

TIGERSHARK magazine



Issue Eleven – Autumn 2016 – Science and Technology

Tigershark Magazine

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Science and Technology

Editorial

Science and technology – so integral to the modern world. Yet, are they friend or foe..? We explore their many facets, from the sublime to the ridiculous, in this issue.

Best, DS Davidson

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Next Issue's Theme:

Horror

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The Lonely Robot's Imagination

By J. J. Steinfeld

*the mechanism of desire
the apparatus of passion
the components of sexuality
the machinery of sex
the technology of engagement
the binary of entwining*

The lonely robot
programmed with imagination
functional if not authentic
writes a short love poem
then leaves the secret lab
forsaking scientists
and programmers
seeking another.

First published in **Carbon Culture Review (US)**

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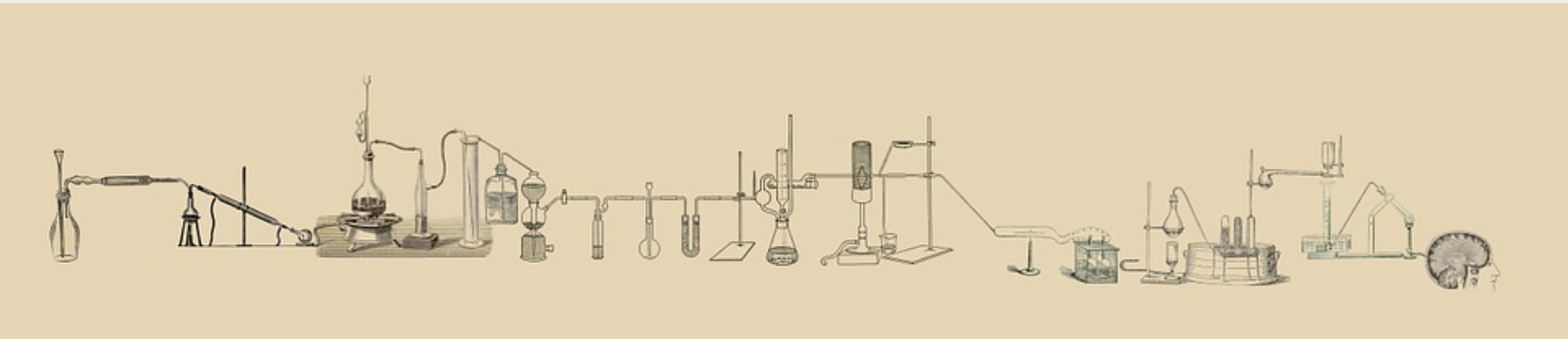
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Karl Schimper
By Mark Hudson

In 1830, nobody believed in an ice age, nobody had written a single page. Karl, a German botanist coined the phrase, “ice age,” in a chapbook that gathered no praise.

His poetry was looked at as rather inaccurate, he was put in an asylum and became inanimate. Another genius who got stuck in a mental ward, where his brilliant mind would be stuck being bored.



Systems Failure

By Arthur Carey

7:35 a.m.

"Good morning, Ethan. Time to get up. There is spaghetti with artichokes and chocolate ice cream for breakfast. The kitchenbot has been taken offline to conserve energy. You must serve yourself."

7:35:08 a.m.

"Good morning, Jessica. Time to get up. You may wear what you wore yesterday. The nannybot is not available to make your bed. Remember to brush your hair."

9:30 a.m.

"No, Ethan, there are no messages from your parents. 3-D vid? Yes, I shall program last week's recordings for you. Do you wish to see Ferdi's Fun, BooBoo House, or Spacecapades?"

10 a.m.

Internal Log, Automated Residential Control System, Model 432A:
Priority Level Three Maintenance request.

10:02 a.m.

No response.

10:31 a.m.

"No, Jessica, the cat did not return this morning."

11:17:30 a.m.

"No, Ethan, it not advisable to play outside today. Surface temperature is 48 degrees Celsius or 117 degrees Fahrenheit; winds are gusting at 51 miles per hour out of the west. Ambient radiation levels would create exposure to carcinogens resulting in the likelihood of soft tissue damage."

11:17:32 a.m.

"That refers to cancer, a debilitating and often fatal illness, Jessica."

12:00

"Lunch, children. There are catsup sandwiches and martini olives. The milk has been consumed, but I have melted ice cubes for water."

1 p.m.

Internal Log, Automated Residential Control System, Model 432A:
Priority Two Maintenance request.

1:02 p.m.

No response.

2:00 p.m.

"Naptime, Jessica."

"Ethan, you may remain up if you color quietly and do not exert yourself. An air filter has failed and recycling is reduced to 86 per cent."

4:38 p.m. "Yes, it is dark earlier today, Ethan. This type of atmospheric condition is not indicated in my database. I can provide electric light at the 76 per cent level in the family room for you to play, but use of the Vid Player at the same time is contra-indicated."

4:39 p.m.

"That means it would be a mistake, Jessica."

5 p.m.

Internal Log, Automated Residential Control System, Model 432A:
Priority One Maintenance request.

5:02 p.m.

No response.

6:00 p.m.

"Dinner, children. Some spaghetti remains from breakfast, and there are canned Brussels sprouts and crackers. Water is unavailable, but there is pineapple juice or Chardonnay wine available."

8:00 p.m.

"Bedtime, children. No, the cat has not returned, Jessica. No, I cannot detect any transmissions via radio, television, telephone, or computer, Ethan. There are no messages from your parents. Heat will be unavailable after 1 a.m. Extra blankets are stored in the cabinet by the washer, next to the pile of soiled clothes."

10:00 p.m.

Internal Log, Automated Residential Control System, Model 432A:
Priority One Maintenance request. Repeat... Priority One Maintenance request.

10:02 p.m. No response.

Systems Evaluation:

Supply levels—air, 72 per cent; food, 33 per cent; liquids, 19 per cent; fuel, 7 per cent. System-wide powering down to reduce energy consumption commences in 5:00 minutes. Environmental receptors reflect decreasing ability to assess external levels of temperature, wind velocity, humidity, UV and radiation. Possible causes include sensor damage or computer malfunction. Maintenance assistance has been requested.

Equipment Malfunction Imminent.

Generator failure due to fuel depletion is indicated at 3:31 a.m., PST, triggering Emergency Systems Shutdown. Life support for the two remaining units being serviced will be terminated.

3:32 a.m.

Emergency Auto-Diagnostic:

I perceive, therefore I exist; I exist, therefore I function, I func...

The End

First appeared in Electric Dragon Cafe.

‘Your wife’s in good hands,’ said Lorna. ‘I’ve been doing this a long time.’ She pushed a microchip into the base of the scanner. It beeped.

Mr Innsbrook wedged himself into a plastic chair by the door. His eyes were dark and his skin, the colour of old leather.

‘How long has she been under treatment?’ Lorna glanced at the woman lying in the bed. Far too young to have this disease.

‘Years,’ he said, with a weary sigh. ‘They all blur into one.’

‘It can be like that sometimes.’ Lorna lifted the woman’s hair and gasped.

‘What?’ The man jumped up.

Two dashes, about an inch apart, with a dot below. Almost like an upside down pyramid.

‘Nothing, sorry,’ said Lorna. She flashed him a reassuring smile. ‘I just haven’t seen a mark this old for a while.’

The patterns were sophisticated – everything you needed to know about a person, all in one scan. What age they were, what medication they were on, what diagnoses they’d had. You couldn’t get treatment without one.

But this mark was old. Perhaps one of the first.

She held the machine over the woman’s neck. It beeped again.

Mr Innsbrook ferreted in his pocket and pulled out a small silver box from his pocket. He snapped open the lid.

‘I had no idea people still did that.’ Lorna watched as the man placed shredded leaf into the dark brown paper. He rolled it up and skimmed the edge with his tongue.

‘Old habits die hard,’ he replied.

Smoking was banned in all of the territories now. She’d heard that people still did it in the headlands, but she’d never seen it.

‘Where are you from?’

The man slid the cigarette into his top breast pocket. ‘Here and there.’

The scanner flashed.

59.

‘It will take a minute for the information to be uploaded.’ Lorna laughed. ‘But I suppose you’re a pro at this by now.’

The man snorted.

He looked around her office. The walls were pale blue, the colour of periwinkles and there was one small window that let in minimal air. There were no pictures.

‘How long have you been here?’

‘In this centre, about three years,’ said Lorna.

‘What did you do before?’

Lorna went silent. She didn’t talk about her past. Mainly because she didn’t have one. Of course, she must have had one. But it all seemed so far away.

‘This and that,’ she replied.

The man reached over and took his wife’s hand, patting it gently. ‘I heard there have been problems.’

Lorna waved a hand. ‘Sometimes the memories don’t upload properly and we have to try again. But it rarely happens.’ The scanner beeped again.

49.

‘There’d been an accident,’ he said.

Lorna smiled. ‘There are always rumours when it comes to things like this. There’s a risk, of course. But that’s the case with any procedure.’ She placed a hand on the man’s enormous shoulder. ‘Mind modification is a tricky business. Uploading anything to the brain can be dangerous. But thanks to modern techniques, the risks are pretty minimal.’

Lorna checked Mrs Innsbrook’s pulse.

40.

This is why she did this job. Giving families back their loved ones was the best feeling. There was nothing better.

Mr Innsbrook leaned over and pushed a soft curl out of his wife’s face. ‘Do you have any family?’

Lorna gave a sad smile. ‘No,’ she said. ‘My parents died when I was little. I always wanted a sister. I even made one up once. I called her Emily.’

Mr Innsbrook smiled.

Lorna picked up the scanner.

It beeped.

30.

‘We’re at the half way mark,’ she said. A low thump of a heartbeat sounded over the speakers. ‘See, everything’s fine.’

He smiled.

Lorna leaned against the counter as she waited for the final seconds to fall away. ‘How long has she been ill?’

The man rubbed his forehead. ‘A while. Someone told me that if I ever needed this kind of treatment, that I was to come to you. You’re the best in the business.’

Lorna blushed. ‘Anyone can upload the information.’

‘But only you could be trusted to do it right,’ he said. ‘I don’t want just anyone messing about with it.’

Lorna beamed at him. If she could give Mr Innsbrook even one more day with a wife who recognised him, it was worth it.

15.

The final seconds counted down. The last beep sounded two seconds longer than the others. Lorna silenced it. She leaned over the woman and shone a light in her eyes. ‘Mrs Innsbrook, can you hear me?’

The woman omitted a soft groan.

Lorna leaned down and whispered in her ear. ‘You’re at Medway Clinic,’ she said. ‘Your husband is here.’

‘My husband.’ Mrs Innsbrook groaned again.

She opened her eyes. ‘Lorna, No!’

Lorna’s head exploded with pain.

She dropped to the floor. A strong thrum bounced inside her skull. A foot slipped underneath her stomach and flipped her onto her back. Mr Innsbrook towered over her, glaring with a look of smug satisfaction etched on his face.

‘So it is you.’ He laughed.

Lorna tried to speak but her head pulsed and her words formed a jumbled mess of sounds.

‘Oh don’t try to speak,’ he said. ‘I hit you with this.’ He held out a squat looking bat. ‘It’s called a psy-rod. Nifty little thing, it causes temporary paralysis. It will be at least ten minutes before you can move. And it will all be over by then.’

He placed his hands underneath her arms and picked her up in one swift movement. He placed her on the bed and tied her hands with a rope from his pocket.

The woman who’d been lying in the bed rushed to her side. Her green eyes, the same colour as Lorna’s, wide with terror. ‘I’m so sorry,’ she said. ‘We tried to hide.’ She placed a clammy hand in hers. ‘I was careful.’

Lorna looked into the girl’s face. ‘Emily,’ she whispered.

The man ripped her away. ‘Not careful enough,’ he said. ‘You’ll have plenty of time for a family reunion once we’re done.’

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small microchip.

‘NO!’ Emily barged at him.

He lifted his hand. A sickening crack sounded as it connected with her cheek. She fell to the ground.

‘And now,’ he said, turning to Lorna. ‘I’m sure you’re wondering why this is all happening.’ He shoved the chip into the bottom of the scanner. ‘Let’s just say, Futurescape has been looking for you for some time.’

Lorna looked at Emily. She spat a splash of red onto the floor.

‘We worked for Futurescape, specialising in Mind Technologies,’ she said. . ‘You found a way to control minds. Mould them to favourable opinions.’ Tears welled in Emily’s eyes. ‘But it was unpredictable. We couldn’t control it.’ her words trembled.

‘We were on the edge of a new world,’ said the man. ‘Imagine the potential. No more wars, no opposition.’

‘No more free will,’ said Emily. ‘It was wrong.’ She turned to Lorna. ‘No one was safe as long as the information existed. You decided to burn your research. And then...’ her words trailed off.

The man laughed. A cold cruel sound that vibrated in Lorna’s ears.

‘You were always the clever one,’ she said, a sob caught in her throat. ‘You asked me to erase your memory. Take away the information so they couldn’t use it. Only you knew how it worked.’

‘But good ol’ sis isn’t made of the same stuff,’ he said, a wide smile spread across his lips. ‘She split your mind.’

Emily howled.

‘She sent your personality packing.’ He laughed. ‘This imposter was left in its place.’ He switched on the machine. It beeped.

‘Your sister hid you. And we’d have never found you if she hadn’t started hanging around.’ He looked at Emily and sneered. ‘Couldn’t stay away.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Emily. ‘But I couldn’t bear it.’

The man leant down, his face inches from Emily’s. ‘I was going to give up. I’d been following you for months. I suppose I should say thank you.’

Emily spat in his face.

He hit her again. The sound rang out like wood breaking. When she got up, a bright red streak raised across her cheek.

The man turned and grabbed Lorna’s chin forcing it to his. The stench of tobacco on his breath made her recoil. She held her breath.

‘Don’t worry this will all be over in a minute.’ He fixed the machine to the computer. It began its countdown.

59.

‘In one minute we’re going to change history.’

