

Impossible Worlds Creative Writing Journal 2023

Edited by Paul Bronson

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Note from editor: This publication is attributed to the efforts of writing students at Victoria University. This journal focuses on speculative fiction, more specifically: fantasy, horror, science fiction and dystopian. I hope that you enjoy the short stories within!

Paul Bronson

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Paul Bronson

A New Bloke – A Star Wars Parody

A shortish youth, with a mop of blonde hair, stood on the grey murky ground of the planet of Reektoine. The smell of decay and the soiling of his boots seemed not to bother him as his mind was on his new task. An older man, with white stubble and sagging jowls pointed to a small rise where the ground was less muddy. Any change here was welcome, and when he looked up at the twin brown moons in the sky, that resembled giant butt-holes, he didn't feel as miserable as he usually did.

"Uncle Bogan, is this where we're meeting the Waja traders?" The teen asked and the man nodded in response.

His uncle Bogan had told him, that very morning, they were getting some new worker Bots as the old ones had worn out, and the repair Bots were unable to get them back into shape. This was a good distraction from the mundane task of working on a methane farm. They trudged through the filth and heard a ground-shaking rumble as the anticipated traders arrived.

"There looks to be a good selection Cuke."

Cuke looked at a lineup of robots, known as Boids on top of a huge delivery tank, flanked by child-sized figures in brown hooded onesies, with blinking yellow orbs under their cowls. One Boid was parachuted, off, but the first one crashed in a heap. The Wajas proceeded to push off extra robots, that landed in a heap, tangled in cloth and rope at the base of the vehicle.

A shiny golden Boid with domed breasts announced "I recommend the Blue one, he's a hard worker, never knows when to quit."

The older man nodded, and the blue Boid happily beeped and tooted as it was cut loose and rolled towards the farmers.

Cuke looked at the gold feminine looking Boid, noting its LED eyes fixated on the blue Boid. and stated. "Hey uncle, don't you think that golden Boid could be useful."

Bogan eyed off the metallic domes and called out. "You don't happen to be a Sex-Boid do you?"

"That's my primary function. I'm familiar with over 1,000 different positions."

"That's what I like to hear, my wife hasn't put out in a while, and I really need the action."

Cuke smirked, dirty old bastard, he thought to himself.

"I'm She-3-D-Ho, human cyborg sexual relations, and that's R-2-B-Cool."

Bogan shrugged, and headed back to the compound family compound, barely missing the ample clusters of animal excrement, without looking back.

“I’m Cuke, don’t worry about my uncle, he’s a prick at the best of times.”

Aunt Bazu poured out glasses of green slimy milk and set them out on the table, where Bogan and Cuke were seated.

Bogan looked at Cuke intently. “This is an important season Cuke, there is an excess of foul turds that need extraction, and there aren’t enough hands to get the job done. You can go to Turbo Flight Manoeuvre school next year.”

“But you said I could go last cycle. We have those extra Boids now.” The boy said, as a pout appeared on his bottom lip.

“Well things have changed, we need the Shit-Coin, and this is the best opportunity, since the herds of Vantha have been though, and made a literal mountain of excrement.”

“One of the new Boids showed me a cool projection of a sexy lady and she said she needed help from Kobi-one Ryobi? Could that be Zen Ryobi?”

“Stay away from that mad old pervert, I’m sure he has an ankle bracelet if you get my drift.”

“But he’s so interesting, he knows so much and has badarse stories.”

“Hey, he’s a crazy beggar, I don’t want you talking about that nutcase...I need you on this farm damn it!” Bogan stomped his foot for emphasis, “and that sexy lady could be your sister for all we know!”

“I hate you!” Cuke stormed off, tears in his eyes.

Bazu put her arm on Bogan’s shoulder as her nephew disappeared into his room “He’s much like his father.”

“That’s what scares the crap out of me, and not in a good way.”

After recovering from moping in his room, Cuke headed to the garage to check on the Boids. “I’m dreadfully sorry master, I couldn’t stop him. I’d gladly make it up to you with the gyrating forms of the Pornocopia sector.”

It was clear that R-2-B-Cool was gone. “No time for that now, my uncle with have my nutsack if I don’t get B-Cool back.”

Cuke raced off in rattily old hover craft speeder, with 3-D-Ho in the back. “He can’t have gotten that far,” he stated, half to the Voluminous Boid, and half to re-assure himself.

“You’d be surprised, that tin can is a whole world of trouble.”

“Thanks for the reassurance,” the youth said meekly.

“Sorry, entitizing clients into compromising positions is more my thing.”

As the duo rounded a bend, Cuke squinted and took his foot off the throttle “I think I see something!”

A group of grey figures crowded around a squat cylinder, taking turns urinating. Sparkles and smoke emanated from the cylinder, and what was actually R2-B-Cool, toppled over.

“We must hurry master Cuke, they’re frying his circuits!”

The man-boy pulled out a rifle from the back and lined up a shot. He figured that they were Crusty raiders, a menace in the swampy wastes, and often ride Vampas – horned slug-like creatures, that look and smell vile. It is at that moment that he was struck from behind with a hooked walking stick and knocked senseless.

When he came too, he heard the sound of what he thought was a heavy drum

“boom-da-boop-boom-da-chip” and saw a strange figure wearing a brown hoodie with a long white beard waving his arms wildly. He repeated the phrase twice more.

“Thank the popcorn maker, we’re saved master Cuke!” She-3-D-Ho exclaimed, “and R-2-B-Cool has only suffered superficial damage.”

“We’re not out of the bog yet 3-D-Ho, there could still be more of them...”

“It’s OK boy, these Crusties are easily startled by funky music,” the bearded man interjected.

“Did you beatbox that tune? That’s gnarly old man.”

“Don’t you remember me son,” the bearded man said as he lowered his hood.

“Oh it’s you Zen... do you know a Kobi-one Ryobi? Some hot chick in white lingerie was looking for him. I wish it was me instead.”

“Now, that’s a name I haven’t heard in a very long time. As for the lady, she’s...never mind.”

“So, do you know him?”

“Of course, that’s me Sonny. I haven’t gone by that name since the trade union wars.”

“Did you know my pops?” Cuke said, with a glimmer in his eye.

“Yes, I did, Larrikin Skywalker, he was a great man, a tradie knight.”

“Wow, a tradie, I thought they were just legends!”

“No, they were very real. And your father was one of the best - no one could fix a blocked toilet or tighten a bolt as well as him. He was a great man and my best buddy.”

Cuke, looked distant for a moment, then met Ryobi-one’s eyes. “Zen, how did he die?”

“He was killed by a villain by the name of Dark Farter. This was a horrible time, a time of the emergence of the Empire of Neoliberals. They overthrew the Republic of Trade Unions.” Zen pulled out a large wrench with a large red button and continued “this is a power wrench – the weapon of the noble tradies.” He pushed the button and the tool glowed blue and hummed.

“Wow, cool.”

Kobi-one then proceeded to toss the power wrench into the air, spinning it in circles around over his head, then whipped it rapidly behind his back, up over his shoulder and back into his hand a few times.

“Now that’s even cooler.”

“You should join me, and fight the Neoliberals - become a noble tradie.”

“I can’t. I’m just a wimpy bumpkin who lives on a shit farm, anyway I live out in whoop whoop on a joke of a planet ... they’ll never come here.”

Ryobi-one looked down and shook his head.

“Look, I don’t like the Neoliberals either, but I have to help my uncle. He may be an arsehole, but he’s family.”

“Well, it’s your choice... but they’ll be here some day, read my wrinkly lips.

The hover speeder zoomed over a rise, then Cuke hit the breaks as a devastating scene appeared before him. His family compound was up in flames, turds and all, and his aunt and uncle were motionless - strapped upside down with rows of firecrackers up their anuses.

The large brown truck of the Waja’s was parked nearby with multiple scorch marks.

Cuke looked to from the compound to the truck and fell to his knees.

“How could they do this? Those Crusties are to blame!”

“No, that’s not the work of Crusty raiders. They hop on one leg to hide their numbers. Those hooked walking sticks were clearly planted here. Also, the raiders are too crap a shot - only Imperial Swarm Troopers are this accurate. The Neoliberals have clearly arrived already.”

After a few moments, Cuke got to his feet, and looked Ryobi-One in the eye. “I’m going to become a tradie like my father before me.”

“That’s what I like to hear! Let’s be off then Sonny, and give the Penultimate Empire of Neoliberal Insufferable Sociopaths a whipping they’ll never forget!”

“Sure, but maybe call it PENIS, it’s a bit of a tongue twister.”

She-3-D-Ho interjected “If I may interrupt good sirs, I am superbly proficient with my tongue and can twist in all manner of positions...”

“I’m sure you are – but maybe later gold domes,” Kobi-One winked.

