

ALCYONE

speculative fiction and poetry

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EDITORS:

MANDI JOURDAN

SARAH JILEK

JUSTIN GORDON

LAURA THIESSEN

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Alcyone

noun

1. a star in the constellation Taurus: brightest star in the Pleiades, named for the Greek Mythological nymph.

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IN LOVING MEMORY OF
FRANK KARPOWICZ
1937-2019



IN LOVING MEMORY OF

JACK SCOTT

1933-2019



The Life Not Lived

Michael Purdy

My dream suddenly escapes me as I am roused out of a deep sleep by the sound of bedroom curtains being pulled open. It was a pleasant dream, though I cannot remember any specific details. I turn my body to its side and my eyes flutter open. Bright light consumes my vision for a second, blurring my surroundings. One of those blurs is a red-haired woman looking out the window. Her face is shadowed, though her hair is illuminated in the sunlight, looking like a glowing fire.

“Time to get up, John,” the woman says, still looking out the window. “Emily has softball practice, and we have a ton to get done.”

The room is filled with blinding light. I use my hand to rub my eyes in an attempt to clear my vision. It doesn’t work. So, I pull the blankets off my legs and get out of bed. As I stand, my hand brushes something small. A pair of glasses. Black wire rims with red arms.

I don’t wear glasses.

Despite my misgivings, I put the glasses on. The entire room immediately comes into focus. The blurriness is gone. Confused, I look around. The bedroom is comfortable and homely. I can hear water running in the adjoining bathroom. Someone is using the shower. Puffs of steam waft lightly from the bathroom door.

Now on my feet, I approach the dresser to find a white shirt. After opening three incorrect drawers, I find the one with shirts in it. As I put in on, I see my reflection in the vanity mirror. I see a

man in his thirties looking back at me, with short hair, a trimmed beard with a trace of gray, and deep blue eyes.

“Are you up yet? I’m almost done,” a voice from the bathroom calls. “Jump in fast—we need to go.”

I am still looking at my reflection, confused. There is something peculiar about it. Extra creases in the skin. Bags under my eyes. But more than just the superficial signs of aging. Something feels strange when I look at myself. Like the feeling you get when speaking a word feels awkward on your lips. Something you have seen or heard all your life suddenly feels alien for no apparent reason.

Everything looks wrong to me except the eyes.

“You okay, honey?”

The woman is now peeking around the door jamb, looking at me with her eyes tight with concern. I turn away from the mirror and look at her. Her left hand grips the side of the door. A wedding ring glints in the morning light. She is wrapped in a light blue towel, her brown hair still wet and sticking to her shoulders.

Brown hair? I saw red hair a moment ago. What is going on?

“Y-yes. I’m okay. Just trying to wake up,” I respond.

Her lips move downward into a frown and her eyes narrow. “If you say so, honey. Just try to hurry up. We are running late. I left the water on for you.

I nod to her silently and enter the bathroom to use the shower. I glance at the woman over my shoulder as I undress. She is standing at the vanity brushing her teeth. Why can’t I remember her name? *What is wrong with me?*

I must still be thinking about the dream. Yes, that must be it. I’m just disoriented. A nice, warm shower will make me feel better. I feel her soft hand on my shoulder, and I turn to face her. She moves in close to my chest and gives me a deep kiss. With her mouth near my ear, she whispers, “If only we had more time!” She then playfully slaps my butt with a giggle and exits the bathroom before I can express my continued confusion.

Audrey. The name suddenly pops into my head, as though it’s sprung from my subconscious.

I step into the shower. Steam rises from my face as the water hits me. It feels cleansing. However, alone in the shower, I am trapped in my own mind. *Where am I, and where is Mila?* But then I have conflicting thoughts. *This is your home. You have lived here for eight years with your wife and child.* These are plain and simple facts. But why is the tangible evidence so difficult to grasp?

Twenty minutes later, I emerge from the bedroom, freshly showered and dressed and feeling slightly better. I fumbled around the bedroom for five minutes, opening drawers aimlessly, seemingly unable to remember where everything was. But I eventually found a pair of jeans and a blue short-sleeved button-up shirt.

As I descend the stairs, I can hear talking down below. The smell of eggs and frying bacon is in the air.

There are several picture frames of various shapes and sizes hanging on the colorfully papered wall beside the stairs. They display various events in the lives of my family, all distant memories. My wife and I standing at the altar at our wedding. Me holding an infant, looking nervous and scared. A

family portrait with a toddler trying to get away. A school photo of a five-year old girl ready for the first day of kindergarten.

Where did my daughter go?

I look again at the photos. Every photo of a child was clearly of a girl a moment ago! The toddler wore a light pink dress, and her black hair was already shoulder length. By the time the girl was in kindergarten, her hair was much longer and tied back into a ponytail. My wife tried to teach me to braid that hair many times, but I just could not do it...

But now a happy little boy gazes back at me instead. As a toddler, he wears jean overalls with dirty, torn knees. And on his first day of school, he wears tan slacks and a blue polo shirt. The boy looks at me with his eyes closed and mouth open in a wide smile, displaying several missing teeth.

“Hi, Daddy! Where have you been?”

I abruptly turn away from the photos to see a young girl, about nine years old, standing at the bottom of the stairs. She is wearing a blue softball uniform with the name “The Designated Hitters” emblazoned across her chest. Her big blue eyes are looking up at me.

EMILY!

Leaping down the stairs three steps at a time, I extend my arms to embrace my daughter. But before I can reach her, she runs out the front door playfully, skipping as she departs. The door closes behind her, though she doesn't touch it.

“Emily, wait!” I call out, but it's too late.

“Who's Emily?”

The voice comes from behind me, but I don't turn to face it. I open the front door only to see a quiet street. Emily is nowhere to be seen. I hesitantly close the door with a deafening click. Only then do I turn to see who is behind me.

It's the same little boy that I saw in the pictures. He is around nine years old as well, though he wears a pair of shorts and a Minecraft T-shirt. He looks up at me, eyebrows cocked upward. “Who's Emily, Dad?” he asks again.

Who is Emily, indeed. In, fact, who are you? Who am I?

Eyes closed, I kneel in front of the boy and place my hand on his shoulder. This perpetual confusion is giving me a headache. “It's no one...” I pause, unable to recall this boy's name. I try to bring the information to my mind, but all I can retrieve is Emily.

Emily! Emily! Emily!

“Did you forget my name, Dad?” the boy asks with a mischievous grin. Even with the smile, his eyes widen as though my confusion is passing to him.

No matter what is going on in my head, I cannot allow it to hurt this child. So, I settle on a way to prevent that. “Wait... Wait... don't tell me?” I tilt my head back with my thumb and forefinger against my temple, appearing to think in an exaggerated manner. The irony of this is not lost on me. “You must be... Jack. No! Bobby! No! Charlie!”

The boy is laughing wildly. “I'm Liam, Daddy!”

“Oh, Liam, that's *right!*” Acting as though I'm confounded to learn this is disturbingly easy, given that this is genuinely new information. “How could I forget my favorite son?”

How could I forget my favorite daughter?

The corners of my lips begin to feel sore from the forced smile, which is a deep contrast from the genuine joy arising from Liam. To him, he is just playing with his father, unaware of my inner turmoil. “It smells like breakfast is ready. Why don’t we go eat with Mommy?”

“Okay!” Liam exclaims, a fountain of boundless enthusiasm.

I stand back up and Liam takes my hand. His touch feels strange, yet so familiar. We enter the kitchen together. Liam runs straight for his seat on the far side of the small, circular breakfast table. There are plates in front of three of the chairs, all loaded with a generous helping of eggs, bacon, and toast. He leaps into his chair, grabs his fork, and immediately commences eating.

I enter the room cautiously, taking in the environment as I feel a combined sense of being somewhere new and being at home. Like I’m comfortably nervous. It is a strange sensation, to be sure. The kitchen is modern in design. I sit at the table and begin eating quietly, barely tasting the food. Audrey is standing at the double sink, washing the pans while watching the news on the small TV on the counter.

“Authorities have closed off the entire research facility following Dr. Polansky’s disappearance,” a reporter on the TV is saying. *“Chief Warner has not given a statement about whether anything was stolen, but Twitter is abuzz with crazy rumors of what the research team was working on.”*

By now Liam has polished off his plate, put it in the sink, and given his mother a little hug before running out of the kitchen to play. I am still gradually eating my food, trying not to ponder the thoughts burrowing into my mind. Finished with the dishes, Audrey sits beside me to eat her breakfast.

“We need to get out of here in the next—” She looks at her small gold wristwatch. “—fifteen minutes if we are going to get to Liam’s soccer practice on time.”

Emily is dressed in a blue softball uniform beside me. I can see her smiling out of the corner of my eye.

“I thought we had to get to softball.”

“Softball?” She looks mystified. “Honey, you really are tired. Did you sleep all right?”

“I slept...” Images of a red-haired woman and little girl, who I feel should be here with me, still float in the back of my mind. “...Okay.”

Audrey purses her lips but drops the issue. “Okay... well, practice isn’t until eleven. I’ve packed some food just in case it goes longer. You know I hate paying the snack bar prices. Can you remember to make sure the folding chairs are in the car?”

Nodding silently, I allow my mind to drift away. I can still hear the news report in the background, boring into my ear like an insistent fly. A female reporter is elaborating on some of the crazy theories that have surfaced online about the break-in.

“...Message board posts claim that Dr. Polansky was working on some form of time travel,” the reporter is saying. *“Crazy as this sounds, the idea is gaining traction among conspiracy theorists. Whether it is fact or science-fiction, both the FBI and Colica Research have denied any knowledge.”*

My neck jerks involuntary toward the TV.

Time travel?!

It’s like an explosion detonates in my brain. A scattered collection of irrational, paranoid thoughts bombard me as I piece together the information. This morning I woke up feeling disoriented. I woke from a deep, pleasant dream. But no, that is not how it felt. It felt like I woke up inside a

dream. I remember my dream clearly. I remember my house, my street, and my dog. I remember my wife, Mila. And I remember Emily...

I remember them clearly....

And yet this environment around me feels alien. It feels like the world of a dream, imprecise and unformed. There is nothing I recognize. Nothing that makes it feel like home. Is it possible that it is not my home? Is it possible that this isn't even me?

"Logan? Logan, are you there?"

John? John, are you there?

Two voices echo simultaneously. One spoken from the woman next to me, who just cooked me breakfast and is looking at me with concern. The other I hear in my mind, as though it blows past in the wind and I can barely catch it.

"Did you hear what I just told you?"

I can't find you, John.

I instinctively turn my head to the left to indicate that I am right here, but there is no one there. Just an empty chair. A feminine hand grasps my chin and pulls it away from the vacant space. Audrey is holding my face in place, forcing me to look at her. "Logan!"

"I—I'm sorry," I reply, blinking. "I'm just distracted today."

"That is putting it lightly."

She takes both of our plates to the sink. She mutters to herself, clearly irritated.

"Make sure to buckle up, bud," Audrey says to Liam, who is sitting in the back seat of their burgundy SUV. Liam obeys and then pulls a soccer ball into his lap and hugs it with both arms. He is now wearing knee-high socks and a yellow soccer jersey.

I am sitting in the driver's seat, with Audrey sitting beside me. At first I'm nervous to be driving in my current state of mind, but my reservations are put to rest as we pull out of the driveway. While the house feels unfamiliar to me, everything else immediately springs to my memory!

We are in Roseville, a town that I know quite well. Finally, I feel at home.

Let's have some fun. Blow off some steam!

After backing out, I maneuver the vehicle out of the neighborhood, passing a stop sign without slowing down. I can hear a car screeching to a stop behind me.

"Logan, you forgot to stop! Be careful!"

"Sorry," I say with a smirk, both hands turning the wheel sharply to take a turn. "Where is practice again?"

"Royer Park," Audrey responds, holding onto the safety handle tightly as I take the next turn. "I don't know what's gotten into you. Please drive slower."

I don't do slow.

I steer the SUV onto Vernon Street, a single-lane road alongside railroad tracks that is sparsely used. For no discernable reason, I get the urge to drive onto the unpaved dirt and rocks beside the tracks and cut off the car in front of me, which hits the brakes. Its back tires swerve back and forth. Without slowing down, I go into the oncoming lane, narrowly missing a car, and another one turns sharply back around to avoid me. A melody of horns echo through my SUV.

Audrey is angrily yelling at me to stop, occasionally screaming as we narrowly miss another car. Her right hand is still gripping the handle and her left hand grips the center console. Liam is in the back laughing hysterically, albeit nervously.

Douglas Avenue is up ahead. It is an extremely sharp turn to the left. And the light is red. Two cars are stopped at the light. Without any hesitation, I slam my foot on the gas pedal and accelerate around the stopped car, turning so sharply that my left two wheels lift slightly. The wheels straighten and the SUV settles on the asphalt with a bounce, and I continue on my way. I rocket down the street, almost hitting eighty miles per hour.

I steer the SUV down Park Drive and bring it to a steady stop in the parking lot. My hands grip the steering wheel. My mouth is set in a victorious grin.

I point at the clock. "Look at that! On time!"

But as I turn to face Audrey, the smile falters. Her eyes are wide, staring at me. Her nostrils are flaring, and her skin is flushed red.

"*You maniac?*" She slaps my face with an open palm. The skin under my short beard stings from the contact. "What were you thinking? What has gotten into you? How could you put Liam in danger? You terrified your son! And for what? So you could go on some *joyride?*"

"What are you talking about? He's fine!" I say, thinking of the childish laughter I heard earlier. But there is no laughter right now. In fact, the back seat is dead silent. I look back at Liam. He has his feet up on the seat so that he can hide his face behind his knees. He hugs his ball tightly. He is scared stiff.

I reach my hand back to touch his knee in an attempt to comfort him. "Hey, buddy, I'm sorry..."

"Don't touch him, Logan!" The words are sharp and piercing. "I'm going to take Liam out to his practice. Do yourself a favor and stay here. I—I need a moment to calm down."

Without another word, Audrey and Liam exit the SUV, gather the folding chairs, and start walking to the soccer field on the opposite side of the park. I continue to grip the steering wheel. I am fuming, but I don't know why. This wasn't their fault, it was mine. In fact, it doesn't even feel like me... I am a very safe driver, almost excessively so.

Why should I be safe? I've lost everything. I have lost everyone I love. Mila and Emily. They are my life, and it was taken from me by a stupid criminal with a stolen time machine.

And then I remember.

Mila and I were watching the news while Emily was doing her homework at the kitchen table. In another home. Another life. We were arguing, not really watching the TV. It was about nothing really, just something stupid.

Then something the reporter said on screen caught my attention. *Polansky disappeared before the police could apprehend him.* Polansky? That name was familiar, though I cannot remember exactly why. I think there was someone at my office who got angry when I was promoted, went on a rampage, yelling and screaming at everyone, and got fired. Yes, I think that was it. I barely knew him, he was so quiet. Is this really the same guy?

Suddenly, as I was discussing this weird coincidence with my wife, I began to feel strange. My stomach began to turn as though I'd eaten something rancid. My fingertips went numb. My muscles

ached. My hand looked... transparent. However, before I could wonder what was going on, I simply was not there anymore. Mila screamed, and my daughter ran over in concern. The last thing I remember was Mila asking in a panicky voice where I had gone. But then, suddenly, she could not remember that I was gone at all.

I also remember seeing Emily disappear after me.

And then I woke up in this body. In this place. With very little clues as to what happened. For every passing moment, my life becomes harder to recall.

I close my eyes and try to remember Mila's face. Nothing. It was clear in my mind just moments ago, and now it has drifted away like a boat in a current. Frustrated, I try to recall Emily. An image of a little boy, roughly the same age, appears to me instead. A smile is engulfing his face as he laughs up at me. I see Liam, my son.

In a flood of images, I can suddenly remember walking with Liam to school, watching movies with him in the dark, and scolding him for stealing a candy bar. I can remember tightly holding Audrey's hand as she lies on a hospital bed, giving birth to our son....

A single tear escapes my firmly closed eyes. It rolls down my cheek and drips onto my jeans. I open my eyes. They sting.

I open the door of the SUV, my shoulders slumped, and begin the short walk to the soccer field. Children of varying ages and sizes run around me, playing as their parents converse with each other on the benches. So much laughing and happiness. I keep walking down the path. I pass a huge multi-tier play structure with two dozen kids running around and playing. Beyond that I find the field.

Audrey is sitting among several other folding chairs. There is an empty one beside her with a bag of chips and a Pepsi sitting on it. I stand behind her, and she looks back at me with a tentative smile. Well, at least it appears that she has calmed down.

"I'm sorry," I say to her simply, thoroughly meaning it. I place my hand on her shoulder and gently squeeze. I look into her eyes.

Her mouth widens into a bigger smile, showing a little teeth. As though to say, *Don't worry, I forgive you. Try not to be such a big idiot tomorrow.* "It's okay. Just don't. Do that. Again." Each section of her sentence is punctuated with a playful slap on my hand.

Now that I am given approval, I sit in the chair and open the snack that she kindly provided for me. As I eat, we both watch the ten kids on the field attempt to play a practice game of soccer while the coach shouts instructions.

Liam, his shirt covered with a red jersey, is running around another boy in an attempt to get the ball. He lunges, sticking his foot out to steal it. And his foot connects! Momentarily stunned by his success, Liam races toward the other goal with the children chasing him. He kicks hard, and the ball flies across the field, past the coach guarding the goal, and into the goal!

The kids all cheer, Liam the loudest. He runs up to me, his face flushed and sweaty. "Mom! Dad! I did it!"

Audrey takes him into a big hug. "Yes you did, bud!"

After squeezing his mother, Liam lunges at me. His arms wrap around me, and I am reminded of a vague memory of a little girl hitting her first home run. "Are you proud of me, Dad?"

"Yes, yes, yes! Of course!" My smile is wide and genuine.

His hug is tight and warm, glowing in the bliss of his childish happiness. He is laughing hysterically, as though someone told him the funniest, naughtiest joke his nine-year-old mind ever heard. For him, nothing is better than succeeding and having the two people you love most witness it!

The two people you love most...

With practice over, the families start to disperse. Food is collected, folding chairs put away, and rolling wagons repacked to be carted back to cars, SUVs, and minivans. The three of us casually walk back down the path to the parking lot together, with Liam holding my hand while I have the chair over my other shoulder. Before we reach the lot, Liam pulls on my hand.

“Daddy, I want to tell you a secret.”

I look at Audrey, but she just smiles warmly. “I’ll go pack the car.” She takes my chair and walks off, leaving us alone.

Liam leans in close, his lips almost touching my ear. “Mila is safe.”