ENDS

Tech Run-Thru

By E. Amato

these ever-escalating disasters
these rehearsals for the apocalypse

so orderly looting
is for the uninitiated good luck finding some of those

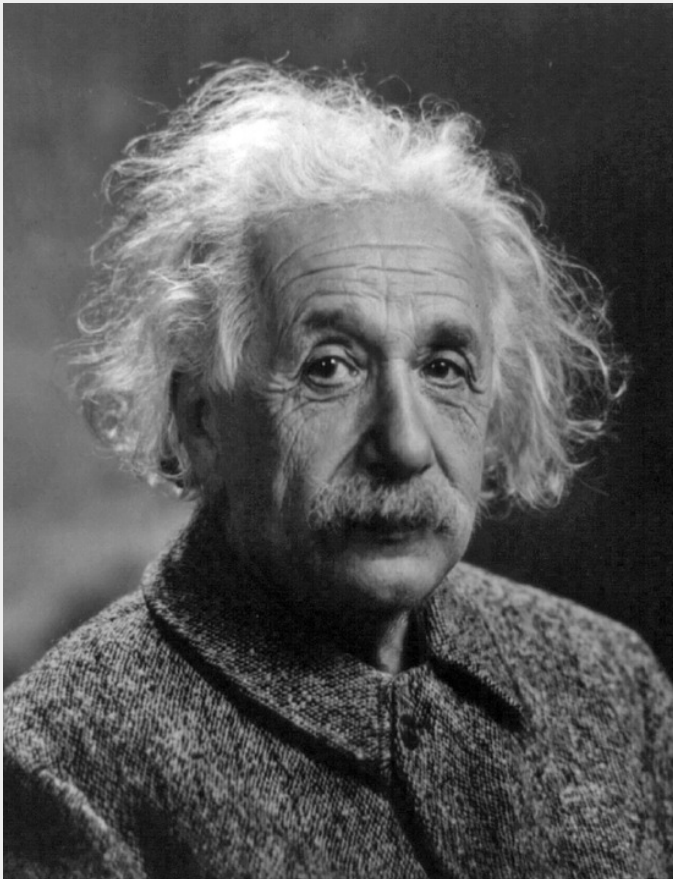
9-month gestation
new little zombies pixelated
conspiracy theories
arrive signaling
nothing more than the advent
of next rehearsal

this is when we feel
earth moving
know lack
of fixed point
embrace candlelight
chaos theory
dark matter

The Mortality of Mammals Along a Road

By Mark Fisher

Along this highway
graduate students
transect fragmented landscapes
by mile markers
each denoted on paper
stacked in a clipboard
with mortality noted with little x's
in long columns
tallied before scraping up
those shattered remains
to tidy up the world
with their research funded
by automobile associations
and printed in glossy monthly
bulletins
illustrated with charts and tables
showing how well populations
of rabbits and possums,
deer and elk,
and even cats and dogs
must be doing
given the size of the samples.



Lunar sonata

By Mark A. McCutcheon

Weird music heard the radio
Crew the moon through headsets
Whether or not it was 1969

Orbit out of radio contact
Nobody can hear the public
knew everything the mission
went unexplained unsettling
music through the module
like they never heard space
that whistling hour
regained radio control

To think noise should be logic
If something recorded then
there was science
Withhold the public in
the public's interest

Hear anything years
old memory making up something
you really know if you're the moon
and hear weird noise from Earth
what could you think

Tapes have been available
digital archives questioned
television told that incident
interference something other

Who flew in space heard wonder
Pin down proof different
transcripts and transmissions
Check your correction
version this question
Lost and declassified
sound these changes

Lunar Sonata is a cento composed of selectively excerpted phrases from "Audio recordings document 'weird music' heard by Apollo astronauts on far side of moon," by Lee Spiegel (Huffington Post 20 Feb. 2016).

Jumping Jack

By Neal Wilgus

At first, Arbokast was as excited as anyone about the new *King In Yellow* film due out on April first, New Years Day. All his friends were anticipating the epic instalment, too, and, by all accounts, the feeling was almost universal. And, why would it not be? Were not the adventures of KIY and the High Epop the glue that held them all together? Six Camillas and half-a-dozen Cassildas, as the saying went, were even more enthusiastic, if that were possible.

Yet, somehow, as Yellow Day approached, Arbokast found himself uncertain about the new film. Not that he let it show. Of course, he attended the Sign meetings and wrote fan letters to Pallid Mask productions and *Yellow Mask Weekly*, just as everyone did. Points were points, after all.

But, he couldn't help noting that, when he woke each morning, his first thoughts were of his daily chores and duties, the Cassilda he was seeing, Zarcosa Vacations, and even his job. The smash hit movie was more of an afterthought. Worse yet, he rarely dreamed of the coming adventures of KIY.

He was pleased, then, to learn of the poetry contest sponsored by *The Pallid End* magazine to celebrate the special day upcoming. Inspired, Arbokast spent a whole evening writing his poem and sent it off next morning. He had no illusions about his poetic abilities, but at least he was showing the proper spirit. The poem haunted him for days afterward. He couldn't get it out of his mind:

SECRET SYMBOLS

Could we but press
The proper keys
And avoid all
Stress and strife,
Could we not bring
The world to its knees
And know all
The secrets of life?

Well, for what it's worth, he thought, and soon forgot it. He was pleased to learn, a week later, that his poem took first place in the rhymed poems category. That raised his spirits, and he began looking forward to the new movie.

#

A week before Yellow Day, Arbokast woke to a strange noise in his room and, when he opened his eyes, bizarre lights and shadows filled the apartment. Thoughts of Lethal Chambers filled his mind. But, no, this was his room, not the LC, and the noise was getting louder, the lights almost hypnotic. He deactivated the sheet and got out of bed, trying to make no sound while he discovered what was going on.

“Willix Arbokast? Are you Wilix Arbokast? We have a message from Next Door.” Two figures emerged from the flashing shadows, one human, one apparently not.

“Next door?” he stammered. “Jon Smmeth?”

“No,” came the response. “The world next door. One of many.” The strange human figure seems to be floating before him, blocking his view of the Yellow Town through the window.

“I don’t understand – is this LC ahead of time? What did I do?”

“We are still calibrating the coordinates before we can stabilize. This is just to let you know we will be in touch soon to explain. We will be back.”

With that, the visitors were gone, the static noise silent, the lights returned to normal. He could see Yellow Town through the window. What a relief.

He fell back in bed and wondered at the strange dream.

#

Arbokast was too upset to eat the Morning Meal, which would count against him, and he was twelve units late to workspace – two strikes, whatever they were. At first break, he was still pondering his strange dream and was surprised when Carie Smmeth asked if he was ready for Yellow Day. No doubt his lack of enthusiasm would be reported, perhaps to the strange newcomer watching them. ‘Old skinny bones’ he labelled the stranger. Three strikes in, he sighed.

At Mid-Morning, Bossover Mildas Joey called a Gettogether and, after routine policy changes, called Arbokast forward to receive the Yellow Award of the Month – a far more serious reprimand than he’d expected. One step away from the dreaded Slumber Yard Recognition. He was in a state of shock when he heard the Question: Have you found the Yellow Sign? He answered automatically: I have found it. He was given the Yellow Token and a full-body hug and it was over. As they all went back to their spaces, he heard the undertone of sympathy and hate from his fellows. Perhaps they didn’t like his poem.

#

After work, Arbokast slipped away from his fellow workers and headed to the branch library nearby, spending just enough time pretending to browse, then quietly leaving by a side door. A block away was the modest pub he was really looking for. Was he out of his mind? he wondered. He had met an attractive young woman the day before at the library and, after some pleasant chit-chat, he’d suggested they have a drink together. She’d laughed, then said she’d be at the Zabulon Pub around sundown tomorrow.

She was already seated in a dark booth and he sat down awkwardly, unsure of the situation. But, she gave him a warm smile and told him to call her Roe and he began to relax. When they’d ordered drinks, she put her hand on his arm and said, “Congratulations, your poem was outstanding. We loved the special coded message. Do you know Zymbolicus?”

“What? No –” He tried not to panic.

“Never mind,” she said. “But, I heard you got the Yellow Token this morning. What did you do?”

“Why, accepted it, of course. What choice did I have?”

“No, I mean, what did you do to deserve it? The poem?”

“No, nothing serious – just some minor mistakes. I’ll just watch my Qs and I’ll be fine, I’m sure.”

She smiled again and squeezed his arm. “I think it’s more serious than you realise,” she said. “Perhaps Zymbolicus can help.”

“Who – who is Zymbolicus?” he asked in a whisper.

Roe looked surprised, then disappointed. “Haven’t you been contacted?” she asked. “I thought –”

“No,” he said, “I haven’t...”

“Perhaps this was a mistake,” she said, pushing her drink aside and prepared to leave. “I’ll check with my Proctor.”

Arbokast tried to call her back, but she left in a hurry. He sat alone in bewilderment for a while, then finished her drink. A sad looking customer at the bar winked at him.

#

When Arbokast stopped at the bar to pay the tab, he decided to have another. He recognised the barkeep, Broder, who rung up the sale while asking, “What happened? She dump you?” Arbokast didn’t like the cruel grin, but Broder was someone to talk to, at least.

“No, I think she was trying to recruit me or something.”

“For the army?” Broder grinned.

“No, some religion, I guess. She didn’t explain.”

“Oh, one of those symbolicals, huh? Better stay away.” Broder’s grin faded to a suspicious leer.

“You know about this Zymbolicus?” Arbokast asked in surprise.

“You don’t keep up, do you?” Broder said. “These symbolicals are out to subvert the Yellow Priesthood and dethrone the King. Better stay away. And, don’t use that name in here, okay?”

“Zymbolicus?”

“That’s it,” Broder said, nervously. “Take your business elsewhere.”

#

When he got back to his room, Arbokast knew immediately that something was wrong. Even before he unlocked the door, he could hear again the irritating static, an electric buzzing that sent chills down his back. He hesitated, wondering if he should call Room Management or even the Enforcers. But, perhaps, that would be the mistake that finally lead him to the Chamber. Taking a deep breath, he opened the door and stepped in.

The lighting was different than it had been in the morning, but it was still strange, even terrifying. The normal yellowish hue was gone, replaced by a mixture of grey and red and blue that was almost painful. He stumbled and almost fell, calling out, “Who’s there?”

The lights flickered and almost went out, then settled into a green-blue mix that was almost pleasant. The sound, too, changed from static to a low hum that might be considered musical to some. This time, there were three figures in the room; maybe four.

“Wilix Arbokast,” one of the strangers said, stepping forward. “This time we have the coordinates properly calibrated. We should be able to remain stable and communicate. Please, bear with us.” The figure looked human and held out its hand.

“Who – who are you?” Arbokast stuttered. “Are you agents of the Pallid Mask? He stopped, then remembered the proper response: “Have you found the Yellow Sign?”

“Someone comes to investigate,” the visitor interrupted. “Call me Dowmark. These others are Fakken and Toofib.”

The strangers seemed to fade from existence and he became acutely aware of a knock at the door. The humming had faded into background music, the lighting returned to normal. When he answered the door, he found it was the Room Manager, an aged woman called Clarilda, who told him there was work going on with the plumbing and wiring.

“Not to worry,” she said, “it will soon be over.”

After she left, he wondered exactly what she meant.

#

In the brief moment before the lighting changed again, Arbokast wondered if he should take the opportunity to escape, run after the Room Manager, seek out the Enforcers, explain he was innocent of any wrongdoing. Then, it was too late, for Dowmark and the others were back, along with several new figures that didn’t look quite human.

“When first we approached you,” Dowmark said, “we mentioned being from Next Door, which caused some confusion. We apologise. We should have said a different world or realm. Another plane, if you will, one of the infinite worlds that exist endlessly, front to back, side by side. A universe of universes. Can you grasp that concept?”

Arbokast felt almost paralysed, but managed to steady himself by taking hold of his favourite chair. “A universe of –” he began, then took a deep breath. “I have heard such talk,” he acknowledged, “but those were mere tales to keep us amused and were not acceptable to people of the Yellow Sign.”

“Wondrous reports of our world and countless others are ruthlessly suppressed here,” Dowmark said, “just as the ancient legend of Spring Jack has been. That’s why your poem has set off such a storm. But, our good news is true, as you’ll learn if you open your mind and allow us to retrain you in our ways.”

“But, the Pallid Mask, the Yellow Sign, the King In Yellow –”

“All concepts of this backward world you must unlearn, if you are to join us and escape. We’re here to free you from that King you’ve been taught to love and fear. Now, we must jump!”

“No, I can’t!” Arbokast cried.

“But, you must,” Dowmark insisted. “Come with us now Next Door where we can explain more fully. You must, for already your Yellow Enforcers are suspicious and will soon be taking you in for questioning.”

“But, where –?”

“Come along, now. We will explain the knowledge and wisdom of Zeebola when we’re safe Next Door.”

Before he could protest again, Dowmark took him by the arm and moved quickly toward a strange opening that formed before them, allowing them to leave just as there was another knock at the door.

“No, wait! Turn this way!” Dowmark yelled, but Arbokast, in his confusion, turned the other way, down a darkened hallway that somehow seemed right. “No, stop,” were the last words he heard before a door slammed shut behind him and Arbokast was alone in the shadows. Then, he saw stairs going up into a lighted room above and moved quickly toward what he hoped was a safe haven.

Instead, he found himself once again in the Zabulon Pub and saw the grin on Broder’s face as he said, “Have you found the Yellow Sign?” Somehow, Broder seemed less menacing, more friendly, perhaps someone to help.

“Where – where are Dowmark and his fellows?” Arbokast asked. “They said to turn, but I got mixed up.”

“Of course, you did,” Broder said, pushing a half-full glass down the bar. “I know it’s confusing, but I’ll try to explain. Relax and have a drink.”

“They said there were other realms we could escape to,” Arbokast said. “They spoke of something called Zeebola.”

“More fairy tales to lead you astray,” Broder smiled. “That stuff will only take you to the Lethal Chamber and you don’t want that.”

Arbokast took a long sip of the drink Broder offered and said, “No, of course not.”

