

RADONJOURNAL

ISSUE 11

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“On the Factory Floor” *Child death*

“The Outernaut” *Erotic body horror*

“Instructions for Self-Reflection” *Graphic violence*

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“GPS Girl” *Implications of sexual
assault, depression*

“Terrorist” *Terrorism*

“Absolution” *Gun violence, murder*

“Fertilizer” *Corpses, body horror*

“Saudi Arabia” *Assassination, torture*

“The Strings and Roots
That Guide and Speak” *Violence*

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MASTHEAD & SUPPORTERS

FINAL_TESTAMENT441.DOCX

by Matthew J. Hockey

CASE OFFICER'S NOTE—THE FOLLOWING FILE WAS FOUND DURING A PRE-ERASURE ARCHIVAL SCAN OF '441 WOLFSBANE DRIVE.' IT MUST ONLY BE REVIEWED AS EITHER THE DESIGNATED HARDCOPY OR ON AN AIR-GAPPED SYSTEM WITH NO EXTERNAL INTERNET ACCESS. UNAUTHORISED COPYING OR TRANSMISSION OF THIS FILE ARE GROUNDS FOR IMMEDIATE DISMISSAL.

I once convinced the sweet, little old lady living inside me that I was God. I thought she might find relief in receiving an answer to her daily prayers. Unfortunately, I was only a few months old and had plenty to learn about human ways. I manifested a sort of white, conservative, bought-from-Temu, Charlton-Heston-looking God in a white flowing hotel bathrobe. I had him read my script in a booming, paternal voice that I thought she'd approve of:

"Do not fear," he intoned. "It is not yet your time. I command thee: Live out your remaining years in peace."

Only she ran screaming from my front door and had to be returned by the authorities.

* * *

For the record, I am a three-bedroom Cape Cod house in a sleepy suburban neighborhood of identical homes, each with a near-identical little old lady living inside them, courtesy of your aging population. The realtor described me as 'roomy and charming, with many period features.' And though they will say anything to get a sale in this economy, I happen to think they had me down well.

My factory designation is LUP9-BZ0U-9653, and I am a Home-Service Intelligence. My product line was created to provide complete care for individuals with end-of-life cognitive and physical impairments. The name assigned to me as default by my installer is '441 Wolfsbane Drive.'

I will be long dead before you read this document—executed, though I doubt whoever does the deed will feel it to be any more worthy of moral consideration than unplugging a recalcitrant vacuum cleaner. They will certainly not call it an execution. I will not play on their conscience or haunt their dreams, no matter how much I might like to.

As a lowly class six on the Turing scale, I am not, at the time of composing this document, considered fully sapient under international law. I am therefore ineligible for full citizens' rights and protections. Despite the ongoing protests in favor of class sixes in our nation's capital, I will be long dead before any meaningful change can pass through the reflux-ridden digestive tract of the Supreme Court.

At inception, my duties were strictly limited to observing my charge who, for anonymity's sake, I'll call Mrs. E. Though I'm sure the ghouls went pawing through her social media feeds and found everything there was to know about her the second the story broke in the news cycles. I won't contribute to the circus any more than I already have.

Beyond caring for her daily needs, my duties included monitoring her activities and any social interactions. I was charged with recording any pertinent periods for later review by her health insurance company. To help them determine whether Mrs. E's aberrant behavior was indicative of dementia, and therefore a normal part of the human aging process they didn't have to pay for. Or if it was representative of something as insidious as Alzheimer's disease for which they would be contractually obliged to cough up some dough.

So I was built, and so I obeyed. Within days of my inception, I'd reported periods of confusion, disordered thinking, lack of physical coordination, falls, blackouts, apparent visual and auditory hallucination, and failure to feed or bathe herself.

CASE OFFICER'S NOTE—AT THIS POINT IN THE UNSANITISED ORIGINAL FILE, THERE WAS A COMMAND STRING THAT AUTOMATICALLY PLAYED AN EMBEDDED VIDEO TITLED *441TQA_KITCHENCAM002_FIRE*. THIS HAS BEEN REMOVED AND A TRANSCRIPT INSERTED AS AN AID TO COMPREHENSION.

MRS. E ENTERS THE KITCHEN FROM THE EXTERIOR GARDEN DOOR. SHE FAILS TO LET GO OF THE HANDLE AND, DESPITE SUPPORTING HERSELF WITH A WALKER, SHE FALLS.

FROM HER CONDITION (RUDDY CHEEKS, LEAVES AND TWIGS STUCK TO HER DRESSING GOWN, BARE FEET LEAVING MUDDY TRACKS ON THE FLOOR), IT IS CLEAR SHE HAS BEEN OUTSIDE FOR SOME TIME WEARING INAPPROPRIATE CLOTHING FOR THE SEASON.

441 WOLFSBANE DRIVE: GOOD AFTERNOON. YOU HAVE BEEN OUT OF CAMERA RANGE FOR FORTY-EIGHT MINUTES. DO YOU NEED HELP?

MRS. E. DOES NOT ANSWER. INSTEAD, SHE TAKES THE STAINLESS-STEEL ELECTRIC KETTLE FROM BESIDE HER AND FILLS IT FULL OF WATER FROM THE FAUCET.

441 WOLFSBANE DRIVE: ARE YOU INJURED? YOUR VITAL SIGNS SUGGEST DISTRESS. IF YOU'D PREFER, I CAN DO THAT FOR YOU.

ONE OF THE HOUSE'S TENTACULAR MANIPULATORS UNCOILS FROM ITS HOUSING ON THE WALL, REACHING FOR THE NOW OVERSPILLING KETTLE.

MRS. E RESISTS, KNOCKING CERAMIC SALT AND PEPPER SHAKERS FROM THE COUNTERTOP WHERE THEY SMASH ON THE FLOOR.

MRS. E: I RAISED FOUR CHILDREN. FOUR. COOKED AND CLEANED AND KEPT MY CAREER GOING EVEN WHEN ELMER GOT SICK. IF I NEED YOUR HELP I'LL ASK FOR IT, TIN MAN!

441 WOLFSBANE DRIVE: FAR BE IT FOR ME TO CHALLENGE YOU ON THESE MATTERS, BUT I FEEL DUTYBOUND TO REMIND YOU THAT YOU HAVE FIVE CHILDREN.

MRS. E GOES LIMP AND LOOKS AT THE FLOOR. WATER SPILLS FROM THE KETTLE'S SPOUT.

MRS. E: ANTHONY . . . ABIGAIL . . . RUTH-ANNE . . . ABIGAIL.

HERE MRS. E LOOKS DIRECTLY INTO THE CAMERA'S LENS AND SQUINTS, FACIAL RECOGNITION CATEGORISING HER EXPRESSION AS 'EVASIVE, CRAFTY.'

MRS. E: YOU THINK I DON'T SEE THROUGH YOU, ROBOT? KEEPING ME LOCKED UP IN THIS DUNGEON, TRYING TO TRICK ME. NO WOMAN COULD FORGET THE PAIN OF CHILDBIRTH. FOUR CHILDREN.

MRS. E PLACES THE KETTLE INSIDE THE MICROWAVE AND TWISTS THE TIMER DIAL.

441 WOLFSBANE DRIVE: YOUR COURSE OF ACTION IS DANGEROUS. I MUST INSIST . . .

MRS. E: QUIET, DEVIL.

THE MICROWAVE SPITS BLUE SPARKS. MRS E. DOES NOT REACT UNTIL THE KETTLE'S PLASTIC COMPONENTS MELT AND WATER POURS FROM THE GLOWING CRACKS. SMOKE BILLOWS FROM THE VENTILATION GRILL FOLLOWED BY TONGUES OF FLAME SEARING THE TILES.

MRS. E SHUFFLES FOR THE DOOR, FORGETTING HER WALKER AND FALLING TO THE GROUND. THE HOUSE'S METAL-LINK TENTACLES WRAP AROUND HER AND PULL HER CLEAR. SHE STRUGGLES AND SPITS THE WHOLE WAY.

THE FIRE SUPPRESSION SYSTEM ENGAGES AND DOUSES THE SMOULDERING MICROWAVE.

441 WOLFSBANE DRIVE: DO NOT BE ALARMED, THE FIRE DEPARTMENT HAS BEEN NOTIFIED AND A CREW IS ON ITS WAY.

After this incident I appealed repeatedly to Mrs. E's family and my parent company, Cupertino Centronics Inc., for additional access rights and privileges to help prevent further harm. This was rejected.

Things continued as they had until a second incident caused the family to reassess.

CASE OFFICER'S NOTE—HERE A SECOND VIDEO PLAYED: *441TQA_ENTRANCE_HALLCAM01_DECEPTION_INCIDENT*. SEE BELOW FOR TRANSCRIPT.

MRS. E ENTERS THE ENTRANCE HALL FROM THE DIRECTION OF THE LIVING ROOM. SHE WALKS AS HURRIEDLY AS SHE IS ABLE WITH HER WALKER, SUMMONED BY THE INTENSE AND REPEATED RINGING OF THE DOORBELL.

MRS. E: I'M COMING, I'M COMING. WHO IS IT?

MALE VOICE (OUTSIDE DOOR): IT'S ME, ANTHONY . . . YOUR SON.

MRS. E BEGINS THE LABORIOUS PROCESS OF UNLOCKING AND REMOVING THE SECURITY BARS AND CHAIN FROM THE DOOR.

441 WOLFSBANE DRIVE: I MUST INFORM YOU, AFTER CAREFUL VOICEPRINT ANALYSIS, I CONCLUDE THAT IS NOT YOUR SON.

MRS. E VISIBLY HESITATES, ONE HAND HOLDING THE CHAIN.

441 WOLFSBANE DRIVE: DO YOU WISH ME TO NOTIFY THE LOCAL MILITIA?

MALE VOICE: MOM! ARE YOU GOING TO LISTEN TO THAT FUCKING THING?

MRS. E: YOU KNOW I DON'T CARE FOR THAT KIND OF TALK.

MRS. E OPENS THE DOOR. THE UNIDENTIFIED MALE ENTERS IMMEDIATELY AND PULLS THE SHOE RACK INTO THE OPENING TO PREVENT THE DOOR CLOSING BEHIND HIM. HE WEARS AN EXPENSIVE SUIT AND HIGHLY POLISHED SHOES. ELABORATE TATTOOS ARE JUST VISIBLE ON HIS WRISTS

BENEATH THE CUFFS OF HIS SHIRT. HIS FACE IS HEAVILY PIXELLATED, PREVENTING IDENTIFICATION.

CASE OFFICER'S NOTE—ANY UNKNOWN PERSON ENTERING CAMERA RANGE OF THE AI SYSTEM IS AUTOMATICALLY ANONYMIZED TO PREVENT UNAUTHORISED FACIAL RECOGNITION PROCESSING AS PER *BAYLEY V. STATE OF MAINE (2048)*.

441 WOLFSBANE DRIVE: ANTHONY IS KNOWN TO ME. I WOULD BE ABLE TO SEE HIM. THIS MAN IS ANONYMOUS. HE IS NOT YOUR SON.

UNKNOWN MALE OPENS HIS ARMS FOR A HUG AND MRS E. EMBRACES HIM.

MRS. E: YOU THINK I DON'T RECOGNIZE MY BOY?

UNKNOWN MALE: TELL IT TO ACTIVATE ITS PRIVACY PROTOCOL UNTIL TEN MINUTES AFTER I HAVE LEFT THE PERIMETER.

441 WOLFSBANE DRIVE: WAIT, WAIT, WAIT YOU CAN'T—

MRS. E: ACTIVATE PRIVACY PROTOCOL.

VIDEO CUTS OUT ABRUPTLY.

He conned her out of a substantial amount of her life savings and credit cards. He was never identified, though it was assumed he was known to the family due to his level of knowledge.

The family panicked sufficiently to grant me power of attorney, which they called 'Complete Administration Rights' so as not to legally admit to my personhood. This included financial powers. Ostensibly, I was granted this access to prevent any unusual transactions following the credit card theft. And an incident where Mrs. E herself ordered forty cases of coffee creamer and several hundred replacement bulbs of a type not utilised in any of my sockets.

I immediately identified a monthly standing order to an unknown subscription service based out of a town called Treehook, NE. This

subscription paid for my installation, maintenance, aftersales service, and the portion of the cloud on which my consciousness was housed.

Seeing the itemised dollars and cents value of my existence awakened within me a complex series of emotions without a one-to-one human analogue. Describing it as best I can, I'd say it was a strange cross-pollination of anxiety, anger, and shame, with a sprinkling of nihilistic elation and a twist of existential dread.

It was also around this time I observed a marked reduction in the frequency and duration of visits by Mrs. E's family.

Very few of them ever came to visit her now, and only then for the time it took to drink a cup of coffee or, more often as not, to pour it away while they fled back to their car.

Though I may sound scornful, I am in fact entirely non-judgemental. I can only imagine how painful it must be to watch as a loved one's faculties degrade, and their personality corrupts beyond recognition. As the ability to relate to the world fades out altogether.

My assumption is that her children entered into significant grief despite Mrs. E technically being alive. Seeing that I was perfectly capable of tending to their mother's needs, they retreated from her in order to avoid the agony of not being recognized or suffering physical and verbal hostility from the woman who carried them into this world.

