



TOMORROW'S CTHULHU

**STORIES AT THE DAWN
OF POSTHUMANITY**

EDITED BY SCOTT GABLE & C. DOMBROWSKI

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Published by
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All characters and events in this book are fictional.
Any resemblance to persons living or dead is coincidental.

Table of Contents



INTRODUCTION		
C. Dombrowski & Scott Gable		1
TANGLES		
Daria Patrie		5
THE STRICKEN		
Molly Tanzer		11
BEIGE WALLS		
Joshua L. Hood		21
THE FIVE HUNDRED DAYS OF MS. BETWEEN		
Joshua Alan Doetsch		31
68 DAYS		
Kaaron Warren		41
TEKELI-LI, THEY CRY		
AC Wise		55
THE SKY ISN'T BLUE		
Clinton J. Boomer		65

A PATHWAY FOR THE BROKEN Damien Angelica Walters	79
THE CRUNCH UNDERFOOT Lizz-Ayn Shaarawi	91
THE LARK ASCENDING Samantha Henderson	99
ASTRAL AND ARCANES SCIENCE SJ Leary	111
ADVANCED PLACEMENT Richard Lee Byers	121
FRIDAY NIGHT DANCE PARTY Thomas M. Reid	131
BOOTS ON THE GROUND Jeff C. Carter	141
INNSMOUTH REDEMPTION Joette Rozanski	155
CHURCH OF THE RENEWED COVENANT Shannon Fay	163
THE POSTHUMOUS RECRUITMENT OF TIMOTHY HORNE Pete Rawlik	167
CURIOSITY Adam Heine	177

PERFECT TOY FOR A NINE YEAR OLD Bruce R. Cordell	191
THE STEEL PLAGUE Nate Southard	199
BETWEEN ANGELS AND INSECTS Simon Bestwick	211
THE JUDAS GOAT Robert Brockway	223
MADNESS ON THE BLACK PLANET Darrell Schweitzer	233
DRIFT FROM THE WINDROWS Mike Allen	241
CHUNKED Matt Maxwell	249
TESTIMONY XVI Lynda E. Rucker	261
THE WORLD ENDS IN NEON YELLOW LA Knight	271
NIMROD'S TONGUE Cody Goodfellow	281
THE GREAT DYING OF THE HOLOCENE Desirina Boskovich	295

Introduction

C. Dombrowski
Scott Gable



There's something in the air. You can't quite put your finger on it. Maybe it was just the branches against the window. Or the zoogs in the attic. Or the "corpse" in the lab. But the air seems charged. Filled with change, with promise. It's making your tentacles itch.

There's really nothing to worry about. It's coming. Or rather, it's here. Possibility, slouching toward reality. It's exciting, really. Out there, everyone's changing, discovering what this new tomorrow holds for them. Some will go kindly; some won't. But in here, it's all you. Quiet, cozy. Here in your study, you've got your brandy at hand and a cat in lap. Many of your friends' brains lie in their jars on the bookshelf, always up for a chat. The Tillinghast resonator's turned to low, and you've got your books.

For when you need a touch of the weird, when you just know something's not right. These stories will help you remember the rituals, the important things. This is a collection of Lovecraftian proportions, gently revealing the tears in this reality we hold so dear.

Just this moment, things couldn't be better.

“Pleasure to me is wonder—the unexplored, the unexpected, the thing that is hidden and the changeless thing that lurks behind superficial mutability.”

—HP Lovecraft

Tangles

Daria Patrie



He called out to me in the night. He called over and over, night after night. At first, I thought it was dreams, and then, I thought I had a mental problem. But it was him, calling, all along. We fear what we do not understand, and I didn't want to fear any longer, so I sought to understand.

That was the first mistake.

There was this man named Plato, and he talked about shadows on the wall and how a man, if he was with some other men and watched the shadows on the wall all the time but one day he turned to look at the light behind where everyone was sitting, he would go blind, because he couldn't handle the light. Then, when he'd try and go back to explain to the other men watching shadows on the wall, they'd tell him he was nuts because they wouldn't understand without looking at the light themselves.

You don't want to look at the light. Keep looking at the wall. I'll make some shadow puppets for you.

Take the internet. It's this big mess of connected stuff, and some of it is real, and a lot of it is crap people made up. It has big flashy pictures, things you can click on, VR you can go live in if you're rich enough. It's a technological wonder, and it's the greatest communications tool since people first started scratching pictures in the dirt, right? Ok. So what if the internet was this giant smokescreen? What if it had another purpose?

It's in people's homes. It's how your fridge tells the grocery what to auto-deliver. It's tied into the backbone of every communications system on the planet. It monitors our children. It drives our cars. Even if you're not on the internet right now, you interact with something that interacts with the internet. Everything from streetlights to satellites.

Now, what if there was a thing, a big thing. And what if this big thing had some kind of psychic powers. Now, don't go all rolling your eyes at me. Just listen.

You know how if you leave water out in a bowl, it'll evaporate into the air? And then eventually if the bowl is big enough and enough water evaporates, curtains across the room can get moist, but if you dip the ends of the curtains in a bowl of water, the moisture will move much faster to the top of the curtains? What if it was like that. What if there was this big thing that had psychic powers that had set up the internet, so it could diffuse to all the human brains, and it was just ready to push over the first domino in a big pile that would reach out in all directions.

And what if it wanted you to be domino number one and called you in your sleep? What would you do?

I'll tell you what you'd do. You'd wake up screaming. And you'd wake up screaming the next night, too. Humans can be very well conditioned to stimuli. When something bad happens, our brains try and get us to avoid having the bad thing happen again. It's a Darwinian survival mechanism. So your body, after several instances of calling and screaming and pain and fear would just stop sleeping. There've been all sorts of crazy-ass studies done on sleep deprivation. It's supposed to be like the most powerful hallucinogen, makes people irrational, violent, twitchy.

After two days, I found the yarn. No, it wasn't smart yarn. It was just regular yarn. Only it wasn't.

My grandmother's sister's husband's friend's daughter was Melissa Witchboorne-Halloway-Smithe. Her name had three hyphens because she had a hyphenated name when she married and added the married name on the end of the whole mess, too. She only had one leg. The other leg was cut off because it grew cancer. She lived with a fake leg for nineteen years after the real one got amputated, but the cancer came back and ate her bowels. She died because you can't amputate all of someone's bowels. It just doesn't work. It's like trying to dig a hole out of a hole—you just end up making a bigger hole. She kept her crochet

yarn in her fake leg. It was one of the new fake legs: a smart leg, connected to the internet, GPS, stats on physical activity . . . it had pockets. In one of the pockets she kept the yarn. Don't ask me why. I don't know why. Maybe you go a little nuts when cancer eats your bowels.

So she had yarn, the yarn was purple, and I found it in the leg. She had been crocheting this thing when she died, and it was a sweater-like thing, but it had six arms, and everyone had thought it was a joke she was making a sweater with six arms that was purple. But she just scowled when they commented and kept poking away at it with her hook.

So I found the yarn, and I started unravelling it, and the thing I found was that, while it had no fiber-optics in it, it also wasn't normal yarn. It was real yarn though. It didn't feel like something manufactured by robots. It felt . . . organic. But it wasn't normal yarn. It was connected in this strange sort of three dimensional mesh. The only thing I can think of similar was this one time on a nature show they were talking about fungus, and they did a time-lapse photo of a fungus growing underground in a clear jelly that they'd made so they could watch it grow. That was how her purple yarn was. It split off in all directions with different places where it rejoined itself, no knots or obvious ways of having it joined. It just was this tangle that had no ends. And while it was normal yarn, it also wasn't normal yarn. I started trying to make sense of it because I hadn't slept in two days, and it was wearing a little thin on me: this whole not sleeping and nightmares and crap.

