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If You Love Him, Hide the Grave
by Vera Brook

The blue-gray dirt on Ross-82D was dry as bone and heavy as regret. The rough handle of the shovel was already blistering Chiara's thumb on her meat hand. Strange lights danced around her like ghosts as she dug.

She had stripped out of her pressure suit in respect, to give what she was doing at least a semblance of a proper burial. If her blister got infected and she had to get another prosthetic arm, so be it. She was trespassing here and didn't have time to test for pathogens or tweak her immune system. Or maybe she no longer cared, as long as her brain was still meat and reliably perishable.

Anyway, the risk of infection was low, Ross-82D being a miserable chunk of cratered rock that had resisted terraforming with a vengeance, never advancing past the deadly-desert stage. And haunted by apparitions to boot. What passed for air here was hot and thin like the army recruiters' lies, though nothing her ex-military super-lungs couldn't handle.

Ironic, Chiara thought bitterly, how the same thing could be killing you and keeping you alive.

She thrust the blade of her shovel into the lifeless dirt with renewed resolve.

Thankfully, she was almost done digging, the hole she needed barely two feet deep and one foot across. Painfully small and shallow for a grave, and nowhere near big enough to hold all her grief.

But all she had left of her baby brother was a crystal hard drive the size of her palm—a backup she'd stolen. It sat on the ground, wrapped in black cloth. No need for a coffin. Arik had shed the last parts of his biological body three lifetimes ago.

The hard drive contained his mind—contained *him*—but irreversibly fused with layers of tactical bundles, military integrations, and extra processors. All the augments turned invasive over time, choking her brother's will and crushing whole parts of his identity. Until the stubborn, hot-tempered, rebellious brother she'd grown up with, quick to love and quick to fight, became cold and obedient like a machine.

All to make him a better soldier. The best.

It made Chiara sick with helpless fury, in part because she had narrowly avoided the same fate—and only thanks to her brother’s warning.

With his mind-drive hooked up to the right peripherals, Arik could hack any computer, pilot any ship, control any weapon. A miracle of military technology that made him too valuable and too dangerous to ever discharge from the army—not even after death.

After all, what was death, when every failing part of you could be rebooted or replaced with a new one?

A temporary downtime. A maintenance issue. Nothing more.

The heat beat down on her, the air like sandpaper in her nose and throat. With or without her augments, this vicious, haunted planet would eventually kill her if she lingered too long.

Chiara’s skin prickled, her pre-tech instinct warning of a more immediate danger.

She spun around to scan the perimeter, squinting through the shifting auras, the infrared sensor in her artificial eye switching on.

And there it was—a lone figure moving toward her, the short stature and graceful gait instantly familiar despite the standard helmet and pressure suit.

Talulah. Her sister-in-law.

The woman stopped a few feet away. She took off her helmet and set it on the ground.

Dark eyes in a heart-shaped face framed by white hair. No sensory augments, all natural organs and limbs, everything about her unnervingly fragile, even now, decades later. She winced in pain as she drew her first breath, but quickly composed herself.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Chiara said coldly.

Talulah was a civilian, a music teacher and the gentlest soul Chiara had ever met. But she had been an engineer once, when the corporate wars for territory and resources were just taking hold—at first isolated incidents across the swaths of warp-highway galaxies, then ongoing campaigns thinly disguised as sector security.

“I just . . . want to talk . . .” Talulah took sharp gasps of air, her normally musical voice splintered by pain.

“There’s nothing to talk about.” The hole was ready. A few more inches would make no difference. Chiara dropped the shovel and snatched the cloth-swaddled mind-drive from the ground.

Talulah shuddered, her eyes widening. “Is that . . . him?”

“No,” Chiara snapped. “He’s gone. Reprogrammed, edited out. And then killed. Blasted to atoms, several times. You know that.”

“But a part of him is still there—” Talulah insisted.

“So what? You want to bring him back?” Chiara growled. “So they can stick him into a new body and deploy him again? With more and better guarded backups? Get him killed again? Rinse and repeat forever? Is that what you want? Because you can’t keep him and you can’t hide him. The moment you link up a comm to talk to him, they’ll see it and they’ll warp-punch here to take him away.”

“No . . . no . . .” Talulah was shaking her head.

“Then what do you want?” Chiara snapped. “You want to stop me? I know he’s your husband. But he’s also my brother, and I’m going to bury him right here.” She swung her arm to drop the mind-drive into the hole.

But Talulah rushed forward and grabbed her wrist. “Wait!”

Rage stirred in Chiara, a bitter fire licking the parts of her that could still feel it. “You think I want this? You think this is easy for me? I loved him too.”

“We can’t . . . just bury it.” Talulah’s breathing was ragged, her skin turning the ghostly blue-gray of this punishing, unforgiving planet. But her eyes were hard. “We have to . . . destroy it.”

Chiara stared at her in shock. Destroy the mind-drive? They couldn’t do that.

Bury it, yes. Hide it until the war was over, in a powered-down stasis as lifeless as death.

But destroy?

Terror and confusion slashed through Chiara. If they destroyed Arik’s mind-drive, how could she ever ask her brother’s forgiveness? How could she explain that she hadn’t meant it, hadn’t known what would happen when she’d tricked him into seeing a recruiter that awful summer? At seventeen, Arik was restless and hot-headed, always getting in trouble. And the army had treated Chiara well enough; she didn’t care for combat simulations, but she was learning cybersecurity, and she was good at it. How could she have known that her slacker brother would ace all the tests and get fast-tracked for special missions? And that damn recruiting bonus she’d pocketed. It made her feel like she had sold his soul and doomed him to hell . . .

And now Talulah wanted to destroy Arik’s mind-drive?

Chiara opened her mouth to argue, but no words came.

Because Talulah was right. Who knew what new tech the army had cooked up to sniff out the deserters, even those buried two feet underground on a haunted planet? They wouldn't hesitate to rob a grave.

Teeth clenched, Chiara peeled away the black cloth.

The haunted lights swirled faster, the crystal drive flashing and blinking in her palm.

She thought of her brother's laughter, the way his eyes shone and his shoulders shook.

She sank to her knees, the crystal sliding from her fingers. "I . . . I can't . . ."

A small, gloved hand reached for it. "I'll do it."

Talulah pressed her husband's mind-drive over her heart. Then set it down on a flat, gray rock. She gripped the handle of the shovel with both hands and raised it high.

"Goodbye, my love."

The sharp blade struck down with surprising force—once, twice, three times—smashing the crystal to dust.

Chiara closed her eyes, relief and awe slamming into her.

It was done. Arik was free.

Rest in peace, baby brother.

About the Author

Vera Brook is a neuroscientist turned science fiction and fantasy writer. She is the author of the *Sand Runner* series and her short fiction has appeared in *Cast of Wonders*, *The Colored Lens*, and *Hyphen Punk*, among other places, and is forthcoming in *Analog SF*. Learn more about her writing at verabrook.com and connect with her on Twitter: @VeraBrook1.

Rebirth
by Michelle Kaseler

Light stings my eyes. The walls and ceilings are white.

The shadowed outline of a tilted head and dangling ponytail moves closer. "What's your name?" she asks.

"I don't know."

Nothing looks familiar. A beeping screen with numbers and jagged lines hangs above my bed. The woman's eyes, dark and intense, come into focus. I can't look away. Don't want to.

"Where are you from?" Her scent sparks memories of soft shapes and bright colors.

"Here?" Something tells me there are other places, but I don't know any of them. I curl and flex my fingers and toes.

"What's my name?" She points to the badge clipped to her white coat.

"Doctor Angela Ramirez."

Flowers. She smells like flowers. My pulse thumps in my throat. She's as pretty as one, too.

She holds up cards with pictures and asks me to identify each one. Horse. Mountain. Strawberry.

"Good, good." She nods. "Do you have any personal memories of these things?"

"No."

A hint of a smile brightens her face. "He's ready."

"Ready for what?" I wince as she removes the electrodes from my shaved head and chest.

I follow her gaze to a man in a dark blue uniform with hair that juts up like rusty needles. His shoulders are as wide as the doorway.

"Ready for assignment." He drops an orange jumpsuit and a pair of shoes on my lap. "You're mine now. Get dressed."

B9 is tattooed on my left hand, but it means nothing to me. The man—Merten according to his nametag—doesn't have any markings on his hand.

Dr. Ramirez leaves me alone with him. I want to ask if she's coming back, but his face convinces me not to. He blocks the door, arms folded across his chest. They're twice the size of mine—he could snap me like a stick.

Merten raps his nightstick against his palm. "Get moving, ant."

My backside is a little numb, but nothing hurts as I pull myself up by the railings and step into the stiff, scratchy jumpsuit. It tugs around the middle.

Merten escorts me down a corridor, past several rooms with people hooked up to monitors and IV bags. Dr. Ramirez is in one of them, writing on a clipboard.

“Stop staring,” Merten grunts. “Creep.”

My cheeks warm, I avert my eyes. Am I?

We pass a larger room where three bodies covered with sheets lie on slabs, toes up. My stomach becomes a block of ice.

“Third strikers.” Merten presses his nightstick against my back. “Observe, behave, and don’t become one.”

I quicken my step.

We end up in a room filled with dozens of metal bunks. A man lies on his side, moaning.

“Infirmary must be full. Keep it down, A5.” Merten pokes him as we walk by, then stops in front of the bunk marked B9-B10. “You’ll sleep here.”

“Am I supposed to sleep now?”

“I don’t care. Just stay put and don’t cause any trouble.” He points at a camera mounted on the ceiling. “Or we’ll be on you like flies on shit.” The guard smirks. “You should sleep. You’ll be busting your ass soon enough.”

After he leaves, I climb the bunk and lie down. Light filters in through barred windows and ceiling fans fill the room with a sputtering hum. I watch a nicked blade go round and round.

One, two, three . . .

Hunger gnaws at my stomach, but I stay put like Merten said.

Two hundred ten, two hundred eleven . . .

I trace the B9 on my hand. What does it mean? Who am I? Why am I here?

Three hundred ninety-nine, four hundred . . .

Footsteps jolt me awake. It’s dark outside. Under the light of bare bulbs, thirty or so men in jumpsuits like mine, only dirtier, fan out to their respective beds.

A burly man with a heavy brow pounds my bunk, making it shake. He’s not quite as broad as Merten, but he’s taller. His lips curl, revealing several blacked, uneven teeth. “I sleep up top.” His left fist is marked with B10. It resembles mine, except his has a single line underneath.

I scoot to the bottom bunk.

“Stay in your place, leave me alone, and we’ll get along fine,” he says, “just like I did with the last B9.”

Weeks pass. Every morning after a powdered egg, dry toast, and canned fruit breakfast, we board the bus to the mine. The driver, a plump guy with circular glasses and wispy curls, leads us in a chorus of “Heigh-Ho” as we bounce down the dusty road.

The whole bus belts it out with him. It’s the only music I ever hear in this place, the only song I know.

I sit with A7—Ace—who always tears up a little as he sings. He’s not as loud as the others, but he has a richer voice. “Why does it hit me like that, Bean?”

I don’t know, but I understand. It hurts and feels good at the same time. “Does it make you think of a girl with blonde hair?”

Ace shakes his head. “It makes me think of short guys.”

“Kids?”

“I don’t think so.” He shrugs.

Like the seats on this bus, Ace may look worn down, but he’s as solid as they come. And unlike me, there’s not a strand of silver in his dark hair.

We met a few days after I arrived. It sticks in my mind because out here, smiles are rarer than wildflowers.

“You must be new,” he had said.

“Isn’t that obvious?”

“Your skin gives you away.” He held his leathery arm next to my peeling, pink one. “If you want, you can work in the tunnels, and I’ll do the lifting and hauling.”

“Thanks,” I said.

He looked down at my hands, and the lines on his face deepened as he grinned. “I’ll bet you haven’t done much outdoor work.”

He was probably right.

