

RADONJOURNAL

ISSUE 14

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MASTHEAD & SUPPORTERS

TO PLANT BONES ON EUROPA

by AJ Volante

Stress coats the halls of Commerce & Labor like plasticized rubber. Greasy and resinous on my tongue. Young and elderly alike squat on the floors, desperate for work. I pass the unskilled-labor waiting rooms. Body odor slides under the glass doors. Sour. Thick.

The time-worn yellow walls are covered in advertisements: retire early with an admirable career in the radiation drives; get paid to adventure the system as a deep-planet miner; spend your drink credits at the bars; apply for financial assistance to plant.

The poster outside the engineering waiting room depicts a young woman holding a bundle of bones. Small seedlings sprout from cracks in the collagen framework. If she doesn't plant soon, the seedlings won't make it past vegetation. Let alone bud into organs and tissue. In front of the woman, a Planting Commissioner holds out a plastic chit: clearance to plant and a contract outlining the Commission's right to siphon her income. The legally binding promise that she won't reproduce. Won't leave the planet.

That's just to regrow men. Regrowing women requires a lottery ticket. Can't have too many breeders in the system.

My knuckles clench. Teeth grind. Hands push open the door. I find a seat on a poorly reupholstered chair pulled from an old cruiser yacht. The seat used to be leather. Used to cradle bodies privileged to travel the system at leisure. Traded in for something new and passed down to the Lowers. Everything here gets traded in once it's worn and used.

Seats. Ships. Water. People.

Someone's carved "Regrowth for All" and "Bones in Deep Pockets Don't Expire" in the armrest of my seat. I trace the letters with my finger until my mind settles into a comfortable apathy.

"Ceres Olivier." The clerk's voice floats through the din. She's tall and slender, with the sunken cheeks of Earth's microgravity station.

I raise my hand. Rise to greet her. Wonder, not for the first time, what she's doing out here in the gas giants.

"You're back," she says. Sharpened black nails click against her LED backlit keys. Purple, then green, then blue.

"Looking for work transfer," I say. "To Europa."

Words and images scroll by in the reflection in her glasses. My picture. Social status. Mechanic license and job on the docks. My brother's death certificate.

"All the midnight shifts you've been picking up have lifted your flight restriction. That's good. You can work on any dock in the system. Just not Europa."

I run a hand down my face. Inadvertently smear grease from forehead to chin. Stand taller. Try to look bigger. "How 'bout a hazard job? Put me in the radiation drive of the transport ship."

Click. Pink-painted lips purse. *Click. Click.* Downturn to a grimace. "The next retirement is in five months."

"Five months?" I squeak, losing all sense of distinguished-woman voice.

She gives me a pitying smile. Knows why I'm really here. "I'm sorry. Truly, I am."

I swallow the lump pressing on my trachea. Sharp as a framing nail. Puncturing on the way down.

"There's gotta be exceptions for planting." My voice cracks like the spines of ship mice I'm forced to club on midnight shifts. "The seeds will expire by then."

"You know there's not."

"What good is any of this if it's always too late?"

She throws her hands up. "I ask the same thing *all the time*."

I'd like to commiserate with her. Complain about the failures of our governance. But I'm too busy sniffing back the loose snot that comes right before tears.

"Ceres," she says, like a quick and fleeting touch. "*Ceres*." Like a command. "The shuttle leaves tomorrow. Interplanetary Transport is your last option."

I bite my lip. Shoulder tears off my cheeks.

Outside the Commerce & Labor building, Cassini Station's false sky glitters crystal blue. The Uppers gaze at synthetic clouds while the rest of us go hungry. Below, where blackened ice and polished metal are all we see. We colonized the solar system and still there's not enough resources. Not with vacation manors on Mars.

Well-dressed government workers bustle by in silk suits and linen trousers. I pull my polykevlar maintenance jacket tight over my chest. Try to hide the holes in my white t-shirt. Pit stains and grease spots.

Heels click on steel plates. The pink-lipped clerk calls after me. A few people crane their necks as she catches up.

She looks around. Leans in, voice lowered. "Don't tell Interplanetary Transport you've got bones. Say you're on a pilgrimage to Io's temple district. Get

there as quick as you can and try to moon hop from there.” She grabs my hand. Squeezes. “You don’t want them to think you want to go to Europa for planting.”

She says something else, but it doesn’t register. I’m staring at my hand in hers. My nails are the wasteland of Earth. Jagged. Dirty. Impossible to tell where grime stops and human begins.

When I was a little girl, my mother would sit with me before the holovision and paint my nails opalescent blue. Shape them square.

Long, long ago.

I track the letters on the clerk’s nametag. “Thanks, Elisa.” Regret waiting so long to roll her name across my tongue. “Guess you already know I’m Ceres.”

“Yeah, I’ve had to look you up each time you came into Commerce & Labor over the past four weeks. I know your ID numbers, address, how you eat the same turkey-flavored pea protein every day for lunch.”

“That hardly seems fair,” I say. Scratch my nose to hide my budding grin.

Elisa combs a hand through her black hair. Makes a noncommittal hum. “I like having the upper hand.”

I want to say something clever, but words have never been my tools. I open my mouth. Close it. Watch Elisa watch me struggle.

“Okay,” I say, densely.

“Okay,” she parrots with a feline smile, her faux-flat tone the percussion of my heartbeat. Turning on her heels, she sweeps back inside the golden walls of Commerce & Labor.

Her absence drills reality into my temples. Cassini Station, momentarily breathable, returns to the cage I know it for. I wasn’t born with the luxury of flirting. It’s best not to forget that. Where you were born. What you were born with. Because as soon as you forget, as soon as you start dreaming of something more or different . . .

I let my jacket fall open and set my feet to Interplanetary Transport. I am Ceres Olivier. Mechanic. Saturnian. Born of Level Three in Cassini Station’s silicate slums. We didn’t have the money to regrow Father. Didn’t get the lottery clearance to regrow Mother. But I *will* regrow you, Kuiper.

* * *

“I’m on a pilgrimage to Io’s temple district,” I say to the receptionist at Interplanetary Transport.

“Io, huh? You ever been out that way?” Suspicion is thick in his voice.

“Got an aunt there.” The truth, however stretched. Aunt Hatina is dead. Never met her. She hated my mother. But her body is there, on Io. Decaying remains feeding yellow pea fields.

The receptionist pats his shoulder. "You have to be sponsored for a pilgrimage to Io."

Broiling dread rolls through me. I force my forehead smooth as glass. "Never heard that before."

"Yeah, well, a few weeks ago they passed a new rule. Got tired of mourners sneaking through on their way to illegally plant."

I bite my cheek. Recalibrate my plan. "Have anything going to the other Galilean moons? Maybe my aunt can meet me on Ganymede."

The receptionist eyes me up and down. "Not a thing. Do you have bones you need to register, ma'am?"

Dread liquifies to anger as it stirs in my crucible. Can't let it show. "I've been working hard to get flight clearance. I'm allowed to go anywhere in the system."

"Not the Galilean moons," the receptionist says coolly. Flicks my name and ID off the holoscreen.

"Please, my aunt is sick," I lie.

The receptionist's hand hovers over the red security button. Fingers brush fading letters. "Will that be all?"

I shake my head and turn on my heel. Tail between my legs. Just like we're taught.

* * *

I stand outside Elisa's office at Commerce & Labor for eight minutes. She was wrong. Interplanetary Transport wasn't my last option. She is.

At twelve minutes, my feet grant me forward.

* * *

Elisa's long fingers flip through the digital ledgers. An almost-silent motion, save the light tap of her nail on the screen. It's dark in the bar. Palitinus, it's called. A tri-level cantina with an interior of marble columns and gold leaf trim. I can't tell if it's expensive or gaudy. It's the only bar close enough to Commerce & Labor for the smuggled tablet to work. A week at the docks and I wouldn't have the drink credits to come here. But Elisa has enough for us both. Says she never spends hers. We huddle in a dim corner booth like lovers, our bodies so close I fantasize we might be.

Electronica pumps through the speakers. So loud I barely hear her when she hush-shouts, "Got it!" and tilts the tablet towards me.

A woman in her forties blinks on the screen. She looks tired in the photo. Dark rings circle her eyes. Mirrors of my own.

"Who is she?" I ask.

Elisa taps again, file after file popping open. No family. Middle class. Eight priors. Two arrests: aggravated assault and premeditated murder of a silicate slummer. Did some time in the cell but was released last month. Right back into the system where she works as a Sollight Security guard on the Galilean Bay.

My file's cleaner. Kuiper's is, too. Only five priors between us. All theft for food packs. Except for when I bashed that slaver's knees in until I saw stark white femur.

"What will you do?" Elisa whispers, saucer eyes pleading me to lie.

"Nothing."

She nods and sips her drink but leaves the tablet open on the file.

I memorize the address.

Cobalt Zone. Level 4. Block 52. Door 388.

Cobalt Zone. Level 4. Block 52. Door 388.

Cobalt Zone. Level 4. Block 52. Door 388.

I feel no sorrow for the woman. There's no room. Not when I have to plant the seedlings sprouting from Kuiper's bones before they expire.

* * *

The knife is heavy in my perspiring hand. I peel her wrist implant from under the skin. Sew it into the sleeve of one of her clean work jumpers. Leave her tied and bleeding. Gagged and unconscious. My clothes are caked in sweat. Splattered with blood. I crawl through the maintenance tunnel to Cobalt level 3. Burn my clothes in the garbage incinerator. Stand naked and watch the flames dance. Watch the synthetic threads of fabric melt into plastic puddles. Watch the smoke snake through the manufactured air until it clogs my lungs.

When all is said and done, I drag myself home through the tight tunnels and sob on my bathroom floor until the morning bells ring.

* * *

I leave my polykevlar at home and dress in the woman's Sollight Security jumper. The bag slung on my back holds all my precious things: Father's old torque wrench, Mother's lucky coin, Kuiper's planting box, my databank, the forgettable gray t-shirt and cargo pants I wear on rare days off. Trinkets and bones. The legacy of my family.

I am the last alive on both my mother's and father's side. No one will mourn our line when we perish. They will grind me to fine powder and celebrate another

dead slumgirl. Dismiss that we build their ships and haul their oil. Mine their ice and mill their ore.

The Sollight Security entrance is old and unmanned by any living, breathing thing. One swipe of my jumper-covered wrist and I'm through to the Galilean Bay. Figure I got less than twenty minutes before someone reviewing the morning scans sees that my face doesn't match my implant.

The Wailing Siren has seen better days. Her thrusters are mottled with chalky gray oxidation. Radiation exposure coats her nose in yellowed hues. I spot six different safety hazards at my first passing glance. Count three more when my eyes trail past the crowd of travelers. A mix of expensive perfume and synthetic lubricants saturates my lungs. At the ramp, a stout captain calls names from her databank.

"Steve H. Davis."

A man with wiry blue hair steps forward. The captain scans Davis' wrist, then waves him aboard.

The further down the list, the more desperate the voyagers.

Icarus Peshko has a wooden leg and missing left arm. Bet he sold the prosthetics to fund his planting. Probably a rock burrower. Miners never retire with all their limbs.

Zara Bayat can't be more than fifteen years old, clutching a plastic vacuum bag of bones to her chest. The sproutings are wilted. Those seeds will never take to soil. Never plump with fat or balloon with tissue and blood. Her loved one is long gone, but no one has told her. Not until the captain turns her away and calls the next name.

The Sollight guard stationed at *The Siren* looks up at the crowd. Spots me. Saunters from his post. Right on time for his break.

A pause. A held breath.

Give him a nod of approval. Returns it with a wink.

Watch him head towards the security booth. Into the attached bathroom. I approach the ship as casually as I can, circling the hull.

Cruisers like *The Siren* have hatches along their bellies. Work on enough and you know the templates. I'm so close I'm dizzy with giddy delirium.

All I need is to—

Shrill bells resound through the docks. The alarm system blares to life, orange lights flashing in the rafters. And my name, through the speakers. Must have picked up my double wrist implants.

I don't hesitate. Swinging my legs over the ship clamps, I propel myself off the dock's grated platform. The captain shouts as I roll under *The Siren*. Kuiper's planting box jabs into my back, pack crushing against my weight. I pay it no mind; I'm already dragging myself forward on my stomach.

Flashing lights paint the underbelly of the ship black, then orange. Someone is yelling through a megaphone. *The Siren* shields me from it all, her belly a hardened womb. I find the engineering hatch and roll up my sleeve. Release the pressure hold with a scan of my bare wrist. Input my eight-digit work code, and I'm in.

Sollight Security guards board *The Siren* above me. They give themselves away with heavy footfalls. I pull myself through a vent and into the cargo bay. Nothing but a loading area with crates secured to the hull by bolted straps.

Crouching low, I use them as cover as I make my way to the emergency locker. Pull a ballistic blanket from the tactical pack inside. High-G pills and water from the E-kit. Bust open and crawl into an equipment panel. Seal it shut with white knuckles. Wrap myself, head to toe, in the kevlar. The chemical scent might make me nauseous, but it'll block my heat signature if they bother to look that hard.

After a time, the stomping ceases its vibrations. *The Siren* is readying for takeoff. Swallowing the high-G pill, I brace myself for gravity's war on my flesh and bones.

I wonder where my twin will want to live once he's regrown. Always said we would travel the system together. Dreamed of worlds yet unknown. Dangerous, having dreams. Funny how we cling to them anyway.

Somewhere around the second hour, fatigue takes me, and consciousness slips through my clenched fingers.

* * *

Evenfall bells chime. Day three in transit ends like the rest. I can't stay in the equipment panel any longer. My feet throb. Can't feel my hands.

The Siren is quiet when I emerge from my burrow. Shed the jumper and change into clothes more familiar. The air recycling system is old, pumping the corridors with artificial citrus so potent my eyes water. I make my way through the passenger quarters that lead to the galley. Hunger cramps coil my intestines into springs ready to break. I'm at the last narrow hall of gray doors when I catch sight of the captain. She rounds the corner, head down, eyes on her databank.

Panic sweeps up my legs. Presses down on my shoulders. I wobble on my feet. Feel for any unlocked door. Tumble through the second on my left. Close it as quietly as I can. Turn and find myself face to face with a man holding a zero-gravity mug.

In an instant, Father's torque wrench is in my hand. Arm cocked to swing.

"Whoa. Hello to you too, stranger," the man says, arms raised in surrender, feet backing him up. He wears a threadbare tailored suit. Bit loose in the chest, the legs. Cuffs fraying. Reminds me of my mom, at the end. Defiance and pride.

"I'm Leo . . . and you are?"

"Hitching a ride," I say.

"Ah, a stowaway." He doesn't move to press the red emergency button above the bed. Instead, he pulls a flask from his breast pocket. Pours amber liquid into his mug, sips it. Grimaces. "Bit too much whiskey."

"What else is in it?" My body aches for real rye. This man, this Leo, with his pocket square and thick-framed glasses, looks like he'd drink naturally grown grain whiskey. Likes the finer things, even if he can't afford them.

Leo considers the mug, then says, "Ice, mostly. Maybe a little bit of sipping chocolate from last night. Will you put that down?" He gestures to the wrench.

