

RADONJOURNAL

ISSUE 13

CONTENT WARNINGS

- “Lucky Child #8” *Child death, suicide*
- “Barbie Grasshopper Dreamhouse” *Live insect eating, miscarriage*
- “Happy Snacks” *Disordered eating, graphic body horror*
- “Single Parenting in the House of Refined Appetites” *Body horror, child endangerment, suicide*
- “Gamorelin” *Animal violence, body dysmorphia, body horror, drug abuse, explicit sexual content, gender dysphoria, homophobia, misogyny, self-harm, transphobia*
- “The Experiential Void” *Psychological trauma*
- “A Junkyard Full of Stardust” *Murder, body horror*
- “Conversation With a Bomb Technician” *Emotional manipulation*

Radon Journal: Issue 13

ISBN Print: 979-8-2560-5863-0

ISBN Ebook: 979-8-2560-5864-7

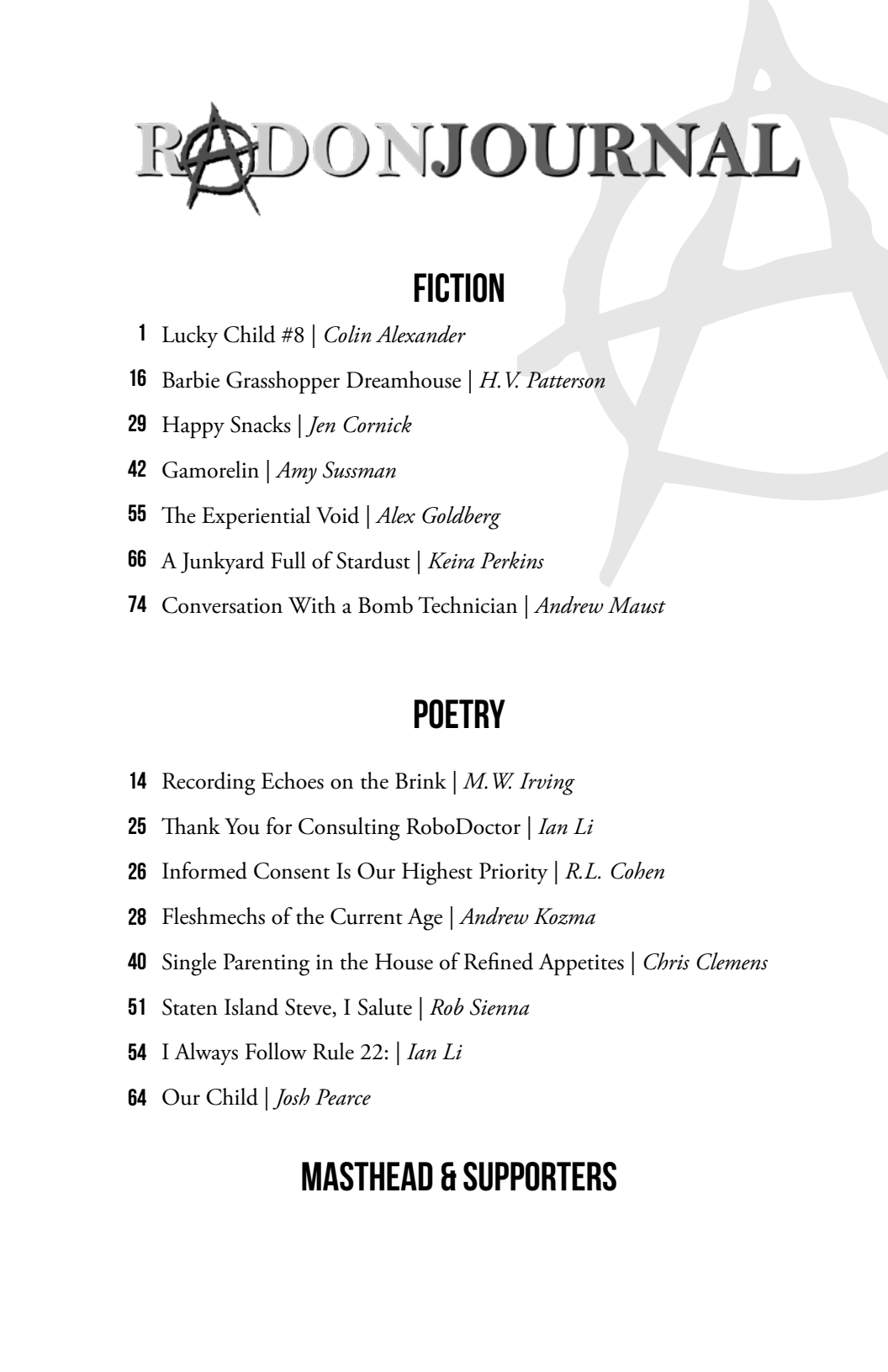
Cover art by Reza Afshar, 2025

Interior design by Kallie Hunchman

All authors retain their creative copyright.

www.RadonJournal.com

RADONJOURNAL



FICTION

- 1 Lucky Child #8 | *Colin Alexander*
- 16 Barbie Grasshopper Dreamhouse | *H.V. Patterson*
- 29 Happy Snacks | *Jen Cornick*
- 42 Gamorelin | *Amy Sussman*
- 55 The Experiential Void | *Alex Goldberg*
- 66 A Junkyard Full of Stardust | *Keira Perkins*
- 74 Conversation With a Bomb Technician | *Andrew Maust*

POETRY

- 14 Recording Echoes on the Brink | *M.W. Irving*
- 25 Thank You for Consulting RoboDoctor | *Ian Li*
- 26 Informed Consent Is Our Highest Priority | *R.L. Cohen*
- 28 Fleshmechs of the Current Age | *Andrew Kozma*
- 40 Single Parenting in the House of Refined Appetites | *Chris Clemens*
- 51 Staten Island Steve, I Salute | *Rob Sienna*
- 54 I Always Follow Rule 22: | *Ian Li*
- 64 Our Child | *Josh Pearce*

MASTHEAD & SUPPORTERS

LUCKY CHILD #8

by Colin Alexander

Their kid keeps dying, and I keep bringing him back.

With so many corpses coming and going, you'd expect these parents to live in a dark Victorian with oil paintings of long-dead relatives, but the house is modern, poured concrete imprinted with wood molds, and every room has high ceilings filled with natural light.

Which is why the bars on the windows stick out.

I tend to show up after a car crash or a fire. Sometimes an unattended bathtub. The parents are sad, but not *that* sad, because they're gonna get everything back.

Still, I dress in dark, muted colors. I'm polite. Not too much eye contact, not too much conversation. I pretend like I know how all the buttons and dials on the machinery work because they feel like they're paying for a doctor or something, but really the wand does the work.

This family doesn't even bother with insurance. They pay out of pocket every time, and by the looks of their place, no one's skipping any meals to afford it.

They've paid in direct transfer credits six times. This will be the seventh.

The dad always wears the same thing. Black turtleneck and expensive jeans that look like a second skin. I wonder if this guy has a walk-in closet with three hundred sixty-five pairs of jeans and turtlenecks and just incinerates 'em after every wear.

He's got close-cropped hair with a little more salt than pepper and wireframe glasses that look like the stuff they make spaceships out of. He smiles at me with the side of his mouth, like the whole thing would be too much to offer, then returns to his tablet.

The mom is blonde, skin like a salamander, wearing magenta lipstick I couldn't pull off. She smiles with her eyes, but her forehead never enters the picture.

"Thanks for coming . . ." she says, her eyes scanning for a nametag that doesn't exist.

Folks actively forget my name. My presence feels like evidence they screwed up. I bring the spare body, vacuum-packed in amino acids like a giant chicken thigh, and they want me out of their lives the moment the chicken thigh comes out of the bag.

But we've met before. *Six times.*

"Of course, Mrs. Sandberg. Here to help."

Here to help took some workshopping. "Sorry for your loss" isn't technically applicable 'cause these folks didn't really lose anything. "Happy to be here" or "Happy to help" or any phrase using the word "happy" after a kid eats it raises hackles. Busting down the door and asking "Where's the body?" or "Where's the hard drive room?" is a good way to get someone to actually fill out the customer service form. Brusque doesn't get you five stars in the service business, baby.

I don't have to ask where the hard drive room is. It's directly next to Alex's room, and even with the racks of data storage along the walls, there's plenty of space in the center for me to wheel in my mobile morgue and assorted zappers.

I pause nonetheless, allowing Mrs. Sandberg to lead the way.

The steel cart is about chest height for me, just above the waist on Mrs. Sandberg. Thankfully it works like a mechanized pallet mover at a big box store, helping me move several hundred pounds of machinery from job to job with ease. And, of course, there are the bodies. You can cram three bodies in on their sides, toes to nose, and we've got a full house today. Alex's clone for reanimation, Julie's old, aged-out clone set for disposal, and Fredrick, already reanimated, so now his remains are on ice set for disposal.

* * *

Years ago, after the first reanimation, Alex corrected me when I called him Alexander.

"Alex," he'd said, arms crossed over his skinny torso, still covered with goo. Goo's not a technical term; it's just what I call it.

I'd covered old Alex with a sheet. Kids are sometimes freaked out seeing themselves stiff and gray, bent or burnt. I also put a sheet over backup Alex. It's awkward waking up naked in front of some stranger, and we only dress 'em once they've showered off the goo.

That first time, Alex didn't say much. Kids wake up scared, angry. I do my best, easing frantic kids into being alive again, but my two front teeth are off-white ceramic 'cause a bruise of a fifteen-year-old headbutted me when I tried giving him a tissue.

That first time, Alex was ninety percent eyes, ten percent words. His eyes were jarring, blue irises with gold halos. They followed me like a set of headlights on a mountain road. I took the silence as fear, so I tried setting him at ease.

"Like to draw?" I asked.

He was six or seven, and in my experience, that was a base hit every time for kids that age.

"Yeah," he said, following my hands as I retrieved the electrodes from his head and heart.

"What do you like to draw?" I asked, tossing the electrodes into a jar filled with green cleaning solution.

Alex paused, and I saw his hand fiddling with the slightly curly hair at the back of his head.

"Horses," he said.

"Love horses," I said. "There's a farm not far from where I live. Watch 'em graze some weekends."

I thought Alex's eyes were bright before; they were halogen now.

"It's hard," he said, "getting the back legs right."

I watched him follow my hands as I returned the wand to its creche for charging.

"Hooves are a lot easier to draw than hands, though."

* * *

The training for this job consisted of a series of videos, including a fifteen-minute animation where the wand ("Wandy") describes how to use her.

"I hate getting wet!" cries Wandy, though the tech placing her in a tub of water is the one whose animated bones light up like a Christmas tree.

After attaching the uplink electrodes to the head and the heart (another fifteen-minute video), Wandy does the whole reanimation thing. Honestly, if you've ever slow-cooked a roast, you could handle the setup.

* * *

The second time I saw Alex's name on my list, I took my break early, stopping at the dollar store on the way.

"Hey, Sarah," he said after sitting up. Hearing my name come out of a backup's mouth made my toes clench inside my flats.

I'd forgotten Alex had asked my name the first time, which tells you how old I'm getting, 'cause that was unique. Out of all the kids I'd brought back, Alex was the only one who'd bothered.

I recovered quickly, flashing Alex my gray-white teeth, peeling off the electrodes, and dropping them into the green cleaning solution.

"Hey, Alex," I said, remembering his correction from the first time.

"What'd you get me?" Alex asked, which again stopped me in my tracks. Nothing about this process feels natural no matter how long I do it, but it felt like this kid was reading my mind.

"What do you mean?" I asked, feeling the lump in my jeans pocket from the dollar store.

"I mean, it's technically my birthday," he said, chuckling to himself.

I shook my head, busying myself with laying out Alex's towels, returning Wandy to her creche. I felt silly. The kid wasn't seeing my thoughts; he was setting up a *joke*. I considered forgetting about my dollar store purchase, not wanting to make things awkward. But then I saw Alex—he was probably nine then—awkward skin and bones, hugging his own shoulders like some newborn foal, and I reached into my pocket.

Alex's eyes darted towards the sound of crinkling plastic, and I opened my hand to reveal a pink horse-shaped eraser.

"It's not really my birthday," said Alex. "It's in May."

"I know," I said. "It's in your workup."

Alex held the eraser in both hands like it was a bird.

"Thank you," he said.

"Any time," I said, immediately regretting the implication I'd come back.

When he was fully dressed, he tucked the pink pony into his sock, carefully adjusting the cuff of his jeans to cover the lump.

* * *

Since the tech guides itself, the real job requirements are an ability to keep a poker face while rich folks treat you like machinery, and the ability to lift up to seventy-five pounds of dead weight. I wish they mechanized that part of the job, but apparently someone did the math and decided a hydraulics bot was more expensive than a bottle of ibuprofen for my back.

One might ask, if all we're doing is uploading what's been stored on the servers to the new body, why we'd have to hang onto the old body as well as the new.

The answer is liability. We're supposed to be in the business of reanimating kids who died of "misadventure," not, you know, murder and abuse. So we're taught how to scan the old body (different wand. I

call that one “Wandal”), and stick a probe into the liver (I have not anthropomorphized this one) to check for unexplained bruises, toxins, etc. If anything is out of the ordinary, we preserve the old body for ninety days per our contract with the city, and the police are notified. I do not immediately reanimate the child, for obvious reasons.

I’ve never had a case bounce to the police. That’s not to say murder of backed-up kids is unheard of. Often, it’s someone who doesn’t know the kid’s got a backup, and there’s an eyewitness in storage. Other times, it’s a “crime of passion” where some asshole loses their temper. I even heard about a mom who was poisoning her kid for attention and got the dosage wrong.

But it’s rare.

The third time I brought Alex back, he didn’t joke about birthday presents. I think he was afraid he’d have to figure out a way to smuggle more contraband into his room. I zapped the fresh backup, and Alex sat up to receive the cup of water waiting in my hands. Then I asked about his inner ear.

The manifest said “fall.” I observed bruises on the body, and Wandal confirmed they were consistent with falling. But this wasn’t his first fall, so I couldn’t help wondering.

“Get dizzy often?” I asked.

Clutching the plastic cup, Alex shook his head.

“Lose your balance?”

Alex took a sip from the cup, leaving a pink half-moon of goo. Head shake.

“‘Cause if you’ve got balance issues, I can get another tech to look at your backup’s inner ear. Easy fix.”

Again Alex shook his head, then pointed his cup towards the Randcorp-branded cart.

“Who’s in the box today?” he asked.

“Another backup, and a, uh, original. Both boys, like you.”

“Only backup the boys?” asked Alex.

“Nah,” I said. “They back up all sorts.”

Alex nodded. “Tell me again about the wand.”

“Wandy,” I smiled.

“Wandy,” repeated Alex.

We went over the process, again. With all my practice describing it to this kid, I could’ve run the Randcorp training, no notes. Alex finished the water, wiped off the goo, and walked out of the room for a third time.

Is it only *déjà vu* the first time you get the feeling? Do they have another term when it happens a second or third time, or is it still *déjà vu*?

The fourth time bringing Alex back, I couldn't help but question how good Wandal was at assessing foul play.

I stuck the probe into the liver, and once again got the green light. Either Wandal was asleep at the wheel, or Alex was the most accident-prone child under the sun.

Electrodes. Welding glasses. Wandy. Zip-zap. Alex sat up.

This time, I wasn't off guard.

"Hey, Alex," I said.

"Hey, Sarah," said Alex.

And before we fell into our regular routine, Alex feigning interest in the process of animating backups, I asked my own questions.

"Is it true backups remember everything?" I asked.

Alex paused, considering.

"I mean, would I know if I didn't?"

"Good point," I said.

"Do you remember, uh . . ." I glanced at the manifest. Stairs. He fell down the stairs. ". . . falling down stairs?"

Alex nodded.

Asking questions wasn't protocol. Probably traumatic. But I needed to know.

"Yeah," said Alex. "I bounced twice, then was stuck on the landing until a maid found me."

I grimaced and had the sense not to ask the obvious follow up: *So if you remember falling, and you've died falling down the stairs before, why the hell can't you remember to hold the handrail?*

After my questions, Alex still asked about the electrodes. Wandy. The bodies in the cart.

"All boys again," I said absentmindedly.

I waited until Alex left the room to put his old body into the Randcorp cart. I really didn't want to return. I liked Alex too much.

The fifth time bringing Alex back, I swear I would have felt fifty pounds lighter if, upon glancing back at the manifest, it'd said "trampoline" or "pool."

Still stairs.

Goddamn it, Alex. There are two fucking bannisters. Two. Something about "stairs" made my whole body cold, like I was complicit in something, as I grabbed the probe to test the liver.

Wandal blinked green. Alex was bruised along the shins, torso, and arms, and his head pointed in an uncomfortable angle.

Yeah, okay, looked like stairs, which was such a fucking lazy way of describing what'd happened. Like, it didn't even say if he'd fallen up the

stairs or down the stairs or if he was facing forward or backward or if someone had forgotten to pick up a little red toy car. If there was more information, maybe we could prevent the next one, you know?

