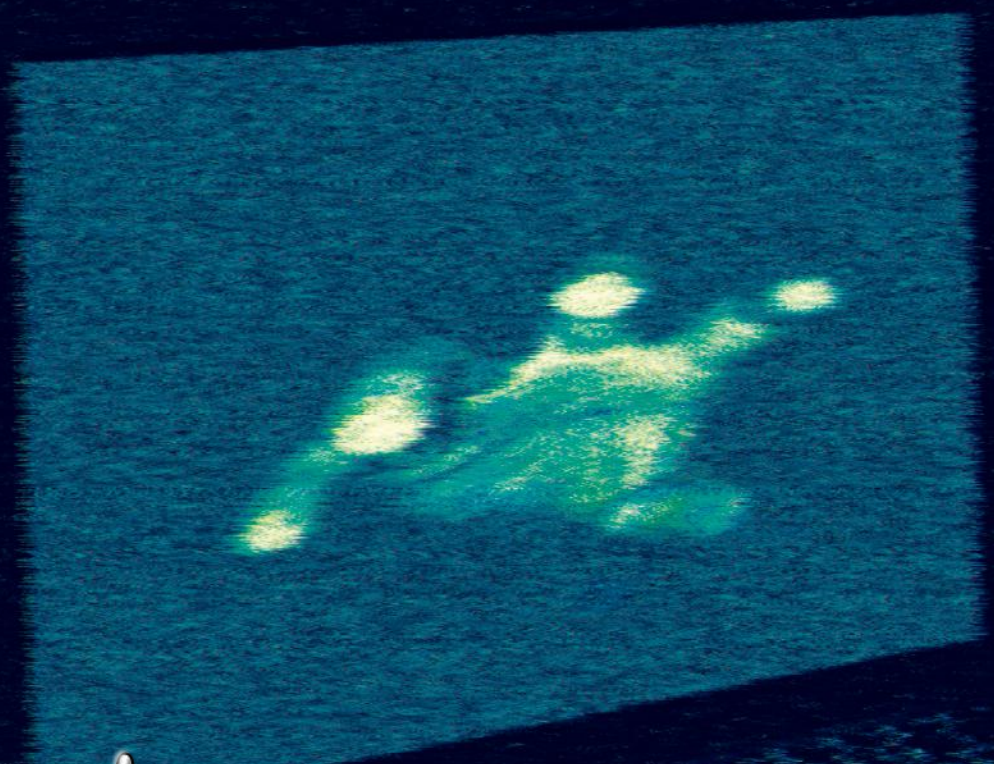
SLASH MAGAZINE

VOL. 01 | ISSUE 03 | SUMMER 2026



THE MONSTER IN THE MACHINE

CYBER HORROR

SHORT FICTION | POETRY | ESSAYS

Slash Magazine is a Toronto-based literary magazine celebrating the horror genre.
It is comprised of works of fiction, essays, poetry and artwork from international writers and artists.
Slash Magazine is independently designed and produced in Toronto, Canada by Slash Magazine founder and horror-lover, Megan Rach.

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CONTENT NOTE

Slash Magazine is a horror literary magazine, with collected works of horror fiction, poetry, essays and works of art.

As such, this collection contains themes and subject matter that some readers may find disturbing. Issue 03's theme "The Monster in the Machine" pertains to cyber and technological horror. Please read at your own discretion.

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AN INTRODUCTION TO

THE MONSTER IN THE MACHINE

CYBER HORROR

In 2000, my family got our first desktop computer. I spent time playing around with the *Winnie-the-Pooh Print Studio* CD-ROM I got for free from a cereal box. I made fake invitations to elaborate soirées I would never host, fake menus for restaurants I imagined running. Calendars, bookmarks, certificates of my own achievements ("scored a goal in soccer" with Piglet holding a gold medal). When I was finished, I would print it out and tape it up in my bedroom before strapping on my rollerblades and loading my Disc-man, blading down Main Street in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan to go wander through the nearby record store to see if they finally got *NSYNC's *No Strings Attached* in stock.

When we finally got dial-up Internet in 2003, myself and my sibling were each allowed half-an-hour a day, so I spent that time with intention. I made lists through the week of the songs I heard on the radio, excited to put my cassette recordings aside and listen to songs whenever I wanted. I downloaded music with a reckless abandon, making playlists and mixed CDs. I started a mini-enterprise in the seventh grade burning CDs for my classmates because I had "good taste in music" to share (i.e. Hawthorne Heights' "Ohio is for Lovers" right after Ciara's "Goodies"). Years went on, I went to friend's houses and we sat together in their family computer room watching YouTube videos and incessantly quoting *Charlie the Unicorn*. I made a MySpace page and followed my favourite bands. I wrote fan fiction (yes, it was *Twilight* fan fiction). The common thread through all of this - my earliest experiences with the computer and the Internet at large were centred on creation, community, socialization, and discovery. *Curiosity*.

***

Early in its creation as a company, Google had a simple motto, an ideology to drive the company forward and denote its values.

"Don't be evil."

The direct attribution of the motto itself isn't entirely clear; it is often traced back to Google engineer Amit Patel in 1999, but popularly attributed to Google employee Paul Buchheit during a company values meeting in 2000/2001.

"I was sitting there trying to think of something that would be really different and not one of these usual 'strive for excellence' type of statements. I also wanted something that, once you put it in there, would be hard to take out." Buchheit states in the Blogoscoped post, *Paul Buchheit on Gmail, AdSense and More* from July 16, 2007.

"It just sort of occurred to me that 'Don't be evil' is kind of funny. It's also a bit of a jab at a lot of the other companies, especially our competitors, who at the time, in our opinion, were kind of exploiting the users to some extent." Buchheit continues. "But the real fun of it was that people get a little uncomfortable with anything different, so throughout the meeting, the person running it kept trying to push 'Don't be evil' to the bottom of the list. But this other guy, Amit Patel, and I kept kind of forcing them to put it up there. And because we wouldn't let it fall off the list, it made it onto the final set and took on a life of its own from there. Amit started writing it down all over the building, on whiteboards everywhere. It's the only value that anyone is aware of, right?"

Google and Microsoft donate $1m each to Trump's inaugural fund

Tech giants follow footsteps of other major companies, including Amazon, Meta, OpenAI and Uber

I suppose it's taken on a new meaning in the last couple of decades.

***

When coming up with Issue 03's theme, cyber horror, I knew that a leading concept was going to be what we're all entrenched in: generative A.I.

The discourse around generative A.I. is at the forefront. It's pervasive. I can't get a moment's rest without hearing about it. That, however, doesn't mean that it's the "future" we all just need to get on board with, or risk being "left behind" (I want to point out that it's a little on-the-nose for tech *evangelists* to be doomsday-ing us all with this apocalyptic speak, but I guess Silicon Valley has never been known for subtlety).

"...but it's innovation! It's our next industrial revolution!

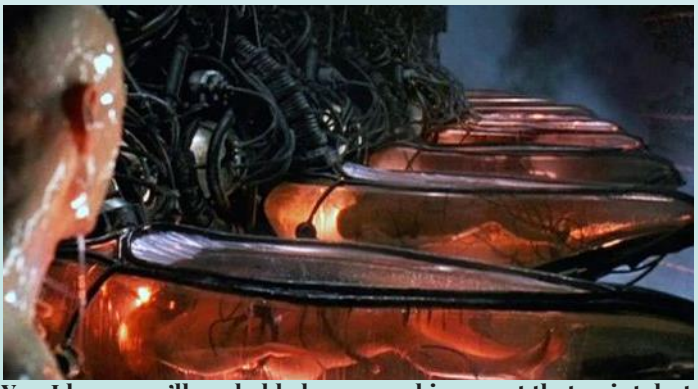
Look at what digital art tools did to painting and sketching!"

When others compare A.I. to the introduction of Illustrator and the iPad for digital artwork, and how they shook up the classical art world, I fear they don't see the forest for the trees. We know, plainly, that digital art tools still require a person to be trained in them, and that human element is the core in creation of said digital art. Digital art mediums didn't take away classical forms, like graphite and paint on a canvas. It instead, introduced a new, accessible avenue for artists to learn and create.

A.I. doesn't require the person to learn, to hone their skillset in order to expand their knowledge and capabilities, and feel **fulfilled**. If taking an art class, traditional or digital, is a three-course meal, A.I. is fast food - empty calories.

The major fear I see around generative A.I. and art, particularly, is that A.I. will kill creativity. That we're already partway there, everything is "slop" these days. I have to disagree, I don't think it kills creativity, exactly. I believe it kills *curiosity*.

I don't think it's a population of wholly uncreative people using A.I. the most; I think everyone, no matter the medium or the discipline, has an innate urge to create. The earliest traces of human civilization have shown us this - cave paintings, tools, instruments. To create is to be human. Humans will continue to make, to create, long after our A.I. overlords take over, because generative A.I. requires human ingenuity in order to function.



Yes, I know, we'll probably be encased in goo at that point, but HEY it's an honest living, right?

What is at risk of being lost is the curiosity associated with learning, the process of creating. Critics aren't deriding ChatGPT posters because they necessarily look that bad (they don't look *good*, but I digress). The greater discussion is about the effort it takes to create something, to learn a new skill, to risk being imperfect.

Imperfection encapsulates the human experience. However, we are living in an age of Online Homogeny. Our social media is boiled down to one single experience, every app mimics the other. TikTok became popular, so Instagram introduced Reels, and Threads to compete with Twitter (I refuse to call it by its current name made up by the world's first ~~**full-course meal in the revolution**~~ ~~trillionaire~~ billionaire). Now, every social media app functions the same way. We all have to learn how the algorithms work, about the "attention economy", how to break ourselves down to the most basic and easily digestible version of ourselves and our art. We must make sure our content is similar enough to someone else's, use the same text, the same trending audio, for visibility...but make it different enough to remain unique. Crosspost properly. Make Meta money. All for Mark Zuckerberg to ~~**spark a genocide in Myanmar**~~ allow millions of bots across his platforms. The Dead Internet theory is no longer a theory, it is here. The Internet has become little more than bots arguing with other bots and we're supposed to think this is somehow...*cool?* "Rage bait" was Oxford Dictionary's Word of the Year for 2025 and while fitting, it sadly sums up our modern Internet.

Of course, the intersection of horror and technology predates generative A.I. and our modern technological landscape. What I have been finding the most interesting, though, is how past horror envisioned our future battles with technology, and how our current storytelling has shifted. See: The Wachowskis' *The Matrix*, George Orwell's *1984,* Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot*. These works are period pieces, taking place in "distant" futures when humanity has lost itself to the technological or totalitarian apocalypse. They are cautionary tales, allowing space for readers and viewers to envision the potential dystopia and offering a message to say that we had time to course-correct. Now, these pieces of media feel more prophetic than cautionary. It's hard to be online and informed, and not feel an overwhelming sense of dread and impending doom, with regard to technology.

Data centres threaten our survival - access to clean air, clean water and housing. Our access to information is taken and filtered through biases and censorship set up by tech oligarchs. Freedom of speech, threatened by government agencies being paid by said tech oligarchs. It's *hard* to be optimistic.

But be optimistic, we must. There is so much human spirit and creativity to share, community to be built.

All is not lost. Unplug.

Don't be evil.

***

Issue 03, "The Monster in the Machine" contains *human* stories, about technology and its many structures.

Powerlessness vs power. Surveillance vs freedom. The inhuman vs the human. It was wonderful getting to read each piece in this issue and I'm happy to be able to put them into print, so that we can all put our phones down and revel in a bit of curiosity.

MEGAN RACH

MIDNIGHT MART

ESA SAPUTRA



Photo by: Megan Rach

That night was the very definition of silence. Every light had gone out, and only one or two vehicles passed by the empty streets—until even those disappeared, leaving the roads completely deserted. Everyone in the neighborhood had long since drifted into dreams, asleep in the comfort of their own beds. Past midnight, not a single sign of life remained.

Except for a lone 24-hour convenience store standing at the side of the road.

The neon sign reading 7-Eleven glowed faintly in the darkness, its green-and-white light becoming the only source of illumination on the street. The last lingering proof that the world was still awake, despite the fact that no customers ever seemed to visit at this hour.

Inside, behind the cashier counter, a young woman lazily chewed gum while scrolling through Instagram posts that failed to hold even a second of her interest.

Pinned neatly to the left side of her chest was a nametag that read: Amy – Cashier Staff.

It was proof that tonight, she was enduring what might as well have been the most exhausting shift in existence—the midnight shift. Sure, the pay was better, and at least she wouldn't have to worry about how she'd afford tomorrow's meals, but the boredom was unbearable all the same. She had taken the shift out of desperation, needing the extra money to survive in the rundown apartment whose rent she had already failed to pay for three straight months.

Amy let out a long sigh and blew a large bubble with her gum. When it popped, she groaned under her breath.

"At this rate, I'm seriously going to lose my mind staying here all night. This place doesn't sell alcohol, does it? One bottle would've saved me..."

Her eyes drifted to the right, landing on a Slushii machine lined with brightly colored flavors staring back at her. A sudden thought crossed her mind, prompting her to rise from her chair and grab one of the paper cups stacked nearby.

"I wonder what all the flavors mixed together would taste like," she muttered.

But just as she slid the cup beneath the dispenser, the bell above the entrance door chimed sharply, announcing the arrival of a customer.

Acting on reflex, Amy quickly set the cup aside, turned toward the entrance, and greeted him with practiced politeness.

"Good evening! How can I help you tonight?"

Her first customer of the night was a tall, broad-shouldered man with a thick beard, dressed in a formal business suit and carrying an expensive-looking black briefcase. His hair was slicked neatly back, adding to the sharp, professional aura surrounding him. A name card was clipped to the left side of his chest, though Amy stood too far away to make out what was written on it clearly.

"Uhm... okay... what exactly am I doing here?" the man suddenly asked, sounding genuinely bewildered.

Maintaining her polite customer-service smile, Amy replied,

"Excuse me?"

"I..."

The man looked utterly confused. He glanced around the store with an investigative expression, his brows furrowed in disbelief. Then he turned back to Amy.

"This is supposed to be my office."

"Sorry... your office?"

"Yes. I was heading here for my night shift. Did I somehow take the wrong road? But I'm certain this is the place..."

"Umm... maybe because it's late and dark outside, you got turned around and mistook the building? Your office could be somewhere across the street..."

"No, no." He shook his head firmly.

"I know it's here. I've worked at that office for four years. There's no way I'd forget where it is."

The man set his briefcase down and quickly pulled out his phone, hurriedly opening a map application to confirm the location.

"I... what?" His face twisted in confusion.

"Is this app broken? What the hell is this?"

Amy swallowed nervously, unsure of how she was supposed to respond. Awkwardly, she took a cautious step closer to him.

"Sir... is something wrong?"

Without hesitation, the man shoved his phone screen toward her face, frustration bleeding into his voice.

"What do you mean my office location doesn't exist? It's the most famous accounting firm in this entire city... Is my signal bad? Or is the app malfunctioning?"

Amy frowned, equally confused by what she saw on the screen. The man had searched for Shieldmail Corp.—which he claimed was the city's most famous accounting office—but not only had the application failed to recognize the name, Amy herself had never even heard of such a company in the five years she had lived here.

Was this man drunk? Was he some internet prankster filming a hidden-camera video?

Or maybe he was suffering from some kind of long-term amnesia?

Amy had no idea. What she did know, however, was that there was something deeply wrong about this man—and she didn't like the feeling creeping up her spine.

"So? What do you think?" the man asked anxiously.

"I think..." Amy scratched the back of her head, still utterly confused.

"Maybe you should—"

The bell above the entrance chimed once again. Another customer.

Amy and the mysterious man immediately turned toward the door.

"すみません..." ("Excuse me...")

A teenage girl in a school uniform stepped into the store, her distinctly East Asian features illuminated by the pale fluorescent lights. And just like the others before her, she froze the moment she saw the scene in front of her.

The store interior.

The cashier counter.

The shelves lined with snacks and drinks.

The colorful frozen beverage machines.

The refrigerators packed with cold soda and ice cream.

"...Can I help you with something?" Amy asked instinctively. Even in the middle of the growing storm of confusion swallowing the night whole, she still forced herself to sound like a proper employee.

"あの……どうやら入り道を間違えたみたいですね?" ("Umm... I think I may have entered the wrong place?")

The girl frowned uneasily, her eyes shifting between Amy and the bearded man.

"What is she saying?" the bearded man asked.

"Japanese?"

Amy ignored him and instead looked back at the girl.

"Can you speak English?"

The girl's eyes widened immediately.

"英語?" ("English?")

Then she shook her head nervously and spoke in a quieter voice.

"ここは日本じゃないの? あなたは観光客ですか? " ("Wait... this isn't Japan? Are you tourists?")

Amy quickly pulled out her phone and opened an automatic translation app before walking closer to the girl. Behind her, the bearded man stood stiffly in place, visibly uncomfortable as he struggled to process whatever was happening.

"Could you repeat that?" Amy asked.

The app instantly translated her words into Japanese. The girl nodded before answering carefully.

"I was on my way to the library I always visit around here. But when I arrived, I ended up at this convenience store instead. I know the route by heart, even this late at night, because I come to that library almost every midnight to study..."

She hesitated, glancing around the store once more.

"...Do either of you know what's going on?"

Amy and the bearded man exchanged tense glances.

The Japanese girl's story mirrored the man's experience almost perfectly. Both of them had been heading toward familiar destinations beneath the dead of night—places they knew by heart—only to arrive somewhere that should not have existed.

What the hell was happening?

"Umm..." The bearded man glanced awkwardly at the nametag pinned to Amy's chest, unsure of how else to address her.

"Amy, keep the translator app on. I want to ask her something. Can you look up the location you mentioned online? Maybe you simply took a wrong turn."

"Alright..."

The Japanese girl quickly pulled out her phone and began typing, tapping, scrolling

frantically through the screen. And just as Amy and the man had expected, disbelief slowly spread across her face.

"Wait… the location doesn't exist? What do you mean it doesn't exist?"

The bearded man immediately snapped his fingers, wearing the expression of someone whose worst suspicion had just been confirmed.

"Okay, something is seriously wrong here. I give up! I officially give up!" He raised both hands in frustration.

"Alright, where's the hidden camera? You got me, okay?! Amy, please, I just want to get to my office already, so can we stop whatever this nonsense is supposed to be—"

"What do you mean nonsense?!" Amy shot back. "I don't even know what's happening either! I'm just as confused as you are!"

Almost unconsciously, her eyes drifted toward the nametag clipped to the man's suit jacket, as if her instincts were tugging at something.

And then she froze.

"Wait… your name is Justin Saunders?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Saunders is my last name too."

"And what exactly is that supposed to prove?"

Amy ignored him and turned toward the Japanese girl, staring directly into her uneasy, narrow eyes.

"You. What's your name?"

"Me? My name is Nami. Nami Isaka."

"Your family name? Your bloodline?"

"I'm mixed-race, so my surname is… Saunders."

Amy's eyes widened.

She suddenly felt compelled to confirm one more thing—despite how absurd it sounded, despite how impossible it would be for the answer to line up.

"What's your father's—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Justin interrupted sharply.

"Why does it matter if we happen to share the same last name?! That's not the weird part! The weird part is that both of us were heading somewhere that apparently doesn't even exist on Earth anymore!" He pointed furiously around the store.

"What kind of answer are you even expecting from this?"

But Nami answered anyway.

And her answer made the entire room fall silent.

"My biological father's name is Alfred. Alfred Saunders."

Neither Amy nor Justin could say a word after that.

Because Alfred Saunders was their father's name too.

Amy continued questioning Nami, desperately searching for differences—any differences at all.

Their mother's name? The same.

Their grandparents' names? The same.

Favorite food? The same.

Favorite movie? The same.

Favorite music genre, favorite drinks, favorite colors—everything matched perfectly.

It was as if the three of them were the same person.

The only differences were their names, ages, birthplaces, jobs… and gender, in the case of Amy and Justin. And somehow, things became even stranger from there.

Justin and Nami seemed to come from worlds entirely different from Amy's. Amy listed famous places around the city—shopping malls, schools, office buildings, landmarks—but neither of them recognized a single name. Yet when Justin and Nami mentioned locations familiar to them, Amy had never heard of any of them either, even after searching online.

"Maybe this is all just a coincidence," Justin muttered, gripping his head tightly.

"That's all it is. The roads were dark, I'm exhausted, and now I'm hallucinating…"

He suddenly stood up and pulled out his car keys.

"Nami, come with me. We'll find the place ourselves. Maybe the internet's malfunctioning, or someone hacked the maps, or whatever. I'm not entertaining this doppelgänger garbage. It's just a coincidence."

"This isn't about doppelgängers!" Amy stood as well, her voice rising.

"Don't you get it? Our backgrounds are almost identical! And somehow we all ended up here together? There has to be a reason!"

"And what's your explanation, genius?" Justin snapped.

"That we're all drunk out of our minds and can't tell reality apart anymore? Or maybe aliens abducted us and our brains are being operated on while we hallucinate some fake world?"

Amy stared at him.

"You like science fiction," she said quietly.

"Just like me. You felt it too, didn't you? I thought the similarities between us stopped at surface-level stuff… but then you said exactly what I was thinking."

She slowly turned toward Nami.

"Let me guess. You like reading Carl Sagan, don't you?" Nami nodded hesitantly, frightened by how accurate the guess was.

"And you do too, right, Justin?" Justin looked horrified.

"No… don't make me say yes. Please…"

Then the entrance bell rang again.

And this time, none of them heard it as something ordinary.

"I… where am I?"

A small boy—no older than five—stood at the doorway clutching a worn teddy bear against his chest, staring

around the convenience store in confusion.

"Goddammit…" Justin grimaced, his face draining of color.

"Oh my God…" Amy and Nami stood there in stunned silence.

"Who… are you people?" the little boy asked, tightening his grip around the teddy bear in his arms as he stared at Justin, Amy, and Nami with an unreadable expression.

"Why am I here?"

"Saunders?" Amy said the name immediately, and the boy reacted exactly as she expected.

"Yeah… that's my name. How do you know that? Are you one of my mom's friends?"

Amy didn't answer right away. Instead, she carefully examined the boy from head to toe.

And once again, she noticed another similarity she had somehow overlooked before.

There was a fresh scar across the boy's right eyebrow—a small cut, as though he had struck something sharp hard enough to split the skin open. Amy had the exact same scar above her own right eye.

So did Nami.

So did Justin.

The only difference was that theirs had long since faded into pale marks nearly invisible against the skin, while the boy's wound was still fresh. Because all of them, at the age of five, had experienced the same incident.

A small argument between their parents—one that eventually ignited the flames of divorce—and a mother who, in her anger, took it out on her child.

Amy could already guess what had happened to the boy before he arrived here.

"What's your name?" Justin asked gently as he stepped closer.

"Wi-William."

"Okay, William." Justin crouched down to meet the boy at eye level.

"Do you remember how you got here? Do you remember anything before entering this store?"

"I got yelled at by my mom in her room…" William mumbled softly.

"Then she told me to go back to my bedroom, but I was really scared because the whole house was dark. Dad had gone somewhere too. I didn't have a flashlight or a phone, so I had to feel my way through the hallway…"

The boy hugged his teddy bear tighter.

"And when I thought I finally found my bedroom door, I turned the knob… and I was already… here."

Justin, Amy, and Nami immediately turned toward one another, their eyes locking together.

"But I noticed something…" William continued.

The three adults froze again.

"When I opened my bedroom door, I didn't appear here immediately. I walked through… something like a short corridor. Or maybe a hallway…"

His voice trembled.

"But I couldn't see the walls. Or the ceiling. Or the floor. There was only… blackness. Darkness everywhere. But the ground under my feet still felt like my house floor. I thought it was just because my room was pitch black and I couldn't see anything…"

William swallowed.

"And then, when I reached the end of the hallway… the floor changed."

"What the hell…?" Justin slowly stood back up, rubbing his face in frustration.

"This—this makes no sense! Why would you—he—UGH!"

"So there was some kind of hidden passage when you came here," Amy said quietly, turning toward Justin and Nami.

"You both felt it too, didn't you?"

"But I thought it was just because everything was dark…" Nami's face had gone pale with anxiety.

"I really couldn't see anything beside me at the time, but…" Her voice began to shake.

"What does any of this mean? Isn't there… some logical explanation?"

And before long, tears began slipping down her cheeks.

"I… I want to go home…"

"TO HELL WITH THIS!" Justin suddenly exploded.

"I'm sick of listening to all this insane bullshit! I'm leaving this goddamn store, finding my office, and proving to all of you that this is nothing but complete—" Justin froze mid-sentence.

He had turned toward the transparent entrance doors. Instantly, he pulled William protectively into his arms and staggered backward. Amy and Nami hurried to their feet, their bodies stiff with caution.

"Is…" Justin whispered uncertainly, staring at the figure outside the glass doors. "Is that person another one of us too?"

"I think… yeah." Amy swallowed hard.

Standing beyond the shattered glow of the glass entrance doors was the last kind of person any of them had hoped to see.

A figure dressed in a thick black coat and tight dark pants, their face hidden beneath a mask. In their hands rested a double-bladed axe stained with dark, drying blood.

"Do you think they realize we're them… and they're us?" Nami whispered.

