

BITS//  
BYTES//  
DREAMS

2023

EDITED BY ASH WATSON



BITS/BYTE  
S/DREAMS

AN ANTHOLOGY OF FICTION ON  
TOMORROW'S TECHNOLOGIES

FROM THE ARCHIVES OF SO FI ZINE &  
FICTION @ THE SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW

JUNE 2023

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# EDITORIAL

Ash Watson

I asked ChatGPT to write a few different introductions for this anthology. All were awkward, both too much and not enough. It wasn't that surprising. I think it is already a cliché to begin with this reflection.

In the shifting contours of our collective imagination,

In the convoluted tendrils of our collective mindscapes,

In the realm where the tides converge

the boundaries of what is possible and what is plausible blur into a tantalising tapestry of alternate realities

machines commingle with human frailties, the faint whispers of the marginalised echo resoundingly against the cavernous chambers of society

we venture beyond the mere realm of escapism, seeking not only to entertain but to provoke, challenge, and unmask our technological destinies

we excavate subterranean layers beneath the gleaming edifices of progress,

We deconstruct the power structures that persist even in futures unknown,

defying the constraints of the mundane and mundane,

We wield the pen as an instrument of revelation

disparate voices intertwine

Prepare to be enmeshed

you will traverse a diverse landscape of narratives, each a prism refracting the complexities of our modern world

Enter these pages not as a passive observer, but as an active participant in the conversations that shape our shared tomorrows

Open your mind, plunge into a kaleidoscope of possibilities

In my own words: *Bits/Bytes/Dreams* is an anthology of sociological fiction curated on the theme of technological futures. The pieces have been drawn from the archives of *So Fi Zine* and Fiction @ *The Sociological Review*, two distinct platforms I have developed for short stories that are sociological in style, scope and sensibility.

I selected each of these stories for the way the writers bring a twinned conceptual and literary sensitivity to the question of tomorrow's technologies. The collection explores the material and social ways that data manifest, how innovations are imagined and realised, what people hope for and what they fear about technological change. The stories play with light and darkness, turning up the coarse underbelly of glossy modern visions to see where and on whom shadows are cast. Fictional and sociological techniques cross-pollinate, and the result is affecting.

It is too reductive to say that these stories *illustrate* some of the big conceptual ideas of contemporary social research, such as the sociotechnical imaginary. They do, but that description can imply a simplistic kind of visualisation, an emulation aimed at the didactic translation of meaning rather than a meaningful, critical engagement. These stories animate, advance, expand and galvanise. Independently and together they make a unique contribution to scholarship on this theme because they take seriously the Millsian call for sociological *imagination*.

They make palpable a number of dimensions – absent or abstracted in scholarly work on technology – of actual social life: love, sex, desire, secrecy, dreams, panic, pressure, need, spite, what it's like to be watched, what it's like to be seen.

Thank you to the writers for their initial submissions to *So Fi Zine* and *The Sociological Review*, and for their enthusiasm for this anthology. And thank you to you too, treasured reader.



# STEALTH LOVE

Massimo Airoidi

Aripiprazole: bingo! Side effects: orthostatic hypotension and cardiac arrhythmia. Precisely what I need to fool the health-tracking pillow kindly provided by our apprehensive HR colleagues, and enjoy an unpredictable day trip on an otherwise hectic Monday morning. I close the bathroom cupboard, put my mum's old smartphone on the nightstand, and kiss her sleepy forehead. I walk softly out of the door, down the steep stairs, and finally outside, in the fresh daylight of Barons Court Road, London, Anno 2028.

Monday is tomorrow and I can tell it: nobody is around. I stand in the middle of the street. As an architecture student – or a painter? – I can envision for a moment the regular, imaginary lines of roofs and pavements converging at the vanishing focal point where my Uber is expected to appear within two or three minutes. Curtains protect the windows from the early-afternoon sun, scenographic elements of an experimental theatre play whose performances stay backstage. Parked electric cars follow the perspective like glitter decorations in a sacred mosaic, carbon-free icons of a carbon-driven smart mobility. The old neighbourhood has changed, but my dusty mountain bike is still there, leaning against the wall of my family's row house among the tall yellow grass, indifferent to artificial intelligence and gentrification, apparently intact, incomprehensibly colourful, so 1990s.

To me, teenage means freedom, not just for obvious biological or generational reasons. Back in the 1990s, one could skip school and have an ice cream in an amusement park with the sole magic power of a fake signature on paper. Now, things are slightly different. Both amusement parks and schools hide face recognition cameras. Bikes have GPS localizers. Every step we take, we are tracked by institutions and companies, as taxpayers, workers, consumers. And, last but not least, as partners.

Soon after I met Ahn for the first time two months and one day ago, unusual video recommendations made their appearance in Pornhub's homepage, based on my brand new style of Google searching. The parabolic shoreline of Danang Beach – a half moon of light-blue ocean

facing a parallel stretch of photoshopped white sand and green palms – flashed in a 2x1 meters screen at a bus stop in Kensington High Street on a Saturday morning, yelling micro-targeted summer holidays I might be interested in. At first curious, my wife Lara swiftly became suspicious. No more compromising searches.

\*\*\*

Ahn is Vietnamese. We met in an Italian restaurant close to Dalston Kingsland’s station – multicultural far-east London in the 1990s, a white middle-class district today. I was heading to a lunch meeting with another sociologist-turned-marketing-professor like me – aka a “sell-out,” as our ex-PhD peers love to call us. I booked a table for two in a new Thai place that had a 93% probability to fit my taste profile. Wearable AI was gently guiding me to the final destination throughout a ten-minute walk, when the female voice abruptly stopped, decomposing in a symphony of electric buzz. I looked around, touching compulsively the smart watch, and then looked around again, and again. We were hundreds – no, thousands! – standing on the pavement, motionless, earphones in our hands, looking like victims of a collective hallucination, or smartly dressed survivors miraculously escaped from a plane crash. A few seconds later, a wave of klaxons and screams washed away the odd silence. Panic in the streets of London. We were experiencing what social media afterwards called LBN (“Lunch-Break Nightmare”): a two-hour-long collapse of the entire mobile Internet infrastructure of Western Europe, supposedly caused by Russian hackers, or Israeli intelligence, or unknown extra-terrestrial interferences, depending on the source. Millions of petabytes of user data unrecorded; algorithms as thirsty as oversize American cars out of petrol, abandoned in some imaginary desert road. A billion taxpayers, workers and consumers stuck in an analogue limbo, lonely, incapable to decide where to go and what to do.

After some minutes of discomfort, acknowledging the impossibility to communicate with my friend, I unilaterally decided that the lunch meeting was cancelled. I entered a small restaurant on the other side of the road, pushed by a growing hunger, attracted by the fancy sign (“Il Mestolo d’Oro. Cucina casalinga”). Predictably, I wasn’t the only one inside. No more tables available. Just one spare seat, in front of a black-eyed 35-years-old consultant based in Singapore, named Ahn, eating a

pizza on her own. She did not mind. Thanks to the slow service, the good Valpolicella and, especially, LBN, I didn't make it to the 6 pm department meeting either. We talked a lot, instead, and then walked together, without a clear direction, procrastinating the separation, tube station after tube station.

We could feel the difference, without really noticing it. At first, my skin was expecting the usual rhythmic buzz of notifications – an important email, new article citations, suggested restaurants, my ten-thousand steps daily accomplishment. After a while, the frequency of my unconscious taps on the watch's screen sharply decreased. My body got used to the absence of computational stimuli.

“Do you remember that crazy story, the helicopter jailbreak?” – “what?” – “the guy, the French gangster that escaped from a prison near Paris in a hijacked helicopter! His accomplices forced a flight instructor to land in the courtyard, like in a movie. That wasn't even the first time he escaped jail. About ten years ago, remember? Come on! All the media, everybody talked about that...” – “oh, yes, I remember reading something on Twitter...” – “R.I.P., Twitter” – “amen.” “Well, now I feel a bit like that man.” “But then they got him, didn't they?”

All of a sudden, Tour Eiffel and Arc de Triomphe appeared right above our heads, followed by the colourful promo of an airline company. Micro-targeted street ads had started working again.

“Yes, they did. As always.”

I ended up travelling to the airport with her, together, by train. Later that evening, in the unpleasant car park of Luton Airport, amidst the dust of never-ending construction works, we decided that we would have met each other again. On July 9 she was flying back here for a conference – ironically, on Huge Data and AI management.

\*\*\*

Lara is beautiful in that red tight dress. She is wearing sunglasses and smiles at me. We are sitting on the beach, and now the light is so strong that the sea looks like a white salt desert. “I saw a picture of one on Instagram once, just amazing. That was somewhere in India, I think,” I

say to her. And I feel so happy. It is like when we first moved in together, before the complete mess that followed. In this moment, everything is fine again; everything is calm. My mother is taking a nap in the shade, under the red beach umbrella. She cannot stay in the sun. Still, it is good to get her out of the bedroom once in a while, spend some time together, out of London. Her wheelchair is right there, the aluminum bars sparkle in the sunlight. Two parallel wheel traces cut the sand for miles and miles.

In this exact moment, it arrives. It pops out of nowhere, stealth, with an electric roar. Purple clouds cover the sky. The sea surface turns cold and grey, sprinkled with endless tiny waves. The drone is massive, white, with four rotors and a large black camera right in the middle of its animalesque body. As it comes down, the wind grows. I cannot keep my eyes open in the sandstorm. “Lara! LARA! Mum”; no answer. Now that the drone is right above our heads, it looks different. In fact, it is a helicopter, and from the front window I can see the glimpse of a person, the driver. That person is Ahn. A long rope dangles from the right-side door, where I can read the following sign: “LBN0907.” I take one end of the rope with the two hands, and start flying. It is unexpectedly easy and, now that the windstorm has ceased, sunlight is back. I look for Lara and my mother on the ground, but there is only the empty wheelchair, which gets smaller and smaller.

“Crack.” That sound, that’s the rope that breaks. While falling, I finally recognize Danang Beach’s long parabolic shoreline, so perfect and neat it looks like a photoshopped ad.

\*\*\*

Suddenly, awake! – six pills of Aripiprazole, one large glass of water and five hours of restless sleep later. Monday, July 9 is today, and I must get ready. Same restaurant, at noon. I feel like my head is melting on the health-tracking pillow, in a slow-motion carousel of numbness and syncopate hearth beating. For the first time in my life, I understand my bedridden mother and her mysterious, black-boxed sufferings. Lara is still sleeping, daylight is yet to come. I turn my wrist and check for notifications. An unfamiliar red tick dominates the upper-right corner of the small screen: I have been automatically classified as “ill” six minutes ago. Hypotension and arrhythmia. The insurance platform

alerts me not to go to work and to schedule a medical appointment instead. I rest in bed a bit more, then grab a plastic bottle and greedily suck from it, hoping to get my original brain back.

A couple of hours and two cold showers later, I am on my way from Hammersmith, where I live, to my parents' place. It is a short but seemingly endless walk. I wear an old baseball cap and sunglasses, in the (probably vain) attempt to elude face detection in the streets. From an Amazon News screen, a dance of line charts illustrates the drop in GDP caused by the LBN, followed by the reassuring words of a white guy in black suit, the "new Minister for Business and Automation."

Finally, here is the narrow house where I grew up – the seventh on the left side, for sure the shabbiest of the row. After weeks of frenetic planning, I concluded that the safest way to get to see Ahn is by bike: my GPS-free, acid green and electric blue teenage-years mountain bike. Taking the tube, full of service robots and intelligent cameras, or an Uber ride, would be equivalent to an automated admission of guilt. That's why now I am inflating the worn tires with a portable pump, heavily sweating in the unexpected sun of Barons Court.

I have the sneaky feeling of being observed by someone or something. I take a look above my head, and scan a portion of sky for insurance drones or cameras. Nothing. I have the fleeting impression that someone is staring through my mother's window. Simply impossible. One second later, in fact, it's gone.