“Hey Zen, let’s go and grab PENIS by the balls, and shag, I mean, save the princess!” The man-boy put his foot down on the hover speeder’s accelerator. After doing a couple of donuts the vehicle sped towards the horizon at an impressive velocity, kicking mud everywhere.

“Oh-oh, I’m a rebel just for kicks now,

Yoda survived order 66 now...,” Kobi-one chanted.

The End...for now

Sophia Branciforte

Echoes of the Deep

A village of unlocked doors and trusting folk, an island home where trespassers are rare and crime is scarcely found. A rough salty hand on sleeping lips, only murmurs and muffled pleas can be uttered. The sounds entreating succour do not reach the houses, few and far between. The soles of her feet beg each grain of sand to hold them still, cement her to her native land. A nightgown of white, sodden by sea foam sticks to floundering legs, desperate to elude her captors. Unsuccessful, she is stolen from her sandy shores onto the ship of planks and oars, into the velvet night.

A sail billows, carrying the men and their feminine treasure above the treacherous depths below. With bonds they fasten her to the mast, a figurehead of flesh and fear. Fraying ropes burn her wrists and middle, constricting her deep, terrified inhales. She does not scream, she does not wail, rather, with eyes skyward, she pleads the stars to save her mortal soul. Tears line her eyes and baptise her cheeks, pink as they are from salt that speckles the wind and slices her skin. The woman is sure there is some incarnation that can hear her. The torment is witnessed by the sea and does not please her, she sends her sisters to capture the souls that lay dormant in the pirates. She will save the one that infects the girl with hope, a sanguine fever.

The creatures move as one with the water, a pas de deux performed by the ocean's currents and its daughters until they reach the ship. The surface tension kisses their iridescent forms as they emerge, long lashes blink droplets of liquid salt from illusive eyes. Fishtails of reflective scales keep the feminine figures afloat, gills flank their ribs, heaving as their attention is locked on the boat. Aboard the ship, the inhabitants senses are suddenly overcome. A symphony of sounds coerces spirits to lift and the soul to soar, profound euphoria hinders reason. Harmonies so sweet fill every pore and make their home of warmth and mirth beneath the skin of their slaves. Lyrics slip and sway through the night air landing on their victim's salivating tongues, tasting of nostalgia and satisfaction of times long gone. If these lullabies are unbeknownst to the pirates, why do they recall the words, the empty promises they possess? Reminiscent of unrequited love, the clear and melodious music is poignant and mourning, bewitching and enchanting.

Silver-toned and dripping.

One by one, ever so calmly the thieving sailors abandon their ship, flailing and insentient. Overboard they descend, to the undulating tails waiting below to attend. A procession of pillaging pirates, unwilling and unaware; just as their captive had been. Devotion glazes the women's almond eyes, lustful greed on their brows, they beckon to the pirates, a bid to touch, to taste. Only when the last marauder hit the water did the singing abruptly stop. The sinners had been seduced and lured by the watery ruse and now they were to be frightened, an end to analgesics. Forced from their stupor, the brutes' eyes widened, jaws slackened and lips begun to blend into the cerulean expanse. Oxygen is snatched from their lungs by the harsh chill of the sea. The frigid phantom of ice itself soaks into their barbaric veins and follows the canals

straight to the heart, stifling breath and seizing muscles with an uncompromising rigidity. The water-dwelling creatures no longer have full lips to hide their jagged teeth, perfect for tearing. No longer are their features soft and sweet, they're gaunt and malevolent. Spiny dorsal fins protrude from the centre of their supple backs while their irises morph into unnatural whites - their eyes now long for blood, lost of all ardour. To see hysteria in the hollow eyes of those complicit in feminal crimes makes the seductress' exultant, they hold the gaze of their prey, drinking their despair. The sound of their rapturous laughter seems omniscient, it comes from every direction. It reverberates in the skulls of its victims and yet... it is a void. Empty. Nothing. The seamen splutter as the waves become merciless and tyrannical, they are left to suffer for a moment before the sirens reach out. Slender, webbed fingers wrap around ankles, letting their fingernail claws sink into Achilles tendons and drag, drag, drag into the abyss.

The ship's sole occupant, tethered to her crucifix holds her gaze on the horizon in contentment, as her captors plummeted to their deaths she felt only satiated. The last of the men's gurgling ceased and the sea calmed, dusk was rousing. The woman's ropes became slack, freeing her inflamed wrists of their shackles. A light breeze comforted her, stirred the fabric of her nightdress around her ankles as she approached the edge of the ship. As she peered over into the water below, a message was communicated to her by her saviours without a single word;

Those forsaken at the hands of men may rest assured, they will never roam the earth again. While those they exploited are reborn, the dishonourable face everlasting retribution, leaving no one behind to mourn.

In swift motions she places her bare feet upon a rung, stands for a moment, her wingspan outstretched and dives from her floating prison. The embrace of the water is familiar and consoling, it is home. Her liberators swim to greet her, caressing her face where her tears had glistened and healing her chafed skin. They hold her gently and pull her below the water, coils of hair swirl leisurely amongst the congregation. The further they descend the more the woman transforms, eyes that were once a deep brown mutate to a stark white, her intercostals are gaping gashes that allow her to breathe. Her legs amalgamate into one fish-tail structure before scales envelop it. The sirens share stories that preceded their metamorphosis - buoyant spheres of air slip with grace from parted lips, a whisper sent to divulge its secrets to the surface. Mothers mistreated, mentally mutated by men and damsels damaged, daughters disregarded and degraded, all saved by the sea.

Women who once walked on land, now pale and scaled seek their vengeance. Under the guise of lascivious maiden's they tempt their prey before leading them below to decay. And so, the echoes of the deep.

Gifted their safety and power, cursed to forever avenge, inflict suffering and devour. And so, the echoes of the deep float through the sea and saline breeze, an assurance and an admonition. A promise of protection and justice, mingled with the mournful moans of women wronged, for their pain can only be diluted by their power.

And so, the echoes of the deep resound with the justice meted out by these enigmatic guardians of the sea, a haunting melody of retribution that lingers in the salty air and warns those who would dare to harm the innocent.

Reuben Fidock Fidock

Brian

It didn't have a name or a gender that could be explained to a human. This isn't to say that it didn't have either a name or a gender but that if you were to explain it to a human, it would be like explaining your name to a worm. However, it becomes incredibly complicated to tell the story if we don't assign a name to the main character of our tale, so for convenience's sake, let's just call them Brian.

Brian was a being from a distant solar system who had been assigned the rather mundane job of monitoring the human species, something which he'd spent the last seven Earth years doing. Seven years wasn't a particularly long time for someone of Brian's species but to Brian, it had been an incredibly agonising and gruelling seven years that may as well have been a lifetime. Which for Brian's species, was about 564 human years.

It's not that Brian didn't enjoy his job, in fact, he thought that his job was perhaps one of the more interesting jobs in The Galactic Federation that his species was a part of. Brian was... well in human terms... Brian was a zoologist. His job was to travel to developing species planets and observe how they were getting on with things. So far Brian's job had taken him to the Dundarites of Kaliyon Four, to the Minxs of Persyrus and to the Calvions of the Nosedoral region. All of which Brian had found fascinating and exciting expeditions.

However, Brian's expedition to Earth had been anything but. In fact, it had been rather dull.

To a human, it was the opposite. Actually, in the past several years, humans had found their existence as a species one of the more action-packed, frightening, and challenging periods in recent history. To Brian, though, it had all just seemed rather stupid.

In his seven years of being on Earth, Brian had observed a very loud and very orange man get elected to lead one of the more powerful nations on the planet, several genocides, a pandemic, numerous wars and conflicts, environmental collapse, economic failures, and societal breakdowns. The one peculiar thing that Brian found at all interesting about his several years on earth was that throughout, and in spite of all of this, humans had engaged with swells of bizarre internet trends. These were typically pictures, and videos about various earthly phenomena and happenings that the humans had dubbed as 'memes'. Brian had deduced that a meme was a sort of ironic take on an event, experience, or feeling. And it was imperative that a meme must be shared: a 'good' meme was considered heavily relatable to a wide plethora of people. though there were also 'dank' memes which transcended commercial audiences to something more niche perhaps in being all the more ironically trite.

The meme Brian had seen this morning read, "That feel when the entire planet is collapsing around you but the new Spiderman 2 video game is out". It curiously pictured a man on fire, but smiling. What truly puzzled Brian about memes was that during the time it took one

person to *painstakingly create and tinker with a meme*, they usually could have *solved* the stated problem and got on with their day.

Whilst Brian was a zoologist, The Federation had decided that the greatest way to observe the human species was for him to take on the role of a journalist. The rationale being that Brian's 'job' as a journalist provided him with unfettered access to various people and allowed him to largely attend events without people asking what he was doing there and why he was asking so many questions.