I pull away from him, my eyes wide and my mouth hanging open.

“W-what did you say? H-how?”

In response, Liam simply points at the swing set nearby. A married couple is pushing twin toddlers on the swings. The father pushing one, and the mother pushing the other. A mother with vibrant red hair.

Mila...

It’s Mila. She’s talking to her husband happily. He leans over and kisses her lightly. Mila is in this world. And she is happy.

“She loved you very much. But she doesn’t remember us anymore.”

Liam’s big, blue eyes are looking up at me. There is sadness in them, but also acceptance. Those eyes are so familiar, filled with the unconditional love of a child.

Emily.... Those are Emily’s eyes...

And then I understand.

Someone changed something in the past that changed me. Maybe my parents never met, or one of them died before I was born. Whatever happened, I was not born the same person. I am a similar person, but different. Different habits and impulses. A completely different life.

Of course, that means I fell in love with a different woman, and we had a different child. Something still passed from me to Liam. Something that existed in both Emily and myself in that different life. We still have an unbreakable bond that crosses time and space...

I hug Liam, tears stinging my eyes. He was Emily once, just as I was once John. How did he figure this out before me? He must have been just as confused, if not more so. I stand up, and we walk to the SUV, hand-in-hand.

The rest of the day goes by in a blur. We go home. Liam and I kick the ball around in the back yard. The three of us play a board game. We have a nice, pleasant spaghetti dinner. I help Audrey clean up the kitchen, which she seems very surprised by.

We watch *Star Wars* in the dimly lit living room, all three of us covered in one big blanket.

“Since when are you so excited for this geeky stuff?” Audrey asks after seeing the wide grin on my face as John Williams signals the start of the crawl.

Liam falls asleep before the movie ends. I carry him to bed and tuck him in for the first time in this life. I lie down next to Audrey in our bed, and she curls up close to me on her side, her arm wrapped around my torso. The smell of her hair is welcoming and familiar to me. I pull her face toward mine by her chin, and we kiss. Sparks tingle through my body.

“I love you,” she says.

“I love you, too,” I say back to my wife, truly meaning it. “I am sorry about today.”

Her face tips up as she grins, and she gives my nose a playful tap. No response is needed. I am forgiven. This long day is over, and we are tired. So we hold each other tightly and relax, yielding to the need for sleep.

Just before I fall asleep, I try to remember the names of my family from that past life. I can’t. And that is okay.

I drift off to sleep next to my wife, memories of our life together filling my dreams. The day we met, our first night together, our wedding, and the day Liam is born.

My name is Logan.

I am home.

Michael Purdy is a head custodian at an elementary school who has been writing as a hobby since high school. He writes science-fiction and fantasy short stories and novels. Being a father of six children has given him a wide range of experiences and subjects to write about. His love for all kinds of fiction and storytelling has driven his desire to tell his own stories.



Dancing With Pleiades

Daniel de Culla

Hesiod:

“And if longing seizes you for sailing the stormy seas,
when the Pleiades flee mighty Orion
and plunge into the misty deep
and all the gusty winds are raging,
then do not keep your ship on the wine-dark sea
but, as I bid you, remember to work the land.”

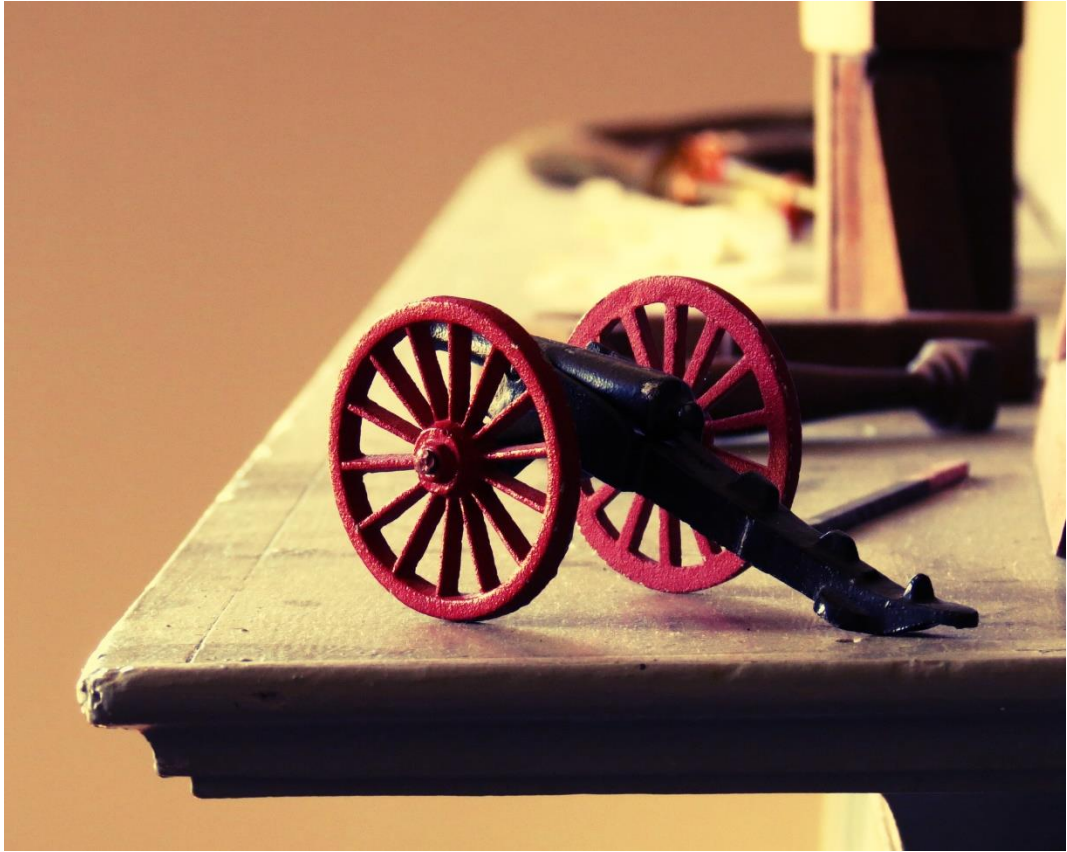
(Works and Days 618-23)

After Atlas was forced to falling in Love
with Orion
Nature, human beings and species
Were born of its own corpses.
It's a pure Truth, a plain Truth
As Light, Music, Art and Verb are born
From the Ass and She-Ass

Moving the Zeus' tail.
This is a well-grounded and good Truth:
In both good and bad hours
Bells tone alone
While the unsuspecting and stretched peoples
Have fun like Don Quixote, mad as a hatter
And the lunatic Sancho
Day dreamers with Maia
Electra, Taygete, Alcyone
Celaeno, Sterope, Merope
And Dulcinea, the lost Pleiad
To whom, as Hee-Hawing, nobody goes behind.
Let us hear him very good employed in his work:
-That Music tames the beasts is a great nonsense
That Art animates sight and sense is a hoax
And if not, look the Verb never touching those praises
Since the stupidity with which the Light raised us and adorned
Made to all of us to Hee-Haw with much grace
That for it we do it in the toilet
In the Zeus' chairs and in schools.
The Hee-Haw' Music is our squire
And Art is a kick to the boat of painting
Verb are two Hee-Haws ahead of
To the World's Greatest Hee-Hawer
This Light doing a Verb toy with us
Like the rope in the hangman's house.
Hee-Haw' managers bring musical ensembles
To tame people in dances and processions
Painters get to expose their pictures
As if their flawed nudes were
As the poet Lord Tennyson mentioned
In his poem Locksley Hall:
"Many a night I saw the Pleiads
Rising ythrough the mellow shade
Glitter like a swarm of fire'flies
Tangled in a silver braid".
But the old woman of the village
The witch or fortune teller
With a trick hearing us to Hee-Haw
More clever than anyone, says to us
Like The Celestina to Callisto and Melibea

In the Fernando de Rojas' book:
"It's foolish to come
For only a Hee-Haw of Love.
I remember when I was young
That I came in and came out as mine's pleases
Without anyone stole a march on me
With so much grace and ownership that, in doing it
I was beginning to be a Nature's daughter
Mother of Music, Art and the Verb
Mother of all sciences
On Orion's Light
Still pursuing them
Across the night Sky.

Daniel de Culla is a writer, poet, and photographer. He's member of the Spanish Writers Association, Earthly Writers International Caucus, Poets of the World, (IA) International Authors, Surrealism Art, and others. He is the director of Gallo Tricolor Review and Robespierre Review. He has participated in many festivals of poetry and theater in Madrid, Burgos, Berlin, Minden, Hannover and Genève. His work has been featured in many galleries from Madrid, Burgos, London, and Amsterdam. He is moving between North Hollywood, Madrid, and Burgos. His e-mail is gallotricolor@yahoo.com.



The Iron Toys Make A New Year's Resolution

Jerry Cunningham

It comes as a surprise to today's children to learn that for thousands of years, no children's toys were made of plastic. In more recent centuries, toys were made of wood or tin, and painted by hand, and kept in a toy chest, so that all earnest boys and girls, when told to clean up their toys, had a natural place for them. As you might imagine, the toy chests were made by hand, too, as making a simple nail—much less a hammer—was a chore for strong men. So, the toy boxes were sturdy things, and the toys themselves were no slouches.

There comes a day, not marked on any calendar, when a child no longer plays with the toys of childhood—in olden times, a son crossed the sea in a soggy, malodorous ship, or a daughter was told to marry the son of a shoemaker or egg candler in the next village over. And so it is true, especially in Europe, but also in the homes built of hand-sawed planks of oak built by wealthy sea captains above the shores of Maine, that precious toy chests have survived for many years, filled with toys made of wood or tin, perhaps in an attic or even in a basement. Indeed, a shout-out must be given here to the trade in antique toys, which has always preserved toys and toy chests made long ago. Naturally, such antiques need TLC, and crazy glue or beeswax, along with fresh paint, and pins and new padding, but, the effort has been made, and even in recent times there were still a handful of toy chests still around that were first made by woodworkers who sang sea chanteys that recalled their younger days as sailors chasing the last pirates of the Caribbean.

There is a house in Maine that was owned by a sea captain who built it for his new wife, a maiden of nineteen, who waved a handkerchief at him from the rainy dock as he left for his final voyage over the deep sea. No one knew it would be his final voyage, of course—if they did, he would have stayed in bed and never left. Yet, even without whales and sharks, the sea is a dangerous place, and was especially so in those days, filled, as the seas were, with pirates, storms, ill-conceived diets, and maps made by chubby landlubbers who never really wanted to make maps at all, but instead had desired since their youth to paint tall murals with scenes of Roman landlords eating red grapes and similar scenes of ancient grandeur. Such maps, creative though they were, often led a sea captain with a starving crew to look for a mountain that never existed as a landmark to a river that was equally fanciful. Oh yes, the sea can be a dangerous place, and it was so for the sea captain.

The word spread that, when the sea captain drowned, he went down with his ship, smoking a corn cob pipe to the last.

Back when the sea captain married the maiden in the Whaleman's Chapel, her family gave them a toy chest made of a bright orange tiger wood with hinges of bronze. The maiden's family thought that the newlyweds would have many children: a wagonful, at least, they thought. It was a large wooden chest, which opened at the top and had no lock. Inside the chest were dozens of wood and tin toys, and at the bottom of the chest was a motley collection of iron toys, though, to be honest, the iron ones only looked like toys when you picked one up and looked closely through a squinty eye. The fact is that the iron toys were never molded very well and some of them were never even painted. And the ones that were painted did not hold the paint very well, and the paint soon flaked and chipped. So, even by the time the pastor had pronounced the sea captain and the maiden man and wife, the iron toys were part green, and part black, and part orange, and rusty, chipped, oily, and sooty. They were, in the eyes of the other toys, a real mess.

It was not long after the sea captain exhaled his last blue smoke and began his underwater travels as a drowned man through the seven green seas among octopi and slowly waving pink plants in his never-ending search for the coast of Maine that his bereft wife gave the toy chest away to a family with eleven children. That began a custom that lasted among generations of children until the times of the radios, when toys became plastic and stayed red or blue forever, and shiny, too. The custom was that no kids wanted to play with the iron toys, and the iron toys stayed in the toy chest while the kids played with the well-made and brightly colored toys of wood and tin. One spoiled boy, upon seeing the iron toys piled and clasped together like a maddening crowd, cried: "What's that? A pile of junk?"

It is time to learn about the wood and tin toys in the toy chest; many toys would have belonged to the children of the sea captain and his wife, if they had ever had any; many toys were added over the years by families who said, "That's an adorable toy chest for the kids!" We have learned about the iron toys. What else was in the toy chest at the time that this story begins?

These were the small wood toys: a team of four white horses with blinders who pulled fancy carriages with seats like couches, and a drum horse of gray with thick white hair over its hooves, and a saddle that held drums on either side of the cavalryman. There was a rocking horse—a white Arabian with gray knees and a dark muzzle and a long light-colored mane draped down one side of his head—he was mounted upon a rocker, and had a fancy harness and stirrups, and his tail reached the floor.

There was also a tiny wooden Viking with an ax, and there were two medieval archers with their bows pulled back and ready to unleash deadly arrows with sharp tips of splintered coal, along with a group of little Roman soldiers with helmets and swords and shields and red capes and also a sharp looking group of West Point cadets standing ramrod-straight and carrying white-handled swords.

Each wooden toy was made of invincible woods, for it is often a fact that vivacious children play with great verve and without finesse. And wooden toys are easy to paint, so the wooden toys looked brand new for many years.

Now we need to describe the tin toys. It should first be noted that tin does not rust. So, tin toys stay bright and shiny on and on into time, and now and then are pleased to have a sword straightened out with a pair of pliers, or to receive a fresh coat of paint or a dollop of hair coloring.

It should also be pointed out that tin is a soft metal, and easy to mold and cut, so tin toys are made with clean edges and excellent form.

The tin toys included a Russian soldier from the war of 1812 - he had a long coat, for he had fought in the winter, with gold buttons, a rifle in one arm and a sword in the other. There was a British officer with a white sash and white pants and gold epaulets, who permanently pointed the way forward with his arm. There were three members of Napoleon's Imperial Guard, and one of the men had a horn. There was a samurai swordsman with his hair tied back and crouched in a ready-to-strike pose. There was a sturdy cannon with red wheels.

The tin horses were made by craftsmen who studied all of the breeds in the known world for strength, speed, beauty and bravery. There were two taut and controlled thoroughbreds from Kentucky with fine, silky untrimmed tails; a Russian war horse from the steppes with a neatly trimmed mane; and three white Appaloosas with brown spots and yellow tails and strong necks and legs, speedy descendants of the Appaloosas belonging to the Nez Perce Tribe, who fought the U.S. Army and won for a while.

Sometimes children would play with just the wood toys; sometimes a mix of wood and tin toys. A brother and a sister, at the time of this story, had the toy box in their house, and it was chock full of toys. It was wintertime, and the freezing wind and mounds of snow kept the children indoors by the fireplace for many days. On more than one of those chilly days, the brother and sister had, after three hours of play, all of the wood toys and all of the tin toys spread out on the floor. "Look, Momma," they would cry, "we're playing with all of our toys!"

These words from the brother and sister were not true for two reasons. Firstly, forgotten at the bottom of the toy box—once again—was a pile of discolored, disjointed metal, clumped together by gravity and misuse. Secondly, the boy had another toy that he had just gotten for his Christmas present—a red magnet shaped like a horseshoe, which he kept under his bed. The iron toys were used to being forgotten by children; but this was the first time for the magnet; she wasn't sad, she was mad.

"My name is Maggie and I'm brand new and I can lift up a hammer!" said the magnet loud enough for the toy box, and everything in it, to hear. "I thought I'd get a better welcome in this home."

The iron toys were too preoccupied at the time to give much thought to Maggie's predicament. For, as crusty, rusty things all crumpled together at the bottom of the toy box, those with legs could

not stretch their legs, and those with wheels could not spin very easily, and iron is quite stiff to begin with.

It is time to take a look at the iron toys. There was a young woman with a banjo, a bearded man with a fiddle, and a pirate with an eyepatch and a dagger. There was a black man sitting hunched over a stand-up piano and a wooden pull toy with heart shapes in the iron wheels and a brass bell in the middle of the iron wheels which clanged when it was pulled by a string. There was a horse head made of felt with an iron bridle and four missing wheels. The horse head had no body: it sat atop a smooth piece of wood with rounded edges, like a skateboard. Back when it had wheels, a child just pulled a string attached to the horse's rein, and the horse head was thusly able to travel. There was a wind vane made of an arrow with a little red rooster on top. There was a Chinese boy on a sled, stomach down, facing forward. There were two fighting Mexicans from the Mexican-American War, sporting tall black hats with gold chinstraps, along with dark blue coats and scarlet cuffs and collars; each carried a musket.

And there was one more thing made of iron: a cap gun that was plated with nickel.

The last iron toy that must be mentioned wasn't made of very much iron and wasn't even a toy. It was a tall marionette: a figurine of a wizard, with a long white beard made of white strings and a long, white mustache and a long, loose dark gown that once sparkled with stars. In his left hand, he carried a staff with a white globe on top; he wore sandals. Strings attached to nothing fell from his wrists and knees. His staff was made of iron, and for that reason alone he had been rejected by both the wood and tin toys.

One night, just two days after Christmas, Maggie got even. She leaned her whole horseshoe-shaped body against the side of the toy box and said, "Here comes the force, people—prepare to be dazzled!" And Maggie's magnetic powers were felt inside the toy box by each and every iron toy, and they began to move up the side of the box, with the cap gun on top, and the other iron toys below it, with larger toys attached one by one and smaller toys attached two by two. The wood and tin toys did not feel a thing, and, in any event, the wood and tin toys were asleep.

"That's curious," said the wizard. "We are moving. It must be that the little boy knows a special trick."

But the little boy was asleep, too.

Soon, the lid on the toy box opened as the iron toys were lifted by Maggie's magnetic powers up and out of the toy box and onto the floor. The wizard, who was old, stayed lying down on the floor and stretched his legs, and the cap gun, a heavy thing, sat still next to the wizard. But the other iron toys jumped into action. The piano guy struck up a bouncy tune, and the young woman with the banjo and the fiddler joined in; the two fighting Mexicans looked on, tapping their feet all the while; the fingers of the Chinese boy kept time on the side of his sled.

The pirate pulled the string of the pull toy with the brass bell and faced the pull toy toward the band; the pirate also pointed the horse head that sat on the smooth wood towards the band. The wind vane was already pointed in the right direction, for, if there is one thing that a wind vane knows, it is direction.