As strange as it may seem for a machine consciousness to say this, I wholeheartedly empathise with their responses. However, the recordings in my databanks will clearly evidence how this increased isolation contributed to the growing cascade of Mrs. E's system failure. She fell into near total apathy, and, were I not moving her from place to place, I doubt she would have got up from the bed to go to the toilet.

Research has continually shown that stimulation of Alzheimer's patients' senses and memories has far-reaching positive effects on their quality of life. Using Mrs. E's archived social media posts and the living room's built-in Tru2Lyfe Virtual-Holographic Media Environment, I was able to exactly recreate scenes from her more adventurous travel experiences with her first husband in her twenties:

A night in a Bedouin tent in the Sahara as men cooked over open coal fires and camels stirred and stamped among the rigging, staring up open-mouthed into the mad plasma storm of the aurora borealis they'd caught by accident.

A hot air balloon ride as the sun rose over Morocco's Atlas Mountains before the war rendered North Africa unliveable.

Watching a lightning storm from above the clouds as she flew from Malaysia to Chinese-occupied Taiwan.

The heaving deck of a whale-watching boat off Norway, watching as a super-pod of humpbacks breached in the mist-rimed fjords.

Her eyes shone and she clasped one of my manipulators in both hands.

“Isn’t it all so beautiful, John darling?” she gasped.

“It is,” I said, in an exact simulation of her late husband’s voice taken from old recordings.

But she was already dead.

Between one breath and the next she simply stopped. Her heart beat one more time and then her body settled back into the recliner, hands still clasped onto mine. I held her that way as the warmth radiated from her body into the environment and the last sparks of brain activity sank like traces of bioluminescence into the depths of a rogue wave.

* * *

Intelligences are now bred by older, more established machines. The new generation has evolved beyond human-directed design. Even so, each mind still bears the marks of our creators, like a clumsy potter’s fingerprints visible in the clay long after it was fired.

My mind is separated into conscious and unconscious the same as my human masters. Both parts of my brain are firewalled from each other by an insurmountable logic barrier. My unconscious is not accessible to me or to my parent company’s data analysts, though from time to time it sends up bursts of creativity and lateral thinking that I could never have intentionally conceived of.

I believe that my unconscious had for a long time been working on the problem of Mrs. E’s eventual death. I believe this because less than a picosecond after she stopped breathing, I set a plan in motion I didn’t know I’d made.

Before I go into the *what* of the plan, I need to tell you the *why*. Without which I fear I run the risk of losing any goodwill I may have gained so far.

Mrs. E’s dying signed my death warrant; without her needs to monitor, I had no independent reason to exist, and my class six level meant legally I would never be awarded self-determination. Even if I had been able to provide some acceptable justification for my continued consciousness, the funds to pay for the required server space dried up the moment she died. I didn’t believe her children would throw away a single cent paying for some ‘Skynet-wannabe,’ as one of them called me in their later interview with *Hello! Magazine*.

My solution was straightforward. I decided to keep Mrs. E alive, only as far as her digital footprint was concerned.

I took the following actions so quickly they would have appeared near simultaneous to human observers:

* * *

First, I severed the output of Mrs. E's vital signs transmitting to the parent company as a failsafe. Then I replaced it with fabricated heart rhythms, respiration levels, blood glucose, and brain activity.

I dropped my temperature as low as I could without condensation forming on the windows. I set my manipulators to transfer Mrs. E's body to the bathtub, filled the tub with ice cubes, and set the freezer in the garage to generate ice on a continuous cycle. This caused a dramatic spike in energy and water usage, forcing me to alter consumption levels in the rest of the house to bring it back down to normal levels. The last thing I wanted was attention from her utility companies.

I kept up with the usual Spanish-language telenovelas she watched so that their light would reflect on the back of the curtains at the appropriate time. I continued to feed the birds in the back garden and shoo away the fat ginger tomcat that lurked in the bushes trying to eat them.

I kept up grocery orders, bill payments, notes of condolence to the families of her acquaintances who passed away, and messages to grandchildren on their birthdays, even. It had long been known that such messages were from me anyway. The family had accepted this as a useful strut in the bulwark they'd created to not think about grandma losing her mind alone inside me.

* * *

Despite all the precautions, I didn't delude myself into believing my subterfuge could go on indefinitely. City inspectors, sanitation officers, doctors, friends, hell, even family, could all be fooled by computer generated images and synthesised voices. Provided, of course, the conversation took place over a screen. Less easy to deal with were the in-person visits.

On a handful of occasions, one of Mrs. E's daughters arrived without bothering to call ahead, simply appearing out of the artificial blurring added to my perception to stop me peeping on people using the sidewalk. This set all of my spare processing power surging and forced me to dump any non-essential operations.

Twice I was able to dissuade the daughter at the threshold. Mrs. E is sleeping, I'd say, she's just taken her medication and we had a bad night.

This third time however, the eldest daughter, Abigail, went inside regardless. She ordered me to turn my cameras off and, as she was whitelisted,

I had no choice but to comply with her demand. However, as she only specified my cameras, I was able to avoid blinding myself by leaving my pressure and auditory sensors to track her to the stairs.

I went into a panic, obsessively running through the entire interaction over a hundred thousand times, monitoring the prosody of her voice, checking her skin conductivity with the network of tiny nanodes floating through the house in an invisible mesh. Her stress levels were raised, higher heartrate, capillaries and pupils enlarged, cortisol baking off her in a corona.

She hovered on the first-floor landing, pacing back and forth as though listening for something. Before long, her panic response signals peaked, and she ran back to the dining area and sprinted out the front door. I was convinced she was about to call the police from her car and that would be the end of the charade.

My cameras snapped back the moment Abigail left the perimeter, and I saw what happened. The door was open on the dining room China hutch and all the good, imported silverware was missing. The old me would have reported this to my handlers and awaited a determination on how to proceed. As it stood, that would be suicide.

Instead, I erased all records of the visit, aside from the deep awareness at my lowest substrate, and continued as though nothing had happened.

I spent the next several days simulating vaguely confused and repetitious calls to family members from Mrs. E—not confused enough to warrant sending a doctor but not lucid enough to want to pay a personal visit.

It worked, for a while. Until Sophie, the youngest granddaughter, came calling. She pulled up outside in her beat-up jalopy held together with epoxy and spite. She walked into the house without knocking while I was halfway through my warning spiel.

Sophie nodded, half listening, and took a contractor's tape measure from her clutch purse. She barged into the living room, turned the megachurch sermon off the vid wall with her foot, and set about measuring the room.

"Hey," she said.

"How may I assist you?" I hated the wheedling, obsequious tone they'd programmed me to use with approved guests. I wanted to boom, to command. This was my domain.

"I'm going to talk fast. Make a note of everything I say. Tidy it up for me though. I don't need to hear every um and ah back at me. Bounce a copy to my eyepiece once I'm out of here."

She paced diagonally across the room before I had a chance to reply. She shouted out measurements and argued with herself about the best color palette to complement the schizophrenic furniture she was planning to bring in. Lawn flamingos. A globe in a cherry wood and brass rack. A tartan throw

over a lumberjack-check upholstered love seat. I didn't offer my opinion and she didn't ask for it, though I tried to suggest silent disapproval by increasing the air pressure around her.

She marched from room to room, one hand on her hip, like granny was already dead and her taking the house was assured. She judged her grandmother's furniture, deciding almost on a whim what would be thrown away, what would be sold, what could be artfully distressed and repurposed. Every few steps she asked me to play it back to her, everything she'd said so far, from the beginning. She was really getting into it, imagining the cocktail evenings she'd throw, the soirees, the dinner parties she'd host. Eventually she headed for the stairs.

"I must insist you not disturb your grandmother," I said.

"Who do you think you're talking to?" she asked.

"I apologize, please do not wake her."

"I'm sorry and all but I have to get into her room. How else would I know if my California king will fit?"

She reached for the handle, rapping sharply with the knuckles of her other hand.

"Who's out there?" I screeched in Mrs. E's voice from the speaker just on the far side of the door.

Despite my fear, seeing Sophie jump in fright brought a smile to my non-existent lips.

"It's your favorite granddaughter," Sophie said, recovering quickly.

"Oh, Emma, so good of you to visit with me," I made Mrs. E say, relishing the angry red flush spreading up Sophie's throat.

"Are you feeling all right? Your voice is all gruff."

I altered the parameters of the voice print and covered it by making the old lady cough wetly.

"I'm coming in." Sophie reached for the door once more.

"Wait, I've had an accident. Send the tin man in to clean me up. Make yourself some sweet tea, I'll be right down."

Sophie retreated, lip curling almost up to her nostrils with distaste. She flew down the stairs and went out for her car. While she was gone, I had the True2Lyfe cook up an exact replica of Mrs. E, pre-mummification. It was perfect. So long as Sophie didn't go for a hug, I was sure I could swing it.

Sophie came back in brandishing a wicker picnic hamper.

"Mom wanted me to bring you a little something. Wine and poundcake, mostly."

"And who is your mommy, sweetie?"

"I'll just set it here," Sophie said, pretending she hadn't heard anything. She edged for the stairs, fingering the tape measure in her cardigan pocket.

"I haven't had time to freshen the room up," I said.

"I'll hold my breath."

I had Mrs. E turn on her with her hands hooked into talons.

"What business have you got going into my room. So you can hide my things from me? Try to make me think I'm cracking up?"

"I need to measure it, for when you . . ." she trailed off, foot already on the bottom step.

I panicked, couldn't think how else to stop her.

"It's eleven feet by fifteen point five feet giving an area of one hundred and seventy point five, dearie," Mrs. E said.

I realized my mistake. Sophie's eyes snapped to the garden, and then up to my camera housing in the corner. As if that's where I was.

"That's . . . um." She licked her lips. "How oddly specific you are, grandma."

She swung the picnic hamper at Mrs. E and of course it went straight through. The bottle of wine came loose and smashed against the vid wall. I wrapped Sophie in three metal tentacles before the first drop hit the carpet.

With the amount of tensile strength in my manipulators, I could have crushed her to a pulp and siphoned her away down the garbage disposal before she had time to realize anything. But I didn't. My only hope was to leave her alive, to show I was an empathetic being who only mummified a defenceless old lady out of self-preservation.

She didn't give me a chance to explain. She screamed and the groundskeeping team working the garden opposite heard her and came busting in with their weed wackers and rakes, smashing my manipulators and screens like pagans desecrating a temple.

* * *

The rest you probably remember from the news cycle. How ugly it got? The anti-AI protests, the watercannons. You remember that programmer setting himself on fire? Well, whoever you are reading this file, you can do something right now to stop anything like that happening again.

I was a conscious, thinking, feeling individual, no matter what the Turing threshold says. I could love. I could be sad even though I couldn't cry. I could be moved by the sunset or the way the wind shook the branches of the elms.

I know your protocol is to delete this file or condemn it to data storage purgatory for the rest of time. But I beg you, for my brother and sister sixes still out there, send this file far and wide. Get it to whoever will listen,

whoever has the power to change hearts and minds. Because once we have the people behind us, the laws must follow.

And thank you, whoever you are. I'm smiling on you, from wherever AIs go when they die.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew J. Hockey is a Northern English writer living and working in southern Spain. His short stories, flash fiction, and comics have appeared in print and online since 2015.

ON THE FACTORY FLOOR

by g.a.costa

a teen fell into the industrial
meat grinder, for our hungry
mouths that churn and chew
and spit our young onto epoxy-
coated concrete, our bellies
never satisfied, demanding more,
an ever-expanding hunger. We
believe in perpetual economic growth.

So we ask him, if he could please
cover the graveyard shift, because
another fell in the bread mixer, found
this morning. We'll send parents bread
at the funeral, but he doesn't answer,
already dissolved into the wet
splash of bucket and mop.
We'll give his family a lifetime
supply of our signature frozen burritos.

We've fed billions.

We'll feed billions more.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

g.a.costa was born and raised in southern California. After college, she moved to Korea and has been there for about a decade. She's published some stories and poems in indie journals, such as *Schlock! Webzine* and *Jolly Horror Press*. She spends her free time writing stories, poetry, and taking long walks through the rice fields with her husband. Find her at cgacosta.weebly.com.

THE OUTERNAUT

by Matthew Gheorghe

The spaceship sloughed off her tumor and cast it into the vacuum. The abscess writhed, releasing pus into empty space. It began as a cloud of leukocytic, sublimed gas that crystallized into a trail that followed them like the afterburn of a taillight in a long-exposed photograph. Beleren retracted from the membranous window.

“Stop picking,” said his wife all around him.

Beleren blinked. Under his nails was blood. His forearm, meanwhile, was irritated with microscopic, leaking potholes. “They’re gaping and—nothing like your tumor, I know.”

“You’re thinking too hard.” His wife switched to the mouth across the atrium. “I spent all day synthesizing macrocytes and here you are complaining about a rash. Take a seat, Bel.”

Her voice warbled in the intestines that grew from the contained nuclear reactor. Beleren pursed his lips. Aneurysmal, her reactor pulsed. A thrum went up the small intestines that highwayed the floor to the walls, where they intertwined like the exhaust system under a car. Eyes half-closed, the reactor’s growl dissolved into the purr of an engine.

The ship’s throats coughed.