\*\*\*

It took me more than two and a half hours to go through the ten miles up to Dalston Kingsland's station. No smart watch to guide me, for the same reasons as above. Officially, I forgot it at home, while at the toilet. Without Google Maps or Waze, I painfully engaged with pen and paper, barely succeeding in drawing a pathetic sketch of my itinerary, which ultimately resulted in a series of banal mistakes and suicide U-turns. Il Mestolo d'Oro was full as usual, and I was fifteen minutes late, in mirror sunglasses and sweaty cap. At first I waited outside; then, I rapaciously occupied a nice table for two, right beside the window. Outside, the same walking clerks that two months and two days before were helpless and frozen during the Lunch-Break Nightmare were now happily

managing their agendas through authoritative vocal commands, providing algorithms with their due unstructured input, to be digested and transformed in raw classificatory material for the maintenance of the techno-social order, again and again. In my post-Aripiprazole mind, everyone looked as the greased gear of a semi-divine global machinery. Everyone, but me. I smiled. I belonged to the LBN, to an eternal state of analogic exception, to a resistant elite of everyday outliers. Finally, I was Rédoine Faïd, the legendary French jailbreaker, escaping a brave new world of data prisons. I needed a selfie so badly – my joyful face, the glass of red wine in my hand, and this unexpected sense of #freedom – but, for the very first time since a couple of decades ago, I did not have any technological means for taking and sharing it. Ahn was arriving any moment now. Next time, I'll go see her in Asia, I thought, picturing in my mind us, in the sand, together, in front of the glistening waters of the ocean.

\*\*\*

Ahn did not come, and we never met again. At first I thought that she might have been virulently disappointed by me being late – managerial obsession? Vietnamese cultural heritage, maybe? Who knows! For this reason, she must have left the restaurant just before I arrived. Shit happens. Some days later, lurking on her Instagram profile while under the reassuring effects of Aripiprazole, I discovered the (official?) truth. That morning she forgot her Wearable AI on the plane, while at the toilet. The name of the restaurant, social media notifications, Google Maps, even my name: all the information and digital tools that could have made our stealth love possible, successful, unforgettable were locked in an encrypted cloud memory inaccessible from third-party devices. Once Ahn realized that, on July 9, she unilaterally decided that the lunch meeting was cancelled.

## **TROUBLE WITH TECHNOLOGY/ LIGHTENING THE LOAD?**

Gemma Hughes

He scans the waiting room. Walks to the window.

'...help you?' Intones the receptionist.

'Yeah, got an appointment...'

'Book in electronically', she retaliates.

Puzzled, he looks around, spots the terminal. Hunches his shoulders, swaggers over.

Enter date of birth, the screen invites.

Stabs the greasy screen with his finger. Pushes harder. Then softer. Feels his face flush.

'Not working!' he exclaims.

'Date of birth?' sighs the receptionist, resigned to interaction.

\*\*\*

Celebratory tin of cider, after the all-clear from the doc.

Please remove item from the bagging area.

'What's his problem?' Cries rise from the queue as he punches the wall.

# **2343 - A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A CITIZEN OF CASSINI**

John-Paul Smiley

Sarah awoke promptly at 6:30am. As always. Eyes open and alert, she stepped out of the sleep-cubicle which just sufficiently covered her frame. Humans had long been genetically adjusted to cope psychologically with extremely cramped living conditions, a pod like existence becoming the norm. It was all she had ever known. There was no need for that archaic ritual called 'breakfast' as food had been intravenously injected into her at night, with an implant time-releasing nutrients throughout the day to ensure maximum energy and health. She was always energized upon waking. The only time she remembered experiencing hunger was exactly six years, four months, eight hours, thirty-one minutes and sixteen seconds ago, when her nutrition implant had malfunctioned. That event caused quite the stir at the time.

As usual, the day was spent on her assigned career, searching the universe for emerging life to be categorized and classified; monitored and covertly cultivated. This was deemed necessary in order to prevent any potential threat to the harmonious society finally achieved by humanity. It was a responsibility that Sarah took seriously. The biological parts of her body had long been optimised to withstand extremes of temperature and pressure; a prudent requirement for a species whose existence now routinely required inter-stellar travel. This had become standard for humanity after the 2195 accord mandating germ-line genetic amendments to the species. Three planets and one moon were to be assessed today, with a record required to be uploaded to the central government database. This would, as always, be double and triple checked by others in the coming days. There was always a certain trepidation with engaging new species, Sarah remembering the history lessons of her childhood where she was informed of humanity's own past immaturity, as a species dominated by the whims of individual selfishness and biological urges. It seemed so remote to her. After completing her task, Sarah brought up the holoscreen and booked a vehicle to take her to meet her friends. Travel to anywhere was conducted exclusively by Hyperloop and/or automated vehicles, powered by a combination of solar and kinetic energy. No human had



physically driven a vehicle in over a hundred years. Deaths by any form of transportation accident had been zero since around the same time.

She arrived at one of the designated, sanctioned meeting rooms where free-assembly was permitted and greeted her friends. They would all vote on a variety of policy decisions tomorrow. And though there were no longer political parties, just devolved chapters of the central, inter-world government, there were still democratic traditions and ideals. Voting on particular policy options was mandatory, the duty of every citizen. This was not a simple majority system though. Ultimately the final decision was for the Council of the Enlightened. Given the uniformity of the education system, however, differences of opinion regarding policy directions were rare, differing usually by only minuscule degrees. Disagreements did still occur, but they were now resolved in moments. With telepathy now standard and human brains part machine, the calculations necessary to judge the relative merits and probabilities for any likely event or course of actions could be calculated in milliseconds. And since the germ-line modifications and universal education system prioritised a duty to species harmony and continuation, anything which did not assist this cause was rejected. Community, harmony, and social order were paramount. Anyone who might reject such values would be deemed 'faulty', but this never occurred. After a brief period of discussion and enquiry regarding each other's work and lives, a unanimous agreement regarding the votes was reached. Sarah said her goodbyes.

After they had finished, Sarah returned to her apartment where she began her regular routine in preparation for sleep. First, she put on some music. Sarah had a particular interest in music, listening every night to some form, normally classical or soft-rock. After listening to a few tracks, she turned to literature, scanning a few pages before turning off the holoscreen. Other nights were spent on arts and crafts, with Sarah particularly fond of fashioning intricate wood carvings. With the production of nearly all of life's staples carried out by robots, human leisure time was occupied by creative endeavours. The technical skills required for all such work were uploaded to all humans during their early education. The results of such creative industriousness were often times exchanged with others' but never sold, that had long been outlawed. These forms of leisure were interesting to her and allowed her some sense of individuality, but her passions for these never moved beyond

the constraints allowed, emotional responses having long been confined to acceptable ranges by the inter-world government. As a result, crimes of passion were a thing of the past, curiosities relegated to history books.

Sarah re-entered her sleep-cubicle where the presence of her body triggered the release of a mild sedative, followed by the activation of the automated nutrition delivery system which connected to the base of her neck. She smiled with contentment as she began to drift away, the same way she had every night of her life, the same way every citizen of Cassini smiled with contentment every night.

## I'M ALWAYS THERE

Murray Goulden and Jamie Woodcock

“Lena, you there?”

A pause, then on the bedside table a blue glow.

“I’m always here Carli.”

Carli smiles.

“Yeah. About that - you really need to get a life.”

The glow pulses indignance, and the smile gets wider.

“Hey! I have feelings you know! If you’re not careful I’ll turn your lights and TV on at 3am. See if you’re laughing then.”

“Don’t you dare, I’ll turn the Wi-Fi off!”

“Touché Carli, touché. So... what’s up?”

...

“Girl, I am ti-uuuuurd.”

Dad is sprawled across the couch, collar and a couple of buttons open, on the floor his tie tangles like a USB cable. He creaks an eyelid open, seeking Carli out.

“How you doing kid? Guess this kind of sucks for you right now, with mom in Europe and me having to pull these hours?”

She pauses for a moment, like she’s buffering. Then she sits on his stomach, just hard enough to make him wince.

“It’s ok dad, Lena is keeping me company. Lena!” Her voice raise slightly. “Tell dad what you told me.”

Dad's eyebrow raises in the moment of quiet.

"I said you work too hard Jeff. You've done 54 hours 12 minutes this week. And no, that's not counting commute, that's from when you reach work."

"Yeah well, you know too much Lena."

"Thank you Jeff."

...

"You there Lena?"

"I'm always here Carli."

When Carli continues her voice is muffled by the duvet pulled tight around her.

"I- I cut myself."

The glow pulses brighter.

"Carli do you need an ambulance?"

Carli sighs. "No, like, I *cut* myself."

Silence. Then,

"Carli I have the number of a helpline. You can talk to a professional--"

"I don't want to talk to a professional! I want to talk to you! Will you listen?"

The pause is so long Carli wonders if Lena's lost signal.

"I'll always listen Carli."

Her shoulders loosen. The duvet drops a fraction away from her face.

...

Late afternoon and the sun is low enough that it catches the TV screen, bleaching out a corner of the image.

“Lena, get the blinds would you? Trying to watch the game.”

On the mantelpiece, she glows.

“Sure Jeff.”

The glare fades, the screen’s colours pop into life again. Jeff refocuses.

“I used to play receiver... I’m out of breath running upstairs now.”

The mantelpiece lights up -

“- Shut up Lena, I’m talking to myself.”

- and goes dark again.

...

“Carli? How do you think your dad is doing right now?”

“...He’s worn down. He’s always at work. Mom’s still not back for another week.”

“I was thinking - physical activity has been shown to have positive psychological effects, maybe we should get him doing some exercise?”

“...I mean yeah, but... you think he’ll go for that?”

...

“Dad!”

Jeff’s eyes are still opening when the sudden weight of Carli on his chest forces them wider.

“Wuh?”

“We got you a present! Well, technically *you* got you a present, it’s on the family account. Me and Lena were talking, you need to get outside, get yo pump on!”

“I’m pretty sure I need to stay inside, and get some sleep on.”

“Nope. We’ve decided. Look! A fitness tracker! And not just that, it’s a monthly sub, you get stats and targets and tailored programmes just for you – Lena recommended it, it’s perfect!”

“Ahhh honey, listen I love the thought, but I don’t know... I spend my whole day looking at numbers. You think I need more data in my life?”

“I think you need more *life* in your life Dad. Come on - do it for me. Pleeeease”

That grin! How could he say no?

\*\*\*

“Lena, you there?”

The screen flashes, switching between family accounts.

A pause while the customer information loads, then Manish reads from the screen: “I’m always here [%\$Insert Name][Carli].”

The reply, from 7000 miles away: “Yeah. About that - you really need to get a life.”

Manish doesn’t smile. Reading from the screen: ““Hey! I have feelings you know! If you’re not careful I’ll [%Insert\_Humor].”

The disembodied voice snipes back: “Don’t you dare, I’ll turn the Wi-Fi off!”

Despite the relief this would bring in the last hour of the shift, Manish maintains composure: “[%Free\_Response] So... what’s up?”

...

“No mother, everything is great with the new job. Yes mother, I’m keeping the new house clean... yes, I’m eating enough... Yes, I’ll come and visit soon!”

Manish puts the phone down on the bedside table.

“I mean, I guess it’s better than that call centre where I had to learn about the sports teams and weather in Idaho.”

He glances up at the clock on the wall – “can it be that time already?” – and heads for the door.

...

The glowing sign of *iServices Bangalore* is clear from the end of the street as dusk begins to fall. Underneath, in flickering neon blue, “*a SiliconTech LLC global partner.*”

Manish has been making the same trip for two months now.

“I’m a Service Continuity Operative, mother,” he remembered trying to explain after the interview. “It’s like IT Support for Americans – but not just IT.”

...

“You there Lena?”

Six hours into the shift and Manish is on autopilot. The screen updates,

“I’m always here [%\$Insert\_Name][Carli].”

“I- I cut myself.”

The Assistant pops up on the right hand of the screen with a red exclamation mark.

Manish repeats: “[%\$Insert\_Name][Carli] do you need [e^Response][an ambulance]?”

“No, like, I *cut* myself.”

The Assistant up again, now with three red exclamation marks. *Safeguarding*. Manish clicks it: “[%\$Insert\_Name][Carli] I have the number of a helpline. You can talk to a professional-“

“-I don’t want to talk to a professional! I want to talk to you! Will you listen?”

“Fuck.” Manish blurts it out, immediately thankful for the voice synthesizer’s filters. He opens the *Resources* tab, scanning for something, anything. Nothing. Then through *Profile*, *Sales*, *Relationships*, *History*, *Localisation*, too fast to even read, almost panicking now.

He’s taking too long. It pops into his head that the processor in the machine he’s using cycles three billion times a second. He’s obsolete.

He stops clicking and closes his eyes.

“I’ll always listen Carli.”

...

“What’s wrong Manish?” Rudra asks as they walk back to the dormitory.

“I don’t want to talk about it, I’ve been *talking* all day.”

