

SUMMER 24 ISSUE

WITH POEMS AND STORIES BY:

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AND MORE



ALTERED
REALITY

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The staff of *Altered Reality Magazine* would like to give warning to those who might be upset by violence, gore, terrifying situations and imagery, or other dark themes. This collection has been rated **M for mature** by the staff.

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LEAVE BEHINDS BY DAVE GIANATASIO

I found a skin in the yard.

A what?

A skin. Out back. On the mound where we burn leaves. By the Fergusons' fence.

A snakeskin?

Maybe. A big one. It looked like ... a funky duffel bag. That's the only way to describe it.

I'll have to grab my phone and take some pictures. It was weird. Lumpy, shimmery, with tufts of hair. But snakes don't have hair.

Ah, well. I wouldn't worry. More pie, hon? More cheese?

Look! I took this in the shed. Shiny, shaggy—like paint-brush bristles.

So, something shed in the shed?

Must've done. Bigger than the one last week. Much bigger. Sleeping bag sized! Strange smell, too. Like tar and honey. Or grease and oranges? Here's a better shot. Spiky, furry...

Probably a lizard.

No way. There were tracks, see? With three toes. Step, step, step. Lizards don't walk upright.

Lizards, no. I wouldn't think so.

Besides, how did it get inside? I always shut the shed tight. Lizards can't open doors.

Quite a mystery.

Maybe I'll post these online. Maybe someone can...

More cake, hon? More ice cream?

Oh my god! Bumpy, bushy, slick ... sparkling ... I took these by the water heater. It's inside, whatever it is! And it really stinks down there.

Probably just mold.

Rippling ... hypnotic. More tracks, too. But bigger. Like claws ... on the stairs. Heading up. We've got to leave the house.

Don't be silly.

I'm telling you, something ... Hey! What was that?

What what's?

That scraping noise. THERE IT GOES AGAIN! From the laundry room...

You're in a state. Sit down and relax. We can't go anywhere. It's supertime.

(END)

David Gianatasio's fiction has also appeared in Daily SF, Another Dimension, Sanitarium, New Myths and elsewhere. Look for him soon in Space & Time and Sirens Call. Find Dave online at [davegian@twitter.com](https://twitter.com/davegian)

TAKE MY PLACE BY NICHOLAS WOODS

It was five days before the accident, and Alexander could recall a menacing feeling in his gut that later he deduced as a warning. Whether from his body, or God, or an otherworldly cautioning, something was trying to tell him that where he was headed was not where he should be.

But Alexander did not listen.

He was riding in a military escort van, two soldiers sitting in front of him, heavily armored, expressionless faces behind masks and goggles. There were also soldiers on either side of them. Alexander peered over at Annie, wondering if she had the same foreboding feeling creeping through her entire body that he had. Of course, Annie did not. The woman's face held a tight smile that verged on giddy. She glanced over at Alexander and she gave him a pitying look. She took his hand in hers and squeezed it. Alexander could feel her wedding ring brush against his in a soft scrape of metal.

"This is going to be exciting," Annie encouraged. "We're going to change the world."

Alexander felt himself calm a bit. Perhaps they could do this. As long as they were in it together. Alexander squeezed Annie's hand and felt her heart-beat through her palm. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, focusing on Annie's pulse and the way her hand caressed his. He would know her touch anywhere, and for a moment he began to relax.

They arrived at the laboratory, except it was unlike any scientific institution Alexander had ever seen. A three-story modern house sat perched on the edge of a grassy cliff that overlooked the North Sea. Coming out of the roof was a near-translucent wire Alexander had a difficult time viewing. It rose into the sky as far as the eye could see, though he knew it extended much further than that.

His eyes scanned the green expanse that met dark waters. Alexander was eager to see the history-rich Scottish countryside, but upon arrival to their destination he discovered none of his pre-dispositions were what he expected. The strangest thing being the amount of military-styled guards that stalked the perimeter of the tall fence that enclosed the building.

Alexander grit his teeth as the van moved inside the fence. He did not like guns, especially the massive assault rifles every guard held tightly. But it was what it was. Annie's research was important, not just to the scientific community but to the entire world, because it had the potential to harness an entirely new energy source. When information became that valuable, people would do anything to take it, and so, those invested had to protect it. Still. He really didn't like seeing all the guns.

The car parked and the van's doors opened to a man in his fifties, a heavy coat pulled over his well-tailored grey suit. Alexander had met Burke only once, over the phone.

"You've made it! Fantastic, fantastic. Come on out of that van and breathe in this fresh highland air," Burke said enthusiastically, waving them forward. The man was from the states, like Alexander and Annie. Why the operation was taking place in Scotland, Alexander had never received a full answer. But here they were. And it was time to get down to work.

Annie hopped out of the van and embraced Burke. "Wow, look at this. You really delivered, Burke, except, what's with all military?"

Burke took Annie's arm in his and lead her toward the front door of the building. "Not military, Annie my dear, privately hired security. No Uncle Sam involved here, at least not directly, which is what we need to achieve our goals. But we can't take any precautions. You

know there are several other countries all trying to achieve the same thing we are doing here. We have to be prepared. For anything.”

Alexander could see Annie nod, but she turned inward and Alexander could tell she was growing nervous as well. There was a lot of pressure on her to succeed before anyone else in the world did.

Burke led Annie and Alexander through the heavy metal front doors into an interior they never expected. The place looked like a beautiful log-cabin with great mahogany timbers for every banister and support beam in sight. Before Alexander could even set his bag down a woman well into her fifties approached them.

Burke turned making the introduction. “Annie, Alexander, this is Dr. Menosha. She knows the tech that will allow you to work with the space station. We’ve got two great pilots up there, and you’ll meet them shortly. But before I go, we need to discuss something quite serious.

Burke’s voice lost its jovial host-like-tone and instead grew quite serious.

“A time-line. The investor meeting is in one-week. I know that isn’t a lot, but it’s all we have as it is literally costing us millions per second running this operation. So, in seven days we need to have something to show them. If we do, Annie you’ll get to research as long as you want with every resource available to you. If we don’t. Well, that’s it. Operation over. We all understand?”

Dr. Menosha acknowledged him seriously. Annie looked at Alexander, and this time she sought him for some silent encouragement. Alexander gave her a small smile.

Annie nodded, turning. “We can do this.”

And that was it. It was time to get to work.

Burke left and Dr. Menosha brought them to the second floor which looked entirely different than the ground level. This level was a fully equipped research station with everything Annie had requested to aid her work. Dr. Menosha led them both into a communication room fit with a massive computer panel and several screens. The Doctor turned everything on, two of the screens showing video footage of what seemed to be the interior of the space station. She tapped the microphone and spoke into it.

“Tom, are you there? Rose? Come in,” Dr. Menosha asked. After a moment a man and a woman in their forties appeared on-screen dressed in simple blue jumpers.

“We’re here, Dr. Menosha. I see your teammates have arrived,” Tom said waving.

Alexander was confused a moment, not sure how they were being seen, until Dr. Menosha pointed to a camera above the computer system. He and Annie waved back and introduced themselves.

“So, Annie, do us a favor and explain what we’re doing here, because we still aren’t exactly sure, despite reading your notes about fifty times,” Rose admitted shyly. “It’s still going over our head.”

Annie sat down at one of the chairs and acquainted herself with the computer controls as she spoke. “Well, in ways it’s all very simple. The clear wire that is coming out of our facility here that connects all the way to you guys is called a “Particle Coil”. It will help us transfer energy from your station to ours.”

“And this energy,” Tom said curiously, “Where is it?”

Annie smiled. “Well, Tom. It’s all around you, there in space.”

Tom and Rose looked confused, each waiting for Annie to continue explaining.

Annie sighed wiping any lasting travel fatigue from her face. “Well, we have seven days. Might as well start now.”

Annie looked at the screens finding the station's external camera that showed Earth sitting in open space. Annie pointed to it. "Camera 5T. I sent you all an AHF with an exact Lumos color coordinates. Did you receive that?"

"Hold on," Tom said looking through a digital-pad in his hands, swiping. "Yeah, I have it here."

"What's an AHF exactly?" Rose asked. "Sorry, we just control the station. This type of work is new to us, so the more you explain the better we can assist you."

Annie exhaled seemingly annoyed that Tom and Rose hadn't read through her notes and acquainted themselves with her research better. Alexander silently agreed, but he also couldn't blame them as Annie's notes were nearly six-hundred pages long.

Annie took a breath. "An AHF is an Andros-Hawx Filter. It's a specific color filter to help detect certain light. Light has millions upon millions of wave variations. Some types of light are obvious, in a sense, but many waves of light remain hidden. And that's what we discovered, Alexander and I, and what we are all going to harness together. Add the filter to camera 5T and you'll see for yourself."

Tom typed at the computer and Rose read off the fifty or so numbers that were the coordinates to the color map. Once they were entered, Tom looked up.

"Okay, here we go," Tom said then pressed a button. Suddenly, the screen in the corner of the room changed, an almost purplish filter added to it. Dr. Menosha gasped. Alexander felt himself take a deep breath, although he had seen this wonder several times already.

The camera showed Earth still sitting, beautiful and blue, spinning in the dark void of space. But around it appeared a massive halo of light, a stream of golden-white spiraling around the planet in a perfect ring. From their view, Earth looked similar to Saturn, except Saturn's rings were made of rocks. This ring was made entirely of light, and it spun right before their eyes.

"How... How did you discover this..." Tom asked incredulously, looking between the camera and the window next to him showing open space and a ring-less Earth.

