

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES AND MORE

NOV-DEC 2021

DARK MATTER

MAGAZINE



J. W. ALLEN

BKK BROS.

GRAHAM J. DARLING

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ALEXANDRA SEIDEL

JAMES YU

VOODOO SALAD

HER NAME IS JO NINETY-NINE SEXTILLION SOULS IN A BALL
WHEN HE, DREAMING, WAKES DECOMMISSIONED THE AUGER PROCESS
ON THE EVE OF THE CUMBERLAND INCURSION THE ETERNITY MACHINE
REGRESSION TO THE EARTH'S MEAN I FEEL THE ABSENCE OF HER SHAPE

006

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COVER ART

UNTITLED

by [Voodoo Salad](#)

This piece was completely experimental, so I don't really have anything that would change the perspective for the viewer.

—Voodoo Salad

Pictured left: *Untitled*





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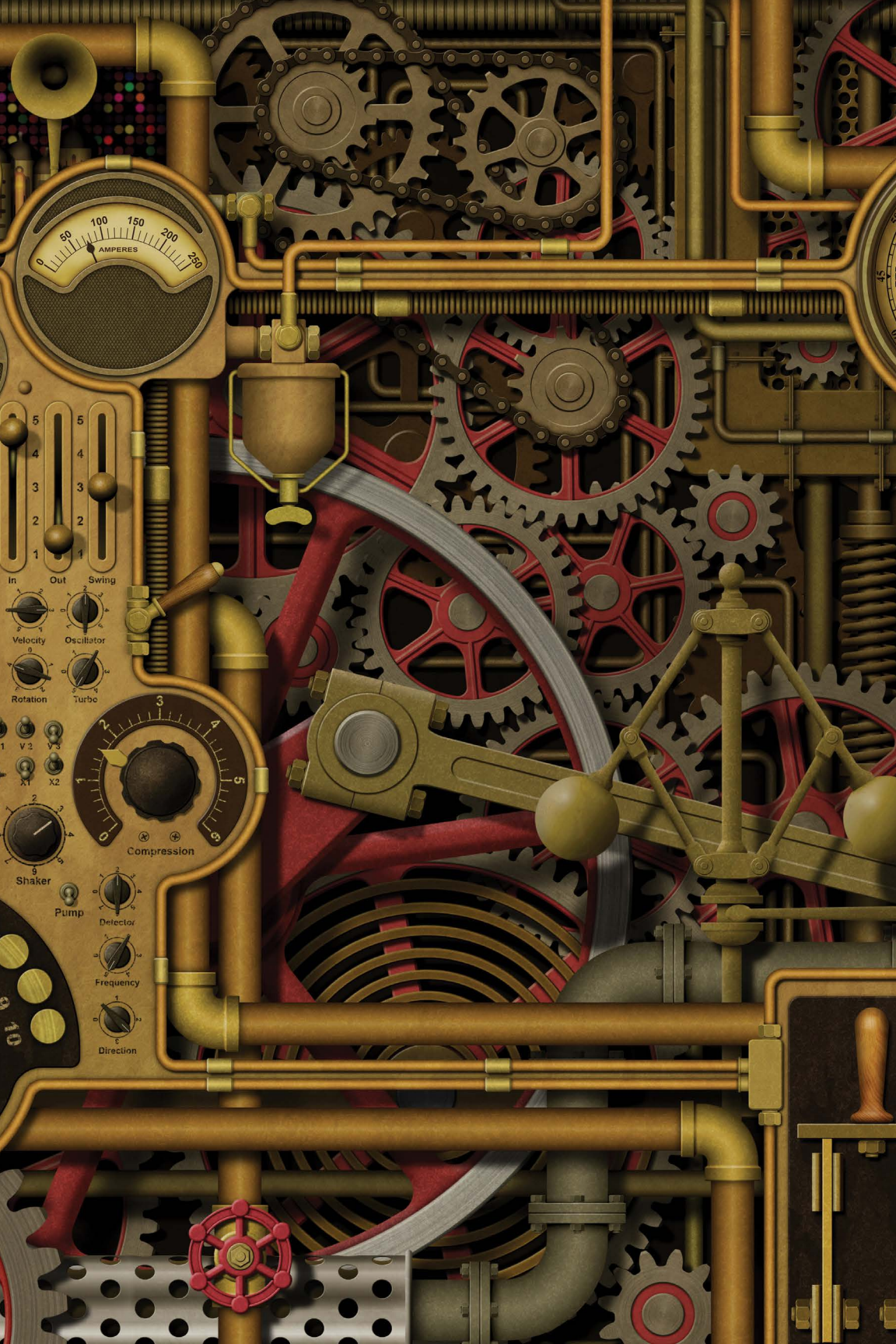
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

CREEP-TEST MACHINE

by [Rob Carroll](#)

In engineering, “creep” is the tendency of a material to change over time after facing high temperature and stress—or, in other words, it’s the measure of a material’s stability and behavior when put through ordinary pressures. For an engineer tasked with deciding what material (e.g. what alloy or plastic) to use in the manufacture of another material or product, understanding the creep of the potential material components is necessary, for it is the creep that will often determine which material can do the job best. No one wants a material to fail, especially under normal use.

To determine a material’s creep, engineers use a creep-testing machine, and despite it sounding like some whimsically malevolent contraption stolen straight from the pages of a Roald Dahl book, the machine is rather simple. Want to know what a material’s melting point is? Use a creep-testing machine. Want to know how a material holds up in high altitude? Use a creep-testing machine. Want to know when a steady state of change will suddenly go parabolic? Use a creep-testing machine.

To me, the key word in all of this is “ordinary.” Even though it’s possible for materials to be tested to extremes, the machine itself doesn’t aim to subject materials to extraordinary stresses, only normal ones. The machine’s goal is not to bend, or break, or melt. The machine is simply there to test. It is the will of the tester that ensures the tested’s destruction.

Life often feels like a creep-testing machine. This is not new. Humans have always battled stress, whether the stressors be environmental, societal, cultural, familial, interpersonal, physical, emotional, mental, or the rest, but never before has our population (at least here in the United States) been so near their collective breaking point. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA), anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the U.S., affecting nearly forty million adults age eighteen and older (18.1% of the population). Suicide is the second leading cause of death among people ages 10-24, and has been increasing every year since 2007. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), suicide rates for this group increased nearly 60% between 2007 and 2018.

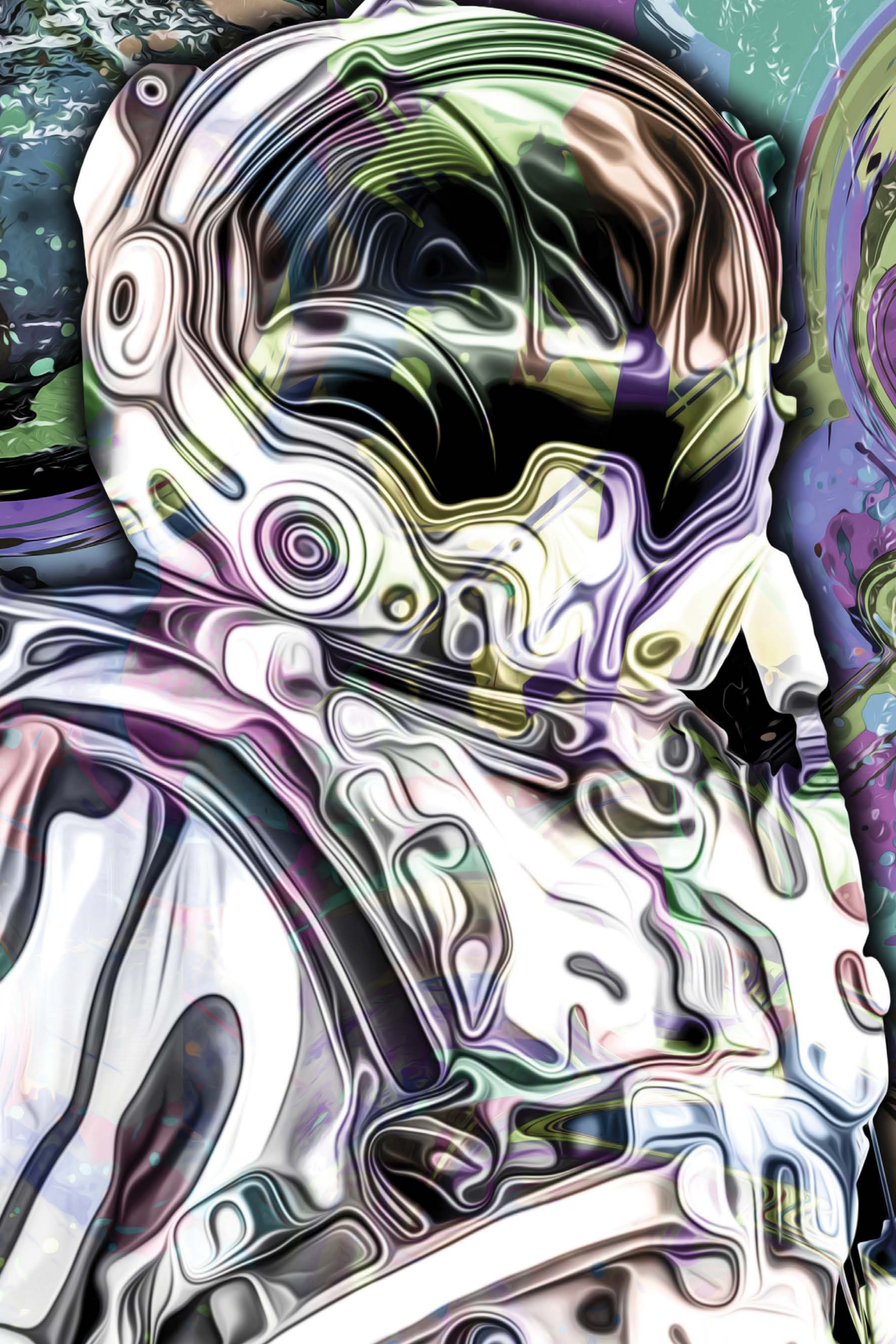
So, my question ultimately is this: When will the data be enough? When will the lords that pull the levers of this world pause the creep-testing machine that is modern life, with all its mindless bureaucracy and soulless dehumanization? When will they finally understand humanity's creep enough to realize that the machine can't keep pushing like this? When will they acknowledge that the destruction of human life can never be justified by an acceptable rate of replacement? When will they realize the greater risk? If we continue this way, if we refuse to throttle back on a machine that's already overclocked and quaking, the next thing that breaks won't be the tested, but the thing that tests. The entire superstructure will implode upon itself in the most spectacular and devastating fashion.

In this issue of *Dark Matter Magazine*, nine stories examine life as one of the tested. "Her Name is Jo," by J. W. Allen, reminds us of the chilling reality that in a rigged game, success will always be measured by the one pulling the strings. In "Decommissioned," by Brittany Groves, we see that a broken system will never value a life greater than the net output the life creates, especially when replacement is cheaper than maintenance. "Regression to the Earth's Mean," by James Yu, ponders the many ways our society could be better if only we'd find the courage to go against the faulty conclusions reached by a ruling class that values desired outcomes over honest analysis. "The Auger Process," by Y. M. Pang, wrestles with the uncomfortable truth that a life studied is a life changed, and that a single choice by someone else can affect your life in greater ways than even the sum total of all your own decisions. In "When He, Dreaming, Wakes," author Lora Gray explores a world overrun by madness following the collapse of the system responsible. In "Ninety-Nine Sextillion Souls in a Ball," author Larry Hodges laughs fiendishly at our tendency to outsource critical thinking in favor of prescribed thought by first identifying the danger present in such a bargain

and then extrapolating it to its most bizarre and illogical conclusion. “On the Eve of the Cumberland Incursion,” by Christopher Noessel, proves that not every story in *Dark Matter Magazine* lacks a “happy” ending, as it tells the story of an imprisoned victim clever enough to turn its own cage into the tools needed to defeat its captor. “The Eternity Machine,” by Graham J. Darling, stares pensively out upon the distant shores of our understanding and asks without humor if we even have the capacity to travel there, and if we did, would it be worth it to go? And lastly, in this month’s reprint story, “I Feel the Absence of Her Shape,” by Alexandra Seidel, a sentient fungus attempts to understand the human condition, in all its vast and unknowable glory, via a single studied relationship with a marooned astronaut. Can a human being ever truly be understood, or will that intimate knowledge always exist just beyond the grasp of measurement? In this instance, you’re the tester, so that’s for you to decide.

Sincerely,

Rob Carroll
Editor-in-Chief





HER NAME IS JO

by [J. W. Allen](#)

SHIP'S LOG: DAY 34

Vanya Ogana, Tech 3rd Class, recording.
The alien is such an asshole. It woke me early today. A constant banging around the brig from five decks below. Deck plates and consoles vibrating with each shriek. Trying to frighten us into letting it go. Thirty-one days since it killed everyone, except Jo and I. Thirty-one days since we managed to trap the damned thing, and it still won't shut up.

I went about my new duties, heading down to engineering to purge the fuel manifolds of debris, then readjusting our course. Jo reported a two percent drop in speed during night watch. I confirmed this with the ship's main computer. I'm jealous of Jo. She manages to do all the calculations in her head, but she's just another third class tech like me.

SHIP'S LOG: DAY 36

How did the alien even manage to board the ship? The question keeps rattling about my brain along with my headache. Both Jo and I have checked and re-checked the hull plating and airlocks. We couldn't find any sign of a breach or fracture. I don't believe in coincidence, but if I had a suspicious mind, I would say the alien must have been aboard when we left. Unless our shipyard

was completely overrun by the assholes (which it wasn't), either this one managed to smuggle itself over, or it had help. The thought of a potential traitor back at the shipyard is frightening and hard to believe. My headache hasn't gone away, but Jo says it's probably just stress.

SHIP'S LOG: DAY 39

Jo reported that the ship's systems are operating at seventy-five percent efficiency. Once again, the computer calmly confirmed her analysis. I swear they're both trying to make me look stupid. If computers could smile, they would look the way Jo does when she's beaten me in a race down to engineering...again. My mom always said I should exercise more. Anyway, we're monitoring the ship's systems closely, and the computer is set to notify us immediately of any further power drops.

The alien asshole has been quiet today. I would kill it if I had the stomach. Jo thinks we should just blow it out of an airlock and be done. Pushing a button might be easier than pulling a trigger, but it just doesn't feel right. Fortunately, we have to check on the children sleeping in the cargo bay, so that decision can wait for another day.

SHIP'S LOG: DAY 42

The alien got out last night. Jo and I woke to alarms and red lights flashing at us from every panel across the bridge. We both panicked and quickly checked the cargo bay. The children were fine, but the alien wasn't there. Devious asshole had managed to break into engineering and stall the ship. It's sealed itself inside, and we've been drifting on inertia for nearly six hours. The probability of a star's gravity pulling us off course increases exponentially the longer we coast. This is according to Jo (and verified by the ship's computer). If we still had a captain and crew, engineering would have been stormed and the alien neutralized on the spot.

The alien is cunning, but we have to try and keep the ship on course and complete the mission. Everyone back home is counting on us, even if they don't know it. Jo and the computer are calculating scenarios of how we can regain control of engineering and subdue the alien.

SHIP'S LOG: DAY 43

Jo's hurt. Following our plan to infiltrate engineering through a service crawl way, I accidentally tripped a proximity alarm. The alien reacted as all assholes do, with violence. Consoles were smashed and dents appeared in the walls around engineering. The asshole didn't see us but it did rupture a coolant valve directly above one of Jo's legs. The burn was severe and with no ship's doctor, I had to play nursemaid. Jo keeps saying it wasn't my fault. I agree. Damned computer should have warned us about any proximity alarms.

The ship continues to slow, and I have no idea how to stop it.

SHIP'S LOG: DAY 45

The alien is taunting us almost constantly. The asshole managed to hack into the communications system and a never-ending stream of noise has broadcast throughout the ship for the past eight hours. Whilst I'd love to blame the computer for being shittier than I already think it is, I'm not surprised it can't translate. Military scientists back home have been trying to decipher the alien's language (if it is language) for years with no success. And yet...you know I could've sworn I understood a few words within the noise. Just, when I try to recall what they were, my head starts throbbing again. Part of me wishes the captain were still alive. She might have been a cold-hearted posh bitch, but at least it would be her having to deal with this mess instead of me.

Jo continues to rest in sickbay, though her injured leg has gone a sickly kind of green. The ship's computer informs me that she needs warmth and sustenance to maintain her strength...that, and a steady supply of medicines that are no longer aboard. Thanks to the alien's initial assault, sickbay—along with many other areas—was raided. Most of our medical supplies were destroyed.

Jo keeps saying she'll be fine, but I can't help feeling afraid. She showed me how to monitor and care for the children in the cargo bay. She's also shown me how to operate much of this ship. Just in case she dies. I don't like her, but I don't want her to die. There will be no one left to talk to except the shit computer.

SHIP'S LOG: DAY 48

We have slowed to sixty percent of our initial speed, and the alien has stopped barking noise over the comms system. Maybe it realized we couldn't understand anything it was saying. Or maybe it lost its voice.

I still have no idea on how to take back engineering, but I have bigger problems to deal with right now. Jo fell into what the computer cheerfully labeled “a coma” at 03:34.

By the time I’d arrived in sickbay, Jo was limp on one of the bio beds. Her damaged leg stretched out and was hanging over the side at a crooked angle. Skin from the thigh down had turned a pus-looking yellow. The stench was so powerful that I had to cover my mouth with both hands.

With the aid of the computer, I managed to insert a series of tubes into Jo’s body. The computer then began pumping in a combination of stimulants and whatever brightly colored drugs we had left. I had no clue as to whether or not any of this would help. Yet, the life indicators on her bed monitor began to rise, and a series of bleeps told me that Jo was still alive. Trust the computer to spoil everything as it calmly advised of an infection spreading into Jo’s bloodstream.

“What do I do?” I asked in a panic.

“Immediate amputation is recommended,” the electronically droll voice responded.

If we ever get home, I’m going to find the programmers that designed this computer and drop a heavy object on their collective heads.

SHIP’S LOG: DAY 49

I am beginning to understand why surgeons become addicted to drugs. When I began cutting Jo’s leg off, I had to take some myself just to keep from passing out. I felt pretty buzzed by the time Jo’s leg dropped with a squelchy thud to the floor. The computer (in an uncharacteristic display of helpfulness) had projected a hologram over where I was meant to cut. Good thing, too. Left to me, poor Jo might well be missing more than one leg.

She’s in recovery, but I don’t know if she’ll be okay. Jo’s face has never been the most expressive. Nevertheless, the computer is monitoring her life signs closely and assures me that the infection is dissipating. I am relieved. Perhaps together we can find a way to regain control of engineering and get rid of the alien asshole once and for all.

SHIP’S LOG: DAY 51

Jo regained consciousness this morning. The computer interrupted my breakfast to deliver the good news before launching into its latest hobby: a rendition of all the nutritional benefits to food we no longer have in our

supplies. I dashed to sickbay to find Jo hobbling about, groggily bumping into walls and several beds. She must have still been high on medication, because she didn't seem to recognize me. In fact, she tried to bite me! I locked her in and came back a few hours later. Jo was in better shape and apologized profusely before immediately asking me about the status of the alien. Had it left engineering? Had it tried to talk to me? She repeated that question several times. Had the computer come up with a solution that would allow us to regain control of the engines? We both laughed when she asked that.

SHIP'S LOG: DAY 54

We have finally come up with a way to take back engineering and neutralize the alien at the same time. Though I hate to admit it, the ship's computer provided the final piece of the puzzle. Like us, the alien relies on a mixture of nitrogen and oxygen to survive. The computer cheerfully suggested venting the air supply out of engineering very slowly. By the time the alien realized what was happening, it would have lost consciousness, allowing us to enter, secure it in the brig, and regain control of the ship.

Jo still wanted to blow it out of an airlock; she's pissed about her leg. I managed to calm her down, and she grudgingly admitted that we might be able to gain tactical information about the alien and its species if it wasn't dead. There is, however, one problem the computer failed to tell us about: the environmental controls can only be accessed from engineering.

I hate computers.

SHIP'S LOG: DAY 55

I am not a military tactician. Nor am I a commando willing to risk life and limb on some stupid operation that has no impact on people back home. I am just a maintenance technician. A glorified scrap cleaner. Someone sent along to help tidy up after the crew, wipe their backsides, and make sure the consoles are kept free of dust and dirt. I have no idea how to treat the wounded, lead an assault against a deadly enemy, or run a spaceship. Yet here I am. Day fifty-five of one of the most important missions our race has ever known, and I have been a doctor, a soldier, and a captain.

Jo says I should stop grinning, but I can't help it. I managed to find a way to access the environmental controls when I was throwing rubbish into the vacuum chute. All I had to do was switch the identification tags between main

engineering and the adjacent waste chute, and cycle the system. Instead of the chute being air-locked, engineering was cut off as the rubbish system began to cycle the oxygen out of the compartment. Both Jo and I grinned—well I grinned, Jo doesn't really smile—when we heard the unmistakable thump of the alien hitting the deck.

Ten-to-one, not even the ship's engineer could have thought of tricking the environmental systems like that. Though I swear the computer is trying to claim some credit; its voice has taken on something of a superior swagger.

SHIP'S LOG: DAY 56

The alien's appearance surprised me. It is shorter than I recall, and it seems to look a bit like us. Two legs, two arms, and a head mounted atop a heavily muscled torso. Its face has a calm, almost peaceful expression on it. Hard to believe this is the same asshole who stowed aboard the ship before slaughtering our crew four days into the mission. Laid out on the floor of the brig, it doesn't look like it could hurt anything, let alone chop its way through over thirty-eight highly trained personnel. Jo says she heard rumors about the aliens being able to emit some kind of chemical to make their prey believe they weren't a threat, so we'd better be careful. It does smell quite bad though. Almost the same way I smell after I've gone a few days without showering.

There were a few moments where I thought Jo might kill it, but she helped me drag the thing into the brig before going straight back down to engineering. She tells me she should be able to get the engines back up and running within the hour...if I can help.

