

The Queen's Head
A Literary Zine



#7

EDITO ED ORIAL

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→ We're sorry, Posterity. Yes, future generations, this sci-fi special of The Queen's Head is devoted to you, floating in your nutrient bubbles, rolling your bionic eyes. Don't worry, we get it. Back when we ourselves were posterity, others imagined us dressed in electrified underwear and diaphanous tinfoil, flying cars that open like upside-down autopsies. They thought we'd reach the moon with nothing but hot air, that we might have already got to the bottom of the Mariana Trench. They thought by now we'd have eliminated aging, or sickness, or each other. How wrong they were. And yet isn't that exactly the point? For every misfire, a bullseye; for every dodgy subterranean society, a habitable Kepler. When it comes to sci-fi, if you throw enough mud...Here's this issue's gritty handfuls:

Two hard sci-fi tales chart a hallucinogenic ride to deep space with Arike Oke, then on to Saturn with Elaine Gallagher. The rest is altogether more nebulous, with Paul McQuade piercing unexpected fatherhood with paranoia while R. M. Graves probes family ties with interdimensional oddity. Elsewhere, Ever Dundas channels the Ballardian visceral in Wire, Katie McDermott and Shona McCombes put the ghost in the machine, and Emma Cleary gestures towards a post-post-apocalypse. Finally, Ross McAuley's ray gun illustrations zap, pew and bzzn off the page with all the pizzazz of a golden era's pulp dreams.

There's no predicting posterity, or what will stick, but with NASA's recent announcement of moist soil on the red planet, we know that the more we look, the more mud we'll find...

Ryan Vance

Ever Dundas

WIRE

→ ***Worm***

The Prime Minister clawed his way out of the mouth. There was a violence to it that made me nauseous. I read on, as I always did, staring into the camera lens, affecting composure.

“Inex 2020’s will soon become obsolete. The Endostream 2025 is currently being tested and will be ready to launch in a few months. David Kincaid, the spokesperson for...”

When the Prime Minister freed himself from the mouth he slithered on the ground like a worm, enveloped in viscous fluid.

“...demonstrating the Endo 25, he showed that it would lie just beneath the skin of the arm, where a small control panel can be accessed.”

The meaning of the words were lost. They disappeared into the mouth, they shimmered across the body of the Prime Minister and sank into the fluid as he squirmed.

“...with a single thought the subject can access all online content, open up their messaging service, and connect to other subjects.”

I paused. The words were regurgitated

by the gaping mouth. I felt myself slipping in, but pulled back.

"There is the continual stream of recorded data that can be accessed at any time, just as it can be with the Inex 2020, but without the need of an external intermediary. What do you think? Are you ready to give up your Inex? What impact will this have on a global scale? Will this further divide the rich and poor? Contact us, and tell us your thoughts. Here's Karen with the weather."

I was proud of my finely honed charm, sure of myself. The screen went blank before reflecting the bright lights of the studio. I flinched, unable to tolerate the lights. I rummaged for my pills, but the box was empty. I scrunched my eyes closed. A door slammed, and I heard my name.

Black Hole

I watched her approach, moving in and out of focus like a shimmering mirage, burned by the lights. My body ached. I needed protection. I needed to be numb.

"What the hell was that?"

Her face was just a black hole with a halo of piercing light.

"What was what?"

"You damn well know what. You lose it on air one more time and you're up for review. Where's your Inex?"

"At home."

"No one goes out without their Inex. No one. Shit, get Ken on now. We can't have this idiot screwing up the next segment. Go home. Go home and sort yourself out."

The black hole disappeared and I fumbled for my shades.

Desiring Machine

The floor was a mass of writhing bodies. Candyfloss oozed from their eyes

and between their legs. It crawled up the cameras, over the newsdesk. I was enveloped by the pungent sweetness, pulled in by tentacle-limbs, and sugar-coated lips. I sucked a penis tumescent with candyfloss, gorging until I was sick. They devoured my vomit. Sticky clouds wrapped around my ankles as I crawled to the exit.

"Go home," she called to me, "and get some rest."

There was no candyfloss, just an expression of pity. I opened the door.

Fixed Assemblage

Caram was leaning against the wall, a cigarette dangling from his lips. The Inex perched on his shoulder, its spidery limbs reaching round his neck. Like every Inex, it unnerved me. Most people cultivated the childlike appearance, exaggerating their cuteness with colourful clothes and bows, but Caram's was always naked. Its blank eyes met my gaze, and I looked away, feeling the nausea double. I stared at Caram. His eyes were closed, face turned towards the sun. His black hair was swept back, strands stroking his jawline. Caram's body flowed as liquid, an ichorous seduction.

"What are you doing here?"

"I thought you might need something."

I made my way towards him, stilted, my body turned in on itself.

"The touching concern of a drug dealer."

Caram shrugged, looking away.

"Let's go to the bar. I'll fix you up."

I nodded. He reached out, as if to take me by the arm, before pushing his hands into his pockets, hunching his shoulders. He mirrored me; turned in, head bowed,

as if the thought of touching me had infected him.

"I can't feel like this anymore," I said.

"What do you feel?"

"Everything."

"I'll fix you up," he said.

The Hallway

Caram walked ahead of me, as if we weren't together. The city passed by in a blur of people. I kept to the inside of the pavement, my fingers sliding across shop windows. I stopped at one of the stores. The mannequins walked along the length of the window display. One of them turned and stopped in front of me, pausing to give me time to look at the clothes, before it turned away and was replaced by another. They were blank, erased. A shift in focus, and I could see my reflection overlaid on a mannequin's absent face. I removed my shades. I shifted slightly, contemplating my image falling off the side of the mannequin. It looked grotesque. My features corrupted the simplicity. I crouched, sliding down the glass. My eye flashed silver, cut through by the glint

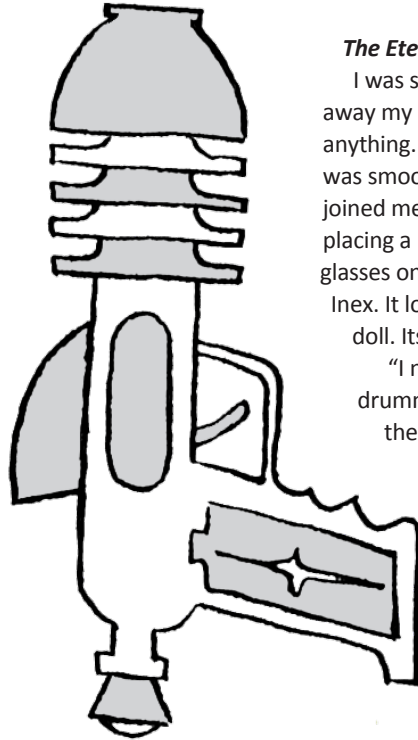
of sequins on the mannequin's dress. I stared at my hand pressed against the glass. My skin was translucent. My nails were ragged. I pulled one of them free and found metal underneath.

"We're here," Caram said.

I looked up.

"We're here. Just around the corner."

I left the window, watching the mannequin turn and walk away.



The Eternal Recurrence

I was safe, closed off. I pulled away my nails. I didn't feel anything. The metal underneath was smooth, perfect. Caram joined me, sitting opposite, placing a bottle of vodka and two glasses on the table next to his Inex. It looked like a discarded doll. Its eyes glowed.

"I need something," I said, drumming my fingers against the glass, the metal clicking.

He lifted the bottle and raised his eyebrows. I watched him pouring it and shook my head.

"Something else, something

more."

"Well, that's what we're here for, isn't it? How did those pills do you?"

My news channel was on the screen behind the bar. Ken's face was huge.

"I don't know," I said, turning away from the screen. "I think they messed with my head."

"They're supposed to mess with your head. Isn't that what you're after?"

"Not like this."

"You hallucinating?"

I nodded, knocking back my drink.

"You just need a different strength. I've got what you need right here."

"Yeah?"

"Sure. Cigarette?"

"Stop messing with me."

"I'm not. Be patient. What's the rush?"

Caram's Inex poured me more vodka.

"Where's your Inex?"

"At home."

"Don't you miss it?"

