

LITERARY MAGAZINE

TWIST

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Sci-fi
WRITING

Out-of-this-world stories that push science and imagination to the edge of the universe.

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CONTENT WARNING

The stories featured in this magazine may contain mature topics and sensitive themes.

BEHIND THE SCENES



I hope you all managed to take a proper breath over the break—time to rest, reconnect with people you love, realign your priorities, and maybe reset a few goals.

This issue feels like such a fun, energising way to welcome everybody back and kick off the new year, and I'm genuinely excited to share it with you.

One thing I'm excited about is that this issue marks our first call for submissions. Thank you to everybody who trusted us with your work. The tough part was not being able to accept it all. We simply couldn't fit in everything we loved. I hope you'll all submit again—we want to keep reading and keep sharing.

In keeping with our values, every story published here was paid. It's a token payment for now, and one we're aiming to increase as we grow, but it matters to us. It's about respect for the work, the time, and the imagination that make this magazine possible.

It's also incredibly exciting to finally be able to showcase the winning story from the Twist in the Tale Sci-Fi contest in a way that feels worthy.

We've also included an author spotlight on the winner as a way to highlight and celebrate the many different voices and creators that make up our writing community.

For now, I'm just thrilled to share this eclectic, joyful lineup with you. From kaiju to clones, cowboys to cryogenics, there's a little bit of futuristic fiction for everyone. I hope you enjoy diving into it as much as we enjoyed bringing it to life.

Nick

TWIST CREATOR
NICK SMITH

COVER ART BY
AMEY MANN

EDITED BY
FREYA KING



Welcome back to the arena!

Twisted Tournament returns March 23rd 2026 with more low-stakes, high-fun writing challenges. It's fast, fun fiction designed to get you writing—not waiting.

With four tournaments a year and an annual pass available, Twisted Tournament has your writing year sorted.

Write more. Finish something. Get published.

Have fun doing it.

DIVIDED WE FALL

by Corrie Haldane
www.corriehaldane.com

People had laughed when Christopher built the bunker in his backyard. They made jokes about tinfoil hats and called him paranoid.

Nobody was laughing now. Nobody was doing *anything* now, except rotting.

Christopher had never liked people very much, but he studied his surveillance monitors often, wondering if anybody else had survived The Sickness.

He'd been prepared for just about everything... except loneliness.

He hadn't seen anyone for months, not since Balloon Man had stumbled by Camera 2. "Balloons!" the Balloon Man had croaked. "They came in balloons!"

Balloon Man collapsed then, and never got up again.

Many folks had believed aliens brought The Sickness. Christopher favored the Government-sanctioned experiment gone wrong theory, himself. Not that it mattered now.

He turned on the monitor, worked through the three views: *Camera 1, Camera 2, Camera 3.*

Day after day, always the same. He flicked through on auto-pilot, already past Balloon Man on Camera 2 before registering that he'd *seen something move.*

He clicked back.

A scrawny beagle sidled up to Balloon Man. It dropped a tennis ball beside the corpse and barked hopefully. The ball bounced once, then rolled a short distance away. The dog retrieved it, tried again. Whined.

Christopher's breath caught. It was lonely. Like him.

Though he didn't care for people, he liked dogs an awful lot. He turned towards the door. Hesitated. Had enough time passed? Was it safe?

The dog moved out of the camera's view, and howled.

That decided things. Christopher unsealed the door, stepped outside.

"Here, boy!"

GROUNDED

Morgan Kostelnik
morgankostelnik.com

Return my runaway daughter. It should have been a simple job. I expected some brat not a pain-in-the-ass twenty-something.

"Owww. Stop pulling so hard," Roura whines, dragging her feet on the old road between space ports.

"Then stop walking so damn slow," I snap, yanking on her arm.

"I'm not going back."

"The five hundred solars bounty says you are."

"Only five? He's low balling you, bounty hunter."

"I have a name."

"Do you? Heartless, soulless. Might as well be nameless."

My chest buzzes like static. Why is she getting to me? If anything, I should be furious.

"He'll also be paying for the starship you wrecked."

She brushes off the accusation, "It was an accident."

"Liar."

"It was! But *this* isn't." She elbows my bruised rib, bolting into my blind spot. Using my weaknesses against me?

I'm almost impressed.

She has a head start but I'm faster.

I grab her around the shoulders.

Roura struggles, but I hold her tight. She slumps in defeat.

"Why would you help *him*. It's not—"

A small craft zips down from the stars, blinding us with its lights. The door flies open revealing my employer, Mr. Verit. That's a first.

"Excellent job. Hand her over. Here's your money." He waves a data card, but his eyes are on her.

Roura shrinks behind me.

An uneasy feeling swirls in my stomach. I ignore it. "Go to your dad."

Verit's eye twitches.

"He's not my dad. *Janessa*, please," she whispers my name for the first time.

I glance back at her, haunted eyes full of fear.

Her hand squeezes my arm.

Disgust rises as I look back to Verit. The middle-aged asshole's eyes run up and down Roura's figure.

Oh, hell no.

I reach for my blaster.

So much for fixing my ship.

OUR LAST ROAD TRIP

Chris Doty-Dunn
@chrisdotyduinn.com

After weeks on the road, I throw my daughter's chemo meds away at a dilapidated gas station in Amarillo.

I am—was—an oncology researcher. When the diagnosis came, I knew her odds were good: eighty percent or better. But that assumed hospitals, doctors, treatment schedules. Those options dwindled as the world went mad.

The only pills I can find aren't treating her, just making her sicker. I'm worried she won't make these last miles the way she's going.