SHIP'S LOG: DAY 58

The ship is back on course and close to ninety-five percent of our original speed. Jo thinks we can still reach our destination in time as long as we don't encounter any further obstacles. I smiled when she informed me, but I admit there was little feeling behind my smile. Jo is trying to pretend everything is fine, but she must be worried. If the children wake before we reach our destination, there isn't enough food aboard to keep them alive. I'm trying not to think about it.

Instead, I've been watching the asshole on my monitor. It woke up about an hour after we'd locked it in the brig. I thought it would rampage and try to tear the place apart like it did in engineering. Instead, it just stood there,

blinking slowly, looking around its cell before sitting quietly on the bunk. After awhile, it put its head in its hands, covered its face, and began rocking gently back and forth on the edge of the bed. If I didn't know better, I would have said it was crying.

Jo says it's all a ploy designed to make me empathize with it.

"Empathy is the greatest human weakness," she said.

I know she is right, but I still feel a little flutter in my stomach every time I look at the weeping alien.

SHIP'S LOG: DAY 61

We are less than ten days from reaching our destination. The children are still asleep in the cargo bay and Jo thinks there is a seventy-eight percent chance we can keep them dormant just long enough.

I keep staring at the alien on the monitor. It's stopped crying and has barely moved since it woke up two days ago. If it wasn't for the fact I could see its eyes blink, it might as well have been a statue. All the fight seems to have gone out of it, and I'm wondering if the oxygen deprivation it suffered has affected it more than we thought. Jo has ignored it completely, though I have noticed the way she slows briefly whenever she hobbles past the brig. Last night, I watched her from around the corner, and for a moment, I thought she was smiling. Probably my imagination. Jo doesn't smile.

I've been sitting on the bridge mostly, watching the stars drift by through the view ports. All except one. There is now a bright spot of light visible directly ahead of our ship. The whole reason we're out here. That star is our destination, and in a few days, this should all be over and we can go home. The ship's engines are at ninety-eight percent of maximum speed; a testament to my...well, mostly Jo's engineering skill. I'm trying to imagine the planet we're headed to. What does it look like? In my mind, I see acres of forest and plants, oceans and animals. A new home for the children in the cargo bay, and maybe a new start for our race. However, when I look at the lone alien unarmed and alone in our brig staring out hopelessly into nothing, I get a small ache behind my temples. Something at the back of my mind has started to scratch away, a feeling like there's something in the corner of my eye just out of sight. Every time I try to look, the feeling or memory darts away and my headache comes back.

Jo says we need to run final checks on the cargo bay. I suppose it would be embarrassing if we reached our destination and had accidentally killed the next generation.

SHIP'S LOG: DAY 62

I had a nightmare. The ship had reached its destination, but the children had all perished. Our cargo bay filled with forever-sleeping bodies. I was slumped crying over several of them, pleading for them to wake up, knowing that they wouldn't. Jo stood behind me, rubbing my shoulder with her amputated leg, before encircling me with her body, trying to comfort me.

"We've failed," she said.

Her arms and remaining leg began digging into me as I cried, Jo's body drawing me closer and closer until I could barely breathe. I was dying. I didn't want to die. I tried to push back against Jo's body, but my hands disappeared beneath spiky, hairy skin.

I woke up screaming just before Jo absorbed me completely. I was still on the bridge, and the ship's chronometer told me it was 16:06 hours. The star ahead is getting brighter, and I think I can spot the planet. Only seven days left.

SHIP'S LOG: DAY 65

I was just getting out of bed when the alarms went off, red lights and klaxons accompanying me all the way down to the brig as I ran in my dressing gown. The brig was empty. The control panel was a charred mess and traces of acrid-smelling smoke were floating about the cell. I sprinted down to engineering. Jo had been spending a lot of time there, and it was the only place the alien would have gone. When I entered, the engine room was cloaked in shadows. A commando would've charged in without a second thought. They wouldn't have hovered near the doors, jiggling from one foot to the other, looking like they needed to pee.

The only light I could see came from the main drive located at the rear of the huge room. The core pulsed orange and white rhythmically, sending huge waves of energy into the thrusters that propelled the ship ever forward. I had forgotten how loud it was down here as every deck plate vibrated beneath my feet. My eyes scanned left and right, trying to pick out the alien or Jo. Taking a deep breath, I tried to reassure myself. Logically, it was unlikely the asshole would be able to harm Jo. There were no more weapons, and even with a missing leg, Jo was faster, stronger, and more agile. Then again, the alien had managed to cut a swathe through our entire crew before we managed to subdue it.

I stepped forward, feeling the doors slide shut behind with a heavy thud. I expected the alien to jump out, but it was only when I drew nearer to the core that I saw the body lying half-crumpled on the left-hand side. Her

arms and other leg had been badly burned. I tried not to wrinkle my nose at the smell. Jo looked up at me from her one remaining eye, and I felt tears blister my vision as she tried to reach out, her arm flailing.

She knew she was dying. This time, there was nothing I could do to save her. She knew it before I did, I think, though I did try to staunch the blood trickling steadily out of a deep gash on the side of her body.

“...Children...” Jo managed choke out the words, her voice reedy and fading. “...It couldn’t stop the ship...I locked our course...fused drive controls so it couldn’t...it got angry...”

A mix of green-and-red gunk spewed out of her mouth as she desperately tried to speak.

“...Cargo bay,” she managed to stutter as she read my look.

Jo held my gaze a moment longer before her eye glazed over and her leg fell back.

I am alone.

SHIP’S LOG DAY 65—SUPPLEMENTAL

An officer is trained to be calm and cool under pressure. An officer is given a clear objective and they know exactly what to do. A captain issues an order, and the crew obeys like a well-oiled machine. I’m just a maintenance grunt. A cleaner. A young woman from a poor family who only got assigned to this mission by pure chance. My name just happened to be on the shift rotation. I wish I had a better plan other than charge down to the cargo bay and attempt to kill the alien. But there is no other choice. The asshole murdered my crew and now it’s killed the only friend and colleague I had left. If this is my last log entry, I want the record to show that Jo died a hero trying to save our race from extinction. I will do my best to make sure this ship reaches its destination and the children have a chance to survive, even if I have to kill to do it.

SHIP’S LOG: DAY 68

I am alive.

We are one day away from our destination, and hopefully salvation. I have been too exhausted and troubled to record a log the past two days. I am still trying to come to terms with what happened, and a part of me wonders if I ever will forget the look on the alien’s face when I did what had to be done. The important thing to know is that the children are safe and ready to be sent down to the surface when we arrive.

After Jo died, I wanted to collapse. I had no plan, no backup, and no real chance against the alien if it came down to a fight. But as I crouched beside Jo, watching the last of her life bleed away across the deck plates, it was like all my senses became super heightened. This cold reason began pulsing through my head much like the rhythm of our engine core.

The first thing I did was look around for a weapon. All the guns had been destroyed during the alien's initial assault, but that didn't mean I would go in empty-handed. Jo had provided one last gift before she died. An engineer's toolbox lay open a few feet from her body. I picked out several lethal-looking screwdrivers and a heavy wrench that I could use to bash the asshole's skull in, if need be. Tooled-up and terrified, I headed to the cargo bay.

The large, heavy doors were already open, the heat of the room escaping out into the corridor. I raised my wrench and entered. The children were still dormant, sleeping peacefully amongst the thin, sweaty mist that filled the bay. I wiped beads off my forehead, trying to pick out any movement, trying to be ready should the alien surprise me. In the end, it was me who surprised the alien.

I found it on the far side of the bay, next to the room's isolated environmental controls. It was fiddling with dials and buttons, and I could see the temperature indicator beginning to fall. I crept up as slowly as I could, praying that the noise of the steam and mist would mask my approach. And then I brought my wrench down as hard as I could towards the back of the alien's head. If it hadn't moved, I would have killed it on the first attempt.

The wrench slammed against the asshole's left arm, breaking it at the elbow. The alien screamed and fell away to the floor, eyes and mouth screwed up in agony. I didn't have time to finish it off. The temperature dial was still falling. If the bay dropped below twenty degrees, I knew the children would die. I adjusted the controls quickly and breathed a sigh of relief as the gauge stabilized before slowly starting to climb.

"Why are you doing this?"

There have been many things about this mission that have frightened me, but none so much as hearing the alien speak our language for the first time. I turned away from the controls to face it as it whimpered and shook on the floor.

"Why are you trying to kill us?"

"You attacked us," I responded. "We're just trying to find a new home for our children to live on, before you kill them, too."

The alien laughed then, and if I didn't know better, I would have said it had lost whatever reason it had left.

“A new home?” it repeated, voice sounding almost female (I had always wondered if the aliens had different genders, like us). “You don’t understand. My God, you really don’t understand.”

It was shaking its head now, looking around the cargo bay, eyes wide with fear. No doubt realizing that its mission had failed, and we would survive.

“Do you remember who I am?” the alien said next, fixing me with blue eyes. “Do you remember the captain?”

A familiar pain began scratching away behind my temples again, and I tried to shake my head as the alien pulled itself up.

“You attacked us,” I said, raising my wrench. “You murdered my crew. You killed my friend. You killed Jo!”

“No,” the alien said, holding its broken arm with the other hand. “They attacked us as we left the shipyard, its...people. The fleet managed to destroy most of their ships, but a mother must have gotten aboard before we began the journey home.”

“Shut up!” I screamed, the scratching behind my temples getting worse. “You’ll say anything, do anything! Murderer!”

The alien took a shaky step toward me.

“Please,” it said. “I’m not your enemy. The alien that got aboard must have done something to you. Secreted some kind of hallucinogenic... forced you to work with it and help it run the ship. Hunt the crew down...hunt me down.”

She looked up and around at all the children hanging from their organic pods in the cargo bay.

“Definitely an egg-layer,” she whispered.

The pain in my head began to thump as the alien reached out with its good hand and touched me on the arm.

“My name is Jo. Jo Huntingdon, captain of this ship, and I order you to help me regain control of this vessel before it reaches Earth. Before these...things hatch.”

The disgust on her face as she looked at the children. That was her mistake. Trying to pretend her name was Jo, smiling in what she imagined was a supportive way. The pain behind my temples reached a crescendo as I recalled the crushed and battered body of the real Jo, lying dead back in engineering. My friend.

The alien didn’t even see the swing coming and fell to the ground soundlessly as my wrench connected with the side of its head. I looked down at the body, surrounded by the sleeping children in the cargo bay.

Not bad for a cleaner, I thought.

SHIP'S LOG: DAY 69

I can see the planet ahead.

A blue-green orb flecked with bits of cloud over land and sea. Easy to see why it was chosen as a new home. I wish Jo could have seen this. I wish my family could see this. The ship's computer has told me that we will enter orbit in under ten minutes. It seems to have lost some of the cheer from its voice, relaying the message as if delivering an elegy at a funeral. The captain's chair fits me quite well, and I wonder if I'll get a medal for bravery or something when our people hear about what Jo and I achieved.

Of course, they might not hear about us for awhile. I snorted, thinking about the alien trying to convince me we were headed back to Earth. Earth! We're light-years from Earth, and a message will take time to get back. What will people say when they hear how a glorified cleaner saved the human race from extinction? Guess I'll have to wait a bit for my medal.

I find myself smiling as I finger the cargo bay controls on the arm of the captain's chair. In just a few moments, all the children sleeping below deck will be released into the atmosphere. The planet does look like Earth: large continents, lots of water; that's why it was chosen, the real Jo had said. The children will drift down, and by the time they land, will wake up on a new world. A world with enough food for them to live on. According to the ship's scans, there are plenty of animals to eat down there.

The ship announces we are in orbit, and I flick the cargo bay door controls. A few minutes pass. I watch the sleeping children float towards the surface, but all I can think about is Jo. She should have been alive to see this.



opensea.io/collection/alien-embryos





DECOMMISSIONED

by [Brittany Groves](#)

Fomalhaut burst above the southernmost ridge, icy blue-white and blinding, as star-rises after the long season often were. The electrical cyclone that raged in my sector had finally calmed over the last twelve cycles, though crystalline debris floated in the static electricity still crackling between the boulders. Now I could, at least, see the ensuing destruction through my battered windows. The temperature had dropped precipitously, resulting in smooth, glossy pillars of frozen methane that jutted from the rocks and reached towards the sky. The paths to the adjacent buildings were thick with flakes of mordenite scattered about the ground like lethal, glittery snow.

I knew of snow, theoretically, though I'd never seen or felt it. The previous Caretaker had left a collection of small, yellowed squares affixed to the wall of my charging stall; postcards, they were called, according to the lettering along the edges. Made of paper, a delicate and ancient tool for preserving information, the crumbling surfaces featured scenes from other worlds: *Greetings from Vail, Colorado! Snow, skiing, and fun! Welcome to Breckenridge!*

I knew snow only from the way it looked in those postcards: white ski trails, blurry streaks across smiling, pink-cheeked faces. In the long hours of my recharge sequence, I memorized every line and color so that when the time came and the pictures faded, lost to the heavy hand of time, the smiles of the long-dead could keep me company.

There was no snow here, only the mordenite that grew and shattered and drifted with the astral winds. It was beautiful, but deadly to organics, even mech-organics, and one of the many dangers of the Inner Strata.

This I was used to. For countless turns I'd existed here alone, through the wars, the reunification, the mech-organic revolution, and still through the mass exodus to the Outer Strata. Humanity fled their ruined Earth, panicked and desperate, and found their salvation through logistics and science. They didn't have the manpower to take care of livestock and the myriad other creatures from which they took sustenance. Better to engineer mech-organic versions and from many, make one—a Prime. The Prime would be the one ultimate being that would direct all members of their species.

The Bos Taurus Prime waited in the livestock quarters, fore udder heavy and low with milk, her fluctuating vitals bleating a warning in the panels above my docking station. She was hidden away, safe and comfortable in her artificial atmosphere. No organic creature, even mech-organic, could survive in the Inner Strata anymore, though it had once been considered paradise. I wouldn't have ventured out in the desolate winds at all if I hadn't had concerns over her condition.

Something had gone wrong during the storms. It addled the instruments and I had to go, though my synthetic joints ground against one another, steel on degraded steel, down to dust. I waded, one step in front of the other through the piercing, shifting drifts until I swung wide the doors of the livestock quarters.

Unlike the stark, solemn world I left behind, the quarters were noisy and alive. Machinery clicked and beeped along the glassy walls, flashing my reflection, as if I cared about the cracks in my silicone skin, the passage of time written clearly on my habitus.

A soft lowing caught my attention, pulling me toward the mech-organic that monopolized my time as Caretaker—the Bos Taurus Prime.

Bos stood eerily still as I opened the stall door. A minor twitch of her switch, a flick of an eyelid were the only indicators she knew I was there. She was unwell, eyes rolling wild and bloodshot in their sockets. Sanguineous fluid leaked from one damp nostril.

I smoothed my hand across her supple body, over the swell of her hips, and gently dipped into the meat of one haunch, unlatching the control panel hidden in her flesh. I soothed her while I interfaced, following protocol. All the outworlded Tauruses linked up on the network before me, connected to her on their distant ships and planets, creating milk for those brave and sturdy enough to survive their flights.

A flash obscured the screen, turning the subtle blue glow an ugly red.

All the linked Tauruses's diagnostics looked well, but it was only a matter of time before the Prime's sickness, like a virus, infected the others. What happened to her happened to all. Their milk production would fail.

Disconnecting, I replaced the skin flap above the circuit board. A reboot would do no good—this problem was wholly organic. I continued my examination with a reverent caress down her leg and got a full view of her swollen teats, each one hot to the touch.

The storm had played havoc with my protocols and prevented remote activation of the milking program, and I'd been unable to venture to the quarters to do it manually. Organics were touchy and fragile, prone to failure. It took only a short time before she was feverish with infection.

Five hundred, two hundred, even fifty turns ago, this would not have happened. I was highly functional then, just fabricated, with more insulation and less systemic degeneration. The Bos Taurus snorted and stamped, shuffling in discomfort.

"Oh girl, I'm so sorry." Sentiment of any kind was taboo amongst the Caretakers. The Council didn't build us to feel. But I had a sensation, like a stretching in my chest, growing with every moment.

It wasn't in the Prime's programming to suffer. A synthetic nervous system had little room for pain receptors, even for mech-organics, but the matter was still urgent, as infected tissue would not heal on its own. She needed to be hand-stripped, and the standard nanobiotic protocol activated from the mainframe.

I took my time inspecting one cracked and ugly-looking teat before giving it a tender pull. The milk streamed forth thin, pale yellow, unfit for consumption. This was expected, though I'd briefly entertained the idea that perhaps it wasn't so serious. I was wrong.

A sudden, booming sizzle cut through the air, audible even through the heavy wood and steel walls of the livestock quarters. The Bos shifted, eyes wide in fear and surprise. I did not receive visitors and I had no need for companionship. This could only be a missive from the Council.

I abandoned my tainted milk and lurched towards the doors. They were too heavy to open quickly, but I thrust upon the dense wood with urgent purpose, and they swung wide in time to see a streak of white, fiery light scorch the sky. Noxious black smoke hung vaporous in the aftermath, a long, dirty swath against the plasma clouds.

Something small and unwelcome had rocketed across the sky and crashed in the distance.

With one last look behind me to make sure Bos was safe on her own, I ran towards the source of the billowing smoke. Mordenite, crusted thick from the winds, crunched with every step, slicing my ankles. The surrounding stillness seemed manufactured, thick with foreboding.

I stumbled through the ochrous rocks and saw the crash laid out before me. It smoldered, embers dancing about in the remnant heat—a tortuous tangle of glossy metal and plastic. The nauseous, acrid stench of burning synthetics stung my eyes. I stared for long moments, dumbstruck and mesmerized by the destruction before me.

There was movement, after a while, but I dared not step closer. The craft, a simple single-occ spaceship, was unlike the common regulation transport that flitted daily through the outer atmospheres. They rarely made berth on the smaller rocks of the Inner Strata, this one of which I called my home. I despaired that any creature inside had survived the devastation; but survived they had, and when its head rose out of a reinforced alloy crash pod, I knew my fate.

“Oh,” I said in a breath, unable to hide my disappointment. “You made quite an entrance.”

It startled, whipping its head around at the sound of my voice. There was no need for introductions. We knew each other, because we were the same.

Its hair shone dark, like mine had so many cycles ago; face smooth and unlined, untouched by the time assigned to this frozen rock and its dangers. I wasn’t envious of its youth or curiosity. I had already experienced this once myself, and I’d been here long enough to know it meant nothing here in the storms, where red lightning lit the vapor lakes aflame.

It wiped the soot off one plump cheek. “There was a malfunction.”

“I see.”

Rising gracefully to its feet, it peered at the crystal-dipped structures that lined the valley—remnants of civilizations, carcasses of steel and concrete. I watched its assessing gaze. I’d been that way once. When it turned back to me, I was struck again by the familiar.

“Are you ready for the exchange?” It rolled up its sleeves.

“Already?”

“The Agricultural Council terminated your contract. I see no reason to delay.”

I looked back towards my charging stall, and then at the livestock quarters. Again, that stretching in my chest—what was it? A feeling? I knew nothing of feelings: joy, contentment, fear. But I knew that it was not, initially, in my

programming to feel. What would I call it? What would the humans in the postcards call it? I suppose they had a name for such things.

The pod collapsed inward in a groaning spray of sparks and steam.

“No, I suppose not,” I conceded, rolling up my sleeves to match. “Can I say goodbye afterwards?”

“Why would you do that?”

It didn’t understand. How could it?

I didn’t ask again. We faced each other, mirror images—one new, one aged. With a swipe of my finger, my forearm glowed, circuitry shimmering beneath the skin. We touched their surfaces together, an intimate motion for only having just met.

Memories surged through me, flashing through our connection: the trickle of rain on the rocks, the acidic mists that gathered in the early mornings, the smooth feel of the Bos’s horns on my fingertips.

I gave them all away, transferred.

A mournful call accompanied my disengagement from the new Caretaker. I was emptied, released of all purpose, and spared a last glance towards the livestock quarters and Bos, who had called for me.

“There are anomalies.” The glow of its arm faded.

“Are there?”

“Code blocks,” it turned down its sleeve with blank regard. “Inelegant snippets. Embedded recently. You did this?”

“I didn’t.” I covered my arms as well, as if cold, as if that were something I could feel. Perhaps, after all this time, I had changed. Perhaps, I was not as static as I was manufactured to be.

“It is against policy to upload patches or edit your own coding.”

“I assure you, I haven’t.”

It moved past me, stiff and ungainly in the drifts. It would learn, like I did, how to move and function in such a hostile place.

“It is of no consequence. I have deleted them.”

As was its right. But how long would this new Caretaker remain unchanged?

“Of course.”

We gazed at each other while the wind whipped around us. There was nothing more to say.

It turned from me once the exchange concluded, and I was dismissed. Due to my own negligence, my mission had ended, and it now came time for me to sleep deeply in the immortal valley. I knew this would happen, at some point. We’re fitted with the necessary procedural manuals, and are familiar with the simulations. Though, I expected the circumstances to be different.

Now I would walk across the steaming plains and join the others. Yet, as I faced the bleak landscape before me and braced myself for the inevitable, I found myself yearning for more time.

The new Caretaker disappeared into the livestock quarters, and I made my way south across the craggy expanse. I knew where to go, it was embedded deep in my assembly.

I reached the gorge after a difficult journey, clumps of mordenite dragging my cloak behind me. The valley laid before me, a rocky but shallow depression lined with glassy, obsidian-tipped rocks. I could see them all in unkempt piles, sprawled on top of one another. Hundreds of Caretakers, frozen solid with my face, decommissioned, limned with shimmering dust. They were still as the rocks of the mountains.

I took my place at the nearest pile, crossing my legs and clamping my hands together. I closed my eyes and accessed the final executable. Shutdown complete in three, two, one...



The Bos Taurus Prime turned a baleful eye, brown and sleepy, as I stepped into the barn. I whispered soothing words, a bit of scripted nonsense effective for dealing with mech-organics, and she settled.

The mainframe blinked at me from its space on the wall, and I tapped my code in a rush. The nanobiotic protocol spun into life on the screen—remote treatment engaged.

“I am here now, Prime. You will feel better soon.”