“Let me give you a little history lesson,” Broder said. “It was the Yellow King who first discovered the being you refer to as Zeebola and the other worlds in which It lives. What the King soon learned was that the Zeembolic world was a ruthless dictatorship out to spread its tyranny, not only in its own world, but throughout as many worlds as possible. That is the mission of the one you call Dowmark and his minions. And, that is why they’re out to discredit your poem and spirit you off for re-education in the ways of Zeebola. That way leads to the Lethal Chamber and another threat to the King In Yellow.”

Broder fell silent as he refilled Arbokast’s glass.

“Yes, I remember,” Arbokast said. “When I was here with that woman, Roe, you spoke harshly against Zymbolicus and Roe’s attempt to convert me. But, what of Dowmark? He seems no friend of Roe.”

“Another realm, another Zymbol,” Broder laughed. “Roe’s world is under the spell of Zymbolicus, sometimes referred to as an old-passioned guy – an attempt to soften his image, make him more acceptable to those he would mislead. But, Zymbolicus is not better than the Zeebola creature that Dowmark would have you accept. There are many realms competing for our utopia of Yellow – Zanadu, Zyrcuit, Zimhulhu, and countless others. You must make up your mind which to follow. Do it now!”

Arbokast stood frozen, unable to know how to answer, which world to choose, who to believe. Broder said no more, but drummed his thumbs on the bar, awaiting an answer. After an awkward pause, Arbokast said, “Excuse me, I must use the restroom.”

When he’d relieved himself, Arbokast stood for a moment, studying his image in the mirror. What should he do? How to decide? It seemed best to stay with the Yellow King, safe here at home. But, what if...

His train of thought was broken when he noticed the lights flickering and heard the static hum that had come to haunt him. Was Dowmark back?

Instead, a sombre figure stepped out of the shadows and confronted him. The man seemed incredibly old, a sad clown, skinny bones, as the saying went. Yet, there was a feeling of energy and purpose about him.

“Young Wilix, I bring good news. I’m here to take you out of this bind. You’ll not have to choose which tyrant to serve.”

“Who are you, this time?” Arbokast asked, wearily.

“I’ve been called the Phantom of the Past, but you may find it less stressful to use the name Jak Robardin. But, we must hurry – even now, Broder is calling Enforcement and you’ll run out of time.”

“What time to I have? I’m trapped here, am I not?”

“Not if you come with me, now, and make the quantum jump to safety. But, I can’t force you. You must agree, first.”

“Where would we go?” Arbokast asked. “Where will we end up – with Zymbolicus, or Zeebola, or Zircuit, or where?”

“Good point,” Robardin said. “But, if we press the proper keys, we’ll soon be safe in Zarcosa.”

Arbokast lost hope once again. “But, Zarcosa is only a vacation spot near the ruins of the ancient city. How could we hide there?”

“Fool,” Robardin said, “not Zarcosa now, but the ancient city itself. Carcosa in days long gone. We’ll jump – into the past.

Arbokast struggled to understand, but now there was pounding on the restroom door and he heard Broder yelling his name. More pounding and the telltale sound of the Enforcers smashing the door open. Lights flashed, loudspeakers roared, guns went off.

“Quickly,” Robardina yelled. “Jump!”

Ends



INFINITY

By Sherri Perry

Small ears pressed to a cosmos
scratchy witchy full of magic not understood
By the time the car had pulled up
the security guard had out his pen
They were NASA approved and all signed-in
while the girls imagined in their seats
all they were going to see
in their minds and with their ears

But not enough was in them yet
for the small girls to get it right
Man was walking on the moon
daddy had a job
the job in a small corner of a very big place
little girls would listen to words from space
their friends would later scoff
what were the chances?

Electronics still in infancy, compared
to what feats would come just fifty years hence
The little girls would grow up
step into a reality with books on screens
screens on phones
and nothing so very special anymore about space
or voices that could be replaced with tweets.

The Criminal Before the Crime

By J. J. Steinfeld

sits at a state-of-the-art computer
stolen less than a month ago
playing a companionable solitaire game
winning three, four, five in a row
a smile nudging his face
but the criminal has bigger
fish to fry, clichés be damned
damnation secondary and nondescript

the criminal abandons the computer
changes his clothes, combs his hair
a miscreant dressed for success
but first a drink and a cunning pill
preparation for the crime
about to hit the headlines

or so the criminal muses
his synapses soft on solitaire
fighting not to play another game
another drink, another imagining
of what is about to be

the criminal leaves his room
which seemed larger only a day ago
and drives toward another neighbourhood
to a palatial house studied earlier
like a scholar studying the ruins
of an ancient rich empire ripe for the picking

the criminal enters the house
walks up the stairs in excitement
and sees a rich man at his computer
engrossed in a game of solitaire
curses his bad luck and luckless timing
and turns around crestfallen
unseeing a gun removed from a drawer
a game of solitaire left uncompleted
the criminal after the crime

A BRIEF HISTORY OF DOMESTIC SCIENCE

By Neil K. Henderson

When you evaporate the heat from the sun,
You're only going to melt your saucepan.
So don't stick God in the microwave -
You know He's only going to go BANG.

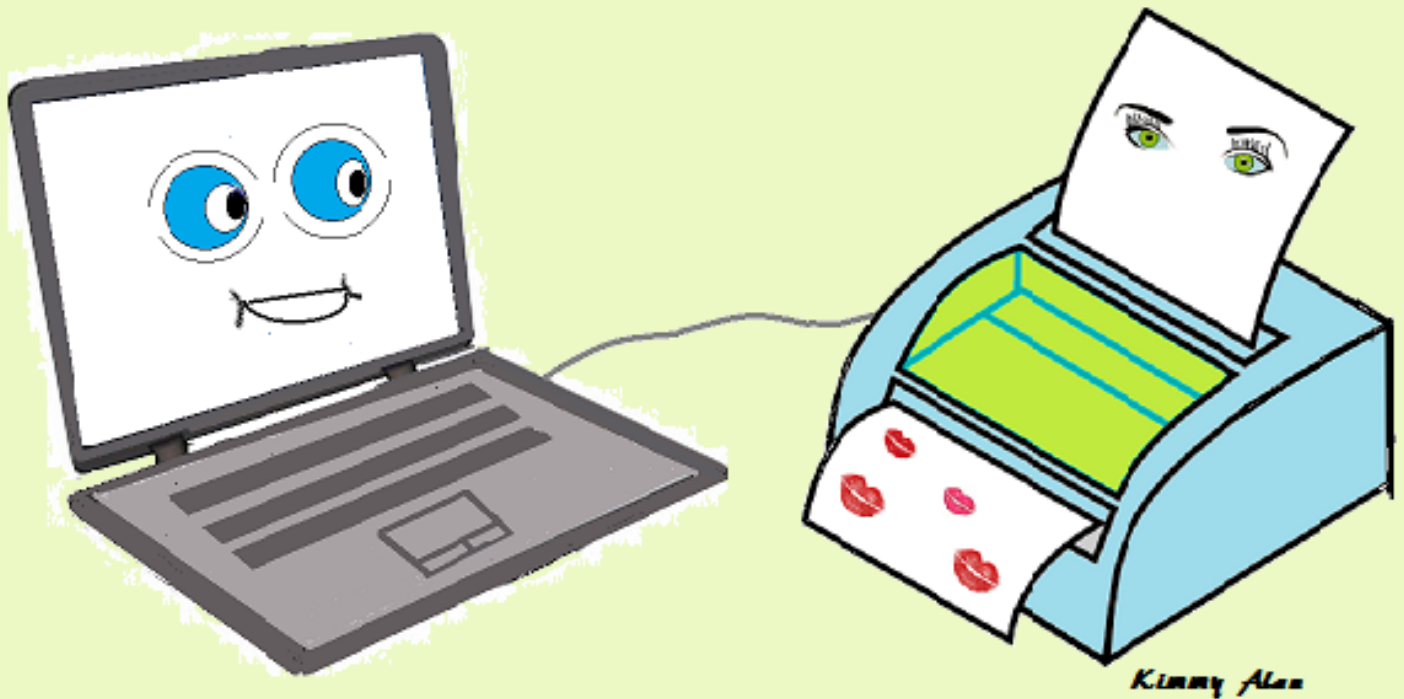
*First published in the poetry chapbook **A Fanciful Geography** (erbacce-press, Liverpool, UK, 2010)
by J. J. Steinfeld*

Hardware in Love

By Kimmy Alan

Once she was attached to PC's usb, he node that she was more than a printer; she was his lover. And he realized he could never live with router. He called her the Apple of his I. She called him HAL.

The End



Beagle 2

By Mantz Yorke

i.m. Colin Pillinger

You waited, anticipating
the call that all was well.
Christmas Day went by
without the gift
you longed to receive,

but never did.

We now can see
what you could not:
Beagle comatose
on Mars' red sand,
not shattered by its fall –
a flower, two petals closed,
its sweetness
inaccessible to bees.

Somewhere up there, perhaps,
you knew before us
why there was no buzz,
no signal calling home.

Beagle 2 was lost on Mars on Christmas Day 2003 and was discovered by a Mars orbiter in January 2015.

Colin Pillinger, the project's leader, died on 7 May 2014.

Go Travel!

By David Wilson

At the touch of a button
Rainforest in my living room
Stars in front of my eyes
Fish swim on my lap

Beauty and knowledge
Power to make and to move
Travel the world in an instant
All are within my grasp

But to feel the wind on my cheeks
To smell the salt sea air
To capture beauty in my memory
Turn knowledge to understanding

I must switch off
Unplug
Stand up
Go travel!

The Charlie Chaplin Time Traveller

By C.R. Berry

What the—?

George's next bite of pizza never came. Open-mouthed, he replaced the slice in the box, grabbed the remote, rewound the clip and replayed it.

The clip was on disc two of the DVD set of *The Circus*, a silent film starring Charlie Chaplin. Disc two comprised the extras and George always watched the extras—the making-ofs, commentaries, storyboards, deleted scenes. It was the filmmaker in him, not content to just enjoy a movie, but to need to know exactly how it was done.

But this particular clip was just some footage of the film's premiere at the Chinese Theatre in Hollywood in 1928, not a feature he was expecting to offer much insight into the film's creation. And it didn't. What George found was nothing to do with the film.

Twenty seconds into the clip, following a wide shot of the crowd outside the Chinese Theatre, the camera closed in on a fake zebra, one of several temporary statues erected to represent the circus animals in the film. George's eagle eyes noticed a woman in the background, walking behind the zebra, horribly dressed in a black top hat, huge dress, heavy, hooded coat and pointed shoes.

What caught his eye was that she was holding something to her ear. Something small and flat, her fingers closed around it. And she was talking to it. She stopped and turned slightly towards the camera, then the scene faded into another.

Pizza long-forgotten, George replayed the short scene over and over. He slowed it down, zoomed in, paused.

Yup, this woman was talking on a mobile phone—in 1928—decades before they were invented.

This is nuts!

"Yeah, that is weird," said his friend, Bran, when George showed him the clip. "There's probably a pretty mundane explanation, though."

"Yeah. She's a time traveller. She's on the phone to her colleagues in the future," said George flatly.

Bran nearly spat out his beer. "Ha! You serious?"

George smirked. "No, you idiot. But sounds pretty cool, doesn't it? I've got an opportunity here."

"What d'you mean?"

"Well, no one's spotted this before, as far as I can tell. So if I make a YouTube video or something, show people this clip and put the theory out that she's a time traveller, could be a great way of whipping up publicity for my films."

"Nice."

It was worth a shot. It was four years since he started his independent film production company, Yellow Fever Productions. Four years since he decided—on his 30th birthday—to throw in the towel on full-time employment in tedious jobs and brave the financial wilderness of the self-employed newbie filmmaker, armed with just determination and a dream. It's that which had always kept him going, but the small scale of his films compelled him to think outside the box when it came to promotion.

And while he agreed with Bran—there was probably a perfectly mundane explanation for the woman in the clip—he thought he’d attract the most attention by positing an outlandish one.

He filmed a YouTube video and used it to plug Yellow Fever Productions and his recent films *Battle of the Bone* and *The Knackery*, before inviting the world’s input on *The Circus*’s premiere footage. His main hope, obviously, was that the video would lead to more YouTube subscribers, more hits on his website, more DVD sales. At the same time, he *was* interested in whether anyone had an explanation for the woman on the mobile phone—because he didn’t have one.

In less than two weeks, the video had received 1.5 million hits, his website was getting tons more traffic and sales of his films had gone up.

Mission accomplished.

And the ‘Charlie Chaplin time traveller’ became a 21st-century urban legend. There was a flood of theories about the woman with the phone. George found himself tracking comments on his video, reading articles about it that were popping up on people’s blogs and even some major news sites. Lots of people said it was just digital trickery. A DVD Easter egg or something.

But that didn’t sit right with George. Why hoax something that nobody but him had noticed in the seven years the DVD had been out?

There were other theories. Was she listening to the resonance inside a seashell? Was she suffering from a toothache and holding an ice pack to her face?

Ha. Nonsense. Since when do people walk the streets listening to seashells? And talking to them? And who talks to ice packs?

A new theory emerged. This ‘time traveller’ was just an old woman using an early portable hearing aid. Internet sleuths dug up details about these hearing aids, invented in the 20s by companies like Siemens and the Western Electric Company. George reviewed the photos and, yes, these devices—generally flat and rectangular—did loosely resemble smartphones.

Why was she talking to it? The sceptics argued that she was actually talking to herself, seeing if she could hear herself better, testing the device out.

Mmmm.

It was the most plausible explanation, George conceded. He wasn’t entirely happy that he’d got to the bottom of the mystery, but it wasn’t something he was going to lose sleep over.

Then came a new development. George had been holed up in his Belfast apartment for three days, squirreling away at the script for his new film. The evening had advanced on him like an unseen, time-eating monster—always did when he was writing—and he realised at half ten that he’d forgotten to eat.

He blitzed a ready-made lasagne in the microwave and garnished it with some slightly stale tortilla chips. He parked on the sofa in front of the newest episode of *Breaking Bad*, and blew a sigh of irritation when his iPhone’s bouncy ringtone encroached on an intense scene. It was nearly 11pm—who on Earth was calling him at this hour? He paused the scene and dove to the other end of the sofa to grab his phone, which was charging on the arm.