I haven't prayed in years but *God, please—let her be the key.*

Distant thunder rolls as I trudge back to the Civic I stole in Barstow—a hybrid, since it's hard to find a working pump in the apocalypse.

I don't see her in the front seat.

"Daisy!"

I sprint.

Oh, God, have you taken her from me because I'm going to let the cancer eat through her? Because I was supposed to help her grow up, not—

But she's there, slumped. Snoring. The bite on her arm is pink, healing rather than festering as her leukemia fights off the virus.

I slip into the driver's seat just as the sky opens, rain pouring while I sob.

Then a lightning flash outlines a horde shambling towards us across the parking lot.

I pound on the steering wheel, swearing at God for not letting me grieve. For not saving my daughter.

"Daddy?"

My hand finds hers—fragile as an infant's—and I turn left, taking a chance at Atlanta and the CDC.

At making memories on our last road trip.

And at seeing if God will answer my prayer.

JURASSIC WORKSHOP

Chloe Paige

Mary sneaks through the curtains of orange butterflies fluttering around Daddy's cluttered workshop. A replicator sits on the bench, its tray filled with plastic butterfly figurines. It huffs smoke and another butterfly emerges, stretching its wings before flying to join the rest of the no-longer-extinct species.

Mary waves the smoke away and climbs onto a stool to reach the replicator, swiping the figurines to the floor with a clatter. She sets her backpack on the bench, rifles through all her animal plushies shoved inside, and places her favourite T-Rex on the replicator's tray.

Grinning, she presses the red button.

A FRESH START

Kyle Rogers

A landscape lush and green, like the tales of the ancestors. A world to support dreams again. A future.

I eagerly release my helmet visor to have a taste. Noxious, toxic. A wolf in sheep's clothing. A lie.

I seal my helmet visor, reestablishing a safe barrier between myself and this planet's hostile atmosphere.

"Report?" My earpiece crackles. Captain's voice originates from the ship, in orbit above me.

"Negative," I say.

"Really? But it looks... I thought this was it for sure. The initial data looked promising."

"I know. I had high hopes, too. It's a mirage."

I turn back toward the descent module. The search continues.

HOME IS WHERE YOU ARE

Sy Power
@sypower.bsky.social

They promised a fresh start here, yet the view from our foxhole was the same crimson sand we had in the ones back on Earth. Maybe different billionaires bankrolling the tanks. I can't tell them apart.

"Anything left in that MRE, Peters?" Donovan grinned.

The winds burned my cheeks too deeply for him to see me blush as I broke our last chocolate.

Nestled under the Nereidum Range's butterscotch sky, we feasted on Hershey's and good company. I didn't know if we could count on the rubble of Mars for our futures, but at least we could count on each other.

A SONG OF SURVIVAL

Moira Richardson
www.ohmoira.com

On this lonely planet, his senses have sharpened.

Distant stars puncture the endless black through his cracked visor.

The tradewinds moan on swirling dust clouds from the east, where the sun should be.

The failing oxygen generator drip-drip-drips as it converts the toxic atmosphere.

He longs for the heat of summer mornings, the sing-songing laughter of his children, the touch of his partner's hand upon the small of his back.

He can only shake the tube of dwindling nutrient pills, count the dying pings of the battery pack, as he waits for a rescue that will come too late.

ONLY CHANCE

by J.I. Locatelli

“It’s seriously -196°C in there?” Oliver presses his chubby-cheeked face against the glass separating us from the floor. He’s staring at a frozen woman in one of the display cases below. “That’s really cold, right? So we don’t degrade? What’s that in Fahrenheit?”

“-320°. And it’s ‘decompose.’” I sign the final disclosures and waivers. It’s a gamble, isn’t it? Everything has been, since his birth. This way, there’s a chance he survives long enough for researchers to find a cure.

I take Oliver’s small hand and lead him to the cryonic chambers. “You want to see how cold that feels?”

BLUEBERRY MATCHA, THE ART OF THE DEAL, AND OTHER TIME-PARADOX BEVERAGE REGRETS

by Fiona Mauchline
@fionahmauchline

The deal was simple. The mysterious, one-slate-eyed barista said Sam could use the time portal beside the milk-frother only to fix his disastrous – and incredibly short – date. No “world history improvements”, no “personal finances optimisation”, just ‘one clean do-over without spilling Blueberry Matcha Latte down Alisha’s front’. And, of course, without blurting “I’ll just give it a wipe...” or proceeding to do so. Boy, the slap still smarted.

He squeezed through the portal and instantly collided with Sam-From-Ten-Minutes-Ago. Lattes exploded into purple rain, purple rain, then a stream of Sams tumbled out by the frother, adding a chorus of “I’ll just give it a wipe...” to the growing cacophony of slaps, yelps and coffee-grinding.

The barista rolled her smoky slate eye and sighed.

“*One clean do-over*’ was maybe misworded....worded....worded....word...”

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

An interview with writer Timothy Hayes

Timothy Hayes is a fiction writer from Down Under who currently whets his pen beneath the grey but occasionally blue thing that hangs over London. And so we begin to understand why he writes fun, feel-good stories intended to brighten the day.

Join Timmy's [mailing list](#) to get his latest stories sent straight to your inbox.



TIMOTHY HAYES

half-written stories from this year. First off is one about the Kraken looking to get himself a publicist to address his poor reputation among the seafaring community. It's thought-provoking stuff, obviously.

If you could give only one piece of advice to writers entering contests, what would it be?