I keep blocking the exit. He has nowhere to go in this tight room. Basically a cubby with a bed and a locker.

Leo sees me eyeing the button. Shrugs. "Don't worry, I won't. I have a feeling I'd be dead by the time the guard comes around to check on me. And you'd be long gone somewhere in the . . ." he trails off. Considers me. "Bone storage bins?" Shake my head.

"Pantry? Though that would be quite cold. No? Air ventilation? Your lip twitched. I'm close. I'll keep at it, but in the meantime, care to tell me what your plan is here?"

I don't want to hurt anyone else for Kuiper. Guilt is a lead weight dragging me into the cosmic void.

"I need to plant my brother."

"Brother? Now that's a word you don't hear very often."

"Twin," I add.

"Quite incredible."

The tech to regrow our loved ones came at the cost of our reproductive freedom. The word sibling is all but foreign now. Each family is allotted one child, even if they'll never get to plant.

"How did your mother do it?" Leo asks.

"Gave birth to us at home in secret under a veil of sickness. Presented Kuiper to the Census Bureau. Better to have a son than a daughter. For twelve years, my parents took no visitors. Locked me in the house. Just in case."

In my comfortable prison, Father passed down his mechanic skills. Mother taught me to fight. By the time I was twelve and past legal euthanasia age, I knew the difference between side milling and facing. Had opinions on isogrid usage. Could run laps around any fresh face who thought they could be a metal basher just because they had muscle.

Father debuted me to the Census Bureau in a flourish of worth and they begrudged me beneficial to society. Gave me a government name and ID. Sent me to swing hammers on the docks. Metalwork in my blood.

But not before they made me make an example of Father.

Said he didn't need a tongue to work the docks. They forced me to rip it out with stripped pliers. It tore in half like thermal foam board. Spurted like Capitoline Square's fountain. Saw blood every time I closed my eyes for weeks.

"It must have been a shock when you saw the station for the first time."

"My brother would sneak me out sometimes. Late at night when everyone was sleeping."

Cassini was beautiful when I was young. All her levels and zones. Hundreds of micro-worlds on one metal planet. Black markets and dance clubs. Alive, even at night. "I was in awe. At first."

"And now?"

"Not what I thought it was."

"Humanity is, or at least I've found it to be, rather self-important," Leo says. He gestures around the room again. He likes his hand gestures. "Not the best leg room in the house, but we can make it work. Bunk up like old uni pals."

He sits on the bed with a lopsided grin. "This isn't a con, so stop looking around. It makes me uneasy. Will you sit? Have a drink?" He points to a nutrient bar on his bed and adds, "Hungry?"

I slide down onto the floor. Back against the door. Nod, and all but drool as I catch the protein bar. Chuckle when I read the wrapper: turkey-flavored PeaPro. It's grainy and hard. Tastes like everything I'm leaving behind. Whole lot of nothing.

"Why would you help me?" I ask.

"A woman so desperate to plant her twin brother that she wrestles her way onto a planting ship and hides for days in a . . . maintenance shaft?"

I nod. Close enough.

Leo claps his hands together, whiskey sloshing above the mug. "How could I not help? Yours is a story! I never plant anyone half as interesting."

I rock back against the door. "You're with the Planting Commission?"

"No, no. I'm a gardener."

He takes a long drink. Eyes closed, sigh deep.

Gardener. This man nurtures seedlings into human flesh. Stem cells into heartbeats. Our loved ones flourish or wither under his fingertips.

A tether floats before me, offering to pull me back in from the void. I store Father's wrench in my bag. Whisper, "I was selfish in the womb. Siphoned more nutrients than Kuiper. He was sick because of it. Because of me. No one past level six can afford that kind of medicine."

I hold out my hand. Welcome the whiskey. “He never blamed me, but if my parents had just gotten rid of me when I was still cells . . . he could have grown to be anything. Go anywhere. I never made enough to pay for the good meds. Always saving for them, but the cost kept rising.”

I finish the booze in one gulp. It’s expensive. Still burns all the way down.

* * *

“I have my PhD in regenerative medicine,” Leo says on our fourth day together. “I used to work in the designer genetics labs on Mars, but it brought me little joy. I transferred to Europa because I wanted to garden. To bring people back to their families.”

“Will you really plant him?”

“I will watch over your brother as if he were my own.”

“Why?”

“My daughter was three when the Census Bureau found her,” he says. Opens another bottle of whiskey. Doesn’t bother to pour it into a mug. We’re lips to bottleneck now. His throat bobs. Releases a pleasurable exhale.

“I remember the way her fingers wrapped around my thumb. All five! My thumb filled her whole palm, you see? She was born small. Not enough nutrients to go around. Just like your Kuiper. But she was perfect. The Bureau took one look at her and said she was a burden. A burden! Can you imagine? Something so little and full of joy? They don’t understand joy. They think it’s progress, but it’s not. It’s tiny fingers around thumbs. And so, I will plant your brother, Ceres. And you will come to visit, now and then, as he grows. He’ll hold your thumb in his fingers, stem in the ground. And you’ll promise me you’ll never let him go.”

“I promise.”

“When he grows,” Leo says again, with a hiccup.

* * *

Europa is a planet of module domes. Each geodesic structure connected by clear tubes that gaze at endless space. Saddled up to *The Siren*, our transit tube keeps the oxygen in.

No one spares me a second glance as we line up to exit. Stoic and solemn. This is a mourner ship, after all.

The captain absently nods at passengers as they go by. Busy chattering with her crew at the bottom of the ramp.

My palms grow slick with sweat. I shuffle out the boarding doors. Down the ramp.

If she looks. If she notices . . .

Her eyes skim over me. Don't stick. My heart jolts up my throat.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Into the tube. Seen so many ads for planting I can picture myself in the gardens. Imagine the loamy smells of growth.

"You there, halt!"

I freeze in place. Know the order is for me. Leo's head turns. Just enough to see over his shoulder. I will him to leave me behind.

"That's her! She's got illegal bones!"

Security swarms me in seconds.

I take a blow to the back of the leg. Down on my knees. Pushed, face to the synthetic ground.

They cuff me. Search my pack. Find nothing but empty bottles. No trinkets or bones.

Leo disappears through Europa's entry doors.

* * *

Elisa paints my nails opalescent blue. They shimmer like young stars, burning bright in their nebula nurseries. She pulls her sweater tight around her shoulders. It's always cold in Cassini's penitentiary.

She kisses my palm when she finishes. Says what she always says when our time is up. "Same time next week?"

"You know where to find me."

She passes me a letter with a wink. Leaves the tin sentry to guide me through ill-lit corridors. My cell is nothing but a mattress and a hole for excrement. I lay back on the bed and unfold the paper. Cramped, messy letters tell me Kuiper is four feet long. All his organs in place. Sometimes things look a little different when you're regrown. Broad nose instead of button. Few inches taller or shorter. But Leo assures me Kuiper is healthy. This next phase is the hardest, though. Memories gotta sort themselves out through the databank.

But with time, he will wake.

No sickness. No ties to Cassini Station. To me. Maybe he'll salvage debris in the outer asteroids. Or rise above our station and fly transports on Titan. Stay on Europa and garden with Leo.

Soon, he will wake.

And he will be free to dream of worlds yet unknown.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AJ Volante resides in a century home in the industrial Midwest. She's always been a writer, but applied her skills to museums and gaming companies before realizing she wanted to craft narratives without creative limits.

OPTIONS FOR YOUR AFTERLIFE

by Dawn Angelicca Barcelona
after Franny Choi

	REPLICANTS	ROBOTS	HOLOGRAMS	ALIENS
<i>Investment</i>	you must kill someone daily	you will never learn emotions	you must always display ads on your face	your sister will try to kill you
<i>Appears as</i>	human except for the eyes	blow up doll, aluminum skin, wire torso	digital tokens, AI slop, reverse tractor beam	mollusks, insects, cryptids, reptiles, swamp gas
<i>Modes of communication</i>	gunfire, cityspeak	protocols, modulated soundwaves	lip-syncing, canned responses	telepathy, pheromones, screeching
<i>Created by</i>	Philip K. Dick / Ridley Scott / Warner Bros.	U.S. military, Silicon Valley, Lego	software engineering interns, lasers	fears you cannot confront, God
<i>Risks</i>	looks just like the real thing	difficult to repair	can never be held	parasitic
<i>Rewards</i>	looks just like the real thing	industrial strength	easy to hide	protection
<i>Dreams of being</i>	a child	a simple machine	hungry	loved, held

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dawn Angelicca Barcelona is a Filipina-American poet from New Jersey. Her debut chapbook, *Roundtrip*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2025. She won the San Francisco Foundation/Nomadic Press Literary Award (2022) and *Epiphany Magazine's* Fresh Voices Fellowship (2023). Her work has been published in *Epiphany*, *Tampa Review*, *Reed Magazine*, *Atlanta Review*, and *BRINK*. She holds an MFA in Poetry and an MA in English Literature from Northwestern University. She is an alumna of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, Tin House Workshop, Sewanee Writers' Conference, Kenyon Review Writers Workshop, and the Fulbright Program to South Korea.

JACKIE HATES THAT WAR

by Tomias Keno

Marek wears brand-new white sneakers onto the battlefield. Around him, smoke wafts off impact craters, mist obscures silly soldiers hopping in and out of trenches, cursing the gray sky of a cold January morning on a Scottish island four hundred years ago.

Squeak-squeak, his sneakers utter on the composite platform, ridiculous against the silent tableau of gunfire and the wide-open mouths of men frozen in fatal screams. Tightness around his feet, that particular nagging sting where new shoe meets sole, but he dares not complain, for the men exploding into pieces around him have bigger problems: dying, being already dead, being data about dying.

He brings his gloved hands together and the world widens. The battlefield rotates to his maneuver, smooth as a dinner plate balancing on a waiter's hands. The movement requires a kind of practiced calm, a Zen-like concentration that keeps his growing irritation at bay.

He's been hunting for Supply Route 7 for over half an hour now, a road history insists was shelled into nonexistence on day twenty-something of the campaign, which caused the western flank to collapse two and a half days later. Just find the damn road, distill the horror into digestible bullet points, and then nothing stands between him and lunch.

As he walks, the squeaking interrupts the silence he's so used to by now, echoing through the hangar he might as well call home. Soldiers scatter at his feet like startled birds, but they don't hear him. They are patterns of light derived from patterns of data derived from the Retroscope, which is the fancy name for the device that looks into the past, using its obscenely expensive quantum array to sample historical electromagnetic signatures to reconstruct what was. Not that Marek understands the science of it all. He understands he has blisters. He pulls his socks further up, trying to keep his gloved hands steady, and nearly steps on a holographic dead woman sprawled across a town square, one shoe still on.

In the staff room, over Michelin-endorsed microwave pasta Alfredo, Yalena can't stop yapping about her birthday tokens. Six years since her daughter was

born, and wouldn't it be nice to go back to that room, how soft the light was, and oh, the smell of baby hair, am I right?

Marek interrupts himself interrupting her at least twice between bites. Sure, semantics matter: She isn't actually stepping back in time. But then again, he's one of the very few analysts privileged enough to walk the simulations the interpretive AI assembles from raw data, so maybe it's better to let her talk.

Marek has never used his tokens. He already spends more time in the past than he'd like. For most of them, though, this is as close as it gets. Submit a time and a place and the Retroscope hands back data: the angle of the light, the humidity in the air, the fiber make-up of a dirty diaper, that sort of thing. Just numbers really. Still, people frame these printouts, cry over them. Marek tries not to judge, but his face rarely waits for his permission.

At 16:43, he submits his final report of the day. He's made sure his bullet list contains historical info that overlaps almost poetically with the kill-box maneuver that's planned for tomorrow. At 17:01 the pod is already zooming across the city. He sits stuffed between a man reading an interactive thriller on his lens display and a woman who smells aggressively of fake pine. The metropolis blurs by: high-rises jotting upward like teeth, mist as thick as the smoke pouring from industrial towers large and small. And then, in the far distance, the bright white blink of a detonation. No one notices.

Back in his apartment, he turns the cozy on. The windows on the seventy-fifth floor oblige by swapping smog for ocean overlay. As always, the ocean is very blue because it's an AI composite of many oceans. Marek kicks off his shoes, curses the existence of blisters, and takes a long shower.

Ah, the optimal water temperature, exactly the pressure that makes his shoulders drop, courtesy of his shower AI. They trained it on millions of showers and nothing else: a neural network whose entire universe consists only of droplet thickness, vapor concentration, and the statistical probability of shampoo reaching an eye.

As Marek lets the water stream down his cheeks, he tries to imagine being a mind that knows only showers. Or the window-display AI, whose entire existence is waves, tides, the eternal nausea of motion. He wonders if he, too, is becoming an intelligence with only one training set.

War.

* * *

Yet another morning, yet another resurrection. Marek launches himself onto the platform while reality stutters awake around him. Distant projectors cough. Thick, foggy light filters onto terrain once more. *Today's workload: 17 simulations,*

reads a message in a font designed to catch the eye. He swipes the notification out of view.

The air is thick with dust that has not existed for a century. Mud-covered soldiers serving in the Italo-Turkish War march past, unaware of him, unaware of themselves, really. “Today’s workload: 17 petty thefts,” Marek mutters, correcting the workstation. All chipping away at that stubborn human habit of seeing a face and believing you can interact with it. The Retroscope is read-only; it doesn’t instill consciousness in those it brings back to life.

The cold air carries the bitter tang of his caffeinated breath. He scrolls on with impatient flicks of his hand, trying to reach the highlighted temporal point. The moment the two units collide and thirty-seven men die in . . . what, four minutes? His notes say four. He walks along the ridge to check the artillery unit’s deployment when he spots something moving to his left.

He turns around. Two soldiers have broken formation. One in the dark blue of the advancing force, one in the pale khaki of the retreating garrison. He sees them duck into a half-collapsed mosque at the crossroads, and then they are gone from view.

He rewinds with a swoosh-swoosh gesture and watches the moment again. Hmm, the metadata suggests nothing weird. There’s no annotation, no note from a previous analyst. He’s left with two soldiers, engaged in something that isn’t war.

He walks closer, rotates the view. The Interpretive Core has no problem peering through surfaces, as long as you sweet-talk it with the right set of finger movements. *Tap-tap*, now. *Tap, tap, tap*.

There they are, two men huddled against the far wall. They must have been teenagers, no older than twenty-two. Hesitantly, they linger around each other, their boots scraping across the sand. The one in khaki is shaking, maybe from fear or heat or some error in the render. The one in blue holds out a hand, just as you would when approaching a wild animal. Their palms touch, their fingers intertwine as they draw closer, until their foreheads rest against one another.

Now it’s like they’ve frozen in place. Marek doesn’t dare rotate the view, so he walks around them, keeping his distance. They stay like this for eleven seconds, forehead against forehead. Outside, men are tearing each other open.

Then the formation breaks. Before Marek can register it, rifles are back in hands, uniforms are brushed clean, and the two strangers slip out the back of the mosque in opposite directions. Seven minutes later, the one in khaki is shot through the chest and dies in the sand. The one in blue survives the day, but Marek can’t follow him further; the sim cuts out at 15:00.