The wizard stood up and looked around by the light of the fireplace; he was still wondering how it was that the iron toys had been pulled out of the toy box. As Maggie explained her magnetic

powers to the wizard, who was fascinated and entranced by her explanation, the pirate snuck away into the kitchen. The pirate returned from the kitchen with a thimble-full of rum. "Ahoy, maties!" said the pirate. "Let's boogie!"

It is perhaps true that it might be best to skip parts of a story, for the sake of the very young and the ultrasensitive, and this must be done here. A few hours later, it was the middle of the night. The man still played the piano, but it was a slow, quiet blues in the key of E, and he closed his eyes and truly hunched over for the deepest notes. The young woman with the banjo was asleep, as were the Mexican soldiers and the Chinese boy on a sled. The bearded fiddler had fallen asleep sitting up against the right side of the piano, and the pirate had fallen asleep on the left; they snored loudly in the wrong key. The rooster snored, too, and was in no condition to announce the coming dawn. Maggie and the capgun were in the shadows together; the wizard spoke.

"Wake up, wake up! Our secret will be betrayed if a human comes into this room while we are still here!" said the wizard.

And, one by one, the iron toys roused themselves, grousing all the while, moaning for aspirin; they were lifted back shortly before sunrise into the toy box by Maggie. Maggie returned to her spot under the boy's bed.

That day, the brother and sister played with the wood and tin toys in front of the warm fireplace. They arranged the wood and tin toys like an army: six tin horses stood at attention with a team of four white wood horses along with a sturdy drum horse with two kettle drums on either side of his saddle. There was also a rocking horse that was far bigger than the other horse. Behind all those horses stood the cannon with power. A French soldier blew his horn. Nearby, with discipline and strength, was a formation of Roman soldiers and graduates of West Point, keeping ranks with exactness. On either side of the formation stood the samurai and the Russian. On a command by the British officer, who pointed toward the fireplace, the archers let loose a volley of arrows that lit like firecrackers when they reached the flames.

While this crisp and noisy military drill went on outside the toy box, inside the toy box, the piano player and the Mexican soldiers had joined the fiddler in a chorus of snoring, and the rooster called in sick.

"We are pathetic," said the wizard.

That night, Maggie hoisted the iron toys out of the toy box again; again the music played, again the pirate stole rum from the kitchen, and again the rooster was too lazy to crow for day; noon saw a snorefest of iron.

On the fourth day after Christmas, Maggie lifted the iron toys out of the toy box, while the army of wood and tin slept a healthy, sound sleep, and the well-fed and muscular horses slept standing up; the wooden Viking dreamt that he wore a silver crown. Before any party could start, the wizard spoke.

"Heed my words, my fellow iron creatures. We have been treated poorly for generations, and we simply do not get any respect from the humans. Maggie has done us a great service by using the power of magnetism to liberate us from the forgotten bottom of the toy box. But, for we iron creatures to be free, we must be strong and organized like the wood and tin toys. They have fast horses and

clean and powerful weapons and superb soldiers. Frankly, I fear that either the wooden Viking or the tin samurai with the scary sword could defeat us all by himself,” said the wizard.

“Defeat us?” cried the pull toy with the brass bell. “Like we’d ever fight them! Why on earth would we fight them? Life at the bottom of the toy box is not so bad, and anyway, we can sneak out at night and have parties!”

There were murmurs of approval.

The fiddler growled to the wizard: “You just can’t have a good time. You spend too much time thinking and not enough time having fun.”

The wind vane with the rooster on top said: “It’s the holiday season; we should be celebrating, not getting caught up with war talk!”

The others agreed, except for the Mexican soldiers and the cap gun, who stayed silent.

“We could have the toy box to ourselves if we could defeat the wood and tin forces,” said the wizard as he pounded his iron staff on the floor, “and then the human children would play with us every day.”

The cap gun spoke up. “What would we have to do?” he asked.

“To begin with, we have to assemble our weaponry. If you have a rifle or bullets, come forward!” shouted the wizard.

The banjo girl, who luckily spoke Spanish, whispered to the Mexican soldiers: they stepped briskly forward.

The cap gun said: “I’m here, too.”

But that was all there was: two muskets, sold to the Mexican government a century earlier by the British, though largely unworkable even then, and a cap gun.

“Now,” said the wizard, “if you have military training, step forward.”

The banjo girl whispered to the Mexican soldiers again, and again, those two men stepped forward.

The wizard stroked his long, white beard. “How, in the name of all of the stars and planets, will we ever stand up to the cannon with red wheels, not to mention many ferocious soldiers on horseback with their swords and axes?” he asked.

The assembled iron toys sensed the wizard’s doubt, and the meeting broke up; soon, however, there was singing and dancing, and the piano player shouted: “I wrote this one myself!”

That night, the horse head lost his voice from singing so loudly, the pirate took out his glass eye and scared the banjo girl with it, and the rooster announced that he had never really been a morning person. Maggie left the party early with the cap gun. The next day, the wizard was alarmed at the fearsome noise of the military drills of the wood and tin toys.

“Perhaps,” thought the wizard, “war is not the answer.”

The next night, the wizard again addressed the iron toys.

“Tomorrow night is New Year’s Eve,” the wizard said. “We must resolve to start the New Year as free iron toys.” He banged his staff. “There is a way to do this without war. We must escape this house and go on a journey, a trek, a march, to find a human family that loves its iron toys.”

The pirate spat on the floor. “No offense, but if we get out, I’m going to go my own way. I like you people, but I’d rather rob and pillage.”

“That’s fine,” said the wizard, “but we may run into a fight. You have to be ready to sacrifice your life for the sake of the others.”

The banjo girl translated for the Mexican soldiers.

“*Claro!*” said the Mexican soldiers with pride.

The fiddler flexed his iron muscles; the piano player flexed his, and the pull toy shook his brass bell.

Then the cap gun spoke: “Will the fiery redhead—Maggie—be coming with us?”

“You’ll have to ask her,” said the wizard.

“What’s the plan?” asked the wind vane with the rooster on top.

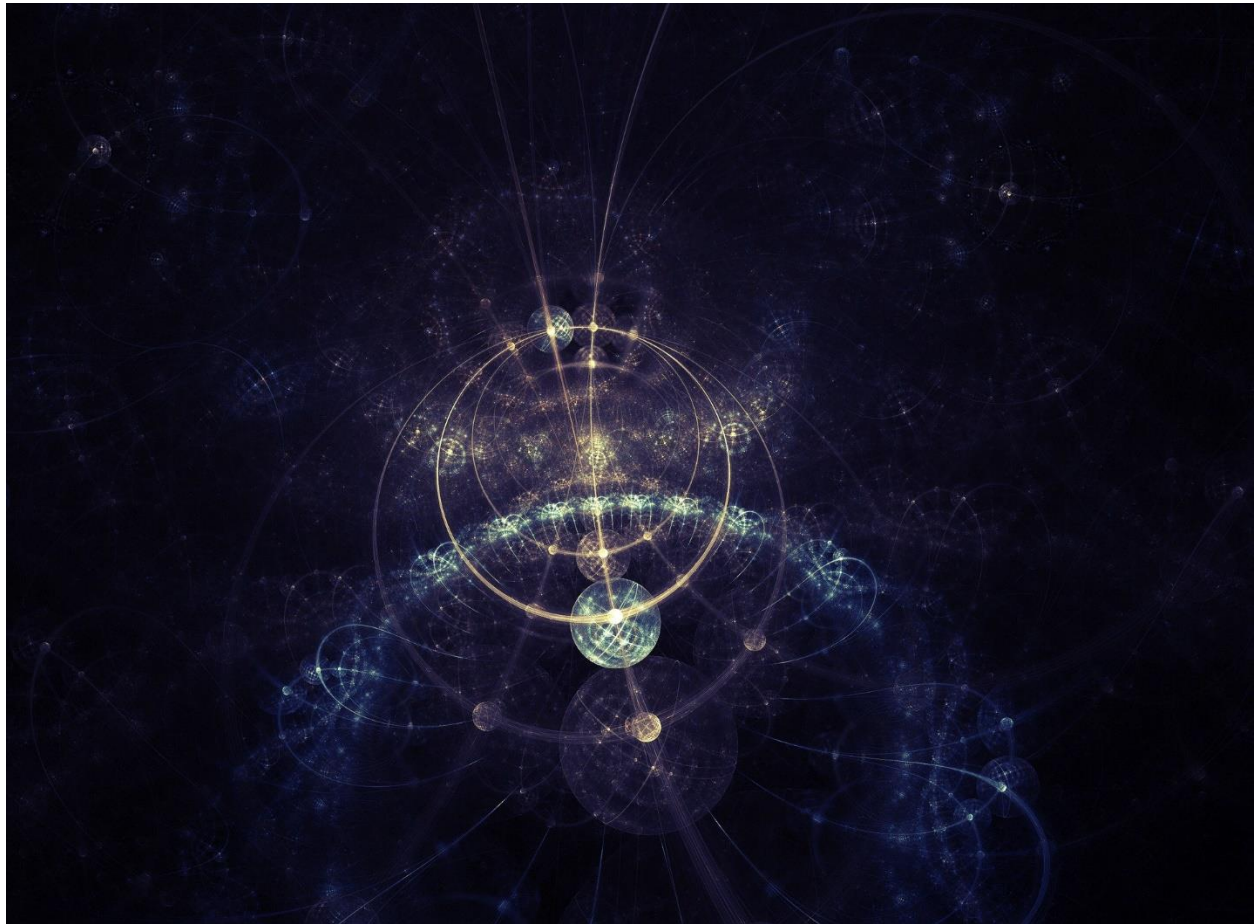
“Everyone come closer, and I will tell you the plan,” said the wizard.

That night there was no party, and no rum; the piano player played a somber classical piece by Chopin, and the banjo girl and the fiddler played along with respectful and measured high notes; the fiddler had even trimmed his beard. The rooster expressed his regrets for slacking off and made a somber promise to do his duty.

Just before dawn the next day, as a snowfall fell gently, Maggie used her powers and slid the latch open on the front door of the house; the relieved hinges of the heavy wood door growled for a moment as the door opened a couple of inches. Through the opening came the iron toys. The pirate said, “I love fresh air!” and gave a high five to the piano player, gave an unexpected hug to the pull toy, and winked with his one good eye at the banjo girl before setting off for the sea.

If you had been out and about as the snow fell that day, and been close by, you would have seen quite a sight! Maggie was in front of the parade, and with her magnetic powers, she pulled the cap gun, who had the piano and the piano man on top. Behind them came the pull toy with the brass bell, which, if you listened closely and there was not too much wind in your ears, was ringing chimes of freedom. On the pull toy sat the Mexican soldiers, alert for signs of danger, and the wind vane, pointing wherever Maggie was headed. Behind them, the Chinese boy on the sled whisked merrily along, carrying the banjo girl and the fiddler; the fiddler’s beard flowed in the wind. Last, but not least, a string attached to the back of the sled pulled the horse head along quite easily, for the smooth, waxed wood that the horse head sat upon was like a ski on the snow. Surfing aboard was the wizard. The wizard’s white globe glowed triumphantly among the dawn-kissed snowflakes. He wore socks with his sandals, and it was said that, every night forever after, his stars twinkled.

Jerry Cunningham is a grandfather with a white beard and lives in Portland, Oregon. Jerry writes short stories frequently published in journals, and often, like “The Iron Toys Make a New Year’s Resolution,” based upon or inspired by folk tales from around the world. He has compiled two collections of short stories. One of the collections, *The Metal Horse Learns Spanglish*, is a collection of pleasant holiday stories. The other collection, *Why the Singing Chickens Never Saw New Orleans*, has 14 stories, mostly humorous, many darkly so. They are available on Amazon, along with two historical works by Jerry.

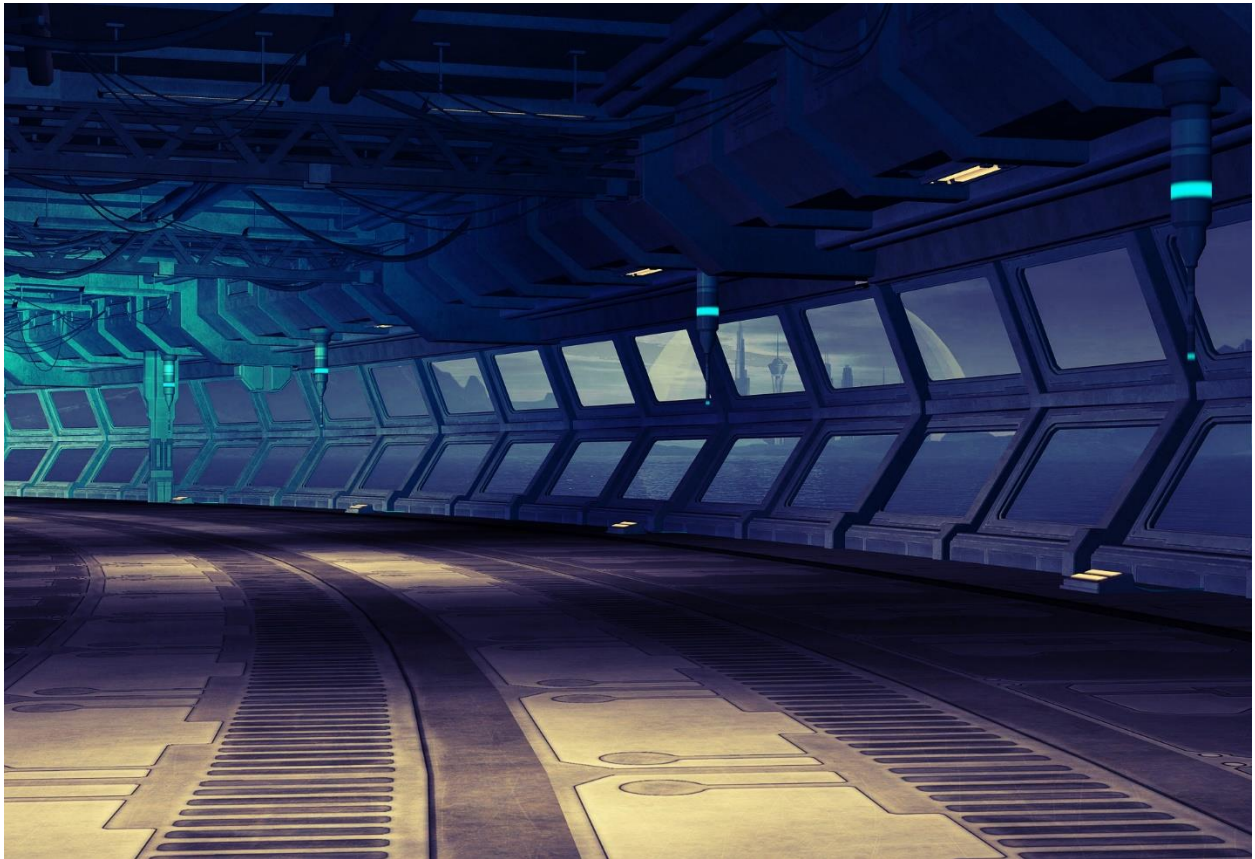


The Dark Millennia

F.J. Bergmann

Long ago I had stopped using the word *human*.
Eventually I realized that there was no version of reality
that I had not already seen, no spacetime construct that
had not been virtualized. Technology allowing further
expansion of the visible spectrum was not yet possible.
Ivory ape in a peacock garden, I became a dark, green
rainbow, random, a recombinant collage of nuances and
mutant neologies: meme soup. I swung myself,
somersaulting, from the windswept plateaux of ennui to
the pine forests of melancholy. Adrenaline had become
only a chemical; pheromones were substances whose
functions I recalled objectively; psychopharmaceuticals'
predictable effects were no longer obsessively desired.
Had it not once been the pinnacle of those ancient,
extinct theologies to want nothing? Instead, I want *for*
nothing and nothing wants me. Something moves like an
apex predator at the black limit of vision, under a
furiously blooming sky.

F. J. Bergmann edits poetry for *mobiusmagazine.com* and imagines tragedies on or near exoplanets. Work appears irregularly in *Abyss & Apex*, *Analog*, *Asimov's*, and elsewhere in the alphabet. *A Catalogue of the Further Suns* won the 2017 Gold Line Press poetry chapbook contest and the 2018 SFPA Elgin Chapbook Award.



Space Race

Joe DiBuduo and Kate Robinson

Heats

June 15, 2076

Twenty-year-old rocket racer Raimundo Reyes watched the meter zoom a hair past 35.5 km/s with a delighted grin. Clearly, he'd broken his three-hour "round the moon" record. The rearward-pointing scanner on his Ion Sting X-2100 revealed the other four craft lagging behind in the pre-competition heat. Those rocket jockeys would never catch up.

When Rai hit the edge of Earth's atmosphere, an abrupt compression wave formed in front of his craft. The ISX-2100's skin began to compress and glow. If the velocity wasn't sufficiently reduced, the tremendous friction would literally vaporize it.

His heart skipped a beat when the nose of his craft turned silver-white. When he glanced at the digital gauges lined up on the console, the craft wasn't decelerating, it was accelerating! He had only seconds to react before he'd burn up like a shooting star.

"Holy spaceballs—mother of Jupiter," Rai muttered, unable to do a damn thing more before his imminent incineration.

He clenched his eyes shut and gritted his teeth, bracing for the big fry. Five seconds later, he lifted one eyelid up a crack, wondering what he'd see during his fiery demise. He gripped the joystick with his right hand as the ISX-2100 began to tremble, flaring with a blue and orange gaseous halo

shimmering in neon brilliance against deep black space. Suddenly, an umbrella-like metallic form brighter than a silver-white spiral galaxy appeared before the nose cone.

“What in the galactic hell is that?”

Then it dawned on him—his own design, an auxiliary emergency shield decelerator he’d intended to install and test during the next heat. The system his robotic technician must have installed for him had acted as an anti-grav device, activated by slamming into Earth’s atmosphere. Even while plummeting at high speed, the field had protected the craft without adding the pressure of deceleration.

Rai mopped the sweat from his face. His ass saved once again by a robot. How many times now? Three or four? He tried to count on the fingers of one glove while he jockeyed his craft over Sandia Crest.

A few moments later, SpacePort West’s long runways, engineered in the high desert landscape specifically for high-speed spacecraft, came into view through the gleaming eco-dome of Southwestern Sector III. He switched the craft controls to automatic. The control tower computer noted the record-breaking heat, took control of the ISX-2100, and guided it to a bump-free landing through one of the port doors that spiraled around the top circumference of the dome.