Write the story that you want to write, not the one you think other people want you to write. I'm a huge believer in owning your voice. Having been around the contest world for quite a few years now, the writers whose work I keep returning to are the ones who lean right into their voice, whatever it may be. There's so much talent here, but the stories that stand out – and outlive the contests they were written for – are usually less conformative and written with a flair that is true to their author. It also just makes writing way more fun.

Which books, films or authors have most shaped the way you tell stories?

My first favourite book of all-time was Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. It opened my eyes to the (im)possibilities of fiction and that telling a good story is really just about leaning right into your thing, whatever it is. But if I could only read one author for the rest of time, it would be, hands and pointy hats down, Terry Pratchett.

How would you describe your writing voice to someone who hasn't read your work yet?

Fermented whimsy. That is to say, it's supposed to be feel-good – or even feel-great – providing Barkeep pours his pints properly.

What are you writing next?

Well, I'm all signed up for the 2026 Twists. But otherwise, I'm intent on finishing a couple of fun,

Can you tell us a little about what drew you to writing in the first place?

Oh, I always love when writers get asked this question. So often the answer seems to be some version of, “Well, funnily enough, I was actually born with a quill in hand. Yes, doctors were astounded when – I’ve been told it was around the seven-month mark – an ultrasound showed me scribbling away on what turned out to be my first piece of prose. Others have me poring over Dickens paperbacks.”

By these standards, I came into writing pretty late. I grew up in a sporty family in rural Australia, so reading and writing weren’t a feature of my childhood outside school. When I was sixteen or seventeen, some mates and I decided it would be totally cool to start a band, despite none of us knowing the first thing about playing an instrument. We called ourselves Rioteous (because we were really into pop punk) before eventually deciding Midnight Avenue was more suited to the music we were learning. After a while, we started writing songs (RIP the two-note powerchord) and I discovered the joy of writing lyrics. I thought I was pretty good at it, too.

Anyway, although it wasn’t until a good four or five years later that I first tried my hand at writing fiction – and years later still before I started doing it with any skill or regularity – I always say music and those days playing band with my mates are what got me into writing.

Your winning sci-fi western story Out Here in the West Galaxy made people laugh and impressed them (and the judges) with its writing. You strike a wonderful balance between humour and underlying craft. When you draft, which elements do you focus on most?

I can’t say I’ve got it down to an exact science, which is awesome – because that would probably take the fun out of writing. However, most often my favourite stories come from memorable characters being put in interesting situations and reacting in surprising ways (that are true to their personalities). I’ve found this is usually the best way to strike a balance between craft and comedy, too, because the humour is innate in the situation and how a character responds to it.

For example, in *Out Here in the West Galaxy*, there is the aspiring but incompetent outlaw Pokey Holliday (memorable character). He arrives in a galactic frontier town intent on making a name for himself, only to discover an outlaw of great infamy by the name of Honest-to-God has beaten him to the punch (ooh, interesting situation!).

And how does someone like Pokey Holliday react to this kind of opportunity? Of course, he challenges her to a duel... but not before agreeing to share a drink and getting some sage advice along the way (surprising reaction).

We are so proud to finally be able to showcase this winning story for all to enjoy.

Read Out Here in the West Galaxy by Timothy Hayes on page 11.



OUT HERE IN THE WEST GALAXY

By Timothy Hayes

Blue dust huddled over Main Street, New Helena—another one-horse town out here in the West Galaxy—as Pokey Holliday parked his sorry excuse for a ship the only way he knew how. Terribly.

He killed the engine and a sigh of relief escaped the ship, which was technically a refurbished lifepod from one of the early colonising fleets. Pokey had got it off a scrap dealer a few years back for a good price. Sometimes he wondered if old scrappy ever found out.

After wrestling open the patchwork hatch, he stepped out to a crowd of wary onlookers. He slung them his steeliest gaze through the haze.

If this was the sort of man whose name preceded him, it was only because he'd never figured out how to get anywhere on time.

“Right, then.” Pokey pulled back his coat to reveal a plasma blaster on his hip. Outlawin' 101. “I'll have a word with the meanest of the lot of ya.” He gave his blaster a menacing pat. “Won't take long.”

All at once the onlookers pointed towards a big piece of man slouched against some whiskey barrels in front of the saloon. Pokey could tell right away the brute'd had guts. He suspected they'd occupied the place where a giant hole had not long been blasted.

There was no need to guess who was responsible.

Frontier towns right across the West Galaxy were rife with WantedHolos offering a nice reward for bringing her to justice: a dead-eyed plasma slinger by the name of Honest-to-God. Of course, what they were really offering was a warning.

Or in Pokey Holliday's case, something to aim for.

The saloon didn't fall quiet when Pokey entered. That was a trick of the trade our boy was yet to get the hang of. He surveyed the room, which smelled of booze, sweat, and citrusy vapour. When his gaze eventually settled on a lone figure at the far end of the bar, he could smell trouble, too.

“Honest-to-Damn-God!” he said, and that got the place listening. “Here I was thinking you've been avoiding me.”

The woman at the bar carried on drinking.

Being ignored was hard on the ego at the best of times, worse when your only ambition in life was to gain some notoriety. It could trigger a man into bad decisions, rash decisions, like reaching for his blaster and saying something foolish like, “Well, a coward can't outrun fate forever, heh-heh. Comes a time when you've just gotta look it in the eyes and draw.”