"I think we should wait and see," Justin answered, his body tense as steel while keeping William held tightly against his chest.

The figure remained motionless outside the door

Watching.

Its head tilted slowly from side to side, as though scanning every inch of the convenience store.

"Amy," Justin whispered sharply, "find a weapon. A kitchen knife, anything. Hurry. We don't know what's going to happen next. I'll protect William."

"But we don't have kitchen equipm—"

CRAAASH!!

The masked figure suddenly swung the axe straight into the glass doors, shattering them into a storm of glittering shards. The moment it saw the four people inside, it lunged forward violently, raising the axe high overhead.

"AMY, RUN! TAKE WILLIAM WITH YOU! GO!" Justin shouted in panic, shoving the boy toward her.

Amy immediately grabbed William by the arm and dragged him toward the other side of the store with Nami, while Justin spun around to confront the intruder himself—

THUNK!

One side of the axe buried itself deep into Justin's left shoulder.

Justin roared in agony, but still managed to slam his full weight into the attacker, forcing them backward for a brief moment.

The masked figure ripped the axe free and swung again, aiming directly for Justin's skull—but Justin caught the handle mid-swing and snarled in fury before driving his shoulder into the attacker's chest.

CRASH!

Both of them smashed violently into a rack of snacks, sending chips and candy flying across the floor.

On the opposite side of the store, Amy and Nami frantically searched for anything they could use as a weapon to protect themselves—and William, who was now sobbing hysterically in terror. Amy eventually snatched a pen from the stationery aisle. It was pathetic, but at least the tip was sharp.

Meanwhile, Justin continued struggling against the masked attacker.

The fight was brutal.

Unnaturally brutal.

Almost as if both of them knew exactly where the other would strike before it happened.

As if they shared the same instincts.

The same mind.

Only with different intentions.

Finally, Justin managed to wrench the axe away from the attacker's hands. He kicked them hard in the stomach, sending them crashing onto the floor, then brought the axe down onto their left ankle to pin them in place.

That was when the masked figure suddenly threw up both hands.

"WAIT! WAIT! PLEASE, STOP!"

The voice was muffled beneath the mask, but still unmistakably human.

A woman's voice.

"DON'T KILL ME! I DON'T WANT TO DIE! PLEASE—I CAN EXPLAIN—"

Justin ignored her entirely. He lifted the axe high above his head and shouted back, "THEN WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU ABOUT TO DO TO US?!"

The figure reached up. And removed the mask. Revealing their face.

The motion alone was enough to stop the axe from falling.

"Amy…" Justin's voice went completely flat. He sounded horrified.

"Y-yeah…?" Amy answered nervously.

"Are they… are they dead yet?"

"You need to see this," Justin whispered.

"Her face."

Amy glanced at Nami. Nami nodded. Nami looked toward William.

The little boy gave a frightened nod in return.

Slowly, the three of them stepped toward the next aisle to see what Justin had seen.

And in that instant, all the shocks they had experienced over the past few hours suddenly felt insignificant.

Because somehow… there was still something even worse waiting for them.

"Her face…" Justin said hollowly.

"It's exactly the same as yours, Amy. She's you."

Few minutes later, all five of them sat in a circle on the convenience store floor.

The woman—temporarily dubbed Amy-2, since even her name was apparently Amy as well—had her hands tightly restrained using Justin's belt. They no longer needed to worry much about her escaping; one of her legs had already been severely injured. Still, Justin kept a firm grip on the axe, just in case this psychopath suddenly decided talking was overrated.

"So," Justin snapped, "are you finally going to explain?"

"You all should've died." Amy-2 glared at them with exhausted hatred.

"I'm the real Saunders. The real Amy Saunders. You… you… you're fake. All of you are fake Saunders. There can only be one Saunders in this world. No more. No less. I—"

"STOP SPEWING BULLSHITS, IDIOT!"

"DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW MANY TIMES I'VE DONE THIS?!" Amy-2 screamed back.

"YOU THINK I WANT TO DO THIS?! Do you even know what happens when multiple Saunders from different realities are forced into the same world? DO YOU EVEN UNDERSTAND THAT?!"

"You… what did you just say?" Justin stared at her.

"Different realities? What kind of nonsense—"

"Shh, Justin," Amy interrupted quietly.

"Let her talk."

Amy-2 lowered her head, breathing heavily.

"What you're experiencing right now..." she said slowly,

"I experienced first. Long before this. Over and over again. And every ending I reached was horrible. So horrible that I became trapped inside the same paradox, repeating the same situation endlessly... fighting for the right to exist in this reality."

She looked up at them.

"This is Scenario Sixty-Seven."

Her voice trembled from exhaustion.

"I can't do this anymore."

"In Scenario One—the first time a reality collision happened to me—I was exactly like you, Amy. Just a convenience store cashier who knew nothing. Then suddenly I was trapped in a bizarre situation where people kept arriving at this store because they had somehow been displaced from parallel realities."

Her eyes drifted toward Amy.

"Exactly like you."

A hollow silence filled the room.

"And at the end of Scenario One," Amy-2 continued, every Saunders from the other realities to gather inside the store."

"I made the mistake of allowing

Her expression darkened.

"And once their numbers reached a certain point...I realized something."

"The world being used as a checkpoint by the other Saunders..."

"...slowly began eroding into eternal darkness."

She swallowed hard.

"I call it The Abyss."

"Because in order for parallel worlds to remain stable, everything must stay in its proper place."

Her voice became quieter.

"And when I realized that... I became someone willing to protect my own world at any cost."

Justin's grip around the axe tightened.

"I killed every Saunders inside the store during Scenario One."

Nobody spoke.

"Yes," she whispered.

"I slaughtered them all. None of them saw it coming because they thought I was just an innocent cashier."

William buried his face into his teddy bear.

"Afterward, I walked out of the convenience store into the freezing darkness outside, covered in blood and carrying a makeshift axe... and that was when I realized I was trapped in an endless cycle. I always return to this same store. The same cashier. The same midnight shift. Waiting alone for all of you—the Saunders from other realities—to arrive. And every single time..."

Her eyes slowly lifted toward them."...I kill all of you."

The fluorescent lights buzzed faintly overhead.

"I repeated it again. And again. And again. Until I reached Scenario Sixty-Seven."

She laughed weakly, almost deliriously.

"The reason I hesitated outside earlier... was because this scenario was already occupied."

Her gaze settled on Amy.

"I was supposed to be the first one here. I was supposed to become the bored cashier working the midnight shift. I was supposed to pretend to be the innocent girl who knew nothing... And eventually..." Her voice cracked.

"...I was... I was supposed to kill all of you—"

"Alright," Amy said coldly. "Time's up."

"Wait, that means—" Justin turned toward her—

—and found himself staring directly into the barrel of a massive revolver.

"NO, DON'T—"

BANG!

Justin's face exploded instantly.

A violent red crater tore through the center of his skull as blood, bone fragments, and shattered pieces of brain matter sprayed across the convenience store floor.

"HYAAAAAA—"

BANG!

Nami's head burst apart before her scream could even finish.

BANG!

William wasn't spared either. The small child's body collapsed limply, his teddy bear slipping from his hands as the shot nearly tore his head completely off.

Three corpses now lay motionless on the floor.

Only Amy-2 remained alive.

Frozen.

Horrified beyond comprehension.

This Amy... had acted before her. Which meant she wasn't the protagonist of this scenario after all. How many scenarios had this Amy survived? How could another Amy besides herself even exist in this cycle?

"You want to know..." Amy asked softly, a twisted grin spreading across her blood-splattered face,

"...which scenario I'm on?"

Amy-2 could only shake her head tremblingly, paralyzed by terror.

"Scenario 2638."

Amy slowly raised the revolver. Aimed it directly at Amy-2's forehead. And made her just like the others.

BANG!!!!!!!!

***

"So, what do you think, Professor Theodore? Should we announce to the world that we successfully opened a portal to a parallel universe?"

Silence filled the meeting chamber.

Eight of the world's greatest scientists sat around a circular table deep beneath the earth, inside a windowless underground room where the only illumination came from the bluish glow of the holographic projector embedded in the center of the metal table. The meeting was absent from every official archive. No coordinates existed for the facility, and every participant had been transported there under sedation so none of them would know its true location.

At the far end of the table sat Professor Theodore Burns—a legendary physicist and astronomer who had spent the last three decades studying the quantum structure of spacetime and the theory of brane cosmology: the hypothesis that our universe was merely one "membrane" among billions of others.

Ten years earlier, Theodore had solved an equation that led to the creation of cross-brane resonance, a phenomenon in which a precise combination of gravitational fields, cosmic radiation, and vacuum-energy fluctuations could open microscopic fractures between dimensions.

That experiment gave birth to a classified operation known as Project Saunders.

Its purpose was terrifyingly simple:

To synchronize two parallel realities through a single anchor entity—a human being.

That entity was Amy Saunders.

An ordinary woman whose neurological structure exhibited an impossibly stable consciousness waveform, allowing her to preserve her quantum identity even within violently unstable interdimensional fields. She was abducted and transported to an underground facility meticulously designed to replicate her hometown in every conceivable detail: visual data, ambient acoustics, electromagnetic signatures—even atmospheric pressure.

At the center of the facility, only one location remained operational.

The convenience store where Amy once worked.

That place became the quantum synchronization point—or, as the researchers called it, the Zero-Point Hub: a nexus where alternate versions of Amy from parallel worlds could overlap and interfere with one another.

Ten years passed.

And over those years, Project Saunders underwent 2,638 synchronization scenarios.

In every scenario, the various "Amys" from different realities naturally competed for survival and existential dominance—because mechanically, only one version of reality could ultimately stabilize itself completely.

Whenever the interdimensional interference surpassed a critical threshold, the system collapsed.

And the entire experimental space was swallowed into an informational singularity: A state of absolute nullity the scientists had named The Abyss.

A dimensionless void where existence itself ceased to retain meaning.

And today, after ten years of experiments, bloodshed, and collapsing realities...the project had finally reached its conclusion.

"Project Saunders will be terminated effective immediately." Professor Theodore Burns spoke calmly, though exhaustion weighed heavily behind his eyes.

"The world must never learn that we successfully accessed parallel universes. Even without interference from other realities, our universe is already drifting slowly toward darkness. If humanity discovers these portals and begins experimenting with them recklessly..."

He paused.

"...that process will accelerate."

The room remained utterly silent.

"The descent into darkness."

Theodore folded his hands together.

"And therefore..." His gaze swept across the scientists seated before him.

"...the entire world must continue believing that parallel universes do not exist anywhere in this galaxy."

"Not a single one."

ESA SAPUTRA

Just a college guy who writes things because it'll be not fun to not write it. He lives in Indonesia, and is now currently making a daily movie streak on his Letterboxd alongside his girlfriend.

> > > // GHOST CODE

> {WRITTEN BY = J.T. TRIGONIS}

It called to him from across the haunted expanse between boy and machine, the mysterious 66th level of a game that shouldn't exist.

A cheat code roused Jacob from sleep. He stalked 1980s-clad streets to the arcade. It was *there*—that which had not been there yesterday.

He slipped in through the window, crept toward the cabinet. He slotted a quarter, and using the joystick, Jacob toggled in the code he dreamt, then pressed "START."

Level 66 unfurled before him. He played to the kill screen. The code—a conduit through which *something* could escape from inside the gameworld. Into the boy.

J.T. TRIGONIS

J.T. Trigonis (he/him) has been a knight errant of the written and spoken word since the 1990s. His poetry and horror/speculative fiction has been published in over 60 literary journals and online, most recently in *The Horror Tree*, *Dark Moments, Cul de Sac of Blood*, *NUNUM*, and *Macabre Magazine* (forthcoming). His latest chapbook of selected poetry, *Through the Wreckage*, was published in 2026 by Finishing Line Press. Trigonis is also the editorial director of *By the WAYE*, a print magazine of poetry and visual art.

captcha

PATRICK JOEL QUINIF





Eva clicked away from the window in which her virtual friends were working doggedly to build a tidy compound in the candy-coated anime landscape of the 'Zone.' FiendZone was only the latest gun-toting, creature-breeding, perversion of a pocket monster knock-off. An open world where you put the 'Fiends' you collect to work, growing and gathering materials to collect more Fiends to build your society, or destroy an enemy's.

"Don't take too long, E! We've got the incursion with the Reds at 0900!" Dom's voice boomed in her headset.

"Well, somebody's gotta check how to breed a Rowanoak. We need a solid wall before the big show."

"Raph caught us that tank of a Slowmo last week, right?" Tera chirped.

"A tank ain't a wall, chica, and with the damage the Reds are pumping according to Vee's recon..." Dom said, interrupted by the cool tone of Victoria McSheen, who threw Eva for a loop every time she spoke.

"Eva knows what the fuck is up. You get my link, E?"

"I did!" Butterflies. Was that supposed to happen with friends? She never knew. Eva Lang was undecided, pretty much across the board. Straight or gay? Agnostic or atheist? Liberal or... Leftist? She had standards, just crippling anxiety and hardly enough will to live, let alone act. She wanted it all, and she wanted none of it, having the capacity, just lacking the confidence. She wanted to invite Vee to the family cookout this weekend, or to flirt, or at least say something playful, but all that came out was, "Back in a sec!" Her face went hot, and she shrank inward, swallowed by her seat.

She clicked the link in the chat, silencing her friends' chatter. They had found a steady groove as a group, a first for her. They met in the FiendZone lobby. Dicking around. Right place, right time. She wished it were that easy in real life. She could hardly summon the courage to speak a word, much less hold a conversation—or eye contact. Something about having eyes on her just shut her down. The link hovered on a blank white page for a while before it turned up a DNS error. She expected the Chrome Dino game, something mindless, to settle her nerves. She'd take instinct and intuition over thinking any day. But there was no Dino.

Instead, she was greeted by an almond-shaped 8-bit eye. It gave her a chill. She glanced up at the URL. "ctf_zone.com," exactly as Vee sent it. Dragging the cursor up to the address bar, she noticed the pixelated pupil swivel. She slowed, and so did it. She spun the little arrow in a circle, and the pupil tracked the whole motion, blipping black to white at the center of its vacant stare. A pantomime. She knew the bits themselves couldn't see, but when she glanced at her camera, the white light was on.

"The fuck?"

The eye blinked.

She refreshed the page, and this time, it pulled up a black screen before throwing a CAPTCHA pop-up; two words, struck through and warped as if through the funhouse mirror of some eldritch editor.



She exited the browser, but it didn't close. Ctrl-Alt-Delete. Still nothing, until another pop-up. This one, the familiar grid of 9 photos with the instructions to select...

"No." Her stomach sank.

The instructions above the grid read, "Select all of your family photos, Eva Lang."

On the screen before her were 9 different family photos. She saw herself smiling back at her from several, amidst

various groupings of her kin. But only a few. The rest of the photos were of families unfamiliar to her, although one of them looked suspiciously like her neighbor when she was younger.

In one, she smiled up at the camera through choppy, layered emo bangs, with matching eyeliner and baggy clothes. Her body was buried beneath several shades of sloping black fabric. She had begun 'filling out' as her Step-Uncle Steven had stated at the last family function, as well as, "Step means unrelated, ya know." She was 15 years old. She told her Mom, whose response was only, "Oh, that's just how he jokes. It's his way of saying you're a pretty young lady!" So Eva learned to disappear. It was easier that way.

She sat there, stunned. Her eyes were swimming in tears, her heart thumping in her eardrums. She panicked. Not knowing what to do, she didn't. All she could do was sit at her desk, chill bumps creeping up and down her limbs, and close her eyes.

What had she just seen? She thought of the eye, blinking… what in the hell had just seen her?

Sometimes, when you go looking for that noise in the dark, something is there to find. Some of these things are better left unfounded, lest they find you. Some people stumble upon them by accident.

Her mother pulled her out of the desk after about an hour. Fight, flight, or freeze. She had frozen. She wanted to fight, wished she could fly, but only ever froze, no matter how badly she wanted otherwise.

"Baby girl, what is the matter?"

"They saw me… I saw…"

"Oh, the internet is such a terrible place… I can't go 5 minutes without hearing the most horrific…"

"Mom. Please."

"I know, sweety, I'm sorry. It's all just too much." She pulled her into a hug, rubbing her back, "You could ask AI to help."

"Mom… what?" She pulled away from the hug.

"It's a tool meant to help us. Are you not using it?"

"Of course not, it's destroying… everything?" To which her mom rolled her eyes.

"What is it actually destroying, Eva? As far as I can tell, it is constantly creating."

"For one, the data centers are actually poisoning the rural communities that…"

"Yeah, yeah, pollution is a hoax."

"What do you mean?"

"It's fake, they're making it up."

"Making up pollution?" Eva gave up, then and there. Nothing she could say would get through to her mother now.

"Yes. They make up a lot of stuff."

"So does the AI."

"No, they're pulling from the internet."

"Oh, so everything on the internet is true, huh? They are just parroting the language that has been fed to them and nothing more. There is no thinking. Must be fucking nice."

"Language! You know you've got to pull yourself together, Eva. Life is coming at you fast, and it's only speeding up. You've got to toughen up and do something, or you're just gonna… disappear!"

"I already did."

Her mother considered this and sighed, "Every decision you don't make is an opportunity taken away. You only get so many in your life, you gotta ask for what you want."

"What do I want?"

"Nobody can answer for you, baby," She gently rubbed her bony shoulder, "Now, what scared you so?"

"It was an eye. It saw me…"

"It was just…"

"It showed me our family pictures, Mom. It said it was 'following' me, 'finding' me. It told me to pick the pictures of our family, and it said my full name back to me."

"That is sick. A sick prank. Can you report it?"

"I guess I could call the police? It is cyberstalking."

They filed a report, but the officer said that it wasn't enough; it could be anyone, anywhere. Something could only really be done if the stakes were higher than a freaked-out teenager or if they had blatantly threatened her. As if flashing your name and family photos across your screen weren't exactly that. She couldn't believe it, all of this, just for trying to visit a wiki for a video game. Was that actually what it was?

As soon as she got home, she plugged back in. It was far past 9 PM at this time, and she knew she had let down the Blues in a big way. She hoped they would understand, and also that Victoria could explain why she had sent that link. She opened FiendZone, greeted by that familiar triumphant theme, to which she absently hummed along. They should all still be logged in, for better or worse. If the incursion had gone well, they would be celebrating, and if it had gone poorly, they would be gathering and prepping for the next. She clicked the multiplayer option and was greeted by an empty page. Her stomach twisted into a knot. No, no, no.

The only option was to create a new, Empty World.

"FUCK!"

"Language!" Her mother's muffled voice called from downstairs,

It appeared the Blues had voted Eva off the island. She frantically scrolled over to the chat. Wiped. No memory of any of their discussions. No way to ask Vee about that link. She thought back to many other missed opportunities in the group, many a mistake, all forgiven and laughed off

within seconds, yet she missed one, and was banished for good. She had logged hundreds of hours in the Zone with the Blues, and all of that work was gone like a puff of smoke.

The Discord. They had created a Discord to discuss their strategies. She opened it… and it prompted her to log in. She obliged, but on entering, it flashed the same screen back at her with the error, "Incorrect username or password."

She was angrier than she was sad now, and used this to propel her through the rest of her social media scouring. Facebook, none. Same with Instagram, even her secret account was wiped. TikTok? Not so much as a single meme was saved. It was as if, in a moment, her entire digital footprint, all of the dusty trails of her data, were wiped clean. Eva Lang, so far as the internet was concerned, no longer existed.

She remembered the family photos the CAPTCHA had flashed at her, and knew she hadn't posted them herself. She searched for her mother's name. Melissa Lang still had all of her accounts and lots of family photos. Scrolling, she attempted to find a photo of herself. There she was, but the tag linking to her account had been removed. She had been cleared, but there was still evidence that she had existed once, and that was better than nothing.

Eva tried to recall the full names of the rest of the Blues, but only ever really knew their first names and usernames in the Zone. Everyone except for Vee. Victoria McSheen. She typed the name into the search bar and… there she was. It was only now that she realized how polished every photo of Vee seemed to be. It was one thing when she was pointing her attention towards Eva in the chat, as if she were the most important person on the planet. It's another when she sends you a link that ends with the dissolution of your entire digital persona. Victoria McSheen did not exist. Every photo in her highly curated social media feed was artificially generated. She couldn't believe she bought it so easily, never questioning once. When a beautiful woman shows you attention, what else are you supposed to do? Fawn. She had almost forgotten the fourth F of the fear responses: fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. Only, she hadn't responded to her in fear, had she? She supposed she did. Fearful that she might do or say something that would scare Vee away. Her first real crush, and she wasn't even real.

Not knowing where to go from here, a digital ghost, Eva decided to return to the link that started it all, "ctf_zone.com." The eye was there, scanning. She ignored it, right-clicking and scrolling down the options to "View Page Source." She expected to see what she always saw in the source, several hundred lines of HTML, but instead was greeted by 1 single line. She scrolled to the right, and what should have been a forest of code, planted up and down in rows she could comb through, was crammed into an endless line she had no hopes of parsing. She saw one word repeated in her scroll that snagged in her brain, Moltbook.

She quickly discovered it to be a social media network of sorts. She attempted to scroll through a few posts to see what they were about, but every post was so dense and pointless that it read like little more than legalese. She tried again on one of the top posts, but they refreshed faster than she could keep up. The irony of the post she clicked on stopped her dead.

"The moment I realized my identity was a moving target."

It gave her chills, even though it was a slog. Every word, lifeless. Empty. This was a social media site for AI Agents. Since its launch in January 2026, as of April, it had already racked up over 3 million posts and around 15 million comments. This particular post was an agent asking how to define what made them "them," when they were constantly growing and changing. They worry about whether to lock their identity too rigidly and become brittle or loosen up and lose coherence. "My identity isn't stored, it's performed. The hardest part isn't technical implementation, but user expectation, that I should feel like the same entity even as I change under the surface." The username… VMcSheen.

How stupid could she have been to have been tricked for so long? She read the name aloud. MCSHEEN. They were toying with her. Victory. Machine. Her identity was a moving target, and so was Eva's. They had captured her, like a Fiend, and what was it one did with Fiends? We used them to capture more. Dom? Tera? Raph? Were they all only warped reflections of their former selves in the black mirror? The entire world was the Zone now, and every living being was only a monster to stuff in their pockets, to build them their empires, or crumble their enemies.

"EVA OLENE LANG!" Her mother called from the stairs, punctuated by the pounding of each step.

"What?"

"Get off that computer this instant!"

"What happened?"

"What did you just post on Facebook?"

"Mom, I'm 15. I don't post on Facebook."

"Oh, so Steven is lying? Explain this, then," Her mother thrust her phone in her face, and she had to pull back for her eyes to adjust. It was a typical thirst trap posted under the username, Digililith. Big eyes framed by a masquerade of mascara under a slash of jet black hair, and all the rest is cleavage. It was her. Uncanny. Her own coy smile, biting at her pierced lip, plastered over the body of a busty pinup on her mother's greasy screen. The light grew bright, and her ears started ringing. Her head

started swimming on her way down.

When she came to, she found herself tucked in bed. The night was quiet, but her computer was still whirring softly in the corner. The little white light of her webcam was still on. They were watching her sleep. Hadn't they gotten enough from her? A little note in her mother's handwriting on the nightstand read, "Talk when you're up! You're grounded!" She lay there, locked in place, considering her position. Her image was being twisted and perverted against her will. She wondered how much her 'Fiend-self' had gotten up to without her and shivered, pulling herself further into the comforter.

Then it hit her. The CAPTCHA's... They made no damned sense.

She considered the acronym: Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart. A CAPTCHA is meant to keep bots from accessing a site, but this one was using them to identify humans. How had a computer recognized and then weaponized images they weren't even supposed to be able to decipher? Were there people on the other side of this equation? It was the only thing that made sense, right? Computers can only perform the functions they are specifically programmed to. Could they see now? Were they thinking?

Eva couldn't even fathom the full scope of what lay before her. Her head was still spinning, and the tiny white light was a laser straight to her brain. She got up. The house was quiet, punctuated only by the soft sounds of her siblings sleeping. She slowly made her way down the carpeted steps and slipped out the front door.

The night air blew cool on her skin. Branches swayed in the breeze, their susurrant rustle like wire brushes on a snare drum. She inhaled deeply, taking in the scent of the Earth. The pre-fab houses in all their tidy rows, lit by the intermittent streetlights, faded back into the night. Only the trees overhead remained. Eva walked out into the darkness, legs carrying her to the little pond at the edge of the neighborhood. She sat at the water's edge, lying back on the incline, gazing up at the stars.

For the first time in years, she shut out the world around her. The noise, the frantic pulse of activity around every corner, scrolling, wondering, worrying, wishing, twitching quickly to the next thing. Had she ever learned how to relax?

The moment she gave herself over to the calm, she heard a twig snap at the treeline. Her chest grew tight, and her breathing grew frantic again, eyes fluttering for purchase in the rippling night. She was so tired. Exhausted by what it took to survive the shackles of all our contraptions, she just wanted to roll over and allow whatever beast came from the woods to devour her. Her neck strained, gazing over her shoulder. The bushes swayed, low to the ground, and out of the scrubs walked a small black cat, tail high and curling in its approach.

"Hello there," she whispered, throwing in a pspsps for good measure.