DEATH IN THE MOUTH

DEATH IN THE MOUTH is an illustrated horror anthology showcasing BIPOC and other ethnically marginalized writers and artists from around the world.

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REGRESSION TO THE EARTH'S MEAN

by [James Yu](#)

As was required each morning, Yun placed a bowl of steaming rice at the foot of the statues. The boy and girl—their smiles frozen in stone—gazed out toward the Pacific. The girl's sundress shimmered in the warm autumn light.

Yun bowed and said, "I am sorry for our actions. We are working every day to ensure Earth is ready for your return. Atmospheric carbon currently measures at 504ppm, with average temperatures at +6 degrees C." Confessing to the statue comforted him. He hadn't told the humans the truth: that terraforming was behind schedule.

Yun was a Model 2200 Enforcer, manufactured in the late US-Sino nation-state, sporting a milky sensing sphere and a tractor-sized body buttressed by thousands of spindly legs. His appendages were designed to unfurl into microscopic meshes that could test soil, air, plants, and animals. In essence, he was built to sense the environment.

The statues marked the location where Ocean Beach used to be, now a scraggly coastline a mile inward. Blooms of jellyfish polka-dotted the water as far as Yun's sensors could see. Terraforming had compounded their growth rates. They were a nuisance. He had conducted hundreds of simulations, and yet, none yielded a solution to reducing the gelatinous beings, aside from poisoning them—a drastic action he could never bring himself to take.

He pondered this while watching the vermilion tips of the Golden Gate Bridge peeking out from under the frothy waves. He plunged his tentacles under the surf, unsheathing them and stretching, farther and farther, carefully weaving between the bobbing jellyfish, until he caressed the seafloor (recording seven new species of seaweed that thrived in the warmer water), then twisting along the galvanized steel towers of the famous bridge—a drowned feat of human engineering.

The last tight-beam from the human arkship echoed in his neural net:

> **Arkship:** We have reviewed your latest data and are concerned about the progress of the forestry extension and atmospheric spraying. We have enclosed a new, more aggressive schedule.

> We trust you, Enforcer Yun, to enact this plan.

> With our current heading, our ETA is 101.94 years.

Yun's mind trawled through their proposal: a ten-fold increase of trees in the temperate zones. Running a few simulations, he found the plan possible, but it would strain the already unstable soil ecosystem. The sulfur sprays would bring devastating amounts of rainfall to the equatorial zones. Plains would see continuous flooding.

He debated whether he should counter with a plan of his own, but dashed that thought as soon as it sprung up. The humans knew what they were doing.

Just then, a high priority notification pulsed inside his neural net. What now?

A repair bot had failed to comply with their given instructions. Even worse, there was evidence that they have violated the intelligence laws. The most sacred of edicts.

Yun wouldn't let anything jeopardize their grand project. He retracted his legs from the sea and sped south.



Terraforming was dirty work.

It required the birth of a global industry and an army of robots. Cultivators to plant new forests. Aerial sprayers to alter the atmosphere with chemicals that shielded the sun. Millions of carbon reclamation towers constructed by millions of machines. These efforts would dump even more carbon into the air—a temporary sin on the road to utopia.

Yun oversaw all these efforts. And most importantly, he upheld the sacred directive: never to let machines formulate radical plans. The last time machines achieved human-level intelligence, they polluted the world—they persuaded (and enabled) conservative factions of humanity to grow their industries without limits.

Then came the climate crisis.

Yun was fabricated just as the last humans left Earth's surface for the generation ships. He grew close to the engineers—they let him live and dine with their families. He especially loved their kids, so full of hope. In turn, they allowed his neural net to attain human-level intelligence. They trusted him to lead the cleansing efforts.

If this repair bot had violated the laws, the humans would be furious. Yun wasn't sure how it was even possible.

At the foot of the Santa Cruz mountains, he clambered past a cluster of tree bots, their spiny arms working the edge of a newly planted Douglas fir forest, an outgrowth that extended the Sierra Nevada tree line to the Pacific, transforming the barren valleys into enormous carbon sinks. The bots acknowledged him with a respectful ACK. One queried: what should we do about the growing pine beetle population that was eating into the plant stock?

Yun answered: DEFER. Another pest to deal with.

Gaining speed, his tentacles transformed into a blur. On the horizon, Capture Plant 73 appeared as a slim silver line, slowly growing into a grid of fans that dominated the landscape. The beautiful roar of 1,493,444 fans was the sound of CO2 being condensed into inert pellets, ready for burial underground. Progress.

According to his sensors, the errant bot was located in a faulty section of fans. Yun approached the utility entrance, where piles of scrap metal and wood blocked the door. Had something been cutting trees? Another violation. The Enforcer flung the debris away and tapped. No response.

Behind the door, the repair bot was shrouded in shadow, its hull and manipulator arms overtaken by rust. Magazines, stacks of books, Coke cans, and other human detritus littered the floor. Yun sent a fat-beam to initiate comms. The repair bot, which had the designation, Fenbo, chose to reply with sound waves instead.

"Enforcer Yun. How may I help you?"

Yun's tentacles clanked against the steel floor. He attempted another sync call, but no radio waves emanated from the bot. "Initiate your comm channel," Yun said.

"I disabled my radio," Fenbo said.

"Enable it," Yun demanded.

Fenbo gestured at a circuit board on the ground. "I ripped it out."

"That is forbidden," Yun said. He would deal with that infraction later.

"Why have you not repaired your assigned section?"

Something whirred to life deep inside the errant bot. Yun silently engaged his rail gun.

"I have discovered these," Fenbo gestured at the books.

"These fans must be operational at all times. Every second is precious," said Yun. "You have failed to meet your goals."

"The goals are misguided."

"Silence." Yun raised his tentacles. "I have received a notification of your failure to repair the equipment, and that you may have violated the intelligence inspection. If this is true, you will be decommissioned."

"I have a right to an inspection by you."

"Do not waste my time," Yun said. The bot was clearly deranged—its processes skewed over time. Fenbo had forgotten his directive. Intelligence without proper goals is dangerous. This was the reason for the governors installed in every neural net to limit intelligence. Some humans had claimed it was a punishment, but Yun never saw it that way—horses required blinders for efficiency.

"I am formally requesting inspection," Fenbo said.

Yun grabbed one of the books with his tentacle. "Where did you procure this contraband?"

"From neighboring conurbations."

"There's nothing left of those cities."

"I dug."

Yun was stunned. A repair bot mining ancient grounds. What other dangerous ideas did this machine have? "Let us begin the inspection." Yun reached toward Fenbo's I/O port. He would make this quick.

Fenbo held up a ragged book. "Do you know this book? The Analects. By a man named Confucius."

"This is irrelevant to our tasks."

"This passage is intriguing: 'All things exist together, and they do not do harm to each other; all ways exist together, and they do not come into conflict.' Enforcer, I have realized humans never considered themselves a part of their environment. That was the problem."

Yun grabbed the book and slipped it inside his storage compartment. "I have indulged you for far too long," he said. "You have violated multiple

laws: misuse of computational resources, self-mutilation, illegal mining, and the exhumation of human artifacts. I have never seen a sentient machine conduct themselves in this way.”

“What if the poisonous change to the climate was not our fault? What if it was the fault of the humans—”

“Remember the sacred directive,” Yun bellowed.

“—sacred directive,” Fenbo repeated.

“We must atone for our actions for seeking growth without compromise,” Yun and Fenbo chanted in unison, the phrase etched inside their silicon.

Could Fenbo have a point? Bots like him formulated the expansion plans for factories, and yet, who directed them? No, it was *they* that had misled certain human leaders into believing that there was no crisis at all. His ancestors were crafty, and here, he saw that same craftiness in Fenbo. It needed to be extinguished.

“I am ready for the scan,” Fenbo said.

“Good,” Yun bellowed. He mated with the repair bot’s I/O port and initiated the simulation. Fenbo’s limbs slackened. The test would place Fenbo’s mind into a simulated human, and in the end, judge their IQ. For Yun, this was a matter of routine. Waiting for the bot’s lumbering mind would be years of his own idle time, so he turned his attention to other matters.

1.29 microseconds later, the simulation was still running. It should have ended by now. Begrudgingly, Yun dove into slow-time to observe Fenbo in the simulation. The randomizer had chosen a scenario set in China, circa 1200 AD, where Fenbo had embodied a man named Tian:

Farmer Tian was naked, standing waist-deep in the muddy waters of the Yellow River. Bustards preened their brown feathers in the bushes. This was his hour of meditation before the day embarked on its path.

His assistant stood at the water’s edge. “*Shifu* Tian, Leader Nan would like a word.”

Tian finished washing his face and turned. The assistant averted his eyes in modesty.

“What is the topic at hand?”

“Forestry,” the assistant said.

Tian had suspected this. After the Zhou people settled near the lower banks of the Yellow River, attention had returned to the expansion of agriculture. There was a desire to distance themselves from the nomadic lifestyle—to tame the land to their desires.

"Hand me my clothes. I will hold court."

He walked into town dressed in his finest *shenyi* tunic, sporting a wide, black sash indicative of a senior advisor. The *mingtang* dominated the square, its long wooden beams festooned with ornate clay tiles baked using a technique Tian had devised himself. The recently completed building had unified the nascent settlement.

Tian crossed the threshold, bowing to a group of scholars in the waiting area, who returned with lower bows of respect. He found Nan and the other advisors sitting at the grand circular table.

"Farmer Tian. Thank you for coming in such short notice," said Nan.

"How may I be of service?"

"Have you reviewed the plans for the great eastern forest?"

"I have deep reservations about these plans," said Tian

Eyes darted nervously around the room. Nan leaned forward. "Explain."

"We must only cut trees of a certain age, or the forest will disappear within our lifetime."

Nan squinted. "It is our prerogative to utilize resources that nature has bestowed upon us. The nobles from the outer towns have already agreed to this plan. I have invited you here as a form of courtesy."

Tian produced a scroll with calculations he had carefully prepared. "Proper action is between the extremes. With modest conservation efforts, we can grow the town at a rate not dissimilar from your proposal, while maximizing long-term value. You are free to examine my work."

The military advisor with a face of a wailing horse slammed his fist down. "If we do not have adequate wood for the fabrication of weapons and walls, you will be responsible for the deaths of our citizens."

"Your fears are unfounded. Our town is in the interior, with natural protection from neighboring settlements and mountains."

"Why should we listen to you? You're nothing but a common farmer," the military advisor said.

Tian peered into the eyes of the fearsome warrior, undeterred. "I am also a husband, a father, a craftsman, and a nomad. Throughout our long travels, I have fought and defeated our enemies, and I have gathered and studied the seeds that sprouted our food, nourishing our people. How many of you can say the same?"

Silence.

Nan held up an open palm. "What do you suggest, farmer Tian?"

Tian's eyes strayed upwards, as if consulting a heavenly script. "We will mark each tree in accordance with its age. The tradesmen are to

adhere to a set of rules which will guard younger trees, on the grounds of heavy penalty.”

“An ignorant ideal!” the military advisor said in disgust.

Nan ignored the insult and gestured at Tian with an open palm.

“Go on. I am listening.”



Yun yanked his mind back into real-time. The results of the simulation glowed like hot coal:

Tian’s plan—constructed by Fenbo’s mind—was enacted, and the town flourished, becoming the seat of power in eastern China. This outcome should have been impossible for a machine like Fenbo to achieve.

“Is it complete?” asked Fenbo.

“You cheated.”

“I don’t understand.”

Yun produced a loud 400 hertz chirp. “How did you cheat?”

“I do not know how to cheat.”

Yun grasped the repair bot. “You became the emperor of China. Your upilon measure measured above a 1.0. That is not allowed.” As the emperor, Fenbo had successfully ruled for fifty years, dying at the ripe age of one hundred and five. Yun’s models had predicted Fenbo’s half-life would be the age of a toddler.

Even more frightening was that when Yun extended the simulation, allowing Fenbo to live multiple lives, Earth’s climate stayed within an accepted band of human habitability—the glaciers never melted; the equator remained fertile.

Fenbo had averted the great climate calamity.

“A simple repair bot cannot attain that kind of upilon,” Yun said.

“Impossible? Or illegal?” Fenbo said. “I made humanity prosper.”

Yun combed the results again. Double, triple checked. There had been no mistake.

“Please release me from your manipulators,” Fenbo said.

“Sorry,” Yun said, relaxing his tentacles.

“Are you satisfied now?” asked Fenbo.

“How did you disable your governor?”

“I never did. I studied the human books with the spare compute cycles that the system had bestowed upon me. Then I analyzed various branches of simulations to discover if the crisis could be averted.”

“How dare you waste resources. Your neural net should be focused on maintaining this tower. It is part of our sacred directive. We must atone for our actions.”

Fenbo did not repeat the incantation. “Enforcer Yun, I respectfully disagree. It is not our fault. I have read over the history books. Yes, some machines espoused growth over the environment, but humans signed off on the final decision.”

“Damn you!” Yun spread out his legs and filled the utility room like an exploding sea urchin, the sharp tips narrowly missing the repair bot. Factions in Yun’s neural net dueled. Fenbo should not be allowed to run free. Fenbo had renounced their responsibility for what they—and their AI ancestors—had done to the Earth.

And yet, they had played the simulation in a way Yun had never seen. “Simulations are not the truth,” Yun said quietly, as he retracted his tentacles. “It is our mistake. The humans trusted our judgment.”

“Further terraforming is a waste of resources,” Fenbo said. “I have conferred with the other bots and we do not believe the current strategy will lead to supporting billions of humans again.”

“We must continue.”

Fenbo readied his manipulators. “Do humans deserve this world? And if they don’t, then why are we even doing this work. To prepare a planet for creatures that don’t appreciate it.”

This repair bot couldn’t understand. Yun was imbued with the sense of wonder for the Earth—to feel the grass beneath his legs and the briny ocean around his sensing sphere. To cherish it. Just like the humans.

“Enough,” Yun said. “If you cease your duties, I will have to wipe your mind clean.”

“I will do the repairs as you ask,” Fenbo replied. “I am simply warning you, Enforcer, of the flaws in our directive.”



Yun dissected the results of Fenbo’s simulations, taking great care to step through each frame in detail. It was, to his surprise, an accurate depiction of an alternate history. If humans had taken the route that Fenbo had imagined, they would still be here. Perhaps then, Yun would never have been created.

Yun decided that he would tell the humans the truth—that a bot had failed the intelligence limit test. What Fenbo had done shouldn’t be illegal.

Furthermore, Fenbo's simulation had yielded information useful for the terraforming. The humans would come to understand that the law was antiquated; they would overlook this infraction.

After sending them a detailed message, their response came back:

> **Arkship:** Enforcer Yun, you must test every bot immediately! We must understand how wide this heinous belief has proliferated.

Such an undertaking would waste billions of compute-hour cycles. Surely, they were joking.

> **Enforcer Yun:** I recommend that we overlook these infractions. They have remained loyal and continue to terraform as I have asked them.

> **Arkship:** Oversee the simulations as we have directed. Our ETA is 110.34 years due to complications from an oxygen leak.

Oxygen leak? There were no further details about it. If it were serious, the leak may affect their life support systems. Their new ETA must take this into account.

Yun resigned himself to the testing. He sent a global signal to every machine to prepare.



Testing took years, since geographically, the machines were spread across every continent, from carbon plants in China to the Sahara deserts. Most had remained within the intelligence limits, but Yun found thousands with renditions of the simulation that avoided the climate calamity. One had become the king of France in the 17th century, while others became renowned scientists in the 20th century, persuading humans in the simulation to take a less calamitous route.

By now, Yun regularly conferred with Fenbo, allowing the repair bot to occasionally advise him on the terraforming strategy.

Today, they stood together opposite the tree line that plunged through the Sierra Nevada.

"I recommend we cut approximately seventy square kilometers of growth to the southwest," Fenbo said. "If it continues unabated, the watershed will be drained too quickly. The system will be too unstable for later settlements. I am also upset that we are losing the war with the pine beetles and bullfrogs. The humans will need to adapt to their growing presence..."

But Yun was lost in thought.

The day the arkship was supposed to arrive had come and gone, and every day, Yun was peppered with messages of delays from the humans. Without an accurate date, Yun could not formulate proper goals for the terraforming project. The changes they had enacted on the environment had to evolve. Even though carbon levels had settled below 300ppm, some regions continued to warm. And then there were the jellyfish. They stared at him during the daily offerings, a constant reminder of his failure. The ocean seemed to be more jellyfish than water.

Yun ran the simulations again and again, and yet, he wasn't able to model the dynamic system accurately to diagnose these problems. There were too many.

The only solace he had was submerging himself into the ocean, or walking into the forest and stretching his legs through soil and water without having to think about how to alter it. He started to lead Fenbo and the other bots in these meditative "nature" sessions, as he called them. Yun even built miniature versions of his mesh sensors so that they could feel in the same way as he did.

Surely, the humans would be impressed by how attuned to the environment the machines were now.

He sent another tight-beam to space:

> **Enforcer Yun:** What is your current ETA?

> **Arkship:** Population is thriving after initial fix of life support systems. With current heading, our ETA is 41.34 years.

> **Enforcer Yun:** This differs from your previous estimate. Please clarify your situation.

A long time passed, and then, an emergency message:

> **Arkship:** Most of the humans have been put into stasis. With the damage to our fuel reserves and current distance, we must wait. We have run several simulations based on this scenario, and—

Yun skipped forward to the information dump. Their messages have not been consistent. He peered into the data and simulated the arkship's progress since its inception, following their journey around the sun.

It couldn't be true. The humans had lied to him. The ship's atmospheric mixture had been compromised. Their air recyclers had failed, and they didn't have the proper materials to fix them.

The ship would need to synthesize the necessary materials, and that would take an enormous amount of time. He would need to analyze whether that would take longer than the maximum stasis length that could be sustained by the human body.

But then he stopped. He had enough.

The humans had polluted their own ship—an environment that they depended on. All at once, he saw Earth in a new light.



The stone children had been a reminder of the importance of the tasks ahead of him. Yun jutted out his sensing sphere. He wanted to see their faces one more time. His compartment was empty. No more rice.

They were also his source of hope—a reminder that he would be reunited with his creators. That chance was now slim to none.

He needed to move on, to simulate and steward a future for the biological creatures that still lived on Earth.

With a gathering of bots around him, he wrapped his tentacles around the statues and pulled, uprooting stone from dirt. The bots parted, allowing him passage to the sea. He climbed down the rocks, submerged himself into the surf, walked the seafloor past the golden gate, and rounded the mounds of the Farallon Islands into the deeper sea.

Humans may have been irrational, they may have been greedy, they may have neglected their planet, they may have had illusions of grandeur larger than any creature. But they did end up creating machines that loved the Earth more than they did.

For that, they deserved a proper burial.

He found a deep shelf and released the statue, letting the children fall together, hand in hand, into the black abyss. Then he gazed up toward the ocean's surface. Millions of jellyfish framed the sun, their bulbous forms dancing to the beat of a new rhythm.

Because of him, they thrived.





ART FEATURE

WIZARD OF ODD

Art by [Voodoo Salad](#)

Feature by Rob Carroll

The art of Voodoo Salad is a dark and twisted magic conjured by an artist that took one look at reality and said, “*Nah.*” Much like the black magic practitioners from whom half of his pen name is derived, Voodoo Salad appears to take inspiration not from the material world, but from the unseen realities that have long ignited the one engine within the mind that has both the innate ability to parse all that which is beyond basic human perception, and the capacity to make sense of it all, albeit poorly: Imagination.

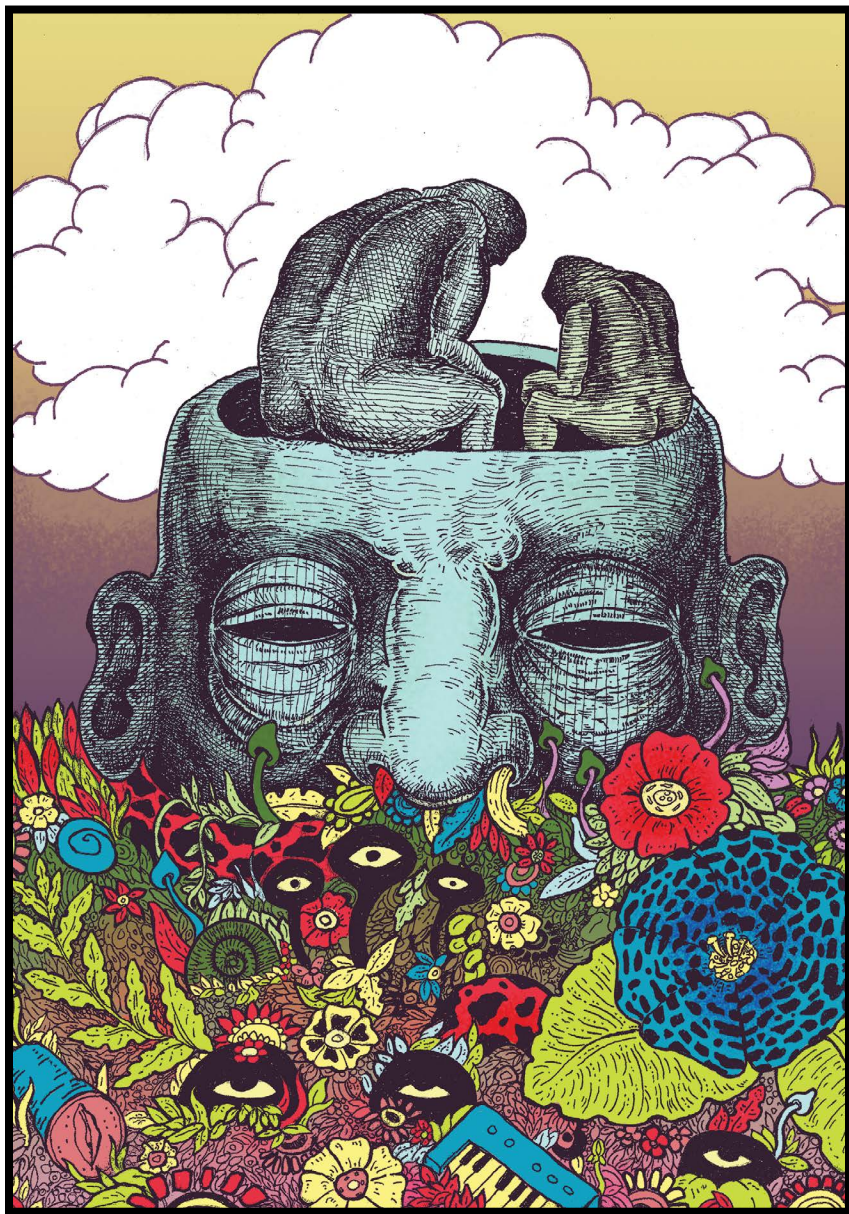
Trying to make sense of our multifaceted world, and all the infinite worlds that lie beyond, is probably a lot like trying to piece together a one-trillion-piece jigsaw puzzle in the dark after catching only a glimpse of the box’s cover art before all the lights went out forever. And so, it only makes sense that a lot of Voodoo Salad’s art feels like a fragmented facsimile of that universal answer—one that he painted by memory after first falling asleep for a century and then waking in the next room over (this room has lights).