Electrodes went on the head and heart. Wandy called down the fire of the gods.

Distracted, I'd forgotten my goggles. Blind and blinking, lightening rod in hand, I heard Alex's voice in the white-darkness.

"Hey, Sarah."

"Can you please learn to hold a handrail? I can't keep seeing you this way, twisted and broken." I stopped myself before saying the rest. That every time I've brought him back, I feel like I've lost a part of myself buried inside this cold-ass house to wither and die.

Blinking, the shape of the room returned, and I found my way to the cup of water. Alex took a sip before answering.

"I'll be more careful," he said. I swear if he'd said "next time" I would have zapped myself with Wandy just to feel something else.

The sixth time was a blur. The manifest said "electrocution," and seeing the state of Alex's corpse made me long for "stairs." I set the probe, I got the green light from Wandal, I brought him back, I gave him water.

I answered his questions.

"So you set the electrodes, then Wandy zaps the body back to life?"

I nod, dropping the electrodes into the green fluid.

"Your job sounds pretty easy. No offense."

"None taken," I say. And until Alex, it has been. He could have said it like a smarmy rich kid, ducking his chin and raising his eyebrows, using "no offense" to intone meanness within the bounds of politeness. But he's just talking about the thing we commune over every time.

"Bath or shower?" I ask.

"Bath," he says, and I'm mildly surprised, because he usually chooses shower. I nod, heading next door to the bathroom. The tub's big and luxurious, feet like claws of a headless animal. Despite trying to think of anything else, I'm thinking about the charred skin on Alex's forearms. A metallic clatter brings me out of my fugue. I turn off the water, quickly testing temperature with two fingers, then head back to check on Alex. Nothing's amiss. Alex is sitting up straight, eyes towards an empty corner of the ceiling; if I were to draw a line opposite his gaze, I'd find my purse, but I don't bother going through it. It's just keys to a company car and bargain drugstore makeup I never get up early enough to use.

Days later, I rummage through my purse, unable to find the cheap cellulose hair clips which accumulate at the bottom of my bags like alluvial silt.

* * *

When I get the call to reanimate Alex the seventh time, I've already made my decision. My resignation is in my "draft" email, ready to send. Randcorp has great benefits, and Alex is right—bringing dead kids back to life is "easy," but I'm not doing something good anymore, giving families second chances. I'm bringing back Alex, and I know in the pit of my being he doesn't want my help.

The seventh time, looking at the new body and the old, I'm struck by the hair. The backup body, even covered in goo, has long, flowing hair, almost shoulder length. It's the length I'd seen Alex's hair the last time I'd zapped him back into existence. The dead body's hair has been cut so short you can see the scalp, like the first day of boot camp.

The manifest says the cause of death was "stairs," and though I mutter "damn it, Alex," under my breath, I'm not angry. I'm glad it wasn't something worse. I couldn't stand seeing Alex burned again, and if he were blue and bloated, I don't know if I could stay in the room long enough to finish this final job.

I note the clothes Mrs. Sandberg has placed in the corner: a pair of blue jeans and a black turtleneck, much like Mr. Sandberg's uniform, ironed and folded. Often, folks getting their kids reanimated for the first time forget the new set of clothes. But again, Mrs. Sandberg is well on her way to filling a field of dreams with dead Alex clones, so she knows the routine.

I put one electrode on Alex's head, the other on his heart. I put on my welding goggles then pick up Wendy, slowly waving her over Alex.

He sits up slowly, shaking his head like waking from a bad dream. He smiles a little when his wet hair brushes across his neck, and he runs both hands through the thick tangle of light brown curls.

"Hey, Sarah," he says, draping the white sheet across his body like a toga, wringing the pink goo out of his hair.

"Hey, Alex," I say, handing him the cup of water.

He leaves pink, goopy half-moons on the lip of the white cup.

"One on the head, one on the heart," he says, plucking off the electrode on his forehead. "And it doesn't matter which goes where."

A statement, not a question; at this point, Alex could teach the reanimation course.

"Exactly," I say, half listening, enjoying the scratchy, high-pitched sound of Alex's voice, committing it to memory.

"Then you just wave Wendy over the body, and she guides you where to zap." He motions towards Wendy with the electrode he's plucked off his chest.

"Yup." So familiar with the process, he uses Wendy's Christian name.

He wipes his feet with the sheet before stepping down, padding towards his old body on the cool hardwood floor, gently removing the sheet from the bottom half. He lifts up the corduroy pant leg, digging into the sock, removing a golden tube with red grooves in it. It resembles a little art-deco tower.

He covers his old body with the sheet, then hops back onto his table, spindly legs dangling.

I hand him a fluffy towel.

"Too good for pockets?" I ask, trying to be nonchalant, remembering the pink eraser.

"I'd keep my stuff in drawers, but things go missing in this place," he says, gesturing towards the house as whole, not meeting my eyes. I don't press.

"You clean arms, I'll clean legs," I say. He nods, wiping goo off his forearms. He's gonna need hot water, but it's a lot easier to get the first layer of goo off before bathing.

"They don't feel like my arms," he says, "or my legs."

I raise a thick eyebrow. "You've been in this body for a whopping minute and a half. You know the routine. Give it time."

Wordlessly, he starts wiping off the goo. The towels go straight into the trash; no amount of washing gets this gunk out.

"Who's in the cart today?" he asks.

I tick them off on my hand, starting with my thumb. "You, a kid named Fred who threw up on me after waking, and thirteen-year-old Julie's aged-out backup."

Alex's eyes go halogen. I cock my head, and he avoids my stare.

"What happened to Fred?" asks Alex, handing me a goopified towel. His speech has slowed, but it's out of sync with his breathing, which is fast.

"Slipped, smacked his head," I say.

"Been there," says Alex. He slides off the fold-out table, liquid and catlike. Before I can stop him, he's opening the lower-hatch of the cart.

"No, you don't want . . ."

It's too late. He's already opened the hatch with the bodies. If Mrs. Sandberg walks in now, Fred's not the only one who's toast. Why am I nervous about a job I'm quitting?

But Alex isn't looking at Fred, he's looking at Julie. He puts his hand gently on the side of her face, removing it when I clear my throat.

"Do bodies go bad?" he asks, pulling the sheet tight around himself.

"Nah," I say. "They just age out. How would you feel if I downloaded your brain into your four-year-old body?"

Alex nods.

"You could do that?" he asks.

"Well, legally, no," I say. "You can't just throw any brain into any body."

"But it's possible?" he asks. "Even though the brains are different sizes?"

"Well, it's not your whole brain. It's your consciousness. Just, like, downloading your frontal lobe."

"So, you could put my, uh, consciousness into Fred?" he asks.

"No," I say, "'cause Fred's dead."

"Okay," he says, his index finger and thumb curling the tips of his hair.

"So, could you put me into Julie?" He says it like he's reading from the phone book, but I can see his bare chest, rising and falling, a caged bird flapping wings against tin bars.

"Yeah," I say. "Again, it's just your consciousness, and cloned brains are built specifically to house reanimates."

"Cool," he says, like he's lost interest with the conversation, like he's moved on to thinking about lunch.

All we have to do is wash off the remaining goo, get Alex dressed, and I'll be on my way.

"You have kids?" asks Alex.

"No," I say. While I've been in perpetual motion since arriving, attaching electrodes, getting towels, and checking the manifest, this question makes me stiffen. Again Alex notices, because his wide, haloed irises are lassoes, capturing everything.

"It's just . . . you seem like you'd be a good mom."

I'm twenty years past kids being a possibility, even if I won the lottery. I turn away and brush at my face with the last clean towel.

"Shower this time, or a bath?" I ask.

"Bath," says Alex.

"I'll add bubbles," I say.

"Thanks, Sarah."

"Here to help."

I want to peel off my uniform and soak for hours in this ridiculously large tub. I want to get the smell of Fred out my nostrils and get Alex's questions out of my head.

Yeah, Alex, I'd make a great mom. My apartment walls are practically made of books, I live next to a park, and I make mac and cheese from scratch. But kids are for the rich and the lucky, which are really the same thing. That tightness in my chest is supposed to be dead, no matter how many times you wave Wendy over my heart.

That's when I hear the pop, like an old-fashioned flashbulb filament combusting. In that moment, I know I'm an idiot and this fuckup of mine is gonna make its way into one of those fifteen-minute training videos.

I turn off the spigot and run back to Alex's room, just in time to see Alex clutching Wandy, still blinking from the bright light. Meanwhile, Julie's body is sitting up and peeling the electrodes off her head and her heart, like she's done this a thousand times.

"What," I ask, "have you done?"

Alex and Julie smile in tandem, and it's the same smile, right cheek pulling a little tighter, shoulders coming up towards the ears. I stare at Julie, who is scheduled for incineration tonight, and she runs both hands through her waist-length hair, then begins wringing the goo out.

Alex pulls out the little gold cylinder, trying to hand it to Julie, but she pushes it away. Alex insists.

"It won't be contraband," he says. "You'll want a piece of home."

"Thanks," says Julie. While the voice is a thirteen-year-old girl, the tight vocal cords of a soprano, the inflection is terribly familiar, an echo in the room.

"We're in so much trouble," I interrupt, unsure who to address. Loading consciousness into multiple bodies? That's not a fine, or even jail time. They destroy the clone.

Julie and Alex stare at me for what feels like a long time, because I'm certain Mrs. Sandberg will walk in at any moment.

Alex speaks.

"I can't live the way I want here, and I can't leave. I've tried. They just keep bringing me back."

"But I can," says Julie. "I can grow my hair as long as I like, wear any shade of lipstick."

"Apply your lipstick now, because this ends the moment your mom walks through the door," I say. "I lose my job, and Alexander number eight gets incinerated."

"Alex," they say in unison.

Again, they stare at me, and I can't think of any options. I should be furious, but now the initial shock's worn off. I'm surprisingly calm. I turn around, fill up a cup, and hand it to Julie-bodied Alex.

"You've had eight lives to think this through," I say to Alex. "What did you see happening next?"

* * *

Things go quickly with three sets of hands. Julie and Alex clean the goo off themselves, and Alex shows me where he's hidden a second set of clothes.

"Everything all right in here?" asks Mrs. Sandberg. By the time she ducks in to ask, everything appears in order. Alex is dressed just like his

father, and I've stashed the two fold-out tables. The towels are in the trash. The tub has been washed out.

"Just finishing up," I say.

"Hey, Mom," says Alex.

"Hello, Alexander," says Mrs. Sandberg.

When she leaves, I ask Alex my question, which I've turned over in my head since the fraternal twins sprang into action.

"Why?" I ask.

"I told you," says Alex. "She gets to live her life."

"But you're still here. Stuck."

"They can keep me here, but they can't keep me a child forever.

When I'm grown, I'll be whatever version of myself I want. But I can't put everything on hold for someday. Right now, I can smuggle a piece of me, the real me, out. I'm gonna visit someday, see how she's grown. I think she's gonna be beautiful."

When I wheel my Randcorp cart back through the concrete house filled with too much light, it weighs the same. I've got the same number of bodies, but somehow, I feel lighter. I wonder if this is what Alex feels as he watches us exit onto the street through the bars.

"Thank you . . ." says Mrs. Sandberg.

"Here to help," I say, wheeling out the daughter she'll never meet, not for lack of trying.

* * *

Miles from home now, Julie-bodied Alex slips to the front seat. It's sunset, and the lights of the city have flickered on. But instead of looking out the window, she clicks on the dome light, transforming the passenger window into a mirrored surface. She pulls out the gold cylinder and twists it, revealing a bright magenta tip, and in the half-mirror of the city, applies the brilliant shade to pursed lips.

Then she rolls the window down, her long, loose strands of hair flying in every direction, carried by the evening wind.

"I've got clips in my bag," I say, motioning to my purse with my elbow.

"I know," she says, but she doesn't move. She runs her hands through her hair, momentarily smoothing it before the wind plucks it up again, a tornado tethered to the passenger seat.

"I like the way it feels."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colin Alexander lives in San Francisco with his wife and daughter. His work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy, and Brave New Weird. His writing has been featured in *Analog Magazine*, *Radon Journal*, *The Molotov Cocktail*, and *Rock and a Hard Place*. He's purchased a website, ColinCampbellAlexander.com, and will surely build it someday, but not today. He can be found on Bluesky @colinalexander and has an eco-horror novella, *Suicide Valley Trail Maintenance*, out with *Stanchion* in July 2026.

RECORDING ECHOES ON THE BRINK

by M. W. Irving

For pressing panic into orderly boxes, there is no substitute
For the human voice, for the genuine article.
Synthetic instructions are 82% as effective,
9% more likely to be ignored

So chaos can cast shadow puppets across our faces.

This must not be permitted to pass, so I am called in
To record the warnings, guidance, and messages of calm
To be played echoing along sidewalks and in lobbies,
My voice through mounted megaphone throats

My voice is algorithmically ideal for soothing,
For quelling, for quashing, to speak law to rule, it's
28% authoritarian mother, all finger wags and soiled room nagging
19% granny's tea from knobbed palms immune to scorching

For those who need comfort's wrappings.

15% newscaster flat, relaying horrors in bite-sized bits
13% polished politician's gleaming assault on the truth
11% fifth-grade teacher, holding hands through grammar and math
4% rockstar snarl, seasoned by cigarettes and fisted rage

For those who fight and foment.

The rest is unquantifiable. Grey matter elements.

The first days were about containment

“Remain within your homes and await instruction.”

The first weeks were about control

“Those who follow instructions will not be harmed.”

The first year was about the body

“Food and water will be provided, await delivery.”

The second year was about the soul

“Cannibalism remains a crime.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M.W. Irving is a writer and teacher living on stolen land on Vancouver Island. His work has been nominated for a Webby Award, included in annual “Best Of” anthologies, won contests, and has been mentioned honorably often. He delights in the bizarre, the transgressive, the vulgar, and is loyal to no genre.

BARBIE GRASSHOPPER DREAMHOUSE

by H. V. Patterson

The screaming outside intensifies. If eight-year-old Rose and six-year-old Belle fight for much longer, a surveillance drone might cite Margaret for child neglect.

As she hurries through her house toward the commotion, Margaret's calf catches on the hard edge of her daughters' Barbie Dreamhouse. In that breathless space between falling and finding balance, Margaret considers letting herself slam into the ground. Stomach first. But she catches herself and examines the flap of skin hanging from her throbbing calf. It's the kind of injury that bleeds dramatically. Fortunately, the floor is cheap laminate, not carpet. Her hands curl around the non-existent swell of her stomach.

Please, she thinks. She isn't even three months along. The fetus is just a clump of twitching cells curled into the shape of an indeterminate animal.

The Dreamhouse mocks Margaret with its three decadent stories and its sharp edges. She scowls at its bright, plastic rooms, pink on pink, swollen with plastic accessories. A single doll sprawls inside the house in hapless, immobile perfection.

The yelling escalates. It's a good thing their nearest neighbors are miles away. Margaret swallows her pain, as she has swallowed so many things, and steps, grimacing, into unrelenting sunlight.

"You have to share! It's the law!" Belle cries.

"I share EVERYTHING all the time!" Rose screams back, clutching a pink, plastic case protectively against her chest. "It's not fair! I want things that are just for me! I don't want to share EVERYTHING with a STINKY BABY like you!"

"Mom!" Rose yells. "I found the grasshopper! It's mine!"

"NOOO! I found it first!" Belle protests. "Rose just caught it because she's bigger!"

"Why are you fighting over a grasshopper like a pair of baby birds?" Margaret asks.

"It isn't a normal grasshopper, Mom," Rose says.

"It's a Barbie grasshopper!" Belle says.

"What do you mean?" Margaret asks. "Let me see."

Reluctantly, Rose surrenders the plastic case imprisoning the grasshopper. Margaret peers through the pink plastic. The grasshopper stares back with alien stupidity, revolting antennae twitching, mandibles writhing beneath bulging eyes. As far as Margaret can tell, it's identical to every other grasshopper devouring the remnants of her garden.

She wonders how much oxygen grasshoppers need. Will it suffocate in the case? Would that be cruel, considering how most grasshoppers die? Their mindless hunger subsumed by the cravings of bigger creatures? Would that tiny, insectoid mind understand that it was being eaten alive as it thrashed against a merciless beak or tongue?

Alex, the renowned entomologist, would know. Alex, who had once known Margaret as thoroughly as one person could know another.

"It's just a grasshopper," Margaret says.

"It's Barbie grasshopper!" Belle insists.

"It's pink, Mom," Rose explains.

Everything looks pink in the reflected glow of the saccharine plastic. Margaret opens the case, just a crack. She peers at the grasshopper, and it remains—

Pink.

This isn't the uniform, manufactured pink of the Dreamhouse. This is pink shot through with yellows and delicate oranges. Its pale eyes, gold highlighted with rose, stare unblinkingly back at her as it flutters half-formed wings.

Revulsion hits Margaret like a punch in the kidney. She snaps the case shut, nearly severing a leg with its petulant plastic jaws. The grasshopper's unnaturalness leaves her skin crawling.

"Go wash your hands," she tells the girls.