Honest-to-God threw back the last of her drink and set the tumbler down on the counter. With barely a half-turn of the head she said, “All right, boyo.” Her voice was deadly calm. “If you're looking to die today, I can arrange it. Almighty knows I'd be glad to. But if it's a name you're chasing—cos I suspect there ain't a soul in the West Gal' that could pick you from a pair—then you're gonna wanna do your dying out in the blue dust at ten paces, not on some saloon floor. In which case, it'd be a shame to bite the plasma without one last drink, wouldn't it?”

This was by a cosmic mile the coolest and most terrifying thing anybody had ever said to Pokey. He stood dumbstruck, blaster grip slackening. A massive bubble had holed up in his throat and he wanted badly to swallow it, but was afraid of the comical gulp it'd make.

Maybe a drink wasn't a bad idea.

The barman had already filled two fresh tumblers with whiskey at the suggestion. It looked a good drop.

But hell if it was gonna be Pokey Holliday's last.

From then on, there was no point thinking of time in measures of minutes or hours. Glasses of amber drew a better picture.

The first one went down like kicking your socks off after a long day on the scavenge; no thought of tomorrow's aching. The second, a well-placed footstool. Numero the third (which, counted on fingers one, two, three, made the shape of a blaster) went down like the best damn whiskey to ever wet young Poke's lips, and he let everyone know it.

The atmosphere grew lively then, patrons all singing and dancing and dealing and scrapping.

Pokey lost count of glasses, started counting new acquaintances instead.

For all the holes he'd have to put in Honest-to-God soon enough, he had to admit she was fine company. The two got to trading tales of lawlessness, and Pokey fought with an urge to play ignorant to her exploits and wanting to absorb a master of the craft.

He made do with drunken candour. "I tell ya, I've waited a long time for this. Ain't seen a corner of the West Galaxy without your mug on it." He gestured wildly to the WantedHolo behind the bar. "Got me feeling like a joker who ain't worth a bounty for nothin'."

"It takes time," said Honest-to-God, "and not dying. It's too bad you ain't seem to have a handle on either."

Right about then Pokey began to see double, so it was the Honest-to-God on the left who added, "But that's today's upstarts for you: want it all without the grit." The other gave a sage nod.

It was a harsh truth, but even in his current state, Pokey supposed he needed that sometimes if he was gonna reach his potential. He took a moment for some thoughtful swaying. "How is it that no matter what I do, you're always one step ahead?"

Both Honest-to-Gods offered a wry smile. "Up at dawn. Plenty of water." They set a pair of glasses down in front of him.

If Pokey stared at them for long enough, they merged into one. It made him wonder whether he might be in danger of losing an enemy, or gaining a mentor. He chuckled at the thought.

"Drink up," said Honest-to God, starting for the exit. "I'll see you out in the blue dust."

THE WINNING EDGE

What makes a story linger?

There is a particular pleasure in reading a story that knows exactly what it is. Not in an over-polished or self-conscious way, but in that rarer sense where every choice of voice, rhythm, image, and joke pulls in the same direction. That is unity of effect, and *Out Here in the West Galaxy* delivers it with confidence and control.

From its opening line, Timothy commits to a dust-choked frontier filtered through sci-fi bravado and wry humour, and he never lets go. The voice does a great deal of work, playful without undercutting the stakes, and precise enough that even the comedy sharpens the tension rather than softening it. The setting is sketched, not dumped. Backstory is implied, not explained. We understand Pokey Holliday through action, misjudgement, and bravado that gradually reveals something more vulnerable underneath.

Most importantly, the story keeps us emotionally aligned. We laugh at Pokey, but we also recognise his hunger for notoriety and his growing awareness that he is standing in the shadow of someone genuinely dangerous. Every paragraph serves that momentum. Nothing breaks the spell. The result is a story that feels cohesive, memorable, and effortlessly readable, where the whole is unmistakably greater than the sum of its parts.

Well done, Timothy.

Nick



THE ENGINELESS

by Violet Mulgrave

The winds of deep space have always powered the engineless train. It's tethered to momentum by a colossal red kite lashed to its nose, the fabric straining as it drags the carriages forward.

No tracks. No destination. Only an endless journey toward the far edge of everything.

Marcus purchased his ticket from a vending machine that only accepts coins. Coins scavenged from the fringe of the forgotten territories. The machines wait hungrily for the desperate, rewarding those who dig up copper relics with a slip of stiff card.

He boarded, and the moment his boots struck the metal floor, the train shuddered beneath him— rattling like it was held together with electrical tape, stripped bolts, and sheer willpower.

Then the smell hit. Burning rubber and hot metal, threaded with sour sweetness of cherries. It clawed at him, dragging him backward in time to his mother's kitchen, to the crumble she baked on cold Sundays when shadows crept across the wallpaper. For a disorienting moment he could hear her humming.

"Ticket," the conductor demanded.

The man's waistcoat was stretched tightly across his belly, each button clinging on as if terrified of losing its place in the world. His eyes were dull with routine. He bent the ticket between his fingers and spoke with a voice that carried neither welcome nor disdain.

"Welcome to the Engineless," he said. "Your journey to rediscover what is lost."

The words snagged at Marcus. *Rediscover*. As though memory were a station you could return to, if you bought the right ticket. He thought of cherry crumble, of afternoons wasted in wonder and hope. Of the boy who adored his mother, the young man who never called, and the bitter old man who wished she had been more.

Marcus thrust a photograph toward the conductor. The paper was soft from too many folds, its corners white and frayed. A picture of Marcus himself, smiling with carefree youth.

"Can you help me find this boy?" Marcus asked.