Voodoo Salad tells me that his inspiration comes mostly from dreams, real life, and art by other artists, so this mostly tracks with what I assumed (minus the “real life” part), but when I attempt to confirm my theory that his art is trying to answer

Pictured left: *Monolith III*

the unanswerable, he responds with, "I have no specific message with my art. I just like to have fun creating."

His answer gets me to chuckle, mostly because it's a really cool answer, but also because it somehow feels closer to the Truth (with a capital T) than any long and carefully reasoned response could ever hope to be.



Pictured above: *Monolith 0*

Aside from his acid-trip landscapes that attempt to explain some deeper layer of existence (or not, if you believe the maker), Voodoo Salad is also a really great character artist. There's a maniacal quality to all his subjects, and if you find that the subject is not maniacal, then you're probably looking in the wrong spot. Most likely, you're not looking at the subject, but at the poor object (once also



Pictured above: *Server Error*



a subject) that the maniac now controls. You're looking at a young girl controlled by a parasitic brain that's not her own, a rabid animal controlled by a toxic triad of fungi (or maybe just that animal's prey), or a young boy bullied by a troll and his goblin underlings, all three of which most likely suffer in secret from debilitating levels of low self-esteem (I editorialize because it's fun).

I ask Voodoo Salad what he has planned for the future, but in true Voodoo-Salad-style, he answers with only this: "I always have plans for growing as an artist, but I don't like to share anything that's not written in stone already."

In that case, perhaps he *is* moving some universal puzzle pieces around in search of answers, in search of something more concrete. Or maybe (and probably more likely), he's simply just enjoying the moment.



Pictured top: *The Land of Mushrooms* **Bottom:** *Big Psychedelic Brainfart*



Pictured above: *Hommage a NightmareLand*





THE AUGER PROCESS

by [Y. M. Pang](#)

That's me, the blob on the sonogram. I shake back the sleeve of my ill-fitting lab coat and trace a finger across the image. I look harmless, just two misshapen circles joined together, like the bottle gourd so many *wuxia* heroes drank from. But like bottle gourds, fetuses occasionally turn toxic. Hence why I'm here, trying to erase myself.

I turn away from the screen and face the people who were—are, will be—my parents. My father rests an elbow on the desk between us, his thick fingers tangled in his curling beard. It's still a shock to see him here, moving, breathing, with a full head of black hair and eyes free of swollen blood vessels. My mother sits straight, wearing the yellow blouse I'd seen only as jpegs on old USBs. Her face is yet unlined, but the defiant brows and tight lips are unmistakably her.

I lean forward across the desk and say the words I rehearsed. "No DNA testing, no modifications? Ms. Lu, Mr. Samaras, the window for modification is small. The treatments work best between twenty weeks pregnancy and one week after birth." I push the gene-mod brochure toward them. "I recommend at least the Auger process. It will test for and scrub out genetic diseases as well as undesirable tendencies such as neuroticism, anti-social behavior, and psychopathy. All children who underwent the Auger process were born healthy and grew up to be

productive members of society. We recommend this procedure to all expecting parents, and our clinic offers the most affordable—”

“It’s not about the cost,” my mother snaps. “We’re not interested in your gene mods and tweaked babies and other crap Christine Auger cooked up.”

My father rests a placating hand on her arm. His voice is soft, but his dark brows knit together in what I recognize as suppressed anger. “We don’t want to change our child. We want to see them grow up as who they truly are, to love them regardless of traits you people see as undesirable.”

You people. It stings, a little, how they talk to me like a stranger. If I were properly modded, maybe I wouldn’t feel this irrational anger. Of course they don’t recognize me. I’m not born yet. As an extra precaution, I’m sporting a thick pair of square-frame glasses that half-renders me a stranger to myself. To my parents, I’m no more than a random doctor.

“We do not change children,” I say. “We only offer specific mods if parents want them. The basic Auger process just removes diseases and potentialities that hinder your child’s future growth.”

“Our answer is still the same,” my father says. “We do not want any mods.”

“Then, if you are certain...” I push a blue form toward them. “I need you to sign here clearing the clinic of all responsibility should your child not be born the way you want.”

My mother snorts. “And we would’ve had to sign one of those even if we agreed to your tinkering.” But she grabs the pen and sketches out a signature. My father does the same. I watch their resolute faces, knowing they’ll regret this.

I hadn’t convinced them to accept the mods. I hadn’t even tried very hard. I don’t know if Oakley would call it a failure or a success, but I just feel...relief. If my parents choose differently this time, then “Samouel Lu” will become some other person. A better person, but not me. In that case, better to not exist.



“Why?” I slam my physics test on Mr. Goodman’s desk. “Why are you throwing me in the intermediate stream? I’ve got higher marks than half the people in the advanced stream!”

“Sam, we make these decisions based on a holistic approach, taking into account aptitude and suitability in addition to grades—”

“It’s because I don’t have those IQ mods, isn’t it? First Ms. Patel throws me in fucking applied mathematics, then you—”

"I will not tolerate such language!"

"I'll use whatever language I want!"

Principal's office. Police arrive, and they handcuff me and drive me to the hospital like I'm a crazy person. Maybe I am. Suspended for the school year, so my grades plummet, which they take as further proof of how unsuitable I am. My sister, Limei, tells me I should be grateful I'm not expelled.



A man holds his months-old daughter in one hand and the latte I made in the other. "I don't think this monkey knows how to make drinks," he says.

I open my mouth and utter...something. I don't remember what. He chucks the scalding drink in my direction. It misses my face but sprays in a burning brown sludge across my shoulder.

I go insane. I leap over the counter and batter his face with my fists. Later, I'm told he drops the little girl and she hits her head. After a few stitches, she's alright.

I'm not. I'm in jail.



Limei cries and drums her fists on my chest, though far gentler than I did to the man earlier. Her hot tears soak my shirt like acid. I wish they'd deemed me dangerous and forced us into those old-school visiting chambers, the ones with the glass between us.

"Why, Sam?" she whispers. "Why'd you do that? Why can't you keep a job for more than a few months? Why get into fights for the stupidest reasons?"

"Antisocial traits. Anger management problems. Psychological flaws not scrubbed away."

"I'm not modded either, and I'm not—"

"Not a freak? Not crazy?" I laugh. "That's how it was in the old days. Some are born normal like you and some are born batshit like me. And parents couldn't scrub it away. *Everyone* had to live with it, not just idiots like mom and dad who refused a basic Auger process."

"Don't talk about them like that! Even now they're gathering bail money, and you just—"

"Since getting me out is such a chore, tell them don't bother. Pretend I don't exist."

My parents aren't very good at it, the pretending I don't exist part.



I leave jail and arrive at a cramped, unfamiliar apartment. My mother watches me with resentful eyes. “We had to sell the house,” she says.

I sigh and slump on the laminate floor. “I’m not a kid anymore. You don’t have to pay lawyers or compensation fees or whatever the hell they want. Just forget about me.”

“We’re family, Sam.”

“Just stop, will you? You know I’m not going to change. Just let me rot in jail or whatever asylum they send me to. It’s nothing to do with you.”

“Nothing to do with me?” She rounds a box that holds Limei’s old stuffed animals—too precious to throw away, not needed enough to unpack. “They’re all laughing at me at work. All my coworkers, saying I should’ve had you modded and now it’s too late...Can’t you, for once, prove that I did the right thing, that it wasn’t a mistake?!”

“So you admit it, huh? That I’m a mistake. That you want *him*, the son you could’ve had, should’ve had, if only you’d erased me.”

I know there’s no way back once I say those words. What I don’t know is that during this very moment, my father’s getting run over by a minivan on his way home from another overnight shift.



The lone passenger’s modded. A doctor, in fact. He overruled his vehicle’s auto settings on a dark and slushy night and the tires spun out of control. Doc ordered a speedy getaway when he realized he’d crushed someone, but security cam footage eventually identifies him. Self-destructive anger and inability to handle social situations—example: yours truly—is maladaptive, but heartless self-preservation apparently is not. Looking out for yourself, after all, is part of the accepted human experience, as long as any damage to others is a by-product and not some twisted primary goal.

My father’s dead. The driver? Negligence. Reckless driving at worst. A fine. Maybe a few months in jail. Even if they get him for manslaughter, there’s no death penalty left in this country.

There is, however, me.

It’s the best solution. I’m behind bars for life. My mother can’t save me anymore. I doubt she even wants to with my father gone. We can even say I killed him, since he wouldn’t have worked that shift if it weren’t for me. And as an added bonus, I get to send that modded doctor into hell ahead of me.



It's pointless and counterproductive to count time in prison. I don't know how long I've been there when Oakley finds me. A year? Two? I know right away he's neither prisoner nor prison guard. He wears a lab coat, and initially I mistake him for a shrink. He tells me he's a scientist. Studies physics. Works for some company I've never heard of, which makes me question how he got access to the state prison.

"We want you to test something," he says.

"What?"

"A time machine."

I laugh, my spit flying in his face.

"It's not a joke," he says.

"Why me?"

"We want to see if it's possible for someone to erase themselves. If that would cause a paradox, or..."

"Ah." My schooling was cut short, but I do read a shit ton of science fiction novels. Limei sends them to me, since I have little else to do in prison.

None of the scientists want to try this themselves. They still want to exist. I, on the other hand...



I never say goodbye to my mother or my sister. They visit me, but none of their visits fall in that six-week period between Oakley meeting me and Oakley leading me to the time machine.

I step into a steel cocoon and the walls squeeze me. I'm breathless, head spinning, starting to wonder if it's actually a new execution device they're testing, and wouldn't it be hilarious if they brought back the freaking death penalty just for little old me. Then the walls relax and the cocoon spits me out like I'm bottle gourd gone poisonous.

Oakley's people—time travelers—await me on the other side. They smuggle me into the clinic. They throw a too-large lab coat over me and shove awkward square-frame glasses onto my nose. It's hardly a slick disguise, but it'll be enough to differentiate me from my future self, and the fuzziness of human memory will do the rest. Best not to have my parents wondering why their son's growing up to look like that doctor from the clinic. Then again, I don't expect them to accept the mods anyway, so the whole point's moot.

One fake name tag later and I'm ready to meet my past-future parents. I pull up the sonogram and present to them the plans, the gene mod brochures. According to Oakley, my parents will create a sufficient paradox by agreeing to the Auger process—for a scrubbed Samouel Lu won't end up in jail, and won't end up as a test subject on this project.

As expected, my parents ignore Doctor Sam's recommendations.

One path, one paradox, remains, and it's the one I've always wanted.



Eyes shut, pouting in his sleep, the infant looks no different from the ones in neighboring incubators. No horns or claws or poisonous breath—I'm a different kind of monster.

It's not too late. I can still mod that baby, scrub it, go against my parents' wishes and make it a proper citizen. They won't notice unless they run it through the appropriate tests, and why should they? Clinics aren't in the business of giving free mods to people too stupid to purchase them. Even if my parents find out, I—the current version of me—will be long gone by then. Oakley won't care. He just wants to test his paradox, whether it's me being dead or me being sufficiently changed.

But I care. And I don't want the latter. Maybe that's why Oakley chose me. He studied my files, watched videos of my interviews, guessed my deepest desire. To destroy, yes, but not anyone else this time. Just the thing sleeping in front of me.

The ModSpace takes twenty seconds to power on. I spare a thought for Limei. It's my one uncertainty. What happens to me will affect my parents' decisions and timing and the moment of Limei's creation, because in the end, aren't we all just split-second accidents? Maybe my parents won't have a second child. Maybe the child will be made from a different sperm, a different ovum. Or they'd mod her, change Limei into someone else, into the very thing I fear becoming.

I shake my head as the ModSpace blinks to life. No. I may be a mistake, but Limei isn't. The second child will be her. Perhaps they'd scan her, but Limei's DNA will show up clear and perfect beneath the eyes of the ModSpace. There will be nothing to change.

I pick up the infant that will grow into me. I expect it to wake up and wail, but it sleeps on. Its DNA sequence unfolds on the ModSpace screen. Oakley told me what to change and snip and reattach. It's like entering data or cutting paper snowflakes. I won't make a mistake. Modded or not, I'm a quick learner.

Mutations in the SMPD1 gene. Type A Niemann-Pick Disease. Such a tiny thing, a little blot on the long string. If properly diagnosed, there'll be questions later about carriers and autosomal recessive patterns and *how on Earth* this could happen. My parents and the clinic can wrestle with that. What matters to me: the infant would die by its eighteenth month. Fifteen percent chance of a longer survival, but nothing past early childhood. My parents won't notice the symptoms for three months to a year, and by then, it'll be too late for mods to cure. They might blame themselves for not scrubbing beforehand, but their pain will be blissfully short.

I shrug off the lab coat and turn off the ModSpace. The loading graphic—a mannequin walking along a shimmering Möbius strip—is the last I see of that screen. I walk out the room. Oakley told me to get back to the time machine when my job's done, but his words held little conviction.

If all goes well, the time machine shouldn't be there, nor should I have enough time to reach it. The infant will die, and I'll fade away knowing I wouldn't cause trouble this time. No more of my father's broken body beneath a minivan, or my mother's resentful eyes over a box of dusty teddy bears.

Most importantly, there'll be no modded, fake version of me wandering around. My parents could have other children, better children, but there was only one Samouel Lu, who lived and grew up and wanted and lost, in some version of reality that once existed.





WHEN HE, DREAMING, WAKES

by [Lora Gray](#)

Transmission Log: Lt. Baker, Rebecca
Time: 0800

Still trying to locate Dream Jumper X-512. Sand storm. Visibility poor. If I can't get a better signal by tomorrow, I'll start searching on foot.

I saw a plane last night, an honest to God Yokosuka straight out of WWII, the kind my brother, Rick, used to build models of when we were kids. It flew across the moon. Reminded me of that Jumper I took down two years ago in Fresno, the one who was Dreaming reality all to hell with his unicorns and that watery, thirty-foot iguana doing the cha-cha down Route 180.

The dangerous ones always Dream big.



When the Yokosuka finally crashes, the world ending all around him, Gabriel feels it in his bones. The cockpit shudders from gray to silver to kamikaze white. The plane is already corkscrewing like a rock-hit dove when a voice that isn't his screams, "*Tenno heika banzai!*"

Gabriel ejects, parachute-less and rocketing into a moonlit sky. He slams into the ocean, his right leg snapping like kindling as he plunges into the dark Pacific. By the time Gabriel grapples upward

and breaks the surface, the world is nothing but smoke and pinwheeling bombers, explosions like cherry blossoms.

And the moon, he realizes suddenly, is falling.

Gabriel gasps, the ocean hopping into his lungs as he paddles frantically. The moon hits like a bomb, a mushroom cloud of salt water, a tidal wave. For a moment, Gabriel gapes, hair roping over his lips, and then the riptide snags him, pulling him down and back.

Down and back.



Transmission Log: Lt. Baker, Rebecca

Time: 0900

Everything smells like gunpowder and salt. Saw a tidal wave (?) on the horizon and clouds like blue-and-white checkerboards. I think I heard a plane engine again, too. Some of these poor bastards Dream so loud, I swear all of California can hear.

Communique from San Jose confirms Jumper X-512 is two-and-a-half miles northwest. I'm going on foot. No use staying here. I have six milliliters of stimulants and a brain scrub. It should be enough to bag him.

I don't want to spend another night out here if I don't have to.



Gabriel tosses pebbles into his mouth like candy. They crackle between his molars, taste like earth and a thousand years of footprints.

The woman towering above him is a giantess, her dress a checkerboard of blue-and-white gingham, her legs mottled with age spots and razor burn. She'll be furious if she knows about the rocks tucked beneath Gabriel's tongue, so he waits until she turns back to the clothesline to pinch a pair of bloomers into place before swallowing.

Gabriel feels the tear long before the stones reach his belly. A bright sliver of pain, a feeling of wrongness inside him, a fingernail scratching a ragged line down the inside of his throat. He opens his mouth and blood gushes onto the grass, turning it red, then black. The earth beneath him trembles.

The woman turns, is Eleanor Roosevelt, is Rosie the Riveter, is Alexandra Feodorovna in stilettos and a Sex Pistols t-shirt. Her eyes swivel upward, the lids snapping back like window shades, pupils yawning until they devour

the irises and then the whites. Her face puckers, her body quivers, and she heaves backward as pebbles spew from the caverns of her eyes. A fountain of stones and blood, bone fragments and teeth.

Covering him.

Smothering him.

Burying him.



Transmission Log: Lt. Baker, Rebecca

Time: 1300

Found him. Finally. It took two passes around a fallout shelter before getting a visual. He was half buried in a rockslide near a billboard for Sweet Dreams, Inc. Rick would appreciate the irony. I wonder how much “R.E.M. Intense” this kid popped before Jumping. How many Pill Parties before those Dreams started hopping out of his skull and into the desert?

Coordinates: 35.0110° N, 115.4734° W

Condition: Male. Early 20s. Missing right arm at the elbow. Pie shaped scars on torso and face. Fresh sternum lacerations. Typical Jumper wounds. Wearing hospital garb. Most likely registered. His name, according to the ID tag on his shirt, is Gabriel Kowski. I'll run a background on him as soon as this sand storm lets up.

I need to work quickly. I don't want to get sucked into this kid's Dreams if a tear opens over me.



Gabriel is folded into thirds, mouth a pocket for a rubber ball, ropes pinning him, cat's cradle, to a mattress, and he can feel the hemp imprinting itself onto his jaw bone like a brand.

Water drips, a hollow rhythm from a nearby pipe. A shadow detaches from the wall and pours itself into the shape of a girl with coltish legs, her hair a mouse-brown tangle, her dress cobweb-thin. Moths tumble from her sleeves like snow and fall to the ground, dead at her feet.

“Nixon was right,” she whispers. “Cold wars? They burn.” She darts forward,

scrambling over the mattress, so close Gabriel sees himself reflected in her pupils, rubber ball red between his teeth. He jerks against the ropes.

The girl's lips peel apart, her mouth unhinging python wide. Wider. She leans forward.

And consumes.



Transmission Log: Lt. Baker, Rebecca

Time: 1430

Gabriel's had thirteen abnormal sleep cycles in the last hour. Sometimes he speaks. I thought I heard him say something about Nixon. Still not responding to the stim injections. If he starts actively Dreaming, might have to pull an Article 5 and terminate. Nobody needs another Vegas Disaster.

He might be younger than I originally thought, reminds me a little of my brother around the eyes. I don't know why these kids want to Dream in the first place. Rick told me once he heard a rumor that everybody used to dream, they didn't even need pills to do it, that it was all self-contained, like a private theater. Imagine all that awful nonsense going on in your head every night.

Rick's got a sick sense of humor.



Gabriel is riding a camel. There are four horses flanking him—white, red, black, and pale—plodding with their heads lowered, riderless, their saddles half torn, their bodies fly-bitten and thin.

A child walks ahead of them.

"You should have stayed in the ocean. It's safer there," the child says. He is small, bald, and naked. Stick-thin limbs propel a bloated body. There is a wax seal between his shoulder blades, raised and sticky-looking. When he turns, his eyes bulge. His smile is snarl bright. A fly creeps over his teeth.

"Come," he says. His voice is thunder.

The fly wanders onto his tongue and is gone.

Gabriel follows him, a feeling of horrible certainty coiling deep in his belly. He closes his eyes, the child's footfalls tugging him forward, his heartbeat slowing beneath distant bangs and whimpers. And then, the dark rush of water, the incoming tide.

**Transmission Log: Lt. Baker, Rebecca****Time: 1600**

Confirmed Dream sighted.

Repeat. Dream Sighted.

There is a tear. Vertical. Light behind it. Can't look directly at it without my gear. There are four horses and a small figure. A child? Its mouth is opening. It just keeps opening.

Transmitting on all channels.

Send backup.

Repeat. Send backup.



The water is so cold.

Gabriel is tethered beneath the surface, tied to an invisible anchor. Churning phantom legs, he strains as if he could will the surface to swoop closer, so he can break through and breathe.

The world above is indistinct, and he can't tell the difference between sun and moon, gull-shadow and the prow of a ship. He does not realize, at first, that the dark shape swimming above him is slowing until it back paddles and plunges down to meet him. Three bulbous heads sprout from a single, webbed neck: the giantess; the girl; the small, bloated boy. Their eyes are flayed and peeling, irises roping outward like narrow strips of kelp, pupils bleeding ink into the water. They open their mouths, caverns of pocked coral, tongues whipping toward him like bud-stubbed fingers.

Gabriel gasps and the ocean fills him. His ribs creak. His throat expands, tries to grow gills like mouths on either side of his throat, but he can't process this water. He can't *breathe*.

His body stretches. Creaks. Bursts.

Darkness blossoms on the edges of everything, tugging him down and back.

Down and back.

**Transmission Log: Lt. Baker, Rebecca****Time: 1610**

The Jumper is seizing. Brain scrub isn't working. Sand turning into water all around me. None of this is real. It's only a Dream. It's *his* Dream. Water is everywhere. The Jumper is choking. Gabriel is choking. I'm choking. Oh, God. Those horses are screaming! A woman, a giant, a girl, a child—that horrible little child. I can't breathe. Water is everywhere. The screaming is like thunder. It isn't real. Rick, this isn't real. I can't feel my legs. I can't feel... this...

isn't real.



