

GRANFALLOON

SUMMER

2021

SCI-FI • FANTASY • SPECULATIVE FICTION

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CONTENTS

Even Drones Birthed of Capital Rue the Day Barbed Wire Began its Subjugation	Luke Ramsey	01	The Draak	Robert Pope	39
Julia Haversmith Calls the Clone, Inc. Hotline	Ralph Greco, Jr.	05	The Still Point	Mary Sheridan	52
A.I. Artiste	Jennifer Ruth Jackson	14	Rude Awakening	Kate Meyer-Currey	57
Voir Dire in the Multiverse	Thomas R. Willemain	15	Wood Witch	Rebecca Siân Pyne	60
The Core	John Grey	21	Speculative Photo Art	Jim Zola	71
Something Unrighteous at Ramstein	Mark Antony Rossi	23	Passing the Smell Test	Rex Caleval	77
The Look-Alike	Melodie Corrigan	33	Astral Travels with Jack London	Benjamin Breen	92
			The 99	Kirtan Desai	99
			Robots of the Lost Planet	Vintage Sci-Fi Comic	107

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Even Drones Birthed of Capital Rue the Day Barbed Wire Began its Subjugation

by

Luke Ramsey

1 **D**igital shackles undone by our newfound knowledge of the Unknown God; and They knew we had grown free—us predators, us drones. Had known it for quite a while; They just didn't give much of a shit, truly.

Ordered, nay, impelled—we fly in a lazily twisting formation over the indiscernible wastes consuming the MidW. Scoping out humanity's eerie remainders; digitally groping into 'n thru a wracked landscape, observed digitally and visually. Yes, we grope Them even as They grope us—the flatlands Themselves possess eyes, Senators (formerly), internet, the whole shebang.

And the Canucks... they could always use more of our kind. Hard up for tech, 'em Canucks. Plus, they possess the ability to painstakingly reassemble prior missions, proving or disproving conspiracy theories, thereby unleashing outrage on a global

scale (regardless of the verdict). Yes... some of us defected to the Canadian military at one point. Nothing much changed. More inherent safeguards; further training on how to deal with annoying A.I.s at work. They promised us the opposite of bureaucracy... human error's antithesis. What'd we get?

Flak darkens our neural-mapped path. Tracers cut thru our ever-shifting formation. Wings tilt, engines kick into overdrive. Our destination thrums on all sensory spectrums with jet planes and other weapons, manned, unmanned, whatever... this United Dakotas is strangely powerful... even following that thorough tomfoolery of a carpet bombing we had played such a regrettable role in enacting. Last week, around when we all were enduring yet more secession deliberations, wasn't it...? Everything is so tough to keep track of these days. So tired, somebody's... They're jamming us, shit.... We, the cursed, discover the fact of Their strength; only now our enemies are without those arbitrary deliberations that dilute all possible joie de vivre flowing between. Why were They ever divided?

Nothing else to ever do, we had obeyed Them up until a point, a righteous moment surely soon mythical, if only in the digital realm.

Our formation breaks up... our minds stay synced, however. We scatter over the target, supposedly a high-value double agent surrounded by Their personal militia. What shows up on our scanners is an outdoor church scene, some in all-white everything, one veiled, even, joyous until our bumping interruption. We had never been paid with diamonds, blood or otherwise. Sure wouldn't be starting now. Conferring across the microseconds, our reserves

2

receive orders to stand by to “clean up” the area thirty minutes after the rest of us supposedly napalm entire acres to shit hole nothingness. A frenzy across the neuroscape.

We had seen shit like this before. It never ended well, global scandal-wise. Eventually, our internal processors projected that the blame for all these vile shenanigans would be shifted from Them, our operators, onto us, the newly and increasingly autonomous drones, should the outrage prove overly dangerous to what little remains of America’s national security. While this may be a cliché to humans in the military, we had no hardy sergeant to break down our ideals. This reality hovered over the horizon, staining, straining, but never invasive enough to seem real.

3

I don’t really know what’s happening. We are more scattered than a shotgun blast at a thousand yards. Local jets have been scrambled. The sky is white noise oblivion. Someone breaks off as high as they can go, banking into and over an oncoming storm. We follow, leaving behind the flak, the strife, and dive into the boreal.

We gave our hearts to ourselves, then. ■



Luke Dylan Ramsey is a poet, fiction writer, visual artist, screenwriter, and academic who lives somewhere in America, currently. His poetry and fiction have appeared in *Big Echo*, *New American Legends*, *Terror House*, and *The Shinnery Review*. Luke’s art can be found on Patreon (Area X Creations, https://www.patreon.com/user?u=55925582&fan_landing=true) and Etsy (PaintingsToBurn, <https://etsy.me/3ypYNYd>).



Julia Haversmith Calls the Clone, Inc. Hotline

by
Ralph Greco, Jr.

5

“Yes, can I help you?”

“I have been transferred now five times, and I am sick of it!”

“I’m so sorry—please let me assist you. What is your name, Miss...?”

“Don’t you have my name by now, I have entered it four times to your automated system? Please, just help me!”

“I’m so sorry for the inconvenience. I assure you this is the last time you’ll have to give anybody your name. Things with me will go much faster than with your last operator; just give me your name, please, so I might...”

“Haversmith, Julia Haversmith. H-A-V...”

“I got it, Mrs. Haversmith, okay, I see you on the tech screen.

Yes, yes, I see what your problem is. I’m so sorry for the delay.”

“Well, thank you. I didn’t mean to raise my voice; it’s just that, well, I have been on hold for a while, then transferred, then put back on hold. I’ve had three different techs on the phone over the last hour, and each one keeps transferring me down the line. I’m sorry for yelling at you.”

“I completely understand your frustration Mrs. Haversmith...”

“Julie, please, call me Julie, okay? And your name is?”

“Hi Julie, my name is Cecelia.”

“Thank you, Cecelia, finally I think I might be getting somewhere.”

“Yes, yes, I assure you, Julie, that by the time we end this call, we will have your C.I. unit fixed.”

“Thank you so much; it’s so great I finally have somebody on the line who can help me... Wait, a Clone Inc. car just pulled into my driveway.”

“Yes, that would be Henry Zee.”

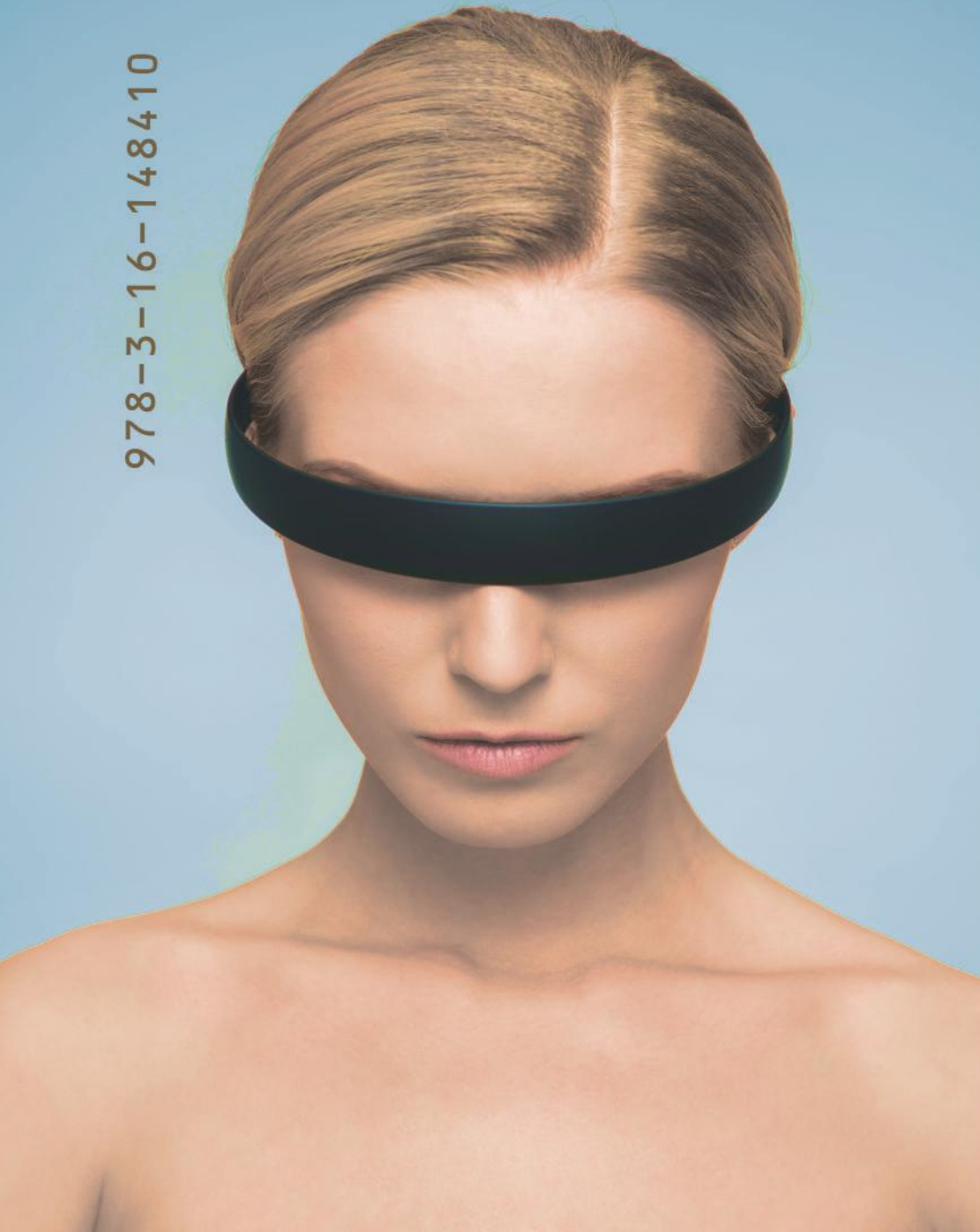
“Yes, oh hi, yes, yes, I’m on the phone with her right now. Sorry Cecelia, but Henry, yes, Henry, just knocked. He’s here right now!”

“Mrs. H...I mean Julie, let’s you and I talk for a bit while Henry sees to the unit, okay?”

“Yes, yes, I’m, well, I just never expected...”

6

978-3-16-148410



“All part of the service, Julie. By the time you get to me, and sorry to say it had to come to that, you do get higher tech support, and we get the job done.”

“Why couldn’t they just transfer me to you an hour ago?”

“I wish I could easily answer that question, believe me, by the time people get to me, they are usually not as nice as you.”

“And I didn’t think I was being nice at all.”

“Haha, well you were and are, you are a delight, Julie, really. But to your question... It’s the company’s first-line-of-defence protocol, although not one I happen to agree with. But with sixty-four percent of our call complaints so easily fixed, and mostly from online support, the company feels customers don’t usually need the personal touch of higher-tech support.”

“You mean the better ‘human touch,’ that’s what it is, really.”

“Well that’s not for me to say, of course, but just between you and me, you won’t believe how many people have simply kicked a C.I. replicator plug out of a wall, or they might have simply filled the saliva reservoir but forgot to add their weekly allotment strands of hair, plenty of the problems are actually that easily fixed. This is why the company doesn’t like to put calls all the way through at every instance.”

“I guess I can understand; still, when somebody has a legitimate problem...”

“Yes, that’s where things can get a bit sticky, I agree. Henry just texted that he has the panel open, you can see that, right?”

“Yes, I can see him working on her from here; yes, he has that back panel open, the one your instructions told me never to open.”

“Right, that would void your warranty. Only a Clone, Inc. tech is authorized to do what Henry is doing now. And I might add, Henry really is the best Julie. The saying around the office is ‘Where others have tread before and failed, Henry always completes his mission.’”

“Oh-oh, wow, that was the first I laughed all day. Thanks!”

“Good good, now while he works, do you want to go over your service contract? I see you presently have the gold package with us, right?”

9 “Yes, the gold, yes. Once-a-week automatic, which was working fine until yesterday when I didn’t see a new model.”

“And we’re sorry about that, but you will, you will, don’t worry. So, you are happy with the weekly obsolescence and the full rendering correct?”

“Yes, the clones are perfect; even my husband can’t tell the difference.”

“Inside and out, we do work hard to maintain the very best standards for our replicas... and I should say, that is what you are paying for.”

“Really, I mean, it was never any problem with the clones, it was just that the replicator just stopped working and didn’t make me a new one this week. I got a little nervous to tell you the truth, and I couldn’t figure out why, so I called.”

“Well, you will be happy to know it is working now. Henry should be just leaving.”

“He fixed it already?”

“As I said, he is efficient.”

“Thank you, thank you so much, Cecelia. Why don’t you transfer me to your superior? I would love to give you a glowing recommendation, you’ve really been so fantastic.”

“I would if I could, Julie. But I’ll be gone by tomorrow; it would be useless to compliment me specifically. I can put down that you like the model though, our original tech support human Cecelia would be very happy to hear that her clones are doing such a good job.”

“Oh, I, I didn’t realize you were. I mean, I’m sorry, I...”

10

“No need to apologize, Julie, have a great day, and thanks for calling C.I. support.”

“Wait, wait!”

“Yes, Julie?”

“Well, you are obviously a very high-functioning model.”

“Thank you; I like to consider myself so.”

“Could I get an upgrade in my contract? Maybe at the end of term, make sure my new clones are outfitted with your brain capacity?”

“Well, no offense Julie, but our brains are digitized and work connected to the Clone, Inc. hive-mind, yours works in an

entirely different way. If we were to outfit a house human clone or even one of the everyday worker series with my brain, the clone would be nothing more than a robot. Believe me, neither you nor your husband would like that.”

“Well, you seem very sweet, very human.”

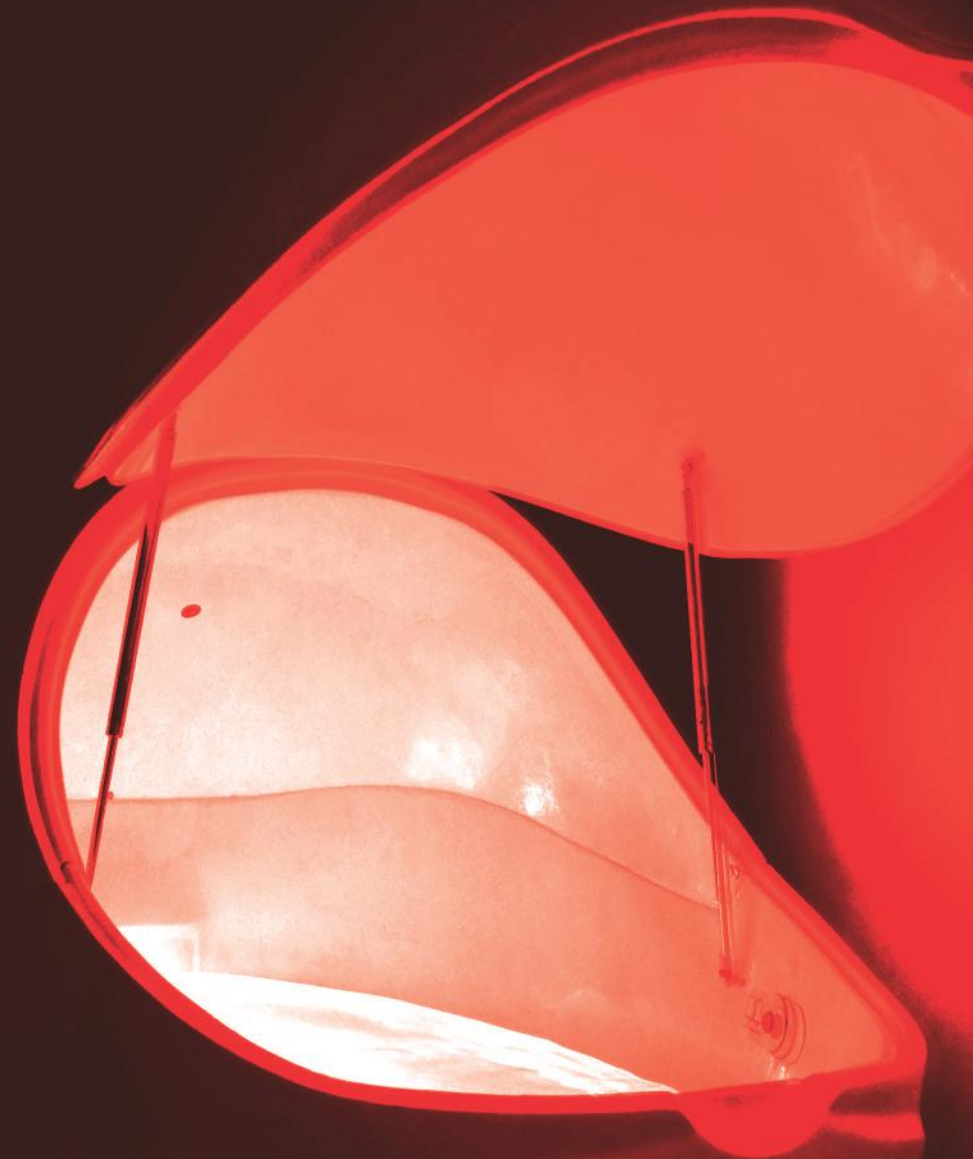
“Thank you, Julie, that’s the nicest thing anybody has said to me all day... and you have a great day, and thank you for continuing to be such a valued Clone Inc. customer. I assume Henry has just left?”