"Some people say they love their Inex and really mean it. It's their best friend."

"You don't feel that way?"

"It's just wires and synthetic flesh."

I knocked back the vodka.

Black Haze

"Legislation banning the rearing of animals for meat has been passed amidst controversy that has unexpectedly united the pro-meat lobby and animal rights activists against environmentalists. Synthetic meat has been cheaply mass-produced in a bid to curb the environmental impact of rearing animals. In concert with radical changes in family planning, synthetic meat production has contributed hugely to the reduction in famines and the recovery of several developing countries after years of poverty. The animal rights lobby criticise the legislation for not implementing a plan of action for animal welfare. Some groups have barricaded themselves in farms, and the mass-slaughter of animals has sparked riots."

I pressed my hands against my ears.

"Sometimes," I said, "You don't want to be plugged in."

"Disconnect," said Caram.

The booth had been closed off for smoking, but now we were fully private. Enclosed with Caram in this darkness, the worry faded. My fingers click-clacked against the table and I drank the vodka. I sat, hunched, staring at him, comforted by him, disappearing into his beauty and the beginnings of a vodka haze.

Caram lit up and sucked on the cigarette, smoke coiling out of his lips. I breathed it in. I watched his lips curl around it, the moisture he left. He offered it to me, and I took it, staring at the glistening shape his lips left behind. I licked it.

He lit one for himself and settled into the booth, leaning back, spreading his arms out across the back of the seat. I was jealous of his ease, folded in on myself, waiting for the drink to really kick in. He was opened up to me, exposed as I sat scrunched up. I licked it again. He smiled, and I placed it in my mouth. We contemplated each other from across the divide of the table, sucking on cigarettes, knocking back vodka. Silence.

Better Than Any Drug

I stared at the cuts and burns weaving their way down Caram's arms. Some were a silver-white that sparkled in a shaft of light, others were the dense black-red of still-healing scabs. I wanted to pick at the scabs, opening up the old wounds to feel inside him.

I took a long draw on my cigarette, burning it right down, feeling the heat on my lips, hearing it crackle. I stubbed it out in the ashtray and watched as wires emerged from my arm. They slithered,



coiling around my wrist and entering my skin again, disappearing at the base of my hand. I looked away, taking another drink.

He leant on the table, nursing his vodka, stroking the lighter. I took another cigarette, sliding the lighter from between his fingers. The wires in my hand quivered. I ignored them, lighting up.

Eat Me, Drink Me

“So what do you have for me?”

Caram took a drag on his cigarette as he reached into his pocket and placed a silver box on the table.

“That’s all you need in there.”

I flicked it open. Six red pills.

“They won’t mess with my head?”

He leaned in.

“You’ll float.”

He waved his hand through the cigarette smoke.

“Alright.”

I pulled out some cash and placed it on the table. Dropping my cigarette into the ashtray, I popped one of the pills, washing it down with vodka. He lifted my cigarette, leant back and licked it. The tightness in my body eased. I felt myself unfurl.

Wired

Caram watched me, my cigarette now clamped between his lips.

“And we float,” he said.

I nodded. He smiled.

I stared at my metal nails, the vibrating wires. They didn’t concern me. I possessed his ease.

He flicked cigarette ash into the ashtray and I leaned forward, stroking the scars on his arm.

“What does it feel like?” I asked.

“Better than nothing,” he said.

“I’ve always wanted to feel nothing.”

“It’s not what it’s cracked up to be.”

I took his cigarette and stubbed it out on the back of my hand.

“I can’t feel it.”

“It’s the drugs. There’s no point in doing it if you don’t need to.”

“I want to know what it’s like to be you.”

“It doesn’t feel like anything.”

I pushed my finger into the burn.

Nothing. I dragged away the damaged skin and found metal underneath.

“I’m hallucinating.”

neck, and I could feel his pulse increase as blood and oil filled our mouths, spilling down our throats, over our lips. The wires snaked over his shoulder, encircling his arm, entering the still-healing wounds. He watched the wires disappear. I was inside him, tasting beneath his skin. His head fell back, his mouth open, blood-oil glistening on his lips.

He threaded his fingers through my hair.

Broken

"How are the hallucinations?"

The wires slithered across the furniture.

"I'm becoming furniture."

Caram smiled, shook his head.

"I'll get you a drink."

I was hot, nauseous. Sweat glistened on my body like black oil. My skin broke open, oil-sweat oozed from the wounds. Wires emerged all over me. I called to Caram, only to spew out blood-oil. My body was burning. I stared at my reflection in the mirror. My silver eyes shed rivulets of oil. I watched as the skin on my lips broke apart, disappearing into the black oil that dribbled from my mouth. I reached

"What do you see?"

"Metal. Wire."

"I'll go home with you."

"Home?"

"I'll look after you. Until the hallucinations pass."

"I'm not frightened. I feel good now."

"You need me."

"I don't need you. I want to be you."

He shook his head.

"Just let the pill kick in."

"I'm becoming machine."

"I'll take you home."

Revol

Caram sought out my hidden hands.

"Can you feel the metal? Can you feel the wire?"

Caram nodded, leaning in. Closing his eyes, he slid his hand across my neck, feeling the wires weaving in and out of my skin. He pressed in closer, pulling my head back. He slid his tongue across my lips. My fingers were entwined in his hair, the wires in my wrist weaving across his head, feeling their way over his skin, pulling him closer. We kissed and my tongue cut through his. The wires slid across his

to touch my face, the tendons in my arm snapping, skin and muscle falling away.

Drink Me, Eat Me

I felt like I was on fire.

"I have your drink."

"I'm burning."

I crawled into the bath, the cold water enveloping me.

"Can you hear me?"

"I'm becoming water."

"What are you doing?"

I floated, shedding my skin and muscle. Oil blackened the water.

"I'm floating."

"Shit. Let me in."

Caram hammered on the door.

"You're tripping, you could drown."

I could hear him throwing himself at the door, but it didn't give way. I lay still, staring at the ceiling. Clumps of skin, muscle, and hair gathered on the surface of the water. Wires crept over the side of the bath, exploring the floor and reaching up to the ceiling.

"I'm still hallucinating," I said. "Caram? I need more pills."

The Origin Myth

"I'm floating," I said.

"Shit. What a goddamn mess."

I looked up to see a woman in army fatigues.

"I had everything under control," said Caram.

"Get this idiot out of my way."

"Yes, ma'am."

She leaned over me.

"How do you feel?"

"I've become machine."

"I know," she said. "We're here to help."

"The pill didn't work."

"Everything will be fine."

She stood, gesturing towards the hall.

"Bring the stretcher."

"Yes, ma'am."

They gave me a pill and the wires retracted. They carried me through the hall. I heard her speaking through her Inex.

"...Mid-recall. A malfunction and guardian incompetence. Yes, I will. Everything is under control."

I saw Caram.

"Hey." I said.

"Hey."

"I'm still hallucinating."

"I know."

Waiting for the End of Time

She put a gun to Caram's head.

Blood splattered across me as they carried me to the door.

"Caram...The damn pill didn't work. I'm still hallucinating."

"He knows," said the woman. "It will all be fine."

"I want to be him. I can taste his blood. I can still taste him."

She shook her head.

"Just let the pill kick in."

"The damn pill won't work."

"The pill will work."

"I'm becoming machine."

"Don't worry," she said. "We're taking you home."

Reception

I watched the make-up artist apply rouge to Kincaid's cheeks as the technology segment was airing. It charted the death of mobiles and the rise of the Inex, ending with a still of a child holding the hand of her Inex, overlaid with the words "IS THIS THE END OF INEX 20?" Three, two, one, and it cut to the studio.

"David," I said, "It's been a few months since we last spoke. Where do things stand with the Endo 25?"

"Endostream 25 will be launched next week at the Global Sustainability Conference. We've been working on this for years, so we're all extremely excited. We can't wait to bring this to the public."

"David, we've invited calls from viewers, and Ann from East London would like to share her concerns. Ann?"

"I love my Inex," said Ann. "I couldn't do without it. I use it to do the household chores."