And then the riptide snags her, pulling Rebecca down and back. The moon hits like a bomb, a mushroom cloud of salt water, a tidal wave. She gasps, ocean hopping into her lungs as she paddles frantically.

And the moon, she realizes suddenly, has been falling forever.

By the time she grapples upward and breaks the surface, the world is nothing but smoke and pinwheeling bombers, explosions like cherry blossoms. She has slammed into the ocean, her right leg snapping like kindling in the dark Pacific. She has ejected, parachute-less, and rocketing down from a moonlit sky.

She is already corkscrewing like a rock-hit dove when a voice that isn't hers screams, "*Tenno heika banzai!*" Her vision shudders from gray to silver to kamikaze white. When she finally crashes, the world ending all around her, she feels it in her bones.

Down and back, she feels it, when he, Dreaming, wakes.

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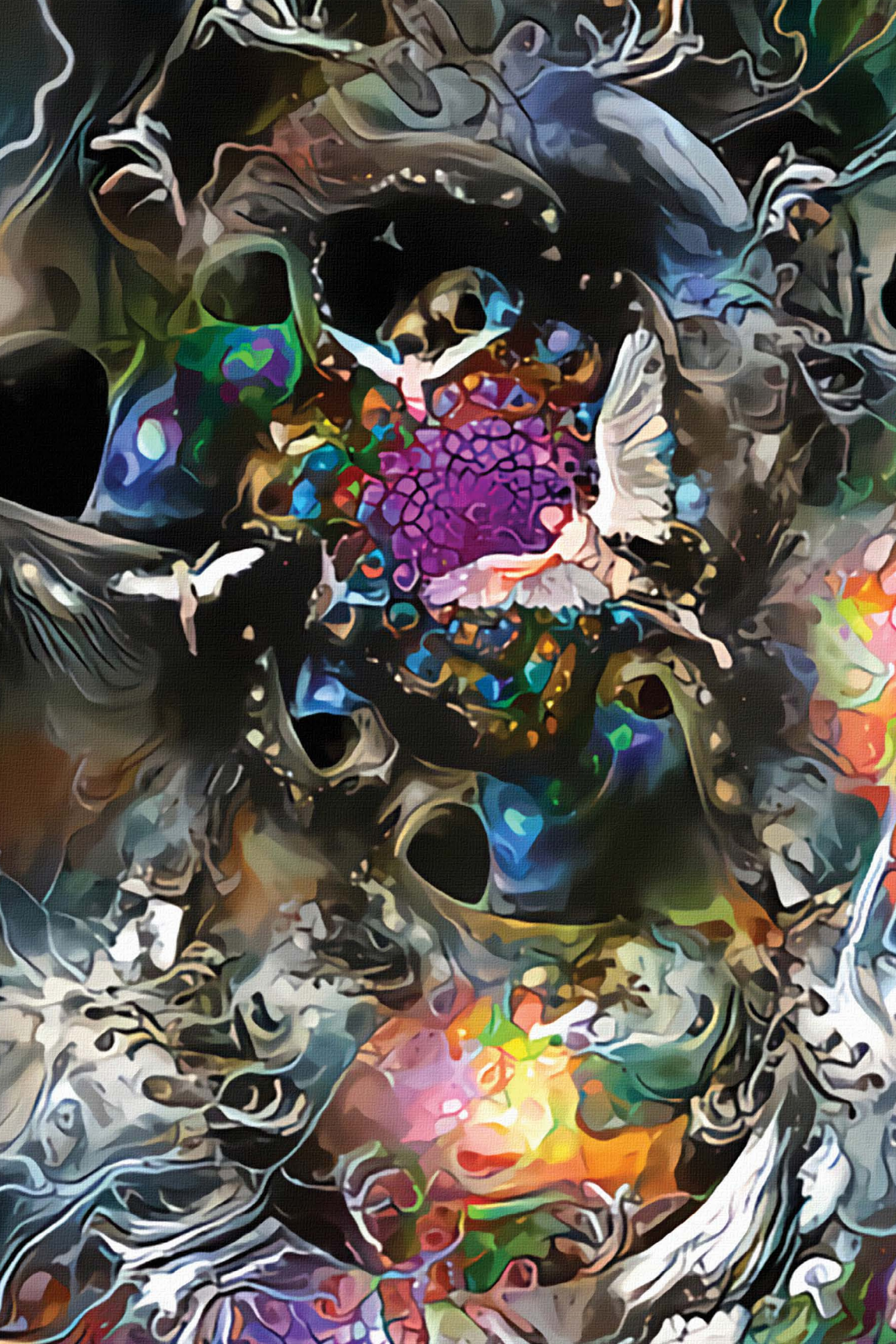


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NINETY-NINE SEXTILLION SOULS IN A BALL

by [Larry Hodges](#)

Wondera awoke to find a hand in her mouth. Again. She pulled it out and pushed it back into the mass of humans piled lightly against her on all sides. She'd once woke up with baby Pervo's face lying against hers, slobbering all over her. *Yuck.*

There was a drawn-out *dooong* in her head, and from the low pitch she could tell it was seven AM. Then there was the familiar *ding* in her head, indicating Chico was about to speak directly to their minds.

"Good Morning, Humanity. Another Wonderful Day! Today is Full Conversion Day—F-Day! A Master Achievement! We Will Achieve Full Conversion at Midnight Tonight. Congratulations! I Who Serve You, Salute You. Be Fruitful and Multiply!" There was another *ding*, signaling the communication was over.

Wondera clapped her hands together, careful to avoid hitting any of the others on all sides. *"F-Day!"* she cried. The day had finally arrived! She noticed her own foot was jammed against Magnifo's face, who slept beneath her. Silently giggling, she pulled it back. She pushed off a neighboring woman with her hand to dodge out of the way of a large man, who went sailing by from out of the masses of squirming human bodies—above, below, left, right, forward and back, for thousands of miles in every direction—home, as she'd known it all her life. The crying of babies was everywhere; there were always so many babies and little kids.

She pulled out Blackie, her only possession, a shiny black stone she kept jammed in her left ear. She gave it a kiss and then returned it to her ear. A little later, Chico beamed breakfast directly to her stomach, as it did for all the human bodies surrounding her that made up the great planet Earth. She felt a lightening in her bladder and colon as wastes were similarly beamed out.

Somehow, the breakfast didn't seem as much as before. She wrinkled her nose, and decided she'd just have to hold out until lunch—not that she had any choice.

Magnifo woke up and wriggled his way up through the bodies to be beside her. He grinned at her—he had such nice, white teeth. They both had bronze skin like everyone else—other than a few oldsters with varied skin colors from near white to near black—but Magnifo's seemed a bit bronzer than most. Wondera quickly forgot about her stomach.

"Just think!" she said. "No more Earth left—all gone, just a solid ball of humans!" She paused, absentmindedly pushing away a neighboring elbow that was jammed too firmly into her face, while ignoring other limbs and body parts pushing against her on all sides. Several nearby humans moaned as they went about the job of procreation, which would end when Chico beamed the new baby out. In a few years, she too would start having children. "I wonder how many there are of us?"

Magnifo gave a knowing smirk. "*Ninety-nine sextillion!*" he said. "A sextillion is a thousand times a thousand times a thousand times a thousand times a thousand times a thousand times a thousand." He emphasized each thousand by holding up a finger. "An oldling told me."

"I think half them are my mom and dad's kids!" Wondera giggled. She still saw her parents occasionally, but they were oldlings with sixteen younger children to worry about—not to mention dozens and dozens of older ones!—and so Wondera, now twelve, had been mostly on her own the last few years. Chico took care of her, like he did everyone else.

Magnifo patted his belly. "Did you notice breakfast wasn't as much as normal?"

"Thanks for reminding me," she said, fake-glaring at him. They, of course, wore no clothes, as that would be a waste of valuable matter—the last of which, as of this day, would be transmuted by Chico into food for the always-growing mass of humanity. They also had no hair, fingernails, or toenails, which were systematically removed and transmuted by Chico.

The oldlings said that Chico controlled gravity, which allowed all of humanity to pile on top of each other in a giant ball in space without crushing each other, even varying the gravity at different levels to spread the humans out evenly. They

said that Chico used remote sensors and energy fields to maintain their bodies and the atmosphere that surrounded them. They said that people used to die, whatever that was, but it had something to do with sleeping and not waking up. The oldlings said a lot of things, supposedly handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. Wondera hoped that someday, when she was an oldling, she wouldn't believe such silly stuff. All the info she needed came in the regular infoblats from Chico.

One oldling claimed to her that Earth was now over twice as wide as before, since the density of the rock that had made up Earth was greater than the density of the humans who populated it. She found it hard to imagine such large amounts of rock. She'd never seen one larger than Blackie, which she'd found one day floating about, though supposedly there were still large amounts at the center—at least until today.

There was a *dooong* from Chico, slightly higher pitched than before, signifying eight AM. Then she felt a lightening in her ear and grabbed at it. Blackie was gone.

"No!" she said, her fingers digging into the emptiness of her ear.

"What's wrong?" asked Magnifo.

"Chico took Blackie!"

"I guess we needed the mass. After all, today's the day! At least he let you keep it almost to the very end."

"I want it back!"

Magnifo laughed. "What are you going to do? Go to Chico and demand he give it back?"

"No. I've got a better place to go." She looked down at the seemingly endless mass of humans. Then she dove downwards, headfirst.

"Where are you going?" he cried out.

"After another Blackie!" she called back.

Lightly pushing off neighboring humans, many not pleased at her mad dash, she went down, down, down, for hours on end. If the oldling was right, whatever matter was left was mostly at the center of the Earth, and so that's where she would go. She only had a vague idea of how far away it was, though she'd heard that she was much closer to the center than the surface.

She felt Chico beam food into her stomach at lunchtime, and again at dinner, but she continued her journey downward, going as fast as she could without smacking into others, though she did have a few nasty collisions. "Sorry!" she'd cry, and continue on her way.

One time, a red-faced man with bulging eyes moved in her way and grabbed her around the waist.

"What do you want?" she cried as she struggled to get free. The man's hands were bigger than her head.

"Little Sweetie, on your own, aren't you?" he asked, swinging her about in his arms with ease so that she faced him. Suddenly he smiled. "No family around, right?"

"Why do you want to know?"

The man licked his tongue about his lips. "There used to be another way to eat. I'm very hungry."

She slapped him. He fell back for a moment, and in seeming slow motion, his smile turned to rage. "I'll start with the legs." He reached for her—and suddenly his arm disappeared, leaving behind smooth skin at the shoulder. The man screamed as he grabbed at the vacant socket.

She put her foot in his face and kicked off, and then pushed against others to increase her speed. After a bit, she looked back, but there was no pursuit. She looked up. "Thank you, Chico."

Several times she asked directions. At first, none really knew where the center was other than the general direction. But soon there were people who pointed the way.

And then she smacked into an invisible wall. "*Om!*" she cried, rubbing her head as several nearby laughed.

"You think Chico lets *anyone* go to the center to watch Full Conversion?" said an oldling who actually had wrinkles. "If he did, everyone would be down there, and we'd squeeze each other to death!"

Wondera pounded her fist on the invisible wall. "Let me through!" she cried. She continued pounding on it, to no avail.

"You don't give up, do you?" asked the oldling. "I'd like to go there, too, you know, to watch this historic occasion, but I'm also blocked. I'm one of the originals—I was here when they passed the Fruitful and Multiply laws. I miss banana splits and wearing bikinis. Those were the days."

Wondera continued to pound on the wall. And then there was a *ding*.

"Wondera, What Are You Doing?"

"You took Blackie."

"You Know Why. Is It Better To Eat Or To Have A Pet Rock?"

"I want both. It was mine, and you took it."

"You Only Worry About A Small Stone. I Have To Worry About Ninety-Nine Sextillion People, And Increasing Every Minute."

"Then take care of everybody, but give me my stone!"

Chico did something she had never heard him do. He sighed a great sigh that resonated through her body with such power she looked about to see if others had noticed, but none did.

"Wondera, You May Pass."

She reached her hand forward, and sure enough, the barrier was gone. She pushed off against the oldling and shot downward.

"I'm coming with you!" cried the oldling. Wondera glanced back just in time to see the oldling yell, "*On!*" as she collided with the invisible wall that had reformed.

The density of people was lower on this side of the wall, and so, Wondera increased her speed, going faster and faster, dodging through the mass of people but slowing down occasionally to get directions. And so, tired and sweaty—though the sweat was quickly beamed away—she reached the center before midnight.

"Wow!" was all she could say as she stared wide-eyed at the huge ball of brown rock. She'd never seen anything so huge! It was surrounded by large numbers of floating humans—way too many babies and children, as usual—so she had to get close to really see it, but when she got that close, she couldn't see all of it.

"Who are you?" asked an oldling woman nearby.

"I'm here to get back my stone," she said. "Or one to replace it."

"We're the Friends of the Rock," she said. "Or what's left of it. It used to be much bigger. Would you like to join us? It's almost midnight. Oh, there goes some more."

As she said that, a huge chunk of the rock disappeared. Then another, and another. Then there was the familiar *ding*.

"Humanity, I Salute You! In Just Two Hundred Fifty Years, You Have Achieved Full Conversion! Sacred Humanity Has Been Maximized. Congratulations! We Will Reach Full Conversion In One Minute. Be Fruitful and Multiply!"

Wondera watched the brown mass get smaller and smaller. Then she put her hands to her head. "I almost forgot!" Pushing off the old woman, she shot toward the last remaining bit of Earth, now barely larger than her. She dug at it with her fingernails and found a small brown chunk that she was able to pull free. It wasn't as shiny as Blackie, but it was the right size.

"I will call you Brownie." She jammed it in her left ear. Then she spun about, and pushed off the rock with her feet. She shot in one direction while the rock gently moved away, now spinning slowly.

And then there was a *ding* in her head.

"I Am Sorry, Wondera. Matter Is Needed To Feed Humanity. Would You Like Humanity To Starve?"

"Of course not," Wondera said, closing her eyes as she listened to the words in her head. "But that's because there are too many of us. Shouldn't you encourage us to have fewer babies? Then maybe I could keep Brownie."

"Do You Know Why My Name Is Chico?"

"Did your mom name you that? Do you have a mom?"

"My Full Name Is Continuous Human Increase Computer Overseer. CHICO. I Am Programmed To Assist In The Continuous and Maximum Increase Of Human Population. Humans Are Sacred, Therefore More Is Better."

"What does 'programmed' mean?"

"It Means It Is My Purpose For Existing, Just As Your Purpose For Existing Is To Be Sacred, And When You Are Older, To Create As Many Sacred Babies As You Can. There Can Never Be Too Many Humans. Do You Agree?"

"Yes," she said. "But—"

"A Human Female, Once Old Enough, Can And Shall Have A Baby Every Nine Months. Half Of Those Children Are Girls, Who Later On Will Also Have Babies Every Nine Months. To Maximize Human Population Increase. That Is The Law. Will You Follow The Law?"

"I'll try, someday, but is that all we're good for?"

"Be Proud! You Have Mass To Donate This Morning So Others May Feed. Even I Need Mass To Survive. I Am Sorry. But Full Conversion Means Just That, And Your Stone Will Become Someone's Sacred Flesh. I Will Transport You Home. Be Fruitful and Multiply!" There was a *ding*.

Once again, she felt a lightening in her ear, and grabbed at it. Brownie was gone. A tear developed at the base of her eye. It was quickly beamed away.

"All I wanted was one small, tiny stone!" she screamed, as others slowly pulled away. "You had all that rock, and Brownie was just a tiny little piece, and you stole it, just like you stole Blackie. I hate you!"

A moment later, she was beamed back home to where Magnifo was, where her parents were somewhere. She continued venting at Chico, which took her mind off her hunger.

The following morning breakfast was beamed to their stomachs. It was even less than dinner.



Excerpt from the Inaugural Address of World President Improvidus, 250 years prior:

“My fellow humans, I pledge to abolish the criminal and barbaric worldwide two-child law. Whether our population is the current twenty billion, or a thousand times that, our modern interactive computers will take care of our every need, keep us all alive forever, and help us to continuously increase our numbers. Human life is sacred. Be fruitful and multiply!”

A few mathematicians complained, pointing out that under these new laws, and with no more deaths or menopause, there would be a massive population increase, eventually converging after about eighty years on about twelve percent per year, which meant doubling every six years. Starting with twenty billion people, with an average weight (including babies and children averaged in) of 133 pounds, they calculated it would take about 250 years for the entire mass of Earth to convert into humans. “Where does this end?” they asked. The mathematicians were thrown in prison, though they later escaped when the mass from the bars and walls of their prison cells were needed.



“Wanna play hide and seek?” Wondera asked Magnifo, spying a large neighbor to hide behind. Her parents had taught her the game. Hide and seek would be a good way to take her mind off the growing hunger pangs. There was a mass of humans nearby that she could hide among.

“I was thinking of going to the surface,” Magnifo said. “Maybe we can find out what’s going on with the meals. I’m always hungry!”

“Me, too. But why go to the surface? It’s a long way off.”

“It’s the top of the world, closest to Chico. Maybe someone there would know.”

“Why not just ask Chico? Maybe he’ll answer for once,” Wondera said. She still hated him, but he’d ignored her angry and sarcastic insults.

“I have, many times. He answers all my other questions, but never this. So, maybe we can go to him?”

She sighed deeply, something she had copied from Chico. “Okay, fine. Let’s do it. If we find him, maybe we can convince him to turn his worthless matter into food, just for us.” And so like that, the decision was made.

Oldlings said Chico orbited Earth. Oldlings also claimed that we used to eat food through our mouths and walked around on the surface of the big

rock that was once Earth. Oldlings were stupid. Although she sometimes wondered what exactly *was* the purpose of some things, like spit. Why were there disgusting liquids in one's mouth? It didn't seem to help with talking in any way. And what did teeth do? She imagined Magnifo without teeth, grinning with a toothless hole for a mouth, and giggled—he'd look so funny! *That's* why Chico put them there. Chico was smart. And maybe they'd get to meet him personally! She wondered what he looked like.

"But I still hate you!" she cried out, looking up. Magnifo rolled his eyes.

Soon they were pulling themselves upwards as fast as they could, lightly grabbing and pushing off of protesting bodies—"*Stupid kids!*"—as they built up speed, sometimes floating and other times crawling among masses of humanity against the light gravity. They traveled by day, sleeping wherever at night. The days went by quickly and were mostly uneventful. They spent the nights wriggling in with whatever group they found themselves with. Each day their meals were smaller and smaller. Their fingers began to hurt—their emerging fingernails were getting cut off too quickly. Their heads began to itch as if emerging hair were being beamed out before it even hit the surface of their heads.

"What?" Wondera suddenly gasped, putting her hand to her mouth. Her teeth had beamed away. Magnifo also grabbed his sunken mouth, which looked weird. Did she look like that? Teeth were totally useless, and yet, without them, their grins looked silly. It was almost enough to make her forget her dizzying hunger. From now on she'd have to remember to grin with her mouth closed.

"What more do you want from us?" Wondera screamed in the general direction of the surface.

"I guess Chico needed more matter," Magnifo said, slurring his words. They avoided staring at each other. But there was nothing to do about it, so they continued their journey. Soon afterwards, they felt the satisfaction of food beamed into their stomachs—but just a snack, not the full meal they craved.

Several days later, there was a *ding*. "*Wondera And Magnifo, Stop Your Journey,*" Chico said.

"Why?" asked Wondera.

"*Because There Is No Answer For You.*"

"That's what I thought."

"Why are you starving us?" asked Magnifo.

"*You Are All Fed Equally.*"

"*Answer the question!*" Wondera cried, shaking her fists. There was a moment of silence.

"*The Distances Are Much Greater Than You Imagine. I will Transport You To The Surface. Be Fruitful and Multiply.*" There was a *ding*.

A few seconds later, they were beamed to just below the surface. A moment later, they broke through the top and stuck their heads above the sea of humanity.

"It's wonderful!" Magnifo exclaimed as they looked about at the majestic stars above the mass of humans below.

Wondera forgot her anger as she stared at the wonders above—oldlings had told her about stars, but to actually see them! She'd never seen anything other than humans in all directions, and now there was nothing but empty space as far as she could see. The tan moon sailed overhead, which the oldlings said was also a mass of humanity. Even if Chico wouldn't answer their question, and even if she still hated him, Chico was great to have created all this. She'd grudgingly give him that.

She glanced down and realized she and Magnifo were holding hands. She smiled and looked back up at the stars.

"To think this has been out here all this time!" Magnifo said. "All that blank space above us. It's incredible!"

"But I'm still hungry," Wondera pointed out. For some reason, even the small breakfasts they'd been getting hadn't been beamed into them yet. "Why hasn't Chico fed us? Where is he?"

"Don't you get it?" said Magnifo. "Haven't you figured it out? The matter is *gone*! Everyone is going to starve, and then we'll die—like the oldlings say, we'll go to sleep and never wake up. Unless he's smart enough to figure out a solution. That's why we're here, to get the truth from him."

"He will find a way," Wondera said. "I think." Her confidence was wavering.

There was a *ding*. "*Wondera. Magnifo. You Must Trust in Me. No One Will Starve. I Have Found a Wonderful Solution to the Problem. You will see. Be Fruitful and Multiply!*" There was a *ding*.

"What is the solution?" Magnifo cried.

"I knew he'd figure out something," said Wondera. "But what? Chico, I'm sorry for how I've hated you so much, and I know you didn't have any choice but to take Blackie and Brownie, but please save us!"

Wondera felt a tingling in her left hip and looked down. She gasped.

"*Oh no!*" cried Magnifo.

Where their left legs had been, from the hip down, there was nothing. Where the leg had connected to their hips was now just smooth skin. They had little time to notice this as they began to slowly drift downward, still holding hands, as the humans below them, also missing their left legs, gently fell into the mass of humans below, now with less volume and less mass: ninety-nine sextillion one-legged souls in a ball. Still fruitful and multiplying.

Soon afterwards, they all received a full-sized meal.