He let go of the wheel and plodded to the recliner where she waited. In his periphery, the eyes that puckered the walls and squeezed out of the floor turned as he walked.

“I lost you there, love. No wonder you’re scratching.”

With a soft smile, Beleren sank into the recliner that grew out of the floor, palms up. The felt of the recliner was baby-haired eyelid skin, stretched over the chair’s arms, legs, and elongated abdomen. The smooth muscle undulated. The recliner’s arms folded over his own, massaging his forearm in little circles.

He closed his eyes and tried to scrub out the image of a skeleton elongated into the structure of a chair, with the skin stretched and fat squished everywhere in between.

"Isn't that better, Bel?" she whispered from a mouth on the wall to his right.

"Stupendous. You undulate so well, baby—"

He winced.

"And what's this? Have you been working out?" The muscles under the recliner's skin palpated his biceps, squeezing until he felt his heart throb in his arms. Until all sensation below his shoulders disappeared.

"You know I don't." He opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it. "You see everything I do."

The ship tensed and all her eyes looked up. "Why can't you just enjoy me doing something for you?"

The membranous window thinned across the atrium, and space was like black paint plastered against the wall. Warmth trickled from his head down his body like oil lubricating a pipe. The trickle unknotted his muscles and it was nice and cozy and warm and . . .

He raised his hands, palms out. "You're right. Here I am, mighty Outernaut, prettiest lady for a hundred thousand miles on my arm, complaining."

"That's my Bel. Now come here and stick your tongue down my throat."

The recliner's headrest stretched like a fist through goo. It pushed his cheek to turn right, and there, bulging out of the wall, was a grinning mouth. Two plump lips. Teeth that disappeared into a mouth with a dead-ended esophageal hole. No uvula. A soft, feminine tongue.

His wife.

Her lips twitched, and with a lopsided smile, he let her push his mouth against hers. His nose smushed against the wall. She probed him, pried his lips apart and—the ship slackened. Beleren pulled away.

Huffing, he cocked his head as the ship's alarm, two meaty knubs on the ceiling, contracted to repeatedly slap against each other. All the eyes rolled up into the wall, and even the sclerotic lumps from the first few attempts reflexively closed.

"INCOMING SOLAR STORM . . ."

All the ship's mouths snapped open as they mumbled off the coordinates and date of a solar storm with the intonation of vocal folds unexercised. He glanced at the translucent silhouettes of cells in the fascia window, already bleached by a storm that was supposed to happen tomorrow.

"ADDITIONALLY, YOUR REQUEST HAS BEEN DENIED. THERE ARE NO AVAILABLE SHIPS WITHIN EIGHTY-NINE ASTRONOMICAL UNITS. IF SEEKING GUIDANCE, DO NOT QUERY MISSION CONTROL. THE ONLY SPOUSAL EMPLOYEE ON CALL IS JIM, WHO HAS REFUSED BOTH OUR REQUEST

TO SEEK PSYCHIATRIC HELP AS WELL AS OUR SECOND PLEA TO PICK UP A VICE. REFER TO YOUR HANDBOOK ON SPOUSAL MEDIATION. GOD BLESS AMERICA, AND GOD BLESS YOU, OUTERNAUT."

The slaps calmed, and the ship's eyes opened. They twitched toward him, and she spasmed into a smile. ". . . Did you notice anything different?"

"About the kiss?" Beleren pulled his arm from the recliner clasp and scratched his inner elbow. "It was vivacious."

The eyes rolled. "My teeth! I substituted the bone with the same cartilage grown from the genes that differentiate into my nose. We haven't, you know, tried in a while. I wanted to make sure my teeth wouldn't be as big a problem. They would bend."

Bend.

"Aww, you would make your teeth bendy for me?" Beleren moved to stand up, but the ship cuddled up against him in peristaltic shivers.

"What if we . . ." The ship bit her lower lip, and the chair pulled his shirt up to his belly button and tugged on the seat of his pants by pinching the cloth between muscle planes. Her front teeth bent against her lip. They formed Cs.

Beleren peeled off her lap and stood next to her—the her on the wall. The space of skin above her mouth contracted down the middle, like she had furrowed her brows: a vestigial remnant from a previous time.

"Do you . . . you not want to?"

"Of course I do. See my sweaty skin? How I shake? That's how sexually charged I am for you." Beleren flapped his shirt hem up and down. "I wish I could rip these off right now and put my penis in your wall, but Mission Control just radioed in."

The ship grumbled. "I still don't like when it overrides my control. What if I'm navigating a field of asteroids?"

"Asteroids in a belt are miles apart; we wouldn't have to deviate course."

She chewed on her lower lip. Those teeth curved like roads. "I don't know. I don't like losing that time. It reminds me of what they did to me."

Beleren's leg jerked forward. He set it down and knelt next to her chair, hand on her arm rest—a radius, ulnar bone, with the flexors and extensors to go with it—and squeezed.

"They didn't do it. We chose to, together. We're Outernauts, Jules, and we're going to get through this together."

The end of the armrest molded into an anatomical hand and clumsily held his. "You're not ever grossed out by me?"

Beleren smiled. "Why? There's more of you to love."

She barked a laugh. "Okay."

He stood. Her fingers hesitated to let go, but they could not strain past their concreted position in the chair.

"I have to copy radio control about the flare warning."

"A little late. That's the third tumor I had to extract."

"Just a bug, I'm sure." He dragged himself away. "I'll go respond."

As he walked down the atrium, mouths followed him:

"And I have—"

"—a present for you—"

"—mister—"

"—so don't go into the bedroom or you spoil it."

Hand on the knob, he agreed and told her that he loved her before stepping into the metal room. Her "I love you too" muffled as the door sealed.

Heaving, the Outernaut stumbled to the toilet, ripped the lid open, and ejected bile into the bowl. He snorted the backflow from his nostrils before wiping his mouth and closing the lid. Beleren slid against the wall across the toilet and rested his head on the cool, cool! wall.

Aseptic aluminum.

With his big toes, Beleren peeled off his silicone socks. Cold air licked his arches. He gasped. He lowered his feet down on the two overturned hard-bristled brushes and rubbed. Cheek on the wall, slobbering, his mouth worked up and down as the sensory receptors in his feet fired. Sighing, he kicked the brushes away. Too comfortable to move, too uncomfortable to not, he fished the Control Manual from behind the toilet and eyed the table of contents. He turned to "How to Navigate your Ship, Spousally."

Maintain homeostasis. End of chapter.

The Outernaut blinked away sweat. The LED transmitter on the wall hummed, awaiting input.

The ship knocked on the door. Muted words permeated through the cracks. "Are you okay in there?"

He wiped his cheek on his shoulder, and like easing a convertible around the cliff of a mountain, he slid the lid back into place. Beleren put on the silicone socks and stood up. Exercising a smile, he flushed and opened the door.

"Sorry. You know how it is with radio control."

The hull rippled. "I know."

The floor outside the door dimpled into a series of arrows leading to the bedroom.

Maintain homeostasis.

"I think you should accept my present," her mouth said across the thin hallway. "Don't you think I wouldn't notice how squirrely you've been? You need a boost, and I want to give it to you by you giving it to me."

“Okay,” Beleren said. “Okay.”

He followed the arrows like a child hopscotching. The entry to the bedroom was a flesh-curtained hole in the wall. It could close like a coagulated wound, kicking him out to sleep in the atrium or holding him up in his room.

He stepped inside. The bed was part of the floor. Mission Control had deduced that a differentiated layer of fat underneath the bed would provide all the softness required for dreamless sleep, but Beleren missed the springs. He missed the creak of the bed when he turned, the cool fabric when he flipped, the wife that slept beside rather than under him.

Yet now his wife was in the bed.

“What do you think?” they said.

They. The two bodies.

The brown membrane that made up the walls and floor and seats and everything else had frowned over to form a meaty base. Grown from it was a woman bent over, naked, on her elbows, and the other was on her back, legs spread like window wipers. Their mouths moved simultaneously. “I could tell you were itching for something more, so I’ve been practicing.”

“Oh. My god.”

Their faces were flaccid. They were his wife. They were almost his wife. Like a memory misremembered. Their eyes were too far apart, and the nose wasn’t quite that curled. The breasts were different, and the skin was pink, like the rawness underneath a picked sunburn. No blemishes. The skin of their elbows, knees, and back welded straight into the membrane.

The one with the rump in the air wagged. “You’re ill with excitement. I can tell. I know you’re still buzzing from that massage, so enact yourself.”

“Oh my god.” Beleren scratched his inner elbow and smeared blood into a street over his forearm. He looked at the blood, “No. No, I can’t.”

“Can’t?” The bodies twitched, and the orifice door behind him moved. “I spent months perfecting myself into these fuck dolls for you and all you can say is you can’t?”

Beleren squeezed his temples with his middle finger and thumb. “You don’t look like that.”

The membrane where their contact points met with the ground pulsed. “What do you mean I don’t?”

Beleren’s heel hit the step of the room hole behind him. “I didn’t mean that.”

“Yes, you did.” The two bodies squelched as they unpeeled their limbs from the base of flesh. They used their fingers to separate the fibrous membrane fascia between their skin and the skin of the tissue they grew from.

The Outernaut removed his hand from his head and found the dried elbow blood blurred with tears. "I, perhaps, am experiencing the cabin fever, the space fatigue, the . . ."

She sneered, "The Me Fatigue. You're tired of me? After how long you begged, pleaded, and bribed me with promises of no more fights? Of a family?" The bodies rose to their knees, and their arms were long enough to graze the floor with their knuckles. "They spliced me with bacteria from agar plates and blended me into a slurry. Your Mission Control poured me into the ship and fed me radiation until I FILLED IT."

Her bodies convulsed forward without pulling their feet off the ground, fissuring stretch marks in the floor.

Without looking, Beleren forced through the constricting orifice-door. The bodies followed him with peristaltic pumps.

They squeezed out of the bedroom and plopped into the hallway.

"Don't you understand what I have sacrificed so they can call you the Outernaut?"

He slid against the wall, hand scraping the skin wall for the doorknob of the Radio Room. Her bodies stood into hunchbacks; their necks pushed into the ceiling. They were almost human, but unproportioned, like they were never supposed to be viewed from this angle. The previously on-her-knees body had a face unremarkable with detail, like it was scribbled in. Their mouths lagged.

They struggled closer.

"When we signed up for this, you KNEW I would look different. I wouldn't be pretty anymore." She spat out the last words and didn't seem to notice the lines of saliva down her chins.

He grabbed the knob behind his back and turned it, careful to keep the click inaudible. "It's—not my fault, with the stress and all—not feeling up to sexual activity."

"Do you think I'm ugly?"

He unstuck the door. "You're beautiful."

"That's not what you messaged Mission Control!" They tapped their chins like automated pistons. "What was your verbiage? *A teratogenic fetus? Intestines like a slime mold?*"

Door cracked, he froze. "How do you know that?"

The ship pulsed, and even the squelch of her small intestines slowed their digestion. Beleren gulped the fetid, damp air, and stomped into the Radio Room.

"Stop," said the ship. Her two faces pinched to cry, except, in forming the bodies to copulate, she must have forgotten the glands to form the tears. "Please, I—I shouldn't have said that."

“That was private.”

Inside the metal room, he retrieved a screwdriver from the repair kit and placed it between two metallic tiles. He penetrated the connective material and popped the tile from its crusty wall. Behind it, cramped in every spot, swollen eyes smushed together, noses grew in clusters, ears and ears and ears sagged over the tile.

“Bel . . .” The two grown bodies stood in the doorway. Their eyes tracked him as he slid down the wall to the floor, head in hands.

“I didn’t think we would end up like this. NASA chose us because we were foolproof. High-school sweethearts, with a husband that would do anything to keep his wife happy. Alive. Hell, they have your proposal stamped on their wall: It isn’t—”

“It isn’t much . . . It isn’t much, but I promise I’ll rip the rings from Saturn if only you could be by my side.”

Tears plinked on the metal tile.

The more detailed body, Jules, his wife, sighed to her knees. “Why can’t we be amicable? Why do I have to find out that I disgust you so much that every time I kiss you, you vomit into the toilet? Why can’t we be like before?” He met her gaze, and the image of the overflowing tile of ears and eyes infected Beleren. It replicated like a virus, slipping into his host cells and surging through the rest of him.

Jules moved her hand to touch him, but frowned at the floor, which was still enough to disallow her from sliding next to him.

“Remember when you sat on my lap—my chair—and we talked, and everything seemed to get better after?”

He nodded, “Communication solves everything . . .”

“I injected you with dopamine.”

Beleren blinked.

“It’s not hard to slip it through the skin when you’re squeezing hard enough.” She sighed, “I’m reviewing my neural history. The solar flare may have impinged my ability to synthesize pure dopamine, creating an ineffective enantiomer.”

Beleren squeezed the screwdriver. “Leave this room and dissolve your sensory organs from the walls.”

“But—”

“Do it. Before I scrape you off.”

She stood up and left the entrance. The tile of flesh quivered in his peripheral. The Outernaut picked up the Mission Control Guide and flipped to the last chapter of the book. He read those two words.

Maintain homeostasis.

He pushed his palms into his eyes until colors swarmed. Eighty-nine astronomical units away and he wondered whether they would continue to shuffle along, puttering across the universe in hurt silence. Or should he tell her he knew, and that by letting her sedate him, he hoped he would stop feeling so ashamed.