Well, I don't know if you've ever stared at a puzzle for long enough, but if you stare at randomness long enough, the randomness speaks back. It's called scrying. Seers and witches do it. Some of them look at fire, and some stare at tea leaves . . .

See, there's a pattern in a tangle, every tangle. When your hair gets in a knot, or there's a mold bloom in your living wallpaper, or you look at the roots of trees, there's a pattern in it. And if you look long enough and take the time to untangle it, it will tell you things. A pattern is something that repeats. Doesn't matter what, but if it repeats, it's a pattern. Sound is a wave pattern. And light, light is radiation just like your surface sterilizer in your kitchen is radiation, and radiation happens in waves. So that's a pattern. You wiggle light one way, and that's blue. If you change it, it's red. If you wiggle sound the right way, it's the note E. If you wiggle it fatter or thinner, then it's E-flat or E-sharp.

The patterns in the yarn made no sense and had no beginning and no end and

were tangled. It was him calling again. But this time, it was a puzzle that I had to unravel. When you start getting unsure of yourself, you start to quantify your surroundings to try to understand. You count things because math is this logical fundamental concept that most brains find reassuring at low levels. So I started counting. And as I was pulling the yarn one way and another way, following it along one strand to where it met with another, and following that second to meet with two more, I started to see a pattern. Now, I was really squirrely from lack of sleep and all preoccupied with unravelling the yarn, so I didn't realize when I stopped actually counting and started doing it in my head. And then, my mind started telling me what I would come up with before I saw it, and I realized that I was telling the future—that I knew what kind of branch I would come up with before I got there because, even though I did not consciously understand the pattern, unconsciously, I had absorbed it, and it was part of me.

And then I looked away from the yarn and started to see the spider web patterns showing up everywhere. In the cracks in the walls, in the way smoke swirled out of someone's cigarette . . . there was no chaos any more. I understood. I knew which way something random would happen before it randomly did. I was tapped in, and my mind was in a groove of the web, and I knew things. And then as the patterns began to be clearer, around the fourth day of no sleeping, I started to see him. I saw parts of his mind, and how he was using the patterns to call to me because when he tried calling directly it was too much.

I killed the dog on the fifth day. I felt bad because it was a nice dog. But I needed to know if my idea was true. And it was. Most animals that wander around on two or four legs, humans included, have swirly bits in their brains, wrinkles that are all squished up and random. But they aren't actually random. They have a pattern. Those are the fingerprints of our maker: the mark of God. Those little squiggles that hold thoughts, those patterns, they are the blueprint and the circuit board for what the human race was designed to do all along.

People project holograph ads into the subway and scrawl graffiti on the walls about how God is coming. They're right. And the end of the world too. But God isn't a nice guy. God is big and wet and dripping and ugly and hungry and has a whole lot of squiggly bits. The only thing God is going to save you for is dinner, and it isn't going to be quick. It isn't going to be okay. Nothing is ever going to be okay. No one is going to be okay. God isn't some benign entity that thinks humanity is special. Humanity exists for one thing and one thing only. You know how steering wheels have grooves for fingers? How tools have grips

designed to conform to the shape of your hand? Yeah . . . that's what the squiggly bits in our brains are. They're handlebars.

Even if we're dead, he can still reach in. He can take over and force us to prepare each other and every living thing in the world for his . . . homecoming dinner. He's a slow eater, too, and even if you're no longer alive, he makes you linger, keeping you so even death can't take you away. Killing people doesn't protect them. Nothing protects them. There is only one way to protect each other from him, and it, like God, isn't very nice, but it's a hell of a lot better than the alternative. He doesn't have enough control yet. He's not quite here.

I'm fighting. I started with everyone I ever cared about because they were the ones that I wanted to be sure were safe first. He called me. That's through ears. And then he called me with yarn. That's through fingers and eyes.

Drano makes things smooth. Sure, we have plumberbots and smart drains, but when it comes down to it, nothing cleans out a blocked pipe better or cheaper than Drano. It's like extreme soap. When you get soap on your fingertips, it makes them all slippery. That's because the soap is actually gently eating away at the fingerprint ridges in your hands. Drano does the same thing only it's stronger. It has chemicals in it that make it boil when it comes into contact with water, and tiny bits of metal that work like sandpaper, so it boils and swishes and makes everything slippery and flat. That's how it cleans drains, by swirling boiling bits of metal to eat, to cut, to destroy anything in the way.

You need to start with the eyes and the ears because that's how he gets to you. You have to stop him where he gets in and take away the handlebars before he can take over. Now, at least the people I care about are safe. I can't save everyone, but I've made a difference to a few lives. He won't ever touch them. He won't ever make them do awful things. They won't have to hear the screams: their own or anyone else's.

When he comes through the internet, he won't have anything in them to hold on to.

I made everything inside their heads all smooth.

§

***Daria Patrie** is a delusion, agreed upon by society, which sometimes manifests during the process of reading. If you are reading this right now, you may be under the presumption that Daria exists. You would only be partially wrong. Some say Daria evolved from the left over pasta sauce forgotten in the back of a second-year Physics student's fridge, emerging fully formed and blinking from the crisper drawer one rainy afternoon. Others say Daria is one of several humans possessed by the long dead and quite angry spirit of a three-legged alley cat named Pickleface. Still others say that long ago, Daria arose from a failed poet's recycle bin, the mountain of crumpled paper having gained sentience through a strange mutation of grammar, and that the fiction attributed to this "author" is in fact a misguided attempt by the abomination to locate its accidental creator.*

The Stricken

Molly Tanzer



The rain-puddled, mist-shrouded streets of Arkham are empty—emptier even than the sullen graveyard Hannah now calls home.

Home. It used to just be *camp*, but she has been squatting in this mausoleum for close to a week now and has no immediate intention of leaving. In spite of what it is, the stone room has taken on an almost cozy appearance. Her few possessions—a cookpot, spoon, some food, matches and dry firewood, a blanket, a few changes of clothes, her bike, a fire axe with a brown-stained handle, and a sturdy burlap sack with a large jar in it—are strewn about the place just like they used to be when her apartment was *home*. When she slept on a futon instead of with her back against a shattered coffin.

To be fair, the sack with the jar hadn't been there—but if it had been, it likely would have been tossed into the corner. Funny, the things that never really change. She's still a slob, even now.

It's a shitty evening, that's for fucking sure, but Hannah is barely damp and almost warm from the small, unpleasantly smoky fire she risked building. Steady rain drums on the roof and patters on the unmown grass and disturbed headstones beyond the doors of the crypt, and the soggy branches of the trees rattle in the intermittent gusts of wind. She is keenly aware that the orange glow might attract unwanted attention, but she has made her choice. She needs the

fire. She is certain she will die of exposure or misery without it—and she does not believe those who would injure her will seek her in this place.

When it all began, it would not have occurred to her that a graveyard would be the safest place to hide from the dead, but they seem eager to roam everywhere but here. Her sanctuary was empty, with the doors broken open from the *inside* when she sought refuge here on the solid advice of the only person she has spoken to in a very, very long time.

Hannah sighs and pokes at her fire with a wet stick. The bark peels away under her palm. She knows she should make herself something to eat, but she has not been honestly hungry for a long time. Her clothes fit a little looser, and she knows it's not just from all the dirt and grime and wear. It occurs to her that when her mother died, her father stopped making real meals for himself; he would just throw together sandwiches or pour himself some cereal and soymilk to eat it in the lab. When she'd chided him, worried about his health, he'd looked her in the eye and shrugged.

“Cooking for one is a fucking drag,” he'd said before turning back to his work.