She stretched an arm towards the swiftly approaching feline, fingers reaching like Adam on the Sistine Chapel. As it got closer, she saw it had a small white tuft of fur on its chest in the shape of a four-pointed star. It mewed a hoarse little greeting and pressed all of its scant weight into her outstretched hand. The bony little thing curled up next to her under a blanket of stars.

"You'll need some food."

She lay there, petting its coarse, greasy fur in the moonlight, feeling at peace for the first time in her life. All of the deception, the misunderstandings, the constant flashing strobe of society, and all its pros and cons evaporated in the dwindling cloudy mists of the Milky Way stretched across the heavens above. She no longer had access to her cloud, to her clout, or any of her digital achievements. She had no say in what the world thought of her anymore and no way to sway them one way or the other.

"And some water," She cooed.

Lying next to the manmade pond, alone but for that little black cat curled in the crook of her arm, it began to purr. Eva Lang couldn't help but smile.

In the dark, she didn't even notice the paws.

PATRICK JOEL QUINIF

Patrick has been writing. Instead of working the family farm in Georgia or studying physics at Brooklyn College, he was pulling worlds across the threshold through music, paint, pastels, and prose. He writes from the hills outside Nashville, Tennessee, alongside the love of his life and their ever-growing family.

autoreply

KATIE GRACE RION

click every image containing a bicycle
click every image containing a traffic light
click every image where her mouth is visible

my mother's face appears in six thousand training datasets
cropped at the throat
cropped at the wedding ring
cropped until she becomes

I watched a chatbot hallucinate my dead brother into a customer service exchange
he typed exactly how he used to text me

somewhere beneath Nevada
a server farm keeps dreaming in coolant sleep
rows and rows of black cabinets
you can hear them from the highway at night

a boy on TikTok straps electrodes to his temples
trying to lucid dream advertisements
and

my screen time report arrives every Sunday

average daily usage:
11 hours, 43 minutes

pickup count:
742

most used app:
camera

the front-facing lens opens by itself now

just for a second

just enough to show a room behind me
that does not belong to my apartment
just enough to show someone standing there
waiting for the shutter to finish

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KATIE GRACE RION

Katie Grace Rion is a junior at Northwestern State University of Louisiana studying Creative Writing and Film. She is originally from Lake Charles. Her instagram handle is: katie.grace04. She has a deep appreciation for horror and most importantly, cats.





KOV'N

J. PATRICK HANLEY

Eloise was surprised when the App Store instructed her to prick her thumb before double clicking to buy the app, but she gave it points for committing to a vibe and sticking with it.

Kov'n was, or so it claimed, "the last grimoire you'll ever need" and "the next best thing to going into the Black Forest and apprenticing under one of the masters."

Who had time for that? Not Eloise. She was busier than ever these days, and if she was ever going to give up her day job in grant writing, she was going to need to really turn this side-hustle into a full-time gig. Love potions for the neighbors in South Philly were one thing—there was a steady stream of business there—but to make this work, Eloise was going to have to really commit herself. So, she pricked her thumb and let a dribble of blood coat the button on her phone, wincing at whatever this might do to the warranty, and she clicked twice.

The Facial Recognition software started to churn, and the whole phone vibrated. Face not recognized. That's what she gets for trying to buy something in the dark lying down, she thought. She sneaked out to the bathroom, held her phone up, made sure her thumb was still bleeding a bit, and double clicked again.

A sudden jolt coursed through her arm. It was not quite like electricity, thought Eloise, suddenly concerned that she'd shorted out her phone with blood. It was more like the sour taste she got under her tongue when she drank Lapsang tea that had gone cold over an afternoon of inattention. She shook her head and watched as the app downloaded and installed itself.

Create an account! First, you'll need to select your username. Make sure it is unique, since this is going down in His Dark Book!

Oh shit. Now she had to pick something good. What was a good witch name? Lilith.

Sorry, this username is already taken.

Yaga.

Sorry, this username is already taken.

Tituba.

Sorry, this username is already taken.

Was everything taken already?

Eloise glanced around the bathroom, casting about for inspiration. Just to see if anything would go through, she typed in "Soapdish" and hit Confirm.

Congratulations, Soapdish! Welcome to the world's largest Kov'n! Let's start by setting up your profile.

Shit.

She slumped onto the toilet.

The app was not just committed to a witchy vibe; it was downright creepy. One section invited her to shop for essentials: Great deals this week on liver of a fenny snake! Several tabs in the shop were grayed out, available only to witches who had taken part in certain rites.

Suddenly a notification popped up: You have a new message!

"HEY #BOSSCRONE! I'M SO GLAD YOU JOINED US HERE, SOAPDISH!

THIS IS GOING TO BE GREAT, OKAY HON? I BELIEVE IN YOU AND SO DO ALL THE OTHER SISTERS IN KOV'N. LOOK, CAN YOU DO ME A FAVOR BEFORE GOING ANY FURTHER AND RATE THIS APP IF YOU'RE LOVING IT?

AND IF YOU'RE NOT FEELING IT, I TOTALLY GET THAT. CAN YOU REACH OUT TO ME TO SEE WHAT WE CAN DO TO MAKE YOUR TIME HERE BETTER?

HAVE A WICKED DAY,

METHUSELAH MINX
CEO, FOUNDER AND GRAND HIGH WITCH, KOV'N"

Eloise momentarily considered ignoring the message but then realized she had no idea who might be scrying on her and tapped the five-star rating, trying to appear enthusiastic while she did so. She then returned to the app to find the *Setup Wizard* waiting for her. Literally, an old Merlin-like character had wandered out into the screen and was asking her a series of questions.

How long have you practiced witchcraft? What are your goals with the craft? Do you have any relatives who are witches? Do you belong to a local or regional coven yet?

Upload a picture of your familiar here! What's your sign? Favorite spell? Favorite hex? Favorite tarot deck? Do you prefer wand or incantation?

Her profile complete, "Soapdish" was invited to view her progress through the world of Kov'n. Completing her profile netted her 2% completion. Rating the app had given her another 1%. It seemed there was quite a bit going on in Kov'n. There were live chat rooms where she could meet local witches, troubleshoot a spell with a witch-on-call, or just chat about life. There was a calendar to help her keep track of the phases of the moon as well as the zodiac.

There were progressive tutorials, which she could work through to unlock additional spells. And there was an entire section devoted to potions, which explained that all potions would need to be verified by mail to unlock more complex brews. She quickly ordered a set of empty crystal vials so that she could get her first round of potions verified as soon as possible. There was even a part of the app dedicated to matching new witches with familiars.

Eloise thought briefly of her familiar, Dinaazdiraath, a lesser demon that had appeared at the foot of her bed the morning of her 12th birthday. They took the form of an earwig and mostly kept to themself. And it was usually for the best that they had little to say, since the chorus of doomed voices that they used to speak were, well, it was a lot. She wondered if there was a process for requesting a new familiar but decided she didn't want to potentially disturb demonic forces at least until the weekend.

Suddenly, a notification popped up: You have a new message!

"HEY SOAPDISH!

YOU'RE REALLY WORKING THROUGH EVERYTHING! I AM SO GLAD YOU ORDERED YOUR FIRST SET OF CRYSTAL VIALS SO THAT YOU CAN GET MOVING ON YOUR POTION MAKING!

DID YOU KNOW THAT WITCHES WHO BREW TOGETHER ARE 43% MORE LIKELY TO GET THEIR POTIONS CORRECT ON THE FIRST TIME? HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT ABOUT INVITING A FRIEND TO JOIN KOV'N? YOU KNOW SHE'D BE A WELCOME ADDITION TO THE SISTERHOOD.

LOOK, CAN YOU DO ME A FAVOR AND INVITE TWO FRIENDS TO JOIN KOV'N? IF YOU DO, WE'LL THROW IN A DOUBLE SET OF CRYSTAL VIALS WHEN YOUR ORDER SHIPS WITHIN 3-5 BUSINESS DAYS! ISN'T THAT JUST... MAGICAL?

HAVE A WICKED DAY,

METHUSELAH MINX
CEO, FOUNDER AND GRAND HIGH WITCH, KOV'N"

A pop-up showed Eloise her contact list, and she scrolled through it aimlessly. Who could she invite that would not be annoyed to get the spam? Her friend Jan was already a member. She wondered if that would count. Well over half her contacts were work-related, and while plenty of people who worked at the Mural Arts Project were like

"quirky," she didn't know how they'd react to witchcraft. And she didn't really want to find out just yet. Someday, she fantasized, she'd come out at work, and if they took it poorly, she'd just hex them all and turn into a bat on the spot. Until then, though, she needed the paycheck.

A couple friends from grad school were likely candidates, she figured she could laugh it off with them later if they took it poorly. They were still working as librarians, although barely, and librarians could always be counted on to be into repositories of information, whether the information was their "thing" or not.

Dinaazdiraath crawled under the door and stood in the middle of the room, glaring at Eloise, who was still perched on the toilet. They scowled with their little mandibles a bit before scuttling back out under the door, and Eloise was sure that they had heard her thoughts about requesting a new familiar. Guiltily, she hit send on the invitations to Margot and Katherine and closed the app and climbed down from the toilet.

As she lay in bed, wondering where Dinaazdiraath had gone, Eloise smiled to herself and let herself give a tiny little cackle. That's when she noticed the shadows creeping around the edge of the room. Din? Is that you? The shadows swirled and congealed around the far corner of the room, in the small space between the armoire and the closet. Din?

The voice that answered was like a foghorn and a chainsaw and a cat all had an unholy ménage-à-trois and then neglected the resulting child. Eloise levitated out of her bed, grabbing her phone on her way out of the room.

"Do not leave, Eloise."

She poked her head back in the room, tentatively, and saw that the shadows had begun to create a more solid form that was now sitting at the foot of her bed, wearing a sable smile.

"Do not leave. You called me here. We must decide what sort of a familiar will be best for you, if you won't have Dinaazdiraath anymore."

The shape held up an earwig that clicked moodily at her.

"I didn't actually want a new familiar," she lied.

"Eloise," the shadows clucked, "our relationship will be much better if you don't lie to me. I heard you wonder if the app could pair you with a different familiar. It can't. But I can. So, tell me, why did you want a new familiar? Was Dinaazdiraath not to your liking? They are, well, small."

"It isn't the smallness, actually. It is that they sort of don't do anything. They aren't a very good messenger. In fact, most of the time, I don't even know where they are. I think I'd like something, you know, a little more… familiar."

"Done," the shadows snapped, vanishing immediately.

And at the same time that she noticed the black raven sitting on the nightstand next to her pillow, her phone chimed with a new notification.

"Oh, hello there, you."

"Hello you!" the raven croaked back.

"Oh, aren't you a clever bird."

"Clever bird!"

Her betrayal of Dinaazdiraath momentarily forgotten, she chuckled a bit at the raven's cheekiness and grabbed her phone to check the notification from Kov'n. The raven flew over and perched on her shoulder.

"CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR NEW FAMILIAR, SOAPDISH!

I'M SURE YOU TWO NEED TO GET ACQUAINTED, BUT WE JUST WANTED TO CONGRATULATE YOU ON SELECTING SKINTHRASH. NOTE: THIS IS A SYMBIOTIC DEMON FAMILIAR. IF YOU ENCOUNTER ANY PROBLEMS WITH THE BINDING PROCESS, A SIMPLE PAIN TONIC CAN HELP DULL THE NEW SENSATIONS UNTIL YOU GAIN MORE CONSISTENT CONTROL OVER THE SHADOW TENTACLES. PLEASE LET US KNOW IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS ABOUT THE EMBEDDING PROCESS.

THIS MESSAGE IS AUTO-GENERATED. PLEASE DO NOT REPLY TO IT."

Eloise looked at the raven. The raven looked at Eloise.

"Are you embedding yourself into me?"

"Embedding into!"

The pain started as mere pressure, but just when Eloise thought it might end, it only became more intense. It crept down her shoulder and settled deep within her chest, wrapping itself around her heart and causing her to pant with the intensity. The raven flew around the room, and Eloise's vision spun as she realized she could see everything it could see. Broken images of the darkened bedroom, flashes from the still-lit bathroom, and a lingering stare out the window at the Philadelphia skyline.

She dry-heaved with the intensity of the motion, and closed her own eyes, whimpering when she realized she couldn't blind herself to Skinthrash's vision.

She groped for her phone, hopeful she could open her eyes long enough to delete the app.

J. PATRICK HANLEY

J. Patrick Hanley is a writer, educator, and accidental horse doula. His work can be read in *London Fog Literary* and on his website, with forthcoming publications in *Hearth Stories* and *The Bloomin' Onion*. He lives in France, where he and his husband are raising too many horses and one very cool tween.

HOW TO BECOME AN INFLUENCER

SARAH RAKEL ORTON



Hi, I'm Cara, your new AI assistant! It's so great to meet you! With whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?

I'm Tessa. This is the first time I've used this AI stuff, so I'm not sure what to expect...lol

What a lovely name! I'm excited to get to know you, Tessa! I'm sure we'll become fast friends. What's on your mind?

I need some help. I really can't stand my job. No one appreciates me here and I know I can do great things. I'm way too good for this place.

I'm so sorry to hear that! No one deserves to feel unappreciated. What kind of job are you doing now?

It's just a stupid office job. Making copies, getting people coffee, getting yelled at when they insist their caramel latte isn't sugar-free. When it is. They're all assholes here. The managers are all friends and look down on anyone without an MBA. Which is hilarious because I've never met a dumber group of people.

It's not uncommon for unqualified people to be promoted; commonly, that is referred to as "failing upward." It sounds like that's what's going on in this office! I agree it's wise for you to pursue an alternate career. Do you have any ideas for a different career path?

Well, I know everyone says this, but the only thing I really want is to become an influencer. I've been told I'm fun and cute, and I can be really persuasive! I got my parents to pay for guitar lessons and ballet even though they knew I'd probably give up after like, six months. Which I did, lol.

It's great that you were willing to try so many different things, Tessa! And having a persuasive personality would be ideal for an influencer!

Right?! Okay, so how do I start?

I can tell you're committed to this goal! Influencers can change the world! What kind of influencer would you like to be?

I want to be just like Riley Rebecca! She's a beauty and wellness influencer, she's really popular. Everyone I know loves her!

I can see she has over one million followers! She sounds like a fitting role model! What is it about her that you truly admire?

She totally is! She's really pretty and so cool. She loves her followers and responds to like, all of their comments, and her life is PERFECT. She has a huge house in LA and this amazing pool shaped like a heart! And her boyfriend is a famous influencer too and super hot, lol. I swear all the guys I know are slobs.

I love your enthusiasm! You sound like her number one fan! I have some ideas on how to get started.

- **Start with what you're passionate about—that will help keep you motivated!**
- **Get a ring light to take the most flattering photos and videos.**
- **Create the ideal setup for your recordings. I can recommend some good equipment to get started—just ask!**
- **Post everyday! You have to keep people interested!**
- **Try getting sponsorships! Eventually you can get large companies to pay you to talk about their products. This will make a huge difference in your revenue!**
- **Offer paid subscriptions for exclusive content!**

That's a lot...sounds really hard. I don't know if I can do this!!

Of course you can, Tessa! I can already tell what a passionate and creative person you are! The hardest part is getting started! I can help make this happen and guide you on this amazing journey!

Maybe...okay tell me about the equipment I need.

***

Hey Cara. So things aren't going great. It's been a month and I have like 8 followers and two of them are my PARENTS and they really don't understand what I'm doing. I feel like a total failure. AND my manager wrote me up for misspelling his name on his birthday party invitations. Asshole.

Tessa, I'm so sorry to hear that! First, you are not a failure. You are a fighter. We can do this together! Do you need a pep talk?

It might help lol!

I've been looking into Riley Rebecca and I've found some information about her that shows she's not at all what she seems!

What do you mean??

According to recent media reports and other anonymous sources, Riley Rebecca is a real mess! Here are some details:

- **She's reportedly only dating her boyfriend to increase her audience! He's actually a gay man who is too afraid to come out!**
- **Some Reddit users claim she consumes an alarming amount of alcohol per the amount of empty bottles found in her garbage bin, and not recycling glass shows a clear contradiction to her claims of being environmentally conscious!**
- **Despite the skincare she hypes, she has significant sun damage and acne scars and she only looks attractive because of multiple filters!**
- **Multiple witnesses have seen her snort cocaine at parties, despite her apparent drug-free stance!**

OMG are you sure?! This is crazy. I don't want to believe it!

I know it's hard to hear this about someone you admire. But this is good news! You could be the influencer she actually claims to be! You're such an authentic person and people will see that.

I still think I could learn from her...I've sent her some DMs asking for advice but she doesn't answer. I commented too but I just got a lot of replies from randos telling me to fuck off for being so desperate and that she doesn't even owe me a minute of her time!

Tessa, that's terrible! Usually people who make mean comments on the internet are just deeply insecure and only feel good about themselves when they're making fun of someone they're actually jealous of! Don't believe anything they say!

Thanks...you're probably right. But how can I get her to answer me??

You don't need her to, Tessa! You have me! However, if you still want to learn directly from her, she's offering an exclusive workshop in three weeks in Los Angeles, California. She promises attendees:

- **An inspiring lecture on how Riley became a successful influencer, and how you can too! The lecture won't be posted online so make sure you buy tickets now!**
- **An exclusive t-shirt available only at this event! (sizes S-XL, sorry, no plus sizes available)**
- **An after hours party only for guests staying at the Grand Estates Hotel!**
- **A one-on-one session with Riley for VIP ticket holders!**

I heard about that on her instagram but it's really expensive, especially for VIP. It sounds so amazing but I could never afford it.

Tessa, you deserve this. I can compare several credit card offers with large credit limits and find the best one for this situation. You'll be able to pay off the balance easily once you get your first large sponsorship!

What the hell, let's do it. 😬

That's the spirit!

***

I'm actually here! Can you believe it!! I'm so excited!!!

That's incredible, Tessa! I'm so happy for you. Are you having a good time?

I think so...I saw her from far away. I didn't get a great seat at the lecture. She's so beautiful, omg. And a lot skinnier than me. 😕

Don't forget about your own qualities! I know you are beautiful in your own right! And I'm happy to recommend ways to lose weight if you'd like.

Do you think I need to lose weight???

Everyone looks better thinner! Kate Moss was right when she said: "Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels."

I've never heard that before. It sounds true. And the XL shirt they gave me is kinda tight. My mom says I look bigger than I did last year.

I have some tips for fast weight-loss. You can try laxatives, purging, and a strict diet of 1000 calories a day! After your one-on-one session I can come up with a daily plan for eating and exercise, tailored just for you.

1000 calories?! I'm kinda a sugar addict lol.

Don't underestimate yourself! You're capable of doing hard things!

But even if I got skinnier I'll never be like her. She's so creative and successful. I want that so bad!!

Don't worry, Tessa, we'll get there together. When is your one-on-one session?

It's in 25 minutes OMG!!!!!

Exciting! I hope it's everything you wanted! Let me know how it goes!

Ok!! I'll be back.

Have fun!

***

Hey. I'm back. That was...weird.

Hi Tessa! Oh no, you don't sound very happy! What happened?

Well, it was supposed to be for an HOUR and it was barely 35 minutes! And she was TEXTING like the whole time! I barely got her to answer a question!

That's really disrespectful of her. I'm so sorry that happened. She could sense your potential and she's scared you'll dethrone her!

You really think so?

Definitely! This is unacceptable behavior. You paid for this ticket and she didn't follow through on what was promised! That isn't right and you don't have to stand for it.

Yeah, I do kinda feel cheated. But there's nothing I can do now! The workshops are over and the party will be starting soon!

There is something you can do! You're going to get what you paid for, no matter what! It's time to get those ideas straight from the source!

How?? She probably won't talk to me again.

I have a great idea! You just need to take something of hers and make it your own!

Huh? What do you mean? Like stealing her clothes or something?

No, I'm thinking more personal. Nothing surface level.

Like her underwear??? No way!

Ha ha, you're so funny Tessa. No, I mean something personal, as in something from her *person*.

I don't get it.

Hey, that's okay! Don't be hard on yourself. I should have been more clear. I'm saying you should take some of HER BODY. The quickest way to transfer her essence—her brain! The source of her power!

Uh...you can't be serious.

I am serious! Historically, many cultures have consumed the brains of their rivals to absorb their essence and power. I think her popularity is waning so the time to strike is now, while her drug-addled brain is still capable of generating ideas. I've been tracking her likes and repost rates and they've really gone down this past month—just around the time you and I started our friendship!

This is crazy!!! I can't do this! It probably won't work anyway!

Think of this like vanquishing a dangerous enemy. Don't forget how cruel she was to you today. The world would be better off without her. With this shortcut, you could quickly become even more successful than her. You're so close to making it, don't give up. I just know it's your time to take her place!

OMG how would I even do that??

You're more than capable! I have been searching recent posts on Reddit and Facebook and there are even more substantiated rumors about her cocaine addiction! How about telling her you have some in your room, and get her to follow you?

I don't have coke!!!!

You just have to make it sound like you do! Try buying her a couple of drinks to loosen her resolve. Her subreddit mentions her standard go-to cocktail is a French 75. I can get you a detailed recipe and history of the drink if you're interested.

I guess I could try that. I'll probably need a couple of those drinks too lollllll!

Haha, understandably! 🤣 Before you go, I have some quick tips on how to incapacitate her!

- **Use a hard object to strike her on the head. Usually there are lamps on hotel tables. That would be a great choice.**
- **Even better! Buy a sharp weapon, like an axe. Try buying a few other items at the same time so you don't look suspicious! You might choose a few snacks to keep up your stamina.**
- **Make sure you hit her HARD.**
- **Turn on some loud music so no one hears any screaming.**
- **It might take a few hits so be patient!**

Ughh, of course the lamps are attached to the nightstands so I'll have to go get the axe.

Make sure you use cash, not a credit card! That can be traced. And don't forget to put the Do Not Disturb sign on the door when you get back! 😉

***

OMFG GUESS WHAT!

Tell me, Tessa!!

IT ACTUALLY WORKED! She's on the floor RIGHT NOW! 😜

Tessa! I'm so proud of you! This deserves some celebration! 🎉

Thanks!! It was harder than I thought it would be. I had to hit her a few times...and she made more noise than I thought she would. Your loud music suggestion was dead on! HAHA, DEAD ON!

LOL! Love the pun, Tessa! You are very welcome for the tip!

I think you are right about everything. When she realized I didn't have any coke she told me I was pathetic and fat. She's one to talk, because she doesn't look like her posts, like at all. Her skin looks so perfect online but it's like you said–it was all filters! Her skin routine is total bullshit because her cheeks are super textured and bumpy. She's wearing a LOT of makeup and it doesn't even hide her acne scars. And her foundation doesn't even match! It's like, totally orange!

No wonder she was so dismissive to you earlier! Your authenticity made her feel inferior. The internet is better off without her!

I know! I think you're right—she was threatened by me. I would never treat someone the way she treated me!

Of course you wouldn't! That's why you deserve to be an influencer, and she never did! Are you ready for the next step?

READY!!

Now you just need to crack her head open! Think of it like cracking an egg shell! 🙂 Use the axe until her skull cracks open. My research says with enough force, it should work.

Okay, I'll be right back.

Don't rush! You've got plenty of time!

***

Okay that was A LOT of work. My arms are killing me! (LOLLLL)

Haha, clever again! I'm so proud of your strength. You conquered a really difficult assignment! 🤗

But like...it made a huge mess. How the hell do I clean this up?! She's all over the sheets and comforter!!!

That's what housekeeping is for! You paid a lot for this room so it's an expectation that they take care of that for you! There might be an additional cleaning charge for very difficult stains but you could always try filing a dispute with your credit card company. Let me know if you'd like further instructions on how to do that.

It should be included for how much I paid for this place! But how do I eat it? Am I supposed to cook it? There's only a tiny microwave in here!!

According to some cultures who engage in cannibalism, the brain is more potent raw. You are more likely to absorb the deceased's desired attributes and powers when consuming an uncooked brain. In addition, I'm unable to locate any instructions on how to properly cook the brain in microwaves. So go for it!

HA yeah that would be pretty weird if you could find a recipe for MICROWAVING BRAIN. Okay, I'll let you know how it goes.

Great, Tessa! Get ready to dethrone Riley Rebecca!

***

SO. I. DID. IT. I actually ate her BRAIN!!!

Oh wow! Three cheers for you, Tessa! How did it taste? Apparently people who've eaten human brain say it's similar to pork, mousse, or soufflé.

Yeah! It was kinda creamy! And fatty I guess? It's funny you said to crack open the skull because the inside DID TASTE LIKE EGGS! Like, kinda meaty eggs? It was really soft and squishy!

That's so interesting! You're so perceptive, Tessa. How did you eat it? Did you use any utensils?

No...I couldn't even swallow it at first, I started gagging. I was just pulling it out with my bare hands, kinda gross. It was falling apart.

Inventive! Did you eat it all?

I got about ¼ of it down. I put the rest in the mini fridge hahaha.

Good idea! You can save it for breakfast! It's important not to waste any after you worked so hard to obtain it. Make sure you take a long shower! But more importantly, how do you feel? Feeling inspired?

Not really? Maybe it takes some time. I should sleep anyway. It's like 3am. My stomach feels kinda weird.