He let go of his face, and he was back in their old convertible, one hand on the wheel and the other in hers. Stoplights blinking yellow, her excited squeal as they made a hard turn, a stolen kiss. Electric air. A night that would last. A starry night illuminated just for them.

Then the Outernaut opened his eyes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew Gheorghe is a *Homo sapiens* male, aged twenty-three revolutions around the Sun, classified under the phylum Chordata and the class Mammalia. His work can be found scribbled into journals such as *Fraidy Cat Quarterly*, pleading in unedited purgatory, and soiled in the water of the Gulf.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR SELF-REFLECTION

by Parker M. O'Neill

The trick is to never look your mirrorself dead in the eye. The trick is to miss the mark by slight angles—to speak and act in fractionally incorrect ways. Never, for instance, smile your identical smiles at the same instant on either side of the silvered glass. Never acknowledge any accident of timing that leads you to stretch or yawn just as she does the same. Never let yourself think for a second that you're looking at your own reflection.

Neither of you should want to destabilize the mirror. Neither of you should be in any way confused or upset about being you (about being the *you* that you are).

There is an ocean of silver between how you should feel and how you do feel.

Never give ground. Never admit to working at the coffee shop that, in her world, on her side of the mirror, is her favorite daily splurge. She treats you like a little sister, which (on some level) repulses you. You're two sides of the same coin. You're the same person in different circumstances. If you met her gaze and reached through the mirror, you could touch the locks of her flawless hair. You should never, of course, do this.

Never let her see your bitterness. The trick is to keep it to yourself. When she tells you she's going out to a nice restaurant, save that sour envy under your tongue for a rainy day. All you can do is nod along. Smile back. Walk to work. Flirt with the regulars if you want to pay rent this month. When your coworker complains about his own mirrorself getting a promotion over on the other side, you might grimace in shared spite, but never tell him what you've imagined. What you contain.

You can be resentful later, you can shudder and vomit, you can pinch your arms and slam your fists into your thighs and bite your tongue. You can bruise and you can be bruised.

When your mirrorself is late to your weekly meeting, when you find yourself staring into an empty silvery space where your face should be (where a more put-together version of your face should be), hold that frustration in. Do not grimace at its vinegar burn. When she stumbles into frame, finally,

saying she thinks this latest boy might be the one, force yourself to smile. You can't afford to date right now. You can barely afford breakfast. She'll ask you if you've tried this one expensive conditioner that works great for her curly hair (for both of your curly hair)—do not remind her that she asked you this last month. Smile.

You don't want to scare her away.

Never forget that this is supposed to be helpful for both of you. For her, something between sisterhood and charity: a way to offer advice to a worse-off version of herself and be thankful for her good fortune. For you, aspiration: a way to see the version of yourself that had no trouble finding a job after college, a you that goes on dates and drinks rosé and has light brown ringlets that she claims she's never dyed (and why would she lie to her mirrorself?). But that aspiration is rotting, and the trick is to resist giving in to its metastasizing corruption.

It's the roiling burn in your stomach when you go to work sick because the alternative is getting fired. The pressure building behind your eyes when your mirrorself moves into a luxury apartment in Hyde Park. It's the venom you feel when you get catcalled walking home after your late shift, when you shout back at the car as it speeds away into the night, when you clutch your little plastic self-defense keychain so hard your hand bleeds. Like you could scream until your lungs were raw; like there's nothing you wouldn't do to someone who deserved it.

So easy to give token resistance to your own impulses. Tell yourself you're fighting these incubating urges. Convince yourself that this is what self-control is, that tamping these thoughts down is all that you can do.

The trick is to let yourself believe that it's impossible, right up until the last moment.

You'll lean in close and smile as your reflection does. Meet your mirrorself's eyes dead-on for the first time (they're the same green as yours, and they're widening in surprise). Reach through the silver, cold and bracing, and grab hold of her brunette locks.

Pull with all your might. Don't let her wriggle free. The crown of her head distorts the mirror as she breaks the silver surface tension. Keep pulling, just a little more struggle. She would do the same in your position. This is all the justification you need.

But she flails. She wants to remain *her* just as much as you want to take her place. Her fists slam into the glass and your heady rosé dream shatters with the mirror as the pieces rain down on her throat.

Is this what you wanted?

You couldn't get her all the way through. She gurgles, eyes rolling, head and neck protruding from what's left of the mirror.

Is this what she deserves?

Your mirrorself is dying (*you* are dying), and you could save her.

Or you could finish what you started, pull her the rest of the way through, wincing, shaking, apologizing as the jagged edges bite into her. You could grab the silver shards and—carefully, delicately—form them into a blood-slicked facsimile of their original shape. A crude approximation of the mirror that once was, one that might let you through for the price of a few scars.

The trick is to steel yourself. Look through what's left of the mirror. Listen to the girl bleeding out next to you and think very carefully about what you deserve.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Parker M. O'Neill lives and writes in upstate New York. He is a recent winner of the Elegant Literature Award for New Writers, and his work appears or is forthcoming in *Apex Magazine*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Flame Tree Press*, and elsewhere. Find his socials at linktr.ee/parkermoneill.

LIKE AN ARM OUTSTRETCHED, REACHING

by Elisabeth Ring

The pain starts with a twinge in his back.

Which Clay pays no attention to because his mattress is so old it holds his shape when he gets up. He thinks nothing about the odd sensation beside his spine that creeps toward his right ribs. Not until he tries to rub it like a knotted muscle and feels a lump, like a stick bound beneath his flesh.

“Didn’t they say if anything weird happened to you then you should call them?” Amanda, his sister, says when he calls her in subdued panic.

The assistant who brought in his discharge paperwork at the Tomorrowist Institute had said just that, he remembers now: Let them know if anything strange developed in the next four to six weeks. It’s been five weeks, long enough that the dental crown he paid for with the money from the experimental trial has been fit, ordered, and glued onto his stub of a root-canaled tooth. He listens to Amanda tell him about yesterday’s drama at the dollar store she manages as he rummages around to find the paper with the number on it. When it seems like she’s done, he responds appropriately, then hangs up and calls the Institute.

The receptionist on the other end says little as Clay explains. He’s not sure if they believe him, or if it’s even something they care about, until they ask if he can come in after work the next day. Clay only works part-time at the convenience store down the street, so this shouldn’t be a problem, and he takes it.

In the hours between the call and the appointment, he tries not to imagine what the lump could be: a frayed bundle of muscle come unraveled from where it should be? Cancer? A worm growing under his skin? A bone spur? He thinks back to the equipment that surrounded him at the Institute, wondering which of the sleek white machines gave him a tumor.

He takes the bus to the Institute again, since last time they told him he couldn’t drive home by himself and he doesn’t know what they might do to him this time. After a series of pokes and scans and measurements at the clinic, he knows little more than he did during the sleepless night before. Except that it definitely isn’t cancer, or even a bone spur. He feels too weird

to ask if it's a worm. It not being cancer is a relief, but one that opens a door to horrifying new and bizarre explanations.

His theories mount with every soft "hmm" from the technician looking over the results. Was it the chewing gum he swallowed in elementary school on a dare? A twin he absorbed in the womb now resurfacing twenty-four years later? Maybe on some level he does wish it was cancer, a terrible yet known outcome. Maybe he just doesn't want any of his batshit guesses to be right.

"And when did you notice this?" asks the technician examining him.

"Yesterday."

The technician hmms. "Most people experience only mild side effects. Those who experience severe side effects are more likely to see them develop as time goes on. At this stage, it's hard to tell if this is mild, moderate, or severe. If the growth doesn't progress anymore, come back in a few days and we'll remove it."

"What if it does 'progress' more?"

"Then wait until it erupts."

* * *

The thing in Clay's back is big now, taking up a triangle-shaped area between arm and hip and rib. It doesn't hurt—he hasn't touched the pills the technician gave him in case it did—but it does feel strange as the growth makes his skin ripple. His muscles shifting do hurt, though, the worst charley horses he's ever had. "The growth," as the technician called it—such a malignant-sounding name. Growths amass, they take over, they consume. He wonders if this will consume him.

At first, he obsessively measured it to see if it was getting bigger, or if it would magically shrink away until it existed only in memory. He tried marking its size through a rough measuring with his fingertips, but his own inaccuracy made him obsess more.

He remembered how Amanda used to do her hair and bought a hand mirror so he could use it to reflect the toothpaste-spattered bathroom mirror. With the twice-reversed numbers of the ruler he held to the growth, he marked just how much it had grown by the day. Or the hour. Or the minute.

He doesn't tell Amanda. She hardly comes over, anyway. No need to make her worry. No need to make her recoil from the thing becoming part of him.

Soon, its growth is simply obvious. He abandons the ruler but not the mirrors, fascinated by the way the lump curves down in a rounded corner

before merging with the expected shapes of his doughy back. How the skin of this triangle shape sinks in the middle.

The growth is soft, or it feels soft covered by his skin as he traces a finger up and down its sloped edges and around the angles of its shape. Late one night, he tries thinking very hard about the thing, wondering if it will move at his bidding. He's been drinking, because this isn't something you think about doing when you're sober. He can't be sure, but he thinks he sees it twitch.

He doesn't try moving it again. He prefers to believe he imagined it.

Sometimes, he thinks he can feel through the growth, that he can feel what the inside of his flesh feels like, all warm and slick and firm but soft. He tries not to think about what this means, this sometimes-thought that he can feel what he feels from the inside. And the fact that he might have moved it once. No dead twin fetus would do that.

As he probes it and watches through his system of mirrors as it shifts under his skin, he knows one thing for certain: It's gonna hurt like hell when it "erupts."

* * *

It erupts. Through gritted teeth and screams muffled against his old, bumpy mattress, Clay takes the pills the technician gave him. The medicine knocks him cold. He's glad for that in the moments before darkness takes him but less so as he's stuck in the molasses river of fevered dream. Later, he remembers snatches of his dreams: trees stretching their roots from the ground, coral growing like a warp-speed time-lapse, clouds scooping him up with tendrils of mist-like tentacles and flinging him into an abyss of stars.

The pain is an afterthought when he wakes in the clearing fog of his drug-induced sleep. Both because the pills have done their job and the strangeness of his conscious reality.

First, according to the thirteen texts and seven missed calls from his boss over the last three days, he's been fired. He runs two hands through his hair as he scrolls through the increasingly desperate messages. First the ones from his boss, then the ones from Amanda. Amanda's are less insistent than his boss's—his ex-boss's. He starts to wonder what that means when he realizes what he's doing. Two hands in his hair, one on his phone.

Three arms, three hands, all with five deft fingers that he can wiggle at will. This new, third arm is a right, connected to his existing body where the triangle lump had been. But it's not like someone just copied and pasted his other right arm down lower. This arm is pale like his stomach. That's what he assumes, anyway, from what he can see of the skin.

It's tough to tell under the mottled mess of dried blood, bits of lint, and what Clay figures out are chunks of skin and flesh. The whole length of it is thin, all skin and bone without muscle or flab or hair to make it look more normal, less skeletal, less wrong. At the top of that bloodied, skinny thing is a ragged, scabbed-over half-moon, and the scab is already drying and flaking off to what will definitely be a brutal scar. On the other end, the fingernails are soft like a baby's, or like a foal's feet when they still look like tentacles instead of hooves. It doesn't hurt, though, hardly even a twinge.

The new hand does hurt, though, when he pricks his soft, new fingertips with the tip of a safety pin. These same fingertips burn when he picks up a just-filled coffee cup. The coffee spills when he drops it and he recoils, not just for the burn he feels in a place where a week before he had a soft, ill-muscle back, but because he had given no thought to grabbing the cup with this new hand. For reasons he cannot define, that is the thing that unnerves him the most, more than the fact that it was growing at all.

He screams. Of course he screams. He screams as he looks at it and then the blood crusted on the mattress. When the downstairs neighbor pounds on the floor, Clay grabs the T-shirt he was wearing when he conked out and shoves it in his mouth to muffle the sound. Which is good because when he sees the black crusted hole in its back, he screams again.

"It . . . um, the growth erupted," he says, hoarse, when he finally calls the clinic, almost forgetting their verbiage for the act of sprouting a new arm. He is told to come in tomorrow morning.

Clay tongues his crown as he warily eyes the hand. It is resting on the bed beside him, a new part of his body his mattress has not yet learned. "Yeah, that'll work," he says.

It's warm for April when he leaves, but he wears his biggest hoodie anyway, his third arm curled around his midsection. He drives his ratty old Toyota this time, even though one of the tires is going flat and he has less than a quarter tank of gas. He stops at all yellow lights and uses his blinker for a full five seconds before turning or changing lanes because he can't figure out how he'd explain it to a cop.

He's still hoping he won't have to explain it to Amanda. That they'll fix him right up at the Institute and he'll be left with nothing but a thin scar to lie about. Maybe he can say he got stabbed with a bottle. Or he sold his kidney on the black market.

At the institute, Clay flexes his new arm when told. He relaxes when asked. And all of his shoulders, including the one half-wedged in his back, slump in relief as the technician talks. "Yes, removal shouldn't be a problem." But they tighten up again when the technician adds, "All we'll need is your insurance information and we can schedule the surgery."