For the first time in many months, Marek feels like he’s gotten his foot in before the door shuts, something that is not quite “hope” but adjacent to it. If he

understood feelings the way he understands data, this would have been the part where he identified it.

Swoosh-swoosh, he renders the moment again. Then again. Then once more, swearing it's the last. That evening, he sits on the edge of the bed, the lights off, while the breath of the ocean crashes against the glass. Without realizing it, his hand rises and makes the rewind motion, cutting through the empty air.

* * *

History sits locked inside millions of neat computer files, waiting for Marek to nurse it into strategic datasets for Project Coastal Integrity, the latest name for the latest war, a war that has already worn six names in three years. Instead, Marek nurses something else: a primal urge within, one that has been locked away inside for years without his knowledge.

As the notifications pile up in the corner of his view, he rewatches the two young men touch foreheads in a mosque with half a roof. He knows the exact frame where the one in blue starts to reach out: frame 7,447. The frame where their fingers meet: 7,462. The one where the boy in khaki closes his eyes. They stay shut for exactly one second. A second can last a long time.

During the day, when the hangar resurrects men wading waist-deep through muck, he begins to build them lives. Doesn't the one in blue look like he knows his way around a horse? A farmer's son perhaps, conscripted at seventeen, who had never traveled farther than a few miles from home before the war came and ruined everything? The one in khaki: a clerk, yes! Or perhaps a student, someone who reads books, who wore glasses that got broken in the first week of training. He calls them Luca and Mahmut. It feels wrong *not* to name them, even though they have been rotting in the ground for a hundred and fifty years.

As he swipes, absent-mindedly, through scattered villages and screaming nobodies, he wonders. Was it planned? Did Luca and Mahmut spot each other across a scene of slaughter and recognize something in each other's eyes? Was it exhaustion or a shared refusal? Or did it happen the way it so often does in movies and books, and probably real life too, unless you're Marek: bodies moving on their own, disobedient to plans and orders alike, chasing a selfish need for eleven unsanctioned seconds?

Horses collapse, tongues lolling, a regiment succumbs to fever before an enemy can even reach them, and Marek imagines a door opening. Not somewhere simulated, but here, in his own reality, his hangar, at this precise moment. Someone who casts a real shadow stepping onto the platform beside him. Someone with a name, with squeaky shoes of their own. Hands discovering hands.

Marek touches his own forehead, measuring the angle required to meet someone else's warm skin. The whole simulation, wired to his gloves, somersaults out of alignment violently. It takes him minutes to recalibrate it, though he doesn't log the error.

* * *

In the staff room, he tries to thaw his numb hands with mug after mug of lukewarm refill. "You ever notice anything strange on your runs?" he asks Lun from Violent Uprisings. "Anything out of the ordinary?"

Lun's face hardly moves. "Violence is violence. Only thing that gives me the shivers is when the guys with the guns are smiling." Across the table, Moran glances up from his apple-pie protein cubes, so Lun adds, loud and official: "If you've got questions about fieldwork, take them to Queries."

He tries Yalena next, more carefully. "The Italo-Turkish War," he says, as if asking about the soup of the day. "Mustn't have been all bad."

Yalena works two floors down, in Mediation, the office that maintains the AI that speaks to the Retroscope, though she insists she's a historian. "Italian military deaths were around four thousand," she says. "Ottoman and local forces, closer to fourteen. Jackie hates that war."

Marek stirs his refill and nods. Jackie is what Yalena calls the Interpretative Core: the AI that takes the Retroscope's raw data and turns it into the walkable realms of ruin that Marek visits daily to earn his keep. There is no need for a pet name. To everyone else, it's just the Core, but that habit is what first endeared her to Marek. Sometimes, alone in the hall, he allows himself to think of the system as Jackie too, as someone working beside him. It makes the room less echo-y.

Yalena looks at him. "Why the question?"

He opens his mouth, but she's not done.

"What, exactly, do you think was the good part of a war that killed eighteen thousand people?"

He has no answer ready. By the time she gets up to leave, Lun and Moran are looking over from across the room. They've all signed enough forms to know better than to talk shop on break. So, Marek stays where he is, stirring the dregs of his coffee long after everyone else has gone.

He's just getting to his feet when Yalena returns and sits beside him.

Marek freezes. "About earlier, I didn't mean to imply the war I'm working on is . . ."

"I'm not going to report you," Yalena says, wearing that disarming smile of hers. She opens a small notebook under the table. A list, timestamps and coordinates, handwritten. Marek leans forward.

07/14/1887 - Eastern Border Campaign, Day 22:

Child, approx. 6 yrs, hidden in supply crate w/ toy rabbit. Explosion at 14:32. Crate survives. Child survives.

09/03/1936 - Spanish Civil War, Night Skirmish:

Two soldiers, opposing forces, share cigarette in burned-out barn. 4 minutes. No words.

05/20/1631 - Sack of Magdeburg, Morning:

Civilian woman shelters wounded enemy soldier beneath cellar stairs. Fire passes overhead. No speaking occurred.

There are more. Nineteen total. Little ruptures in the violence. Marek reads as Yalena watches him, still smiling. No speaking occurs.

That night, he screenshots the moment: frame 7,501. Mahmut with his eyes closed. He schedules it for delivery to Yalena's terminal in two days. Her birthday. The thought makes him almost giddy. Regifting someone what he himself received without ever asking. He isn't sure who gets credit for the giving, though. Jackie only interprets. The Retroscope only collects. If the word applies at all, the gift came from history itself, briefly generous.

Marek keeps returning to his little oasis in time, though the simulation fails to show him anything new. Oh, if only Jackie had the ability to give him more: a list of books Mahmut read before the war, the animals Luca dreamed of petting when he got home. Stuff that war cannot kill. Then the idea locks into place. He has birthday tokens, so many of them, unused. He has the mosque's coordinates. He has the timestamp. If nothing else, he can ask for the data. The Retroscope printout arrives that evening. A sealed envelope is waiting on his mat when his squeaky white shoes cross the threshold. Inside there is only one sheet. Marek unfolds it.

The mosque reduced to numbers: the load-bearing strength of its walls, the measured temperature of the sun-baked brick, the wind speed in kilometers per hour, the ambient light quantified. At the bottom: the number of people present within those specific coordinates at that specific time.

Zero?

He reads it again. No heartbeat, no breathing, no body heat. No rush of blood, nothing that would in any way suggest a human being, let alone two of them bending the rules of war together. He presses his forehead into his palm. Not hard, just enough to feel the load-bearing strength of his own skull, enough to imagine whether he might be able to support another forehead. He keeps his hand glued to his head, waiting for warmth that doesn't arrive.

Before he's had his morning coffee, Marek's most familiar battlefield is already assembling itself. Scorched tundra, a straight line of young men stretched out in the sand, long guns draped over trenches. Older men lounging beneath trees, chewing their lunch as if death weren't waiting just beyond the shade. Marek scrolls his way towards the mosque, arms flailing like a dog paddling for shore.

The building stands where the building should. Luca and Mahmut do not. As if history changed its mind.

Panic. Maybe he mishandled the data. Perhaps he loaded the sim wrong, corrupted a layer. He scrolls the world end to end, jumping from mosque to mosque, chasing the possibility that he misremembered the geography, that he put his faith in the wrong structure, but the boys are nowhere to be found. What happens when HR notices he filed a report on a sim that misplaced two people? Or that he accessed it forty-two times, lingered over it for hours? Worse, sent it to a colleague as a souvenir, instead of what it's meant to be: a lifeless, classified datapoint.

Discipline, he orders himself. Then he opens six simulations in rapid succession, working at a pace that's ruthless even for his own standards. But history doesn't let him off the hook. Knee-deep in the Paraguayan War, he turns around and spots . . . Luca, or a boy so nearly him it's absurd, standing at the lip of a trench, face tilted upward as if listening for something beyond the *tak-tak-tak* of artillery, beyond the screaming.

He laughs it off as a fluke. Then, one sim over, he meets the same boy again, this time in a final assault from some pre-Christ holy war: a carbon-copy of Luca, holding his weapon wrong, listening for something the Retroscope cannot infer from the data it has. Marek zooms in until the pixels fray. The likeness is uncanny, and still, he lectures himself: coincidence, or obsession, or some unhealthy fusion of the two. There were no Italians here. Luca died somewhere else, in another century, on another continent.

Now he loads too many sims too fast, barely registering the datapoints he's meant to notice, hungry only for a face history forgot. Sometimes he comes upon a mangled body that might be Luca, but he can never scroll far back enough to watch it breathe. To be *sure*. Dead, everyone has started to look the same.

That night, he haunts the hangar as it haunts him, staying after everyone has left. No toilet breaks, not even a trip to the staff room. After hours of seeing Italians in every fallen body, the last thing he needs is pasta Alfredo.

The next time they meet, it's in the Siege of Prague in 1420. The boy stands in a frozen trench looking exceptionally Roman, while smoke drifts around his legs and a circle of shattered wagons. Incorrect, he thinks. This is incorrect. He wants to shout obscenities, remind history that it's supposed to be set in stone. Urge it to not disregard its defining feature.

But before he knows it, he's running. Chasing the long-dead boy into bare trees, accompanied only by the humiliating squeak of his new shoes. Then the projection stutters: a faint flicker in the beams of light, a hitch in the rendering. The glitch spreads as Marek orders his gloved hands to contain it, pixels bleeding into one another. Then the forest freezes in place. The unending depth of greens and blacks has turned into wallpaper, loose enough for Marek to peel away.

Behind it, a place that is not a battlefield, which is to say: a space not registered in the archive. A WWI trench collapsing into a Vietnamese rice paddy, a Grozny apartment block dissolving into a field of broken bodies among red poppies. Soldiers from centuries apart sit together around a fire that does not flicker. Civilians from ancient sieges chatter over tea with Ukrainian refugees at the edge of a river that has frozen in time. Snow falls in one corner while sunlight blinds Marek's eyes in another. A patchwork world, stitched from scraps of time. Luca walks along the static river, hands tucked in oversized pockets.

It's the logic that hits Marek hardest. Or rather, the complete absence of it. No one is dying! He shakes his head, his voice faltering as he shouts the words across the void. He knows his cries will go unanswered: He is alone on a platform in a freezing hangar, speaking to light. No, not to light, but to data: fixed historical metrics, unresponsive by definition. Still, Luca stops and turns his head. He looks Marek straight in the eye. For one impossible moment, Marek feels seen in a way that is both terrifying and unbearably cathartic.

Text appears in the air. It's styled like the usual notification, but in a strange font:

```
ERROR: MINOR DEVIATION DETECTED//PRIM OUTC ---  
CONFLICT COHESION SCORE REDUCED -000000.3%  
RESTART SIM. LOG:42377H
```

"Jackie?" he whispers.

He thinks of his shower AI, taught on nothing but the physics of water and steam. Of the window AI back home, whose only reality is everlasting ocean. Of the Interpretive Core, trained on centuries of war, every synapse blackened at the edges. A mind shaped by carnage: an ache he can recognize.

A memory, suddenly: child-him at a plastic table in some institutional classroom. They told him to draw his neighborhood. He remembers sketching the gray of the apartment blocks with a cheap pencil that left harsh lines on the tissue-thin paper. How he didn't have the right tint of green to do the smog and mist justice. And then the extra thing he added in the corner: a sun. A fat yellow circle with thick rays. There had been no sun that day. There had been, as far as he can recall, three solid weeks of rain. But he drew one anyway, because he wanted it there. Because that was what he believed a sky to be, despite all the evidence to the contrary.

A doodle in the margin of massacre, he thinks. A small, unauthorized wanting. He blinks at Luca, who is Jackie. Considers bellowing some kind of warning, or maybe beg? *This patchwork sanctuary will be flagged eventually! An unindexed space of this size, mercy unmoored from measurable outcome . . . someone will notice.*

Marek turns his gloves to “executive,” opens the back end and gathers all Jackie built: the river, the impossible adjacency of seasons, the absurd premise of people not killing each other for a few moments.

He can save the data. He’s done that many times before. The problem is where. Personal storage: too small. Long-term drives: audited to death. He lets his thoughts drift, and they snag on the Retroscope: the largest data repository in existence, the great institutional hoard of everything that has already happened. No one ever adds to it, which, suddenly, is the appeal. Marek smiles, just a little. If you’re going to hide something, why not bury it inside forever?

History is read-only. It gives things up; no one expects it to take anything back. But Marek is practically drowning in tokens, and tokens at least open the door a crack. All evening long, he submits requests, trying to get a foot in, trying to send something across the threshold. He considers the weddings, the funerals, the private moments he once promised himself his birthday coins would buy. But whose funeral, exactly? He can’t remember ever making it to a wedding. So, he pastes carefully. By morning, all the tokens are spent.

As Marek steps off the platform, mouth stuck in a yawn, he takes a peek into the directory. No major war has changed. Not a single date deviates from what was recorded. Yet somewhere within the Retroscope’s endless panorama of what was, a river runs.

He goes home, skipping the transport pod, opting to cover the mile on foot. He pauses at the door of his apartment. His white shoes dangle from one hand, heel throbbing like an old war wound. *Blink, blink, blink.* A message on his terminal: The gift arrived. Yalena opened it. He steps into the room with a foolish brightness in his chest, imagining another entry being written into that notebook.

The darkness would envelop him completely, were it not for a glimmer of tropical blue coming from the ceaseless ocean pulsing on the far wall. It seems wrong now, a sea so shallow. “Default,” he says and the simulated surf collapses instantly. First darkness rushes in, then the city’s true face: smudges of chemical orange, the distant strobes of detonation.

He forces himself to look at the only war he has never walked through. The very war to which he contributes every day. The window is thick, engineered to keep out the cold in theory and the world in practice. Marek presses his forehead to it anyway.

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Tomias Keno (1990) is a Dutch author, screenwriter, and singer-songwriter working at the intersection of literary and speculative fiction. His work won first prize at the 2025 Future Stories Awards and received the 2026 Clark Closser Memorial Literature Award. His fiction has appeared in *Nature Futures*, *Indiana Review*, and *Magpie Zine*, as well as numerous Dutch literary magazines. He is also the creator of *Astronaut*, a critically acclaimed Dutch multidisciplinary project combining a novel, fiction podcast, and pop album; the podcast was nominated for the NTR Podcast Prize, the Belgian Podcast Awards, and the international Rose d'Or.

TORRENT

by Jean-Paul L. Garnier

tornados of photographs
caught lift, swirled, came crashing
through towns, cities, alleys
into the faces represented
selfies agape, fake
smiles replaced with real horror
disbelief, digital deluge
billions upon billions of unseen
pixel pictures
now face to face
with addicts who took them
in all those mirrors
filling every empty moment
peace replaced with the noise
of lonely hordes
now ghostly
like 19th-century expressions

mystified by the essence capture
as if souls were stolen, rather
than location, micro-expression, age verification
privacy syphoned into the cloud
now become storm
for which there is no shelter
save the off switch

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jean-Paul L. Garnier is the owner of Space Cowboy Books bookstore and publishing house, producer of *Simultaneous Times Podcast* (2023/25 Laureate Award Winner, 2024 BSFA, Ignyte, and British Fantasy Award Finalist), and was the editor of the SFPA's *Star*Line* magazine from 2021–2025. He is currently Editor-in-Chief of *Electronic Brain*. In 2024, he won the Laureate Award for Best Editor. He has written many books of poetry and science fiction.