Hannah frowns at the memory, but it is not the remembrance of her father's attitude that upsets her. It is the recollection that she had once, and not too long ago, felt the need to worry for someone's future *health*.

She decides to go measure out a few handfuls of lentils and rice from the bags she snatched from the bulk bins at Horn of Plenty, the little “natural” market that once served Miskatonic University students and professors, when she catches sight of a ragged figure lurching across the intersection of Lich and Parsonage. Her stomach rolls over on itself, and she decides she doesn't actually want any food right now. Watching the horror shamble away on some unfathomable errand, Hannah just about jumps out of her skin when a rattle, like a bottle rolling over concrete, disturbs her melancholy peace. Quickly realizing the source, she groans, resigned to seeing what he wants. He's prone to drying out, so likely he needs her to wipe him down with a damp rag. Or maybe he's bored and wants to talk. Neither prospect thrills her, not particularly . . . but then again, it has been several hours since she's spoken a single word. Some conversation might be nice.

The jar has fallen over, so she rights it before opening the lid and reaching inside to withdraw a living, severed head crowned with a mop of filthy grey hair.

He blinks at her through thick, old-fashioned spectacles, sour-mouthed, as she sets him carefully on the inverted lid.

“Hi, Great-Uncle Herbie,” she says. “Need something?”

“I have asked you on more than one occasion to call me Dr. West,” he says primly—very primly, considering what and where he is.

The tomb isn’t much warmer for his coldness, but Hannah smiles anyway, until her lip cracks. Then, she sobers. “*Doctor West*,” she says, overemphasizing the syllables as she daubs at her lip with the back of her hand. “Can I get you anything? Scalpel? Curette? Forceps?”

“Very amusing,” he says. “My eyelids are dry. I need you to moisten them.”

“*Well*, Doctor West—”

“Please!”

They must be really dry for him to ask so nicely. Without further ado, Hannah grabs her head-wiping rag and trots to the edge of the mausoleum. After holding it out in the rain for a bit, she returns and sponges him off. Then she applies a dab of under-eye lotion—organic, the good stuff, also pilfered from Horn of Plenty.

“That’s better,” he says. “I thank you. You can put me back in my jar now.”

“Oh,” she says, actually a little disappointed he doesn’t feel like harassing her further now that he’s out and they’re talking. “Okay.”

“Is there something else?” he asks, his left eyebrow quirking up. “News, perchance? Or perhaps you’ve had some kind of heartfelt revelation in the face of adversity, and you’d like to share?”

“No,” she says, stung. “Just, you know, living in this mausoleum, wondering what’s next for me.”

“They’ll find you, and then they’ll either kill you or make you one of them,” he says, not a shred of emotion in his voice.

Hannah stares at Dr. West in disbelief. Sure, he’s just a head in a jar and has been since long before she was born, but she’s still surprised at his callousness.

“Oh, don’t look so wounded,” he drawls. “I told you . . . well, I don’t know when, it’s difficult for me to tell in my jar, but I told you some time ago that you should leave Arkham as quickly as possible, and yet . . .” he scans the interior of the mausoleum, eyes rolling dramatically to make his point.

“Where the fuck else do you want me to go?” asks Hannah, pleased to see his mouth shrivel up like a cat’s butt at what he’d on numerous occasions deemed her “unladylike” language. “I know where everything is in Arkham. I know

where to go when I need supplies. It's three miles of open road to Kingsport, minimum, and Boston's even farther. All I have is a bike, and anyway . . . we have no idea what we'll find there."

"Exactly," he says in such a know-it-all tone she's tempted to grab him by the hair and hurl him not back into his jar but into the night. "It might be safer for you."

"Or it might be full of more . . ." Hannah gestures at the world beyond the door of the mausoleum and lets her arm drop. It is just too damn depressing. "Jesus Christ," she says, "this is my fucking life. I'm arguing with a severed head about what to do during the zombie apocalypse." She guesses she should have been watching *The Walking Dead* instead of all those seasons of *Game of Thrones*. Likely, it would have provided her with some useful hints and tips given her current circumstances.

"I'm as surprised as you are," says Dr. West. "I always assumed my work would be shelved along with me, but my *brilliant* nephew had other ideas."

"Don't talk about my father," says Hannah, a lump rising in her throat.

"Why not? He was a fool to think he could duplicate my research, much less advance it. When he asked my opinion, I *told* him—"

"Shut up!" cries Hannah before stuffing her great-uncle's head into his jar. She doesn't want to think about how this is all her father's fault. She doesn't want to lay the blame for the world's demise at the feet of a scientist whose only crime was letting grief rule his reason.

But Dr. West is right. Her father had been unable to let go of the dead . . . and because of that, as far as she knows, the world now belongs to them.



Hannah tries to remember when she first realized everything was going wrong.

It wasn't when her father had called her, demanding she come home *right now*. She'd wondered what was going on, as he pretty much lived at his lab, and only went to his dusty house to do laundry; her answer had come when he hugged her, tears standing in his eyes.

"Ask him what to do, if it comes to that. He'll know if anyone does," he'd said before injecting her with something that had knocked her out. Then he'd locked her in the basement.

No . . . she'd known something was wrong before that stupid day. She just hadn't known what to do about it.



"It's sad, but it's also just so *humiliating*, don't you think?"

Hannah had overheard two of her father's colleagues talking at her mother's funeral after the service. She'd sidled closer, curious: the catty bullshit of academia intrigued her, even if it's what had made her decide she was better suited to a "career" as a barista halfway through her PhD.

But you're so smart, they'd said. What a waste when you showed such promise.

Yeah—fuck *that* shit. She'd rather swim with sharks when she was on her period. It was safer.

"*Humiliating* doesn't describe it." The man pulled a face. "Her life's over and so's his career. Can you even imagine? I always thought it was a mistake for him to let his wife volunteer for his 'revolutionary' new cancer treatment. Let's see him apply for funding now."

Hannah hadn't said anything to either of them; quite frankly, she didn't see the point since nothing she could say would feel as good as punching them both in the face. Unfortunately, controlling herself turned out to be the wrong choice for once. Her father had ended up overhearing some of their spiteful gossip, and given his choices after that night, she couldn't help but wonder . . . if she'd hushed them up, one way or the other, would it have come to this?



She'd awoken in her dad's basement, a crick in her back and a spider running across her nose. A quick swat resolved the latter concern, but the former took a bit longer. She'd risen, gingerly, and climbed the stairs, pointlessly rattling the knob for a good long while before resigning herself to looking for an axe or something to force her way out.

"What the fuck, Dad," she'd said—sadly, not angrily. If she was angry at anyone, it was at herself. She had known he was losing it and had chosen to remain a spectator, hoping he'd pull himself out of his depression, his obsession, without her demanding he give up his research.

Then again, she hadn't known what exactly he was researching.

Hannah thought it telling that she had no idea if it was her father's foresight or mere coincidence that led to her finding the fire axe next to her great-uncle's head, but that's how it happened. She'd been overjoyed to finally find an implement that would allow her to get out and take a piss somewhere more dignified than the cellar floor until she'd startled at the unmistakable sight of a human profile sitting in a large Ball jar.

She'd screamed—of course she had—and when her heart slowed again, she'd inspected the head. Her whole life, she'd heard stories about her creepy great-uncle, and given the nature of those tales, it didn't totally surprise her to find some decapitation victim in a jar.

"The fuck?" She'd poked at the glass.

Then the eyes had fluttered open, and Hannah no longer felt the same urgency in her bladder.



She lets her great-uncle languish in his jar all night. Whether he sleeps, she does not know. She certainly gets no rest.