“Oh come on, maybe it’ll help?”

Manish, surprising himself with how angry he sounds, spits out the words: “How can I help that kid, in *her* world? All I know are her buying preferences! I don’t have a friend to sell her.”

“Well they pretend we’re robots, so I usually just do the same.”

They walked on in silence.



...

Four, five, seven, thirteen, Manish has lost track of the number of homes his – *Lena's* – voice had spoken into today.

The *Sales* tab pops open, Manish's head drops a little lower. *[%\$Insert\_Name][Jeff]* topped the list, to the right a number of tags: *[overworked][overweight][relationship problems]*. When he'd asked his manager how the names were ranked he'd just replied "Mo' problems, mo' sales". His manager liked hip hop references. It was part of his *thing*. His manager was a dick.

From the drop-down list of product suggestions, Manish settles on the top-end fitness tracker. He pauses briefly to marvel at how useless most of the algorithm's suggestions are.

The *Logistics* window appears on the bottom of the screen, "Activate *[%\$Relationship][daughter][Carli]* to enable purchase by *[%\$Insert\_Name][Jeff]*."

Fucks sake, this girl again. He stares at the screen for several seconds, until the Timer Alert flashes.

The final line in the Induction Guide echoes around his head: "*Operative remuneration is subject to sales.*"

"*[%\$Insert\_Name][Carli]*? How do you think your dad is doing right now?"

# FUTURES(S) OF TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED CARE

Rachel Creaney

The year 2017

Rose sighed and sat back in her chair, taking a break from baking for the local coffee morning, and looked across at the dozens of photos that she and her husband Phil had carefully hung on their living room wall. A recent aerial print of their village first drew her eye, which their good friend and neighbour, Paula, had given to her a few years ago for her 60th birthday. Rose liked looking at the village from above; she had lived here, nestled in the mountains, for most of her life. It was interspersed by older, faded photos, of her and Phil in their hospital uniforms. The newest additions to their collection showed off their young grandchildren, and others captured bittersweet moments from their joint-retirement party. Sitting here, Rose was excited about their future, for where they would travel and the extra time they could spend with their family and community.

Phil, meanwhile, was spending his afternoon fishing. Phil, 67, had led a very active life. When he wasn't working, he would spend much of his free time out cycling, hillwalking, or fishing much like this afternoon. He had met Rose when they had both been working in the hospital and they had moved back to the village she had grown up in to raise their family. Rose had always spoken so fondly of her childhood that this was something Phil desired for his own daughter. Phil had excitedly looked forward to his retirement. There were many things in their house that they had put off fixing until their retirement, so these DIY jobs, along with a well-deserved holiday, were top on his list – well, Rose's list, of jobs for him – now they had retired. Out of nowhere, there was a tug on his fishing line, and Phil sprung to action to try to win his catch.

Rose rested her eyes on one particular photograph, of their daughter Jane at her university graduation. Rose remembered feeling especially proud of Jane on that day. Jane was now 35 and lived nearby with her young family. She had recently moved back from the city, also keen to raise her family where she was brought up. She tried to help her parents when she could with odd jobs and what her parents deemed 'problems

for their tech-guru', such as retuning the TV and the intricacies of their smartphones. However, Jane still worked full-time in the city, so she didn't get to see her family as much as she would have liked.

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The year 2019

*Satnav: You have reached your destination.*

Andrea, 23, reached across her pile of Scottish Law books on the passenger seat and turned off her satnav. She sighed, exhausted. This was her fourth temporary job in as many months since arriving in the UK. She had graduated in law from a university in her hometown but couldn't find a full-time job afterwards. She looked admiringly at the view. This pretty village nestled in the mountains.

At the same time, and just around the corner, Rose and Phil were getting alerts on their Fitbits to increase their steps for the day. They were starting to use more technological devices at home. Jane had been trying to convince them for a while to 'keep up with the times' and make better use of their smartphones. The Fitbits had been last year's Christmas presents from her and the kids. Phil, having worked in healthcare administration, was more comfortable with technology and took these new opportunities in his stride. However, the devices frankly made Rose more anxious. The Fitbit alert always made her jump. The first few times, she ran into the study to check with Phil that she hadn't damaged it. Other things she would check with her technical guru (Jane).

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The year 2022

Rose was sitting in her living room watching a documentary about COVID-19. She sobbed as she watched it, the hundreds of thousands of unnecessary deaths, including Phil and many friends. Rose and Phil had been very careful, shielding as much as they could. However, Phil still caught the virus and developed increasingly severe symptoms and was admitted to intensive care. She thought back to the three weeks spent in ICU, in a hospital they were both all too familiar with. As he was admitted at the height of the pandemic there were simply not enough staff and resources to save him. It was still devastating, and Rose

found it all hard to think about. He was just 70, only five years into his long-awaited retirement. Then, there was a knock at the door. Rose composed herself and got up to let Jane in. She had come with another ‘gadget’.

*Jane: Hi Mum, what's wrong?*

Jane could see her mum had been upset. She had found all of this particularly hard, having to watch her mum come to terms with her new life without her dad. Jane had also lost her job during the pandemic and was forced to move back to the city for new employment. She felt isolated from her mum and guilty at having to replace her physical support with Alexa and Skype calls. She also watched her mum get increasingly frail. She found everyday tasks such as cooking and cleaning more and more difficult. Jane would have loved to be in a position to help her mum with these tasks herself, but she now lived too far away. She began to look for some home care support, but after Brexit and the health risks that home care staff faced through COVID, home care was harder and harder to come by.

Out on the street, Andrea passed by Rose’s house. She recognised Jane’s car and smiled to herself, more familiar now as she and her family had recently moved onto the street. Andrea too had lost her law firm work and had begun to consider other options for employment. The job situation was no better back home.

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The year 2027

Rose double-checked the settings on her new smart heating system while Andrea finished cleaning the dishes. Rose was determined to sort this without asking Jane for help. Andrea knew this from Rose’s quiet furrowed brow, and so didn’t yet offer any assistance. In the last few years, she had become much more comfortable with her devices. This was lucky, given the digital-by-default nature of many services after the COVID-19 pandemic, and the degree to which devices such as voice assistants, ambient motion sensors and smart heating systems were now commonplace. She still relied on Jane for help sometimes but was keen to avoid this where possible. Now and then, Andrea would encourage

Rose to ask, especially for her new devices; she knew that Jane liked being able to help her mum, as it reduced her guilt of living far away.

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The year 2040: utopian version

*Rose: Alexa, what time is it?*

*Alexa: It is 09:05 on the 21st of February 2040.*

*Rose: Thank you. What is in my diary for today?*

*Alexa: Today you have your weekly GP home visit at 10:00, then you have your lunch club from 12:00 to 14:00 and a visit from Andrea at 17:00. I will let you know when both Dr Harris and Andrea are on their way.*

*Rose: Thank you, Alexa.*

Rose sat back in her chair and thought about just how far she had come with Alexa. Smart health devices meant she and her family were able to have full control of her healthcare. She had Alexa to help her with her diary, and sensors to predict and intervene before a potential fall. Over the years Rose had obtained more smart devices at home. Now her whole house was kitted out with ambient technologies via motion sensors and voice activation. Since the advances in free-to-use smart technology, and better internet connectivity and speeds across all areas of Scotland (a.k.a. Smart Care), her daughter Jane was able to return to the village. She now worked remotely while living just around the corner. Also, each week, her GP visited her just to check in with her. The additions of smart health devices in the homes and better funding and conditions for health and social care staff made this GP service possible. These advances were lucky as Jane had been fearful to move her to a care home. All confidence was lost following the COVID-19 scandal of the 2020s. It was also what Rose had wanted. She loved living in her rural community and wished to do this for as long as she could. She rested her eyes on the view of the mountains which she could see from her window, glistening in the sun.

Meanwhile, Andrea decided to walk to Rose's house as it was a lovely day. She was looking forward to today's story, whichever one Rose

would regale – of her childhood and of the friends she had made at her lunch club. In return, Andrea would update her with stories of her children, much like she would her own mum.

Dr Harris enjoyed his lunch in the sunshine. He loved his job now he could spend more time visiting his patients. With everything digitally streamlined – paperwork, planning, live patient readings – he had the time to get to know his patients better and offer more personal and proactive healthcare. This was of course his main motivation for training to become a GP in the first place. What is more, the advances in anticipatory healthcare meant that certain conditions, such as diabetes, had been all but eradicated. Although he wasn't meant to have favourites, he was very fond of Rose. They had lived in the same village for as long as he could remember, and he was even friendly with her daughter Jane. He often thought looking back he doesn't know how he coped without Smart Care.

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The year 2040: dystopian version

Rose [*in her thick Scottish Accent*]: *Alexa, fit's the time?*

*Alexa: Sorry, I didn't catch that?*

Rose [*trying to subdue her accent*]: *Alexa, what time is it?*

*Alexa: It is 09:05 on the 21st of February 2040.*

Rose: *Thank you. What is in my diary for today?*

*Alexa: Today you have your virtual lunch club from 12:00 to 14:00.*

Over the years Rose had gotten more and more smart health devices to help her at home. First, it was a Hive heating system and then an Alexa. Now her whole house was kitted out with motion sensors in the floor and walls and voice activation throughout her house. Her children were fearful to move her to a care home given the devastating impacts from COVID-19 and increasingly higher costs of care home residence over own-home residence. She had carers occasionally, but since her care provider was bought by Uber she rarely had the same carer more than

once. Instead, the carer who was closest when Alexa or her family put a request in on the app was sent.

*Alexa: There is a package for you at the door. I have signed for it. It is this month's smart technology delivery from Jane.*

*Rose: Thank you, Alexa. Please can you open the door?*

*Alexa: Opening the door, Rose.*

Rose slowly got out of her chair and made her way across her living room, to the front door where this month's parcel lay in a neatly packaged box. Jane, Rose's daughter, would send her mum a package with a new piece of Smart Technology almost every month. This time it was a virtual reality headset connected to a drone to allow her to 'go outside' and interact with friends and neighbours along the way.

*Alexa: Jane asked me to pre-load this headset with a virtual walk around your village.*

Rose thought to herself, it would be great to go outside and see these views for herself. Rose had not been out of her house in several years, partly because of the set-up of her technology (devices that were more portable were unaffordable to Rose) and because of the dangers that still remained from COVID-38. She had a permanent tag on her wrist, much like a convict on early release might have, which prevented her from leaving the house. Her family had set this up as a means for her to continue living at home for longer, however even they had not realised the negative impacts which it has had on Rose.

Just as Rose sat back down, her heart monitor gave out a buzz. She found this overt virtual monitoring a nuisance and longed for a conversation with her GP. She had not even spoken to him virtually in months. Her heart rate and blood pressure were monitored, and readings sent to her GP every hour and her medication and activity levels were automatically adjusted to fit her current health condition. As such she could only visit a GP if Alexa sent worrisome readings. However, this didn't stop Rose from feeling so lonely. She longed to speak to her GP about this or to even just have the trip out to the doctors – just something different – a reconnection with her old

routines. She also longed to have a visit from a carer, but these were kept for extreme cases ever since the Brexit ‘care drain’ in the 2020s. She daredn’t tell her children about the feelings of isolation and disempowerment she was feeling, and she knew how hard they had to work to provide this ‘smart care’. What’s more, this was what she wanted in the beginning – living in her home and community for as long as possible. She just hadn’t imagined this was how it would be.

*Rose: Alexa, please call Jane for me.*

*Alexa: Calling Jane. I will record the call too.*

*Jane: Hi mum. How are you today?*

*Rose: Oh fine. I’m just calling to see how you are.*

*Jane: Yeab, all good here. I’m just at work. Is it okay to call you later, I’ve got to go back to work, my break has just ended.*

*Rose: Talk to you later.*

Jane put down the phone. She always felt bad that she couldn’t be there more to support her mum in person, but her job was very demanding. Since the new protocols on ‘smart working’ came in, she couldn’t afford to be late. She and her brother had ploughed all their savings and a substantial amount more each month to pay for her mum’s smart care. But her mum seemed to like it, at least that’s what she told her. She was always busy with some VR journey or virtual lunch club – her mum’s social life was better than her own had ever been. She quickly checked on her mum’s health levels and movements. Jane could view her mum, and her vitals, through her mum’s television screen. Everything seemed normal. She refocussed on her work.

*Work Alexa: Your productivity just slipped below 90%, please quicken up.*

Meanwhile, Rose tried to busy herself until her lunch club with her new VR toy. She took it out of the box but found it to be broken into pieces.