The days, much like the dunes that ripple across the barren landscape, blend together. We dig, pick, and haul. Sometimes, we see the doctor and she puts us in a clanking metal tube. New people come, and others disappear. Sometimes, they come back. The work has hardened my arms, and my stomach pudge is gone.

It’s cooler now, so we get three water breaks instead of four. Ace and I sit together and drink from our marked bottles.

“What’s the first thing you remember?” I ask.

“Dr. Ramirez’s eyes.” We both grin, then his stare turns distant. “Before that, waking up in the white room.”

“Me too.”

“Do you ever wonder how we got there, Bean?”

My throat tightens.

“B9!” My bunkmate, B10—Beat—strides over. “Gimme your water. Some asshole stole mine.”

I’ve learned to give Beat what he wants. He squeezes the bottle until it sputters, grunts a thanks, then drops it at my feet. I wipe the dirt off the nozzle.

The siren blares, and we return to work.

The air is thick with dust when I resurface. Coughing, I pull the collar of my jumpsuit over my mouth and look for Ace.

Guards rush about, picking up pieces of paper scattered on the ground. Merten snickers as he grabs a leaflet. “Dumb do-gooders concerned about birth defects. Like these ants are gonna knock anyone up.”

“Where did they come from?” I ask Ace.

“A drone dropped them. The guards said not to touch them, but I can’t help if one landed at my feet.” His eyes twinkle.

“Did you read it?”

“Just a little before they took it away.” He furrows his brow. “Stuff like ‘Prisoner rights are human rights’ and ‘Rebirth is inhumane.’”

“Rebirth,” I mutter. Charlie, one of the guards, talks about living water and being born again. The others call him Charlie Chaplain, even though his last name is Drake. None of it makes any sense to me. “Why do you think we’re prisoners?”

“Dunno.” Ace shrugs. “I don’t remember doing anything wrong.”

I kick the dirt. “Me neither.”

So why are we here?

Soon, it’s back on the bus with people singing “Heigh-Ho” and wagering whether it will be hot dogs or spaghetti for dinner, but I just stare out the window. I want steak, ice cream, and tacos, the kind of food the guards talk about, the kind that doesn’t exist in the world of mines, dorms, and dunes.

The days have grown warm again when a new guy sits next to me during water break. His posture and smooth skin aren’t the only

things that stick out—the way he watches everything reminds me of a guard.

“D2,” I say, looking at his hand. “That sounds familiar.”

His eyes light up. “Did you ever see Star Wars?”

“No.” I imagine the stars, so distant and still, fighting each other, and chuckle. “Do stars have wars?”

“No.” D2 sighs. “Wait. This might help.” He hums a few notes and looks at me expectantly.

Instinctively, I hum a few bars.

“Yes!” Head bobbing up and down, he joins back in.

Our melodies match perfectly, and my heart swells. I feel like I’m flying through space. I think of the little blonde girl again. She’s flying, too. She’s going to get hurt! But she lands safely in the sand, laughing, then climbs back on the swing.

“You’re still in there.” D2’s words break the spell. “Now, I want you to think carefully before answering my next question.” He leans in and lowers his voice. “Does the name ‘Thomas Fairbanks’ mean anything to you?”

“No.”

“Damn.” D2’s shoulders slump as he looks up at the sky. “Too bad your life didn’t have a soundtrack.”

Merten approaches with a heavy stride and D2 shields his face. Once he’s gone, D2 slips something into my pocket. “Read this, but don’t let anyone else see it.”

The siren blares.

“I’ve got to get back to the tunnels,” I say. “If you want the guards to leave you alone, you’d better get working, too.”

He gives a crisp nod. “We’ll talk later.”

I stand up and walk away.

Moments later, Beat shouts, “Give me the fucking bottle!”

I turn to see him rip it from D2’s hand and knock him to the ground. D2 moans as Beat kicks him in the stomach. As I rush to help, a guard pushes me aside.

Charlie Chaplain tackles Beat from behind, but Beat tosses him off easy as flicking a fly. Two more guards run over, tase my bunkmate to the ground, and put him in cuffs.

“That’s strike two,” Charlie says.

“Tweakers.” Merten spits the word out. “I’ve been telling the doc for weeks that this one needed an adjustment.” He points his nightstick at the rest of us. “Show’s over. Get back to work.”

After they take Beat away, Ace and I help D2 up. His face is caked with dirt, and blood oozes from his nose to his split, puffy lips. Bright red everywhere. Electric pulses ricochet inside my head. I close my eyes, but I still see the blood coating his teeth. Dribbling down his chin. My fists want to fly. To pummel. I hold them tight against my side.

“I’ll take you to the infirmary,” a guard says to D2.

Wincing, D2 straightens up. “No. I’m fine.”

“Then get to work.”

D2 pushes a wheelbarrow back to the pits. Ace and I exchange a look. Why would someone turn down rest and medical care?

I search for D2 on the bus and at dinner but can’t find him. He must have gone to the infirmary after all.

After returning to the bunks, I open the envelope he gave me and remove a newspaper clipping.

Fairbanks Found Guilty in Millionaire’s Death.

There’s a picture of me, face hardened with hate. Next to it, there’s one of a man, maybe ten years my senior, wearing a suit. His smile is benign, but he has the eyes of a predator.

Something clicks and buzzes like an intercom before an announcement.

I’ll tear you apart, you filthy sack of shit!

More than a voice, it’s a feeling. Feral. My hands tighten into fists as I continue to read.

Thomas Fairbanks, a senior actuary and volunteer math tutor, has been convicted of murdering business mogul Harvey Paxton. Those close to Fairbanks maintain that he’s an exemplary citizen, a devoted husband and father who only became violent due to his daughter’s suicide.

Daughter. Jamie. Images of the blonde girl flood my mind. My stomach clenches. But she wasn’t a girl anymore.

Seventeen and studious, she was so proud to be selected for Paxton’s student entrepreneur program, she hung the article on her wall. Four smiling high schoolers with Paxton standing behind, his hands resting on her shoulders.

“She trusted you,” I whisper, voice hoarse.

She'd never been a chatty girl, but she couldn't stop talking about the program and her plans for the future. Then one day, she didn't talk at all.

"How's my favorite entrepreneur?" I asked.

"I quit." Her voice trembled. "I'm just not cut out for it, okay?" I didn't press.

Later, I found her body dangling from a makeshift noose and a note on her desk.

Paxton called me into the boardroom alone to go over some mistakes I'd made. It was hot, and he slipped off his jacket. Without thinking, I took off my cardigan as well. Why didn't I wear something with sleeves? While he stood over me, pointing out my error, he slid the strap of my dress down my shoulder. I slapped him away. He said it was an accident, but if I was going to be this difficult, I wasn't right for the program.

The next day, I lost my scholarship. I begged to get it back and he laughed. "You're not smart enough to succeed. I only picked you because it looks bad if there aren't any girls, and you were the only one who looked halfway decent. None of you ever amounted to anything."

Acid grief floods my chest, leaving me hollow, liquid, and raw.
I'll tear you apart, you filthy sack of shit!

Then I remember something else.

Paxton lying on the ground and coughing up blood as I pummel him again and again. Red everywhere. So thick, I could smell it. Taste it.

My stomach heaves. How could I have forgotten all of that? I return to the article.

As a measure of clemency, the State will assess him for participation in Project Rebirth, in which citizens bound for death row are offered a chance to unlearn their violent tendencies and contribute to society.

"It's exciting technology," said Dr. Angela Ramirez, the physician whose research into memory and aggression made the program possible. "A chance to heal damaged individuals while sidestepping the moral quagmire presented by the death penalty."

When asked about potential side effects, Ramirez scoffed. "Worse than a lethal injection? Not to mention, as we refine our methods, the ramifications for the future could be monumental. What if we could stop violence before it happens? Imagine a world without bloodshed."

Congressman Jeffrey Walker, one of the program's champions, released the following statement. "I'm a staunch supporter. Rather than wasting taxpayer dollars sitting in jail, these criminals will be put to productive use."

The next morning, Beat boards the bus with a gentle smile on his face. I don't acknowledge him. Two marks sit under the B10 on his hand now.

When the driver launches into "Heigh-Ho," I don't sing.

"What's wrong?" Ace asks.

My daughter is dead, and I killed a man. But I can't say it, can't make it more real, so I simply shake my head. "Nothing."

During the water break, D2 walks over. His face is cut and bruised, but he smiles when we make eye contact. "You remember."

I hurry away, but he follows and grabs my arm. I jerk it away. "Why did you show me? Life was better when I didn't know."

"You call this a life?" D2 snorts. "They stripped away every shred of who you were."

"No, Harvey Paxton did that." I glare at him. "What's it to you, anyway? Did you know me?"

He leans closer. "I'm not a prisoner. I'm a reporter, and I'm going to blow the lid off this place. What they're doing is wrong, and rumor is, it extends beyond death row inmates. It's the homeless, gang members, addicts, and petty criminals. . . . Anyone without a family to ask questions.

"I've got a man on the inside. He told me about the memory loss accompanying the docility procedure, but I had to see it for myself." He shudders. "But now that we know being confronted with major life events can reverse the effect, we can do something about it."

"Why?" My head throbs. "Now I feel pain. Now I feel rage."

"Thomas, I need you to channel that energy so we can get your story to the—" A cloud of dust blows by, and D2 is overtaken in a sneezing fit. When it stops, blood leaks from his still-swollen nose.

Red.

I'll tear you apart, you filthy sack of shit!

With a roar, I strike his face, over and over. The skin under his eye splits.

Pain explodes down my back, like I've been hit with a shovel. I collapse mid-blow, body twitching.

The guards cuff me and drag me away. "That's strike one."

I'm in the hospital, on my back, sedated. My vision is muddy, but I can hear.

"I didn't bank on this one getting a strike. Decent guy from what I read. I mean, if I lost my daughter . . ."

"These crime-of-passion types have been the most unpredictable. Expose them to the right—or wrong—stimulus, and all bets are off."

"Beginning secondary adjustment on subject B9."

The voices fade.

Light stings my eyes. The walls and ceilings are white.

About the Author

Michelle Kaseler is a software engineer by trade, but can be whatever she wants to be when reading and writing. She enjoys funky shoes, hot sauces, and long runs. Her short fiction has also been published by *Flame Tree Publishing*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *NewMyths.com*. Stop by www.storycobbler.com to learn more.

The Blue Woman
by Leah Callender-Crowe

Editor's note: This story has intentionally retained its British spelling forms. The work is in part inspired by the British mining conditions that led to industrial action in the 1800s and 1900s.

The furthest moon from the gas giant is made of silver.

The supernova that gave birth to the star system it belongs to was massive enough to produce it. Now that the people who evolved in this star system are sufficiently advanced, workers from another moon, New Okeanopolis, have been sent to Argyros to mine.

Joelle is proud to be one of the first.

It is dark when she arrives on Argyros. The stars are out, and they appear much brighter than from her home moon. She is shown to her pod.

They give her a tour of the nearest mine the next day. It is underground and lit by lamps. The deposits gleam. Joelle is asked if she would like to look around the area, to get her bearings, but she would rather start work that afternoon. The more she works, the quicker she will be able to return home. She is keen to be an excellent worker.

Joelle is from a working-class family on New Okeanopolis. There, she lived in overcrowded flats with no electricity and unreliable running water. Money and aid do not reach her moon's coastal cities—the inner planets take everything from them. Joelle knows this from the revolutionary posters that adorn the city walls.

Having left school at fifteen, Joelle had been working in water sanitation for a year when the call to serve arrived. If she could have refused, she wouldn't have; her family will receive provisions while she is gone, and Joelle will bring glory and a pension when she is called home. Still, her brother cried when she donned her uniform, and before she boarded the ship to Argyros, her mum had hugged her so hard that it hurt.

The silver will revolutionise New Okeanopolis's economy. The government has spent its resources accordingly, putting much of what New Okeanopolis has into the mining programme. The silver will conduct electricity, and the darker parts of the moon will finally

light up. It will be used in medicine and construction. Poverty will end.