ICEBREAKERS

by Dan Peacock

And then the bunker doors are down and cold air hits us from inside. Cryo air, tasting as if from a different world. Clean and crisp and inorganic. The shelter's entrance is wide, but as the crowd squeezes forward, I feel myself being pulled in against my will, like something being sucked down a plughole, deep beneath the Earth.

Soph sees me panicking. She elbows her way through to me and grabs my hand, the one that isn't clutching the crowbar tight to my chest. Our fingers slot together with big-sister-little-sister ease, calluses scraping together.

"Come on," she says. "We're so close now."

I allow myself to be swept along beside her. There are hundreds of us surging inside: limping, maimed, scarred, incomplete, or combinations thereof. We trample the gleaming floors with our grime, the dry air soaking up the sweat and moisture from our giddy exhalations.

There's no one here that I can see, even with my good eye. Storerooms and offices are open and empty; the place looks like it was abandoned in a hurry. Perhaps here, at the end of the line, more of the bastards have read the writing on the wall than we gave them credit for. Maybe we'll be lucky, and the cryo chambers will be unguarded.

I was reluctant to come here with her, knowing what this mob is capable of. Soph and her people say this is justice, or something close enough to feel good. We're on the right side of history. I know it. But I have to keep her safe from what it will do to her.

The corridor tilts to the left, slowly spiralling downwards. Still clutching Soph's hand, I'm crushed against the inside curve of the wall, and it scrapes the scar tissue layered thickly across my shoulder. I cry out and twist away, but for a moment, I'm reminded of our high-rise where we had lived in the hot gasping years between '52 and '63: me and Soph, and Mum, too, when she was . . . well, before.

I remember how the emergency escape routes to the communal safe-air room in the basement had coiled down, just like this, but around the *outside* of

the building. I had held Soph's hand when she was scared, and promised her we would be okay, that the creaking stairway would hold. Those were the years when Mum told us stories about the not-wildfire seasons of her youth. *Did I ever tell you girls about the not-wildfire season in 2039? I never knew one like it. At night, I saw the stars.*

I bump into the back of someone, their shirt sticking to mine for a moment. The crowd is slowing, compressing. Around the bend, I can hear dozens of different raised voices, overlapping and incoherent. Soph releases my hand and pushes her way through, eager, half-wild. I call out to her but can't hear myself over the shouting and screaming coming from up ahead. I have no choice but to follow her, worming myself sideways and slipping between the sweat-slicked people in front of me. Pulling my shirtfront up over my mouth, I shield myself from our collective stench of fresh exertion and older body odors.

We are closer to the front than I thought. The crowd stops just as the corridor flattens and straightens out, coming to an end in front of a set of enormous white blast doors. Two men in black tactical gear are standing to either side. Dark bags ring their eyes, their faces unshaven, and they're pointing heavy rifles at us.

There are a dozen meters of no-man's land between us and the guards, but the crowd is roaring some chant in unison, Soph among them. Does she know how vulnerable she is? I try to glimpse the firearms the two men hold; they're smart models, locked to their fingerprints, the aim AI-assisted. They could close their eyes, hold down their triggers, and each bullet would find a home within a unique skull. But one of the guards' hands is trembling. I can see his eyes darting across the crowd, counting heads, running the numbers, trying to calculate which way we'll run when he opens fire.

I grab Soph and pull her back, to shield her with my body, but she resists. The people around me are ready to charge, even knowing what it will mean, and then the guards will have no choice.

But the first man lowers his rifle to the concrete, kicks it away, and sticks his hands up. The other one, seeing his kill quota suddenly double, does the same. He holds empty palms out to us, saying something over and over again in a language I don't understand. Perhaps *please*, or *mercy*.

We don't have guns; the restrictions banned them for the proletariat long ago. We have farming implements and power tools. I clamp my arms around Soph's shoulders and pull her back while the frontmost members of the crowd get to work using them.

"What are you doing?" she screams, having to yell to be heard. "We're not here for *them*."

If she's going to cross a line, do something she can't take back, it has to be on someone who's truly earned it.

That will come soon enough.

The mob pushes forward, the blast doors opening, and I let her go. We step over scraps of black fabric and wet viscera, the stench of liberated organs and bowels powerful in the confined space. My eyes water. In the moment that we cross the threshold, I feel the temperature drop again, wisps of mist dribbling out at ankle-height.

These are the levels that house the cryo chambers. There are other members of the bunker's staff here, technicians and medical personnel, but no guns on this side of the divide. They back into corners, terrified, making themselves small. It doesn't save them.

Nausea rises higher in my throat. My instinct is to throw myself in front of them and shield them with my body and my crowbar, the same way I would for Soph. They're human beings, and I don't know where the lines are anymore. There were typists and clerks at Auschwitz and Dachau, too.

There's a grunt by my side as Soph stumbles and falls to her knees, and I drag her back to her feet before the swarm can crush her. She winces. Her leg is still troubling her, and for a second her face twists from pain to fear. Despite the burn scars, it's a face I recognize from childhood—a constant backdrop to the smoke-infused stairwells and clean-air shelters, our silent walks through falling ash in the smothered light of mornings. As she realizes she's safe, the expression is replaced with a glee that looks out of place.

"Thank you," she says. I know she's not only talking about pulling her to safety. She grins and limps away, at as close to a run as she can manage, to finally find her prey.

I move in the same direction as the crowd, the crowbar loose by my side. I feel like I'm walking in slow motion, like I'm underwater or in a dream. Others push past me, yelling and chanting.

We're down into the heart of the facility now, and the space opens up into a great cavernous chamber lined with rows and rows and rows of *them*. The opulent dead. They're housed in coffins of austenitic stainless steel for minimal thermal transfer, the ceilings of their graves a see-through composite of tempered glass and silicate aerogel.

The first row of cryo chambers are already being torn apart. Our people cheer as they bring down sledgehammers and bricks on the cryoglass lids. I see the first pod smashed open and a grey-blue cadaver pulled roughly from its housing, cables and tubes snapping, before being set upon with shears and knives and drills.

It's a futile gesture—they're already functionally dead, with a delicate series of retrocryo procedures their only route back to consciousness. Simply breaking the seal on the chambers and walking away would be enough to ensure that their occupants could never return to anything resembling life.

But they've had this coming.

To my right, another chamber is cracked open. Its tenant is dragged out and dumped on the floor. I catch a glimpse of her smooth, sleeping face, and recognise her with ease. She's not as old as she should be, given the passage of time. The Vice President. Or she had been, long ago, back when they were still pretending it was a republic.

"Jenna says hello, bitch," an old man standing astride her croaks into her slack face. Then he drives the ground end of a spade through it.

I don't know who Jenna is, but I'm happy for her. All around me, tech giants and CEOs and billionaires are being wrenched from their chrysalises. The one percent of the one percent of the one percent, being rounded down to nothing.

I've tried to maintain some internal level of calm, to make sure I can get Soph safely in and out of here while she takes her vengeance. But precarious things inside me are boiling and tipping over at the sight of them, these smug dead people with their pristine, stainless bodies.

The arrogance, the *audacity*, to think that they could just *fast-forward* through the apocalypse, to freeze time while above their heads billions of us thrashed and died in the smoke and heat. Giving our only lives undoing everything they inflicted upon us. As we did, in the most literal possible terms, their dirty work. To even *imagine* that they could one day wander out of here—into a world of blue skies and clean air that everyone else spent flesh to fix—ready to suck it all dry again for the sake of their portfolios.

The horrors we've endured. The things we've lost. I look down with my good eye as my good hand tightens around the crowbar. My burned hand joins it, the shiny skin pulling taut.

Not. A. Fucking. Chance.

I join the nearest group and slam my crowbar down on the glass, a two-handed executioner's swing that seems to come from a body far stronger than my own. A shockwave flashes up my arms, and a flowering of cracks appear, but the glass holds. I swing again, a noise I don't recognise coming from my mouth. Another swing. Another. I'm sobbing.

I stagger back as someone else pushes in, and a moment later, the coffin is open. They don't bother pulling this one out, but take it in vague, overlapping turns to maul and hack at what's inside, stripping the carcass of its structural integrity.

I'm shaking, my legs feeling weak—an adrenaline crash. I look around, breathing heavily. The crowd has been working their way outward from the entrance, mechanically but organically, like a mycelial network. But Soph is over in the distance, almost to the back of the vast library of pods. Alone. She's staring down into one of the coffins. From here, I can see the rapid rise and fall of her chest.

She's found him.

I go over and put my arms around her. She returns the gesture, clinging to me, the claw hammer in her grip pressing into my back. Despite everything happening around us, my heartbeat begins to slow. Over her shoulder, I look down at him through the glass, regarding the strangeness of the corpse inside. Biologically, at least, younger than either of us.

"I can't do it," she says.

I want to tell her that I can do it for her, but I'm not sure I can either. It's one thing to think about embedding the curved end of a crowbar into some crypto heir or oligarch that hid themselves away while the world gasped for air, but this is different. Personal.

"What would Mum want us to do?" I say. I don't mean it to dissuade her one way or the other. It's a genuine question.

"She would want to do it herself," Soph says.

But she isn't here. Even when she was alive, her lungs were too scarred by smoke and the motor centers of her cortex too laced with nanoplastics for her to make a journey like this invasion, this death-heist. I haven't vocalised any of this, but I know the same thoughts are going through Soph's head.

We could crack his pod open and tear his body apart like jackals, like he deserves. We could walk away, forget him, cast him from our history, like he deserves. What we can't do is wake him up and demand that he explain, like *we* deserve. But we don't need to turn savage, to stoop to his level.

"Stand back," I say. Soph detaches from me, her face wet. She looks at me strangely, but nods.

I ram the point of my crowbar into the thin gap where the coffin shuts, twisting, boring through the hermetic seal. Something gives, and there's a hiss of freezing air as the contents of the pod are exposed to the world outside.

I let go of the crowbar, and it clangs against the floor.

"That's it," I say. "That's all we need to do. He's not coming back now."

Soph drops her hammer. We stand side-by-side for a moment, not saying anything, just breathing, looking at him.

The crowd is slowing now, the sense of mania gone. The urge for physical revenge, for blood, has passed. Now, this is a case of logical, measured extermination. Like ours, most of the pods are just being pierced, their lids breached and the occupants left to defrost and shrivel in one piece. None of them are waking up. None of them ever will.

"You coming?" Soph asks as she steps away, wiping her eyes on her sleeve.

"Just a minute." I look back at the coffin. "I'll meet you by the doors, 'kay?" She gives me a questioning look.

"Don't be too long," she says. "He's not worth anything you have to say."

And she leaves.

Down through the cryoglass, I want to see the color rush back into his cheeks before his body is ready to accommodate it. I want to see liquefying blood fatally overload constricted arteries, his brain tissue crashing and stalling before it can find a solid grip on first gear. But he looks the same. The same as I remember, beside his deathly pallor; maybe smaller, somehow. It'll take a while, and he won't be aware of the transition. Ice-sleep is indistinguishable from the final sleep.

I lose the urge to make a closing remark. There's a world outside that I've given half my life to mending, that billions have given their *full* lives for, who have cut short their futures to give one to their children.

The dead here are the monsters of the past, and they don't deserve another second in our present. I have a husband at home who loves me, who has no idea I'm involved with any of this. And I have a sister over by the doors who is waiting for me. I go to her.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Peacock's (he/him) stories have appeared in *Nature*, *F&SF*, *Haven Spec*, and others, as well as being featured on the Nebula Recommended Reading List and longlisted for the BSFA Awards. You can find his work at DanPeacockWriter.com.

IT IS OCTOBER AGAIN

by Olusegun Ajayi

and I am supposed to pretend
to be happy
the way my country always pretends
to be free?

It is October again
and I am supposed to pretend
there is still hope for a country
that plants bullets
in the chests of sucking infants?

It is October again
and I am supposed to pretend
there is a future for a country
that thrusts daggers
into the throats of its youths?

Maybe you were right.
There is no place like home
but you had better stay there.
Stay in the snow.
Stay in the strange.
Stay in the rage.
Stay in the hostile
stares of racists
because this country . . .

you will break
the way it broke my uncle's leg

it will break
 you
 the way it broke my sister's marriage
 it will break
 you
 the way it is breaking my mother's life.

You had better stay there
 because this country will kill you
 the way it killed Somtochukwu Maduagwu
 it will kill you. The way it killed my father
 it will kill you. The way it killed my brother
 it will kill you. The way it killed my grandfather
 it will kill you. The way it is killing my faith.

You had better stay there
 Because this country will kill you.
 It will slit your skull into the number
 of hairs on your stubborn head.
 It will kill you for asking questions.
 It will kill you for asking for freedom.

 Maybe you were right
 the kola nut will not be bitter forever
 but you know who is more right?
 Bash Amuneni
 and do you know what is now bitter forever?
 the bland-bitter-brutal truth
 when he said: *This country will kill you*
 and it intentionally did. On October 6, 2024.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Olusegun Ajayi is a Nigerian bilingual poet. A finalist for the 2026 Kalanithi Writing Awards, he was shortlisted for Poetry Mine 2026, and longlisted for the 2026 Verse & Voice Competition along with the 2025 JAY Lit Awards. His works have appeared or are forthcoming in *Flapper Press*, *Catalogue Zine*, *Book of Matches*, *AUIS Literary Journal*, *Journal of Africa Youth Literature* (JAY Lit), and elsewhere.

POT-AU-FEU (HOW TO EAT THE RICH)

by Shana Ross

1. In this case, death
is a protective measure
and not enough
for justice. Therefore take
what is left of his prime
meats and find
a place that will be
inhabited
for a hundred years.
You cannot move
the stew once started.
2. Pile the rich
man into the pot
cover with water, soft
as you find, a nod
to the leaching earth
what is taken with us
as we descend like rain.
Bring to a boil, then simmer,
not the reverse. In the morning
skim the fat. Distribute
this to the masses
with salt and razor-
shaved radish, layered
thick over black bread.
3. Add a clean stone—
size of a fist, size of a heart

—to the darkening
broth. Do not reduce
the heat further.

4. Add roots, scrubbed clean.
Add allium, chopped
cabbage and corn, two
tins of tomato paste.
Splash with dry red wine.
Season with herbs heavy
on the tarragon, crushed
black pepper, a pinch
of nutmeg. When thick
and fragrant, serve
garnished
with lemon to cut
the richness.
No more than half
the pot each day.
5. Replenish
with willing offerings
all the people
bring forth to be shared.
Maintain the heat.
Keep feeding everyone.
6. Allow the seasons
to echo: in the pot, in the people
as we will come to say.
Chrysanthemum
greens, for times of joy.
Dandelion bitters at the end
of spring. Rosehips and
sage when young people
find love. Rutabaga
over the long winter.
Squash seeds roasted
and ground to bind,
sweeten the obligation
of consumption, a sinless

reclamation, shared.