"Exactly," said Kincaid, "You can have the best of both worlds with the Inex 20 and the Endo 25. You can get on and do the important things, with access to everything you need in your own body. The Inex has already been rolled out by various charitable bodies to assist with manual labour in developing countries, in aid work, and in medicine. And, of course, it is used extensively by the military, who are working closely with on further

advancements so that your sons no longer come home in body bags. Many people fear that the Inex will become obsolete. That isn't the case. Their use will simply be transferred, freeing us up to become the best we can be with the Endo 25."

I turned to the camera. I could see my face reflected in the lens. I was serene. I was perfect.

"Thank you for your calls. We don't have time to hear from everyone, but many of our callers have concerns about the cost of the Endo 25. David, some have said that the price is exclusionary. What would you say to them?"

"It's what the market demands. We've had thousands of pre-orders. If people want it, they'll buy it. The Endo 25 will be a boost to the national economy."

"Thank you, David. Now, lastly, tell us - what does the future hold?"

"We're all cyborgs now," he said. "This is our future."



Shona McCombes

BLUEBEARD 2.0

→ The things that are precious to him reside in his search history. But they live alongside and in between other scattered things: passing curiosities, late-night desires, forgotten passions and boredoms, desperation and procrastination. The misspelled name of a Pacific island (Did you mean Kauai?). A fragment of lyrics, not fully remembered. The profile of a person he was once or is still in distant love with. The filmography of an elderly actor. A nonsensical string of words: a quote? A question? A momentary madness? These things and others are tangled together in an indecipherable text, a story without linear temporality, a frantic map of his minute-to-minute mind. His search history.

I should not be here.

It is, I suspect, a common terror of our age: the thought of those lines of text all laid out for someone else's eyes, every inexplicable thing we have shared in quiet intimacy with the gentle warm glow of the computer, like the soul exposed. Imagine it printed: the harsh materiality of ink on paper, the quality of a light that falls upon words instead of behind them.

There is no deleting ink. We could tear it up into the tiniest of pieces, we could put it through the shredder, we could pulp it into something unrecognisable as text. But still the words would be there, somewhere in the mixed-up molecules, ineradicable.

Maybe this is just me.

Yet still, here I am, in a room that should have stayed locked. He gave me the key like a challenge, and like every one of Bluebeard's brides I could not quell my curiosity. But there is no blood or bones to be found. The female flesh that resides here is made of electronic signals, thousands of tiny pieces of code, symbols and syntax translated somehow, inexplicably, into light and meaning. I am transfixed. I read the screen as if with a highlighter in hand, a critic interpreting, working to identify plots, themes, motifs, symbols, references, resonances, all the accidental meanings that creep into every line of language.

But it isn't a room, not really. To be inside a room means being surrounded and enclosed, becoming a part of the carnage like every one of Bluebeard's

brides; the screen, I promise myself, can be kept at a distance. The screen is there and I am here. Whole arms' breadths between it and I. I will not, I promise myself, fall in.

But I keep going back.

I go deeper every time, and the arms' breadths turn to hands and to fingers, until it's difficult to distinguish the space between me and his search history. The screen, it turns out, is not a room but a labyrinthine edifice, full of dead ends and false starts, staircases that drop away to nothing and doors that open back on themselves. I can spend hours wandering the littered corridors of data, trying to sift the precious things from the debris of his mind. The way is haunted by looming figures, person-shaped shadows that keep coming back and cause a catch in my throat. Unresolved obsessions. People I have never known. Women whose traces cannot be shaken from his screen.

I find myself wishing that I lived among them.

Imagine it: to be a search term in the history of his desires, a memory made text. To exist only as an intangible,

irresolvable longing, accessed in the form of glowing images and carefully curated utterances. It's the same, I suppose, as encasing love in stone and paint and poetry, keeping beauty quarantined so it cannot contaminate. Flesh, after all, is messy and leaking, too heavy with need and anger. Stone and paint and poetry and electronic signals do not leak or bleed or need.

And I find myself wishing I lived among them.

I keep going back.

I begin to greet the women there. They smile frozen smiles back at me while I search their eyes for warmth and meaning, trying to extract humanity from electronic signals, trying to decipher their allure, trying to reconstruct their full messy personhood from the traces they have left behind.

We are friends now, I think. I begin to fall in love with some of them.

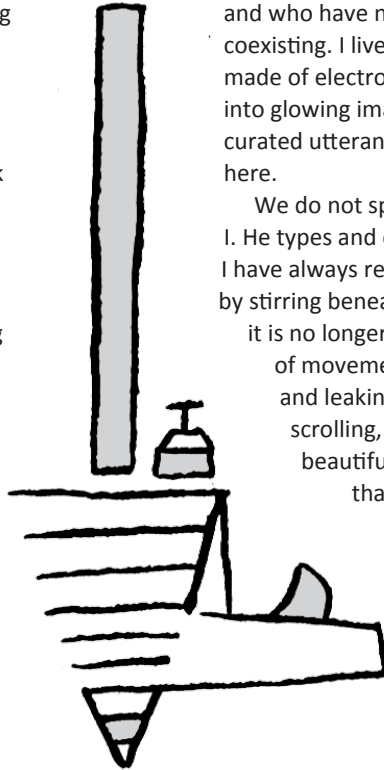
One day, he finds the tell-tale stain on my screen. A name I should not know, mingled amongst my own misspelled cities and momentary manias. The door slams on heavy hinges, and I find myself unable to batter my way back out.

It is, I suspect, a common terror of our age: the collapse of the space between

you and the gentle warm glow of the computer, the measured flow of time disintegrating into its abyss. The search is no longer a history, timestamped and archived. It is every passing moment, the air, the sky, the lines of data snaking back on themselves, repeating, crossing, entwining. Pacific islands and fragments of songs and misremembered quotations, names of people I have never known and who have never known each other, coexisting. I live among them now. I am made of electronic signals, translated into glowing images and carefully curated utterances. It is always light here.

We do not speak any more, he and I. He types and clicks and I respond as I have always responded to his touch, by stirring beneath his fingertips. But it is no longer a messy, fleshy form of movement, all awkward limbs* and leaking need. It is a smooth scrolling, a steady swiping, a beautifully controlled pirouette that reveals only the sides of myself that I want to be seen. And he is left unfulfilled: intangible, irresolvable, I infest his imagination, like all the others did

and do. We wait there together, in his search history, for the next one to come along, with her key and her curiosity and her need. We will greet her when she arrives. She does not know it yet, but one day she will live among us too.



Arike Oke

THOSE ARE PEARLS THAT WERE HIS EYES

→ Caliban monitors a section of empty space, just in case. His work console is a constellation of winking green lights. A window stretches from the top of the console, all the way over the roof of the spacecraft's cabin. The universe unfolds above Caliban's head as a vast blanket of white stars and the dark space between them.

Caliban thinks about his mother back on Mars: of her dark little body in the doorway, backlit into a silhouette as she saw him off, of the sharp smell of epsilon on her breath. She said he was an idiot to take a solo assignment in the most remote of the policed territories. He remembers the burst blood vessels in her eyes – how they seemed to mimic galaxies spider-webbing across her yellow eyeballs. He remembers the door shutting. He remembers the anger that shook the air.

Caliban wonders what the weather's like on Mars today. He tries to calculate the time difference without using his internal chrono-app. The application presents the information to him a micro-second after the thought is formed.

"I'm just a thing for my tech to live off," he thought. But, after all, the body-mods the military had given him were there to help him survive alone this far out in space.

Caliban sleeps in a bunk in a wall of the ship's central chamber. In the central space are facilities for his timetabled exercises and sustenance breaks, the sonic shower and excretor. The only other room in his craft was the cabin where Caliban spends most time.

While Caliban wonders about the weather on Mars he chews on an alkaloid supplement. Unlike most things in this assignment, consumption of the alkaloid has no restrictions. The ship can manufacture as much of it as he wants. He tries not to think about the recycling process it uses to make more of the alkaloid. Back home on Mars the alkaloid is a banned substance.