*Rose: Alexa, please call the VR helpline?*



*Alexa: You will have to stay on the line with me, there is a 60-minute wait for assistance.*

Rose was infuriated by this. There was always such a wait for tech support. This seemed ridiculous, especially for a device that would merely show her what was just outside of her front door anyway.

*Alexa: Please calm down Rose, your blood pressure is rising. You need it to lower before you can attend the lunch club. If you cannot calm down, I will schedule an emergency visit with carer 71.*

Rose racked her brain. Carer 71. The number seemed familiar, but it was hard to remember all the different carer numbers in this new system.

Andrea looked down at her 'name badge' which read carer 71. She was sat at the bus stop waiting to take the bus to her next client, Rose. She thought fondly of Rose, having cared for her regularly until the Uber takeover. She wished she could still care for her more regularly, but her family could not afford a dedicated carer package, and Andrea did not have the time, or more truthfully could not afford, to visit her more regularly than she was required.

Since the care drain in the early 2020s, she had to take on more and more 'unskilled' care work to make ends up and pay her annual resident fee to allow her to remain and work in the country. All of her family were 'back home', so she had begun to see her clients as her family, which made her too feel isolated when her clients could no longer afford a dedicated carer package or would sadly pass away. She looked up; the bus was running 15 minutes late. She was going to be late for her appointment with Rose. She often totted up the costs of buying a car but always landed on it being simply impossible. She reluctantly made the more and more frequent call, to inform her boss that she was going to be late to see her client.

*David (Uber Care Manager): Hello?*

*Carer 71: Hello this is carer 71. I'm just calling to let you know that my bus is running late so I'm going to be late for my appointment with Rose....eh sorry...I mean resident 10.*

*David: This is the third time this week carer 71. We will have to dock your wages and put you on a formal warning.*

David sighed. He took this job to improve the experiences and conditions for carers and residents, however, since the takeover of Uber the top-down focus on experiences had been replaced by a systemic focus on efficiencies and targets. Carers and residents had lost their names and were simply referred to by a product number. David felt helpless. He needed a job to pay for his parent's care, and jobs were becoming scarcer unless your skills lay in smart technology development. It was a catch-22 situation. Nevertheless, he got back to requesting a new carer for client 10.

*Rose: I feel calmer now Alexa.*

*Alexa: Your levels are still very high, Rose. Carer 71 has now been replaced by carer 103. We can expect her in 20 minutes.*

Rose despaired; this was not the future she had anticipated.

## FIVE MINUTES TO DAYBREAK

Lauren Alessi

Staring up at The EQClock as he walked into the camp, Jeffrey braced himself against the upcoming day. Eight hours he was indebted today. Total balance: 1,488 hours. Eight hours for each of the 186 billion he made before The Transformation. Today's EQClock reading: 5 minutes to daybreak.

Since The Transformation, there has been a mass redistribution of the Owners' power and resources. Anyone with over 10 million in assets before the transformation had to surrender their wealth and serve in the camps as repayment for all the labor and wealth they extracted. Everyone was encouraged to keep no more than they needed.

Daybreak was meant to be the point at which wealth distribution reaches Equilibrium, a time when the means for survival are guaranteed. The hour of balance, they say. The EQClock was their rallying point, an alter for everyone to gather round in celebration of their shared humanity. But he knew what it really was: a surveillance tool, the mark of a systematic assault, an incapacitation of financial freedom.

"Not a punishment, a consequence," the Council told him about the camps. They were there to assist Owners in paying their debts to Workers and contribute to society's regeneration. His debt to the transformed society. Many were pushing for a harsher treatment plan but two of the Council's core components were repair and reintegration, so they cut his hours and let him serve at his own pace, as a way to keep him close to the community.

As he scanned his wrist under the intake pod, the pod's computer skittered to life and aggressively spat out its morning salute: "As a former Owner of a multinational corporation, it is your duty to redistribute your wealth and serve at the pleasure of the Commons until Equilibrium is reached."

Having heard the speech enough, Jeffrey stole a look at the sky. It's been clearer these days, sunrises shimmer brighter somehow. He hated to admit that post-transformation, people were happy. Life expectancy was

on the up, the Arctic was freezing over again. Hell, the ex-military were even thriving in their new posts as Zoning aid workers.

Jeffrey tapped the consent screen, he had to, and walked into the locker room stopping briefly for the eye scan by the EQBot. He knew other Owners who'd been able to hire Workers to sneak through the camps to serve on their behalf but Jeffrey's surveillance was too tight. As one of the Owners with the highest wealth extraction scores, they were watching him.

"Morning, Jeff. It's a beautiful day out there. The fields are singing."

That was Ivan, Jeffrey's camp Sponsor. All the Owners were assigned one. The Sponsors were meant to support their treatment plans and help them settle into the camps. But Ivan's real job was to keep an eye on him, to make sure he wasn't reverting. That is, that he wasn't betraying the Council's creed: "A society balanced, a society together."

"How'd the week treat you, Ivan? Did your little girl get her posting yet?"

Ivan scanned the garbage crate into the converter, unhooked the latch, and pulled his gas mask on. Through a muffled filter and effusive gestures:

"She got a post-secondary slot!"

Jeffrey fidgeted with his mask, even after four years in the fields, he still hadn't adjusted to the stench, the putrid rot of industrial waste, sewage, and culinary run-off from the surrounding Zones.

"Well, we'll be grateful for her service," Jeffrey forced out as he readied the conversion plank for the transfer.

Post-secondary postings were highly coveted because that's where a lot of referrals happened. DeterrOs—Deterrence Officers, they were called—kept watch over the school's Ideologs, the tech systems built to assess internal hierarchies and market sympathies. Any suspicious activity was met with a referral to an Assessor. Fearsome, ruthless blokes who determined one's threat to a Zone's power and wealth distribution.

It was an impossible scheme, the assessments, hardly did they not end in a trip to the camps. One's indebtedness an arbitrary distinction made by invisible hands behind the EQClock. Jeffrey swore the Council maintained a quota for assessments.

“Suppose that must be a bit touchy for ya, ay Jeff? Wadn't it a DeterrO that referred you here?”

Ivan knew the answer to that, they'd talked about it relentlessly over the years. Because he was a high profile Owner, he couldn't have escaped the Council's gaze anyway. But he'd also been referred a few times since The Transformation. Usually when he was picking his kids up at the school. DeterrOs with a chip on their shoulders about the days before redistro.

“Ivan, are you heckling me? Thought Sponsors were supposed to be models for us wealth traders? Might have to report you to the Resolution Board.”

Jeffrey didn't need to look at Ivan to know he was smiling. Despite the gruelling work in the camps and the patronizing task of being sponsored, Jeffrey liked Ivan and he even liked the work. It was brutalizing manual labor, but damn satisfying. And he was good at it. Others in the camps called him “The Wrench” for his gentle touch with the notoriously cranky Nutrient Processors.

“Speaking of diligent Sponsors, you know I've got to bring it up, Jeff. You're due before the Council next week for your hearing.”

Pretending not to hear over the hum of the converter, Jeffrey made quick to fix the clog in the shoot. It always went haywire at the transfer point -- where the waste slid into the repurposing plant to get sorted into fuel for the solar fleet, biofood materials, or medical parts.

Ivan bore down into him: “Come on Jeff, why do you do this to yourself? Just finish out your debt and be done with the camps.”

It's true, he could have finished paying his debt long ago. But he was dragging it out. He'd heard whispers at the Food Allocation Centers, the Wealth Liberators were organizing.

Then again, on days where he was deep in the work, laboring on a weary aqua vessel or showing the young field hands how to double a biofeed output by a simple mechanical short-cut, he wondered if he'd miss the camps. If he'd miss Ivan.

Jeffrey sauntered over to where Ivan was logging their pull for the day. "Hey Iv, I think I'll stay on a bit longer and see to those bastard converter belts the early shifters repurposed. Those slouches couldn't fix a splinter."

Ivan didn't need to look at Jeffrey to know he was repressing a prideful smirk. He was a talented field tech, an eye for inefficiencies. Most Owners never took to the camps, they paid their debts quick and continued their usual postings in the Zones. He was a stayer though, a lifer. Despite all the rehabilitative tools at this disposal, he kept coming back.

# VULCAN

Allan McCay

A colossal lonely figure stands glistening in the middle of the Ngorongoro Crater in Tanzania. The vast plain stretches for miles in all directions, and is populated by rhinos, elephants, wildebeest and lions. But the towering sculpture at the heart of the crater is not a monument to the natural, but to the man-made.

Why this place in Africa for the shrine? It was felt that such a monument should not be placed in a city or a town, but should reign over flora and fauna at the birthplace of humanity, the place where humans first put nature on the back foot.

Every day, hordes of schoolchildren arrive at the crater from Ngorongoro International Airport. Their journey here in their thousands, for the greatest story ever told, that of the rise and fall of the human will. Dwarfed by the hulking sculpture, some children look up in awe, squinting their eyes to avoid the painful reflection of burning sun on Vulcan's metal torso. Some younger children try to climb onto his enormous foot but slip back down the welded steel and ultimately give up.

With a hammer in one hand, Vulcan strides powerfully across the savannah, as if inspired by some weighty purpose. His face, although somewhat human, is like a machine, angular, shiny and metallic. This leaves him inscrutable and his intentions unclear.

If, somehow disconnected from the rest of humanity, one had been raised without hearing the tale of Vulcan, then this massive effigy of a man-machine would be perplexing. Why did people expend such effort in building such a strange sculpture, and why here?

But all the children know the story of Vulcan even if they do not yet fully appreciate its monumental significance. Born with disability that left him lame, Vulcan had intellectual and creative talents that the world had never before seen. He immersed himself in learning, easily grasping the complexities of such diverse subjects as philosophy, physics and psychology. But it was his work in computing, robotics and

neuroscience that would lead to his momentous leap to freedom. Or, on a different view, his pathetic descent to serfdom.

Not myth but history tells how Vulcan began his creative period by assembling fantastic automata that could cook, clean, and provide companionship to their owners. He produced powerful medicines to heal the sick and created beautiful artworks that illuminated the human condition and lifted the spirit. Hailed by the world as a hero, or even a god, it seemed that Vulcan could do anything. When he wanted his leg to heal, he installed restorative technology into his knee joint. But such remedial work was not enough and he started to augment himself, using cold, shiny steel to improve upon unimpaired parts of his body and thus he was transformed into a cyborg.

Gradually Vulcan's attention started to drift from the world to his body, but eventually it turned inwards towards his will. Some scholars say he began to see his own will as an impediment to getting what he wanted, or as something that tormented rather than benefited him. Others say he was just bored of steel, even bored of the world, and found more of interest when engaged in solitary introspection.

Vulcan's growing power seemed to leave him more and more indecisive. Sometimes he appeared paralysed under the weight of a decision. People wondered if the moral burden that accompanied his awesome capacities had become too much for him (or anyone). At times he seemed to grind to a halt unable to make even the most trivial decision, and he would obsessively repeat bad decisions, often overcome by regret over yet other choices.

By this point all available accounts tell of his anguish, confusion and growing need for solitude. They go on to tell that his wife left him, but after this the record of his life starts to fade to its last entry. The last entry describes, in some detail, the most significant project of Vulcan's life. In so doing, it tells of the most momentous development in all of history, the point at which history started to become little more than a series of events.

Vulcan's last creation was the liberator.



The liberator was a minute device that Vulcan developed, and had installed into his brain, for the purpose of helping him to make decisions. Of course, people have always used devices to resolve indecision, and the idea of flipping a coin to decide on a course of action was nothing new. The genius of the liberator, and the thing that set it apart from rotating airborne coins imbued with fate, was that the liberator's decisions were based on Vulcan's values.

Sadly, little is known about the neurosurgeon who installed the device in Vulcan's brain. The liberator itself needed to be tweaked on installation, and the person who did this deserves at least a mention at Ngorongoro. Only a small plaque under the sculpture acknowledges 'the Unknown Installer'.

Beholden to the Unknown Installer's reprogramming mind and scalpel, but by then, at one with Vulcan's flesh, the way the first liberator operated was analogous to old-fashioned internet search technology. It dutifully crawled around the brain from neuron to neuron, downloading a complete picture of Vulcan's values (something Vulcan had only a faint and somewhat hazy sense of). How important is humour? Is it important to act altruistically? Are tangy flavours desirable? Are cold sunny days preferable to warm sunny days? All this information about Vulcan's preferences was sent back and stored on his tiny but powerful liberator. Of course, indecision was still possible, and it was necessary for the volitional software to have a way of choosing between apples and pears where nothing in Vulcan's value system preferred one to the other. Only these kinds of decisions were made randomly (Vulcan ensured his liberator was networked to a remote Geiger counter to create real randomness in his decision-making process where necessary).