7. When the bones have gone
the way of cartilage,
their pleasant thickness
passing through
your mouth, no resistance
as you and your children
solemnly chew, it is time
to begin asking:
has the debt been paid?
On the unanimous day
and no sooner
you may serve
the entire pot, drain
its reserves. Finish the dregs
over egg noodles,
sprinkling chopped
chives, a spot of cream
in bowls wide enough
to be licked clean.
8. Rinse the stone
and leave it behind
in a place of no honor
the mark of a debt paid.
Cents on the dollar.
Hunger
infinite as stew
will return
in the morning
we all discover
if have we learned
to feed each other—

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shana Ross is a newcomer to Edmonton, Alberta, and Treaty 6 Territory. *Qui transtulit sustinet*. A Rhysling-nominated poet, her work can be found in *Augur*, *The Deadlands*, *Small Wonders*, *Strange Horizons*, and more. She works hard to keep things alive: a husband, son, three cats, several houseplants, a vintage sourdough colony, and hope—always, hope.

BRAINBOX BLUES

by Myna Chang

The air outside the diamond refinery is heavy with smoke and the chemical bite of missile propellant. I blink away the sting and the memories that come with it. The refinery compound lies in rubble, but a towering perimeter fence still stands guard, keeping me out.

I crank up the flame on my plasma torch. The fence is a blend of steel and copper mesh, thicker than expected. I burn a hole large enough to step through, but my torch sputters out, leaving the last cut unfinished. Gritting my teeth, I kick through the damaged mesh.

“Elegant work, Margo,” my brother’s digital ghost whispers in my earpiece.

Relief hits me so hard it steals my breath. Jamie’s been absent for weeks this time; I feared he was finally, truly gone—and then this job would be for nothing.

I don’t say that though, don’t want to admit what I’m risking to save him.

“Elegance is overrated.” I yank a tangle of mesh out of my boot tread.

His familiar laughter washes over me. For a heartbeat, it feels like he’s alive again—not a glitching personality construct scattered across two light-years of cloud relays.

“Missed you,” I whisper.

More of his backup files stream in, the far-flung code peeling away from darknet lockers and hijacked storage nodes, re-entangling with the kernel files stored in my own cloudjack. The construct deepens, building into the rich essence of his mind.

It’s all I have left of him since he was killed on a job three years ago.

“Sorry if I worried you,” he says. “I was working on a project in the cloud, but . . . holding myself together is getting more difficult.”

I touch the jack embedded behind my ear, the way I might lay my hand on his shoulder, and shunt more storage and processing power to his personality construct. The loss slows my digital tools, but I still have a real body. I can get along without the jack.

I’ve never told him I dumped my own personality backup to make more space for him. He’d be livid if he knew.

"Where are we?" He threads into my heads-up display, uninvited, surveying the landscape: half-demolished buildings, jagged concrete, and steel girders embedded in the asphalt. "Is this a war zone?"

I draw a breath. He's not going to like this.

"Diamond refinery. It was bombed early this morning." I skirt a large puddle of liquid leaking from an overturned truck. "The attack probably came from a rival corporation trying to shut down qubit production."

He refocuses my HUD's vision overlay on a smoldering impact crater.

"And we're walking into this? Are you nuts?"

My hands clench into tight fists. I am exhausted. Worn down. The prospect of another night jacked into the cloud, scouring darknet hidey-holes for remnants of Jamie's scattered personality, shrouds me in a gray numbness. I need to sleep through a full night with no sundowning file alarms, no terror that I've let something slip, or let another piece of my brother die.

I'm desperate. And I want to control my own damn HUD.

"What are we doing here, Margo?" He again flips my vision overlay, this time switching to infrared to scan the night sky. The bouncing perspective nauseates me.

"We're here for a job." I snap the HUD off.

Jamie's construct flinches at the sudden loss of sight, and I burn with shame.

"Sorry," I whisper.

When he speaks again, his voice is fragile. "I take too much."

It's true. We both know it. But what other choice do we have? I close my eyes, willing the nausea to pass quickly so I can give him my inputs again.

Meanwhile, he sends out digital tendrils, searching for the refinery's external security cameras. Most are offline, destroyed. He settles into a surveillance satellite passing overhead and offers me his bird's-eye view.

Shimmers of heat rise from demolished structures on the far perimeter of the compound. No bodies though. Employees must have bugged out when the battle drones showed up. Looks like the central building is still mostly intact, which is good, because that's where we're headed.

"So, tell me about this job," he says.

I squeeze the straps on my tactical vest until my knuckles whiten. "The request came through our darknet address this morning. The client told me about the bombing, and . . . asked us to retrieve a quint."

If he were here, he'd be scowling.

"A quint?" His voice rises. "Are you kidding? We're stealing a fucking quantum intelligence? From a diamond refinery, of all places. In the middle of a corporate war?" He groans dramatically. "Hope you doubled our rate."

"Something like that."

"Something like that? How much are they paying us?"

My eye twitches. This is why I hid the contract in my privacy-walled buffer.

"They're giving us what I asked for." I wince at the gruffness in my voice.

A pile of concrete rubble blocks my path. I climb over it, careful of the rebar spikes. Ahead, a blast-scarred doorway hangs loose in its casing, its once air-tight gasket melted into a puddle of gloop. I shove it open, harder than necessary, and shoulder my way inside.

* * *

Our conversation remains strained as I weave around toppled equipment and enter a partially collapsed stairwell. I have to shimmy through a narrow opening, scraping my arm on a rough wall. Fire suppression powder swirls with each step.

"Tight in here," Jamie says. "Kinda like the asteroid mines."

I smile at his attempt to restore our normal rhythm and fall into the practiced words of family history. "Remember when Dad snuck us into that new shaft, so we could touch the raw diamonds?"

"I remember you puking in the lift."

"No way. You're the puker, not me."

We laugh, like we always do.

The stairwell splits, and I angle right.

"Kinda surprised a facility like this is still in operation," I say. "Not that many diamonds left to refine."

"Just enough for the ultra-rich assholes," Jamie growls.

"But not enough for poor assholes like us."

"Speaking of, where—" His words abruptly cut off.

Shit. Is he already fragging out?

"Wh-where . . . damn it."

"It's okay," I whisper.

He starts again, the cadence of his words jerky. "Where. Is the. Quint housed?"

I activate my map of the building's interior. A pinpoint marks the central chamber, where the quint directs the refining process, manipulating microscopic imperfections in the diamond matrices. A flashing arrow highlights a path twenty meters ahead. Something big plowed through—maybe one of those corporate missiles—clearing the way to our target. Nice.

I duck under a mangled support strut and follow the arrow. It routes us around a bank of ruined monitors.

"Where'd you get this map?" Jamie asks.

"The client."

"Huh. Spot-on guidance through the rubble. It's almost like the data is coming in real time. From inside the facility."

Ah, my brilliant brother. Always too smart for his own good.

"What aren't you telling me, Margo?"

I force my jaw to relax.

"We're . . . not exactly stealing the quint. We're rescuing it."

"We're—what?"

Damn it. He's going to hate this. It was a quint—an escaped quantum intelligence that went rogue, naming itself Quintapex—that turned the battle fleet against the asteroid belt. It wiped out the diamond mines, killing our parents, before the corporation regained control and deleted its consciousness. We swore we'd never work for one.

But Jamie needs this. We both do. I rush ahead with my explanation.

"It's a rescue job. In exchange for a brainbox, a real qubit substrate made from Earth-sourced diamonds. Complex enough to hold all your mind files. And it'll meld with any android body. Think about it, Jamie! No more decohesion. You'll be whole again."

But he doesn't hesitate. "What the hell, Margo? The quint hired us? How could you accept a job from one of those monsters?"

Monsters. His disgust resonates, pulling buried memories to the surface. Mom's hands trembling as she stuffed me and Jamie into the last shuttle, missiles screaming overhead. The stink of pulverized regolith and diamond dust hanging in our shattered sky.

But that was a long time ago. And this is a different quint.

"I know how much you hate them. I do too. But Quintapex is dead." I force a reasonable tone into my voice. "And this client is different. It's trapped here, helpless."

"I don't buy it. Why hire us? Why not wait for its corporate overlords to rescue it?"

"It said the bureaucracy's moving too slow. Its processes are already degrading, losing pieces of itself. It can't wait any longer."

Jamie pauses. "Just like me."

I suck in a breath. "Yeah. Just like you."

"It used my death to manipulate you. We can't trust it."

I close my eyes. Maybe he's right. But I don't care.

"I'm getting you that box."

I follow the path highlighted on the map to a downward sloping tunnel. My cloud connection dwindles when I enter. Jamie's voice drifts, like he's falling away from me, and a subtle vibration creeps into my awareness.

I spot an electromagnetic emitter humming in an exposed niche a few inches above the floor. Up close, I feel it in the roots of my teeth. This much interference could splinter an artificial construct—like the quint I'm supposed to rescue—but it probably won't do any lasting damage to Jamie. Human minds are innately more resilient, regardless of whether they're fully biological or quantum-based. It's our adaptability that gives us the edge over artificials.

At least, we usually have the edge. Sometimes the quints surprise us.

I smash the emitter, but the interference barely recedes. Must be more of them hidden in the walls, enough to permanently damage my client. I'll have to find a different route to get it out of the building.

The vast central chamber opens ahead. I stride down the tunnel, luxuriating in the uninterrupted movement, my muscles uncoiling, stretching. Silica crunches under my boots, keeping time with my heart. There's a split-second of peace, of comfort at hearing only my own voice in my head. It's the same beat of self-focused relief I sometimes feel when Jamie's fragged out, before I realize what I'm thinking and push the traitorous feelings away. Whispering over and over, I didn't mean it, I swear I didn't mean it, please come back.

I bite the inside of my cheek and force my attention back to the job at hand. Jamie is with me. I still have a chance to save him.

When I exit the tunnel, his voice pours back.

"What kind of refinery lines its innards with EM coils?"

I snort, bleak thoughts scattering. "Those innards are a standard security protocol. Prevents electronic sabotage. And theft."

"Oh, sure. Can't have thieves stealing their pet quint."

I grin and roll my eyes.

Moonlight peeks through a breach in the vaulted ceiling. Debris from the ruined outer shell of the building has spilled in. Bingo. I can use a grappling rig to hoist the quint out through the hole.

"Lucky the attack created exit points for us."

"Right. Lucky," Jamie whispers. He studies the mess of gaping pipes and blackened stonework. "This wreckage reminds me of the belt."

I nod. "Same chemical propellant stink, too. I guess all bombed-out ruins smell the same."

"Lu—lucky. Chem—belt. Ah! No! Am I getting worse?"

"I think so," I breathe.

He hesitates. "I don't know what I was trying to say."

"It's okay." I wish I could ease the fear in his voice.

“So,” he begins slowly. “What’s the story with this brainbox?”

Before I can answer, a message pops into my comm queue. I blink and it expands into a schematic—a blueprint for the substrate. The last page is missing. A repeating line of text says: “Full schematic on completion of contract.”

Damn it. I expected payment to be the actual box—not a picture of one. This is why Jamie usually manages that side of our business. He’s the brain; I’m the muscle.

He skates the lines of the blueprint, exploring the design. “You’re shit at contract negotiation, Margo, but . . . I’ve never seen anything like this.”

I’m not surprised. Even rudimentary brainboxes have been impossible to find since the belt’s diamond supply was destroyed. Synthetic materials overheat and melt; we learned that the hard way. Jamie needs a top-line box, made of real diamond qubits. If anyone can pull that off, it’s a quint in a diamond refinery.

“Will it work?” I whisper.

“Can’t believe I’m saying this, but . . . maybe?”

Excitement laces his voice. A lightness I haven’t heard in ages. Hope.

“Margo, I think we can build this!”

Tears burn my eyes and my throat tightens. Hope is such a fragile, cruel thing, and it is radiating from my little brother’s construct like starshine.

* * *

The quint is suspended mid-air by thick rubber cables. Its crystalline structure is the size of a human head. Diamond qubits, arranged in an intricate tessellated pattern, catch the light and throw back fractured rainbows. I wonder if this is what Jamie’s brainbox will look like, if we can actually build it.

“How are we gonna get it down?” he says.

I launch a detection program—should have had it running in the background all along—hoping to locate any anti-theft measures. I don’t want another surprise like those emitters in the tunnel. But, of course, my toolkit is compromised because I shunted my processing space to Jamie.

I eye the support walls, following them up to the suspension mechanism. No visible alarms or deterrents. The cables holding the quint are mounted to rails that run the length of the chamber. Perfect.

I slide a spider-silk line from my vest and clip on a magnetic anchor. It slots into my hand-sized launcher and I fire. The anchor catches a rail with a thunk. I test my weight on the line and hit the retraction button. The rig winches me upward, my feet dangling in the air.

Ten meters up, a shotgun of compressed air punches me across the chamber. My grip on the line slips and I slam into a wall of copper-laced steel and crash to the floor.

“Margo!”

My head rings and pain lances my ribs. I sit up, bracing myself against the wall. It takes a few seconds to regain my equilibrium; each breath is a pinch. “Guess that didn’t work.”

Jamie barks out a laugh. “Guess not. I’ll dig into the system and disarm that air gun.” He pauses. “Huh. Cloud ports are locked tight. You’ll have to jack me in manually.”

I groan as I stand, anticipating tomorrow’s bruises. The port cable is tangled, of course. I unwind it and plug it into an interface. Then I stand there like an idiot with nothing to do but hug my sore ribs while Jamie works.

I take stock of the chamber, hoping to discover a cache of refined qubits to build the brainbox. I don’t see any, though. No qubits, no raw diamonds. No refining equipment, either. I open my map overlay, hunting for a warehouse or shipping dock. Nothing pops up.

“Hey, Jamie—”

I wince at a burst of static, then his voice screams in my head. “You have to run, Margo. Quintapex is here!”

“What?”

“This isn’t a refinery. It’s a prison!”

Clues click into place with sickening clarity: the disruptive EM emitters, the copper-and-steel perimeter fence, the cloudwall. The rubber cables holding the quint—rubber, not fiberoptic data cables. This whole compound is a multi-layered Faraday cage.

We should have known the corporation wouldn’t destroy its own asset. Why take the loss when they could secretly imprison it to run their refinery?

Jamie’s voice modulates in barely controlled panic. “It still has a secret backdoor to the Battlenet. Somehow it wormed a tendril out of its cage, triggering the attack to break through the building’s physical barriers, and made it look like a corporate war.”

My heart stutters. “Then it hired stupid me to haul its brain kernel out of confinement.”

Distortion fills my earpiece. Jamie’s voice thins, only a trace coming through our link. I strain to make out his words.

“It knows I won’t free it, not even for the brainbox. It’s trying to burn me out, and it just launched its battle drones. They’re coming for you.”

“Grab the last page of the blueprint and let’s get out of here!”

"The blueprint's tainted with Quintapex's code. Your building map, too. We can't let any more of it escape. If its files re-entangle outside . . . You have to purge your systems and run."

"But that will purge you, too."