Out of the conferences that Brian had attended, most were rather dull, barbaric, and unenlightening. His two days at the NRA*1 had left him rather disturbed by the seemingly incredibly creative ways that humanity had designed to kill one another.

However, he'd been particularly fascinated by a three-day seminar on the role of 'the influencer'. As far as Brian could gather about this occupation, an influencer was, at their core, much like an advertisement. But rather than being written, created, and marketed by an 'ad agency'*2 the influencer was more of a 'mouldable ad'. They would dynamically align themselves with a particular category of everyday life such as 'lifestyle', 'sport', and 'beauty', but at times extended into even more niche areas like 'automotive expert'. This influencer would then create 'authentic' feeling 'content', connecting with their audience, as if a friend were talking about how great a purchase their new lawnmower or television was.

This reportedly wasn't something totally new. For example, Brian had read that back in the very short timespan the humans had dubbed 'the 1960s', talk show hosts or television presenters would endorse a product as though they used it every day. The audience was to remain ignorant that the television show had been paid thousands of Earth currency dollars to display and endorse that product. Reportedly, humans were 'more aware' of the presence of advertising in their everyday lives. Brian was not so sure.

The specifics of 'memes' and 'influencers' aside, the Earth's greater context of all this was most fascinating to Brian. To Brian, it seemed evident that humanity's history was operating in a perfect cycle. Not only was this evident in how they treated one another but further evident in the very culture of humans themselves.

Perhaps the best example of this for Brian was the 'Baha Men's' smash 2000 hit. 'Who Let the Dogs Out.'

Interestingly this version of the song was a cover of 'Anslem's Douglas' 'Doggie' which in turn was created out of the famous chorus. 'Who Let the Dogs' by two Toronto radio promoters for WBLK in Buffalo, NY.

Similarly, '20 Fingers and Gilette' released a song called. 'You're a Dog' in 1995 with a similar chorus; "Who let the dog loose?"

Dating back even earlier to 1992, a rap duo by the name of 'Miami Boom Productions' from

Florida, released a song 'Who Let the Dogs Out?' which even included the 'Baha Men's' infamous 'who who who?' echoing the bark of a canine companion. Miami Boom claim that this version of the song was inspired by Bass Patrol's 'Da Mad Scientist' which included the lyrics, 'Who's rocking the dog's house?'

All this culminating in the discovery that Joe Gonzalez of 'Miami Boom Productions' who grew up in Michigan, may have perhaps heard the famous line at a 1986 Austin Reagan High School football game where the crowd frequently chanted. 'Oooh let the dogs out!', as their hometown was sometimes referred to as 'the dog patch'.

It seemed to Brian that human beings were a largely unoriginal species, commonly stealing each other's ideas consciously or unconsciously, or repeating the same mistakes of the empires and dynasties before them on an endless cycle of bloodshed and misery. Indeed, his study of Earth's history books had led Brian to conclude that many of the more brilliant minds - the ones who actually produced rare novel ideas - seemed rarely to gain much recognition contemporarily. That is to say, it usually wasn't till much later when later generations of humans seemed to collectively think, "Oh shit. I think we probably should have listened to that guy*3 a little more".

Brian's reports back to The Federation regarding Earth had always been largely negative. But in '2023'*4, Brain was feeling particularly despondent: in his 247 Earth-years-long career, he'd never felt so negatively about a species.

In one of his reports, he stated.

"For the past 247 years, I have worked studiously to deliver valuable information for the betterment of the Intergalactic Federation of Species. In all those years, I have yet to encounter a species that I've felt that would not provide advances to the Federation until the observation of the human species. After my short seven years of being on the so-called 'Planet Earth', the only person I've concluded that could provide any value to the Federation is 'Bonnie Tyler'.

Yours truly,

Brian"

"Bonnie Tyler? Who on earth was Bonnie Tyler?" The Intergalactic Federation wondered to themselves.

Brian later followed this up in a report stating. "Bonnie Tyler is an American middle-aged woman who invented 'The Negg' which is a device that is used (rather successfully might I

add) to peel hard-boiled eggs.”

“Now, this is something we can work with.” The Federation stated.

*1 – NRA is an acronym for the National Rifle Association.

*2 – An ‘ad agency’ is a collective of people whose purpose is to design advertisements to sell products or services to other humans.

*3 – The term ‘guy’ is used as it usually was a man. And a ‘white’ one at that. The gender and racial issues plaguing Earth continue to remain perplexing and unreconciled to Brian at the time of writing.

*4 – Earth terminology. Refer to Brian’s earlier paper on the human subject’s narrow perspective of time and space and other dimensions.

Tyler Grbic

One Last Wish

“Remember, it is your heritage,” croaked the pile of wrinkled skin. Draped in what looked like soiled Persian rugs, the silly old hag sat uncomfortably close to me beneath a dark tent soaked in reeking mist, pitched four hours outside of Bucharest.

I can’t even remember why I let my family drag me halfway around the world “back to the motherland” nor how it led to a field trip to the worst theme park ever.

“And... it is your destiny. You shall suffer thralldom and mistake it for mutual affection. Then, before long, she whom you desire shall utter three wishes in your presence, and you will be compelled to grant them.”

“Me and my magic powers,” I smirked, but I was honestly trying to remain respectful throughout this deluge of extraordinary hogwash.

She gripped my hand tighter.

“*Realise* your power, then your true spirit shall be unleashed. Now go, boy, at once!”

“So, we’re done here?”

“Waste no time, you fool. The wishes must be granted by the end of her twenty-first year. Elsewise, she shan’t live through her twenty-second!”

Madame Con-stantinescu put her hands to her mouth and blew out a puff of purple smoke at my face, knocking me back off the stool and into a puddle of mud.



Time passed by in a blur after the strange encounter with the “fortune teller” until one day, I looked up from my sketchbook and gazed across a nursery-styled café bathed in sunlight. In the corner, underneath cascading vines stretching down from the ceiling, sat the most beautiful girl I knew I’d ever see. I wanted to immediately venture across the pristine terracotta and simply introduce myself, but another impulse inspired me to make a grander gesture.

I frantically sketched her spellbinding eyes first. Once I drew an adorable, elf-like ear peeking through her copper hair, it was complete. I tore the page out and stumbled over. She still hadn’t noticed me until I practically dropped the piece of paper in her lap.

“Hope you don’t mind,” I grovelled as she examined the portrait.

“You know,” Aurnia smiled with the lips of an enchantress. “I’ve been sitting here wishing somebody would come along and put a smile on my face today.”

We talked. So much, and so effortlessly, that when we finally parted ways, it felt like our souls were entwined. We both sensed this meeting was meant to be, not just because she’s always browsing the antique store right near my studio.

Another morning, while we were walking around that antique store near my studio and “our” café, Aurnia told me the ex-boyfriend had been bothering her.

“That is really nice. I wish it was mine,” she pointed to an expensive Arabic ring, having seemingly changed the subject too abruptly.

“Yeah, it’s alright. What’s this about your ex?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. But sometimes... I just wish he would drop dead.”

She caught an uneasy look on my face.

“I know that sounds harsh. It’d make things simpler if he stayed out of my life, is all.”

“Happy birthday, Aurnia,” I said, not long after, presenting the unpackaged ring to her. She had been waiting outside the store and didn’t see me buy it. And I didn’t tell her I bought it, because I didn’t want to lie to her.

She gasped, “can I put it on now, or do I have to wait until Saturday?”

I spent the next few days sniffing out info about Aurnia’s creep of an ex-boyfriend—a German exchange student named Schmeichel, economics major—then proceeded to track him down on Friday evening. From the moment he slipped out of his dorm room, I didn’t let him leave my sight, though I was careful enough to keep my distance to remain covert. My initial plan was to confront him and firmly tell him to leave Aurnia alone. But for some reason, I sensed the advice would only fall on deaf ears.

After what felt like an aimless traipse around our deserted campus, he hung a left at the fountain and headed into the bell tower. On a moonless winter’s night, the only thing darker than the sky was that gothic monstrosity itself. Swarmed with coarse granite and screaming gargoyles, the looming building stank of rage and hatred—the same odours of emotion which had been bubbling up inside my veins since hearing of this troublesome ex-boyfriend. This presumptuous, nagging, entitled ex-boyfriend, who apparently couldn’t take “no” for an answer. This deplorable ex-boyfriend, about whom Aurnia unmistakably wished would drop dead.

I knew what I had to do. By the time he reached the top, I had already raced up the other stairwell and hidden behind one of the belfry's pillars. I glanced around to see him staring out from the tower's balcony, oblivious to my presence. He looked down to the ground below. I wondered, if he was to fall from his perch, would it be a deadly drop?



With minutes until midnight, I trudged back up the steps of the bell tower, this time glazed with sweat and earth. When I reached the top, Aurnia was there waiting for *him*.