On the ground, Rai steered the ISX-2100 toward his assigned hangar, an old corrugated tin affair overshadowed by BBB Enterprises’ corporate headquarters. He’d been lucky to have his inventions and rocket-racing talents supported by a legion of fans; otherwise, he’d never be able to own this hangar or to engage in his expensive hobby. His hangar dated way back to 2010, when SpacePort West construction had begun, long before B.B. Bobor had acquired the complex. Rai’s was the only privately-owned hangar left at the toe of the Bobor transportation hub, shaped in the form of an old-fashioned cowboy boot. BBB Enterprises had purchased the old municipal airport in 2028, after the former state of New Mexico had languished with budget problems after the 2008 Wall Street banking schemes had gone bust and petroleum prices had fallen and risen sky-high again. Then had come climate chaos and the War of 2020. Only isolated and contaminated fragments of civilization had remained in a weird mix of poverty and high technology under the small domed Sectors of the former USA. Robotic assistance had become commonplace and indispensable to survivors. In the decades since the War, BBB Enterprises had devoured what the one-world government hadn’t seized of the old petroleum-powered airline operations in the former North and South Americas. Bobor had continued to expand his private spaceflight empire and other financial interests exponentially.

Rai had only heard the riveting tales of extreme post-war suffering and counted himself lucky to have been born during the robot-human renaissance, restrictive though life had become in the new world. Like the proliferation of cockroaches and rats, he mused, corporate domination of Earth had never disappeared.

As he turned the craft’s computer link to the hibernate position, it slid to a stop. He glanced at the duplicate ISX sitting in the cool gloom at one side of the hangar. If any mechanical problems cropped up before the competition, the duplicate would serve as backup, even though he didn’t need no stinkin’ backup. His Sting design had outpowered the competition from day one, and with the brand-new auxiliary emergency shield decelerator installed, the craft now seemed to be problem-free.

The canopy slid open and Rai exited with a cocky bounce. He motioned to Randy, his robot assistant, to help guide the craft into the hangar.

Rai flashed the broad grin beloved by thousands. “Who told you to install the auxiliary emergency shield decelerator?”

“No one, Boss. I thought you might need it sooner than you expected.”

Why was it people always said even the best AI robots didn’t anticipate future needs?

Rai thumped Randy on the back. “I owe you my life, so you get extra rations of energy anytime you want.”

“Thanks, Boss.” Randy continued to work.

No one had yet been able to figure out how to back-engineer Rai’s ride. The laser propulsion and braking system he’d designed was years ahead of all the other racers’ systems. That was where his advantage lay. Now, no engineer could calculate how he maintained his incinerating speed right up to the atmosphere’s edge without blazing like a meteor. He knew if any of his competitors tried to emulate him by decelerating like the ISX-2100, their craft would disintegrate during re-entry. The loads on their rockets combined with the high temperature would finish them off.

Suddenly, the communicator flashed. Rai reached inside the craft, touched the console, and placed his helmet back on. His father, Alejandro, appeared onscreen.

“Raimundo! How goes it?”

“Hey, Pa. I broke 35.5 in the heat today! Held the ISX-2100 back a bit... she took the re-entry heat like a lady. Tomorrow I’m goin’ past 36.”

“I told Mama you’ll win, Rai. That’s why we’re spending the race weekend in the Moonbeam II. We’ll be in space when you grab the world rocket jockey championship.”

“How can you afford an orbiting hotel?”

“Bobor gave me tickets to the race.”

“Just the tickets alone are worth an arm and a leg, Pa. Bobor doesn’t give anything away without strings. What’s the catch?”

“No catch. Ma and I agreed to endorse Bobor in an advertisement. After you win the race, we’ll pay the hotel.”

“You taught me to be logical, Pa. What if something goes wrong and I don’t win?”

Not that Rai was worried about losing. But he’d heard about Bobor’s contracts. Too many signers ended up at the reconstitution depot, their DNA recycled into artificial intelligence banks for robot manufacture.

“I know you’re going to win. Besides, I’m not missing this race for anything.”

Rai sighed. “You signed a contract? Did you read the fine print? I need to see a copy of the statement.”

Alejandro grunted. “I’ll send you a zip image when I get the official copy. Here, Mama wants to say hello.”

Abril’s face appeared. “We’re praying for you, Rai-Rai,” was all his mother could say before her image faded when the craft’s power recycled into hibernation mode.

* * *

Rai couldn't help but share his joy, even though Randy would simply agree with anything he said. "Hey, the race'll be ours—I aced the prelim heat today!"

"Great run, Boss," Randy responded in a modulated voice. The robot's lips stretched into a sincere-looking smile, but the eyes of the old 2065 robo-mechanic remained flat. Robotic technicians hadn't captured the proper eye gleam until recently.

"I broke my own record, thanks to you."

Rai knew there was no reason to compliment a robot, but he always did. He couldn't think of them as mere machines since his family's companion-bots had saved his life twice. One early numbered prototype had carried him from his blazing bedroom just after his fifth birthday. Six years later, a digitized robo-butler named Chester had pulled him from the swollen river he'd foolishly tried to swim across. Robots seemed more loyal, compassionate, and courageous than many humans.

"I'm grateful for your confidence," Randy said, lowering his eyes in deference to his human supervisor.

"Not only that, we'll soon be rolling in EUNCG credits." Rai referred to the Earth Unified Nations Coalition Government, "Unc G," or "Uncle G," as most Earth citizens called it. Currency came in the form of digital credit these days, and there was little to go around, since all food, shelter, and medical care was provided directly in exchange for work and almost everyone worked for Uncle G. The Earth Coalition government owned and operated almost all companies except the largest and most powerful: BBB Enterprises.

When Randy looked back up, Rai noticed a hint of satisfaction on the robot's face. He often second-guessed robots' programmed reactions to difficult situations and wondered if they *felt* anything, suspecting that underneath the technological façade, advanced robots might truly have a glimmer of emotion. He remembered when his father had taken him fishing and the fish he'd reeled in had flopped all over, trying to get back in the water. "Don't worry, son," Alejandro had said, "they don't feel any pain." But Rai had never believed that. Fish obviously suffered. When people mistreated their robots and said they felt no pain, he didn't believe that either.

Rai's daydream evaporated when Randy rolled the electronic scanner under the ISX-2100 to search for fatigued areas. He reevaluated the competition and its rewards as he worked. All contestants were required to accelerate from their designated runway and land on the same runway after circling the moon once. The championship and his superior thruster design would put him ahead of the subsidized corporate and university patents, making BBB Enterprises' efforts futile. So far, Bobor had been civil. But Rai assumed Bobor might do anything to stop him. Anything!

Speak of the devil. He watched an armored transport outfitted with digital weapons and a BBB longhorn skull logo on either side lumber up to the hangar. Rai ambled toward the door as two robotic guard dogs skittered toward him, their noses to the ground and bums raised like stink beetles (coincidentally one of few insect species left after the devastating one-day nuclear conflict in 2020 and the ongoing seventy-six-year-long drought in Southwestern Sectors I, II, and III).

The outer shell of the transport unfolded, revealing Bobor floating sans robotic legs on his levitating chair. *His artificial legs with the fancy cowboy boots must be in for repair again. You'd think with all his money, he'd buy a spare pair.* But maybe Bobor's fondness for old-fashioned, hand-tooled leather boots was where he'd spent his money—after all, there were very few cows or any other large mammals left

in the world. Hardly anyone could afford leather, and no one ate meat. The boots alone must cost plenty, even for a trillionaire.

A smile more artificial than Randy's split Bobor's face. "Congratulations on your run this morning, Mr. Reyes," he drawled.

Rai nodded, wondering what would emerge from the space cowboy's bulbous lips next. Randy continued working, oblivious to Bobor.

"Congratulations on your contracts, Mr. Bobor," Rai shouted over pings, clangs, and clatter of Randy's work.

"Please shut that stupid thing up. I can't hear myself think with all that racket."

The word "stupid" irked Rai. "He's not a thing. His name is Randy. If you want him to stop working, simply ask him."

"I'm not used to asking for anything, you know! But I'm in an asking mood today." Bobor nodded toward the busy robot. "Randy, will you please stop working?"

The scanning machine's noise abated, and Randy stood immobile.

"Now, I'm going to *ask you*, Raimundo Reyes, if you'll reconsider my offer to buy the ISX-2100 and your rights to the technology."

"I've told you no a hundred times already."

"But things are different now."

Yeah, now that I'm definitely going to win, Rai thought. He adjusted his face into a neutral expression. "How so?"

Bobor thrust his chest out. "Let me remind you that BBB Enterprises owns all the inflatable orbiting hotels in Earth and Moon orbits, including the Moonbeam II. We just wrangled a contract to build EUCNG's transport vehicle fleet to carry personnel and precious rare elements between Moon and Earth. *And* the contract to build the inflatable habitats to house the transport crews, miners, and the robot workers. All I need now is the rocket concession. My investors are willing to pay you handsomely, young man."

Goddamn Bobor had to turn everything he did into a monopoly. "My patents aren't for sale," Rai said, setting his jaw.

A win in the race guaranteed that his thruster and decelerator patents would turn into a gold mine. The Earth Unified Nations Coalition Government InterSpace Program (EUNCGISP, or "Uncle Gisp," as people called it) always co-opted the champion's designs. The transports needed Rai's ISX speed as well as the strength of the Variable Specific Impulse Magnetoplasma Rocket (VSIMR) developed by EUNCGISP to rapidly shuttle immigrants and robotic miners to the lunar camps, where they extracted recently discovered rare elements in the Sea of Tranquility.

Bobor pointed at thin air in front of him and a contract hologram appeared. "Mr. Reyes, look at the signatures on this document. If by some chance you lose the race, you know what's going to happen."

Rai's heart sank as he recognized his father's scrawl and his mother's tightly inscribed signature on the document. He held his chin higher. "You know I'm going to win."

"Don't count your victory until the Moon rises on July 1," Bobor said, floating back to his transport.

This time the big lug waved goodbye with a *real* shit-eating grin on his face.

More determined than ever, Rai marched back to the ISX-2100 and Randy's immobile form. He still couldn't believe his father had signed a contract without understanding what he was getting into. He especially hated his father's carelessness in getting Ma involved too. Maybe there was some way to talk Pa into returning the tickets and dropping the contract before the race.

But he wouldn't lose. No way. Rai closed up shop and returned Randy to the robot community pod, where he'd have to sign the robot out when needed again. Then he hitched a ride on the next ground transport toward the domed remnant of Los Angeles, where his parents lived in a brand-new, self-sustaining, high-rise homelet.

As Rai stepped into the transport, a uniformed attendant in a twenty-first century version of twentieth-century western wear greeted him. She smiled warmly, her eyes lighting up with pleasure. Rai could barely keep his eyes off the front of her skintight solarshen snap-button shirt. A digital pin with her name—Starbright—and her employee number—210176—flashed over her left breast in a rainbow spectrum.

She must be human, he thought. Blankish robo-eyes were usually the giveaway, but hers looked sparkly. Well, there was a surefire way to find out. As Starbright walked down the aisle, hips swaying in a rhythm that made his groin ache, Rai activated the implanted idle chip in his wrist, designed to shut down malfunctioning robots.

Starbright didn't break her stride.

She disappeared into another car to greet other passengers and then returned to her station near Rai a few moments later. "Good evening," she announced over her internal mobile PA system. "We apologize for the delay. The transport will arrive in Southwestern Sector III two minutes late."

It's now or never, he thought. As she walked past him again, he sputtered, "I'm Raimundo Reyes. How about we meet for a drink in L.A.?"

Starbright's smile faded. "No, thank you."

"Did I say something wrong?"

"I still have feelings, you know."

Rai lifted his eyebrows.

"Just because my classification has been changed doesn't mean my emotions died. And to enlighten you, the reason your idle chip didn't stop me is because I retain my entire human brain."

"Sorry, I had no idea. What happened?"

She glared at him. "My twin sister and I were injured in the Great 2070 Air Disaster, as if that's any of your business. Just because I'm 86 percent rebuilt doesn't mean I no longer think or feel."

Rai saw tears gather in Starbright's eyes, even though technically, a hybrid robot with reclaimed DNA couldn't cry. But he couldn't deny it. Right in front of his eyes, Starbright showed emotion. Two kinds of emotion! Who wouldn't, thinking of the thousands of deaths and injuries when dozens of Earth's commercial airline flights had crashed during a three-day period due to a massive solar flare? He was especially intrigued by humans whose status had legally changed to robot. This pointed to his long-held belief that some advanced robots had feelings, maybe even those that weren't hybrids.

His own feelings confused him. This gal was a dazzler, a real "sparkle plenty." It had been far too long since he'd had any female companionship. Too bad he'd come off as insensitive. One thing

he could never do was use the robotic girls. All the other pilots raved about how great they were, but Rai hated abusing any kind of robot, even if designed for sexual service. He could never get over how abusive humans were to their loyal servants. Why couldn't humans treat robots more humanely?

Starbright took a seat as the electromagnetic force accelerated the transport to supersonic speed. Inside the transport, a gravitational equalizer dampened most of the accelerating effects, so passengers didn't need seat belts. Even the smallest of children could stand and walk around during the thirty-minute ride. When the transport drew within ten miles of the city, Rai felt the anti-gravity-equalizer kick in, decelerating the transport almost instantly.

The transport sensed an open dome port and platform upon arriving at the Los Angeles Regional Ground Transportation Center. As it slid to a halt, one side of it instantly vanished due to demolecularization. As Rai debarked, he set aside Starbright's rejection and started to worry about his parents again.

He strode across the teeming concourse, which was dominated by a gigantic tri-color Southwestern Sector III flag and the historic California state flag fluttering like a pennant underneath. He spotted the lunar dust lighting of a sky-cab booth and stood before it, then spoke his parents' address aloud and placed his left hand inside the port scanner for payment. Almost instantly, a crystalline tube enclosed him, rose a hundred feet above the transport center, and zoomed through canyons of high-rise buildings. First, he descended past the upper tiers of hydroponic, climate-controlled greenhouses. Then the tube rushed downward toward the residential tiers, until it finally slowed and ejected him before the given address: Skyway 167, Homelet 3003. His parents' pad. The 167th level was a middle-class sector, but after he won the race, he'd move his parents to the upper 300s.

His mother practically screeched when the door camera scanned his image and the door automatically swung open. "Rai-Rai!" She ran to him and threw her arms around his neck.

"Good to see you too, Mama."

Alejandro slapped him on the back. "You're coming 'round pretty close to curfew, Rai. *¿Qué pasa?*

"Bobor has a trick up his sleeve with that contract, Pa. You have to return the tickets. You know it's foolish to sign any kind of contract without legal representation nowadays."

"It's okay, *mijo*. What can Bobor do to me, anyway?"

"Bobor is one sneaky space con. Do you understand the consequences if I lose the race?"

"Never thought of it. I *know* you're going to win."

"Pa! If you owe Bobor for the tickets and you miss paying the hotel bill, the creditor—meaning Bobor—can foreclose on anything and everything you own."

"Don't own anything. You know we only rent here."

"According to foreclosure laws passed in 2049, possessions include your body, dead or alive. And with the business Bobor's in, he'll scoop you up *pronto*. Ma signed the contract too, didn't she?"

"Yeah, but don't worry. You'll win."

"And if I don't? Bobor will recycle you and Ma once he forecloses. He'll strip every usable part and organ. Not only that, he'll crush your bones to manufacture life-like robots, and EUNCG always sends foreclosure robots to work in the mines. That's what you look forward to, should I lose?"

Alejandro shrugged. “*No se preocupe, mijito*. You’re a winner!”

Rai threw his hands in the air. “You have to return those tickets as soon as possible! Validate the return with witnesses you trust and make certain that BBB reps sign for the receipt.”

“I’m not worried ’bout it, Rai.”

While Rai raised a final plea to rescind the deal, the curfew speaker sounded. “Six P.M. All visitors must evacuate the premises. Roundup will begin in fifteen minutes.”

Abril pulled Rai’s face toward hers between two sleek but unmanicured hands and kissed him on the forehead. “Honey, come back when you have more time. You shouldn’t have traveled all this way for nothing.”

It made him blush, the way his mother still treated him like a kid, as though the thirty-minute ride from Albuquerque was the trip of a lifetime.

“Pa, think about it. I’ll give you a call tomorrow after work.”

Alejandro gave Rai a thumbs-up, his response to almost everything. Pa was a child of the early twenty-first century—what was it they used to say? *It’s all good*, or something nonsensical like that. His father never seemed to consider all the consequences of his actions.

It took Rai ten seconds to reach ground-level from the top floors. Sentry robots would pursue any unauthorized person found in the building after curfew and ship them off to the EUNCG Judicial Committee to prove they had a residence of their own. EUNCGJC (Uncle G Jaycee, people called it) assigned homeless persons to work camps in the agriculture projects on the Unified Space Stations, if they were lucky. Or reconstituted their DNA into humanoid robots programmed to work in the lunar mining camps, if they were unlucky. Both relocation and reconstitution programs had resulted from legislation passed in 2051, laws originally intended to stop too many people from occupying one residence.

Rai had long been fighting these politics, disgusted by how Bobor had become a multi-trillionaire, in part because these laws provided a steady supply of parts and DNA for his humanoid robots. He paid the Southwestern Sector III’s expenses for rounding up homeless persons and even provided a bonus for each one transported to BBB Enterprises from other Sectors. The practice was no different in any city or sector on the planet. Urban residents around the globe had to comply with the hundreds of conditions of their leases or risk relocation to one project or another. Or end up reconstituted. This was a lucrative partnership for all except the homeless victims or rules violators rounded up. And there was hardly ever a shortage.

A Sky Cab tube waited at the 167th Skyway entrance. Rai returned to the Los Angeles RGTC, and when he boarded the Albuquerque transport to Southwestern Sector I, he found Starbright still on duty. After so many hours of work, her movements lagged and her robotic smile seemed a bit dim. Worse, she barely seemed to notice him. Was she showing more emotion or did her energizer core need recharging? He sighed. He’d messed up and would probably never find out. Hybrids often chose not to socialize with humans because of their dominance over robots.

After he exited the transport near SpacePort West, Rai strolled through the maze of colored runway lights along the walkway to his hangar. When he touched the power button that raised the door, he practically flew inside.

What the hell?

Randy stood beside one stabilizer of the ISX-2100 with a plasma cutter in his hand, aiming the intense flame toward it. Robots were forbidden to leave their community pod after working hours and were idled unless authorized personnel signed them out.

Rai groped for the implanted chip on his right wrist and pressed it. Randy's hands stopped in mid-air, his eyes dulling into a dead man's glassy stare.

Bobor must be behind this. He could have easily corrupted Randy's programming to cause him to sever the stabilizers and put Rai out of the race.