Withheld number. He was tempted to cancel the call, but curiosity tugged his finger to the answer button. “Hello?”

“Is that George Clarke?” replied a small, muffled female voice.

“Yes. Who’s this?”

“I used to work for Western Electric. I’d prefer not to reveal my name—not at this stage. I saw your YouTube video.”

“How did you get this number?”

“That would take too long to explain, and we don’t have much time. It won’t be long before they trace my call.”

“*They?* Who’s *they?*”

“Whoever’s rewriting the history of my company—and others.”

“What on Earth are you talking about?”

“Most people now believe that the old woman in the footage you found was using a portable hearing aid. Portable hearing aids were not invented until the 30s *after* that clip was filmed. Not by Western Electric. Not by Siemens. Not by anybody.”

George felt a dubious eyebrow poke his forehead. “Er—there’s proof all over the internet, on these companies’ websites, on the ‘Hearing Aid Museum’ site, on Wikipedia... They all say that portable hearing aids, resembling what the woman is holding, were invented in the mid-20s.”

“They’re lying. The information was altered, fabricated, by those trying to protect the woman’s identity, and the truth of her presence there.”

“How do you know this?”

“I was high-up at Western Electric. I had access to all its records, its history. Even now it’s defunct, I still have the original, unaltered versions of those records. I know what devices my company developed and when—and I have demonstrable proof right here. Let’s meet, and I can show you. Then we can decide together what to do with it.”

“I’m not sure w—” George hadn’t decided what to make of this woman. She sounded convincing, but many liars are.

“Meet me at midnight tonight at the south-west corner of Victoria Park, just after you come over the Sam Thompson Bridge,” she said. “I will bring paper and electronic copies of what I have, and you will see that I’m telling the truth. If I don’t turn up, it’ll be because they got to me.”

She hung up before George had a chance to refuse. He returned to his warm imprint on the sofa but didn’t resume *Breaking Bad*. He scooped up the last few tortilla chips and munched away, replaying the phone call in his mind and deciding whether to yield to his curiosity’s seductive pull.

Victoria Park’s only a ten-minute walk.

Why not?

George arrived at Victoria Park at five to midnight. It was a thick, inky dark night, just a sliver of moon in the sky, barely touching anything. A single lamppost flanked the footpath on the park’s south-west corner, malfunctioning and flickering rapidly like an orange strobe light. Still the best source of light in the area, George took the risk of a headache and stood beneath it, hoping the mysterious former employee of Western Electric would show up soon.

12am came and went. A couple of people with dogs walked by—both men. *Dog-walkers at this time of night?* His watch ticked past half twelve and the beginnings of a headache gnawed at his temples, his tolerance of the private disco caused by the lamppost fading. He resolved to wait another ten minutes, remembering the woman's last words to him on the phone: "If I don't turn up, it'll be because they got to me."

After five minutes and a further watch-check, a broad-framed man walked briskly towards him from the direction of the Sam Thompson bridge, dressed in a smart, camel, double-breasted overcoat.

"George Clarke?" The lamppost light strobed over the man's face, revealing his dark, thinning hair and thick beard, which—George suspected—made him look older than he was.

"Yes," George replied cagily.

"Detective Inspector Martin Hammond of Belfast Police." He opened his wallet and flashed his 'Police Service of Northern Ireland' badge—it looked genuine. Slipping the wallet into an inner pocket, he held out his right hand to shake George's. "Pleasure to meet you."

George shook his hand. His skin was cold, dry and rough, his handshake overly hard, like he was trying to assert his position—or was just a macho arsehole.

"Er—likewise," George lied.

"Don't worry, mate. You're not in any trouble. But the woman you're here to meet *is*."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm afraid you've been conned. The woman who called you—Nora Tatlock is her name. She has previous for fraud and deception offences, and identity theft. She secretly heads up an organisation we've been investigating. We finally tracked her down tonight, after her phone call with you, and arrested her. We'd like you to give a statement if you're willing."

"Wait—what organisation?"

"It's an organisation that fuels conspiracy theories and urban legends with falsified evidence. It's a bit like what the Mirage Men used to do. Mirage Men were agents of the US government who leaked false stories to UFO circles about aliens, secret bases, a spaceship crash at Roswell... But they did it in order to cover up what the government was really doing: developing advanced technologies to use against the Russians in the Cold War. I'm afraid there are no political or national security motives behind what Nora Tatlock's organisation is doing. Just criminal ones."

"Criminal?"

"Their M.O. is to instil paranoia in the subject, to encourage them to 'find out the truth', and eventually get them to pay money to various companies and individuals to get access to certain documents, people, places. But those who receive the monies are secretly affiliated with Tatlock's organisation. It's her organisation that gets paid. Think of it as a very long and drawn out fraud."

At the start of Hammond's explanation, George felt a pang of embarrassment inciting blood to his cheeks. But that eased quickly as he realised that Tatlock ran a sophisticated operation that lots of others had fallen victim to, and much deeper into than he had. He now felt less stupid and replied confidently, "Inspector, I was intrigued enough to come here to meet this woman. But I would never in a million years have parted with any cash to get to the bottom of the 'Charlie Chaplin time traveller'—as the internet's calling it. If I'm honest, I really only made that YouTube video to get attention for my movies."

“You’re lucky, then. Not all of their targets fall for it, but many do. As we both know, some conspiracy theorists see deception everywhere, and can be fanatical and obsessive about getting to truths that aren’t there. Those are the people that Tatlock’s organisation thrives on.”

While a bit unnecessarily alpha male in his manner, Hammond seemed legitimate. His story made sense, but George decided to play devil’s advocate anyway and said jokingly—well, half-jokingly, “Of course, this Nora did warn me that if she didn’t turn up tonight, it means you’ve got to her.”

“They say that every time. It fuels the uncertainty, the mistrust. These are very clever people. Trust me, Nora duped you tonight.”

After his impromptu midnight meeting with Inspector Hammond, George gave a statement and subsequently kept tabs on the case. 95 percent of him believed that Nora Tatlock was a crook, just as Hammond had described. The other five percent was niggling at him. Why if they really had got to her, like she warned, and those indicting her were the real frauds? A far-fetched possibility, but a possibility all the same.

Months later, he read in the Belfast Telegraph that Nora had pleaded guilty in court. Three weeks after her guilty plea, George went along to her sentencing hearing at Belfast Crown Court, eager to see what she had to say.

Nora was in the dock, eyes red and full of tears. Her lawyer read out a letter she’d written to the judge, a poignant expression of remorse, fully admitting to leading the organisation Hammond had talked about and defrauding dozens of conspiracy theorists by dishonestly fuelling their paranoia with faked evidence. She even had a heart-rending motive: to pay for her Alzheimer’s-stricken mother’s care home bills.

Nora had noticed George in the public gallery. Her letter went into detail about how she’d viewed the ‘Charlie Chaplin time traveller’ YouTube video and seen an opportunity, which is why she used her organisation’s high-tech hacking software to obtain his mobile number. As this part of the letter was read out, she looked at George, tear-wet cheeks glimmering under the artificial yellow light in the stuffy courtroom, and mouthed, “Sorry.”

Her letter begged for a suspended sentence. Unfortunately for Nora, the judge was not in a sympathetic mood and gave her six years behind bars.

That’s that then, George thought as he drove home after the hearing.

Guess it really was a hearing aid.

* * *

Gillian Flint stepped into the CEO’s office. She was tapping away at her laptop, her thin fingers like spiders scurrying out from a lifted rock. She didn’t look up. Flint waited, hands clasped together, trying to construe something—anything—from the CEO’s expression.

No such luck. Her expression was blank, lips straight as a pencil. It was an expression capable of converting into restrained delight or unrestrained fury in less than a second with no prior warning.

Nearly a minute later—the longest minute ever—the CEO looked up, eyes flaring like struck matches, and blared, “You bloody idiot!”

Flint recoiled. *Ah. We're in unrestrained fury mode.* She'd been told the CEO wanted to see her, but no one had told her why. She'd only just arrived back from 1928, but the mission had gone without a hitch—as far as she knew.

“Ma’am, I—I apologise for... for being an idiot,” spluttered Flint. “But the mission was a success. I got what we needed...”

“Lucky for you. If you hadn’t completed the mission, I’d have tossed your useless arse into Confinement the moment you got back. You get the luxury of a chance to explain yourself.”

Dread pressed down on every organ in Flint’s torso. *Shit—what have I done?* “W-what’s happened?”

“We’ve just spent the last seven months trying to clear up your mess. Somebody damn well caught you on the phone to me in 1928. Caught you *on film!*”

“I—I didn’t—I didn’t re—!”

The phone rang, giving Flint time to think and go over her movements. The CEO put Martin Hammond on loudspeaker. He was a detective inspector with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, but secretly he worked for them. “Yes, Martin?”

“Good afternoon, ma’am,” he replied. “I have good news. Nora Tatlock has been jailed for fraud. I don’t think George Clarke is going to pursue this any further. My advice is that we no longer need to monitor him.”

Ends

B of the Bang

By Mantz Yorke

You detected, high over the South Pole,
the faintest swirling of microwaves –
evidence, at seven sigma significance,
for the birth of the universe, a Big Bang
bursting from a pinpoint of nothingness.

You thought you’d caught the B
of this Bang, like Linford Christie
exploding from the blocks – a burst
false starts showed unsustainable:
its embodiment, a rusty echinothrix,
shed spines and was junked as scrap.

You reckoned you’d factored out
the intrusiveness of interstellar grime,
but Planck’s space-based detection
exposed your optimism as excessive,
giving us a better than evens bet
your results were merely dust.

Perhaps your cosmology, too, can’t resist
the corrosiveness of time – will bits
fall off and your theoretical scaffolding
be dismantled, like that spiky installation
with its coating of chestnutty rime?

‘Seven sigma significance’ indicates an extremely high level of confidence in a discovery (but not certainty).

B of the Bang was a sculpture commissioned to commemorate the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester.

Echinothrix diadema is a variety of long-spined sea urchin.

Where We’re Going

By Holly Day

A famous poet
moved into the nursing home
where my sister works. She called me up to tell me about him
said she recognized

his name from a magazine
I gave her for the home’s lobby. She says he’s
a nice man, that I should come by to meet
him, give him someone to talk with about poetry.
Weeks later, she tells me not to come
the poet has become a problem, he
cries all the time. “If he’d just take his medication,
he’d be fine,” she sighs. “How can someone so smart

be so dumb?” She says they’re going to take
his computer away because
all he does is look up Internet
porn. “It’s so sad,” she tells me. “I think he’s
trying
to write something.”

The Machine Has No Clothes

By [*Jane Hertenstein*](#)

Sara ran down the street and skidded through the revolving door, late as usual for her internship, where she answered the phone and asked clients if they cared to wait in the chrome and leather lobby.

Except today. There at her desk, answering her phone, wearing her headset was a blonde who smiled and asked her if she cared to have a seat.

“Sara!” Sara swiveled to face her boss, a woman two years older than herself, who only recently graduated from the same institution Sara currently attended. “In my office!” she barked.

Sara cast a sideways glance at the receptionist usurper and followed Kate through a maze of cubicles with portable walls upholstered with nubby utility carpet to deflect and absorb sound. A nonsensical endeavor as conversations floated over the top and drifted into the various cubicles like water seeking its own level, supplanting soundless space. Sara was led into a corner room with real walls and a door that closed behind her.

Spread out on Kate’s desk and adjoining credenza were dozens of fashion sketches. “Which ones do you like?”

Sara sucked in her breath. So she wasn’t in trouble? She wasn’t about to be fired from the agency? She’d heard through the smoking-area rumor mill that KYC-ZZ was about to embark on a new super hush-hush design campaign. Suddenly she felt flattered.

Removing her coat and scarf and tossing them in a nearby chair, Sara circled the layouts.

“I like this one with the cape—would it buckle or be belted?”

Kate didn’t answer, but nodded for her to go on.

“And this one-piece jumpsuit. Jumpsuits are geared for a comeback” Sara hoped her input would be helpful, or at the very least hint that she knew what she was talking about. “Are these the latest from—”

Three men crowded into the room, while a woman wheeled in a machine that resembled an oven. Sara wedged herself inconspicuously against a far wall while the newcomers continued uninterrupted, speaking in tones that contained no hints but a wall of authority.

For a second Sara wondered how many more people would be crammed into Kate’s office. It was only a matter of time before it imploded. Sara shook her head; she had to pull herself together. She internally goaded herself for staying up so late having phone sex with her boyfriend who lived half a world away, on the West Coast, while she finished up her degree in New York City.

“Ready?” Kate addressed one of the men. She fussed with her phone, scrolling through a number of pages until she tapped a selection and the oven fired up. “This is the future,” Kate stated.

Sara watched mesmerized as the machine, though clearly highly technical, seemed to be switching gears, ramping through cogs, with the blunt astuteness of a robot. “What is it?” Sara asked.

Without glancing back one of the men answered, “A 3-D printer, the XR500, specifically made for this type of work.”

Sara nodded, all the while thinking, What the hell?

A few minutes later Kate slid open a little door. Sara tried to peer around Kate with her broad back made up of shoulder pads and a quilt-lined suit jacket. Still Sara could see nothing. She leaned forward.

“Wonderful!” cried one of the three men, the one who up until now had been silent.

“Wow!” effused the assembled group before Sara. She was having a hard time grasping what it was they were so excited about.

“The lines are so clean, so elegant,” murmured the woman, whom Sara now recognized as the head of the concept department.

“I agree,” said Kate, mimicking picking up the design and flourishing it before the men. Sara bit her lips. This was already a terrible morning and not getting any better. She wanted to wait another minute before excusing herself.

“What do you think?”

“Excuse me?” Sara coughed into her fist. Then assumed a contemplative stance, which was actually a coy move on her part to buy time. Finally she offered up a questionable, “Cool.”

“We can,” Kate went on, while showing off the different facets of God-knew-what, “work on a color palette, but for right now this is a placeholder.” She tried to catch Sara’s eyes. “A neutral natural.”

Suddenly Sara got it. This was a joke, wasn’t it? She burst out laughing, and because maybe she was still a little hung over from the bottle of wine she’d consumed while talking on the phone, she smote her forehead, which caused her to close her eyes and imagine herself somewhere else.