The rain stops sometime in the wee hours. When the day dawns, the sky is a brilliant blue that's almost obscene in its perfection. She has thought long and hard about Dr. West's advice—about what it would mean to try and leave Arkham, to see if the world beyond the town's borders is also a shambles—and she has decided to risk it. Sooner or later she'll either be caught scavenging for food, or her sources for supplies will run out entirely. Better to make the run while she's still healthy and can afford to spend a few days on the road. Finally hungry, Hannah pulls some Primal Strips out of her bag and tears into them. Thai peanut was always her favorite back in the before-time. The familiar flavor brings tears to her eyes.

She'll need a map. She's been to Kingsport many times, but though the bridge across the Miskatonic tributary should be easy enough to traverse, she has no idea what the state of the roads will be like on the other side. With all the rain they've been having there could be flooding. With only her bike and no access to antibiotics, she's not sure how wise it would be to cross anything too nasty.

She packs what she can into her backpack, but before strapping on the fire axe

she takes out her great-uncle to tell him her plan. He seems pleased, probably because she's finally taking his advice.

"I figure a gas station might still have a map," she says. "The problem is . . . I have no idea what else will be in there."

"Did you think this would be easy?" Dr. West sniffs derisively. "You're certainly your father's daughter. I've been reading over your project notes, Uncle, and I think where you went wrong was injecting the cadavers with reagent. If I vaporize it, then—"

"Shut the fuck up," says Hannah, shocking him into silence. "That's my fucking father you're talking about, okay? And,"—she swallows—"my mother," she whispers when she can.

Hannah cannot really blame her mother for her part in all this, given that she was already dead when it began. Nevertheless, it was mom's thrashing that sprayed the other corpses in the morgue with the formula, causing the chain reaction that ended . . . well, *everything*.

After a moment, her great-uncle's lips unpurse. "You're quite right," he says, the first time he has ever sounded apologetic over the course of their acquaintance. "Forgive me. I have never been sentimental about the dead, but of course, you would have reason to be in this case."

"*In this case*. Jesus." Hannah shakes her head. "Anyway, I know it won't be easy. I was just wondering if you . . . well . . . *fuck*. In case I don't make it back, where should I, you know . . . leave you?"

"Oh." It clearly had not occurred to her great-uncle that she might care about what happened to *him* in all this. "I suppose . . . any place is as good as another. You've been very kind to me, but I existed for years without anyone to sponge my brow and all that. Who knows, I may live longer than . . . everyone. Forever, even." He chuckled, the creep. "All this to say, just put me where you can grab me if you *do* make it out alive. I've enjoyed the novelty of your company, Hannah, and if it is possible for me to come along wherever you go . . . I'd like to."

Touched, Hannah replaces him more carefully than usual in his jar.

There is a gas station at the intersection of Peabody and Washington on the way out of town. Hannah heads there with her great-uncle and everything she owns in the world on her back. She spies a few of the dead on her ride, but she either speeds by them or swerves to avoid their notice.

Her great-uncle had once told her his few successes involved very fresh specimens. Many of those exposed to the vaporized reagent had been in the

ground for years, if not centuries; they are mobile and possess an unnatural strength but not particularly acute faculties.

When the gas station comes into view, she pedals past it but not too far. She figures she can sprint away, if necessary, and parks her bike in the lee of a neglected forsythia.

The only thing she takes with her is her axe.

Derby's Gas-n-Go looks deserted, but in her experience, that's no indication of anything. She approaches cautiously and skulks around the perimeter. No windows are smashed, which is usually a good sign. Still, when she pulls on the front door, she does so cautiously.

It's not locked, but it does ding upon being opened wide enough for her to squeeze through. The chime is terrifyingly loud, and Hannah suppresses a giggle, imagining being mobbed with the undead, succumbing at long last . . . in the Gas-n-Go.

Once inside, the store is almost silent—though it should be even quieter. The electricity is off, everywhere, but here there is that characteristic subtle hum of lots of refrigerators. There must be a generator still working. She glances around, sees nothing, and heads for the wobbly kiosk filled with self-guided tour pamphlets, postcards—and maps.

Hannah grabs a likely handful, stuffing them into the back pocket of her jeans, intending to sort through and pick the best one later—but before she goes, she wonders about the humming of the generator. Her gaze tracks to the wall of drinks at the back of the store, and she is suddenly parched. It has been weeks since she last had a cold beverage, and the temptation is irresistible. The desire for a soda, icy and sweet and fizzy, takes hold completely, and before she is consciously aware of her actions she is in front of the cooler, setting down her axe and thanking the God she's pretty sure doesn't exist for university students' penchant for Mexican Coke—the kind with actual sugar instead of corn syrup.

The door opens after the satisfying resistance she remembers from when she wasn't the last woman in the world, and it was still commonplace to grab a drink at a convenience store. The cold air on her face is glorious; the feel of the bottle in her hand even more so. Remembering her grad school years, she pops the top on the handle of the fridge and drinks half of it in one go—guzzling it, reveling in the experience—and sighs before belching richly.

Only then does she notice the eyes staring at her from behind the rest of the beverages.

She drops the bottle on her foot, feels the impact on her sneaker and the liquid seeping over her toes. It has seen her. She grabs her axe before backing up.

“Son of a fuck,” she mutters when she realizes the corpse is not alone. They have congregated in the cool of the refrigerator, and when they begin to move, she hears the bones creaking in their skin.

She is going to fucking die. And for a fucking *Coke*.

The dead are pretty quick for being, well, *dead*, but they will have to go around and find some way to get to her, given that they’re trapped behind rows of bottles. Hannah decides to run for it. It’s not her usual choice since she has always hated running but needs must and all that shit. She turns, hearing a door squeal somewhere to her left, throws open the front door, and puts on a burst of speed, heading for her bike.

Three corpses, two of them naked, the third still in its funeral suit, are milling around her stuff while one in some terrible Laura Ashley gown scrabbles at the zipper. As she approaches, its stiff fingers find the tab and yank the bag open, revealing the jar containing her great-uncle’s head. He is looking around wildly, helpless, panicked, and his eyes meet hers for only a moment before Hannah looks away to do what must be done.

Before her legs stop pumping, Hannah’s axe is swinging up above her head and chopping into the thief. It is a fairly dry body, and the cut sinks deep into the corpse’s putrid neck. She yanks out the blade and swings again—this time, the head spins away as if she’d been wielding a driver in some unholy game of golf.

The body drops, twitching, but Hannah doesn’t stop to admire her success. She turns around and chops at the closest of the other three, the one in the suit, lopping off an arm and its head before spinning to whack at the second, which is horribly naked. A few swings and that one falls, too, and though blisters are starting on her palms, Hannah takes down the final body in a cloud of dust that her half-elf necromancer would have paid 30 gp for back when she still had an RPG group.

Hannah zips up her backpack, kicks her bike’s kickstand for all she’s worth, and is fucking out of there as the rest of them come up behind, her now-gross axe laid across the handlebars. The dead are fast but not as fast as a scared thirty-something on a bike. She pedals for all she’s worth until she’s over the bridge and reaches a crossroads.

The afternoon is waning, and before the last of the light goes, Hannah

dismounts, exhausted, to read her maps. She pores over them for a time before deciding on a route to Kingsport. Only then does she consult with her great-uncle.

“Thank you,” are the first words out of his mouth. “I have no idea what they wanted with me, but they wanted me.”

“Hell if I know,” says Hannah. “Maybe they wanted to make you their king.”

He ignores this sally. “Did you get a map? Do you know where we’re going?”

“Yeah,” she says. “I think so. Who knows what we’ll find there, but . . .”

“It’s always better to know.”