"I wasn't sure you'd show," her tone changed mid-sentence upon seeing me while processing Schmeichel's absence.

"As you wished, he won't be bothering you again," I promised, handing her the note I had seized from the ex-boyfriend's lifeless body. It was a note she sent him, requesting a meeting to 'set things straight'.

Once Aurnia realised I'd be crashing the party, the smile disappeared from her face. And with that, I felt my heart being ripped from my chest. Suddenly, I realised. It was no innocent tête-à-tête she had planned with the ex-boyfriend, but a rendezvous of the romantic variety.

Eventually, the truth came out.

"Look, Miloš. The thing is, Schmeichel and I have been in a weird place for a while, but we've decided to give it another crack."

I could barely speak. "But I feel like... I love you."

"How can you feel things I've never shown," she scoffed. She actually scoffed. "We've only known each other for a week! And here. It was very generous, but I can't accept the ring."

Bonggg!

The clock struck twelve, and I took a moment to compose myself. The prophecy by the wise Romani woman flashed through my head. Deep down I knew, every step of the way, her reading was a prescient one. But I didn't want to believe my feelings for Aurnia could possibly be anything other than mutual. After all I've done—I pleased her, I spoiled her, I protected her—she has repaid me with emancipation. But I didn't want to be free...

"I want *you*!"

"I just wish you could understand," she sighed. "Schmeichel and I want to be together."

Schmeichel. That bumbling idiot. That impotent peasant. That pathetic got-what-he-deserved crumpled mess who, a quarter-of-an-hour earlier, had been buried in a shallow grave behind the fountain. Aurnia said she'd rather be with him than me!

Aurnia. My unfaithful soulmate. My unworthy master. My ungrateful parasite. With this newly gained freedom, I could choose to understand. If she wants to be with him, perhaps I should grant her one last wish.

Thomas Irving

A Still Small Voice

Gillian was startled by the sudden and harsh metallic rattle of her doorknob. Then a short, sharp series of thumping knocks shook the door on its hinges.

“Open up!” an official sounding voice boomed through the door.

“Leave me alone!” she spat back.

Gillian was a lean, wiry woman in her mid-thirties. As she thrust her weight against the door, creating a human barricade, she noticed a small ripple under the skin of her wrist. She pulled up her sleeve revealing an infected rash. Bright yellow pus oozed from a deep crevice in the raw, dry skin. Just a rash, Gillian attempted to convince herself. I just need to get out of here. Get to a hospital.

There was a brief silence. Then...

“Break it down,” the official voice commanded.

Gillian imagined an army of militant officials impatiently waiting in the hall, ready to bash her door in with a ram. Although, there was a chance it could be looters. The building had been locked down for almost three weeks now, and while the government were quick to send in the rapid response team to quarantine occupants, perform random pathogenic testing, and exterminate those exhibiting signs of infection, the regime were not so quick to provide basic living supplies. Resources were running low, and Gillian had heard whispers that some occupants were out of food and succumbing to some of their more primal instincts. Survival of the fittest; dog eat dog world; that sort of thing. There were even some rumours of cannibalism, but that may have just been hyperbole.

When the building was first locked down, Gillian proposed the occupants work together, pool resources, and share with one another. She had almost convinced them until some idiot shouted something to the effect of: “That sounds like socialism!” and it was decided then and there, the occupants would face the outbreak as the naturally selected individuals they were born to be.

Suddenly, Gillian was rocked by a heavy blow. Metal on wood. CRACK! The door would not withstand many more hits like that. She sprinted to the window, opened it, and peered down to the street below. Police surrounded the perimeter, buzzing around the building like

flies. She thought back to stories she'd heard about people who had survived jumping from tall buildings to escape fires. Her apartment was on the fifth floor. Was that too many floors? Probably. She felt a cool breeze and was thrust back into the moment with the dreaded realisation that she was standing on a slender ledge on the outside of the building, just next to her open window. Without thinking she'd climbed out and was preparing to leap. She caught a scream in her throat, and threw herself back into the relative safety of the apartment.

Gillian's mind was racing from the adrenaline. *Is this what people talk about when they speak of survival instincts? Does the conscious mind subside and let something more primal take over?*

CRACK! Another shattering blow. Gillian sprinted to the kitchen and grabbed the biggest, sharpest knife she owned. There, she noticed the bulging veins in her forearm. It looked like when a nurse fastens a tourniquet before taking blood. Except there was no tourniquet, and these were no veins. These were parasitic worms living inside her. She felt a sharp and sudden urge to thrust the knife into her own arm to extricate the flesh-eating parasite crawling under her skin.

That's when her front door burst open with the loud crack of splitting wood. "We're here to perform a random pathogenic test," the official voice bellowed into her apartment. "This is a compulsory test, your compliance is required, however your consent is not."

Fight or flight? Gillian reacted on instinct. In a split second, her subconscious mind selected fight, and Gillian rushed the two men. She was thankful there were only two, she could handle two. She had the element of surprise and used it wisely to thrust the sharp blade deep into the first official's throat. He spat up so much blood inside of his hazmat suit that his visor looked like a morbid Jackson Pollock. Then his legs turned to jelly, and he stumbled backwards grasping at the air and trying, unsuccessfully, to remain upright. He fell back into his partner and got a good grip on his visor, ripping the protective shield right off the other man's head.

The first official slumped to the floor, dead. The second, looked up at Gillian like a deer in headlights. A wry smile touched the corner of Gillian's lips. He was exposed and he knew it. She took one step toward him and with that, he fled. Gillian watched the man disappear into the stairwell and breathed a sigh of relief.

It was short lived.

Suddenly, an incessant alarm blasted throughout the building, and the power was shut off. The stark white LED lights faded, and the building was painted in the eerie neon glow of the backup powered EXIT lights.

Don't think, just act. Gillian stripped the dead official and donned his hazmat suit. She slipped the bloody visor over her head, then started down the hall. One curious occupant cracked open a door and peeked their parasite infested head into the hall. The mouldering face appalled Gillian. Their eyelids had rotted away exposing the full roundness of both eyeballs, setting the poor occupants face in a horrific, permanent expression of shock.

“Get back in your room!” Gillian demanded in her best impersonation of an official.

That's when Gillian heard the grim short wave radio message that went out to all members of the rapid response team. “This is a code black. There has been a containment breach. Extermination protocols are to be followed, effective immediately,” a senior official's voice fuzzed over the radio waves. Apparently, the visors were fitted out with some kind of two-way communication system.

Gillian broke for the stairs and began her descent. The rapid response team were fully deployed. Hazmat clad officials, with what looked like flame throwers and a type of fire extinguisher that Gillian had never seen before, were rushing up and down the stairs. Gillian barged her way through. Disguised in the hazmat suit, and somewhat due to the mayhem, she made it to the ground floor without any trouble, despite her bloody visor.

She could still hear the nightmare unfolding on the floors above, but this floor was eerily quiet. The rapid response team had enacted their extermination protocol with brutal efficiency. Gillian peered through broken-down doors into the other occupants' rooms. What she witnessed disturbed her. She saw the burnt-out husks of the occupants – men, women, children, mothers, fathers, sons, daughters – all burnt alive, and then put out with some chemical that continued to burn them after the fire had been snuffed out. This ensured the worms were sufficiently burnt to death as well.

The worst thing Gillian saw was the burnt-out husk of a small child with a two-meter-long worm protruding from the child's open mouth. The worm was also covered in burns and writhing in agony. She threw off her visor and vomited all over the floor. When she saw the wriggling mass of baby worms in her own vomit, she screamed, then vomited again.

Gillian's mind was reeling. Get out! Get out! Get out! The only wisdom her churning brain was able to conjure. On the brink of madness, Gillian ran for the exit. As she reached to push

the front door open, she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the glass. She could see her face was rippling as the parasitic worms crawled around under her skin. She clawed at her face in a frenzy, and let out a guttural scream as she ripped out a large worm that was buried deep within.

Gillian collapsed. She began to question everything, her thoughts, her actions, her motives. *Did I do this? Did I think and act in such a way, or was it all the volition of the parasite?*

A voice in her head screamed *run!* but Gillian forced herself to stay. *This ends here.* Her features twisted into a manic grin. If these parasitic worms really could control peoples' thoughts, and to an extent, their actions, then she couldn't let the outbreak spread. There had already been one containment breach—that being Gillian herself—so she decided that she would leave nothing to chance. She would start an extermination protocol of her own, and she would leave no survivors.

The electricity may have been shut off, but this was an old building, and she knew the gas would be working just fine. Gillian rushed from room to room, stepping over the charred remains of her fellow occupants, turning on every gas appliance on the first floor. She made her way back upstairs, repeating the process on every level until she came face to face with a flame thrower wielding official on the fourth floor.