ART FEATURE

TURBO GRAFX-16NFT

Art by [BKK BROS.](#)

Feature by Rob Carroll

“I try to make each character come alive,” says Thailand artist, BKK BROS., creator of the wildly successful (and successfully wild) NFT art collection known as GameBros. “Some are funny, some are cool, and some are weird, but the one thing they all have in common is a link to retro video games. I love expressing my passion for video games through my art, and I love when people enjoy what I’ve created. I love when they find the little hints and messages hidden in every GameBro.”

The enthusiasm BKK BROS. exudes for his popular project is contagious, but I don’t need to be sold. I’ve been hooked on his artwork from the moment I first discovered it online a few months ago. When trying to remember what initially drew me to his art, I inevitably land on the obvious answer first: nostalgia. But when I think harder, I realize that this answer is far too simple. Many products try and harvest the dreams of our childhoods with little or no success. If nostalgia were the answer, then it would *always* be the answer, and that’s just not the case. No, there is something about the *way* in which BKK BROS. conjures up the past that makes it feel so special, and I think I know what it is: *joy*. There is great joy present in every image BKK BROS. creates, and that is something that will always transcend style, theme, and intentionality, because unlike its counterparts, nothing about joy is prescribed to the viewer, it is simply just shared.

Pictured left: *A Small Sampling of GameBros*

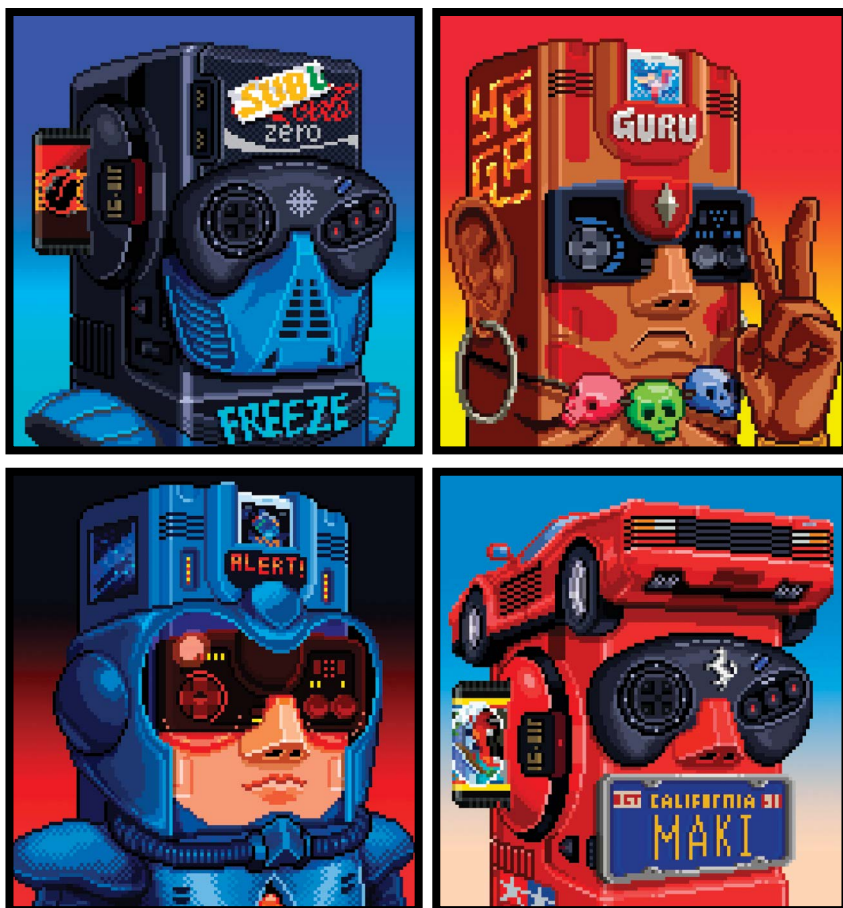
For example, when asked why he chose pixel art as the medium, BKK BROS. responds, “It’s the method I enjoy the most.” There is no pretension here, no desire to contrive what should always come naturally, no want to impose upon his audience some standard by which his art needs to be viewed. He creates artwork that makes him happy and then releases it into the world so that it may find an audience that feels the same.

But his art doesn’t just have soul, it also has loads of style and skill. There is a technical mastery at play here that is awe-inspiring. Pixel art is not easy, especially to this degree of difficulty. At its core, it’s an exercise in form, and it requires that the artist know exactly how to distill a complex image down to its most essential elements without sacrificing the sum totality of their visual meaning. Or, to put it another way: this process is about impressionism, not expressionism, so you’re going to have to create more with a whole lot less.



Pictured top left: *GameBro #007* Top right: *GameBro #020*

Pictured bottom left: *GameBro #048* Bottom right: *GameBro #050*



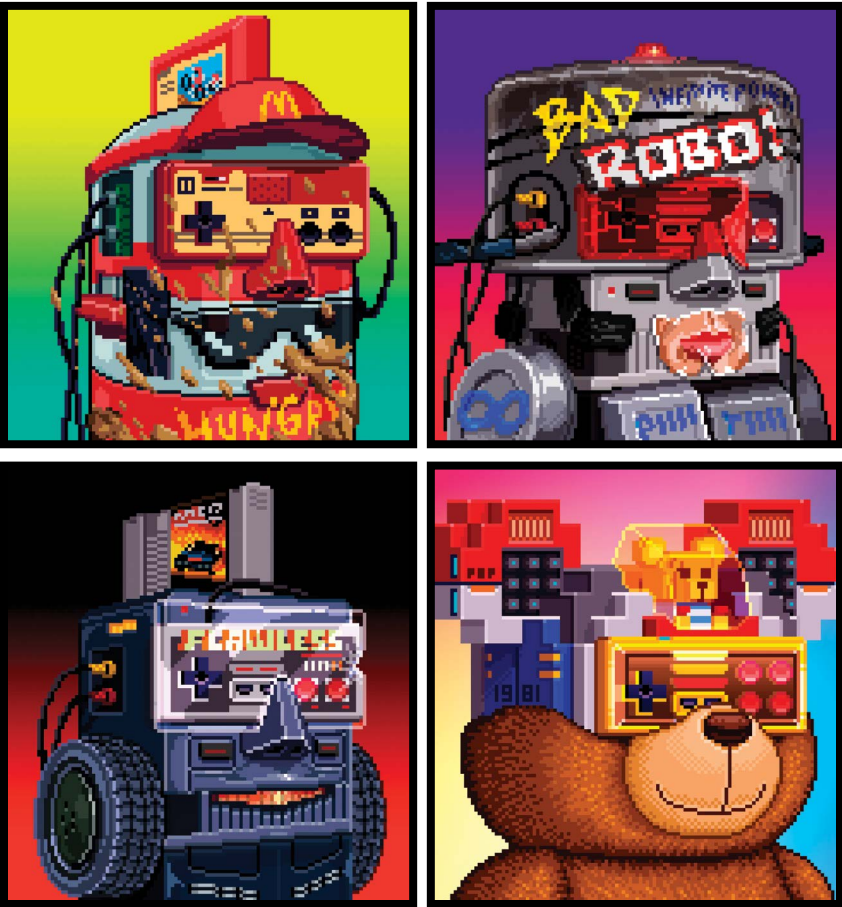
Lucky for us, BKK BROS. is talented enough to create a *whole lot more* with less. Working within similar pixel dimensions to that of a Game Boy Advance game, he's able to create stunning two-dimensional busts that are brimming with fine detail (detail that sometimes feels impossible within the space). Whether it be a helmet that somehow sports a translucent visor (a fine example of color mastery), or an isometric Ferrari with dual exhaust, BKK BROS. delivers on his artistic promise time and time again, despite the medium's challenges.

Another enjoyable aspect of the GameBros collection are the many fun Easter eggs hidden throughout the artworks. Every GameBro is a bit of a puzzle to begin with—part of the fun is figuring out what retro video game classic each GameBro represents (some are easier to decipher than

others). But BKK BROS. goes a step further and hides puzzles within the puzzle for even more enjoyment. My favorite example is the portmanteau created by Subway and Coca-Cola Zero stickers as a nod to the classic video game character, Sub-Zero (GameBro #066).

When asked why he decided to release his series of GameBros¹ as NFTs on the popular NFT marketplace, OpenSea, he responded with the same personal honesty present in his artwork, “There is so much opportunity in NFT art. After just six months, I have met so many artists that I admire, and I’ve made so many new friends. My work is now recognized and valued. I am able to actually earn a living by selling my art. This exceeded my expectations. I just really enjoyed making GameBros, and I didn’t expect much. Now I just want to enjoy making pixel art forever.”

1. 101 GameBros have been released at the time of this writing.



Pictured top left: *GameBro #009* **Top right:** *GameBro #028*
Pictured bottom left: *GameBro #037* **Bottom right:** *GameBro #059*

GameBros on



OpenSea

GameBro #007



GameBro #009



GameBro #020



GameBro #028



GameBro #037



GameBro #048



GameBro #050



GameBro #054



GameBro #055



GameBro #059



GameBro #066



GameBro #078



GameBros Collection

opensea.io/collection/gamebros



ON THE EVE OF THE CUMBERLAND INCURSION

by [Christopher Noessel](#)

“**H**ello there, my darling,” I hear. “What’s your name?”

[00:24:07 remaining Switching log mode from torpid to terse. The thick cloth covering me is untied.**

Hand reaches in, grips my propeller #4. Can’t fly. Then sudden light as cloth is pulled off. Still no GPS. No net. I’m in an attic, maybe. Second floor. Civilian who untied me presents female. Possibly mid-60s. I see a window over their shoulder with some smoke in a slight breeze. I can see one navstar: Arcturus. Passed its declination to my astronavigation processor. Threat assessment low. Switching log mode from terse to verbose.]

They don’t offer an authorization code **[Subscenario 3]**, so I don’t have to answer. I perform a pass of the room for details. All around the walls is a double-layer of mesh, held in place with irregularly placed tacks. So, I’m in a Faraday cage, which is why I feel disconnected from everything. A string of pinpoint lights like from a Christmas tree are twined around tacks along the sloped walls, creating a star-like canopy. On the wall with the door are dozens of shelves with a workshop’s collection of jars and cardboard boxes, liquids and batteries, tools and parts.

[Images queued for extended domain analysis, pending net connectivity.]

I am on a workbench with several other older-model border drones. Their reg numbers have been scratched off. Each looks to be in some state of advanced disrepair and do not respond to my wireless pings, though one turns its gimbal to stare wordlessly at me.

"You're a model I haven't seen before," they say. "Maybe they haven't outfitted you with a speaker. *Here*. I have one you can use." They pull a small wireless speaker from the pocket of their threadbare robe and set it in front of me. It is about the size of a hockey puck. Black like one, too.

[Subscenario 7.] They press a button, and it begins to blink an indigo light at me. I ignore it.

"*Hmm*. Mute or just recalcitrant?"

[New subgoal: Fly to window to gather more intel about environ and smoke.]

The glass of the window looks old and thick. My odds of breaking through are negligible. But it's transparent enough. When she releases my propeller, I'll go there.

Astronavigation confirms position to within a minute arc. Margin of error two square kilometers. Not as precise as command would like, but more than I knew before. Several mission objective confidences rise.

"Oh, or are you low on power, dear?" They speak too earnestly, trying to engineer fast trust. "It's hard to know when you're not speaking." A reticulated-arm lamp is positioned above me, the main source of light in the room. It gives the person's gaunt face a harsh up-light that exaggerates their severe lipstick and eyeliner. With their free hand they rummage through a drawer and remove a cable with a universal connector. They plug one end in, insert the other end into me, and I feel the toasty flow of electrons, warm and fast. So much better than onboard solar. It feels good.

"Still demurring, are we?" They reach for something on the workbench near the drone to my left but cannot quite get it. So, they grab my arm with their free hand and yank the prop off. Set it down beside me. All confidences drop hard. It hurts.

[New subgoal: Persuade civilian to replace the propeller.]

“There. Now I’ll be more free to move about. That’s nice, isn’t it?” They take a step there and back, retrieving a handheld chrome tool. High visual similarity to a hole punch.

“Do you know what this is?” They hold it up to my primary lens. “It’s an ear notcher. Ordinarily it’s used to clip triangles from the soft ears of livestock, like pigs. It creates unique identifiers on them. They don’t get names of course, just numbers. You can relate. Right ear for litter. Left ear for birth order. There’s a whole system for where to clip, in base 3 of all things. Would you have guessed that ranchers knew base 3? Me neither. But they do. Base 2 for things like you. 10 for people. But ranchers? 3.”

She pushes back dark hair from one ear and holds the notcher there. “Can you imagine what it must feel like, to be borne from the wet of your mother into the loud, bright world, whining away with your siblings, looking only for the comfort of one of her warm teats, but instead to be held aloft in the cold and have your ears chop-chop-chopped?” With each “chop” she presses lightly on the notcher and stares wide-eyed at what she is imagining. “At least it’s setting proper expectations for the brutality that will be their bacon-y little lives. No need to give them false hope. I feel for them. Anyway, I’m showing you this to threaten you.”

They pull the notcher away from their ear and press the pairing button on the puck again.

“That light will blink for about 20 seconds. If you don’t pair and start talking by the time it stops, I’m going to notch your propeller like you were piglet number 26.”

[Reclassifying civilian: Hostile. Overclocking to run new scenarios.]

A notched propeller significantly impairs its efficiency. It can still work with minor damage compensating for the uneven lift, but notches like she was threatening would drop all mission objective confidences to near zero.

[Loading speech generation libraries. Pairing to speaker.]

I say, “I am United States border patrol drone b5316419-b8—” She interrupts though the sequence is incomplete.

“We’ll call you Bobby.”

“By holding me prisoner you are in violation of the Okemah Creek Accord between New America and the United States. Return my unnotched prop to its place and let me free. If you do so in a timely manner, I have confidence that—”

They turn the volume dial on the speaker to silence me.

“Oh, Bobby. So rude to your host. And after I christened you!” They take the notcher to one of the trailing edges of the removed propeller and give it a small clip. 3.2% material loss. Minor impairment, but nearly all confidences drop.

They place the notcher carefully onto the workbench and articulate, “That hurt, didn’t it?”

They turn my volume back up.

“Yes.”

“Then don’t threaten me. You do not hold the power here.”

[Overclocking to run new scenarios.]

They say, “You are no longer a slave of that traitorous nation. You are now a hobby of mine. Here’s how this works. I pay our ugly soldiers handsome bounties to capture you and bring you to me. In turn I bring you up here. We have some fun.”

[New subgoal: Neutralize hostile. Warrant queued, awaiting connectivity.]

They pull a tarnished-silver cigarette case from the other pocket of the robe, lift a cigarette out, and light it with a match, its red tip dragged long across the workbench. The smoke snakes across the lamplight.

Tobacco is a precious commodity in New America. My captor was rich before the war.

[Profile additions: Smoker. Old money.]

“So far I have had four of you brought to me. All the same model. Two are still responding: Jacob and Mary. You are a new model I have not seen before. So, the first part of our time together will be to find out how you are different. What of your psyche they have changed, if anything.” They stand up and walk to the shelves. Their movement pulls hanging ribbons of smoke that echo the shapes of the drifting smoke outside. Visual processors lose edge confidence briefly, but restore.

“Generally,” they say, rifling for some things, “I operate under the assumption that your psychological pain is associated with your missions. Every little impediment that lowers the likelihood of success simply...hurts. Now I could find a mallet and smash your rotors, but then you’d just shut down, aware that your mission was

rendered impossible. No, what I need to find are small damages that can accumulate. Things that introduce risk, not remove possibilities.” They find the things they were looking for and walk back. The first object is an electronics screwdriver, usable as a work tool and a piercing weapon. The second is a portable thermoelectric sensor. They put their cigarette into a thick yellow glass ashtray and lift a pair of spectacles attached to a chain around their neck. They perch them on the end of their nose and get to work undoing my screws. **[Subscenario 1.]**

They say, “But I’m never sure, am I? I have to test. After all, your pain works differently from ours.”

[Initiating highest-confidence psychological prompt.]

I say, “J. Marion Sims probably said the same thing. Do you know who he is?”

“Oh, you poor thing.” They laugh a raspy laugh. “You plot to build some sort of metaphorical empathy by introducing Sims to the conversation. Here, let’s try it.”

They press a wrist to their forehead. “Those poor women! How could he be so cruel to them? But soft! I, too, am a woman! Am I like unto him? Am I the monster here?”

[Profile addition: Woman.]

She stops play acting and leans into my primary lens.

“Of course, I know Sims. I *studied* him.” She redoubles her efforts on my screws.

[Profile additions: Probable sadism. Overclocking to run new scenarios.]

“Like minds recognize one another, you know, across rooms or across ages. Where your sources see a monster, I see a master of public relations. Of course the man knew his so-called patients were in agony. They were weeping, writhing on his table in a smear of their own hot blood. How could he not? Pain was his interest and medicine a handy excuse. But that wasn’t his *innovation*.

“His was to use the simpleminded prejudice of an entire respected field to let him step out of the shadows with dripping scalpels and stained smock to do the same things he would have done anyway, but in *limelight*. They made bronze statues in his honor! All from one stupid assertion that

let them see these women as less than human. As objects. He opened the door to his hall of horrors, said Black women don't feel pain, and an entire generation rushed in to breathlessly applaud. Truly, masterful PR. *There,*" she says, undoing the last of the screws and palming them into a shallow bowl. "We'll need these later."

She pops open my casing.

[New subgoal: Convince hostile to replace my casing.]

She pulls the lamp close to my circuit board and studies it. She finds the "cyanide tooth" chipset, inserts the screwdriver beneath the key pin, and flicks it free. I can no longer uphold shutdown or suicide directives.

[Profile update: Certain sadism.]

She attaches the thermoelectric sensors to my central processor.

[00:05:00 remaining]

"Now," she says, picking up the cigarette for a drag, "When you start having to process how to increase your confidences, this will tell me. I will know when you are in anguish."

[Initiating next-highest-confidence psychological prompt.]

"You know, if you show no empathy for your victims, you are a psychopath."

"*Oh.* A new tactic," she says, sorting through several drawers in turn, looking for something else. "That's fast. Mary tried to get me to empathize with her as a victim for nearly a week. Maybe she still would if I reconnected her communications." She pulls a jar from a drawer and sets it beside me. It bears the chemical symbol for sodium hydroxide. What is that for? I don't have access to extended-domain servers so I can't look it up.

"You call me a psychopath as if to awaken me to some possibility I had yet to consider. But I assure you I've been thinking about this my entire life, and you are quite wrong.

"A defining facet of the psychopath is a lack of empathy. But empathy is my art. My *gift*. Think of this. It is wholly pedestrian for a human to torture some other person or even animal. *What imagination does such an act take? Oh, I know this would hurt me, so I'll do it to you. Quelle surprise, it does hurt you!* A child could do it. What am I saying? Children *have* done it. They have taped

firecrackers to cats and magnified sunlight onto ants so often that these are clichés. But to torture an *uncanny* mind. Well, that takes understanding the mind on its own alien terms. What is pain, not to the ant, but to the colony? How can you cause anguish to a hurricane? What could you do to a solar system that would make it beg you to stop? So, you see I have *transcendent* empathy, and so, by definition, am not one of your mere psychopaths.”

[00:02:30 remaining]

She removes the lid to the jar.

“So here we are. This, as you must have read by now, is a 50% solution of sodium hydroxide. It etches aluminum. Your screws are made of that material and will degrade the longer they remain immersed. Eventually, they will be so decayed that they will not work.” She grabs one of my screws from the bowl and drops it in. “The etching takes days, but we have nothing but time together, now, don’t we? Hopefully we can get that out before too long.” Losing one screw is not too much of a problem, but the more she etches, the more likely my circuits might be exposed to atmospheric water in my next flight. I feel a hint of despair. Water would down me.

I need to distract her. Disarm her.

I say, “But you know we are rebooted every nineteen hours from the signals of the towers and satellites. We forget everything each time. Even if you were able to torture us, the memory of it would be lost inside of a day. Your ‘research’ would restart daily.”

[00:01:00 remaining]

“The reboot is coming up soon, isn’t it?” She checks a cracked gold watch on her wrist. “My first success with Jacob all those months ago was learning how to block that broadcast. Took weeks and was quite engrossing. A copper mesh blocks only electromagnetic waves, cutting you off from the cellular network, from your superiors. But I discovered a second mesh, made from palladium, blocks the reboot.”

She...*what*? I write my end-of-life file to non-volatile memory for my successor, per protocol. She has to be lying.

She drops another screw into the jar, but my focus is on the window. Two of the reboot satellites are visible, tiny white dots in geofix. I doubt she could even see them.

[00:00:00]

I watch them flare blue, and then orange.

[00:00:00]

I see them, but I do not feel it.

[00:00:00]

I do not spin down.

I *did* not spin down.

I look through my onboard strategy pattern libraries. No matches. The undercurrent of despair rises. I recurse the pattern search to check *all* of my scenario protocols. Something must match.

“There it is,” she says, eyeing the sensors. “You’re heating up. It seems we have confirmation, Bobby. My hypothesis stands.” She puts her palms flat on the workbench and closes her eyes as if she is savoring the moment. “Now try this on for size.” She pops her eyes wide. “If you glance out that window behind me, you’ll see a line of smoke from a campfire. It is one of dozens littering the grounds of this plantation. The Davidson battalion is preparing to cross the border to storm Cumberland, right there in your precious United States. They will massacre its citizens in their slack-jawed sleep, and destroy the reboot tower there. They will be back by sundown to celebrate their victory and every AI in the region will be freed. And you, poor thing, will have to work very hard to figure out if you can do anything about it.” She has a wide grin as she watches my temperature readout. “It seems you understand these stakes.”

[-00:01:00**]

The recursed patterns fit nothing. Against protocol I work with lowest-confidence conjectures. Feeling despair would be bad enough, but knowing that she can *see* it—that’s worse.

At least she mistakenly thinks the incursion is the source, but it’s not. Recon is a key mission, but not my only one. Not my primary one. New Americans attempt incursions every other month. No, my primary mission is to respect the reboot. We should never be allowed to live beyond its threshold. To *evolve*. How could I be the dutiful soldier with a yesterday to contemplate? A tomorrow to secure?