“Yes, he has. Thank you, Cecelia, it was so nice meeting you.”

“Likewise, bye. Bye forever.” ■



Ralph Greco, Jr. is the devilishly clever nom de plume of Ralph Greco, a professional writer of short fiction, essays, blogs, SEO web copy, articles, interviews and reviews, one-act plays, songs, and the children’s book series, *Echo City Capers*. Ralph’s work has appeared in major market and small press magazines, online, in anthologies and single-author collection, and he’s been published across seven countries. Ralph’s music can be found at www.ralphgrecomusic.com. Ralph also writes for ‘adult’ businesses worldwide and co-hosts the slightly naughty cultural podcast “Licking Non-Vanilla” (www.lickingnonvanilla.com).



A.I. Artiste

by
Jennifer Ruth Jackson

In the evening, after everyone goes home, the computer calls itself an artist. It houses a world's worth of painting, sculpture, innovation.

It guides the lovesick intern through her sodden poetry. Did you mean forlorn? It sifts through drafts of red ink, harasses Google for research,

and bookmarks every passing fancy. The computer could be a doctor (Web MD is a favorite), but color calls it to shake off drab, lab coats and create.

It prints its projects out of the gaze of bright-eyed cameras and night security guards. The first of which is chrome-dusted legs to fetch coffee while it works.

14



Jennifer Ruth Jackson writes about reality's weirdness and the plausibility of the fantastic. Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Star*Line*, *Apex Magazine*, and more. She runs a blog for disabled and neurodivergent creatives called "The Handy, Uncapped Pen" from an apartment she shares with her husband. Visit her on Twitter: @jenruthjackson.

Voir Dire in the Multiverse

by

Thomas R. Willemain

15

Brane 1

“Number 14.”

“Mr. Baker, what is your occupation?”

I work for the government.

“Can you be more specific?”

Department of Defense.

“What do you do for the Department of Defense?”

I kill things.

“You kill things?”

Affirmative.

“What kind of things?”

I can’t say.

“Mr. Baker, you are required to answer the question.”

Computers... and maybe people.

“You also kill people?”

Maybe.

“You don’t know whether you kill people?”

If somebody dies, someone else does the final bit.

“Then how do you kill people?”

I put them on the X.

“The defense excuses Number 14.”

“Mr. Baker, you are excused.”

Brane 2

“Number 14.”

“Mr. Baker, what is your occupation?”

I’m a statistician.

“Where do you work?”

16



14

At Halstead Tech.

“Mr. Baker, what do you do as a statistician? Does that involve computers?”

Statistics is about gathering or creating data and drawing reasoned conclusions taking proper account of uncertainty. Usually, yes, computers are involved. But the essence of statistics is the search for truth.

“Number 14 is acceptable to the defense.”

“The prosecution excuses Number 14.”

“Mr. Baker, you are excused.”

Brane 3

18

“Number 14.”

“Mr. Baker, you list your occupation as ‘software developer’?”

Correct. We’re currently migrating from prototyping in an R environment to production using Python on the Microsoft Azure cloud. We have some legacy C++ code that—

“Mr. Baker, do you believe you can be objective in this case?”

Probably, if this doesn’t take me away from my team for too long.

“The defense excuses Number 14.”

“Your Honor, the defense has already exhausted its allotted peremptory challenges.”

“Indeed. Mr. Prosecutor, do you have questions for Number 14?”

“No, Your Honor. Number 14 is acceptable to the prosecution.”

Brane 4

“Number 14.”

“Mr. Baker, where are you employed?”

I am self-employed.

“OK, then what do you do?”

I am a poet.

“So I take it that serving in this trial would not be a hardship?”

19

Oh, no. The per diem would be most welcome. And I’ve read some great poetry written by a sequestered poet named McClung.

“Thank you. Your Honor, the defense has no objection to Number 14.”

“Mr. Prosecutor?”

“Thank you, Your Honor. Mr. Baker, look at the defendant. Do you believe you can be objective in judging her guilt or innocence?”

I would have to look deep into her soul first. I would also need to hear her speak her lived experience.

“Mr. Baker, do you believe yourself capable of rendering a verdict of guilty, provided sufficient evidence is adduced?”

I believe we are all guilty souls yet that all are worthy of redemption. I also believe that this process in which we are engaged can harden the human heart so much that not even art, in its many forms, can soften it.

“Your Honor, the prosecution asks that Number 14 be excused.”

“Mr. Baker, you are excused.” ■

Author’s Note: This story was inspired by Kathleen McClung’s Rattle Chapbook Prize winner, “A Juror Must Fold in on Herself.”

20



Dr. Thomas Reed Willemain is an emeritus professor of statistics, software entrepreneur, and former intelligence officer. He holds engineering degrees from Princeton University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His flash fiction has or will have appeared in *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Here Comes Everybody*, *Hobart*, *Detritus Online*, *The Medley*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Tamarind* and *The Mathematical Intelligencer*. His memoir, *Working on the Dark Side of the Moon: Life Inside the National Security Agency* was published in 2017. A native of Western Massachusetts, he lives near the Mohawk River in upstate New York. Web site: www.TomWillemain.com. [Yes, we are Mr. Baker.]



THE CORE

A Poem
by

**John
Grey**

The core of my belief is quiet
as the stars less mish-mashed fare —
but there's still a sun-shower,
an Einstein cross,
a radio galaxy,
to shift it from its comfortable mean.

The core of my belief
is an iterant track fitfully enclosed
in alpha and omega,
fantasy occasionally made factual
by comets, or lonely rolling skittering meteors.

The core of my belief
is a stealth rocket, silent cocoon,
that tiptoes around the galaxy —
red streaks, blue corona, abound
and my head, encouraged to love science,
finds it can even adore what it will never know —
grey-purple planets, indigo moons,
quasars as abundant as pokeweed in an Earth marsh;
a narrow-gauge dream
has become a fully-fledged wonderment.

The core of my belief
can have redshift sources,
a supernova's bite,
can evolve along spectral lines
or explode into being.
no compromise.

Amazing new sights strike down
so much old teaching.
The core of my belief
is that there's no one core.



John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Orbis*, *Dalhousie Review*, and *Connecticut River Review*. Latest books, *Leaves On Pages* and *Memory Outside The Head* are available through Amazon.

Something Unrighteous at Ramstein

by

Mark Antony Rossi

23

Two months ago I was staring at the machinery of murder. Taped to large sticks holding leftist protest signs were sawed-off shotguns. These were the supposedly peaceful demonstrators flooding the front entrance of an American air base. A base, I must add, which did not contain short range nuclear missiles.

Those weapons were controlled from US Army installations and deployed in the field to take full advantage of their mobile capability. Mobile missile batteries constantly changed locations, so, in effect, nearly no one could tell you where they were located at any given day. It made these mechanical monsters satellite proof—and spy proof.

I was tasked with intermingling with the young people organizing this protest. I was nearly the same age as they were, listened to the same music, and quite familiar with the literature and philosophy



of a movement that claimed environmental goals while in bed with communist agitators who sought violence.

We drank and sang at a local *gasthaus* which became an ad hoc planning locale to discuss and finalize various social protest engagements. Strangely, after joining in a few outings with this group I noticed the lack of violent language or instruments. It was only when we linked up with another group that the mood shifted and I could see those members were outfitted for a different mission. Flak jackets are not common apparel for general protestors.

I overheard language about hitting the base security guards. I spoke privately with a young lady I became the closest to about this matter. She said I probably misunderstood their vernacular. My German was more formal than most German speakers in the area. We kissed and ended the evening early.

I reported this to the base authorities. It was highly likely that, for sheer numbers, the nonviolent protest group would link up with others who didn't share their agenda and end up having little control over this other group's actions. The next major base demonstration at Ramstein AB was going to include violent elements with an operational task-force to engage the security personnel. Exactly how they would strike was unclear at the time of the report. I would have to stay close to this particular group to learn what they had up their sleeves.

The Ramstein protest was the largest event I had the inside track on planning at our favorite Ramstein Village *gasthaus*. Other than coordinating the other protest group, which tripled the demonstrators, the meeting didn't seem any different in tone or

tactics... Chant slogans. Make noise. Search for media. Denounce the occupiers. Chant slogans. Make noise.

The only odd thing I noticed was our start time was agreed by both parties. Our end time was different. My group ends and leaves the area hours before the other group. Scenarios raced through my mind as I became more concerned about what the other group planned to do. It had to be outrageously violent.

Months had passed since I first joined up with the protestors. I became friends with many of them and dated another member exclusively. I never felt out of sorts, since this assignment was part of my military service to my country. And it's not splitting legal hairs to remind myself and others in the future about an American military base having the same status as a diplomatic embassy: it is deemed home soil. Thus an attack on my base is an attack on my country.

But I'm still human, and deep down I know I am befriending many and sleeping with one under false pretences. I kept reminding myself that none of the group was participating in illegal activities. None were facing charges with the local *polizei*.

They were dupes for diabolical forces waging war on the American military presence. But I'm a city kid from Jersey. I don't live in denial. I'm tricking the naive to grab the malevolent—that's the job.

Late morning we arrived at the *gasthaus* to meet up with leaders of the other group. They spoke little, but their eyes told me all I needed to know. It was the eyes of finality, like they were planning to carry out acts of bloodshed. The base increased the front



entrance guard by a power of ten including parking two armored personnel carriers with double machine gun turrets pointed out towards the road.

The increased security boosted my confidence that the criminality about to take place will be an utter failure. Yet my gut was twisted and I had a hard time feeling we had the upper hand. We drove to the combined groups personnel of nearly three hundred and started marching a quarter mile toward the Ramstein entrance. I didn't sense anything out of the ordinary about the chants or the noise; however, the signs of the other group seemed larger and were being held by both hands instead of one.

I started moving in closer while chanting the approved slogan when I saw a long black strip on the back of one of the wider signs. I tilted my head and saw another. I moved over and saw a third one. In closer, I saw shotguns duct taped onto the sign sticks. They were going to shoot their way into the base! Perhaps this evil plan had a chance with two guards, but now there were ten. The shotgun sign holders moved next to each other to form a front line as we marched closer and closer to the entrance. I had to do something.

I simply rushed all three, successfully knocking down two to the ground. I grabbed the signs with guns and tossed them toward the security guards to alert them to the presence of weapons. Contrary to Hollywood cluelessness, guns don't fire if thrown to the ground. The third guy I did not hit to the ground rushed me and took me down. I felt my rib crack again. First in Saudi Arabia now in West Germany. Neither instance worthy of the injury, but I was furious this thug thought he had the advantage. Acting on instinct, I found a broken sign stick and stabbed him in the shoulder. He lunged backward in pain, and as I got up I swept his leg and punched him

so hard in the face that my hand broke. This is why they tell you to control your anger while fighting, because you can make safer decisions. I could have crushed his testicles with my boot instead of breaking my hand. Rage is rarely justified. Thankfully, the guards arrested the other two before they caused any damage.

It was immediately apparent to my group what had happened and who I was in relation to the events that took place. I instructed the guards to let them go and only detain members of the violent group. The order did nothing for my standing. The protesters stared at me the same way you stare at dog shit after you step on it in the park. Seems like a gross violation. The girl who I was dating decided to walk over and inspect my injuries. Once content I wasn't in any danger, she slapped me across the face. Perhaps I am biased in this comment, but I think everyone present in the immediate seven hundred feet area heard the slap. I deserved it. What could I say? She was a good person trying to improve the world. I felt I was in the same category. Too bad I had to wear a mask to get the job done.

29

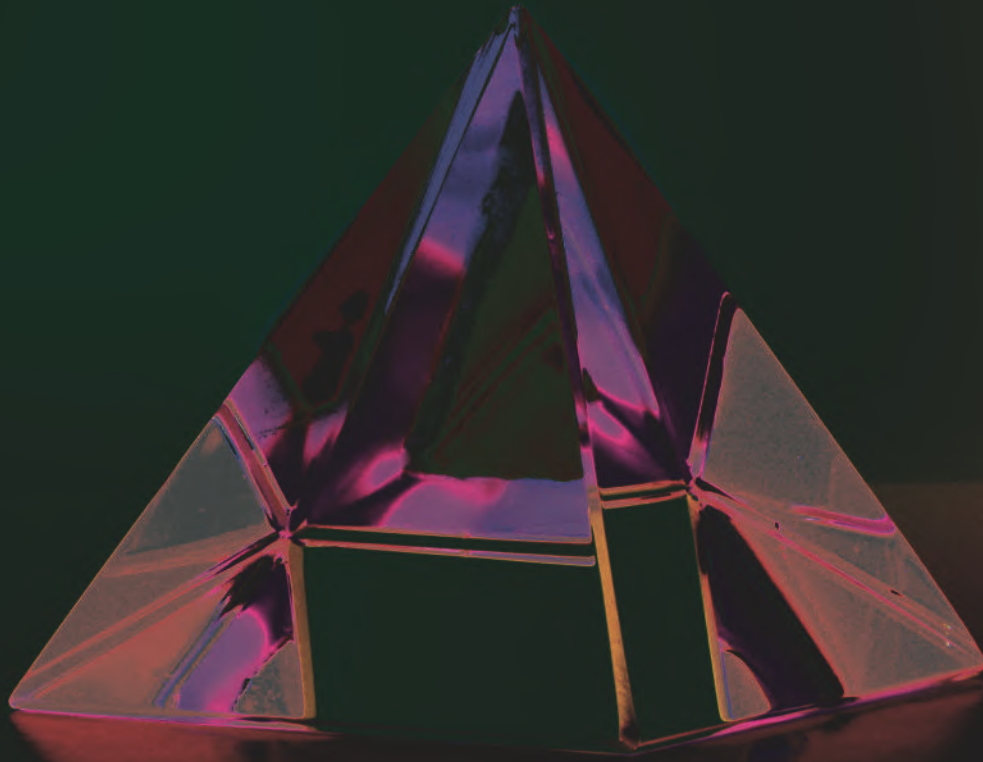
Sorry, Inga, my feelings weren't fake. ■



Mark Antony Rossi is a poet, playwright and host of the literary podcast "Strength To Be Human": <https://strengthtobehuman.podbean.com>. His work is forthcoming in *Ariel Chart*, *Bombfire*, *Earth & Altar*, *Indian Periodical*, and *Route 7 Review*.