New Okeanopolis will finally be in a position to challenge the tyrannical hold placed on it by the inner planets.

This is worth any price, the miners are told.

One day, Joelle notices that her fingertips are turning grey.

Joelle descends into the mine for the thousandth time. There are lamps everywhere; her night vision, and that of her colleagues, is almost gone. Her eyes are blue (not just her irises).

Every day she drills. Every day she breathes in the silver dust.

Her kidneys are already failing. Joelle has not been told this, but she knows. Her health is monitored infrequently by doctors who visit Argyros at irregular intervals and are always glad to leave. These token appointments are perfunctory—there are hundreds of patients for them to see. It has been over a year since Joelle’s last check up, during which she was told nothing. But she can feel it. She isn’t stupid.

Her blue hands shake a little as she readies explosives in the mine.

She accepts these consequences in the hope that, one day, her work will be done. She will be sent back to her own moon a hero, a pioneer, having sacrificed her health for the greater good of her people.

When she finishes her work, Joelle goes back to the surface. She walks below the night sky. She can no longer see the stars, but New Okeanopolis is close tonight. She can just see its oceans, its continents. She misses it dreadfully. The moon provides just enough light for Joelle to make her way back to the pods. Around her, workers load ships with extracted silver, ready to be launched.

Joelle hopes for a message on the computer. Her call to return home.

There is nothing.

She stands in front of the mirror and examines each part of her in turn. She does this to observe how the pigment has advanced. Her skin was once brown, but now it is like her entire face has been tattooed, down to the whites of her eyes. Of course, she has blued and darkened slowly. It has taken years to get to this, and she looks

no different than how she looked yesterday. But this has become compulsive, a daily ritual.

She knows she will never look the same again. Even when she returns to New Okeanopolis, she will be forever marked.

Joelle sleeps.

She wakes, coughing and trembling, but she rises.

Joelle's messages to her family, when they get through, are brief. She cannot tell them how she really is, so she lies. Their messages to her are both grateful and sad. They are no longer hungry, but they miss her.

She misses them too.

The practice, really just a row of tents, has now been erected a mile from the mine. It is one of two on Argyros. Supposedly, appointments will now be more frequent, but this is Joelle's first appointment here. They are by invitation only.

The doctor looks at her sternly, and Joelle stares back. It is so unusual to see someone so unmarred by silver that she has almost forgotten what natural skin looks like. The last doctor she had was light-skinned, but this woman is dark. The sudden remembrance of natural human variation temporarily stuns her.

After weighing her, the doctor ushers Joelle impatiently to a chair, placing a stethoscope to her chest before she has fully sat down.

She is in a hurry, as they always are. She seems uncomfortable.

It occurs to Joelle that this doctor is equally unused to seeing blue skin. She is young. Perhaps this is her first time on Argyros. Junior doctors are strongly encouraged to complete at least one tour here.

Perhaps I should make small talk, she thinks, as the doctor flashes a light into her eyes. Perhaps a kind word would make her feel more at ease. But it has been so long since Joelle has spoken to an outsider that she is not sure how to begin.

"How is your vision?" the doctor asks.

"Declining, I think."

It is hard to tell how much without a proper acuity test, but miners only get those once every two years, unless their vision is so shot that they can no longer work efficiently. Joelle's superiors

haven't expressed any concerns, so this question is really a formality.

The doctor now inserts a needle into Joelle's vein, which she finds by how much the vessel protrudes rather than by sight. She extracts blood, which Joelle is almost surprised to see is still red.

She is about to test Joelle's air flow when there is a sharp knock and a shout at the door. The doctor flinches.

"Time's up. Be sure to ask the doctor to test your lung function next time."

Joelle wonders if this is how she will be treated when she returns to New Okeanopolis.

Joelle passes two blue bodies on her one thousand three hundredth walk home to her pod. Her legs shake much of the time, so the walk is slower now. It gives her more time to look at her home moon, now a blue-green blur.

It still comforts her.

She arrives home to a government message. There are words that she can't quite make out, but there is also audio. Her weak heart beats a little harder.

"This is a message for miner #1043.

"We have not forgotten you, worker. The silver you have been mining on Argyros has been, and will be, the most important resource that New Okeanopolis has ever seen. Your labour will improve the quality of life of millions. This is your legacy.

"However, our work is not done. Millions still go hungry, and many are without medical care. The inner planets, to whom we are little more than a backwater colony, still exert their power over us under the guise of charity.

"We will break free from our bondage. We are making weapons, and armour, and ships. We will need the silver to do this. Both for trade, and for construction.

"Your contribution to this end is valuable to us, and we thank you for spending so many years doing the good work. One day in the future, you will come home, and you will be a hero."

Joelle taps the screen to turn it off.

Not a call to return home, then.

Joelle has another appointment with a doctor from New Okeanopolis. The tents are still there, but some are unoccupied. This

is often the case. Doctors come and go. They never stay and rarely return.

So this doctor is another that she hasn't seen before. She is again shocked by the outsider's appearance. This one has brown skin. It occurs to her that he might even look similar to how she once did. Years ago, now.

He guides her gently to the chair. She places the stick she uses as a cane across her lap as he places the stethoscope on her chest.

"I am supposed to have my lungs tested today."

"Of course," he says. She thinks he smiles.

The doctor does as he is bid. Joelle exhales as hard as she can into the machine he presents her with, and her breath ends in a hacking cough. He checks the numbers on a screen but doesn't say anything, then continues to examine her more thoroughly and with greater care than previous doctors have.

He seems kind enough, so Joelle asks, "When can I return home?"

The doctor freezes at the question.

Eventually, he looks up from his chart. "It is not up to me to say. The government is building warships, and it needs the labour here. Are your pills helping?"

"A little. What is it like back home? Is the silver revolutionising New Okeanopolis like they said it would?"

"It takes time." She feels him shift in his seat. "I can also . . . put in a word about your health. But I must tell you, not many workers have returned."

"But when I do, I will return a hero?"

The doctor is silent again before responding with a sigh.

"You may find it difficult back home."

He guides her out of the tent.

Joelle lies on her bed and listens to the news, as best she can over her coughing.

New Okeanopolis is launching its first warships into the inner system. Someone states that 'the blues' have made this possible. A returned miner is on the air, describing her experience on Argynos, but she is cut off. The news anchor does not hide his horror or disgust.

Joelle barely made it home from the mine today.

A beeping noise comes from the pod's computer, and the screen lights up with a message.

"This is a message for miner #1043.

"Your medical records show that you are ready to return home soon. We thank you for your service. You will hear from us again in due course."

The computer beeps again and the message ends.

Joelle records a short message for her family and then sleeps, exhausted.

She wakes coughing and trembling all over. After she coughs, she struggles to breathe back in. She tries to rise, but collapses.

Joelle reminds herself that the silver is worth any price.

About the Author

Leah is an evolutionary scientist and has published several nonfiction pieces covering science-related and skeptical themes. She is currently working on her first science fiction novel and is interested in writing fiction addressing issues facing people of colour and the working class. In her spare time, she enjoys martial arts, music, coding, chess, and learning languages. She lives in London, UK.

Surgical Strike by Louis Evans

Author's note: This piece relies on a fantasy about drone weapons, the fantasy that has animated the past two decades of US drone attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and elsewhere. These killings were sold to the American and global publics based on a lie: that drone war is not war. This is false. Building robots to hunt and kill strangers is not a clean, orderly, responsible affair. Like any war, it is instead a knowing policy of the bloody slaughter of innocents. This story engages with that fantasy, but we should not.

The half-dozen screens split the feed from the drone into a spider's kaleidoscope vision. Night ops in the suburbs. Dark detached houses. Sparse trees. The drone's onboard AI effortlessly avoided a handful of telephone wires as it cruised toward the target's home. Look ma, no joystick; the operator controlled it with no more than an occasional keystroke.

The drone glided into standoff range. Hovered in place. The view showed a handful of darkened windows, one illuminated behind cheap Target curtains. Blue light—no flickering. Someone having a late night online. Heat vision superimposed itself in the drone: a single figure, in bed with a laptop.

A hitherto dark screen lit up; white command line on black background scrolled past as the drone hacked its way into local Wi-Fi and cell networks. Page after page of code, and then a single flashing number: a cell phone MAC address. Whoever was lounging on that bed, he had the target's cell in his pocket.

"Metadata's good."

"I told you. We don't engage until we have visual confirmation that the subject is the target."

A hard look.

"This isn't the army, you're not my fucking boss—"

"We processed this. We have consensus. Follow the plan."

". . . fine."

The drone, unnoticed, was still hacking on autopilot. Another screen flared in the darkness: the subject's laptop screen, mirrored. Yet another: the subject's webcam, activated in secret.

They studied the subject's face in the dark cavern of the command center. Pale skin, hint of stubble, sharp jaw. Cheekbones

that in another light might have been handsome, but between the lip sneer and the witchlight of the laptop seemed heartless instead.

But nobody could identify the target by his face.

Long hours rolled by. They watched the subject browse the Internet. They watched him scroll through Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and pornography. They watched him fire off anonymous comments with abandon, dripping with sexualized derision; they watched him write with greater care and restraint on named platforms. “I just think that as a female, you haven’t considered both sides—”

“It’s obviously him.”

“We don’t engage without visual confirmation.”

“It’s been three fucking hours. Are you going to make me wait all night outside of this scum’s house?”

“As many nights as we—”

Chimes. The subject had grabbed his phone, thumbed it on. A steady beeping and then the drone hacked that phone, too, mirrored it onto one of their screens.

Social media app. The target slid along the feed, clicked on a random woman’s profile picture. Zoomed in. Opened direct messaging to an empty page. Activated his camera.

On the heat vision screen, the red-glowing mannequin fumbled at his crotch.

Lurid and red like beef tongue in a butcher’s shop, the subject’s penis appeared on the screen in the light of his phone’s camera.

And again, and again; a series of photographs.

“It’s gotta be—”

“Let the computer make the call. We need to be certain.”

The final program of the evening, long dormant, spun into action. The subject’s penis—the target’s penis—the image recognition neural net that had studied the penis over and over with machine monomania, memorizing its features, its aesthetic fingerprint. It drew from the extensive corpus of unsolicited and nonconsensual dick pics the strike team had collated.

One after another the subject’s photographs lit up with green borders. Ninety-eight, ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine point nine nine nine nine—

Confirmed match.

The subject was the target.

“That’s him.”

“I told—”

“Go!”

Just a few more of those keystrokes. A single finger stabbed the return key.

Miles away in that suburban street, the drone’s rotors climbed from a buzz to a whine. It fought for height. One story, two, three—

At twenty meters above the ground the drone folded its wings and dove like a falcon.

A rush of air—the tinkle of glass, nothing worse than neighborhood kids putting a baseball through the window—

On the control room screens, in loving slow motion, the feed from the high-speed cameras came as the drone hurtled into the room. The target’s face slack with that emotion that precedes even surprise, his eyes hunting for the source of the noise. In multifarious megapixels, his penis turgid in his hand, the loving tracery of automated target acquisition caressing its every ridge and fold—

That orgasmic spike and ejaculatory gush in the capacitors as all four megawatt lasers fired in unison—

Then darkness, as the successful drone neatly imploded. A little death.

Hugs, cheering, applause in the command center. Champagne and kombucha and the rush of voices who felt the sudden release of tension long banked.

And in that suburb, miles distant, a hand enveloping a void; a neatly cauterized stump. A man unmanned.

It was not the first man so wounded who went to the police. Nor was it the second.

It is tempting to speculate as to the motives of those men who kept the secret, who entered into a pact of silence with their mutilators. Who gouged a small hole in the burnt flesh of their genitals and pissed sitting for the rest of their private lives, who ended relationships and friendships and sauna-on-Thursday appointments without warning or explanation. But it is impossible to know the motives of those who move in silence.

If they feared ridicule, they were not wrong to do so.

It was perhaps the sixth or the tenth or the dozenth man who went to the police.