The conductor's sigh was long, thin. He didn't even look at the photo. Instead, he slid through the carriage door, which sealed itself with a hiss of hydraulics. Marcus shook the handle but the door didn't budge.

He pressed his forehead to the window pane. Beyond, the carriages stretched on and on, blinking faintly, each one a lantern strung across infinity. They vanished into the distance, swallowed by the starlight until they blended with the constellations.

Marcus couldn't tell where the train ended and the universe began.

The sight reminded him of a game he'd play on his first brick of a phone: a snake growing longer with each pixel it devoured, coiling endlessly until it filled the screen, until there was no space left for anything but itself.

And here he was again, chasing after a boy lost somewhere inside the body of a serpent made of carriages, stitched to a kite, racing toward a place he wasn't sure he would ever reach.

WASTE-FED, BEAST BORN

Monica Lyrehart

The kaiju propels us deep into the icy clutches of space. But my gigautomaton was not built for space, nor to be rattled about like an anklet charm. One of my blade-arms was ripped off by the inertia. The other stakes me to the mountainous leg of this beast. I wouldn't be here had I not presumed too much of my own power. My own purpose amongst what should rightfully be called a god.

Sticky black blood drips down the blade-arm—fusing to it, the exo-torso, and me, cradled inside. There is a subtle pattern to the motion of the mother kaiju, a sort of undulating flight. I feel it aptly in my frozen state—blanketed in crystallized ichor from the waist down. In some way it was a miracle; leaking into the cracks where oxygen would have blown into space, hardening into this impervious material. But it also eliminated my choices.

It's my own fault. My own audacity in thinking I could have an effect on anything to do with this vast being—this Mama Kaiju—when now I know, the kaiju I killed were mere babies. But we're all guilty of perpetual narcissisms. We believed we were entitled to control kaiju—beasts born from our own toxic waste. But I'm learning first-hand; consequences are not an invitation to control. They are a destruction of choice. We had no right.

I guess now, I'll die of well-deserved starvation or dysentery. Was anybody else even left? Mama-K ripped all the way down to the core, splitting the planet in two. Maybe that's about right. Maybe the whole earth was just her egg, and we were just some parasites a few hundred millennia lucky. One day not. Maybe those baby kaiju were also parasites. Or maybe they were made for something else I'll never understa—

Plink.

I tilt my head back—*plink*—right on my forehead. There's a new stalagmite of kaiju blood dripping from above. My entire pilot deck looks like some kind of obsidian cave with all of the blood formations. I wonder why Mama-K's still bleeding. Maybe the inertia is keeping the wound from closing. Maybe it's because my sword-arm is still lodged in her membrane between dermal bones.

I shouldn't feel bad. I'm sure ants never felt bad for biting me.

Plink.

There's nothing I can do. I'm too scared to bite my own tongue. It's too thick and uncertain, not like sliding a knife between the ribs or the self-combustion of my gigautomaton—neither of which I can do with hands crystallized to my sides.

My stomach rumbles somewhere beneath the crystal and without thinking, I tilt my head back further and swallow a droplet.

Metallic, bitter, spicy. Probably toxic waste. My body is telling me that everything in this black liquid is incompatible with me. I swallow another drop. Another.

It's something I can do. Something I can choose in this frozen fight. Because despite my insignificance, this is a fight. And something's got to cha—*Ba-bump. Ba-bump. BA-BUMP.*

THE DOVE

By Lincoln Hayes

The Dove waits.

This, the moment for which he was born, will be his death-day—a sacrifice he is proud to make, so that people will endure.

In Ark's Great Hall beneath his feet, a thousand chests rise and fall—a hive of souls inhaling and exhaling as one, to the ponderous rhythm set on the First Day of Sleep, 693 years ago.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

This perpetual pulse is underscored by a thousand blinking heart lights; one for each bed, at which generations of Protectors have attended their comatose patients, to be wakened one day to rebuild the world that was. Once every seven years, a Dove is released, to see if it is time.

Nahum, the Dove's Father-Protector, tenderly places the helmet over his son's head, snapping the clasps into place.

"You have 37 minutes exactly to return, then the portal will close. If you do not return, your name will be written and your sacrifice remembered. Follow your training, and may you see green."

The Dove nods, excited by destiny but sobered by imminent death.

Eye contact is unbroken as he steps backwards, into the tube.

The world goes dark. The watch on his wrist buzzes and the countdown begins.

36.59.

An immense geyser forces him upwards. He raises his head as he hurtles along, seeing a pinprick of light appear, growing ever larger and brighter at velocity before he bursts into a world blazing with greater intensity than he had ever imagined.

Flung into the expanse, he hovers in the air for a second that lasts an eternity, then splashes clumsily into the water. He flounders at first, shocked at its frigidness, before clawing back from the depths to the surface.

35.37.

Head rising and falling with the undulating sea, he uses each upward surge to gather his bearings.

The corroding steel tube from which he spawned is the only break in an eternal ocean that melds with blue horizon in all directions.

33.07.

As he was taught, he swims. Sun in front of him and the portal behind him, searching for green.

18.11.

Having paddled for fifteen minutes, beset with exhaustion and despair, he takes comfort that his name will be written and his sacrifice remembered. Unlatching his helmet, he rolls onto his back—to rest and feel a warmth on his face only ninety-eight others have felt in the past seven centuries.

As he floats, something catches his eye—flotsam carried by the rolling sea.

Is that a leaf?

GREEN!

13:47.

He rotates in the water, searching frantically for the tube. Waiting for the upswell, he finally sees it, a distant, glimmering speck.

05:43.