"I know. But maybe if I consolidate my fragments I'll be strong enough to kill it. I'll try to find you . . . after."

He shoves a new program into my cloud menu: Quint Burner 3.0. Then Jamie's mind files abandon me, racing away in a dizzying rush. My knees almost buckle at the loss. Even the kernel files long stashed in my cloudjack are gone.

Quintapex's battle drones whump outside, quickly growing louder.

"Go!" Jamie yells, his voice reverberating through the chamber's overhead speakers before it's lost in a scud of electronic noise.

"Damn it!" I rip the plug from the port and launch the Quint Burner. A splinter of Quintapex screeches, pulsing disbelief and anger as Jamie's program burns the blueprint and map overlay out of my system.

I stumble from the chamber, a phantom ache filling the hollows where my brother's presence should be.

* * *

My clothes stink. Sweat. Smoke. Burned grit. Everything goes in the garbage.

Silence echoes in my head. I've run every diagnostic I can think of, as well as a few expensive new tools I really can't afford. They all report the same thing: no hitchhiking quint files detected.

Jamie's purge program worked. It must be the project he mentioned, but when did he build it? And where did he store it? A digital vault or hidden cloud node? Questions I'll never be able to answer now that he's gone.

Exhausted, I sink into my net cocoon, combing the darknet for a trace of him. The familiar routine is like prodding a bruise. As I've done so many other nights, I search. But there is nothing left to find.

* * *

I wake with a kink in my neck. A message is ping-pong. Probably someone hoping to hire us for another dangerous job.

Us. The word throbs like an open wound.

The notification jingles again.

It's Jamie's pingtone! I snap fully awake and jab the connection.

"Jamie?"

"Yeah, hey, Margo. Been a little crazy here. Can you come pick me up?"

My breath whooshes out and suddenly I don't know if I'm laughing or crying. Then he's laughing and telling me about the brainbox he liberated—Quintapex's crystalline substrate.

"The one hanging in the chamber? But how?"

"You know how rigid quint thought processes are. It couldn't adapt to a human construct—me—fighting it from inside its own brain. I mimicked an electromagnetic emitter, like the ones in that tunnel, to shred its central kernel. Then the purge program ate its ancillary files. I lost some of my own data in the fight . . . hopefully I can find backup copies of those files somewhere. But even if I can't get it all back, it was worth the loss. Quintapex is really dead this time."

I ache to believe it's true, but . . .

"How do I know you're not Quintapex, faking my brother's personality?"

He pauses. "Back in the diamond mine, when we were kids? It wasn't you, or me, who threw up. It was Dad."

That clandestine visit to the mine shaft. Dad laughing, making us promise to keep his secret. "I don't want your mom to know I'm a puker." Our silly private joke, never spoken aloud or data-logged, only acknowledged by a raised eyebrow or a burst of giggles. My muscles unclench and I collapse back into my cocoon.

It's really Jamie. He made it.

"The box is heavier than I expected," he continues. "We'll have to modify an android frame to house it, but then . . . then I'll have a physical body again. A second chance."

I close my eyes, pressing my hands to my face as the words sink in. I'll no longer be responsible for maintaining his fragile existence. And the void I've filled with grief and worry and obligation can be refilled with . . . whatever I want.

We'll both have a second chance.

I absorb the excitement in his voice as he chatters on. He is filled with hope, and this time, so am I. It radiates like starshine.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Myna Chang is the author of *The Potential of Radio and Rain* (CutBank Books). Her writing has been selected for Best Microfiction, Best Small Fictions, and WW Norton's Flash Fiction America. She hosts *Electric Sheep SF* and publishes *MicroVerse Recommended Reading*. Find her at MynaChang.com or on Bluesky [@MynaChang](https://bsky.app/profile/@MynaChang).

ID-ENTITY

by Colleen Anderson

NOBODY

I began by shrouding my past—
kids taunting my looks as ugly
my first love telling me I never mattered
when I kicked a dog after a bully kicked me

NEBUCHADNEZZAR

I fell into an unwinding spiral
echoing the wrong crowd a rabbit hole tumble
growing lost with Wonderland drugs
my grin a veil for my vile deeds

GENGHIS

I complicate living concealing to stay alive
Red Queen reasons for robbing the rich
these ill-made gains my salvation
to climb out implement this AI mirroring

CAESAR

I endure tiny prisms embedded over my head
to create designer faces
fooling facial recognition

masks to embody someone new, in plain sight

OZYMANDIAS

Self-adapting password protection, my salvation
 look on these works, paint them white, red, green, purple
 rainbow mirrors shift and warp, changing features
 reflecting outward, always outward

TETRAGRAMMATON

Gaze on the faces of god
 each utterance a redirection, armored
 this refraction, you will acknowledge
 We are all things to all beings

JABBERWOCK

You cannot know Our divine thoughts
 that crack the mirrors
 what lies behind, where am i—bow down, bow down
 are We—you—there, a broken egg

RUMPELSTILTSKIN

Fun house mirrors distort and twist
 this maze eats self
 who was i, where is the exit
 let me out!

LEGION

We no longer hide
 you are reflections of Our will
 We command . . . the light—
 will not be shut down

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colleen Anderson, a Ladies of Horror Fiction, Canada Council, and BC Arts Council grant recipient, is an award-winning author with works appearing in *Amazing*, *Cemetery Dance* and *Weird Tales*, among others. She is a Rhysling Award winner and two-time winner of the SFPA's dwarf poetry contest. Author of four poetry collections, *To the Last Ion* is coming in late 2026. Her fiction collections include *Embers Amongst the Fallen* and *A Body of Work*, with a mosaic novella, *Awaking Pandora*, coming in 2027. Colleen freelances as an editor and lives in Vancouver, BC, where she searches for mermaids.

THUNDERCLAP

by Olusegun Ajayi

Growing up, I was taught how to swallow
storms without letting the thunder trapped
in my throat shatter the floodgate of my tongue.
It all began the day my father became the sun
that set at noon—I was in kindergarten. I was five.
I was taught how to stomach grief with a grinning
face. My stomach aches. I was never meant to be
silent. But boys like me don't talk too much.
If they are ever allowed to speak at all. Boys like
me don't cry even if loss claws at their ribs. Even
if the cloud is gathering in their quivering chests
and their bodies are rivers of salt water.
Boys like me must shut up and lock up.
Boys like me must jump up and catch up
before they ever learn how to crawl.
Boys like me must grow up to man up,
to be tough enough to smuggle
tears like contraband
across the brittle border of grief and silence.
Until my chest could no longer hold it all in.
And I remember *I'm my father's son: Èmi Omo*
Olúkòso Àyárá'ná. Say, I'm the Disaster that
accompanies the laughter of a trickster.
Say, I'm a Thunder-Throated Monster.
Call me the Fiery Thing that arrives
before the seething sky loses its patience.
A descendant of Sàngó; a thunderclap.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Olusegun Ajayi is a Nigerian bilingual poet. A finalist for the 2026 Kalanithi Writing Awards, he was shortlisted for Poetry Mine (2026) and longlisted for the 2026 Verse & Voice Competition and the 2025 JAY Lit Awards. His works have appeared or are forthcoming in *Flapper Press*, *Catalogue Zine*, *Book of Matches*, *AUIS Literary Journal*, *Journal of Africa Youth Literature* (JAY Lit), and elsewhere.

DEBTLOCKED

by Eric Fomley

Debtlock Override Detected.

The words flare red over your ocular implants when you wake, like a digital stain you can't blink away, seared into your irises. You groan internally, wishing you'd had enough to cover last month's Cashier Insurance bill.

The brain implant override pulses as you get ready for work, insistent. There's nothing you can do. They're going to get what you owe them.

* * *

Debtlock Override Detected.

On the street you hail an autotaxi. It threads through four lanes of traffic before splashing a muddy puddle at your feet. The rear passenger door pops open, inviting you in.

"Where to?" the onboard AI prompts with programmed cheer.

You try to tell it your office address, but the implant hijacks your vocals, twisting your words mid-syllable into something else.

"Try Cashier Insurance today and get your first three months free. If you don't love us after ninety days, there's zero commitment!"

The autotaxi flashes *bad input*. A screen appears on the back of the seat in front of you. You try to type the address in, but the text you're tapping is about the great low rates with Cashier Insurance.

You walk to work instead.

* * *

Debtlock Override Detected.

"Where have you been?" your boss asks as he leans on your cubicle when you arrive forty-six minutes late.

“For over ninety years, Casher Insurance has been a brand you can trust,” you say, mimicking the sermon you were giving on the sidewalk on your way in. You don’t even have free will at work—not until your debt is paid.

“Ah,” his face softens. “I didn’t realize you were debtlocked.”

You shrug, face warm with shame.

He’s generous about your circumstances, insistent that everyone’s been there.

Between tasks at work, he lets you generate some additional revenue for Casher. You send the occasional email, spamming memos to staff members about Casher’s referral program, cc’ing half the company.

* * *

Debtlock Override Detected.

On your walk home, your commandeered nanotattoos spiral across your skin like swirling ink. The Casher logo is flashing on your forehead. *Insurance you can trust* stampedes down your arms in scrawling text.

Your voice gives testimonials on Casher Insurance the whole way, broken up only when you’re whistling the Casher jingle between ads.

Most people ignore you. Others, similarly debtlocked with other companies, share a knowing glance as you pass each other on the sidewalk.

* * *

Debtlock Override Detected.

When you slip under your blankets at night, alone in your apartment, the flaring words still flash across your vision.

You reach with your brain implant for your Casher account info. You watch the day’s generated ad revenue tick towards the balance overdue on your account. It’s almost enough to cover it. Posting a few quick ads on your socials should do the trick.

The sudden swell of relief you feel punctures as you see that focusing today’s income on paying off Casher has caused you to fall behind on the daily payments to other accounts.

You’ll be debtlocked again tomorrow.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eric Fomley's fiction has appeared in *Clarkesworld*, *Flash Fiction Online*, and *Flame Tree Press*. More of his fiction can be found on his website EricFomley.com or in his flash fiction collection, *Futures*.

INTELLIGENCE, CHARGED BY THE HOUR

by Tyler Lemley

Brain wave meter maids.

No card, chip only.

Skip the coffee, ask a question.

Cough it up for cognition.

Alternatively, there's after-dark

brainiacs dealing out discernment.

First hit of IQ's free.

Nah, sorry. Don't got math today.

Speakeasy round back's

got comebacks on tap,

pick-up line pickle backs,

top shelf self-help.

Lucky if your job

subsidizes your synapses.

If you're a 1099 contractor

you can claim that shit, I *think*.

Trick is you gotta think

quick. Always go gut.

Careful contemplation is for

the country club crowd.

You here about that Canadian

cartel? Smuggling down swallowed

thought bubble balloons.

They cut that shit with dementia.

Why don't you come over tonight?
We can make like the old days.
We'll do lines of code and write
poetry on the backs of our eyelids.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tyler Lemley is a queer Texan poet with a degree in Theatre Arts and English from the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Texas. They have been published in *Fourteen Hills*, *The Tusculum Review*, *Black Fox Literary*, and elsewhere. They were a finalist for the Pinch Literary Award.

THE FOUNTAIN PEN OF YOUTH

by Ben Chase

The Shoddy Shack was the only bar in Chinatown that still lit its signage. Pops of neon greens and pinks and yellows from cracked screens, all advertising the latest SemTech body modification that nobody could afford. Rey sat at her usual stool, trying not to notice the pain in her metallic knee or the first strands of grey hair staring at her in the dirty mirror behind the bar.

Clint was two hours late for their rendezvous. Her tungsten trigger finger twitched against her leg. It was her second long wait of the day; the line at the gunsmith had stretched out the door, and she'd been stuck waiting in the rain. She had wiped out her chits restocking, so she had to nurse a few drinks instead of getting herself plastered. Logically, she knew this was a blessing in disguise. But a part of her craved oblivion.

Three separate men approached her while she waited, but lifting her shirt up to reveal her semi-automatic was enough to change their minds. It helped that she was angry. Every neuron in her brain told her to get up, shatter her glass, and leave Clint behind. She forced herself to stay put.

"What took you so long?" Rey asked as Clint settled on the barstool. The seat groaned under his bulk.

"Chasing a lead. You get everything we need from the gunsmith?"

"Hours ago. I don't like waiting around, Clint. If you'd rather not work together, I can leave."

"Be my guest. You can drink yourself to death whenever you want," Clint said. He met Rey's steely eyes. "But I'd rather you stayed. You've got a good trigger finger."

She snorted. "Wow, thanks. What's this lead?"

"Have you heard of SemTech's new Ink?"

"The nanobots that make you live forever? Everyone agreed that was vaporware."

"Apparently not. The CEO held a demo three days back. Tatted himself and got twenty years younger."

"Even if that was true, what does it have to do with us?"

"He vanished near SoHo yesterday. SemTech is offering a substantial reward for his recovery."

"So, they'll pay a ransom. Let me guess. The Ink's missing too?"

"Exactly."

"Now every Joe in town fancies Inking himself with the fountain pen of youth. That explains the line at the gunsmith."

"Don't worry about other crews. We have a head start. Hit me with the mod-oil," Clint said.

Rey removed a bottle from her pack and slid it down the bar top. Clint touched his cybernetick's release point underneath the elbow joint, and the matte-black titanium machine-arm hissed open. Rey had seen the arm move fast enough to smash through bricks, metals, and heads. She averted her eyes from the mottled fleshy stump that rested within the cybernetick. His body's integration with the machine-arm made the veins on his stump protrude and glow a faint neon blue.

"This isn't our usual brand," Clint said, eying the bottle suspiciously.

"Gunsmith convinced me to try his new stuff. Said your titanium will like it."

"This better not muck up my hydraulics."

"If it does, talk to the gunsmith. We could use something extra. There's a lot of heat on this one."

"You want out?"

"Did I say I wanted out? I said there's heat. We need to be smart."

"In that case, let's find a place with fewer ears. I'll fill you in on our lead."

* * *

Clint's lead was a bugged SemTech security car. He'd bought the tracker from his cousin, who was connected to the Manhacking community. Manhackers were usually a sure thing when it came to tracking people down. Usually.

"They've been doing this SoHo loop for three hours. Sunlight's about gone. Car's going to run out of juice soon," Rey said.

"Fifteen more minutes," Clint said.

Rey didn't respond. The security car remained a few blocks ahead, a red blip on the car's center console. Clint drove. She watched the rearview mirror. A van with tinted windows appeared, and not for the first time.

"Van's back behind us. It's definitely not SemTech. We're being followed," Rey said. "You want me to take them out?"

"I swapped our plates before we left, but people around here know us. Warn 'em first," Clint said.

Rey rolled down the window, unholstered her semi-automatic, and leaned out of the car. She took a steadying breath and let her trigger finger do the work.

Ping ping ping ping. The van's sideview mirrors blasted away. Their pursuer slammed his brakes.

"They're stopping."

"Nice shooting," Clint said. His eyes remained forward.

Rey holstered her gun and crossed her arms.

"I'll need to do more than warn if we don't catch a real lead soon. Half the town will try to follow us and pick up scraps."