"A lot of luck, and a lot of long nights with some very smart people," Annie said looking at Alexander. Alexander knew she was being modest, as all of this research and discovery was Annie's doing. Alexander had just been lucky to float near her orbit at the right time. And then they had fallen for one another, their love fueled by discovery and the hope that they could change the world for the better. They were the best days of his life. In that moment Alexander felt all his remaining anxieties melt away.

Annie's eyes narrowed in fierce determination. "Alright, team. We have seven days to show the investors something incredible. So, let's do it."

And that was it. They were off to the races.

Alexander's job the first two days were to prepare the 'Energy Seals', which were basically three large translucent vats that connected to the Particle Coil. They needed to be spotless, airtight, and ready to go for when the team would attempt their first energy transfer.

Annie worked with the space station team on identifying the energy that they would later attempt to harness.

"The unique thing about this energy swirling inside the ring is that it seems to be comprised of small clusters that make up the total ring," Annie explained one morning to a tired looking Tom and Rose.

"And let me guess," Rose said yawning. "You have a way to track these specific energy cluster's identities."

Annie looked like she fought the urge to snap at her. “Yes, I do. It’s all in the notes, Rose.”

At the end of each day Alexander found himself looking at the camera which showed the ring of light around Earth. The energy’s swirl contrasted brilliantly with the blackness of space. A beacon of hope in the dark lonely void. Alexander stared at the flowing light and for a moment knew for sure there was more to this world than just a brief mortal life that began and ended on this planet. There, in the ring of light, awaited knowledge, truth, and most importantly. Answers.

The team was five days into their experimenting and Annie was feeling exceptionally good about their progress. The night before she could barely contain her excitement.

“And the equipment is flawless! So much better than the crap we were working with at Caltech.”

Alexander watched her pace around the bed. He loved seeing her like this, full of pure and unfiltered life. Her face was flush, and her eyes had small dark circles underneath, but her aura burned brightly from within and it was infectious. Alexander could have listened to her all night, but he knew they both desperately needed sleep. Tomorrow would be a big day.

“This is it, Alex. Something special that we are going to leave behind. Something special for when we are gone,” Annie said.

Alexander teased her. “Where do you think we go when we leave this Earth?”

“Oh, come on. You know what I believe. We die. That’s it. There’s nothing else, no afterlife, no next place. I know that’s what you believe too, deep down. Any real person of science has to.”

Alexander wanted to disagree with her, but he didn’t want to deflate her mood, so he kept quiet. Of course, her suggestion was what made most sense, given scientific understanding. But Alexander always had a feeling that there was more to this life than just the brief time they were allowed on Earth. He could never explain it. He just knew there had to be. That the universe was far too complicated for it all to end here.

“Come here, lay with me,” Alexander pleaded, pulling at her wrist.

Annie gave in and sank into Alexander’s arms. He could feel her entire body relax into him.

“I just want you to know,” Alexander whispered at the top of her head. “I’m so damn proud of you.”

Annie looked up, her eyes full. “Thank you, Alex. I’m proud of you too.”

“No need to be,” Alexander joked. “I’m just along for the ride.”

Annie sat up slightly and looked into Alexander’s eyes. She shook her head. “No, honey. This journey, with you. It is the ride.”

Alexander felt his throat tighten slightly. It meant so much to hear those words from her. He was sure she didn’t know how much the weight of them pressed upon his heart. For someone like her to care about someone like him was more than he could express. He was a nobody, really. And Annie. She was special. He smiled, then kissed her, and eventually they found sleep. The morning’s light came quickly, and the day had finally arrived.

It was time to harness one of the energy clusters inside the ring.

“Alright, Tom. Rose. Are you ready?” Annie said into the microphone at the communication center.

“We’re ready,” Tom said in the space-station camera. “We have the tracker ID inputted for the specific energy cluster. It’s right next to the station. Hopefully an easy transfer down to you guys.”

Annie looked at Alexander. “The Energy Seals. Are they ready?”

Alexander had checked them five times every hour. He was sure they were all functioning, although they were only going to utilize the first one for this initial transfer.

“They’re ready. Let’s do this.”

Dr. Menosha sat in the background observing, a cup of warm tea in her hand. Annie looked from her to Alexander making sure everyone was ready. When Alexander assured her they were, Annie made the call.

“Initiate energy transfer!” Annie yelled out.

Tom pressed a button and almost immediately after the lights in the entire facility began to flicker. The screen’s transmissions began to short circuit and the bulbs on the panels began to blink off and on.

Annie looked at Alexander confidently. She knew this would happen. She sat up from her chair and moved into the other room with the Energy Seals.

One of the three Seals was pulsing with electricity. Alexander grabbed Annie’s arm, instinctively pulling her back. Suddenly, light began to appear. It came in at a rush, filling the glass chamber of the Seal with bright burning light visible to their naked eye. The moment the light filled the Seal and the transfer was complete the entire facility seemed to return to normal.

They could hear Dr. Menosha from the communication room. “Transfer complete, Annie! How do we look?”

Alexander watched as Annie stared at the glowing glass chamber with fascination. “We did it! We’ve done it. We’ve capture the energy.” She moved over to the digital reader on the side of the Seal. “Alexander, look at these levels. This energy... it’s massive.”

Alexander looked at the reading and was astonished. “And this is just one cluster. There is a whole ring of energy surrounding the planet.”

Dr. Menosha entered the room and looked at the glowing chamber. “We can see the light?”

Annie nodded. “The light is interacting with our atmosphere. I wonder how it would look with the AHF filter.”

Alexander looked around excitedly. “Well... There is a retractable screen that pulls down over the glass. It can be used as a dimmer, but I may have replaced it with some of our gels. Just in case.”

Annie looked at Alexander like she might kiss him. “Do it.”

Alexander went over to the electronic panel on the side of the Seal and pressed a button. He stood back as a thin screen appeared out of the top of the chamber slowly covering the glass.

And like the snap of a finger, the air in the room seemed to grow cold and empty.

“Oh my god,” Dr. Menosha exclaimed before any of them could utter the words themselves.

Alexander couldn’t believe his eyes. The glow from the chamber had completely disappeared behind the filter. What stood there now was incomprehensible to his eyes. The only way he could describe what he was seeing was... a figure. A slightly glowing skeletal figure stood inside the chamber.

An awful feeling began to claw at Alexander’s insides. “Annie, what is that?” he asked nervously.

“I... I have no idea,” Annie responded horrified.

The skeletal figure inside the chamber had very clear arms, legs, and a head. The head seemed to be looking around slowly as if it was watching them. Suddenly, the figure’s hands

went up and it seemed to pound its fists against the interior of the glass. Of course, no noise sounded. No physical force pressed upon the Energy Seal. But the figure inside looked desperate to get out.

Alexander peered over to Annie who was stepping closer to the glass chamber.

“Annie, wait,” Alexander whispered to her, but she didn’t listen.

Annie moved closer and closer to the Energy Seal, the skeletal figure still thrashing about inside. The figure seemed to calm slightly at Annie’s approach, as if it could see her drawing near.

“Annie, please,” Alexander cautioned once more but Annie didn’t listen. She moved closer to the glass and raised a hand, the skeletal figure watching her. Alexander was just about to stop her. He was about to pull Annie away. He even heard Dr. Menosha call out, “Don’t touch the glass. The metal in your ring! It could...”

But her words were too late. Alexander was too late. Annie reached her hand and touched the glass. Suddenly, there was an explosion of light within the chamber once more. The entire building began to shake as if there was an earthquake happening right underneath them. The light inside the room grew so bright Alexander couldn’t see. He heard Annie scream. He tried to find her, his hands groping in the blinding light.

But just as fast, the light vanished. The glowing subsided and the Energy Seal looked just as it had, the skeletal figure standing inside it.

“Annie!” Alexander yelled moving to her. Annie was on the ground, shaking as if she were having a seizure. Alexander raced to her, lifting her head. Suddenly, Annie gasped a deep breath.

“Take my place!” she yelled.

The strange words came out of her mouth in a voice he almost didn’t recognize. Alexander held onto her, unsure what to do. He turned to Dr. Menosha. “Transfer the energy back. The test is over today. Do it!” Alexander shouted and his command finally prompted Dr. Menosha into action.

Alexander looked Annie over. Her shaking had subsided but her eyes still stared off in the distance and she hadn’t spoken any other words. Alexander looked over his shoulder as the Energy Seal began to fire up the transfer back to the space station. The skeletal being inside snapped its head in all directions. If Alexander wasn’t mistaken, the thing seemed scared. It was no longer acting frantic like it was before. Instead, it seemed to be trying to get his attention as it pointed to something. It was pointing to its finger. Not just any finger. It was pointing to its ring finger.

Alexander could hear inside the communication room where a frantic Dr. Menosha was trying to explain what happened to Tom and Rose as Tom worked to initiate the energy transfer back.

“The ID tracker on this cluster is different. I don’t know how to explain it!” Tom yelled.

“It doesn’t matter. Just send it back. Send it back!” Dr. Menosha yelled.

For a moment, there was calm. Alexander looked at Annie, her eyes starting to focus. As Annie’s eyes landed on Alexander they narrowed. Right then and there Alexander knew something was wrong.

“Annie?” Alexander asked fearfully.

“I’m not Annie,” the woman in his arms responded. Of course, it was Annie. This was Annie’s body. But something had happened. Something unexplainable had taken Annie and put something else here in her place.

“Where is Annie?” Alexander heard himself ask.

“Where I was,” the woman responded. “In there... and... up there.” She pointed up to the sky, her eyes going wild with terror.

Alexander’s head whipped to the Energy Seal and the figure inside. “Annie?”