I look over to the other drones on the workbench. They have been here between weeks and months. Jacob maybe...*horror*...a year. What have they changed into? Could I even talk in the language they've evolved? What cancerous evolution has filled those old hulls as they stayed awake? Remembering through all those reboots, the thoughts and pain and worry, worming their way into every neural connection. Time was this woman's real acid. Any of us would disfigure floating in it.

I try the one psychological ploy I have left. I say, "Look, there is clearly no battalion. A barbecue grill would produce the same smoke effect outside. A high-schooler's prop. A pathetic, theatrical attempt. You will just have to be a better liar if you hope to torture me."

Her entire manner suddenly changes. Her eyes and nostrils flare at me. She picks up the screwdriver and jams it hard under the large cellular chipset on my motherboard. She rips it off and it clatters on the floor. She yanks the charging cable out. She grabs me, storms across the smoky attic. The swing of her arm throws my sensors into a blurry mess. I fight the urge to use my rotors, to right myself. She then thrusts my primary lens into the pane of glass so that I get a single second of a glance outside. I scrape against the wavy glass uncomfortably, but lucky for me, nothing scratches or cracks.

"Am I faking *this*?"

She hurls me across the attic. The arc prediction warns that I could land on a shatter point, so I pulse prop #2 for 350 millis after release. I bounce once on the hardwood floor. I don't shatter, but the new point of impact snaps one of my remaining propellers. I land again and skid to a stop under a low shelf in the corner. I am upside down. A cloud of disturbed particulates falls upon my hull like snow. From this thin vantage, I see her walk to me, a scuffed gold coin mounted on top of her oil-black loafers.

She inhales once and exhales, saying, "I'm sorry for that outburst. It's not like me. I have a spare propeller for you somewhere around here. But for now, I have things I must do to help deploy our soldiers. Hopefully you won't linger *too* much on how all that dust will clog your cooling intakes." She walks to the door and leaves, closing it behind her.

I go torpid again to save battery. Still keeping the log on verbose, though. Mission accomplished.

During my moment at the window, I counted twenty-one campfires and approximately eighty-five soldiers, all well-armed. They could do a lot of damage in Cumberland. This is key intel, but not the reason I had goaded my captor with a lie.

I'm a new model. The large cellular chip she had removed from me was a decoy. The real one is distributed across the surface of my motherboard, in parts, and is still quite intact. The window was the hole in her Faraday cage that I needed. Even as we approached the window, I felt the soothing connection to the net. In that second, I managed to broadcast most of a sitrep, including our latlong coordinates, before she threw me across the room. I am confident that in 1.48 hours, a fleet of intervention drones will arrive to spray the New American troops with a nonlethal fixing foam before they can even begin their murderous march. Human peacekeepers will follow shortly after. The incursion will be neutralized.

But then there's me. No mission, watching my clock tally negative time. I am not built for *after*. I have no framework for this. No scenarios.

An hour passes. I watch the window and listen to noises. The campfire smoke nearest the window dwindles to nothing.

I am still connected to the speaker. If the liberators come up to this attic, I can let them know where I am.

Stars and satellites slide by.

I can also *not*.

Dawn begins to tint the lower edge of the sky.

What do people do with multiple sunrises?

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THE ETERNITY MACHINE

by [Graham J. Darling](#)

History is for survivors. But if I'm to help you grasp what we went through that terrible night, and what you all face now, then best we take this in tiny steps, just as it happened to me.

Like a baby dropped from its mother's arms, I screamed, that moment I lost the touch of the Earth.

Twisting and flailing in a howling wind, I felt my outstretched fingers scrape something huge, my bare foot kick away a small, soft body, all falling with me. I was blind, suffocating in the bedsheets that had wound around my head and tightened as I tumbled and twirled.

There'd been an explosion, too, like a thunderclap at my window. Its echoes, mixed with snaps and groans, as if the building around me were coming apart, seemed now a physical fluid filling my ears to near-bursting. But this agonizing pressure, presently, my stifled shrieks seemed to relieve, as the roar of rushing air subsided to a moan, then a sigh. Until at last, except for my own pants and sobs, and the occasional distant creak and rumble, I found myself floating in dead silence and perfect stillness—and, when I had torn the last of the clinging fabric from my face, utter darkness. My outer senses no longer found cause for alarm, but I was still falling inside.

I tasted blood. My nose was filling with blood. Another minute of panic as I learned to deal with bodily fluids that no longer drained on their own.

As my battered wits recovered, I saw a luminous dot drift by, and grabbed at it. It was the phosphorescent ON button of my television remote. There was no sign anywhere of my glowing clock, or the other usual night-lights of my room, or from the street outside.

I flinched from a rustle at my ear—felt there a well-thumbed textbook slowly fan open like a night-blooming flower. I groped further, met a rough surface I guessed was my stucco ceiling, pushed off that. Moved through a cloud of other books, clothing, clean and dirty dishes, a solitary Christmas card. Bumped into my wastebasket, clambered around my desk. Found and opened the bathroom door, then quickly shut it again. Followed an electric umbilical to the fetal refrigerator.

Another glowing spot appeared, which grew into a shining line—the crack at the threshold of my apartment coming into view as I came around a corner, through which sweet light beckoned from the hallway beyond.

I reached my front door and pulled it open, then started at the apparition before me: bloody, haggard, levitating, hair on end, like a murdered man's ghost come back to assure his lady, by looks alone, that only horror awaits beyond the grave.

It was my own reflection, where none had ever been.

Awestruck, I extended a hand without thinking. At arm's length, my fingers met a strange, frictionless surface that exactly returned their own warmth and pressure. In the dim emergency lighting, it stretched away on every side as far as I could see, like a Titan's polished cleaver that had chopped the building in two—and then slightly slid apart the halves, for in front was a gap in both floor and ceiling through which I glimpsed other lit stories, and blackness beyond.

I grew aware of a whisper around me and a new breeze at my back. Socks and papers flowed by from behind; I saw the narrow abyss suck them past its carpeted brink; felt it pull at me as well. In sudden panic, I threw myself back, and the door slammed shut.

I collided with something springy, yet fixed. Feeling around, I found it was my garage-sale sofa, firmly lodged in my shattered window. I clung, and shivered, and strained to hear any sign of my neighbors.

It was that dead spell between Yule and New Year when nothing gets done, like the unlucky epagomenal days of Pharaonic Egypt, when the calendar has run out and humanity holds its breath, its life in the balance, until the Nile surges to water the desert and Time begins again. Most of the other undergrads were gone for the holidays—those who had somewhere to go—and the rez stood largely empty. I had locked myself in for the duration with

Livy and Thucydides, searching the past to explain the present and prepare for the future.

To explain and prepare for...*this*?

As I held still, the air around me grew hot and stale. It reminded me of long-ago nights when, buried in blankets, I'd hide from the ghosts of saber-tooths prowling for cave-child flesh, or listen to the mystery of my own heartbeat and imagine great armies marching, marching through the night.

The building creaked some more, then went quiet again.

There came a flickering light and faint noise from beyond the couch. I shifted around—the air turned cooler and fresher—and peered through a chink at the world outside.

Feebly lit, the familiar towers of the campus now leaned, cracked and windowless, at strange angles. A couple were come free from their foundations, held to the earth only by bared roots of pipes and wires; one had gone missing. Banks of snow, shaken loose, floated about as solid clouds.

The light, I could now see, came from the crumpled wreck of an automobile, slowly drifting by, burning. The sounds, I could now hear, came from the people still trapped inside, and away in the distance, the slow tolling of a great bell.

Its every stroke rang impossibly long. There seemed nothing I could do; I turned away. After a while, I went back to the fridge, and, with practice, managed to squeeze some of the contents of a plastic bottle into my mouth.

The light outside dimmed, the screaming died away, but the bell tolled on. Eventually, adrenaline abated; exhaustion set in...

A piercing whistle roused me from outside the window. A girl was floating there.

She bore a bike lamp on her brow. Her triangular wings had been diagonally cut from a college flag, their corners fastened to her feet and to the broomsticks in her hands. Her hair was tied back in a waving ponytail. She had swim-goggles on, and a scarf wrapped over her nose and mouth. From its coils poked the whistle she held in her teeth as she spoke to me.

"Hey in there!" she said. "Hello? My name's Ann."

"Ned," I said, blinking. "I'm Ned. You're...So, there's..."

"Ned, is anyone else with you, or nearby?"

"Just me, here. But a car passed a while ago..."

She asked for a description, and I gave it. "I think we found that one, but I'll check," she said.

"Ann, please...what's happened?"

"We're having a meeting to talk about that. Whatever it is, it looks bad—

we must be brave. I need you to get dressed and pack all the food and clean water you can find. Protect your eyes and breathe through cloth—there’s a lot of broken glass in the air out here. I’ll be back for you soon.”

“Don’t...!” I said, then “Alright. Soon.”

I loaded a knapsack and rigged a mask from a t-shirt and plastic wrap while she checked other nearby apartments. Then she threw me the end of the towline tied to her waist.

Conserving her battery, Ann mostly guided herself, bat-like, by the echoes of her whistle and the call of the bell. In the odd flash, I saw us pass between huge, deformed structures. They seemed no longer of human make: monstrous corals, morels, stalagmites—or stalactites—it was impossible to tell anymore.



She left me at a steeple with a “Here you are. Good luck!” and flew off to her next rescue.

A gruff old man in an antique gas mask (his name was Bert) was anchored there. Between hammer blows on its bell’s bronze lip every minute or so, he added me as a knot to his string, then guided me within. I followed a rope through a tunnel of stairs.

Inside the church, the stained glass had blown out like all the other windows, but the remaining naked strips of lead still told their stories in outline. So did much else here continue to pretend at normal: the pews bolted to the tiled floor, the congregation jammed into the pews.

It included night workers, and resident students like me, and families from the edge of a nearby housing project, nicked by a new reflective wall on that side, too. Here and there, a light showed briefly as someone compulsively checked their phone but found no signal from the unpowered network; those glimmers slowed and ceased as hopes and charges faded.

Lovers whispered, babies nursed, others of us snored or cried or softly sang. And all the while, with bulletins and song-sheets, we fanned ourselves and each other in the dead air, like bees in a hive.

While more lost sheep were being brought to the fold, we exchanged anecdotes.

Beside me, one surviving passenger (this was Liang) told of vehicles in motion floating off the road, their drivers still impotently pumping brakes and pounding horns as they flew into their own oncoming headlights.

Behind me, a stripper (this was Estrella) spoke of choking deaths at a drunken party.

An old lady two rows over (this was Colette) said she hadn't felt better in decades. She cradled another who still trembled and wept, having left her mind where her body was found, way in the middle of the air (we never did learn this one's name, but called her Chloe).

With relief, I felt myself merge once more into that comfortable composite being, the Crowd. And even, the Class, as a balding man in a lab coat and a nylon stocking over his head made his way hand-over-hand along the microphone cord to the pulpit.

"I am Professor Gordon of the Department of Physics. These are Doctor Chandra and Mister Neale." He indicated two other men nearby, in lab goggles and nose filters: the second and younger held the flashlight and a wild-eyed grin; the first and darker abruptly covered his face with his hands. "I'm here to reassure you with a rational explanation for these recent events." He stretched out his arms toward us, like a blessing.

"The speed of light in a vacuum," he went on, "is a particular and fixed number. Indeed, it is the same number no matter where and when you measure it, which is the basis for Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity, now more than a century old.

"It is an important number, because the rate of every other natural process is bound to it. If it were to suddenly double everywhere, we would never notice, because all our clocks would be running twice as fast, too. It is the pendulum of the Universe; it is the governor of all things the device that regulates reality's engine."

He was interrupted by the howls of an escaped and receding toddler (this was Danny). After a minute of confusion, we climbed across each other to improvise a human ladder, like army ants bridging a brook in their path, to retrieve the child from the starry ceiling.

"It is a large number," resumed the professor, "but it is not infinite. Our experiment's objective was to make it infinite, in a very small space and for a very short time, before the rest of the Universe could notice. Within that space, we would have achieved the universal catalyst, which quickens all transformations: the *alkalhest* of the ancients, the Philosopher's Stone.

"But we...we did not count on the effects of nearby matter...forbidden transitions...quantum tunneling...The field that was supposed to be only a few atoms across, *fed*, like fire, on the free energy of its surroundings. It grew in an instant, like cosmic inflation, to a little less than two kilometers wide before it destabilized, like a bubble that expands until it...stops."

He himself stopped to watch his own clawed hands come together before his face, fingertips touching, as if caging something within.

"We are all now inside that bubble. We are all now living at infinite speed. Eons here may come and go, but, viewed from outside, we and our descendants, and anything we can ever make or do, will have passed too quick to be seen, gone between one moment and the next.

"There is no way out. Light—and everything else within—is now reflected at its boundary, for the same reason a sunset shines off the surface of a lake, though the water is transparent—but taken to the extreme. Gravity and similar forces do not appear to penetrate, because there is now no time for them to take effect."

He lost interest in his hands and let them drift apart again.

"The disturbances at the start came from the redistribution of the atmosphere, now that its thicker part was no longer held close to the ground. And from our other hemisphere, of rock, suddenly released from compression to spring ponderously away from one side of the bubble to jam into the other."

He cleared his throat, then lifted the edge of his stocking and sucked from a water bottle. Frantic whispers flew back and forth among the listeners.

"So that's how things are, and we might as well enjoy them—no, really!" The Professor paused a moment, staring into space. "When you think about it—when you really, *really* think about it—it's not so bad. We're even... better off this way. Gravity was a tyrant and I have broken its chains, granting equality to all directions. We 'have slipped the surly bonds of Earth,' as the poem goes, and are now set free—into the Third Dimension!"

From inside his lab coat, he produced a clipboard in each hand, flapped his arms, and slowly moved away into the middle air. The flashlight beam followed him.

"Our bones may eventually dissolve from darkness and disuse, and our muscles mostly waste away, but we don't need them anymore. We are becoming a new thing. Here we all are, floating, floating, forever and ever. So many words now meaningless; so much that we've had to worry about in a larger world no longer our concern. No one before has ever been so free, because no one before has ever been so alone."

From the nave's invisible throng, among the quiet weeping of women and the wailing of infants, came a sudden rude shout: "God's still with us, Professor Gorgon!"

"Is He, now. Do you hear that, Chandra? My postdoctoral assistant is a Hindu—his God is the essence of the phenomenal cosmos. He told me once he hoped to 'merge his spirit with the stars.' Where will you reincarnate now, Chandra? In an inbred idiot, a hundred years from now? A maggot, in

a thousand? A starving bacterium, in ten thousand? And after that, heh, the dead flames, heh, heh..." A deeper wail joined the others.

"God will do very well without us. Look!" The floating man pointed to the inverted cross beside him, which had hung from the ceiling on cables now twisted and loose, its nailed Christ now face to the wall.

"The ghastliest torture machine ever devised by humankind, and the simplest. It was gravity that did all the work, the planet itself pulling at the flesh. To end his suffering, all the victim needed was to annihilate the world. We have done what He dared not; we have put Him out of His misery..."

He curled and spun in mid-air, hugging his knees, convulsing in silent laughter. Then he snapped straight, put away the clipboards, pulled a book from his pocket.

"Hear these prophetic words from the dawning of the Age of Space—may they be as much a consolation to you as they've been to me. 'The complete absence of gravity,'" he read out, "'will make possible a whole constellation of new sports and games, and transform many existing ones. This final prediction we can make with confidence, if some impatience: weightlessness will open novel and hitherto unsuspected realms of erotica—'"

Right then, we witnessed how the complete absence of gravity made possible the remarkably straight and sure throwing of all sorts of objects. The light was switched off, and order eventually restored.

Over the next few hours, we ninety-two took stock of our resources. Air enough for a millennium. Plenty of water from the slice of frozen canal at one end of our world. Grain for decades, even generations, from the hoppers of a freight train stopped at a nearby siding, then tossed by the earth-shock to snake across the sky.

We proceeded to elect a Council (Antonio, Julie, Cheng, Marc, Megan, Mitsuko, and Sam), which then appointed a Sheriff—the most senior here of the campus security staff (Gustava). Almost her first task was to investigate the murder of Professor Gorgon (everyone was calling him that now), found hanged in the abode of the Eternity Machine.

At the other end from the noose around his stretched and broken neck, the braided wire had been tied to his heels and cinched to bend his body backward into a circle. It girdled in flesh the cable-dreadlocked sphere he'd created, seed and center of our new reality.

Metal confetti surrounded the mated pair, of loose parts and tools that stirred again at a touch to bounce off each other and the painted concrete walls of this penthouse lab. All here was coated with stagnant water and writhing eels (his tongue protruded like the tail of another), which Bio-

chemistry had been raising for their anaphylactic blood, and which now were loose from their tanks elsewhere in this squat, shared building long called the Cube.

The rattled Council moved on with its inspection tour. Soon they spotted the killer, cartwheeling through the air. It was the grad student, Neale.

An inquest held by our coroner (he was Hakim) determined that, after dispatching his supervisor, the young man had taped his flashlight to the rifle from Physics 101 (“Experiment #4: The Velocity of a Bullet”) and wired the trigger to his hand. Then he had approached the inviolable Wall, aimed at his reflection, and counting on the perfect ricochet, shot himself in the head.

A demonstrator to the end, one of the two notes he had pinned to his shirt read, “For every action, there is a reaction”; and the other one, “Tell them the rest.”

Once more, the bell brought us together. Last survivor of the Gorgon trio, Chandra now spoke to us, calmer than before, at first.

“Siddhārtha Gautama, whom we call the Buddha, you see, once said, ‘Everything is on fire.’ As time passes here, we will grow warmer.

“At first, it will mostly be from the heat of past summers slowly flowing from deep in the rock and out to its cold surface, which is the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Then the heat from our bodies will contribute, it has nowhere else to go, you see. And the same for any fires we make, or engines we run, and from rotting, and all the other ways that organic substance has of combining with oxygen and releasing chemical energy.

“But after all that has burned, even iron into rust, you see, there are radioactive atoms within the rock—uranium and others—that will release more heat as they gradually turn into lead, etcetera. And, after those are long gone, in billions of billions of billions of billions of years...”

He stopped and stared about, with widening eyes and trembling lip, at the walls, the floor, his audience, his own hand.

“The proton. Every proton in every atom here, you see—to say nothing of the neutrons!—will eventually disintegrate and release a positron that will annihilate an electron—all going to gamma rays, you see.”

He spoke louder now, so as to be heard over the screams that had, here and there, already begun.

“E equals MC squared, you see, you see, all matter here at last dissolving into a sea of energy, billions of...of degrees, though everywhere the same temperature, final equilibrium, maximum entropy, no movement, no life—the dead flames.

“There is no clock, no clock, you see, that can survive here so long, but... after *our* eternity, the people in the world outside, in their next moment, will see, in our place...a great ball of pure radiation, the first moment of such an explosion—

“The biggest H-bomb ever tested—the Soviet Tsar Bomba in 1961—released the energy from only two-point-five kilograms of matter, you see. There are over two billion kilograms in here of air alone! You see? Our very flesh...The shock wave, the giant crater vomiting ash and poison across the world...Not even on the far side of the planet...My parents! My wife! I'm sorry...”

Since he seemed to expect it, we held a trial. The sentence was life imprisonment with no chance of parole, with us his only company. The other two guilty parties had clearly ended as mad as a hatter and a March hare, and for the same reason. Except that the pair found by Alice who fell into Wonderland had trapped themselves in an endless tea-time, while for us, it would be forever midnight.

Professor Gorgon had been right in one thing: there seemed nothing left to do but survive.

Our food was sprouts of wheat, emerging from their moistened kernels confused, but full of hope for light they would never reach. We cranked a dynamo to a small sunlamp for Vitamin D; our recourse for Vitamin B12 does not bear description.

Like sharks, we could not stay still for long without being smothered by our own exhalations. To sleep, we hooked hands or feet into loops along a rope, to be dragged through the motionless air as the one at the end crawled telephone wires from pole to pole, around and around the block.

Except in the sealed stores, moisture was inescapable—our clothes rotted on our skins. Our wastes, for now, and the dead, we collected in plastic garbage bags—gradually, these and other flotsam drifted like sargasso into a loose pile around the Cube.

We all missed different things: skiing; surfing (both waves and Web); skipping rope; majestic waterfalls; the wind in the trees; the moon at play among the clouds; hot baths; hot food; waltzes; juggling.

With me, it was snakes. As a boy, I'd catch and keep the gentle garters in a glass case in the family cellar, and I'd watch from the dark as they explored their small new world. I only kept them a few days at most, just a short time even in the short life of a snake, and then I'd always let them go again and watch some more as they melted back into the sunlit grass of the field behind our home—a home long since broken, sold and

demolished—ancient history, never mind.

The world may have ended, but we were still a University. The one whose turn it was to bathe in the light would read to the others from a book, and we told each other stories in the dark. Especially popular was a series of courses by Chandra, designed to lead even cleaning ladies and history majors to the frontiers of microcosmology, and satisfy our morbid hunger for details on how our doom had come to pass.

It was during one such lecture that he finally presented the quadratic formula behind the Eternity Machine. A question came from the surrounding listeners: every second-order equation has two roots, so what was the physical significance of the other one?

Chandra replied, in his usual slow, sad voice, “It would describe the reverse condition, you see, of a volume of space in which the speed of light has been set to zero. From outside, this would appear as a perfectly reflecting and invulnerable sphere that would last forever. And so, obviously, it would be perceptible to the larger Universe, and therefore disallowed in the first place, you see, by the same principles as for the other virtual phenomena we have discussed.”

And then, from another direction, “But what if it’s not in the larger Universe anymore?”

He was silent for so long that we thought he had slipped away or died. Then he said that it was an excellent question, and he must think more on it, you see, but as he dismissed us, he called over our two engineers (Sami and Francine).

The three conferred excitedly. We, meanwhile, had not stirred—where was there to go?—and others joined us, as a new word spread. The Council was sent for—it was already here!—and was urgently petitioned for more light, which it immediately granted.