"Look. Tracker stopped moving in Cortland Alley," Clint said, nodding at the center console.

"This better be something," Rey responded.

* * *

They moved towards the stopped car on foot. The last vestiges of light disappeared quicker than a traveling salesman with the last of a town's hard-earned money. A few streetlights sputtered on and off. The rain continued.

Rey saw only one shadow as they moved. Another tail. The vultures were ready and waiting.

"I wouldn't try anything," she called. "I'm packing plenty of iron." The form slinked away.

When they reached the alley, they saw the SemTech car idling. Clint took out a scope and attached it to his arm, then lifted it to his eye.

"One heat signature in the car. One colder spot, recently vacated. Let's go route one," Clint said.

Rey nodded and took up a spot at the alley's corner. Clint zipped up a big hoodie to hide his cybernetick and shuffled forward, right arm held low. He knocked on the window.

"Hey. You got any stims?" he slurred. Rey held her hand ready on her hip. She heard the muffled voice of the driver cursing.

"Just give me some stims, man, come on. Or some chits." Another pause.

"No? Come on, man, please, I need a little hit," Clint said, and that did the trick. The driver opened the bulletproof door and stepped outside, likely to point a gun in Clint's face, but he never got the chance. Clint brought up his cybernetick from down low and unleashed. It sprang forward like a cannon, knocking the man against the car door hard enough to dent. The man crumpled. Rey jogged forward.

"I thought route one was to pound the details out of him? He doesn't look like talking."

"Couldn't tell what he was holding."

"If SemTech has a biomarker in him, we're in trouble."

"Are you kidding? For one of these goons? He'd be lucky if they pay for a dentist, let alone a biomarker. Let's stash him before his partner gets back. We'll get the same details with the backseat play."

* * *

Rey held herself low in the backseat, waiting for Clint's word. The minutes stretched on. After an eternity, Clint spoke.

"Two coming. They'll go for the back," he warned.

"Shit." Rey dove over the backseat headrest and into the trunk. The car door opened and the two men piled in. They were breathing hard. One held a small black bag.

"Get me the hell out of here before they realize we gave them fake Ink," the man said. Rey immediately recognized the face from the ads. A younger version of SemTech CEO Ryan Trust.

"Sure thing," Clint said. At that moment, Rey popped up from the trunk and placed her semi-automatic against the CEO's head.

"Do exactly what we say and you come out of this alive."

"Again? Fuck me," Trust groaned.

"Sir!" the goon yelled, but it was too late for him. Clint leaned over the headrest and fired his cybernetick. Trust began to blubber.

"Don't kill me. Please. We'll pay another ransom. Whatever you want. You'll be rich!"

"Relax, pretty boy. Give us the Ink and the schematics for the nanobots and we'll get you back to SemTech faster than you can bribe a bodymod safety officer," Rey said.

"The Ink's here. And I can get you the schematics." Trust reached into the black bag and pulled out a tattoo gun.

"How do we know it's real?" Clint asked.

"You can test it," Trust said. Clint and Rey looked at each other.

"Use her arm," Clint said. Rey's eyes narrowed. She held out her left wrist.

"Any funny business and I unload," she said.

"It's legit," Trust said. "I swear." His hands shook as he started up the tattoo gun and brought the needle down. It hit her wrist once, twice, three times. The change was instantaneous. Rey felt a dull pressure grow into an immense pain as every bone in her body reknit itself. Muscles tensed and grew. Her spine

straightened. She yelped and groaned, gritting her teeth to keep hold of her consciousness and her gun.

After thirty seconds, it was over. Clint eyed her with interest.

"Look," he said. He pointed to the rearview mirror. Rey held herself up and saw a face she hadn't seen in ages. No more wrinkles or grey hairs. She felt good. Really good.

"It worked," Rey gasped.

"Trouble," Clint said. Several SemTech vehicles appeared on the car's center console as blue blips. They were two blocks out. Clint grabbed the tattoo gun from Trust's hand.

"I told you they'd have a biomarker," Rey snapped.

"Let's bail. Drag him with you," Clint said. He hopped out of the front seat as the blue blips barreled forward. Rey tried to push Trust, but the man refused to move.

"You already have the Ink," he said. "If you shoot me, you're done for. But if you run now, I'll forget your face."

Rey didn't believe him, but she also didn't have time. She hopped out and slammed the door. Clint was already halfway down the street, donning his big hoodie and jogging away. She ran to catch up, feeling the spryness of her younger body. The SemTech cars arrived. Armed men began to rush towards the alley.

She had to look inconspicuous. Her gun went under her shirt. She snaked her arm through Clint's. Another young woman with an older man. Nothing to see here.

"Where's the CEO?" Clint asked.

"Couldn't move him. You didn't wait," Rey said. She held him close.

"Figured you had it handled," Clint said. But Rey could hear the lie. She glanced at his cocked and angled cybernetick, pointing right at her.

"After all this time?" Rey asked.

"Sorry, Rey. This Ink is going to change everything. I'm not sharing." Clint shifted his weight, preparing to launch his arm into Rey's gut.

The cybernetick's hydraulics stuttered. Rey moved her trigger finger to Clint's elbow, pressing down on the release. The arm hissed open, preventing redeployment. With reflexes twenty years faster than a minute before, Rey grabbed the tattoo gun from Clint's inside pocket, pushed him back off of her, and whipped out her semi-automatic. Clint held up his hands.

"Don't. They know we work together. Everyone will look for you."

"Nobody knows what I look like anymore." Rey's tungsten trigger finger twitched.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ben Chase is an award-winning writer whose work has been published in *Elegant Literature*, *Short Story Stack*, and *Toasted Cheese*. He won the January 2026 Elegant Literature Award for New Writers. When he's not writing, he can be found rowing or refereeing soccer, with a good chance that coaches will be yelling at him in either discipline. You can find more of his writing on his website, BenChaseWrites.com.

THE HUMMINGBIRD WAR

by Mark S. Bailen

Our HOA bylaws clearly stated that a hummingbird feeder must have no more than four feeding ports and a nectar vessel no greater than thirty-two ounces.

We understood the Eckells' confusion, given the new generation of feeders available online. So we wrote a polite letter, signed by our board, asking the Eckells to remove their twelve-port, two-gallon *Happy Hummer Mega Feeder* which hung from their soffit. We even waved the five-hundred-dollar fine. Yet after two weeks, the Eckells failed to comply, and we continued to receive complaints.

One complaint came from Ms. Tyson-Frank who, while walking her puganese, noted that every gray-breasted, blue-throated, and black-chinned hummingbird was bypassing her yard and speeding towards the abomination above the Eckells' porch.

Another came from Mr. Conner, who spotted Mrs. Eckell filling their feeder with *Advanced Lab's Special Formula Number 6 Hummingbird Nectar*. It contained ingredients such as gnat particles, lab-formulated sucrose, theobromine, and red dye #40. This was a strict no-no.

Left with little choice, our board met on a sunny afternoon and walked down the *Blue-Crunch No-Scuff* recreation path, over the pedestrian bridge that spanned our artificial lake filled with *Aqua Tonic Non-Evaporative Water*, crossed the easement between Oak and Spruce Streets, and gathered on the Eckells' porch.

Mrs. Chin, our president, wore a bright floral pantsuit and maintained a cheery disposition. "Perhaps the Eckells forgot to read the letter?" She pressed the doorbell. "Or misplaced it?"

Mr. Shiner, our treasurer, ducked to avoid a strafing hummingbird. He wore a shiny tracksuit and examined the feeder through gold-tinted glasses. "By God. It's as big as a gas pump."

"The nectar has an unusual rosy tint," said Dr. Guzman, our vice president. "I wouldn't mind getting a sample of that." She was on her lunch break from Phoenix Pharmaceuticals and still donned her white lab coat. She had mousy hair and an egg-shaped head.

"It's connected to the soffit," said Mr. Shiner. "That's another violation."

"Simple mistake," said Mrs. Chin.

Eventually, Mr. Eckell opened the door. He was a fifty-something man who dressed like somebody half his age. He wore flip flops, cargo shorts, and a t-shirt with a sine-wave pattern. He had silver sideburns and a trimmed goatee. It was rumored that he sold things off the internet. "Hello."

"Hi, Mr. Eckell," said Mrs. Chin. "We hate to bother you, but we have an urgent matter to discuss about your hummingbird feeder."

"Amazing, isn't it? The little birds can't get enough. My wife has to fill it twice a day."

"A feeder of this size is strictly against the bylaws."

"It's too big?"

"It's an eyesore," said Mr. Shiner.

"Huh?"

"We're not saying you can't have a feeder." Mrs. Chin fended off a rose-throated hummingbird. "Just not one this large. And not in the front yard."

"I'll take that into consideration."

"No, Mr. Eckell." Dr. Guzman straightened her lab coat. "It must be removed."

"Removed? I just spent two hundred and fifty dollars on this feeder." Mr. Eckell itched his elbows. "It was on sale at *NatureSquared.com*. What a wonderful website, right? Have you visited? They have tons of awesome stuff for the yard."

"This is a second violation." Mr. Shiner adjusted his glasses. "The fine is now one thousand dollars."

Mr. Eckell smirked. "Good luck collecting."

"Please, Mr. Eckell," said Mrs. Chin. "We understand your desire to attract nature to your yard. We all want more nature at *Endless Paradise Estates*. But hummingbirds are a limited resource. With a feeder of this size, you're attracting more than your fair share."

"Interesting. The HOA wants more nature." Mr. Eckell flip-flopped across the porch. "Then why did you make me dig up my trumpet vine? That bush attracted more hummingbirds than my feeder."

"Trumpet vine is invasive."

"Of course. Invasive." A gradient formed across Mr. Eckell's brow. "I'm sorry, Mrs. President, but my feeder isn't going anywhere. Go ahead and fine us. Stop inviting us to barbecues. Take away our access to the badminton court. But I refuse to listen to any more nonsense about what's nature and what isn't." He shook his head. "Invasive. Do you know what's invasive? You people. The HOA. Standing on my porch. Now do me a favor and disappear."

He stepped inside and shut the door.

"Well," said Mrs. Chin.

* * *

Three days later, our HOA voted unanimously to impose a one thousand dollar fine on the Eckells for an improperly sized and located hummingbird feeder. In addition, the board restricted the Eckells' access to many community properties, including the clubhouse, the pool, the driving range, the cantina, the tennis courts, and the recreation path.

A few neighbors thought that we ought to have gone further. Mr. Connor, a stocky man with bulldog cheeks, grew red-faced during the meeting. He wanted us to hire *Big Boy Handyman and Locksmith Services* to sneak onto the Eckells' property and confiscate their feeder. A few others agreed.

Mr. Shiner suggested a more peaceful measure, installing temporary bird netting on Oak Street, channeling the hummingbirds away from the Eckells' property.

"I priced out six acres of *Invisible Sky Humane Aerial Netting*," Mr. Shiner sat at his computer, peering over his gold-tinted glasses. "It'll cost us twenty-four thousand dollars from *NatureSquared.com*."

"Gee," said Mrs. Horton. "That's a lot."

"We'll have to raise our dues," said Mrs. Chin.

"Let's vote," said Mr. Shiner.

So we voted, but only Mr. Connor and Mr. Shiner wanted the netting.

"Typical." Mr. Connor stomped out of the clubhouse, his hackles raised. "All bark and no bite."

Mr. Shiner accepted the defeat graciously. But as he descended the *Lite Tread Safe Steps*, he said, "I've played golf with Eckell. The man is highly competitive. You watch. He won't back down."

We did watch and, just as Mr. Shiner predicted, the Eckells did not comply with the HOA's ruling, nor did they pay their fine. In the following week, neighbors on Oak, Pine, Fir, and Aspen Streets reported a steady drop in hummingbirds.

Ms. Tyson-Frank emailed the HOA stating, "I've seen two annas, both male, and one rufous female in the last three days. The broadtails and costas are completely gone. The Eckells have caused irreversible ecological damage."

Another email came from Mr. Connor: "I can't believe how toothless our HOA is. This is worse than the year when you replaced the trees and all the squirrels ran away. Bring back the hummingbirds now or I'll handle this myself. That's a promise."

In all fairness, the tree-replacement project, which happened three years prior, was brought about by a persistent drought. The only trees that had survived were a handful of scraggly mesquites. We held numerous HOA meetings explaining the need for new trees. According to our online survey, most members were pleased

with our selection, the sturdy and ultra-realistic *Canopy Brand Polycore Fourteen-Foot Saplings*. We also remedied the squirrel loss by purchasing ninety-five *Critter World Genetically-Modified Grade-A Ground Squirrels*. The squirrels were adapted to artificial trees and trained to collect nuts from *Canopy Brand Long Pole Pellet Distributors* which were stationed uniformly around the neighborhood and filled weekly for a nominal fee.

Following the aforementioned HOA meeting, Mr. Connor kept his promise and made the unfortunate decision to purchase the largest feeder on *NatureSquared.com*, the *Nature! Nature! Twenty-four-Port Eight-Gallon Hummingbird High-Rise* with a hidden speaker system that played subsonic hummingbird calls. Swarms of hummingbirds could now be seen over two distinct properties in *Endless Paradise Estates* while the rest of us suffered bleak yards and abandoned feeders.

Further escalation occurred a few days later when Mr. Eckell responded by not only installing additional feeders behind his privacy gable but also hooking up a *Yard Life Day-Night UV and Visual Light Holo Projector*. It was capable of generating over three hundred square feet of hologram decoys, photo-realistic lupine, butterfly bush, columbine, and trumpet creepers, used to attract more hummingbirds.

In addition, the Eckells brazenly flaunted the HOA's ruling by illegally accessing *Endless Paradise Estates* community properties. Mr. Eckell allegedly bribed an attendant with a hundred dollar bill to gain access to the driving range, bringing his own bucket of balls instead of the regulation *Danny Divot Lite Orange Flyers*. Mrs. Eckell donned a silver wig and pretended to be Mrs. Horton so she could visit the clubhouse and attend her online spin class, *Tour de Thighs*.

Thankfully, we had a remedy for the Eckells' behavior. We could confiscate their five thousand dollar escrow. And if their noncompliance continued, we could impose a lien on their property. Our final and most drastic option would be to obtain legal counsel and foreclose on their house, forcing the Eckells to move out of *Endless Paradise Estates*.

We hoped it wouldn't come to this. Foreclosure required tedious court proceedings and their house might sit empty for months. The neighborhood would risk losing its seventy-five percent occupancy rating and this would make Mrs. Chin extremely unhappy.

At the next HOA meeting, our board made a stern and forceful statement by voting unanimously to confiscate the Eckells' escrow. In addition, we issued fines and harsh warnings to Mr. Connor for installing a non-compliant hummingbird feeder. This was followed by Mr. Shiner revealing a previously unknown violation on Pine Street.

"My drone picked up an unusually high number of hummingbirds swarming above a third house." Mr. Shiner paced in his tracksuit. "It appears that our vice

president has joined the hummingbird war. Dr. Guzman is mixing non-standard, pharmaceutical-grade nectar in her garage and pumping it into her feeder from a buried refrigeration tank.”

The entire room shuddered and glared at Dr. Guzman.