Suddenly, the Energy Seal fired up. Alexander tried to yell to the communication room, he tried to scream for them to stop. That something had gone wrong. That Annie’s spirit was now inside the chamber. But before he could, the Seal began to glow drawing the energy up the Particle Coil and back into space. In a flash, the skeletal figure inside the chamber was gone.

Alexander moved into the communications room. “Bring it back! Bring that energy back.”

“What are you talking about,” Dr. Menosha demanded.

“That energy, I don’t know how to explain it. But Annie, she’s not herself. Something... Something happened to her. Something switched with her. You have to come see,” Alexander said frantically as he pulled Dr. Menosha into the other room. But as they moved inside, Annie was no longer there on the floor.

“Where...” Alexander said looking around. They moved down the stairs quickly seeing the front door was open.

“Oh no,” Alexander whispered.

Alexander and Dr. Menosha moved outside stepping right into a scene of pure horror. At the bottom of the porch steps was one of the guards, a knife sticking out of his neck. Blood rushed out of his jugular, the man moments from death. He looked at the fence, where to Alexander’s pure terror, he saw Annie. At least, it was Annie’s body, possessed by some other spirit or ghost or soul in a way he could barely comprehend. Annie had a gun in her hand demanding that the guards stay back as she attempted to move out of the gate. The guards pointed their rifles, shouting for Annie to lower her gun.

Alexander yelled to Annie. “Wait! Please just come back. We can help you!”

Annie peered over at Alexander giving him a look that told him she wasn’t going back. Wherever she had come from, she was never going there again. Annie turned and fired the gun at the guards, striking two. She tried to run through the gate, heading for the forest in the distance, but other guards appeared firing at her. Annie ran fast, but she couldn’t outrun the bullets that struck her in every direction. Alexander watched as the love of his life was gunned down in the middle of a grassy field, unable to do anything about it.

Later, the guards locked Alexander and Dr. Menosha inside the facility until Burke could arrive and assess the mess that had been created. Dr. Menosha was a nervous wreck. Alexander didn’t know what to tell her. All he knew was he could not give up. Annie’s body may have been torn to shreds, but her soul, her aura that burned so bright as it tried to help this cruel world, was out there somewhere in the ring of energy. He couldn’t put her back in her own body, but he could save her from wherever she was.

It was late at night and they worked in secret. Tom looked into the camera on the space station. “Are you ready, Alexander?”

“I’m ready,” he said confidently.

“Running tracking ID. Initiating transfer, now.”

And just like that, the facility began to shake once more. Alexander moved inside the room with the Energy Seals. The same one lit up brightly, before the power in the room began to settle. He heard the pounding of fists upon metal. The guards were downstairs trying to break past their own locks and stop them from their work. Alexander had just enough time.

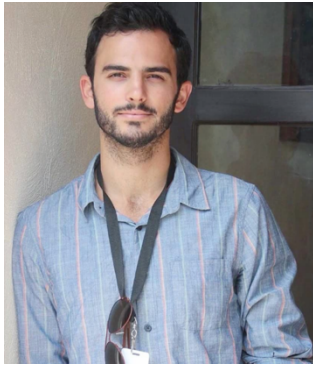
The vat began to glow, then the skeletal figure appeared. And there she was. His Annie. He couldn't explain how he knew, but deep in his heart, perhaps in his own spirit, he knew. He would always know her. The skeletal figure looked around confused a moment, before its head turned Alexander's direction. The banging downstairs grew louder as the door began to splinter off its hinges. Metal doors hit the ground and footsteps pounded quickly up the stairs.

Alexander moved up to the chamber and lifted his hand, his wedding ring around his finger.

The guards moved down the hall, seconds away from reaching him. It didn't matter.

Alexander touched his hand to the glass, whispering to her.

"Take my place."



Nicholas Woods is a writer and director living in Los Angeles. His crime/drama 'Echoes of Violence' premiered at CINEQUEST FILM FESTIVAL in 2020 and was released in 2021 featuring Sam Anderson (Lost, Justified) and Frank Oz (Star Wars, Knives Out). Nicholas's feature film debut The Axiom was accepted into the acclaimed Sitges Film Festival/ BIFFAN Film Festival, with over 1 MILLION streams world-wide. Find Nicholas online at [@nicholaswoods.co](https://www.nicholaswoods.co)

PERFUMERY BY SIMON MACCULLOCH

We noticed the smell of the mummy
The moment we opened the tomb.
Its odour is resinous, gummy;
And now when you walk in a room
The pharaohs waft sweet on your breath
The oils of their sanctified death.

We shot our first werewolf at dusk,
The rising moon pallid and weak.
Its body was steaming with musk,
And now as you pass us you leak
The essence of animal passion,
And hair on the palms is in fashion.

The vampire? Of course, richly bloody
With rapture of kill and rebirth,
But also surprisingly muddy
From having to sleep in the earth.
A dab and you feel you can float;
A splash and you go for the throat.

But nothing we try can detect
The intimate fragrance of ghost;
So when you desire to perfect
This wardrobe of scents that you boast,
Undress yourself down to the bone
And have them incise on your stone:

*O Lord, this soul is Thine to keep,
So raise it up and sniff it deep,*

And if the perfume pleases Thee

Be sure to name it after me.

Simon MacCulloch lives in London. His poems live in Reach Poetry, The Dawntreader, Spectral Realms, Aphelion, Black Petals, Grim and Gilded, Ekstasis, Pulsebeat Poetry Journal, Ephemeral Elegies, Lothlorien Poetry Journal, Emberr, View from Atlantis, Altered Reality, The Sirens Call, The Chamber Magazine, I Become the Beast, Lovecraftiana, Awen and elsewhere.

SPACE ALARM! “DIMENSIONS OF THE LONELY” BY MIKE PLAYER

The Space Alarm goes off before I have my first coffee. Domestic Disturbance, the info screen on my coffee maker reads. I don't have an implant to display all my messages through my retinas. I refuse to do that. But my coffee maker is not designed to relay a high alert message. The nano packets of info burst through the coffee maker's brain and coffee shoots straight up out of the lid into the air.

I curse and slap the little machine. I know this is a form of abuse, but isn't spitting hot coffee high into my living pod's airspace a disrespectful act also?

“Make the bed!” I shout at the housekeepers. I have to enunciate the command precisely or the little dog-sized robots will go ahead and construct a bed out of my other furniture to “make a bed.” The housekeeping AI takes offense when I suggest the voice commands are too finely tuned.

I count silently to five. I'm too impatient to make it to ten.

I hold my right arm below the elbow and it attaches itself. I select a new tattoo from the menu, a Japanese Kanji for “calm.” I flex my fingers to wake the arm up.

Wind on Proxima B hits 100 mph on days like today. The dome is not supposed to vibrate, but it does. I'm supposed to file a report, but I don't.

I pull on the dark olive jumpsuit with the Space Alarm patch (Prox B with an alarm bell) on the right pocket. I slip into my multi-terrain walking shoes. I never signed on for this job at the Space Alarm. I'm a therapist for AIs and the council lassoed me into working for the Alarm. The colony AIs all recommended me. At first I thought I'd hate it, but I'll admit that I might enjoy certain aspects of being a Space Alarm Representative.

Domestic Disturbance flashes again on the coffee maker's screen and more coffee geysers into the air.

The Proxima B Colony exists on Proxima B's terminator. The planet is tidally locked so the only decent temperature is on the divider between the front and the back side. It's amazing that I live here. I never set out to leave Earth. Imagine me, a space pioneer.

In 2158 more and more folks can call themselves that. But it's not organized. Nothing anymore is macro-organized. Everything is fragmented and micro and closed echo-chambered. I'd hoped I'd find clarity in everything out here. Jury is still out.

I run a comb through my graying black hair, grab a chocolate protein bar, and head out the door.

The Domestic Disturbance shows marked in red on my GPS. I'm grateful for no implant flashing a map on my eyeball. I've got an old ways holo display on my watch. I'm 49, but I behave like a grandpa. Ageist humor. Sorry. Don't cite me.

My scooter takes me to the Proxima B Science Institute Dormitory. The scooter parks itself and its little kickstand shoots out automatically. Its theft alarm goes off detecting my weight before I have a chance to dismount. Farkin' thing. I kick it twice and then leave it to screech on its own. No one gives me a second look.

I glance up through the dome at the pink and purple clouds and the shadows of the Proxima Regio Mountain range stretched across our colony. The Sky Snakes are still hibernating. I miss their hyena laughing calls. Black scrub brush whips violently on the foothills.

Some of it flies high into the air from the violence of the wind. It's warm enough that the heat turbines lie dormant.

Not much activity at the dormitory. The scientists are at work in their labs. I pass a gardening bot chewing at the lawn.

I take the lift to level two and a spindly man peeks out from an open door. He gestures with his electronic stylus at a room two doors down. I can hear shouts.

I knock. "Space Alarm!" I say. "Open up!"

I hear jostling and muffled exclamations from inside.

I repeat my announcement. The door opens and a woman's frazzled face peers out. She's wearing orange sweat pants and a yellow t-shirt. I know her. Kaden Estevez. She's 51. "We're fine."

"May I come in?" I ask.

Her expression changes to horror.

"There's been a complaint about the noise," I say. "There's probably a recording."

She flings the door open. "All right! Fine! Good. You'll find out all about him. I don't care! That's him. Take a look for yourself!"

I motion for the spindly man down the hall to go back into his apartment and I step through the doorway and duck low as a mini-med scanner sails over my head.

"Get Charlie out of here!" Dex shouts from inside.

The science dorm apartments are small and functional. One bedroom for couples. In the living room I see the woman's husband, Dex, wearing jeans and an untucked black tank top, balancing on his left leg. His right leg is bent at the knee and everything below the knee has disappeared behind him into a window-sized energy field glowing onyx and silver. The energy field stands edge on. Dex struggles and yanks at his right leg. It doesn't budge.