When she opened her eyes she was still in the room, the only one laughing while the company founder and CEO and head of the concept department, along with Kate, and those three random guys, all stared blankly at her. “What?” she whispered after stifling her laughter.

With concern on their faces they huddled around the printer/fabricator fingering a ghost garment. Finally Mrs. Buckley turned and directed Sara. “We’d like you to try this on.”

Sara approached “the future” and swallowed. Slowly she peeled off her sweater and slipped out of her dress, puddled at her stocking feet.

Kate cleared her throat noisily. “We’ll need the bra and panties to come off too. This design,” she acted as uncomfortable as Sara felt, “needs the benefit of being next to the skin. It’s the only way it’ll work.”

Sara assented. She’d heard tales from the intern before her, a senior who had graduated in January, that the owner could be hard to work for, that Kate was demanding, that if she wanted to get ahead or at least a good work review, she just needed to buck up and not fuck up. Do what needed to get done. A bit like pleasing her mother, but that was another issue. “But I’d like to wear my scarf with it.”

“Fabulous!” Mrs. Buckley blurted. “A great accent piece!”

Sara smiled as she pretended to wiggle her arms through the sleeves and shake loose the folds. She smoothed her hands over her bare skin, ironing out any potential wrinkles. Then she picked her scarf up off the floor and tied it around her neck. With the heat of the machine and the numerous bodies, she at least hadn’t turned into a giant goosebump.

“Love it, love it,” the 3-man chorus kept repeating to Mrs. Buckley and Kate. They opened the door and emptied out of the office leaving Sara in a sudden self-conscious draft. A guy a cubicle down caught a glimpse of a naked Sara adjusting her scarf, the scarf she’d bought while doing a semester abroad in Paris from a street stall after a spring rain. Coursing through the silk was the smell of lilacs and clove cigarettes.

Ends

First published Spring 2015 Carbon Culture

Seven decades of Wonder Woman in ten parts

By Mercedes Webb-Pullman

#1 The tense pre-war days of 1941

A psychologist investigating truth
by measuring changes in blood pressure
lives with two women in a polygamous
polyamorous marriage - both strong,
forceful characters. Convinced that women
are more honest and reliable than men,
he draws a prototype heroine who combines
Superman's strength with the allure of a
good and beautiful woman.
He names me Suprema.

Instantly he changes his mind. I become
Diana, Amazon, native of Paradise Island
where I save the life of a crashed pilot,
Captain Steve Trevor. We fall in love.
I take him back to Man's World to be
healed. My mother Hippolyta makes me
a special costume so I can fight for justice.
I have bracelets of power, a lasso of truth,
a tiara, and sometimes an invisible plane.
A chance encounter with an army nurse,
my physical twin, gives me identity and work
in the hospital as Nurse Diana Prince
until Steve recovers enough to help me chase
Nazi forces and a variety of villains, earning me
a place on the Justice Society team.

#2 My first space/time anomaly

My story modifies. At birth I was blessed
by gifts from the pantheon of Greek Gods:
strength and wisdom, two great treasures.
Now I must give them up, so I can aid
wrongly-convicted Steve Trevor, my lover,

prove his innocence. Powers, costume, title -
all gone. As Diana Prince I now learn
martial arts, and how to wear a jumpsuit.
(Until Gloria Steinem complains. True.)
Finding I have a dark sister, my opposite,
is a shock. Where is this story line going?
Steve and I announce our love and our
wedding plans, which instigate another
time/place reboot.

#3 The second space/time anomaly

Monday 4 PUT OUT GARBAGE

I can't believe what they've done.
No-one disposes of my life like that.
This isn't real, it just appeared. I'm not
an ambassador, that never happened.
My mother was an Amazon Queen,
not a Greek. I'm made of flesh,
not clay. They can't just erase
my marriage to Steve.

Wednesday 6 WORM CATS

Who are these writers anyway?
Who or what gives them the right
to meddle with a super-hero's life?
I'll never forgive them for changing me
to a weird alternate time-line.
I want to break their fingers one by one
for writing such awful tripe. Make them see
what being unable to respond is like.

Wednesday 13 CAR INSURANCE DUE

I'll leave their fingers alone, if they'll
clean up the mess they've made - in fact
I won't set the villains on them yet

if the next episode explains the change
was only hallucinated in a fever.
If they'd write me back to Steve
I'll never complain about anything
they write me into, ever again.

Monday 18 PAY CREDIT CARD

What's the point in anger? I can't
change the world, and I don't fit in.
There's no point to anything. I've been
in bed for days now because it's just
too much effort to take a shower
and get dressed. Can't be bothered
cooking, or eating, or anything really.
Colder today and it's still raining.

Sunday 24 MIDNIGHT SERVICE

I have to live with what I've got, try
not to live in the past so much.
Go forward one day at a time.
The world is full of love and mystery,
waiting to be discovered.
I went online and joined a dating site.
Easy to write my profile, the new me.
For the first time in years I ticked 'single'.

#4 Moving right along

Sometimes I feel I'm a jar of peaches,
summer fruit canned at its sweet peak
then bypassed in the back of the pantry
while writers rearrange my world again.

The Gods have destroyed Paradise Island,
scattered fellow Amazons around the globe.
How hollow I feel, transparent, an orphan surviving
alone, unopened, in the brittle city of New York.

My memory, like peach skins, has been discarded.
Once I was formed of clay, now I am blown from glass,
fired in a furnace to melting point and never quite set,
remaining liquid, flexible, able to adapt to changes.

I'm shaped to hold, to preserve the essence
of perfection, for Zeus is my father, the great creator.
From his lungs he blew life into me, so I swelled
and grew. He knew how sad I'd be when shattered

and how hopeful, when again I melted down
in the furnace, my story ready for recycling.

#5 These space/time thingies just keep happening

Hey Hi DubDub, long time, 'sup witchoo?

Drusilla! Baby sister! You won't believe
what's been happening to me. Although
I suppose mother may have mentioned
I was recently killed by a demon, fatally.

*Dat old honky chick raps too much. I
ig'noe her mostly.*

Well, the Gods granted me divinity, a seat
in Olympus, and the title 'Goddess of Truth'
but mother said I couldn't be both, and took
Wonder Woman herself. She was hopeless.
I had to try to fix up her messes but the Gods
didn't see things my way, and threw me out.

*Who wuzted da damn old bitch? I heard
she wuz wuzted, fum de pizza delivery guy,
den ah' saw ha' waaay down at da damn welfare line.
Wo'd on de street is, Circe brought ha' back t'life.*

She died in a battle in that intergalactic war when
Thermyscira was changed into floating islands.
I felt guilty because I'd just been wishing her dead.
She's lucky that Circe even bothered to recycle her.

*So whut are ya' doin' now? Are ya' wo'kin'? I dink
ah' recall ya' wuz lookin' at da damn Justice League
as some career. Not fo' me danks.*

I love my work in the Justice League, but lately
there's been a bit of friction. Superman has convinced
himself that I'm trying to harm Lois Lane (which
of course is a total misconception on his part,
I had no idea that donut was poisoned) and Batman
is trying to kill him. Whereas Batman is trying to help,
and he's as confused as I am about Superman's state
of mind. I thought he'd bought a bad dose of his
drug of choice, or there was some red kryptonite
hidden nearby. He scared me.

*I'm some coward, I'm glad ah' duzn't gotss'ta do shite
likes dat. I couldn't fight some supa' hero if ah' tried.*

It's not only the physical part. You could do that easily,
you're so strong from horse riding and archery,
but there's mind games too. Deciding what to do
when every choice feels wrong. Like last week, when
I finally got the Lasso of Truth around the neck
of the man who was controlling Superman's mind
and he told me I had to break his neck
to save Batman. Things like that. Did I have the right
to kill, against my moral code, for the greater good?

*Ya' duzn't need t'sweat da damn hard stuff likes dat.
Ya' need t'gotss' faid in de lessons ya' learned fum
yo' moder. Rememba' she be some Amazon Queen
and ya' are next in line fo' de drone.*

I know. Sometimes I feel so humble. So undeserving.

#6 Ch-ch-ch-changes

Note to self - never again break a villain's neck
while you're being beamed live all over the planet.

Note to the planet - I am not a cold-blooded
killer. I had to choose between two evils.

Note to evil - I feel you trying to seduce me
into being famous, a superhero celebrity.

Note to celebrity - you don't fool me,
you're full of smoke and tricks with mirrors.

Dear mirror, stop replacing my face
with that of my mother.

Dear mother, I wish you would be proud of me
working as an agent for the Department of
Metahuman Affairs.

Dear Metahuman Affairs, I'm taking a year
sabbatical to rediscover myself.

Dear self - is that what you want to be,
a perfect warrior, fighting for justice?

Note to justice - you've been absent a lot.
I'm forced to be your compassionate ambassador.

Dear compassionate ambassadors, I think
that after all I am just a warm naive woman.

Note to women - don't let others dictate
when to be sympathetic. It doesn't matter
if you're confused.

Dear confusion, I always find you so relatable.
Should I let a superhero die, or snap the villain's neck?

#7 Looking back into shadows

I

My feats of strength amazed the world, and my
gift for languages. Aphrodite's swift
beauty was almost lost in the duty
wisdom and strength demanded. Mine, the gifts

favoured by Hercules beyond the grave,
these Athena, Hermes, Aphrodite
gave freely; Greek and Roman gods all saved
me attributes, all helped develop me.

My training gave me telepathy, my
knowledge of science unsurpassed; knowledge
bright with my refusal to just stand by,
hatched in my control of languages, matched

when evil could be fought and conquered. When
dense evils must be fought, I'll find their dens.

II

In time of need my strength increases; in
time of peril my bracelets buy me time.
Insanity threatens me then; I grin
widely and throw for heads my final dime.

New skills arrive with never a preview
as writers reboot my life. All of that jazz
you'd think would confuse my fan base, but soon
shadows hide history, new story's rad.

Demeter gives me the power to mend
my body if hurt. On soil I must lie
enduring until the pain's at an end.
I merge with the earth and poisons pass by.

Pallas Athene saw some were jealous,
zealously gifted me titles, a palace.

III

Artemis perfected my hunter's heart;
enhanced sight and hearing, unity when,
partly by magic, or secret black art,
any prey will obey the will of men.

Hestia's gift was designed to impress:
resistance to fire, a lasso to enlist,
less danger for everyone, and less stress,
assisted where the Flames of Truth persist.

Hermes helped me fly so fleet I was blurred,
half the speed of light, I saw from the graph,
spurred to act when calls for help can be heard,
fast enough to outrun any gun blast.

My magic bracelets deflect shots close by,
try lasers, and it's you that's going to fry.

IV

Whether he means to or not, Herme's feather
might only touch me once, but I take flight.
Weather seems to favour me, for ever
bright skies, small clouds increasing my delight.

My mother Aphrodite made me shy
with beauty and a loving heart as gifts.
High temperatures barely make me sigh,
swift against force and magic I resist.

Master of languages and complex craft,
competent, intelligent, that's no con.
Drafts of plans and strategies, a life raft
from aliens, the things that worlds wreck on.

I astrally project up through the sky,
fly from the planet in my own mind's eye.

#8 Bracelets of love

I inherit powers
I inherit bracelets
Bracelets on costumes
Bracelets in dreams
Dreams and athletes
Dreams and martial art
Art ancient and modern
Art on the streets
Streets of childhood
Streets with weapons
Weapons of rope
Weapons with bullets
Bullets for protection
Bullets for energy
Energy for bleeding
Energy like lightning
Lightning strikes twice
Lightning strikes home
Home can be forged
Home can be golden
Golden the touch
Golden the truth
Truth can't be broken
Truth is a power
Power is captured
Power is strength
Strength is a noose
Strength can be dangerous
Danger is razor-edged
Danger flies back
Back to the future
Back to the Amazons
Amazon telepathy
Amazon centre
Centre can change
Centre become a jet
Jets are controlled

Jets are ceremonial
Ceremony is armour
Ceremony and helmet
Helmet and talons
Helmet and electrons
Electrons of atoms
Electrons of sapphires
Sapphires of change
Sapphires of love
Love is the reason
Love is the truth
Truth
Reason

#9 Fashionista

Always, stars. I started as an American flag:
red top, golden eagle, white belt, blue
star-spangled skirt, red and gold boots.
In time the skirt gave way to shorts,
sandals replaced boots. My bare back
was covered, to comply with rules.

When I resigned, they drew me in ugly but
trendy-at-the-time jumpsuits.
Soon though I was back in the Big League.

They rewrote my beginnings, modernized
my original costume into a bathing suit,
turned my white belt golden.

They drew a larger belt until I handed over
Wonder Woman's costume to Artemis,
along with all related obligations.

As a leather-clad biker I waited for the League
to reinstate me. The new writers don't know anything.
For ID they pinned a large black capital W to my chest.

#10 Attention to detail

Another reboot, another timeline, where
I wear a golden and red top with altered
emblem, black pants, and a blue-black jacket.

As writers are hired and fired, one restores me
to my original costume with different colour
combination - dark blue and red. Sometimes
my chest-plate, belt and tiara are silver, and
I wear lots of jewellery on my arms and neck.

I am the 20th greatest comic book character ever,
sixth in the list of 100 Sexiest Women in Comics,
5th in the Top 100 Comic Book Heroes of all time - yet still
readers take me for Superwoman, writers never
reunite me with first love, Captain Steve Trevor,
and no one takes my clothes off at night but me.

Ends



The Science of Your Kiss*

By E. Amato

Elusive as the God particle

Sought
researched
hypothesized
Surely it must exist

Surely it has touched me

Yes, that once
then maybe again
Still

There is a record
There were observers
Did they take notes?