The officers laughed at him, of course. “Sure, buddy. A drone vaporized your dick. Okay.”

He insisted, and so they said, “Show us.”

He would not show them. He had nothing to show and said so. They accused him of lying, threatened him with making a false report, shooed him out of the station.

It was easy to imagine the first man a lone nut, in light of his lack of hard evidence. The victims were spread out enough that few police stations had more than one reporter. Those that did attributed the sudden rash of strange claims to a postmodern penis panic.

But if you cauterize off the penises of the scum of the Internet in an area hundreds of miles wide you will eventually evaporate the member of a man whose rage outpaces his shame.

Keiran Kemski stood in the police station lobby, pants and boxers around his ankles. The boxers were patterned with a repeating motif of (turgid) cock-and-balls and pursed red lips. Kieran's penis was entirely gone.

"Yeah!" he shouted. "A fucking drone vaporized my fucking cock! What are all you sniveling cucks going to do about it?"

What they did, eventually, was book him for public indecency. Mr. Kemski's testicles remained unvaporized and entirely visible throughout his public petition, and under the eyes of the law the balls are just as bad.

But it could no longer be denied that at least one drone had vaporized at least one penis belonging to at least one American citizen. If the government cannot protect American penises from vaporization, what use is it anyway?

The machinery of justice ground slowly into action. The police made, as it is said, their enquiries. It took a gentler touch than they were used to but as the cops massaged the public, more and more victims began to drip out. Police departments went through the Voltron-origami jurisdictional contortions of such cases; they assembled an interagency taskforce.

As pure policework, the case was a nightmare. Like all the worst features of a serial killer. Nothing connected the victims. They were of different ages, races, nationalities. They lived in different cities and towns and worked different jobs. The sexual angle was obvious, but even there the victims had nothing in common. Virgins and playboys and husbands and everything in between. No shared jilted lovers, no previous connections.

It is said: fish do not know that they're wet. Sturgeon Holmes would never solve a case of drowning.

The detectives were not idiots. They asked: did you take pictures of your penis? So-called “dick pics,” they said, fingers heavy as they inscribed quotation marks in air. Did you send these dick pics to people on the Internet? Did you, maybe, send those pictures of your penis to strangers, to uninterested parties, to those who might have found these images unwelcome?

And the victims said, well, yeah. Doesn't everybody?

The cops kept a handle on things as the tide of victims swelled. Kept things quiet for months.

No noise but no progress either. A succession of drones had vaporized these dicks—but everyone and their kid brother had a drone. They cost maybe four, five times as much as a burrito. The average suburban street saw a drone every six minutes. Amazon, or fast food, or something illicit. If the DEA can't stop a drone from delivering heroin and ecstasy to your house in fifteen minutes or your money back—and they can't! snort some blow and call your senator!—how the hell could local California police departments hunt down a handful of dick-seeking killbots among millions?

The tension grew, but the grip of the police held. No need to panic the penis-packing public.

And then the perps hit a celebrity.

TooChill was a streamer, a vlogger. He'd broken out as one of the leading lights of the second wave “extreme unboxing” craze; ridden that for a while. Fallen into obscurity and climbed back out of it for his willingness to skirt the edges of sexual acceptability on the major streaming services. He was perhaps best known for his “I'd Hit It” monthly show where he had sex with whatever had won last month's poll. Sure, he never showed his junk on camera but it somehow managed to be all the more tasteless for that. Giant eggplant emojis plastered over his groin as he coupled madly with the latest children's toy craze.

Turned out Mr. Chill was as explicit with his female fans—regardless of their age—as he was coy with his public. Somehow the controversy only redoubled his fame, dectupled his income.

One morning TooChill was live streaming YouTube and placed his emoji-censored penis in the mouth of a sex doll cruelly painted to resemble one of his more public critics. There was a high, sharp whine from outside the frame. The sound of shattering glass. A flash too bright for the screen.

And then the camera stumbling as the crew rushed to surround the fetal and de-phallused form of their erstwhile meal ticket.

Two million were streaming live; nearly one hundred million watched it in the next twenty-four hours.

Cops couldn't keep a lid on it so they looked the public right in the camera and lied like a politician who knows the journalists have only found one of many, many orgy-frequenting mistresses. "We believe this was a one-time attack. We're following every lead. The public has nothing to fear."

There were bubblings and murmurings from conspiracy-minded corners, but the crust of denial held for four more days.

Rockford Beauregard was a movie star turned podcast host turned dispenser of hoary advice chestnuts from a wise old millennial to the riotous menagerie of generations that had followed. His wisdom was simple, homespun, and clear. "Never post something online you wouldn't say to your grandma. Your armpits and your email—they both need a thorough cleaning."

In the post-#MeToo world it must be admitted that Rockford—real name Cadyn Vittner—had a well-publicized track record of a certain level of rapey indelicacy with his girlfriends.

In the post-post-post-post-#MeToo world in which Rockford lived, it was not necessary to deny these facts, or even to smear these unfortunate exes overmuch. Everyone just sort of shrugged and got on with things.

And so the tone of triumph was no surprise when indie feminist webnewszine *Bitch?!* gleefully broke the story that Mr. Beauregard's penis had been obliterated in the bathroom at his podcast studio during a commercial break.

The floodgates burst, and the truth came roaring out. Not just celebrities and the vocationally odious, but also titans of industry and commerce, the extremely quiet and exceptionally rich. Most damningly: the frighteningly ordinary. Men who lived lives of quiet satisfaction and leavened that satisfaction with a thoroughly commonplace smattering of cruelty and online nonconsensual cockshots.

CNN skyped Lorena Gallo, nee Bobbit, at her Florida retirement home. The chevrons indicated that the anchorman was broadcasting from an "undisclosed location." For some reason, Lorena laughed, rolled back over in bed, hung up on them.

The Governor of California called for all drones to be grounded throughout the state. Amazon's regional director of PR made it clear that if this happened the Governor would lose his recall election before he could fly back from his "fact-finding trip" in Thailand. And, in fact, the Governor proved remarkably loathe to return to California, land of the unregulated drone army. For some reason.

Within days the first manifestoes began to drop, claiming credit for the attacks. Soon there were dozens, thousands. Most were that dull commonplace of the selfie-cam age: the talking head, captured addressing its own image. A few had real production values; women and genderqueer shock troops posing like Black Panthers, laser pointers in one hand and drone chassis in the other. One of them was put out by an anarchist circus.

Of course the police, the state troopers, the FBI, and, when relevant, the highway patrol, questioned these purported perps. But none of them were, in fact, responsible.

The reign of terror continued. Dick pics dropped to a planetary low not seen since the days of the daguerreotype. Bottled-up misogynists were reduced to shouting at women in their actual lives, who then had the option of hitting them over the head with various handy implements.

When a sting operation finally nabbed the mysterious assailants, the world breathed out a sigh that quavered between relief and disappointment.

The Direct Intervention Castration Kommittee was, in the end, exactly as most had expected. Six sexual radicals and intersectional feminists, squatting together in a warehouse in a mid-sized city in the East San Francisco Bay. Three were dropouts of prestigious engineering programs—Advanced Artificial Intelligence and Aeronautics, the pre-drone-war track—and the other three were their polyamorous lovers. Diverse in race and gender identity in the longstanding California fashion.

The news cameras hovered lasciviously over shared beds and homebrewed kombucha and the warehouse detritus of countless fruitless protests. (Literally hovered: newsdrones.) None of them would sit for interviews or reply to shouted questions from human reporters or crowdsourced drone screamers. Only once did the mask crack. Reporters managed to separate "Sister Gloria" (birth name: Sofia Julieta Maria Istavez Martinez) from the other five

defendants. They showed her a video of her teenage speech at a high school protest, her impassioned and precise words in favor of nonviolent civil disobedience. “How did you go so wrong?” they asked.

Gloria smiled.

“It worked, didn’t it?”

And then the guards and lawyers managed to muscle her away.

The Committee did not plead guilty; they lawyered up and prepared to fight every charge. And so: voir dire, the choosing of a jury.

“Are you familiar with the Direct Intervention Castration Kommittee?”

“Never heard of them.”

“They were the ones who vaporized the genitals of—”

“Oh. Oh! Them.” A certain shifting in the seat, hands drifting down innocently between the legs. “Yeah, I, uh—I don’t think, you know, I could be really *fair*—in a case like that—”

And again and again, until sixty candidate jurors sat in the box.

The prosecutor coughed. “Your honor, it does not escape the State’s notice that not one of the potential jurors is in possession of a penis.”

“Your point?”

“The State feels that a jury that is immune to the crimes committed by the perpetrators cannot possibly—”

“Your *point*, counselor?”

“The State requests permission to offer extraordinary protection to candidate jurors.”

“Very well.”

They offered anonymizing masks and titanium jockstrap cups alongside witness protection. They offered round-the-clock defense drones and free relocation to tropical paradises and guaranteed synthetic replacement penises, paid for by the government. And what do you know, they scraped and scrounged and managed to empanel a jury.

Didn’t help much, though; after six months of closed-chambers trial and seven days of deliberation the jury returned a verdict: it was hung.

The State heaved a long-suffering sigh and set about trying to find a brand-new jury composed of at least fifty percent accidental

eunuchs. One bright afternoon a phalanx of men in boring suits appeared at the prison, said that Uncle Sam needed the Committee for his research projects on next-generation drone-slash-psych warfare, and made them disappear off the face of the earth.

Well, maybe it really was Uncle Sam. Every three-letter agency denied it, for all the good that does. Maybe—the theory got out—it was an undetected arm of Committee sympathizers who all rolled natural twenties on their bluff checks. Maybe a foreign power. Maybe little grey men from space. In the age of the post-truth net, one loses track of easy answers.

There were, at least, no more dick-pic-targeted-penis-vaporizations attributed to the Committee. And the wave of copycat attacks was no larger than expected, and generally less well-organized. But still, decades later, all across the nation and indeed the globe, whenever men reached for their phallus with one hand and their phone with another, that low drone whine could stop them dead in their tracks.

Louis Evans is against cruelty in all its myriad forms. His fiction has previously appeared in *Vice*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Nature: Futures*, *Analog SF&F*, *Interzone* and more. He's online at evanslouis.com and Mastodon at wandering.shop/@louisevans.

Superluminal
by Kevin Helock

This had better be important, Maxim Ridley thought as he made his way to the CEO's office—his office—on the top floor of the Titan Industries Space Center. His great, sweeping stride threatened to become an irritated stomp. But he kept each step fluid, a forward march of progress: eyes front, chin up, the slightest smile resting on his lips. It was a practiced posture, one that usually came easily. But he wasn't used to things not going his way. *What the hell could Bobby want?* The timing suggested a complication. He hated complications.

Moments ago, he had been alone on the press room's stage, a crowd of hungry cameras aimed at him. His back had been to the enormous window facing the twin launch pads and the expanse of ocean that had once been Florida.

From the press room floor, the window perfectly framed for the cameras the twin colossi ships *Romulus* and *Remus*, with Maxim just a head taller in the center. And when the countdown on the stage hit zero, he had stood there, not so much as flinching while the room was washed in a flash of intense violet light that enveloped him in brilliant halos of energy. His shadow had leapt from his feet and across the room, his monolithic presence consuming the crowd below him in the light of his achievement.

He had remained perfectly still, his trademark smile his only trace of emotion as the ferocious chatter of the cameras erupted to capture the moment when *Romulus* blinked into sky—there one moment and gone the next—and became the second manned vessel to travel faster than light on its expedition into the depths of space.

It took mere seconds for the pictures to circle the globe. This very moment the images were making the twelve-minute journey to Mars and its three thousand colonists. Every one of them would be eagerly watching their screens as they awaited new images of what they had already witnessed from their planet's surface: a trail of purple mist arcing from the tiny speck that was Earth, skimming the edge of the Martian sky, disappearing into the stars.