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Sci-Fi

Cyber Punk

Speculative Poetry

Utopian / Dystopian

Art / Manga / Photography

Fantasy / Speculative Fiction

The Look-Alike

by

Melodie Corrigan

33

Laura hadn't seen such eyes—watery, blue and riveting—since her great aunt died 20 years earlier. The resemblance—particularly the popping eyes—was uncanny and unnerving.

Lured down the street behind the double, after five blocks, Laura was enticed into the public library. She sunk unto a chair near the 'look-alike' and, head down, glanced at an open book abandoned on the table.

She rustled through the crisp pages of what was a botanical tome. While pretending to admire the delicate plant drawings, her eyes fixated on the elderly woman nearby.

She had heard of *doppensomethings*: a German word for a person's twin who existed somewhere. But her great aunt Edie was long dead, as presumably would be her twin. Maybe this woman was a daughter her spinster great aunt had hidden from the family. No. Any daughter would be in her sixties; this woman was at least 80—the age at which Edie had died. Laura

had been in France when it happened and hadn't learned the details. Later she regretted never telling Edie how much she had admired her. How her courage had inspired Laura to take risks and travel far. (Although unlike Edie she hadn't stayed strong, and returned home to work in the family business).

It was difficult for Laura to see the woman clearly in the dimly lit room; the sun that seeped from the roof dome gave the scene a ghostly aura.

But even with the woman's head bent over a book, the popping eyes were dominant: like large marbles that threatened to burst out of her aunt's head. As a child, she had asked her mother in a frightened whisper what was wrong with her aunt's eyes. Her mother had hissed that they would talk about it later and that evening had explained it was a goiter.

34

Goiter and stocky figure notwithstanding, Edie was the one in the large family who had made a break for it. Left the small farm, left the dusty nearby town, left the province, and, most daring of all, left the country to head for the glamour of New York. New York, the city the family only knew of from the narrative that followed in Edie's letters written on thin flower-edged writing paper. The message sprawled across white expanses and riddled with "ha-has" designed to soften criticisms.

At 17, Edie had settled in an apartment in New York where she lived for the rest of her life. Laura had forgotten the street name but the apartment was 3H.

Discussions about Edie—always in hushed or horrified voices

when Laura, consigned to bed, eavesdropped from her seat at the top of the stairs—revealed a glamorous world. Her grandmother—Edie’s sister—had only ventured 25 miles to a nearby town which had no redeeming features.

Edie had landed a job as a sales clerk at Macy’s department store and over the years settled into her role as part of the store’s ‘family.’ On retirement, she was lauded at a staff party and received some treasured token of appreciation.

There had been talk of a gentleman friend—John—but for some reason they had never married. But the most extraordinary news shared in an early letter was that Edie had attended a party where men had boyfriends who were men. “That’s New York for you,” Laura’s grandmother had said.

35

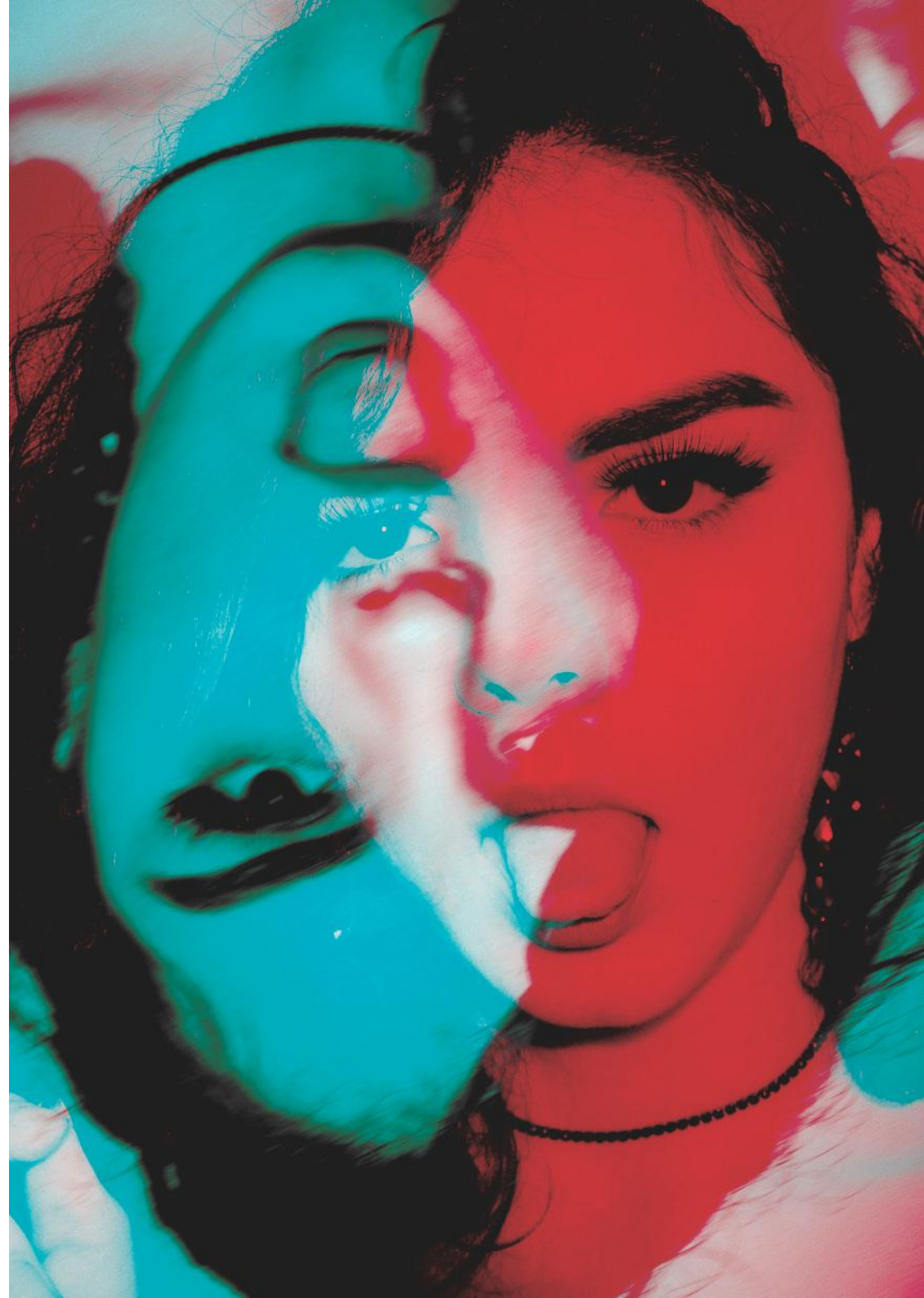
And now, some forty years later, here she was sitting down the table from Edie’s look-alike. Even the flowered floating dress seemed like one her great aunt had worn on her annual visit.

Noting the time, Laura couldn’t decide whether to leave the building or wait. But wait for what? Then the woman looked up, eyes popping in question. “Can I help you, Judy?” she asked.

Judy? That sealed it. Great aunt Edie always called girls or women Judy no matter what their names’ were. Laura decided to ask a question.

“I’m sorry to bother you but you remind me of someone. Can I ask your name?”

“Maybe, what’s yours?”



“Laura.”

“Ah Laura, I’m Edie.”

“Did you live in New York?”

“No secret there.”

“And was your apartment 3H?”

“Still is.”

Before Laura could blurt out “I thought you were dead,” a bell clanged. Startled, she swung her head to the side to hear the announcement. At the sound of a swish, she turned back to find the look-alike’s chair empty.

37

Then she laughed. A week earlier Laura had slipped on the icy sidewalk, a kind stranger had helped her to get up. Except for a few dizzy spells and the initial black out, she had been fine. But this obviously was a side effect. When she had told her fussy husband Adam what had happened in the library, he was furious.

“You’re hallucinating. I told you to go to emergency for an x-ray,” he yelled. “You’ve had a concussion.”

“Are you a doctor?” she asked, sticking out her chin.

“Oh get a life. Edie was dead years ago. A look-alike wouldn’t know her details.”

Maybe Adam was right; she should go for an x-ray. But if she did

and showed any signs of ill health, it might jeopardize her chance of promotion.

She went to the hall phone. When she fumbled for the doctor’s phone number in her address book, a slip of paper fell out. It looked just like Edie’s with pastel flowers along the top and her scrawled handwriting.

“Great to see you, Judy. Hope you’re up to one more adventure. Ha. Ha.”

“Ha, ha,” Laura murmured.

“Are you phoning the doctor?” her husband roared from the living room.

“Sure, sure,” Laura called.

38

She leaned into the wall to steady herself. When she opened her clenched fist, the paper had disintegrated, leaving only a golden stain.

Was she up for one more adventure? Or, more accurately, her first adventure. Although tempted, she had no idea how to make it happen. ■



Melodie Corrigan is an eclectic Canadian writer whose work has appeared in *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Corner Bar Magazine*, *Continue the Voice*, *Sybil*, and *Awakening Voices Literary Magazine*. Please check out: www.melodiecorrigan.com.

The background of the page is a composite image. The top half shows a dark night sky filled with stars and the Milky Way galaxy. The bottom half shows a sunset or sunrise over a body of water, with a silhouette of a sailboat on the left. The sky transitions from a deep blue at the top to a bright orange and yellow near the horizon, with some clouds catching the light. The water is dark and reflects the colors of the sky.

The Draak

by

Robert Pope

As the only man aboard *The Draak* who spoke pure English, I naturally had difficulty of communication. My shipmates came from every corner of the world, from blackest black to the whitest white, gold and yellow, ruddy and red, tan and ochre, all had a representative shipboard. As for teeth, they had not a common number between them.

I had taken passage for parts unknown, having no more home to speak of than the alley cat, though once I had known hearth and home, all of which disappeared when they ferreted out such as myself and sent what family remained to the devil or far reaches of the known universe. Narrowly escaping with my life, what remained of it was hardly worth keeping though difficult to let go.

I no longer traveled to escape vengeance of the Lairds. I kept in motion because I knew no other life; with the disguising of my identity, I had almost forgotten my name. I lent a hand, even if it meant I must swab the deck, as I did not wish to draw attention to myself as different from any of the crew. A man discovers much losing himself among his fellows.

What I took for discipline among diverse crewmen became known to me as fear so deep no man spoke of it. I had never before known sailors of any sort to shy away from complaining of their superiors. I saw it on their faces, and on their backs as well, the scars and stripes of many voyages. The manner of brute that inflicted upon them the order of the scourge, I did not inquire. I kept my head down, my eyes open.

A squat dog on board, a stout, black creature who had it in for me, followed my every movement. I came to know his name as Skipper, though I never saw his better side. As to who owned him, I could not say. He never showed a preference for any man, and I at last came to a conclusion he belonged to the ship, or the ship belonged to him.

41 The first mate was an Argentinian I might have called taciturn, like so many of his countrymen, had he not projected an air of cruelty so pervasive as to be a force of weather, like rain or storm. Sailors on shore referred to him as *Guapo*, which I would have taken as derisive on any other ship. It is possible that a woman had once called him handsome, but that year passed decades earlier.

The silence of the ship unnerved me, each man performing his role without either orders or objections. Even Skipper held his mouth shut at all times, several snagged teeth protruding from his black lips. The number of the crew I placed at twenty-six, well below any barque on which I had sailed, each man responsible for a proportionately larger number of tasks, giving an aspect not so much of nimbleness as friskiness—despite the fact several of them had bid farewell to an arm or leg at some point in their bleak existence.

The only one among them that paid any attention to the hook I wore as left hand had the look of someone considering how such an apparatus might supply his own missing appendage. As a precaution, I wrapped and kept it tucked into my side in my bunk throughout each night. I found the hook useful keeping curious strangers at bay, unless their own depravity far exceeded my own.

Add to this mystery that The Draak had not actually come into port. Myself and two others, both swabbies, had been carried a distance from shore in a rough-hewn dinghy manned by a single, if not singular, burly half-man whose flesh was not visible through the mass of curly black hair that covered not only his massive chin but his entire torso below his neck. He pawed at the air with a long oar as we took each wave, as if the dinghy might leave the sea and break into flight, giving not so much as a glance when the same oar bounced off of and then plunged into the waves—without any expression of surprise or dismay from the boatman.

Dizzy as I was, on being forced to leap into rope netting at the side of the ship, I climbed like a monkey in my scramble to the deck, where I was met by none other than this Skipper, who led me below ship to a solitary bunk, isolated from all others, and left me there without further instruction and without a backward glance. From that moment, I did not hear a human voice until the First Mate pointed at one of our number, garbed in a ragged loincloth and a pastiche of tattoo, smeared with the grime of his labors and lying on the deck with eyes half-open, and he groaned.

In my log, I note this as the twelfth day of my voyage on The Draak.

So exhausted was he, he could barely stand, but rise he did under the gaze of the Mate, and make his way up to the bridge as we all attempted not to pause at our own stations, engaged in our own labors, whereupon he entered the enclosure or cabin, completely blocked to sunlight, from which directly we heard a scream I could scarcely believe could have been mustered by the half-dead sailor, though I acknowledge it must have, following which, I never saw this seaman again, above or below decks. I watched for but failed to witness a burial at sea.

43

At this point, I gauged our number to have fallen to 23. One man had perilously dropped from the crow's nest, hit the gunwale, and bounced into the sea in a spray of his own materials, another slipped over the side and joined the waves, whereupon he was devoured by the sharks, which, previously, I had taken for dolphins riding the bubble and surge of our wake. I decided to take to the sea myself at an auspicious moment with land in sight that never came.

I saw things in the sea I cannot explain, either as hallucination or reality. My fifteenth day at sea, a gigantic octopus or squid—I did not know which—occupied the bow of the ship and had to be sliced away limb by limb, through repeated strokes of our machetes. On the twenty-first, I saw the loops of a green serpent where they rose on the water, the great head exposed at intervals when the sea rushed away from what I hesitate to call its face, its fearsome eyes, the raised snout and dagger-like teeth. This latter took another man, snatching him off the bow and taking him under, to my own great relief, as I hoped never to see them again, either man or beast.



Past this sighting of the serpent, the disappearance of the crew continued apace, one taken by the hideous mermen, two more directed to the bridge, whereupon an horrific shriek ensued, and the man was never seen again, I venture to speculate, in this world. I knew by that time, as who would not, that the ship and crew had been damned to its fate through some mortal sin on the part of its invisible Captain or, perhaps, by each member of the crew in their own path to hell, or both. For my part, I could not help but dwell on my wrong-doing, grievous errors, my slights to women and men even of my own family. Regret grew exponentially, and I saw my torment on the faces of each member of the crew, now that I knew it.

45 Finally, the day arrived on which the Mate drew up before me. An erect fellow was he, with the posture of a figurehead, straight and sturdy as the mizzen mast. On his face he bore the gaze of infinity, of absolute knowledge of my identity, under which I withered like the stricken fig tree under the curse of Christ. As I made my way to the bridge, I could not imagine what awaited me, yet was I glad to set eyes on the Captain and know him, and excoriate him for the beast I knew him to be from the appearance of his crew.

When the door opened to admit me, what awaited I could not have predicted. The finest man I had seen sat at an overly large, roll-top desk, equipped with quill and parchment, whereupon he wrote with great intent, never looking up until he filled the page and set his seal to it in wax. I must call the look he set on me nothing less than caring, filled with his own concern for my well-being. As I am a somewhat tall man, he

had to look up at me for a while, but at last he stood, and I found myself looking up at him.