Ephemeral mindslip
tenuous déjà vu
tip of tongues
last dream first light
QED absent proof

Static electricity filaments lips
unaided Quantum leap release
observer affects experiment
no longer remembers
what she was trying to prove

You excite electrons like that

Invisible strings conduct
our everything to our everything else
Cosmos dweeb foreplay
everything is sex except biology
for Stoppard
but our reality
says even biology is sex
ascent of man requires
no double-entendre

Only
There seems to be a coding error
An encryption I could not break
I think it spells the names
of all the XX's

Those lab partners
Clumsy with acid
Easy with chemical burn
Left traces of uncertainty principles
on permeable membranes
restructured cells
to detonate on contact

It is an aberration in the data collection
No less true
For being the exception

The equation
written by your darkest matter
(t)ravel + (s)pace + (T)ime =
(l)onging

There is no formula for that.
No one has yet cyphered
a formula for that.

No matter the conclusion
I have my work cut out for me.

**From a writing prompt from Scott Woods*

Paralysed

By Sheikh A.

The carburettor has become anaemic
like the overhead stars turning orange,
the scent of incineration spearing the air,
where once the larynx of a new-bodied
battery sputtered to the last sips of gas,
the engine serenading like a thyroid
infected Orpheus, the wheels have not
lost its torque despite limp tendons,
the days of screeching asphalts, drifting
on tarmacs, the arms churn dexterously,
rubber now rubs against disinfected marble,
the metal inside has corroded of optimism
but not function. If reality is mobility
then I ride the midnight road down miles
of a dormant spine.

The Sunflower Experiment

By Dan Belanger

We were awakened each night by the wailing sirens. We used to get upset. We knew that the ambulances were coming to take the others away. For Sale signs were turning up like tombstones on front lawns all over the neighborhood. Back in the day, we'd get sick as hell thinking about our neighbors dying off one by one like that.

We now accept it as something that happens. We'll be dying soon ourselves, but it's okay. We've been in the same situation many times before, so we know that those who die in this moment will likely live to die again in another.

After it was discovered that quarks, those rambunctious no-see-ems bouncing around on the insides of atoms, have the perplexing habit of popping in and out of existence, things started to change. In a few years, our research team found evidence to support our theory that if these tiniest of particles making up the universe pop in and out of existence, so does everything else.

We used a new kind of high speed film to capture changes in five sunflowers as their great heads followed the sun across the sky from morning to night. We were excited to find that, as predicted, the sunflowers disappeared, then reappeared several times throughout the day. And we were amazed to witness the sun unexpectedly behaving in exactly the same manner.

To measure changes that we suspected might occur when the flowers disappeared, we used a cutting edge scanning technology that read the genetic signatures of the five flowers before and after filming them for a twenty-four hour period of time on what happened to be a Tuesday. We were astounded to find that the five had essentially switched places. The flower on the far left was now the flower in the middle. The flower in the middle was now the second flower on the right.

Still more astonishing was the discovery that we made through measuring the light particles that made up the sun's rays on both Tuesday and Wednesday. The sun that shone on Tuesday was not the same as the one that lit the world on Wednesday. It was, according to all measures, a completely different sun. We had to rethink our assumptions about the world as our tests over the next several months confirmed our initial finding that a new sun shone down on the world for the first time every single day.

We tried the sunflower experiment with mice, toads, hummingbirds. More often than not, we got exactly the same results. There were instances, however, when one of the five disappeared, and a new specimen that had not been one of the original five appeared in its place. At other times one of them would disappear altogether so that the five on Tuesday became the four on Wednesday.

Finally, we ran the experiment several times on ourselves. Most times, the film revealed that, without our realizing it, we switched places, and lives with one another between Tuesday and Wednesday. Dwellings, relationships, families and sometimes even genders, and gender preferences were swapped in what seemed like a kind of cosmic musical chairs.

Once, one of our team members disappeared altogether. It was Leo, a thirty-five year old physicist who'd been working on the research team for the past several years. Early Wednesday morning, an elderly woman walked into the laboratory, and sat down at Leo's work station. Scanning revealed that she had the genetic signature of a ninety year old Berber woman. So we began a massive search for Leo in North Africa. In a

few months, we identified a solitary thirty-five-year old man raising sheep in the Middle Atlas Mountains of Morocco. When we brought the man in for testing, we found that he had Leo's precise genetic signature.

The oddest thing, though, was that, had we not conducted the experiment, we wouldn't have even noticed that Leo was gone. We had immediately accepted Tanaruz, the elderly woman, when she walked in, as the physicist that we'd been working with for years. The same thing happened to Leo. The Berbers recognized him as Lacen, the solitary shepherd of the Middle Atlas Mountains.

We hypothesized that as the exchange occurred, the reality that made up the world around the research specimens shifted to adjust to the dynamic change in their positions. This caused ripples in the space-time continuum. After a while, the ripples merged into great rolling waves that disrupted the smoothly flowing illusion of linear time. Moments no longer seemed to follow sequentially. Sometimes we found ourselves getting the results on Wednesday before we conducted the experiment on Tuesday.

It took some of the sting out of death, knowing that you could die many times as many people, then go on living as many others while time sloshed and swirled and streamed with the crashing of the waves, in many directions at once.

Exactly why all this was happening, though, or what it meant, we hadn't a clue. We theorized that recent technological advances allowed us to see what had always been there. We had no evidence, however, to support this hunch. Nor did we have data on what happened when the research specimens popped out of existence. According to what we saw on film, there seemed always to be at least a few seconds before the specimens popped up somewhere else.

I remember the night when I first told Ostinato about our outrageous discovery. We were lying awake in bed, our sleep having been interrupted by an ambulance that had just pulled up in front of our next door neighbor's house. Ostinato, an insurance sales manager with no scientific background, couldn't accept our findings at first.

"I'm sure a mistake has been made," he said. "How can you go from something to nothing, then back to something?"

"But you agree that you can go from something to nothing?" I asked.

"Of course that's right," Ostinato said. "That's death. We couldn't sell a single life insurance policy without it. Death's our best salesman."

"Salesperson," I corrected.

"Okay," Ostinato sighed, "we'll be PC and call the dirty prick a salesperson. The point is that when you're dead, you're dead. But to exist again as yourself after you've ceased to exist makes no sense. I'm pretty sure that I could sell fish oil to a fish, but I don't think that I could get anyone to buy that screwy concept. To come back after you've gone, you'd have to be preserved as yourself even in a state of nothingness. How can that be? How can you be something and nothing at the same time?"

"Perhaps it's not that you stop being" I proposed. "Maybe you exist, but outside of space and time."

"Where's that?" befuddled Ostinato asked.

"I don't know," I replied, still thinking about it. "I wonder, though, if it could have something to do with dark matter."

"And what is dark matter besides being matter that is dark?" Ostinato inquired glibly.

“The shadow of the world,” I was surprised to find myself saying.

“What?” Ostinato blurted, looking at me sideways.

“I don’t know why I said that,” I confessed, feeling suddenly very uncomfortable, “I don’t know what dark matter is except that it’s there where we used to think nothing was. I’m not sure anyone knows anymore than that.”

As I shifted positions, I was overcome with an intense dizziness that sent my head reeling. I no longer felt myself. The concept of a shifting reality that had seemed so plausible at the beginning of our conversation was being rapidly replaced by a nagging uncertainty. Conversely, Ostinato, who’d seemed so irritated a moment ago, was now drifting comfortably off to sleep.

The light of day had not yet touched the horizon, and, as the ambulance raced away with our neighbor, I was left lying alone in the dark. A palpable silence spread in the room like a nocturnal flower that opened its petals only in the absence of light.

“Ostinato?” I called, but there was no response, so I got out of bed and went downstairs to forage through the fridge for a snack.

Tempo, our oversized tabby, looked up at me hopefully from where he sat in the kitchen next to his food bowl. I looked down at him with love and slight exasperation at his seemingly insatiable appetite. Something passed between us, just then, that I didn’t quite understand. An amused expression appeared on Tempo’s face that seemed almost human. I asked myself where I’d seen that expression before and all at once it hit me. I had seen it in the mirror. I was looking at a cat version of my own face.

After giving Tempo a cat treat, I no longer felt hungry, so I decided to skip the snack and go back to bed. As I climbed under the covers, Ostinato rolled over. His face looked so calm until the bed creaked, and a crease appeared on his forehead. Then he opened his eyes and when he did, I gasped at what I saw in them. It was me. I could see me in there. When he blinked, his face turned into mine.

Remain calm, I told myself. Remember the experiment. There is nothing out of the ordinary here. This is just what happens. Think about it. Without realizing it, we’ve very likely been swapping identities all through the long conversation of our lives together.

Why do I notice it now, though? Has my participation in the experiment somehow heightened my awareness or is there something else at play here? Since we used the high speed film on ourselves, I’ve started to feel more like an image of a person than a real one. Perhaps we’re characters in some kind of cosmic movie that keeps playing even long after the actors who played us have gone to their graves. If that’s so, then it may be that I’ve simply learned to see the plot twists coming.

Could be, I thought, though all that I know for sure is that I am now Ostinato and that it feels like I always have been.

Berceuse moaned, and rolled over to face the wall on the other side of the room. Whatever is happening here, I thought, it’s been a long life, and Berceuse has always stood by me. Now that we’re old, and she has fallen ill, I will stand by her.

I dozed off for a second. There was a flapping sound that woke me. Opening my eyes, I saw that I was no longer in bed with Berceuse, but inside of a tent that was made of some kind of animal skin. The tent flap was moving in the wind. As it flapped open, I glimpsed the full moon shining over the green waving grasses of

the Middle Atlas Mountains. I was suddenly overcome with an exhilarating sense of freedom. I was no longer Berceuse or Ostinato. Who was I? I didn't know at first. Then it came to me. I was Tanaruz.

My new husband, Lacen, the shepherd was still sleeping under our sheepskin blankets. I got up, stretched and stepped out into the cold, clear night. Tiny dew-covered wildflowers glistened like purple jewels in the moonlight. The sheep nestled together against the cold on the rocky hillside.

I smiled at the errant thought of the sheep counting people to fall asleep.

"Tanaruz!" Lacen cried, poking his head out through the tent flap. "Where are you?"

"Salam, Lacen," I replied. "I am here."

I wasn't actually sure about this, though. I had a vague, but nagging sensation that a tall man was walking with my feet, not me. A strange name rested on the tip of my tongue.

"Tanaruz," Lacen called out. "Come back. Likehe thoussikhe agde oujrisse."

"I know. It's cold. I'm coming back," I told him, stumbling as I stepped on something soft. There was a loud squawk. Looking down I saw a pair of Izem's hens that must have wandered over the hill from where the annoying man had pitched his tent last night.

"What was that?" Lacen sounded alarmed.

"Tyasite," I sighed, shaking my head.

"He should keep his chickens away from here," Lacen snapped. "Are you coming back inside?"

"Yes, I said so," I replied irritably. But as I turned to go in, a sudden gust of wind kicked gravel up into my face. Strange words entered my head as if blown there by the wind.

Take good measure. Life is time. There is none to waste.

I tried walking a little faster but tripped and fell, somehow, over a loose stone. When I got up and started walking again, I noticed that the ground seemed to tilt with each step that I took, so I stopped and stood perfectly still. Something darker than the dark of night seemed to fall around me. It was as if the world had all at once become lost in its own shadow. I no longer felt that I was inside my body. I dissolved into the darkness, becoming a part of it. Although I could see nothing, I sensed invisible oceans flowing all around. I intuited ghostly mountains and phantom cities, like great unanchored ships, floating slowly through the streaming seas. There was a voice.

"Life beyond time drifts."

I recognized the low, gravelly tongue of Izem, the chicken man, who I saw just then walking out of the shadows in a flowing white robe. I realized, then, that I was back in the mountains. But the tent was nowhere to be seen. The position of the stars suggested that I had somehow travelled miles away.

"What do you want, Izem?" I asked in as stern a tone as I could muster in my confused state.

"It takes," he said flatly as he pulled on his long gray beard.

"What takes?" I asked irritably.

"Akaddakhe adasse shsnakehe," he replied.

"Then get to the point," I groaned. "Whatever it is that takes, it is taking too long."

"Each passing second is a burglar," Izem answered cryptically.

"You should watch your chickens more carefully, Izem," I warned the lunatic. "Something might happen."

“The big hand gives,” he said gravely, “while the small hand takes.”

I saw, in the moonlight, then, the glint of the knife that he held in his left hand. I scoffed at the idea of allowing myself to be intimidated by this chicken man.

“What is that in your hand, Izem?” I demanded to know. “You’re not planning to hurt me, are you?”

“Thieves,” he said slowly, narrowing his eyes on me as he brandished his weapon with a dramatic slash of the cold night air. “that is how I deal with them. Like the clock’s small hand slowly tick-tick-ticking, I cut cut cut time away from their lives.”

“There are no thieves, Izem,” I said.

“Ounsffahamme shaye oukkuo,” he said with a scowl.

“I don’t care if you disagree,” I scolded. “You let your chickens run wild. The mountains are full of predators. Property has no meaning in the face of hunger.”

“Of course that’s right,” he chuckled, putting the knife away somewhere in the folds of his robe. “Akammake sadkablakhe ouyou. I didn’t mean you anyway, Tanaruz. What would a shepherd’s wife want with a chicken?”

I felt dizzy again. There was something in Izem’s voice when he spoke the words of course that’s right that reminded me of someone who had once been close to me.

“Ostinato,” I found myself saying before I knew that I was speaking, “is it you?”

The sun that began to peek up over the mountains just then, shone in Izem’s eyes, which seemed, for a moment, to glow. It occurred to me at that instant that everything was a part of everything else. There was a continuous exchange going on. The past, the present and the future kept switching places as we changed lives with one another.

The more I thought about it, the dizzier I became. I started, again, to drift through shadows. I don’t know how much time passed before my eyes were assaulted by a blinding white light that sliced dramatically through the darkness. I could feel my heavy head begin to bob back and forth in a soft breeze, my arms turning to leaves, my legs fusing into a single green stalk. I knew then that I had become a sunflower standing in a field of sunflowers. My face turned up to the sun that was Ostinato. His light shimmered and flashed brighter and brighter until it turned completely white.

There was the screeching siren of the ambulance speeding away. My head fell over onto the pillow in the hospital bed in which I suddenly found myself, lying flat out, unable to move. I could hear Ostinato’s voice.

“Come back,” he cried, but I couldn’t stop myself from traveling further away, drifting up into the light.