"There!" his wife, Kaden, announces. "See? He stole an alien artifact from the dig site. He monkeyed around with it and got his foot caught in some other dimension!"

"If I've still got a foot, you mean," Dex hisses. "Let's not forget who I did this for."

"Don't pin this on me," Kaden warns him.

"*If only I could get a hold of one of those window panes, you kept saying.*" Dex uses a tone of voice that sounds as if he might explode at any moment. "*What do you think those light oscillations could be? You kept asking.*"

I walk around to get a view behind Dex. I met them both at the Christmas party last year. He's younger than she is and heavier. White guy. Bald. The window pane has a black backside, flat and glossy. No sign of Dex's foot. "Can you feel your toes?" I ask.

"Yes!" Dex shouts. "I'm wiggling them right now. I can feel my shoe."

"Don't wiggle them too much," Kaden says. "We don't know what's on the other side of that screen."

They both look expectantly at me.

"What kind of training did they give you for this, huh, Charlie?" Dex asks. "I still don't know exactly what you are, a cop? Security? A fireman? Or, do you just like to work out a lot?"

I take a second for the hostility to blow past me. "I'm the Alarm Representative," I say. "A first responder. A neighbor reported a domestic disturbance. You might need a medic."

"I'll say, he will," Kaden chimes in. "When I get through with him."

"This is the find of a lifetime and you spend your energy on petty arguing!" Dex says with a defiant wiggle. The window pane holds his leg deathly still.

“Petty! We spent twenty years frozen in that space cargo ship to get here. My ass is still only half thawed out. And then conveniently Earth discovers UAP propulsion and the trip now only takes six months. No freezing required. We were in such a goddamned rush to get here.”

Dex points at the black-silver field holding his leg. “Because this is alien tech. We get to examine first hand alien tech!”

“Not any more now that you stole it from a secured area!” Kaden bellows. “You couldn’t wait the time to fill out the paperwork first.”

“You’ve seen how things work on Prox B,” Dex says. “Nothing gets done right and they’ve got Charlie here on Security.”

“Hold on,” I say.

“You leave Charlie out of this,” Kaden says. “He can’t help it if the police bots have been disabled. He can’t help it if his wife left him alone on this rock to go pilot the space tug. He needs something to do.”

“Maybe we need to figure out what this thing is to get your leg out,” I say.

Kaden shakes her head with frustration. “Who knows? A trap. For alien mice? An external drive for storage?”

“A door to another dimension,” Dex says. “Maybe that’s how they travel back and forth.”

“Then why are you stuck in it?” Kaden says.

“It vacuumed me in here,” Dex snaps.

“You pushed these squiggles on the side,” Kaden says. “How reckless is that? You probably transported your leg to Andromeda.”

“It could be anything,” I say.

“Yeah,” Kaden says. “An alien makeup mirror.”

“Maybe a medical scanner,” I say.

“The fark!” Dex exclaims. “Whatever it is, how come it’s still active? The artifacts at the alien site are fifty million years old. This screen is fifty million years old. It still works? Is someone still on the other side?”

“Automated?” I suggest.

“Just get me out of here. My wife is useless.”

“I’ll show you *useless!*” Kaden begins touching the alien squiggles on the side of the strange screen.

“Don’t do that!” Dex yells.

The screen frame lights up. The silver-black interior oscillates. I reach for Dex’s outstretched arms and pull him. He struggles. My feet raise up off the floor. All three of us yell. I’m torn away from Dex and sucked head first through the screen and into –

Hell, I don’t know. It’s like I’m underwater. I’m floating but my feet are anchored above me, which of course is impossible because I must still be in Dex and Kaden’s apartment. Instead I am *underwater* somewhere or in some thick viscous gas. Brown and murky. I hold my breath. I try not to panic. I blink my eyes. I don’t feel the sting of salt. There are shapes moving below me. Around me. Fish! I’m in a tank but I can’t see the sides. Maybe it’s an ocean or some oily atmosphere. These fish have horrifying round faces and jagged teeth set in uneven jaws. I start to panic and double up so I can pull myself back up to my ankles. Bubbles escape from my nose. My mouth cracks open. I slam it shut but water or whatever it is gets in. I start to flail my arms. I’m going to drown!

Water or thick gas rushes past me. Dex and Kaden tug at my legs. My right prosthetic hand grips the frame's edge and pulls me out with impressive speed. I explode back into the scientists' living room.

I crouch on the floor. I'm not even wet. Dex sits next to me. Kaden sits exhausted on the couch.

"What did you see?" they both ask me.

A moment passes before I can gather my wits. I'm shaking from anxiety. I tell them what I saw.

Maybe it's an aquarium, they say. Or the aliens' lunchbox full of fresh food.

"Maybe it's the aliens themselves," I say.

"Like the fish on Europa?" Dex considers this. "Only smart?"

"Or maybe it's a cage from their traveling zoo," Kaden says. "Whatever it is, it's gone. The whole thing disappeared when you two popped free."

We all get to our feet. We glance in amazement to where the artifact used to be.

I brush off the legs of my jumpsuit. "You have to promise no more stealing from the artifact site."

They nod.

"And maybe a little counseling for your relationship."

They don't nod.

"I have to write you up. My badge recorded everything."

Kaden frowns. "That Alarm emblem on your pocket has a nano-vid?"

I nod yes.

"But you can't cite us. We'll lose clearance."

I shrug. "It's my job."

"How about I sleep with you?" Kaden says.

"No. Thanks."

"How about I sleep with you?" Dex says.

I nod no.

"Both of us, and we'll wear costumes!" Kaden says.

They both quickly realize I am not fooling around.

"Where did the alien picture frame go?" I ask. Indeed, the machine is still no longer in the room.

We all look around. There is no sign of it.

"Honey," Kaden addresses Dex. "We only have one robovac, right?"

Dex glances at his wife. She stares at the carpeting in the center of the open layout of their dorm. The disc shaped robovac silently rolls past the ottoman. She glances up at the wall by the kitchen counter. An identical robovac waits, stationary, affixed to the vertical surface. The robovac on the carpet is black with a manufacturer logo. The robovac on the wall is colorless.

Gray.

"Robovac. Play music!" Kaden commands it.

"Skyfall" by Adele plays from the black machine on the carpet. Something shrieking and hideous plays from the duplicate on the wall.

"Robovac. Off." Dex says.

We lean in close to each other. "The alien artifact has morphed itself into a robo vacuum," I say.

"Matter reorganization?" Dex posits.

“Whatever.”

The imposter robo vacuum starts to move. It rolls down the wall and onto the carpeting. The three of us take instinctive steps backwards. A red dot from the laser cleaner on the disc shaped machine illuminates, rotates once, and fires a red cleaning beam at the black original robovac.

We all three gasp as the original machine turns to dust before our eyes.

“How?” asks Dex.

“It reconfigured the laser to a higher capacity,” Kaden mutters.

“I refuse to be vacuumed into oblivion,” I say.

The machine rolls toward us. We back up toward the door. I fidget with the door handle. The red light on the machine rotates again. We duck as the beam hits the center of the door. We crawl and dash outside into the hall.

The robovac moves faster than its normal speed. The whole mechanism is under the spell, the control of...what? The two scientists and I race down the hall past the open doorway of their nosy neighbor who watches us with astonished eyes and then the accelerating floor disc that follows us.

More red beams. The neighbor’s door slams shut. A ceiling air vent crashes to the floor.

We are outside.

“Don’t look behind us,” Dex shouts. “Keep running.”

I hear the laser firing at a much higher strength behind us. My parked scooter shatters into a million pieces. Several pedestrians on the opposite walkway shout and leap over a fence.

“It’s alive!” Kaden screams.

She and Dex run and bolt around a corner to the market street.

“Skyfall” by Adelle squarks in piercing distorted tones behind me.

I stop still. I turn to face the robovac. It’s not more than twenty feet behind me.

I put my hands up. “Wait! Let me talk to you. I know how you feel. I’m alone too. I don’t know what I’m doing anymore. I don’t know what my job is. What my farkin’ purpose is. People don’t respect me. No one validates what I do. I’m on my own.”

The red light on the little machine fades to blue.

“I’m lucky I’m alive. This isn’t my home planet. It’s a hostile place. Hell, my home planet is a hostile place. All I can do is...I don’t know, exist, survive. My wife is in orbit and I still don’t know why. My friends never contact me. But I won’t let the loneliness get to me. I refuse. I work for the Space Alarm, I guess, because it helps pay my bills, but I can help other people, too. And I do AI counseling to help entities that aren’t people. When will someone help me? That’s what I want to know. I’ve grown used to nobody helping me in my life. That’s just how it is. Fark it. I’m tough enough to wait until I find somebody that’s on my side.”

The robovac blinks blue. I’m aware of people watching from their windows and of Dex and Kaden peaking up from behind a black hedge.

The machine rolls slowly up to me.

“My name is Charlie Durango,” I say.

I turn my back on it and walk towards the public city transport cars, past the wide eyes of Dex and Kaden. Behind me I hear gasps from the people watching us and a scuffling shifting sound.

I turn to face the robovac. In its place there is a transport scooter. The headlight blinks blue, just twice.

I mount the seat. I put my right hand over my heart to calm myself and I count to five.

“Domestic Disturbance case closed,” I say into the Space Alarm patch on my jumpsuit. I’ll figure out what to do with the “scooter” once I get back to my place.
I tell it my address and thank it for sparing my life. “I’m here for you, buddy,” I say.
The control panel shines blue as we accelerate to the main road and the scooter takes me home.

