

No further memories of the dancer play: the core MP is clearly over. The supplemental memories are little more than short clips, accompanied almost universally by a soundtrack of racing thoughts. Many are corrupted or not rendered appropriately. Others are only the briefest snatches of a whispered conversation, faces obscured, before ending abruptly, the memory cutting off mid-word. No more than a dozen were still pristine, complete memory attachments—hardly surprising.

* * *

MEMORY 14 – MOLLI MARTIN

Record: The ARTEMIS II (Zeta Lyrae system); 3824 A.D.

I'm a young girl eating breakfast alone. I can't stop thinking about the G-force increase two days ago. It's hard to eat—because of the Gs, but also because through a small round window to the central hallway, I can still see them loading the broken bodies onto carts.

* * *

MEMORY 17 – DENYS KOZAR

Record: The ARTEMIS II (Epsilon Lyrae system); 3884 A.D.

I'm a middle-aged man sitting next to my shattered father, lying in an infirmary bed.

"I've been reading natural history," he murmurs.

I sigh.

"Why are you doing that again, pops? It's no good for you."

"Our ancestors lived there. I want to understand."

"Fine, fine. If it makes you happy."

"Not particularly. But look—there's something I wanted to tell you. You won't have heard of the Atures Parrot."

"No . . ."

"I read about this parrot in a poem buried in a footnote. Essays from an explorer who lived over two thousand years ago. The poem is about a parrot—*the Atures Parrot*. He lived by a river called the Orinoco, with a tribe of people called the Atures—parrots were birds that could talk, by the way; they copied the sounds of their human owners. It sounds rather fantastic, I know." He chuckled, then winced. "This parrot lived with people he loved, in a land like paradise. But enemies came and took their lands and killed them all. And the parrot was left alone."

After that, he made everyone who came across him uneasy, for he spoke a language that was dead—dead with his humans. The parrot reminded them of something they wanted to forget—never a welcome guest at the feast."

He sits up to look at me, balancing unsteadily on an elbow as he tries to recapture something like dignity.

"Does that mean anything to you?"

"I need to think about it . . ." I hear myself saying.

"Do you?" he whispers. "Do you really?"

* * *

MEMORY 23 – AVERY HILL

Record: The ARTEMIS II (Beta Lyrae system); 8725 A.D.

I'm an OB-GYN cutting a baby out of a woman—seventeen pounds, nearly as wide as she is long. Already we are beginning to change. I watch one of the nurses sneak a memory inheritance tech under a bloody towel. We aren't supposed to have them aboard, but there are at least six that I'm aware of. Maybe this MP will cross the chasm of space and time between us and a Lunastus still six thousand years away. Maybe you'll receive it and know how we once were. I worry they'll never tell you.

* * *

MEMORY 29 – JOON SEO

Record: The ARTEMIS II (Delta Lyrae system); 11984 A.D.

I'm a boy running down the hall to the recreation center with my friend, Rupert. We're laughing and not paying attention when we careen into a cart of medical supplies coming around the corner. We crash hard to the floor, and I hear my arm breaking. Beside me, Rupert moans softly. Rupert isn't as big as me, and as I turn to face him, I'm already imagining what his parents will say when they hear we've been running again. When I have to look into their eyes and tell them—

Rupert's neck is broken.

* * *

MEMORY 36 – RENE VALK

Record: The ARTEMIS II (Interstellar Space); 13002 A.D.

I'm a navigational specialist—maybe captain, one day. I eat dinner with my family and eye the mutants at the next table. At every meal, they're given larger servings. When they're injured, extra care is taken. And we all know why. *Targeted genetic drift*, the anthrobiologists call it. The mutants are the ones who'll survive the next G-increase, and the next. Their lines are the ones we need, the ones who'll settle Lunastus. I remain tall, my bones stubbornly slender and fragile. My line won't survive, not without a mutant of its own, which hasn't occurred yet. The G-increase in twelve years' time will likely be the end of me and mine. They're all so satisfied, I think, as I watch them with a mixture of contempt and jealousy. *Freaks*, I call out. I can't help myself. *Dead man walking*, one of them calls back.

* * *

MEMORY 39 – SANDER UNT

Record: The ARTEMIS II (Lunastan orbit); 14647 A.D.

I'm a sanitation engineer. One of the final generation of voyagers, they tell me. I'm scrubbing a lavatory floor when I see something large and pale out the porthole window—*Lunastus*. I press my face against the window and stare and stare. Soon, I will know what it feels like to walk on soil. To have our very own star. The earthborn called theirs Sun, nothing more specific than that. We call that one Mor, which means mother. Sometimes they point Mor out to the children in their lessons—I hear it from the hallways as I sweep. It's just another white dot in a sea full of them, no mother to me. I am ready to be Lunastan.

* * *

MEMORY 43 – TIA HANNINEN

Record: 64 Andra Lane (Meadowlands, Lunastus); 15293 A.D.

I'm a young mother inheriting this MP from my father. Our family has lived on Lunastus for untold generations; before that, all I know is a ship carried the colonists over the great black sea.

I see the voyage of our ancestors play out, the long, fragile journey of targeted genetic drift, the mutants that emerged and were cherished and nurtured, bred and multiplied. But before all of that, I see what it was to dance, to leap, to move without fear, to move with true abandon.

I cry at this unbidden knowledge, and something in me believes the only comfort is to share it. I tell my friends about these strange beings and their long metamorphoses. They smirk at me, eyes darting. When I turn my back, whispers tail me.

It's too late to share the secret. We have all forgotten; we don't want to be reminded.

* * *

MEMORY 45 – ELIZABETH NIEMINEN

Record: Lunastan Central Hospital (300 Park Avenue, Silversea, Lunastus); 15471 A.D.

I am Elizabeth Nieminen, nine years old. I hold my dying grandmother's hand.

"You're the Atures Parrot now, Lizzie," she murmurs.

"What does that mean, Na?"

"It means, the one who speaks a language that is gone. The one who remembers."

* * *

I open my eyes.

I'm lying on my bed again, a Lunastan once more—short, compact, and careful. I sit up and walk slowly to the darkened kitchen for a drink of water. So *slowly*. And I recall the great We, who used to leap unchecked by gravity. The glass slips through my fingers and shatters on the floor.

"Why did you give me this?" I cry out.

Elizabeth answers across a chasm of time and space so impossibly vast I can barely hear her, and I know in my dense and heavy bones where her spirit has departed to.

Because you were a little boy who tried to dance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eleanor Lennox lives in New England, on a quiet hilltop where fog gathers and animals linger. Her work has appeared in *Flash Fiction Online*, *Radon Journal*, *Factor Four*, and *34 Orchard*, amongst others. Find her online at eleanorlennox.com or [@eleanorlennox.bsky.social](https://www.bsky.social/@eleanorlennox).

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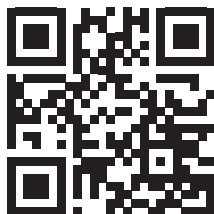
FRONT AND BACK COVER ARTIST

Artem Chebokha is a digital artist and musician, known also by the nickname Rhads. He creates speculative, slightly surreal, colorful, and airy painterly artworks. Over the past few years, he has been focusing on creating illustrations for book covers.

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