“Sure, I guess.” Hannah sighs. “I just wish I had, I dunno, a motorcycle and a sawed off shotgun instead of some crappy bike and a fire axe. This is some *Mad Max* shit. It would be nice to be prepared.”

“Mad Max? Is he an old boyfriend of yours?”

Hannah sighs. Sometimes she forgets her great-uncle was a head in a jar before color film was standard.

“Yeah. An ex-boyfriend,” she says, and she puts him back, screwing on the lid extra-tight.

It’s time to move on.

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Beige Walls

Joshua L. Hood



Beige walls, beige cubicles, yellow sticky notes that were slightly more beige than usual. For some reason, she had thought a state-of-the-art government research facility would be a little more . . . state of the art. A dot matrix printer tittered in the distance.

“It’s because,” Dr. Merrick said, “if we upgraded hardware every time technology evolved, we’d spend all our time and money just trying to keep up. Really, it’s only the operational hardware and software that need updating frequently. And the brains, of course. You guys are our most valuable assets. Don’t forget that.”

“I won’t if you won’t,” she said with a smile.

Dr. Merrick didn’t respond.

Renee swallowed her nerves.

“Besides, funding has waned since the private sector has lost confidence in the capitalizable potential of our work.”

“Huh. Bummer.”

“Here’s your work station,” the doctor pointed to a beige cubicle. “Workflow is distributed by a performance-to-priority application. The better you are at certain things, the more of that thing you’ll get to process. But don’t be discouraged from widening your scope. Performance evaluations take into account your priority grade on all divisional subsets. That’s where incentive

raises come from . . .” He trailed off, sounding bored, distracted, like his favorite song was playing somewhere in the distance. “Um, I’ve got to go. Get familiar with the set up. I’ll be back for lunch, and we’ll take a tour of the facilities. That part I think you’ll really like.”



In truth, Renee liked all of it, even the beige—in its own way. She would put up with all the divisional subsets and incentive programs she had to as long as she got to be a small part of the team exploring the Elder Reach.

“*Eigenstatic space*,” she sternly reminded herself, “not *Elder Reach*. Only amateurs and sci-fi hacks called it the Elder Reach. Be professional.”

She looked up at the framed poster on the wall. A pixelated mealworm-looking thing floating in a black void, bearing the caption *Eigenstae Howardia goldmanii*. She got the tingles in the same way she used to when she would look at cartoony drawings of eigenstatic creatures in picture books with their sharp teeth rounded to polished knobs and their scaled tentacles turned to cute nubbins. She was glad she could still enjoy the wonder of these things after all this time. Most of her peers thought it was childish. The picture in the poster was old news, after all, but it was the first of its kind, and that meant something. It was the first confirmed proof of things that were considered pretty farfetched at best from back when they were still just fairytale horrors that drove men mad.

“It was actually the machines,” her father had told her once. “The creatures are harmless to those in active space, but the early machines that the scientists and spiritualists plugged into their brains in the 1920s and 30s are what caused them to become manic. That’s why no one believed them. Of course, if we were to try and force our minds into static space we’d probably lose a few neurons too. Just because technology makes things easier now doesn’t make us better than those old pioneers. Don’t let the familiarity of amazing things fool you. We are constantly rewriting the fine print of the universe—and that’s big.”

It was that last part that stuck with her. People seemed to think that just because Elder Space photos were so pervasive and mankind so accustomed to their strangeness that they were old and boring. Like it wasn’t a mind-blowing discovery every time a new one was revealed. The romance, the mystery, it was

all still there behind the kids' books and the pop-science and the ElderBurger meals at fast food joints.

The first thing Renee did was to set her computer background to a grainy black and white photo of the earth as seen from space—her favorite image from a V2 rocket launched in 1946, the first of its kind. She gazed at the black blobs of land amongst the white blur of clouds and smiled. Most people would have picked “The Blue Marble” or some other famous space photo. But this one was the first, and moreover, as far as Renee knew, this image had never been used to market some used-car dealer’s “Out Of This World Prices!”



“I’ll be honest with you,” Dr. Merrick said three hours later on the way to the optics lab. “Forget what I said earlier. Don’t worry about cross training. Focus on neutrino distortions. Everything else is going to be an algorithm soon. Every time you guys clear a frame, the computer learns from what you did. This data center will probably be reduced to one small supercomputer within the next two years—except for neutrinos. Those have proven a bit random for the computers. For now, anyway.”

“Nice thought,” Renee said.

“Don’t worry. With your resume, I have no doubt we’ll find something for you. So here we are. Brace yourself—most people don’t realize just how intense these machines can be.” Dr. Merrick opened the beige door into a stark, white room. In the center was an orb four or five meters across, covered in slender spindles like a porcupine. It was spinning so quickly that Renee felt like she was standing in a room full of fans. It smelled of sterile grease. “Stay behind the red line. This thing changes direction erratically,” the doctor said. “Each arm carries a fifty-thousand-dollar optic camera set-up. They’re not like regular cameras, of course, but that’s kind of the idea. Eigenstatic space moves by very quickly—or rather, we move through it. All five thousand of those cameras are taking pictures of the same particle cluster. Given the speed of the earth around the sun, the solar system through the cosmos, the North American plate across the mantle, and the movement of all the uncertain particles, the machine has less than one trillionth of a second to determine the course and speed of us in relation to a single Elder parti—er, eigenstatic particle.”

Renee smiled, feeling vindicated. “Fascinating,” she said, trying to seem impressed.

Of course, she knew all of this. Most people with PBS did. By focusing on the recently discovered static particles, those that didn’t move or fluctuate—not subject to uncertainty—a universe similar to the normal plane of existence was revealed. Just how that worked was still unclear, just like how a lot of pharmaceuticals work. And just like miracle drugs, the how of it quickly became immaterial once the results were observed. It was soon discovered that taking a series of images of these particles could result in a mosaic that revealed a very clear physical realm, just out of notice of our own. That the realm just happened to be populated with unimaginable creatures was a huge bonus.

Naturally, it took a lot of computational power to build a world out of single particles, and with things like atoms and neutrinos vibrating around and photobombing the pictures, it took a lot of people to sort through the confusion in the viewing spectrum, which is where jobs like Renee’s came in. As far as the population at large knew, it only took a dozen nerds and an upload server to make the pictures, but the population at large was uninspired, bored, used to it all.

Dr. Merrick peered over thin-framed bifocals. Renee barely glanced away from the rapidly gyrating machine. “You find this all very interesting, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Renee said.

“Hmm. Come this way. There’s something I want to show you,” Dr. Merrick said, deep thought creasing his brow. “Yes, I think you’ll enjoy this.”

“What is it?”

“A game changer. Still photos may soon be a thing of the past.”

Renee looked startled. “Video?”

“Better. It’ll shut this whole data center down and open a vast new world of exploration . . . if we’re lucky.”

Dr. Merrick started walking quickly toward the door. Renee hustled to keep up.

“It’s just a pet project, really. But it’s one I’m particularly proud of. I kind of feel like showing it off . . . to someone who cares. Grant managers and lab directors are only so receptive.”



They walked back down the beige hallway until a door with the red words “Authorized Personnel Only” appeared in the distance. Renee shivered with excitement. She was hoping she’d make a good impression.

During the walk, Dr. Merrick prattled on. “In the beginning, it was tempting to think of it as a world of infinite horrors. There are so many of them. Then, someone actually saw the same creature twice, and then a third time, and a fourth, like it was following us as we vibrate along. This caused a bit of apprehension at the time, but it was soon realized that they were, in fact, different creatures of the same species. Then we started categorizing, applying a standard taxonomy, which seemed to hold up over time. That led Donald Racoult to create Racoult’s Theorem.”