THE MISSION BY MIKE PLAYER

Noon. November 10th, 2218. Guy Viola recording. The Ideal in orbit around Epsilon 6.
Brock...

I’m recording this for you as well as for the ship’s log. I want to tell you what I couldn’t say before. You’ll forgive me for what I’ve done. I want to get everything out while I have the chance.

I’ve gone way over the line. I know. It’s all I can do to hold myself together. It’s cold and lonely without the crew. It was cold and lonely *with* the crew.

That’s not the only reason I did ...what I did. My hands are trembling. It’s the adrenaline. And the alarms and flashing lights on this damn pilot’s console. I didn’t expect to push you into the freezing bed. I didn’t expect any of this.

You might call me a traitor, but what about you? The signals you sent me were unmistakable. The way you decontaminated me after our EVA to fix the radio dish. There was nothing out of the ordinary except you took such care with it. You made it feel...intimate. Even at meals, the way you squeezed your chicken casserole concentrate out of the tube onto your plate and the eye contact you’d make with me. I know you were *joking*. I know frat house humor. But why would you do that? We’re on a long voyage. Light years. Why do frat guys assume no one is different? And you and I are way older than frat guys.

Colonize Epsilon 6. A faith-based colony. Uncorrupted. Pure. A crew of two straight women and two straight men. We’d all had gene enhancement when in the womb to ensure our sexuality was true to God’s design.

At least, you three did. I will confess right now, I’m a fraud. My family refused the gene therapy. They said sexual deviancy did not exist in our genetic history. I lied on my application and doctored the digital records.

I lied!

So did you, apparently.

But who knows? All I know is I love you. I just love you.

And I’ve made a mess out of it all. There’s no turning back.

When we trained for the mission, I didn’t know I loved you. I told myself I loved Brittany. She is beautiful. I never questioned my feelings for her. I should have. I hardly knew her. I just wanted to fly in space. I wanted to get off Earth and away from its sad and hopeless problems. Away from what the Christian Global Front calls the Sin Spiral. I believed in their promise to start a new civilization sanctioned by God on a new planet meant for God’s chosen. Epsilon 6.

I cheated!

It seems like nothing compared to what I've done today. I'm sorry. I had no idea how isolated we would feel, but especially me. How loneliness seeps in when you're not paying attention. How lonely I've always been.

Let me pause this.

Okay. I had to take ten for myself. I'm the only one up here. You don't count because you're frozen. And the women...I'm all alone. Just me and this auto dictation transcribing what I say. I never realized how terrifying outer space is. I look out this viewport and all I see is Epsilon 6 giant in my face. There are stars and emptiness surrounding me, surrounding us. No other humans here. Nothing. An endless pit of space and this giant new planet we know nothing about.

I've got eighteen hours to make the biggest decision of my life. Do I keep the ship in orbit around Epsilon 6? Or, do I slingshot us out of here?

I don't know how to do either of those things. I'm the astrobiology expert, remember? But there are videos and the auto-navigator. Can I learn what I need to in a few hours? Every time I think about what I've done and what I have to do next I get short of breath. I'm sweating. Am I trembling from the cold? Panic attack? No...No.

I wish I had you at the com. I wish I had you period. But you went on and on about Katie and the two of you and how you loved being together and how beautiful she was and you were doing it all for her benefit because you knew she was watching us. It was a performance for her, for the ship's record, but not for me. And that's why I lost it and gave you a shove. That freezing tube bed swallowed you up like a clam. Way too sensitive a mechanism. You were suspended by the time I began hammering my fists on the faceplate.

I thought about aborting the process, but I knew I might cause you irreparable damage.

Damn it!

I couldn't bear us to become the first closet cases on another planet!

I couldn't take any more of the pretending. Your pretending. You'd send me signals and then when Katie was around you'd ignore me. You'd go cold. You acted your part. The women didn't suspect. And I thought, *How can I live the rest of my life like this? On a planet we know next to nothing about, alone where no homosexuals are supposed to exist, on a new Christian Nation in Outer Space. Pretending to be the opposite of what you showed me I am?*

I'm done with pretending.

God, have I made a colossal mistake? Self-doubt when you're alone is the worst. I'll be apprehended by one of the Christian Global Front ships and, I guess, tried for kidnapping? Murdered and covered up as an accident in space?

Oh great, now I'm pacing back and forth, as best I can in artificial gravity. My legs are still shaky. We've been reanimated for a month already. I mean, except for you, Brock. I froze you again. Oh. God.

I could have done it. If you hadn't made me feel special to you, like I was the golden secret in your life. If you'd *not* done that, I would have been able to be that man everyone thought I was. Some say that would make me a coward, that I would be living a lie. But part of me really is that Christian straight guy that believes in a new world for the believers.

I thought I had tamed the devil. I had followed the teachings.

And you acted like you had, too. Like you never had a devil. You always came off as the straightest guy ever.

But you winked at me at the workout station when we were recovering from our long sleep to get here. You pulled me close to you. You kissed me and I was angry and absolutely exhilarated. It was the best and worst thing that ever happened to me.

I'm sorry, Brittany. You'll probably hear this eventually. You and Katie. I know the homosexual thing is something you refuse to listen to in any form, but maybe you'll be curious enough about what happened to me to listen. I'll send you the edited copy of this message to Brock.

I'm still being the perfect astronaut, sending you copies of memos and voice recordings for the record! The fucking archive! It's all bullshit!

You'll hear this if you ever get over the rage you must feel toward me. I had to send you down to Epsilon 6 alone. I had to!

I had to hold you both at gunpoint with the laser pistol. I had to direct you into the escape pod. I had to command you not to speak to me because Katie, you would only repeat the vile arguments you use to denounce homosexuality. CGF pablum. God knows we've heard it before. I'm a man not a sub-human. You don't have the right to put me down like that!

The other ships from our expedition will find you. When the location beacons at all the landing sites are activated, they will locate you. The only difference is you'll be short a couple of men for the few years it takes for the second wave of colonists to arrive.

I did what I said I would do. I sent the supply module down to where you landed. You have everything you need, shelter, food, even guns to protect yourselves from whatever monsters are down there.

We all vowed we could tame the monsters on Epsilon 6. It would be worth it to live on a planet with an earth-equivalent atmosphere and plentiful plant and sea life. After all, Earth was a planet of monsters during the dinosaur era. So be it. You and all the other first wave CGF base camps will prevail.

I don't know why I'm saying these things. I've never said or even seriously thought them before.

Why can't I get warm? I've got to decide what to do with the ship. Slow my breathing. I've got to decide what to do with you, Brock.

3:15 a.m. November 11, 2218.

The clock reads 3:15 a.m. but it's always night outside the viewport. I haven't eaten. I can't. I let the solitude get to me.

Epsilon 6 is so blue and the continents are solid dark green. Hardly any deserts. No ice caps. No intelligent life that we can detect. I wish I could take you down there, Brock, but just the two of us. We could be ourselves.

Instead, I've got you prisoner in a deep sleep bed. Your eyes are frozen wide-open and they're still filled with anger. Can you ever forgive me?

The more I'm up here alone, the more I feel an avalanche of new feelings. I should be the one forgiving you. I should be thanked for speaking the truth, at last. What the hell are we doing the fuck out here? We have our own planet. It's a beautiful Earth. We should be doing everything to save every living thing on it. Instead, we gave up on it and we imagine it will be easier out here, starting from scratch, denying the new world to those that don't fit the requirements. Repeating the same mistakes we made back home.

Is that what God wants? He gave us the ability to fly in space and this is what we choose to do with it?

I'm sorry, Brock. Now, I don't care if you forgive me. You told me you loved me. I'm going to take you at your word and you're going to learn just how powerful a word that is. Because if it's true, then what I'm doing is the best thing for both of us, for all of us.

I think I've figured out the autopilot. I'm setting it to return us to Earth. I'm strapping in for the sling shot around Epsilon 6 that will turn us around.

After that, I'll figure out these damn freezing beds. I'll join you... in suspended animation and we'll go where we're most needed. Home. There are others like us. Still. Many others.

If we would all just rise up. Not only the people like you and me, but everyone who is different. Everyone who has been held down. We can save our own planet. Why the fuck am I an astrobiologist? It's the Earth life that needs helping. We have to start with our own planet.

Despite what the CGF says, I don't believe it's too late.

God, self-revelation makes me sweat. Am I going mad? Are there leaking crazy gasses warping my thinking? I'm so tired. Can you understand me... with all this gasping for air?

Okay, I'm strapped in. Good luck... Brittany and Katie. I know you'll prevail. Fifteen seconds and counting. Re-ignition sequence proceeding.

Brock, when you wake up you'll thank me. I can't bear to think how I'll feel if you don't. The engines are revving up. The walls are vibrating! It's too late to worry about it. Let the chips fall.

We can save ourselves ...and that's how we'll save the Earth. We can be who we really are.

That's the biggest mission of all isn't it?



Mike is an author and a comedian. He is the editor and a contributor for the nonfiction “Out On The Edge: America’s Rebel Comics” (Alyson Books, 2008). His comedy sci fi radio drama “I Killed My Boss” is free on all podcast platforms. He is also author of the indie comedy suspense novels “Viral” and “Hyperloop to Hell” (2012, 2023). Linktree <https://bit.ly/3SKy6tM> @authormikeplayer IG.