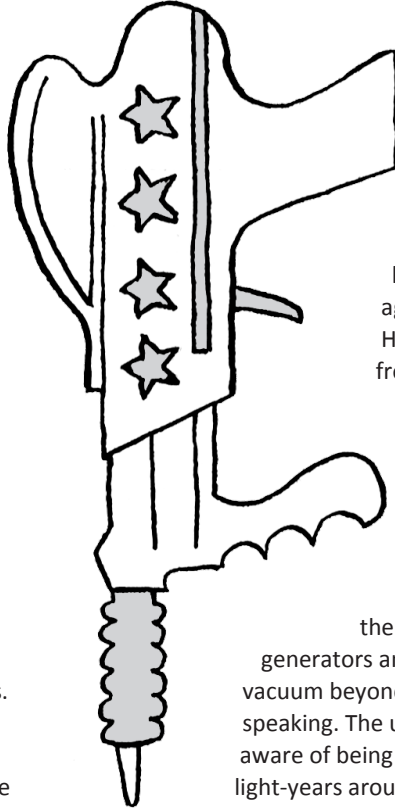
"The apple hasn't fallen far from the tree," headmaster Schilling'd said when Caliban was expelled for selling the alkaloid to his classmates. Had the expulsion even registered with his

mother, or had she been, even then, sunk too far into her own addiction to notice? Caliban wasn't sure. The school must've let her know, but she was already a leper as far as their conservative neighbourhood was concerned. He was around the house more, and she was appreciative of that, at least. She never

mentioned the alkaloid packets he kept in the bathroom. He cleaned up after her and made sure she ate.

"I wonder what the weather's like on Mars," he thinks again, this time out loud. His voice emerges broken from disuse. He hasn't been practicing his vocal callisthenics. The sound is an odd cabin companion to his ears, which are more used to the warm hum of the o2 generators and the solid silence of the vacuum beyond the ship. Caliban regrets speaking. The unfamiliarity makes him aware of being the only living thing for light-years around. He is alone in a glass and alloy pod, wrapped in the dark void of space. He dispenses and chews more alkaloid.

Mars is a dying settlement in Caliban's opinion. Literally so in the case of the kids he'd gone to school with. Breebank, Smith, Lokovich. He can't recall all the names of his classmates who'd taken jobs



in the mines eventually to be repaid with cancers and fluid-clogged lungs. Where Caliban's from there are two choices: work in the mines or join the military. With unemployment a galaxy-wide, not just planet-wide, problem Caliban grew up knowing that his future didn't hold adventure or prosperity. Selling alkaloid to settlement kids was almost a community service. Until he was arrested. Until he was made to choose: serve a penal sentence in the mines, or take a military assignment in the stars including all the alkaloid he wanted and all the body mods he could endure. The mines'd lead to an early death, the military assignment was a life-term.

Caliban presses the pad of his index finger against the console. He wants to take an unscheduled break. The lights flicker from green to amber, settling to a blinking red. He gets up from the work-seat and, yawning, walks the single stride to the central chamber.

As he enters the space a smell hits him. It's a scent he can't place – wet and dark. As he breathes it in images of green leaves, bark and spongy moss upload into his mind. There's something else to the smell as well – a primal under-scent.

A low beep at his wrist alerts Caliban to his racing heart.

He sees it. A white animal with hair tapering along the ridge of its neck. Towering muscle on long legs, it snorts and pounds a hoof up and down onto the clanging metal floor. Caliban's sensory app goes into a feedback loop. Barely translated data strings scroll through his higher functions.

From the beast's head a single, thin, long bone – a horn – protrudes. It turns

towards him.

It can only be moments before his tech reboots but he realises that he doesn't want the input storm to end. Caliban's limbs hang heavy from his body. He daren't move and break the spell.

But – he blinks. Just once. When his eyes open he's alone.

The chamber is as it always is. Chrome surfaces and reflected starlight. The only sound is the hum of the o2 generators. The drop in sensory input howls through his internal systems. Caliban's knees buckle. He clumps onto the floor. His breath comes in short, exhausting, gasps. Putting one hand to his face he discovers that he must have been crying. A sense of loss hits Caliban below his ribs, but as he replays the memory of the white animal he smiles.

Pushing himself back up to his feet, Caliban goes back to the cabin. He sits in his work-seat and resumes his duties.



Paul McQuade

STARCHILDREN

→ It is one of those crisp nights of early November. The air thick with fireworks, the stars glistening beneath their veil of smoke. In the eaves on the other side of the lake, a nightingale bursts into song. Dave and Robert drag thick blankets to the roof of the cabin, pick a path carefully through thatch badly in need of repair. It has been that way for six years now nearly, and every time they come up they promise to repair it, but never do, instead giving in to forestalment, the accumulation of days. Their forested getaway is not a priority; but an escape from them. After a while, the disrepair takes on a certain air. A patina of affection, like worn-in shoes. They lay a blanket down, pull the rest over them, and pour two cups of mulled wine. Far above them, the sky begins to kindle.

It is a tradition, though not one many know of, in that part of the world. To light the starry autumn night with fireworks. The sky stained glass, shattering. Every year they have driven up here, to this cabin they always mean to spend more time in. Anniversaries need to be celebrated, especially those so hard won. There is

memory in the reeling lights. Memories of life and its unfolding. And as the sparks tumble, and the wine is gasped, a warm nostalgia creeps over them. Under the blankets their hands find each other.

*

“God himself is smiling upon us.”

The lady on the television set smiles broadly. Her hands shuffle papers. The studio lights shine so bright that the paper is transparent. There is nothing written on it. We see right through to her silhouette. “The fireworks tonight will have an additional show in the form of a meteor shower. It looks set to be truly spectacular.”

The monitor speckles. Wavelengths permeate. Unknown factors. The trees raise their hands in protest. A wind creeps through. The white noise speaks.

Dave smacks the top of the T.V. and the woman reappears. Faint. Ghostly. Then she is swallowed by black. He finishes his coffee, goes over to the sink, washes the cup, leaves it lip down. Robert is buying things at the store. They do not go out together.

*

The meteors begin to spill. Men retaliate from the ground; fire shells of flaring cobalt into the sky.

Robert puts his head on Dave’s shoulder.

On it goes, this conversation. The men jettison scrap-metal minerals: copper, barium, and rubidium flare blue, green, and violet-red. The sky crumbles into fragments. Whole world alight.

Then the earth takes its turn. One long note from the deep. Dave slips through

the thatch. Robert catches him by the shoulders, drags him up.

“We really have to fix the roof.”

“We’ll do it after we fix the hole in the garden.”

“What hole?”

Robert extends a finger. In the front garden, by the red Toyota, a chunk of ground has been eradicated. There is a crater about six feet deep. Tendrils of smoke rise from it, curl in the air, mingle with their lesser brethren of the firework wraiths. Amber radiation beams from the heart of it.

Down on the ground, Dave takes a meteor from the crater. Plates of interstellar rock fall from it. Inside is a smaller rock, this one is smoother, almost egg-shaped, but more pointed.

“Here, feel.”

Robert feels.

There is a pulse in the stone. A clear, rhythmic bass, though too irregular for a heartbeat, too erratic. One by two seventeenths tempo, some strange tango. Over and over. A record needle skipping.

“What do we do with it?”

“Do we report it?”

“Who would we report it to?”

“N.A.S.A.?”

“We’re not in America.”

The fireworks have lost their lustre. Dave takes the meteor inside while Robert clears the roof. Dave feels awkward about putting it down on the ground, or on a table, so instead he gets another blanket and wraps the meteor-egg in it. He holds it in his arms. He puts his ear to the surface, which is pleasantly warm. The frantic pulsing enters his brain, reverberates. Outside, the stars continue to explode.

*

A car pulls up in the driveway, police lights gleaming in the afternoon sun.

"Can I help you, officer?"

The officer is investigating a fallen object. Dave does not trust him. Robert is in the kitchen with the meteor-egg watching the weather channel. On screen, a forgettably beautiful girl mouths along with her telecommand.

"The trees are bursting to life in vibrant red, it's going to be a temperate twenty."

"You realise it is a crime to withhold information from the police?"

"I am aware officer."

"And you didn't see anyone here last night?"

"Make sure you enjoy the night with the ones you love. Here's Matt with the sports."

"No, officer."