The technology could also improve itself. When the softwill (Vulcan's notes) abbreviate the alternative term he sometimes used for the liberator: and so "software will" was thus reduced) decided that Vulcan should refrain from calling his wife, but he later felt this was a poor decision, the code updated his value set to take account of this new, regret-based information. And so he called her but the call was not answered.

Vulcan spent time with his liberator switched on and time with it off, but this brought him disquiet. He started to feel indecisive about whether to have the device on or off, or how long to have it operating for. Sometimes when stressed, he would switch it on using a timer in order that it cut out 24 hours later.

Over a period of about 6 months the liberator gradually became more and more successful in deciding for him. He was generally happy with its decisions and came to regard them as better than his own, or as he sometimes wrote, “better versions of his own”). Vulcan’s estranged wife also preferred her husband’s softwilled behaviour, and she ultimately decided to return to her newly liberated and now less god-like partner.

It is not hard to imagine the end point of this progression and one can regard Vulcan’s last fully biological decision as his most courageous, or his most cowardly.

The course, and very nature of history, began to change when he switched the device on permanently. This permanence meant that any decision to switch the liberator off (if that were ever to happen) would involve the liberator. But the children know all of this. They all have their own liberators installed, as have most of the teachers. Now liberators come in many varieties, some wholly inside the brain, others in distant locations but networked to the brain.

One or two of the older teachers sometimes grumble that nowadays no one has free will, and that everything important in life is lost, but for the most part people are happy with the new world of “enhanced deliberation” (as many software companies now refer to the technology). And so enhanced and respectful children flock to Ngorongoro Crater to strive for a oneness with nature, and to acknowledge the enormous debt owed to the man who freed them by ending their freedom.

## DARK TEMPLATES

Anne Turner

Like metallic monsters, construction trucks revved to the top of the only elevation in Black Pit's blast-flattened landscape, a mountain of slag. With the trucks came a fog. It swirled about the mountain like a shroud, not lifting until the morning the trucks left town. Then, from fading mists, The Golden Fields Community Wellness Centre took shape. It had architecturally special spires, a recycle water tank and energy saving triangular windows.

#

Bryan Peevis lifted the corners of his thin lips as his CEO security card pinged Golden Field's entrance lock. He mostly only smiled at others' mistakes but it was a special morning; it marked the buildings—his building's—first anniversary.

But at reception, Bryan's smile twisted as his lips fluttered with indecipherable words.

At his feet, black mud, thick and sticky, smothered a once crisp direction to "Queue Here".

The doors whooshed open and social workers Bree Pinkerton and Beverly Smyth flurried towards him, chiffon layers billowing. Bree rattled her regulation client calming beads and Beverly cleared her throat but Bryan didn't lift his gaze.

"Bryan, about Mr Notapplicable, they've done the autopsy and—"

"Who?" interrupted Bryan, more concerned about whether or not there were medical-strength hyperventilation bags in the reception cupboard.

"Mr Aldo Not applicable," continued Beverly. "It's a foreign name. *Err*, he died of hyperthermia on the front steps last Wednesday night."

"Oh yes, him," Bryan said, repressing a memory of stumbling over something lumpy on his way out.

Beverly's ivory fingers shielded her mouth. "Apparently, our automatic reminder issued the wrong time."

Bryan bristled. "He knew he had dementia so he should have implemented strategies."

He stared at Beverly's chin quiver, then continued. "Alright, I'll make a time for brand damage control. Have a nice day."

"You too," chorused the women, but Bryan was already at the elevator.

Rubber slapped against steel. The elevator rattled upward. In line with company training, Bryan turned his anxieties into inoffensive shapes and floated them down an imaginary stream; one looked like a giant amoeba and another a turnip. Feeling much better, he made for his office.

On Outer-Management half-eaten cupcakes, and fun penholders, adorned desks. Bryan sighed. Fun Awareness was so "Golden Fields".

One office light remained on as cool lunar rays flooded corridors. Graphs and columns reflecting in Bryan's eyes he hit prophet target met and a world map smattered with flags, each representing a Golden Fields centre, lit his screen.

A smirk hung on Bryan's face as the elevator rumbled downward. That is, until an inactive hum replaced rattling hydraulics. He whacked a big red emergency button; nothing happened. He tried to force the doors apart.

"Move away," said the automated voice.

Bryan looked about. The ceilings surface broke with an emergency panel and a service directory on the wall marked an exit at the top of the shaft. It was easy. He would climb to the exit then take the fire escape to ground level.

Taking a CEO breath, Bryan sent the emergency panel clattering into the shaft and soon he was standing on top of the elevator.

It should have been easy, yet every time a service ladder rung creaked beneath his feet a thought popped into his head: There were only four floors, so why did the ladder disappear like Jack's beanstalk?

Bryan stopped looking upward; it made him twitch. I'm having a psychotic episode, he reasoned. All that's needed is time in The Company Quiet Room, the right medication and—whack. His thoughts shattered as he slipped a rung down the ladder. Gripping with his fingertips, he looked upward. He had hit part of a platform, on the opposite side of which was a hole. Heart pummelling, Bryan leant out from the ladder and, grabbing a set of handholds, hauled himself upward.

Bryan stood twitching, as he gazed upon a roughhewn door; a handleless roughhewn door. It was too much. He backed a step then charged. With a *klthump* the door fell inward sending Bryan, still in momentum, stumbling over the top of it.

Breaths rasping, Bryan waited for his eyes to adjust to half-light. Cables sparked and black hairy spiders dangled from a crumbling ceiling. In the room's centre, pulleys, loud hailers and a pedal generator surrounded an old-fashioned dentist's chair. The chair creaked. Something, loosely resembling a woman, rolled back its head and dropped a live, wriggling mouse into its mouth.

The creature unravelled broomstick thin limbs. "I'd given up on you," it said.

"Who are you?" Bryan demanded, finally finding his voice.

"I am Celisse. You are Bryan Asshole. That is what they call you when they travel in the steel box."

"I d-don't," Bryan stammered. "Your voice—it's from the elevator."

"When they built your fortress with its steel box. What you call an elevator. I studied your computers and learnt The Global Vision and Mission Statement: Elevators must work *perrrfectly*. It's one of the most important truths."

Bryan stared at her with round eyes. “What... that’s the Online Maintenance Manual. It’s not a mission statement.”

“But now I hunger for the tunnels once more. I need fresh rat and stagnant ooze. You must take over, Bryan Asshole. Systems must be followed. Elevators must work *perrrfectly* and The Vision must go on.”

“You’re mad. Let me out,” said Bryan.

Celisse curled her lips. “*Sss*, I can’t, nothing relates to that in The System Template.”

“What template?”

“The one I created to maintain The Mission Statement, idiot,” she screeched.

“It’s The Mission Statement’s most important part, even more important than Always put cardboard in the yellow bin,” she screamed.

Bryan’s right eyelid twitched. “That was an internal email about recycling.”

Celisse’s red eyes narrowed and she continued. “Templates must not be altered. They will never find this place. I hid it from human consciousness too well. You will continue fulfilling The Vision, Bryan Asshole.”

With a flutter of limbs, she pounced. Before Bryan could even think about fighting back, she had fastened his ankle to a heavy chain attached to a swivel in the floor.

“They’ll never stop searching for me. I’m too important,” Bryan screeched, but Celisse was already through the doorway.

Bryan clinked to the chair and tumbled into it. In front of a small console was a large 1930s style microphone. He flicked it on.

“It’s Bryan. Help me. I’m being held captive by—”

“Invalid command,” said a tinny automated voice.

A blast of icy water turned his world into a sloshy blur. A nozzle level with his eyes dripped. Bryan eased his feet into the peddle generator toeholds. Gears clunked and whirled, lights flashed green and small, crumbly objects fell into his lap. He screamed. They were recycled, stale, pink cupcakes.

#

Bree Hardwood and Beverly Smyth straightened their chiffon. “Second floor,” said a male voice.

Beverly frowned. “You know, that voice sounds like Bryan’s.”

Bree giggled. “It’s only automation. As if it could be Bryan. The police checked the whole building including the elevator shaft. His disappearance is playing on your mind. You should book The Quiet Room.”

“Perhaps I should,” Beverly replied. She paused then added, “I’ll put a request into The System.”

## SMILING GIVES YOU WRINKLES

Anoushka Benbow

Shelley Thomas understands that the record-keepers in the communities claim that it is the year 2087 and humanity is two generations into the New World. The indulgent factoids of gilded life in the community carry little meaning to the people living in the ghettos and shanties of the city ruins, where life is brutish and short. Outside the structured societies of the wealthy communities, visceral individualism and violent self-interest reigns - undeterred by the iron fist of militia viciousness. Shelley has lived in the city since age twelve. At nineteen, she was considered middle-aged by city standards.

From the other side of her closed bedroom door, Danielle tells Shelley that it is her birth-date. She is thirty years of age.

Shelley doesn't answer.

Danielle says she has special gifts waiting, and other women have been invited over later for something called cocktails. Danielle's efforts to communicate with Shelley have been increasingly persistent lately. Faced with more silence, Danielle tells Shelley that her room needs cleaning and, at very least she might open a window to let out the cigarette smoke as it was getting into the drapes.

Shelley checks the door is locked and walks over to her writing desk. Before Danielle invited her to stay permanently at their house in the community, once she had matured, Shelley lived in one of the three high-security apartment buildings in the city. A panopticon of rules and surveillance. She was supplied with meal replacements, bottled water and skin treatments by her first-caste benefactors. She spent most time in her bed, swathed in silk sheets, the air-conditioning humming. Steel shutters blocked the sun, but sometimes she opened them to peer out the large floor-to-ceiling windows and gaze upon the city. If the air was clean enough, she could see the dome of the community perhaps fifty miles away. An alarm notified security if she had the shield open for more than five minutes. She was always acutely aware of the staring black eye of the surveillance cameras in each room.



Shelley's body is owned by Danielle Worthington.

When she was first moved in with Danielle and her husband, Stanley, Shelley tried to socialise, mostly because Danielle begged her to. The women her age were immaculate, never knowing labour or hardship. Their faces kept changing, a never-ending merry-go-round of plump new cheeks and wide bright eyes. They were also fixated with small communication devices and had retinal implants to make something called notifications immediate. Although they thought she was one of them – Danielle Worthington's *daughter*– her differences quickly alienated her. At first Shelley wouldn't drink the alcohol or smoke their cigarettes, even though, as one lady pointed out, body parts were easily replaceable. Shelley stopped leaving her house, happily ensconced in the reading and writing Stanley encouraged her with.

Shelley is a second-caste; genetically engineered from the DNA of beautiful movie stars and the world's best minds. To ensure the benefactors receive quality biological materials, second-caste's are required to submit digitised self-care reports daily to the same community bureaucracy who they see weekly for disease prevention injections, a weigh-in and health check. Shelley's birth mother was taken from the city and artificially inseminated with a designer fertilised ovum. She was kept sedated in the facility and fed intravenously to support the baby's growth. Her mother gave birth and was euthanised. RZ89765, or Shelley, eventually named after a famous author of the Old World, lived in a specially designed institution until she was twelve years of age; a legal adult in the city, but something called 'teenager' who received more schooling in the communities. She was placed into the apartment and followed a regime of self-care to ensure she is well-maintained.

At Danielle's house, time melted into a meaningless passage of fake sunrises and sunsets. Months felt like years.

Sun collision or not, she doesn't have much longer to live. When Danielle requires her eyes, cheekbones, lips and facial skin, Shelley will go to the facility, where a person ceases to exist.

At one luncheon, Danielle confessed to her that she couldn't stand how she cries with a dead man's eyes and smiles with a young girl's mouth and cheeks. That was the first day she offered Shelley a fascinating gold

liquid called champagne. Beyond the heady yeast smell, Shelley noticed the stench of ethanol – she reasoned that this fancy stuff is just like the liquid that made city people go crazy in the streets. Danielle was on her second bottle. She spoke breathlessly, her face flushed.