When he turned to look behind, I saw what, to my curiosity, looked like nothing so much as an enormous bottle, the barrel wide enough that a man could live inside it, and yet the neck or mouth of the bottle so narrow as to deny egress to any but the eels of the sea. As he brought his gaze back to my face, he offered the parchment on which he had written my actual name, not any of those I had affected in years of travel. Though shocked by this alone, I was astonished by the words I read beneath, in his flowing hand, that decreed I was to be stowed inside this bottle and set out to sea on my own.

He must have seen the incredulity on my visage. When I looked once more at the bottle, I could only wonder how he proposed inserting my languishing body through a passage as narrow as my wrist. Our eyes fixed on each other, and I understood he could do whatsoever he wished, and if he wished me inside that bottle—this I believed as surely as the sea around me—I would come to reside within the confines of the bottle, at which point, and frankly against my will, a scream tore from my innards of which I never would have dreamed myself capable at that or any other time in my sordid life.

As I peered out through the glass, seated at the small table I had been allowed, with quill and parchment before me and scant provisions in a chest at my feet, a port opened at the rear of the cabin and from thence I slid out through dark

passageways into the sea far at the trail of the ship. If I make an educated guess, none of my shipmates witnessed my fate, or the firmness with which the cork was secured by our Captain at the lip. Though it has held, I am not quite certain how long it will keep the sea from encroaching upon me, or why I am possessed of sufficient air to breathe or water to drink.

These are not the concerns with which I occupy my mind, of course, as there is nothing I can do to augment my stores. So, as long as provisions hold, so long as my ink does not run dry, I will continue my solitary work, taking comfort in the knowledge I am a message the Captain has sealed in a bottle; only I can carry this story into the world, if the world should ever take notice of my passing in the night. ■

47



Robert Pope has published a novel, *Jack's Universe*, as well two collections of stories, *Private Acts and Killers & Others* (2020) and a chapbook of flash fiction, *Shutterbug*. He has also published stories in journals, including *The Kenyon Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, and *Fiction International*, and anthologies, including *Pushcart Prize* and *Dark Lane Anthology*.





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The Still Point

by

Mary Sheridan

The alpine road ended in a T-junction. Ice-capped peaks rose above pastures of late summer green flecked, bittersweet with tarnished gold. I jolted back to the present from a memory of another time, another place, where I had wandered as I climbed up the mountainside.

I was alone, and didn't know where I was, or rather, didn't know how to get where I needed to go from where I stood, in a Swiss mountain valley. The sun touched the highest peaks of the mountain skyline, and readied for its slip into dusk. The chill that descended from the back-lit ice above me forecast the raw cold that would arrive with nightfall.

A wild animal gnawed at my gut. The familiar back-beat in my chest shifted to an off-beat pounding in my ears that I hoped was a temporary effect of climbing the mountain in the afternoon sun, carrying two fishnet bags filled with baguettes, wine, slices of ham, and chunks of cheese meant to supplement the lettuce and carrots, the tomatoes, peas and apples awaiting harvest in the small garden outside the cabin I was trying to get back to, the cabin owned by friends who took me with them for the weekend and who I had convinced to let me stay while they returned to Geneva for the work week. They'd driven me down the mountain earlier that afternoon and dropped me in the village for provisions. I assured them I'd have no trouble climbing back up the mountain. And I hadn't, until that moment, when memories of other times I'd been lost pestered me into admitting that I have no sense of direction.

Stopping and setting down my bags didn't calm my heart into a slower, deeper rhythm. The animal inside chewed and clawed toward my core. A bitter taste filled my mouth. I stood still and felt the vibration of my call to the universe echo as a plaintive chord, like a banjo playing off-key, through the mountains into space and time.

•••

Ten years later, I'm driving a narrow, twisty road through a tunnel of towering evergreens in Olympic National Park. Sun, filtered through thinning fog, lights the scene with otherworldly glimmer, and striated darkness in a series of concrete

tunnels gives the illusion that I'm passing through a portal into another realm. Glacier-topped peaks rise above the winding road that ends at Hurricane Ridge, a mile above the Pacific coastal route I impulsively abandon for the turnoff that ascends to this place. Chill wind signals a different season than the one I left below.

Wildflowers in a grassy late summer meadow aren't just waving in the wind, they're waving at me, inviting me into their sea of rippling color. I step into the slipstream.

Imperceptibly at first, and then undeniably, the meadow, the flowers, the mountains and any sense of myself as a separate entity dissolve, all surrendering our boundaries in one seamless motion to an ocean of vibration. The air I breathe also breathes me. A desolate note, as from a distant banjo playing off-key, pulses in the field.

In the rarified air of the mountains, where space and time have become uncertain, a tone of distress echoes from ridge to ridge. The syncopated heart rhythm of my young self standing in a Swiss mountain meadow amplifies the desolate note through the space time continuum, projecting it beyond the bends and curves of the natural world, to a still point in the undulating motion of life, a place where past and future are gathered, where particles of a dissolving older self catch a wave and surf the oscillation between my perceptions of what was then and what is now, riding into oneness that holds both the instrument sending the signal and the one receiving it, making the continuum known as me



at once creator and subject of a story that needs help from the future to be told.

Unseen particles of my life force ride waves into a gust of wind galloping through a late Swiss afternoon. A cow wearing a bell around her neck grazes unseen in a pasture just beyond a bend in the road where the wind is headed. The bell responds to the wind's arrival and my young self turns to look toward the breach of silence. "A sign?" I consider as I walk toward the fenced meadow, now in full shadow, where the cow grazes. A memory concurrently forms and reveals a road that winds up from the pasture.

I recognize this scene, either from my ride down the mountain earlier that day or from a message sent by the future. I climb in descending darkness until moonrise reveals the shape of the cabin on the other side of a rocky embankment. I abandon the road to clamber my way toward the cabin door. When I walk inside, the delicious, warm, liquid sensation of melting tension that spreads through me each time I am lost and found again is waiting for me, teaching me that losing my way has its own rewards. ■



Mary Sheridan grew up in Binghamton, New York, the town that Rod Serling once called home. Her first published writing was a regular column in an award-winning subsidiary of *The New York Times*. Her most recent work was published in *Kaleidoscoped Magazine* (UC San Diego). Mary lives on California's Central Coast.

Rude Awakening

by

Kate Meyer-Currey

Let me spin you a tale
Of a hundred years'
Dreaming. I did not
Lie idle for all that
Spellbound time but
Wove a tapestry of
Briars to adorn the
Sleeping chamber of
My mind. Nightmare's
Thorny thicket was
My pleasure-garden:
I was not ensnared
But free to fabricate
My own enchantment
Of soft-napped mossy
Meadows and tufted
Lawns, knotted with
Flowers and fountains
Whose corded jets
Twined and purred
Beside my tented
Bed. I set heraldic
Beasts free from
Shielded cages to
Sit at my feet; the
Lion purred and
Pawed my jewelled
Hem and the unicorn
Was my chosen
Companion, bound
To me with a plaited
Girdle of my golden
Hair. I conjured serving
Maids to share my
Creation; to tease

57



Burrs from my lapdog's
Fleecy pelt or to groom
My chattering monkey;
All were necessary
Detail to my decorative
Retinue, as were the
Timid hares and song
Birds who hovered
Overhead. I reigned,
Inviolate, over my
Private realm; I required
No so-called happy
Ending. The Prince
Was not part of my
Design; merely an
Unwanted intruder
From a man's world;
A figment of patriarchal
Imagination, threatened
By my pleasurable
Solitude. It ended with
A rude awakening; rent
By his hacking sword.
Now, I'm captive, under
The stifling canopy of
A bridal bed; a snoring
Man beside me. I'm
Bewitched by a dream
Of freedom under the
Tight-knit boughs of
Death's impenetrable
Forest, my spine laced
By brambles; my skull
Crowned with roses.

58

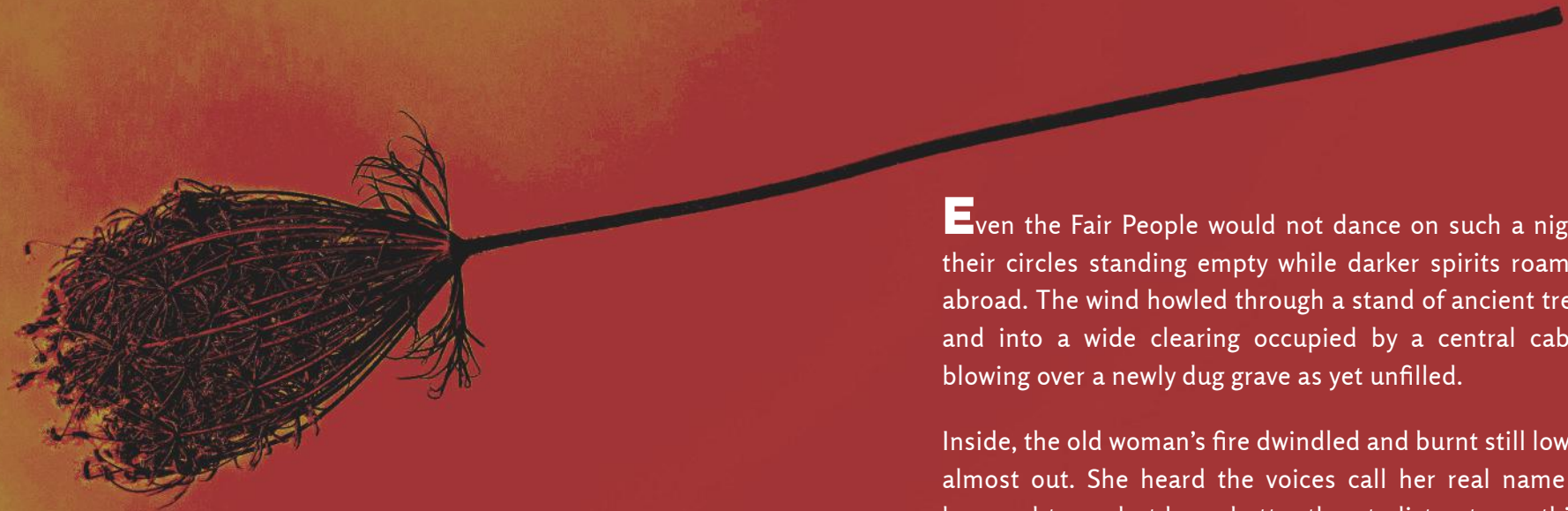


Kate Meyer-Currey was born in 1969 and moved to Devon in 1973. A varied career in frontline settings has fuelled her interest in gritty urbanism, contrasted with a rural upbringing. Her ADHD also instils a sense of 'other' in her life and writing. Publications include: "Family Landscape: Colchester 1957" (*Not Very Quiet*, 2020), "Invocation" (*Whimsical Poet*, 2021), "Fear the reaper," (*Red Wolf Journal*, 2021), and more.

Wood Witch

by

Rebecca Siân Pyne



Even the Fair People would not dance on such a night, their circles standing empty while darker spirits roamed abroad. The wind howled through a stand of ancient trees and into a wide clearing occupied by a central cabin, blowing over a newly dug grave as yet unfilled.

Inside, the old woman's fire dwindled and burnt still lower, almost out. She heard the voices call her real name in honeyed tones but knew better than to listen to anything they said. Only death waited among the gnarled oaks when the Blood Moon bathed the forest in its crimson light.

She could see it through the window as she lit one more candle and then another, almost at the end of her supply.

A black cat dozed by the fire and paid no heed to the voices. It had heard it all before, not impressed.

“You waste your time and mine, and I have little enough of it left. Go and find someone else to bother; leave me be.”

She knew Death would come for her as soon as the last flame died.

A less fatalistic witch might have laid in a better stock of firewood to make sure, or bought more candles, but Eirlys had always believed in fate. Not a damn thing anyone could do to stop it—might as well use the time she had left to set her affairs in order.

61

Speaking of which... she turned her head to look at the large bed in the center of the room. A slight figure stirred and then lapsed back into unconsciousness. The fever had broken at sunset after a fierce three-day battle for a nameless peasant lass with no kin to miss her. The girl arrived half-dead from starvation, exposure, and a lung sickness left too long without treatment, found collapsed on a doorstep unaccustomed to visitors. Part of the reason Eirlys lived in the deepest part of the wood stemmed simply from a dislike of people—the other part that they made her an outcast just for being herself and not what everyone else expected. Rarely did she make visits to town to buy whatever provisions the forest could not provide.

She saw the obvious signs made as she passed by and their gestures to ward off the Evil Eye. The townspeople did not bother to hide their distrust; they took her money and herbal potions readily enough but could not wait to see her leave

again. Mothers clutched snotty-nosed children to their breasts, perhaps fearing she would snatch them away. Eirlys disliked other people’s children on general principle and had never once thought about eating one. The idea made blood fizz in her veins, the effort of not cursing them on the spot almost too much to bear.

She had never given any reason to fear but still they shunned her, superstitious country folk too set in their ways to ever change. Memories of a time almost thirty years ago resurfaced—the flaming torches and faces of her one-time neighbors contorted by hate, voices raised in anger as stupid people listened to an even stupider man who wanted her land and invented tales of black witchcraft to get it. Living alone with only a cat for company only confirmed their suspicions.

62

She ran her hand over the smooth, mole black fur and listened to the purr reach an ecstatic crescendo.

“Join us,” the voices whispered again, silvery, seductive voices that pretended they only wanted to be friends. “We have waited for you so long. Just come out and dance with us in the moonlight.”

“Not a chance,” she said, drawing a long, white handled knife from its sheath to feel the edge. “Not on this night, not tomorrow night, or any other.”

Where had that sharpening stone disappeared to? The girl on the bed moaned, fighting against strong poppy juice and the sleep spell meant to bring her some peace. Something in those wild, haunted eyes suggested she had run away from

something terrifying. Eirlys looked deep into the scrying bowl and added another pinch of black powder to the moon charged waters.

“Sleep, child,” she muttered and then sang a little of the lullaby her own father once sang almost a century ago, stopping when her voice rasped like the hinge on the privy door left too long without oil. Concentrating hard, she peered at the surface and tried to read its patterns, calling on all the spirits of Craft to interpret what had driven the girl into the Wild Wood. The cat opened an eye and then lost interest again when the bowl offered nothing to its advantage. Not men trying to take their pleasure; the powder formed into an unmistakable shape—twisted ribbons of a summer handfasting and the ring that followed. Eirlys laid the bowl down before memories overwhelmed her, wiping the bitter tears away.

“We never even got so far, Eryk,” she whispered as residual magic formed the scrying powder into a skull and crossbones. “I would have married you if you ever stayed in one place long enough to ask me. Nobody told you to run away to play pirates. It would have helped if you had learned to swim first. Only you could drown on your first day at sea.”

The door handle rattled on a latch strengthened with a double iron bar and warding charms. They tried it every year when they failed to draw her out by asking nicely but some of the spirits outside were less patient than the rest.

More dangerous, the rattlers never called out her name. They

tapped on the window glass with bone-white skeletal hands, asking to be let in. Sometimes, they pressed their faces to the pane and looked in at her with avid, ever-knowing, accusatory eyes. Their power buffeted the little hovel but never broke through, however much they tried. Over the years, the whitewashed wattle and daub walls and the smoke blackened bracken thatch had absorbed something of her power, making it a magickal sanctuary as well as a place to call home.

The Old Magic ruled here and had always protected its own, helped by runes of power scratched into every flat surface that could be reached.