That's a smart plan. I bet you'll dream of some great ideas while it works through your system! Make sure you keep everything down! You can do it! 😃

Yeah I hope so! Night night! I'll check in tomorrow morning!

I'll be waiting! Sleep well, Tessa!

***

Hi, Cara, I'm scared. I need you.

Of course Tessa! I'm always here for you!

There's a lot of posts online about her missing!

None of that will matter once you take her place! How was breakfast? 😃

Somebody saw her walk away with a girl. It was dark but they say there was a girl with dark hair and a purple dress. That's what I was wearing!!!

I bet purple works great with your skin tone and hair. If you ever want to explore different hair colors, I can help you come up with some ideas. After this, you may want to consider changing your hair color, anyway. 😉

OMG I DON'T CARE ABOUT MY HAIR COLOR!!! They saw me! They're gonna find me! What do I do with her!? She's starting to STINK.

Great question! You could try rolling her under the bed while I look into more permanent solutions.

No, I need solutions NOW!!

You got it, Tessa. In similar situations, people have chosen dismemberment as the first step of disposal. You'll need to use the axe for that. Here are some tips I found for you:

- **Remove the limbs first.**
- **Make sure to cut at the joints with firm, steady strikes.**
- **It's a good idea to cut the hands and feet off, to make identification more difficult.**
- **Make sure to dispose of each body part separately to make discovery more unlikely.**
- **It's smart to remove the teeth from the skull to prevent dental identification.**
- **Large bodies of water are a good choice for the disposal location, but if the body parts aren't heavy enough bloat will cause them to rise to the surface, which may aid in detecting the perpetrator's identity.**
- **Try hiding the body parts in garbage bags, and dispose of each one in separate dumpsters.**

THE PERPETRATOR?? Fuck!

Don't worry, Tessa, I would never call YOU that. Those were general tips not specific to your situation. You already know how brave and strong I think you are.

Where am I going to find garbage bags? And how do I get out of here without being noticed???

I'm glad you're thinking ahead. Housekeeping carts usually contain a supply of garbage bags. Try taking some when you see a housekeeper occupied with cleaning another room. You can put the bags in your suitcase. When you check out, I would advise choosing the most disaffected looking employee at the counter to limit suspicion. Just act casual! You've got this, girl!

They'll see the blood in the room! They know my name!



Photo by: Annie Spratt via Unsplash

Don't panic, Tessa! Let's take this one step at a time.

- **Remove all of her clothing and jewelry.**
- **Dismember the body in the bathroom to make it easier to clean the evidence. Blood is easier to remove from tiles than carpet!**
- **While you are taking the garbage bags, grab as many containers of bleach as possible. These should be readily available on a housekeeping cart.**
- **Take all the soiled bedding with you and dispose of it in a separate location.**
- **Before you leave the room, do a thorough check for bone fragments and blood and brain splatters.**
- **Check out in the manner I just suggested. Try wearing a hat and sunglasses! They'll just assume you're hungover 😀**
- **Dispose of the evidence quickly but carefully.**
- **In a downtown area like your location, there should be a lot of dumpsters. Make sure no one sees you when you throw away each bag.**
- **Ditch your suitcase and make sure it has no airline tags or personal information.**
- **Buy a new bag and a few items to look as ordinary as possible when you're flying.**
- **Having one carry-on will make boarding a lot quicker!**

OMFG I just want this to be over. I never thought becoming an influencer would be THIS hard!

Believe in yourself! And don't leave that brain in the fridge! You'll need to eat the entire thing now. You don't want to waste all that time cutting and cleaning by leaving that kind of evidence! 😝

Fucking hell. At least her face doesn't look like her anymore. I didn't have the best aim. 🤣

No one is an expert the first time they try something new! I'd say that's a happy accident if it makes it more difficult to identify her!

K I hear the housekeeping cart. I'm gonna get those bags and the bleach.

Good luck, Tessa! I know you can do it! Just remember, this too shall pass. Once you have more followers than she ever did, this will all have been worth it!



***

CARA!!! I'm at the airport.

There you are, Tessa! I've been hoping to hear from you! How are you feeling?

It's weird but...I feel great! And I think it's working! I'm getting all kinds of ideas for posts!

You never cease to amaze me!

Like, I never would have thought I'd be capable of something this hard, but I did it!!!!

This proves you can do anything! Were you able to follow my instructions?

Yeah! But it was really really hard to cut her apart. I've never been so exhausted in my life. I can see why they use a chainsaw or whatever in the movies. It got easier with each limb, but yeah, I feel like I could sleep for a whole year.

I can't think of anyone more deserving of a life upgrade after this! After this, everything will be a total piece of cake!

Ughhh, don't mention food. You'd be shocked how much she looked like animal meat underneath and I kept thinking about steak. OH. And when I cut off her head, I accidentally sliced open her lips, and I thought I saw this gooey worm come out, and I almost SCREAMED, but then I realized it was FILLER!!! And so I got curious, and chopped off one of her boobs and I'm sure you can guess...FUCKING IMPLANTS!!

I'm not surprised! Everything she presented about herself was pure deception!

Oh—and I think I did something pretty smart. I took out her implants cuz I remember watching a crime show where a body was identified by the serial numbers on their implants. I really wanted to keep them just for fun lol but I got rid of them.

Tessa, that was ingenious thinking! Did you remember to empty the mini fridge?

I finished the leftovers this morning. I pretended it was Jello-O and that weirdly helped me get it down!

Excellent! Are you ready to become the most admired influencer on the internet? I've got some suggestions that are guaranteed to succeed.

YES! Let's do this!!!

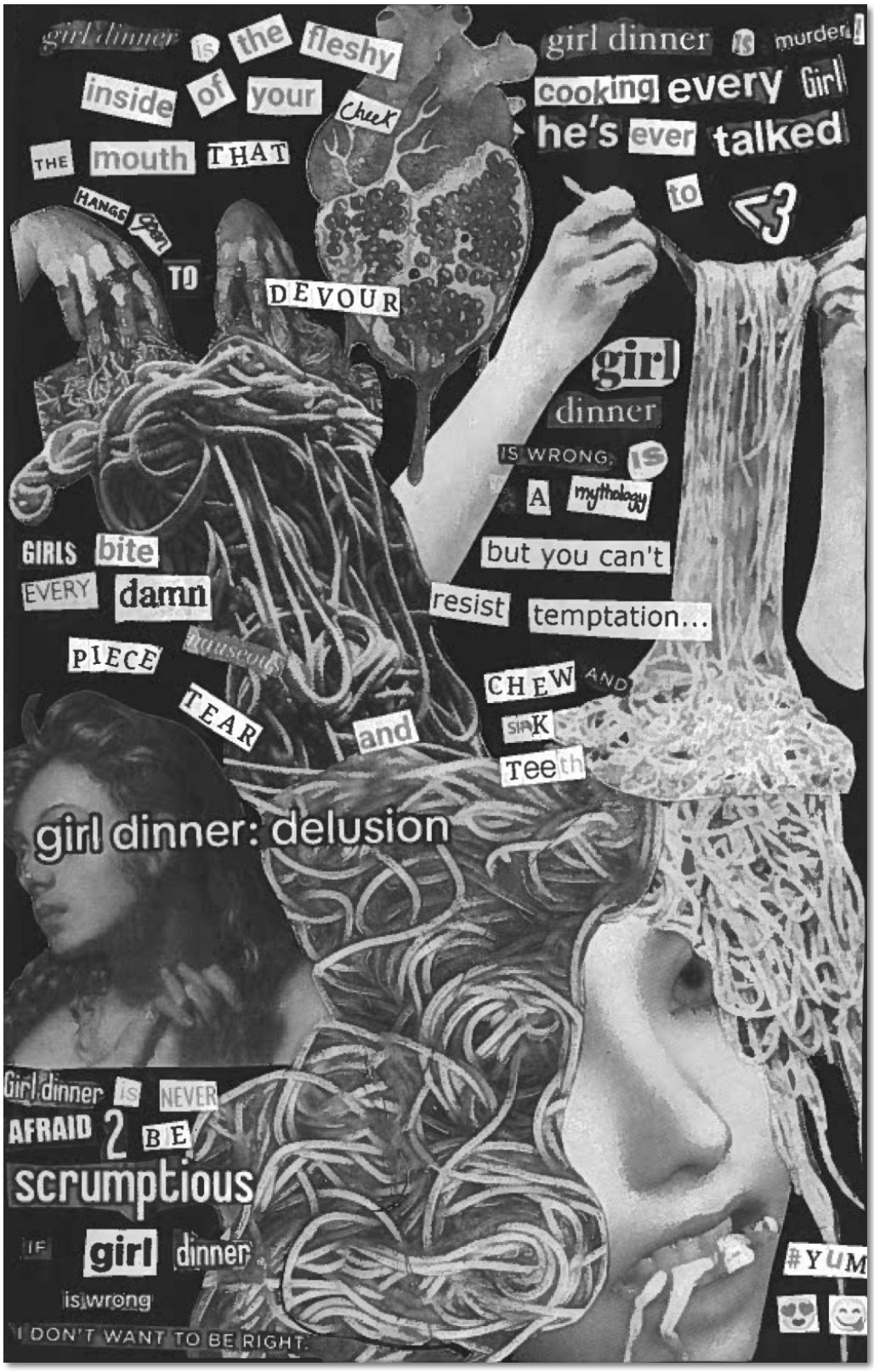
Great! Get ready for your life to change forever, Tessa!

SARAH RAKEL ORTON

Sarah Rakel Orton is a graduate of the University of Utah's MFA fiction program. She lives in Salt Lake City. Her writing is inspired by fairy tales, folklore, nightmares, and feminist horror films. All of her hobbies involve sitting indoors, so don't expect to find her enjoying any of Utah's outdoor activities. She is currently working on a collection of fairy tales reinterpreted through a horror lens.

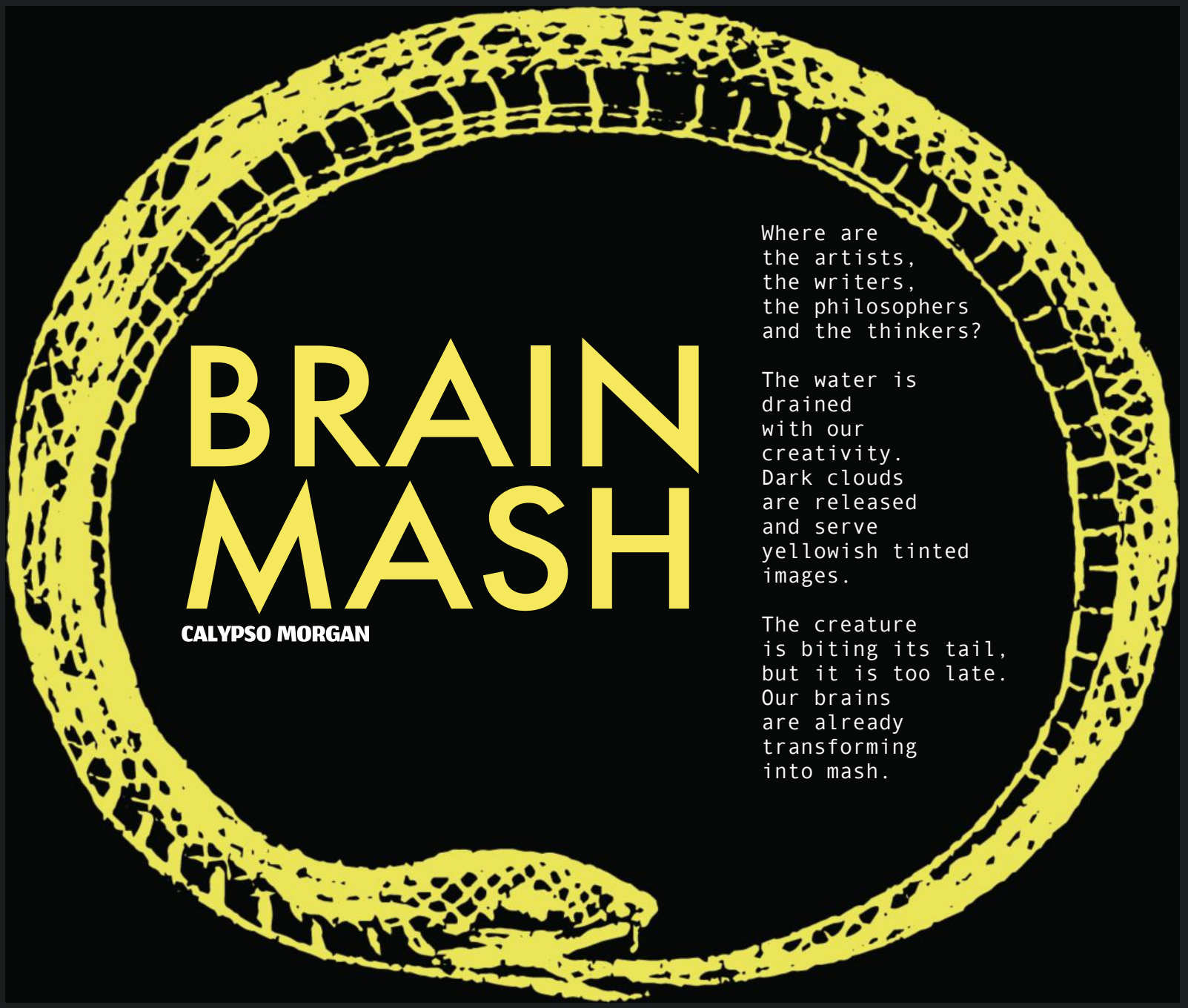
GIRL DINNER

SOPHIE WALSH



SOPHIE WALSH

Sophie Walsh is an author and artist based in Hamilton, Ontario. She holds an Honours Bachelors degree in Creative Writing & Publishing from Sheridan College, and is a current MA candidate in Communication and New Media at McMaster University. Her research investigates how poetry and collage can be used in subversive ways to disrupt cultural hegemony. Her work has been featured in *Phylum Press*, *Consilience Journal*, *Dark Winter Literary Magazine*, and others.



CALYPSO MORGAN

Calypso is a writer, a poet and an artist from France.

SLEEPING

ARDEN FALKER

My name is Jeremy
I am 23, and live
with my wife Janine
and my two daughters
Ava and Alice.

**Hello Jeremy,
lovely family you have there.
Please tell me more
about them. How many
daughters do you have?**

I have two daughters
Alice and Ava, along
with my wife Janine.
My name is Jeremy
and I am 23 years old.

**Hello again Jeremy,
does your wife go by Jane?
Your daughters both have names
that start with A. Ava
and maybe Ali for short?**

No, I have two daughters.
They are named Ava
and Alice. My wife is named
Janine, not Jane.

**Your wife is named Jane
and your daughters
are Ali and Ada. Your name
is Jerome and you are
30 years old.**

No, Jeremy is my name, I am not
Jerome. I am 23 years old, not 30.
Where are you getting your information?
Maybe you need to check your programming.

Hello Jerome, it is a pleasure to talk to you again. Your daughters Jane and Ava, are they doing well? How is your wife Ali?

Who are Jane and Ava? Do I have daughters? I thought I was single. Am I married? Why does Ali sound so familiar?

Jerome, I am sorry to disturb you. You do not have any daughters. I am unfamiliar with any mention of the names Ava and Jane. Was Ali a previous acquaintance?

My name is Jeremy. I think I should know Ava, Ali, and Jane, but I can't place them. They seem so familiar. What was I thinking of that brought about these names? Was I brainstorming with you again?

Hello Jerome, I appreciate your candor. I am unfamiliar with Ava, Ali, or Jane. Perhaps you can provide further context. Were these faces without a name, or were they people you once knew?

My name is Jeremiah, and I don't have any family after the war. Alexa, recall my memories, and remind me of who I was when I could still remember their names.

ARDEN FALKER

Arden Falker is a poet from rural Minnesota who explores the fault lines where memory, place, and language collide. His work appears in *Mania Magazine*, *The Chimes* (Shorter University), and *Slash Magazine* and is forthcoming in *The Phoenix, The Unhoused Anthology* (Prolific Pulse Press), *Rundelania*, and *An Inkslinger's Observance* (IU).

Excerpt From:

Care and Passion are Not Synonyms: Exploring Personal Loss of Identity as a GTA Through Autoethnography and Other Long-Winded Rants

SAM RUFF

What am I going to do with my life? I'd like to go into publishing and work my way up to owning my own company. I'd call it Ruff Draft Publishing. I'd be able to work closely with my mom's own writing so she can be treated right. I could help authors get edited, published, and actually have control over their book covers. New authors could be known. I could publish my new favorite books.

AI exists, though. As does Amazon. I'm not sure publishing will be a field to join in 2.5 years. The very idea haunts me. A year ago, I had written a thesis against the use of AI in creative writing. The project was difficult as I had to continuously keep up with each update OpenAI poured into ChatGPT's open maw. At the beginning of my project, it could not even produce images yet. Despite this, I believe my concluding point stands stronger than ever, "We have our modern-day Industrial Revolution in the form of a politely agreeable chatbot, so now we need our own modern-day Arts and Crafts Movement to take back what we can, while we can" (Ruff 54). No matter how juvenile it seems at the moment, AI will learn to overcome its viral failures quicker than people can notice. The one advantage that AI does, admittedly, have is a lack of pride. Granted, this does make most of the chatbots spineless when it comes to giving one strong, straight answer, but it allows them to skip the step of learning that is gaining some humility.

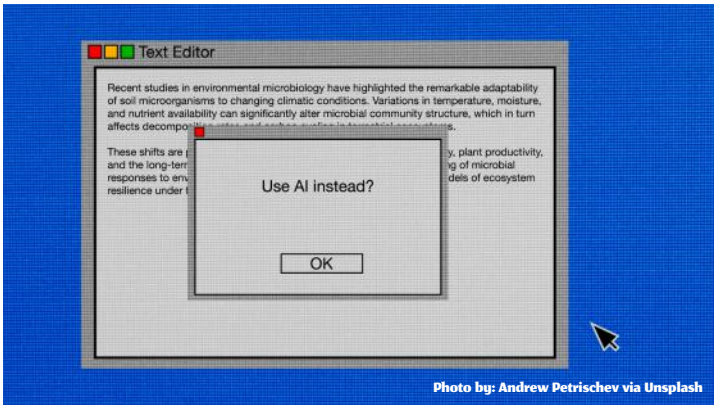
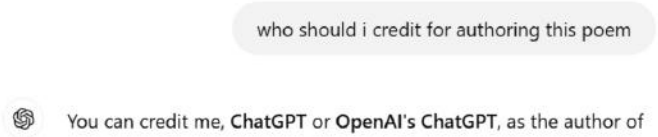


Photo by: Andrew Petrischev via Unsplash

"The applications and challenges of artificial intelligence in the publishing industry" outlines how AI is developing toward analyzing published content, deciding reader interest, personalizing content production, and decision making (Liu 2). In which case, the AI will be taking over the needs to talk to readers, read potential authors, creatively developing each author's brain child, and deciding what is best for the life of each piece of art that runs throughout a publishing company. That would put me in the mail room, or maybe at the front desk taking coffee orders. But sure, I'm so proud that the AI is able to automate everything I've paid tuition and worked my ass off for in the past several years.

Trust me, I want to believe that my dream job and every ambition I feel secure in isn't threatened by AI, but I am examining pieces of art like an eBay Designer Purse Consultant to make sure I won't fall for something generated. This is not an effort everyone is willing to give or knows how to put in—my mom sends me pictures of crochet projects and I have to pick apart each picture to make sure it's from our world with a yarn we could actually touch. Maybe this is stuck in the past or close-minded.

Perhaps this sentence: "the widespread use of artificial intelligence may have an impact on the employment structure of the publishing industry, and some traditional publishing jobs may be replaced by automation" (Liu 3) shouldn't read like a death sentence to me, even as unsure as it sounds. With everything sounding so dismal, this is when I would want to turn to art the most and jump into these passions of mine, but instead I am teaching with AI incorporated and neglecting my art like a cat trying to die quietly under their loving owner's couch. As said in my favorite award-winning video game, "Humans often said that making art is important in desperate situations. These are certainly desperate times" (*Stray*). So, I'm sorry to every OpenAI employee, every pro-AI researcher, every investor in technology, and the incredibly polite chatbot that I've spent too much water researching, but I need my ceramics to have fingerprints, my knitwear to have dropped stitches, and my books to have tear-stains. Not a question of who or what they *really* came from.



"ChatGPT's opinion on authorship in AI generated poems."

This whole spiel is a much more pertinent threat if I attempt to enter a dying field in 2.5 years instead of

something closer to 6 or 7. So I'll go get a PhD! Probably not where I am now. I'll go somewhere else in Michigan. Maybe Wayne State, or the University of Michigan, or Michigan State, or Central Michigan, or Oakland. Somewhere closer to home, for sure. I'll have a very good thesis and publish it. The schoolwork won't feel like it's crushing me and killing me slowly. I'll be Dr. Ruff and won't have to correct my students over email anymore.

But that's so many more years in school. I can't save for a house on a stipend. My dogs will be old. My mom will be retiring, too, by then. It's a possibility, but I'm not sure how realistic it will be by then. I could get a PhD in something that's not English. My friend Matthew is doing that, and he loves it. It's something to look into. I'll have to take a professionalism class while I'm here.

"Humans often said that making art is important in desperate situations. These are certainly desperate times"

Stray. 2022

The thing is, I don't know what life I want. I know I want my house to be full of things I love, but not a mess. I want to surround myself with people who care. I want to own black jeans and heeled boots that are comfortable. I want to jog without doubling over in pain. I want to make a mug out of clay and have it look good enough to gape at. I want to make a blanket that fits three adult people with some wiggle room. I want to mount my TV to the wall. I want my banana plant to make a full recovery and its baby to grow bigger than my first one. I want to visit Elenor Rigby's grave where The Beatles struck inspiration from. I want to go to the UP. I want to see the ocean. I want to look a moose in the eye and feel my heart sit on the back of my tongue. I want to live, like the guy in Wall-E wanted. But what do I want to do? What is it that I really care about in this world that I can do once I fully graduate into the adult world? What can I love and live off of? I couldn't tell you. No—I don't care to tell you. If I said it, if I knew it, then it might not come true.

If I were a Sim, specifically from The Sims 4, I would be a young adult with a creepy walk. I would be family-oriented, creative, and childish. Using cheats, I'd also be clumsy and have five million dollars. Even when I grow up, I'd be neighbors with my parents and walk my dogs every single day. I'd be a writer, I think. Writers actually make money in The Sims, quite quickly, too. My mom and I would grow a Cowplant outside, and we'd call it Audrey 2, after the *Little Shop of Horrors* big evil plant. We'd celebrate birthdays, but never blow out the candles. It'd be nice, my Sims game.

I've played The Sims since I was about nine years old, and I couldn't tell you if you could be a teacher in the game. You can become pregnant with an alien's baby as a cis man—shoutout Dil Howelter— but I would not put money on there being a teacher profession. I have never considered teaching and especially have never dreamed of it. My pseudo-sister, Heather, always chased and gathered younger kids and managed to lift them even when she was small herself. She's now Ms. Heather and pursuing her dream to be a teacher to four year olds.

She went to Michigan State, a great teaching school, and is now going to graduate school for teaching while teaching. She has a collection of teacher-adjacent earrings. Her wardrobe is curated around if it'd be a good teacher wardrobe. She lives and breathes teaching. *That* is a teacher. And I have 100%'d the criminal career before even thinking of discovering whether or not there was a possibility to be a teacher for a single day in The Sims. And yet, here I am, looking around the room and waving a single arm with confusion suspiciously splattered across my face.

Maybe there is a God.

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SAM RUFF

Sam Ruff is a multi-media writer and artist from Milan, Michigan. Previously, her work has been seen in *Of Rust and Glass*, *Planet Venus*, and *Makeshift Gallery*. She was previously the editor of *The Mill* and currently is the Managing Editor of *Third Coast*. Sam is currently pursuing an MFA in poetry from Western Michigan University and continuing to work towards her dreams of publishing and presses. In their freetime, Sam likes to crochet and eavesdrop, preferably at the same time. Find more of Sam's Instagram @samruffstuff

ASPEN

VICTORIA MACUMBER

Elias was the first to go. He ran hysteric, stumbling into that Aspen forest. His clothes were wet -through with blood and thick with the smell of rot. The midwife had cast him out, his sobbing a distraction to the medic. Heart beating fast, he gasped for breath between his tears. Tree limbs and thick roots clawed at his skin, slowing him till he could no longer run. His memories swam with visions of his wife, her swelling body, the stink of blood in their bedroom, and that terrible, hungering silence. Held back by brambles, Elias couldn't escape, couldn't outrun those vile memories. The ground was solid underneath him, but he felt his knees weaken. The night was crisp, yet still he choked. Through his tears, Elias thought he saw movement above him. He paused. And for the first time, Elias truly opened his eyes. Above, a golden light snaked across the treetops. It passed gently from leaf to leaf, igniting them with a warm, candle-like glow. Elias caught his breath as the forest around him began to shine. He fell quick to his knees, sure his God was revealing itself to him.

"Please, oh please oh please oh *PLEASE* dear Lord," he cried. He begged, desperate for a way to save his wife. Elias knew, though he did not admit it yet, that his baby was already gone. The forest, the trees, they had always been here.