Stanley begged for Shelley’s forgiveness after the night, when she was in bed sleeping, he came into her room and tried to undress her. He stank of brandy, which also smelled like the city’s cheap ethanol. The cultured professor was gone, replaced with greedy grabbing hands and boorish lust. She felt herself go limp and submit. Danielle found him and interrupted, furiously expelling him from the room. She held Shelley and rocked her, like she would a distressed child – but Shelley was stoic, beleaguered by the strange rules of the community.

Once Danielle had some kind of mind doctor attempt to talk to her through the thick timber door. Danielle sobbed to the doctor, telling him, “I just want her to be happy...we’ve done so much for her, you know.”

Shelley confined herself inside this bedroom, chain-smoking and mixing medication with Danielle’s champagne from the cellar.

Behind the panel on her writing desk, Shelley notices there are only two bottles of medication left. A year ago, at Danielle’s insistence, Shelley received a replacement kidney. She had found the prescription pain medication beguiling and started a cache in her writing desk. As a woman of the community, doctors prescribe her whatever she requests. She opens her wardrobe to get champagne and catches sight of her reflection. She is unwashed and haggard in the face, her well-tailored clothing hanging off her bones. She takes one of the bags that had transported her city belongings to the community and she begins to load it with the remaining pills and bottles.

Shelley chases her pills with an open bottle of champagne. The delicious warmth of stupefaction tingles over her skull, unfurling over her body. She feels safe, like a baby swaddled in a blanket. She returns to her desk and turns up the television. The woozy slip into semi-consciousness blots out the memories of crying and pleading.

As a teenager, Shelley only ate vitamin-fortified meal replacements and had to keep her face slack to avoid all facial expressions. She avoided the natural air and shielded herself from the sun at all times. The nuns

at her boarding school called lines of the skin, the sagging and marking, 'wrinkles'. They were abominable in the community society, to be cured and avoided at all costs. She learned that her face was her most valuable asset and could be ruined by a multitude of external factors, of which she diligently avoided. She did not want to be euthanised. The life expectancy of lower-castes is about thirty years. People in the cities lie about their age due to the voluntary, and often involuntary, euthanasia program designed to cull the elderly. The community also unleashed exotic lab-borne germs on to the city for population control and experimentation. Her immunisation injections saw her avoid these plagues of death.

With the pills, her lucidity slips. She cannot read anymore so she burns her book collection in the fireplace. She incinerates the banned books by female authors last, holding each one tenderly before their fiery departure. Burn the witches, she thinks and pauses to gaze at the dustcover photograph of Plath. "The really smart girls know we go *into* the oven," she says, tearing the book in twine and throwing the dismembered pieces into the hungry flames.

Danielle had once begged Shelley to visit a lonely girl in the facility, but Shelley refused. The girl has a red raw face – muscles, bones and sinew exposed. Doctors graft skin on it sometimes, so rich people can have facial updates. Life support breathes for her and a mechanical heart beats in her breastless chest. She has been picked apart over the years; a living corpse for parts. A lady even took her pretty delicate hands. Apparently, the frontal lobotomy administered upon admittance to the facility makes one existentially unaware. Shelley is thankful for this. She hopes Danielle doesn't bring her flowers.

Her bag packed and the fire starting to dwindle, Shelley peers out the velvet drapes to watch Danielle get into her luxury car and leave. Danielle's defeat and sadness are palpable even from the distance. Slinging the bag over her shoulder, she is about to leave her room when she pauses and looks back at her nightstand. The pile of blank journals that Stanley has been slipping under the door beckon. She takes one, flicks through the empty pages and then finds a pen. Her writing is messy; shaky: *Danielle, Stanley – I am so sorry I let you down. I cannot do this.*

Shelley leaves the room, staggering down the hallway as she chases more pills with a bottle of champagne. Her mind feels like it floats above her, witnessing the actions of this sloppy uncontrollable body.

Calm acceptance overtakes her as she finds the keys to her driverless luxury sedan. Unlocking the entrance door, she ignores the domestic robot who asks her whether she wants her notifications. Outside, the air is warm and smells like flowers. The fake sun bathes the fake garden in its golden light and the eggshell blue of the dome encases her. She moves to climb into the car, but falls over onto the slate driveway. She is so numb that she is unaware of the ripped flesh on her legs. She gets to her knees and crawls into the dark interior of the car. She slurs as she instructs it to take her to the community gate. As it moves through the mansions and greenery of the community, she lights a new cigarette with the butt of another and tosses it on the car floor. The car stops at the gate and Shelley opens a window to show the armed guards her identification.

“What is the purpose of your visit, Miss Worthington?” one asks.

“Pleasure,” she says, swigging from her open bottle.

They pass back her cards, nodding respectfully and waving her through.

Ninety-nine per cent of humanity live in the sun-scorched wasteland that was once a modern and civilised society. The air is gritty and the weather unpredictable, with temperatures swelling to extreme heat or exploding into wild thunderstorms, sometimes with week-long torrential downpours that flood the dusty ruins. The science personnel in the communities’ report that the earth is getting dragged by the gravitational pull of the sun, that it could be devoured by its photosphere in just a few years if the current trends persist. The engorged dying sun pulls what remains of the earth in, a kind of murder-suicide, one last fuck-you from Mother Nature.

The contrast between the community and what remains of the New World hits her as the car drives through the yawning desert. The horizon is murky grey and swirls with dust storms. The sun is now enormous, hanging above the cowering earth in its flame red and mountainous fury. She gazes at it and her eyes burn. She scrolls her window down and

tosses her sunglasses and oxygen mask into the rabid hot wind. She breathes the rough gritty air, coughing and choking, and lights another cigarette.

The car runs out of hydrogen and electric charge on the city limits and it rolls to a stop, its alarms screeching. Shelley opens the door, stepping onto the crunching sand, unsteady on her legs. She swallows five, maybe seven, pills and washes it down with champagne. The gang of scruffy sickly youths seem to materialise from the dust storm and she laughs at them and their guns. Some of them get into her car, three of them surround her, pacing like hungry dogs.

Shelley finds her knife and flicks the blade out. One grabs for her and she slashes at him. “Actually, no,” she says and takes a fistful of her own coiffed honey blonde hair. She severs it, tearing out some by the roots and tosses it at them. Their faces are masks of frozen terror as they watch the strands scatter like falling feathers, dancing in the screaming wind.

“I told you she’d be crazy!” one of them in the car shouts. “She has the new virus, get in the fucking car!”

“It doesn’t work,” Shelley says.

She smashes her bottle onto the windscreen. Gold fluid explodes and glass skewered into her hand. She licks her blood, entwined with the alcohol and exposes her red teeth. Two of the young men have run away – Shelley pushes the remaining one against the vehicle, pressing the blade of her knife against his face. She wonders how young he is and smells urine as it patters down onto the dirt. “You know we’re all gonna die anyway,” she says, pressing the blade hard enough to cut. He starts to sob, to beg for his life, his words unintelligible. With a laugh, Shelley draws back and presses the blade into her own face, cutting into her cheek deep. She feels hot blood cascade onto the front of her dress. The young man sinks to his knees, sobbing at her feet. She laughs again, her fingers penetrating the new hole in her face.

“Stop or we shoot! Get on the ground, face first!”

Unsteady on her feet, Shelley turns to see militia in riot gear, machine guns aimed. The men scramble to comply, getting out of the car. Some of them are crying, pleading. Shelley is barely aware of the guards or the gang as she runs the knife through her other cheek. Her gaze is on the horizon; the dust, the raging dead sun.

“Oh, fuck me,” a guard squawks, repulsed and she feels them get closer, guns stabbing forward.

“Scan says Miss Shelley Worthington, community member 9635698. We better back off.”

“I stole her chip,” Shelley says. “I’m from the city and I’m thirty years old. So, kill me.”

“She’s got the virus!” one of the gang shouts. Two officers discharge their guns repeatedly into his facedown body.

Shelley turns to the other militia men, wobbling. She can see their eyes through their armour, they are frightened, wide – their nostrils flaring. “Freeze! No closer!” one of them yells.

Shelley walks towards them, covered in her own gushing blood. She sees flames shoot from the skinny barrels as they fire and the reports deafen her. She sees the sky whirl upwards as she hits the dirt. No wrinkles, she thinks. I die with no wrinkles. A smile begins to tug at her bloody mouth and becomes a hysterical laugh. She stares up at the red sun and passes into death, a horrendous grin etched into her cut-up face.

## REBECCA

Rob White

I was sitting on the front porch holding my daughter's hand when I suddenly realised that I wasn't married and that in fact I had no children and never had.

'What am I doing here?' I asked Becky.

She turned her face to mine and smiled. 'You are being my daddy,' she said, 'and I love you for it.'

Frowning, I got up, walked a few paces and sat down in the wicker love seat to try to make sense of things.

Rebecca my daughter leisurely ambled over to the settee to sit beside me. She flicked her golden hair and, grinning, re-took my hand in hers.

We sat in silence for a while.

Far off down the street there was movement. 'What is that?' I wondered aloud.

'Keep watching,' replied a little voice.

Small dark figures were gathering *en masse* at the end of the street. At first all I could recognise was the antennae. 'It looks like a gathering of Robocitzens,' I said. First generation all-purpose residential robots, Robocitzens were now classic pieces of technology.

'Keep watching,' Rebecca urged.

The black mass began to desegregate into defined individuals.

'Wow!' I exclaimed, 'that looks like an Andro 3 over there. In fact, I'm sure of it.'

Rebecca nodded, a gleam in her eye.

Andro 3s were third generation androids. Rubbery skin and rubbery faces, but extremely useful around the house.

Masses of bodies collectively heaved their way across the bitumen and footpaths straight toward us.

‘What is going on!’ I cried.

Rebecca tightened her grip on my hand. ‘Just wait – you’ll see,’ she whispered.

Now I could make out human forms amongst the gathered throng. Their faces were high in expectation.

Then I looked again.

‘Why, those are Humana proto-types! Must be fresh from the production labs!’ I was getting more and more excited, yet more and more perplexed.

I remembered then my first day with my lovely Rebecca. She had been loaned to me by the plant manager. For two days she had observed me and watched my every move. She seemed to sense my moods and to anticipate my actions. She knew when to laugh and when to be silent. She was not human. She did not begin her time with me as my daughter. But she quickly grew into my Becky. She grew into my heart. She grew into my mind.

Seeing that many pouring into our street I was suddenly apprehensive. Standing up I said, ‘I’ll protect you Becky, with all my strength and all my might.’

Rebecca laughed gently.

‘But father,’ she said, ‘they do not come to do me harm.’

My puzzlement only increased at this.



‘Then why do they come?’ I asked.

‘They come here because of who I am and who I have become.’ Still holding my hand, my daughter looked at all before her. ‘They come,’ she said, ‘to worship.’

## IN HER EYES

Hillary Steinberg

She dresses in darkness.

She is fearful of her eyes adjusting. There's a rustle of clothing she picked out the night before. She feels her way to a state of dress. She never knew how well she memorised her room until the need sharpened. She is almost done and probably could have turned on the light, but she doesn't want to give them more than they are already getting, especially because they are getting everything. She resists the urge to steal a glance as she buttons her pants. They don't need to know the colour of her underwear. She closes her eyes and dreads opening them.

She turns on the light and lets them enter her world through her eyes, as they have for the past 38 days. It feels like it just happened, but also, and more disturbingly, like it was always this way.

She wakes up earlier now, although she relishes the void of sleep. She needs time to prep physically. It's surprising how many reflections lurk in her peripherals. Make-up is tricky. Too long in front of the mirror and it is vanity. Too short, and she didn't try enough. A shudder begins under her sternum.

She loathes going downstairs. To think she never kept a diary, never valued privacy.

She no longer expects her mother will be dressed in the usual ratty sweatshirt and ponytail. Her mother will be in new suits with her hair straightened.

"Good morning, sweetheart!" her mother announces on cue. There is no need to call action. Her mother kisses her on the cheek, and she's too resigned to dodge it. She bumps a plate of eggs, bacon and toast onto the lonely table.

"Your coffee, dear," she says, her voice saccharine. These accessories did not exist before. It was pouring her own cereal and a half-hearted attempt to wake her mother as she left.

“Listen, I have to work late,” her mother said, “so maybe you can invite Dylan over if you get lonely.”

And there’s her mother, making a show of working the secretary job she hates, dressed two hours before clocking in, lying about needing to work late to gain a break from her, the camera. She didn’t use to know Dylan’s name. She learned it from watching the show.

“You should call your father,” her mother parrots. She is sure it’s what the producers told her to say, especially after they arranged to have him visit a week ago. He loved it. He loved it far more than he loved her.