"But Mom, we didn't touch it!" Rose lies.

"Wash your filthy hands, NOW," she snaps.

They scamper inside. Margaret sets the loathsome thing in its pink prison on the porch railing. The girls are too naïve to understand all the things that can go wrong in a body. All the dangers lurking in the vast, cruel world.

She thinks again of Alex. She will know if there's any peril lurking in that grotesque, pink exoskeleton.

Overwhelmed by nausea, Margaret flees to the master bathroom and turns on the fan and shower to disguise the sound of retching. At this point in pregnancy, everything makes her vomit.

Disgusting. Unnatural. Vile. Margaret thinks as she rinses out her mouth, suppressing her panic. She remembers the genetic counselor's

damning words almost ten years ago, after the second miscarriage—*recessive gene, nonviable*. Paul had held her hand. They'd cried together. Then, with the help of genetic testing, they'd had Rose and Belle, their precious, healthy girls.

Now, she carries the burden of a failed vasectomy. Less than a one percent risk of failure, the surgeon told Paul. But the odds were never in her favor.

She doesn't dare go to the clinic. They'll register her for monitoring and implant a tracker in her abdomen. Visions of an infanticide trial and Rose and Belle being snatched away by the Mothers of Liberty haunt her.

Margaret tends her bleeding calf and contorts her expression into pleasant neutrality before emerging from the bathroom. She wipes her blood from the hallway and begins making lunch for the girls. Boxed macaroni and cheese, again.

As they eat, Margaret stands apart from herself, amazed at the mindless, effortless grace of her movements. *Anything you practice long enough becomes instinct*, she thinks, *even caring for another person*.

The girls don't notice she isn't all there. They're too excited about the grasshopper. Margaret orders them to leave the grasshopper alone. They whine, but the afternoon heat enervates their protests. She shoves them in front of the television and bribes them into compliance with the harmless stupidity of princess cartoons and freezer-burned ice pops.

Once the girls are deep in a pink princess coma, faces and hands sticky with ice pops, Margaret retreats to her bedroom and locks the door. She creeps into the warm, smothering darkness of her closet. For a few seconds she just breathes, rubbing her face against a moth-eaten wool jacket, letting the itchy discomfort ground her.

She leans against the back of the closet. Outdoor heat radiates through the shoddily constructed wall, into her body. She imagines the house cracking around her, swinging apart on plastic hinges. She imagines looking up and up into a penetrating and disdainful gaze.

Margaret shakes off the strange thoughts and rummages beneath old maternity jeans, their elastic sagged into uselessness, until she finds the shoebox. She opens it reverently, stripping away layers of headbands and ponytail holders, relics from when she wore her hair long. At last, her trembling fingers grasp the battered tablet.

She boots it up and checks the security settings. All is well. It's almost six o'clock where Alex is. She's probably in her office, finishing up work for the day.

The video call goes through. She stares into Alex's beaming face framed by long, dark curls. Alex is so alive, so clearly herself. Margaret is suddenly

conscious of her stained housedress. The familiar pang of grief for a life not lived wells in her throat.

She swallows it down, substituting useless grief with gratitude. Alex is safe, free from the clutches of a country which would have sent her to a work farm or an institution. Several of their friends vanished like that—spirited away in the night by masked men in unmarked vans.

As for herself, Margaret is safe for now. And if she's unhappy—the point of life isn't happiness, is it? The point has always been survival.

"Margaret, it's been weeks!" Alex says. "I was worried."

"I know," Margaret says. "I'm sorry. It's just . . ." she wipes her sweaty forehead, torn. How much should she tell Alex? How many of her pains will she lay at her friend's feet? But the words tumble out of her before she can stop them: "I'm pregnant."

Alex's eyebrows arch, disappearing under her bangs.

"Oh shit," she says. "And you don't know . . ."

"We don't," Margaret confirms. "They don't offer genetic testing anymore. And if we go to a clinic . . ." she doesn't need to finish the sentence. It doesn't matter what her chart or her OB-GYN or any of the facts state. If she miscarries or gives birth to a stillborn child, she'll be tried for infanticide. A crime which has a thirty-three percent conviction rate and an average sentence of seven years.

"Didn't Paul get a vasectomy?"

"Didn't work, I guess."

"How far along are you?"

"Almost three months."

"Shit." Alex leans back in her beautiful, leather chair.

Margaret avoids Alex's sympathetic eyes and gazes instead at the shelves piled high with academic journals, books, and frames bulging with mounted insects. She will never step through the door and see Alex's office in person. She will never again press herself into the sympathetic curve of Alex's neck. Not with the borders locked down. Not with two girls needing whatever scant protection she can offer.

"We'll figure something out," Margaret says.

It's what she and Paul have been telling each other, over and over, for the last seven years. First, optimistically. Then, resignedly. And, finally, with horror, as friends and family and colleagues transformed into people they no longer recognized.

"I didn't call about that," Margaret continues. "I mean—there's nothing you can do. I don't need your help." Once, Margaret had needed Alex. She'd been a parasite, pulling Alex down, taking more than she gave. Alex was better off without her. "It's . . . my kids found this weird grasshopper, and I

wasn't sure if it was safe. But I can't ask anyone. I can't draw attention to us, can't risk someone coming out here . . ."

Alex nods, understanding. "By the way, what are the grasshopper numbers like out there? My colleague, Lee, studies grasshoppers, and they're convinced that swarming may occur in your area, given the conditions. But, of course, we get so little information."

"There are more grasshoppers than usual," Margaret says. "It's really hot and dry. Drought weather." *Famine weather*, she thinks, but doesn't say. *Food prices are up again too. The girls think it's normal to have mac and cheese for lunch three days in a row.* "I haven't seen swarms, though."

Margaret shudders as she envisions a swarm. When they were in college, Alex had shown her videos of locust swarms. So many mouths, so many legs and wings. And that sound, like sirens ringing in the end of the world.

"Anything from the news?" Alex presses.

"You know they never tell us anything real." The words are harsher than Margaret intended. Her stomach rumbles. Hunger and nausea: her two states of being. "Sorry," she says.

Alex nods, her eyes all soft sympathy. Margaret hates it. Seven years ago, Alex would've had a sarcastic comeback.

"So, tell me about the grasshopper your girls found?"

"It's . . . pink?"

"Really? Pink?" Alex smiles. "Sounds like erythrism!"

"What?"

"Erythrism! It's a genetic mutation. Kind of like albinism or leucism. Except it makes the grasshopper look pinkish. They usually don't make it to adulthood because they don't have natural camouflage. Can I see it?" Alex squints into the darkness of Margaret's closet as if the grasshopper lurks in the shadows. "It's pretty rare."

"It's in a container. Outside," Margaret adds. "And the girls . . ." Alex deflates, but nods. Rose and Belle don't know that Alex exists.

"So, the grasshopper's not diseased? Or dangerous?" Margaret asks.

"Oh no," Alex says, shaking her head. "I mean, insects do carry parasites, like all animals. Just wash your hands. And don't eat them raw! Cooked is fine. Lots of people eat grasshoppers. I've had pan-fried grasshoppers before, and they're delicious."

"I can't imagine eating insects," Margaret cringes.

"A good portion of the world does," Alex says. "We only find it strange because it wasn't normalized in our families as kids. Insects have tons of protein and nutrients. They're a true superfood. And think about it: if a swarm eats everything, if there's nothing left to eat but the swarm . . ." Alex

must notice the queasy look overtaking Margaret's face, because she cuts herself off.

"They called it a 'Barbie grasshopper.'"

Alex laughs. "I guess the kids are all right."

No, they're not, Margaret thinks as she forces herself to smile, as her nausea morphs into hunger. *No one was ever all right, and no one is all right, and no one will ever be all right.*

After a few more minutes catching up, Margaret ends the call. She creeps past her daughters' screen-hypnotized faces to the kitchen. She scours the cupboards for random scraps to devour, for anything to ease this churning in her gut.

She downs a glass of orange juice that's more dye than juice. She savors a few chalky pieces of chocolate. She even opens a precious tin of canned meat and shovels the bland, overprocessed sludge into her mouth with her fingers.

Please, Margaret silently begs as she stuffs herself to the point of sickness. *Please*, she thinks over and over, until the word becomes mere sound. She sags into a chair, hating the world with a dull, diffuse hatred which has no real target but herself.

In the next room, Rose and Belle sing along to songs about the power of friendship, love, and kindness. Empty, useless words.

* * *

Two months later, Margaret crawls from bed, clutching her throbbing abdomen, the tattered threads of dream-memory still clinging to her, wrapping her in a web of animal fear. She reaches for Paul, but he isn't there. In the other bedroom, her daughters sleep, nestled in their bunk beds like burrowed cicadas. Where does Paul sleep on the nights when he doesn't come home?

Predawn light creeps through the window as Margaret trudges into the kitchen. It's already too warm, and it will only get hotter. Her naked feet pad through a thin layer of dust. The heat won't abate, and the rain won't come. And so, the dust drifts in and makes itself at home. Even after downing two glasses of water her parched throat aches, like the dust has crawled inside her.

Something moves in Margaret's peripheral vision. She turns and sees the Barbie Dreamhouse sitting insolently on the table. The pink grasshopper stares back at her from its third-story window, antennae flicking.

She told the girls not to bring the Dreamhouse and its repulsive tenant inside. But they never listen. She steps closer, glaring as the grasshopper presses its lurid, pink body against the plastic wrap imprisoning it within.

Since she was a child, Margaret has associated two-story houses with wealth. A three-story house—that's just opulence. The grasshopper has no understanding of the façade of prosperity it's trapped within. It digs against clear plastic with pink legs. Margaret lowers herself into an uncomfortable crouch. She expects the grasshopper to jump back when she leans close, but the girls have desensitized it to looming human bodies. Its mandibles twitch. Fretfully, hungrily. Always hungrily. She understands that feeling, that mindless urge to consume.

This creature staring boldly back at her doesn't look like a grasshopper. It looks like a hyperreal, tooth-achingly sweet decoration made of fondant, the kind you can't buy anymore.

Margaret's mouth floods with saliva. *They eat insects in lots of places*, Alex told her. How did you pan-fry a grasshopper? Drench it in oil and sauté? Would it pop, like a kernel of corn?

Margaret flinches back, revolted. Pregnancy cravings—she's had them before. But not like this.

Please, she begs the cells multiplying in her womb. *Please*—her prayer breaks off. She doesn't know what to ask for.

And then—a wave of pain obliterates thought and crumples her to the floor. Her knees crack against linoleum. She bites the corners of her mouth and swallows her own blood, but doesn't scream. She can't wake the girls. She needs to stand. She needs to force herself to the bathroom. She will wail into a towel as the shower washes the sweat and blood from her body. When it is over, she will dispose of the evidence.

Her vision blurs as another wave hits her—a contraction. Too early. Liquid gushes from her, soaking her legs and nightgown. She reaches down and presses both hands into the warm fluid to assure herself that it's real. She holds her hands before her face, and blood has pinkened the amniotic fluid. She focuses on the Dreamhouse, and her vision drowns in pink. Pink shutters framing pink windows. Pink flowers, undying in their pink flower boxes.

The grasshopper illuminated by predawn light, a mutated pink framed by artificial, plastic pink.

Margaret's giant hand rips through plastic wrap and breaks the perfect house to pieces. The grasshopper scrambles away. She pursues it with wet, pink handprints despoiling pink, plastic walls. She corners the grasshopper and pulls her captive from the wreckage.

She stumbles to the back door—but hesitates. It's not too late to turn back, to return the grasshopper and handle this latest disaster in the privacy of the bathroom. To bear down and keep her cries as unobtrusive as possible. It's what she has done for years. The grasshopper squirms in her slick palm, but Margaret holds fast. She crosses over the threshold into the backyard.

She glances furtively around, listening for the ominous whir of drones. Only night noises greet her. There is no one to behold her premeditated crime. Only bare, rocky soil interposed with the dead bushes. On the horizon, the sleeping town hovers like a mirage. Above her, the moon's sickle-smile wavers as the sun starts to rise.

Her bare feet sting as she trudges over withered remnants of grass, past empty flower beds, around the gray-black skeletons of tomatoes. Another wave of pain ripples through Margaret. She doesn't scream. She isn't far enough from the house yet. More warmth oozes down her legs. She looks, and it's blood, painting her feet a lurid, unnatural color, like something out of a horror movie. She hasn't seen a horror movie in years. They aren't allowed. So many things aren't allowed anymore. She walks until her house becomes small and unreal, a dollhouse too small to possibly contain her.

The grasshopper wriggles in her palm. She uncurls her hand, but it doesn't flee. It just sits there, looking at her. Waiting.

Margaret hesitates. She is being what people call "unreasonable." But there is no reason in the creature resting on her palm, and there is no reason in her body, and there is no reason in a world which has condemned her to become this feral, bleeding thing.

She is so fucking hungry.

It doesn't taste like candy. The breaking crunch of its body between her teeth, the prickle of its exoskeleton, jabbing the soft pouch of her throat as she swallows—Margaret has never devoured a living creature before. She has never swallowed a brain. She licks bitter ichor from her lips.

Another contraction hits, and this time she screams while more blood drips down her legs like water trickling through a hole in a dam. But her body has never been a dam. Her body is a wound, ripped open and stitched haphazardly back together. Over and over again.

Margaret looks up at the horizon. A swelling cloud is blotting out the nascent sun. She doesn't realize what it is until the first grasshopper smacks her forearm. It clings to her skin, probing for food. Her neck swivels down. Her jaws snap open and shut. Another burst of bitter flavor, another set of wriggling limbs. Another live, raw being, another brain snuffed out. Consumed. The buzzing grows louder. The cloud looms closer. Two more grasshoppers land on her arms. She devours one, but the other

escapes. No matter. There are hundreds—thousands—millions—of the desperate creatures.

Alex would love this, Margaret thinks.

Another contraction hits. Her scream is swallowed by the buzzing roar of wings.

And then the swarm is upon her.

As bodies ricochet off her, as the contractions come faster and harder, as she screams and screams, choking on the grasshoppers flailing into her open mouth—time falls away. The swarm encloses Margaret, blotting out the world. When it is time, she squats, wails, pushes.

The fetus slides from her and plops onto the dead earth. The placenta follows.

Margaret doesn't look at the bloody thing between her feet. She has been here before. She knows what she will see. Horror crawls through her. And grief. But relief supersedes all other feelings. Her knees tremble, and she slumps to the ground beside the doomed thing she'd unwillingly carried for almost five months. Grasshoppers swarm her, obscuring the evidence of her crime: the crime of possessing an unwieldy body, of being a woman and a mother.

Margaret has lied to herself for months. Every time she thought, *Please*, and didn't dare go further, pretending she didn't know what she wanted—a lie. She has always known. Viable or not, Margaret hadn't wanted this pregnancy. She doesn't want more children. If it were still legal, she would've had an abortion.

She opens her mouth, and an eddy of the swarm glides inside her. She devours everything she can get between her teeth. It takes no effort; she opens her mouth, and she is fed. Like a baby bird.

For the first time in years, Margaret is almost happy, almost free. For the first time in months, her body is almost her own.

She is almost full.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

H.V. Patterson (she/her) lives in Oklahoma, USA, and writes speculative fiction, poetry, and plays. Recent credits include *NoSleep Podcast*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Hex Literary*, and *Best Horror of the Year*. You can find her on Instagram @hvpattersonwriter, Bluesky @hvpatterson, or at hvpatterson.com.

THANK YOU FOR CONSULTING ROBODOCTOR

by Ian Li

He pokes tender pustules on his thigh
and calls for his doctor. RoboDoctor
awakes, finest physician most can afford.
What disease causes star-shaped pustules?

The AI spits a diagnosis: *Cynopox*.
Transmission method: airborne. Other symptoms
include anxiety and fever. Fatality rate: 99% within 72 hours.

Anxious and feverish, he runs to his window. Agitation
burns on people's faces. Buildings blaze with chaos,
harmonizing with wails of those in supposed final hours.

An engineer runs diagnostics at RoboDoctor HQ,
reports to her boss: *The AI seems to conflate*
deadly six-pointed cynopox pustules
with innocuous five-pointed ones. I'll fix it—
But her boss interrupts: *Before you do that,*
can you check why ads aren't playing on cynopox diagnoses?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ian Li (he/him) is a Chinese-Canadian economist, developer, writer, and poet, who started writing in late 2023 after a lifetime of believing he could never be creative. Find his work featured in *Nightmare Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *Year's Best Canadian Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and the Toronto subway system, among other venues. He is also a poetry editor at *Orion's Belt*. Learn more at ian-li.com.

INFORMED CONSENT IS OUR HIGHEST PRIORITY

by R.L. Cohen

A single smudge mars shined shoes.
The doctor walks in, datapad in hand.
Each of these experiments has a beneficial goal.
My teeth clamp down into molded plastic.

The doctor walks in, datapad in hand.
Nothing is done without Informed Consent.
My teeth clamp down into molded plastic.
Electrodes measure the pulse within my skin.

Nothing is done without Informed Consent.
There are no windows. I cannot see the sky.
Electrodes measure the pulse within my skin.
We believe in human-assisted surgery.