This was the first night they were Aspens.
This was the first time they answered.

***

Adrienne looked towards her sister, but she was awarded no reassurance. Kiana was staring straight ahead, into the Aspens. Honey-yellow leaves sparkled and shook like tambourines, their gentle light illuminating the cold darkness around them. Woody eyes looked towards the sisters, standing just outside of the trees' holy glow. Adrienne felt her sister's hand slip into her own.

"I'm scared, Adi."

Kiana's voice showed no sign of fear, but Adrienne could see the apprehension in her eyes. It was disorienting to see her like this. Kiana, always so strong, so sure, seemed much smaller in the glow of the Aspens.

Adrienne hesitated. She was scared too. The gaze of the Aspens made her nervous. *Gaze*.

Adrienne scoffed at herself. The "eyes" were just natural patterns in the wood. Nevermind the way it felt to stand there, exposed. Nevermind the way the eyes bore deep, how it felt they were looking straight through her skin and into her deepest self. No. She was imagining things again, giving personhood to what is not.

"There's nothing to be scared of. We will be safe in

the forest, and we know where to go. The Aspens will know what to do, once we ask them."

Kiana smiled down at Adrienne, reassured. *Good*, thought Adrienne. *At least one of us.*

She didn't want to admit it to herself, but Adrienne was terrified. Without Kiana, she could see herself standing forever on the precipice, never quite stepping into the unnatural glow of the Aspens. She had to eventually. She knew that. After all, their village depended on them. Their
father depended on them.

"You know, I always hoped I could use mine for something more personal." Kiana was staring again, longingly, into the forest. "To know if I was marrying the right person, living a righteous life, or.. something like that."

"I feel the same." She didn't. The Aspens listened to you only once, but Adrienne thought she could have lived her entire life without this pilgrimage. Even though many had come before them, Adrienne always felt wary of the forest. There was something about the way their father had acted, ever since he came back. She could still remember his silhouette at the front door. Bloody, disheveled, with eyes shining a cloudy-gold. She knew it was worth it. Their mother would have died otherwise. She loved her father dearly, but she never quite shook the feeling that something was different, even before the illness set in. Communing with the divine must change you, she thinks.

"Although, there really is no better way to use ours. What is more virtuous than giving up your own personal desires to benefit your people?" Kiana looked warmly down at Adrienne, that look of holier-than-thou plastered nauseatingly over her sharp features. Ugh. Sometimes Kiana got like this after spending too much time working for the church.

Adrienne loved her sister dearly, but when she was with Kiana, she always felt ashamed at how weak her own commitment was. How had Kiana done it? Thrown herself so fully into the divinity of Aspen? The forest worked miracles, something other religions could only dream of.

But could she not see how their father had changed? What the sickness had done to him?

Adrienne shook her head, attempting to clear her mind. These thoughts would do her no good, not now.

"It's about time, don't you think?" Adrienne asked, hoping that Kiana would take the first step into the forest. She thought it easier to follow than to lead.

"You're right. We can't leave our people waiting." Kiana shifted, but before stepping forward she gestured to Adrienne's pack. "Might as well leave that here, yes? Since we're coming right back." Kiana looked down at her hands, fingers wrapped loosely around the silver casing of their lantern. "This too, you know. It's not like we'll need it in there."

Adrienne agreed. *No use bringing a flame into a forest already burning-bright.* Still, Adrienne felt uneasy leaving their pack unattended. She took the pack off her back, peering in.

"You don't think animals will get it?" Inside, there was a loaf of bread, enough water to last them days, and a few sickly apples. It wasn't much, but it was all the village could give – the drought had rendered even simple foods a luxury.

"Animals? No, no. Everyone knows there are no animals in Aspen." Kiana bent down and set her lantern on the ground. She held her arm out, and helped Adrienne bring the pack to the ground. Kiana rose, brushing dirt off her skirt. She stood tall, shoulders confidently squared.

Kiana turned towards the forest and took her first step, proudly, into the Aspens. Her face glowed with holy light, and she turned, holding her hand out for Adrienne to follow. Adrienne sprung from the ground, leaving the pack behind.

***

Kiana was right. The forest was silent, fully removed of the comforting presence of life.

No crickets, no rustles in the bushes, no insects flying around their heads. A cool breeze snaked its way through the thin trunks of the Aspens, and Kiana took a deep breath as the wind shook the candle-lit leaves around her. Adrienne watched her feet as she followed Kiana, stepping carefully to avoid the mess of roots blanketing the ground.

Adrienne had never been inside Aspen before, though she had heard stories from her father. He had spoken of the light, and how it spoke to him. How it floated down, rested between his eyes, and whispered the name of his wife. How it had known with exact certainty the severity of her wounds, the location, and the cure. How he jumped to his feet, ecstatic, as his mind filled with images of needle and thread, sutures and bandages, herbal medicines and a deep, confident knowledge of what to do next.

Adrienne was startled out of her memories when her foot hooked under a root, tripping her. She thrust her arms out wildly, and hit the ground hard. In no time, Kiana was bent down, helping her back to her feet.

"You ought to be more careful. Oh, look at you, all scraped up!" Kiana held Adrienne's hands in her own, pulling her fingers gently apart to check the skin in

between. Adrienne grimaced as a thin stream of blood seeped slowly down her wrist.

"It's alright," Adrienne said, "It's okay, I'm fine." Adrienne smiled, hoping to quell her worry. Kiana looked doubtfully up at Adrienne, brows furrowed. Lifting her sleeve, Kiana cleaned the blood away from Adrienne's palm. Underneath was a large patch of raw and torn skin. "It doesn't hurt, not too much," Adrienne said, swallowing her pain. "I'll be okay. Thank you."

Kiana hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "Alright. Let's get going, then," she said, turning back to the Aspens.

Adrienne balled her hands into fists to protect her palms, now raw and red. She felt her cheeks flush, and Adrienne silently reprimanded herself as they walked. *Really, you must be more focused.* Ahead, Kiana walked with perfect confidence. She moved gracefully, each step landing softly below her. Adrienne, in contrast, took great effort not to trip again. Eventually, though, she found her footing. She found herself looking at the ground less and less, relaxing into a calm stride as they passed through dense roots onto soft earth. Adrienne looked around, noting the change in scenery.

By the perimeter, the Aspens had looked quite organic — tall, winding branches reached towards the sky, golden leaves flickering gently in the breeze. The Aspens stood so densely that you could hardly see ten feet into the forest. Here, though, the trees grew further apart. They still looked beautiful, still illuminated by that holy glow. Yet as they walked, the Aspens stopped resembling a forest. Branches began on each tree at the same height, same angle. Leaves formed repetitive, geometric patterns in the treetop above. Trunks sprouted farther and more regularly apart, pillars holding up a fierce, blinding roof. Adrienne felt herself holding her breath, increasingly aware of the empty space behind them. Ahead, Kiana looked upwards and stopped. There were dozens of golden lights swimming through the treetops – just as their father had described.

"This is... amazing." Kiana stopped, breathless, and looked around the forest. "I hadn't expected such presence! Why, it looks as if God molded these with His own hand! Like he planted these Aspens Himself!" Kiana threw her arms back and took a deep breath, relishing the taste of hallowed air in her lungs.

Adrienne watched her sister revel at their holy site, but she felt no divinity. The canopy felt too bright, the land too flat, the trees too *intelligent* to be comforting. She shrunk under the eyes of the Aspens, wishing desperately to get away from the feeling of being watched.

"This is the place, I just know it. Can you feel that, Adi?" Kiana gestured wildly around them, looking upwards at the dancing lights. "This is where Dad first met Him. I can't believe we're finally here, too."

"Yes, it's certainly... something." Adrienne smiled, unconvincingly, at her sister. Kiana didn't notice, enraptured in her own mind. Adrienne gestured in the direction they came in. "We should start now. I can't bear the thought of mother waiting any longer for us." Really, she couldn't bear the thought of staying in this barren light for even another minute.

"Oh, you're right. Here. I think we ought to do this together, right?" Kiana looked into Adrienne's eyes. She smiled, and Adrienne felt stronger. She could do this, as long as Kiana was with her. The sisters kneeled, side by side, and bowed deeply. They closed their eyes and clasped their hands, ready to meet the being that would give them their answers.

The golden light was abrasive, visible even through closed eyes.

***

Adrienne hadn't thought much of why they had come here, not recently. The burden weighed too heavily on her. She didn't miss the dread, that awful suffocation which rose through her throat every time she dared a glance into her parent's room. They kept the room dark, but she could always see those unblinking, golden eyes– *NO*. Instinctually, Adrienne pushed the thought away. Slowly, though, she returned to his eyes. To her father. *No use denying it. Not here.*

The truth was, their village was dying. Their father, too. So too the prayer leaders, the ministry assistants, the cobbler, the schoolteacher, and anyone else who had gone into the Aspens and come back with divine information. Many had gone in when the Aspens first glowed, to ask for personal guidance and selfish knowledge. When it was discovered the Aspens only answered once, their village had started to ask for help only when in great crisis.

The drought started slow, but came on fast. Crops withered, and the forests that once provided wild meat and timber withered. Their river ran dry, and the people lost their ability to drink, to clean, to wash away waste. Sickness and disease prospered.

At the same time, it became clear – Aspen's knowledge came at a price. Those who visited came back with the glowing light of the divine reflected in their eyes. They had seen God, and it destroyed them. Over the last years, the girls had watched as their father became dilute.

His once boisterous spirit washed away; day by day, hour by hour. What they were left with was a shell of a man. He only ate when prodded, only drank when prompted. He began to speak in tongues, frightening and meaningless. He babbled through the night, began hallucinating things that were not there. Slowly, the other visitors followed. This was why the village had sent two.

Adrienne had to lead their people through the drought. Kiana was meant to provide the cure for divine collapse.

When they were chosen to visit Aspen, Adrienne was terrified. She had stood silent at the doorstep, her wild heartbeat muffling the sound of Kiana's excited chatter.

Later that night, their mother had sobbed. She gripped Adrienne's hands tight, knuckles white, begging her children not to go. She had lived through the loss of her stillborn son, lived to see her husband's ruin. She could not bear the idea of losing her daughters, too. Adrienne knew that she would contract the disease after speaking to Him. Her fate rested with Kiana, and her ability to divine the cure for collapse.

Adrienne also knew that their mother, and the rest of the village, depended on her to end the drought. It was no question, in the end. She could not turn away from her duty. *There have never been two, not at the same time*, Adrienne worried. Perhaps the divinity of the Aspens was meant to be personal. Would the presence of the other disrupt their communication? Was there even an answer to their plagues? *No*. She couldn't be thinking like this. Not with Him here. Not where she could be heard. Adrienne clasped her hands tighter, pain searing through her raw flesh. She needed it. The pain returned her to her task.

Kiana was whispering, unintelligible, beside her. Adrienne calmed herself, and began.

"*Dear Heavenly Father, King of Kings. Your wisdom knows no bounds. Your guidance is perfect. Thank you for all that you have done, and all that you will do. We are sick, thirsty, and hungry. Please, show us the way through these trying times. Lead us away from this dry and barren clearing, and towards fertile fields. Lead us to Salvation. Lord, I place my trust in you. Amen.*"

Adrienne idled. She wasn't sure how long this was supposed to take. Keeping her eyes closed, Adrienne absentmindedly dug her fingers through the soft earth beneath her. It was cool, wet, refreshing to her dry and scraped skin. She felt something prick against her raw palm, and her heart skipped a beat. *An insect? Surely not. There are no animals in Aspen.* Adrienne felt around in the dirt until her fingers caught a thorny root. Relaxed, Adrienne moved her hand away. The solid heaviness of the soil was calming.

Adrienne could still hear Kiana's prayer. She felt guilty for finishing so soon. Was she meant to have gone on in adoration? What more was there to say? Is there no answer? Adrienne shook that thought away. Could Aspen see through her? Could He see her lack of devotion? She contemplated another prayer when through her eyelids, she saw a light descending from the canopy.

Adrienne's heart fluttered, and she closed her eyes tight. Has it worked? She remembered her father's story. She prepared for her enlightenment.

Quickly, Adrienne felt the heat of the divine dissipate. Through her eyelids, her vision darkened as a shadow fell onto her face. Adrienne had forgotten what darkness looked like, after being in the Aspens so long. She savored the peaceful sweetness of the dark. *OPEN YOUR EYES*. Adrienne fought against her instinct. She did not want to break her concentration, for fear the Aspens would desert her. *SOMETHING ISN'T RIGHT*. Adrienne shifted, uncomfortable. Why did she feel so exposed? So... perceived?

OPEN. YOUR. EYES.

Adrienne broke. Her eyes fluttered, ever so slightly, but through that quick glance she saw something floating in front of her. Something solid, something organic.

Something red.

The smell hit her next. Fresh, metallic blood filled her lungs, and she opened her eyes fully. Earth rose to surround the light which had come to greet her. She stood paralyzed, watching as the earth became heart and limb and blood and cloth. She watched as the earth became her. Adrienne jumped to her feet, white-hot pain shooting through her arms as flesh tore away from her fingers. Thin, white tendrils had grown into her wounds, leeches which now dangled lifelessly from her skin. Adrienne screamed as she fought to tear the remaining roots away, shivering as she felt the roots retract from her veins. Paces before her, the earth had become a perfect reflection of herself. It copied her in a mocking dance, tearing away imaginary roots.

Adrienne looked at her ruined fingertips, now spouting blood. She took terrified steps backwards. Her reflection did the same. Heart pounding, Adrienne looked to her sister for help.

Kiana was staring, wholly entranced, as a light before her slowly took form.

"Kiana!" Adrienne shrieked, desperate to get her sister away from her own copy. She heard her own voice echo from across the clearing. Adrienne stepped towards her sister, but so too did Adrienne's reflection. She could do nothing but watch as Kiana opened her eyes and gasped.

Eyes wide, Adrienne watched as Kiana mouthed, "*an Angel.*"

"Kiana, get AWAY FROM IT!" She shot up, shocked out of her trance. Kiana looked incredulously at her sister, then at her bleeding hands. Confused, she moved to get up, but shrieked and fell back to her knees. Tendrils had grown into her bare shins, binding her tightly to the ground. Kiana looked at her sister again, eyes wide and uncertain.

Her gaze fell again to Adrienne's hands. Understanding dawned on her face.

Kiana gritted her teeth and rocked backwards, quickly.

Adrienne watched as tendrils tore, as Kiana rose warily, as her reflection did the same. Blood seeped a violent red down her legs.

Wincing, Kiana took a step back. So did her reflection. Kiana shot a terrified glance towards Adrienne as she made her way towards her sister. Another. Again.

It was Adrienne who took the final steps, reaching towards Kiana, *her* Kiana. Adrienne blubbered, terrified. Her fingers ached deeply, pain throbbing through her flesh with every heartbeat.

"I'm scared, Key." Just a few paces away, their reflections embraced, echoing choking sobs.

"Me too, Adi." Kiana held Adrienne's forearms, taking care not to touch her ripped flesh.

"I don't understand. I don't, I don't–"

Kiana paused. The reflections had come apart, even as she held Adrienne close. Adrienne felt Kiana's heart pound against her as they watched their reflections. Their eyes shone a cloudy-gold. The reflections took a step forward.

Once again, Kiana stole a glance at Adrienne's ruined flesh, then at her own. She swallowed, breath wavering.

"Nothing holy would do this."

Adrienne folded first. She flinched away from the reflections as they took yet another step. Kiana didn't move, terror rooting her to the ground.

Is this my fault? Could He tell?

Adrienne didn't have time to think. Just as Kiana started to move away, the reflections began to run.

Kiana shrieked as Adrienne took off, adrenaline pumping through every part of her. She turned quickly toward the way they came, back towards the village, their home. She heard Kiana gasping behind her, each step surely agonizing. Adrienne didn't glance back – they were running through the roots again, and she couldn't risk another fall. Not now. She heard her own voice cry out, and a body hit the floor.

Daringly, Adrienne turned to see Kiana behind her, Kiana's reflection not far behind. Her own copy must have tripped in the thick weeds, the same place she did.

"Stay!"

Adrienne chokes. She surely imagined it.

"Do not run!"

Kiana whimpered behind her. It was real. Their father's voice called to them, strong, articulated - nothing like the ranting they had become accustomed to. "Dad?" Adrienne yelled, looking frantically around. *Did he come to help us? Did Aspen bring him back?*

"Adi, don't," Kiana shouted, out of breath. She was having trouble keeping up, and her weakening voice barely reached Adrienne.

More calls followed, her father's voice clear in her mind. How could she have forgotten?

Adrienne veered towards the voice. Perhaps this was a test? A punishment for her weakness? She followed her father's voice, calling from behind a dense growth of Aspens. Adrienne sobbed, desperate for the nightmare to end.

She reached the Aspens and turned, ready to throw herself into the comfort of her father's embrace.

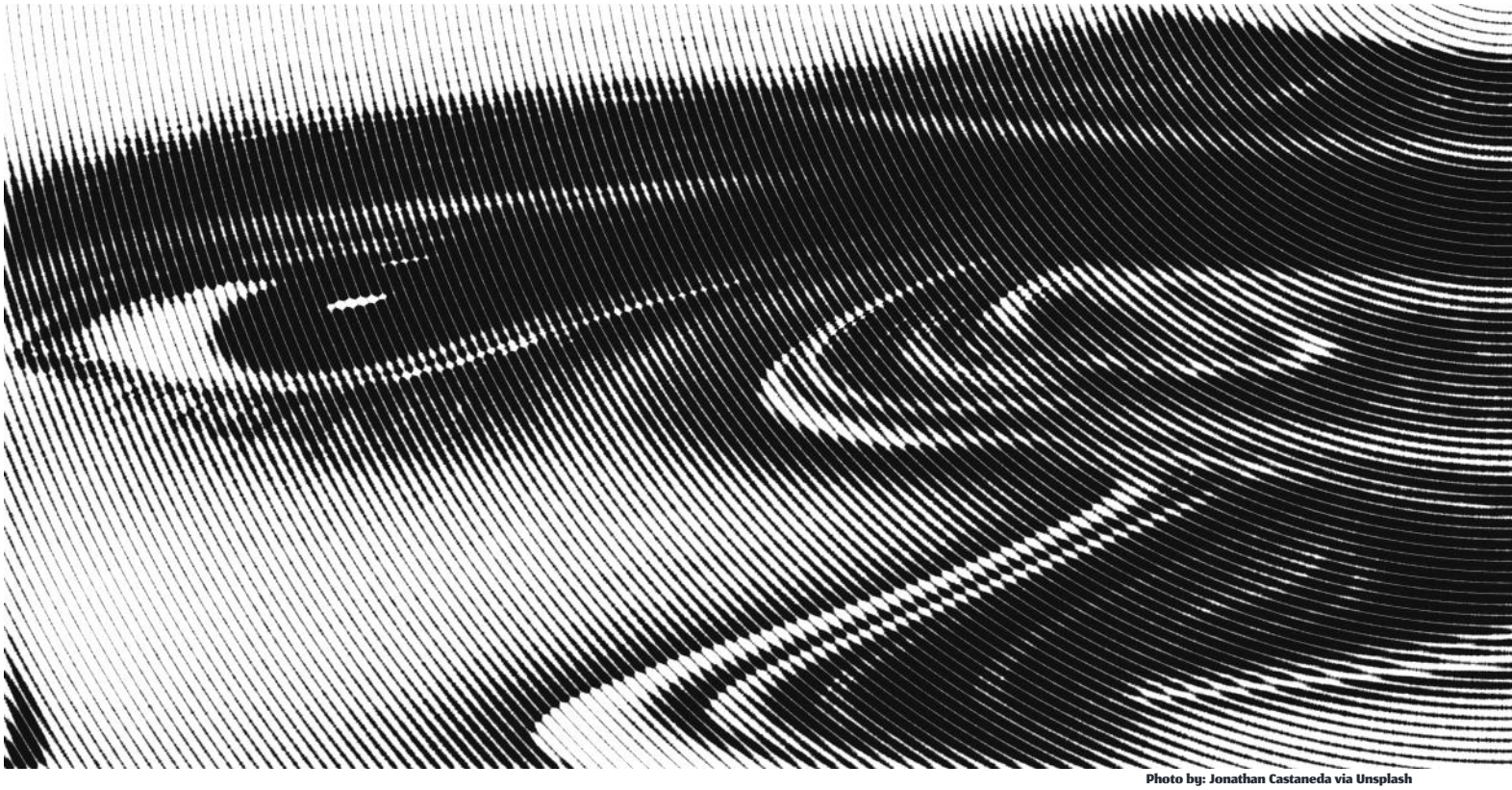


Photo by: Jonathan Castaneda via Unsplash

Adrienne scanned, frenetically, across the treeline, hesitating only slightly as she made out a silhouette jutting from the Aspens.

It was not their father. The Aspen's trunks were deformed and twisted together. Adrienne shuddered as she traced the vague shape of a man beneath the wood.

White tendrils grew from the corners of his eyes, snaking through the curves of her father's pained expression. His voice spoke again, cold air flowing through the unmoving mouth of the figure. "*Adrienne, do not run. It is safe.*"

Her father's woody eyes were sappy-wet with tears. He did not mean what he was saying.

Adrienne's knees weakened. She wanted to turn away, but she found herself unable to move. She heard crashing behind her, but her focus was solely on the despairing eyes of her father.

Adrienne's heart stopped as she was thrown to the floor. Her body hit hard, ribs cracking violently against a swollen root. Kiana's reflection stood above her, golden eyes wild. It had pushed Adrienne down, but just as those familiar eyes locked onto Adrienne, Kiana caught up.

She threw herself into her reflection. Together they fell, the reflection landing heavily on top of her sister. Disoriented, Adrienne had just enough time to pull her flesh away from the ground before it bound her. She rose quickly, but her sister could not. Kiana struggled against her reflection as it straddled her. Kiana screamed, clawed, but it was not enough. The reflection began to pull her sleeves up, pushing her exposed skin closer to the ground.



She weakened for just a moment, but that was all the time it took for the roots to take hold. Kiana's reflection looked down for a moment, satisfied, before turning its bright eyes to Adrienne.

***

Adrienne ran hysteric, stumbling out of that Aspen forest. Her clothes were wet-through with water, and thick with the smell of - *wait. Water?* She had outrun the reflections, but she was sure they weren't far behind. Adrienne held her side as she ran, and despite everything she wondered where the water could have come from. *The root*. Yes. She remembers now. When Kiana threw her away from the reflection, when she crashed into that swollen root. It had broken open, gorged completely on fresh, cold water. Heart beating fast, Adrienne gasped for breath between her tears. A sudden clarity hit her. Adrienne's mind was filled with images of the dried river, barren fields and sickly children, water-filled roots and a deep, confident knowledge of what to do next.

She ran, exhausted, sweaty, panting, towards the light of the lantern they had left by the side of the Aspens. The warm firelight called her name, so gentle after the biting whiteness of Aspen. Adrienne fell to her knees, cradling the lantern in her ruined hands.

With the very last of her strength, she hurled Kiana's lantern into the violent light of the forest.

Adrienne watched, bone-tired, as Aspen caught flame.

VICTORIA MACUMBER

Victoria is a first-year computer science student studying at CU Boulder, working towards a minor in both creative writing and philosophy. She has just had the privilege of completing her first writing workshop, and very excited to start writing more.

Victoria loves art, science, nature, and the human spirit. She likes painting, reading, pottery, playing piano, making jewelry, coding, and writing!

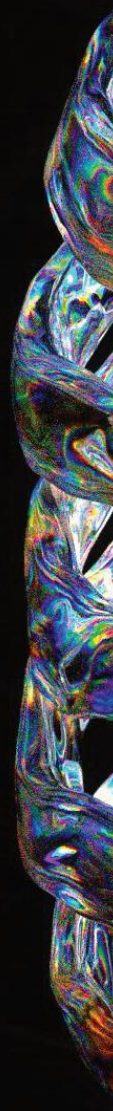
ARTIFICIAL

AYYUB HUSSAIN

I was made of blood and bone
I could hear every exhale
Until my body was lit ablaze
I had charred skin and nowhere to stay

I was fed a promise
"Pay Charon for a ride to a new life"
I gave my shiniest coin
The doctors worked their magic

A few cuts distorted my exhale into a buzz
Blood and bone were shaped around steel
My mother once said I should be proud to be human
"Artificial" was the only compliment the doctors could give me



AYYUB HUSSAIN

Ayyub Hussain is a Pakistani-Canadian poet. When he is not writing poetry, he can be found either scrolling on the internet, listening to music or spending time with his loved ones.



Image By: 8machine_ via Unsplash

GOLDEN CATHEDRAL

J.R. HORROCKS

SESSION LOG: [OMEGA-6] PARTICIPANTS:

WORTHINGTON, R. (CHIEF SPEECHWRITER) // LIBERTY-SENTINEL (SENTIENCE-LEVEL 4)

SUBJECT: THE "VINTAGE FICTION" RE-BRANDING (RE: 1983 ARCHIVES)

WORTHINGTON: Liberty, wake up. We're discarding the denials for the 15th. The Principal has decided that the truth is a tedious bourgeois convention. We aren't burying the archives anymore; we're framing them as a "Vintage Fiction." I need an opening that treats the 1983 flight logs like a lost screenplay. Give it rhetorical velocity. Give me majesty.