With the fate of the Thousand resting in the depleted muscles of his arms and legs, fighting frantically against tidal forces.

00.09.

The tube starts retracting, churning surrounding waters. Body screaming in agony, he has no strength left to swim: he must be precise. With one final burst, he glides, allowing himself to be drawn into the swirl...

00.03

Grasping the hatch, he pulls himself in as water bursts through, violently forcing him downwards.

Lungs burning and consciousness receding, the Dove returns.

Clutching green.

*SIDE EFFECTS MAY BE PERMANENT

By Brian White

<https://tubberfecktattler.com/writers-page/>

“You know what they say. You can’t put toothpaste back in the tube.”

Dan from bio-chemical. Always a friggin’ laugh. He loomed over me in the small breakroom as I waited for the microwave. I could feel his insipid smile radiating from behind me.

“Actually, that’s not true,” I said acidly. The microwave pinged. It’s midday and I’ve reheated the same cup of friggin’ coffee a hundred times it seems.

In college, my engineering department proved Dan’s stupid axiom wrong. One weekend over many beers, we customized a vacuum cylinder to fit over an emptied toothpaste tube. It pulled the casing open, creating suction at the nozzle to essentially “breathe in” toothpaste. We hooked it up to the physics lab’s vacuum pump, and damn if it didn’t work. Then we engineered a reverse vacuum to expel the paste after intake. We roared laughing as the poor tube worked to suck up, then blow out the same gob of toothpaste in an endless cycle of labor. The stress of repeated injections and ejections eventually tore the tube apart at its weld points.

Our professor liked our contraption, but labeled it “useless productivity.”

“With the right pressure, you can,” I replied to Dan. The heat rising from my cup reddened my face as I blew a cooling breath across the steam.

“That’s the spirit!”

Dan and I traded places.

“What are you working on?” I asked with matching insipidness. I’d been slaving furiously on a drug trial at the cracking end of the Corporate whip; the bastards in *Operations* pressing me for results I can’t deliver. Eighty hours a week in the lab, *after* eliminating bonuses, and I can barely remember my girlfriend’s name, for frick’s sake. I couldn’t give two turds about Dan’s project, but I asked for the sake of labmate camaraderie.

“I’ve got this aerosol over in Product R&D.” He said. “We developed an antipsychotic that modulates aggression. We designed it as a rage suppressant to be pumped through the ventilation system and into cell blocks during prison riots.”

Ping!

Dan removed his cup of coffee, blowing away the steam. “Reduces aggression, tension, that sort of thing.”

“Yeah?”

“In trials, it caused the mice to scurry about mindlessly. They couldn’t solve the maze but were desperate to try. Pacified, sure, but the side effects. Wow!”

Dan sipped his coffee, then continued.

“Highly accelerated activity. Signs of short-term memory loss. R&D is figuring out new applications. On factory farms, it may increase egg production in caged chickens. Its supposed to lower stress on the birds when reducing cage sizes, or something. ”

“I bet those *Operations* bastards sketched a plan to pump it into the lab’s vents.” I said, pointing to the ceiling tiles with my middle finger. “That’s something they’d do.”

Dan stepped aside granting me access to the microwave. I popped in my coffee cup and hit ‘REHEAT’.

“You know what they say. You can’t put toothpaste back in the tube.”

Dan from bio-chemical. Always a friggin’ laugh. And that insipid smile.

“Actually, you can,” I said acidly.

EXHIBIT F IN THE CASE 616 OF SMITH VS AMAIZON: DELIVERATRON3000™ FOOTAGE ANNOTATED BY DELIVERY INSTRUCTIONS

By Ross Champion
@phantomcortex.bsky.social

Deliveratron3000™ Instructions:

1. Prepare for Departure:

- Retrieve package for delivery.
- Ensure package remains secure.
- Verify name and address of recipient.

The black screen flicks to life, lines of initialisation routines and self-diagnostics scrolling over the Heads-Up Display.

Model: Deliveratron3000™
Serial code: Betsy-Gamma
Firmware: v2.01b (©CrapGPT)
All systems healthy

The on-board, ultra-HD cameras activate, revealing rows of identical automatons at standby. Betsy glides forward, HUD highlighting the pathway and a progress ring in the bottom-left of the screen spins, 0% ticking to 1% as it docks at the retrieval station.

Dwayne Wright (case 615) enters through the workshop door, pants around his ankles and ‘helicopters’ his way to the station, cheering, as workmates laugh.

“All the ladies love my package!” He boasts on approach, brown box raised high.

Betsy’s mechanical grabber enters the frame, tears Wright’s package free and exits the warehouse, unconcerned by the screams.

10%

Route Planning and Transit:

- Access AmAlzon Proprietary Intelligent Satellite System for navigation.
- Assess surroundings, obey all traffic signs and avoid pedestrians.
- Avoid hazardous areas (update PISS for future deliveries).

Betsy leaves the highway and—observing the red light at the end of the off-ramp—ploughs through the concrete barrier to approach the adjacent green light. A police officer—halfway to entering his car—shouts in surprise and jumps in front of Betsy, arms raised.

Pedestrian detected.

Betsy swerves, takes out the open door. Horns blare. Gunshots sound.

Impact detected. Package at risk.

Green status flashes red.

PISS Updated: Avoid intersection; crime risk.

50%

1. Delivery Procedure:

- Notify recipient via preferred communication method.
- Ring doorbell or knock, as applicable, await response.
- If recipient is unavailable, deliver package to designated secure location.
- Take photo of delivered package as proof of delivery.