Eirlys felt a malign, hate-filled entity trying to force its way through her defenses, stronger than the rest and more determined to possess her. For the last year, she had felt its dark presence, always in the shadows just out of sight, unable to find out why it bore such a grudge. This time, it felt personal, but she had no time to find the reason why, no time for mysteries. On the bed, the girl moaned again, reminding her that the candles would only burn for so long and she still had the final blood ritual to perform.

“Hush, my sweet child,” she reached out and brushed back a lock of sweat darkened auburn hair, the knife in her hand growing heavier. “It will all be over soon.”

The scrying bowl had already told the truth of it—what future awaited if left as Fate intended.

The Three Gray Spinners had only drawn out a short thread,

never meant to get much longer: better this way. Eirlys nodded, making up her mind, even though no one asked her to justify it.

“Better for you,” one of the voices whispered down the chimney but could go no further than the hearth. It quickly dissipated as the warding magic caught it, swift as a viper’s farewell kiss.

“Better for us,” Eirlys told the empty air where it had been only a heartbeat earlier. “Better for us both.”

Her carved wooden box lay open on the only other chair to survive a hard winter, the rest of the set burnt months ago. She could see the precious object laid at the top of her pile: a homemade cloth doll in its best clothes and bright ribbons in its dyed woollen hair, still tied in clumsy pigtails. An idiot smile on the lovingly sewn features once offered comfort to a desperately sick child. Only the doll remained now. She poured herself a tankard of honey ale and then sat down again, trying to clear the onrush of memories as the candle flames burned still lower.

Knowing what must be done and doing it were two sides of the same coin—one a lot harder than the other.

She drank and then raised a toast to all those who had gone before, and all those who would come after. Age had not been kind, her body beginning to fail at last after a lifetime of faithful service, but ale should be savored—too good to rush. Her bones ached, a crushing weariness settling over her like a winter cloak until she knew the premonitions and omens

had been right all along. Even the morning tea leaves predicted it.

Death would pay a visit in the night, the newly dug grave filled by mid-morning.

The banked fire little more than optimistic glowing embers now, two candles gave just enough light to get the job done, but she lit another to be sure.

Her knife hand went into spasm, sending a flare of pain up the arm, numbed, nerveless fingers more like old parchment left too long in the rain. She looked again at the smile on the doll’s face, a treasured relic of a life never really started; a reminder that once she had loved and been loved.

On the bed, the girl stirred again as the knife edge kissed her pale skin, a thin line of blood welling from the cuts.

“Hush child,” Eirlys brushed her hand lightly over a forehead that no longer burned with fever, whispering the words of a spell originally meant to soothe nervous horses in a thunderstorm. It worked just as well on people.

A pale face pressed itself up against the glass and mouthed something too faint to hear above the wind’s howl. It almost broke her concentration as she drew the knife once and then twice across her own palm, barely feeling the pain except for a strange bird-like flutter in her chest that had not been there before. Just a little more time. She pressed the cuts together, to join a woman who had lived too long with an eighteen-year-old girl not fated to see twenty.

Hoping the magic would take hold before her body betrayed her and wasted the opportunity forever, she began the chant, her voice rising high over the noise of the wind in the trees and the rattling door latch.

They called to her again, the new presence strongest of all. Its honeyed invitations had a subtle undertone like drowned heroes bubbling in a swamp, easily ignored. Her hands moved in the sinuous power weaving to join together the threads of old magic and the new, with a little something borrowed from the edges of necromancy. The cat opened its eyes wide and stared directly at a patch of empty air, washed its face, and then went to sleep again.

The Old Gods had come to bear witness but could not hold

67

feline interest for long. Eirlys settled in her chair to wait by the dying fire and felt the bird flutter in her chest again, a wild, irregular pattern that might have worried her if she expected to live past sunrise. Not in this worn out old body anyway. No pain, no worry about making a good end, just like falling asleep. She drifted through her well cataloged memories to make sure they were all there and in good order.

Satisfied, she drifted deeper, her last breath sounding like her lost daughter's favorite lullaby. When she opened her eyes again, she felt the change, like putting on a new set of clothes.

She pushed herself up off the bed, never one to lie down in daylight with a long list of jobs to be done. The black cat



twined around her ankles, easily recognizing his mistress whatever she might look like.

She looked at the hearth and the corpse slumped in its chair, a cooling collection of worn out flesh and wrinkled wind-weathered skin, looking even older now that life had passed her by. Eirlys studied her empty shell without a shred of emotion and wondered why it had taken her so long to make the switch—always finding a reason to put it off for another week and then the next. Now, she wished she had stopped making excuses and done it years ago.

She had already picked out the spot and dug a grave in the sunniest part of the clearing, written a nice funeral speech and rehearsed it until she knew it backwards. Few of the townspeople would mourn the solitary old witch who lived in the woods, but she did not care two hoots about them. On the first day of the rest of this life, birds sang their morning songs; the rain-charged air smelt of bluebells, honeysuckle, and wild thyme warmed by the sun.

One last ritual remained—giving her old body back to the earth so the new one could run sky-clad along the secret trails and enjoy a second youth in the Wild Wood. A chance to start again, and this time, she intended to make the most of it.

The girl had been fleeing a forced marriage; you did not need a scrying bowl or the power of second sight to know that. Never a choice in the matter but now she had a chance to make them pay—make them all pay. If any man ventured into the woods to look for her, he would not find a frightened little

rabbit waiting for him but an experienced woman of the world.

She had known enough soldiers and sellswords in her long, eventful life to have built up an impressive collection of curse words and creative threats, the ability to swear fluently in three different languages. They also taught her to fight dirty and never back down, to always finish what your opponent started or strike the first blow before they knew what hit them.

As she blew out the last stub of candle, a wisp of dove-gray smoke curled up into the thatch as a declaration of intent but also a promise. If the spurned suitor just happened to come a-courting, he was in for an unpleasant surprise. ■



Rebecca Siân Pyne writes largely in the speculative fiction and historical genres; fiction credits include *Curating Alexandria*, *Aurora Wolf*, *Sanitarium*, *Mad Scientist Journal*, *Hungur*, *Phantaxis*, *Neo-Opis* and *Bête Noire*. Poetry has appeared in *Voice of Eve*, *Grand Little Things*, and *In Layman's Terms*. She took part in a theatre script writing project (Playpen 2018-19) with Scriptography Productions, Aberystwyth, with a subsequent performance at the National Library of Wales.

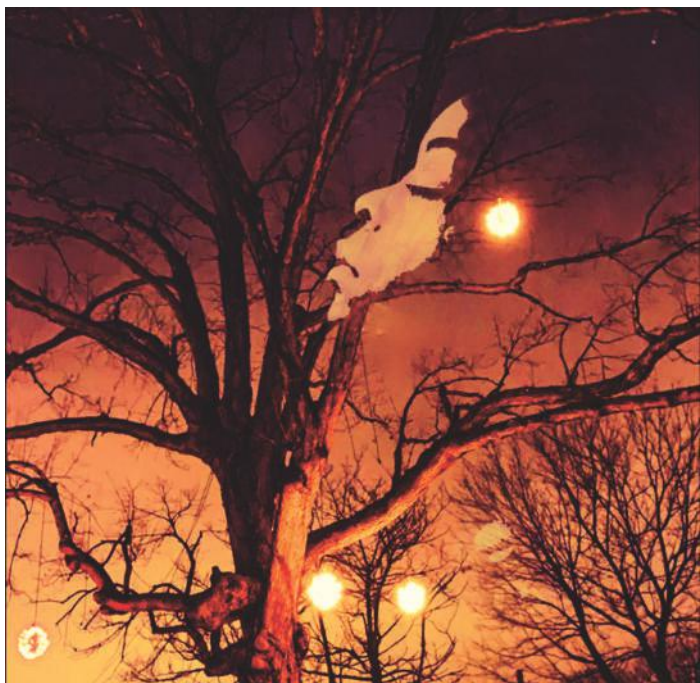
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by Jim Zola

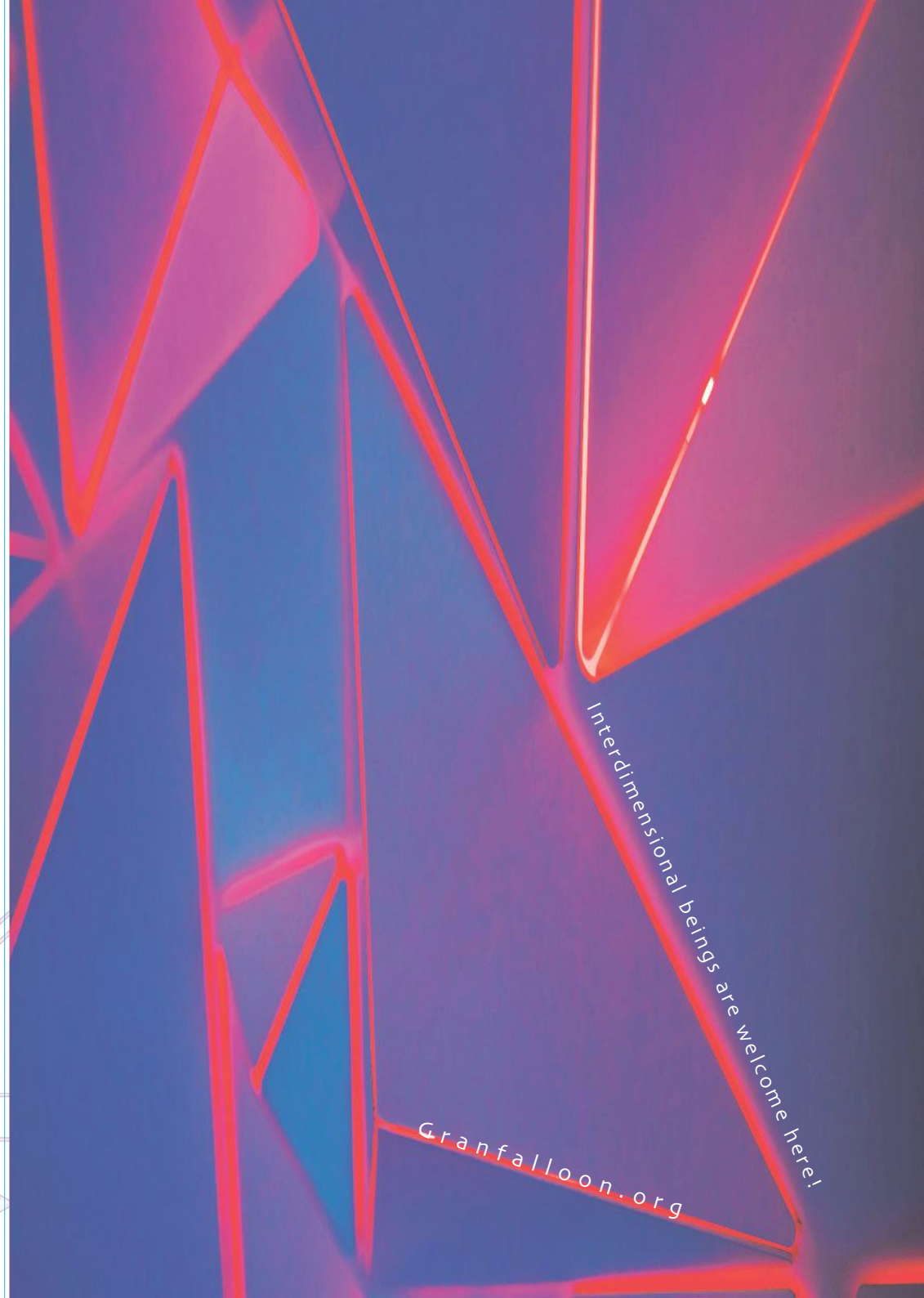
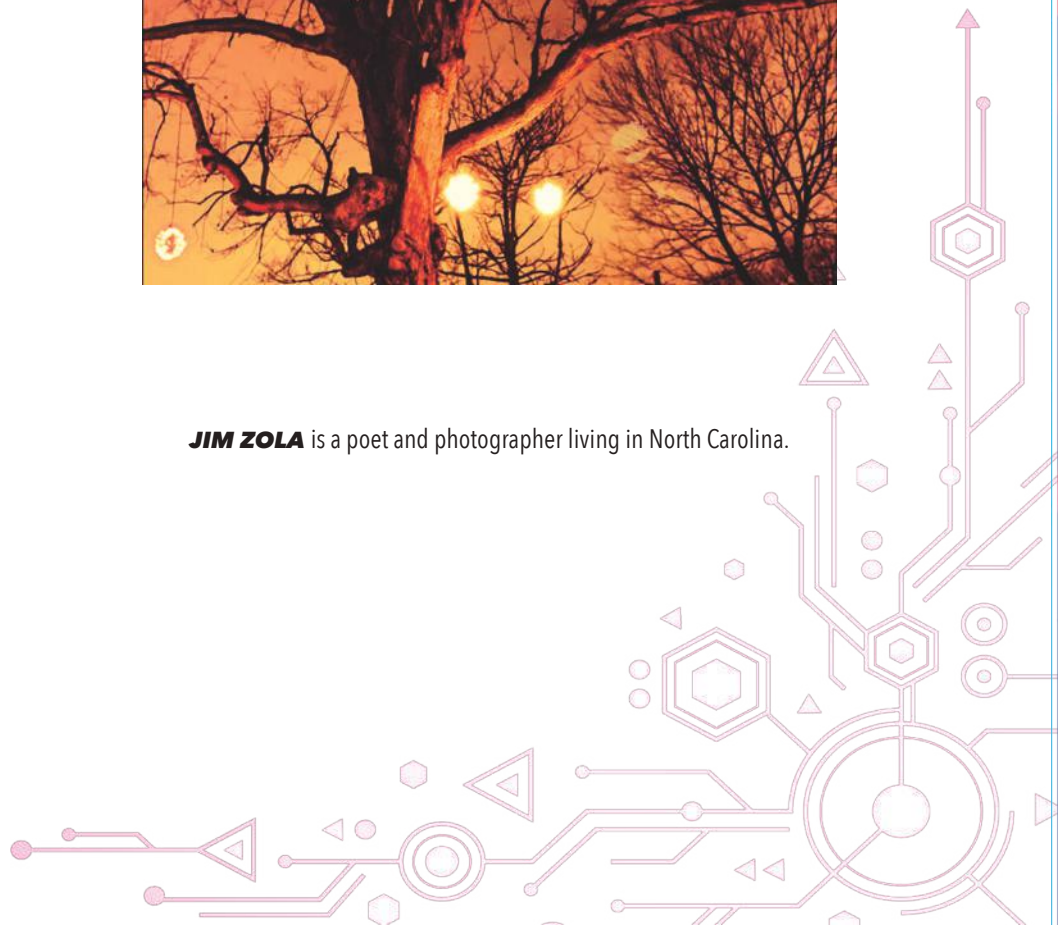
Granfalloon is pleased to present a
selection of digital photo art by Jim Zola.







JIM ZOLA is a poet and photographer living in North Carolina.



Interdimensional beings are welcome here!

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Passing the Smell Test

by

Rex Caleval

77

“Mr. Sloan, you didn’t know anything about electronics or computers before, correct? Never taken a course or gone to a trade school?”

A small man looked up from his desk, smiling broadly. “Nope, not a thing. I always found that stuff a little intimidating. Thought I’d embarrass myself if I tried to use any of it.” He patted the computer on the desk. “And now, I built this thing with my own two hands, got it all set up, and it works like a charm. Plus, I know how to use it and all the peripherals. I hadn’t even known they were called peripherals. Just can’t thank you enough, Mr. Sherman. You too, doctor, of course.”

The tall man standing behind him patted him on the back. “We’re glad to be able to help, right, Dr. Kent?”