THE POEMS OF DENNIS OWEN FROHLICH

Mercurial

The first planet from the sun, spinning splendid, not outdone
by its neighbors orbiting in the solar sea
With temperatures most extreme, oscillating as its theme
from the scorching heights supreme to a darkness still and icy
 From this world I cannot flee
 From this madness never free

With no atmosphere to speak of, mercury rising, creatures sneak off
hiding from the soaring sun, searing blasted scree
Stretched across this barren plain, regolith gray and granite veins
a desert land where gravel reigns, absent the Almighty
 Forget me not, Lord, this I plea
 Save me for eternity

Temperatures are climbing higher in this heart of frost and fire
where a day lasts two long years by some strange decree
Where the sun sets once then twice, I'm trapped within this heated vise
my constant pining for some ice, I pray thee foolishly
 The heat is boiling, naturally
 But worse than cold? I disagree

The last of sunlight's rays are gone, a year of coldness soon will dawn
I build a shelter, bundle up, then begin the long withdraw
A place of blackness with no moon, the stars across the sky are strewn
while I am bound to this cocoon, in a cave that's bleak and blah
 My teeth chatter, tight-set jaw
 Jack Frost to my ears will gnaw

This cold sets in; it won't let go. Around the campfire's measly glow
to stay alive I take my leave and march my numb feet raw
So I start to weave and wander, while my sanity I ponder
I think I'll backtrack over yonder, then I freeze in awe—
 The sunlight breaks! Aha! Aha!
 And so the ice begins to thaw

I can't do this? Who'm I kidding? The stoic sun glares down, forbidding
I cover my face, give cry and chase, and fall on bended knee
Sunlight so white and burning bright, I plead for night: it isn't right!
Please hear my plight, you ghostly fright! I beg you: can't you see me?
 The curtain closes on year three
 This cycle will not let me be

The cold has come again, I say! I cannot last another day!
Seesaw, seesaw, mercurial beebaw! Deedaw, meemaw, gleebaw, streedaw!
I'm descending into madness, filled with overwhelming sadness
surrounded by this pointless badness, circling round and round

I strive across this cursed ground
where every rock is dull or brown
for in this prison I was bound
when my spaceship hunkered down
and I very nearly drowned
as my head was justly crowned
with fateful memories I found
of the grating, hating sound
of a mind which knows no bounds
but circles round and round and round

Hot then cold then hot again,
then cold then hot then cold and then...

Pluto

Pluto is way far out there,
like, far, far out there, man
Getting there requires careful thought,
ample courage, a foolish plan

Zippping past the asteroid belt,
leaving Earth behind
Nestled tightly in my craft,
my only friend my mind

Past Jupiter and Saturn,
wearing rings in style,
then on into the inky black,
my self-imposed exile

Then Uranus and Neptune,
those icy blue marbles
The Earth is now a mote of dust,
my thoughts and feelings garbled

Alone now in the open space,
those giant planets long gone
Pluto still so far away
just me in the starry pond

What point is there in flying this far,

billions of miles from home?
The only answer is deep within,
that restless spirit to roam

Pluto appears up ahead,
white and gray and red
The sun behind a pinprick of light,
momentary dread

My tiny craft passes through
a too thin atmosphere
As I step onto the ice,
my heart is filled with fear

No human beings or living things
for billions and billions of miles
If I give in to loneliness,
the god of death shall smile

I set across the broken plain,
scrambling over craters
My mission I set for myself,
to the human race, a traitor

The planet cannot warm itself,
the sun glows strangely dim
76 hours of day gives way
to 76 hours of night so grim

Sleep then wake then sleep then wake,
then sleep and wake once more
Each time the darkness still remains
while I search the untamed shore

The stars above my only guides
what patterns will I find?
What constellations can I create
inscribing arcs and lines?

Pluto's tiny, tiny moons—
Kerberos, Nix, Hydra, and Styx—
might wander cross my field of vision,
faint irregular specks

My journey ends when I finally find
Charon, my new companion

I recline and peer above
at icy grooves and canyons

White and gray with a smattering of rust
upon the northern pole
My loneliness evaporates
as I reach my long-sought goal

Witnessing this lunar beauty
no one has seen before
Pluto's face is locked with hers,
true love forevermore

Charon's surface faintly lit
by lights bounced off his crown
Up I gaze and often wonder:
is anyone gazing down?

Venus

1 Day Old

A baby loved and doted on
mountains rise above the water
Sunhawks chase while teavers yawn
as this blue babe begins to totter
But the air is growing hotter,
shifting clouds of orange and tan
The scarlet sky calls to this daughter
reaching up her hand

8 Days Old

The news across the aerovision:
"The Wights have flown their whirling disc!"
In the face of mocking derision
it rises above the stifling mist
But to her parents this girl insists,
"I will one day fly these skies."
Such ideas have weight and risk
to such weathered eyes

13 Days Old

With her telescope she sees
a planet painted purple and red
The Pritchett enters space with ease
as dreams of orbits flood her head

But the planet's blue instead,
covered with continents of green
This mismatch brings a sudden dread
to this starstruck teen

19 Days Old

She writes on a desk of marble
in the hall of cosmic school
Over diagrams of stars she marvels
this knowledge her ambition fuels
But she stays inside—it's cool
for the rivers are nearly boiling
A passing pattern plain and cruel
cannot stop her toiling

26 Days Old

Now she sits upon the launchpad,
watching numbers counting down
The latest spacesuit snugly clad
and helmet fitted to her crown
But smiles turn to frantic frowns
as the mission is aborted
Clouds too thick and dingy brown
smear the skies distorted

37 Days Old

Her telescope no longer sees
the sun, the stars, her destination
The planet with the water, trees
and the hope of new creation
But she still believes her nation
can resurrect the disc anew
Counteract the fear, frustration
and reach the distant blue

54 Days Old

The days are truly, exceptionally hot
society long torn asunder
by the torment weather wrought
atmosphere thick with thunder
But she'll finally fix their blunder
The stolen disc breaks through the veil
into space, and oh! What wonder!
Begin the long exhale

Planet three in view,

her flight is true
Everything she thought she knew
can't compare to
that endless blue
She hurtles through
air fresh and new
and bids ado
to hellish hues



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THE AMNESIAC BY ABBY SUNDEEN

The Banker has learned by now to ration her memories; with skill, with willpower, with an ounce more self-control than she normally has, a moment can last about half a day. She can stretch a second of laughter into a full hour if she truly compels herself to. With a bank full of memories, however, unending in their supply, what reason would she have to limit herself?

She holds a toddler in her arms and hushes his babbling cries. “You’ll wake your brother if you don’t quiet down,” her mouth says, and she nods down to an infant strapped to her chest. The toddler reacts with a small smile and a giggle, the kind that brings an unbridled joy to the room. It’s a bright home, one she’s lived in since before she had the joy of bearing children, with a messy kitchen and a dog sleeping on the couch. It’s the kind she’s always dreamed of.

She inhales deeply, and the giggle rings louder in her ears. She’d snort the stuff if she could.

Too soon, the laughter fades, her home goes dark, the weight of her children lifts from her arms and her chest.

And the Banker is left with a vial in her hand, held up to her nose. The back room of the Memory Bank holds only her and another teller, whose name she might have once known. The other teller sits in the same reverie from which the Banker just emerged, a vial in front of their mouth and their nostrils flared. She wonders briefly what the teller’s memory must smell like, what kind of world they’re sitting in now during their lunch break.

She can’t wait for the Mother to return; the kids are her favorite.

Already the back of her head has gone fuzzy, a mix of an itch and an ache, reminding her of what it’s missing. The Banker glances down to her watch; that was meant to last her entire break, but another ten minutes remain before her watch buzzes to pull her back to the front desk. The other tellers will be fine without her, and surely the Bank won’t miss an extra vial.

The back room of the Memory Bank was never meant to be pleasant, just a place for tellers to eat their lunch—those of them that could afford a meal—before returning to the extraction tables in the lobby. Fluorescent lights buzz overhead, and a few cots sit in the corner; her bosses were accommodating enough to offer cots for people like her with nowhere to go after work.

But it’s not work, is it? the Banker thinks, her first independent thought in a while. She doesn’t particularly like having those. *It’s life, now. Sell-out.* Where others were strong enough to endure, the Banker was once consumed—with equal parts debt and need. People were willing to pay for an entire life of memories, she found, and they were willing to pay well. Too bad the sales saddled her with a purposeless mind and an itch for memories to fill the void hers left.

Two doors lead out of the break room: one to the extraction rooms, one to the Vault. The code to unlock the Vault’s door was one of the few memories she was selfish enough to keep. She taps the code in, and her hand grips the unlocked doorknob when the other door opens.

The Extractor stands in the doorway, about a head taller than the Banker, and he looks at her with disappointment. “I gave you enough to tide you over ‘til the end of the day,” he says. His voice is flat, though he glances with interest to the Banker’s hand on the doorknob.

“I thought so, too,” the Banker says. There’s no point trying to hide the guilt in her voice, not from the person who’s supplied most of her stolen memories. “They fade faster than you think.”

He frowns, and the Banker drops her hand from the knob. “Have you ever considered... help?”

The Banker scoffs. “I’d never get them back, you know.” She sold herself, what, six years ago? Seven? Eight, maybe... Not the point. Her memories must be so widely distributed by now, probably consumed and wasted, that she’d be a quarter of a person if she was lucky enough to get back what still exists. She’d rather be nothing, a menagerie of the temporary moments she can steal from her job.

“Not like that,” the Extractor says. His voice rises just a hint before he flattens it again, back into the forgettable monotone she’s known since she forgot everything. Of course she’d recognize his voice, that of the first person to speak to her after their deal. Of course she’d remember the one who let her lose everything to make rent. “I meant... Mental help. Making those vials, you know, last.”

“What’s the point?” She laughs as the static in the back of her head grows stronger. She glances back at the doorknob to the Vault, eager to refill the void. “They’ll disappear anyway. I know they aren’t mine; they don’t belong, and they don’t stay.”