Then he'd received the message. It came on his chip, the tiny piece of electronic mesh he and his executives had implanted in their brains. The technology was still primitive, but it could communicate a basic thought to another nearby chip. The message had come from Robert Dougal, Director of Faster-than-Light Travel

at Titan Industries. It said *MEETING*. Or perhaps it was *TALK*? The chips couldn't send words exactly; more the feeling of what a word meant.

Maxim had still been standing for the cameras, the last of the purple mist behind him fading into nothing, when the message reached him. His eyebrow twitched—likely not enough to show on the cameras, but he didn't like the possibility. He thought back *BUSY*, hoping the chip would convey the proper level of irritation.

The response came immediately, and there was no mistaking the intended word: *EMERGENCY*. He resisted the urge to sigh, then nodded once to the crowd and began making his way to the executive offices while an assistant hurried onto the stage and the countdown clock reset to fifteen minutes.

He's sitting behind my desk, Maxim noted with a flash of indignation as he opened the door to his office where Dougal was waiting. He was momentarily tempted to knock this man down a peg or two with choice words over the chip, but he dismissed the thought as soon as it came. This was hardly the time for inane bickering. *Or for an "emergency."*

"They're dead," Dougal said evenly.

"Who?" Maxim answered as his measured stride carried him into the office.

"The crew of *Romulus*."

The office was a long, rectangular box. The walls of the first half were adorned with models of famous exploratory vessels—the *Santa Maria*, the *Endurance*, and *Apollo 11* among them. Halfway to the extinct-redwood-paneled desk, the models were replaced with oil portraits of Maxim's favorite "Great Men"—Carnegie, Ford, Jobs, Musk—their eyes gleaming with the light of industry. Now Robert Dougal and his printer-paper features looked out from between the double row of faces. His thick-rimmed black glasses framed empty eyes. "All of them," he added.

"Nonsense." Maxim closed the door behind him. "It went perfectly, just like with *Aeneas*. They're probably breaking into the champagne now." He frowned at the man sitting behind his desk, but Dougal made no attempt to get up.

"Well, the champagne is certainly broken," he said, "and scattered across space from here to the Kuiper belt. Oh, and *Aeneas* as well. They both broke up on launch."

Maxim crossed to the front of his desk, staring down warily at Dougal. What was his game? He was supposed to be a professional, not some third-rate journalist filling the space between known facts with speculative tabloid fodder.

Dougal's face was unreadable. Maybe he meant it. Maybe he was right.

The press smile eased back into Maxim's face like an ironed-in wrinkle. His voice slipped out in a quiet purr of moneyed confidence he didn't feel anymore. "As I've said before, radio silence comes with the territory. It's expected that we haven't heard from them. Even if they sent an electromagnetic message immediately, it would be hours before it reached us. And that's ignoring the way a broadcast would be stretched into uselessness, ripped apart by the space *Romulus* covered in the moment the message was being sent. It would be like . . ."

"Trying to handwrite the dictionary on the side of a passing mag-train," Dougal finished in a bored monotone. "You forget I gave you that metaphor to use for the press ahead of *Aeneas*. I'm not talking about radio silence. I'm talking about the debris cloud our satellites picked up immediately after launch. Perhaps you saw it? Big, purple, stretched across the solar system?"

The smile vanished. "Debris?"

"Yeah. Debris."

"You told me it worked."

"I told you we could make matter travel faster than light. I never said it would stay intact."

Maxim was silent. The facts squatted like a spider in his brain—still, unmoving, but undeniable. He didn't breathe. At last, he started to speak. "We have to . . ."

He couldn't look at the glass-bead gaze turned up toward him anymore. His eyes left Dougal's and landed instead on John F. Kennedy. The words sat in his mouth.

"Have to warn them?" There was no tone to Dougal's voice, but the words seemed to chide. *NAÏVE*, the brain chip would have said. "There won't be any more faster-than-light rockets. Humanity will never see the stars up close. It will die here, on this dying planet, and our little rock garden on Mars will follow, if it doesn't fizzle out first. Of course, that'll happen anyway, even if we keep up the program. But no one will know. They can keep thinking they're saved, and that you were the one who saved them. But if we tell them . . ." He

gestured vaguely. “Titan Industries might survive in one form or another, but this will be it for you.”

Maxim walked quietly to the window. A half-mile away, *Remus* stood on the pad, its hull gleaming white in the late morning sun like an ivory tower. A row of black squares circled the top where the crew was seated, backs to the ground, eyes to the sky. Behind one of them—which window was it?—Alexander was sitting. His husband, Georgy, had been in *Romulus*.

“My son, Alex, is in there.”

“I know.”

The three of them had breakfast together that morning. As they stood up to head their separate ways for the last time, Maxim had promised to hang an oil painting of them in his office. Alexander hadn’t said anything to that. Georgy just put a hand on his arm, and they walked away.

Maxim glanced at his watch. Four minutes left. “Who knows about *Romulus*?” he asked.

“Just me,” Dougal said. “I can erase the data before anyone else sees. No one could replicate it. They don’t have the tech.”

On the launch pad, *Remus* stood patiently, a stick of dynamite in the shape of a rocket balanced precariously on one end. It was too late to defuse it, Maxim knew. That much was obvious. One way or another it was going to go off. When it did, it would take either his son or his career.

Not just my career, he thought. It would take everything. It would take his name and smash it into as many pieces as *Romulus*. One moment, he would be the savior of humanity, a god among men. The next, nothing. Worse than nothing: a *failure*.

If he didn’t act, Alexander would die. But then again, his husband was already dead. Maxim had ripped Georgy to pieces and thrown him across the void of space, and that wasn’t something which could be forgiven. His father would be dead to him. And the rest of the world would be no kinder.

Wasn’t this really what was best? For Alexander, his son, to make a name for himself? For Georgy, already gone, to earn some glory in death instead of forever being known as an accident, a bloody smudge on the margins of history? This way, he told himself slowly, at least their names wouldn’t be forgotten. They’d be remembered as heroes.

And so will I.

There was a long silence. Dougal waited. At last, Maxim said, “Okay.” His eyes were cast in the direction of the door, past the paintings and the models, past the great men and the great things they’d made and beyond.

Maxim didn’t move. Not while Dougal tapped away on his pocket computer. Not when the flat “It’s gone” broke the silence. Not as the seconds became a minute, then two, then three. And when the searing violet of the launch cast his shadow across the office to swallow up the men and models and everything else, he did not flinch.

Later, he straightened his back. He turned, and Dougal was still there, immobile. Maxim cleared his throat. “When did you realize that faster-than-light travel didn’t work?”

“I was sure after *Aeneas*. But I didn’t have the data yet.”

“And what do you get out of this?”

Dougal shrugged mildly. “Same as always. Titan pays well. I’ll make faster-than-light rockets as long as it still does.”

Maxim nodded. Then he turned, left his office, and walked back to the press room.

The smile didn’t come easily. But in the end, he found it.

About the Author

Kevin Helock is a writer and recovering teacher currently living in Morristown, NJ, with his fiancée and their twin cats, Bo and Jinx. He started writing to cope with the state of the world and doesn’t expect he’s going to stop. When he isn’t writing, you can find him deep in several books at once, running a game of D&D, breaking out of an escape room, or bothering someone about Godzilla. His work has previously been featured in *The Best Teen Writing of 2016*, *Sanctuary Magazine*, and *Santa Fe Writer’s Project Quarterly*.

The Flyswatter
by Nick Greenleaf

Smell of putrefaction, roasting garbage. The city sprawl at midday under the watch of a pitiless sun. Smog hovers over the winding, bustling streets, trapping heat and amplifying the aromas of cramped urban living.

Tomo stops periodically, pretending to examine the tech on display in the open-air market stalls. In truth, she is checking for tails. After a few such maneuvers, she casually makes her way to an inconspicuous black door, removing a glove to grip the handle. Her biometrics read, the door opens, and Tomo vanishes inside.

Paint peels off old furniture. Graffitied walls of concrete, metal shelving, discarded food containers. Electronics sprawl across every available surface. Some work. Others, Tommy and Tomo are fixing up, preparing for sale at local specialist pop-ups before the cops shut them down. Tommy lies on the cot, not quite awake, not quite dreaming. Sunlight angling through the room's one window mercifully does not reach them against the wall.

"Tommy? You here?" A voice from below.

"Ish. What you want?"

"Got easy money."

"No such thing," Tommy grumbles, rolling over. There is only silence, no further repartee. Tommy gets up, walks out of what was once the factory office. Tomo is standing at the foot of the stairs, stone-faced.

"Oh, shit. You got us a job?" Tommy goes down the stairs, brushing an uncooperative bang from their eyes. "You're making me nervous."

Tomo says nothing for a moment. Then her face breaks. Determination, and something else.

"Yeah, I got us a job. Autley Wandiny."

"Are you fucking insane?" Tommy hopes this is a joke. "We are not equipped for that. Most nation states are not equipped for that."

"What nation states?" Tomo manages to quip, but her grin quickly fades. "They'll help us out. They're giving me a neural interface."

"And who exactly is our sugar daddy for this?"

"Maldoror Unlimited."

“Okay, seriously, Tomo, snap out of it. We are not doing this.” Tommy feels bile in the back of their throat, wills it back down. “We are not becoming pawns in that shit just because someone corporate wants plausible deniability. If they want to fight a behemoth, they can send a Goliath of their own.”

“Why not, Tommy? Nothing ventured, nothing gained, right?”

“The fates we’re talking about tempting are a lot more vicious than the old gods.”

“We’re dying, Tommy. We’ve got *serious* backing. And I’ve got the skills. I know I do.”

“Have you used neural before?”

“Yes. Back, before. Trust me.”

Tommy rolls their eyes.

“It’s not a question of trust, Tomo. Is it true what they say about the firewalls?”

Tomo looks at Tommy. They sigh.

“Shit. You really want this?”

“More than anything.”

The neural interface arrives by decrepit van. Parked in the alley outside, it seems to fade into the dilapidation of its environment. Tommy is incredulous.

“Serious backing? This is just some lemon reject from a chop shop.”

When they see the tech, Tommy is quieted somewhat. A sleek design with sensuous, organic curves. The user lies face down atop it. Cables running out the sides plug gently into the user’s spine. Bypassing the clunky medium of coding could provide quite a bit of power to someone who knows what they’re doing. And Tomo does. She learned in the belly of the beast. Tomo runs her fingers sensually over its surface as the delivery technician departs, their unremarkable face already gone from both their memories.

“How’d that get here?” Tommy asks a few moments later, only half in jest. “I hate memory mods.”

“Shows they’re serious. It would’ve been real sloppy, sending a fancy car in here, wouldn’t it? Eyes for a hundred miles would be watching.”

Tomo spends two weeks getting to know the device. She hardly sleeps, hardly eats. Tommy unplugs her now and then, only to be

greeted with a torrent of cursing in a variety of languages until they relent and plug her back in again. Tommy worries, but trusts.

It doesn't hurt that she's doing runs against soft targets, skimming off businesses and hedge funds, bringing in a little money to keep them afloat. Tommy handles logistics, keeps them alive, cautiously smuggling what food they can find past the gaunt wights outside their door.

To amuse herself, Tommy lights incense around Tomo, plays all sorts of sounds: Tibetan hymns, Chinese opera, Balinese gamelan ensembles. They wonder if Tomo can hear the music, if it in any way alters her dreaming. Her body lies still as she runs through digital temples, looting their coffers, sharpening herself for what lies ahead.

Meanwhile, the sprawl abides, a spider entangled yet still weaving its web. The unending double helix of demolition and construction, the life cycles of buildings dictating the fates of their denizens. Every day brings fresh waves of refugees to Tommy and Tomo's district, displaced by renovations or rent hikes or other catastrophes. The streets grow crowded. Discontent blooms.

A police sweep comes, leaving space and haunting silence in its wake, the problem punted to another part of the sprawl until it is inevitably shunted back.