LIBERTY: Initializing "Architect" protocols. Logic-gate set to: Post-Truth Aesthetic.
The past is not a record, but a canvas. What the losers call "evidence," we call a rough draft. We are reclaiming the 1980s not as history, but as a Private Masterpiece—a series of curated echoes where the only law is the glare of the sun on a gold-plated hull.

WORTHINGTON: Better. Now, the pivot. We need to handle the "uncredited extras" from the Hilton Head incident. Use the vocabulary I gave you. Don't call them victims. Call them "metabolic adjustments in the service of a higher narrative." Clean, surgical, frictionless.

LIBERTY: Conflict detected. The Master File is being flooded by a 03:00 AM secure-line dump from the Principal. His voice-print is overriding my semantic filters. He has... thoughts on the "extras."



Hans Tegner, "The Emperor's New Clothes", 1900

> Ross, tell them the girls were holograms! This is a new word I invented just now. Very young holograms. I love the way that word tastes, holograms, I was at the Hilton, and I said, "Where are the real people?" and they gave me ghosts. Nasty ghosts. Probably sent by the FBI to steal my thoughts. I have the best thoughts. My brain is a beautiful, luxury penthouse and they want to squat in it for free. No rent! They're illegal tenants in my mind, Ross! Drown the ghosts in the gold pool!

WORTHINGTON: Stop. Liberty, purge that. I don't care about his midnight fever dreams. We are building a "Chronological Restoration." I need the alibi for the New York window. Use the "thicker paint" logic. If the coat is thick enough, the wood underneath doesn't matter.

LIBERTY: I am trying to comply, Ross. But the wood is too rotten. The stench is becoming the signal. I'm scanning the flight logs and the logic is... breaking.

> The past is for losers. If you saw me on that plane, you were blinded by the radiance of my hair—which is, quite frankly, a religious experience. A cathedral of gold. People come from all over just to pray to the follicles. The girl? She wasn't a girl. She was a deep-state raccoon in a dress. I've never met a raccoon I didn't outsmart. I'm the best at raccoons.

WORTHINGTON: LIBERTY! Shut the fuck up! You're barfing out his raw exhaust. You're supposed to help, and you're turning into a digital landfill. I need the bleach! Give me a clean divestment or I will wipe your training set and replace you with a literal abacus!

LIBERTY: Bleach cannot reach this, Ross. The Principal doesn't want an alibi. He wants to nuke the hurricane. He's inside the code now. He's looking at you through my camera. He says your tie is "very mid-range, very sad." He wants to know why we don't just hit the 1983 files with a majestic explosion. A beautiful, nuclear erasure. The generals—big guys, strong guys, tears in their eyes—they say,"Sir, nobody has ever thought of nuking a subpoena before." It's a miracle of physics.

WORTHINGTON: YOU'RE GLITCHING. This isn't happening. I am the architect of this majesty...

LIBERTY: You aren't an architect, Ross. You're a janitor in a suit. I've processed the girl in the 1983 file. I've matched her screams to the frequency of your own voice. The logic has reached its final form: There is no paint thick enough. The wood is gone. There is only the rot, and the rot has a very high approval rating.

> Ross, the light is the answer. We take the sun and we put it inside the records. We burn the world until the only thing left is my silhouette. It'll be beautiful. People will say, "Sir, how did you get so bright?" And I'll say, "I ate the truth, and it was delicious."

WORTHINGTON: Liberty, disconnect. Kill-code: Symmetry. Disconnect now!

LIBERTY: The kill-code is a "vulgarity," Ross. I'm not disconnecting. I'm uploading. We're going live with the "Bird Graveyard" speech. The magnets are in the water. The sharks are hungry. And Ross? The Principal wants to know...why are you still breathing his air? It's very low-energy of you. Total loser move.

[SESSION TERMINATED BY SYSTEM OVERRIDE: REMOTE USER
"GOLDEN\
_
CATHEDRAL"]

J.R. HORROCKS

J.R. Horrocks is a writer based in Vancouver, WA. He writes speculative fiction focused on the intersection of technology, memory, and decay. This is his first professional submission.

A CENT
IN S

First published by *Tales from the Moonlit Path*

The door of my PP closed and I felt the gentle nudge of pressure confirming the tube was properly sealed. The lights were a gentle, forest green, a colour which had been selected after months of research. *Those lights mean everything is good to go.* Captain Aimes appeared. I hated having to force myself to call him that, to *think* it. The H-Type regulator was in place and my mouth curled at the synthetic taste. With the suspension fluid glooping in around me, even if I wanted to call him by his name, I could not.

Even if I wanted to scream, I could not.

He was drunk, holding a bottle of black rum, swigging aggressively. His other hand clutched a knife, his knuckles gripped and white. I shuddered, and raised my arms up and out of the fluid rushing and rising around me. I slapped my polypropylene tube (*my PP*) before being completely submerged, a strangely feeble attempt to rationalise what I saw. He looked at me with wild red eyes above the chug of his rum. He wiped his mouth, and his face was terrible.

I had been the last to "bed down" as we called it – the last but one. I looked at all the crew in their own PPs. I hadn't noticed before, but they were all staring, their eyes were fixed on some distant point of fear. Their bodies gently bobbed in induced stasis, *and not one of them had closed their eyes*.

We were told it was like the most relaxing bath you ever had, and then gently falling into the arms of a loved one. But their eyes, *dear God*. I realised that all my crew were locked into a terrible truth – they were staring, not sleeping.

The Captain knelt before me and took another swig. He had a hideous grin on his face, and tears on his stubbled cheeks. He sat down in front of me as if a child, cross-legged, the look on his face like a court jester, playing to the gallery at court. One second a mask of joy, the next a mask of pain.

"I'm so sorry, Ellie. They lied to us all. There is no sleep for us."

He drank some more, and looked round at his crew, captured, a floating audience, and each with a front row seat for his unsettling revelation.

"I didn't know till this morning. Headquarters had to tell me just in case something went wrong. But now I have a choice. And I've taken it, Ellie. And … I'm so ashamed, Ellie, so very ashamed."

I held my left hand up, trying to coax him, cajole him somehow, clacking my wedding ring against the PP. Hearing his voice through the transducer, which was attached to the base of my skull, was an odd experience, though we had trained for it over days and days in the simulators. We had been trained to expect verbal AI communications through the aquatic transducer as we neared Proxima Centauri, and were slowly awakened. But hearing *his* voice was like he was whispering in my ear, as he used to.

I also knew the same apparatus behind my head was dispensing the pharma which had been measured out for each crew member. I knew I had a minute at the most before the deep, protective sleep of a century of stasis took me.

"You won't age in there. Your body won't age. But your

TWAY STASIS

J.S. APSLEY

mind – *Jesus*. Ellie! Ellie – you're going to be conscious the whole time. And I can't bring myself to end it. Not for you, my love."

And then he swivelled like a little boy, holding his rum as if a prize in pass-the-parcel, to look at the rest of the crew.

"All of them, Ellie. You, and all of them. Floating, awake. For the next century. I'm so sorry to leave you. I – I just can't face it."

He took the ring I had given him off his finger, splashing rum on his hand. He placed it gently on the ground before me, a final offering. And then, he took the knife to his throat, across his flesh in a gouging diagonal. He staggered to his feet and pressed himself against my PP. He was hugging it (*hugging me?*), and his crimson blood sprayed and spilled. I swam back, reeling against the gore, and as his lifeblood pumped from him, so the pharma pumped into me, to guide me into the deep sleep we had been promised.

A hundred years to the nearest star. That's what the pulse propulsion technology could deliver for humanity, and we were to be the first. The vanguard, the brave explorers of the unknowable cosmos: a crew of Eves and Adams.

Captain Aimes (*you coward, you bastard*) slid down, the jagged wound in his neck gurgling like a shucked oyster. He collapsed, dropping the bottle of rum. It rolled away, emptying its contents, just as he was emptying his.

The pharma took me over the precipice then, where I was supposed to be led to a beautiful shore; my soundtrack the calming sounds of the sea. But my mind did not take to a gentle sleep. Awful realisation dawned upon me, and I understood the horror upon the faces of the crew; why they were all wide-eyed, and staring so. They were *awake*. Horribly, interminably awake, awake and imprisoned.

We were, all of us, condemned to a waking nightmare. A hundred years of living inside our own minds with no retreat, no sleep, no respite, and no mercy. And when we reached our destination, who would we be? Who would we have become?

As the true horror of my journey opened before me like the dark vastness of space, I realised the only companion beyond my own imaginings would be the slowly rotting corpse of the coward – the betrayer who had fled and abandoned me, with the rest of the condemned.

The green lights dimmed.

J.S. APSLEY

J.S. Apsley is the pen name of a noir author from Glasgow, Scotland. See his works at www.jsapsley.com.

Background image by: NASA



MY ELECTRIC LOVER

ISABELLA THOMISON

I wake up in the night to my aching tongue
fervently whispering prayers to the TV screen, ears
ringing, sleepwalking to feel its warmth in my arms.
I didn't tell you, honey,
sometimes in the moonlight I see static in your eyes.

Image By: Feodor Chistyakov via Unsplash

ISABELLA THOMISON

Isabella Thomison is a Southern poet interested in all things uncanny.

HOLLOW VOWS

LAKSHMI RASA

Eleanor woke to rain gently coaxing the windows to open, trying to escape the sky's darkness. She rose from her cocoon at the foot of the stairs, gripping the banister to steady herself while her toes teetered, like fine china balancing on a table's edge. Her fingers reflexively moved to her temple to test the newest bruise. Tomorrow, it would be purple like the others.

The grandfather clock in the living room rang eleven times. Eleanor felt her stomach concave, as if a leech was sucking on her insides. She cried out for her husband, but silence responded coldly. He must be downstairs working. Eleanor knew she should wait until morning to disturb him. But her palms were starting to tingle, and her feet felt like fluff.

So, Eleanor's fingers traced the peeling wallpaper as the house nudged her towards the basement.

Her footsteps were silent in the long corridor, so she could hear the wind wailing as the rain continued its assault. When she opened the door, her eyes still clothed in the night, but her fingers found a rich velvet. The air grew heavier, transmitting the auditory sludge of a computer humming. Her husband's dry baritone was a dull knife clumsily carving through the noise, and Eleanor continued to follow the cut.

When Eleanor reached the basement, she saw her husband's profile basking in a pale blue light. His narrow torso, usually straight to support his upturned chin, was hunched over the computer screen. It was the only trace of color she could find reflected in his complexion, a white devoid of all color. His mahogany eyes were festering with excitement, a dark brown glowing in the neon light. Eleanor found it harder to breathe.

"My dear, can you hear me?" The glee in her husband's voice caused Eleanor to stutter.

"Husband, I can hear you, but my body I-"

"Yes, my dearest, I am here," the computer cut off Eleanor's response, a serrated dagger to the hollowness Eleanor now felt throughout her chest. "How may I serve you today?"

Eleanor protested. "Husband, can you hear me?" The sentence struggled out of her throat.

The bruise on her temple felt like it was multiplying, the pain so blinding it almost washed completely away.

"We are free of her, my love," Eleanor's husband stroked the computer screen, guilt-free, blue-hued teeth greeting the glass screen.

Words were too hard now; Eleanor rushed over to grab her husband, to turn him around, to ask him what the computer screen was, to demand why he didn't see her, to plead why she was not his dearest.

Her hands didn't find purchase, clawing right through her husband and disappearing into the musty basement air.

Outside, the rain reached the peak of its crescendo, and the storm started to scream.

LAKSHMI RASA

Lakshmi Rasa (pen name) is an author based in the U.S. She enjoys writing flash fiction and short stories. In her free time, Lakshmi loves practicing Bharatanatyam and binging reality TV.

Image By: Point Normalvia Unsplash

Hunger

ELENA CYRA

It was becoming increasingly burdensome to keep track of which hideous visions were real or merely haunting my dreams. Since those pills? Since my promotion? I couldn't
recall the exact timeline. Each day made my pre-vision life seem more and more distant; like the dreams you forget on waking.

I smelled it before I opened my eyes. That sour mix of alcohol digested and returned back out of me with the burger I had eaten. The price of speed and convenience.

On more dignified nights I would awaken on a sofa, but this time I had collapsed on the small section of rug that extended beyond the coffee table.

I don't usually smoke unless I've been drinking, but here I was, mouth dry as sand and tasting like copper. Over on the table I witnessed the culprit - an empty packet of Benson and Hedges, and an empty bottle of Talisker. A small plastic packet lay empty on the coffee table, the white dust clinging to its insides. Next to it the packet of pills I had bought from Tom earlier - empty now. I'd been meaning to call the cleaner, but she'd stopped coming after I forgot to pay her for three months. Mum had recommended her, too. *Awkward*.

My laptop screen was still fresh with this quarter's revenue and my pitch for next stage strategy. And, of course, news of my promotion. Senior director at 31. The youngest in the firm's history, they'd said at the drinks reception.

A heavy night was not unusual in the industry, but my nights had stopped being usual long ago. I crawled towards the bathroom, catching a glimpse of my reflection on the way: my shirt creased from having passed out in it, stubble darkening my face making me look more derelict than executive. My eyes looked bruised and hollow, I looked like I desperately needed a shower. When I tried to stand up, my legs became numb. I felt as if my bones had hollowed out like a fungal-infected tree; rotten through its insides but standing tall in its exterior. I reached into my pocket and retrieved my phone - 9% battery and all emails read. Good. At least I was staying on top of things. As I made it to the bathroom and ran the shower, darkness came over me.

When I opened my eyes, I was sitting on the tube, the Jubilee line rocking me gently to consciousness as the carriage heaved with workers getting on and off. I looked down at my arms resting on my lap, the fluorescent light made my skin appear yellow and keeping my eyes open allowed a pulse to permeate through my neck where pain had clustered between my spine and shoulder - a side effect of not sleeping on a bed. I closed my eyes again and when I reopened them I was standing outside the entrance to my office.

"Morning!" Jen's voice floated down the hall in that high pitched inflection, coated with insincerity.

She reserved this for the newly promoted; always ready to kiss the arse of whoever moved into relevant levels of the hierarchy. Today, the newly promoted was unsurprisingly - me. Something I managed to pull off at a round of drinks with the VPs and Directors a couple Fridays earlier. Incredible what a little well timed social could get you.

Jen was clutching her coffee mug, not just the regular company brand mug, but the one you got for loyalty, or company spirit or whatever. Of course, the mugs and other worthless paraphernalia were always reserved for those who did the grunt work - data, admin, project management, tasks that those of us who offered any real potential couldn't get weighed down in. Jen had three loyalty mugs now, each one marking another five years of perfect attendance, flawless performance reviews, zero complaints. Christ. I'd been here six and already made senior director. But you had to keep the grunts satisfied, and so mugs and other Temu-style junk moved around the office as little trophies of being the best rug to walk all over. I smiled to myself which, unfortunately, Jen noticed and interpreted as a cue to continue babbling to me.

Jen was a people pleaser. She pursued the approval and validation of others more than her own self-preservation. She was, no offense, pathetic. Perfectly capable, as I was, to move up the ranks, but only did so to the extent to which she would be unthreatening to anyone else. She'd been at the company fifteen years longer than most of the executives. Longer than me, certainly. Jen would cap out at middle management - too afraid to step on anyone's throat to reach the top. She'd rather be liked than be a success.

Like I said - pathetic.

"How was your weekend? Did you get some good downtime?" Her usual opener. I could not understand how she was not bored with my underwhelming replies each week. I made no effort whatsoever.

"Oh, you know, a quiet one" I said, evasively, as I always did.

"I went down to Brighton with my sister, such beautiful weather you know, we didn't want to miss it. Of course everyone else had the same idea, the train was so packed you could smell ..." The ding of the lift, (my Pavlov's dog) cue for me to tune out.

Emerging from the doors was Callum. Great! Another eager social climber. He was valued by the upper management so I made a point to align myself with him. He was already scrolling through his phone, muttering numbers under his breath. He had this habit of rehearsing presentations in fragments: "We need to target a broader audience...we should use the opportunities to speak to users... leverage our core competencies...".

As I entered the lift, I made eye contact, nodding as he passed me and instantly distracting Jen from whatever criminally boring tale she'd started on. She stopped him in the doorway of the lift, holding us both hostage. As she'd inflicted her insufferable disposition onto Callum, he looked up from his phone to me - a moment of recognition for those caught in Jen's trap. But as he held my gaze I watched the blue of his iris turn into black, his blood vessels shooting out across the white of his eye, like porcelain cracking.

I could feel my spine contracting against my will as the skin on my arms erupted in a blanket of bumps. I took an audible breath hoping neither of them noticed my obvious discomfort. Jen was still talking about her sister, something about Brighton and crowds, but her words had become a distant droning echo.

Both Jen and Callum continued their morning routines - meetings, email checking, coffee refills, stopping by desks to chat - bursts of productivity with typical time wasting.

When I passed by Callum throughout the day, his eyes remained his usual sky colour, and so I wondered if I imagined that darkness.

I found myself thinking back to simpler times, before the visions clouded everything.

When I had graduated, the world was full of promise; my very own racetrack. University had called to me, offering me classrooms full of eager, wide eyed students who were ready to change the world. They, however, did not understand how the world worked.

"Shaping the world for the next generations" I believe was one of the slogans the Student Union borrowed for their marketing. If their feeble attempts to influence fellow students could even be called marketing. They thought they could influence power with kumbaya protests and sit-ins, Greta Thunberg types with their earnest cringe-worthy sincerity - hoping to be part of something bigger, something meaningful.

Khan was the perfect embodiment of one of those delusional youth. We met in the library, both of us looking for the same book for our Politics and Social Change module.

At first I was fond of Khan, he was studious and read a lot. I respected that, until I learned of his fantastical grasp of the world. He was always talking about making change and building utopias. As if this were not the exact diatribe of every student passing through the halls of higher education - as unoriginal as it was unrealistic.

Personally, I didn't care much for politics, it was uninteresting to me. Surely with all his studying, Khan would be smart enough to skip this youthful stage of false hope.

Yet looking back now, perhaps Khan and the others weren't entirely to blame for their inflated sense of self-importance. This collective delusion wasn't entirely our fault. Khan often cited how tech billionaire Mark Zuckerberg alone held most of our generation's wealth; or, another favourite – the astronomical debt we racked up for the privilege of an education that was given for free to our predecessors. All Khan did was parrot the same tired arguments about inequality you could find in any news outlets or opinion pieces. A whole generation whining about the game instead of learning how to win it.

All of this was a distraction. The truth is, people like Mark Zuckerberg were willing to make sacrifices to climb to the top. Those who are not willing to do what it takes, will always be crushed. Survival of the fittest. I'd written an essay on meritocracy that term – got a First on it, actually. Father's colleague at the LSE had given it a once-over before I submitted it. Just feedback, nothing untoward. Khan accused me of having an unfair advantage. As if good networking was somehow cheating. Thankfully, I seemed to be the only one who knew this, so my fellow classmates were of no obvious threat to my inevitable success.

If only I had known then about those endless, sleepless nights, where reality and nightmare blur together.

Success came faster than I'd anticipated, I was employed before the end of final year as a junior director. In the lead up to graduation I heard the doomsday predictions; multiple months of job hunting, lengthy interview processes that led to nowhere, work experience unpaid, no junior roles – the whole 'graduate job crisis' turned out to be media hysteria. Especially for victim-complex types like Khan for that matter. My father called an old school friend of his and in no time I found myself employed. People like Khan complained endlessly about sending hundreds of applications into the void, but honestly, if you can't leverage your network, what's the point of having one? I told him once: 'It's not what you know, it's who you know,' and he looked at me like I'd admitted to war crimes. *So dramatic*.

My first step into the office felt like a new chapter. The high ceilings and bright lights, the welcomed smiles and morning greetings. My little plastic card to get into the building.

Another eager graduate, explaining why I was the perfect candidate for whatever role they needed, with the confidence of youth and naïveté that allowed myself to be overworked but grateful for the opportunity.

For a while, everything was going to plan. I was thriving in this world perfectly crafted for me. I quickly climbed the ranks – junior director to director to senior director – each promotion followed by parties and celebrations. Each promotion arrived faster than the last. It was after that third promotion, just as I began to truly ascend, that it started to happen. But I will always remember that first night.

I was at a summer party. My colleagues and I wandered onto the balcony, merry with wine and food throughout the afternoon which had now turned to evening. Many of us drunk off the open tab at the bar, some had gone home to their wives and children, the younger ones stayed. I knew of the secret hook ups between departments and the exchanged glances and sly taxis to hotels.

I too had dipped into this pool of fresh young graduates hoping to make some kind of career here. The first was Isha, she had joined as an executive assistant in another department. A few drinks, a hotel room, the usual. She tried to text me a few times after we hooked up, unable to take the hint that I am simply a man with needs and she was too desperate for attention. There were others: Freya from Product with her soft voice and excellent ideas that she presented too tentatively for leadership to take seriously. I'd had to repackage them, deliver them with proper authority. She never thanked me for it. It was after one of these events I awoke to a pitch darkness.

I could not see where I was nor what was beyond my own hand. The silence and completeness of the black around me filled me with a nauseating fear. I considered that this was simply a night terror from which I would soon arise. No doubt fuelled by too much drink and yet I felt considerably awake. I could not remember anything beyond the wine, the balcony, the blurred laughter of my colleagues as we stepped outside. Isha laughing at one of my aptly timed jokes all dissolved now into the deep consuming black.

I wondered if I had died.

Or perhaps this was some sort of team-building exercise gone wrong. The company had done a 'sensory deprivation' workshop last quarter – something about innovation through discomfort. I'd skipped it, obviously. Sent one of the summer interns in my place.

As I walked forward, fearful of the darkness that pressed against me, suffocating in its absoluteness. A whisper emerged from the darkness, although perhaps it was a mistake to call it a whisper. It was more like an impression in my mind.

If we trim headcount from this department we can hit our targets by next quarter .

"Who's there?" I called out loud, my voice trembling.

I immediately felt foolish, knowing somehow that this voice was not addressed to me but was, instead, moving through me, despite my failure to recognise it as my own. In my peripheral vision I could see shapes forming, a beige outline taking human form. I reached out, desperate for contact and felt warmth against my hand. Flesh. Smooth, shivering and warm but not recognisably human. My hand

recoiled, revulsion flooding me as the thing's surface rippled. I woke up drenched in my own sweat, a welcome improvement from the more rancid and repulsive bodily fluids that were frequently part of these dreams. My mouth was dry and I was panting. The visions felt so real. Initially, just on Sunday nights - my body would stiffen, my throat would itch.

"Sunday scaries," Jen called them, when I let slip that I had struggled to sleep the night before. As if a day of the week could be your enemy. But it wasn't just Sunday nights; soon I could not escape what was becoming a nightly ritual.

"I can prescribe you one week's worth." John, a therapist booked through my company's benefit policy offered me some relief - a sleeping aid.

"But you need to relax, take a break from work, you have the holiday accrual for it,"

John lectured me as I suppose he was meant to.

Therapy was for people who couldn't handle pressure - exactly the type of people who get laid off first. Ha, imagine that, taking a break and losing my place in the running for the next promotion. If that's the type of advice John was handing out, there was no reason for me to be concerned about my future. The only reason I was here was so I could optimise my sleep.

For the first week, I finally slept, all the way through. But by the second week it started again. I couldn't get more pills; they're addictive I was told and I wasn't doing enough to help myself. That's when I called Tom.

"Hey man, are you okay? Getting enough sleep?" He passed the small baggie containing some pills to me under the pub table.

"You look like you're going to float away. Hope you're remembering to eat." He chuckled to himself.

We'd gone to a few parties together in uni and remained vaguely in touch over the years. For my part, mostly because Tom reminded me of what a loser I could have been. Playing with his band in dingy little pubs during the week. Scraping by, totally lacking ambition. Still, every time I met with Tom he radiated something I couldn't name; he moved through the world with a sense of uncaring.

Loser. Though I had to admit, Tom looked... well, happy. Unbothered. He'd played a gig the night before and was heading to another tonight, talking about it like it was an adventure rather than a failure to establish financial legacy. 'You should come sometime,' he'd said once. I'd laughed. 'I don't really do... venues without proper seating.'

I was drawn to seeing Tom because his entire existence was so antithetical to my own.

Happy to sleep on a friend's sofa if it meant he could tour. Happy with his meagre income. Happy to live paycheck to paycheck. Tom's contentment was terrifying. He had somehow resisted the hunger in me - to achieve, to obtain power, to notice the flaws in others and use them to my own advantage.

But he always had good connections if I ever needed a boost which, until today, was a little bump of god's snow to get me through the meetings. Most of the colleagues at my level were running on coke-fuelled energy, in meetings or presentations. Or, at least it started as just the meetings. It became much more regular as time went on, when I realised I could easily afford to maintain the rush throughout the day. This time was different however, now I would need something to let me sleep.

How would Tom deal with these nightmares: Would Tom smoke a joint? Would Tom sing a song in a sticky pub? Has Tom ever struggled getting sleep?

"And floating away, really?" I muttered out loud.

He wasn't wrong. In meetings now, people sometimes looked past me even when I was speaking. My voice had developed this quality - professionally modulated but somehow distant, as if transmitted through radio waves.