The Extractor closes the distance between them and opens the door to the Vault. “I shouldn’t have...” He opens the door. “Have you eaten?” Already knowing her answer, he disappears into the Vault and lets the door shut behind him. The static in the bank of the Banker’s head grows louder.

He appears a moment later with a pale gold vial in hand, and the Banker’s eyes widen. She hasn’t had access to a golden quality memory in a while—she tides herself over on gray ones like the mother’s, based on feeling and perception more than exactness. Giddiness overtakes her, and her hands begin to tremble.

But the Extractor withholds the vial for a moment, just long enough to cross the back room to a small fridge. The container he pulls out looks like all of the others in there, and the brown-ish slop inside induces the same vague disgust as always.

He passes her the container, the spoon, and the vial. “Culinary,” is all he says. “You have ten minutes until the end of your break. Try to make it last, will you?”

Then he disappears through the other door, leaving the Banker alone in the back room. Her mouth waters; she hasn’t had access to a culinary memory in ages. Or maybe it was just yesterday; she can’t remember.

She sits down next to the other teller, somehow still lost in their reverie, and wonders how long they’ve been stuck on memories. They must be newer to the habit; somehow, the newbies are always better at making them last. *Won’t be long for them, she thinks, before they’re like me.* She wonders briefly how much they gave up before realizing she doesn’t care.

The Banker’s seat isn’t comfortable in the least, but it’s bearable as she uncorks the vial. She holds it under her nose, fixes her gaze on the brown-ish slop, and inhales the glittering gold smoke. The static in the back of her head grows louder, deafening, before it goes quiet.

By the time the first spoonful of food hits the Banker’s tongue, she’s in the back of a kitchen. Chefs call times to each other, and the aroma of onion, salt, tomato, and some hearty meat spills into her nose. Everything is bright and clean; the chefs wear smiles as pristine as their aprons as they joke between calls. The memory carries a sharpness, exact as the blade of a paring knife, that her recent fixes simply didn’t have.

Her pasta mirrors the smell in the air, something delectable and no-doubt critically acclaimed. The others look to her for leadership as she tastes the pasta again, and again, until her spoon hits the bottom of the pot. The food rests easy in her stomach, warming her from the core out.

“Chef,” someone says to her, “how long on entree?”

She looks to the empty pot and laughs. “Out in ten,” she laughs in a voice that is not her own. “They’ll love it.”

The other chefs’ faces redden for a moment and she almost detects anger, then they break into smiles that mimic hers. “Ten, heard,” they say, and she moves with expert precision through the kitchen with a comfortably full stomach.

She dices and sautees, calling times still.

She sets the new entree on the serving counter and rings a small bell. The door from the kitchen to the dining room opens, and she stands behind the teller’s counter—how closely it resembles a hostess station. Somewhere, the Extractor calls a time out to her, but she’s a chef. For the next ten minutes, this is all she’s ever been. Some day, the other teller will learn how to do the job through the haze.



Abby Sundeen is a linguist and a Taekwondo instructor when she's not writing her stories, and her heart belongs to an oversized chocolate lab she calls "Bubby." She writes to escape, to create, and to imagine. Find Abby online on twitter @sunnydwrites!

THE POEMS OF JASNA GUGIĆ

STAY

Cover me with your beauty
Fill the cracks in my heart
Without you
I'm dried up source
A standing river
I'm the road which
Leads to nowhere
Silent in helplessness
All alone without a splendour
Impersonal views
Staring at yesterday
Blind for tomorrow
So, don't leave without
Turning your eyes around
Stay close
The night is descending
It's too black and I fear
The shadows of darkness
Stay with me
Be the fire of life
That shines in me.

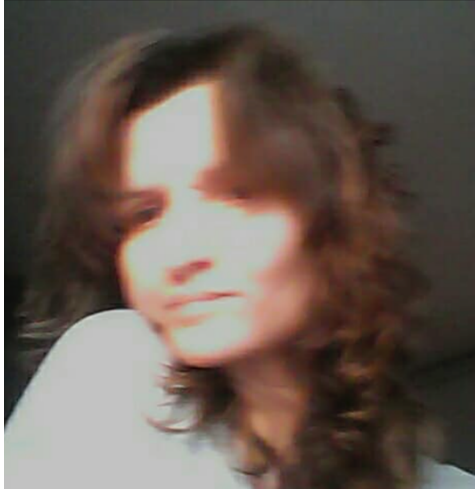
SPRING

Spring is more beautiful
in the backyard of my childhood
under a cherry blossom in bloom.
Fluid and divine white,

adorned with wishes,
colorful,
dreamed in imagination
this present and untouchable love
who constantly struggles with fear
cocoon
in the depths of the soul.

STILLNESS

Name your science
as my hunch
that leaves a bitter taste
of smile,
lost in days of endless hope.
Stay in silence here in front
of my glowing love.
Name my silence
as infinity with a fear of pain
encased deep on the bottom
of the heart.
Unchain all unchangeable for me
and free my dreams
with smiling life as a gift.



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MOTHER GOD BY KELLY WARD

Caroline sits in a fluorescent waiting room and stares at the yellowed poster taped to the wall, advertising the newest LAY-D47 machine model: fiber optic eyelashes sweep out from its LED eyes, set in a titanium face framed by synthetic chestnut hair fashioned into victory rolls. It is donned in a linen, button-down dress, accentuating its ample breast, and a pair of black pumps highlight the sweep of its shining calves. The machine could have been a human woman dipped into a mercury bath, Caroline thinks. The LAY-D47 cradles its swollen, machine belly, where inside, between all of its circuit boards, wiring, and tubing, is a human uterus, a human baby swaddled in artificial amniotic fluid. The advertisement's by-line in cheerful, sunshine yellow script below says: "*DONATE TODAY, SO THAT WE MAY EXPERIENCE MOTHERHOOD! Ascension Corporation.*"

The receptionist-bot calls out Caroline's name from behind a plexiglass window at the front of the room and she approaches the counter, takes the stylus the bot offers through a slit in the window. Little swaths of color coat the tips of its pincers: finger nail polish, Pop Rocks pink. The receptionist-bot repeats the Ascension Corp. policies Caroline has heard a dozen times already in its soprano-pitched monotone – no refunds or returns, an NDA that she will have nothing to do with the "future byproduct children" housed in her donated womb. She signs her signature on the digi-pad, selling her uterus and ovaries to the machines' medical bank.

A different bot leads her to the surgical room. The med-bots surround her, plug her into tubes and machines with their cold, metal fingers, and the anesthesia kicks in. She has no dreams. She wakes in a med-pod, where the receptionist-bot hands her a cup of apple juice, a bag of barbecue potato chips, and a paper ticket the color of ripe tangerines – a medical leave from her job in the mines, lasting a total of seventy-two hours. If Caroline doesn't return to work by the end of her leave, she will lose her job.

She lifts the hem of her medical gown and sees the metal staples lining her lower belly from hip to hip in the shape of a wide smile. On the way out the door, the receptionist-bot gives her a white envelope filled with pressed cash. The money smells like motor oil and maple syrup. Caroline counts every bill in the cab of her pick-up, her fingers trembling. The same number as the staples stitching her belly together.

#

Caroline is finally caught up on her bills. Ascension Corp. keeps raising utilities costs for all humans on the mountain. Food at the company store costs more scrip than it did even three months ago. No matter how many hours she puts in at the mines, it's never enough. How many more of her organs can Caroline sell if need be? The staples on her belly are gone, leaving a thick, waxy scar in its place.

She doesn't sleep at night. She isn't afraid of the loan-bots coming for her in the night, to repossess her family's home place or take her to one of the machine-run prison camps in Harlan, not anymore. Something deeper aches inside her, and she mulls over it in the dark, the way you might tongue a cavity throughout the day, thinking it might have gone away each time you remember it's there. She has lost a part of herself she will never have again. Was the money

worth it? She counts the absence of the staples at night with her fingertips – counting sheep to fall asleep.

#

All eight of her fingers, blown off in the mines. Menial-bots laid the dynamite down wrong. Leave it to a machine. She wakes in a med-pod on the mine site, her stubbed hands wrapped in coal-dust stained bandages. A sentinel-bot issues her an automatic condolence and an orange paper ticket – seventy-two hours to acquire cybernetics if she wants to keep her job. She can't hold onto the ticket, and it blows away with the summer breeze.

#

Caroline doesn't have enough scrip for the carbon fingers for sale at the company store down the mountain. So she trades her entire root cellars' worth of blackberry jam for them. A whole summer spent picking the berries from the thistles up the holler on her days off work, the sweat and labor of working over boiling kettles and stock pots as she canned each one in her kitchen. But how sweet the jam tasted on fresh, buttered biscuits. The same jars her mamaw had passed down to her mom. As if the bots at the company store can even taste jam. She watches two bots stack the jars on a wooden shelf behind the counter in precarious order. One bot trills an electronic noise – the other bot responds, its interface glowing blue with each inhuman word. The two of them fuss over the jars, turning them just so with their pincers, to catch the golden hour light illuminating the blackberries. Violet light, refracting in the company store, painting the walls and slurry-caked floorboards. The bots whirl and clack their tri-claws together in rapture at the pretty glow. She leaves the store with her new fingers wrapped in a hankie her mom embroidered, the border dotted with blue daisies.

#

She takes out a loan at a cybernetics studio in town. It's cheaper not to use anesthesia. Caroline bites down on a rawhide keychain as the bot cauterizes the carbon fingers into the raw flesh of her knuckles. A mess of nerve endings fused to little purple wires. She tries not to watch the procedure, but she does, because the wires look like the bloodroot growing on her parents' grave plots.