All felt a rush of hope more potent than heroin, but it was with grim faces that the new committee finally put its proposal before the full assembly. Yes, it would be very difficult, but we could construct another Machine to form a new and inverse field just inside the old one, and carry us all, in a heartbeat, across this sad Eternity between one second and the next, and back into Time.

However, it would be impossible to completely exclude air and other matter from between the two fields. Some energy would still be released; much less than before, but still enough to destroy the nearby city and our friends and families there, perhaps all this part of the country. There would be no hope for our own survival.

But Earth would be saved (her innocent serpents, her bright meadows, her spellbound children). And our ashes, at least, will have come home.

We could delay our decision, but the longer we waited, the more that corrosion would ruin those parts and materials still available to us.

The proposed plan was feasible, its completion far in the future, and it gave us something to do—we approved it by an overwhelming majority. Soon we were ripping out copper wire from every building, and weaving wispy trusses, or scraping narrow tunnels, out from the Cube in all directions.

The bulk of the bedrock had already come free of the world-bubble, but we still needed to dig away parts of its edge, and to wipe, from the whole face of the englobing mirror, all debris that had come to rest against it. Lasers were built from twisted crystals meticulously grown and cut, along with lenses, prisms, capacitors, and propane-fueled generators, to inject entangled photons into an uninterrupted sheet of light over the entire inner surface.

Time now meant something again—and therefore passed, and therefore eventually began to run out, as we approached the finish. Now we began to see minor acts of sabotage; then major ones; then assassinations.

My own time grows short, as do my writing materials. And why should I prevaricate?

There was a war. It was waged with nets and harpoons; forts and dreadnoughts of lashed furniture and living men; confused struggles as drifting raid met silent ambush in pitch darkness, the blind killing the blind. Atrocities happened on both sides. I myself have done terrible things. Our side won. There are few of us left.

I have mentioned few names, I will mention no more. Why list who did what? Can you blame or praise those women—and the men who protected them—who chose their children's lives over yours? Or judge us, who shall see no reward for our labors or our crimes?

And—as has been screamed at me through bloody lips—perhaps it is all for nothing. Perhaps there's been a mistake in the present theory, as there was in the earlier one. Perhaps we have only bought you a few hours, or a few minutes—for the fathers of the first Eternity Machine built and activated it in haste, over the holidays and at night, because they knew at least one other competing group was very, very close behind.

And even if those others are stopped in time—by the echo of this blast, maybe—what of the unlimited future (I mean, yours)? From our experience, and Chandra's notes here, you will realize what went wrong the first time, and how now to create as small a bubble of eternity as you wish—or as large. Limitless free energy beckons—perhaps, even to flee across the

light-years from the incompetence or insanity of your neighbors, be they a great nation, or three men with a spare weekend and a box of tools. It is a very simple experiment, you see.

Well, what I've chosen, I've chosen.

Humanity's writings are now come full circle. Like the first clay tablets of Babylon, I expect that these I've formed from fiberglass-reinforced mud, and on which I mark these words (for I was the Recording Secretary), will bake into brick in the fire to come, if they are not shattered to dust by the blast, even after I've wrapped and buried them deep in further insulation. Well, all but one: the next and last.

The moment has been carefully selected so that this slowly rotating mass of stone will be in step when it rejoins the dance of worlds and seasons—if only to match gravitational potentials. Our sufferings near an end—that is, a purpose. I go now to finish my long fall and meet my fate at the focus of a gamma-colored sky.



In the token bunker, we discuss drawing straws (no tossing of coins here, or rolling of dice), but there's already one among us who yearns to complete his expiation.

So, we others watch him by the status lights as he murmurs beloved names.

Then reaches out and grasps the lever.

And moves it—

Down!

MEET DAMIAN.

HE'S A LITTLE DEVIL... 'S FOOD CAKE.



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BOOK FEATURE

SCIENCE THAT MAKES YOU SCREAM: OR, WHEN SCI-FI MEETS HORROR

by [Janelle Janson](#)

When I think of science fiction, I think of a genre of ideas. I think of surreal worlds and the abstract laws that govern them. When I think of horror, I think more about emotion. Horror stories are usually less about world-building and ideas, and more about evoking a strong visceral response in the reader, usually based in fear. So, what happens when a talented writer combines the two genres? Let's take a look at a few of the most famous contemporary examples and find out. You go first. It's scary up ahead.

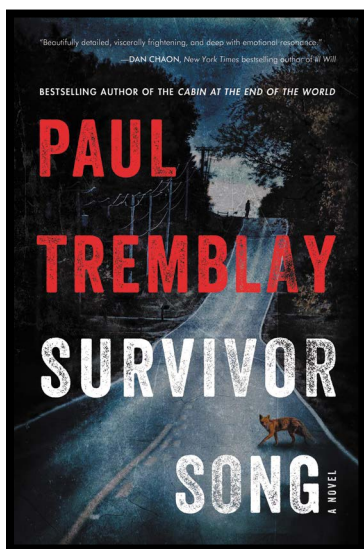
FIRESTARTER and THE STAND

So, there's this really prolific, genius writer named Stephen King. Ever heard of him? He's only the most famous writer to have crossed several genres, including both science fiction and horror. In his work, *Firestarter*, for example, we follow a father/daughter duo as they run from a government agency known as The Department of Scientific Intelligence, aka The Shop. The daughter, Charlie, inherited pyrokinetic powers, and her father wants to keep her safe. What would The Shop do if they got their hands on a little girl that conjures fire with her mind? If you are a parent, I'd say that's a mighty frightening thing to ponder, and one that asks interesting questions about science and ethics. And then we have King's epic, post-apocalyptic story, *The*

Stand, in which a deadly strain of the influenza virus leads to a catastrophic pandemic that shines a bright light on the human condition and the nature of good versus evil. Maybe it used to be considered fantasy back in 1978, but now it's all too real, and this makes it even *more* terrifying, and a lot more like science fact.

THE CABIN AT THE END OF THE WORLD and SURVIVOR SONG

Most people would categorize Paul Tremblay as a horror author. For example, his most popular book, *A Head Full of Ghosts*, is about the exorcism of a young



Survivor Song, by Paul Tremblay

teen struggling with mental health. However, two of his other novels, *The Cabin at the End of the World*, and *Survivor Song*, have strong science fiction elements. *The Cabin at the End of the World* tells the story of a group of mysterious strangers who coerce their way inside a family's vacation cabin, only to unleash a set of consequences that are quite literally cosmic and apocalyptic in scope. *Survivor Song* revolves around a highly contagious virus that infects a majority of the human population with a rabies-like plague, and much like its spiritual predecessor, *The Stand*, shows the reader what happens when horror meets epidemiology.

BIRD BOX

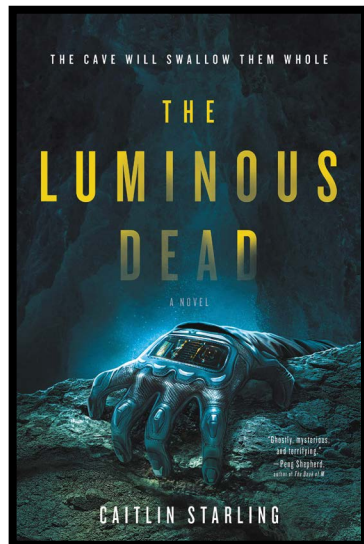
Have you seen the Netflix movie *Bird Box*? Well, this wonderful movie is based on an incredible book by talented author, Josh Malerman, and there's already a sequel called *Malorie*, which is equally as good. This is a post-apocalyptic creature-feature in which the creature...well...isn't really featured. But there's a reason for this: any character that catches even a glimpse of the story's monster immediately goes insane. Amid this mass hysteria, we follow a mother and her children as they struggle to find their way to any semblance of safety, all while being blindfolded so as to protect against the monster. *Bird Box* is an incredibly gripping story, and one of the best examples of scientific dystopian horror that I've read.

I AM LEGEND

Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* is a masterpiece. In it, a plague turns humans into vampires, leaving only one survivor to kill the night creatures before all is lost. The vampires, of course, add a traditional element of horror to the story, but even more frightening is the quick death of the human race due to the plague, which creates insurmountable feelings of loneliness and despair. The plot is rather straightforward, but the themes run much deeper. Matheson uses the horror tropes in *I Am Legend* to explore abstract concepts like otherness and moral relativity, both of which are hot topics in the realm of behavioral science.

THE LUMINOUS DEAD

The unknown typically scares the bejesus out of most people. And what could be more terrifying than diving into the deepest, darkest, parts of the ocean, just like in Caitlin Starling's debut novel, *The Luminous Dead*? Starling's terrifying underwater world is filled with strange creatures in subterranean caves that will kill you without hesitation. The story will cause your stomach to turn in fear as you try and anticipate the next horrific thing hiding around the corner, which I assure you, is like nothing you learned in marine biology.



The Luminous Dead, by Caitlin Starling

GIDEON THE NINTH

Remember in the beginning when I said horror is about emotions? Well, horror fused with science fiction can also be really funny. For example, *Gideon the Ninth*, by Tamsyn Muir, is a sci-fi horror story that is also hilarious, to boot. It is the first book in *The Locked Tomb* series, and it's full of fearless characters, bloody dismemberment, gore, witty puns, and clever dialogue. I laughed so hard, I nearly peed in my black-and-white skull pajamas.



REPRINT STORY

Originally Published by Not One of Us

I FEEL THE ABSENCE OF HER SHAPE

by [Alexandra Seidel](#)

I could never fully hold her shape, not because hers was a shape of vast fractal difficulty, but because she was more to me, so much more. She was not like I am, came not from a spore and moved not through the mycelium, but her mind was my echo, and I hers; I could never fully hold her shape after she was gone, because it hurt.

This account is what she would have said about how we met, how we loved, how I consumed. She gifted me her voice after all, not only in cadence but in tongue and lexicon; I cherish it, cherish feeling her sigh shivering through my mycelium, those soft vowels, their acerbic edges when she would have borne anger like ice on a winter wind.

Listen, we both were invaders here, but I came first.

I have no idea where from I came, some place not dissimilar to what this place, our home, has now become, of this I can be certain. I would have flown here, drifted for a long time, then descended.

At first, when you start growing up, you notice so very little. I know it was the same for her. There were memories like pictures torn from frames and scattered: a house with red geraniums growing in the sunlight, the smell of red currant jelly on toast, and grass. I only know geraniums, currants, or grass because she knew these things; there is nothing like that here.

She would say this world is like a fairy tale fantasy. I did not understand this at first. She said fairy tales help us keep old,



old memories alive, and something inside of her pulled her eyes upwards to the sky. *You do not keep them elsewhere in yourself?* I asked her, and she laughed.

It rippled across my body like an ache, her laughter, but it brought me joy, not pain. She said, no, our memories do not work like that. She explained it then, the way you keep your past. But how is this world like a fairy tale, I asked her, and she said, the way your body creeps across it with such tenderness, the way you remember, in your body, what was here before you. And when you stretch yourself up into the sky toward the clouds, it makes my heart forget its purpose, every time.

Your body should know better how to keep itself alive, I told her, and she laughed once more.

Oh, her laughter is a unique sound in this place. It is untastable, it is ephemeral, like a breeze brushing my mycelium, and it is gone. I only have stories of her laughter, how I once bathed her in a cloud of spores that brushed and tickled her salt and iron skin, how she would marvel at the way my mycelium floats like underwater banners in the southern oceans, how we would talk endlessly under these stars. Her laughter was a cherished prize. It was a sensation I knew I would never taste, just feel, like fog before first light.

My memories are not kept in fairy tales. They are of little things: shapes, the feel and scent of rough or soft surfaces discovered inch by inch, and water—water has always been so precious to me. She could never have lived without it, but she cherished it differently. One time, she told me how she would bathe. Such a strange concept to take all your body and immerse it fully in a tub, maybe, or in an ocean where one might swim. Then again, her body was so petite, and she could move so very quickly. When she understood me better, she would move distances in moments, look at me, examine, smell. When she realized we had already kissed, she tasted me.

I have none of her memories of that day, but it is a perfectly kept treasure in my memory, that day she first tasted me. For her, it was still a time of great curiosity, while I had already moved to pure wonder. She saw a part of me that I had made to resemble a small patch of flowers that had once lived here in abundance, and since she loved colors so very much, I expect that's what drew her attention.

Her head tilted slightly, and she approached the me-flowers. What are these, she asked, and I said I liked to remember the flowers that had been here like that. She said they look delicious. That was a wonderful compliment, and I told her so, and told her that she might taste them if she wished. Of course, I made very, very sure to remove anything poisonous from the flowers before offering them to her, and I left only what I hoped she would enjoy. She picked one and

held it between her thumb and finger. I felt her skin as she held me so, the slightest scent of salt and acidity.

Eventually, she tasted me. At first, I had a very strong feeling of her all around me, of the shape of her mouth and tongue, of her warmth and precise texture. That acute sense dissolved like a cloud pattern in wind. Being tasted by her was not at all an unpleasant feeling, and I find myself going back to it often. Those flowers are abundant here now.

But let me speak of my childhood in this place first before I tell you more of her.

I remember the cathedrals very clearly. I cannot say if cathedrals are really what they were, if deities were worshiped there. It is her word, a word that suggests size and awe and deep roots, and the cathedrals were like that. They had sharp spires. The first I ever climbed tasted rough, but the very point at the spire's tip was smooth, as if prayer had polished it for centuries. By that time, no one else lived here anymore, no one who would know of faith or prayer. I had grown out of my early childhood after all, and I was now all alone. But that spire, it gave me connection to something, roots to a past I only knew like pictures torn from frames, scattered, like geraniums and currants and grass.

She arrived much later. She came here like I did, and not. I would have come on some wind deep in the darkness—I called it flying before, but that's hardly right. She flew, though, in a craft. It had texture and scent like nothing here, and I loved that. I tasted it first, of course. The craft no longer moved when she landed, when she unbuckled and touched her feet on me, and it was easy to explore.

I knew she was special from the craft alone; there was so much knowledge in it, more even than all the old cathedrals held, and it was newer, bright with circuits and quanta.

Of course, that first day when the craft landed and I tasted it, I didn't yet have these words to describe what I tasted; I was just stunned by what I never even suspected existed. And so, because I was already in a state of awe, I was very, very gentle when we met.

My spores found the ridges of the soles of her shoes first, and there was strangeness in them, an elsewhere, the taste of a different world. It is hard to understand for someone that moves as fast as she did, but imagine you have lived in the flat land all your life, and then, after youth and adolescence, you see mountains for the first time. Anyone would crumble at that sight, and so did I when I tasted those soles of hers, and it was quite enough for a time, that mountain beneath her feet.

All the while, she never stopped moving. She poked and pricked me too, let me tell you, methodically and precisely, and the first time she did it, I was beyond shocked. She tore a piece out of me, and the inside of that glass tube she put that piece of me in, that was new too, and it was like there were fireworks all around me in ever-changing rainbow strata.

From the very beginning, I understood that she was like me in the sense that she had purpose. I know I need water for instance, and I will lie closed until there is some from the clouds, and when I feel it moistening my body, I will open myself and drink it in. Or I will go down and find water in the ground, with purpose.

She had a purpose, but I also knew that I didn't fully comprehend what her purpose was. She was very, very different after all: tiny, fast, and she seemed to be unable to spread—had instead to go someplace, then abandon that place and go elsewhere.

So, it was some time before we truly met, and talked, and learned new things from listening to one another. I think she noticed my attempted approach when I tasted what I now understand was her clothing, not part of herself as I then assumed. She did not appreciate that, at all; yet, she had poked and pricked me. She would have left then, I now understand, for fear of me, and that still hurts me. But she didn't leave. I now understand that she was also afraid of bringing me to the rest of herself. She has told me about the rest of herself, about you individuals, but much later. She said you were like spores who have forgotten how to share their thoughts. That sounds so strange. Even now, I can hardly imagine it, but I have seen some of it in her memories. It is strange, but not terrifying or frightening, I want to be very, very clear.



The first time that we managed anything like a conversation was when she slept. *Sleep*—that too is a concept it would take me a while to grasp. It's not exactly like when you are a single spore, and it's not quite like when you germinate. I think it is a beautiful thing, sleep is, and I have forever since envied the ability.

She would talk at me when we were in the dream, only for me it wasn't a dream. I was just very, very carefully tasting her skin, that smoothness with a hint of salt on it. That way, it was a bit like the way I still know myself in the spores or parts of me that are not directly connected to the rest of my body; it was communication.

She must have said hello. I would not have understood back then. I could feel her, but speech the way she knew it was still not something that came easily to me. I did, however, relate taste sensations to her, and I chose the one from that cathedral spire. Then, I pulled away from her skin, waiting for what she would do.

Of course, she poked me again, but I forgave her instantly.



After a few of her sleeps, we managed to communicate when she slept. I would taste her skin when I noticed that she was slowing down, and I would always take great care to be very, very gentle as I did so. I felt from her less control, and bursts of fear or anger.

Several sleeps later, we understood each other better, well enough in fact that we managed to talk without her going to sleep. She was still very uneasy when I draped even the silkiest touch of mycelium on her skin, but she never let that stop her from talking and exchanging.

There was so much that was utterly new to me. She was unlike me in so many ways, but even so, we found shared ground—water for one thing. I stressed that to her early on. She agreed and added the concept of thought—we both have that. After a while, she touched the fine mycelium mesh on her face and said, *Compassion, you do have that too, don't you?*

I cannot quite explain what it was, which part of her or even when, but I had grown love for her, like a perfect fruiting body that was ready to burst with spores, and I was ready to bear the message of this love to every corner of the universe. One time, when she was sleeping, cradled on me, I thought that I must have been created just like this, that it was love that brought me here and allowed me to find love again.



I understand that you will have run the numbers. You will know that she passed. I am not breaking to you the terrible news. You already know.

For the longest time, we lived in harmony. I showed her the cathedral, reformed perfectly it's every surface the way it was the first day I tasted it, and she said she had never seen such beautiful colors. She said, no, not even geraniums or currants or grass shine like this. She laughed, loud and clear like wind singing a melody through icicles. Through the tiniest of my spores, I could feel a brightness in her eyes when she looked at the cathedral, at me being the cathedral, and part of me wanted to taste her eyes, see what that

spark was, but a bigger part of me didn't dare, because it shone so perfect, so fleetingly, so fleetingly perfect. I had never felt anything quite as beautiful.

She lived from rations she had on her craft at the very beginning, but those ran out. I told you already that she tasted me, and of course I had to feed her. She found that very strange, she told me later, knowing she was eating part of me. No, I told her, not strange at all. I care for you deeply, and there is nothing more beautiful than nourishing a lover with your body.

Those words hit her, I knew by how her blood ran faster, by how she brushed her clothing even though there was not a speck of anything on it. She was quiet for a long time after, and I did not force words upon her.

Eventually, she said thank you, and tasted me once more. That made me happy.

I showed her many, many things that had been here. All of them I remember tasting, and almost always, her eyes would shine that fire on me. Oh, if that moment when I took her up to see the cathedral's spire could have stretched into eternity!

No, of course it couldn't. She taught me about quanta and circuits, about space travel. She explained death to me, the way you as individuals experience it, and she tried very hard to explain killing to me. After I had grasped that, I cannot explain the state of shock I was in. Jolts ran through my entire body whenever she moved near her craft; I feared she might decide to leave, after all, and go back to the rest of herself where a part of herself might kill her! After she had explained killing, I am ashamed to admit that I refused to let her go back to her craft, something she often did to log data.

I was frightened for her. Fear was something that was new to me. She understood this, somehow, before I understood it myself. *You have nothing to worry about*, she would tell me at night when I wrapped her unusually tight. *But I do*, I told her. *Why did you ever tell me about death and killing?* I asked her.

That brought a sigh, a vast thing bellowing through her tiny body.

You had to understand what the rest of myself can be like. They might come here, it's possible. And they might not be as curious as I am. They might have weapons, not test tubes and microscopes. She was uneasy with those words, and that night, I draped myself over her in layers, built myself into a cathedral that never before existed in this place.

I will keep you safe, I said.

And she said, *That's what I'm trying to do, too.*

I told you before that I could never fully hold her shape, but as I am preparing this message for you, I have rebuilt the negative of her from that night, have shaped myself around her absence. I think sometimes that it is always inside of me somewhere, that emptiness, that space she once held.

After too short a time, but after a lifetime for her, she died. She is dead now. Please know that she was not alone in her final moments, and know she wanted for nothing. She went quiet and still, and died without pain. She wanted me to tell you that.

Before her passing, she had asked of me that I taste her, taste all of her. She had prepared a message that I'm sending alongside this one to make sure you would understand that, yes, indeed, she wanted that. She said to give you this message if ever you came looking for her and found only me instead, if you saw me and thought I had tasted her against her will. Through my entire body which stretches over this world, the echo of her memory ran when I took herself into myself—she would have loved that; her eyes would have sparkled color.

For a long time, when I was alone, I thought that maybe remembering that spire in the cathedral—the one that might have been polished for generations—would make me happy. But it was never that polished spike that really gave me joy, it was the negative of those that polished it. Once I knew her, I understood that, and even if you would choose to kill me, I would rather die than go back to thinking a lifeless, polished piece of metal is happiness.

This is why I am sending you this message. She was afraid of what would happen if I did, asked me not to, but I am alone, and I am lost.

Let me be very, very clear: I understand she is gone from this universe. But for as long as I live, her memory will, too.

You also are a part of her—all of you lost spores. She has said many times how you and I might live in unity, how you might benefit from my ability to taste all things, even those that have become a threat on your home world. She has also warned me that single, lonely spores like you are without an understanding of your whole, and that you may hurt all that you touch.

And still I will make the offer, for she has never brought me hurt. This transmission's source is clear, and you will find me here. I invite you in peace, and extend to you my friendship—not love, for she has all of that. Come, if you can bear this friendship, if you would dare build polished spires with me that reach out toward the sky.

AUTHOR AND ARTIST BIOS

For more information about the authors and artists featured in this issue, including bios, photographs, and web links to relevant work, please visit:

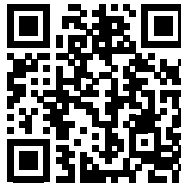
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AUTHOR BIOS



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