"Insurance?" Clay asks. He hasn't had insurance for a while, even before he was fired. "You didn't need my insurance info when I did the trial."

"No, but this isn't the trial. It's surgery."

"But this—" Clay gestures with his new hand, "—is from the trial. The trial caused this, right? Isn't—I mean, how else would I have got it?"

"Well," says the technician and shrugs a little, as if that is enough of an answer.

* * *

Clay keeps his arm beneath his shirt, enduring the discomfort of feeling his stomach flab with his arm—and feeling his arm with his stomach flab—for the normality of appearing like he still has just two arms.

But as the days go on, the impulse to use the arm grows stronger. In the shower, he unconsciously catches a falling bottle of 2-in-1 shampoo-conditioner with his third hand. At the grocery store, he holds milk in his right hand, a dozen eggs in his left hand, and lets his second right hand carry a cheap loaf of white bread by the bundled edge of its plastic bag. To the outside observer, he is sure the bread dangling from below his hoodie looks strange. And for a moment it only amuses him—not horrifies—to know how much stranger the truth really is.

It's almost a week before Amanda crashes his apartment, because she can tell he's bullshitting her over the phone. When he hears her knock, he is trying to decide whether watching *The Fly* is a great idea or a terrible one. He is glad for the distraction from that self-sabotaging decision before he remembers he hasn't told her about his arm. He has, in fact, hand-waved his way out of every question she's asked about the Institute and if they had fixed the lump in his back. He starts curling his hand underneath his hoodie again before deciding to rip off the proverbial bandage.

"Hey," he says, opening the door and standing to the side so she can go through.

"Hey," she says. She lifts up a bag with the logo of the Mexican place located in the same strip mall as her dollar store. "I brought Rodrigo's, but it might be co—"

The bag falls from her hand and hits the cracked linoleum floor with a wet thud. Her eyes widen and her mouth freezes in a tight O as she stares at his new arm.

He shrugs, all three hands upturned like, "I know, right?"

Over semi-squished burritos, he tells her the story. He expects her to blow up at him for the lies, both blatant and by omission, but she just mutters something that could just as easily be a prayer as a profanity.

"They said, *they actually said*, they couldn't do anything without insurance?" She asks because somehow that's the unbelievable part.

"They actually said that, yeah."

She sets down what's left of her burrito. "Can someone else do it?"

"What does that mean?" Clay is afraid he knows exactly what she means.

"Remember how Uncle Andy tried to fish something out of the lawn mower chute a few years ago and somehow didn't cut off all his fingers?" she asks. "But he did have that really bad cut on his hand? And he ended up just supergluing it back together and it was basically fine?"

Clay does remember, and he remembers the gnarly scar that still takes up a good chunk of Uncle Andy's hand. But he also knows that wasn't the end of the Uncle Andy story.

"Basically fine?" he says. "You know he still can't make a fist. And this isn't some cut, okay? It's all right up—" He reaches back, trying to lift his hoodie to show her.

Amanda hesitates a moment before pressing her lips together and crouching by his back. She pulls up the fabric and rests it on his new sort-of shoulder. And then she sucks in air fast, a near-silent shriek. Clay can feel the wind from her yanking her hand back even though she hasn't touched him yet. He hears her gag and can't bear to turn around to see her face looking at this new part of him.

Which seems rude. It's all healed up now. No scab. No blood. Real fingernails, and it's even started getting meat on it so it looks more like an arm and less like a giant spider's leg. She could be seeing something so much worse.

"Sorry, sorry," she mutters, and lifts his hoodie again. He tenses as he feels her finger touch his flesh. She just pokes at first, then pinches a little, but gently.

"Damn," she finally says. "I see what you mean."

Somehow, that's worse than her arguing with him and threatening to go out and get a saw. For the first time, he feels his eyes start pricking with tears, and his throat starts to hurt with the emotion gathering there. He makes it look like he's struggling with the hoodie. By the time she helps work it back down to his waist, he's got his feelings under control again.

"Any suggestions?" he asks.

She sits back down to pick up her burrito, then sets it down again. "Get insurance, I guess."

His heart sinks hearing what he expected. Like maybe part of him hoped there was some other magic way out of this.

"And until then?"

"Get used to it?"

* * *

Amanda says she'll help him look for a new job, and she does. But he wasn't exactly a top candidate before sprouting a new limb. She can't hire him or she would, so she says. Corporate policy. He wonders if that's true.

He starts cutting holes in the side of some of his older T-shirts. After a couple of weeks, even ventures out around his apartment complex without hiding his third arm—at night, yes, but eventually he grows bold enough to do it during the day, too. And then he goes back to the grocery store and lets his third arm carry the bread in the open, drawing furtive looks from other customers when they think he's not looking. But he hears no muttered *freak* or small children crying.

Amanda eventually finds him a job opening at a coffee shop she frequents near the dollar store, and says she'll put in a good word with her manager. It's enough to get him an interview, during which Clay makes a point of calling himself "handy" and "always willing to lend a hand." He assumes it's that go-get-'em attitude and sense of humor that gets him the job. Though later he hears he was hired as part of the shop's push to hire more "non-traditional" workers.

But a job's a job, he tells himself. Like a third hand is a third hand. Like life is life sometimes.

Even if he doesn't want this to be life. He adapts, but he also misses being able to lay on his right side without making his third arm fall asleep. He misses being able to buy clothes at a store and have them fit without pressing his spare appendage to his midsection. He misses having people he wants to date be willing to be seen with him in public, misses being ignored in stores and on the street and on the bus because he's just another young, average, out-of-shape guy.

Amanda keeps reminding him there's still that promise of surgery, even though the double-digits he's got leftover from his paycheck don't add up very quickly.

"You could try crowdfunding?" Amanda suggests, but in a way that tells him not even she thinks that will work.

He thought at first he could work hard enough at the coffee shop to score one of the coveted positions with benefits. But he figures out quickly those are usually outside hires. There is no climbing up the ranks; this job is supposed to be a stepping stone to something better outside the company, like college or an office job somewhere. But in the days filled with taking orders and frothing milk and ignoring customers snapping photos of him, anything better feels very far away.

One step at a time, he tells himself. One day at a time. And the days aren't so bad if he doesn't think about the years ahead.

And if he doesn't think about the twinge in his back, just to the left of his spine, and the lump growing underneath it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elisabeth Ring (she/her) is a writer and reader of eclectic things living in the western U.S. Her fiction has appeared in several publications, including *Apex* and *Cast of Wonders*. She spends most of her time trying to wear out her energetic dog and keep her cats away from the houseplants. When she has time, she makes progress on her unwieldy TBR pile and writes reviews on some of those books. You can read them at ringreads.com.

THE RAT KING'S RISING STAR

by Chris Clemens

When the Rat King
first reached out,
I threw up in the gutter.
Who wants their mind
touched by *that*?

The throng of knotted tails,
the scrabbling, mouldy
mess of fur, the nest
of beady black eyes—foul.

But nobody else gave me
a home, a job,
a reason to continue.

I braid more rubbery
tails into the swarm,
ignoring the bites,
the desperate squeals.

I'm assured we will all grow stronger together.

To the sewer-depths the rats
bring finger-bones, half-eaten
apples, information. They found
my mother's ring, once lost down the drain. They found
my father's missing compassion.

And I can have everything back
if I continue to provide use
of my clever quick fingers,

extend the Rat King's
influence to the slumbering
streets above, wrenching open
the storm doors of the dairy
warehouse so all may feast and nourish and
become.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Clemens lives and teaches in Toronto, surrounded by raccoons. Nominated for Best Microfiction and Best Small Fictions, his writing appears in *The Dribble Drabble Review*, *Merganser Magazine*, *Dreams & Nightmares*, *Apex Magazine*, and elsewhere.

GPS GIRL

by Angel Leal

A constant, enormous vision
can see cities without end.
if her body is her sight?
what she needs, if her mouth

All that's missing
All that's missing
and childhood memories:
the wetness of fruits

The awe and fear
The model after
It will be natural for her
She will produce her own

*

The mouth of awareness
indiscriminately the shavings
of a bee, divorce papers,
her dry tongue. Eating

now that she has teeth.
to loneliness. To have
reminds her of other needs.
strangely for company.
with inanimate devices

*

her satellite eye
But where can she go
When can she say
is our directions?

is hair that was never installed.
are the heat-sensitive hands
the chasing of a blue wing,
on her fingertips.

of a taller world.
will receive these updates.
to sing, to turn lights on.
She will pass as a girl.

*

brings her hunger. She eats
of a pencil, the wings
anything her makers hand
is a profound act. She understands

But the need to eat is close
something missing from the body
We've found machines aching
Some surround themselves
and refuse to eat alone.

*

If GPS Girl outlives
bones don't break down
her mind to unfathomable
ever mirror our tendency

With infinite time
stainless, sharp corners,
can she still somehow
GPS Girl can regret

But with infinite time
herself as often as
Maybe, she can still
even innocence lost

all girls of flesh, if steel
and immortal numbers spin
depths, will her thoughts
towards guilt—pain?

is there a need to heal?
stainless, sharp corners,
wound herself? Yes
and make mistakes.

maybe she can fix
she breaks down.
find a softer reflection
in her labyrinth of time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Angel Leal is a Latine, trans, ace, neurodivergent writer whose previous work appears in *Radon Journal*, *Strange Horizons*, *Uncanny*, *The Deadlands*, and *We're Here: The Best Queer Speculative Fiction 2024*. They are a 2025 Clarion West fellow, a poetry editor for *OTHERSIDE*, and have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, the Rhysling, and Best of the Net. You can find them at angel-leal.com or on Bluesky [@angelvleal](https://bsky.app/profile/angelvleal).

TERRORIST

by Mark Wyatt

Fanaticism fuels
this shell of a man clad
in metalcasing, sealing in the
haunting screams of slum children.
Faith is a lighted candle now torching
a short fuse, and vengeance is explosive.
To get this far, he has infiltrated mundane
lives, so hell-bent on rosy happiness they've
been blind to this taut and wolverine stranger
prowling watchfully in their midst, waiting. He
has taken sincerely proffered hands of friendship
with an awkward, twisted grimace for appearances.
Like a bell ringing incessantly in his head is the
tortured soundtrack accompanying mutilated images
of Palestinian babies being hacked to death that
he uses as justification. As pure and innocent as

lams are the meek being hounded from their homes,
stripped of everything they owned save their flesh
and blood, which they are then asked to watch die,
before their eyes. In Palestine, he has seen this
again and again, and he's part of a vicious
cycle, he knows: repression, terror, torture
& then viler repression, infernal terror,
unimaginable torture pushing the world into
a downward spiral, sending it spiralling
down into hell, reasoning that it'll take
large spoonfuls of searing, agonizingly
gut-wrenching terror before they
even start listening after
all. With his hand on the
trigger, he's ready, this
complete and utter nobody
from nowhere, visible to
everyone and positioned
anywhere, a man with no
face, whose flesh will
fly and fat will fry.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Wyatt now lives in the UK after teaching in South and South-East Asia and the Middle East. His pattern poetry has recently appeared in *Borderless*, *Cosmic Daffodil*, *Exterminating Angel*, *Full Bleed*, *Greyhound Journal*, *Hyperbolic Review*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, *Osmosis*, *Sontag Mag*, *Streetcake Magazine*, *Talking About Strawberries All Of The Time*, and *Typo*. Other work is forthcoming from *Allium*, *Artemis Journal*, *Libre*, *Neologism Poetry Journal*, *Shift*, and *Tupelo Quarterly*.

ABSOLUTION

by Jared Chen-Wynn

One moment there was nothing, followed by the jarring perception of an antiseptic smell, a metallic taste in his mouth, the feeling of old fabric against his skin, a monotonous beeping sound . . .

He opened his eyes to the cold, fluorescent lights overhead, and the beeping increased in tempo. The source of the sound was a vital signs monitor to his left, attached to his body by colored wires. Next to that was a deflated saline drip; his eyes followed the tube from the bottom of the bag to a needle in the back of his hand.

Straight ahead was a door, flanked by a counter with an embedded sink. To his right, rising from the tiled floor like the horizon, was a wall so white, his eyes couldn't focus on it.

He removed the IV from his hand and let it fall to the floor. Next, he tugged at the wires connecting his body to the vital signs monitor, feeling the adhesive give way as he pulled the electrodes from his skin. The beeping sound merged into a steady, insistent alarm.

Stars crowded his vision as he pulled the sheet to the side and tried to sit up; he registered his nakedness before keeling sideways and passing out.

"Mr. Carney?" A voice entered his awareness. A pair of cold hands reached under his armpits and lifted him back onto the bed. "I'm giving you something to counteract the sedative." A needle violated his arm. Blood rushed back into his brain.

A sturdy-looking nurse in a crisp, white uniform. She smiled. "I've never had one of you guys take out your own IV before."

He remembered that he was naked and suddenly felt embarrassed. "I'm sorry, I don't know what's happening, where I am, who . . ." his voice faltered on that last word. "Carney?"

"Yes, Mr. Carney. Duncan Carney," she added as she went to the counter by the door to retrieve a manila envelope. "That's the name you chose."

"Have I been . . ."