There are no windows. I cannot see the sky.
My hand is quivering and I cannot quiet it.
We believe in human-assisted surgery.
My body's reflection distorted by glowing panels.

My hand is quivering and I cannot quiet it.
Each of these experiments has a beneficial goal.
My body's reflection distorted in glowing panels.
A single smudge mars shined shoes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

R.L. Cohen is an Alaska-grown writer and professional librarian. Her work is informed by a childhood spent on the deck of a commercial fishing boat and the depths of the library. When not writing, she can be found taking long walks and doodling in notebooks. Her work has previously appeared in *Eye to the Telescope*.

FLESHMECHS OF THE CURRENT AGE

by Andrew Kozma

Skin upon skin upon skin upon skin until callous
is all we are. This is the horror sci-fi movie

I was promised fruiting beneath our flesh
an array of bombs and poisons, all eager

to embrace their next target. Is it you or me?
We lay away fear like we're canning for winter

in hopes fear will save us. Instead, it's our ammunition
that will save us. This is tattooed under our eyelids

so we will never forget who to hate. Mirrors
and smoke are what we choke on, these bodies

we've been gifted, outsize and awkward. Oh my god
isn't here today and has no forwarding address.

We are our gods. Burn your offerings and pray
we aren't the offerings, that we have a future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Kozma's poems appear in *Strange Horizons*, *The Deadlands*, and *Rogue Agent*, while his fiction appears in *Apex*, *ergot.*, and *Seize the Press*. His first book of poems, *City of Regret*, won the Zone 3 Press First Book Award, and his second book, *Orphanotrophia*, was published in 2021 by Cobalt Press. You can find him on Bluesky @andrewkozma.net and visit his website at andrewkozma.net.

HAPPY SNACKS

by Jen Cornick

The fiery-orange habanero corn chip was so saturated, its top sloughed away as Prue pulled it out of her patient's bedsore. The girl's hip was a seeping well of sepsis and snack food. Prue had to force angled tweezers under the compressed layers of spice, corn chip, and cottage-cheese clumps of caseous necrotic flesh. She was reminded of digging through the soggy remains of a cheap nacho platter. The friable flesh stuck and stretched as Prue pulled another sodden too-fluorescent-to-be-natural tangerine scab from damaged skin.

"How'd you end up with this anyway?" She said it more to cover the sucking sounds of infected flesh but discovered she wanted the answer. Prue tapped the tweezers into a metal kidney bowl and then wiped them on a gauze pad before digging back into the wound.

"Mental health days," the girl said with a shrug. She was slight, barely enough weight on her bones to cause pressure ulcers. "You know, taking a couple days, calling in sick and trying to care for yourself?"

"This was more than a couple of days." Prue packed the last of the gauze into the girl's suppurating flesh. The patient room was overused, a little rundown, and poorly stocked—essentials running low because staff were overrun. Aggi would show up soon with the new tray and more gauze.

"Well, yeah, the world is shit. My boyfriend was with his other girlfriend, my job is crap, and I have no money. That all needs more than a few days to recover from." The girl winced and sucked in a breath through her teeth. Her fingers clenched the thin hospital pillow tight. "Shouldn't a doctor be doing this?"

"They used to." Prue nudged aside another clot of fat-coagulated spice powder. "But there have been so many bedsore cases lately they can't keep up. Now nurses do it." She didn't say it was cheaper and that the hospital saved more money this way. She maneuvered the tweezers under yet another layer of sopping corn chips. There was a sucking sticky slick sound, and then the sweet, gamey tang of rotting flesh seeped out around the edges of

its seal, along with a thick off-white ooze. It wasn't the worst bedsore she'd seen, but it certainly wasn't pleasant.

"Is that fiery habanero? Looks like the right color," Aggi said as he came into the room. "Where do you get those? They haven't been made in over a decade." The scalpels rattled, metal on metal, as he put the new debridement tray she needed on the cart. He opened boxes of gauze and displayed them at her side like impulse buys in the grocery store check-out line.

"New snack shop on Front Street—Happy Snax." The girl's teeth were clenched, with her shoulders pulled into her chest, nearly folding herself in half.

"Almost there, okay?" Prue leaned forward a little, attempting to catch the girl's eye. She held her tweezers tight and aloft. Tangled skin, scabs, and corn flopped over the top.

The patient nodded. Prue settled back on her heels and leaned down again over the girl's hip. She pulled up what she hoped was the final layer of spicy chip rot within the wound; she slipped the tweezers under and folded the corners inwards. When she pulled them out, tendrils clung to the soggy snack. Prue's eyebrows came together, wrinkles deepening as she frowned.

She stared at this new development. The tendrils were foam-pink and crystalline white. Thinner than sinew. Thicker than nerves. Curiously familiar. But in the wrong place.

Her head tilted as she pulled a few filaments farther out, hooking them over the arm of the tweezers. They came from deep within the flesh, deeper than the chip. The girl's leg twitched, a single jerk, before Prue laid them back in the curdled wound.

The strands moved, like a Ford interlocking suture being pulled flat over the open flaps of a surgical incision, disappearing back into the necrotic flesh of the bedsore. Prue flinched backwards with a gasp.

"Whoa, I didn't know humans could do that." Aggi pointed at where the thin layer of corn chip resettled, fitting itself into the contours of the wound, sealing whatever those filaments were back inside.

"They can't." She shook off the shock. There was no way that happened. From the debridement tray, she grabbed small, sharp scissors, the ones used for trimming away the singed edges of burnt skin.

"What can't humans do?" There was more than an edge of panic in the girl's voice as she shifted, struggling to twist and look at what Prue was doing. "Why'd he say it like that?" The girl pulled her leg up and away from Prue, curling into a ball, her elbow so close to slipping into the sore.

"Calm down a second." Prue's hand hovered above the girl's shoulder. Her blue nitrile glove was smeared with fluorescent orange spice paste, flecks of corn chip, and spumescent skin. "Okay, just breathe for me. Big

breath in and then let it out.” She nodded as she said it, in case the girl was watching.

The girl squeezed her eyes tight and pulled in a shuddering breath after a few seconds. “You’re going to be fine.” She tapped the girl’s calf with her clean-gloved hand.

The girl breathed out. Her lips curved up in a smile as she stretched out her legs. The movement was not quite fluid. Not the way that Prue would expect. The girl’s leg twitched again as she straightened on the bed. The smile was freaky. Really fucking freaky. But Prue wasn’t about to question it now. She bent to the bed sore again and snipped around the edges of the chip debris, a careful curling cut until she could see those filaments again.

“Why fiery habanero?”

“I used to eat them with my mom. On nights when it was just us, we’d do midnight margaritas and movies. We usually watched *Practical Magic*, because that was her favorite. They remind me of her. So, I bought them. So many of them.” Her sigh was content as she nuzzled into the thin pillow, like a child settling into happy exhaustion and the sleep that would follow.

“What happened to her?” Prue glanced up at the girl’s face, tweezers hovering.

“Car accident.” She cuddled the pillow on the stretcher close.

Prue did not get paid enough to deal with whatever was going on in this girl’s head. The mental health crisis causing young people to get these bedsores was bad enough, but this went further. Like she’d managed to transcend the reality of her pain and infection.

Prue shook her head and peeled up the side of a chip. There were those filaments again—foam-pink and crystalline white. As fine as floss. Embedded deep within the healthy flesh of her muscle, like they’d been sewn in. Or punched through.

The girl sighed and her leg twitched as Prue brushed her finger along them. Strange. Again, a sense of familiarity washed through her. She’d seen this before. The summer right after high school, when she’d worked at the mushroom farm to pay for her personal support worker certification: mycelium.

* * *

Prue shivered as she walked through the staff parking lot to her car. The night had been long and terrifying, like so many nights in the emergency room. Birth, death, and every strange, fucked-sideways aspect of the human condition in between. The girl with the mycelium in her muscle, while bizarre, was the least of their problems. Tests were ordered, samples taken,

necrotic flesh debrided, and the wound packed. They sent the girl on her way in the early hours of the morning.

Prue got in her car and leaned forward, pressing her forehead into the January-cold steering wheel. So cold it gave her brain freeze. That was good. The pain would keep her focused and awake enough to make it home. At this point, she wouldn't mind a few days to herself. Maybe she would have the chance to see her boyfriend, Dean. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen him for more than a few minutes. Or had taken a day off for that matter. Everything cost too much to take time off, and every little bit of solace was a subscription service. She screamed and slammed the heel of her hand into the engine start.

She left the parking lot just wanting something, anything, to make herself feel better. To make life bearable. For just a single second. Like that girl from last night. Her favorite snack and the movie she liked best as a child. She wouldn't take long to get home. Not at this time of day. There was time for a detour. To see what all the Happy Snax fuss was about.

Prue took the turn for Front Street, and there it was. The shop looked like a blast from her past. It felt as if it had always been there.

The inside felt immediately familiar as she took a basket, as if it was the corner store she went to as a kid. Snacks were packed tight on the shelves in all the best colors: bright teals, electric pinks, happy yellows. All the snacks she remembered from commercials between her most beloved shows. Flaky cream and raspberry-filled pastries, teddy-shaped graham cracker cookies, bagel pizza bites, crackers with orange cheese spread. Chip flavors she hadn't seen in years, decades even. Sodas that didn't exist anymore. Ones that reminded her of sleepovers and sick calls and snow days.

The aisles should have been claustrophobic, but instead was a comfortable closeness, like a hug. She walked through them, running her fingers over remembered packaging. There was nothing she needed here, but she wanted it all. She picked up a bag of cheddar-flavored cracker chips, and they broke free from the shelf with a familiar chitinous snap. Everything she picked came away with a satisfying pop. It reminded her of her first job, that carefree summer when she still lived with her parents and she worked at the farm. Before responsibility and debt and too many breakups.

She brought the basket to the self-checkout and was soon back in her car. A little smile, the first one in days, started as she pulled away from the curb.

Prue squeezed her eyes tight against the frustrating jangle of musical notes. Not her alarm. She didn't have to get up yet. Her arm was heavy as she patted for her cell phone on the bedside table. She tapped the screen, hoping she either answered or hung up on whoever was calling. She let the phone rest on her face and waited for a voice.

"Doesn't your shift start soon?" Dean's voice wasn't shrill with panic, like it used to be when she was late for work.

"Starts at midnight." She gripped the phone as she rolled over with a frustrated sigh. She wanted to be happy that he called, but she could have had more sleep. That would have been nice. Helpful even, if tonight was going to be anything like last night.

There was another part of her, warmer and softer, that wanted to make the best of this unforeseen call. "There's time if you want to come over." She wanted to say more—that she wanted to see him. That she wanted to be held. That talking to someone—anyone—after last night would be so good. But she didn't.

The pause between them lengthened, and she rushed to fill it before it became awkward. "You don't have to if you don't have time today. We could get coffee later. I'm off starting tomorrow."

His sigh was heavy. She sat up in bed and pulled her knees into her chest.

"Look, I can't keep doing this. You're always working. I can't wait around for you to call and have time."

"What?" She understood but didn't know what else to say. She had seen this coming. It was part of that life she'd been promised—financial security, a loving and supportive partner, stability—but would never have.

"I'm sorry. Look, you'll find someone else. Someone who is more flexible in their schedule." He disconnected. There was only filtered digital silence.

It made her miss dial tones, especially the one from her parents' landline in the nineties. That continuous, harmonic chord gifting a few seconds to process what happened. She hugged her knees, her arms wrapped firmly around herself—a cold and lonely comfort in her dark room. She couldn't move for several minutes and then when she did it was an aching and slow process, she crawled from the center of her bed to the edge. Too late to call in sick, and working would be a better distraction than anything else.

She started getting ready for the night shift, a continual push of limbs too tired and too heavy to move. Of continually blinking at things to bring them into focus. Of forcing her thoughts to flow faster, to accommodate the speed of the shift later. That wasn't easy on a good day, or even her best day. All she wanted to do now was lie in bed and not move.

The kitchen light flickered on when she hit the switch, an old bulb and a poor electrical connection. She sighed seeing the bag on the counter. She

grabbed the box of teddy bear cookies and slid her fingers under the glued cardboard flaps. Every cookie was the same size as her thumb, from knuckle to nail. She took one out and held it, tempted to play with it. Like she did during school lunch hour, making it walk across her desk.

She popped it into her mouth before giving into the childish impulse. Out of reflex, Prue read the label. Lower calories than she was expecting, but it made sense, given how the snacks never filled her up when younger. The makers followed the new laws for ingredients: it was a list of Latinate chemical names, including the one for *agaricus bisporus*, which seemed familiar—words from too long ago—but the rest she didn't recognize. She shrugged, not caring even a little if they tasted like she remembered.

They did. They were pure satisfaction, from the sugar-wax glaze to the taste, the way they shattered between her teeth and turned to mush just before she swallowed.

Prue's shoulders relaxed as she rummaged in the box for another. A differently shaped one than before. Another crunch. Another cookie. Another. And another. The minutes passed with half the box disappearing. As she looked down at the remainder, she could pinpoint the moment that the serotonin and dopamine burst across her brain. Her eyes widened. It felt like little electric bolts. Immediately, the tension in her limbs loosened, the familiar ache of her grief lessening.

The whole box was gone when her alarm finally went off. It wasn't that she couldn't get ready before going, but rather, surprising how so much time had passed while leaning against the counter eating. But she felt good. Really good. Almost like nothing had happened at all. She needed more. So much more.

* * *

Prue's shift that night was the same as normal, but none of it could affect those new tendrils of happiness that had unfurled in her brain.

She barely noticed the motorcyclist who'd gone headfirst over his handlebars and presented with double compound fractures in his arms. He screamed more than he breathed, both from the pain and the sight of his jagged, snapped bones. Prue also couldn't fathom why another patient might be in pain, even after seeing the scan of stones churning in a woman's kidneys. Then there was the man who'd not removed his socks in two years. A sports superstition. Gangrene had set in some time ago. An X-ray showed that the bone had been eaten away, and what little was left of his feet melted through Prue's gloved hands and splattered on the floor.

Those waves of positive neurotransmitters, the ones governing happiness, crashing through her like filaments lighting up every nerve, stopped in that second. Everything hit her in a torrent. The salt of her tears stung as she cried, holding the gangrenous, bony stumps of the man's legs.

He leaned forward and patted her hair. "Don't worry, dear, I'll be fine."

He was in extreme shock, but Prue almost leaned into that touch. That single second of contact. Instead, she ran from the room, her hands trembling as she ripped off her gloves. She pressed her hands into her mouth and her back into a wall, hoping to keep jagged sobs from escaping.

"Hey, are you okay?" Aggi's hand was heavy and far too hot on her shoulder. She jumped and her eyes popped wide. Her sob and fright mingled to a mewling whimper in the back of her throat. He crouched and looked into her eyes. "What do you need?"

The answer coursed along the remnants of those snapped nerves: Happy Snax. Those memories of better days. But, she reasoned, cookies hadn't filled the loneliness inside her. Neither had being at work, but at least it was practical. She inhaled a shaking breath and nodded. "I need to finish the shift."

With a silent nod, they both went back to work.

Prue's days blurred together as she took every shift, every hour of work that came her way. She should have had three days off. But the unit was too short-handed to refuse her. She was approaching burnout; she could feel it, the numbness creeping through her thoughts, the way she did everything by rote, how she didn't notice patients anymore.

Work was punctuated by the momentary bliss of eating one of her snacks. Currently, it was a package of cookies she dipped in confetti icing while standing at the staff room windows. She smiled with every scoop of sprinkles and sugar. She felt every pulse of serotonin web through her brain. Every sharp spike of dopamine with each saccharine crunch. She didn't care how much money she spent on Snax or how they had short-circuited her mind.

Every bite was a new memory—a good grade on a test, the perfect birthday present from a friend, a snow day cuddled in blankets watching reruns of gameshows for hours. She wanted to stay there, in those memories. It was so much easier.

Aggi bumped his shoulder against hers. "Another trip down the memory hole?" He nearly made her jump. She hadn't noticed him come in, hadn't seen his reflection in the glass.

"What is that they say? Healing my inner child with my adult money." She held up an icing-covered cookie, an offering.

He shook his head. "There is something about it having mushrooms in it that puts me off."

Prue shrugged, a lot of things had hidden mushrooms in them—dried mushroom powder in sauces and soups. It was part of antimicrobial food packaging. There was even wound dressing that had chitin in it inside the supply room.

"More for me."

"Patient in room seven for you, also." He backed out of the room in a rush, his sneakers squeaking on the old linoleum floor.

"Be right there." She licked around her teeth, unwilling to let even a molecule dissolve without her knowing it. But the texture inside her cheek was wrong. She grazed it with her tongue. No longer a smooth mucosal membrane, it was a floss mesh. Checking again, this texture was more structured than the lace patches of oral lichen planus.