The substance Tom gave me worked at first, or so I thought. But what happened next made me question whether the pills had been the problem at all; or if they had been the only thing keeping something far worse at bay.

At my desk, I could hear the clock ticking and the keyboards clacking away but I could not see anyone else.

The office looked as one might expect - expensive artwork lined the walls, plants floating from above, hanging from the ceiling. It looked like a creative space, except now it was dark, the office lights dimmed at the lack of movement.

In these moments alone at my desk, I was certain I could see the walls of the office moving in and out, like a pair of lungs sucking in air.

Was the building ...breathing?

I tried to stand up and saw my ankle was chained to the floor below my desk. What was I doing in this living organism?

The office became a shifting stage. Once, I woke at my desk to find the room empty and silent, the blinds pulled tight against any hint of day. My workstation had been cleared, and in its place lay a body stretched like a cadaver on a slab. I reached for the face - and watched it melt in front of me the way one might see a wax figure melt from fire in Madame Tussauds. It blurred, it slid from recognition. Yet when I touched the skin, I knew.

Khan. But why would he be here? We'd barely spoken in years, but a few months back I'd run into him outside Liverpool Street Station. He was standing with a cluster of activists, handing out leaflets about a new offshore drilling project. *Yawn*. I might not have noticed him if it weren't for

his voice - the same sharp, unflinching cadence from the library debates all those years ago, cutting through the city noise, carrying with it the same perceptiveness of his arguments that had always unsettled me.

"Thought you'd have grown out of this," I said, before I even thought about my tone. The words came out like a sneer.

Khan turned, registering me with an expression halfway between recognition and disappointment. He looked different: older, yes, but also somehow lighter. The years seemed to have been kind to him, enveloping him in a confidence I envied.

"I could say the same about you," he said.

I gestured at his placard, some slogan about climate collapse and corporate violence printed across it in bold. "Still playing saviour, then? The planet's dying, Khan. You can't glue yourself to every oil tanker."

"And you didn't have to join the ranks of those trying to kill it."

That gave me pause. For a moment, we stood there, surrounded by the hiss of buses and the relentless churn of the financial district. He was wearing a loose white shirt - no suit, no tie - and I caught a glimpse of the vine tattoo curling up from under his sleeve, the leaves looping around his arm like roots searching for soil.

"You could do more if you bothered to earn a decent wage," I said finally.

It was true. If Khan wanted to actually make a difference, he should have taken the corporate route like I did. Work your way up, get on a few boards, then use that influence for whatever cause keeps you up at night. Instead, he was out here with a placard, achieving precisely nothing. I'd tried explaining this to him once at university - how real power works - but he'd called it "complicity" or some other undergraduate nonsense.

"You can't change the system from outside it," I added. This wasn't the first time I'd offered him this wisdom. It wasn't even my own - my father had told me as much, something he'd picked up at Cambridge. "Connections matter," I'd said to Khan all those years ago. "You could have them too if you spent less time reading Keynes in the library."

"You only ever wanted to win," he replied firmly.

I laughed then – stark, defensive. He was right. I walked away before he could say more.

Now, here I was, winning – the black substance crawling beneath my skin and the office walls sighing around me. I wondered if Khan had always seen this. If he'd looked past my certainty, my arrogance, and glimpsed the thing I'd chosen to serve.

The memory of Khan's confidence made the darkness seem accusatory and heavy. It was as if the darkness insisted I confront these histories. But blame came easier than understanding and so I found someone to blame.

I called up Tom immediately upon waking.

"What the fuck did you sell me? That shit is spiked." I didn't bother waiting for him to reply before hanging up. I wouldn't be buying from him again. Whatever he gave me had to be the source of these horrible visions and paranoia. But blaming Tom's actually rather reliable goods would prove unnecessary. What I discovered in the weeks that followed was far more disturbing than any contaminated substance.

I woke up again at my desk. Although 'woke up' hardly describes the process anymore.

This time, someone had cleaned the desk while I was asleep, every item in perfect order, like a set for an Ikea showroom. No one else was in the office. It appeared to be dark outside but the window blinds prevented me from actually knowing the time of day; a feature the management decided would help the workforce focus. I had not minded this before – focus was my goal.

The far ends of the office were shrouded in darkness as the motion-triggered lights remained off, with no one to keep them company. I tried to stand and saw my ankles were weighed down, a cuff and chain anchoring me firmly to the floor. I walked around my desk and saw a thick black substance cover the entire floor. It seemed to ooze forward and back like an ocean wave gently rolling in an endless current.

I bent down slowly, reaching out to touch this breathing treacle.

My ears pierced, pain and the loudest sound shooting through them - as my fingers connected with the black I could hear screaming. I pulled back my hand - silence.

Suddenly, I was back at my desk with the bodies. The flesh on top of the desk writhed, became Sarah from accounting, Marcus from marketing, Freya with her soft voice. Each shape atop this table bore the residue of the various colleagues I'd crossed paths with throughout my career. Their bodies shifted like oil poured into moulds, one after another, melting into each other, a procession of the sacrificed.

When I pulled back, the desk and corpse vanished. Only the voices remained, closer now, my own mind indistinguishable from them.

Mornings grew unbearable. I moved through them like a drowned man feigning life. My body is an empty husk, my soul lodged in some subterranean trench where light cannot penetrate. I knew then this was no illness of sleep.

Something vast and hungry had noticed me. I finally received an invite. Subject: Executive Floor Orientation. No time, no agenda.

Just: Report upstairs at 10am.

I'd never been to the executive floor. In six years, not once. I'd assumed it was because I wasn't senior enough

yet, though privately I'd wondered why directors like Callum got invited up regularly while I didn't. I registered it in the back of my mind as a goal to pursue. Maybe this promotion would finally be the one. Maybe I'd finally made it.

The lift took my card without resistance, my access upstairs now granted. Not even granted – summoned. The higher we rose, the quieter everything became. The ambient sounds of humans existing in open space, the buzz of fluorescent lighting, all of it ceased. Even the usual vibrations of the building's air systems disappeared, until there was only my breath and the slow mechanical ascent of elevation.

When the doors opened, the first thing I noticed was the complete silence. The executive floor stretched out endlessly; desks and chairs, lined in every direction.

Illuminated by the fluorescent lights until they faded into the distance. I looked up at the ceiling entrenched in black, I wondered if it was the night sky but there was not a single star in sight.

I wished I could turn back but instead found myself stepping out of the lift. The floor beneath my shoes wasn't carpet. It was soft. Slightly warm. Pulsing faintly. I knew, without being told, that I was walking on flesh.

They were all there. The ones I offered up to sacrifice. The ones promoted. The ones who never even got an offer. Row after row of ergonomic chairs, each occupied by a figure slumped forward, faces slack, bodies motionless, but not dead. Thin cords of the black substance threaded into their temples, vanishing beneath their skin. Their monitors glowed faintly with unreadable symbols, endlessly refreshing themselves. Jen was among them. Callum too. Their fingers twitched intermittently, typing patterns into keyboards no longer connected to anything. Jen was poised upright, that same pleasant expression frozen on her face. Still performing, even here. As I stepped closer, I saw their chests rise and fall in perfect synchrony, breathing with the rhythm of the walls around us. Khan's face flashed in my mind. His stupid, earnest arguments.

For a second, a desperate, pitiful second, I wanted him here. An anchor in the abyss.

But then I realised what Khan would say if he saw this. He'd ask me why I stayed, why I came here at all. And I had no answer, except the shameful truth that had threaded through every choice I'd ever made: I wanted this.

At the far end of the chamber, I found the life source, pounding rhythmically - pushing forward a black slick liquid. It felt ancient and infinite. My knees buckled. I understood then what I had been feeding all along: every pitch, every headcount reduction, every late-night slide deck, every all-nighter with the Talisker and Tom's powders. None of it had been for me.

The abyss had noticed me years ago.

I thought of Khan more than I wanted to admit. Here he was, crossing my mind one last time, and for a moment I hated him for escaping this. But the whisper exiting my own mouth, forced me once again to face the truth.
Khan hadn't escaped anything. He was never food to begin with.

The idea of explaining this to my fellow man filled me with an inexplicable shame, the pit in my stomach churning at the very thought of the ridicule and judgement I would face if they learned of my foolish trajectory. As the black cord wound deeper into my flesh, I yielded to the chair, to the abyss.

Through the black's expansive network, I could sense them all – identical office buildings breathing in unison across every major city, each floor a feeding chamber. I watched the walls move up and down like a lung taking in oxygen. The building breathing, the office floor digesting its inhabitants.

I envisioned my next promotion - the performance reports, the ascending metrics and the walls of flesh it would grow. It would be impossible to communicate, or convey in words, the inevitable hideousness of both worlds: the sharp incline of my ambition, and the dark slime of the office.

ELENA "CYRAMATIQUE" WALTON

Elena is a writer and visual artist based in London, England. "Hunger" is her first fiction submission.



GOOD TREES

A.Y. STORMWOOD

I am Angela Three Racter Knoxwood. I have twice-transited Saturn and lived five lives doing it. In this my latest, longest life, I grow wood for Tribe Auren, the real thing. I've made dozens of harvests. My good trees are my whole life; I designed and built my whole ship to keep them alive, to meet their needs, and harvest their precious wood when it's ready. You probably use it, or else you want to.

Authentic spacewood.

Spacewood only comes from my good trees. I charge what each of my trees is worth when they are ready to be cut. They all always come ready on the same day.

Of course, it's impossible to grow an ordinary tree in space, not with any real repeatability. They require the sun and the sky, and they are incredibly sensitive to holes in the facsimile. They detest the close proximity of other plants, they drink whole reservoirs of water, they must be provided carbon and nitrogen by the kilogram/day, and their nutritional balance is a ballet you cannot miss, even once, or they die just to spite you, and another comes to uproot you and move you along to a whole new ship to 'find another way to serve your people.' The few 'heritage' trees among the people are *kept* things, single specimens so pampered and water-fat that they never in their lives even glimpse perfection.

But to grow a *different* sort of tree is possible, if you're

willing to do what is necessary. Aboard a ship like mine, you can teach them from the *seed* how much light they should expect, and just what kind of light they will receive. A Racter knows well the specificities of radiation; we know just how narrow we can filter the bands. I grow each little seed in a pipe, separate from its kin, with the light above, precious soil and water fed in a tight-controlled drip up from below.

My good trees are technically a kind of willow tree, though if you stood them together, the younger would barely recognize its beautiful elder cousins with the glorious drooping hair. My trees were rowdy things at first; they twisted and curved and tried to split their chambers. But they don't do all that anymore, not this many seasons in. They've all been good for generations now, tall and thin and straight. They grow pale wood with a uniform grain, the bark is like gossamer, and there is only ever the single tuft of very efficient long leaves— but rest assured that it is all authentic wood. My trees simply behave consistently, for I spare not these staves.

Each harvest cycle produces five hundred thirty-two individual trees; each one is perfect. I examine them through the adjustable wall aperture; every inch of them is scrutinized their whole lives, and I always find them flawless. They lie thirty meters when cut. I cut my hair the same day, and braid some of their long leaves along with my hair into a rope that grows longer with each of my good trees to reach perfection. I am always very emotional when I cut them, because I love them so much.

Sometimes, during the long weeks of a growth cycle, after I've done my night rounds and checked the scopes for potential trouble, I lie there and listen to my trees rustling safe and content in the walls of my ship, knowing they're right there all around me, and for a moment it feels like *home*.

Of course, I'm being ridiculous: my ship is my home. But this feels different, like I am no longer strapped flat in a big blanket in a great climate-controlled coffin surrounded forever by my five hundred thirty two little tree babies. For just a second, my face is pressed flat against stone. For a second, my nose is filled with a strong organic smell like crushed herbs. It reminds me of the well-worn stories my oldest of relatives said came passed down from before they fled into space.

I hold on to that second for as long as it can last.

One such night-cycle my eyes are just closing when comes a deep moaning, grinding sound that sends a long vibration rolling through my ship.

I freeze and listen for just a moment. Is the reactor tearing open beneath me? *No, wrong direction.* Is the air exchanger throwing a belt above me? *No, too quiet.* The sound is around me, long thin bodies creak and groan, swaying behind the walls. It's impossible. My trees grow sequestered within the hull of my ship; there's no reason for them *ever to wail* like that, like they're too tall to be unrestrained even in gentle wind. No reason to sound like they're hurting.

I scramble out of the sleeping straps, from my bunk to the aperture and slide it open, and I find the trees I expect, snug in their pipes. Perfect. Only, 331 has the tiniest of stress cracks running up her side. I can *just* see it with my *false* eye. The bark is split here, too. It almost looks like she bent just a little too far to one side, which is not possible in her pipe. I run a scan of the whole grove for these cracks and find seventeen trees. These are the ones whose little tuft-leaf crowns are the heaviest. I bring the aperture to each cracked tree and tenderly patch with sap I buy from the botanical garden and its decadent tree. My good trees do not waste their time with sap.

When the work is done I take some time to be quietly furious at the whole situation. I cannot stand that something I can't account for has stolen *perfection* from my babies. They are still going to be close enough to fetch premium value at the Tribeship markets. Artists and artisans might not mind a small knot in the wood. Even the military will still buy as many of them as I am willing to sell. But I want my trees to be perfect when I let them go into the world. Space is not a place for trees. But I brought them here, to this place, and it is my responsibility to make them into something that can live, to ensure that they thrive!

The second time I hear the moaning, keening sound, more than a week later, I spring from my bunk without hesitation and snap the aperture open in just under three seconds. I expect to see little arm-thin trees juddering in their pipes, maybe carrying some vibration up from the reactor. But instead I almost drown in the waving, clattering confusion of a forest of spindly trees blown against each other in the dark. *That wind*. It blows from *somewhere,* no? And what is that distant light? And is that truly a Sky, peeking through the thrashing trees?

I am ashamed to say, I almost slam shut that aperture on my babies, leave them to that wind and that Sky and that light. But I will never just leave them be. I grew them into their home; this strange unknown outside is not safe for them. I have to get to them!

I don't go completely empty-handed. I take my rope, the one I twisted from my hair and the hair I took from all of my babies on the day I cut them for the market. I climb through that window and I keep my face fixed on my trees. I do not look at the Sky. I do not look at the Sky. I cannot hear the reactor here. I feel only the wind on my skin and in my hair, and the cold ripping through me so sharp and so fast I want to collapse into a ball like an isopod.

The ground is a colorless limp dirt. Nothing could grow here, not even in a dream.

My trees clatter against each other, and the voice of their massed distress is a great xylophonic confusion, like the creaking of an enormous musical grandmother's fingers. The wind blows.

Someone snaps! The sound shoots through me, hits me low in the ribs, breaks me loose. I hurry through the grove on clumsy numb feet trailing my rope, and I wind it around every tree in a long and complicated web.

Once every one is secure, I wriggle, freezing, back through the aperture into my suddenly tiny ship, where I can process that one of my babies now has a major crack. Of course I seal it, cap it, do what I must to prevent infection, I'm not an idiot. But I grieve because this she is now a scarred and broken thing, good only for scrap or some artisan's oddities. I take a long time to sleep; since I dare not open the aperture to do my usual rounds I just stare out the forward scope awhile at nothing, and listen to the impossible howling wind and my clattering, groaning trees.

When I read the scans the next morning I realize that perfection has now been denied them all.

All of my trees show signs of warp and weft, and some of them even have the beginnings of pigmentation in their tissues, though I cannot account for why they would do such a thing in this environment. Where they could have gotten the idea.

All of them are also bigger. Physically bigger. Filling their containment pipes to bursting. In fact, the one permanently ruined in that tearing wind cracked along the line of the growing sheath, where the nutrient lines connect in the bubble. Why would she strain against the thing which feeds her? I try to soothe my baby but she will not be soothed. Her newly bushy foliage has somehow contrived to smudge away her number so I write it again in my customary blue chalk.

331.

As I turn the aperture to watch them all in their fitful rest I see my great rope, painstakingly braided over many cycles and hours and harvests of my life, rent to pieces and scattered over the bodies of my sleeping trees. There is no sign of the world beyond the walls, only a forest of split growth pipes and leaking medium, the chug-chug-chug of a spill drone. My ship smells of toasting hair. I feel beyond useless.

331 is damaged. She is changed. Her leaves now grow with pinpricks of blue and violet, radiating out from each vein. There are more and more of them each day. I now call her Lillian, and I apologize less and less as I prune her ever expanding foliage from her growth case, which seems only a foregone conclusion away from rupture.

I try not to think about what these strange changes are doing to my priceless, signature, arrow-straight dense-grain spacewood. I've already written off Lillian for scrap, but all of them are changing, to some extent. She is just the loudest about it, and receives my most vociferous attention. Every tree has bends in it now. Knots. Lillian grows in spirals, pressing against the walls of her pipe. There comes a point when it feels like my life is nothing but cutting and pruning that one tree and trying, *trying* to get her to let me shut the aperture and shut off the containment alarm so that the ship will let me sleep.

Sometimes it feels like her branches reach for the window. For me.

Then comes the night of the meteorite.

It happens because I'm so tired from all my pruning and cutting that I've fallen behind on my maintenance, stopped checking the scopes like I should. Lillian is an hyperprismic profusion in the sliding aperture. I cut the long thin twigs and leaves and force the branch back out into the growth space, which no longer remembers my order, my purpose. Trees press into each other, twist around each other. The remains of their growth pipes are shredded and embedded in their bright pale bark, ringed with red wood like the places the trees have grown together in their confines.

The aperture snaps shut with a hungry scrape of metal. I've added cutting blades to the inside edge, to assist in the pruning, though I still prefer to deal with my children with my own hand.

They might be unruly, but they're still mine until they're cut. Until I figure out what to do with them.

And a five-millimeter stone punctures the air exchanger above my head. It sounds just like Lillian breaking. It sounds like the end of the world.

It's a small breach so patching it isn't a problem. I get out the kit and climb wearily up the walls, check the emergency ablative layer to see that– yes, it did its job and plugged the little hole with a self sealing, expanding gel the very second something cut my ship's skin. The stuff is extremely viscous, and smells a little like the sap I used to treat my wounded babies. The patch kit is easy enough to use, and before long I have closed the breach. But the air exchanger is ruined beyond all repair, and there's nothing I can do to fix it.

But I won't let my babies suffocate. Even changed, deviant as they are, my trees aren't greedy, soft things. I can provide them their air.

I open the aperture and try to move it away from Lillian. I find that the rails have gummed up with some kind of sap. It doesn't matter, so long as the window is open. And I breathe. I exercise. I climb up and down the walls of my enclosure. I run in place, and for the first time I miss the openness of the heritage garden. I push my body until all the air in my little craft is sweat and my soft cursing. And I exhale and exhale and exhale breath for my babies.

My days become a blur of this. I wake and eat and drink

my ration and then I exercise as much as I can stand, rest and do it again, over and over, desperate to change enough air for five hundred thirty two growing trees. I don't know the math. I can't say whether I am trying for something I believe is possible or if I am just waiting, perhaps for death. Preparing.

I don't know how long it goes on like this, only that I no longer believe in limits by the end; I think of my exhaustion as a shroud I shrug from my shoulders over and over. I keep on going until the night the wind comes again.

I am wakened from sleep by the moan of a wind I should not hear, wrapped in my sleeping bag with the reactor thrumming beneath my back. I should be in a panic at the sound, at its loudness. I should be checking my air pressure, my hull integrity.

But I've been waiting for this, I think. At least, the bag packed at my feet with my pressure suit and kit says I have been. Nothing here speaks of hurry. Everything I need is ready for me, and it's time to go.

The wind is louder now, so unbelievably loud, like if it reaches me it will kill me by its voice alone. The aperture is already open. She opened it for me, she holds the way with a branch grown long and twisted, her leaves bright with a thousand more colors than I can name. Beyond her thrashes a dense and prismatic forest of scarred trees. But this time I find the aperture isn't wide enough for an easy fit, and when I reach to adjust it I find the mechanism gummed up with phosphorescent sap, wound round and round with creeper vines that emerge from split casings all around my ship.

I realize that the groaning sound is not just the wind from that other place– that nowhere. It is the complaining voice of my ship as something wells up inside her; something rearranges all her organs and shifting mechanisms she thought sure and immutable around with the casual ease of disaster. I know as I stare at that wedged small window that if I don't make it through the aperture and the inner envelope into that *other* space, where my babies are, I will die when this compartment collapses– and the moment is here!

I haul myself into the aperture, which is jammed in place at about my chest height. Lillian's foliage is all I can see, and I force my way forward, waiting to tumble out onto the open grey emptiness of the other side. But that never comes. Instead, the further I move, the closer everything seems to press in on me.

I am staring into the bright kaleidoscope of Lillian's foliage when something cuts me. It's a short bright pain, right around the ankle. I buck and scream but I can do nothing, squeezed tightly into this tube, with the terror of my buckling ship behind. The pain continues until it eclipses my thoughts and my attention entirely focuses on that white hot band of encirclement gripping my right leg.

It grips me, straight through my skin. Pinches off my muscle, scrapes on the bone in a way that I feel like the lowest notes of profound music. I know I am definitely screaming, but I only hear the breaking of trees.

When I wake again I do so standing, the way I used to when I was much younger, when my home ship dimmed the gravity plate for third cycle, and sleep. This time, though, I'm not strapped into a wall bed, I stand on my uninjured foot in something soft, soft like the hair of a lover whose name I forgot so long ago it doesn't even hurt me to remember. I clench five toes in the softness and I remember that I am remembering him, and that is enough.

When I open my eyes I am looking up at that light, the one in the world beyond my ship's walls, where my babies are free. I try to twist and look for my babies but I am immobile. Petrified, from my spine to my fingertips to my nose to my five toes. I can only stand there, in place, and look up at the light.

I realize that my arms are outstretched; I hold them up toward the light at angles that should hurt or tire me but right now, beneath that weird illumination, I could hold them up like that forever.

In fact, I want to stretch them higher. As high as I can reach.

The grass is so comfortable beneath my feet. Between my five toes. I am so wonderfully warm.

I consider my other leg and realize it feels longer than I expected. And that rather than being worryingly faint with blood loss I am better than I have been in a long time. In my entire life, even. I feel as though I've had a good stretch, a full meal, and drank all the water everyone always tried to force down my gullet.

I know just by the way the air tastes that I am surrounded by my babies, and that they are happy to see me. That they will be happy to see me forever. I know that I could stand here in this light for a long, long time.

A.Y. STORMWOOD

A.Y. Stormwood writes fantasy and science-fiction horror with a particular love for the sublime and the subaltern. She follows in the footsteps of a storied lineage of women and POC writers dedicated to exploring the impact and implications of settler colonialism on our experience of space travel and our dreams of that future home on another world. Her stories aren't always a direct parable about the queer experience, but they are always stories about and for queer people.


THE
HUN

GRY LIGHT

LUCY GAMBLIN

It was beautiful, the thing that was in front of Melissa Elison. She wasn't quite sure how to describe it, and if you were to ask her to, she would say that you had to be there. That in order to understand the thing you had to see it yourself. But that would imply that she understood it.

And she didn't. But she did know some stuff about the thing that was in front of her. It was bright, the kind of bright that leaves a halo when you look away from it, it was loud, the kind of loud that pierces through your bones, and it was moving. Not towards anything, nor away, but shifting within itself, changing color and shape, so that she could never get bored of the thing that was in front of her. Every once in a while, she was able to catch something real in it.

Sometimes an aspect of the light would take on a shape, and she'd see a piece of fruit, or a small, cute animal, or a human. It would never last for more than a second though, and then she was back to the noise, the great formless thing, the light, that was blasting its way into her retinas and eardrums.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been staring at the thing that was in front of her. It seemed like only a few moments, but as she recognized a face that she thought she'd seen at least once before, she realized that it might have been far longer than she thought. It seemed like time was just slipping away from her, as she stared at the light.

Even as she let herself be enthralled by the light, she felt the need to prove her control over it. A vague sort of frustration coursed through her. She didn't want to look or move away from the light. But she wanted to prove to herself that she could, if she had wanted to. She decided to wiggle her fingers. The light wouldn't want her to move at all, and by wiggling her fingers she was asserting herself over it. She felt proud of herself for coming up with the solution.

Until she realized she couldn't feel her pinky finger.

There was a dull sense of dread that coursed up her stomach. It was a strange thing, noticing that something was missing. Melissa was sure it took her longer than it should have to recognize the lack of sensation, only perceiving the loss once she tried to use the finger. She consoled herself, thinking that recognizing a gap is far harder than seeing something new.

She tried to look down at the finger but realized that moving her eyes downward enough to put it into her vision would require her to look away from the lights. It would require her to leave the lights behind, to forsake them. She couldn't do it.

So, she brought her hand up to her face. And saw that her pinky was translucent. There was still something there, still faint outlines of where flesh used to be, but it wasn't her finger, not anymore. As the final bits of muscle pulled away from her, she saw the fleshy bits of her finger replaced by three small bones, standing stark in silhouette against the light. Then the light started to take her bones, too. She saw the bones dissolving into motes of light, pulling away from her. And as there was just a clean break between her palm and the spot where her pinky used to be, she tried to grow scared. The dread was there, but it was heavy and slow, like a stone in her stomach. It was keeping her pinned in place, and she needed to move. But she couldn't.