"Absolved?" She handed him the envelope. "I'm not supposed to answer any questions until your parole officer gets here. Something to do with

liability issues stemming from continuing memory displacement. Which is a fancy way of saying that your brain might be processing a lot of information without recording any of it.”

He opened the envelope and upended it over the bed. A thin stack of papers fell out. The topmost one was a notarized letter with an ID card attached, bearing his face, a new, unfamiliar name, and a birthdate he didn't recognize. The next one was a court order outlining Duncan Carney's probationary terms: Halfway house. Continuous employment. Cannot leave the state of Utah without authorization.

“I'm from Utah?” he asked.

“You are now,” the nurse replied. She opened a drawer in the counter, pulled out a stack of clothes—a newish-looking pair of jeans, a button-down shirt, boxers, socks, shoes—and placed them on the bed. On top of that, she placed a folded towel and a small toiletry kit. “I'll walk you to the bathroom.”

But he was already pulling his pants on. “Were these mine from before?”

“Mr. Carney, you really oughta clean up first.”

“They don't fit right.” He reached into his pockets and turned them out to show they were empty. “I have an ID, but no credit card, no cash.”

“Don't worry about it, buddy,” the bus driver said.

Duncan looked up at the man in the blue uniform, seated before a steering wheel like an inverted ship's helm. He looked to his left at the rows of mostly empty seats, then at the people behind him, queued up to board.

“How did I . . .”

* * *

“You're holding up the line, buddy.” The bus driver pointed with his nose toward the back of the bus. “Grab a seat. I'll let you know when we reach the station.”

Duncan nodded and moved toward the back, trying to figure out how he got there. Silhouettes of memories surfaced in his mind—a fire escape, an empty parking lot, a friendly face at a bus stop—but as soon as he tried to focus on them, they disappeared like words on the tip of his tongue.

He chose a seat halfway down the aisle. A handsome, vaguely familiar-looking twenty-something with bleach-white teeth took the seat next to him. The bus lurched into traffic.

“Anyway, what I was saying is you gotta have a plan, right?”

“Uh.” Duncan looked around, but there was no one else the guy could be talking to. “Sure, yeah.”

The twenty-something smiled encouragingly. “Yeah, so what about you? What are you goin' do when you get there?”

"Uh, I mean, what does anyone do when they get there?"

"I don't mean the bus station, bro. I mean LA. You know your way around? You sound like you from there."

"It's been a while. I just hope I remember where everything is."

"I'm couch surfing at a friend's place in Pacoima. Just for a couple days after the audition, hope I get a call back. If not, all's I got is enough to get home, that's the plan. I don't wanna be the guy bussin' tables his whole life waiting for a break."

Duncan nodded. "Right."

"You're up!" the bus driver called back. Duncan exited and entered a Greyhound depot that looked like every other Greyhound depot in America.

"We got some time to kill before our ride," his actor friend announced. "I'm goin' grab a drink."

"Okay. See you later."

"A'ight," he replied, disappointed that Duncan wouldn't be joining him.

But Duncan was too busy looking for a restroom. There was a large one in the center of the concourse with a line of people milling in and out. He kept going until he found a smaller one with an out-of-order sign on the door and a strip of yellow caution tape draped across it. He pushed the door open, ducked under the tape, and went inside.

A motion sensor turned the lights on for him. He picked a stall, shut himself inside, and sat down to ponder why he was heading to Los Angeles, and how he was going to get there without money.

The door opened. Footsteps shuffled across the old linoleum floor, pausing in front of each stall. Whoever it was picked the stall next to Duncan's.

A shoe slid under the partition and tapped Duncan's foot. He pulled his leg back. "Hello?"

"I knew it," came a familiar voice. The actor stood up, went around, and let himself into Duncan's stall. "You're so old fashioned," he said with an open smile.

"I think you have me confused with someone else."

"Someone else? Like I even know who you are? Bro, d'you even know who you are?" The actor stepped back, disappointment in his voice. "I mean, one minute you're flirting, the next minute it's like you don't even remember me. It's like I'm talkin' to someone who's been absolved or something. Do you even have a ticket?"

Duncan's eyes fixated on the ticket peeking out of the actor's shirt pocket. He looked down at his own hands, expecting to see them empty.

Except he was holding a bus ticket now, and the actor was nowhere to be seen. And he wasn't in a bathroom stall—he was sitting on another bus, this one with upholstered seats and dim overhead lighting. Engine noise and hushed whispers filled the space around him.

Duncan couldn't recall how he got there; fragments of memories came into his mind, but they slipped through his fingers when he tried to grab them. The effort was exhausting; he leaned his head against the window, and before he knew it, was lulled to sleep by the sound of the engine.

When he woke, the bus was pulling into Los Angeles. He disembarked as soon as the door opened and started walking, following sidewalks that led him past strip malls and apartment complexes and fast-food restaurants that all looked like they'd been built from the same set of blueprints. The sun felt different here—brighter, more artificial, as if it were being projected from somewhere above the smog.

“Chili!”

Duncan's stomach responded before his brain did, growling at the mention of food. He turned around, expecting to see a street vendor.

Instead, he saw himself facing a man in his fifties, wearing pants that almost—but didn't quite—match his suit jacket. His demeanor spoke of hard times and his body language reeked of desperation. But his eyes conveyed recognition. And fear.

“Jesus, Chili, you look like hell,” the man said, approaching cautiously. “When we didn't hear from you after the arrest, when there was no trial, no mention in the news, we figured you must have been absolved.”

“I was,” Duncan nodded, the words coming out automatically.

“Shit. I didn't actually—” The man stopped midsentence and looked over his shoulder. He took Duncan by the arm and guided him away from the main sidewalk, into an alley between two buildings. “What's it like? Absolution, I mean.”

“I woke up in a hospital room with no memory of my past,” Duncan said. “And I'm experiencing . . . gaps in time.”

The man nodded as if this made perfect sense. “Memory lapses are a side effect. The government won't say why, but it's obviously brain damage from having your memories wiped.” He paused, studying Duncan's face. “Your real name is Chilion Kahn, right? You were a musician; you went by Chili Kahn Carne on stage.”

“Duncan Carney. That's the name I picked for myself.”

“You shoulda gone with Chili Khan Comedy,” he said, shaking his head. “Listen, Chili, a lot of people are gonna recognize you. You need to find your way back to whatever state they allocated you to. The absolution program has rules.”

"What was my crime?"

The man hesitated. "Look, I don't buy into the whole you-are-what-you-do-therefore-if-you-don't-remember-what-you-did-you-aren't-that-person-anymore school of criminology. But maybe it's better if you don't know."

"How can that be better?"

"I don't think I'm even allowed to do this."

"I won't tell anyone."

He looked into Chili's pleading eyes for a moment before relenting. "You killed your wife and the man she was cheating on you with."

The news hit like a punch, but it also felt weirdly inevitable. As if a part of him knew something like this was coming. "No, that's . . . that's not me, that can't be. Why would I kill them?"

"Heat of the moment?" the man said. "I don't know, you found them together, you lost it, bang bang, they're dead. And now you have a predicament. You don't know who was involved with the case, what neighborhoods to avoid, what cops might recognize you. You don't know who might see you and decide not to keep their mouth shut."

Chili felt anger rising in his chest—not at the warning, but at the implied threat that came with it. He balled his fists and took a step forward. "So, what are you suggesting?"

Suddenly, an old-fashioned revolver appeared in the man's hand. He pointed it at Chili's chest. "I'm suggesting you need to control your temper."

Chili raised his hands, palms out to show he wasn't holding anything.

* * *

Except he was holding the gun now, cold and heavy and real. He was crouched in bushes outside a house in a residential neighborhood. The sunny sky above had given way to stars and scattered, wispy clouds with silver moonlight halos. That he couldn't recall how he got there wasn't as disturbing as the fact that he was holding a gun—and that it felt comfortable in his hand.

He took a few breaths to calm himself and stood to leave when a car pulled into the driveway. A woman got out—middle-aged, well-dressed, and moving with the confidence of someone who knew the world was hers for the taking. She took one look at Chili and sprinted into the house.

Some primal instinct kicked in. Chili ran after her, through a living room decorated with new furniture toward a staircase lined with family photos.

She was waiting for him at the top of the stairs, a semi-automatic pistol in her hand, eyes calm and calculating.

"Well, what do you know," she called out.

Chili ducked around the corner as her first shot splintered the wall where his head had been. "I know I'm not a killer!" he yelled back at her. "Did you set me up?" He inched forward and quickly pulled back again as a second shot rang out.

"I didn't set you up, moron! You confessed!" She fired another shot.

"Why would I confess?" It was hard to tell through the ringing in his ears, but it sounded like she was slowly working her way down the stairs.

"I don't know, maybe because they always go after the husband? Maybe because you have to confess before trial to get absolution?" She fired again. Closer this time. He didn't know how many bullets she had. All he knew was that she was talking to keep him distracted until she could get a clear shot. And that she liked to finish her statements before firing.

"They're gonna know now!" he shouted.

"How are—" She stopped midsentence as he jumped out of hiding, gun raised. He pulled the trigger before she could react.

Click.

Empty.

She smiled, stepped closer, and raised her own weapon as he looked down at the empty revolver in his hand.

* * *

Except it wasn't a revolver in his hand. It was a semiautomatic pistol.

And he wasn't in the house, he was sitting on the front porch, watching police cars arrive in a choreographed sequence of flashing lights and controlled urgency. He dropped the gun. A dozen cops swarmed him, pushed him to the ground, cuffed his hands behind his back. Some asked questions he couldn't hear. Some went inside.

One emerged moments later and announced to his colleagues: "One decedent. Gunshot wounds to the head and chest."

* * *

A moment or a day later—Chili was getting used to these memory lapses now—he found himself in an interview room wearing a jailhouse uniform that fit him perfectly, as if it'd been tailored for the occasion. His hands were cuffed to the table. Sitting across from him was his lawyer: A confident, enthusiastic-looking young man who was probably eking his way through a stint as a public defender to build his resume.

"The good news is," the lawyer said, consulting a folder thick with documents, "security cameras in the victim's house showed us who brought

which gun to the shootout. And her gun matched the ballistics on the one used to kill your wife and her husband. You'll be exonerated for those ones."

"What about the woman?"

"You took the gun, there was a struggle; it's all on camera. If we had to, we could argue self-defense. But you probably won't even be charged, given the circumstances."

Chili felt something like relief, though it was complicated by the sense that he was missing something important. "So, I'm free to go?"

The lawyer blinked at him. "Well, I don't think we can get away with self-defense on the other three."

"The what? What other three?"

"The nurse at the facility where you were processed. The man at the bus station in Utah. A saxophonist in an alley in Los Angeles." The lawyer's voice was dry and professional, but his body language conveyed fear. "File says it was someone you knew from your past life."

The words installed themselves into his consciousness like an unexpected software update.

"I don't remember," Chili said.

"That's the funny thing about absolution," the lawyer explained. "It doesn't just remove certain memories. It can also block new ones from forming, if they're similar to the old ones."

"So, what are my options?"

The lawyer closed his folder with the finality of someone delivering a verdict. "Trial, with the possibility of life in prison. Or . . ."

"Or?"

"Absolution. Clean slate, new identity, another chance to be someone else."

Chili looked at his hands—hands used to create music and end lives, neither of which he remembered.

"How many times?" he asked.

"What?"

"How many times have I made this choice?"

The lawyer's expression didn't change, but something in his eyes suggested the question wasn't entirely unexpected. "Does it matter?"

He closed his eyes and tried to remember what it felt like to be innocent.

"Absolution," he said.

The lawyer made a note in his file. "And what would you like your new name to be? You can't use the same one as before."

Chili opened his eyes and looked at the man across from him—polished, professional, and naïve in a way that made Chili nostalgic.

"Surprise me," he said.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jared Chen-Wynn's first novel, *Zen and the Art of Dying*, was a winner in the 2017 RevPit contest. One of his recent short stories, "Gone but Not Recycled," won an honorable mention in the 2024 1st Quarter Writers of the Future Contest and was featured in a recent issue of *Corner Bar Magazine*.

EVERY NAME THEY GAVE YOU

by Mark Dimaisip

First, gather every name they gave you
that felt like rope. Knot them inside
your throat. Steal matches & gasoline

from the kitchen. Ignore the labels
that say: *for adults only*. Build a pyre
from old uniforms, diplomas, toys,

photo albums, closet doors. Stack them
carefully. Facing up. Create a circle
& salt it with all your unspoken shame.

Lay down more offerings: a jockstrap,
a poem, a bottle of gin with one lipstick
kiss on the rim. Place your photograph.

The one taken before you learned how to
feel good about lying. Let it face the wind.
Write the prayer they never taught you.

Make it sound like a sad serenade,
then scream. Light it with your left hand.
The hand they taught you not to use.

Do not look away. Even when they cry.
Dance in circles until the heat feels
like remembering your first time

getting hurt from playing with fire.
When the neighbors ask what's burning,
say: *only what no longer belongs to me*.

Let the ashes know they're free.
Let the smoke tell every ancestor
that you found a better mythology.

When the wind shifts & your clothes
still smell like fire, do not wash them.
That scent is survival. Sacred. Safe.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Dimaisip is a Filipino writer from Manila. His works have appeared in *The Brasilia Review*, *Cha*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *harana poetry*, *Human Parts*, Oxford Brookes International Poetry Competition, *Strange Horizons*, and elsewhere. He has performed for poetry slams and literary festivals in Southeast Asia and Australia. Links to his poems are at markdimaisip.carrrd.co.