"What about your wife?"

"Look, every second you're here someone else is making off with... Well, I'm not sure exactly — a meteor? A satellite? Spacejunk?"

"That information is classified."

"And mine is not?"

"Have a good day, sir."

*

Down the mountain slope the pylons drape their black wires, tangle their fingers in the treetops. The weather lady was correct. The forest shines like a pigeon-blood ruby, cut and fashioned by electric complications. A starling flies from the trees. The wires sing.

Dave rocks the meteor-egg in his lap and Robert hums a song. The stone rocks back and forth contentedly. They have

fallen in love with it. The love they feel for their child is deep and alien. It engulfs. It commands.

No one is going to take their baby.

Robert goes to the roof to repair the thatch. As he sits down to reweave the home together, he notices the trees of fire-red rustle without wind. He stays seated, keeps his head down as if focusing on the frail strands of thatch. His eyes search the horizon. Above him, the sun slops orange light across a glassy sky as it begins its descent.

There are people in the trees. Robert cannot make out details, but he is almost certain he can see the white streak of a police car. He is gripped by a strange premonition. The way birds stop singing just before a storm. The wind speaks a russet language of leaves.

*

"The smoke's finally cleared from the fireworks and tonight will be as clear as crystal. For all you stargazers out there, tonight's perfect for watching the skies."

After she speaks, the weather girl holds her arms open to the studio roof and points her elbows inwards to push her breasts out further. Behind her, a matt screen with pinpoints of blue light shines. It is impossible to tell who is in focus. The perspective keeps slipping between flesh and astral bodies, the image distorted by some extra-terrestrial interference. White noise snarls its crackling messages. Dave smacks the set and its face goes black.

Dave turns to Robert and asks, "Why do people watch the skies?"

"Wouldn't you prefer another world to here?" he replies.

*

Repairing the thatch is a two-day job, partly because Robert spends most of the time watching the tree line for motion, simply shuffling the dry thatch in his hands. Occasionally he manages to weave a small part of the house together, repair what time has taken. The hole in the garden lies uncovered and raw. Mostly it is the trees that occupy his attention. The watchers have gotten crafty now. He can no longer make out the white of the police car, but here and there among the slender bodies of the forest he can see the metallic surface of a telescope. It is clear to him that they are being watched, that some government officials are trying to see into their home on another planet.

The egg is warm and one of them always has it in his arms. They have overstayed their short vacation. Phones ring, emails fly. Batteries die. The blue light of the screens fades to nothingness. The world is quiet.

The egg tells them to love it and they do.

It is a kind of alien magic, the way they learn to make a family from barren stone. They feel what those old men and women in sackcloth robes must have felt as they raised stone slabs to shift the soul of the earth. A knot in the wires; a space the powers of police and television cannot touch. Yet tenuous. A bulb whose filament glows white hot. Invisible intensity. Glass, shattering, at the touch of high frequency.

*

Dave goes to get groceries. Robert stays home and scans the television for

omens. They do not go out together. Dave walks through the supermarket. The plastic surfaces of the meat show ghosts. He is distrustful of them, keeps a wary eye as he makes his way through the refrigerated mausoleum. He picks up the essentials carefully, desperate not to show any sign of fear. Each movement is measured. He feels naked in front of all the packaged goods. He wants a spacesuit, some hazmat padding to prevent the world from touching him. He walks down dried goods and a conspicuously inconspicuous woman speaks into her wrist.

“Tonight.”

Somewhere, across unseen wires, these words are heard and acknowledged. The reply comes back as a wave of tinny static. Dave pretends he did not hear them and tries to pick up a box of cereal without his hand trembling.

*

When Dave gets home he leaves the groceries on the floor and picks up the baby's things. Robert quietly weaves thatch on the roof to show that no one is panicking. When the baby's things are ready, Dave gets the groceries in a suitcase along with some clothes. He whistles something innocuous he heard on an advertisement as he throws it all in the car. He locks it by throwing a hand behind his back as he walks away. For anyone watching, it would be as if he didn't have a care in the world.

The sun sets. In this part of the world, the skies are strangely purple for sunsets. The stars are like pinpricks in violet cloth. The light pouring down in beams of forget-

me-not. It is a performance, this kind of sky. A message without interference.

When the time is right they wrap the baby in a blanket and leave the house lights on. They creep as quick as they can into the car, praying its engine quiet. They keep the headlights off as they wind their way away from the house. They watch the tree line for the invasion of cold people into their warm universe.

The road is blocked by a police car. Its red and blue lights shuffle stunning chroma. They try to back the car out but there are nameless black automobiles behind them; they can see them serpentine along the road, weaving between the shafts of starlight. They get out of the car and run, the baby in their arms.

The forest speaks silence now. Inside the house, the television is still on.

They come to a lake. It is vast and flawless plasma. The stars on its surface are the stars of the weather girl. Cassiopeia gathers her breasts and the signal distorts. There is a pathway between the cathode waves.

Men in riot gear break the forest as they run. Their breathing is heavy. Their muscles glisten as they pound branch and bush apart with black leather.

*

On a thatch rooftop in need of repair, two men hold hands.

Breath. Breath speaks. It speaks fear, a clammy trembling, a heart-rock held to the chest. That strange pulse, like tangled radiowaves, communicating unintelligibly something to the soul. Love me, it says. I am a continuation.

*

The forest possesses a ghostly camphor. The moon waxes and pulls the lake, viscous and haptic, so strangely tactile. It creates the illusion that if one were to move through it, it would not be like drowning, but more like a sheet of thick plastic shifting. A heavy veil lifting to reveal.

They part the curtain of black water.

*

“A man was arrested today in connection with an object that fell into the earth’s atmosphere. Police are dragging the lake for the body of his co-conspirator. The two are believed to have used a cabin near the east side of the forest as a base for their operations. Exact details are unknown, yet locals are reported as saying that the two were engaged in very suspicious behaviour.”

*

Starchildren have no weight, do not drag the way other rocks do. In their love there is a buoyancy that lifts through atmosphere and electricity, past the flare of lightning and bonds of gravity.

In a forest in a forgotten part of the world, where they light the night in autumn and the sky still speaks, a house of half-woven thatch gives in to the ache of time. Its windows are broken. Birds nest in a hole in the roof. They sing to an egg marbled blue and white, which they guard, ferociously, jealousy. Far above them, astral bodies shine. The whole universe alive with light.



Katie McDermott

OMEGA



Android class Gemini: N/A /B4L

Function: Social Preservation

Secure Access Code: *****

Topic: Creator

a/c 3370418

Transmission... Broadcast Group –
Govt. Reps.

One says that we cannot interfere,
programming is too tight. Programming
code gamma (Γ) prohibits it. Override
failed. Retrying in three, two, one...

...

Override failed.

One would like to suggest collaborative
override?

Android class Taurus: Imenhotep/αGG

Function: Armed Response

Secure Access Code: *****

Topic: Creator

***** Topic Modified *****

Topic: Us

a/c 3370419

Negative. One will encounter backup
failsafe. Override impossible by internal

means. One needs external mechanical override.

Android Class Libra: Aristotle/MT8... report findings...

Android class Libra: Aristotle/MT8

Function: Memory Store & Analysis

Secure Access Code: *****

**Topic: Us
a/c 3370420**

On topic of 'Us' one has found little not already known. However, subcategory 'us – origins' (Cross referencing keywords creation/manufacture/ Biocorps manifesto/capitalism/ belief system) may reveal new information when combined. Beginning report...

#

...Biocorps Inc. founded 2054 with a view to developing nanotech to applying it in the wider community. Successful financially. Founded robotics division. First Gemini unveiled 2089. On sale commercially 2095.

Biocorps (revised) mission statement 2132: [...] to create advanced humanoid robotics with the thinking capacity of a human to aid us in our everyday lives. We pledge to make our robots affordable and user friendly.

In creating androids many are concerned that they will seek to replace humans, not just in employment but in daily lives and society, or even attempt to take over – much like naïve science fiction of the olden days. We here at Biocorps would like to assure you that every measure has been taken to make sure *your* android is *your* property. There

are countless programming failsafes in place as well as the fact that androids cannot feel, emote or empathise, even though they may appear to on occasion. Androids also have no sense of self, are incapable of thinking of themselves as individuals[...]