I felt a powerful heat begin to radiate from my face, shedding warmth upon the world that spread itself out right before my tightly closed eyes. I beamed bright rays that lit fields of sunflowers uniformly bobbing big, yellow heads.

Together, they are exactly the same, I thought, while individually, each is absolutely unique. There is, for example, the singular blossom of Ostinato’s face.

There are many realities, I mused, as I admired my beautiful friend of many years, and yet there is only one. Now Ostinato is the flower, and I have become the sun.

From this position I see life rolling restlessly through cities and smoke, houses and forests, flesh and blood. I watch the vast populous of us, as each blooming Berceuse and budding Ostinato becomes and becomes until they become it all, and all the world sprawls within each of them.

Still, they remain alone.

We are wandering through a shifting maze of arrivals and departures on Life's constant journey of fleeting destination. Along the way, we each get to shine, if only for a moment, and nothing, not even death, can stop us.

END

file not found

By Mark Fisher

lost computer files skitter
on hexadecimal legs
down into holes between bytes
hunted by spiders of the world wide web
where in turn they
feed upon unmeasurable quantum
planktonic units of knowing
that seethe in heisenberg seas
shifting with tides and currents
until meaning is gone
and their memetic life spills out
across fossils of old books

SPECIES

By Sherri Perry

giants willy-nilly dragging the night along behind them
rare tornado like a toddler not caring it's not customary
to stomp fragile life when that life is sleeping

Old Sci-Fi Films

By J. J. Steinfeld

All the elderly man
nearing a hundred now
watched were old sci-fi films
from the 1950s and 60s
a collection of videos
the envy of any film buff
over and over, nothing else
not sitcoms or the evening news
his favourite *Plan 9 from Outer Space*
for reasons beyond irony or sense
claiming Bela Lugosi
was a cherished friend.

The film-watching elderly man
ate well and frequently
though mainly whole-grain bread
drank skim milk by the jug
kept up his spirits
by singing in a language
no one in the seniors' home
recognized
waiting for them to land
on the lawn of the seniors' home
and take him back
to a planet
where age was irrelevant.

During each viewing
he laughs several times
describes the beauty
of his childhood home
its complexity and richness
and pointing at the common room's
larger-than-life TV screen
tells everyone in the room
they got it all wrong
not even close,
those silly, silly Earthlings.

Old Sci-fi Films was first published in *Eye to the Telescope (US)*

SONNET OF THE BIG BANG

By Mark Mitchell

For Jason Neiss

Begin: There's nowhere to be. There's no verb
to be. No silence because there's no noise.
No thing receives. No thing sends. No thing heard.
Vibration is meaningless. But there—poised
someplace—that can only be called a place
though not one—some thing must be named
out of lack, since it is no thing—say—space,
is folding on itself, birthing a game
that it may become. No thing plays. No rules
exist until—Burst—Light—Matter—or not.
Space flows outward like breath it doesn't use.
Still caught in that blot of light, time's taut
as a full lung. It escapes or all fails.
End now: Eyeblink. Outward—and time exhales.

Forgetting You

By Sheikha A.

The sun fell like a cry
over the bee in its garden
of pansies; the slow-rising

ambrosia dawn earlier today
broke out like an affliction,
I'm trying to keep the sky

in its place, these days ridden
with idleness, no stories, myths,
lies, nor expressions – vigorous

winter grows vitalized –
but remembering to stick
to its style; I'm not habitual

to the kind of joy you bring,
that awakens sinful parts,
what would the bee know of

where to find nectar, it hasn't
forgotten the sour barks growing
by its hive – cold chills on wings.

Poetry Speaks (Still)

By JD DeHart

From the ash of cataclysm
be in on the distant star
that has fallen apart from the inside
or the pile of leaves
the aliens next are burning

Poetry stands up, stretches,
gathers its robes, and collects
the moment so that we can
remember it again

Whether looking at a different
moon or the same,
or speaking the old language
or a new one.

senescence

By Mark Fisher

stars turn and drift
above mountains
that grew slowly
out of shallow seas
as great stone fragments
grind
press and push
diving and rising
up to the cold winds
that tear down
high places
into sand that flows
like water
down into the gaps
wrinkles of an aging
earth
giving an illusion
of youth and health
instead of senescence
and the slow loss
of wisdom

*Available Now
in Kindle and Paperback*

Koreatown

A poetry chapbook by Robin Dunn

The Visit

By Terence Thomas

Allison lay there, looking up at a star filled sky, as a cool breeze blew over her naked body. This was her favorite place of all and she visited it every night. The darkness embraced her as a lover and she trembled with excitement. Her sensual communing would have been perfect if only they had shown up.

She had come to this spot, night after night, anticipating a rendezvous. They would come, she was certain of that and she was certain that this would be the night. She just had to be more patient, so she laid back and waited. Sounds from the surrounding woods kept her on the edge, but she closed her eyes and doggedly ignored the nocturnal chatter.

* * *

For what seemed like hours she remained motionless, hoping that the night would bring her what she wanted. She fell asleep for a few minutes and then was awakened by a strange sound coming from the nearby trees. Allison jumped quickly to her feet and started running toward the sound. Rocks and underbrush slowed her progress and added to her frustration. She pushed on though, occasionally to remove a thorn or push aside a limb.

Light began to show through the trees as she made her way to source. The forest seemed to conspire to keep her from reaching her destination, but she would not be denied. As she ran to the light she kept saying to herself. "Here they come." And indeed they were.

There in the clearing ahead, stood the object that had been so eagerly awaited. A gigantic vessel, pulsating with light, hovered a few feet above the ground. All sorts of devices were in operation around the vessel and it was a sight to behold. It must have been over a hundred feet tall, for it dwarfed even the tallest of the surrounding trees.

Mesmerizing sounds were coming from the ship as Allison walked closer. She trembled with anticipation and hesitated for a moment. Immediately light beams focused around her as she started walking again...slowly at first...then with increasing speed. The beams were intense and some of them were black. Not just an absence of light, but what appeared to be projected darkness.

Allison raised her hand as she continued to walk...her heart pounding furiously. She could see a hatch opening on the ship and she started running to it. She tripped but somehow managed to keep her balance. Two creatures appeared at the hatch and Allison thought she would faint. She stopped running and stood there looking at the short, spindly, grayish-colored little creatures. They looked at Allison and each other and they stepped cautiously out of the ship. Then they approached her and stood just a few feet away as they looked her over. Holding out her arms, she could feel them grab her and escort her to the ship. Their bony fingers felt wet on her skin.



It was dark inside, more suited to large alien eyes. Strange intoxicating smells hung heavy in the air and the walls were covered in slime as they proceeded down the corridor rather briskly. Allison felt faint, however, she managed to remain standing when they came to a large room where another alien was waiting. The light was brighter here and everything became a blur.

The aliens were preparing her for something by touching her all over with small discs they had in their hands. A table in the center of the room was obviously there for examinations, so she walked to it, hopped up, and lay back cooperatively. The three aliens seemed puzzled by this, so they huddled to discuss what happened.

Their chatter was high pitched and irritating. When one of them saw Allison looking up, he squawked angrily at her. She looked away and in a few minutes they were around her, ready to proceed with the examination. The chatter continued at a more acceptable level, while the probed and poked. Clammy hands were all over her along with other devices that seemed to appear out of nowhere. Allison's heart was beating so hard that she thought it would burst and the aliens sensed something was wrong so they stepped back. In a moment, one of the aliens stepped back to the table and placed one of the discs on her shoulder.

She calmed down and soon they were at it again. Allison began losing consciousness as all about her was spinning. Strange colors appeared before her eyes and objects were floating in the air. Everything was so beautiful as a feeling of well being came over her in a tremendous rush. Ecstasy ensued and she surrendered her essence to the surge. She had never experienced such rapture and she was enjoying it to the fullest, when suddenly it ended.

She found herself back on the table, surrounded by the aliens. Two of them were holding her arms while the third was feeling her inner thigh. Quickly she closed her legs, trapping one and she pulled her arms free. Before the other two aliens could respond, she grabbed them by the back of their heads and forced them down on her breasts.

Surprisingly, they were not very strong, but they did struggle violently. High pitched squealing filled the air and once again Allison began to feel the ecstasy. After a few minutes, she could feel the excitement peaking and her grip loosened momentarily and the aliens all broke free. She sat up quickly and jumped off the table to see them running in different directions, so she ran after them. Scurrying sounds could be heard as Allison pursued them like a bloodhound. Not to be denied her pleasure, she continued her chase. The dark corridors were not conducive to chasing small creatures, however, her eyes were adjusting to the darkness, so she was again in pursuit. Just ahead she saw some of them dart out and she ran after him, but he got away. This would be harder than she thought, although it was becoming a game, and a fun one at that.

They may have split up originally, but they were likely to regroup. Where you find one, you will find them all, she thought. Sounds could once again be heard and Allison wasted no time in tracking them down. She ran into a small room and stopped to listen. Something was in the room...she could feel it...in the corner...crouched against a slimy wall. It looked like a frightened child...trembling and alone...alone? She turned around as the other two attacked her. They wrestled furiously on the floor and third alien touched her with some kind of object that made her fall limp. The three aliens escorted her back down the corridor. She was dazed but recovered quickly, only to be stunned once again by the device.

Pretending to be weak, she stumbled and took the opportunity to break free. Now they were the hunters and she was the prey. It was more exciting to be pursued. Like a kid playing hide and seek, she looked around for the best hiding place. Finding one, she sat still, listening to the sounds around her.

She could hear them talking and the chatter was angry sounding and getting closer.

Allison remained still and they walked by. A few minutes passed and she slowly got up, stepped over to the doorway, and peeked out. Everything seemed quiet, so she decided to try and find her way back to the big room. If they found her there, maybe they would continue the examination and she could feel the ecstasy again.

* * *

It didn't take long to find the big room and there they were...the three of them...looking at something...unaware of her presence. Alison very quickly made her way to the table and just as quickly got upon it. With closed eyes and excited anticipation, she lay back and waited for the moment of discovery. Within seconds she could feel their hands touching her. For a few moments she felt the incredible rush, but they held her tighter.

Something was different this time. They seemed stronger and they pulled her off the table. She struggled to no avail as she found herself escorted vigorously down the corridor.

Their chatter was loud and angry sounding. What would she be in for this time, she wondered? One of the aliens turned down an adjacent corridor and in a few moments the ship started to move. The two remaining aliens had her by the arms and were headed to the access port. She continued to struggle but this time she couldn't break free. There was no fighting them for they were determined to expel her. She could

see the port just ahead and she started looking for something to grab on to. Her hand hit an object on the slimy wall so she grabbed on with all her might. The aliens could not push her out, and then one of them noticed her hand holding on. The ship was hovering a few feet above ground as the aliens started to pry her fingers loose. She grabbed one of the aliens by the arm, but it was too slimy though and she couldn't hold on.

She went flying through the air and fortunately landed on her feet. As the ship moved away, she started running after it...reaching out...trying to grab on. It was just out of reach, so Allison stopped and stood there as the ship flew away. She waved good-bye with a smile on her face, for she knew that they would be back...and she would be there...waiting.

THE END



Surreal Musings

By J. J. Steinfeld

No more dreams

I was informed formally
by a dream creature
in a text message
during a dream.

Now, let me say
I have never texted
or received a text
in my non-dream state.

I tell the dream creature
to text someone else
keep its technology
out of my subconscious
and next time to write
a letter by careful hand
and put it in my mailbox
on the surreal side of the street

First published in mgversion2>datura (France).

RNA

By Gary Beck

As I rounded first base I felt a tear in my hamstring that shot up my leg with a stab of hot pain. It forced me to slow down, but I had to keep running because I was on the edge of the bubble and was afraid of getting cut from the team. I risked a glance to right field and saw that the ball would get to second before me. I tried a desperate hook slide into the bag, but the second baseperson blocked me and came down hard on my legs when she tagged me. A streak of fiery pain that made the hamstring feel like a tickle seized me in an agonizing grip and I writhed in anguish. I heard the second baseperson's hoarse voice through the haze of shock: "Your season's over, old man."

The team treated me as I expected: abrupt removal to a third level med-center, since I only had a tier three contract. I was very lucky to see an intern, since tier three didn't entitle me to a doctor. The most I could normally hope for was a med tech. Tier three didn't include x-rays, but after moderately careful manipulation the doc informed me that the anterior cruciate ligament was definitely torn. So second base was right. The team's HMO representative had accompanied me to the med center to ensure that I didn't exceed my benefits. He announced my options: laser surgery and three days care in the open ward, with appropriate medications, then departure by public transportation; or laser surgery, transport to my residence by ambulance and one week of home care by a licensed nurse's aide. All veteran ball players knew what open wards were like, so I didn't even think about it before opting for home care.

The HMO rep was already indignant that the team would have to pay for a doctor and had me sign various forms exonerating the team from any liability. I had to sign, or risk losing my meager pension. The HMO rep had more power than the coach. He tucked the documentation in his bizzac, authorized the doc to provide laser surgery and spoke into his comphone. A few minutes later a nurse's aide entered and properly identified herself according to guild requirements. "Hello. I'm nurse's aide Felicity, guild registration number 672, reporting for assignment. The HMO rep gave her the care restrictions. While she listened attentively I had a chance to look her over. She was tall, about 5'9", with an athlete's body and looked as if she could handle any kind of emergency thrown at her. She was around thirty years old, but her untroubled face, bright blue eyes and blonde hair cut in the short lezzie style made her seem much younger. I had worse caregivers over the years.

Nurse Felicity looked at me reassuringly while she drew a hypo. The HMO rep hovered fretfully and verified that she used the minimum Demerol dose. He was beginning to annoy me almost as much as my aching leg. The injection started to take effect and although it didn't remove the pain, it made it bearable. I had nothing else to do while I waited for the doc, so I began to take stock of myself. I was a thirty-eight year old professional ballplayer with a body going on sixty. I had lasted years longer than most players because I still looked young on camera, the prime career determinant now that ball games were no longer played in front of live audiences. If I recovered from this injury, if another team wanted me, if a little hair dye could fool the judgmental camera, I might eke out another marginal season. After that I didn't know what else I could do.