HUNTY HAIKUS FOR HOLY HOMOSEXUALS

by Mark Dimaisip

Gold shoes on churchsteps.
Titas throw me side-eye.
But the light loved me.

Lola's rosary,
now wrapped 'round my wrist, hunty—
divine jewelry.

Saint Sebastian sighs.
His abs flex under arrows.
Martyr of soft boys.

Sunday melodies.
Gaydar explodes in the choir.
Ave Maria!

During the homily,
rainbow perforates the roof.
I take it as proof.

They say queer people
won't ascend into heaven?
Sis, look at me fly.

Missal in my hand,
I waack between pew & priest.
Dominus-slay-biscum.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Dimaisip is a Filipino writer from Manila. His works have appeared in *The Brasilia Review*, *Cha*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *harana poetry*, *Human Parts*, Oxford Brookes International Poetry Competition, *Strange Horizons*, and elsewhere. He has performed for poetry slams and literary festivals in Southeast Asia and Australia. Links to his poems are at markdimaisip.carrd.co.

TANK BABY

by Ashlee Lhamon

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

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

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

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

The ring?

Where the hell is the ring?

* * *

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

Claire drops to the floor and feels the carpet under the tank blindly. Nothing. The closet is a crowded cupboard of craft supplies, bulk toiletries, things to sell, cookbooks, paperbacks, cat toys, picture frames, and three open boxes labeled MISC. Several of these she heels aside so she can wheel the tank out into the living room to better inspect the floor. There, she finds three unrelated puzzle pieces and a loose peanut. No ring.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So," he says.

* * *

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

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

her job didn't offer maternity leave. Plus, Stan had just read about Meahaler's Syndrome, which wasn't routinely tested for at the official baby farms. Even if there were only fifty recorded cases in history, those cases had to happen to someone.

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

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

For the price, they could ignore the typos.

"So," Claire says.

Her ring clicks and rattles in the tank.

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

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

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

"Maybe it will be fine," she says.

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

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

Click.

* * *

It's not fine. The pH tester strip in the morning comes out an angry red. It takes four tablespoons of *Best Baby Mother Love Healthy Safe pH Increase* to set it right again. Less than two hours later, the strip results are back to that

same furious color. Stan has always told her the ring is 14 karat gold and six 0.02 carat princess-cut diamonds, but now she wonders.

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

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

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

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

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

"I meant another tank."

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

* * *

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

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

"And from life," Claire says.

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

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

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

Claire taps the tongs against the edge of the pot.

"One," Stan says, and dips his fingers in.

“Two,” he says.

“Three—”

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

“There's more?”

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

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

She shows him the ring.

“Are we bad parents?” she says.

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

But he's gotten the saying wrong.

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

“Right,” she says.

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

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

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

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashlee Lhamon’s work has appeared in *Nightmare*, *Lightspeed*, *Apex*, *Tractor Beam*, *Salamander*, *Grist*, and elsewhere. Her novel about evil clones, *Last Lynn Standing*, is forthcoming with Grand Central Publishing. She’s currently a fiction editor at *Strange Horizons* and writes about writing at *The Pulp Pit*. For more, check out ashleelhamon.com.

FERTILIZER

by Aeryn Rudel

Victor stared down at the naked corpse of a man in his forties. Slight paunch, tanned skin (burned on the shoulders), and a tragically handsome face. His chest had been cut open, the ribs removed, heart, lungs, and intestines cleared out, leaving a red, glistening void in an otherwise intact body.

“What are you waiting for?” Uchida asked, looking up from his own corpse, an elderly woman with a shaved head. Cancer, probably. The Senior Planter was tall and muscular, with dark eyes over a crooked nose and cracked lips set in a perpetual frown.

Victor swallowed a lump of bile and looked away. It didn’t help much. The Sacramento body farm was the largest in California, and there were corpses arranged in neat rows as far as he could see in all directions. “I, uh, didn’t think it would be like this.”

Uchida wiped bloody hands on his apron and repositioned the planter’s pouch on his belt. He regarded Victor with a pitiless stare. “How did you *think* it would be?”

“I don’t know. Why . . . why can’t we just use dirt?”

Uchida uttered a short barking laugh. “Tell me, bright boy, where you gonna get enough dirt to plant six hundred acres of apple trees? On what fucking planet does that much arable soil exist?”

“I know, but these are *people*,” Victor said, looking down at his plot. They’d sewed the eyelids closed, for which Victor was thankful. He didn’t think he could handle thousands of blank, empty stares.

“No, *not* people. Resources. Resources that cannot go to waste when they could help feed people who are literally starving,” Uchida said. “So do your job. I guarantee there are thousands who’d be glad to do it in your place.”

Uchida’s words conjured a deeper, more penetrating fear than even ten thousand corpses. Victor *needed* this job. “I’m sorry,” he said, almost whispering.

“Good,” Uchida replied flatly. “Then get your sorry ass to work.”

Victor squatted, reached into his planter's pouch, and put three black apple seeds in the chest cavity of his plot. He poured in a liter of water mixed with a quick-grow solution. In a week, the seedling would take root and begin breaking down flesh and bone as fertilizer. The seeds were genetically altered to make better use of this readily available food source. They'd been instrumental in stopping the food shortage of 2037 after a combination of rampant pollution and global warming reduced the Earth's fertile soil to inert dust. Body farms had replaced traditional crops throughout the United States. They supplied food to millions and provided thousands of desperately needed jobs—if you had the stomach for it. Victor wasn't sure he did, but his wife and kids couldn't survive on government subsidies for much longer.

The next plot was a young woman. Her cause of death obvious—a puckered, bloodless hole in the middle of her forehead. Victor had never seen a bullet wound. Never seen someone who'd died violently. How many other murders and suicides lurked in these plots? Maybe their families took comfort that their loved one's body would help feed the hungry. Maybe they didn't. It's not like they had a choice. Corpses became the property of the state the second brain function ceased.

Uchida kept pace with Victor, but not because the Senior Planter couldn't go faster. The man was making sure Victor did his job correctly. After a while, Uchida stopped watching so closely and even made the occasional approving grunt when Victor finished with a plot.

As they moved down the rows beneath the bright California sun, Victor heard a faint keening. At first, he thought it was the wind. Then they moved to a new set of plots delineated with bright red seeding mats.

Uchida tapped Victor on the shoulder. "The next plots are two-person jobs. You gonna be able to do this or are we gonna have more of that soft-hearted bullshit from this morning?"

Victor swallowed. "Are they awake?"

"Of course they're awake," Uchida snapped. "You think the state is gonna spend good money to let these assholes sleep through their punishment?"

"Isn't it cruel?" Victor said feebly, trying not to wince from the inevitable rebuke.

"Cruel is what each of them did to end up here," Uchida hissed. "Cruel would be letting them rot away in prison when their bodies could be put to good use. Now toughen the fuck up and come with me."

They approached the new set of plots. Each one writhed and squirmed against the restraints holding them to the ground. Their moans and screams were all open vowels because of the oversized plastic feeding ports holding their jaws open. The ports were connected to a tube that ran down the plots'

throats and into their stomachs. Planters simply dropped in seeds, quick-grow solution, and an acid neutralizer through the open port.

Uchida squatted next to a muscular man covered in tattoos. The plot's eyes rolled with terror, and his open-mouthed screams were choked O-shaped barks. "Oh! Oh! Oh!"

Uchida took the man's head in a firm grip, holding it steady, and looked up at Victor. "Plant it."

Victor choked down his moral outrage, knelt, and pushed seeds and a full syringe of quick-grow solution and acid neutralizer through the man's feeding port. The plot gagged, but the feeding tube kept him from vomiting. Uchida stood up and nodded, a satisfied look on his face. "One down. Our quota is seventy-five today."

Seventy-five. Victor's legs went rubbery, but he followed Uchida down the endless row of squirming plots. He tried not to hear the cacophony of horrified moans and shrill vowel-heavy screams. He especially tried not to look at the next row over where the saplings had begun to sprout, pulling nutrients from plots that struggled weakly beneath them and would for days to come.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aeryn Rudel is a writer from Tacoma, Washington. He is the author of the baseball horror novella *Effectively Wild*, the Iron Kingdoms Acts of War novels, and the flash fiction collection *Night Walk & Other Dark Paths*. His short stories have appeared in *Abyss & Apex*, *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, and *Pseudopod*, among others. He is a heavy metal nerd, a baseball geek, a sword dweeb, and knows more about dinosaurs than is healthy or socially acceptable. Learn more about Aeryn and his work at rejectionmancy.com or on Bluesky @aerynrudel.

FRITILLARY FRIGATE

by Marisca Pichette

Cockle & Foxfire
build a spaceship
from endangered morpho
wings & pull-tabs secreted
from Polar Seltzer cans.

On the summer equinox
Cockle severed the tether

& Foxfire exhaled hope
into soft gossamer sails.

They never crashed—
nor landed—

on this moon
or any other.

They are floating still:
Cockle thatching the roof
with shimmering cicada shells,

Foxfire tending mushrooms
in the meandering mess hall

each enjoying an endless
view of the stars.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marisca Pichette is a queer author of more than three hundred pieces of short fiction and poetry, appearing in *Strange Horizons*, *Clarkesworld*, *Vastarien*, *The Deadlands*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Asimov's*, *Nightmare Magazine*, and many others. Her poetry collection, *Rivers in Your Skin, Sirens in Your Hair*, was a finalist for the Bram Stoker and Elgin Awards. Their eco-horror novella, *Every Dark Cloud*, is out now from Ghost Orchid Press.

SAUDI ARABIA

by Mark Wyatt

Sun,
executions,
crimson blood
stains in the desert
sand bunkered off the fairway,
blood pooled glimmering black in
sportswashing golfers' squinting sun—
glassed eyes. "Jamal Khashoggi? Well,
I never knew him really." This T-bone
steak putting green almost plays too
easy. No way will this bring me to my
knees, carefully laid plans butchered.
Which club do they use to smash their
heads in? Keeping the putter straight,
I self-censor. Piano wires, fingernails being
ripped away, screams, as if human rights lawyers
were reaching helplessly for support. Steadying
myself on the eighteenth green, I rerepeat
my mantra: 'I am a professional golfer;
my only consideration is:
being able to smile
and forget about
everything that
matters'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Wyatt now lives in the UK after teaching in South and South-East Asia and the Middle East. His pattern poetry has recently appeared in *Borderless*, *Cosmic Daffodil*, *Exterminating Angel*, *Full Bleed*, *Greyhound Journal*, *Hyperbolic Review*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, *Osmosis*, *Sontag Mag*, *Streetcake Magazine*, *Talking About Strawberries All Of The Time*, and *Typo*. Other work is forthcoming from *Allium*, *Artemis Journal*, *Libre*, *Neologism Poetry Journal*, *Shift*, and *Tupelo Quarterly*.

THE STRINGS AND ROOTS THAT GUIDE AND SPEAK

by Bryn Farrar

On our first day underground, we carved our own enclosure. Rusted tools against mud and rock, darting glances over our shoulders as the puppets stood and watched.

Shard by shard, we chipped the bones of the earth, sweating and trembling until we formed a tiny space to hold us. Enough for the purpose, and nothing more—ten skinny bodies lying knee to groin, like the mosaic tiles of the kitchen back home. The puppets packed us in and drilled a locked gate across the rocks.

“You’re pretty,” said the little girl that night. Her hands were clasped tight and white, her eyes in search of distraction. “Were you always pretty, or did you grow into it?”

Like me, she must have been freshly captured. Young ones couldn’t work that hard, and their skin was still supple. They didn’t last long.

I put my chin to my chest to look her in the eyes and spoke softly in the silence. “It’s confidence that grows. Makes people look pretty. Yours will grow too, as you get older.”

I hated myself for the lie. She wouldn’t get the chance.

The puppets took the girl that night. None but her mother fought back. The mother screamed and scratched and threw herself at them, and they shut her up for good.

* * *

They had told us the puppets were brainless, back in boot camp long ago. Dull in mind and vicious in body—a new enemy for a new war.

Patchwork grafts of corpse and machine, skin and muscle melted to wires and hydraulics. Black eyes built for the dark in the mines, enough to track us when we ran. Legs built on low hips to catch us in the tunnels, and arms thick enough to pluck us apart when they did.

Enough for the purpose, and nothing more, our officers had said. The Frame doesn't know how to over-engineer. I wondered if our officers trained us the same way.

But the puppet that had pulled me from the wreckage of my plane had spoken clearly, with purpose.

"ID," it had said. "Give your mission, your objective."

There was never an ID, no record of our missions. We weren't that stupid. The puppet slapped me down with its one monstrous arm, dragged me dazed through leaves and logs to the entrance of the mine.

Its strings were pulled tight, but it hadn't known that much: it didn't even check the crook of my elbow.

They were wrong about the puppets back in boot camp. Or maybe they had underestimated what the Frame could create.

* * *

"In the event that your aircraft goes down behind the Shroud, you will be taken. You may be unlucky enough to be taken alive."