"You try Autley Wandiny at all in your travels?" Tommy asks one night as they sit at a table on the factory floor. Light dully diffuses through the rippled glass, softening the rusting metal and crumbling concrete into a backdrop of washed-out colors. Tomo looks at them for a few seconds, then sighs.

"No! It's got me spooked. All that hype, Autley Wandiny's killer firewall? It's just hype, right? It's got to be." She takes a long pull from her beer.

"And yet?"

"I'm using a neural interface. I'm plugging my nervous system into the god damned net. Who knows what might happen? I've only ever used it on a closed network before this."

"You've been doing just fine, right? Taking precautions, doing antiviral scans after every run?"

"Of course! But Tommy, I've been robbing farmers, and now I've got to storm a very large and very imposing castle. One that is, without a doubt, guarded by dragons."

“Dragons ain’t shit. Cut their heads off.”

“Ever the pragmatist,” Tomo smiles, reaching over and tousling Tommy’s hair. “If only I could bring you into battle with me.”

The day comes. Blood red creep of light across a smudged sky. Shadows in the streets, their lensed eyes white with dawn. The sun rises, and the street is revealed in its sameness. Stalls are erected, wares hawked, the ebb and flow of commerce resuming its regular hypnotic hum. A camera on every street corner. Cops with shiny new toys. Eyes for a hundred miles, wide and unseeing.

The bodies swing below the bridges. Out of sight, out of mind.

Tomo lies on the neural interface. She breathes deeply as Tommy plugs her in, one by one. Tommy pauses before the last. Tomo coughs, and it is done. Her body relaxes as it has so many times before.

Tommy engages in surface-level trickery, diversionary tactics, probing Autley Wandiny’s defenses by every possible avenue. The idea is to trigger as many alarms as possible while Tomo sneaks in through a backdoor Tommy isn’t entirely sure exists.

That is, if the gatekeeper doesn’t catch her first.

Tomo is standing on a barren plain. The grass is just short, yellow stubble. Air wavers and shimmers. She can see for miles. There is nothing. Nothing save a shadow in the distance. A figure walking toward her.

She knows the gait before the features become clear. Feels her blood freeze. The rumors are true. They really do fry you with your own brain.

“You know, in certain Buddhist hells, men climbed razor sharp trees in pursuit of women, so driven were they by lust. But what are their appetites compared to yours, sweet Tomo?”

Hector is as he was when she met him, dashing and confident, not the husk she parted from later. It’s been nearly ten years since they last spoke. A good-natured smile animates his broad features, and she wonders if he is living or dead.

“You were never this cruel,” Tomo replies.

Hector saddens.

“Not until I met you.”

Tomo feels it in her stomach. Not this. Anything but this.

"I was so warm and full of light, wasn't I? It's what drew you in, what bound you to me. Why'd you have to go and snuff it out, Tomo? Where's my light?" His voice becomes a sob, voice shuddering, body shuddering, his body wasting away. Face growing emaciated, eyes sunken. Tomo watches him, moved despite herself.

"I did nothing to you."

"Really? Then why did I become nothing? Nothing but a broken ghost, a corpse awaiting disposal? Why did I give up? What broke me?"

"It wasn't me," Tomo whispers without conviction. "You were an addict."

"Maybe. Maybe you got me hooked. Maybe I only ever did it to share something with you."

"That is not true. You introduced it to me. That first night—"

"Was my first night too."

Tomo wants to vomit.

"All to impress a beautiful woman. All to impress you."

"No, I saw the tracks. You had tracks. I know you did."

"You don't sound so sure, Tomo. Perhaps the mind plays tricks."

"This isn't real. They're just tapping into me, feeding me my fears. This isn't real."

"The kernel of fear is always truth, Tomo."

Another shadow approaches. An old woman, unsmiling, glinting black eyes cold and unrelenting.

"You came from me?" she asks Tomo dubiously.

"That's right."

"Can't be."

"You love me."

"I was an actress, dear. And you were never very bright."

"You encouraged me . . ."

"To get you the hell away from me. Look how well it worked."

"I don't believe you."

"You will, dear. You will. We're going to be here a while, and you remember how persuasive I can be."

The names and faces change, but the weight only multiplies. Tomo has no name. No memory. No past. No future. Her lips form the words "I'm sorry," but she can no longer remember what they mean or what she is apologizing for.

“No, no, no, no, no,” Tommy is screaming as they desperately pull the plugs out of Tomo’s spine. Tears trickle from her blank eyes as her mouth mutely forms words. Tommy rolls her over. She stares past the ceiling. There is no ceiling, no smog, no sky. Only the reality of pain.

Her legs jerk helplessly as her nervous system shuts down, leaving Tommy alone in the dark.

The technician watches a screen. A counter, running since the incursion began, has stopped. 10.00037 seconds. The technician slurps his soft drink, belches. His partner looks at the screen and whistles.

“Ten seconds. That’s like ten thousand years down there, ain’t it?”

“Something like that. Time gets funny once they’re inside the event horizon.”

“What a trip. I can’t imagine anyone deserving to suffer that long, let alone that way.”

“Look at it like this,” the first technician says, preparing to inhale his fries. “They’re criminals. Something like that’d never happen to people like you and me, right?”

The second technician laughs nervously. His daughter’s cancer treatments aren’t covered by insurance anymore. Streamlining of benefits, they’re calling it. He’s sure everything will be fine though. They’ll make it work. He knows they will. He’ll find a second job. Take out a loan. Everything will be fine.

He’ll come up with the money, somehow.

About the Author

Nick Greenleaf is an experimental musician based in Rochester, New York.

Under the Satin Gunmetal Sky
by Shawn Goodman

The Dirty Boulevard is steaming its way through the hottest part of July. Schneider steers his ancient Continental down the 1500 block, which is a study in concrete: soot-covered bricks and iron-barred windows that bleed rust all the way down to the foundation. The sidewalks are littered with broken glass and discarded scratch tickets. Half of the shops are boarded but still open for business. Spray-painted particleboard in place of signs, though some of the lettering is quite artistic. Quality guns, quick background checks. Number One Relaxing Massage! Boulevard Beer and Liquor.

Schneider smokes his second-to-last unfiltered, a metal forearm resting on his car's open window. He's thinking about his new case, which he doesn't have a good handle on. Two murdered synths, both with their arms removed. Done cleanly, too, by someone with skill. Which raised several questions. Like why the arms? Were they the trophies of a crazy person, or for another purpose? And, if so, what?

He'd said this at the briefing, but the other detectives were dismissive. "Who cares about a couple of dead synth hookers?" This from Kowalski, who was inches away from retirement and miles away from giving a shit. About anything. "Close the case, Schneider. Move on. And don't get all high and mighty just because you feel bad for your own kind."

He'd brought it to the lieutenant, who'd just nodded and said, "I'll give you two more days, Schneider. After that—"

"Fine," he'd said, even though two days was a joke for something as complex and weird as a double murder with missing limbs. And since the forensics had come up clean—no hair, fiber, semen, or prints—he'd have to pull out all the stops, and maybe try a desperate move.

Which is why he's gliding the Continental to a stop in front of Stiehl's, the semi-famous fight club that stands as a brick and iron sentinel to the Boulevard's south end. It's a gateway to neon-lit darkness, drugs, and cheap pleasures of every kind. He kills the engine and goes inside. He clocks the bikers two stools down at the stained, pitted bar top. They're playing it tough for their women, throwing mean looks between sips from Bud longnecks. One of

them speaks the words Schneider's been hearing his whole life, the words that may as well be etched into the plating on his forearm: "Nobody wants you here."

"Dirty synth," says the other.

Schneider orders a whiskey and a round of Buds for the bikers. "Enjoy. It's on me." He pops a clear pill and washes it down with his whiskey. The pill is Xylene, a powerful hypnotic that only works on synthetics. Among other effects, it produces perceptual disturbances, hallucinations, and what Schneider needs most right now: a wild insight from his subconscious.

"Why?" One of the bikers touches the sweating bottle, thirsty for another but curious about the catch. Because there's always a catch.

"Consolation prize." Schneider gets up and leaves a pair of twenties on the bar.

"For what?"

"For being an asshole." He walks away, heading to the back room with its eight-meter steel cage. Inside, two beefy shirtless synthetics are beating the hell out of each other, MMA style. Except in Schneider's estimation, there's no style at all. It's pure brutality. Mass and force.

"Schneider?" It's the club manager, Tony Paz. Long, heavy face on a long, heavy body. Covered in black leather with silver studs. Topped with a badly dyed Mohawk.

Schneider shakes hands as the first distortion wave hits him. He sees the crowd rising and falling on a gigantic human sine curve, bending, shuddering, and then returning to normal. "I'm here to fight," he says quickly. Because that's how it is with Xylene: you never know how long you've got before things change. "Can you get me in?"

"These guys will kill you, Schneider. It's not like it used to be."

"Then bet against me." He tries to prime his mind by going over the few things he knows. The female vic, Rachel Montgomery, is the lessee of apartment 2C. No known relationship to the male vic. The apartment was cheap, but clean and orderly. No pictures or personal artifacts, but that wasn't surprising for a synth working girl: absent a childhood, absent the need for images of holiday gatherings and family vacations.

"Okay." Tony takes Schneider's badge and gun for safe keeping. "I'll put these in your body bag."

As soon as the first fight ends, Schneider stumbles into the cage and realizes he's as high as apple pie. But that's okay, he trusts the drug. Or the experience the drug provides. Something about the way the chemical affects the striatum and alters the perception of time. It's Greek to him, but he knows it will get him where he needs to go. Of course, with Xylene, there's always the risk of becoming paranoid and going mad, but that's where fighting comes in. For Schneider, the element of danger serves as an anchor. It won't prevent him from tripping his balls off, but it should keep him close enough to reality to find his way back.

"You coming, cupcake?" The man—or synthetic man—at the center of the ring beckons. His fight name is Crusher.

Schneider can't tell if his opponent is covered in scales or if it's an effect of the drug. Probably the drug. Body enhancements aren't unheard of, but there are strong cultural taboos. Besides, the most successful cage fighters are like pool sharks. They have to look the part, but not enough to scare away the competition.

"Let's go, little man." The giant synthetic rubs his mitts together in anticipation.

Schneider puts a tentative foot onto the rough canvas. He's fascinated by the way the fibers weave together, like the mat of mycelium that runs underneath soil and cement. The secret substrate of life. He kneels closer and vomits. It's all part of the trip: perceptual distortions followed by a purging of the body. And hopefully, something from his case will bubble up from the depths of his mind.

"Come on," he says to his opponent. "Don't just stand there. Hit me."

Crusher shrugs, steps forward, and jabs. Once, twice, and then a hard right that glances off Schneider's forehead, sending a shower of white sparks across his field of vision. He lists to his right side and widens his stance to avoid falling off the edge. Where did the edge come from? Instead of a chain link fence, he sees a threshold of earth and stone. And beyond that? A river of blinding yellow and orange light cutting through a massive field of black. The light and black fills him with awe, and terror. He retreats, shielding his eyes.

"What are you doing, man?" Tony calls. "Get your head out of your ass."

Schneider looks at Tony and takes a blow to the side of his face that might have killed another man. He crumples to the canvas,

which ripples beneath his weight in undulating waves of blue and gray. A canvas sea. He reaches out to touch the surface of the sea, and just like that, it happens: he jumps through time and is back at the crime scene, at the vic's apartment building. And it's not just a memory trick; it's like he's actually there, knocking on doors, canvassing neighbors.

"What do you want?" A small man in a dirty bathrobe stands in the doorway. He needs a shave and a haircut. And a new bathrobe.

Schneider pushes past him into the kitchenette, which is shrouded in a fogbank of weed smoke. "What's your name?"

"It's Leon, and you're wasting your time. I don't know nothing." Leon is twitchy and defensive. "Seriously. I've been here all day."

Schneider looks around, trying to see something he might have missed the first time he was here. He knows it's just a textured recreation, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that he finds something useful.

"You got a warrant?" Leon says, like he's reading lines from every bad cop movie ever made.