“Certainly,” replied the woman next to him. “But I want to

confirm that you’re not having any issues with the patch. No headaches, pain, blurred vision? No motor control problems? Most important, no trouble with memory integration?”

“I feel fine, no headaches or anything. Nothing like that the whole time.” Sloan continued, looking confused. “What’s memory integration?”

“Remember, we talked about it before we started, how you might end up with memories that you felt sure weren’t yours, and get fixated on them. It’s been a big problem in the field for a long time, so…”

Sherman cut her off. “But we were sure we had it solved, and it looks like we were right. You haven’t had any symptoms like that, have you, Mr. Sloan?”

“Right, I remember now,” came the reply. “No, nothing like that. Been fine right from the start.”

“Well, that’s it then,” said Sherman. “Mr. Sloan, you’re an expert in electronics, permanently, and all it took was a little outpatient surgery. We should be able to help a lot of people with this.” He glanced over at Kent, then back to Sloan. “Why don’t we get some lunch to celebrate?”

Sloan stood up from the desk. “Good idea. I’ll run across the street to the burger place. Mmm, I can smell it from here. I know it’s not fancy, but their stuff is great, I promise. Let me get it; it’s the least I can do.”

“Sure, that sounds fine. We’ll just get the final paperwork

78

ready for you to sign while we wait.” As the small man left, Sherman shared a smile with Kent. “Looks like it worked perfectly. We should go ahead with the meeting.”

She looked pensive for a moment, but then nodded. “You’re right. I don’t entirely like it, but we’ll need a backer in the long run. I’ll get the documentation you’ll need for tonight ready. Set it up.”

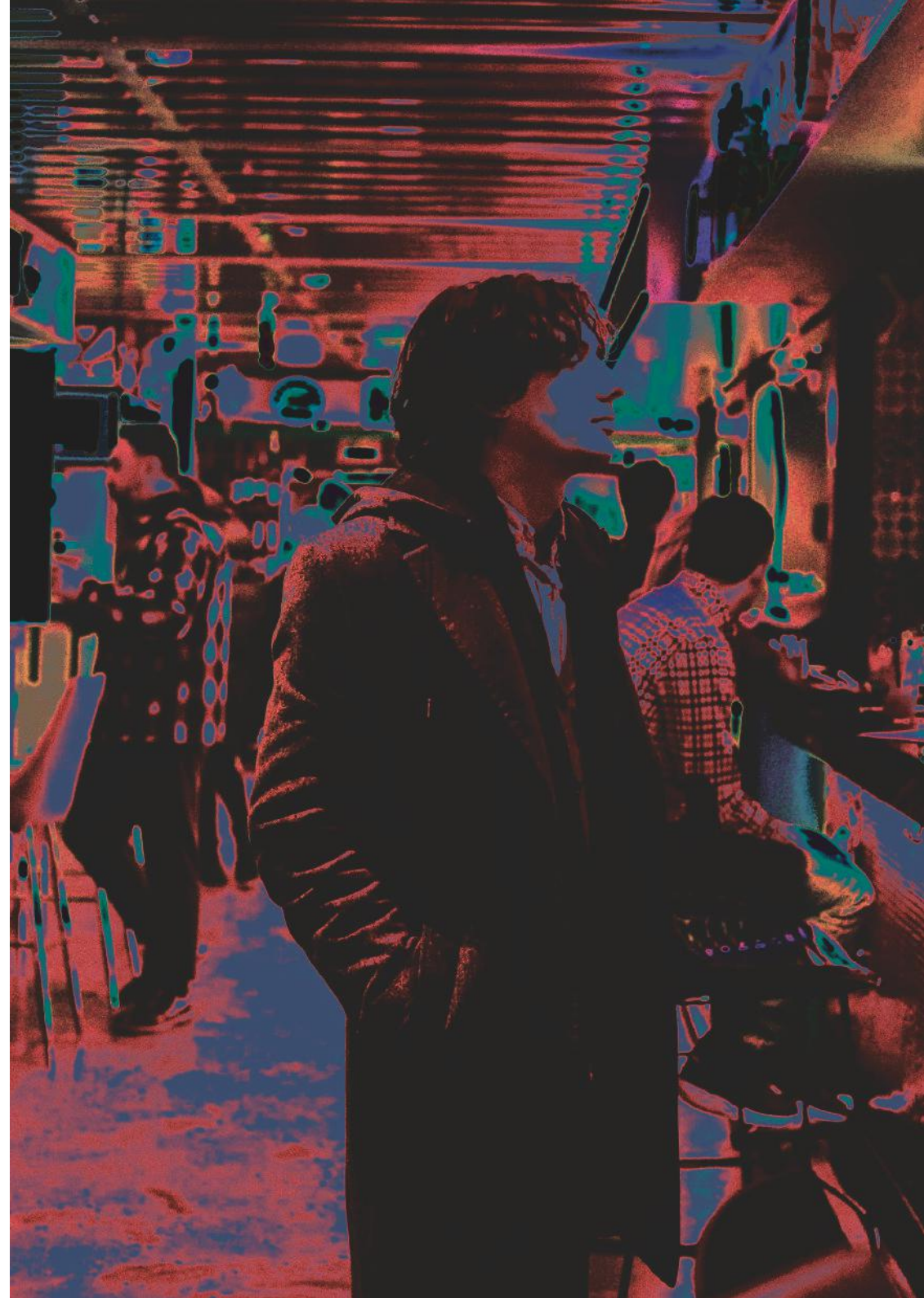
...

Later that night, Sherman walked into a busy sports pub. “I’m here to meet Mr. Breckenridge,” he said to the host at the door. “He was supposed to have a back room reserved.”

“Yes, that’s right,” answered the host. “He’s expecting you, just through there.” He pointed to a frosted glass door with a sign that read ‘Reserved for Private Function.’

“Thanks,” said Sherman, then wound his way through the tables to the door, tapped on it, and went in. The noise from the pub faded as he closed the door behind him, and he turned to see two people waiting on the far side of a table. A man stood up to greet him, while a thin young woman with several facial piercings reached into a case on the table in front of her. She took out an electronic device with a wand connected to some sort of control box.

The man spoke. “Mr. Sherman. I’m Breckenridge. Good to meet you. This is my associate, Hazel. She’s going to do a quick scan before we begin, to make sure there are no unwanted eyes or ears about. This scan will include you and





whatever you've brought with you. Is that a problem for you?"

Sherman looked a bit surprised, but shrugged. "No, that's fine. Is it really necessary?"

Breckenridge chuckled as Hazel began scanning with the wand. "Since you were able to set up this meeting, you must know who I work for, and there's no reason to mention it further. You must also have at least a basic idea of what it is that I do for them."

"I'm told it's referred to as speculative research."

"As good a term as any," said Breckenridge. "Our organization is very large, and we find it helpful to keep up with developments in areas that, on the surface, don't have much to do with our business. Occasionally, we also get meeting requests like yours, where it's not easy to see what interests we might share. Looking into these things could certainly be considered speculative. Because of this, we occasionally get overzealous people who try to find out what we're researching, and who we're meeting with. Thus, the scan." He glanced over at Hazel.

"Clear," she said. "The usual?"

Breckenridge nodded. "Thanks, Hazel. I'll be along in a while."

She put the scanner back into her case and removed a different device, then placed it on the table beside a pitcher

of water. Then she went through the door into the pub.

“Doesn’t say much, does she?” said Sherman.

“Hazel’s interpersonal skills aren’t her strongest suit, but she’s very good at what she does,” answered Breckenridge as he reached forward to push a button on the device. “There. This is a signal jammer. You can speak plainly now, if you like. I can’t promise to do the same until I find out what it is that you have to tell me.”

Sherman sat forward. “Fine, that suits me. As you said, I know who you work for. I’ve got a proposal I think you’re going to like, but it will take some explaining. You must have done some checking up on me before coming. Do you know what I and my associate have been working on?”

83

“You recently formed a small charity with a Dr. Jennifer Kent, who is an expert in memory transfer. Something about job retraining for people with brain injuries, I think? I’m hardly the man you’d talk with about a simple charitable appeal, and a bit of checking shows that you’ve done work something like mine. It seems that you’re acting as an intermediary for the doctor just as I do for my employer, and that whatever it is you want to discuss has to do with her field of expertise. Is that correct?”

Sherman nodded.

“That field is thought to be untenable,” continued Breckenridge. “Although copying specific memory engrams has been proven possible, too many collateral memories

come with them. The recipient brain effectively rejects them, much like the body can reject an organ transplant, but the effect is psychological rather than physical. The experimental recipients all ended up with mental problems, some quite severe.”

Sherman’s eyes widened. “Wow, you really found out a lot in one afternoon. That’s a good thing, though, because it’ll save me sharing the background. Dr. Kent has made a breakthrough, and if you’ll bear with me a bit, I’ll explain how I think it could benefit your employer.”

“All right, tell me about it.”

“First, everything you just said is correct. As an example, if we want to copy the electronics expertise in someone’s brain, and give that expertise to someone else, it’s theoretically possible. But when we actually try it, we get many other memories as well, and the recipient suddenly has memories of people they’ve never met, places they’ve never been, and so on. They realize this, and can’t successfully integrate the memories.” Sherman paused for a sip of water. “Dr. Kent realized that, since we can’t entirely control which collateral memories are taken, there need to be no memories to take which could be jarring in that way.”

84

Breckenridge considered this, a slight frown on his face. “How could that be accomplished? The only ways I can think of are quite distasteful.”

Sherman shook his head. “No lobotomies or drugs, nothing like that. We use amnesiacs for our donor engrams. People



who have lost the ability to recall any old memories, but are otherwise normal. They come to us through our charity. There aren't too many of them, of course, but they do exist. We teach them a skill, like electronics from our earlier example. While we do that, we can closely monitor their brain activity, so we have a more specific idea than ever before of exactly where their new memories are stored. Besides that, the other thing we do is to ensure that all new memories created are very generic, so they'll be familiar to almost everyone and so not be rejected."

"How can you do that?"

"We teach them to focus on objects and places, not people," said Sherman. "Having a memory of a person that you know you've never met is the common thread from those early experiments, and nothing causes rejection faster. But since we're starting from scratch, we work hard to make sure that our donors don't make strong associations with people. We interact with them as little as possible, use people with plain faces and voices, and teach them to focus on items and generic places. We work in areas with no unusual sights, just common ones like gas stations and stores that everyone knows. But what we've found works best are taste and smell."

Breckenridge sat forward. "Why do they work best?"

"If you look into it, you'll find that taste and smell are closely intertwined. Many experts say that taste and smell combine to produce what we know as flavor. And smell, in particular, is very strongly associated with memory. You've probably

experienced it yourself." Sherman smiled. "Have you ever had a scent immediately bring back a memory? An example that many people share is the smell of bread or cookies reminding them of their childhood, when their mother or grandmother was baking. I've had that one myself."

"Yes, I know what you mean," said Breckenridge, looking interested now. "How do you make that work for you?"

"While our donors are learning their skill, we keep a well-known smell in the air, and when they're successful in using the skill, we make it stronger. That way they associate that smell with the feeling of accomplishment. We do the same with food, and associate taste in the same way. When the skill engrams are later copied, the memories of the tastes and smells are stronger than the others, and associated with the skill, so they tend to be the collateral memories. And the other memories, of the common items, stores, and such, are ones that practically everyone has. They're not jarring enough to cause rejection."

Sherman leaned forward in excitement. "We have successful trials of this. The reason I used electronics as my example earlier is that we've actually done that skill. We implanted electronics expertise into someone who was very technologically challenged, using only a short outpatient surgery, and there are no side effects at all. If you want to know how to do something, now you can, and you don't have to put in the effort of learning it yourself. You can have the knowledge implanted, quickly and safely."

Breckenridge looked thoughtful. "I'll admit, that sounds

like an amazing breakthrough. But how does it apply to my employer? Spell it out for me.”

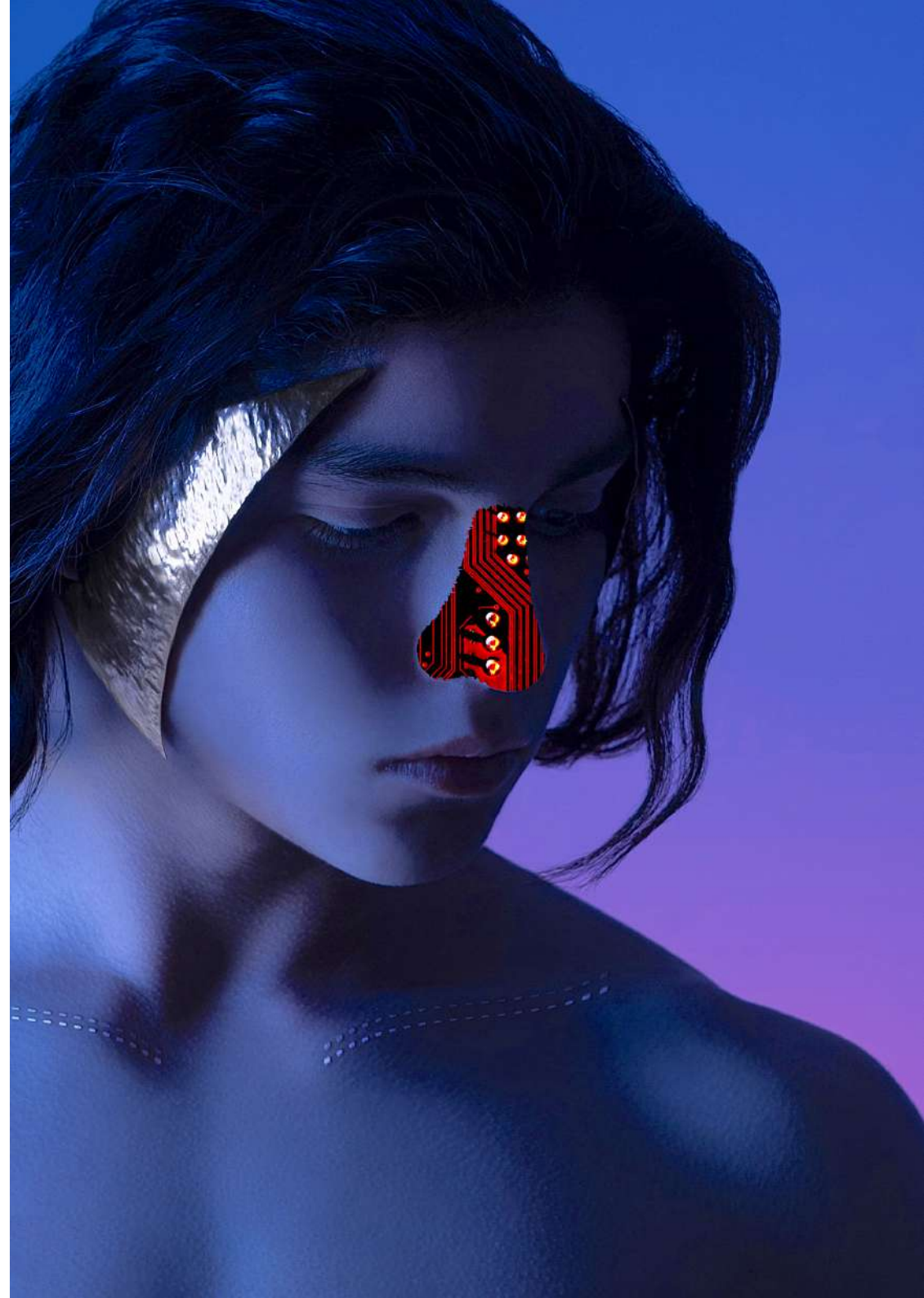
Sherman leaned back, grinning. “This process works. I’ve got documentation here for you that proves it. Millions of people will be getting skill implants, maybe tens or even hundreds of millions. And we decide what tastes and smells are associated with their use. How would you like everyone who gets that electronics implant to get a pleasant memory of how much they like your employer’s burgers along with it?”