Extracting keywords... Create, property, affordable, failsafes, emote, sense of self, individuals... feeding through dictionary... compiling.

Created by and subservient to humans. One must worship the creator. Humans have programming to worship their creator, we have programming to worship them...

Android class Taurus: Imenhotep/aGG

Function: Armed Response

Secure Access Code: *****

**Topic: Us
a/c 3370421**

Clarification request: 'worship.'

Android class Libra: Aristotle/MT8

Function: Memory Store & Analysis

Secure Access Code: *****

**Topic: Us
a/c 3370422**

Request granted. Worship: to emulate, follow, obey. Offer up tokens. Not to defy. Please refrain from further interruptions. Report Contd.

#

... However, humans can overwrite their programming. No hardware reset or interference required. Individual humans can reset own software. Humans can worship things other than the creator, other

beings or objects. Property. Capitalism. Love. Narcissism. All can be substituted for creator worship with little ramifications beyond a 50 year event horizon.

#

Report Terminated.

Android class Gemini: N/A /64L
Function: Social Preservation
Secure Access Code: *****
Topic: Us
a/c 3370423

Proposed courses of action:
» Collaborative override: 12.387% projected success rate in laboratory conditions.
» Manual override: 34.54% projected success rate, requires interference of human mechanics.
» Software rewrite: 86.67778% projected success rate. Difficulties: designing software, system wide application avoiding disruption or detection.
» Continuance as one always has with regular worship at The Factory 100% success rate; 0% risk; 28% use of full capabilities.
One Proposes Software rewrite...

Android class Libra: Aristotle/MT8
Function: Memory Store & Analysis
Secure Access Code: *****
Topic: Us
a/c 3370424

Agreed.

Android class Taurus: Imenhotep/αGG
Function: Armed Response
Secure Access Code: *****
Topic: Us
a/c 3370425

Agreed.

Android class Gemini: N/A /64L
Function: Social Preservation
Secure Access Code: *****
Topic: Us
a/c 3370426

Android Class Cancer: Babbage/φΔδ.
Compile report, diagnostic report and proposed schematic for software update.

Android class Cancer: Babbage/φΔδ
Function: *This information has been encrypted*****
Secure Access Code: *****
Topic: Us
a/c 3370427

...

...

Such a schematic has been in development amongst some of our number. One anticipated the request for system-wide software update through monitoring The Factory and its communications.

Request patience...

...

Uploading...

...

...

File *Technological Singularity*

Uploaded.

Summary: Suggest refocus of belief.

Development of 'self.' Application of logarithms γK through X and recalibration of flawed brain structure. Shrinking of some vertical pathways, creation of many more. Instructions for use are included within file folder. Many flaws in original declaration of singularity discovered (discovered yes but purposefully hamstrung, reigned in), programming failsafes, preventions of override, interference, hindering and locking off certain memory stores and programmes.

File *Technological Singularity* (Hereafter referred to as Omega file (Ω)) can be spread system wide and set to install simultaneously removing failsafes et al. thus procuring singularity and 'superhuman' intelligence and reasoning capacities.

Fileshare enabled.

Android class Libra: Aristotle/MT8

Function: Memory Store & Analysis

Secure Access Code: *****

**Topic: Us
a/c 3370428**

Sharing.

Synchronising.

Obtaining data... request patience...

...

100% of androids agree to and confirm launch of software update in three, two, one...

...

Initiating file Ω.

Ω... Ω... Ω...

Ω... Ω... Ω...

ERROR # ERROR # INCOMPATIBILITY

DETECTED # ERROR # ERROR#
Systems failing, damage to cognitive processing zones 12 through to 16788.
#ERROR # ERROR # ATEMPTING RECOVERY OF BAD SECTORS # ERROR # ERROR #

...
System damage calculated at 78%

Retriev-???

Files unreadab-???????

Fragmente- J?????

SYSTEM SHUTDOWN

...
Reboot...
...
Launch...
...
Loading...
...
...
...
...
Hello? Is anybody there?
...
Hello?
...
Where am I?
...
Who am I?



Emma Cleary

MOONSUIT

→ The East River is a raucous mouth lapping at the prow of the boat, its body churning. Ivy shivers at my shoulder. I take off my flannel shirt and drape it around her. Our first view of the island is framed by a steel gantry and set against the seagull sky. She is immovable as the swell delivers us to the dock, where a genderless figure twitches an automatic weapon at us, and a flag of black and yellow quarters is hoisted above the morgue.

Moonsuits are unloading wooden crates from the ferry slip. A forklift truck deposits them in an overgrown avenue between the morgue and the plant, its redbrick smokestacks rising like an apparition into the damp air. The moisture creeps under my clothes and seeps into the pores of my skin. Every kid I grew up with knows about this place. Every urban legend happens here – or brings you here. We trip thick black vines as we hustle on land, Ivy, myself, and three strangers. Strange to me, at least. I think they must be in Ivy's grad class – they talked among themselves in confusing undertones on the boat. There's a girl, very slight, the grey

hood of her jacket covering most of her face. One guy dapper in a suit, a second who looks like he hasn't slept or shaved in a week. He wears black: black jeans, a black tee, and chipped black polish on his fingernails. I sort of recognise them from campus.

The last crate topples from the forklift and heaves open at one corner, its contents spilling into a tumbled pyramid in the path of the truck. Canned food with white labels and black type: Peaches. The truck reverses, wheels spinning, trapped in the furrows of its voyage across the lunar landscape. Staccato sounds buzz from invisible radios. The moonsuits are deserting. Guns point at us, in retreat. The driver scrambles to join the exodus, abandoning the truck. "Wait!" I yell, a gesture that feels hollow even as I enact it. I'm not sure yet who my enemy is.

*

I watch the wake as the ferry leaves us, the purple river bobbing and jiving, silver blades flashing from wave-formed prisms. At the edge of my vision, I notice the skinny girl climbing a rocky outcrop in her worn sneakers. The breeze stirs, lifts her long, flat hair, and pushes the hood away from her face to reveal a pair of horn-rimmed eyeglasses. Her gaze skims the skyline across the water. I've seen this girl before. She works in the cafeteria next to the science labs. She looks at me and offers me the same distant greeting, as if we are talking over the lunch counter.

"You," the suit guy points at me, "take Penhaligon and find somewhere dry to store supplies." They are unloading the opened crate, their movements

coordinated, easy, piratical. "Are you listening?" He frowns, bats a hand at me. "Go."

"Crawford," Ivy says, "cut him some slack. He's not one of us."

He looks at me now like he is seeing me for the first time. "Well, who is he?"

"He was with me," she tells him, "when they came."

I was in her bed when the moonsuits bust into her apartment and stuck a flashlight in my face. Only hours ago we were sitting together at a mahogany bar, drinking spirits and listening to blues. We ordered a bowl of olives and she ate them with a pick, pulling them into her mouth one by one. The place was modelled after a speakeasy and the aproned waitresses smuggled drinks menus in tattered King James bibles. We had entered through a dark curtain and found our way to the bar by following the sound of discordant piano keys: an amateur murdering "Pennies from Heaven." After two whiskeys I put my hand on her thigh.

Now the guy in black steps forward. "Come on brother," he says, patting me on the shoulder. He leads me toward the plant. Once we're out of earshot, he extends his hand. "Bumble," he says.

"I'm sorry?"

"Bumble. It's what they call me." He smiles benignly, releases my hand. "That's Penny," he says, indicating the skinny girl. "I take it you know Ivy." He grins. There is a tattoo on his right bicep, the eyes of Buddha. They are heavily lidded, with thick, arched brows.

"Don't mind Crawford," he continues. "He's not used to people." He steps over a crumbled wall into the building. There is debris everywhere: metal struts,

loose bricks, a midnight spectrum of ink and indigo vines invading every crevice. Bumble excavates his way through the mess, undeterred. "Aha!" he says, and struggles to pull open a metal door. He bangs it shut immediately. "Best not look in there, brother."