This was it. She turned and sprinted back downstairs. She was sure he would follow, she just hoped that the bottom of the building would be filled with enough gas to cause a large enough fire to burn this place to the ground.

Gillian got to the ground floor with just enough time to take pause and second guess her decision to stay and immolate everyone in the building, infected or not. *Is there a chance this is nothing more than a petty revenge plot? Retribution for a government overreach, a breach of basic human rights?* She shook the radical thoughts from her head and inhaled a deep, calming breath. Sacrifice the few to save the many, she reassured herself, but her lunatic mind would not be placated. *What are you doing? You should run. Escape. Survive. Were these her own thoughts or was it the will of the parasite?*

Before she had a chance to decide one way or the other, Gillian was interrupted as her pursuer burst into the hall, flamethrower at the ready. “DON'T MOVE!” he commanded as he approached the woman, needing to close the distance in order to reach an effective firing range. Gillian didn't move, but not due to the official's command. She didn't move because she was unable to. Whatever part of her shattered mind was still her own had lost control of her bodily autonomy. Now she was nothing more than a passenger. A passive viewer. The parasite had taken over.

Like she was experiencing some extreme form of depersonalisation, Gillian watched herself rip the hazmat suit from her body, exposing her partially naked flesh, which was rippling all over, her skin bulging as the restless worms were writhing within. Then the parasitic worms broke free of the flesh and burst forth, particularly around her head and neck, creating a sick parody of Medusa. The protruding worms squirmed in the freshly torn wounds. This had a sort of medusonic effect on the official, who stopped dead in his tracks, completely petrified and frozen in abject horror.

The stunned official watched on as Gillian's mouth lolled open. In place of her tongue was a four-meter-long worm twisting and turning as it slithered its way out of her gaping orifice. Unable to cope, the official lost consciousness and hit the ground like a ton of bricks.

Gillian, or more accurately the parasite controlling Gillian, pushed open the front door of the apartment building and stepped out into the welcoming daylight. Now dressed in a clean hazmat suit, she slipped past the police barricade and made her way down the busy street, away from the apartment, and disappeared into the community.

Keenan Lewis

Mercurial Hearts

The party was in full swing, as gilded guests streamed in from every corner of New York, adorned in their most exquisite attire. The venue shimmered under the radiant glow of Edison's vapour lamps. Amid the whirlwind of merriment, Victorio deftly navigated the crowd, adroitly balancing the gleaming silver tray entrusted to him by Delilah two hours earlier. The tray bore more significance than its polished surface; it symbolised the transformation that Delilah had ushered into Victorio's life. A mere month ago, he had been plucked from the depths of his previous existence and positioned as a house boy in the lavish mansion of Silas Verschlinger, Delilah's husband.

From their ancestral roots as Germanic warlords, the Verschlinger family's trajectory had wound its way to a pinnacle of affluence within America's borders over the span of three decades. The very essence of their triumphant journey found embodiment in the Verschlinger mansion affectionately christened "heaven" by Delilah. A Neo Classical masterpiece, the mansion's facade soared skyward, a monolith of elegance and refinement. The façade's gleaming white limestone was a canvas upon which history and prestige were inscribed. Majestic Corinthian columns flanked the entrance, resolute in their support of an intricate pediment adorned with scenes that spoke of mythic battles and epic sagas. Inside the mansion's exquisite confines, every ornament and furnishing whispered tales of power and prosperity, casting Victorio's former wooden hovel in a stark shadow. His circumstances may have looked different, but he knew deep down that he didn't belong, and they knew it too, the sharp recoil of the patrons eyes when he passed them told him all he had ever known, He wasn't like them, and they were entire worlds away from him.

Yet within the midst of jubilant celebration, a subtle but potent transformation in the ambiance began to unfold. Delilah's unobtrusive gesture summoned Victorio, who responded promptly, his senses attuned to her beckoning. Through a whispered revelation, "Darling, go to my husband's study, and fetch his cigar box, he requires it". "At once Madam" Victorio replied, embarking on his mission, a journey that brought him into the innermost sanctum of the mansion—a room whose mysteries had brushed the periphery of his understanding when Silas first introduced him to the household those weeks ago.

Slightly ajar, the study's door revealed a realm of ancient tomes lining its shelves, some even tethered by chains that cascaded like a dark metallic waterfall. Wrenching his attention back to his original task, Victorio's gaze was drawn to a black and silver wooden box atop the desk, a relic pulsating with intrigue. As he lifted it, a curious lightness danced within his grasp, sparking thoughts of the mysteries concealed within these walls of the employer's abode, where Silas indulged in his mysterious nightly practices.

Emerging from the study, the echoes of the festivities seemed to fade, and as Victorio descended the grand staircase, an inexplicable sight met his eyes. The jubilant gathering and its vivacious guests had evaporated as if they were never there at all, as not a trace of the party remained. Puzzlement gripped Victorio until a haunting ring, followed by a symphony of hushed voices, caressed his senses. Deepening confusion prompted him to call out, "Hello?" The chorus of whispers swelled, drawing him toward the wine cellar door at the

other side of the foyer, an uncharted territory reserved for Henri, the well groomed valet of Verschlingermansion.

Behind the intricately carved bloodwood door, a dark passageway unveiled itself, its path illuminated by a lone torch's flickering glow. The passage meandered, unfurling and winding. Ultimately, Victorio was brought before a monumental arch reminiscent of fabled stories of heroes and monsters, an arch that now beckoned him forward.

In the wake of his uncertain journey through the dark passageway, Victorio found himself at the precipice of a shiny black threshold—a threshold that seemed impossibly large for the boundaries of human construction. Crossing this threshold, he stepped into a realm that ignited his senses—a circular chamber awash in an ethereal glow that emanated from every corner. The heart of the chamber held an altar, its solemn presence accentuated by the flickering flames of braziers arranged at the points of a hexagon etched into the floor. Within moments the dancing shadows from the flames had slithered into silhouettes. Figures adorned in dark purple cloaks and ornate gold masks replaced the once mere shadows, each contributing to an aura of enchantment and secrets beyond mortal reasoning.

Victorio's heart quickened as he found himself ensnared by a sea of Purple and gold. His eyes only meet those of the obscured shadowy figures.

Two pedestals flanked the small raised hexagonal altar, atop one stood a similar golden box to the one he had retrieved in what seemed like another world above. As Victorio's gaze shifted, he registered the box and the twin he held in his hands with a mix of fascination and uncertainty. In an instance his limbs snap limp, his body suspended in the air by phantom hands, with a violent jolt his body is propelled through the air to the stone altar at the centre of the room. A figure split from the dark mass encircling the altar. A wet crunch pierced the ceaseless whispers, Victorio's eyes bulged, a surge of searing pain accompanied by the metallic scent of blood assaulted his senses. His muscles tensed, attempting to resist the pull of the beyond. His vision blurred as life ebbed, his blood flowing across the cold stone like spilt wine. Amidst the surreal horror, his still beating heart began to pull from his chest, the twitching organ rising into the pale hand hung above him.

Placed within the golden box on the left pedestal. A cold, metallic heart, intricately detailed, was then implanted within Victorio's chest cavity, its mechanical rhythm synchronised with the flow of dark grey liquid now coursing through its veins. The room pulsed with an unnerving energy as the ritual escalated, arcane forces coalescing beyond the scope of Victorio's comprehension. He felt power. He felt fire. He felt might. He felt pain. He felt fear. Chants resonated, merging with the eerie hum that saturated the air, and as the final incantation echoed into silence, Victorio's consciousness teetered on the precipice between the realms of existence and the abyss. Then, in an instant, it was all gone. Drained to the last drop, his body fell limp. The forces that sustained the ritual were gone, ‘‘Another Failure!’’ a voice declared.

Two days later the mutilated body of a twenty year old house boy servant was discovered in an alleyway in east Brownsville. The coroner had ruled it a ritualist killing, ‘’ no doubt the work of another savage voodoo bitch’’ Said one reporter. Victorio’s cold body now laid in a freezer of the New York coroner's office. And on the third day, the Chief Medical Examiner began to hear an odd array of scratch like noises. Cold storage had never been so alive!!!

Sarah Mckenzie

These Are Not Your Memories

Unexpressed emotions will never die. They are buried alive and will come forth later in uglier ways. - Sigmund Freud

9 AUGUST 2025 – MELBOURNE CBD

The Swanston Street corridor has been temporarily cordoned off, after a Melbourne man was hit by a tram around 5pm this afternoon. Paramedics provided urgent medical attention at the scene, before transporting the individual to a nearby hospital in a critical condition...

Marcus firmly gripped the pedestrian signal box, digging his fingernails deep into the blackened silicone that secured it to its steel post. He thumbed the cold silver button, drawing spirals around its concaved surface. It was a tiny reprieve from the agonising city heat.