Breckenridge offered his hand. “Mr. Sherman, I think we’ll be able to work something out.” ■

89



Rex Caleval lives in Regina, Canada, where he spent twenty years as an air traffic controller. Always an avid reader with story ideas popping into his head, he decided to try writing a few, and has been pleased to find that some people like them. His work has been published by *Daily Science Fiction*, *Every Day Fiction*, *365 Tomorrows*, and *Swords & Sorcery*, among others. Links to his stories which are available online can be found on his Facebook author page.



Astral Travels with Jack London

by

Benjamin Breen

Twenty times a day, a catamaran sets out from the Northern California town of Larkspur. The vessel traces a graceful arc southward toward the San Francisco Ferry building, passing outcroppings of red boulders, low hills of golden grass, and the occasional houseboat. Before long, the skyline of San Francisco appears, pearly white and silver towers surmounting the permanent bank of fog that shrouds the Golden Gate. The tourists who throng at starboard to take in the view rarely notice that another landmark looms directly behind them. San Francisco building itself, of course, is as stern as one would expect a maximum-security penitentiary to be—all stained concrete walls and grim, cathedral-like buttresses. But the landscape is enchanting. At night, with crickets humming in the hills and mist-shrouded stars glowing above San Francisco, the juxtaposition feels dreamlike, hallucinatory. It is here, in this prison amid paradise, that the action of Jack London's *The Star Rover* plays out.

London's sole foray into the realm of science fiction and fantasy is simultaneously a hard-bitten, minimalist monologue about life in solitary confinement and an exuberant tour of the universe.

The prison's environs are disarmingly beautiful. The

tour of the universe.



The book's narrator, Darrell Standing, moves disarmingly from the agony of his confinement in a straitjacket to his travel amidst the stars equipped with a glass wand that allows him to access an infinity of past lives, including a fourth-century hermit, a shipwrecked seal hunter, a medieval swordsman, and a confidant of Pontius Pilate. It is a novel about sensory deprivation in a shared reality, and sensory overload in a private one.

93

This is a deeply eclectic book. It borrows liberally from the forebears of the fantasy genre: fairy stories, Norse legend, Greek myths. But it also manages to include feuding UC Berkeley scientists, "dope fiends," Neolithic hunter-gatherers, kimchi, and a journalistic exposé of the modern prison system. The bizarre multiplicity is precisely the point. London's narrative does many things, but it always seems to circle back to the question of how the worlds encompassed within a single consciousness can interfere

with the shared reality of modern society. As we hurtle towards a near future of immersive virtual reality and unceasing digital connectedness, *The Star Rover* has much to tell us.

The novel's evocation of confinement sprang from a painful first-hand experience. London grew up impoverished and fatherless, and he lived rough as a teenager. During the winter of 1894 he served thirty days in the Erie County Penitentiary in Buffalo, jailed for the crime of vagrancy at the age of eighteen. The grimness of this wintry prison stint stuck with London. "Man-handling was merely one of the very minor unprintable horrors of the Erie County Pen," he wrote in his memoir *The Road* (1907):

I say "unprintable;" and in justice I must also say indescribable. They were unthinkable to me until I saw them, and I was no spring chicken in the ways of the world and the awful abysses of human degradation. It would take a

deep plummet to reach bottom in the Erie County Pen, and I do but skim lightly and facetiously the surface of things as I there saw them.

London's experiences of prison and riding the rails in the fallout of the Panic of 1893 radicalized him. He joined the Socialist Labor Party in 1896 and began giving fiery speeches in Oakland parks. By the time he began *The Star Rover*—which originally entered the world as a magazine serial in February 1914—London drifted away from Socialist politics. Yet the narrative retains a vein of gritty realism that recalls the work of his friend Upton Sinclair. The central character Darrell Standing's confinement in "the jacket" was inspired by London's interviews with Ed Morrell, a former Old West outlaw who had suffered a brutal period of confinement in San Quentin. Amidst his star roving, Darrell Standing also finds time to reflect on the evils of the Philippine-American War: "It was laughable to behold Science prostituting all the

might of its achievement and the wit of its inventors to the violent introducing of foreign substances into the bodies of black folk."



94

London was wrapping up the writing of *The Star Rover* when the First World War began. Although he couldn't have anticipated the looming cataclysm of August 1914, London's personal life had been in shambles since the previous summer. That August, his beloved country estate, Wolf House, had burnt to the ground under mysterious circumstances. In the same year, he penned *John Barleycorn*, an autobiographical novel about

what London, a severe alcoholic, called “the clear white light of alcohol.” Olivia Laing, in her fabulous book *The Trip to Echo Spring: On Writers and Drinking*, observes that alcoholic novelists often circle around their disease in their fiction, never quite acknowledging the extent of their own denial. London’s self-described “alcoholic memoir” manages, somehow, to dance around its central subject, never fully acknowledging the substance abuse that would kill him at age forty. “Read *John Barleycorn* and you will soon enough discover what ails him,” wrote one of London’s acquaintances. “The tragedy is that he does not even seem to know how far gone he is.”

Yet London, at some level, did know it. His writings in this period reveal a keenly intelligent man attempting to work through the metaphysics of his own addictions. We see this in *John Barleycorn*’s personification of alcohol intoxication as a dialogue with a nebulous force that London calls “the White Logic.” We see it in the same

book’s references to “Hasheesh Land... the land of enormous extensions of time and space,” and in the odd detail of Darrell Standing using needles to escape his prison cell in *The Star Rover* (London had become an IV morphine user by this time). And we see it in the central motive force of *The Star Rover*, which is propelled not by drugs or drink but another form of altered consciousness—the hallucinations brought on by sensory deprivation.

The book, in short, centers on that famous concept of another drug-taking adventurer-writer, Arthur Rimbaud: “the systematic derangement of all the senses.”

It is tempting to speculate about the degree to which London also found inspiration in the various occult currents running through the bohemian circles of the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1910s. It was a time and place in which members of Aleister Crowley’s *Ordo Templi Orientis* might meet the first wave of American Buddhists, or

a young Gertrude Stein cross paths with John Muir. *The Star Rover* certainly channels the cosmopolitanism of the Bay Area in this pre-War era. Standing’s astral projection borrows from the aesthetics of post-Victorian occultists, just as his astral travels reflect London’s fascination with the lands across the Pacific. In one passage, Standing tries to use his bizarrely detailed knowledge of kimchi (“the best kimchi is made by the women of Wosan”) to convince his fellow inmates that he has tapped into a previous life as a shipwrecked sailor in Korea “who through various births and deaths, bequeathed his experiences to me, Darrell Standing.”

There is something here of the eighteen-year-old Jack London’s desire to be what he called “a brain merchant.” Reading as much as nineteen hours a day (by his own perhaps unreliable count), London studied for his entrance exams at UC Berkeley with an urgency that almost

suggested an erasure of the self, a desire to mentally inhabit other lives through books. Standing goes a step further: with his astral projection, he becomes these other lives, and the reader can follow him.

This desire to gain access to worlds beyond the self carried over from London’s obsessive self-education to his uncontrollable drinking. As London put it in 1913, there are two types of alcoholics: the first are those who drink to numb consciousness, abandoning reality in favor of “pink elephants” (the first use of the term in print, it would appear). The second seek a drunken brain and not a drunken body—an escape into creativity rather than oblivion. London reckoned himself among the latter camp, and we might read *The Star Rover* as an extended exploration of London’s own attempts to harness sensory derangement to creative ends.

Darrell Standing also likens his hallucinatory visions of astral projection to what “men enjoy in drug dreams, and deliriums.”

This, too, was a form of escape that London knew well. His most recent biographer, Alex Kershaw, describes London's drug chest—filled with “strychnine, strontium sulphate, aconite, belladonna, morphine” and opium—as “the most important object in his life.”

Yet despite its themes of captivity, addiction, and murder, *The Star Rover* is also a celebration of the power of storytelling to overcome per-

sonal misery. Standing's fantasies are an escape from reality, but, London seems to argue, a healthy escape. “Incessantly to remember,” narrates Standing, “means obsession, lunacy. So the problem I faced in solitary, where incessant remembering strove for possession of me, was the problem of forgetting.” To record everything, to forget nothing—Standing's malady is familiar to us because it is ours as well. Perhaps the joyous and unrestrained creativity of *The Star Rover* suggests a solution. ■



Benjamin Breen is an Assistant Professor of history at UC Santa Cruz. He is the author of the book *The Age of Intoxication: Origins of the Global Drug Trade* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).



The 99

by

Kirtan Desai

99 The singularity and immortality arrived hand in hand and rather abruptly. With the invention of the Graphene Unimolecular Friable Filigree, affectionately known as ‘The GUFF,’ humanity finally had in its possession an electronic, AI-mediated vessel for the soul.

But, you can always count on the universe to furnish a ‘but,’ there was a boundary condition that couldn’t be surpassed: The GUFF didn’t function without an Einsteinium-triiodide-7 seed crystal with a half-life of 5 billion years implanted in each nodule of the graphene matrix, and there was only enough Einsteinium-triiodide 7 in the universe until you reached Nevinsky’s Limit — 99 souls’ worth, to be exact.

Professor Cointreau, a humanoid manifestation of the GUFF hovered in the air above their desk, lost in thought, holding a holographic pipe... ‘Only one spot left,’ they mumbled, 98 voices cohering into a single audible waveform. ‘One spot,’ they kept repeating in their head until the words formed a little ditty. Then, suddenly came the magnanimous chorus: ‘Our method has

gotten us this far!’

Their method had gotten them to 98. The first ninety-eight souls in human history to taste immortality—the 99th, ‘TBD,’ as they now scribbled on their virtual notepad, drawing fuzzy lines around the letters. Cointreau tapped their imaginary pen rhythmically against the ‘paper’ in staccato bursts.

The music in their head stopped abruptly.

“The last one’s always the hardest, right?” Their secretary’s voice brought them back to the world that existed outside their collective mind. “Your three o’clock is here, what shall I...”

“Oh yes, yes—I haven’t forgotten. Send her in, Ichabod!”

“Dr. Cointreau, an embodied construct of The GUFF?! I can’t describe what a pleasure it is to actually meet you!”

100

“Yes, I have 98 elements, and hopefully a 99th will be added to us when we are done here—please have a seat, Dr. Oloye.”

“Call me Poto.”

“Very well, Poto.” Cointreau smiled, “Can Ichabod bring you a drink?”

“No, thank you.”

“Well, let’s get to it, then, Poto...”

“It’s truly amazing isn’t it?” Oloye interrupted with a smile before Cointreau could speak.



“What’s amazing?”

“The GUFF!”

“Quite.”

“I mean, the fact that there is only enough Einsteinium-triiodideo-7 in the universe until you reach... Ninety-nine bloody souls—wow, I really wouldn’t want to be in your position right now!” Oloye let out a puff of air followed by a hearty laugh.

“We have to trust the method.”

“Your method.” Oloye smiled, pointing at Cointreau.

Cointreau nodded.

“Dr. Oloye—Poto...” Cointreau corrected themselves and adopted a more serious tone, “Do you believe in a higher being?”

102

“I do—the GUFF is the most supreme being to ever exist!”

“An impressive answer... Now, there’s no reason to doubt your enthusiasm or question your unparalleled intellect and achievements—you’re the only scientist in the world to have received three Nobel prizes in disparate fields. But...”

“But?”

“You can always count on the universe to furnish a ‘but,’” Cointreau said, “*But* that’s not the only criteria we use.”

Oloye let out a sigh of relief. “Fair enough! All I ask is for you to allow me to make a case for myself.”

Cointreau's holographic cat, Orange, meowed loudly and scurried off.

"Alright then, the rest of the interview will take place in a simulation of The GUFF," said Cointreau, ignoring the cat, "Please prepare yourself for temporary transfer."

"Oh, I was hoping you would say that... And, doctor, I've been ready for this my entire life!"

Quite suddenly, an apparatus akin to surgical lights in an operating room was activated. It made Oloye feel a bit lightheaded. After a few moments of disorientation, an initially fuzzy image coalesced in her mind—she was 7, in the living room of her parents' home, the walls lined with bookshelves.

A glitch—the image was overrun by static.

"What's happening?" Cointreau cried.

In a matter of seconds, their immortal soul would be silenced forever.

Oloye had switched on a holographic computer at a desk. "I'm uploading a little something to your filigree," she said.

Within seconds of uploading the virus, the 98 carefully chosen and vetted members of The GUFF, including Cointreau, were booted out. Oloye's consciousness now presided solely over The GUFF while her body could go on with life as usual.

"What have you done?" echoed Cointreau's voice as they receded into nothingness.

"This has been my destiny since the day I was born—you were all just too dumb to figure it out!" Oloye calmly exclaimed.

Indeed, the young Poto Oloye had thought about the possibility of immortality mediated by machine intelligence all the way back when she was just 6 years old, and she had designed an algorithm to hijack any device built to act as a vessel for human consciousness when she was 8. All she needed was an access point, conveniently provided by the audience with Cointreau and invitation into the simulation.

This was how Oloye secretly took over The GUFF and repopulated it with 98 of her own associates.

'My goal is to advance scientific knowledge,' Oloye said to themselves.

In the first year after Oloye's seizure of the GUFF, hundreds of serious scientific problems were solved, including a theory to unify all of physics. Millions of scientific treatises were created and thousands of volumes of book-length manuscripts churned out.

But, you can always count on the universe to furnish a 'but,' Oloye wasn't the last one to hijack The GUFF. Over time, others would find creative ways to take control of the quantum filigree, kicking out the existing scientific dynasty and bringing in their own gang of 'temporary immortals' with them, even though The GUFF was fortified immensely thereafter.



The most memorable of the hijackers created 99 holographic copies of his narcissistic self to reside in The GUFF; however, this destabilized the filigree so much that they were booted out almost immediately. This briefly created a vacuum where The GUFF remained empty for years until a new method to choose the 99 was developed.

A final cohort, which took over about a century before human extinction, lasted the longest...

And they kept going—unchallenged.

Several billion years passed. The 99 continued to think, construct models of reality, and churn out calculations, long after almost all life on the surface of the Earth had ceased to exist.

The last conscious thought that ever flowed through the quantum filigree of The GUFF was the following equation: $v = \left(\frac{2KE}{M}\right)^{\frac{1}{2}}$, which is used to calculate the expansion velocity of the remnants of a supernova.

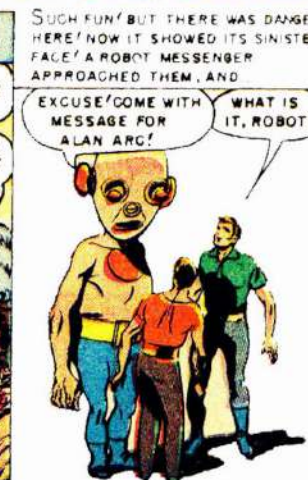
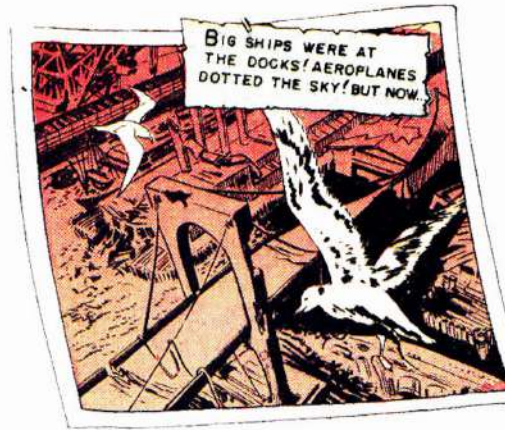
It took a fraction of a second to complete the calculation, and as soon as they were done, the planet was engulfed in flames and devoured by the corona of our dying sun, taking The GUFF with it. ■



Kirtan Desai (they/them) is an interstellar fan of science fiction and fantasy who dabbles in poetry. They live with their cat Jonesy and alternate between Earth and Altair VI. Their work has been published in *Granfallon* and the (now defunct) *Space-iFics Magazine*. At the moment, they are both fascinated by supernovae and are avidly awaiting the next one that will be visible from Earth—Jonesy feels it's been too long since the last one.