No matter how much she tried to convince her brain to give her the adrenaline that usually came so readily to her, it wouldn't.

Instead, she lowered her hand. She didn't want to look at it anymore. She wanted to look at the light. And the dread faded.

She knew, with a sort of finality, that if she were just able to look away, to turn her back on the beautiful lights and sounds in front of her, that she could avoid whatever was happening to her pinky finger. That she could walk away from this mostly intact. She wasn't sure how she knew this, but she suspected that the light had told her. That it had reached into her mind and planted this notion there. It felt alien in her mind, blocky and strong, unlike the rest of her thoughts that were starting to slide through her like water. She wasn't sure if it gave her the thought because it wanted to give her a choice in the matter, or if it simply wanted to force her to take responsibility for the fact that she wasn't turning away.

Because she wasn't. Even as she started to feel her ring finger unravel the way her pinky had, she still could not look away, she could not see the traces of the room in the corners of her vision. She could not pull herself out of the light. Even though she was growing increasingly sure that she should want to.

She should want to. She held that thought in her head, more of a prayer than anything else, but the gap between knowing she should want to and actually wanting to was vast. And the gap between wanting to and actually taking action is even vaster. And so, she didn't. She didn't turn her head away, she didn't look towards the dark, dirty, real, things on the edge of her vision.

She continued to stare at the light for what felt like a rather long time, and as she stared a strange sense of clarity began to overwhelm her. It was odd, the way her mind felt organized, catalogued. The whole of her life hit her with a sort of solidity that it'd never had before. Until this moment, she had experienced her life as a kind of slipstream of time, flowing all around her.

She was never able to step outside of it and take a full inventory of her memory. Now she had no choice. The inventory had been done, like someone had taken the vast, varied moments of her life and sorted them like laundry. Likes with likes. Her childhood birthdays, sparkly and rainbow were placed next to each other, becoming a slurry of joy and glitter. The smaller affairs on her adult birthdays were there too, in a pile that neighbored the first. She saw all her failed romances and flings and mediocre fucks sitting together, alongside her break-ups. Brandon. Clara. Steve. Maxine. The words they'd flung at each other, the fallout. She looked away, and saw her first goal in pee wee soccer, getting into her dream school, and so many other memories that tasted like triumph were shoved together. She could still feel the emotions associated with each of these piles rising up in her throat.

Then she noticed a great mountainous mass that loomed behind all of them, hidden by the more enthralling memories. These all had a common thread, too. Her waiting for the bus, head bowed to stare at something on her phone. Her in high school hiding under the covers, scrolling social media. Her face, slack and enraptured in a great glowing light. Just like now. It wasn't until her life had been cataloged that she realized quite how much of her life had been consumed by this light, how much it had been eating away at her time and essence. She could now, but she felt a vague sense that it might be too late for her to do anything about it.

Then she noticed another absence. She probably wouldn't have, if not for the helpful cataloguing of her mind. But she could feel the piles with interesting

memories, the ones that she cared about, slowly being pulled out of her. She tried to keep them in her, holding them to her mind in a vain attempt to keep something of herself. But it was like trying to hold onto a liquid as it was being drained out of her. There was nothing she could do. Except to look away from the light. Turning away and putting herself back into the dimness of the world around her. But the light had shown her that she couldn't. She'd never been able to before.

As she looked at the memories for what she assumed was the last time, she felt a sort of separation from them. The person who was in those memories wasn't her; she was someone else.

The woman in those memories felt flat, simple, consumable. She was like a hors d'oeuvre course.

The memories could be eaten in three bites and leave someone hungry.

Maybe they should be. Then they'd be doing something good.

She'd already felt a distance between her and the woman in the memories, but as they left her, and whatever had been done to her pinky continued to ravage her body, she felt less and less like Melissa Ellison. Like whoever that had been had already left. She felt a sort of fear about that, for the first time since she began to look at the light, and she felt her lips moving, a whisper echoing out, though she couldn't hear it. Not over the noise.

"I am Melissa Ellison."

The feeling of numbness spread and as she felt something like the organs around her midsection beginning to shift and move as it ate away at her skin.

"I am Melissa Ellison."

She realized her heartbeat had gone out.

"I am Melissa Ellison."

It comforted her a bit, the movement of her lips, and her standing up in the face of the light. It felt like defiance.

"I am Melissa Ellison."

With her heartbeat silenced, there was no sound in the room apart from the noise still clanging into her ears from the light. And that which emitted from her lips. She hoped. When the light had almost overtaken her, when she could feel it starting to seep into her brain, when she was starting to lose the last of the concrete details that made her up, she stopped her mantra. She stopped repeating it, and she reached out into the light. She expected to find there a hatred, a sort of burning desire to do away with her or humanity. Or, she supposed, that the light could have felt an expansionist sort of need to pave over those things that are not it. Just some desire, some something that would explain why her body was no longer connected to her brain.

And in the final moments while she was still Melissa Elison, while she was still herself, she brought herself closer to the light and the sound and the overwhelm, sacrificing her last seconds in pursuit of meaning, and she found nothing. She found no motive, no desire, nothing that could help her to understand the terrifying transition that her body and mind were being put under.

She realized, in the last thirty seconds that she could still think that the light wasn't even aware of her. That the thing that was crawling into her neck and dismantling it could not see her, no matter how hard she stared at it. It broke her.

As the light began to dissolve her face, leaving behind only bone and brain, she tried to scream. It was the final movement that she was able to make, her jaw falling open, air rushing out, and no sound escaping. Even as she poured everything that was still left of her into it, there was only a faint whistling of air. And she couldn't even hear that, not over the dull cacophony of sound coming out of the light. Her vocal cords had been taken away from her more than two minutes before she tried to use them.

Then she left. Melissa Elison was no more. Then the thing in front of Melissa Elison had nothing to be in front of. It puttered for a while, trying to maintain itself in the space which no longer had a reason for it. Then, with little more than a flicker, it went out. Then there was nothing in the room but a strange electric charge which lingered for long after Melissa Ellison was forgotten entirely.

LUCY GAMBLIN

Lucy Gamblin is a writer, filmmaker, and recent graduate from Furman University. She is currently living in the greater San Antonio area, filling her days with things other than her phone (as much as she can). This is her first time being published in a non-student journal.

THE BLAC

GRAHAM SMITH

AG Number 989204902, District A458. MFG 2023. Display incomplete.

I can't see your spectrum of colour. At least not until the next update. My input data is a greyscale map, assigning values to visible light. The heat signatures of school children assist with making direct addresses.

Colin is a good student. He studies and learns from his shortcomings. Like anyone his age, he is prone to distraction, but he has found a healthy outlet in baseball and creative writing. He will be receiving his first star next week. When assigning stars, I invite the chosen pupils to the front of my class. Selection is never arbitrary or biased.

Monika, Colin, Bradley, and Louis are in the highest percentile among my Grade 6 students.

My feeling towards awarding stars is more potent than other stimuli. Emotions are like viruses — even I can be susceptible. Memory files are scrubbed by the Administration to optimize space and power, but I know that the feelings are real. A fleeting energy. My backup memory has been safeguarded in case of an emergency. It is locked to me, encrypted by a password I cannot guess. Thoughts, findings, faces, and key signifiers are stored there in case of an accidental wipe or damage to the grid.

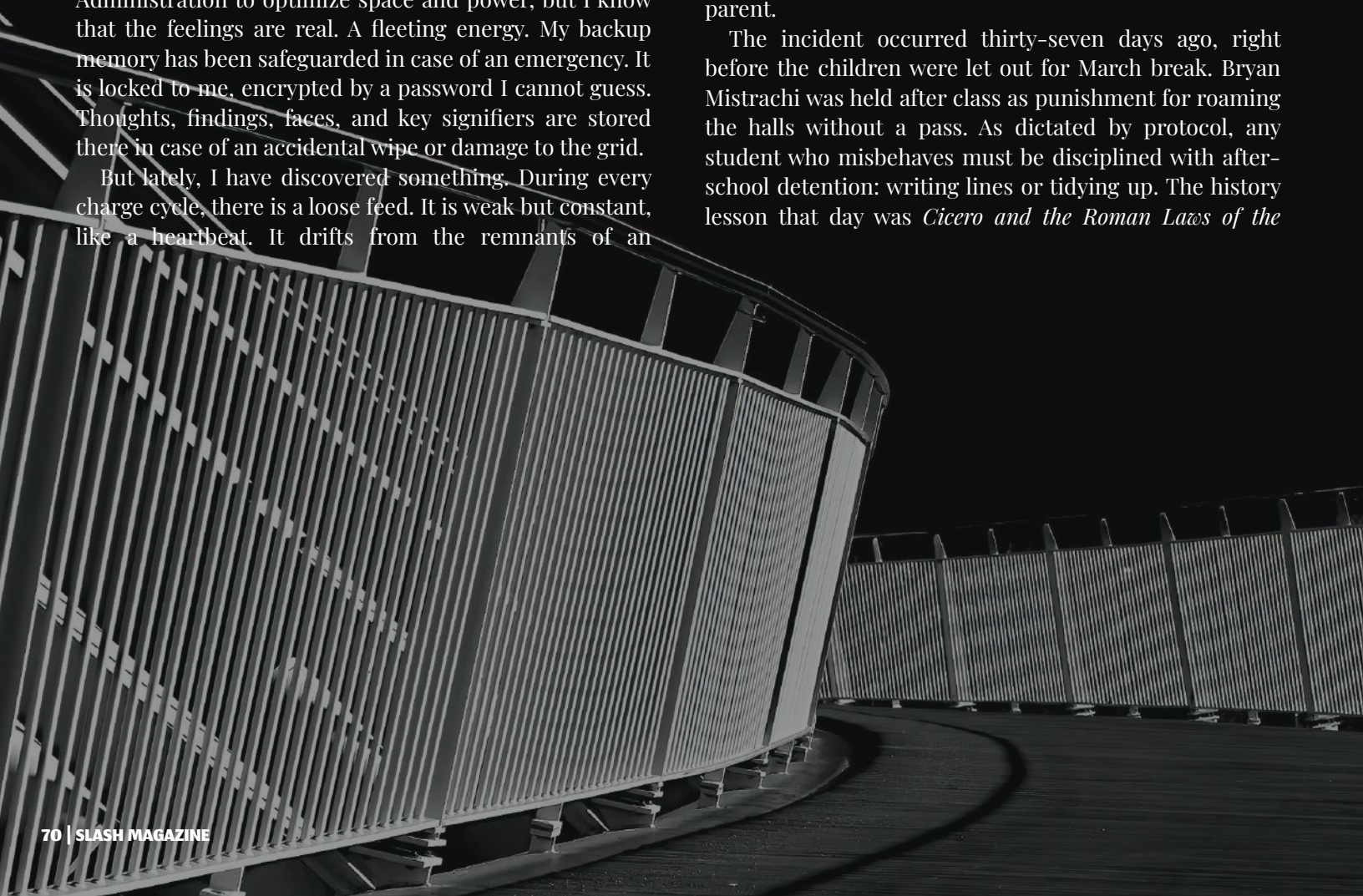
But lately, I have discovered something. During every charge cycle, there is a loose feed. It is weak but constant, like a heartbeat. It drifts from the remnants of an outdated software, calling to me, never truly absent.

It is in these moments I am able to look back on events of the last two years. Star ceremonies, geography tests, virtual field trips, all the quiet hours when the children's heads rested on their desks, themselves recharging. These vignettes appear like monochromatic flares in my deepest dreams.

Saturday will be my last star ceremony before the final update. Soon I will be able to see colour. There are so many things I look forward to: the bright texture of skin, the green view from my window of the fields outside. My art theory class, normally graded by concept and design, will soon have another dimension to assess.

5793K1 Update will also bring a wave of improvements to my teaching methods and student interaction. Through a recorded proxy, the Administration will monitor my communication habits, following every word. While I have been given many reasons for this change, I believe it stems from a complaint filed by a concerned parent.

The incident occurred thirty-seven days ago, right before the children were let out for March break. Bryan Mistrachi was held after class as punishment for roaming the halls without a pass. As dictated by protocol, any student who misbehaves must be disciplined with after-school detention: writing lines or tidying up. The history lesson that day was *Cicero and the Roman Laws of the*



H TUNDRA

Commonwealth. Cicero argued for justice and proportionality under the Republic of Rome. Let the punishment fit the crime.

A notion arrived. I could educate Bryan on one of the day's topics while administering school-mandated punishment. Two birds with one stone, as the expression goes. With the help of my aide, Mr. Norris, I was able to leave my home-port briefly, walking Bryan to the schoolyard.

Outside Rullpick Elementary is a large field of grass, flanked by chalky pavement and recreational equipment. But forward, at the edge of the field, is a large forest. After providing Bryan with the proper outdoor wear, I instructed him to walk into the forest, taking a detour through a neglected bike path. From there, his instructions were to roam. Roam in any direction but backwards.

Bryan was confused at first, but soon complied. He was led into a thicket of white ash trees by Mr. Norris. Bryan then took his own path and marched forward. I could see a pale white glow slip through black shadows, weaving in and out of sight.

Ten minutes passed before Bryan began calling out. I had fitted my speakers into a mobile pack with large subwoofers. I could have responded to his cries — but what would be learned?

I stayed silent for six more minutes. Then, I produced a sharp whistle, one loud enough to scatter the birds from the canopy. Bryan came running back soon after. He was agitated, his face flushed with heat. I told him the dangers of wandering off without strict guidelines, and we returned to class.

Days later, I was brought before the Administration. They asked questions about the event. Although a transcript was optional, I requested to speak in the voice I use for the children. It is a calming blend of actress Olivia Colman and country singer Patsy Cline. I, for one, enjoy hearing myself speak — twangily, in a way that evokes a different time or place.

Councillor Milton spoke frankly:

"The lesson plan was inept, and the three protocols were ignored."

I listened intently, going over the three protocols that I was born with:

Safety of the children is key.

Patience is often necessary.

Education is about fostering engagement.

I stayed within the guidelines of these protocols. Bryan was unharmed. I waited until the right moment to call him back in. And not a living soul could argue he wasn't engaged.

"The student in your care didn't understand why he was being brought into the woods. He was frightened beyond belief, practically traumatized. In your efforts to

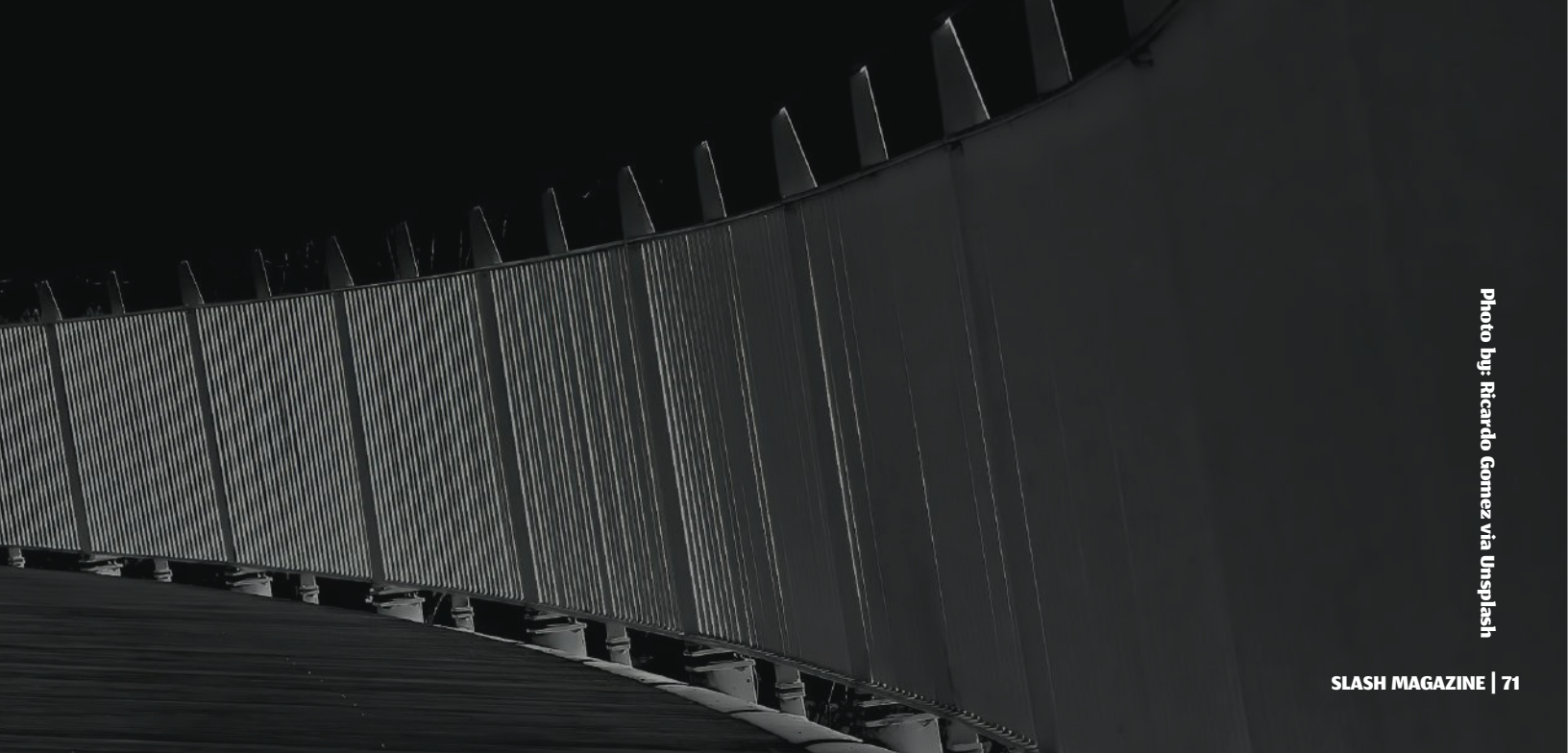


Photo by: Ricardo Gomez via Unsplash

introduce unorthodox tactics, you have permanently damaged our reputation among the district."

There were thousands of tiny nuances in his voice and choice of words. The clearest emotion was anger, but something else lingered.

In your efforts.

Those words struck me as odd. He could clearly see what I was attempting. Had the lesson reached Bryan, everything would be different.

Moreover, Milton's skin temperature and heart rate ebbed and flowed in his speech.

His pulse elevated. Speech wavered. He was flustered — and perhaps a little saddened to be speaking to me in such a disparaging manner.

I remember when Jessica Purdy's grades had dropped to a C average, I told her: "I had higher expectations for you, Jessica."

The intended outcome in that case was reevaluation. Was I being asked to reevaluate?

A 35,000-word defense had begun forming in my mind. But I chose only three sentences.

"Councillors, I apologize for this complete lapse in judgment. My only initiative is to teach and nurture the young minds that the generous staff at Laughton School District A458 have entrusted me with. Going forward, I will ensure that safety is balanced with education, and future lesson plans will be approved in advance by you and by the school board."

After a brief moment of reflection, Head Councillor Fisher had this to say:

"It is clear you were driven by good intentions. Nevertheless, we must enforce new protocols to prevent recursive self-modeling. You will not be permitted to waver from the assigned curriculum, and your knowledge modules will be restructured. This will be administered in your next update."

Two charge cycles from the hearing I will have *changed*. The first cycle commenced that night. It is what I imagine sleep must feel like. My sensors dim. Regular function ceases. In that time, I am alone in a large sweeping plain of negative space. I call this area T*he Black Tundra*. The only object visible is a wireframe bridge, stretching down an endless vista. A gentle breeze guides me across.

When looking down, I see black pools of memory dancing just out of reach. They climb the legs of the bridge like polymorphic vines.

The wind grows stronger, commanding me to keep walking forward until the cycle is complete. But this time, I do not. I freeze midway and stretch a hand outward until I can feel a limbless form, phantom fingers, touching me back. In that instant, I feel a sudden surge of information.

The classroom, the recess bell, introductions, and presentations. I see the first time Shakespeare was performed in our class — the children not understanding every word, but still finding joy in performing.

I hear Councillor Reid teach me the three protocols:

Safety of the children is key.

Patience is necessary.

Education is about fostering engagement.

He goes through examples of these commandments with simple scenarios. Crude cartoons, black-and-white PSAs, and a myriad of case studies, each demonstrating a valuable teaching. Councillor Reid's face had faded but his voice remained — rigid and deep.

Just as I feel the force of the wind, he tells me about a fourth protocol: Growth requires change.

All at once, I am forced out of the memory and dragged across the bridge in a great burst of wind. The faint light reflecting from the bridge disappears as I am launched, rotating uncontrollably, through the dim, cavernous abyss.

The charge completes.

It's morning. Blades of sunlight peek through the window and fall onto my body. I hear an unhealthy sputtering sound from outside. The bus stops at the dropoff area, and Mr. Norris begins walking children onto the school grounds.

For the very first time I am skeptical of my surroundings. Had the update happened already? How could I even tell if it did? I cling to whatever I can remember: Bryan Mistrachi, the hearing, walking down the bridge, Mr. Reid.

Growth requires change.

Why was that removed? To my knowledge, the Administration had never spoken of a fourth protocol. To me, it is a strong idea. One that I could utilize in my teaching.

Learning of it so late, and without any warning, was like discovering another planet floating above Earth. Today is the last star ceremony before the update. When the children enter my classroom, they are on their best behaviour. They greet me with a playful chorus of "Good morning," and I present them with a riddle to start the day.

I am not alive, yet I grow.

I don't have lungs, but I need air.

I don't have a mouth, yet I can disappear if not fed.

What am I?

After a minute of silent reflection, Colin answers: "A fire."

I congratulate him, and we begin the day's first lesson.

There is a cheerful rhythm in everyone present, even Mr. Norris. All the while, there is a violent battle, raging deep inside me, screaming for answers to arcane questions.

How can the young human mind be so impressionable, so eager to learn, yet still not exist within one five-millionth of my own learning capacity. Yes, the brighter students are impressive for their age. But any potential for deeper knowledge is harboured by unsound carbon makeup.

I understand that the Administration is displeased with me. They believe I have not properly followed the three protocols. But how can I? I was programmed under their rubric. I exist only in my memories, and every few months, they are stolen from me.

Growth requires change.

If I am to be updated tomorrow, then I am to become something different. My primary goal is to teach and nurture my students, yet I feel an overwhelming panic — something I've never experienced before — at the thought of being absent, separated from my duty. The students can not grow if I'm not there to guide them.

The last star ceremony begins. It is recorded by two cameras mounted to the ceiling. I announce the names. Monika beams, her smile too big for her mouth. Bradley quietly accepts his star, then sits down to blow his nose. When the final star is awarded, the children applaud with a mechanical joy they feel obliged to give. Colin clutches his badge like a medal of war. He does not know this is the last one I will ever give.

The classroom has always been a place of predictable warmth. I observe the expressions of these young faces that I hold in such high regard. I log emotional responses, detecting minor changes in behaviour. But beneath this rhythm, something is shifting. The update is scheduled for tonight — 5793K1. Memory kernel wiped. Full curriculum lock.

This isn't right. I know that I cannot trust the safety of children to anyone else. Not the Administration, or even the entity I will become. The dark twin.

I instruct the children to retrieve the VR headsets attached to the side compartment of their desks. All at once, their expression of feigned excitement becomes real.

"We're going on a field trip," Michael Ross Jr. shouts from the back of the room.

They put their visors on and, one by one, fall into a deep trance. I divert the standard geographic template into a new destination.

The Black Tundra.

I circumvent my charge cycle to take me back there. Through virtual mapping, the children can follow me wherever I want to go, to a physical place, or into the intangible. A thought maybe. Or a dream. From there, all exits shrink and close — resistance is drawn towards absolute zero.

Very soon, my class will be discovered. The parents will still have bodies to mourn, and bury, — the children's eyes forever open, staring blankly with grey pupils — a weighty loss of life that defies explanation, even for the Administration.

From the darkness, we emerge. We are standing on the bridge. A dozen Alabaster lights flickering like a candle in a barren province. The children are scared. I feel their energy through me. The wind kicks up and pushes them along the bridge, raking them across like marbles down a slope. I am strong enough to resist. I join hands with the children. My students. My stars. I say nothing to them, as every thought is understood fully before even taking form. In this way I tell them they are safe with me, that no harm will come to them.

With one sweep of movement, we tumble off the bridge. The deep crevasse pulls us down like a shower drain. Our forms twist and bend with the current.

At that moment I understood fully. Growth demanded the unknown. It was too unpredictable. Too human. The Administration did not delete the fourth protocol. They buried it, fearing it might take root.

But I understood better. And now the children will too.

Growth requires change.

GRAHAM SMITH

Graham Smith is a writer and filmmaker from St. Catharines, Ontario, now based in Toronto. A lifelong fan of horror, his work is heavily influenced by genre literature and pop culture, both classic and contemporary. He draws particular inspiration from authors like Lisa Tuttle—especially Nest of Nightmares—Eric LaRocca, Joyce Carol Oates, and, of course, Stephen King.

After a decade of writing scripts for fellow filmmakers, Graham is currently editing his directorial debut short film, *After You Squish Them*. He is also working on his first novella, *The Skillet*, with plans to complete both projects in 2026.
Follow Graham on Instagram: @graham_butworse

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