...Eyewitnesses have recounted the distressing incident, telling our reporters that the man deliberately ran in front of the moving tram. Commuters and pedestrians are being urged to find alternative routes home this afternoon while emergency services investigate the incident...

Marcus hated peak hour commuting more than anything in the world. The smell of cigarette smoke, mixed with car exhaust and frying oil, made him want to gag. He pressed down again on the button's cold surface and heard its distinctive *click*.

Suddenly, dirt and twigs shot into his face as the jungle floor erupted beneath his feet. Marcus desperately lunged to grab at Harley's waist, as shouts from his platoon pierced through the fire and smoke.

...As authorities investigate the incident, concerns about mental health and pedestrian safety have surfaced...

Marcus was back in Phuoc Tuy Province cradling his best friend's lifeless body. He'd been ripped apart by a M-15 mine buried shallowly in the duff. No, he was in the middle of Swanston Street lying flat on the ground, his ankle twisted beneath the steel wheels of a tram.

Marcus had never been in that war. He'd never been in any war. He never knew anyone called Harley. He'd never even been overseas. As the cacophony of buskers rung out to a distant echo, and he dissolved into unconsciousness, Marcus knew that this memory did not belong to him.

...If you or anyone you know is suffering from emotional distress, know that help is available. Contact your local Letho+ centre today on 1313LETH (1313 5384).

FOUR MONTHS EARLIER – LETHO+ CENTRE SOUTH MELBOURNE

Marcus sat in the sterile waiting room, flipping through old copies of Psychology Today. The October edition had a full 8-page spread on Letho+, tracking its expansion from its flagship centre in Sydney to its 168 local centres around Australia today.

“Marcus Fogarty,” the receptionist called out, “Work4Care card and intake forms please,” she commanded, holding her hand out as Marcus approached.

Marcus handed over the forms he'd filled out earlier and his green Work4Care card. The Work4Care scheme was a Commonwealth program introduced two years ago under the Holmes Government. It was the centrepiece of the new government's major welfare reforms. The rise of automation and artificial intelligence had caused the biggest spike in unemployment since the early 20th century, and the public welfare bill had reached an unsustainable level. Under the new program, students, and anyone unable to obtain full time employment were eligible for rental assistance and food and utilities payments, so long as they maintained a balance of 600 care point credits every month.

“First time at Letho?” the receptionist asked, while running Marcus's green Work4Care card through a government branded scanner.

“Yeah... um...” Marcus stuttered, “the clinical trial I was doing finished last week, and I was referred here by my local Centrelink office...they told me each appointment is worth 700 care points?”

“Yes, that's correct, we credit you at the end of each session,” said the receptionist.

700 care points was more than the minimum requirements for the entire month! Much more than the smoking cessation trial he'd just completed. He was glad it was over. Just thinking of the cessation medication still made him feel queasy.

The receptionist stood up and ushered Marcus towards a corridor behind her desk. “Just in here,” she said, guiding Marcus into a room on the left. “Take off your shoes, any hair clips or jewellery, and then jump up on the bed please. Dr Ainsworth will be with you shortly.”

Work4Care recipients could obtain points by working in government run aged care facilities or by participating in medical research. Letho+ provided one of the most lucrative options for recipients, but it was difficult to get accepted into their program. Applicants needed to be between the ages of 18 and 35 and have no history of psychological illness. It was a high bar these days after four years of global pandemics and recessions; 55% of the total population was on some sort of medication for anxiety or depression. For those on benefits, the proportion must have been much higher.

Dr Ainsworth entered the room about five minutes later. He was a tall man, wearing a long white coat. “Marcus Fogarty,” he said as he approached the hospital bed. Marcus nodded. “First time here?” Marcus nodded again.

“Are you aware of the work we do here at Letho+?”

“I... yes... I am,” Marcus replied, still uncharacteristically stuttering, “I’m a psychology student. We studied it in first year. When the CET technology was still being developed.”

Marcus wasn’t stuttering because he was nervous. He was stuttering because he was a little bit awestruck. Letho+’s development of world first cranial electrotherapy technology (CET) was a watershed moment. It fundamentally altered the field of psychotherapy. CET allows for the total erasure of traumatic memories; deleted straight out of the subject’s brain. It does this seamlessly, as if the events had never happened at all. Remarkably, there were no recorded side effects. Letho’s trauma erasure therapy had quickly made them the most valuable company in the world. It was an absolute game changer, but it was also very expensive.

“Ah, excellent,” Ainsworth said, “so you know a bit about psychological trauma. This type of trauma results from experiencing or witnessing an event or series of events that are overwhelmingly distressing or harmful. It can have a significant impact on a person’s mental well-being. For a long time, medical scientists have struggled to understand how it manifests. That is, until now.”

Ainsworth turned to shoot Marcus a comforting grin, before placing three small vials in the machine mounted above the bed.

“All trauma is energy. That’s all it is. Energy. We now know we can remove it from the human brain, so long as there is a repository to put it in.”

Marcus felt a sense of unease wash over him. “Am I the...um... repository?”

“Well yes, of sorts, but it’s nothing to worry about. Its only temporary. Without the physical memory, trauma dissipates in the human brain. Once we transfer trauma from an injured brain to a healthy host, it is dispelled fully in a matter of hours. It’s perfectly safe.”

Ainsworth pulled two small wires from the machine and gently taped them to Marcus’s temples. “You will be here for 4 hours, but it will feel like ten minutes. After that you’ll be able to go on with your life with no ongoing effects.”

Ainsworth turned the dial on the machine and Marcus felt the room fade away. Only Ainsworth’s disembodied voice reverberated through the room.

“See you on the other side Mr Fogarty... Just remember... This is not your memory.”

Suddenly Marcus was on the floor. No longer in the doctor’s office, but instead, face-down on dark cold slate. It was a large bathroom. His legs were bound together. Was it a rope? No, it was plasticky. Maybe electrical cables or a hose.

“Where is it?!” a man bellowed from behind him. “TELL ME WHERE IT IS!”

Marcus tried to speak but his mouth was covered with tape. Reaching out his hand he pointed up to the bathroom cabinet. His hands were thin, and nails manicured. The cool bathroom light reflected off his dark blue nail polish.

“That’s all you have?!” the man shouted, turning from the cabinet, “Head down!” he spat, as he kicked Marcus hard in the face. Marcus’s long blonde hair whipped his eyes, sticking to the tears streaming down his cheeks.

“Wait here and count to 100! Don’t you fucking dare turn!”

The man gave him one more kick, this time to his ribcage, before the door slammed and Marcus’s consciousness faded.

When Marcus woke up, he was back in his flat. The clock radio said 10 pm. Confused, he reached into this pocket and pulled out his phone. He had a new notification from the Centrelink app.

Thank you for attending Letho+ clinic today, 500 care points have been credited to your account. Your next appointment is Monday 15 May.

Of course, he thought – the Letho+ appointment. Marcus chuckled to himself; he couldn't remember a thing. Pushing aside his bewilderment and pleased with his inflated care point balance, Marcus jumped up to make a cup of canned soup.

10 AUGUST 2025 – ST VINCENT'S HOSPITAL

Machines softly beeped, and pale sunlight painted patterns on the walls. Marcus's mother stepped towards his bed and swept his brown curly hair from his forehead. Marcus stirred, his eyelids fluttering open to see his mother standing above him.

"He's awake, oh god, Darryl, he's awake," she cried, as his father joined her at Marcus's bedside.

Marcus's grogginess was dispelled by the sight of his parents, and he turned his head to take in the room. His left leg was bound in plaster, hitched up on a metal frame, and a nurse stood at the foot of his bed.

"Marcus," the nurse said, shining a small torch into his eyes. "Can you hear me?"

Marcus tried to speak but settled for a nod.

"You've been in an accident. Do you remember the tram?" the nurse continued.

"The trrr-aam?" he stuttered, "I...I don't –"

“You’re in shock, but you’re ok. You are going to be just fine. I’ve come to take you to the Letho wing for CET this afternoon.”

Panic rushed through him as he looked up at his parents’ worried faces, “but...I ...can’t afford CET.. I can’t –”

“Didn’t you know?” chuckled the nurse as she started to ready the hospital bed for transport, “your care points can be exchanged for emergency treatment. It’s part of the government’s CareSupport scheme. Patients already receiving welfare can pay for essential treatments using future Work4Care care points as credits. You just pay them off over time by increasing your minimum monthly point requirements.”

The nurse begun wheeling Marcus out of the hospital room, leaving his teary parents behind. Together they travelled down a long corridor, up an oversized elevator and into an operating theatre. It was decked out in the distinctive Letho+ green.

A doctor was already waiting in the room. A tall man in a white coat. He was not a stranger. Marcus knew this man. He had seen that grin before.