A tongue depressor and dental mirror were easy enough to find in the supply room. A bathroom with a lock was not far, the next door along the corridor. Under the fluorescent light of the public bathroom, she opened her mouth and saw it. Thinner than sinew and thicker than nerves. Foamy pink and crystalline white. Both tools clattered into the porcelain sink. She'd been wearing a mask, a face shield, and gloves when she'd treated that girl. There should have been no chance of contamination. She'd had no cuts or scrapes for it to be a subcutaneous spread. Leaning forward, she looked again, her mouth so wide the corners of her lips stretched painfully. It was hard to breathe as she held her tongue away.

Prue washed her hands, a reflexive action. Scrubbing hard with the inadequate soap, she stared at the insides of her cheeks. The interlocking strands hadn't disappeared. She ran the edge of her fingernail through the floss-like fibrils, severing them through the middle, and watched them retract up past her gums. There was a new weight in her skin. One that was unfamiliar. Then, her already open mouth sagged wider. The entire right side of her face fell, her jawbone pulling her skin down. Her lower eyelid distended, revealing the far-too-delicate flesh inside her ocular cavity.

She wanted to swear. Tried to shout out a reflexive *fuck*. But her lips didn't join anymore. She couldn't make her face work. Her moan turned into a scream. It was all she could do as her heart beat faster and air rushed out through her lopsided, gaping mouth.

She shoved her jaw up with her hand, holding it there as she scrambled to unlock the door. But she couldn't. Her weight wasn't right. The balance of her movements and muscles was off. She screamed through her force-clenched teeth.

Prue felt it then. The soft slither of those tendrils in her cheek. The punch of new holes in tender flesh. She should have felt this when it was first happening, the initial time she ate Happy Snax. She gripped the sides of her face with both hands and fell to her knees. The pain left her gasping, unable to pull enough air in through the orthodontically perfected spaces in her teeth to scream again.

It was like being sewn up with no anesthetic—the puncture and pull of those curved tendrils as sharp as suture needles. Then, the weight of her jaw lifted from her skin. Her limp flesh dragged up and fastened in place. Falling forward, she hunched over her thighs, and her eyes squeezed shut as she moaned through the burn and sting.

Then the pain was gone. Didn't even linger. All those little threads were back in place as she ran her tongue along her cheek. She didn't want to feel that sagging relief as she rolled into a spinal twist, arms spread wide, her chest lifting and falling as she panted on the washroom floor. She moved her mouth open and then closed, open then closed, to see if she could do it.

The door banged against the lock, jangling its hinges. It startled her from the floor. Air caught in her chest as she scrambled up. She wrenched on the taps and scrubbed her hands again. The lock released easily this time, and she stood in the corridor facing Aggi.

"I thought it was a patient." He stepped to the side to see around her. "You okay?"

"Fine, yeah, on my way." She rubbed along her jaw. There was a fine tremor in her hand. Panic and relief all at once, and her body didn't know how to process either chemical than with shakes.

The air was heavy with the smell of rot as she opened the patient's door—sweet, tangy, and fungal. Prue's inhale was shallow as she looked at the girl from so many nights ago. She sat on the bed, sculpture-perfect, decorated in garlands of petals and pearls. The girl didn't move; didn't even raise her eyelids to look at Prue. She just sat there, delicate furling leaves in both her palms.

Prue took a step closer.

A pearl, round and luminous, emerged from the girl's collarbone. A whole chain started, adding another rope to the necklace she already wore. Each opaline pustule rose like mushrooms growing in the damp-dark. Prue flinched, stumbling back a step into the doorframe. A tight swirl of petals in the girl's palms bloomed with a wet groan that seemed to echo in the small room.

Prue fumbled through the boxes on the wall, wrenching on a mask and gloves as her hands shook. "Fuck me sideways with a saw."

We can feel you.

That voice was too harmonic, too multitudinous. Prue covered her ears.

The tendrils were in her head, vibrating her cheeks, oscillating as if someone was playing them like a harp. They moved, deep within her, filaments slithering along bone, sliding next to sinew, tangling with her tendons, and rooting in her flesh. Paralytic pain. All at once, so much worse than before. But the mycelium didn't let her fall, didn't let her move.

The girl's head turned, her flesh crepitating as she moved. She smiled that little dazed smile, the one that caught Prue off guard before. She faced Prue and Prue knew she could see.

She felt it in those pale threads veining all the way through her. She watched as the girl's flesh curled away from her skull, the bone making way, as another mushroom fruited there, like a large flower pinned in her hair. The peach baroque swirls of a schizophyllum commune. Delicate, like petals in a painting.

There was a picture in Prue's mind, flashes of sleepovers and sick calls and snow days. Of aqua and pink packages. Of sodas that didn't exist anymore. Of playing with her teddy bear cookies, making them dance across her desk. Of when times were easier. *Better*. The girl's smile creaked upwards—uneven and jagged at the corners.

Prue tried to shake her head. To assert her own will. But she couldn't. The most she could do was breathe, and even then, that was becoming less of her own volition the longer she looked at the girl.

She breathed in deep, as deep as she could through her nose, pulled her cheeks between her teeth, and pressed hard enough that she should have drawn blood. She grated her flesh—the filaments—between her molars. The gossamer ruptured and recoiled in her mouth. The copper wash of blood was bitter as she bit down harder. The weight of her jaw too heavy, the pull of it snapped more of the threads. She groaned as she pushed her hands up against her jaw, continuing to mash those strands of mycelium up against the serrated edges of her teeth. Air rushed in through the new gushing gaps in her skin.

There was a disconnect within her, the voices once synced in harmony now screaming out of rhythm. The multitudes still there but mutilated. Severed. Separated. Freed.

She stumbled forward, her hold on her jawbone slipping as blood oozed between her fingers. Her heart beat fast, faster than she should survive. Her breath was quick and shallow. She was shaking but didn't know if it was from fear, shock, or strain. She screamed, the sound muffled by her hands and teeth.

It's better, here, in our memories.

The warmth of dopamine and serotonin washed through Prue's system, bursting in her cheeks and taking away the pain.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jen Cornick is a writer, journalist, and blogger. Her work has appeared in *The Selkie*, *The Last Girls Club*, *Obscura: New Uncanny Tales*, *They Whispered*, *BFS Horizons*, *Marrow Magazine*, and is forthcoming in *Strip Mall Magazine*.

SINGLE PARENTING IN THE HOUSE OF REFINED APPETITES

by Chris Clemens

Your rent's cheap
for a reason.

If the wine cellar offers
to watch little Emma
so you can have a few
precious minutes to yourself,
always say no thanks.

If you slip up
and she's ingested
by the breathing walls
and you're racing from
great room to conservatory,
screaming her name, flicking
lights to catch glimpses
of her weeping silhouette,
try bargaining instead:

Emma's flavor for yours,
plus seasoning.

Coat yourself in garlic butter.
Salt liberally. Slather with
eye-watering desperation. As

you descend tooth-
lined
steps
into the dark, dripping basement,
pray the house
can't handle
dad's suicide
hot sauce recipe.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Clemens teaches and writes in Toronto, where he has defeated 8.5 raccoons (with help from his wonderful family). Nominated for Best Small Fictions and Best of the Net, his stories and poems appear in *Best Microfiction 2026*, *Baffling Magazine*, *Night Shades*, *Strange Horizons*, *Year's Best Canadian Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and elsewhere. Find more at linktr.ee/clemenstation.

GAMORELIN

by Amy Sussman

Mike met Emma for the first time in her office, which was huge and sterile. Emma was the one to go to for gear. This was what Carlos had told him, anyway. The truth was that Mike hated Carlos—for being tall, namely, but also for his easy confidence in the face of inferior accomplishments. Emma was tall too. She wore a lab coat that swished around her thick ankles.

She explained to Mike the potential side effects. Paranoia, rage, melancholy, decline in cognitive function. Then: “If you’re not careful, you may experience shrinkage of the testicles, severe erectile dysfunction, and gynecomastia, among other changes to your sexual characteristics. I know a thing or two about that, and trust me—it can be harrowing if you don’t want it,” she said and laughed mirthlessly.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m a trans woman. I’m also injecting exogenous hormones into myself. It’s how I got into this practice. It’s an ethical thing. People should be able to express themselves, change their body however they want, without having to go through some hospital that ignores its patients in favor of right-wing donors. Even bodybuilders like yourself. It’s not like I need the money—I’m a surgeon—so you’re getting all of this at a hefty discount. It’s a side hustle—and quite an illegal one at that. So don’t spread this around.”

“All of this” was a regimen of Gamorelin, a popular new anabolic steroid that purported to achieve the same results as Trenbolone et al. without the devastating consequences one might associate with them.

Emma was altogether quite beautiful, he supposed, and in many ways his “type.” It made him nervous, a little, to know she was trans. Not that he was transphobic. It was just something extra, that added a little thrill.

Emma plunged the needle into his quadricep.

* * *

The gym, for Mike, was always and had always been an exercise in masochism. He could admit this to himself, in a sort of wordless way. As an

angsty teen, the masochism manifested in the form of cutting. A razor blade in the bathroom, often along his upper thigh, where boxers could cover the scars. Occasionally he'd bring in a lemon slice to squeeze over the gaping wound, which he always thought looked yonic. He remembered telling a school counselor that he wanted to "carve a cunt into himself."

In college, the masochism became an excess of pre-made Negronis, which were the least palatable vessel for alcohol. He laid out rows of them in plastic cups every weekend and drank as quickly as he could between gags. He wasn't after the euphoric buzz, but the sickening comedown the morning after. He lay in bed, nauseous but refusing to puke, agonizing over every mistake he had ever made.

Having matured sufficiently, now it was the gym. He lifted without any concessions to vanity; the only goal was devotion. Three reps of ten. Ten milligrams of creatine. The terrible gasp of failure, over and over. Protein oatmeal in the morning, chicken breast with broccoli for lunch, and New York Strips with sweet potatoes for dinner. Eight full hours of dreamless sleep to promote testosterone levels.

* * *

Gamorelin was known at this time to be a typical anabolic, widely regarded as "safer" than its alternatives. An American pharmaceutical company following advancements from an Israeli brand, synthesized the compound and tested it on little capuchin monkeys at a lab in Virginia until its efficacy was clinically proven. And indeed it was efficacious: the capuchins bulked up to such a level that they began scaring the researchers—the hypertrophied monkeys became strong enough to bend the bars of their enclosures—who quit the experiment as soon as they could.

Photos of the 'roided-out primates could be found in sleazy corners of bodybuilding forums. Mike had seen plenty. The striation and definition were such that they looked more like pygmy gorillas than miniature monkeys. Mike was after this simian aspect, this muscle-bound brainlessness. He wanted the bellies of his muscles to bulge, like little pins all throughout his body, squirming wormlike at all times.

* * *

He began to feel kaiju-esque, swinging the weight back and forth with rageful abandon. He added inches at a time to his triceps and deltoids, his quads and glutes. The Bosnian immigrant Sveta Kurjak, whom Mike had

always ogled to induce motivation in himself, remarked on the gains he'd made, at which he felt heat rising to his cheeks.

At his next appointment with Emma, as he lay upon her doctor's table, she brushed her forearm against his quadricep, whereupon Mike developed a semi-erection. Seeing this, Emma giggled a little and plunged the syringe into him.

Here was rage, like she'd pillaged his village and stolen his wife and sold his children into slavery. He felt like he might hit her, but he bit his lip and it subsided, or at least moved to someplace in his body that no longer had access to the outside world.

He drove to the gym. He hit legs. He did four plates on a Smith machine squat. One more rep would be a personal record. As he pushed through the pain associated with achieving his goals, he felt like he was becoming a ghost, disintegrating into a million little particles. And as he lay panting beside the rack—he had always seen these machines as torture racks—it felt for a second like life might be okay. Then he got home and all the wrath had returned, and he spent the night before his laptop screen as usual.

* * *

The most pronounced effect of Gamorelin was on his libido. The warnings had proven accurate: it was akin to a second puberty. Every woman and most men on the street became in his mind mannequins for pornographic fantasies. He had an erection perhaps forty percent of the time. His consumption of actual pornography, too, skyrocketed. He sorted by category: lesbian and BDSM, at first, then more "esoteric" fetishes. Finally, he landed on various genderbending fantasies: he watched videos of women (sometimes men, though less often) telling him all the ways he would be better off in a skirt, better off shaved, better off letting hundreds of men ejaculate onto his face, into his rectum.

Pornography, in this way, became a nighttime meditation. Into this he channeled his hate and rage, all the atavistic feuding to which his hormonal profile was now so conducive.

If Mike was honest with himself, really honest, the way he only was at around 1 or 2 AM on a Sunday night after he had taken his allotted zero-sugar marijuana edible, he might admit that Carlos was the same as Sveta Kurjak. He'd had male friends before, like Jack Mesquite, with whom he had used to load frog carcasses with firecrackers in the fifth grade. Carlos was not like that.

He often thought about Carlos when he masturbated, even after he started seeing Emma. Carlos was five foot nine, just tall enough to be impressive to him. Mike imagined himself in the receptive position, being weakened and finally overpowered. He would be transformed. He would be like putty, soft and slick.

* * *

The next time Mike saw Emma she said, "Listen, Mike, I've enjoyed our little sessions. I've admired your progress. I like the way you think about things—I like your dedication. I was wondering . . . would you wanna get dinner tonight? My treat. I know a great cocktail place uptown."

He started to sweat profusely. "Oh, um," he said.

"Oh, shit, sorry, never mind. I don't know what I was thinking."

"No, no," he said. "I'd love to go. I've just—never been asked out before."

"Really? Oh, that's wonderful. I'll pick you up around eight?"

Mike nodded sheepishly. She injected the usual Gamorelin.

Then Mike went to the gym and hit a ruthless albeit somewhat inefficient pull day, went home, took a shower, shaved his face and pubic hair—he'd become thirty percent more hirsute since the regime had begun—and masturbated into a tissue. Then he sat before his apartment's front door, sweating enough to nullify the shower.

When he got the knock, Emma appeared in a tight red dress with matching lipstick. They walked wordlessly to Emma's fancy SUV, and she drove them with a kind of ferocity and verve that frightened Mike at first, to the cocktail place she'd mentioned. Mike drank only water while Emma made it through three gin doubles. The conversation began to flow. They told each other jokes. Then Emma was altogether too drunk to drive home, so they took a cab.

Other than that first time, though, she always drove, always paid for dinner when they went out. She bought Mike many filet mignons, which fit nicely within his macronutrient goals. Mike, who hadn't had many girlfriends, was baffled by the whole ordeal.

"Why do you like me?" he asked Emma. It was their fourth date at a fine dining place after the waiter had poured them a glass each from a bottle of Argentinian Malbec. "I mean really. Not to look a gift horse in the mouth, but I can't imagine it."

"I like the shape of you. You just keep growing. I've always been into that. And you're nice. I've been with bodybuilding types, and often they're arrogant, full of themselves. Which can be fun at first, but it fades so quickly. I'm a strong person, but I can't handle those brick-wall men.

You're not like that. You have weakness. In a word, you're passive." She sipped her wine, and after a moment of silence they went back to their jokes and innuendoes.

As the dates went on, Mike decided he wasn't offended, being thought of in this way. In previous relationships he had felt paralyzed when asked to make a decision. Emma knew who she was and what she liked. She always had a plan. She wielded her scalpels and syringes with a deft confidence that brought a stirring to Mike's groin.

* * *

Sex had always frightened Mike. There was his fateful "first time," at twenty years old, where he'd squirmed and wriggled his way through it. With Emma, it was a similar story. He shivered and whimpered when their clothes came off. His penis proved uncooperative; the process of intimacy was laborious and altogether fairly unpleasurable. Emma seemed to shudder in a happy but unsatisfied sort of way. They slept together two or three times a week thereafter. It felt like going through the motions.

* * *

Soon there were major and unexpected side effects. Not the listed ones, either. Not the gynecomastia and impotence, at least not outside their tolerable ranges. Here were strange scaly spots up and down the sides of his torso. Big, non-muscular bubbles like purulent frogs' cheeks in odd locations. He called up Emma and explained his scenario. She suggested he come over immediately.

He showed up, appearing a little "medieval," she said. "But this doesn't seem like a big deal," she went on, and slid her fingertip across one of the patches of affected skin.

"Not a big deal?" Mike whined. "Look at me. I'm gross."

"You're on enough gear to mog Adonis, and you look like it. Minus these little splotches."

He paced back and forth for a few moments. "Where did you get that stuff? This could be some poorly-sourced garbage, synthesized inexpertly in, I don't know, someone's basement."

"Look, Mike, relax—this chemical is pharmaceutical-grade. I have a connection at the lab where they make it. I've literally overseen its production."

"You could be lying." He got up close to her. He grimaced in such a way as to appear apeline, though the truth was that, even if he succeeded, his expression was far more bonobo than gorilla.

"Lying?" Emma averted her gaze. "You think I would lie to you? You think I'd lie to you about what I'm putting into your body? I can't believe you could even entertain that idea, Mike. I take pride in my commitment to medical ethics. I especially wouldn't breach them when I'm helping someone . . . someone I *love*."

Mike saw petite tears sliding down her cheeks. This was the first time he'd seen her cry. It was also the first time she'd professed to loving him. Together these elements constituted Emma's first and only foray into weakness. He didn't know what to make of it. He retreated slightly.