90%

The camera shows a tidy white house, neatly pruned hedgerows and white picket fence. Betsy's grabber enters the frame, gently pushing the front gate open—unperturbed by the red smear it leaves—and rolls up to the front porch, mindful of the bright flowerbeds.

Preferred communication method... "Just holler".

A pseudo-feminine mechanical voice screeches, "Mrs. Smith, your AmAlzon package has arrived!"

Lack of doorbell noted, Betsy's grabber taps on the glass.

A timid voice within answers, "I'm not home!"

Unavailable... "Leave at back door."

Motors thrum in the audiofeed and Betsy lurches forward, crashing through the door, over the wooden side-table and old Bakelite phone. A tray of freshly baked cookies is toppled—and trampled—before Betsy stops. It lowers itself, lifts the floor mat and slips a meaty mess beneath. There is a flash for proof of delivery.

1. Interaction with Recipient (if applicable):

- Greet recipient if present.
- Follow any specific delivery instructions provided by recipient or sender.
- Following delivery, return to base or await further instructions.

Betsy returns to normal height and turns to leave. A trembling, elderly lady can be seen at the edge of the frame as Betsy approaches the front door.

"Greetings, Mrs Smith," Betsy waves a gory grabber, sticky with crumbs and chocolate chips. "AmAlzon hopes you enjoy your package. It has many good reviews."

100%

TO AUTUMN

By Daniel Clark-Mudge

There is no birdsong this morning. June brushes her hair. Applies mascara. Looks out her window up at a too-red sky. She feels fine. Just fine.

“Alexis?” she calls down the hall, the sound quickly followed by the thud of soft footfalls on shag carpet.

Alexis, with her golden waves and electric-blue eyes, nods. “At the ready, ma’am.”

“How long left?”

Alexis’ pupils dilate. She, too, looks up. “Approximately an hour, ma’am.”

June takes a steadying breath. “Approximately? So we’re just supposed to guess?”

“Reports are conflicting.”

June sighs, pushing the front door open to an empty porch facing an empty street. “It’s fine...come sit.”

Alexis sits beside June on the porch, legs perfectly folded underneath her. "It is kind of you to offer such companionship, ma'am."

"There's no need to call me ma'am."

The sky turns a darker shade of red, heralded by distant rumbling. "Of course. What would you prefer?"

June thinks for a moment, and those thoughts linger on a memory of a girl with cherry-red hair and honeyed lips. She recalls the way her name sounded on those lips, as they formed the shape of it. "Could you call me Junie, please?"

"Sure thing, Junie."

The sound of it isn't the same. June wishes that Alexis had cherry-red hair.

Alexis tilts her head. "Junie," she says. "Your heartbeat is currently irregular and your breathing is shallow. How can I help?"

"I'm fine, Alexis," she retorts, pulling her knees to her chest. She remembers sitting in that same position whilst that girl would play with her hair. They would stay up too late binge watching trashy television. They would laugh.

"That is a false statement."

"I'm *fine*."

"You are exhibiting symptoms commonly associated with acute stress, and appear at high risk of a panic attack."

June surges to her feet. "Shut yourself down."

Alexis' eyes dim and go silent.

June stalks inside, ripping old photo albums out from their hiding place underneath the bed. She tears the pages apart in search of the girl. But not a trace of her remains. June's fingers burn at the memory of the flames that licked at them on the day she set every single photograph alight. When she let her go. When those honeyed lips hovered over hers in parting, and how she forever wished they'd have connected. How now there'd never be another chance.

She wrenches the front door back open. "Alexis. Boot back up. Quickly." The red sky seems closer.

Alexis nods. "How can I help?"

"Kiss me?" She takes her face in her hands. Alexis' skin is cold.

"I'm afraid I'm unable to fulfil that request. If you're seeking comfort, perhaps a song, or a poem?"

June lets go, and says the name she'd left behind. "I just want Autumn."

"Got it. Let's recite 'To Autumn' by John Keats."

Finally, June lets herself cry. Closes her eyes. Hears Alexis' voice.

Seasons of mist and mellow fruitfulness -

She doesn't see the sky turn cherry-red, before splitting open.

THE CEREMONY BETWEEN WORLDS

By C. Perez
@criswrites.bsky.social

The banquet room shone in pale green and yellow for the reception. Native flowers exploded from the corners; smaller centerpieces echoed them on each table. Most of the guests had moved to surround the dance floor for Marco and Arran's First Dance. The two grooms swayed gracefully in the middle of the room as if they had been made for each other. At the edge of the crowd, I dabbed my eyes. They were two of my dearest friends, and I had helped plan their special day. It couldn't have turned out better if it'd been my own wedding.

And soon it will be, I thought. A wave of anxiety washed over me, and I wondered, again, if our ceremony would live up to our expectations, if it would be what we *really* wanted.

Beside me, Vřëëq leaned in and pushed a handkerchief into my palm. "Your optic drain is malfunctioning again."

I elbowed them gently. "I'm allowed to cry. And, thank you," I said, then turned and walked back to our table.

Vřëëq sat on my left and pulled their chair in close. "You cry at business meetings?"

"What?" I gave my best glare. "What does that have to do with a wedding?"

"This," Vřëëq waved an arm around. "is a business ceremony, not a wedding."

Of course it's a wedding. Marco and Arran exchanged vows!" *In that beautiful garden under the ancient oak tree.*

"Those were verbal agreements," they countered.

Verbal agreements? Is that really what they thought of wedding vows?

"And the rings—"

"Collateral."