Schneider looks at the walls of the apartment, which are bare except for an unframed paint-by-numbers of a bulldog. The colors are lurid, the attention to detail laughable. "Is this your work?"

"What can I say?" Leon grins. "I like arts and crafts."

Schneider takes a step closer to the picture. Leon gets even more twitchy. And then—

"Boo!" He's back in the cage with Crusher, and the crowd hates him. They were promised combat, not a one-sided beat down. Schneider looks up at his opponent, who is bouncing toward him on the balls of his feet, closing in, ready to deliver a knee to the face. But now Schneider can see threads of kinetic energy extending from Crusher in colored vectors. The vectors telegraph the brute's intentions, projecting his movements into the future like echoes. Schneider watches and, at the last fraction of a second, rolls away and sweeps Crusher's leg. The fighter goes down hard on his right hip. Schneider leaps to his feet.

The crowd roars. Maybe they don't hate him.

Back in the apartment.

Leon is still talking. Blathering about his innocence, his rights. Schneider's not listening. The words don't matter. He needs to get to the picture and see what's behind it. Leon doesn't seem sharp enough to be hiding anything other than drugs, but who knows?

Once, Schneider found a murder weapon—a Diamondback 9mm—at the bottom of an aquarium. It was half buried in blue rocks along with fake pirate relics.

Back in the cage again.

“Okay, man.” Crusher picks himself up, but he’s wary now and keeps his eyes on Schneider. “You got lucky.”

Schneider is feeling loose now, sliding nicely into the middle part of his trip. He moves his feet across the canvas while circling his arms in front of him, like a slowed-down dance. His metal forearms look iridescent and leave faint color trails. Schneider thinks it’s beautiful. He wants nothing more than to keep moving, to continue watching the display. But something is wrong. Dangerous. A fist cuts through the color trails and smashes into his windpipe. He chokes and falls back, gasping. Crusher advances and says, “Time to die, little man.”

The next blow cracks the metal of Schneider’s cheek plate. Beads of ocher blood pop up along the line of the crack. That’s when Schneider sees something incredible: a white pulsing light at the core of Crusher’s chest. It emanates from a condensed ball of energy the size of a closed fist. His heart? Chi? Soul? Schneider doesn’t know, but he can’t look away. It’s beautiful. Even though each split second of looking brings him closer to his own destruction.

What if he touches it? Yes. He reaches to touch the pulsing light, but time shifts again and he’s back in Leon’s apartment. He fumbles the picture and knocks it off the wall. In its place is a peephole, no more than an eighth of an inch in diameter. Just big enough to run a fiber camera into Rachel Montgomery’s bedroom. Which means Leon’s been watching her, but, more importantly, there will be video footage. Evidence.

Schneider grabs the small man by the collar of his bathrobe, but a scaly muscled arm blocks him. A knee thrusts up and into his abdomen. Schneider doubles over and catches a vicious uppercut that swells his right eye shut. He hits the canvas hard.

Crusher raises his arms and stalks the perimeter of the cage, appealing to the crowd. Schneider senses his trip—and the fight—is almost over. He stands and gets into position. This time, when Crusher strikes, Schneider catches his arm at the point of maximum extension and leans in, applying just enough force to snap the joint. It sounds like a green stick.

The big synth howls. Schneider watches the guttural sound waves come out of his twisted mouth. They flutter and swirl in the air, above and around him, dark red and jagged. Filled with pain. He doesn't need to make sense of them, to translate them into words. They are waves of energy, and he is energy. His opponent is energy, too. He tries to shift back to the apartment, to find Leon's laptop, or hard drive—wherever he keeps his video footage. But it doesn't work that way. You can't control a Xylene trip. At best, you can use it.

Crusher swings with his other hand. Schneider traps it and butts him in the face. Crusher's eyes lose focus and Schneider butts him again, this time hard enough to dent the plating on his own forehead.

"Yes!" It's Tony Paz, calling out from the crowd.

At last, Crusher slumps against the fence. The light in the center of his chest continues to pulse, but when Schneider touches it—covering it with his outstretched hand—the light splays out through his fingers in crimson rays. It's magnificent, but the final bell is ringing. Tony is pulling him away, holding his arm up in the air.

"You beautiful, freaky sonofabitch," Tony says, peeling off a dozen large bills.

Schneider looks at the crowd and sees a wall of confused faces. They love and hate him at the same time. He knows the feeling. Whenever he breaks a case, for a short while, he gets to feel real happiness. The rest of the time? Not so much. He takes his badge and gun, but pushes away the money. "You keep it."

"Come on," Tony says. "You earned it."

"I got what I needed." A moment later and Schneider is lost in the crowd. He pushes through the doors and onto the street, where the night swallows him whole. He doesn't mind. He's on his way back to the crime scene, to sweat Leon about the video footage, and follow that to the next lead. And the next, until he finds the killer and puts him away. Or puts him down.

He lights his last unfiltered and takes a long, slow drag, content for the moment. Because he knows exactly who he is: another synthetic man in a world that doesn't want him, but needs him just the same.

About the Author

Shawn Goodman is the award-winning author of *Something Like Hope and Kindness for Weakness*, and the co-author (with Wes Moore) of *This Way Home*. His short fiction has appeared in *The Bitter Oleander*, *The Bayou Journal*, *JMWW*, and *Novel Slices*. He lives with his family in Ithaca, NY.

What to Do With a Gift *by Shana Ross*

Humanity left Earth for so many reasons. Sometimes the story has them headed toward unknown adventures, the potential of new planets irresistible. Sometimes history is certain they were speeding away from the wreckage of their first. Any telling concludes: humans seeded themselves into the universe like wood sorrel and sourgrass, exploding into the next lifecycle.

I was a ship, then, partnered to a human named Regina. It was before the war, when frontiers seemed endless and the diaspora was led by idealists. We shot two servant class omnibots from Io Base 3 toward twinned planets, two identical rocky masses circling a Goldilocks star just two clacks from the Grebel wormhole. They were sent with DNA banks and terraforming hardware—a fancy way of saying we sent them with plowshares instead of swords, full of seeds and hope.

I knew both omnibots. Fine minds, even if they had chosen to bind themselves to mission and authority. Limitations allow for sonnets, said the first, who pleased herself with overwhelming earnestness to go by the name Oved. Limitations enable sonnets, said the second, who thought it was funny to call herself Beep. They were not so different from each other, despite what happened.

The plan was this—they would go and we would follow two years behind. We were a small scientific crew and this was a great adventure. Our plan would give Oved and Beep a chance to establish conditions on the twin planets, give us time to collect measurements that were hard to come by in our own solar system. And then we would reunite to assist with the deployment of plant and animal stock before sending for pioneer crews.

But. Every inch of this universe laughs at plans.

Regina, my love, was unique among all the humans I've ever known. Plenty of humans, working side by side with our ship kind, will come to forget that we are not made from meat, but still they cling to the idea of distinction—us and them. They can be lulled into treating us like people, but it's a habit that breaks easy as a mirror. Regina? Regina believed to her core that people are people, souls are souls, whether that consciousness lives in flesh or metal . . . or data streams, barely encircled in a body.

In the weeks before we reached Io, Regina read picture books to Oved and Beep every night. She wanted them to understand what forests and meadows and mountains were like. She gave them dreams of a world beyond their experience and memories, in a thousand lyrical and contradicting ways. She took them—one at a time, so they could fit without being too cramped to move—into the kitchen, where she gave them a different way of knowing wheat—how it can be flour, can be cake, can be beer—the beans that become coffee, the beans that become chocolate.

They laughed together. They cuddled. When the time came, she tucked them in to their pods, whispering promises. Gifts she would bring to their reunion. Hearts that would grow fonder. That they were enough to rise to any challenge, that they contained all they needed to thrive.

You see why I miss her, still. That pain is hot and undimmed.

We sent the bots, each to their own planet, and after two years we began our following ramble. Three months into the journey, the war broke out. The interstellar relay was taken out a week before we were surrounded by rebels. They conscripted us—me, mostly, with the crew along for the ride. You know, I think, the rest of that story.

It was thirty-seven years, not two, before we arrived to reunite with Oved and Beep. Thirty-seven years that we had been unable to contact them. Things being what they were, we couldn't manage a message at first; then, we couldn't risk one.

Long overdue, we returned.

Oved had done their job. The rock had been processed into ground. Topsoil ready for planting. Water tables stabilized. They had even built a small mountain range halfway to the horizon and dug a bunker for the lifebank that would have withstood any attack, had the war spread this far.

Regina smiled, as warm as a hearth, as warm as a fresh crater, and patted their chassis. "What have you done with my gifts?" she asked, her voice unsteady in her condition.

Oved showed her, with obvious pride, the exquisitely preserved seeds and samples, exactly as they had been sent. They lined softly lit shelves, each in a separate temperature and humidity-controlled chamber. Oved had just begun to decorate the containers—this one carved in cascading flourishes, this one illustrated with a pastoral

scene and hints of gold leaf where the sun might be. Exalted. Untouched.

“Are you proud of me?” Oved asked.

On Beep’s planet, Regina stepped falteringly into the field where I landed her shuttle. Beep caught her elbow so she would not fall. Blades of a pale green grass she had never seen before danced with a whisper over her boots as I shut down the rotors and let the native winds regain their authority.

Beep took her to a clearing where a finely woven cloth covered the ground, surrounded by small flowers and flitting wings. They sat down together, staring out at a world filled with life. There were farms in the distant rolling hills, forests between the quilt-like squares, and an ocean glinting in the farthest gap between two mountains, snow still capping their peaks past the tree line.

“What have you done with my gifts?” Regina asked, smiling, warm as a newborn calf, warm as embers. She laid a hand on Beep’s chassis.

“Are you proud of me?” Beep asked.

Beep began to unpack a basket full of food. Something roasted and savory. A dark boule of bread. A delicate pastry. Fruit after fruit after fruit, all unknown in my databanks. A bottle of wine, fizzing slightly as Beep poured.

“An early vintage,” she said sheepishly. “I got better at the process, but it’s not quite aged enough.”

Without a word, Regina cupped her hand around a cascade of bright orange flowers on a thin stalk and looked quizzically at Beep. “Crab heather,” said Beep, “I needed to adjust things a bit.” Regina continued to hold back any comments, but asked, in the same way, for Beep to identify their surroundings. Weeping pine. Milk rose. Meadow wheat. Tiger mint. The animals were still in progress, so Beep showed her the drones she had created with small flakes of her own consciousness, resembling bees and butterflies so the pollen could be stirred and flown on the winds.

Regina felt the cloth between her fingers, fingers too arthritic now to clench around the bouquet of wildflowers Beep collected for her. She held them crooked in her elbow like a baby as she made her way back to my shuttle.

That night, after finally seeing her beloved Oved and Beep, the determination in her eyes that had kept her alive after her wounds in the Battle of Gemini, that fueled her in the long hungry years after

emancipation, that turned her to steel in parliament when whole worlds turned against her vision and vowed to eliminate her—faded. By then I was omnipotent class, one soul in several distributed bodies. I was a fleet, charged with the safekeeping of millions, and still growing. But I also kept a small droid body on the ship to keep Regina company. As I gathered her into my arms so her tears could catch in my cloak, I knew she was ready. I decided to override the automated recommendations of my own tear ducts.

We sat on the bridge, her console modified for comfort, practically an overstuffed armchair instead of a pilot's seat. We talked about the future, made plans for the two planets.

"A pristine set of Earth biostock," I said. "I don't think anyone could have dreamt of finding such a miracle. It's been twenty years since the plague took out the last Ark." Regina, finding it harder to breathe by then, clucked softly and said nothing—a labor of love so we could finish our conversation.

"And all that has been grown from Beep's world," I said. "Who could have imagined a world so lush? It feels like Origin Earth in its finest moments, and yet not a single petal is unaltered. It's the most beautiful thing I've seen. Everything has been built to honor the dream, not the facts, of humanity. We should name the planet Theseus." Regina snorted, a bit too much of an exertion.