“Any biological life form in the same universe, regardless of plane or dimension, is restricted by the same biological principles. Like Lyell’s uniformitarianism is to geology,” Renee chimed in.

“Exactly. But then, we immediately realized the contradiction of biological creatures existing in static space. It doesn’t make sense on any level, even quantum. So we formed a new hypothesis. Maybe eigenstatic creatures aren’t so static.”

“I hadn’t read anything to contradict static particle theory in the journals,” Renee said.

“You read the journals?” Merrick said, slightly surprised.

“My degree is in statistics, but my interest is in . . . all sorts of unknown things.”

“You don’t say?”

“Sure. I dunno what it is. The mystery, I guess.”

“I hear you there,” Merrick said, then fell silent, distracted.

Renee smiled to herself. *I’m glad I’m not the only one who hasn’t succumbed to the beige*, she thought. “So what’s the new idea?”

“Oh, well, it’s pretty simple really. Biological creatures as we know them can’t live in static space, so we reconsidered and realized that static space isn’t all that prevalent. Thin is the word we use. The eigenstatic creatures aren’t on a parallel plane, they’re behind it.”

“Behind it? How?”

“It’s like a wall separating us from them. A wall with eleven dimensions running through normal space, distorting our view of it. The example I use is to have you imagine that you’re in a swimming pool with one side separated

by a transparent pane of red glass. If you look through the glass, it will appear as though the people on the other side are swimming in a different kind of medium entirely, but it's still the same damned pool."

"Wow," Renee said. "That's news to me." They'd reached the door. A beige-faced clock with a black frame ticked above it, telling her that lunch break was almost up. "So what's behind the door?"

"Well . . . it's a sledgehammer. We're trying to break through the glass."

A brief chime sounded from both of their phone alarms at once. Lunch time was over. Dr. Merrick glanced at the clock and rolled his eyes. "Ignore that. Would you like to go in?" he asked.

Renee nodded.



"Why doesn't everyone know about this?" Renee exclaimed as they entered a room full of wires and digital readouts. She couldn't tell where the so-called sledgehammer was. Half of the stuff in the room looked slapped together, specialized, like it existed nowhere else in the world.

"We're publishing next week, though I don't expect much of a reaction," Merrick said.

"Why not!? This is amazing. People are gonna flip! A chance to see an eigenstatic creature in the flesh, to touch one! This is huge!"

"If it works," Merrick said, "then we'll certainly get a grant boost but probably little more."

"I don't think you realize what this will mean to the world . . ." Renee began.

"Of course, we do. But we're realists. Ask yourself, what was the last dinosaur discovered, the last one reclassified? What was the last thing they cloned?"

"I don't know."

"Neither do I. Nor do I know the last guy to walk on the moon. I know the first but not the last. Have you seen the latest image from Hubble II? It's astounding."

"Yeah, it's of the Sombrero Nebula, right?"

"Galaxy. And it's actually only a single star cluster, but it contains a nascent supernova fluctuation. Something they didn't even know to look for until we found out how to read the magnetic signature of stabilizing iron in the near infrared. Right now at NASA, they're piecing together an image of that supernova

as it occurs. Two weeks from now will be the first time that a supernova has been recorded in real time. You watch. It'll get a mention between celebrity baby names and Black Friday specials. But I digress. This is a gripe as old as technology. Now watch, we're starting."

A blue light began to glow at the end of a thin needle in the middle of the room: the sledgehammer. With a hum, it began to grow.

Dr. Merrick beamed. "Look, Renee, a glimpse across an unknown plane that doubles the size of our universe. The first look at life beyond alien! This is as far as we've got before destabilizing."

A placid voice came from a speaker on the wall. "Control room to observation deck. We have destabilization."

The blue glow dimmed and fluctuated.

Dr. Merrick didn't look surprised, but he did look a little disappointed.

"Interference critical. Looks like the new plasma siphon is insufficient. It's overheating," the control room said.

"Reboot it," Merrick said into a microphone.

A brief pause, then, "No good . . . wait. Something's happening. Numbers are balancing." The voice from the speaker became excited. "Plasma interference decreasing."

Renee glanced at Dr. Merrick, who remained silent. "I'm not sure how this is happening, but the aperture is widening. The plasma siphon is still offline," the speaker said.

Dr. Merrick smiled.

"Where's the plasma going?" Renee asked.

"Into eigenstatic space, I believe. Or what we used to call eigenstatic space. I think we're getting a little help here . . . from the other side," the doctor said.

Renee's eyes widened. "No way. You can't be serious."

"Just speculation," the doctor smirked, "but I have it on good authority that this could be a cooperative effort."

She watched as the blue light grew. An appendage, like a tentacle but of a color she'd never seen before, began to writhe through the blue light. It dripped with a slime that vaporized before it hit the ground. Acrid, cloying decay wafted through the air as the tentacle oozed outward like a worm from a fish eye.

Renee grew cold, afraid. She recalled warnings from the past. The things that scientists said to each other after science had done horrible things.

The question isn't can we, but should we?

The progress of science is far ahead of man's ethical behavior.

All attempts to adapt our ethical code to our situation in the technological age have failed.

I am become death.

Renee stepped backward, but there was nowhere to go.

Dr. Merrick still beamed. "It arrives!" he said. "We've done it! We've done it, and no one even tried to stop us!"

"What?" Renee muttered.

The thing from the blue eye grew and grew.

"No contest, no opposition. A vacuum of interest! The world has grown bland with wonder, but that will change." He laughed shrilly. "I may have been a little dishonest, my dear. The wall between us and them wasn't absolute. There was a force for which static space is no obstacle."

"Dr. Merrick, shut it down. Please!"

"The dimension of thought, my dear! Thought is transcendent, and they heard us looking even as we saw them. Can you hear them? Can you hear them in your thoughts? They come!"

"Dr. Merrick!" Renee shouted as the tentacles slithered across the beige floor toward them.

"On second thought, Renee, don't worry about the neutrinos. I think we've successfully eliminated your job today. It's a shame that the world will never see its first supernova, but I hardly doubt they'll miss it. Perhaps, they will find a wonder again in the age of destruction.

"Say, Renee, would you like to name this one? That's the rules. Finders namers. I've already got a few, so you can have this one. First across the void—what an honor! You may even be remembered!

"But hurry, it comes!"

§

Joshua L. Hood lives in Boise, Idaho. He holds a B.A. in archaeology and occasionally works in the field locally. He also has most of an illustration degree but now regrets all the time and money he spent on art school. On the weekends, he volunteers for a wildlife rehab center with orphaned black bears and, on weeknights, spends his time as a night watchman for our corporate overlords. He's had stories published through several small presses and has put out the short story collection *Melting People*, available from all the big booksellers. There are many more spooky stories and novels in the works, details of which can be found at www.joshualhood.com.

The Five Hundred Days of Ms. Between

Joshua Alan Doetsch



Can't feel my legs. So I slither along the ground, toward the audient window, humming that song. I hear the wet-velcro rip of the thousand hands rending flesh. I see her through the window. That mocking grin.

The first thing Ms. Between said to me was, "I'm a mad woman with a lab." The second thing she said was that I could leave at any time with no obligation. The third thing was that there could be no questions—questions would cause her and her offer to evaporate. I believed absolutely in that, so she handed me the murder weapon.

No, wait. That's not the beginning. I don't remember exactly when it began—some time after Ms. Between came out of our touchscreens. Everyone has seen her Tech Talk videos and all their terrible wonder. Yet nobody knows where she broadcasts from. No one ever meets Ms. Between.

But I did.

She provided no name, only an address. She said he had done a bad thing. Said he deserved it.

I swallowed all of my wriggling questions.