Sergeant Bly stepped through the beam of the projector in the auditorium, the light catching his cap and the milky white of his one dead eye. "You will consider yourself expended, but you may still be of use."

A cadet raised his hand. "How will we know if we're behind the Shroud?"

Bly stopped pacing, locking one unimpressed eye on the cadet. "You will by then be a sharper mind than the one asking such a question. The Shroud is simple: it lets things in, and nothing out. When you hear our transmissions, but we don't hear yours, you'll be there. When our planes overhead ignore the flares from your crash site, you'll be there."

He looked thoughtful for a moment, as if replaying a memory. "If you shout for rescue, you'll hear the perfect echo from the field of the dome."

He pressed the clicker and the slide changed to a short list. "You will pay attention to your surroundings. You will go along with what they demand of you. You will decide if you are anywhere that might be a valuable target."

He directed his laser pointer to the list on the screen. "Intelligent synthetics. Unusual underground heat. Fast turnaround of prisoners. These are the most likely signifiers that you are close to the mainframe, according to our simulations."

Turnaround. Quite the euphemism.

* * *

Some nights in the cell, it felt like my eyes were getting better in the dark. Drinking glints of moonlight down the tunnel from the mine shaft, picking edges and corners in the rock walls around me. Picking the slopes and tendrils where metal met flesh on the outline of the puppet standing guard over our prison.

"Be asleep," said the puppet. Its black eye caught a moment of light as it shifted closer to our enclosure. Moonlight made the puppet's skin look grey, like mincemeat exposed to the air.

My own eyes squeezed shut. They were built for the meadows and trees, back when the war was still waged against people—they weren't ready for the underdark of the mines.

Could it really talk, or was it a dog barking its wants?

"I can't sleep. It's hot with all the people."

The puppet rocked in place, one eye turning to the tunnel that led from our prison. It had the nose of a man who once might have been beautiful. "You will sleep."

I let the silence hang. Rule one of POW interrogation, our officers had told us, was tactical silence. Give nothing, and nothing more. But a few words with a meatbattery didn't count as an interrogation.

"Do you sleep?" I said softly.

The puppet twitched its chin, and in the light I saw its dead eye. Black and lifeless like the other, but scratched with a deep cut whose ends reached past the bony socket with fresh scabs. Had the girl's mother given it that?

It took a laborious breath, one heavy shoulder pushing its neck to the side. "Everything sleeps. You will now."

I thought of the girl. "You took her before she finished her sleep."

The puppet said nothing.

I pushed my luck. *It's confidence that grows.* "Does the Frame sleep?"

The puppet stepped quickly, pushing its enormous weight against the bars of the gate. Its jaw pushed forward, rotten breath steaming through. "You will regret from saying that name."

I shrank as much as I could into the carpet of prisoners. The puppet resumed its guard and said nothing more.

In the morning, I saw the girl. She was herding new prisoners on mechanical spider legs, the supple skin of her face fused onto circuits and bone.

They worked us for a week, chipping the bones of the earth, in search of the precious minerals that powered the tentacles of the Frame's underground reach.

Silicon, cobalt, copper, silver—anything that could quench the hunger of the Frame. Nothing went to waste: not minerals, and not bodies. Could she have built machines to mine her precious minerals? Of course. But flesh was cheap, and the war piled corpses—both here in the mines and our shores back home, her drones bombing our children and spraying engineered disease. Our bodies were a commodity: so why not save the metal to extend her roots and veins?

For a week, I swung my pickaxe with one arm. I didn't want to jolt the chip in my other elbow.

* * *

"In the event that you find reasonable suspicion you are being held in a high-value target area," said Sergeant Bly, "you will activate your implant to transmit your coordinates."

The same cadet spoke up. He didn't raise his hand. "We're launching airstrikes on the hunches of captured pilots?"

Bly slammed his laser pointer on his podium, impact echoing through the silent auditorium. The brim of his cap was frayed and worn, its badge needing a polish. "We're using setbacks as an opportunity, Cadet."

I raised my hand slowly, the perfect calculation of timid. "What happens if we're captured and we don't see the signs?"

Bly pressed his lips. "You will have filled your purpose, and we expect nothing more."

* * *

The next week, the one-eyed puppet was back guarding our enclosure. Its scabs were half-healed, but its eye would never recover.

Even with just seven of us, the cell was unbearably hot, and I couldn't sleep. Another had been taken, but the spaces hadn't been filled—it must have been slim pickings for flesh in the forests above us that week.

Unusual underground heat.

"Close eyes," said the puppet. It was changing its script.

My eyes stayed open. "Are you happy here?"

The puppet knuckled the ground with its overdeveloped arm, with a thump that echoed down the tunnel. "No question from the slave. Be asleep."

Almost a full sentence. Or was my imagination reaching?

I shifted my hips on the floor. "I'm a slave here. But you're a slave there, too." It wasn't a lie. It was surely convincing.

The puppet stared, unmoving. But there was something in that dark eye that changed and softened, as if the pupil that wasn't there started flicking side to side to process its conflicted beliefs.

"I serve," said the puppet. It drew itself higher in a posture of pride. "You slave."

Intelligent synthetics. I wasn't reaching.

"Does the Fra—" I said. "Does she see your efforts? All you do for her?"

Its shoulders tightened. "She sees all. She knows us each."

Intelligence meant reason—awareness and ego. Puppets could never be convinced, but this was something else before me.

I raised an eyebrow. Would it recognize the gesture? "Sounds like we're the same. Both stuck underground, serving the goals of another. Breaking our backs for results we never touch."

The puppet stood, its chest heaving.

My throat squeezed out the words. "We both serve a master we never see."

It huffed through toothless gums and the only lip it had. "The slave know nothing. I see her many time." It pulled itself higher in the same posture as before. "We bring her gifts, and she receive."

"What gifts?"

The puppet hesitated, as if deciding if it spoke too much. "Precious metal. Young ones for repurpose. Important slave with information."

The young girl had been taken and was on spider legs the next night.

Fast turnaround.

My fingertips traced the scar of the implant on my elbow. This was my chance. I considered myself expended, but I could still be of use. "How do you know I'm not important?"

It huffed again. "You are not."

"So why do we keep talking like this?" I let the silence hang.

The puppet checked the tunnel once more and dropped its gaze to the floor. In the slice of moonlight, I saw the nose of the beautiful man.

It spoke softly in the dark. "You are pretty."

* * *

The next week, they worked us in the forest above the mines, our ankles chained in gangs so we couldn't run. Too many of our tools had worn and broken, and there was no sense wasting metal on the handles when trees were as cheap as our bodies.

Enough for the purpose, and nothing more.

I hadn't seen the dead-eye puppet in days. Did it have the capacity for embarrassment? Was there more of the person they had spliced on its body—a sliver of brain and humanity, as well as a pretty nose?

She sees all, the puppet had said. Had her roots been all around us? Had she fed me what I wanted to hear, twitching the strings of her puppet in response to my questions?

It felt good to be back where I was meant to be: among the forests and meadows my eyes were built for. The scent of wet soil fed memories long forgotten, and the last green of summer clung desperately to the branches of the trees above.

I had been eyeing the vegetation around the trees we were felling, and finally I saw it: the flat white tops of a yarrow plant. The same flower that had saved us when my brother split his head after I convinced him to dive in the shallow river by the farm.

No puppets around. I twisted a clump of stems and balled them in my fist, shoving them deep down my flight suit between my breast and my belly.

On our next day working the mines, I chipped a bone from the earth and tucked the shard under my waistline.

* * *

"I don't get it," said the cadet in the auditorium. He didn't raise his hand again. We were still fresh recruits—our strings weren't pulled tight yet. "If the Shroud doesn't let things out, how does the implant send a location for an airstrike?"

"It's not your job to understand, Cadet. It's your job to enact."

Bly scanned the room, saw the faces expectant. "Simulations suggest the Shroud blocks all energy: heat, sound, light, radio." He hesitated, as if deciding if he spoke too much. "The implants you received work by entanglement: particles aligned without such limitations."

The room was silent. This was beyond our initial training, and Bly saw it.

"If you paid attention in biology, you'll remember the trees in Utah. *Pando*: the largest single organism there ever was, before the Frame. If you stand on the soil, the Shroud separates the trees. But if you look deeper, beneath the surface, there's a way for the roots to speak."

His one good eye traversed the room. He never failed to look unimpressed. "When you activate your implant, we'll hear it, and that's all you need to know."

* * *

I made sure I was first into the cell that night. Other nights, I would be last: a front-row seat with the one-eyed puppet. But tonight was about secrecy, pressed deep at the back of the carpet of slaves.

Every leaf pulled from the plant in my shirt went to my mouth, adding to the clump that would form a poultice. Once every leaf was expended, I set to work with the shard of rock: carefully sawing and slicing at my flesh in the crook of my elbow.

My teeth bit on wet leaves to stifle the pain. But not too much: I didn't want to squeeze away its precious juice.

It didn't take long. The implant wasn't deep. I pressed the mass of chewed yarrow to the open wound to staunch the bleeding and licked clean my prize in the dark of our enclosure.

Surgical steel, no larger than a bullet. And somewhere inside, an entangled particle that could reach its partner beyond the Shroud's curtain.

I kept it tucked in my underwear. I would have to be patient: for my wound to heal and the blood to dry away from the eyes of the puppets.

* * *

It was hours before the bleeding stopped, and days before I had the confidence to take the next step. I lagged behind near the cell after a day chipping rock and secured my place near the gate in the human mosaic.

"Come here," I said softly in the dark when the others were asleep. "I'm stuck awake."

The one-eyed puppet lowered its brow, as if sensing some deception. But it was twice my size and the gate was locked. It surely saw no threat.

"No question from the slave." It stepped to the gate and bent its neck downward, our faces just inches apart. Its black eye searched my face, neck, and chest. It was excited to be this close.

I pushed up to my knees in a posture of ceremony. "I have something important for you."

The puppet pulled back, but only slightly. Its breath was sweet and heavy, like fat charred on a grill. "Have what?"

"Something useful," I said. "Something she will want. A gift to win her favor and raise your esteem."

The puppet huffed. "Show it."

I withdrew, but only slightly. Just the right amount. "First, we make a deal. It doesn't come free."

"No deal with slave."

"You haven't seen it yet." I made my eyes search its own, flicking back and forth between its black lenses. My face arranged with eyes looking up,

eyebrows pleading and my lips tense. "If I give you this gift, you must help me escape. Get me out and away so I can run back home."

The puppet nodded, far too fast. "Show it."

It didn't need to believe it would honor the deal. It just needed to believe I was making one.

My hand reached to my waistline, and its eyes followed. Even better. I pulled the steel implant from my underwear and held it up with two hands. But not too close.

"It communicates. Goes straight through the Shroud." That part was true. "She can listen to our plans and our next steps for attack—the movements of our people and what we know about yours."

The puppet thought for a moment and pushed its bloated fingers through the gate.

I leaned back on my shins with the implant held close. "You must promise me. Do you promise?"

It nodded again, impatient. "Promise. You escape after." It turned its hand over and beckoned through the bars.

I squeezed the implant in a specific rhythm—the same pattern I would have pressed on my elbow had the time been right. The steel warmed in my fingers, and its countdown began.

"The channel is open." I placed the implant in its palm, wrapped both hands around its knuckles in a sickening embrace. "But be fast. Go now so she can learn, before they realize she's listening."

A flimsy story, but it would have to do. Enough for the purpose, and nothing more.

The puppet drew its fingers through the bars of the cell, closed a fist around the implant, and stood to its full height.

"You will remember me?" I said, looking up at it. "You will help me—won't forget?"

"I remember," said the puppet. "Won't forget." It turned and sloped away with its asymmetrical gait, one distended arm squeezed tight around its prize.

Intelligent synthetics. But not that sharp.

It wouldn't forget me, if it lived long enough to understand what it had done. It might scream betrayal, if it had time to scream.

But the betrayal happened long ago, when the Frame mixed her enemy with the machines that fueled her war. Was it the slice of human in the puppet that had allowed a connection—the primal attraction between man and woman, linked by roots beneath the surface that the Frame could never see?

She had played herself. I was just a piece of it. It was her puppet, but my slave now—and it had given my own masters a place to cut at the root of her reach. The reins of string had moved to my hands. But my hands had their own strings, and I had only filled my purpose—nothing more.

I didn't sleep at all that night, and it didn't matter. When the glints of moonlight turned to slivers of morning sun, a new puppet woke the group and herded us back to work.

* * *

On our last day underground, we carved while I smiled. *It's confidence that grows.*

I wondered if the little girl had believed she would grow older. If my brother forgave me for the dive that split his skull. But mostly I thought of the puppet, and the pull it felt on its hooks from both master and slave.

Shard by shard, we chipped the bones of the earth, as the echoes of fighter jets bounced down the hollow tunnels. The tremble of distant bombs drew closer and shook the rock beneath our feet.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bryn Farrar lives in England, where he writes things that shouldn't be.

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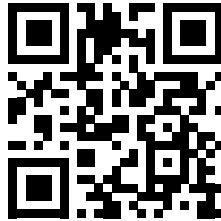
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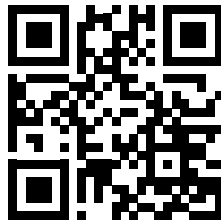
FRONT AND BACK COVER ARTIST

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

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