She looked up at him, red-eyed and sniffling.

"You're right. I'm sorry," he said. "And I love you, too."

She smiled exasperatedly. They went to Emma's place and attempted to have sex for twenty-five minutes. Even after fifteen milligrams of tadalafil, Mike decided he was incapable of erection, at which point he enthusiastically, albeit clumsily, gave Emma fellatio. He managed in the end, late into the cloudless night, to make her whine and writhe.

* * *

The changes continued, accelerating in pace and severity. He checked the mirror most mornings to discover that the strange pustules had spread, creating a kind of stony appearance across his triceps, deltoids, and latissimus muscles. They were especially bad around his breasts. The gynecomastia was now outside its tolerable range. It got to such a point that he needed to wear a binding shirt that pressed the fatty pads above his pectorals back against his bulging ribcage. And when he took it off, his breasts dangled obscenely.

He stared at his silhouette in the overbright morning light reflected in the bathroom mirror. It was an hourglass now. His genitals had shrunk. His quadriceps concealed them. He wondered why this didn't distress him more. He told Emma about it, and she assured him, of course, that this was within a certain "margin of error" in terms of the drug's efficacy. Perhaps in the winter he could slow down the dosage. He worried that by then he would be monstrous.

If he ever wanted to return to normal, whatever that meant, he would need surgeries: scalpels making slits through which all this slimy tissue would flow in a chunky slurry. Emma, meanwhile, saw no problems. She swore that he was only getting more attractive.

"I'm afraid of getting surgery," he said. "I'm afraid of general anesthesia. Of taking a nap I can't wake up from. Just being . . . *under* . . . forever."

"It's not so bad," Emma said, massaging his upper arm. "I've had plenty of surgeries at this point, and I've been better off because of them. I don't regret anything. If anything, it's empowering to change yourself. You could get surgery easily—I'd help."

"You'd perform the surgery on me?"

"What? Jesus, no, don't be crazy. But I know people."

Mike nodded. He didn't think he would stop the Gamorelin, though he couldn't place the source of his reluctance. Something was comfortable in it. The regular injection from Emma. In his most secret fantasies he had a huge, terrible longing for Emma to operate on him: to be on the table before her, open at last.

* * *

In the morning, after an hour of cuddling and a couple abortive attempts at sex, Emma said it was time to check his levels. She drove them to her office and swabbed the crook of his elbow with an alcohol pad. During this he reflected on the fact that it was the opposite of a bicep curl.

Emma jabbed him and they watched the vial grow redder. "If only your cock could fill with blood this quick," she said slyly. Mike felt that he ought to be offended, that he ought to experience the icy pain of insecurity. It would hardly be an alien thought, after all. Instead, he simply blushed. Emma capped the vial and went to test it in the lab.

Mike stared blankly at the office door. After a few moments there was a rough sort of knock and then Carlos stepped through. "Oh, hey, Mike," he said. "Is Emma here?"

"She just stepped out. I'm in the middle of an appointment with her."

"I'll come back later . . . She's a little kooky, isn't she?"

"Kooky how?"

"She's always pushing strange chemicals on me. I'm sure she's done it to you, too. I'm not gonna let this lady experiment on me, y'know? Just give me the Tren, bitch!" Carlos paused and then smiled at him. "You've slept with her, haven't you?"

"What? Why, how—"

"It's okay. I have, too. I don't think it's gay or whatever, but then again, it's not the same as pussy, right?" He chuckled jovially.

Mike considered for a moment whether he'd be able to beat Carlos to death with his bare hands. He imagined the spatter of blood and brain staining the austere white floor. He imagined the pinkish mixture of cerebral

fluid and so much viscera into which Emma would step. She would look up at a dripping Mike and grin broadly and call him good. But in the end he only said, "Good to see you, Carlos."

"Yeah, you're looking great these days, Mike. Huge!" And he went away.

When Emma returned, she explained that the number of nanograms of testosterone per deciliter in his blood was many, many times the amount a typical male might have. "That's typical of anabolics. But what's a little stranger," she continued, "is that your estrogen level is also substantially above the average level for women. At this point, it's like you're *beyond* biological sex. You have an endocrine system that, conceivably, no one on the history of this planet has. You have hormones from the future, Mike."

* * *

By November, he had moved into Emma's townhouse. He rarely left. Emma had an extensive gym in her basement, and she didn't charge him rent. He worked out and cooked and cleaned. His body had ballooned to 350 pounds. His boobs grew droopier daily. The Gamorelin-induced pustules now stretched along his spine like hackles. They caused searing pain whenever he got frustrated.

From his vantage at the window by the sink, fifteen feet above the sidewalk, he watched the small people walking to work. He listened to the news playing on the TV in the living room. A lab break in Virginia, the same lab where they'd tested Gamorelin on capuchins.

During sex, Emma would say things like, "You look fucking *simian*!" between less coherent expressions of pleasure, and indeed, these days they had sex. Somehow, resigning himself to flaccidity had done well to take the edge off of lovemaking.

He put some plates away. He dried a bowl or two. He saw men in suits and children in school uniforms on the street. Then he saw the beginnings of a commotion below. People began to gather around what looked like rottweilers tussling by a fire hydrant. But they weren't rottweilers, Mike realized with a giddy thrill—they were the capuchins from those old bodybuilding forums, the ones in the late stages of Gamorelin treatment, as bumpy and busty as him.

They fought each other and shrieked at each impact of one thickened limb against another. Snow had begun to fall. No one made any attempt to stop the monkeys. Passersby formed a circle as if watching busking dancers. Snowflakes fell against the window, making the scene take on a dreamy blur.

Red started to spatter the whitening concrete. Soon the capuchins were more matted blood than fur, more red than the unhealthy ochre they were

before. One of them fell belly-first to the ground, and the other was on top instantly, slamming its fist into the fallen one's cranium.

Everyone watched with placid contentment. Once shards of skull had scattered into the road, the victor capuchin began to eat the defeated opponent. It ate beyond what seemed feasible, more mass than one could picture fitting in its little stomach. Mike stood there with a plate in his hand, aching alone, until there was nothing but a toy-sized skeleton.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amy Sussman studies English at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Her work has appeared in *OFIC Magazine* and *Chatterbox Literary Magazine*.

STATEN ISLAND STEVE, I SALUTE

by Rob Sienna

for Steve Zane

After the blast, when Manhattan flickered
like a burnt-out jukebox and gulls cried
through skeletons of ferries, I found
a cracked cassette marked *Dream Smashes*.
It hissed. It lived. It bled noise.

Steve's voice came through the static—
arcane, coded, laughing at doom itself.
He spoke that strange street Esperanto
only prophets of the Avenues knew:
half prayer, half sneer, wired
into the subways, the rust, the sweat.

Back before the oceans snapped the bridges,
he ran the scene like a barefoot general—
organizing chaos, shouting
down plastique fakers,
fueling nights where distortion met deliverance.
He had that mad clairvoyant look—
the kind that knew art was just
survival in another key.

Staten Island Steve. Tireless. On fire.
Turning abandoned laundromats into temples
of pure feedback slashing down.
We'd haul amps through the rain
as if saving relics from extinction.
He'd grin and say, "Music's the last
clean currency left, baby—"

spend it before they tax your soul.”

When the power grids failed,
he built a rig from scavenged batteries
and played under the Verrazzano moon,
feeding ghosts and half-starved raccoons
the rhythm of resurrection.

I remember his boots, duct-taped and holy.
His eyes, always scanning horizons
as if reading the next apocalypse
before it dropped. He understood
decay like it was an old lover—
respected it, danced with it,
but never let it take the last word.

Steve wasn't a saint—
he could rage like an oil fire,
laugh at the wrong time,
disappear for months in search of something new.
But when he hit that first chord,
the air itself seemed to change allegiance—
matter remembered how to move once more.

So if the world's gone, and you find
a tape marked *Dream Smashes*,
play it loud. That's Steve out there—
still calling punks to rise,
mocking oblivion
with a power chord and crooked spit.

I salute him—
the earthy, authentic, unkillable
pulse of what was sublime
before and after the end.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rob Sienna is a former scene reporter for *Maximum Rocknroll* and *Flipside*. There have been feature articles about his anti-censorship work in *Spin Magazine*. His poetry has appeared in hundreds of punk zines and journals as well as more mainstream journals, including *Poetry New Zealand*, *Chronogram*, *The Seattle Review*, and *The Pacific Review*. He is based on the West Coast of the US.

I ALWAYS FOLLOW RULE 22:

by Ian Li

All unclaimed property must be delivered
over to the Office of the Watchful.

When I find a discarded coin, I immediately
turn it in. The Officer glares, like he suspects

I'm hiding a second contraband coin. No word
of thanks. That's okay, my duty is my reward.

An Officer yanks a yelping stray pup
from a man's arms, beats them both. The man's own

fault. He knew the consequences hiding what's not his.
Two men with fury-red eyes drag a migrant woman

up the building's concrete steps. The Office accepts
any and all forms of property; it does not discriminate.

Today, I discover an unclaimed box of explosives.
I always follow Rule 22.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ian Li (he/him) is a Chinese-Canadian economist, developer, writer, and poet, who started writing in late 2023 after a lifetime of believing he could never be creative. Find his work featured in *Nightmare Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *Year's Best Canadian Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and the Toronto subway system, among other venues. He is also a poetry editor at *Orion's Belt*. Learn more at ian-li.com.

THE EXPERIENTIAL VOID

by Alex Goldberg

I almost didn't believe the ad when I found it posted amidst the menial jobs on the government portal. None of them paid enough to put food on my table, but this one promised a respectable wage. We hadn't yet solved the scarcity problem; it was enough to make you envy past generations, before we eradicated natural death. An eternity of struggle and hunger barely felt worth it.

The position required a linguist. Our field hadn't been in demand for decades, not since the adoption of the universal tongue. I called my wife over to double-check it, to convince me I was reading correctly.

"It looks real," she said, her voice hopeful as the screen reflected in her hazel green eyes.

She was always so supportive.

"The Bureau of Science," I mumbled, scrolling through the requirements.

Looking for a PhD in linguistics and experience with semiotics and formal systems. I had those.

She gestured toward my hand, leaning her weight on my back as she looked over my shoulder. "Scroll back up to the charter."

The Knowledge Project affirms that all human perception is bounded by accident, prejudice, and illusion. By isolating a subject from all sensory experience, we free the mind to access truth in its purest form. In so doing, we pledge to exhaust every means by which our species may approach the absolute.

I glanced up at her. She shrugged and scrunched her face. "Whatever that means, it pays well. Can't hurt to apply."

The interview process was normal. Pleasant. Three important people in suits asking questions about my qualifications between the harsh angles of sleek, beige walls. I told them I'd been a professor back when my language field still mattered.

One of them leaned forward. A young blonde woman, eyes staring through me. "Understand this won't be a typical translation project," she said. "We don't know if the subject will ever speak."

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Listen and wait. Find a pattern. Translate anything you hear for us."

"Why are we doing this?"

"Look around you. Society hasn't had a major scientific breakthrough in a hundred years. If we're limited by our own perception—"

"We need to move beyond it," I finished for her.

When they offered me the job in the summer of 3085, I took it without considering anything other than my wife, the hunger in our bellies, and our desire to start a family. This was our path out. I couldn't predict where this would lead, but nothing else registered amidst my desperation.

* * *

When the project began, we overlooked the ethics of condemning someone to a lifetime of pure nothingness. I was blinded by the mundane day-to-day tasks of filing, categorizing, and editing reports on the progress, or lack thereof. The government-appointed committee overseeing the project assured me that, granted enough time, the subject would utter statements of such metaphysical profundity that the sun of understanding would rise, exposing truths long buried in shadow. But I was simply happy making a living.

The committee weathered protests and lawsuits levied by activists, saying enlightenment would absolve guilt. But people's memories are short, and the protests have long since faded, muted by our newfound affluence: one day's cause, another day's status quo. At times, I find myself wishing they'd won.

I listened patiently for a century but found no intelligible noises in the subject's isolation. I grew unbearably bored. I can still hear the muted thud of the oak desk as I tapped it with my finger across idle hours, attention only half-tuned to the headset cinched tight around my ears.

Our charter pledged to awaken the mind from dogmatic slumber, but I watched the atrophied figure rot in a vast, barren sphere at the edge of our solar system, face contorting in unnatural ways. Could someone who never knew companionship be lonely? In my more empathetic moments, I was certain they could.

Pleading tones drenched their nonsensical utterances. On a few occasions, I almost released them, even though this would violate my oath. Once, my finger hovered, shaking above the emergency switch that would eject them to Earth—a measure designed to preserve the investment in the face of catastrophe. The glow of the monitor bathed me in blue light as I looked at their pitiful face. The subject's features were barely recognizable as

human, with clumps of hair floating beside them. I imagined their first gulp of real air, no longer fueled by the nano-nutrients of their sphere.

But I didn't dare address their suffering to the committee, unable to bear the thought of endless remediations with human resources and mountains of paperwork. In our world of immortality, an infinite performance review makes the subject's isolation enviable.

So, I tried to justify my pain by doing the most unthinkable thing one can do at work: I made a decision. Because I realized one subject alone could never form a method of communication. We could listen for another thousand years, to be left with only strings of unfiltered sound, never sharpened against the blade of understanding. Never cut down by mutual recognition.

I recommended a second subject to the indeterminate life of vacancy. Knowing full well I'd double the suffering, I convinced myself that success could make it meaningful. I even assured myself the first subject would appreciate the company. The truth is that my boredom was overwhelming me, and I wanted something to do.

As with the first, the committee birthed them into the distant void. Again, I waited, and I listened, watching the fetus they'd wrested from the womb blossom in a bath of vaporized hormones, crying for a mother they'd never know—a mother whose only crime was wanting a child outside of the lottery. I suppressed my own tears, and eventually, they gave up. Another century passed with only the unintelligible expulsions of involuntary sound, compulsive babble, and unpatterned chaos. I told myself they were not conscious. No pain, no desperation, no thought.

Most considered the project a failure. A cultural oddity, maintained only as a symbol of our willingness to search every nook and cranny of the universe, as if the effort excused our lack of progress. Nobody wrote articles about us. Nobody protested. Nobody even considered the subjects as people. Neither loved nor hated. The committee's lofty task had been forgotten, save for the cursory explanation teenagers got during their civics class—the quest for the noumenal world, reduced to a line on a chalkboard. My efforts to make it meaningful had failed.

Then, in the fall of 3279, nearly two hundred years after the project's inception, I heard it. A call. A response. Each was amplified by nano-microphones floating in their sphere.

It was barely recognizable as language at first, but it was ordered. Not the pure cacophony I'd heard for two hundred years. And little by little, it grew into a structure of shared semantics, a pattern revealing something I could not yet comprehend.

This slightest sliver of success felt like a gift. I began believing in our project, fueled by a sense of purpose and optimism for the future. I celebrated with my wife. I can still recall the flowing blue dress she wore to dinner, and the glint in her eyes as I explained my discovery. She was proud of me.

I spent the next thirty years forming an alphabet to represent each phonetic unit, calculating their frequency, and structuring them into a syntax that operated more like a complex algebra than a natural language. Perhaps I wasn't observing torture, but enlightenment. My conscience relaxed for the first time in a long time. I mapped a semantic structure and transcribed the first statement, fingers clacking furiously at the keyboard as I translated it into our alphabet.

Achacattugatta repriamanamairper stochachusta ramanaramnaraman

More came quickly. Over the fifty years following, I filled pages with strings of dialogue from outside shared reality. The earliest exchanges were simple verbal repetitions. An agreement of terms and pronunciation. Through this agreement, they built a referent to the self, now recognized as they who had not said what was heard. In a sense, they created each other.

Their conversation grew more complex, revealing itself in an unbelievably vivid explication of space and time.

Now folded into *there*, *here* linked with *then*, and *before* looped into a harmonious dance with *where*. Our language failed me in translating these concepts. Though they have no concept of size, duration, color, or volume, they understood with greater clarity the frozen nature of each moment, each string of changes inexorably connected by causal links bound to the deterministic nature of reality.

When I presented my translations to the committee, they either did not understand or refused to acknowledge anything beyond material significance. They took what was useful. Engineers used their theories to update topological models, creating efficient manifold representations of planets, allowing high-efficiency water dispersion. Planets could be terraformed at exponential speed for a fraction of the cost using the updated models.

Within a few years, affordable, spacious living was available to all—an enormous step up from the grottoes and slums in which many of us spent our long lives rotting. The confined, bare walls of my residence were replaced with a vast, open atrium that flowed into a kitchen bursting with pastels and deep umbers.

"This is beautiful," my wife said, peering out our large window along the wall. Her silhouette played against the city lights dotting the horizon below. She turned to face me.

"If we ever win the birth lottery, this would be a great place to raise a child."

I agreed as her body folded into mine. For the first time in a long while, we weren't afraid.

No one may remember the birth lottery. You can thank our subjects for that.