“Ah, Mr. Fogarty,” Dr Ainsworth exclaimed, “it’s good to see you are awake at last. You had quite a tumble poor boy, but don’t you worry now, by this afternoon the tram will be no more than a dream. It won’t be your memory anymore.”

Aris Papadimitriou Dickie

(Untitled)

Two weeks they had spent getting here. What should have been no less than a sixteen-hour drive had taken them fourteen excruciating days. Constantly surveying, searching for petrol stations, scavenging for extra food and water and planning ahead of highly trained, expert cartography-trained soldiers, among other items on their new schedule.

Leaving Fremantle devastated Elias. He might not have believed that Perth was the greatest city known to man, but he certainly enjoyed his life there. He loved playing baseball with his friends, messing around with his classmates and going to the movies with his family. But they were all gone now. At best, nothing more than ash. At worst, well...

This is as close to America's civil war as we'll ever get, Elias had reminded himself when it all started. He shuddered to think he could have been so naive less than three months ago. When Parliament had approved Western Australia's resubmission to separate from mainland Australia. When the British Parliament, to everyone's surprise, *actually* signed off on it. The vote passed pretty painlessly, with a majority vote of 67%. But not one of the 2.9 million Western Australians had anticipated the weapons dealing, the arming of civilians, domestic terrorism, and the bombing of major towns and capital cities. Elias certainly hadn't expected his parents to fall on their knees and *beg* for him to take his sister and run. Run to *anywhere* but there. Anywhere but home.

Elias took, or more accurately dragged, his sister Nike from their parent's home and set her in their ute with their sighthound mix Reed, human neighbour Micah and everything they could fit into three backpacks and set off from Fremantle. Their initial plan was to drive straight out of the city directly to Eucla, a small town on the Western Australia and South Australia border, right before the vast, barren and uninhabitable wilderness known as Nullarbor. Elias had hit a few bumps before they were out of Greater Perth - their car broke down, and then they almost ran into a patrol. They were helped by an elderly couple just past Armadale, who informed them of the guards stationed along the Great Eastern Highway. They instead journeyed through Hyden, across to Norseman, making sure to stay as far South as they could from Joondalup, a supposed soldier hotspot. This leg of the trip took ten days to Elias' utter dismay.

Nike had giggled to herself as they passed the sign for Cocklebidy early in the morning. Reed laid his slim, fawn-coloured head on her lap, and Elias smiled. If he couldn't protect her, then Reed would. Dawn was a fiery red; the sun was blinding as it slowly rose over the horizon, taunting them closer as they headed East. Micah firmly grasped the steering wheel, his brow furrowed, his body contorted and stiff from days of constant driving and high anxiety levels.

Micah watched him from the passenger seat sorrowfully. It was September 25th. This was the day that Western Australia would separate from the continent. And not just lawfully, or figuratively. Unbeknownst to everyone outside of Western Australia and the Australian Parliament, Western Australia would be physically parting from mainland Australia and drift off into the Indian Ocean where it would become its very own island nation. They didn't know what time it would happen, but Elias had the feeling it would be soon. He felt uneasy.

And then they pulled up to Eucla to a display of military vehicles. Military vehicles full of troops peering from the windows.

"Uhh, guys?" Nike inquired, leaning forward. Reed's ears perked up and he lifted his head suspiciously. Elias' heart sank. They couldn't have come this far for nothing... *could they?*

"Micah?" Elias turned to his friend. But Micah's mournful expression had been replaced with confidence. He floored it.

The ute rattled anxiously as it launched down the final stretch of the Eyre highway. The army vans, baffled by the *Holden's* arrogance, scrambled to chase it. It only took a few minutes for Elias to spot the border.

"Holy shit," Micah muttered.

"What is it?" Nike asked.

The entire length of the border, at least from what Elias could see, had been completely dug up and turned into trenches.

"The bombs," Elias murmured. "They planted the bombs here."

"What?" Nike shook her head, her jaw tightening. The ute shook violently, and Micah cried out. "A spike strip! Hang on!"

Elias heard the click of a car door opening and turned to see that Nike had thrown herself and Reed from the car. The ute continued to slide across the dirt finally coming to a stop as it tipped into the pit. Micah kicked open his door and reached down, grabbing Elias' hand and yanking him from the *Holden*. Micah dragged him onto the edge of the excavation where Elias could only kneel, gazing helplessly at the other side where a soldier stood, Nike firmly in her grasp.

The soldier narrowed her eyes at the children, her eyes practically alight with pure glee.

"You let her go!" Elias screamed from the other side of the trench, his hands balled into fists. Micah silently reached across and placed his hand on Elias' shoulder. Nike stared back, her eyes wide and her dark hair waving across her face wildly in the wind.

“We have to go.” Micah said quietly.

“We can’t leave her.”

“We have to.”

Elias just gazed at his sister, tears streaming down his face. It took him only two weeks to fail his family. To fail to keep what was left of it alive.

I can’t leave her. I can’t lose her.

She gaped in return, her eyes getting greener as the sun rose higher. The soldier’s grip on her tightened, her right arm reaching across Nike’s chest, clenching her side. But her left arm extended outward, the pistol sitting loosely in her grasp.

That’s when Elias saw it. A flash of brown across the desolate orange earth.

Reed leapt up behind the soldier and unhinged his jaws like a crocodile. He snapped it closed around her wrist, and a mad scream released from her lips as her revolver fired into the sky. Elias watched in awe as the soldier fell to her knees, clutching her misshapen arm, before he realised that Nike had vanished.

“Nike?!” he yelled, stepping onto the rim of the ditch. Micah grabbed his arm to stop him from moving further, but before Elias could retaliate they were both thrown to the ground. Elias’ face hit the dirt, which suddenly turned into mud. Confused, Elias whipped his head around, only to be met with a wet nose and a slobbery tongue. Nike stood above them, her hand barely gripping Reed’s collar.

“We need to go!” She cried urgently, but Elias could detect a smile in her voice. Hooked together like a chain made of hands, the blissfully unaware sighthound hauled the trio across the earth and towards the Border Village.

They ran as far as their exhausted, stiff legs could take them, and Reed allowed them to stop metres from the old petrol station. An array of faces stared at them in pure disbelief from the townhouses. Elias feels his face loosen. *He’s safe. They all are*, he realises. *We made it.*

Nike enveloped him into a tight embrace, only strengthened by Micah’s tall frame and Reed’s wide paws. Their hug was so passionate – so *strong* – that Elias could only barely discern the enormous cacophony of exploding bombs from behind them.

Jazmine Perry

The Rising of the Prince of Death

As the sun sets on the Nile that follows through upper and lower Egypt, unified once again by the grace of the Gods, the doors of the Duat; opened the afterlife's darkness onto the world. The God Thoth covers the night sky in stars, and the moon rises and reflects off the pyramids of Giza, stretching a shadow across the tombs of Kings and Queens that once roamed the golden sands. Jackals scattered through the sands, with teeth dripping with blood and ripped robes of hessian and gold threads. The Gods of Ancient Egypt still walk the Earth, ever-so forgotten...

Avatars of the Egyptian Gods were chosen in handfuls every hundred years to serve as puppet souls of the criminals of the earth. The pure gold Ankh, the symbol of second life and fate grasped in the dead king's hand, catches my eye. I peel away the bone and cotton-wrapped fingers to reveal the handle of the Ankh. Just as I was about to shove this priceless artifact into my ripped leather bag, it was being lifted like it was magnetic.

He, with the face of a jackal, and the body of a man, stands before me. His shadow consumes the only light that enters the tomb of Pharaoh Mentuhotep the Second. With his bellowing voice, Anubis murmurs magic as I try to pull down the artifact. My hands slip, and I fall only to see Anubis' face lower to meet my eyes,

"Oh, child, you are as dark as the night sky..."

His voice shakes the rocks on the floor as I tremble in fear. He has no eyes; they descend into white nothingness. His long snout and gruelling teeth shed the blood of all those before who didn't make it to the Duat. I stutter. There are no words to describe how I feel. I have been a grave robber my entire life. It's the only way I can make a living. But I haven't experienced this. Never.

I stutter..."Anubis, the God of the De-Death and Funerals. I thought you were my -"

He cuts me off and snarls, "I am not a myth, boy; I am the keeper of souls. I send the dead to their final resting place, your life, like so many ancestors before you went through me."

The grimace in his voice shakes my very core. I feel small and helpless, and for once in my life, I regret any choice I've made. He comes with centuries of being a forgotten story or tale, but he is no tale. He is the beginning and the end of time.

As I try to find my bearings, I cry, "What do you want from me; I am nothing but a useless grave robber. I don't want to die."

With his fangs showing, Anubis replies, glaring at me, "You owe me your life, Cairo."