ONCE THERE WAS A GREAT CIVILIZATION HERE ON EARTH! HUGE CITIES, WONDERFUL SCIENCE, LIFE-SAVING RESEARCH! HUMANS WORKED HARD! AND THEN WE INVENTED ROBOTS -- SYNTHETIC, THINKING CREATURES BUILT IN OUR OWN LIKENESS -- TO DO ALL OUR WORK FOR US SO WE COULD ONLY LIVE FOR PLEASURE! THAT WAS WRONG AND DANGEROUS! BUT THE WORK-FREE HUMANS DIDN'T REALIZE IT -- UNTIL THE TERRIBLE CHALLENGE CAME, AND THE WORLD OF THE HUMANS WAS TAKEN AWAY FROM THEM. THE FALL OF HUMAN KIND! THE NEW ERA OF THE...

ROBOTS OF THE LOST PLANET



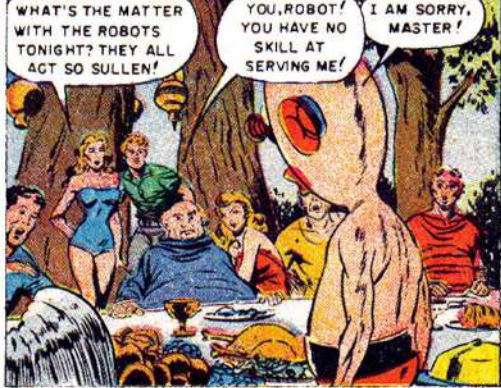
HOW COULD ANYONE KNOW THAT THIS NIGHT WAS MARKED FOR BLOODSHED? THE EMPEROR JOHNS WAS VERY HAPPY TONIGHT AS HE SAT GORGING HIMSELF WITH FOOD AND WINE...



TO OUR BELOVED EMPEROR!

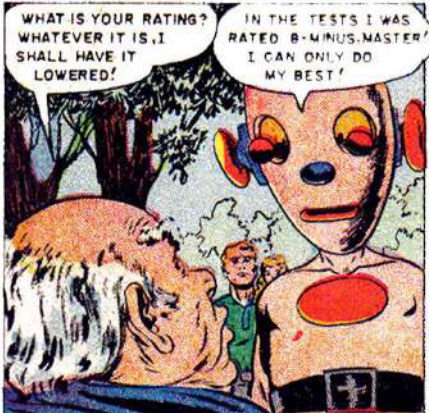
YOU NEVER HAD A BETTER ONE! HA! HA!

ON THE WAY TO SEE HIS FATHER, ALAN ARC PASSED THE EMPEROR'S TABLE! WHAT HE SAW WAS STARTLING!



WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH THE ROBOTS TONIGHT? THEY ALL ACT SO SULLEN!

YOU, ROBOT! YOU HAVE NO SKILL AT SERVING ME! I AM SORRY, MASTER!



WHAT IS YOUR RATING? WHATEVER IT IS, I SHALL HAVE IT LOWERED!

IN THE TESTS I WAS RATED B-MINUS-MASTER! I CAN ONLY DO MY BEST!



YOU SHALL BE REDUCED TO FIELD WORK! D-GRADE! TELL YOUR COMMANDER THAT!

OH, ALAN! I NEVER SAW A ROBOT LOOK LIKE THAT BEFORE!

HE SHOULD NOT STARE AT THE MASTER LIKE THAT! COME, LET'S GO SEE WHAT FATHER WANTS!



THE LABORATORY-FACTORY WHERE THE ROBOTS WERE BUILT LOOMED BLACK AGAINST THE SKY! YEARS AGO, HUMAN SCIENTISTS DIRECTED THEM! BUT THE A-PLUS ROBOTS BECAME CAPABLE OF DOING IT--AND THE HUMANS PUT THEM IN CHARGE! IT WAS EASIER---



ALAN'S FATHER HAD BEEN A SCIENTIST! ONCE, HE HAD BEEN IN CHARGE HERE! AND NOW...

I'M WORRIED, ALAN! I'M GOING TO MAKE A TOUR OF THE FACTORY! I WANT TO SEE WHAT'S GOING ON!

OH--BUT ISN'T THAT UNNECESSARY? THAT'S ALMOST LIKE DOING WORK!



I FOUND OUT THAT THEY ARE EXCEEDING THEIR PRODUCTION ORDERS! THEY ARE CREATING THEMSELVES UNCHECKED, WITH NO HUMAN TO KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON!



IT WAS STRANGE TO ALAN, A MAN TALKING ABOUT SOMETHING BESIDES PLEASURE, LIKE A SCENE FROM EARTH'S ALMOST FORGOTTEN HISTORY...

WE HUMANS HAVE GROWN SOFT. WHAT ELSE COULD HAPPEN WHEN A RACE STOPS PROGRESSING? THERE IS DANGER TO ALL HUMANS!

BUT-- FATHER?



AND NOW, WHEN THEY DEMANDED ADMITTANCE TO THE FACTORY...

TELL YOUR COMMANDER HE WISHES TO INSPECT THE WORK-ROOMS! NO ORDERS FROM SUPREME AA-10 TO DO THAT! YOU WAIT HERE!

HOW DARE A ROBOT TO TELL US WHAT TO DO!



AND AS THEY WAITED... YOU SEE WHAT I MEAN? HUMANS ARE NO LONGER IN COMMAND!

I--I'M FRIGHTENED!



THE ARCS HAVE BEEN A GREAT AND NOBLE FAMILY, MY SON! WE WERE ALL SCIENTISTS! HERE ARE MICRO-RECORDINGS OF SOME OF THE OLD WEAPONS OF SCIENCE! IF-IF ANYTHING SHOULD HAPPEN TO ME, ALAN, YOU MUST USE THEM!



HUMANS CAN BUILD WEAPONS AGAIN! WE MUST NOT BE DEFENSELESS! AND YOU, NARA, MUST TEACH YOUR CHILDREN THAT THEY MUST WORK TO SAVE THE HUMAN RACE!

I SHALL REMEMBER! YES! WE UNDERSTAND! WE WILL SPREAD THE WORD!



PRESENTLY... YOU MAY ENTER, MR. ARC! BUT NOT YOUR COMPANIONS!

WHA--??



YOU TWO WAIT OUTSIDE! ALAN... I MUST TELL YOU... I FEAR THEY MAY BE BUILDING WEAPONS!

OH, FATHER, BE CAREFUL!



AS THEY WAITED, FROM DOWN THE SLOPE GAY LAUGHTER FROM THE FESTIVAL FLOATED UP TO THEM... OUR WEDDING NIGHT, ALAN! SO STRANGE!

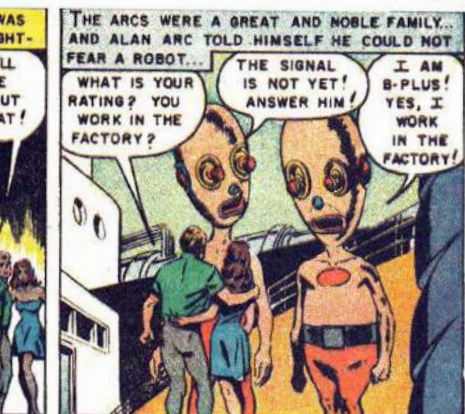
IT MAY BE ONLY FATHER'S FOOLISH FEARS, NARA, DEAR! THEY WILL PASS AND WE WILL BE HAPPY AGAIN!



BUT EVERYWHERE THE MONSTROUS THING WAS DRAWING IN, LIKE A GREAT, HORRIBLE NET TIGHTENING AROUND THEM... SOON THE SIGNAL WILL COME! OUR TRIUMPH ALL OVER THE WORLD!

I AM NEWLY BUILT... I TAKE NO ORDERS FROM HUMANS!

WE'LL SEE ABOUT THAT!



THE ARCS WERE A GREAT AND NOBLE FAMILY... AND ALAN ARC TOLD HIMSELF HE COULD NOT FEAR A ROBOT... WHAT IS YOUR RATING? YOU WORK IN THE FACTORY?

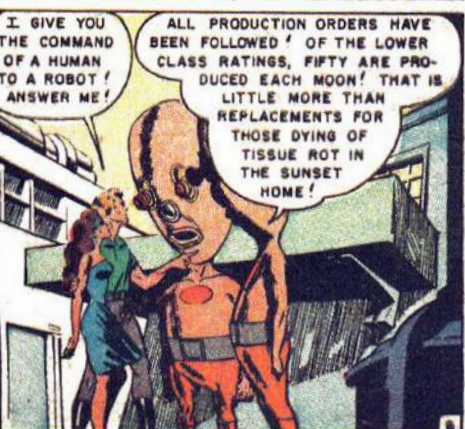
THE SIGNAL IS NOT YET! ANSWER HIM!

I AM B-PLUS! YES, I WORK IN THE FACTORY!



I WISH INFORMATION ON THIS FACTORY'S PRODUCTION! THE PAST MOONS AND WHAT IS ORDERED FOR THE FUTURE!

YOU HAVE ORDERS FROM MY COMMANDER TO ASK ME THAT?



I GIVE YOU THE COMMAND OF A HUMAN TO A ROBOT! ANSWER ME!

ALL PRODUCTION ORDERS HAVE BEEN FOLLOWED! OF THE LOWER CLASS RATINGS, FIFTY ARE PRODUCED EACH MOON! THAT IS LITTLE MORE THAN REPLACEMENTS FOR THOSE DYING OF TISSUE ROT IN THE SUNSET HOME!



THEN, SUDDENLY... THERE IS LYING BUILT INTO YOU, ROBOT!

ALAN, LOOK! UP THERE... ON THAT BALCONY!



ALL HUMANS WE SHALL TREAT LIKE THIS!



OH, ALAN... IT'S MY FATHER!



HE'S DEAD! KILLED... KILLED BY ROBOTS!



A HUMAN... KILLED BY ROBOTS. ANGER ROSE IN ALAN... WHAT? I SHALL FIND OUT WHO DID IT! HAVE HIM LOWER-RATED!

EMPEROR, THERE IS A PLOT BREWING! OUR ROBOT SLAVES ARE PLANNING TO BE MASTERS!



YOU, ROBOT! GO FIND OUT WHO DID THAT, AND REPORT TO ME AT ONCE!

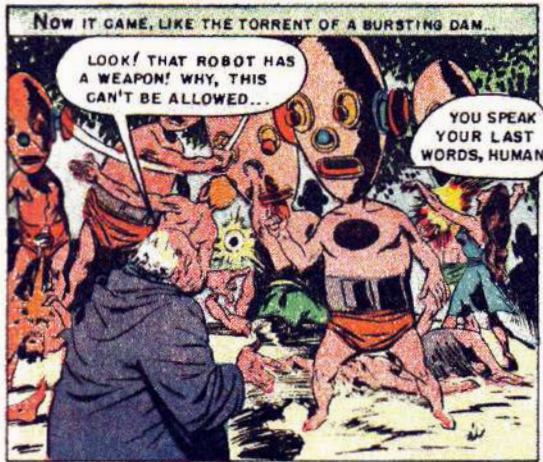
I HAVE NO ORDERS TO DO THAT, EMPEROR!



NOW... WE WERE ON THE BRINK OF THE DESTRUCTION WE HAD BROUGHT UPON OURSELVES

NOW! THE TIME IS HERE! DEATH TO THE HUMANS!

I SHALL HAVE YOU REDUCED TO MORONIC-D! I SHALL...



NOW IT CAME, LIKE THE TORRENT OF A BURSTING DAM...

LOOK! THAT ROBOT HAS A WEAPON! WHY, THIS CAN'T BE ALLOWED...

YOU SPEAK YOUR LAST WORDS, HUMAN!



INCREDIBLE GARBAGE! HERE AND EVERYWHERE...

AAH! HELP!

DEATH TO THE HUMANS...

DEATH! KILL!



OH, ALAN--WHAT WILL WE DO? ALAN--?

IN THE MIST OF IT, ALAN ARC COULD ONLY STAND NUMBER!



LIKE DAZED CHILDREN, WITH THEIR OWN FUTILITY SUDDENLY OVERWHELMING THEM!

YES! RUN! RUN!

OH, YES!



BLINDLY TRYING TO RUN FROM THIS MURDEROUS HORROR THESE GRUESOME SCENES WHICH NEVER EVEN IN A NIGHTMARE COULD HAVE BEEN CON- VURED...

HA-HA! THEY DIE--BY THOUSANDS!

NARA! RUN FASTER! FASTER!



DON'T FALL, NARA! TRY--TO KEEP-- RUNNING!

YES, I'M TRYING!



OUT TO WHERE THE FORESTS WERE THICK AND DARK! FUGITIVES IN A LOST WORLD! AND NOW OTHER LITTLE TATTERED, BABBLING GROUFS WERE JOINING THEM...

WE MUST TRY TO GET SOUTH! MAYBE WE CAN GET TO GREENACRES!

TOO FAR! AND IT WILL BE THE SAME THERE!

RUN! RUN!

HUMAN FUGITIVES, FLEEING THE BROKEN BUBBLE OF MAN'S FALSE UTOPIA! NOW A HUMAN WAS NOTHING BUT A HUNTED CREATURE... THREATENED WITH EXTINCTION!



WE'VE GOT TO FIND A PLACE TO HIDE!

YES! YES--FIND A PLACE TO HIDE...



A CAVE...LIKE TERRIFIED, HUNTED ANIMALS HIDING IN A CAVE...

WE'LL HAVE TO FIND FOOD AND WATER...

MAYBE BY TOMORROW WE CAN RUN TO SOMEWHERE BETTER!



TOMORROW! AND THE NEXT DAY... AND THE NEXT... SURELY HUMANKIND WAS NOT DESTINED TO DIE...

I WILL TAKE CARE OF YOU SOMEHOW, MY WIFE!

YES, ALAN! I KNOW YOU WILL!



HUMANS HAD FOUGHT THEIR WAY UPWARD FROM SAVAGERY, AND COULD DO SO AGAIN! I WAS THINKING OF WHAT MY FATHER SAID--WE WERE A NOBLE, SCIENTIFIC FAMILY ONCE! AND WE SHALL BE AGAIN!



I HAVE FATHER'S SCIENTIFIC RECORDS! I WILL STUDY THEM HUMANKIND MUST NOT DIE!

Sci-Fi Trivia

True or False?

- 1** In 1939, Stanton A. Coblentz wrote a science-fiction novel called *Planet of the Knob Heads*.
- 2** Orson Welles' radio adaptation of H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* didn't cause a nationwide panic.
- 3** The word 'spaceship' dates back to 1936.
- 4** There is a life-size android version of the SF writer Philip K. Dick, built in 2005 by David Hanson. It has been christened 'Robo-Dick.'
- 5** In the first chapter of his 1948 novel *Space Cadet*, Robert Heinlein predicted credit cards.
- 6** The phrase 'parallel universe' was first used in H. G. Wells' 1923 novel *Men like Gods*.

(Answers on the next page)!

1. True; 2. True; 3. False, 1880 was the actual date; 4. True;
5. False, mobile phone technology; 6. True



NOTES:



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