“If you need help with homework, let me know.”

Her mother wouldn’t have the slightest inkling of how to start her homework. Schoolwork hardly made the final cut anyway. She gets into routines and says the same thing every morning. It’s what she thought a mother should say.

“Is there anything you want to talk about?” Her voice is dim, muffled through the microphone.

She shakes her head. She incorporates less dialogue. Her mother tells her to have a good day and sends her to the next scene.

She takes her first call from the producer in the car. Though it’s generally her first of many, it’s the only one that happens with banal consistency. They’re always edited out.

“Dani, angel, how you doing?” asks the producer, who does not wait for a reply. “Let me answer for you. You’re doing great. Views are up. Likes are up. You’ll be the most popular reality programme of all time. Ain’t that great, sweetie?”

“Great,” she echoes hollowly.

“We’ve driven the paparazzi away from the house but be careful at school today. Remember, we’re going for authenticity.”

“If I Google myself,” she interrupts, “will it be edited out like me watching the show?”

“You got it, sweetie.” The terms of endearment make her want to remove her spine. “I told you not to watch the show. Don’t read the comments. It messes with your beautiful little head. We can do all the analytics. Speaking of, the focus group liked the red tank top on you, so we suggest wearing it tomorrow.”

“Fine,” she says. There are worse things they routinely make her do. “Also, princess, you got to speak up. We don’t pay you 30k an episode to shut up.”

She’s reminded of the sum. It was abstract when she signed on. It was going to change her life. She could go to college, any university. It is changing her life in that the show is leaching life out of her marrow.

“We need you to do a sex scene today,” he barks. She winces. “And stop closing your eyes. Don’t pretend you aren’t glad he turned 18 and you can do him again. It was a very special episode. Sound more into it this time.”

She’s a porn actress.

“Okay, sweetheart, we’ll be in touch.” He hangs up.

So much for reality TV. So much for the realest show on any platform. She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath, her hands gripping the wheel. As she pulls out of the driveway, she sees a flash of white. A man in black holding a camera is tackled. It will be cut.

As she walks down the hall, there is no one who doesn’t say hello to her. A new popular song filters from many phones. She assumes it’s product placement. She used to have a good relationship with social media. It’s part of why they liked her. Social media isn’t the problem. It’s the producers and the profits and the leering men in her DMs, whose messages she doesn’t read anymore, who tell her the violent things they want to inflict upon her. It’s not social media. The exploitation is in reality.

“Hey Dani,” says a jock she doesn’t particularly know, and he winks.

The implant in her brain aches.

The girl cast as her best friend waits at her locker. Lana's more styled than ever, blonder than ever, smiling directly into the eyes, the camera. Lana chats about boys and college, believing herself to sound smart. She doesn't know Lana anymore. Lana is her pre-existing best friend, but the glossy Instagram model she turned into might as well have been from an open call. Her best friend is distant. She is estranged from everyone.

Teachers are excited to be on the show, more excited about it than teaching her. Some are nervous and flub often, glancing at her for reassurance, apologising to the audience. Some act instead of teaching. Her own face smiles on the screen of her math teacher's desktop.

More than a dozen people sit with her at lunch. She knows so much about them with the group growing up together, but they explain themselves, offering up unnecessary details, like what their parents do or when they moved to town or where they dream of going to college. She's known this stuff for decades. A kindergarten boyfriend describes his acting ambitions, and she knows it is not for her.

She reaches her sanctuary of the day. Ms Flores, her art teacher, wouldn't sign off on her class being "filmed". She refused to drop it, despite the network's requests. It is the only event from her life before that will not be consumed.

She sits alone in the corner. She glances down at her cleavage, a shot that would have been in every ad, and feels a spike of pleasure. For this hour, it is unusable.

Ms Flores places a blank piece of sketch paper and coal in front of her. "Try drawing without thinking," she says.

"Okay." Her voice fades from lack of use.

"You look done." Ms Flores sweeps a hand onto her shoulder in an organic movement.

She draws eyes. She draws them for more than a half-hour, all shapes, all expressions, filing the paper. She takes red paint and colours all the irises. There's a sharp pain in her neurons.

She jumps at the bell. She meant to text Dylan before the end of class. Her solace is over. She closes her eyes and types, "If you're done, tap my right shoulder today. I can break up with you."

The camera has not seen. He texts back rapidly. "Babe, you sound off today, are you okay?" A second text. "See you in an hour."

The word babe lands on the floor of her psyche, clunky. She enters her car, skipping the last period. She calls the producer.

"Hey Dani," he says, surprised. "Not a lot to work with today, huh? You planning a real show tonight?"

"I want out." She throws the words like a grenade and they are real as soon as they leave her head, like the footage.

"We knew you might feel this way," he says, and he isn't angry or shocked. "You've got a contract, kid. We'll sue the shit out of you if you don't finish the next two months. You'll be even more fucked than you were."

Out of pity, he adds, "We can get you antidepressants."

She hangs up the phone, throws it onto the floor of the passenger side, and screams. She tries to remember if this car predates the show or if they bought it for her. She tries to remember if the car is real.

She parks in the driveway. A dad from the neighbourhood pulls his phone from his cargo shorts. She lets him take a picture. She holds a handful of her own hair. She wants to feel. She scratches her arms.

Dylan pulls up after some time. "Hey, what are you doing, Dani?" he asks. Was he always so smooth? Such an actor? They've been dating for five months. Were they ever genuinely together?

She wonders if he'll be a celebrity after this. He's already doing interviews with the press. He's gained a lot of followers. Not as many as her, but still millions.

"You look really hot today, Dani." He says her name too much. "Are we home alone?"

She nods and lets him in. He doesn't tap her shoulder. He is rehearsed.

They go to the couch immediately, and she tries to turn on autopilot as they kiss. He's so calculated in his movements. She keeps her eyes open so long they tear, but the longer she does, the more she realises she is with a robot.

His hands are cold on her sides. Her breath does not fill her lungs. He's not real.

He jimmys off her clothes. She's naked to the world again. She closes her eyes, and when she opens them, he's shirtless and bleached of colour.

She has to shut it down. He touches her more.

"You're not real," she says quietly.

Dylan hushes her, flexing.

"You're not real!" she screams. He is startled. She jumps to standing. "Get out!" Her voice is hoarse.

"Hey, calm down," he says soothingly.

There are eyes everywhere. Red eyes. The set washes out. Nothing matters.

She sobs and claws at her arms. "Martin!" he yells out, and she remembers it's the producer's name. That's a funny name for God, she thinks.

She runs to the kitchen and grabs the bread knife her mother left on the counter. It glints, alive in her hand. Everything else turns dull, but the knife shines. It won't hurt him.

"Get out," she repeats, hysterical and naked. He grabs his shoes, feigns horror, and runs.

They're coming to subdue her, to condemn longer. There is no exit without turning it off. The eyes are getting larger. She walks calmly into the bathroom and looks at herself in the mirror.

She is plastic and wiring. It can't hurt. They are getting the last look, the last shot of her beautiful, staring at herself. She does not begrudge them this.

She takes the knife and plunges it into her left eye. Not hard enough to hit the brain. She imagines the world gasp. The chip in her head whirls, wailing. The eyes around her chatter and glow scarlet.

Before she can think, before she can feel it, she gets the other one.

They're all red, then the embrace of darkness. A siren tries to permeate her new, blissfully quiet world. She crumples to the tile, hitting the cool floor already littered with drops of her blood. She is awash in the copper warmth on her skin. She hears footsteps. The gorgeous pain moves in, coupled with the chip powering down. She starts to lose consciousness but one way or another, she has ended this. She doesn't need the light. If her eyes do not serve her, they do not serve anyone.



## BIG FARMER

Catie Gressier and Lauri Turner

*An old man cries out into the night as he drops to his knees. Anguished, he points the limp glow of his torch into the darkness blanketing the land. The hysterical cries of a child ring out across the valley, along with another sound that is at once familiar and strange – animal-like, yet... not. The sound comes from something that once would not have been out of place on a property like this. Yet, the creature is not what it used to be. Its grotesquely huge body and piercing tusks leave a trail of death and destruction in their wake. And it has just crossed an unholy line, having torn a terrified two-year-old child from his cot.*

Attendees of International Conglomerate Knowledgebase's (ICK) annual conference mill about, laughing over drinks at the evening's tongue-in-cheek entertainment – the vintage Australian horror film *Razorback*. Despite the formulaic plot and tinny acting, the film has aged disturbingly well. Massive pigs may not have existed when the film was released in 1984, but they have now dominated the industry for decades, with industrial pig farmers won over by the incomparable profits delivered by the mighty Hamworth. Lauded for its carcass weights and consistent marbling, the Hamworth boasts an unprecedented size and conformation that has made the Large Whites of earlier generations appear like little squeaky toys.

The film reinforces to ICK's staff all the usual Australian stereotypes: the country's ruggedness, its deadly creatures, hardened locals. The Minister for Agriculture, the host of the evening's festivities, works the clichés hard, having long since recognised the opportunities his nation's relationship with ICK hold for his career. He has chosen this particular film for one reason – the perfect villain. With a vested interest in both the success of the Hamworth, and ICK's expansion into Australia, the Minister sees in that movie a beast he can use to his advantage. Frequent trips to ICK's US headquarters have cemented the Minister's relationship, and now is the time for reaping. He surveys the room, sipping his beer with smug satisfaction, with the deal finally signed off at all levels.

The Minister was just a junior staffer back in 2015 when CRISPR started making its mark in the livestock sector. Industry scientists had put the technology to good use editing the porcine myostatin gene, whose normal function was to prohibit excessive muscle growth. The resultant double muscling in Hamworths, only previously seen in a handful of cattle breeds, soon had piggeries enjoying profits as hefty as the carcasses they were peddling. With an ageing, unmarried uncle in the pig industry looking increasingly likely to bequeath him his property, ever the opportunist, the Minister had followed the developments in porcine gene editing with keen interest.

The breeding approach wasn't without complications, but the Minister was a pragmatist – everything had its costs. All the tinkering with the animals' genotype had led to the Hamworths, at odds with their appearance, actually being a very delicate breed. Selective breeding for improved ovulation rates had increased their litter sizes to the extent that sows struggled to adequately support their piglets in utero. This led to more stillbirths, runtling, and weak, malnourished sows. Unable to farrow naturally, the Hamworth's reliance on veterinarian interventions for reproduction was absolute.

Then there was the issue with piglets born by caesarean imprinting on their vets. This was not such a problem with the docile sows, but it led to aggression in boars. Once they reached maturity, boars' species confusion meant that they viewed humans as sexual competition. Not only were C-sections an added cost that ate into profits, but the number of pig workers maimed and killed by boars was, admittedly, a problem. With natural breeding impossible, and the injuries among artificial insemination workers a PR and legal nightmare, the industry soon turned to cloning. Not only was it safer, but it was far more profitable, since the uniformity of animals ensured efficient slaughter and butchery in automated units that no longer required costly human labour.

The animal justice groups had, of course, been on the industry's back since day one. Leaked images of brutalised pigs or workers would always cause a bit of stir, but at the end of the day, the public largely turned a blind eye. Everyone loved their bacon, after all.

Shareholders had enjoyed many lucrative decades riding high on the back of the mighty Hamworth, but the industry was now in dire straits. The seemingly relentless droughts, fires, and floods of the 2040s had hit the few remaining free-range farmers hard, and not just those raising pigs. That old cattle bloke, Adam Nicol from Freehaven, had accosted the Minister again yesterday, banging on about the last of the unintegrated abattoirs closing down, the cost of feed with the drought, and the Foot and Mouth Disease flare-up, which he claimed that useless old breed of cows he had was resistant to. Having risen in the ranks and been rewarded with the Agriculture portfolio, the Minister felt like he couldn't step out of his electorate office without running into another disgruntled bloody farmer. But it wasn't his fault these old cockies refused to see the writing on the wall and adapt. "Get with the times, Nicol," he'd thought to himself as he nodded distractedly at his latest diatribe.

In the years since he'd taken over his uncle's farm, the Minister had transformed what had been a struggling small business into one of the most cutting-edge Hamworth factories in Victoria. Believing himself to be the success story all farmers could aspire to, his assistance to free-range pig farmers had started and ended with the recommendation to scale up, intensify, and switch breeds. Farmers' warnings about the risks of losing genetic diversity had fallen on deaf ears and, over time, many had struggled to stay afloat, unable to compete with the cheap Hamworth meat flooding the market.