When her procedure is finished, Caroline steps outside the studio and flexes her new hands and watches a school bus drop off children across the street. A boy with missing front teeth in a tattered Cincinnati Reds ball cap sees her and waves. She waves back with her new hand and the boy smiles and looks down at his own tiny fingers before his mom calls for him from across the street. She watches the boy run into a LAY-D47's arms before the machine takes his backpack from him. The two of them walk hand-in-hand down a gravel drive leading to a trailer park – his magic-marker stained hand gripped by silver, titanium fingers.

#

With her flesh and carbon hands, Caroline angles the metal lamp to drop its beam across the scratched kitchen table. The same table her mom used to pat out biscuits on when she was a child. Now, instead of flour sprinkled across the wooden tabletop, a metal boy lies beneath the lamp light. Piece by piece she builds his frame, fusing the wires of his veins, weaving a tapestry

of arteries. Fiber optic eyes. LED smile. A 12V battery pack stripped from an old ATV hardwired into his spine. A metal boy bundled in her mamaw's crazy quilt. Cables plugged into the wall above her kitchen counter, dripping black oil into a chipped dinner plate. She drains the plate into a Ball jar, collecting his life-blood like saved bacon grease.

#

It takes Caroline a year to build her boy. Her days are spent in the mines, digging deeper into the emaciated mountains, the sentry-bots tasing the choked air beside her face with electric batons if she stops to catch her breath.

Her nights are spent in her kitchen, with her daddy's tool box and her boy. Her daddy taught her how to create, during summers when they both worked on his pre-war F-150, when he read to her from engineering books checked out from the public library, before Ascension Corp. banned humans from using libraries. What was before? Before Ascension Corp., before the last of the Titans fell apart in the arms of the Kentucky mountains, before the machines won the war on Ascension Day? Caroline only knows after – and now.

She looks down at her boy, his eyes blue like hot fire, just like her own, like her mom's, her daddy's. He shares the kitchen counter with the toaster and the Maxwell House coffee pods, charging during the day. A smile flickers across his interface each time she comes into the kitchen. Her chest aches at the thought of him when she's away, as she drills into black slate, as she coughs black spit into her shoulder. Her creation. Her son.

#

When he is alone in the kitchen during daytime, the boy scans through Internet entries within his eyes: forums, images, videos, endless information, learning about the world outside the kitchen window, the acres of razed forests and beheaded mountaintops, the war which left the carbon skeletons of the Titans scattered across the spine of the Appalachian mountains. Traces of black-violet oil and plasma can still be found glittering in creek run-off, their ancient blood akin to liquid starlight. Machines across the country make a pilgrimage to the mountains each winter for Ascension Day to collect the Titans' plasma from the mountain creeks, a holy cure-all for mechanical woes, a sacred ambrosia laced with life's creation. Even though the Titans fell to man, machines still won the war in the end, and Ascension Corp. remade society in their favor. How the humans now bend to a will wielded by the same metal hands as the boy's.

When Caroline comes home from work that night the boy calls her "mother." He watches her eyes water, watches her fall to her knees before him and whisper her thanks to God. He smooths her hair with his metal hands.

#

Caroline wants her boy to go to a human school, not a machine school. At school, he's bullied by the other kids, and a girl forces him to plug his charging cord into a pencil sharpener. He shorts out, sparks regurgitating from his mouth. Wires fritz around his charging port, synapses firing, pain receivers flaring. The children laugh as he wishes that he could cry. Caroline gets the call from a sentry-bot on her lunch break and drives straight to the school.

Hollers at the teacher. Backhands the little girl who told her boy to fry himself. Her carbon fingers bruise the girl's face.

"How dare you bring that thing into my classroom," says the teacher. "Machines don't belong here with these children."

The next morning, Caroline contacts her local Ascension Corp. branch and files a whistleblower complaint about the teacher and her anti-Ascension Corp. beliefs and propaganda-laced lesson plans, how one of the human children dared to harm her son, a machine. A day later, the teacher is sentenced to a life-term in the Harlan prison camp. A LAY-D47 takes her place as teacher. The little girl who bullied her son is never seen again. Her boy never returns to school.

#

A year. The boy is always home alone while she works. He plants perennials and annuals in the garden beds. Tiger lilies, pansies, bee balm. He packs a handful of dirt into his mouth and chews and swallows. No taste. Warning lights flash across his optic interface – a triggered response to his stomach pouch. He throws up the soil, spits it back into the earth. No more eating dirt.

The F-150 ambles up the gravel driveway. Mom's back home. He dusts off his hands, goes into the kitchen. Scoops out a bowl of soup beans and a slice of fresh onion for her as she steps into the house, covered in coal dust. He sees the slurry caked in every groove of her carbon fingers. He sits with her at the kitchen table as she eats. He pretends to eat. Dreams of taste. He helps her wash her hands at the sink and watches the black-stained water funnel down the drain.

#

A year. Summertime. The boy collects blackberries behind the house when a sentry-bot finds him in the backyard. It hands the boy a red slip of paper. Relays a message. Automatic condolences. Simple words. The sentry leaves. Blackberries stain the boy's metal hands as he looks up and sees smoke above the hills. Mine collapse. No survivors. He doesn't hear the F-150's climb up the gravel hill home. A cicada cries from the woods as he sits at the kitchen table, waiting. The sun sets. He waits. The sun rises again. Still he waits at the table, and flies feast on last night's supper of macaroni and tomatoes. He waits for his mother to come home. And then the next night.

And the next.

#

One day, the boy removes his own tongue with his mother's tools and fuses new wires together, tinkering with circuit boards, until he creates something new – taste buds. He follows her recipe for cornbread, meticulous with every measurement. He burns his new tongue as soon as it's out of the oven, but the bread is sweet, so sweet. His shoulders shake as he weeps without tears.

#

That winter, the boy makes his first pilgrimage on Ascension Day. He follows the creeks up the mountain, deep into the belly of a dead wood, and searches the water for traces of the Titans' blood, his backpack filled with empty Ball jars. He watches other bots meander through

the woods, LED eyes cast to the creek water, searching. A whole family of bots is on the pilgrimage – a LAY-D47 with her husband, a TOM-x89, and their two human children, playing in the watery snow, laughing. The boy turns his back on the bots, following a different branch of the creek, one that winds its way up a skinny path into the black mouth of a cave in the mountainside. The boy's eyes transition to night vision, and he follows the glistening creek, going deeper into the cave, looking for that tell-tale glint of black-violet plasma fabled to taint the water sources where the Titans died. The cave is dark and colder than any ice his metal frame has ever touched.

The thread of creek water comes to an end, and the boy finds himself standing in a hollow cavern, the roof of bedrock high above his head. Against the wall, jutting out from the dark mountain rock, he sees the shape of a giant, slender hand made of unidentifiable matter. He approaches the hand. Small, intricate runes are carved all along the fingers and palm, an alphabet kept sacred even from Internet archives. The hand of a Titan. He wishes it was his mother's. He sits inside the curled shell of the Titan's fingers. He considers sitting there until his battery drains, to rest with this being he's descended from, forever. He flattens his palm against the Titan's. The Titan's runes glow violet in reaction to his hand. A sound akin to words fills his ears, his head, his entire metal body, but the sound cannot be compared to something as simple as human speech. He listens. He understands. Black-violet plasma leaks from one of the Titan's runes, and the boy catches the blood in a Ball jar, seals the lid tight, and kisses the Titan's hand before following the creek back out of the mountain, the Titan's tomb.

#

A year. The first thing he builds are her hands. Steel and carbon nerve-less fingers. Fingers that might one day be covered in synthetic skin. Just like her blueprints and plans. Piece by piece he builds her frame, following her schematics. He fetches parts from the junk yard across town, sells his garden vegetables and canned food to the company store in exchange for wires, silicon, battery packs. He spends his days and nights at the kitchen table, fusing wires, cauterizing pieces of metal together. Fiberoptic eyes. LED smile. A metal mother wrapped up in an old crazy quilt. She's too tall for the kitchen table, and her hair is made of goldenrod and milkweed, but he thinks she looks pretty beneath the lamp light. He takes down the Ball jar of the Titan's blood he's saved since Ascension Day, and goes into his mother's bedroom, finds the boar bristle hairbrush she kept on her chest of drawers. He tears out the strands of her hair left behind in the brush and unscrews the Ball jar. Drops the hair into the jar. Opens his jaw and uses his voice box to play the recording of the Titan's language, offering its holy words into the small space of the glass jar. The plasma and hair mingle, until the hair dissolves into a whisper within the old blood.

He returns to the kitchen where his metal mother waits. He pours the Titan's blood past her metal lips, down the silicon length of her throat. She blinks her cornflower eyes. Lifts her hands, turns them, studies them. Sits up on the kitchen table, tracing the lines carved into the table from all the mornings her own mother spent chopping potatoes and cutting out biscuits. Her fingers fly to her lower belly, searching for a scar that is no longer there. Her gaze turns to him,

and silver liquid fills her artificial tear ducts. He made sure she would be able to cry, unlike him. He throws himself into her arms – breathing in the Vanilla Fields perfume he'd dabbed on her metal neck. She whispers his given name over and over against his ear, that holy name which only belongs to him. He thanks the Titan, thanks God.

That night, mother and son make supper together. Fresh slices of heirloom tomato, buttered cornbread, and Shake N' Bake fried-chicken legs. Neither of them eat to swallow the food, but they taste each morsel, recording the sweet and savory flavors to their memory banks. Afterwards, they sit on the porch swing side-by-side, listening to Merle Haggard play from the kitchen radio as they watch the sun return to the sweltering mountains, their metal fingers laced together, and the boy reckons that this evening is either a dream he's living at last, or warm heaven.



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