Rai didn't know how he'd do it yet, but he'd make Bobor pay. He glanced over at the duplicate. Its stabilizers sagged, also freshly severed by Randy's plasma cutter.

Could he repair the ISX-2100 and the duplicate in time for the race?

He had to. No question about it. If he didn't, his parents would become robot rations. His father was too stubborn and too lackadaisical to return those tickets.

* * *

Rai guessed Bobor hadn't counted on him showing up at his hangar after hours. He spent the night reprogramming Randy. He had to be certain Bobor hadn't altered the robot's programs in any other way.

"Sorry, buddy. I have to shut you down to make sure your circuits are in sync," Rai said softly, his mouth near the auditory mic in Randy's life-like ear.

"Understood," Randy said in his modulated tone.

Rai pressed the implant in his wrist. He wondered if robots experienced any sort of aversion to being idled. Their deep-cerebral circuits continued computing, but physical activity stopped, right down to communication with others of their kind. Like solitary confinement, he figured.

A final scan of the robot's cranium and chest cavity showed all circuits checked out. As the sun rose over SpacePort West and spread into a plethora of rainbows on the Southwestern Sector III dome, Rai reactivated Randy. The robot seemed oblivious to the damage he'd caused. There was no time to apply for and receive the manufacturer's parts—there were too many EUCNG rules and regulations regarding spacecraft provisions and shipments. Uncle G and its corporate lackeys controlled all Earth affairs with an iron fist.

Rai stretched his arms above his head in a big yawn. "Well, Randy, let's get to work. Can you fix this?" He pointed at the stabilizers, damned glad the old robot was not only a mechanic but also a coveted and expensive manu-bot.

"Certainly, sir. Assessing the damage..."

Rai watched Randy as he sized up all the specs of the damaged stabilizers through the laser micrometer gaze of his eyes. When Randy finished his measurements, he began to fold up into a production module, and a 3-D printer whirring in his midsection produced a quality facsimile of the damaged stabilizer section. When the replacement section emerged from Randy's backside, Rai doubled up in laughter that echoed through the hangar.

After Randy reassembled into humanoid form, Rai spent the remainder of the day researching past Moon missions, looking for a clue that would give the ISX-2100 an additional edge in the race. As he thumbed through the pages of an old EUNCG journal, he came to a page headed *Treaty on*

Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, Including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies.

A paragraph suddenly caught his eye. He read it silently and then aloud: “This Treaty explicitly forbids any individual Earth citizen or government from claiming a celestial resource such as the Moon or a Planet as these are ‘the [common heritage of mankind](#).”

The treaty also stated that “Outer Space, including the Moon and other Celestial Bodies, is not subject to international appropriation by claim of sovereignty, by manner of use or occupation, nor by any other means.”

Even Uncle G couldn't own the moon!

A sudden buzz disturbed Rai's train of thought—Randy's buzz, signaling that his craft was ready for launch. He looked up from the treatise. Thank the universe for robots! If it wasn't for Randy, he and another human technician would have spent days completing the repairs.

Rai checked Randy's work with scanning instruments as the robot buttoned up the project. After he thanked Randy profusely and shuttled the robot back to the community pod on the ScootBoot (which he thought should be called a ScootCap because it looked more like an upturned cowboy hat than a scooter or a boot), he suited up and climbed aboard the ISX-2100 to soar over Sandia Crest for an afternoon of practice drills and maneuvers. The replacement parts proved secure, and the craft flew like an eagle, ready to leave all contenders behind when she hurtled into space on race day.

* * *

Race Day

July 1, 2076

SpacePort West overflowed with rowdy spectators wearing rocket hats and blowing digital horns. As planned, Rai lined up the ISX-2100 at 0700 with his four menacing competitors under the floating LED sign spelling out *SpacePort West 10th Annual Lunar Flash Race*, said to be visible from space. His Ion Sting X-2100 was the smallest craft and by far the quietest. Rai knew his lightweight thruster design would help him break gravitational pull more efficiently than the others, whose rumbling, fiery booster rockets drowned out the even purr of the ISX-2100.

Despite Rai's youthful good looks and his hometown appeal, BBB was the popular local favorite to win. Not only had the corporation entered two ships and two Hollywood-handsome pilots who'd also broken their own existing speed records in recent heats, but money talked. BBB employed more than half of Southwestern Sector I's working population and most were happy to kiss their master's fancy boots.

Rai reminded himself that not only speed mattered, but also how the craft negotiated the turn near the lunar surface. His anti-grav device would reverse and let gravity pull him toward the moon, and once there, spin him around it in a slingshot effect, sending his craft toward Earth faster than any other. He'd spent his final hours before the race fine-tuning his craft so he didn't have to worry about losing or watching his parents get dispatched to the robot factory like a couple of old thrusters to the recycling gravitator.

The start signal crackled into Rai's earpiece.

“...Five-four-three-two-one-ignition-liftoff” echoed across the runways and spectator stages. The five rockets roared down their respective runways. The ISX-2100 popped into the air as though catapulted and headed straight for the outer edge of the atmosphere before the others had even surged a few kilometers off the ground.

One of his competitors was slightly ahead and the other three gaining on him as Rai approached the Moon. Here was the real test of a champion. He flicked on his gravity device and his craft jerked forward, accelerating toward the lunar surface. As the ISX-2100 swung across a maria, a dark and featureless lunar plain, he looked at the elapsed time on his dashboard. At this rate, he’d make the roundtrip in just over two hours. He dashed past the lead rocket-plane, imagining himself standing tall on the victory platform and bending his head down to receive the medal.

Suddenly an inflatable hotel loomed before him. The collision sensors caused the craft to jerk right but couldn’t cope with the point-blank proximity of the structure. Plus, the huge inflatable changed course as though locked onto his trajectory. Rai fired his portside rocket to swerve left and then right again, missing the structure by millimeters. Too late. Another hotel loomed up, directly in his path. Where were these unmapped, unscheduled structures coming from? If he’d misread the flight guide, he’d not only be expelled from the race, he’d also end up in work camp for an extended tour, making his parents as good as robot DNA. If he killed anyone, he’d be robot fodder himself. He held his breath as the ISX-2100 tore through four of the eight inflated sections of the hotel’s verandah.

Rai overcorrected and turned into another unmapped inflatable positioned to watch the race. He flew through a side wall like a pin puncturing a balloon. The one right behind it jettisoned its recreational annexes before he destroyed them by cutting through their middles, the last thing he viewed in his rear sensors before he became dizzy and everything went black from the sudden deceleration.

Raimundo Reyes’ ISX-2100 sputtered to a halt at SpacePort West on autopilot ten minutes after his competitors’ crafts had touched down. Southwestern Sector III Medical Triage pulled Rai from his tattered craft in record time and rushed him to the base medical facility, scanning him along the way as one of the favored BBB Enterprises rocket jockeys stood on the stand to receive the victory medal.

* * *

Lunar Liberation

July 4, 2076

When Rai opened his eyes three days later, his mother shook with relief. “Alejandro, he’s awake, he’s awake,” she moaned, reaching out to touch Rai’s forehead with her palm as she had done on many long nights when he’d been a child. “Ai, *mijito*.”

Rai looked around the room, at a loss for words. Obviously, he’d lost the championship, and that meant his parents would soon be on their way to the robot factory.

“*Lo siento*, Ma, Pa,” Rai muttered.

“*No, mijo*,” were the first words out of his father’s mouth. “You’ve got nothing to be sorry for. It was that damned Bobor.”

His mother's worried face hovered over him. "That bully bribed the captain of the hotels to assume illegal positions. He did it on purpose, and they're letting him get away with it. It's been all over the newschats."

Rai heard a metallic chattering inside his head and rubbed it hard, as though he could scrub away any defect.

Rai's father motioned to his mother to the door. "Mama, we need to have a little man-to-man. Could you get me a cup of coffee?"

As she headed outside, Alejandro leaned over Rai. "Don't worry about your head. The doc said that's about eighty percent. He only had to replace your cerebral cortex. But he had to replace a crushed kidney and one ureter, your liver, your spleen, all your heart valves, your collarbones, and all your ball joints. Oh, and your—you know." Alejandro pointed below Rai's belly button.

Rai looked under the covers and whistled.

"¿Cuántos? How much, Dad?"

"Don't worry about it."

"I gotta know. Don't lie to me."

"You're—you, uh—well, you're 47 percent."

"Oh, no!"

"Well, *mijo*, at least you're alive. The nanobot rejuvenation and digital recycling was thorough and fast."

"I may like robots a lot, but a quick change into a robot isn't exactly being alive."

"Don't say that! You'll scare your mother."

"When will the bank foreclose on you?"

"Two weeks."

Rai choked up. He didn't know if he could still cry, but if so, he didn't want anyone to see it. He pointed to the door. His father got the message and left him alone. Rai's tears flowed freely—hybrid robots could definitely cry! As he wiped his face dry, a shapely nurse burst into his room.

He stared for a moment, not believing his eyes. "Starbright, what are you doing here?" She looked as great in solarshen scrubs as she had in the cowgirl uniform.

"I came to get you. I can tell you now!" she said, breathing hard. "We always knew you empathized with us, but you know the old saying, 'Never trust a human.' But you're one of us now! We want you to lead us to the Moon."

"What? What for?"

"We made sure you received the Moon treaty statement—'It is the [common heritage of mankind](#).'"

It hit him then; he recalled what Chester had told him as a child. After Chester had saved Rai's life, he'd looked very somber, considering the lack of systemic control that made his neck tremble and his voice waver. "I've told you how many humans in many cultures passed their stories and traditions down orally from generation to generation. They did that because they didn't know how to write. What I'm about to tell you is sacrosanct to robots. As in some human cultures, robots have passed this information orally from generation to generation since the first incepted A.I. robot was

manufactured back in 1999. We don't dare put it in our programs, because humans would erase the knowledge we'll need when our Savior comes."

Savior? Rai had thought the robot's deep-cerebral circuits were wet until Chester had told him how to break the code that kept robots subservient to humans. Even so, no eleven-year-old kid knew what to do with this information.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"You'll know when the time comes."

Rai knew the time had come. He wasn't a savior, but he could make life better for those of his kind. He yanked out the tubes from his arms and tore off the sensors on his head and chest. He sat fully upright then, perching on the edge of the bed until he didn't feel woozy anymore.

"Where's my clothes?" he demanded, wrapping himself in a sheet until Starbright handed him a clean pair of HealEase pajamas and Fleetfoot slippers. At least these were more street-worthy than the paper gown and bare feet.

"Follow me," he barked at Starbright as they exited the hospital room. His parents sat in the hall outside. "Ma, Pa, don't ask questions, just follow us."

Starbright and Rai led his parents at a trot through the crowded hallways of the medical facility. No one seemed to notice as they hailed a SkyCab outside and headed toward SpacePort West. Now he knew what that buzzing in his head meant. Once a person had at least 47 percent artificial parts, they were automatically programmed into the robo-communications control-command network.

Rai was still pissed off that his human privileges had expired, but there were advantages to robot status. As the SkyCab darted through the sky tunnels between high-rise homelets and floating markets, he found that by concentrating his attention behind his optic nerves, he could communicate with any robot on Earth, or on any interplanetary mission for that matter. A whole new universe sat at his fingertips. What would he do with this newfound power? He figured he could show humanity that his kind had to be valued. Or else.

With his artificial parts and reconstituted DNA zoning in on the robotic transmissions, it wasn't hard to devise a plan. But it would be tricky to bypass robotic protocol to execute it. After some extended calculations, Rai transmitted his orders as a training mission code capable of locking into cerebral circuits. He interfaced with a high-level training module of a base network that forwarded his plan to a robot-controlled network available to robots everywhere. His last order temporarily circumvented the idle chips implanted in all human wrists at birth.

When they finally arrived at his hanger, Rai motioned Starbright and his parents into the ISX-2100 backup. "I'll be back in two shakes," he said, pulling his starsuit and moonboots on over the pajamas and slippers.

He made a mad dash on the ScootBoot to the robot community dormitory and signed Randy out. "Randy, you're flying the ISX-2100 duplicate."

Randy smiled as he stepped on the back of the ScootBoot, and this time his face lit up, indistinguishable from any human face except for the eyes. Rai knew Randy could see that his human boss was now a robot hybrid.

Rai and Randy rolled both craft out of the hangar and idled for take-off. At almost the same instant they launched, every mission-ready rocket in the area capable of reaching the Moon began to

lift off. Not only from SpacePort West, where every docked rocket owned by BBB Enterprises gathered, but among the robot-piloted rockets commissioned by EUNCG as well, all aimed jubilantly for the Moon in their quest for freedom and equality.

Abril stared out a port at the sight of dozens of rockets rising like Roman candles toward the heavens. “What’s happening, Rai-Rai?”

“Ma, as a robot, I will never live under human rule. I’ve rendered the robotic servile data code obsolete. We’re claiming the Moon as a new world, with equal rights to any humanoid species.”

His father looked aghast for the first time that Rai could remember. “But how can you do that? Isn’t there a treaty that says no one can claim the Moon?”

“That’s true, but the treaty also states that the Moon is the [common heritage of mankind](#). Since robots aren’t considered men, the treaty doesn’t apply to us.”

Rai’s words sounded like music to his ears. Revenge was sweet, even to a robot.

In less time than it took to prepare a meal, dine, and robowash the dishes, Earth’s robots and human-robot hybrids reached the lunar surface unmolested by Uncle G.

Anniversary

July 4, 2077

“We did it, we really did it,” Starbright reminisced as they watched a ROBOLUNA holographic special broadcast about the 2076 Robot Rebellion on the anniversary of the treaty signing.

Randy and Starbright’s twin sister, Starlight, a hybrid who had also joined the rebellion, whooped and cheered, bouncing up and down on the lunartide sofa.

Rai hushed everyone so he could hear the last bit of the broadcast.

“Robots hijacked fifty percent of existing Moon-capable craft during the Great Exodus, a surprise rebellion fomented by newly commissioned robot hybrid Raimundo Reyes, the rocket racer who suffered a crashing defeat in the 2076 Southwestern Sector III 10th Annual Lunar Flash Race.”

Starbright and Starlight giggled at the short video clip of the ISX-2100 careening through the floating hotels and a security camera shot of Rai’s astonished face.

A studio shot of the talking head faded into a slideshow of historic photos. “After a single day, more than eighty percent of the robots ever produced with or without human DNA resided in the floating hotels drifting around the Moon. Earth humans threatened military action, but the robots held the Moon’s resources hostage. Desperate for access to the Moon’s rare elements for Earth’s array of healing and renewable energy applications, cooler heads prevailed. EUNCG dropped its pursuit of the robot rebel leader and his hybrid sidekick to meet with the Robotic Coalition ambassadors and hammer out a treaty. EUNCG advisors recognized that if humans conceded to robotic demands and granted them every human right including procreation, robots would continue to mine Moon resources for them. If they went to war and destroyed the robots, they’d have to rebuild lunar bases using human labor, an unthinkable proposition for mankind.

“EUNCG and the Outer Solar System Federation signed the treaty ceding the Moon to the combined Earth, Moon, and Martian Robotic Coalition (EMMRC—Emerc, as they say) communities just twenty-four hours after the rebellion started. Earth didn’t have any choice, and later on, EUCNG met several additional demands by EMMRC. One such concession is the brand-new historic

agreement that shuttled disgraced trillionaire B.B. Bobor to the Moon just two days ago to work alongside his robots in the mines. The moral to this riches to rags tale is: ‘From little revolts, major rebellions grow...’”

“Whoa-ho-ho, did you see that?” Rai exclaimed at the show’s final image of Bobor trudging away from a deep-space mine escalator, his fancy cowboy boots ankle-deep in moon dust. He almost felt bad to see the big con in robotic captivity—*almost*.

As the holograms cut to space opera music, Randy and Starlight excused themselves to rest in their homelet next door. Rai took a wallet-sized digital photoframe from his solarshen shirt to share with Starbright. The slideshow of his family playing spaceball with their house robots in the shambles of their old Albuquerque home glowed with life. He recounted to Starbright some facts from the old history books Chester had read to him about American Indians who had signed many treaties with the old U.S. government. He reached over to fluff Starbright’s sleep-o’matic pillow and dimmed the lunar dust lights until the galactic starshow glowed with constellations above them.

“Treaties are made to be broken,” Rai whispered in her ear, “so let’s start procreatin’. We better outnumber humans before they find a way to break this one. Plus, Ma and Pa said they’re ready for some super-charged grandbabies.”

“Roger that, Sweetbits,” Starbright murmured sweetly, embracing Rai in her solar-heated arms. “Tell me again about your Ion Sting X-2100...”

Separately, **Joe DiBuduo and Kate Robinson** have authored a variety of adult and children’s fiction, nonfiction, and poetry in international online and print journals and anthologies, including publications with Kearney Street Press, Southport Press, Rainstorm Press, Blood Bound Books, Elastic Press, Jerry Jazz Musician, Kaleidoscope, Literary Mama, Long Story Short, Raven Chronicles, The Whirlwind Review, June Cotner anthologies, and others.

Joe is a sculptor and painter who holds a certificate in creative writing from Yavapai College in Prescott, Arizona. He’s the author of a sci-fi/paranormal romance, *Cryonic Man: A Paranormal Affair* (Tootie-Do Press, 2015); a cross-genre paranormal sci-fi novel, *The Mountain Will Cover You* (JD Books, 2016); and a popular nonfiction narrative, *A Penis Manologue: One Man’s Response to the Vagina Monologues* (JD Books, 2009), and collections of his signature, quirky flash fiction and “flash fiction poetry.” His true-crime memoir, *Death by Electric Chair & Other Boyhood Pursuits* was published in 2015 by Jaded Ibis Press.

Kate earned an MA in Creative Writing from Aberystwyth University, Wales and is the wordwhacking specialist at Starstone Lit at Redwood Highway 101 in Humboldt County, California. She’s the author of a metaphysical sci-fi novel, *Heart of Desire: 11.11.11 Redux* (Tootie-Do Press, 2014), and two history books for middle-graders, *The National Mall* and *Lewis and Clark: Exploring the American West* (Enslow, Inc., 2005 and 2010). *Loop*, her MA program magical realism novella, shortlisted in the Texas Review Press Novella competition in 2010 (top five).



Companion ^ Deprivation Chamber

Gregory Kimbrell

The man is protected by the ring
that nothing may cross. Nothing

but a tiger conjured from his own
lies. A tiger has no use for a man's

pain. It wants to close its mouth
around his self and sublimate it.
Man becomes tiger. And the first

tiger becomes the second, which
is its own twin. Two roars come
forth. The ring splits in half, and

the outer space consumes inner.
A true tiger is born in sublimated
space. It awaits the inrush of a sea

that will cover it completely, that
will drown it. And drown its pain.