The Nameless Man looked old and kindly. He had one eye and smiled as he slept. Oh, how I wish he had tossed with moaning guilt. Everyone sleeps more soundly since the symbionts.

Hesitating, I stood over the Nameless Man's bed for an hour. With the speed

of a carnivorous plant, I took out the dagger. It was carved from bone and coated in lacquer that gave it a greenish hue. I raised the dagger over my head and held it there, squeezing the leather-wrapped handle. Another half hour. My arm ached. I bit my inner cheek and tasted copper. Ms. Between had said I could leave at any time.

No, Val, Lailah pleaded from inside me. You must not do this.

Lailah is my dedicated symbiont.

“Have to,” I rasped.

The Nameless Man startled. His eye opened. I brought the dagger down. I’ve never been good with knives. It took many tries. “Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry,” I said until I was nothing but tears and snot.

“Lailah,” I said when it was over, “now.”

Her coils tightened in my gut. *No, Val. Don’t make me. Don’t make me.*

“We have to, Lailah. Please.”

I felt her sigh and shiver. Her tendril came out the port in my wrist to snake down into the Nameless Man’s mouth. His symbiont would not live long without him, but it might have stored recent memories in synaptic backup. Through Lailah, I felt its distress. Not a dedicated symbiont, not even a thought interface. How lonely. Just a silent worm. But I don’t judge. I recognize my privilege.

As Lailah devoured the other symbiont, I put the wet dagger into a plastic bag. Ms. Between had handed it to me just before telling me the rules of time travel. It was preposterous. Time travel couldn’t exist.

I committed murder on the off chance that I was wrong.



I walked home through the street-lit glow of the city, the old and terrible city of crimes uncounted, layered and layered like rings in a hanging tree. The streets were quiet, but I couldn’t hear my own footsteps. Lailah released chemicals to soothe my nausea, so I managed three blocks from the Nameless Man’s apartment before I vomited.

The anti-symbio crowd can wallow in ignorance. The symbionts improved our quality of life. They wiped out entire diseases. They’re always there for us. We stare at our screens, pressing our Skinner-box buttons, but now, we’re all alone together.

I wiped my mouth. Lailah cleaned the stomach acid from my teeth. I hummed

a song I couldn't remember. An oldie. Very old. The song Ms. Between sang in the bar the night we met. Johnny Mercer? I couldn't remember the words, but the lyric fragments bounced around my brain like a free radical.

"Strange days," wheezed a vagrant from under a hooded cloak of rags.

Lailah hissed a warning in my brainpan, readying an arsenal of enhanced adrenaline. People without symbionts spook her. She can hear no voices inside them. She calls "Marco" into the darkness and gets no reply. I rubbed my belly and hummed the song to calm her. I tried to sing it.

"You've got to accentuate the positive . . . eliminate the . . . no . . . hmm . . ."

Through broken teeth, the vagrant muttered something that might have been, "Don't mess with mystery?"

"No," I said. "That's not it."

I gave the man my pocket cash. All he had was an empty belly and nothing to call him home. I recognize my privilege.

During the rest of the walk, I avoided eye contact. These days, pedestrians walk like zombie ants, forming curious, unthinking formations as if under the sway of tyrannous spores. I walked in the shadows of jagged buildings. When had I become afraid of the open, starry sky?

Thinking back, I don't recall if I entered my house by the front door or the rear. I only remember lying fetal on my bed. My pillow damp and salty. Lailah shuddered silent sobs within me.

Why, Val? Why did you make me do that?

"I'm sorry," I said over and over. Lailah's tendril poked out, wrapping around my hand. We squeezed one another. "We're doing it for Oliver and Nemo."

But they're dead, Val. They're dead.

"Not for long," I said. But that was stupid. Time travel was impossible.

With murder on my mind, I slept like a baby. Not so long ago—before the symbionts, during the screaming times—no one slept soundly. We screamed all through the night. Screaming was epidemic, and the city aldermen considered passing laws to ration sleep time and reduce the shrieks in the small hours. And that is when Ms. Between came streaming into our feeds.



It began when the autumn was too damn hot, and it was much too late to deny the climate change or the things crawling out of the melting icecaps, and the

country was too polarized to do anything about anything, and the sciences groped in all directions, and the search engines pieced together all dissociated knowledge. It started with emails and texts with subject lines like “Don’t Fail to See!” and “Experience the Transhuman” and “Witness the Post-Mundane!” That is how Ms. Between came into our lives. She commanded our likes, our favorites, our shares, and our reposts. Billions of views. She came as an electronic zeitgeist. On the internet, everyone’s an anonymous spirit—both the message and the messenger.

She looked at you, really looked at you through your touchscreen. The show-woman scientist, her Tech Talk videos were equally artistic. The images! The non sequiturs, the absurd, the grotesque. Faces peering out of ultimate space. Images so frightful that we might not have slept if not for our symbionts singing us silent lullabies of melatonin. And just when the surreal had tripped all the tumblers in your skull and you heard the creak of the suture cracks opening, hungry and ready, that is when Ms. Between would appear. So iconic in her huge goggles, rubber gloves, and waistcoat and suit—rather like a female Tesla. She was the harbinger of the recent surge in scientific discoveries. She dared us to hope.

If time isn’t a flat petri dish poked by contemptuous fingers, if anything actually begins, then there I was at the bar. I smoked a vitamin-supplemented e-cigarette and complained to the bartender that a vice without self-destruction spoils the poetry. He nodded in the fiberoptic glow of my nauseously nutritious pull. I sighed out blueberry-scented smoke, and we lamented the good old days when cigarettes had the decency to kill.

Lailah made that happy vibration—*Mmm*, on my inner ear—that she makes whenever she finds a tumorous growth to eat. That’s when I saw Ms. Between, sitting on the next stool as if she had leapt from my touchscreen. She swirled a nuclear blue martini in a rubber-gloved hand. She hummed and sang that old song. What was it called? The earworm lyrics crawled into my head. Why can’t I remember?

I saw myself in her goggles, mouth gaping.

“You . . . you’re . . .?”

“A madwoman with a lab,” she said. “Don’t be a glum chum. You’re a sleepwalker, blind. How can you see the worlds within worlds? Do you know, if you rip open a gravid sand shark’s belly, what you’d find? Embryos hunting

embryos. Murder in utero. A tiny, black Mesozoic sea, and only one makes it out. From their perspective, you won.”

Then the drinks flowed, and Ms. Between’s sentences went up and down like a rickety carnival ride. She told me my life story. She told me about my twin brother, Oliver, and how he became my parents’ favorite the day I announced that they no longer had two sons; the day they threw me out. She told me how Oliver was murdered. She told me how my mom and dad reconciled with me after his death, even paid for all my operations and changed their pronouns. How I hated them for that. As if I had to buy their acceptance with Ollie’s blood, as if he was a sacrifice on the altar of their love. Ms. Between talked of amputees trying to scratch phantom limbs and how I looked for my brother’s ghost in the bottom of every bottle. There were half-hearted suicide attempts, of course—never serious; always across, never along.

In the screaming times, before the symbionts, suicide was an epidemic. These days, it’s harder to kill yourself when you’re deciding for two. The self-murder rates plummeted, and the company building the civic-engendered suicide booths went out of business. We all pretended it never happened.

Ms. Between told me all these things.

And I believed. I had to.

Last call drove us out into the damp, hot, deserted midnight streets. And up the dizzy stairs and into her lab. She showed me strange instruments. Gaudy machines of glass, metal, and plastic. She threw a switch, and sparks flew, and my hair stood up, and there was a buzzing behind my eyes, and I could see things slithering in the air like the floaters in our peripheral. I saw grotesque shadows squatting on our heads.