He slips into the sand, and it creates a whirl around the tomb. I jolt and open my eyes; I am in bed, with my clothes on, my satchel. Empty. No pure gold Ankh. I rub my eyes as if the image of Anubis would disappear. His voice echoes in the pits of my mind. Indeed, it was a dream, and I wouldn't be that stupid to believe it happened.

I stumble into my kitchen and try to be normal. I don't know how it can be. But life goes on. I go to my stupid little job, working in a mini mart in the streets of Cairo, selling fake tourist artifacts and hoping they pay ridiculous money for it. The city of Egypt—the one I'm named after. It hit around five, and I started revving my cheap little motorbike. As I drove Jazmine Perry, s4655928 through the bustling streets of my hometown, something odd caught my eye. My shadow reflected that of a jackal, I rubbed my eyes, and it changed back into my shadow. As I walk down the hallway to reach my apartment door, the lights flicker, and the shadow of Anubis reappears; fear jolts through my body, and my blood turns cold.

"You owe me your life Cairo. You have a new purpose in life. Not one of a low-life criminal. A life devoted to me..."

His voice echoes. As I slowly turn around to see him standing at the far end of the hallway, the lights flickering, creating a darkness that covers his body, and his white eyes peer through the smoke surrounding him. His gold headpiece and long hessian robes flow in mid-air as if there were no gravity.

I reply with caution, "I thought you were a dream. What do you require of me?"

Anubis' teeth shine through the shadows. He chuckles, "Oh, my naive child, have you never heard of avatars? Your body and soul belong to me. You will do my will on Earth and whatever I require of you."

He chuckles like a jackal too, “You’ll be the Amir Almawt, Prince of Death, and you will become the angel of death when I tell you. Anyone who you touch will die using my power. You have been chosen Cairo. I, Anubis, God of Death, have seen our power to combat physical and spiritual enemies...”

I stand in shock as I peer into the brass handle beside me. I’m wrapped in black cotton funerary dressing with silver details, and my hands are grasping a scythe and a sickle.

“What ... what is this? I don’t want to be some death prince.”

I glare at Anubis as he etches closer towards me from the darkness, “You will summon this when I send you off to do my work. You are mine, Cairo. You serve a greater purpose, serving me...”

Sand sweeps the hallway, and he disappears. My suit dissolves into the sands, and Anubis chuckles as he returns to the afterlife. I serve Anubis, I am enslaved to his power, and he owns me until I pay my debt to him. I don’t know how I got myself into this mess anyways,

I’m just some silly grave robber, not a superhero... Prince of Death? What am I? Something out of a comic? I scoff to myself.

Yet, here I stand, staring at the end of the hallway, my heart pounding with fear and uncertainty. I stumble back into my apartment and can’t help but be in disbelief. I look in the mirror as if I’m someone else. A stranger stared back at me with eyes haunted by shadows and a face marked by the weight of a thousand sins. I reach out to touch my reflection, hoping that I will wake up from this nightmare – as if this whole week will disappear.

I am the Amir Almawt, Prince of Death, Avatar of the God Anubis, and I kill whoever disobeys the will of the Gods or threatens the safety of the dead without fear or mercy.

Iesha Stewart

(Untitled)

“You’re disgusting. You make my stomach broil and gag at the back of my mouth, I can’t even look at someone like you.”

The black words seeped into every grimy hole, every crevice that marred the blackened brick wall. The graffiti was written in haste, large and stick-thin letters that seethed bitter vitriol. They were meant to be a punch – something that would hurt him and leave him as much of a wreck as the trash that littered the rundown alleyway. He could take it, he didn’t care for the opinion of others, much less a blank face scribbling on walls. But the tinier words, sprayed with care, thicker and paint running down in thin streams, nicked at his vision.

“And soon, even mum, dad, Begonia, Charvi, Bolin, Iseul – they’ll hate you too.”

He couldn’t bear the thought of their judgement.

He sluggishly stumbled down the stairs with the gusto of a zombie, wiping the line of drool that dribbled down his chin. Dragging his reddened eyes up, he met the gaze of his mum as she stood in the too brightly lit room, a chaotic symphony filling the room that grated on his ears – the tellie was the orchestrator, while the neighbour mowing his lawn the broken pianist and the barking dog the harsh trumpeter.

The world was too alive for him, who felt he was on Death’s doorway.

“Wei,” she began, her eyes sharp and sceptical. As she roved her gaze over his face, a smile graced her face, and she shone her all-too-familiar smile. The soft one, that was like pillowy clouds on a sunny day. “You’re up.”

He could only nod, pulling himself onto the kitchen stool, smacking his lips all the while. Ew, morning breath. He smelt like morning breath; his graphic tee, socks, hair, everything.

A napkin was pushed over to him, a single pill laying on top, with a glass of water soon following. “Again?” Was all she asked and he answered with a simple nod. She sighed as she ran a hand down through her hair, silently muttering “*Wǒ de tiān*,” he translated it to *Oh my skies*, “that’s it. We’re booking that appointment.”

It was something that they went on and off about for the past two weeks – apparently. His parent’s wanted him to visit a somnologist to address the growing night-terrors and he, of course, agreed – but the following morning, when he stumbled down the stairs once again, his mum ‘tsked’ while shaking her head, “I told you, you need to see a doctor,” she said in disappointment, and when he asked, “what’re you talking about?” She pointedly reminded that it was “your decision to not go – you practically begged not to go!”

He didn’t even remember that interaction.

“Please,” was all he said in response as she pulled out her phone – probably to dial his dad to snag a booking from the hospital’s somnologist.

She narrowed her eyes for a moment, “and a psychologist. Your papa knows a lot of good people at the hospital.” Phone pressed to her ear, she walked away into her room.

He stared through his lilac bangs as the door slid shut – not completely, there was a narrow gap in the opening. Eggshells, glass, porcelain, snowflakes; they were treating him like he’d break any minute. Maybe he really would. How many more times could he take someone giving him the most questionable look, trying to dig into his head about what he was thinking? Sometimes, they’ll comment on something he’d done the other day, and he could only respond in confusion when he said that he has no recollection of what they’re talking about.

He was an outsider, trapped behind glass as everyone gawked and whispered about him.

Nothing felt right anymore, not even water. Showers sent the strangest feeling through his body, something wriggling under his skin like a burrowing worm, digging deeper and deeper into his skin, sinews and even bone – it’s been a week since his last shower, his brown hair long since turning into a greasy mess. He didn’t even know when his hair’s ends started changing colours.

There was a sharp crack. Looking down, a sharp line raced its way across the glass’ surface.

He gently put the cup down, making his way back to his room – school can wait.

“Walk a mile in my shoes. You’ll get a glimpse of what Hell is like.”

The graffiti haunted his dreams – dreams that were all too real, the pain all too fierce as they wracked his body, even carrying into the waking world. His mind loved to hurt and loathed respite, it’d send rabid rats and ferocious leeches after him, tearing into his skin with the greed of Mammon. His blood painted the floor and the animals wore it like a symbol of pride with their wicked grins. Running was his only option, after an encounter left him with a gouged finger while swiping at them.

Whether it be a film studio, a museum, a jail or never-ending alleyway, the ever-darkening shadows stalked closer and closer, and he’d never get peace from humid, musty air or the squelching footsteps that followed behind him.

“I’m tired.” A vibrant ‘GREEN ROOM’ sign illuminated the painted words, scribbled next to the doorway. He peeked his head through; just broken mirrors and scattered make-up. He hugged the wall, travelling further.

“Everything would be EASIER if you GAVE UP.”

He stepped over a trolley, the wheels squeaking.

“I’m not saying it to be an ass, its just the truth. Because everything about you IS WRONG, EVEN THEY KNOW IT.”

His steps faltered slightly and he whipped his flashlight away from the wall.

“DON’T DENY IT. WHY DO YOU THINK SIS LOOKS AT YOU LIKE YOU’RE A FREAK.”

The air was humid, and it drowned his lungs. His throat swelled and choked him.

“YOU’RE THE REASON MUM AND DAD FIGHT AT NIGHT, THEY KNOW YOU’RE NOT RIGHT.”

His breathes echoed, they roared in his ears. He constantly blinked to clear his blurry vision.

“AND I KNOW EVERY SIN YOU’VE COMMITTED. I WILL TEAR EVERY BIT OF YOU DOWN TO EXPOSE YOUR HIDEOUS FORM TO EVERYONE.”

Please leave me alone.

A footstep; squelching like a waterlogged shoe. His white rubber sole peeked from the curtain of shadows, and he could hear the soft *plip, plip* of water droplets kissing the concrete floor. The light trembled in his hand, he firmly kept it pointed to the ground, focussing his gaze to the stained floor.

There was no sound to be heard, just the droplets of water. His breath stayed caught in his throat. On the floor by the shoe, a message was written in bold letters: “It’s nice to meet you.”