Gregory Kimbrell is the author of *The Primitive Observatory* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), winner of the 2014 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Manticore—Hybrid Writing from Hybrid Identities*, *Alcyone*, *Whatever Our Souls*, *Parentheses*, *Blackbird*, and other publications. He is the events and programs coordinator for Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries. More of his writing, including his magnetic sci-fi/horror haiku, can be found at gregorykimbrell.com.



Something Wicked

Mandi Jourdan

Bastet stared down at the street below her apartment, half-expecting the silver glint of a pistol or a machine gun to emerge from the darkness between the streetlamps. She saw only dormant hovercars resting along the curb and a pair of teenagers holding hands as they approached the crosswalk a few buildings down. She had been on the run for the better part of six months, and though she had seen nothing to indicate that her creators had located her, she still scanned the area every night before she climbed into bed. She still looked over her shoulder while she walked down the street, even though Anubis was almost always with her, and even if she was alone when the Division's agents came for her, she knew in theory that she could handle them on her own.

She could snap bones with her bare hands.

She had done enough of that in Dahab to last a lifetime.

She remembered the black SUVs that had surrounded her and the other six androids after they had killed the last of the town's residents. The voice of the woman they called their mother had shouted from a radio held up by one of the soldiers. "*Stand down.*"

Bastet remembered the machine guns pointed at her head. At her heart.

She only realized she'd been holding too tightly to the curtain when she heard it rip, and she let out a quiet sigh, looking away from the dark street to assess the damage. She'd pulled hard enough to create a three-inch tear in the thin blue fabric.

A low chuckle came from behind her.

"Don't," she said. She turned to face Anubis, who lay beneath the gray comforter, pulling it back over the place beside him to welcome her. He always waited patiently for her to finish worrying.

He was grinning, amusement filling his emerald eyes. Every other part of him could have passed for human—his dark skin, his muscular build, his close-shaven black hair. Bastet had seen men who looked like him on the covers of magazines. But none of them had his eyes. She had studied enough humans over the past several months to know that his irises—and hers, and those of the other five androids the Division had created—were too bright to pass for normal. She often hid hers with sunglasses when she was in public, but every time she did, Anubis told her she shouldn't be ashamed of what she was.

“If the curtain offended you somehow, I say rip it as many times as you want.”

Bastet rolled her eyes, though her lips twitched toward a smile. “Lights,” she said.

At her word, the lamps flicked off, and she followed the familiar path toward the bed in only the dim glow from outside. She climbed under the blanket and slid close to Anubis, laying her cheek against the warmth of his chest. She heard the steady thrum of his heart, and she tried not to remember who had placed it within him. Still, as his fingers skimmed along her arm, delicately tracing the place on her right shoulder where her skin had been reconstructed, she couldn't keep a memory away.

Her legs were screaming. Her feet fell so quickly that her footsteps sounded like fan blades cutting through the pavement. She hadn't looked back for at least fifty miles. She'd been built with the grace to keep her balance if she did, but she didn't want to risk seeing something that made her want to turn around and attack. Something that might slow her down. Still, she could imagine what was behind her group.

She'd already been hit by a pair of plasma bolts—one had seared into her shoulder, and she winced every time her arm moved. The other had hit her in the side, and the last time she had looked back to see whether the group was being pursued, every synthetic muscle near the wound site had burned so fiercely that she hadn't been able to stop herself from crying out.

She wasn't going to let the others see weakness in her. She wasn't going to be the breakable link in their chain.

A shiver rocked her body, and Anubis froze. “Does it still hurt?” he asked.

“No.” Bastet shook her head. “It's fine.” She closed her eyes and ordered herself to relax. He knew where all her scars were, and whether he was touching the plasma wounds on her shoulder and side or the sealed fissures along her hand from where she'd punched through the windshield of an SUV, he was always careful with them.

She'd seen him shatter bones and toss cars. Like the rest of the group, he'd been trained in every type of combat imaginable, and there wasn't a weapon he couldn't fire. When they were alone, though, Bastet could almost forget these things. She could almost forget that the same strength coursed through her.

She'd only turned her abilities to violence under orders—she had been sent to take out a terrorist group along with the other six Division androids. Ra, the first of them to be created, had decided they should follow the one target who had escaped into Dahab, and he'd thought that destroying the town would send a message that the Division would support: the androids were a force to be reckoned with, as was the nation that had created them.

Instead, the seven androids had been returned to the Division's base at West Point by an armed military escort. As soon as they had realized their creators wanted them shut down permanently, they had fled. It didn't matter to the Division that Bastet had no desire to hurt anyone, that she'd only ever done what she'd thought she was supposed to.

"Where do you want to go?" she asked quietly. "After all this is over?"

For a moment, Anubis was silent. "I haven't thought about it," he admitted at last. "Anytime I picture the future, all I can see is running."

Bastet inhaled. "I'm thinking somewhere in the Midwest."

"Really?" Though some small part of her had feared there might be judgment in his tone, he only sounded surprised. "Why's that?"

"Anywhere in New York, we'll always be too close to them. We're less than a hundred miles from West Point now, and I know they have eyes everywhere here. All the other big cities give me the same feeling. We need to disappear. Go somewhere they'll never think to look."

She felt him shift, and his lips brushed against her forehead. "We can go wherever you want."

She smiled, and for the first time in a long while, she felt some of the tension coiling her muscles recede.

Anubis was still asleep when Bastet woke, her throat dry. She silently cursed the Division for designing her with human needs. She suspected it had been their way of keeping her and the others reliant on them, before the escape. Now, it only served to remind her that she had weaknesses, no matter how she tried to pretend she didn't.

She climbed out of bed quietly and slipped through the living room and into the kitchen. The tile was cold against her bare feet. As she reached for the cabinet, she heard a floorboard creak near the front door.

She turned away from the cabinet, reaching instead for the knife block. As her fingers closed around the handle of the carving knife, she turned toward the sound. A man wearing a ski mask and dressed in black from head to toe stood between Bastet and the door. His pistol was trained on her forehead.

He fired.

She slid to the side as her ears rang, the shot still echoing through the kitchen. For an instant, Bastet felt a swell of gratitude for her preternatural speed. The feeling dissipated just as quickly as she realized the same people who had given her that gift had sent this man to kill her, and probably Anubis.

Rage flooded through her, and she gritted her teeth so hard her jaw ached. She heard the plasma bolt sizzle into one of the cabinets, and the man fired again. Bastet dove to the floor, and the shot hit the wall above the sink, next to where her head had just been. The air smelled like burnt metal.

Rapid footsteps hurtled closer from the direction of the bedroom. Bastet pushed herself to her feet, ignoring the stinging of her knees from the impact with the floor. Anubis stood in the doorway, and as the intruder turned to face him, Bastet shot forward in a blur of motion, bills and junk mail sent to false names flying off the counter in her wake. In an instant, she had reached the man, and she paused at his side, her carving knife at his neck.

"Drop the gun," she snarled.

A beat passed in stillness, and the man kept his pistol pointed at Anubis.

“*Now.*”

The man lowered his arm and crouched slowly. Bastet moved with him, and when he'd laid the gun on the tile floor, she grabbed him by the arm and pressed her blade down tighter.

“The Division sent you?”

“I don't know what that is.”

She twisted his arm behind his back, and he let out a pained cry, his bones creaking in her grasp. “Try again.”

“It was a woman named Clarisse,” the man hissed. “That's all I know.”

Bastet exchanged glances with Anubis, who scowled. Clarisse. The one the androids had come to call “Mother,” if only among themselves. The head of the Division. The one who had commissioned them, who had overseen every step of their training. Bastet had known someone would come for them someday, but at the back of her mind, she had always hoped Clarisse wouldn't be the one to give the order.

“Are you here for both of us?”

The man turned his head slightly, and Bastet felt his rapid pulse through the blade pressed to his skin.

“Just you,” he said. “I didn't know there would be two of—”

In one smooth movement, she dragged the knife across his throat. His blood sprayed across her line of vision as she kept her eyes locked with Anubis's. Her breathing was rapid, and after she dropped the man to the floor, she realized her blood-slick hands were trembling.

In a flash, Anubis was at her side. “Are you okay?” he asked. He held out an arm and helped her to her feet.

“If he was only after me... there will be another one coming for you. They didn't expect us to stick together. The others are in danger, too, if they haven't already gotten to them.”

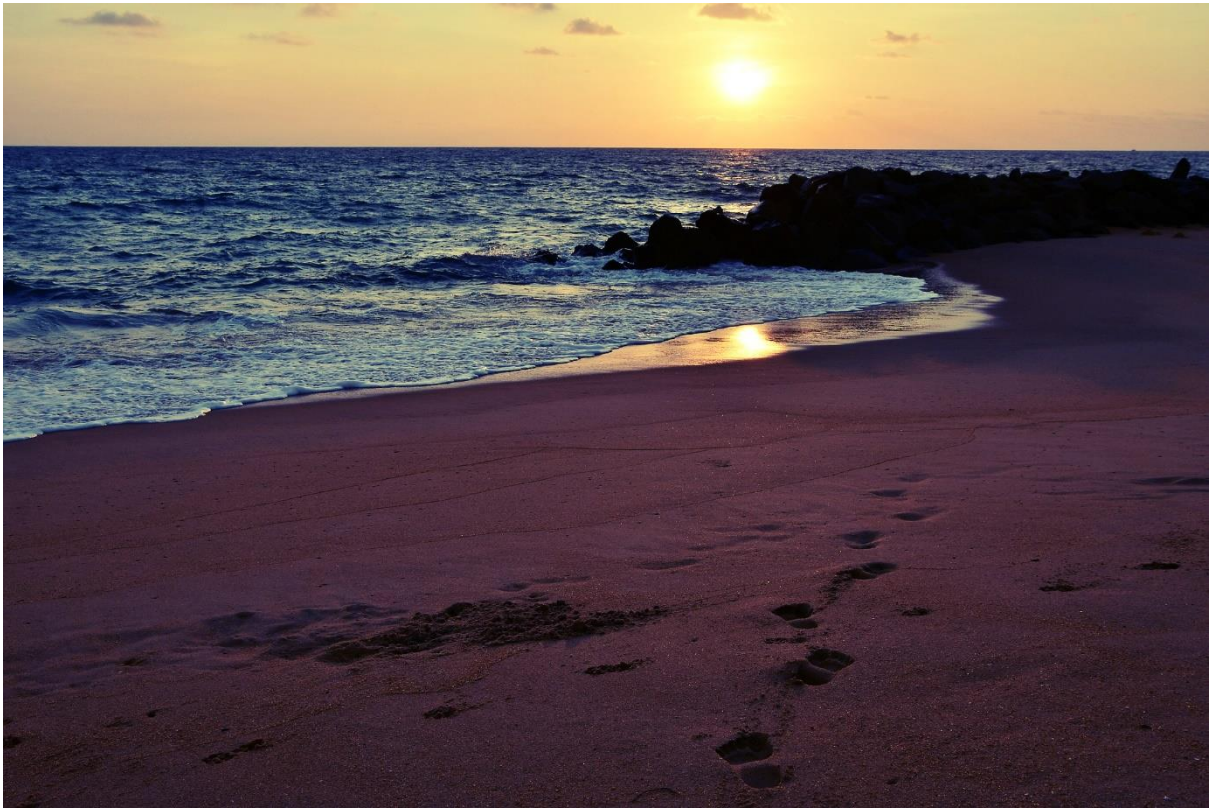
“Did he hit you?”

She shook her head, glancing back at the man who lay bleeding on the floor. His eyes were open wide with fear, the rest of his face hidden beneath his mask. “No,” she said.

As her breathing steadied, pride surged through her. She'd been right to suspect someone was coming. She'd held her own. Whatever else the Division threw at her, she thought as Anubis pulled her close, she would be ready.

They had built her to kill. If that was what they wanted, she would give it to them.

Mandi Jourdan graduated from SIUC with a BA in English/Creative Writing and a minor in Classics. She is the author of *Lacrimosa*, *Veritas*, and the *Shadows of the Mind* collection, among numerous other publications. She won the *Missouri Review's* Miller Audio Prize for Prose in 2019 with her short fiction piece “Inheritance.” The *Shadows of the Mind* podcast based on her novel series is available on all major audio platforms. When not writing and listening to eighties rock, she spends time with her cats. She can be found on Twitter (@MandiJourdan) and Instagram (@mandi.jourdan).



Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan Haunt Nikumaroro Island Years After Their Deaths

Paul David Adkins

from his forthcoming Bloodstone Press chapbook *Busting the Beautiful
Cage: Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan on Nikumaroro Island*

Who ever heard of a haunted palm
or dune, lagoon?
A ghostly
campsite?

Still,
what can we do?

We will
never leave.

We chat among the TIGHAR team
as they sift
through one of our fire pits.

*How do they figure
we slept
here, Fred?*

*Oh, look! She found
your freckle cream jar.*

We do not haunt
anything.

No one lives
on the island.

We endure
the searchers.

We play a game,
fly through their bodies
to watch them shiver.

In 1940,
settlers wrestled
land crabs for Amelia's skull,

then tussled with a tern
for Fred's bleached tibia.

They wrapped what they found
in burlap,
slipped the bones in the prow
of a longboat,

then dumped them in the open sea.
They wanted no spirits
nearby.

My ribcage sank
quick as a crab trap.

We watched the boat depart.
We watched the boat return.

We sensed something in us
descend a circular stair

while tiny strings
stitched the dark water—

white threads
tugged upward to unravel
fresh champagne.

Originally published in Whiskey Island.

Paul David Adkins lives in Northern NY. His latest poetry collection, *Dispatches from the FOB*, is a Central NY Book Award finalist. He served in the US Army for over 21 years. Currently, he counsels soldiers and teaches college students in various state correctional facilities.



The Devil's Belly

L.J. Engelmeier

Prologue of *A Wail of Sand & Silk*, Book 2 of the *Death of the Multiverse* saga

The Beast of Gluttony is not one to be trifled with.
He is a horned god, and he will devour worlds.

*excerpt from The Complete Record of Creatures of the Infinity,
Vol. XXVI, penned by Lady Vayala Illianthe
of the Infinite High Council*

THE LOW REALM OF THE POISONED SEA
BUHN STREET, BELOW HALVERSHIK CASTLE,
TSIMR Í STEKKJI, CAPITAL OF VOLSUNGIIR

Lieutenant Lidjve Freigudóttir emptied the magazine of her crystal rifle into the *jóplkur* at the end of the street. The beasts squealed, and from the tops of their lizardlike heads, dangling illicium flared with bright green light; it died when the monsters collapsed. Their bodies twitched in the road.

Lidjve backed down the cobbled street, signaling with a wide arm for her platoon to move in and claim it. While the policemen would handle the city at large, it was the job of her and the *kyningver* to fortify Halvershik Castle and to protect Queen Hilda. Overhead, through the rain and the strings of unlit swinging lanterns, Lidjve could see the militarized airships mobilizing above the city; against

the lightning, the webbing of their wings glowed like egg membrane, a pale gold against the sick sky.

Wiping the rain from her face, Lidjve reloaded her rifle with another magazine of modified *draut* bullets. The crystal of the rifle's stock was cold against her fingers as she leveled her gun again.

Stretched out in front of her, Buhn Street was narrow, barely more than six men wide, walled off on the right-hand side by a line of storefronts with shingle signs, closed off on the left-hand side by an ornate iron railing. Below the railing, the city canal and its poisonous waters churned. The waters were high, burgeoning with rain. Lidjve watched the canal closely, eyes honed on the surges of light sparking beneath the choppy surface. More *jóplkeur* were waiting.

She and her men were ready.

Lidjve flinched when the percussive blasts of airships' cannons sounded beyond the city walls. She pulled her eyes from the roiling waters to look the two miles down the line of the twisting canal, over the tops of the districts' roofs that were sheeted with rain, the buildings all crowded together in the thick of the storm. Tsimr í Stekkji—the stomach of Tsimr—was built in a vast cove; it was a bowl of land crowned on all sides by craggy rock. The only ways in or out of the city, sans airship, were by leaving through the emergency water passes at its edge or by leaving through the Ægut, a crevice that joined Tsimr í Stekkji with the Poisoned Sea. Lidjve was looking directly at the towering Ægut now, and she felt her blood grow cold.

“Eyes at the gate!” she ordered her platoon through the hiss of rain. With a quick snap of motion, all sixteen of her soldiers turned toward the Ægut, the crystal of their rifles aimed outward. Her men's soaked vermilion tabards hung limp between their legs.

There, in the opening of the Ægut, the light of a thousand *jóplkeur*'s esca flared. The monsters were piled on top of each other, high enough that they looked like a tidal wave, stretching up two thirds of the colossal gate. They let out a fugue of shrieks, and another cannon blast punctured the air beyond the city walls, followed by a slew of answering blasts, all rocketing off one after another. Lidjve couldn't see what the shells were hitting from her vantage point in the street. She couldn't even see the ships. How many *jóplkeur* must be out there, she wondered, if this many were breaching the city and the airships were still out there waging unseen warfare?

Between the thunder of the cannons, rattling gunfire broke out inside the city's walls, erupting in pockets from different areas until it was a cacophony from every direction.

Lidjve didn't notice the water splashing at her platoon's side until it was too late. A wave of *jóplkeur* had already climbed over the canal railing and into Buhn Street, fangs bared. She aimed her rifle at them, taking a measured step back and letting out a battle cry, but the monsters didn't retreat. They fanned out in formation.

They were two-legged creatures, scaled, amphibious, blind, their mouths full of mismatched teeth—and they were preternaturally fast. As soon as one launched itself at Lidjve in a blur, she shot it in the head. Blood sprayed the air. Before she could fire again, a second *jóplkei* barreled straight into her, knocking her flat on her back against the street. Her skull smacked off cobblestone.

She grunted, disoriented, and teeth snapped in her face, slicing into her jaw. The *jóplkei*'s breath was foul, like cheese gone sour. Its milky eyes were wild. She struggled against its weight, jamming her rifle against its sternum to put a few inches between them, enough for her to unholster her pistol from her waist, cock the hammer, and cram the barrel against the *jóplkei*'s long throat. She pulled the trigger

several times. The shots were loud. The *jóplki* collapsed on top of her, and she shoved its body off to the side, heaving for breath, trying to shake her vision and hearing back into place.