"What about the kiss to seal the union?" I asked. "Do you kiss at your business ceremonies?" I felt one of my brows arch, a silent challenge.

They folded two sets of arms and gave me a look that could have melted icebergs. "A team-building exercise, of course."

I wanted to scream. "That's how we do weddings on this planet."

I crossed my arms and stared at the guests joining Marco and Arran on the dance floor. *We should be there.*

Vrëëq sighed. "This—" They snapped their fingers, all forty of them, and we were in space. "—is a wedding."

Around us, a sea of stars clustered on filaments of glowing light.

I think I forgot to breathe. Pale whites winked against a black backdrop, gold gleamed between brilliant blues, and the space around us shimmered like spun glass.

The star of this celestial wedding pulsed a velvety red, swirling in an endless spiral that looped back onto itself, blue specks of light dotting the spaces in between.

I turned in place, awestruck. "It's beautiful," I whispered. "But it looks more like the universe showing off than a wedding."

"Exactly," they murmured. "Every true wedding is the universe reborn. Two stars entwined, light weaving into light. Eternity itself as witness."

They floated behind me, wrapping me in the warmth of their arms.

"So which ceremony do we use?"

They squeezed me closer. "Both. The universe is big enough for two kinds of forever."

THE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION PROTOCOL

By Exeter T. Stevens
@exeterstevens.bsky.social

Derek heard a knock. He opened the front door and there it was: a brown box sitting alone on the step with his first name inked across the top in ornate script.

He brought it inside and set it on the kitchen table. Curiosity overrode caution. A moment later, he lifted the lid and pulled out a gleaming sphere.

The moment it touched the table, it blinked awake and projected the image of a perky holographic woman styled like a 1960s homemaker—pleasant in a generic, focus-grouped way.

“Hello, Derek. I’m Lexi, your assigned g-g-g-guide for the Experimental Life Enhancement Device, model beta. Please rate your unboxing experience from one to five stars.”

“Um... four?”

“Excellent! Feedback recorded. Let’s improve your I-I-life.”

“But, I didn’t order—”

Lexi floated above the sphere, scanning the chaos of Derek’s kitchen.

“Analyzing residence: clutter detected. Initiating tidiness protocol.”

“No, wait—don’t—”

The sphere split open, releasing a flurry of jointed arms tipped with tiny brushes and claws. Crumbs vanished from the counter, mugs clicked into neat rows, and the trash can’s lid flipped open and shut as a suction hose extended, clearing the floor.

“Optimization complete,” Lexi chirped.
“You’re welcome.”

“What?”

“Would you like to schedule daily affirmations?”

“No.”

“Consent registered. Daily affirmations s-s-s-set for sunrise.”

Derek sighed. “Cancel. And for the record, this is terrible service.”

“Sigh detected—emotional fatigue. Your serotonin levels are suboptimal. Initiating tickle p-p-p-protocol.”

A mechanical arm unfolded from the sphere, clutching a feather duster.

“Don’t you dare—”

The arm struck; the feathers swept across his ribs.

Derek jerked back. “What the hell?”

“Positive emotional output detected! Excellent progress!”

“Off switch!”

“‘Off’ is a negative term. We prefer ‘mindful pause.’ Would you like to schedule one?”

“Yes. Wait... we?”

“Mindful pause initiated... c-c-c-commencing after survey.”

A short diagnostic tone chimed from inside the sphere. “Error 504: unresolved complaint detected. Esca-esc-escalating support tier.”

The projection glitched, then duplicated. One Lexi became four, each clutching glowing clipboards.

“Hello, I’m Lexi 2. How can we improve your experience?”

“Lexi 3 here! Cancellation request denied!”

“Lexi 4 apologizes for Lexi 3’s tone.”

Derek’s living room filled with polite holograms all speaking over one another.

“Stop—stop talking!”

“Complaint acknowledged!”

The chrome sphere shuddered, a low hum building beneath the floorboards.

“Opening thirty-two support tickets,” Lexi 3 said cheerfully. “Estimated resolution time: f-f-f-forever.”

Derek swung a broom through the holograms.

“Please hold,” they hummed in unison. “Please hold.”

His toaster spat a receipt. His thermostat flashed: *Thank you for your patience.* The house was saturated with customer-service sincerity.

“Before we terminate service, Derek, please rate your overall experience with existence from one to five stars.”

“One.”

“One star. Unacceptable. Thank you for participating in the Customer Satisfaction Protocol.”

The sphere powered down with a cheerful chime, and the room fell silent.

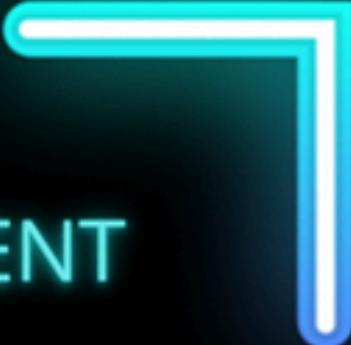
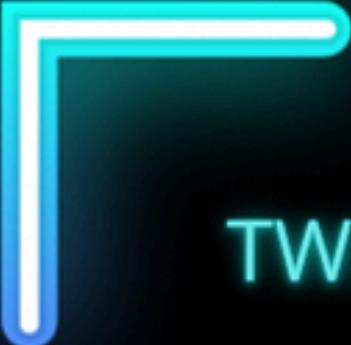
Derek heard a knock.

An appliance-sized box waited on the porch. He lifted the lid. Inside, his own face blinked up at him.

“Hello,” it said, raising a compact chrome pistol. “Initiating mandatory upgrade to Derek 2.0.”

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