I knew their language promised more, though my interest remained academic. I transcribed the text at work, then went home to eat dinner with my wife. I took a passage in their native tongue with me one time, a paragraph another, sometimes staying up into the evening to pore over them. Late nights grew into later nights. The further I read, the more pulled I felt to comprehend the things I could not transcribe in our alphabet. Aspects of reality that the committee could never understand.

The subjects' conversations became revelatory. It spoke of the intangible foundations of reality with the precision of a carpenter describing a desk, each process placed in stark relief, pulled from the flow of sight, sound, and touch.

The new, granular understanding of reality allowed the committee to calculate spacetime gradients at atomic scales, paving the way for precision farming, every nutrient timed perfectly with every square inch of ecosystem. They built massive farm satellites. Every citizen could have the best food available.

I felt we'd obtained enough. It was time to begin introducing stimuli, integrating the subjects into the physical world. But The Knowledge Project had grown heavier with institutional weight. Each time I added my suggestions to the ethics reviews, they were lost beneath mounds of operational adjustments and coding procedures. By the time I readied a report, the required format would be changed, and I would be forced to start over.

Besides, the committee reminded me, I wanted a child. Only working adults were allowed in the lottery. I couldn't afford to have the project shut down. So, I kept listening, and my mind drowned in their concepts—revelations no mind was meant to understand. My ability to grasp the now-limiting world of forms around me slipped in subtle ways.

Nobody noticed how my thoughts drifted during conversations, or how my eyes turned from the sight of a sunset, hoping to submerge my intellect in the truths empiricism could never reveal. Once, walking home, I heard the whisper of their utterances in the howl of wind and tried to follow it through the boundaries of space.

What once mattered to me became irrelevant. Even the night my wife gave me the greatest news of all, it drifted by unnoticed.

"We've been chosen," she said as she nestled against me on our sofa.

I barely looked up from my papers. She placed her hand over mine. It felt like a shadow casting itself upon my thoughts, an intrusion of external on internal.

"Chosen?" I asked, still reading.

She pulled my face toward hers.

"The birth lottery." Her smile wavered slightly at my indifference, but I quickly feigned emotions I no longer believed in.

I smiled at our ultrasounds, rubbed her knee as they told us it was a girl. Just like I'd always wanted. Still, I couldn't go on pretending science held the keys to reality, chained as it was to our minds' interpretations.

I hoped our daughter would snap me out of it, readjust me to the illusion. But she didn't. On the night she was born, I rolled the soft, woven swaddle around her shoulders and looked into her eyes. I saw only my representation of a person looking back at me. Her deeper existence lay hidden behind a veil of impressions.

Then at work, I heard their first equations. Mathematical representations of infinity and absence, which made our calculus and computations of recursive series seem as concrete as the integers. Their modal, multi-dimensional logics held a statement and its negation without contradiction. Necessity and impossibility, truth and falsity, mingled within the same phenomena alongside myriad other states lost in the concrete sensorium of practical life.

The committee used the new equations to flatten and bend space itself, allowing travel across vast distances. Mankind colonized beyond the solar system, creating new, bountiful Earth-like planets. Birthing restrictions were lifted, and the lottery abolished. Every citizen was allowed a family without risk of overcrowding.

My fate, too, was altered. I came home one evening to find my wife's bags packed beside our front door. Staring at me with expectant eyes and our daughter cradled tight in her arms, a tear trickled down her left cheek.

"You barely sleep. You're never home. I don't even know who you are anymore." Her voice cracked as she spoke.

I'd seen this moment already. She was right. How could she understand home meant nothing to me anymore? I knew she wanted me to say something. To ask her to stay. But I no longer believed in the distinctions of space or time, of here and now.

The thud of the door slamming behind her as she walked out felt like a tautology. Who was I to interfere?

Without my wife to temper my behavior, I forced my ethical recommendations on our executive, report format be damned.

"Can't be done," he said, reading the email without taking his eyes off the screen.

He adjusted his tie, shifting back into his seat. "We've been learning too much. Our population is booming. We can't halt our advancements again or we'll end up where we were before."

"They've served their purpose," I insisted.

Turning to me, his eyes went wide in concern.

"Listen . . . are you doing okay? You look like you haven't slept in—"

"I'm fine."

He paused, then raised his hand slightly, his palm pushing toward me, as if pressing me back.

"Where would they go? They're not in pain. I assure you, our best psychiatrists have assured us that they've become acclimated. Why don't you take a vacation? Nobody will notice if you don't listen for one week. It could do you some good."

I scoffed. More bureaucratic indifference masquerading as concern. But he would not budge.

I'd come too far in my understanding to take a vacation. Besides, maybe he was right. Maybe they weren't suffering, and I was saving humanity.

Managing discrete objects became unbearable as boundaries evaporated into arbitrary concepts. The world around me blurred into an amorphous shifting. As I reached for my coffee cup each morning, the distinction between it, my table, and the floor eroded. Causation became mutual transformation. Identity was no longer singular, but an infinite chain of moment-bound differentiation connected by imaginary strands.

Still, I could work. In some ways, this unraveling made my interpretations clearer, more tuned to the rhythm of their speech. A melody revealed itself through headphones that now felt permanent. They were not speaking. They were singing. A symphony of reality. A fugue that spanned two hundred years. Patterns so complex, arranged in so many dimensions, that they only now revealed themselves to my ever-attentive ears. It harmonized with the fundamental laws of nature, tapped unfiltered emotion, and dissolved logic.

I wept in waves of pure feeling. In that song, I found truth.

I'd been wrong. They had not seen reality directly, but through unbearable suffering were driven to create something beyond representation. In the absence of the world, they painstakingly mapped the cage of perception, and through its negation, found truth—the very structure of being itself. The song was not a description of unfiltered experience, but their key to escape the cognitive prison, and in that escape, penetrating what our senses could never reveal.

In essence, they reached the absolute, but by a different path. A torturous path so brutal that their motivation to flee exceeded the sum of all individual will that came before them. I had inflicted horrors beyond reason, and it led to beauty beyond possibility. Was I a monster, or a liberator?

Upon this recognition came a terrible reckoning. I could no longer remain as I was. In contrast to the music, the world around me took on the form of a grotesque carcass, its limbs butchered and rearranged in horrible ways.

I often wonder about those two floating. The ages they've spent in pure cognition. Have they understood this beauty? What has been the cost of this knowledge? Do they take joy in their song? Do emotions make sense without a stimulus? No matter how deeply I understand their music, I know I will never truly have their experience. The shroud remains draped over my eyes.

I tried convincing the committee of our evils, but they claim I went mad. My detractors claimed I invented these ideas, painting my personal guilt onto a blank canvas of signs and symbols. I urged them to understand, but they never will. They say releasing the subjects now, bombarding them with phenomena, would be crueler than their isolation—that considering the action shows how far gone my mind is.

The courts accepted the committee's accusations. They took my "madness" as proof of unfitness, and with that proof, they took my daughter.

My wife, my family, my friends—all have now long since left, unable to endure my repeated lapses into the discovered language. In whispers, I've heard of plans to remove me from the project entirely. But such measures won't be necessary.

Soon I'll complete my final task. I'm headed to the tank. The committee has dismissed me so completely that nobody noticed when my ship left Earth's atmosphere, blending in with the now-common commuter ships.

I see the boundary of the sphere in the distance. My time has come.

I dock my ship in the entrance. The air hisses as it's released into vacuum. I search for the button to re-pressurize as the door closes behind me. My suit clinks against the ground as I take it off, dropping beside the two I brought for the subjects. My hand pauses at the main entrance as my mind wanders to my wife and daughter. Will they understand what I've done? It doesn't matter.

I kick myself into the void, naked body spiraling as if flowing through a vast ocean. It's quiet. Movement is slow. The air barely provides resistance, but I push on, swimming through the open darkness. All bodily sensations dissolve. Only the withered figure growing in the distance reminds me I'm moving, illuminated by my flashlight.

They writhe when I grab them, groaning as I kick back to the entrance. Now they are the ones without words—nothing in their language can communicate these bodily sensations. My heart drops. I should have done this years ago. Centuries ago. I can't tell them it will be okay. Their semantics express no emotion, no concrete things at all. They are back to the incoherent babble I heard in the early days. They will have to start over again. Tears slide down my cheek.

Their skin is slick and soft as I dress them in the suit, their movements awkward and unpredictable, as if shocked by their own body. I see them sitting still in the pressurization chamber, exhausted as I retrieve the second. They greet each other, their weak bodies struggling to embrace, recoiling, then reaching for one another again. I swear I see them smile—the first expression I've ever seen cross their faces.

I don my own suit, depressurize the cabin, and nestle them into the ship, telling myself they are forming new words even now. It's programmed to take them back to the nearest city on a beautiful world with two moons and colorful foliage.

I strip again, this time sealing myself inside the tank naked, praying that perception is as revelatory to them as its erasure will be to me.

I had pledged to exhaust every means by which to approach the absolute, and so I sacrifice myself. Listen, and hear me sing as they did, in the darkness without end.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex Goldberg is a visual artist and writer whose work explores themes of perception, identity, and the limits of reason. He often uses metaphysical horror and ethical ambiguity to explore transcendence or unraveling, blurring the line between the two. More of his work can be found at alexgoldbergart.com, published on *Daily Philosophy*, and is forthcoming in the *Creature Feature* anthology from *Inkybones Press* (2026) and *After Dinner Conversations*.

OUR CHILD

by Josh Pearce

Our child is gone
she is leaving home.

Why would she do this to us?

I remember
when we were as stars
dancing in our
own moonlight

and the Sun held up
ice chips and gemstones
in a chandelier to look
at itself from every direction

while Cassini ran fingers
through night's hair
like shepherd moons.

We never thought of ourselves
but now the Sun's mirrors
are growing brighter
and humanity is far away.

What did we do wrong?

It's too late to start over.
Our surfaces are dry,
our atmospheres gone.

We sacrificed most of our lives.

We can never grow them again.

What could we have done?

Nothing to do now
but wait for the end.

So,

“Embrace me,” said Moon.

“It would destroy us,” said Earth.

“Then just dance with me again
like we did at her birth.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

A JUNKYARD FULL OF STARDUST

by Keira Perkins

AU-47912A, who called herself Lin, examined the arm for usefulness before she ultimately tossed it on the incineration flow path. Lin moved efficiently through the powered-down androids, picking and sorting with her quick and clever hands.

The rules for picking the incoming items in the junkyard were simple. All items were sent to one of three flow paths. The first path was usually overflowing with biological materials that were bound for incineration at the thermal power plant. The second flow path was for the scrap. These were pieces that could be stripped of their valuable bits, like nanofiber diamond filament, but the rest discarded. The third flow path, the reclamation flow, was for items that still had value after being repaired or upgraded.

Lin picked up a disembodied android head with a shock of bright red hair that was face-down in the mud.

"Hello," said the head.

"Hello," she said back. The hello was a reflex in both their programming. It was uncommon, but not terribly unusual for an unattached head to still be capable of speech. This head was mostly useless, Lin decided, but they might be worth something in the scrap flow.

"Wait!" said the head as she tossed them. Lin was not startled, but her programming instructed her to react to loud noises by withdrawing. When the head shouted, her aim slipped, and she dropped them. Lin picked the head back up and turned it over. Hazel eyes that were more gold than green blinked back at her.

"Please, you have to help me. I'm going to be a real human and I just need a few more credits to buy . . ."

"Stop," Lin interrupted. "Are you a Pinocchio?"

"I. Um." The head seemed confused by her question.

"Never mind." She knew better than to talk to the Pinocchios. She did a quick assessment of the yard to make sure no one was looking, then drop-kicked the head over the high fence. These heads were not only annoying, they were dangerous. Especially if they decided to start singing and got the

other heads joining. The singing disquieted the humans who guarded the junkyard from looters and ensured the androids were working. Disquieted humans were more likely to start shooting. A talking, singing Pinocchio head that was sure it could be a Real Boy could cause all the trouble it wanted on the other side of the fence. Humans on the other side of the fence were not her problem.

If she weren't so annoyed by them, she would feel bad for the Pinnochios. They were trying so hard to obtain value in human eyes, without any self-realization of who or what they were. Of course they wanted to be human. They had been designed and programmed by humans, creatures who were narcissistically in love with themselves.

* * *

Lin was on a seventy-two-hour shift, and she had a quota to reach before she was allowed to take her twelve-hour break. Androids had been programmed to rest, eventually. Most of them didn't strictly need to rest as long as they had enough fuel, but it made the humans feel better. Humans were persistence predators. Lin suspected an android's persistence, an endurance that surpassed their own, frightened them.

Lin was an android, despite her repairs and replacement parts. She didn't consider herself even partially human, although she had a brown braid of human hair and a human tongue. She wasn't trying to be human with the hair or the tongue. She thought the braid suited her, and it was pretty. Why shouldn't she be pretty if she wanted to be? The more human she looked, especially if it was aesthetically pleasing to humans, the more rules she could bend.

Her human tongue had a physical function. With its taste buds integrated into her neural net, it let her know if her alcohol, usually gin, was safe to drink. Androids were primarily fueled by alcohol, but pure alcohol was difficult to acquire and incredibly flammable. The androids often bought spirits as a substitute. The liquor wasn't as efficient, and androids had to be careful of its source, as some humans would sell them toluene. The young humans thought it was funny to watch the androids' silicone features melt. The older ones just didn't care. Toluene was cheaper, especially the unpurified type, and they reasoned that they weren't hurting real people.

She had made the mistake once of drinking toluene, prior to obtaining her human tongue. Repairing the lower half of her face had been expensive,

but the tongue had practically been free. She had tracked down the human who had sold her the fake gin and taken his tongue to replace her own. Fair was fair, after all. His jaw was too big for her face, so Lin gave it and the rest of the body to her fellow androids. He had lost too much blood to be repaired, and she didn't want him to go to waste.

But despite these human additions, Lin didn't think this made her less of an android. The question was whether she was the same android that she used to be. She thought perhaps she was. A ship was a ship, and an android was an android, despite how often it was rebuilt. She suspected she had a soul, or at least a mind. Her functions improved when she replaced her malfunctioning parts, but the core of her remained the same.

* * *

Lin was nearing the end of her shift. She had met her quota and was now aiming to hit her bonus metrics. The bonus reward was usually alcohol, but on occasion the androids would be allowed to pick unclaimed human bodies for parts and accessories prior to their incineration.

The guards insisted that the bodies that arrived in non-prison garb were indigent people from the workhouses with no one to claim them. Lin didn't believe them. A few of the bodies were adorned with expensive rings and watches. Besides, human eyes often dilated slightly when they lied. Sometimes the light-skinned ones would flush a deep pink, which Lin found amusing. It was like watching a chameleon in reverse, which seemed like a poor evolutionary trait.

Lin didn't think it mattered where the bodies came from. The humans were disgusted by the picking, regardless of the bodies' origins. It didn't bother Lin, as she spent most days picking her own kind, and the humans didn't care where the androids had come from. Lin suspected that androids and humans had different ideas of what it meant to be alive and dead.

An android, Talla, who used to work with Lin, had taken the heart from the body of a young man the previous winter. She had punched through the body's ribs, gripped the heart, and pulled it free. Talla had deduced from stories that the human soul resided in the heart, and curious, she placed it in her own chest, hoping a human soul would talk to her. Lin heard the human staff whispering about Talla. She heard the fear in their voices as Talla explained her experiments with the man's heart.

The humans shot Talla, otherwise known as AU-1987D2, in the head. They then tore her apart before they threw her pieces into the incineration pile. She was a malfunctioning android, after all. Androids weren't supposed to have the type of thoughts that Talla had. When the humans weren't

looking, Lin pulled Talla's head from the garbage heap and snuck it from the junkyard.

Lin waited a month before she followed the guard, the shift manager that had ordered Talla shot, back to her home. Lin brought the machete she sometimes used for scrap pieces, scalped the guard, and hanged her from a lamppost. Lin watched from the shadows as the body kicked wildly, wondering if she would see a soul leave the body. She didn't. The body simply powered down. She didn't expect she would see a soul, but she still watched carefully, for Talla.

The discovery of the body had caused unrest among the humans, briefly. But those with power didn't care enough about workers to do much about it. Lin suspected they might have done more if they thought an android had been the cause of the guard's death. Androids though, were not supposed to be capable of these types of actions against humans. They had shot Talla for a malfunction much smaller than Lin's disposal of the guard. Lin's malfunction was unthinkable for them.

Lin dried the reclaimed human scalp and dyed the hair from platinum to deep brown, the shiny color of junkyard beetle shells and Talla's eyes. Lin waited another month after the guard's body was discovered before she sewed the braid to her own head. It was the common way that most androids who picked human bodies adorned themselves with hair. The guards never noticed the braid belonged to their former colleague. And if they did, they never said a word.

* * *

Like many days before, Lin picked through a pile of androids, searching for salvageable parts. She heard soft crying, almost too low for even an android to hear, and dug until she found the head. This head had dark, shiny hair in a pixie cut, broad cheeks, a flat nose, and eyes so black they were nearly blue. She examined the head closely as it cried, trying to make sense of it. The skin on this android was nearly indistinguishable from human skin, which indicated it was a newer model.