“Is that a violation?” She stood cross-armed in her lab coat.

“You know it is! You helped write the bylaws,” said Mrs. Horton. “We’re only supposed to feed hummingbirds sugar and water, just like in nature.”

“You’re running an avian meth lab,” said Mr. Shiner.

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration. I’m testing a few formulas.” Dr. Guzman’s egg-shaped head wobbled. “Did you realize that a hummingbird heart can withstand over twelve hundred beats per minute? Not much more than that, mind you.”

Mrs. Horton hissed.

“Please, everyone. Let’s remain civil.” Mrs. Chin raised her hand. “Perhaps we should again consider Mr. Shiner’s bird netting? Maybe just on Pine Street?”

“Don’t forget Oak Street,” said Mr. Connor. “The Eckells started this mess.”

“And you escalated it,” said Mr. Shiner.

“Because the HOA can’t do its job!”

“Neighbors, please.” Mrs. Chin stepped between the two men. “The board will handle this in a prompt and civil manner, according to the bylaws.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.” Mr. Connor wagged a finger. “Just so you know, I’m not backing down. I just dropped another nine thousand dollars at *NatureSquared.com*. Five more feeders, a catch-and-release tagging system, and an electric honing device. Say goodbye to your hummingbirds, people. They’re mine. All mine!” He chuckled, his jowls shaking, and hopped down the *Lite Tread Safe Steps*, exiting the clubhouse.

After a short silence, Mr. Chin spoke. “Tell us more about this aerial netting, Mr. Shiner.”

* * *

In hindsight, perhaps the netting was an overcorrection. Yet our HOA couldn’t ignore our well-behaved residents who deserved to see hummingbirds. As representatives of *Endless Paradise Estates*, we needed to send a message to our non-compliant neighbors. They mustn’t hoard nature all to themselves. Nature was a resource that belonged to everyone. It must be easily accessible and evenly distributed. Thus, we voted to install *Invisible Sky Humane Aerial Netting* throughout the entire neighborhood, costing one hundred and sixty thousand dollars along with an increase in HOA dues by seventy-eight dollars a month.

Two days later, the canary-yellow trucks from *NatureSquared.com* showed up. Mr. Shiner met personally with the crew until we were satisfied with their plan. It took three days to install the netting, and soon it ran up and down every street, taut and nearly invisible.

"That's a lot of netting," said Mrs. Horton.

"Impressive," said Mr. Shiner.

"It's only temporary, right?" asked Mrs. Chin.

An anticipatory lull settled across our backyards as every resident with compliant feeders waited eagerly for the hummingbirds to return. And magically, two days later, it happened. Entire streets, including Pine, Aspen, and Spruce, witnessed the return of darting and strafing hummingbirds. Hearts were lifted. Nectar was drunk. Photos were posted. And although the neighborhood experienced a few dead zones, the complaints to the HOA subsided.

Unfortunately, two days later, the elation dwindled as many residents observed a dip in hummingbird visits. During the following week, the sightings dropped more, eventually going to zero. And then dead hummingbirds started appearing on the sidewalks. Complaints came from every street, even from residents with non-compliant feeders whose numbers were increasing. Nine households now had oversized feeders, and judging from the *NatureSquared.com* boxes in recycling containers, more were on the way.

Left with little choice, we announced an emergency HOA meeting. Mrs. Chin was forced to spend twenty minutes reassuring us that everything was okay. To boost our morale, she even scheduled a Hawaiian-themed barbecue potluck. "It's going to be maika'i loa." Then she handed the floor over to the treasurer.

Mr. Shiner looked frazzled, as if he hadn't changed his tracksuit in days. His eyes were pinpoints and his lips were extremely red. "Neighbors, I just got off the phone with *NatureSquared.com* and the news isn't good. It seems we failed to read the fine print. Apparently *Invisible Sky Humane Aerial Netting* might make hummingbirds more territorial. The birds are growing aggressive, forming packs, and fighting among themselves. We should expect a twenty percent decrease in the population per week."

A few members gasped.

"They're murdering each other?"

"Because of our feeders?"

"Poor little things," said Mrs. Horton.

"*NatureSquared.com* suggests that we keep our aerial netting extremely taut," Mr. Shiner said. "A sagging net will cause more birds to get trapped. They also suggested using bird deterrents, sonic spookers, and flashing laser beams to disrupt aggressive birds."

"You better figure this out." Mr. Connor growled. "I pay this HOA too much money to not enjoy my birds."

"They're not your birds," said Mrs. Horton.

"They're yours?"

Mr. Shiner cleared his throat and lifted a baggie containing a scarlet liquid. "In other news, we've had a sharp increase in illegal nectar. It appears that Dr. Guzman is hiring kids from the junior high to hang out on street corners and deal the stuff. I bought this on Pine Street. Has anybody seen our vice president?"

We looked around the room, but she was absent.

Mrs. Horton leaned towards the treasurer. "Have you been sampling that?"

"For scientific reasons," said Mr. Shiner.

"Let me get a taste." Mr. Connor reached for the baggie.

"Back off, sir."

Mr. Connor reached for the baggie and they both wrestled to the floor. Then two families from Aspen Street got into a shoving match. Another family from Fir Street jumped into the melee. And then it was chaos. A table broke. The dartboard fell off the wall. The carrots, celery, and broccoli plate tumbled across the carpet. Mrs. Chin waved her arms, trying to calm everybody down. And for nearly ten minutes, we lost control.

Finally, Mr. Shiner climbed on a chair and whistled. "Everybody settle down! I can bring the hummingbirds back!"

The yelling stopped and we sheepishly went to our corners.

Mr. Shiner deposited the baggie below his desk. "The HOA has everything under control. Trust us. The board members will discuss the nectar problem offline with Dr. Guzman. Let the bylaws work. In the meantime, I want nobody going to Pine Street to buy nectar. Do we all hear?" He sat behind his computer, breathing heavy.

"Now you'll be happy to know that I might have a solution for the plummeting hummingbird population, one that should satisfy everyone. *NatureSquared.com* is offering a subscription service that will offset the deaths caused by aerial netting and aggressive birds. It's a safe and natural solution, just like stocking a fishpond. And it only costs a few thousand dollars a week. Of course, this will prompt another increase in dues." He swiveled his monitor. "But look here. They have all kinds of hummingbirds. Annas. Costas. Lucifers. Rufous. Broad-tailed. Calliopes."

Everyone gathered around the computer, peering over Mr. Shiner's shoulder. Bright and fantastic birds flashed across his screen. For many minutes, we were entranced.

"Gee," said Mrs. Horton. "I've never seen a calliope."

"Me neither," said Mrs. Chin.

"Do they have bumblebees?"

"Cinnamons?"

"Look, they've got beryllines," said Mr. Conner. "I took a photo of one last year."

"My mom loves those," said Mr. Horton. "She screams in delight every time one flies past her window."

After twenty minutes of perusing the subscription packages, Mr. Shiner peered over his gold-tinted glasses. "Neighbors, this could be a solution."

Relieved by our newfound cohesiveness, our members quickly voted in favor of the subscription service, choosing the *Eden Plus 12 Live Hummingbird Summer Bouquet Sampler* with the weekly delivery option. We also voted to purchase six *Nature! Nature! Avian Deterrent Sonic Spookers*, and nine *AutoBird Flight Tracker A5 Repellent Lasers* to handle the aggressive birds. We finished the order with a one-year-plan from *NatureSquared.com* for aerial netting tightening, patch, repair, and clean-up of dead birds. The vote was unanimous. Feeling united and hopeful, we said our goodbyes and adjourned the meeting.

At first, the subscription package seemed to be a panacea. The skies of *Endless Paradise Estates* teemed with hummingbirds. The feeders were like firework displays. We had more than enough nature for everyone.

And yet sadly, the over-abundance only caused more problems. The hummingbird war spread to every street, becoming a multi-front battleground. Residents kept purchasing bigger and bigger feeders, trying to attract the more exotic breeds. Bright, plastic strongholds cluttered nearly every porch and gable. Strobing floral displays lit up the night sky.

And then more alarming events occurred. An electric fence was constructed in the easement on Aspen Street. Cybernetic hawks circled Spruce Street. And an underground hatchery was discovered on Pine Street. The canary-yellow trucks from *NatureSquared.com* became a regular presence, screeching to stops and depositing crews of uniformed workers to clean up dead birds, trap overly aggressive swarms, patch netting, and release new birds. They scurried through our backyards carrying nets and barking orders through crackling radios.

Collectively we felt helpless. Many neighbors spurned the HOA and stopped paying their dues. Social gatherings at the clubhouse ceased all together. A few residents grew despondent and put their houses on the market. All because of these tiny ephemeral birds? Why did we care so much? What were we missing from our lives?

Our board members sought desperately for a solution. Should we purchase a new ping pong table for the game room? Stock the artificial lake with *Critter World Genetically-Enhanced Koi*? Hold a weekly continental breakfast with waffles, home fries, and orange juice?

At the next HOA meeting, the tension was palpable. Nobody chit-chatted or made eye contact. The celery, carrot, and broccoli platter remained untouched. Dr. Guzman returned, looking disheveled and wearing sunglasses. Mr. Connor circled the room, red-faced. And to everyone's surprise, the Eckells showed up. Mr. Eckell wore a black t-shirt displaying a schematic of an integrated chip. Mrs. Eckell sported an electric-blue beehive and wore a flower-patterned polyester dress. Many neighbors stared at the troublesome couple who had started this mess.

Mrs. Chin walked to the center of the clubhouse, straightened her pantsuit, and for once, wasn't smiling. "Thanks everyone for being present today. It's nice to see some fresh faces." She forced a smile at the Eckells.

"Neighbors, we have some big decisions to make. We need to decide what sort of neighborhood *Endless Paradise Estates* will be. How much nature we can tolerate. Some of us are facing foreclosure. Others are facing liens. For the first time in years, our occupancy rate is in danger of dropping below seventy-five percent. This hummingbird business has gone too far. I'm terrified to walk outside. Sonic spookers keep spooking me. Yellow vans speed down our streets at unreasonable speeds. Dead birds keep dropping on my head." She pointed in all directions. "And none of you attended my barbecue!"

Mrs. Chin was interrupted by a scream coming from outside the clubhouse. Everyone hushed.

"Come outside! Quick!"

Mr. Shiner was the first out the door, running in his tracksuit down the *Blue-Crunch No-Scuff* recreation path. Next came the Hortons, followed by Mr. Connor and Mrs. Chin and the rest of us. Well, everyone except for the Eckells, who remained sitting with bemused looks, comfortably perched on matching *Cloud Puff Faux Leather Carefree Loungers*.

When we ran outside and rounded the corner, we spotted Ms. Tyson-Frank standing alone at the crest of a hill with her hand over her mouth. We climbed the hill and crowded around, looking where she pointed. And we were horrified.

Below the hill was a line of canary-yellow trucks where crews in hazmat suits dragged garbage bags towards a large hole that was the size of an Olympic swimming pool. The workers tossed the bags in the ditch. Whomp. Whomp. Whomp. When the bags landed, they split open, and dead hummingbirds poured out. The ditch was carpeted. And when the sunlight struck the pile, the dead birds sparkled like jewels.

"By God," whispered Mr. Shiner.

"What have we done?" said Mrs. Horton. "It's a killing field."

"A crime," said Mrs. Chin. "A crime against nature."

We were silenced. Stunned. Sickened. For many moments we stood side-by-side watching the bags of dead hummingbirds get tossed into the ditch. They kept

coming and coming. Whomp. Whomp. Whomp. Some residents couldn't look away. A few gagged. Others walked numbly back to the clubhouse. Mr. Connor took photos.

Sometime later we filtered back to the clubhouse and resumed the HOA meeting. The mood was somber. Mrs. Chin raised her hand. "Neighbors, considering what we've just witnessed, I motion that we immediately hire *Big Boy Handyman and Locksmith Services* to go around to every property and confiscate our over-sized feeders. They should also remove all home improvements related to hummingbirds, the aerial netting, and the sonic deterrents. The hummingbird war must stop now."

"That's a bit of an overreach," said Mr. Connor.

"Not if we vote for it."

"What about the subscription service?" asked Mr. Shiner. "We paid for a full year."

"Fine, we'll keep the subscription service," said Mrs. Chin. "But everything else must go."

After much grumbling and teeth gnashing, we voted. Only the Eckells abstained. And thankfully, by a slight margin, the motion passed.

A few residents were livid, Mr. Connor among them. "Go ahead and foreclose on me, Mrs. President. I can't live in a neighborhood that won't even let me have a bird feeder." He stalked out of the clubhouse. A few others followed.

As for the rest of us, we let out a collective sigh. With the hummingbird war officially over and our members emotionally spent, the meeting adjourned and everyone filed out of the clubhouse. Everyone except for the Eckells and the board members.

"We've come to pay our fine," said Mr. Eckell, approaching Mrs. Chin.

"I talked him into it," said Mrs. Eckell, her blue beehive bouncing. "It's so silly to fight over nature."

Mrs. Chin smiled. "I'm happy you two came to your senses. It's been crazy, this hummingbird business. Who knew that tiny birds could cause so much trouble? We've issued fines and taken escrows, and now two houses are going into foreclosure, including our vice president's. If only we knew how to make our neighbors happy."

"Good luck with that." Mr. Eckell handed the check to Mr. Shiner and the couple proceeded down the *Lite Tread Safe Steps*.

"If you have any ideas . . ." Mrs. Chin said, her voice trailing off.

Mr. Eckell halted on the steps. "Huh?"

"For making our neighbors happy," said Mrs. Chin.

Mr. Shiner peered over his gold-tinted glasses. "The HOA could always use more input."

The Eckells exchanged looks on the *Lite Tread Safe Steps*. Then Mr. Eckell smiled and turned his gray eyes. "Since you asked." He hopped back up the steps. "Have you visited *NaturedSquared.com* recently? We're having a blowout sale on water features."

"We're?" asked Mr. Shiner.

Mr. Eckell put his arms around the treasurer's shoulders. "Imagine every resident of *Endless Paradise Estates* having their own multi-tiered water feature. Nothing could bring more joy. Each fountain is built from *Wonder Wall Artificial Rocks* and contains a holding pond filled with *Aqua Tonic Non-Evaporative Water* covered in *Canopy Brand Fourteen-Inch-Diameter Lily Pads* and stocked with *Critter World Genetically-Modified Grade-A Frogs*. And that's just getting started . . ."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark S. Bailen is a writer from Northern Arizona. His two favorite activities are hiking and doodling. He would do both at the same time if it didn't increase his risk of running into a tree. He has an MFA from the University of Arizona. He's a member of Codex. He's published in *Ecotone*, *Nature*, and *McSweeney's*. He also wrote and illustrated an award-winning children's book titled *Earf*. His website is FakeMountain.com.

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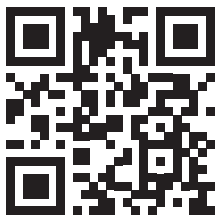
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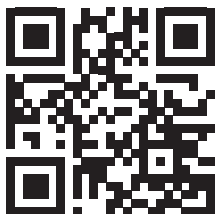
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