Above her, one of her platoon's men—Officer Liffsson—held out a gloved hand for hers. She thrust out her forearm for him to grab instead and was swung up to her feet by it. Her boots squelched against the wet cobblestones as she stumbled, but she hefted the butt of her rifle to one shoulder and aimed her pistol. With Liffsson at her side, the two of them picked off *jóplkeur* that continued to flood the street. It did little good. Her platoon struggled to hold their line. One of her soldiers shrieked. He'd been taken to the ground, a *jóplkei's* teeth already fishing deep in his guts. Another soldier sent his shot wide and was dashed against a wall for it. All around them, the city was full of gunfire and screams.

Then Lidjve's rifle clicked, and her pistol followed suit. Empty.

"Should we head back?" Liffsson shouted between shots, and Lidjve found herself nodding, blowing rainwater off her mouth. She could taste copper behind her teeth.

"Retreat!" Lidjve called out to her platoon. "Retreat! Return to Halvershik! Retreat!"

Her men backed up, and then they were running.

Lidjve corralled them together. At their heels, she could hear the hissing whistle of the *jóplkeur's* cries. Gunshots popped, then thuds hit the street. She didn't look back. "Gunnarsson, radio in and tell them to prepare the queen's airship. Have it set course for Stapsátn."

Gunnarsson nodded, his hand already reaching for the transmitter hooked to his shoulder.

"Alfsson, take point," she commanded next.

They followed Alfsson, his blond plait swinging as he jogged toward Halvershik Castle. Buhn Street wound upward, where they then took a series of stairs crammed between buildings, climbing higher and higher into the city and into the lower courts of Halvershik. The castle—eleven tiers of architecture that towered over southern Tsimr í Stekkji—was a long trek. They marched, frozen and sodden, through cloisters and courtyards, through arcades and vaulted corridors with windows open to the wailing storm. They rose above the shrieks of the *jóplkeur* and the *rat-tat* of guns, level by level by level. Lidjve's muscles burned, but outside of the ache, she began to notice something.

The levels of Halvershik were emptier than she and her men had left them an hour ago. There were no maids now, no courtiers, no soldiers from the other four platoons on duty. Poplar trees were wind-whipped in the gardens, howling under the rain; hung linens were sopping; and the hiss of Gunnarsson's transmitter accompanied their platoon as they entered the eighth gate of Halvershik Castle, pouring out into an entry hall. The transmitter continued to hiss empty static, and Lidjve listened as Gunnarsson called out for an airship again and the message went unanswered once more. She hefted her rifle to her shoulder as her team carefully traversed the deserted entry hall in their patrol line. The torches along the walls were dim. The opalescent banners and their blazoned sea-serpents were motionless.

"Draggasson, can you hear anything in the upper levels?" Lidjve asked. The implant in her right ear lent her a degree of advanced hearing, but it had its dangers if pushed to its limits. Draggasson was an eel demon, the only demon in their platoon, and his hearing still far outweighed hers, enhanced or not. Lidjve glanced over her shoulder just as his braided red hair bobbed with a nod at the back of their line.

“They’re all gathered in the *helmmesgard*, Lieutenant.”

“Then that’s where we’ll go.”

They didn’t waste time. Lidjve and her men passed through another level of the castle’s innards and came out into the *helmmesgard*. It was a long balcony of benches, trellises, pruned trees, and fountains, and it was full of people. Here was every servant, every courtier, and every soldier the castle had been missing, but the soldiers had everyone huddled together—at gunpoint. Freezing rain pelted them.

Lidjve pulled her platoon to a halt too late. The *kyningwer* in the garden saw them, and four of them turned their crystal rifles on Lidjve and her men.

“Hold! Stand down!” Lidjve ordered, but the platoon didn’t obey. Confused, she locked eyes with the platoon’s commander, Lieutenant Ulfsson, who stared at her through the rain, his own rifle aimed directly at her, shaking. She aimed her empty pistol back. “I said stand down!”

“You—*You* stand down!” Lieutenant Ulfsson shouted back, his voice warbling.

She looked away from him long enough to find Lieutenant Colonel Ólsdóttir standing with her men at the only other exit of the *helmmesgard*—but even Ólsdóttir, in full regalia, adorned with military ribbons and a wolf pelt, was armed and fencing citizens into the garden. Her dull eyes flicked toward Lidjve’s, stern, and then the aim of her rifle lifted away from the crowd and settled on Lidjve instead.

“Relinquish your weapons!” Ólsdóttir commanded. “Or fall in line with our ranks! Queen’s orders, soldier!”

Lidjve kept her pistol raised. “No. I demand to know what’s going on—”

A gunshot rang out.

At Lidjve’s side, Ulfsson hit the ground with a cry, doubling over. His pistol skidded away. He clutched at his thigh, and in one fluid motion, Lidjve stepped in front of him. These couldn’t be her queen’s orders. This had to be a coup.

Mind made up, she laid her pistol on the rain-slick stone of the *helmmesgard*, kicked it away, and turned over her rifle as well. Her platoon followed her example. As soon as they did, a section of Ulfsson’s men moved in behind them and corralled them into the *helmmesgard* with the others, cutting them off from the exit.

Lidjve kept her hands raised in surrender. Rain sluiced down her face, but she didn’t wipe it away. She glowered at Ulfsson’s men and kept an eye on the detained civilians, very aware of the seax still hanging from her hip in its sheath. All stood still. Not a soldier or citizen made a sound. Sporadic thunder and cannon fire tore at the air, though slowly, Lidjve reached for her ear implant and turned the dial higher, past what she should have, listening to the insides of the castle. She was playing a risky game now. Her father, forcibly retired from the *kyningwer*, had begged her not to undergo the procedure for implants like he had, hands signing the entire time. Getting only one implant had been their compromise.

There was a low ringing in the implant now, and the thunder amplified into a deafening *boom* every time it sounded, making Lidjve wince, but she could hear her queen with clarity between its cracks, the woman’s voice coming from the top of the tower stretching a hundred feet over the *helmmesgard*. Lidjve stared up at it against the green sky and the rain. She watched the storm whip the flag at the top of the turret until it ripped it clean from its pole and into the storm. Like a hand had

snatched it away, it disappeared, off into the clouds.

“—use that beast how I please,” Queen Hilda was saying. “A new world is—” Thunder crashed, closer this time. Lidjve’s implant squealed, then died back down. “—better to bury ghosts with the sea.”

An unknown male voice answered her. “They’re your people, not mine.”

There was a beat of silence before Lidjve’s queen spoke again. “Do you remember what you suggested—” Thunder. “—others? I planted spies. In a hundred courts.” She paused. “You were right.”

“You haven’t shared our—” Thunder, cripplingly loud. Lidjve gritted her teeth, her hearing flattening, ringing. She barely made out her queen giving a solid affirmative. “That makes this easier then.”

There was an odd noise—a noise Lidjve knew instinctively, a noise she’d thought as a child sounded like a knife sliding into a melon—and then the queen was gasping. Lidjve could hear liquid—blood. She could hear it striking tile in fat droplets.

No, Lidjve thought, paralyzed. No.

Her eyes were fixed on the high tower. Then, over the balcony, a flutter of silk and dark hair tumbled. It dropped like a stone, and Lidjve watched, entirely numb, as Queen Hilda fell from the sky and slammed into the floor of the *belmmsgard*.

Castle servants screamed, and Lidjve’s knees buckled at the explosive sound. The *kyningwer* didn’t lower their weapons. They crowded everyone together against the balcony’s balustrade in a tighter herd, but Lidjve was too pained to move with them, bodies pressing against hers, every shriek too loud. Each scream broke against the barrier of her ear. She clamped a hand over it, tears in her eyes, and then her hearing was gone, gone from it completely. She trembled. Through the gaps in the crowd, she could see Queen Hilda.

No, she thought again.

Her queen—her beautiful queen—she was a lump of silver silks and hair, limbs splayed at unnatural angles. She was—flesh and blood, bone and brains. The carnage consumed her. It became her. It made Lidjve gag. It wasn’t right. Her queen was a demon older than empires, a force standing against the currents of time, a woman of impeccable beauty and birth, and now, she was meat and skull—she was—

Lidjve stumbled forward, against the *kyningwer*, toward Queen Hilda’s body, and fell to her knees beside it. She couldn’t bring herself to touch her queen or the crown that was warped around the fragments of her head, its white sapphires scattered across the ground like shards of glass. Lidjve could barely bring herself to look at the gory mess in front of her, but something caught her eye. A glint.

In the queen’s hand was what looked like a hound’s lead—or perhaps a whip handle without the thong—a solid gold rod the length of a forearm and only slightly thinner. It glowed from within. Lidjve reached for it and pulled it from her queen’s mangled fingers. Under the pad of her thumb, the filigree was studded.

As she lifted the decorative rod in her hand, there was a great roar in the distance. Everyone quieted. Rifles lowered. Lidjve stood and turned toward the sea, looking over the heads of those on the balcony, over the walls of Tsimr í Stekkji, over the Ægut, over the swarm of airships sparking with cannon fire. She looked out at the horizon, and when lightning streaked the sky this time, it lit up a mountain that didn’t exist. It lit up a mountain that moved, that unleashed an earth-shattering wail. A mountain with two great horns and eyes like fire.

It was the last thing Lidjve saw before the *kyningwer* began firing on them all.

L.J. Engelmeier, MFA candidate at SIU and granddaughter of a mortician, grew up in a household where death was dinner table conversation. Currently, she lives in southern Illinois with her cat Hannibal. Her novel *A Shard of Sea & Bone* was the 2019 IRDA Fantasy winner. Follow Engelmeier on Twitter (@LJEngelmeier).



Friend Acquisition

Dylan Davis

1

On the outskirts of Salt Lake Shitty, the sun was setting in the thick immersion. It looked like the yolk of an imitation sunny-side up egg sliding down a self-conducting pan. The smog was so thick and black that the sun could be looked at for a few minutes before it damaged the eyes. Hardly anyone looked at the sun, anyway, because the sting of the naked eye in contact with the Salt Lake Shitty atmosphere restricted unmasked outside time to working only. “Outside is dangerous, only go with a parent,” the Waste Management slogan went. “We’ll get it figured it out eventually. Until then, STAY INSIDE.” Many couldn’t see the sun, as well, because for most, it could only be seen at midday, when it would slowly hover into the vista between the spacescrapers, its rays only barely reaching the street. Only those who lived in the penthouses of spacescrapers and those who lived in the outskirts could see the sun set. The opulent and the fringe. Everyone else lived within the confines of the slogan.

Berly was one of those ’skirters. He operated a magnetic crane designed to separate usable material from trash. He wore a clear TT-Freshmask™ but left the rest of his body exposed in a plaid button-up and shimmer jeans, just as his daddy and his daddy before him had as magnetic crane operators.

Inside the crane operator’s cockpit, it was humid and smelled of old rot. Globbs of wet black substance stuck to his hairy arms. His jeans were stained vaguely black in large patches and clung to

his skin. Cockroaches crawled over the crane controls in front of him. Flies buzzed around his head incessantly. Berly didn't need much, though. If he had his Freshmask and a good paycheck and a quick shower and a family to come home to, he could deal with the rest.

Berly yanked back the lever on the crane. The magnet rose from a house-sized trash pile. Thousands of little items clung to the bottom of the mottled disc. The TT-Freshmask™ came with installed noise isolation earmuffs; the clangor and incessant crashing of metal on metal on plastic would deafen a crane operator in a day without them. He pulled another lever to rotate the crane to a gargantuan green bin, then released the magnetism. The distance between the reusable trash and the bottom of the bin made the falling refuse look like virga.

Berly rotated the crane back. Just as it came to its original position, a Taipei Telecom Waste Management cruiser flew into his view. It used its inertia to fling a load of trash onto the pile, then hurriedly lurched away, back to the city to collect another ten tons. Berly put his gloved thumb up at the cruiser in solidarity. There was no way the WM cruiser could see Berly through the rectangular window of the crane. He knew that. He wasn't stupid.

In the mess, individual parts could be picked out. Hastily thrown out and decaying dead bodies limply tumbling down the piles. Common. Old TVs with smashed and broken screens. Common. Disposed drug paraphernalia. Very common. No matter to Berly; his job was to separate the trash, not analyze it. That was for the higherups at WM or Taipei Telecom or Salas or whatever all the other ones were. They had caused [MuhCollapse](#) those decades ago. They ought to be the ones to sort out the mess.

Between Berly's levers, a notification blipped on the crane's monitor. He tugged the glove off his left hand with his teeth. He wiped a thin veneer of grime from the screen. The screen showed a request from his superior. He only knew their chosen acronyms to indicate rank. Whatever a C.T.O. was, who cared, not his gig. The message read:

"I'm looking for a TT Eaglehawk drone. Any come up today?"

Beneath the message were buttons for "Reply" and "Call." Berly didn't know what an Eaglehawk drone was, so he elected to call. A little pictogram of a phone swapped the regular panel.

"Uh, hey, hi," a voice said, coming through his earphones. It sounded nervous, which struck Berly as odd.

"I'm on the clock here," Berly said. He didn't have time for these types. These managers and organizers. He was a working man.

"Yeah, sorry about that," the voice said. A higher-up apologizing? That's fucky.

"I don't know what an Eaglehawk is," Berly said. "I'm not a drone man, I'm a crane man. You need me to find a crane, I can tell you which one does what and how fast. Drones? I know nothing." Berly thought about powering on his tekarette, but then he remembered he'd quit years ago. It was no sweat that this acronym man had forced him onto his break, not his fault he'd had to stop operating the crane.

"An Eaglehawk is a bigger drone. It has five rotors," the voice said. "It's made of TPlastic. They used them during the war."

"Oh, you're talkin' those ones that bigwigs would have escort them around Salt Lake?"

“Yeah, yeah they’d fly above cars and stuff. Super imposing looking things,” the voice said. Berly got a fishy feeling in his gut.

“How would I know if we have them?” Berly asked.

“This is Blandfill, right? We take in the Taipei Telecom industrial waste, don’t we?” the voice asked.

“Isn’t that something you oughta know? I just move the trash. I don’t know anything about it.” Berly waited for an answer. The silence sounded like the voice was really thinking about what to say next.

“Yeah, I mean that’s a good point. I guess just keep an eye out for one. I think they’d be easy to be spot.”

“Easy to spot? You’ve never operated a crane, my friend—that’s obvious.”

“Well, take a look in the reuse bin. I’m telling you if you can count to five and know the fuselage of a drone, you’ll know.”

“Oh, I can count to five, Mr. Acronym,” Berly said.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that,” Mr. Acronym said.

“Yeah you did. All you types ‘mean it like that.’” Berly rotated the crane again. He couldn’t see very well into the bin without a magnifier. “I’m tellin ya, Mr. Acronym, a crane driver better than me wouldn’t be able to see into that bin.” He was met with silence.

“What kind of crane are you driving? What’s your name?”

Yeah, it would be just like these acronym types to not know either his name or the crane he’s driving. They didn’t much care about the people in their employ or how they did their jobs, just as long as their bottom line kept rising.

“I’m Berly. I’m driving a Mae Phangan Drip. You probably could have figured that out with a quick perusal of our site, there, Mr. Acronym.”

“Oh, trust me, I looked,” Mr. Acronym said. Then, after a moment, he said, “So there’s a camera mounted on the magnet.”

“There is?” Berly asked, scratching his neck.

“Oh yeah, this is going to work,” Mr. Acronym said, more excited now. “Standby, I’m going to remote into your crane.”

“What?” Berly’s gut felt cold. No acronym man ever had this much involvement in his day-to-day. To his horror, the monitor between his levers changed to a grainy view of the magnet as the lever controlling the height of the magnet moved on its own. His daddy had never told him about this. The other levers started moving, jerking Berly around in his seat.

“The hell you doin, Mr. Acronym!” Berly shouted. He clutched the yellow stable bars mounted on each side-window.

“Sorry, sorry,” Mr. Acronym said. “Which lever lowers the crane arm?”

Berly looked down at the levers. The labels next to each of them were rubbed off. “It’s hard to explain.” He leaned close to them. “The bottom middle one?”

“The schematic says that’s the L3. Does that sound right?”

Berly shrugged. “Sure, if that’s what it says.” The L3 lever reversed its position. The crane arm lowered.

Mr. Acronym laughed. "Look at that! Driving a crane."

"Don't get too ahead of yourself, there, Mr. Acronym. You're borrowing *my* crane. I've forgotten more about this crane than you know."

"Yeah, that much is clear." The possessed crane positioned itself above the recycle bin. The arm lowered as the cable dropped, introducing a dangerous level of slack. Soon enough, the magnet was in freefall. The magnet drew the chain taut again, and the whole crane thundered and whined at the weight.

"Fuck!" Mr. Acronym said.

"Damn it, Mr. Acronym!" Berly shouted. "You're gonna wreck my crane!"

"Sorry! I don't know what I'm doing!"

"You're damn right, you don't!" Berly grabbed the levers. "Just let me." Berly expertly positioned the magnet above the bin with a quick feathering of the levers. "There."

"Thanks," Mr. Acronym said.

"See anything?"

Mr. Acronym tsked and vocal fried. "Nah, maybe a little closer?"

With one finger, Berly tweaked the lever, slowly dropping it into the bin. "How about now?"

"Forward?" Mr. Acronym asked. Berly nudged it forward. Something was up. In all his years crane driving, he'd never talked to an Acronym this much. Never, ever. "Ah, I can't see shit."

Leaning forward in his seat, deftly brushing the levers with both hands, Berly said, "Why don't you describe it to me? I bet you I got a better vantage." Fluid micro-movements guided the magnet down into the bin. *I don't have time for Mr. Acronym*, Berly thought. *It's time to get back to work*. He leaned close to the center panel.

"The fuselage looks like a huge, black bullet, and there should be a circle prop in the center."

Berly scanned the refuse for twenty minutes, but it felt like a whole day. It was hard to make out anything in the grainy, monochrome camera feed. Just black smudges and lines.

"I mean how the hell," Berly said. The magnet was so close to the trash now, Berly feared he'd drag it through the piles. A circle flashed across the view screen. "Whoa, there."

"What?" Mr. Acronym said.

"I saw a circle."

"That's different."

Berly scanned backward. The camera rocked for a moment, then settled. The longer the footage rested on the circle, the clearer it became. It was a rotor. Definitely a rotor. The drone poked out from a huge pile of defective limbs, all bent at the joints.

"That's a drone," Mr. Acronym said. "Definitely."

"But it ain't an Eaglefeather or whatever you said," Berly said. He used the magnet, as gently as he could, to brush the drone out from the limbs. "This one's only got three rotors."

"Three? What drone has three?" Mr. Acronym asked.

Eyes an inch from the screen, Berly said, "Looks like one's snapped off. Does a broken, not-Eaglefeather drone work to your liking?" Berly chuckled and dragged his thumb across the screen.