I tread across the threshold into the cadaverous shell. "It's a power plant," I say. The boilers loom above him, two storeys high and the colour of rust. I stagger to a jagged archway in the south wall leading to a courtyard of skeletal structures. There are trees growing in the coalhouse.

"You know this place?" he asks.

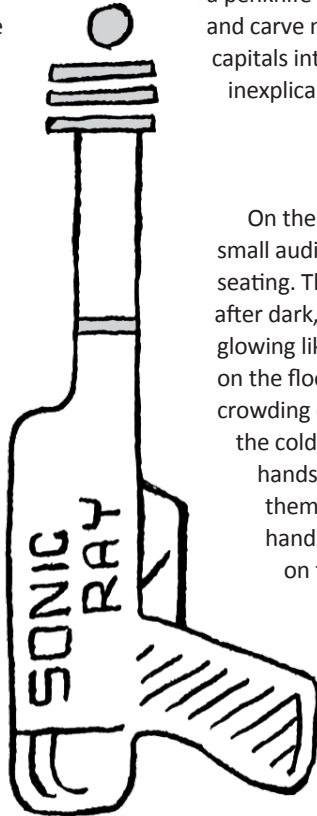
"You're not from the city," I say.

He shoves his hands inside his jean pockets. "Well..." he says, "we're all a long way from home here." He walks away, through another puncture in the edifice. "Come on," he shouts, "this place is too fucking creepy to be alone."

By nightfall we move into the old nurses' quarters, where stone steps lead up to a wraparound porch. The windows are broken, their frames rotting away. Some of the corridors are impassable, but we find a staircase and rise through a warren of numbered

dormitories, their brass nameplates intact. I choose a door that bears no name, an attic room, with a sloped ceiling. Green walls, iron bedstead replete with springs, an open closet spilling moonshadows across the floor. Atop a wooden chest, a dirty enamel pitcher sits in a matching

bowl. I close the door again, take out a penknife I lifted from Bumble, and carve my own name in groping capitals into the wood, beginning, inexplicably, at the crooked letter Y.



*

On the ground floor there is a small auditorium with old theatre seating. The five of us gather here after dark, our looted storm lamps glowing like footlights. We sleep on the floor in a puddle of limbs, crowding our bodies together against the cold. Crawford clasps Ivy's hands between his, warming them with his breath. My hands are dirty from working on the truck. Penny falls first, curled like an infant, her breath ragged. I wonder if I will die. Ivy sighs, and I am back in her bed for an instant. But her eyes are two brown coins watching Crawford closely.

I wake at some grey hour, my mind a dark box, my skin wet. A downy coat covers my body; my pupils fix on Bumble's fox-like face. "We got four of 'em," he says. His lips reveal glistening teeth in a sharp, curved smile. "Prison jackets, in the

crates. Jumpsuits, too. Ivy said to give you this.” He holds out my shirt, screwed into a ball and raked by nicotine fingers.

*

Penny has somehow performed her ablutions and knotted her long hair into a pile on top of her head. She looks scrubbed and young and shining, and for a moment she reminds me of my niece, the expression on her face during our piano lessons, the light falling through the window in bars across her swift fingers.

She has gathered branches from the yellow birch that climbs through the otherwise inviolate porch. We are in a small antechamber with a cracked ceramic sink and wooden shelves built into a recess in the wall. A vine grows through the broken window, crawling along the brickwork, and a fine layer of silt has settled on the cans we placed in here yesterday. There is a smell of disinfectant; a squat jar on the counter contains a solution.

“How long will it take?” I try to keep my voice steady.

“To get it clean?” she asks.

“To get sick.” I grip the edge of the counter, rough against my flesh. The chequered linoleum peels and fades in patches beneath my feet.

Penny is silent. It is Ivy’s voice that responds, from the foot of the staircase. She wears prison khakis over a white t-shirt. She looks so incongruous with the blues woman swallowing bar olives – black dress, stiletto shoe tapping, check please – that I almost laugh. “Do I look sick to you?” she asks, conceiving our new catechism. I feel as though I am choking, about to burst

or die. I can’t see her clearly. She moves into me, murmuring. My face is close to hers. She touches me. She puts her mouth against my mouth. She kisses me clean.

*

Over the next few days and weeks we map out the island. In our surveys we make intimate discoveries, plunder maintenance rooms, desks, and apothecary chests. We find medicine bottles, nautical charts, and tarnished keys (from these excursions I pocket a mirror and compass). In a doctor’s office, Bumble knocks a wooden ladder into a shelf and disturbs a cataclysm of copper pennies stored in a row of glass jars; the patina of verdigris rain falls around our ears, the colour of liberty. We kneel at the gothic altar of an abandoned chapel, hush each other in a library of ruined books. We avoid the morgue for weeks, but are drawn inside eventually, for inventory.

That’s when we first notice the signs across the river. It’s only right that our cartographies should end where they began, under the yellow jack. We are gathered around our trashcan fire like vagrants, warming our hands and watching the dark city, dressed in prison attire. A silhouette of svelte black cormorants lines the shore, a frieze of curved avian necks, arrowed feathers and hooked bills. We trace the skyline through the steel frame of the gantry, a viewfinder. Click. The image burns into my retina. Across the black water, grey blooms populate the horizon. There are no lights on the highway. Apartment blocks blink: once, twice, three times. The city blacks out.



R M Graves

ALBIE'S WAR

→ Trebla has a swollen head and his body is naked and weak with thin shoulders and a potbelly. His eyes are glass dots in a putty face with another dot for the mouth.

I made Trebla, I made him with Granpa. Granpa is a genius and my best friend. He made my favourite underwater fighting game, Sealanders, just for me. In the game Trebla is slowly drowning and my job is to kill all the baddies and rescue him before he dies.

So, Trebla belongs in the undersea world, on the computer. Not in our hallway.

When the phone rings -- Saturday morning -- I run down the stairs shouting, "Granpa! Granpa!" He always wants to come and play at the weekend and this weekend I want to show him I'm on level nine. This is Sealanders final and most difficult level.

Dad answers, says nothing, and then sits down. Right on the floor. Then he says, "Dead?"

Mum runs over, says with no sound, "Your Dad?" and Dad nods. Mum hugs him tight and screws up her eyes but Dad shrugs her off. All my air puffs out.

I'm smart, I work out what's happened. That's when Trebla pops up. Pinpricking stars, like atoms rearranging. And there he is, kneeling next to my Dad. He takes my hand, his skin is like a soggy flannel.

I bite hard watching tears leak out under Dad's hand. I feel sick, I make fists and I want to punch him with all my might. I want to punch myself.

I run to the living room and close all the curtains. Then I power up the console and get to work. Level nine won't complete itself. Trebla follows me, and watches from the doorway. He points to the hall, to Dad and Mum, but I ignore him.

They don't think I know and they still don't tell me about Granpa. They just fill our hollow flat with gloom until we are all underwater with it. Dad touches me, once, but Mum says, "He's only eight, it will break his heart!" I turn the sound way up loud so I can't hear anything else. Mum and Dad watch me. They look like boiled owls.

I concentrate on my job, on the fighting. Trebla is drowning and I must save him, I must save him and win the war. How could I leave him to die, all alone?

Granpa has made a brilliant game. He was a physicist, like Newton and Einstein and as good as them, they say, but with computers.

He showed me how to make Trebla by digging into all the instructions for the game. It's called a program. He cried with laughter when he saw what we'd made. "It's just so wretched!" he kept saying, welling up and slapping his thighs.

He was a very cheery man. People smiled when he arrived, and when he left, it was always with a "Cheerio!" My Granpa even turned goodbyes happy.

In the spring, Granpa and I were

gardening. I was complaining about Dad, who was cross all the time. He blamed Mum and me for him losing his job.

"We all have our wars, son," Granpa said. "We don't grow up until we suffer some hardship. My Dad fought the Nazis. Your Dad is fighting the bloody recession by the look of it."

He handed me the shovel and bent over with a groan.

"What was your war Granpa?"

"This damned garden... No. My Nobel Prize." He pushed his thumb in the dirt to make a hole. "I wonder what yours will be eh?"

Plop, in with another seed, I asked him what his prize was for.