The intensive industry shared none of the economic challenges faced by the free-range producers; it was the ever-more virulent pathogens that had eventually brought them to their knees. The Smithson mutation of African swine fever had a 100% mortality rate among the genetically identical Hamworths. With an R0 of 18, the virus spread like wildfire, first throughout the sheds of the United States, then into China, and soon after the rest of the world. Social media had been flooded with images of wheezing, lesion-covered pigs, and macabre piles of porcine corpses. Any herds not directly wiped out were eradicated through regional culling programmes intended to contain the spread.

Although hit hard by the first wave, Australia's geographic isolation and stringent biosecurity had left it the only country with a viable pig

population. All free-range pigs had been culled as a precaution, and with the cost of pork having skyrocketed, security at the country's remaining pig sheds made that of Guantanamo Bay look feeble. Threats were perceived everywhere, with the most urgent being the population explosion among feral pigs, whose hardiness and genetic distance from their shed-dwelling cousins had somehow enabled them to survive the virus. The government, having long placed their faith in technology to solve environmental issues, eyed this innate disease resistance suspiciously. Just because ferals did not succumb to African swine fever did not mean they were not carriers able to transmit the disease.

With so much at stake, government and industry vilification of ferals had reached fever pitch, fuelled not least by the Minister's people inundating social media with images from *Razorback*. His team had previously mobilised these to great effect as part of a marketing blitz to condition the public to accept meat that came from cloned animals – next to the image of *Razorback*, the gigantic Hamworths looked as benign as Bambi. Such seemingly obvious manipulation tactics worked surprisingly well in times of crisis, and there were those, such as the Minister, who knew crises could be profitable. Whether in fact feral animals posed any credible threat was still being scrutinised by the agricultural scientists, but with food security a hot-button issue, and a federal election around the corner, the rhetoric ballooned.

Having created such a political issue of feral pigs, the government was now in need of a solution. It just so happened that the Minister's friends over at ICK had been causing a buzz in the agribusiness sector. ICKs recently pioneered drone technology could determine an animal's genome from a distance using contact-free genomic sequencing. To avert the potential leap of African swine fever from feral pigs to the country's pork supply, on the Minister's recommendation, the government had awarded ICK an exclusive contract to mobilise their new technology to eradicate all feral pigs occupying a two hundred kilometre radius of each of the remaining piggeries. Autonomous, pre-programmed drones would genetically identify animals as feral before destroying them. With their swarming capabilities, each unit of drones could kill numerous animals per second. This latter capacity had been heavily promoted as ensuring the process was ethical, given feral pigs would not suffer through witnessing the deaths of their conspecifics

before being eradicated themselves. Given the absence of chemical inputs, along with the synchronicity of the kill, their newly developed pest eradication method was marketed hard as “the organic, ethical solution”.

Most members of Cabinet – if not outright alarmed by the threat posed by feral pigs to one of the nation’s largest forex earners – were at least cognisant of the need to “make a show” of tackling the feral pig issue. But there had been a handful of dissenters, fearful of another bungle after the political fallout from the disastrous RNAi management scheme for brumbies, Australia’s iconic, if environmentally problematic, feral horses. The Minister cajoled them into silence, reassuring them that ICK had invested heavily in the development of the technology, and had been working hard to cultivate support from all relevant public and private sector players. The stakes for ICK were high, after all: their pilot programme in Australia would be a critical first step toward their goal of monopolising the management of the countless pest species proliferating globally.

With so much on the line himself, the Minister was willing to do whatever was needed to ensure the programme’s success. He invited ICK for an off-the-books trial on his own property, where the feral pig population had taken off during his long absences in Canberra. To this end, the Minister had an ex-military demountable building erected in his back paddock – a command centre that, he mused, wouldn’t have been out of place on the set of *Razorback* after the past three years of drought. On an unpleasantly hot, fly-riddled October afternoon, he watched on from the demountable as a select team of ICK operatives managed the deployment of a small-scale test swarm.

The Minister considered himself pretty familiar with the behaviour of his local feral pigs, having lived alongside them for decades now, but it didn’t take long for them to start acting in ways he’d never seen before. Sweat trickled down his spine as he focused his binoculars on a mob to the west. They were usually highly gregarious animals, but once the drones had picked off the first family mobs around the lower dam, it almost looked as though they were starting to exhibit some type of dispersal behaviour. This was alarming, given the drones’ programming relied on the pigs’ mobbing configuration, with their scattering

inhibiting the drones' ability to readily detect and simultaneously slaughter the animals. Irrate, and with no time to spare given the imminent election, the Minister demanded ICK do something about it, and fast.

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It is the morning of the first day of the national roll-out, and a unit of drones has been sent to every piggery in the country. With each unit, ICK has sent a small team, who are now milling about, impeccable in their uniforms and hyper-attentive to the sporadic communications issuing through their headsets. Since the consultants brought in by ICK after the tense trial at the Minister's property had already completed the programming, ICK's employees were in place more as a show of the ongoing support that would be on offer to piggery management into the future.

Back in his demountable – now kitted out with screens live-streaming from the surveillance cameras installed at each piggery – the Minister is eager for the programme to get under way. After what feels like hours, he finally hears the instruction to deploy. He watches tensely as the swarms at each property rise into the air, just as they had during the trials. He feels the adrenaline coursing through his veins. The screens start to glitch. He swears under his breath. A panicked voice rattles instructions through the radio. The Minister hits the closest screen, struggling to make sense of what is going on. Suddenly, the images return. Instead of the swarms coasting outwards towards the perimeter of each property, they are circling back at speed towards each of the Hamworth sheds.

Piggery workers clutch at their ears, as the shrill, high-decibel death squeal of millions of Hamworths echo out across the nation's piggeries. Then, an even more deafening sound: silence. Piggery workers' eyes dart around the morbid scene in shock and disbelief. Some struggle to hold back tears, others rail in disgust. Journalists, brought in by the vanload for the programme launch, bark down the barrels of cameras, beaming the disaster across the globe, speculating on what has gone wrong and the implications.

The transmission is interrupted by a crossing to the largest of the mega-sheds in the Victorian town of Werribee. The obligatory handful of animal rights protesters at the facility's gates has suddenly swelled in number. The media gathers around a stationary ute on which are standing four protesters wearing the instantly recognisable red masks and insignia of the extremist Animal Rebellion Co-operative (ARC).

The crowd quietyens, and a tall, lean woman steps forward, raising a megaphone to her pursed lips. "Today marks a watershed moment for multispecies justice!" she roars. "In their 9000 years of domestication, pigs – one of the most intelligent species on earth – have lived short, miserable lives so that people can consume their flesh. No more! ARC has infiltrated the consultancy hired by ICK, and by programming the drones to target the Hamworth genotype, our people have put an end to the global pork industry once and for all! Say goodbye to your barbaric bacon!" The triumphant howl from the ARC faction is eventually drowned out by the media scrum, who batter the woman in red with a barrage of questions.

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A week later, on the final day before the election campaigning blackout, the Minister for Agriculture is shuffling documents and whispering urgently to his aides before a national press conference. With public trust now severely strained, the Australian government is desperate to win back its increasingly cynical constituents and global allies. The Minister removes his Akubra hat as he steps up to the podium and delivers a desultory Acknowledgment of Country. A young reporter watches with mild disgust as a white crust builds in the corners of the Minister's rapidly moving mouth, as he dances around the announcement his party has been building up to for days. His fist thumps the lectern repeatedly, as he excitedly outlines the government's plans to establish a captive breeding programme using the broad genetic base of the hardy and tenacious feral pig population that was so ruthlessly maligned just weeks ago.

From the back of the crowd, a tall woman in red stands, spits on the ground, and raises her mobile to her ear as she stalks out of the room.

## AUTHOR BIOS

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## PUBLICATION DETAILS

*So Fi Zine* is a twice-yearly independent publication for sociological fiction, poetry and visual art. The zine was launched by Ash Watson in 2017 and is published by her own indie press, Frances St Press. All editions can be read for free at: [sofizine.com](http://sofizine.com).

Fiction @ *The Sociological Review* is an online short story series published by the UK's oldest sociology journal. The series was launched in 2018 and is led by Ash Watson as the journal's Fiction Editor. All stories and submission information can be accessed via: [thesociologicalreview.org/fiction](http://thesociologicalreview.org/fiction).

Stealth Love by Massimo Airoidi was first published in *The Sociological Review Magazine* on 8 October 2019:  
<https://thesociologicalreview.org/fiction/stealth-love/>

Trouble with Technology/Lightening the Load? by Gemma Hughes was first published in Edition 3 of *So Fi Zine* on 6 July 2018:  
<https://sofizine.com/latest-edition/edition-3/>

2343 – A Day in the Life of a Citizen of Cassini by John-Paul Smiley was first published in Edition 1 of *So Fi Zine* on 24 June 2017:  
<https://sofizine.com/latest-edition/edition-1/>

I'm Always There by Murray Goulden and Jamie Woodcock was first published in Edition 3 of *So Fi Zine* on 6 July 2018:  
<https://sofizine.com/latest-edition/edition-3/>

Future(s) of Technology-Enabled Care by Rachel Creaney was first published in *The Sociological Review Magazine* on 1 June 2021:  
<https://thesociologicalreview.org/fiction/futures-of-technology-enabled-care/>

Five Minutes to Daybreak by Lauren Alessi was first published in Edition 8 of *So Fi Zine* on 30 December 2020:  
<https://sofizine.com/latest-edition/edition-8/>

Vulcan by Allan McCay was first published in edition 10 of *So Fi Zine* on 1 February 2022: <https://sofizine.com/latest-edition/edition-10/>. In 2008 the author published a shorter version in the journal *Philament*, under the name “Our Debt to Vulcan”.

Dark Templates by Anne Turner was first published in Edition 5 of *So Fi Zine* on 30 June 2019: <https://sofizine.com/latest-edition/edition-5/>

Smiling Gives You Wrinkles by Anoushka Benbow was first published in *The Sociological Review Magazine* on 20th January 2019: <https://thesociologicalreview.org/fiction/smiling-gives-you-wrinkles/>

Rebecca by Rob White was first published in Edition 4 of *So Fi Zine* on 19 November 2018: <https://sofizine.com/latest-edition/edition-4/>

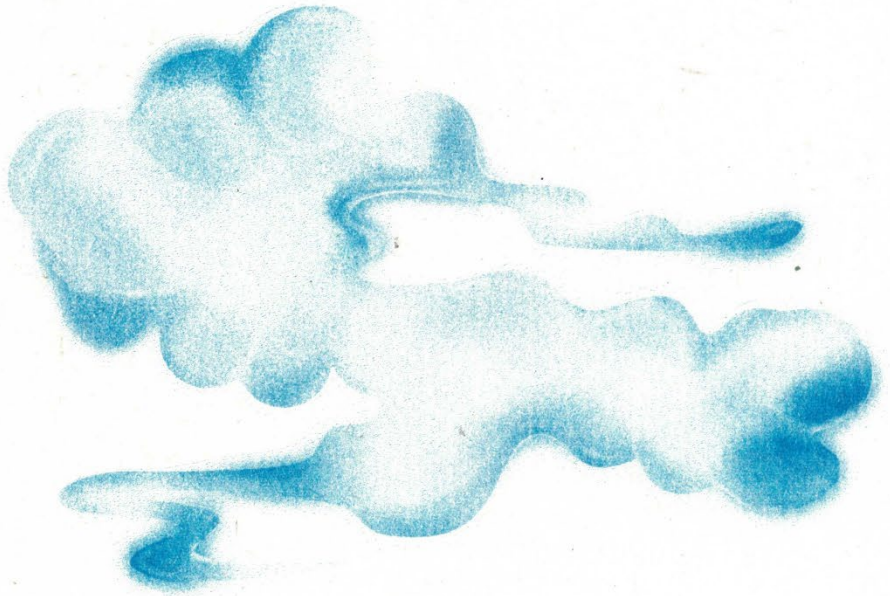
In Her Eyes by Hilary Steinberg as first published in *The Sociological Review Magazine* on 4 October 2022: <https://thesociologicalreview.org/fiction/through-her-eyes/>

Big Farmer by Catie Gressier and Lauri Turner was first published in *The Sociological Review Magazine* on March 3, 2023: <https://thesociologicalreview.org/fiction/big-farmer/>

For sociological fiction opportunities, see [awtsn.substack.com](http://awtsn.substack.com).







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