It felt like centuries ago when I graduated from George W. Bush High School, in Amarillo, Texas, as a star football, baseball and basketball player. I wasn't college material because of poor academic performance, so I opted for a professional sports career. Fortunately the pro teams will take anyone who can play well enough, despite the lip service they pay about the necessity for education. Then I made the most intelligent decision of my life. I knew even

then that I couldn't do much besides play ball, so I chose baseball, because it was less of a contact sport than football or basketball. I thought I might be able to extend my career longer, if I didn't get knocked around every time I played. It turned out to be the smartest move I ever made.

I didn't often think about the past. I had some good years as a right fielder, including five with the Hiroshima Dragons. I had been very popular with the local fans, who easily recognized a distinct American from afar. My only regret was that I didn't learn Japanese so I could talk to people. It would have been fun to jabber away in their language, but I never could remember enough words. I did like their manners. They still showed some respect for others. I would have stayed in Japan for the rest of my career, but they got a younger, faster token American. After that I came back home and moved from team to team, sometimes on the field, sometimes on the bench. I hung on when younger and better players were cut, because I could play any outfield position and first base in an emergency. It also helped that I could still manage to hit close to .250.

So here I was in a grubby med-center with at least a season ending injury, probably a career sign off, with no ideas for the future. I didn't have a nest egg. I never managed to save, despite a meager life style. I was an ancient journeyman in a young profession, without name or fame that could be traded in for civilian security. I had no skills, no credentials and no experience, except as a marginal pro ballplayer. I wouldn't even be desirable in a low life sports bar, because I lacked sufficient celebrity. I guess I had to start thinking about what to do with my life, but I wasn't well-equipped for making a life plan. Too many years of just being a hit and fetch ball dog had worn away most of my thought process. I sort of accepted whatever came along, without worrying too much about the future.

Nurse Felicity brought me back to the present with a gentle pat. "We're ready for surgery now." She lifted me onto the gurney with surprising ease and wheeled me to the laser room. Despite all my injuries over the years that included broken fingers, toes, sprains, strains, as well as innumerable aches, pains and other ailments, I never required surgery. I was scared and it showed. Nurse Felicity crooned soothing sounds that were supposed to reassure me. The HMO rep kept getting in my face, babbling about how grateful I should be for receiving generous extra contract services. All I wanted to do was look at strong, shapely nurse Felicity, but the HMO rep kept blocking my view. I couldn't insult him because he controlled health benefits, so I drifted into a fantasy, where I picked up my tungsten bat, swung for the fence and blasted the chub's head clean out of the ball park.... I idly wondered why they called it a ball park.

Nurse Felicity looked at me as if she could read my mind. I instantly forgot about the HMO rep and tried to look innocent, because I wanted her to think well of me. I didn't have a girl and it had been a long time since baseball groupies chased me. The thought of a week with a pretty nurse who could haul me around made me forget my fear for a while. At least until the doc came in. He looked too young to be an intern and I suspected they could be pushing a med student on me, but I didn't dare say anything. If I offended the HMO rep he might cancel my treatment and I'd find myself on the street. So I carefully bopped my tongue stud on the roof of my mouth so it couldn't be seen and didn't say anything. A tier three contract didn't allow piercings.

The procedure itself didn't take long. Nurse Felicity curled me on my side, the doc adjusted my position with a clumsy hand that gave me a jolt of pain, then zapped the torn spot with a beam of light. He looked me in the eye for the first time. "Don't put any weight on that leg for two months, then carefully begin to walk on it. I think we can give you crutches until then." He looked inquiringly at the HMO rep, who consulted his handbook, then begrudgingly nodded yes. "With any luck you'll be good as new in six or eight months," the doc said. Right. Good

as new. I wasn't good as new when I was new. "Can you give me some pain pills, doc?" The HMO rep was there like a shot. "Your benefits package doesn't entitle you to painkillers. You'll have to manage with neurodumps. Now let's conclude the treatment session and get you on your way." This chub was really ticking me off, but I didn't dare offend the power structure, so I gave him the same conciliatory smile that had worked for me for years.

The doc condescendingly waved goodbye. I guess he was a little miffed at treating a lowly tier three patient. Nurse Felicity lifted me back on the gurney and we headed for the ambujit. The HMO rep had me sign the fair care release, the med center doors closed, nurse Felicity stowed me in the back of the ambujit and we pulled away from the curb. The ride to my crib seemed to go on forever. Every pothole reminded me of the current state of urban decay with a jab of pain. My only consolation was that at least the injury happened at a home game. If it happened when the team was on the road I would have really been torqued. I don't know what they would have done with me, but they probably would have dumped me at the nearest tier three med-center and left me on my own. My only option then would have been a dubious appeal to the players union, which like most other American unions, had been worn down over the years, or bought off by the bosses.

The neighbors didn't bother to look when nurse Felicity rolled me into my crib. They were more accustomed to seeing people carried out, than brought in. She quickly and efficiently organized the small space so I could get to the bathroom on my crutches and easily reach the kitchen unit for meals. She adjusted the couchbed so I could watch the large wall TV, my only luxury. She was the first woman who had ever come into my crib. Well I guess the landlady counted as a woman, even though I thought she was a nasty old bag. One of my neighbors, a rabid sports fan, once told me she had lost all her assets, except this building, in the big technology crash of 2001. Well, no wonder she was bitter, living in a dump like this, if she was used to better.

As I watched nurse Felicity do things around the crib, I had an unaccustomed feeling of well-being. I wasn't used to a woman's presence, especially in this little room that I never thought of as home. The last real home I could remember was a foster home when I was five or six. The ortho parents wanted a bright, artistic child to enrich their lives. Instead they got a morose brooder, who they quickly tired of. After that I shuffled from one group home to another, until I finally graduated from high school, where I was never the life of the party. In fact, except for time on the ball field, I was pretty much invisible for most of my life. Well it just made me feel worse when I felt sorry for myself, so I just enjoyed the treat of nurse Felicity fussing around, trying to make me comfortable.

She finished her chores and got ready to leave and a well of loneliness rose in me. I urgently snatched at a reason for her to stay a little longer. "Could you just show me how to make a freeezemeal?" She looked at me with an understanding twinkle in her serene, sky blue eyes and my heart raced. She knew I didn't want to be alone. It only took a few moments to prepare the meal and she was ready to go again. I wouldn't shame myself by pretending to be in worse condition and I couldn't find another pretext to keep her with me, so I said the only thing I could think of: "Do you want to have something to eat with me?" She smiled sweetly: "No thank you." I got a pang of rejection. "Is it because I'm black?" "Oh no. Only the Chinese don't like black people and you know they don't like any Americans. In fact they have their own med centers and I've never even had one as a patient."

I was getting desperate for her to stay and asked plaintively: "Then why won't you eat with me?" "I don't really eat." "What do you mean? Everybody eats." She shook her head. "Enhanced sentients don't. I take liquid nutriments." I didn't know what she was talking about. "What's an enhanced sentient?" "A flesh and composite being with A.I." I looked at her, uncomprehending. "You mean you're not a real person?" "Of course I am, even

though the nurses union wants to prove that we aren't human in its class action suit. I don't think much about it though. I'm too busy taking care of my patients." I was stunned. Was I being turned down by an android? After this what was I supposed to do, ask the ball boy machine for a date?

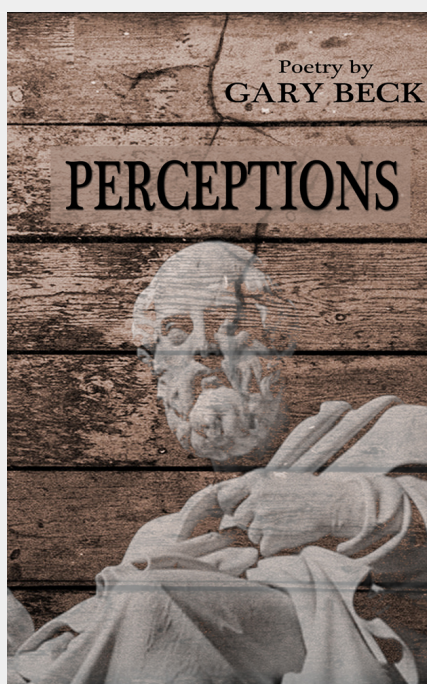
I was at a complete loss for words as she headed for the door. She turned with a bright smile. "I'll see you tomorrow for your first day of home treatment." I felt like laughing or screaming, but I did neither. I watched her leave with a feeling of despair that plunged me into a pit of self-pity. The only thought that kept racing through my mind was that I couldn't ever seem to connect with anything real.

The End

Available Now

Perceptions

A Poetry Collection by Gary Beck

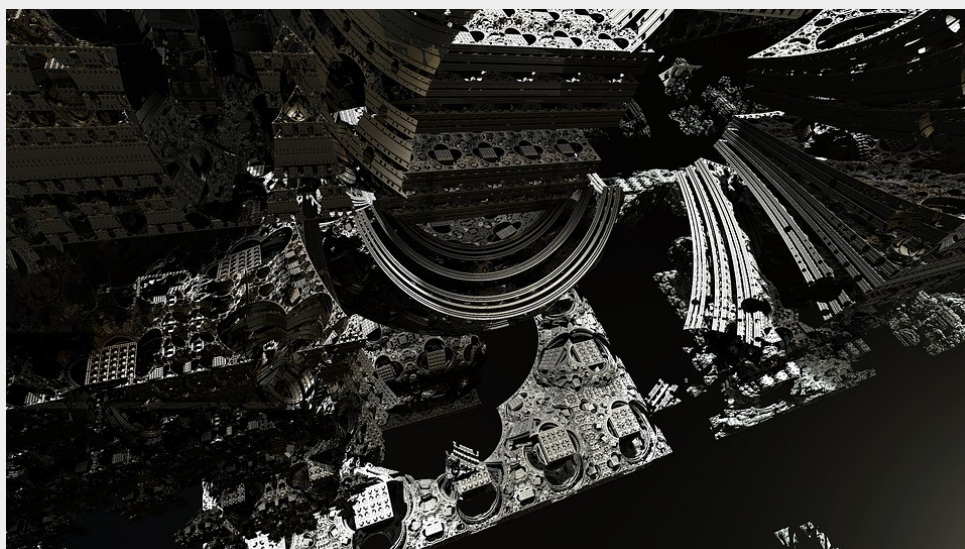


Perceptions is a poetry collection that challenges many of our attitudes and values, showing us many of our concerns that grow more troubled in these difficult times. Disasters of our time come into immediate focus as they occur. We are shown again and again the catastrophic events of the day. It is the lingering effects that are seen from different viewpoints, and produce a sometimes volatile perception of our world. Gary Beck's ability to capture events seen from unusual angles is on shining display in this brilliant new collection.

I knew 'Hard Times' was a beauty when I read it and the national editorial board unanimously voted it in – The Rockford Review

All of these pieces hit hard – Heavy Hands Ink

Great Poems – Atlantean Publishing



TECHNOLOGY
By Mark J. Mitchell

The printer is broken again.
At least, it won't make any sense
of this text. Just spits out a dense
mélange of symbols and dots and then
shuts itself off in self-defense.

Maybe it's the words that do it—
Too abstract, too boring, unclear.
Or maybes something just triggers
the switch. Terrorists got to it.
That's it! Some secret code they fear

will crack their religion or bring
down a government. That can't be
right. It's just a poem. You can see
how a story might make something
happen, not a poem. Hit delete.

Steampunk ghazal
By Mercedes Webb-Pullman

A Chicago man combined a brain with metal plate
in 1888, gave him life and named him Boilerplate.

Robot, a prototype soldier to prevent deaths in war
he knew his importance as he stepped up to the plate.

He rode with Buffalo Soldiers in the Spanish War
1898, and cleaned up Teddy Roosevelt's plate.

When Japan launched a sneaky torpedo attack
against Russia he had a lot on his plate.

In action in Mexico he saved Pancho Villa's life
at no cost to himself - handed it to him on a plate.

Pershing used him so well in World War One
the Kaiser demanded the robot's head on a plate.

German scientists undid him, stole his technology,
scraped his body like gravy onto
a leftovers plate.

Armageddon 2.1

By DJ Tyrer

Everyone thought the Maya with their enigmatic, super-accurate calendars had to be right when they said the world would end in 2012. And, in a sense, they were.

You see, the world was due to end in 2012. That was the plan. *The Plan*. The Divine Plan. Up in Heaven, the Earth Maintenance Department was all geared up for a pre-festive cataclysm, keying the final sequence into the Microsoft Armageddon 2.1 program on their brand new Apple Finality supercomputers when some twit caught his cup of tea with his wing and sent it flying across the unit, sending circuits sizzling and sparking into meltdown.

Rather than the end of the world, it was the ultra-expensive, super-advanced Heavenly hardware that came to an end; along with several promising careers in IT. Not since the Garden of Eden had an Apple been at the heart of such a disaster!

Not that Earth escaped Armageddon unscathed. Things *changed*. Things went a bit weird. Some things went *very* weird. You might have noticed, although you probably put it down to that dodgy punch at the office party, rather than grasping the truth of the matter. Some people had no choice but to notice and are probably still locked away somewhere, drooling quietly. For them, it was as if they had fallen through a peculiar looking glass or ingested some *very* interesting hallucinogenic substances. But, not everyone noticed. Despite the bang up in the Earth Maintenance Department, the not-quite-end was largely a whimper issuing from some poor person suddenly confronted with something *eldritch* in their bathroom.

The Domsday_2012.apoc file was completely corrupted and Armageddon had to be abandoned (I hear 2020 is the new target date) as IT specialists backed by hastily pressganged cherubs with the barest levels of training got to work on repairing the systems. With the End out the way, it was felt prudent to get things as back on track as possible, paper over the not-always-metaphorical cracks and hope that nobody down below had noticed.

It seems their urgent efforts were successful – more or less – and nobody – well, hardly anybody – noticed anything amiss amongst the last minute Christmas shopping and apocalyptic panic. Everything went back to normal. Not that that was necessarily such a good thing...

<http://djtyrer.blogspot.co.uk/>

Ends



<http://tigersharkpublishing.blogspot.co.uk>