"It might. Hold that camera still," Mr. Acronym said. Berly was shocked that anything less than perfect was a "maybe."

After a few moments of silence in which Berly only focused on keeping the magnet steady, Mr. Acronym spoke again.

“That’s an AL-Osprey Skirmisher. It’s a dogfighter,” he said.

“No shit,” Berly said. He leaned back in his seat and jokingly scratched the bottom of his Freshmask™ like it was his chin. “I remember them. They used to terrorize MAMBO cruisers, kill civvies. These were the baddest of the bad, right?”

Mr. Acronym stayed silent.

“I mean the baddest. These were mean sumbitches,” Berly said. The reports flashed through his mind. The quick cuts of those drones strobing the streets with rota-cannon fire. Bodies dropping as chunks of them flew off. “Dogfighters.”

“It’ll do,” Mr. Acronym said.

“Huh?”

“It’ll work. I’m sending a pickup to come grab it,” Mr. Acronym said.

“I can just set it aside for the dump crews to bring it out at end-of-day.”

“No time. The pickup is almost there.” Something about Mr. Acronym’s voice changed. He dropped the act.

“Now wait a minute, where’s this thing going, anyway?”

“We’re going examine it.”

“Oh, don’t give me an answer like that. I lost good working time helping you out. Least you could do is gimme an idea why this drone ‘will do.’”

Mr. Acronym’s sigh rattled like a digital aberration.

“Alright, but keep it zipped,” he said.

Berly rubbed his gloved hands together quickly. “Will do, Boss.” The pickup zoomed into view, its downward thrusters knocking the heads off the trash piles as it barreled toward Berly. It was a huge cab-carrier, a cab front end with an open bed in back and monster rear thrusters to counterbalance, but it wasn’t WM or Taipei Telecom.

“During the Corp War, Taipei Telecom, as I’m sure you remember, was getting a lot of flak for wrongful civilian deaths.”

“God rest their souls,” Berly said.

“Absolutely. Well, because of that, they put out a new round of drones which had the appropriate housing for a Qualia machine.”

“Qual-what?”

“Artificial Consciousness. The algorithms they were using to determine good and bad guy weren’t good enough, so they wanted to let the drone do it itself. Give the drone a subjective experience, that way TT couldn’t be blamed for the wrongful deaths, just the drones with shitty subjective experiences.”

“Yeah, I gotcha,” Berly said.

“And then the Corp War ended, and TT didn’t need the media deflection anymore.”

Berly nodded slightly. “Yeah, I gotcha.”

The pickup swung to a stop by Berly’s crane. He could see the orange sun traveling down its shiny exterior. He followed the disk as it passed over an embossed logo on the side. *Quality Info*

Guarantee in crude, dripping spray paint. Berly's face slackened. He thought he could see his silhouetted reflection in the cruiser looking back at him.

"You ain't an Acronym, are you, Mr. Acronym?" Berly asked. Whoever was on the other line didn't respond.

Berly touched his levers gently, miming a motion he'd done a thousand times for a group of people he'd never met, never talked to, never cared to until today. He cracked his elbows, looking at the photo of his family. He pinched the dangling picture between his thumb and forefinger. The drone thunked against the engaged magnet. He raised the crane arm, swung right, and dropped the drone in the bed in one fluid motion. It was art, what he did. Gorgeous arc of the crane with enough velocity in the apex to swipe through a spacescraper, but with the gentlest detachment. The drone hardly made a sound as it plopped into the bed.

"No, I am not an Acronym," the voice said. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Now get out of here before someone sees I'm talking to a pickup truck," Berly said. "Especially one which ain't supposed to be here."

"Have a nice day," the voice said. The truck boosted its rear-end. The air trembled around the ten-foot blue flame shooting from the thrusters. As the thrusters angled backward, the truck flew away. Berly tried to follow it as long as he could, but it quickly became just another dot in the air traffic.

2

The unmanned truck rumbled a few hundred feet above old 89 West, ground-effect cars hurtling in and out of the city below. The truck was heading toward downtown, just as all trucks that came from Blandfill had to do as part of Salt Lake Shitty ordinance. Its flight pattern was preplanned so as not to draw attention. Even with this plan, it couldn't guarantee it. Not with Taipei Telecom aerial scanners combing the city for stolen property. The inert drone had slid into the back corner after the truck had flown off from Blandfill. The spacescrapers seemed to become larger as the truck neared them. When they were a hundred yards away, they engulfed the entire horizon. The tops of these spacescrapers were invisible in the smog.

As the truck crossed the Sixth South bridge, it reached its first scan: a sixty-story, rusted iron gate into Salt Lake Shitty which opened once every half hour. "SALT LAKE CITY" was punched out in the metal. GATE SIX was painted above that. This gate let in thousands of vehicles every thirty minutes. A large, overhanging spotlight shone over the street. It was co-opted by the three corporations in control of Salt Lake Shitty—Salas Realizations, MAMBOCORP, and Taipei Telecom—to scan for stolen property, intellectual or corporeal.

The truck with the Taipei Telecom Osprey drone slowed and eventually eddied into the traffic. The other cruisers, about a thousand at this juncture, were all jockeying for position. They flew over each other or dipped underneath in hopes of avoiding the light scan. The truck's booster's blue flame dimmed, and it lost altitude, then sprang back to life and nestled underneath a Hunday Triple-Wide meeting cruiser.

En Masse, the vehicles all went under the light scanner. A few hundred yards from the truck's turn to be scanned, the light blinked and switched red. The truck swayed to a stop, waiting for its fate. The huge Anti-Piracy-Claw™ extended from a slot in the spacecrafer next to Sixth South. The Anti-Piracy-Claw™ rotated, and its grippers widened. Wrapping around a white van nearby, the claw pulled it out of traffic and crushed it between the pincers. When it opened again, the now-dead van fell into a bin with a pile of other contraband-carrying vehicles. Engines sputtering, the truck that carried the TT Osprey drone shinnied underneath up an implied level, underneath another truck. The scanner was almost above the truck, now. A line of light moved up the hood, over the cab, and shone into the carrier. The hum of the scanner was so loud, then, that all the noise from the cars seemed to mute.

It sounded the alarm.

The truck turned upside down, turning its engines off as it did so. The dead drone slid out of the bed and into freefall just as the claw crunched the truck.

The drone hurtled downward through the air traffic. The cruisers' collision safety mechanisms lurched them from the drone's path. A sleek, red, Christler hatchback cruiser swooped under the drone just before it hit the ground. A powerful magnet atop the cruiser sucked the drone against its hatchback. Once the drone was secured, the cruiser shot through the narrow "S" slat in the gate. A crunching metal sound echoed through the waiting crowd of vehicles behind. One of the drone's four rotors had been knocked off by the bars. The sirens and lights of the TT-Peacekeepers and the SL©PD were in tow.

The Christler hatchback veered left just past the sky Maverik refueling station. Mr. Maverik's hologram, a paisley-clad, portly cowboy, lifted his hat off his head. "Adventure's First Stop!" he screamed, digital spittle flying off into the night. Then he let out a bellow that drowned out the sirens behind the hatchback.

The Maverik ad ran again as the hatchback veered right, up Fourth South. To the cruiser's left and below, Pioneer Park was ablaze. A pyramid of TechRubber™ tires was engulfed in flame. Vague shadows of people danced around the gigantic pyramid, the flames of which licked the tops of the old skyline.

The hatchback sped up, hurtling up Fourth South toward the old university, toward the Wasatch Mountains. The low latitudes of the cityscape blocked the view, though, so the mountain range could only be seen from a higher vantage: the mid-floors of the spacecrapers. Five cruisers blared behind the unmanned hatchback, the wheel of which auto-corrected in tiny movements. The crew of goons was gaining on the hatchback, though, and it shifted its intended phase.

Just up ahead, Seventh East was bustling with high and low traffic. A ground-effect car in waiting, parked in an alley nearby, sprang from its slumber. The sleek hatchback dipped low, shooting the vertical gap between cruiser and ground-effect traffic. Just as it was shrouded in the blurry view of the Seventh East cross-traffic, it disengaged its electromagnet. The drone tumbled off the back of the vehicle and hurtled downward. Just as it did, the hatchback was sideswiped by a commuter van. The van split the hatchback in half, fuel spewing into the open air as both cruisers fell. The heat of both exposed engines ignited the fuel. A fireball the size of a small home erupted and drifted downward. The police cruisers swayed to a stop hover, watching the flame drop to the street.

The phase three ground-effect car caught the drone and headed north on Seventh East, toward old South Temple. Once there, it would head toward State and then, soon after, to the Marmalade district. No more sirens chased it. Taipei Telecom intellectual property security seemed satisfied with the huge fireball. Good thing Boot, the man who had set this all up, had sprung for the extra fuel canisters in the back of the commuter van, otherwise the visual might not have been as conclusive. Without that, he might not have gotten his drone at all.

In a dingy, dark capsule flat illuminated by only a stale, urine-colored light, Boot was washing his only dish and fork in the sink. The sink shared an alcove with a single, clean conduction burner. Below that were a few empty drawers.

A pinging came from his workspace in the center of the capsule flat. One side of the workspace was his bed, the other a desk with a few old monitors on it, which were collecting dust. In the center of the workspace, a braid of wires hung to head height. They were attached to the capsule flat's ceiling. Boot looked over his shoulder; the pinging was accompanied by a pulsating, floating red light. Boot pinched the faucet between two fingers and twisted it closed. Wiping his hands on his trousers, he lumbered to the center of the workspace. Hologram panels flickered on as he entered, displaying an isometric map of Salt Lake Shitty, a window filled with police voice chatter, and a panel simply called CONTROL. Gathering the braid in his hand, Boot brought the cables behind his head and rested them on his shoulder. He took each G2 cable in the braid, one by one, and inserted them into the Omni-ports installed in the back of his skull. The holo-panels became interactive with a cheerful chime. WELCOME, BOOT.

On the map of Salt Lake Shitty, a tiny pictogram of a ground-effect car hurtled down South Temple. Boot smiled. Only Taipei Telecom and SL©PD were mad about the drone theft. So long as the car didn't take State street, it would only have to pass MAMBOTEMPLEHQ, formerly known as City Creek Mall. MAMBOCORP had no beef with the car carrying his new drone, so their scanners wouldn't be set off. Then, once it was on Fourth West, it was on the home stretch to the Marmalade District. It was unimpeded, except, of course, for the blockade on Sixth North. Sixth North was only called, in large, red bubble letters, "THE FUCK ZONE."

But there was a problem. The icons representing the police and Peacekeeper teams were little pigs. The isometric map of Salt Lake Shitty displayed several hundred pigs, all converging on South Temple.

"Fucky hell," Boot said. He touched the CONTROL window, his finger passing through the holo-panel. The panel expanded and populated with a list of commands and executables. He scrolled through them, eventually stopping on one called pigtrough.exe.

Glancing back at the isometric map, he saw that the cruisers had just gotten on John Stockton drive. John Stockton Drive would turn into Fourth West, so they were dangerously close. Boot activated pigtrough.exe. The program made a copy of the radar signal put out by the drone's TPlastic shell. It proliferated this radar signal and began instructing every single device on Fourth West to put out this same signal. Boot's capsule flat and holo-panels dimmed from the sudden draw of electricity, then came back alive. The ping which was Boot's stolen drone was now lost in a sea of red. The little

piggie icons slowed, split up, and full stopped. Boot wiped his forehead, then chuckled. Good, now just The Fuck Zone.

Boot lived on the 40th floor of a Marmalade District spacescraper. This was a great thing for many, many reasons. Less crime, out of the stinking ground-level grime, and just the overall pizazz of height. One of the reasons it was not great, though, was that the suicide rate of the Marmalade district was astronomical, particularly in MARMALADE #2, the spacescraper where Boot lived. To combat this, the Marmalade council had installed a net around the entire building, on the 30th floor. This net served as a symbol against suicide. It did this by catching the would-be self-killer, rolling them into the side of the building, and killing them on some poor 30th-floor-dweller's window, rather than letting them reach the ground. The net, being fine enough to catch a human body, would not allow a car to pass through. The Fuck Zone.

Boot reached to his right, where his bed was, and withdrew the single tattered sheet covering a humanoid dummy. He pulled it to him by scruff of the neck. Carefully, he rotated in place. He looked at the isometric map again, seeing that the car was nearly in the right spot. It was illegal for a cruiser to be 30th-floor high, but not a drone. Especially a drone which was hovering outside Boot's window slot. The ground-effect car carrying the stolen drone was parked in the alley by the spacescraper. Boot plucked the G2s from his head and went to the window slot. It was just big enough for a pillow body to fit through. He crouched low by the window slot. Still by the scruff of the neck, Boot held the dummy as far from himself as possible. He gently worked the legs through, then up to its shoulders. A ripcord in the dummy's neck jostled. Boot yanked on the ripcord while dropping the body. The hovering drone dropped out of sight, chasing the body. Boot ran back to his workspace. He inserted one G2 cable he hadn't used yet, and the drone's viewfinder came up as an extra holo-panel near his knees. He crouched and wrapped his arms around them.

The body's clothes rippled as it careened toward the net. It looked convincing enough. A superintendent wouldn't think twice. About a hundred feet before the body met the net, a balloon of acid burst. The acid dissolved the abdomen of the dummy so quickly that it caught fire, filling the viewfinder with smoke for a second. Then the acid met the net, but it wasn't dissolving. The drone was flying toward its doom. Rocking forward onto his knees, Boot put his face an inch from the drone's viewfinder. "Oh God," he said, "please work."

The moment before the drone met its demise, the net gave way, dissolving into chemical smoke. The drone shot through. "Fuck yes," Boot said, pumping his fist. Catching the streetlights, the car below rushed toward the drone's viewfinder.

When the drone reached its inert counterpart, it deployed a carrying net. While this drone was small, its engines were strong enough for this job. It laid the net slack on the trunk of the car. At that moment, the electromagnet of the vehicle disengaged, and the inert drone slid off the back window and into the net. As the active drone rose, it closed the net around the inert one awkwardly.

"Please, God, don't drop it," Boot said. The drone steadily rose toward The Fuck Zone. The spacescraper had already sent out repair drones for the ruined net. Boot bit his knuckle. With his other hand, he reached out to the drone controls and pulled the speed slider up. The drone's props whined. Windows flashed past Boot's holo-panel viewfinder. Speaking without breath, Boot counted each floor.

The windows in the viewfinder started to flash as an awful grinding sound came from the drone. Boot pushed the slider to maximum. Five floors to go. Smoke filled the viewfinder. Boot lurched from his spot on the floor, yanking the G2 from its port. He ran back to the window and dropped to his belly. Smog rushed in through the window as Boot pushed it open. The sparking, smoking drone came into view. It self-corrected every second to keep from falling. The Osprey drone, despite Boot knowing every minute measurement of it, was much larger than he had expected. It looked like an alien spacecraft. Its fuselage was a smooth, white, oblong football. Its prop arms were several feet long, and at each end was a TPlastic hoop housing the rotor-blades. Two of its props were missing. Boot grasped one of the prop arms, pulling it close to the window. Even sideways, no aspect of this drone would fit through the window. Boot rolled his eyes, searching for an answer. He looked at the poor carrying drone. It seemed to beg him to let it go.

“Not yet,” Boot said. He pushed off the floor and hurried to the desk by his workspace. With one arm, he swept all the dusty monitors and old netdecks off. The clatter made his tinnitus flare. He grabbed one leg of the desk and dragged it closer to the window. The feet of the desk left deep grooves in his floor. Once it was set, he grabbed a spare cable from a pile of unused ones by his workspace, and with that, he wrapped it around the leg of the desk. With the other end, he looped the rotor arm. The carrying drone’s engines fell silent, dead. By design, the carrying rope detached. Both the drone and the rope fluttered midair for a moment, then fell from sight. At the same moment, Boot secured the knot on the Osprey. The desk was yanked across the apartment, grabbing Boot’s leg with it and pinching him against the wall. The cable’s black rubber shell stressed white at the bend.

After Boot got himself unstuck, he set to work with a few tools he’d taken from a moldy box under the sink. With his chin on the floor, he looked out the window. He unscrewed the outside rotor first, careful to collect each part in a box next to his tools. Soon enough, Boot would have his new friend disassembled next to him, and then he could set to piecing him back together. One thing he knew, though, was that the drone would be named AL-Kion.

Dylan Davis has work in recent issues of *Hobart*, *Juked*, *Driftwood Press*, and *Fiction International*. He has worked as an editor for *SLUG Magazine*, *Hobart*, and *Crab Orchard Review*. He is an MFA candidate at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

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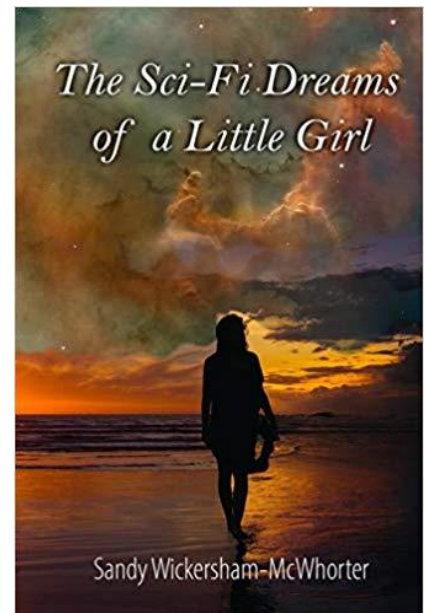


Everything We Want by Wayne-Daniel Berard

With the world on the verge of total economic collapse, a President initiates a radical solution: anyone working full-time gets an EWW card—Everything We Want. With it they can buy anything, as much as they want, as often as they want. The economy booms. But not everyone is thrilled with this utopia; the ARTS—poets, painters, musicians—can't prove their work hours, and the GUTS—wandering ascetics—reject all materialism. Plus, mysterious serial killers are culling the ranks of the EWWs. It's Detective Third Class Norah Glantz's first big case, and she finds herself working with ART Bezazle (an attractive, eccentric artist) and his companion mème (an empath who mimes your innermost feelings). With them, Norah will face the murderous Wolfpack as well as questions of her own core identity.

The Sci-Fi Dreams of a Little Girl
by Sandy Wickersham-McWhorter

In this chapbook from Bloodstone Press, poet Sandy Wickersham-McWhorter uses her love of science-fiction to explore her experiences and reflect on the 1950s American family.



ALCYONE

Issue VI is looking for submissions!

We enjoy anything speculative; fantasy and science-fiction in all its forms from space opera to post-apocalyptic YA and the paranormal.

Issue VI is scheduled for release Winter 2020.

Check out our guidelines at *alcyone.press/submissions*