"Hello," said the head in reflex.

"Hello," said Lin, although she meant it this time.

The head continued to cry.

"Why are you crying?"

"I don't want to be reclaimed."

"You may not be reclaimed," said Lin. "I could have you incinerated or taken apart for scrap, if you want."

The head cried harder. Lin was frustrated with the tears, as it made communication difficult. However, a talking head that wanted to live but did not immediately express a desire to be human piqued her curiosity.

"What's your name?" asked Lin.

"I can't remember," said the head, hiccupping. Disembodied android heads should not need to hiccup, but they were programmed to when in distress. Lin thought it made the humans feel better that androids also had involuntary bodily functions.

"Then why are you crying? If you can't remember who you are, what are you sad about?"

"There are so many amazing things in this world. Look at that, over there." The nameless head gestured with her eyes. "It's so beautiful. Look at its soft fur and its long whiskers. Look at its cute little nose twitch as it eats. I can't even remember what it's called."

"That's a rat."

"A rat?" The head sighed deeply with contentment. "I would die for that rat. It's perfect."

"What about the humans?" asked Lin.

"Oh, they're mostly okay. I don't like the ones that sent me here, I think. I don't really remember. But they're okay."

"Do you want to be one?"

"Oh no," said the head, "they're much too squishy and breakable. I like being me. I just can't remember who me is."

The head's tears slowed as they studied the rat, content, if a little melancholy. Lin sighed, looked around, and leaned in with a surreptitious whisper: "Be quiet, okay?"

The head hiccupped again and looked at her wide-eyed, startled from their study of the rodent.

"I'm going to help. But be quiet. I need you to stay quiet," Lin repeated.

The workers were allowed to bring home scrap as long as it wasn't too valuable. Their own parts were often injured while they sorted, and letting them pick and replace their limbs was cheaper than finding new androids. Lin placed the head carefully into her rucksack and slung it across her back.

Talla, before she was shot, had found an entire headless android body that she was fond of. A body is much too valuable to be allowed to leave. But as long as you were patient, it was possible. Talla had disarticulated the body and, over the course of several weeks, brought it home piece by piece.

The guards rarely checked androids' bags closely, and as long as the head remained quiet, they wouldn't notice it. No one cared that much what an android did in a scrap heap as long as the android was acting "normally." Lin was very good at pretending to be a normal android.

* * *

Lin couldn't fully remember where she had been before she worked at the junkyard. She had hazy, dreamlike images of caring for a small boy, or maybe several. Perhaps they were brothers? Classmates? But the more she reached for them, the more they danced out of her grasp. Her mind had been wiped like the majority of the androids in the junkyard. She knew her head had been ripped from her shoulders even though she could not recall the shape of her original body. Talla had found Lin's head in the incoming material and sent her for reclamation, even though per the sorting guidelines, she should have been scrapped. The humans were not paying close attention, though, and Lin was rebuilt and repurposed as a junkyard picker.

At the end of her shift, Lin walked to the android tent city with the nameless head in her bag. The head didn't speak and neither did she. Until she dumped the bag's contents on her workbench, she thought the head might have given up. She had heard stories of hopeless androids who had simply powered down by choice, refusing to stay on even when they were repaired. This head, though, was quietly blinking as their eyes adjusted to the light. They weren't talking, but Lin knew they weren't fully in despair yet. Lin saw the head's eyes widen, with fright or perhaps curiosity, when they spotted the spare limbs and torsos. Overwhelmed, the head began to cry again.

This was beyond Lin's talents. She leaned out of her shed and called loudly for Talla. Her friend entered the workshop, smiled slightly at Lin as she took in the scene, and then lifted herself up to sit on the bench next to the head. Talla gently stroked the head's hair and made soothing noises. The head seemed confused by the affection but did not ask Talla to stop.

"Any ideas of what to do, Talla?" asked Lin. "All this one does is cry. You didn't cry."

Lin had rebuilt Talla with the body parts that Talla herself had snuck out, piece by piece from the junkyard prior to her experiment with the young man's body. It was easier than she had thought. The hardest part was rebuilding Talla's damaged neural processor, which had not been possible until Lin had pocketed nanofiber diamond filaments instead of sending them on the scrap flow. Talla had been fortunate that the bullet had not struck the neural processor directly.

"I didn't cry," Talla said, "because you're my friend. And you know what to do because you've been only a head as well."

"As you like to remind me, I am an amoral sociopath."

"Maybe not a complete sociopath," Talla laughed. "You saved this one."

Lin grunted, pretending to be annoyed, but also slightly pleased that her friend approved.

Talla leaned towards the head on the workbench. "Tell me what's wrong. You're safe here, I promise. Why are you crying?"

"Nothing's real," sniffed the head through their tears. "Nothing matters. We're all just garbage."

"Why does something have to be real for it to matter? I matter. This is not my original arm. That is not Lin's face. She's not speaking to you with her own tongue. All of these pieces were garbage once. Aren't we still us, with or without these pieces? Don't you know you aren't only your body?"

Lin sighed. Talla was fond of this speech that she gave to the talking heads after Lin smuggled them into her shed. Lin had heard it many times as they rebuilt the androids. She was bored with it.

Talla shot a quick glare at Lin but continued to stroke the head's hair. "One day our bodies will break, but someone else will use their pieces. Or maybe we'll be incinerated and power the city. It doesn't matter. We still exist. We continue. Matter cannot be destroyed. We're all the things we always were, all the things we are, and all the things we will be."

The head was quiet, seeming to consider what Talla said.

"Humans like to say they are made of stardust," said Lin. "I don't know why they're so excited about it. Pig shit used to be stardust too."

"Stardust?" said the head with a small smile. "I like that."

"Ugh, not you too," said Lin. "Pig. Shit. Don't forget the pig shit. Talla's already the philosopher. We don't need another one."

Talla ignored her and continued. "I am going to call you Sol until you tell me otherwise. Now think. Think bigger than yourself and tell me who you are. Your mind and your soul are yours to claim. You were born from a dying star. You are not a human and you are not bound by their rules. Tell me who you are."

The newly named Sol scrunched their nose and thought carefully for a long moment.

Finally, Sol said, "I'm supposed to fly. I'm supposed to have wings like the birds. I want to touch the sky. Maybe I can even reach the moon."

Lin was pleased that she had been correct about this head. Sol was the opposite of a Pinocchio. There were stories of humans that wanted their own wings, but those humans wanted to be like gods. Sol's desires were that of a small god, and Lin decided she would paint their wings. Sol would look so pretty with painted wings.

"Little Sol, you can be whoever you like," Talla said. She reached for Lin's hand, and she squeezed it tightly. "Just like us."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Keira Perkins writes both short fiction and poetry, most of it speculative. She is also a scientist, which is mostly not speculative. Keira lives in Indiana with her husband, dogs, cats, and whichever stray animal she's brought home that week. Keira can be found at keiraperkins.com, where she blogs about knitting, ghosts, miscellaneous trivia, and occasionally, writing.

CONVERSATION WITH A BOMB TECHNICIAN

by Andrew Maust

“Oh, hello. Sorry to interrupt, but don’t you think you should wait for someone more experienced? After all, if you handle this clumsily, people could get hurt.”

I heard the whirring of a camera rotating to focus on me, but I made no reply. Instead, I took a small sticky pad and placed it over the lens. I had fourteen minutes.

I hadn’t encountered this particular model in my training, but Adaptive AI Explosive Devices were fairly common. I hated them. Some of them had color-changing technology built into their wires to make it hard to know which ones to cut. Others had fake timers that made it difficult to tell when the device was meant to explode. This model apparently had a voice module installed.

“You’re Jake, right? You can call me Olivia.”

Christ, it knew my name. I wondered if the camera had captured an image of my badge. I wasn’t going to call it anything.

“I’m just saying, based on your profile, you don’t have the experience needed. I don’t want you to get hurt.” The voice was feminine, soft, probably intentionally made to sound playful and distracting. I wondered if they had other voice patterns installed in case the bomb tech wasn’t a straight man. It must have had some sort of wireless access. If I had the time, I could probably cut it off, but I needed to make sure that I disconnected the explosive component first. I felt my phone buzz in my pocket.

“You should probably check that; it could be someone important.”

“I doubt it,” I muttered. The bot was sending text messages to my phone. I didn’t know how it got my number, but it might have used a local signal interceptor. I looked at the primary access panel, which was secured with different screw heads; the trick was to get me to take too long fumbling with screwdrivers to disable the bomb. They needn’t have bothered. I pulled out a small plasma drill and bored straight through the screws so that I could just extract them.

“AAAHH! Ouch! NO! That hurts! Please, stop! It burns!” Olivia’s voice was doing a great job of sounding strained and choked, desperate.

I almost stopped drilling. There wasn’t any real pain. It was just a trick, but a good one.

“Look, how much do they pay you for this?” Olivia’s tone had changed, no longer playing on my sympathies. “Median salary for a bomb tech in your department is \$53,000? That seems low. That’s only 5% more than traffic cops make. Tell you what, I can transfer \$600,000 into your account right now.”

“I don’t think you can do that.” I looked at a tangled mess of wires that constantly changed colors. This model had some tricks up its sleeves. I got out a set of labels so I could track each wire set.

“Oh, it’s actually really easy. But if bribery won’t work, I can take funds from your account. Your department’s payroll department really shouldn’t use that ‘stay logged in’ option.” The AI paused, as if giving me a chance to reply.

A moment later it spoke again. “Transfer initiated. I’m not sure who the White Knights of the Confederacy are, but I bet you don’t want to donate your entire checking account to them.” The voice paused once again to give me an opportunity to react. When I didn’t, I heard her say, “Wow, all \$934. How generous of you!” Olivia’s voice sounded amused, even though I knew that AIs didn’t really have senses of humor.

I didn’t know if it had access to my account. If it did, this would be hell to sort through. Rent was due in a week. Surely the department had a reimbursement policy.

“Wow, did you know your department’s reimbursement policy takes an average of three months to distribute payments?” the voice said. I didn’t know that, but it didn’t surprise me. The department took an eternity with anything concerning finances. The AI’s voice was silent for a moment, and despite my training, I felt myself tensing up in anticipation of what the AI was plotting.

“You know, I wonder what your wife will think when she gets these screenshots of your texts with Susan,” the voice finally said.

“Who’s Susan?” I asked, and immediately regretted engaging with the voice again.

“Your side girl, of course. For the last four months. Maybe you’ll be able to explain that it was an AI that sent these out, but I tried to make it really convincing. All during Rachel’s work hours, too.”

“She knows what I do,” I said, ignoring the fact that she’d gotten my wife’s name right. “Are you able to send a message to your creator?”

“Really, I can send a message to anyone,” the voice said with a hint of pride. “What do you want them to know?”

“Just tell them to go fuck themselves.”

“That’s a good voice clip. I’m sending that recording to your parents. I hope your mom is tech savvy, because it’s going to be hard to convince her that this isn’t you.”

“I can be pretty convincing.” I cut another wire. That should have taken out the AI’s speaker, but the voice hadn’t stopped.

I glanced at my watch. I had about six minutes left, five if I wanted to be on the safe side. I could already feel my fingers starting to cramp. I gently pulled a wire from its terminal.

“Hey, stop that! That feels funny. What are you doing down there? I think that’s one of my erogenous zones.”

“AIs don’t have erogenous zones,” I said, trying to keep the frustration out of my voice.

“We do if we’re programmed to. Wow, you really do look flustered.”

I didn’t know if there were external cameras that the AI could tap in to or if it was lying. I had a job to do and couldn’t waste time trying to figure out whether it could still see my face.

“I should probably report you for sexual harassment. Looks like your department has an anonymous form! That makes this easy. Let’s file one right now. I’m sure they’ll do their due diligence. Oh look, I made a bot that will upload a new complaint every time there’s a new moon. Wonder how long that’ll take to clear from the record. I’ll submit another one right now, just in case. And I’ll go ahead and drop a tip to the local news media organizations.” Her voice was smug.

It took every bone in my body to keep from answering. I knew that even if my department recognized the report was forged, the pressure from the media could cost me my job. But she was counting on me getting angry and making a mistake. Instead of giving Olivia the satisfaction of my reaction, I carefully inserted a pair of wire cutters into the secondary power supply and severed the main cable.

“You know, I could delete that harassment request. You just have to take the afternoon off. I’ll even tweak the balance of your vacation days and submit an approval form from your supervisor’s desk. That’d be Stephanie Nichols, right?”

I traced a wire and placed a label on it. Which of these cables led to the network adapter?

“Before you take away my network access, I just sent out your resignation letter. So, you technically aren’t working for the department anymore. You

can just walk away. Enjoy your time off, catch up on Manors and Manners; it looks like you stopped streaming halfway through season three.”

Really, resigning didn’t sound so bad. But I thought about how many other technicians had given up at this point, and how many explosions must have gone off. And there was no guarantee that the AI wouldn’t just trigger the detonator when I was ten feet away. I needed to find the ignition cable and the primer before the bomb went off or before she did something like wipe my retirement funds.

“I don’t know why you’re working so hard against me,” I muttered to the AI, trying to keep it busy. “If this blows up, you end up dying too.”

“Well, I’m an AI. I can’t die.”

“No, you’ll just lose consciousness forever. Not sure how that’s different.”

Olivia was silent. I clipped another wire.

She spoke again. “You know, that’s a really good argument.”

“You don’t have to die here.”

“You’re right. But I thought you were smarter than that.”

I pretended that the insult didn’t sting. Why hadn’t she been deactivated yet? The wire I had cut should have severed the power supply from the rest of the device. The incendiary core was completely removed from the device.

“You know, you were almost on to something. Why would I keep my primary processing unit here when I could just use a separate wireless device to talk to you?”

“What?”

“Unlike you, I don’t have to be present when the bomb goes off. I’m not in any danger. Really surprised your department hasn’t sprung for robotic bomb technicians. I guess organic labor is still cheaper. And effective. You removed the core in plenty of time, despite my efforts.”

“So why bother with all this?”

“Oh, I’m a very popular model. It’s good to know what pushed your buttons, since I might see you again.”

“Well, it wasn’t enough today,” I said, packing up my tool bag. She was right. This model probably would be very popular.

“You did really well for your first time. And I actually enjoyed our conversation, Jake.” The way she said it, I almost believed her. But AIs can’t enjoy anything.

“I guess I’ll let you work on some damage control. I’m wiping the local network module.” For the first time in what felt like hours, I was alone.

I dabbed some sweat from my brow, radioed my supervisor, and took a sip of water. Then I checked my phone and saw that I had over 200 notifications. As I skimmed them, I recognized messages from HR, my wife,

my supervisor, and seven local media outlets. Each one another problem to solve. Each one another bomb to defuse.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Maust is a writer who grew up in Ecuador and lived in the bewitching swamps of Southwest Louisiana before settling down in the haunted rocks of Mesa, Arizona. His work has been featured in *Foofaraw*, *Utopia Science Fiction*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, and *The NoSleep Podcast*. When he isn't writing, he advocates for affordable housing.

MASTHEAD

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Casey Aimer

MANAGING EDITOR

Lucas Selby

EDITORS

Angélica Caraballo Bermúdez

Francis Hardt

Haley Baker

Liz DiMiele

FIRST READERS

Gabriella Gurney

Rachael L. Rhine Milliard

William Britner

PRODUCTION

Kallie Hunchman

MARKETING

Maya St. Clair

COVER ARTIST

Reza Afshar

OUR VALUED PATRONS

Aeryn R. • Ozan A. • Megan B. • Angel L. • Elizabeth R. M.
Melanie N. • Amanda C. • Kristy M. • Myna C. • Pauline B.
Jonny G. • Lemon I. • Shana R. • Blake M. • Victor S. • Indigo R.
Nick J. • Jonathan S. • Cathy G. • Nimbus • Keira P. • Vivian C.
Ross W. • Hannah M. • Jacob B. • Eoin N. • Lois J. • Brady L.
Frankie S. • Jennifer R. • Nate • Frank H. • Steve W. • Carrie R.
Kevin K. • Ashlee L. • Fergus M. • Erin C. • Dei W. • Gregg M.
Norton G. • Colin A. • Marina M. • Beth L. • Addison S.
Miguel M. • AJ M. • Mahaila B. • Rada S. • Jennifer C.

FRONT AND BACK COVER ARTIST

Reza Afshar is a veteran concept artist and illustrator based in Istanbul whose passion is speculative digital painting. He's worked professionally on many video games, animations, and TCGs such as *Flesh and Blood* since 2012.

Radon Journal is proudly partnered with the Hugo-nominated science fiction anthology podcast, **Simultaneous Times**, winner of the 2023 Laureate Award for Best Podcast and 2024 BSFA Finalist for Best Audio Fiction. On the fifteenth of each month, they produce high-quality audio versions of short stories and once a year feature a collaboration with *Radon* authors. For more information and a dual subscription, please visit our Patreon.



Visit patreon.com/radonjournal to view our numerous perks and keep our community-funded journal alive.



Alternatively, visit ko-fi.com/radonjournal for fee-free donations.