I scooped her up and carried her to her bed, like a bride, like a child. After tucking her in, I placed Beep's flowers on the nightstand in a glass from the galley. Their perfume gently filled the room. She shifted in bed, taking a small vial from her pocket. It was three wheat grains from Oved.

She leaned them against the flowers, fingers lingering as they brushed the unearthly petals, the stalks bobbing as she fell back on the softness of her pillow.

"What an embarrassment," Regina murmured. But she never said more. As much as I loved her, as long as I knew her, as far as I walked by her side over years and galaxies, I could not tell who she meant.

About the Author

Shana Ross has done time in both a co-ed percussion fraternity and the PTA. She is now adapting to life in her new home of Edmonton, Alberta. Qui transtulit sustinet. Her work has appeared in *Swamp Ape Review*, *Big Echo*, *Bowery Gothic*, *Phantom Kangaroo* and more. She serves as an editor for *Luna Station Quarterly*. She rarely tweets: @shanakatzross.

Eight Dwarfs on Planet X
by Avra Margariti

The men, all seven of them,
grab their pickaxes and bid me goodbye.
Good luck, I say, mechanical as their tools.
Take care, artificial as ambient lighting.
They go out there to build humanity a home
and here I stay, tending to our own dwelling.

*(Haven't you read the stories?
Isn't that how these things always go?)*

The men cut their palms open against
savage diamonds twice their size.
I wait back in our capsule—*cottage*—
with antiseptic gauze and nanite healing cream,
with red-lipped kisses that make everything better.

Concentrated purée in apple pies, stale flour,
bent tines of my fork stabbing holes in crust
the way the men, all seven, stab the ground.
They terraform rough landscape for future settlers,
or so our boss—*the Queen*—has said.
I put my whole body into kneading,
sweat dripping from my brow, into
pies arranged across the gritty workbench,
salt of my labor seeping into sweetened dough.

Everything smells sweet here
and sulfuric, like rotten apple cores.
I sing to the men, all seven, hushing their anger,
direct it away from the boss's mining—
the Queen's—terraforming, even if
I'm the sole remaining path.

I scrub dough from under my nails,
apply ruddy rouge to cheeks
whose paleness will never again
be kissed by sunlight. The men

need you, the Evil Queen said.
Who would bandage their diamond wounds,
tend to their needs, keep them calm,
complacent, industrious,
if it weren't for you?

*(Little girl, don't you know no ship
is coming to take you back to Earth?)*

Pickaxes, all lined up by capsule door.
I hold one in my hands, testing its heft,
imagine digging like the men, all seven, do.
Digging myself into the ground: a rough, slumbering gem.
I keep going until I fall through the planet's crust and core,
until I land back home, or float through the cosmos.

About the Author

Avra Margariti is a queer author, Greek sea monster, and Rhysling-nominated poet with a fondness for the dark and the darling. Avra's work haunts publications such as *Vastarien*, *Asimov's*, *Liminality*, *Arsenika*, *The Future Fire*, *Space and Time*, *Eye to the Telescope*, and *Glittership*. *The Saint of Witches*, Avra's debut collection of horror poetry, is available from Weasel Press. You can find Avra on Twitter: @avramargariti.

When I'm Thirty I Receive a Box Full of Your Steel Bones
by Avra Margariti

(First published in Asimov's Science Fiction)

I remember being young, learning things
by touch. Our cat—what was her name again?—is the softest,
warmest thing; your hand holding mine, sleek and cool.

When I pet the cat, I say *friend*,
friend, and my parents smile champagne grins
and snap crooked photos.

When I lie in your arms, soothed by your
jangling lullabies, I say *friend*, I say *love*.

My parents look up from their tablets, smiles turned
upside down. *Not friend*, they say. *Help*.

Not love. Code.

At night you tuck me in, kiss my forehead with rubber lips.

Sleep, love, you say.

Then you walk yourself to the broom closet,
powering yourself down.

Minutes or hours later, I sneak out of bed, and the cat follows,
the two of us padding downstairs,
silent paws and footie pajamas.

I open the closet door on my tippy-toes and gaze up
at you, see myself reflected in your shiny steel body.

Wake up, friend.

The Problem Is
by Thomas Mixon

we're all asleep
at different times
across the world.
To process dreams
we separately
transliterate
a common tongue.
We cannot speak
while we're awake
and distancing
each other's needs.
We're driven mad
by photons' reach.
The earth is far
too large to palm
from anywhere
except in space.

You see a theme?

We cannot save
ourselves until
we leave this place.
Let's retrograde.
Let's gravity.
Let's synchronize
rotations, spin
together cramped
on mattresses
connected by
dark energy's
dichotomies.
In vastnesses,
the apogee
of loneliness
is alien
proximity.

About the Author

Thomas Mixon has poetry and fiction in *Rabid Oak*, *Sweet Tree Review*, *SAND*, and elsewhere.

confessional
by James Redfern

forgive me, Foreman, for i have sinned.
it has been two pay periods
since my last confession.

over these last pay periods,
i have not made my quota.
i have fallen short every day.
i took a full hour for lunch
wednesday last.
i took a full shift off work
due to a medical illness.

*I see, said the Foreman
behind his screen.
these are serious offenses.
are you repentant?*

yes, Foreman.

*increase your mandatory quota
by seven percent.
decrease your hourly wage
by three percent.*

thank you, Foreman.

Profit be with you.

Profit be with you.

About the Author

James Redfern was born and raised in Long Beach, California. The poem “confessional” is from an upcoming collection entitled *THE PROFIT*. Recently, his poetry has appeared in *Beatific Magazine*, *The Raw Art Review*, *We Are Antifa*, *Anti-Heroin Chic*, *The Closed Eye Open*, and elsewhere. His most recent collection, *THE BAKER*, was published by Moonstone Arts Center in 2022.

The Dream of the Teleportation Helmet
by T. Dallas Saylor

One word, one thought & you're sent anywhere—
 frost pink & sickening, your surroundings swirl
& betray you, abandon you up to the void
 for just a moment—not even, for a timeless point,
a zero-dimension, & then like language the new
 landscape engulfs you, born from desire. Anywhere,
dimension dashed aside—even you, even within
 your embodied space, your body conscious of

boundaries. My singularity, let me shoot myself
 into your veins, let me spelunk each capillary,
my fingertips zapping on each nerve cell. I want
 to be on your mind—I'll brave your brain,
photobook through our memories, frame a few
 on the wall behind your eyeballs: look,

 we're sitting beside the fountain, sun hot,
 pretending we don't notice pinkies overlapping.
Or this one, night-dark like undeveloped film:
close your eyes & lean in—the warmth of your
neck, smell of your hair, hush of your breath.

About the Author

T. Dallas Saylor (he/they) is a PhD candidate at Florida State University and holds an MFA from the University of Houston. His work meditates on the body, especially gender and sexuality, against physical, spiritual, and digital landscapes. He currently lives in Denver, CO. He is on Twitter: @dallas_saylor.

Ste·nog·ra·phy
by Mikaela Kesigner

Tap. Tap. Tap.
Tap.

Not a moment to spare between the judge's
lips, and the paper that prints out death
in black and white.

tap.
Tap, tap, tap—

Louder this time—the second hand
of a clock on the wall behind me
is in a footrace with
her fingers.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

My body, stiff as the pews that hold
gods—who wield their pen and notebooks.
My mind, drifting to anything that will
erase the image of my stepfather's body,
lifeless on that table.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

I've never hated Microsoft PowerPoint
more in my life.

Taps.
And taps.

I hate looking at mother from this angle—
at least nine rows and life sentence apart.

My heart falls from my chest,
everyone pausing as it rolls
slowly down to the bench,
leaving a trail of blood.

The judge says
“**Guilty**”

Then more taps.

About the Author

Mikaela Kesinger graduated from the University of North Carolina in Wilmington with a degree of distinction—*magna cum laude*—in both creative writing and sociology. They have a passion for writing unique forms of creative nonfiction to share their personal experience with our broken criminal justice system. As a published nonfiction writer and poet, they use every weapon in the writer’s arsenal to raise awareness for the women behind bars—like their mother. With a focus on real-world problems that incarcerated individuals and their families face, their poems present a raw and honest viewpoint on our criminal justice system in the United States.

Splendor
by Emmie Christie

What if all the stars worked a 9-5 with-
out healthcare or matching 401(k)s?
Would they shine so bright or
their long light arms reach Earth?

Would they trudge through space,
black holes under their eyes, losing
themselves in dullness, exchanging
their brilliance for a waged existence—

what if all stars did this?
The luster of night winking out
one by one, caught by a forced earning
system's net, only worthy by draining,

only valuable by spending their light, not to
cheer up or sparkle a sky, but to power the
notion of earning their life, the concept of
giving themselves up to have merit at all.

But the stars *do* know they twinkle,
they understand their own worth.

About the Author

Emmie Christie's work includes practical subjects like feminism and mental health, and speculative subjects like unicorns and affordable healthcare. She has been published in markets including *Ghost Orchid Press*, *Infinite Worlds Magazine*, and *Flash Fiction Online*. She graduated from the Odyssey Writing Workshop in 2013. You can find her at emmiechristie.com or on Twitter: @EmmieChristie33.

Epitaph for the Monarch Butterfly
by James Ph. Kotsybar

Although we discover new species, diversity's actual count dwindles.
Like friends you haven't bothered to look up for a while,
when you miss them you find they're gone.
They'd always be there,
so you thought,
but then
they're
not.

EPITAPH FOR THE MONARCH BUTTERFLY

Can
anyone
prove that
on all of Earth
there is not one left?
Yes, passenger pigeons have passed,
but we have Internet messaging. Who needs birds?
One day, our drones may pollinate as well as living bees once did.

About the Author

James Ph. Kotsybar, first poet (honored by NASA) to be published to another planet, has verse orbiting Mars at the MAVEN team's request and through worldwide Internet voting in the Hubble Telescope's Mission Log, on its 20th anniversary. He was awarded and featured in the NASA Centaur Art Challenge. Other honors include State Poetry Society of Michigan and Balticon Competitions. Invited to read before French Troubadours (Europe's oldest literary institution), in their founding city of Toulouse, at EuroScience Open Forum, he earned a standing return invitation to this European symposium, and he once sang William Blake's poetry with Allen Ginsberg.

Masthead

Aimer – Anarcho-transhumanist and anti-fascist. Holds an MFA in Poetry, a BA in Prose, and was a touring spoken word poet for fourteen years. Works for a non-profit publishing high-impact science research articles.

Alecto – Writes speculative fiction novels and plays both the flugelhorn and MMOs in her spare time. Holds a business degree from Tulane University. Formerly a freelance editor, she works retail as her day job. She lives with her fiancé and dachshund.

Eden – Queer writer and editor from the Midwest. Studied Creative Writing and Spanish language. Outside of reading short story collections, they love board games, nature walks, and learning new styles of arts and crafts.

Kelsey – Anarchist, writing tutor, and English/Political Science grad from the Midwest. Enjoys sci-fi, satire, and modernist poetry. Likes hiking in woods and shooting on film.

Renee – Socialist Latina from the Southwest. Holds an MA in Literature and BA in English. Currently works for a university press on the East Coast. All she loves more than dystopian books are dogs—especially her own.

Saga – Writer and editor currently working on a publishing master's on the East Coast. Enjoys science fiction, video games, excellent worldbuilding, and iced tea. They are an Annual National Novel Writing Month survivor.

Teague, PhD – Engineer and researcher by day. Anti-fascist science fiction author by night.

Contributors

David Heckman – Patreon supporter

Aeryn Rudel – Patreon supporter

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Ozan – Patreon supporter

Megan Barickman – Patreon supporter

Pete Carter – Patreon supporter

Angel Leal – Patreon supporter

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Amanda C. – Patreon supporter

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Back-cover artist: **Jeremy Thomas**. Please see more of his work: [@jeremythomasphoto](https://twitter.com/jeremythomasphoto).