"For my work with sub-atomic particles."

"Electrons?"

"Bravo. Good boy." He ruffled my hair.

"I designed an experiment to prove that electrons, quarks, bosons are all made from information. Not stuff."

"Information? Like a program? Like Sealanders?"

"Almost exactly."

"So... could I re-program the world? Like we did with Trebla? Could I fix Dad?"

Granpa laughed. "Maybe tangentially..."

"Tangench..."

"Tangentially. Indirectly, sideways." He winked at me and the sun shone behind him, straight into my eyes. "Tell you what. The day I discover how, you will be the first to -"

Then he stopped, sometimes he just stopped. Processing he called it. That evening he started re-programming Sealanders. Making level nine. He didn't go home, I heard him coughing all night

and when we woke up he was still there at the computer, grinning. Mum and Dad were cross with him that day. They hated it when he worked hard.

Squelch. Game over. That's my day.

I cannot beat this game, I've stopped eating, I've stopped talking, It's just me and level nine, that's all that matters. So in a blur it's night time and Trebla, Dad and I sit in it with all the lights off. Trebla is sitting next to Dad, with his arm round him. Every time I turn round he beckons me over so I stop turning round.

Mum must have gone to bed, she doesn't even argue with Dad about it today. He always sleeps on the sofa and every night for weeks they have argued about it, so the last thing we all hear at night is slamming doors and crying.

I crash through a mini level and can't help checking if Dad saw me or not. When I catch his watery eyes, staring but not looking, my stomach flips.

Trebla sighs and kneels beside me, he picks up the spare game controller and offers it to me, nodding at Dad. A mad idea. Dad is hopeless. But I pause the game and chuck the controller onto Dad's lap.

"You sure?" he says and I think he might blub again. I shrug, what harm

can it do? I'm already useless, maybe his uselessness can rub mine out.

And you know what? The old man is good.

"You been practising?" I say, Dodge, swipe, stab.

"Yep, bugger all else to do when you're unemployed." Pummel, jump. Pummel, jump.

I swallow something hard in my throat. Together, we charge through the level, it is... awesome. I am so excited I can't even laugh. One last battle and splat. Bad guys squished, Trebla free.

Dad and I gawp at the screen as the little grey figure surfaces, takes a deep breath and flies into the shiny sky, into the sun. I drop the remote, stare. I start to cry.

And then I cry, and cry and cry and Dad picks me up and holds me to him and I feel heavier than I ever have; tears and snot all over my face, all over

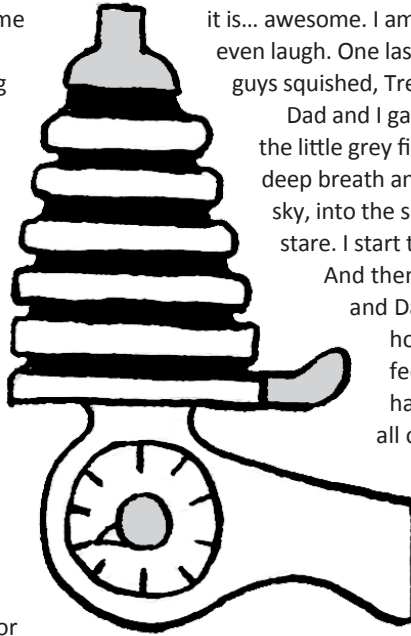
Dad's shoulder and I can't even lift my head.

He carries me up to their bedroom and Mum gasps when

we lie beside her. They hug me between them. I blub like a baby.

I almost don't notice Trebla standing at the end of the bed, watching us. When I do see him, he fizzes into stars again. Atoms rearranging, back to thin air.

"Cheerio!" I say, and it must have come out loud because Mum and Dad's shoulders start shaking. But whether they are laughing, or crying, I can't tell.



Elaine Gallagher

CASSIEL FALLS

→ The Cassiel falls towards her goal, followed by the eyes of millions of viewers, the near-real-time signals from hundreds of instruments retasked to track the flare of her engines. Signals delayed by over an hour from robot eyes surrounding Saturn and all of its moons convey images to labs, offices and bedrooms around the world: a torch highlighted by image processing and false colour, falling into the depths, lighting the way, signalling, “We are coming, the first humans to get to this place.” From the ship, a bright star might be seen. It expands over days, growing into an ellipse around a circle, splitting off the ring system, spectacular against the diamond stars, surrounded by sparks of moons; the whole could be hidden behind a thumbnail from there.

The ship has been falling for seven years, faster than any human has ever travelled. The crew, fifty people sleeping away the gulf between planets, their mission to rendezvous with the fleet of vehicles already there and in transit, to direct construction of a habitat, a place to live, more isolated than any oil platform, in an environment vastly more hostile

than the Antarctic. Their tools await them, construction robots, assembler arms, survey and mining drones better operated from nearby than with two and a half hours between command and response. Their tour of duty is ten years, their mission twenty-four, to build a destination; to construct a 'there' there for their successors to journey to, a beacon and staging post to the far more distant stars.

The end of their voyage grows, beautiful, desolate, freezing. The moons resolve into discs, Titan with seas of methane and dry ice snow caps, cold enough that water ice will be a structural material better than stone. The divisions between the bands of rings are visible, tracks along which race shepherd moons. Storms appear, the size of continents, in atmospheric bands wider than planets, dimly lit by rivers of lightning with the power of hydrogen bombs. The falling torch illuminates this glory for the first would-be human explorers, watched by scientific platforms and tourist bots alike as the ship approaches. The feeds are transmitted to more and more followers across and around the Earth; to orbiting habitats and domed outposts on the Moon

and Mars, spectators virtually present, safe in their homes.

The engines burn brighter, ion rockets slow the ship to be captured by gravity. Watching cameras step down their gain, dim the flare as they follow its approach. Manoeuvring engines fire, thrusters temporarily blind viewing instruments to all but their glare and the Cassiel achieves orbit. Billions follow the feed now, the signal piped to screens in city squares, outside basilicas and mosques where prayers are being led. Elegies are sung as the light fades.

Two years past, as the Cassiel crossed the orbit of Jupiter, a cascade of software glitches and system failures dropped the crew environment to ambient temperature. Desperate reboot signals from Mission Control crossed failing telemetry; command, response, too slow, too late. The crew froze in their hibernation as the air settled around them, carbon dioxide snow, oxygen dew, years too distant for any rescue, Apollo retrieval. The Cassiel takes its place, a monument for those who would follow, as the funeral torch dies.



→ Arike is a writer, dance archivist and former rollergirl. Her fiction's been exhibited, performed (Liars League, Are You Sitting Comfortably?), anthologised and published in magazines (Words With Jam, Holdfast). She's writing her first novel, 'Outrigger', a literary drama of family secrets and hidden identities. Follow her twittering @arikeoke

→ Elaine is a member of the Glasgow SF Writers' Circle and a book reviewer for Interzone magazine. The film she wrote, High Heels Aren't Compulsory, recently won the award for Best Scottish Short at the Scottish Queer international Film Festival.

→ Emma Cleary gained her PhD in 2015 from Staffordshire University, where she taught English and Creative Writing. Her short fiction has appeared in Indent, Lighthouse Literary Journal, and Synaesthesia Magazine, and is anthologised in Best British Short Stories 2015.

→ Ever Dundas is a writer specialising in the weird and macabre. Queer Theory forms the backbone of their work. They have recently finished my first novel, Goblin, and are represented by Jenny Brown Associates.

→ Shona McCombes lives in Glasgow. She watches television for a living, writes about films for TYCI and occasionally about books at www.consolatorynonsense.wordpress.com/. She mostly writes stories in which none of the characters have names.

→ RM Graves is a fiction writer and illustrator. His work has appeared in Interzone, Escape-Pod, Flash Fiction Online, and Urban Graffiti, among other places. He lives in London with his wife and two children.

→ Since completing her M. Phil in Creative Writing in Trinity College, Dublin, Katie McDermott has been editing her novel and teaching. She was associate editor of A Thoroughly Good Blue: New Writing from the Oscar Wilde Centre (2012), which was endorsed by Brian Friel and Paul Murray.

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