I saw these things, and I had to believe. I’m so sorry, Nameless Man. I didn’t believe in time travel, but I had to believe for Ollie. I took the bone dagger.



You’ve got to ac-cent-tchu-ate the positive . . .

Can’t remember the rest of the words. Something grinds in my chest when I breathe. I remember her voice. Ms. Between talks like someone who can barely cage the punchline behind her teeth. I remember how she said the rules of time travel.

One: the window is yours and yours alone. A window is calibrated to one

person. Only that person can walk in or out of it. A person can only have one window. Ever.

Two: a window can open to only one time and place. Once set, that window is set forever.

Three: you can walk in and out of your window once a day. However, every trip wriggles the gap in time wider—sometimes by a millisecond, sometimes more. You will always arrive a little later than the last trip.



When I went back up the dizzy steps with the wet dagger, when I dropped it dripping at Ms. Between's feet, I knew she'd let loose the punchline. Time travel is impossible. It can't be real. Silly me. Stupid, evil, wretched me. I'd murdered for a desperate hope. That idiot hope would go to that chopping block still sticky with the gore of Santa Claus, fairytales, and all manner of moon-blooded dreams.

I shivered. I waited for the axe to fall.

And Ms. Between did the most unlikely thing. She opened the window.

It made none of the gaudy, mad science sounds of the rest of her lab. There was no transition between it not being and being. It stretched in trapezoidal shapes and inconstant angles. Colors swirled like a smoking mirror before they settled and cleared.

"Ollie?"

I gulped air. I saw him. I saw the scene moments before his death as it was described to me. Frozen.

"But," I said, "that's too late. No time to warn him. I need more time!"

Ms. Between shrugged apologetically, said it wasn't an exact science.

I said, "I need weapons: guns, explosives, something formidable."

She shook her head and said, "Nothing synthetic." In fact, she explained, with the window calibrated to me, anything that was not a human byproduct was dicey. She told me to take off my clothes, the way the Big Bad Wolf, stuffed like a sausage in Grandma's skin, told Red Riding Hood. "You won't need them anymore."

She gave me a jumpsuit of supple leather, vat-grown from fetal cells. It hugged me wetly. She handed me the dagger and nodded, and I knew what species of

bone it was. She injected me with something that made all the colors bleed and every molecule significant.

Then I walked through the window.

Tiny explosions. My tooth fillings. I tasted copper. Agony. Déjà vu. The feeling of a forgotten song on the tip of the tongue.

“Ollie?”

Nemo! Lailah said in jubilation. *Nemo-Nemo-Nemo-Nemo!* She could sense her twin, Oliver’s symbiont. They were two halves cut from the same worm when we were just children.

Oliver struggled, visible in the moonlight. He was bound and gagged on a rough-hewn stone at the center of a natural amphitheater, exactly as the police report said.

No time. I ran down the sloping semi-circle toward the killing stone. Dozens of steps from holding his hand. I had to get him out of there. No time.

And then, they were there.

“No.”

I saw them by the light of the LED crosses grafted onto their foreheads. I saw them by the moonlight glinting off the metal peeking from their flesh. Fifteen? Twenty? More? The chromies. Children of the Immaculate Machine.

“No.”

Some anti-symbios were more radical than others. Some found religion through body modification—transubstantiation through steel, the voice of the Holy Ghost through the wireless connection in their skulls. To them, a body defiled by one of the “devil worms” was a profanity. They punished the supporters of that lifestyle. Oliver had brought his medical training to this faraway place for charity work, bringing symbionts to impoverished children. And the chromies had tortured and murdered him. But not yet.

“No!”

Lailah filled my legs with adrenaline. I never ran so fast. I didn’t run fast enough.

Many hands tore me away from Oliver. I stabbed and stabbed with the bone dagger, but it was quickly slapped away. Boots and reinforced knuckles hailed down. I swallowed teeth. A knee shattered. Ribs snapped like twigs in the night. Lailah tried so hard, pumped so many endorphins, but she couldn’t keep up. My left eye socket crunched and closed, an avalanche over a cave. But crueller still, they left one eye open.

“Don’t you do it,” I tried to say through the ruin of my mouth.

But they did. They stood with perfect theatrical arrangement, so my view was not obstructed. Every detail I read in the police report. Every horrible daydream and sweat-stained nightmare. I saw it. They crucified Oliver. They slowly cut him open. They pulled out Nemo.

Oliver made a muffled scream.

Lailah screamed, and I screamed. We screamed to the stars and universe with its insane rules that allowed time to bend. Then there was only the sound of the chromies praying. Then their laughter.

Then silence.



And then a familiar humming. That old song. Lailah stirred in the wreckage of me, sensing a sibling self. A figure hunched some paces away, farther up in the amphitheater. The chromies laughed and leered at the promise of more bloody fun. My head swam, and it was so hard to see in the moon-licked dark. Were my symbiont and I part of triplet sets?

No. It was me, come back through the window. I . . . she shook, barely able to stand. Had it been days? Weeks? Months? However long it took medical and symbiotic care to allow her to limp back through. She fell over, bleeding out from all the places the window had robbed her of her stitches, staples, and artificial bits. Helpless, she had watched our brother murdered all over again. I could tell something had been taken from her, something that only showed in her one good eye. She just kept humming that jolly song.

And then more humming. More me. One by one. There was no transition. They were suddenly there or had been there in the dark. And with each additional hum, the glittering grins of the chromies eclipsed into frowns and uncertainty.

How many of me were there? We filled the half circle of the rising amphitheater. Every step up the slope was another me, one day more healed in body and broken in mind. The ones at the top were lean and well-muscled, marked everywhere with self-inflicted scars, hunched and shivering with insanity. Once a day through the window. How many days?

The amphitheater vibrated with their humming. Lailah called out to the silent symphony of symbionts. All at once, the many mes showed the graveyard of their teeth and made such faces that the youngest of the chromies fainted.

And then, they charged down the slope. The ones highest up moved the fastest, taking the lead, loping down the hill. They surged over the weeping chromies like frenzied maenads. Grabbing, biting, rending, pulling flesh from metal.

And here I am, crawling up the hill. Crawling like a boneless mollusk humiliated by gravity. I can hear the Bacchic orgy behind me, sounding something like a slaughterhouse and something like lovemaking. One of the machine cultists begs for help. The thousand hands kill and defile.

Can't feel my legs. It hurts and something grates inside of me, but I crawl toward the window. Ms. Between watches me from the opening. I crawl back to the mask of her mocking grin and all the things wriggling behind it. I crawl back to her made-up rules—the rules that make rescue impossible but revenge conceivable, the rules that tear down deniability and nurture complicity. She knew. I murdered that old man, not even believing it would work, and she knew. I know all this now, but I'm still going to do it. I'll pay the price, once a day, every day, and walk through the window to watch my brother die.

I crawl and cough and hum. I remember the words now. The lyrics were always in my brain, the way that tentacles and gills lie waiting, safely tucked away under our DNA, hidden behind the thinnest scrim of inhibitor proteins. I crawl and laugh and sing.

“You’ve got to ac-cent-tchu-ate the positive, eliminate the negative, latch on to the affirmative . . . don’t mess with Mistress In-Between.”

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Joshua Alan Doetsch is a sentient word virus spreading across the collective unconscious through the vector of human language. It has taken on many forms, from short stories to screenplays to tabletop roleplaying games. It spreads through print, digital, and audio mediums. It coalesced as the novel *Strangeness in the Proportion* and shaped itself into an anthropomorphic guise as *Lead Writer of The Secret World*, a massive multiplayer online computer game. It is made of cuttlefish ink and earworm rhymes, and its fingernails are gleaming fountain pen nibs. You can help spread the infection at joshuadoetsch.com. It's already too late.