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Palisadia: a Novel Byte

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Palisadia
(A Novel Byte)

by

Gretchen Adams

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Fine Arts

in

University Honors

and

Creative Writing

Thesis Advisor:

Janice Lee

Portland State University

2020

“The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of
returning to dust.”

—Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto”

Part One

1. I remember the name of every bone in a bird's body.
2. I remember my father chopping wood out of anger and not necessity.
3. I remember the first time someone told me to man up.
4. I remember the night I finally said yes to the dream of her.
5. I remember she never said no.

I knew my time at Princeton had ended since the first day of my freshman year's second semester. As soon as I walked into introduction to hydraulics and saw the faces of my so-called peers—all pale, doughy, too eager for whatever the arthritic fuck in front of the blackboard could say—I knew this was not my place. When the pandemic came, it was almost kind of relief, a get out of jail free card. I was among the first to go home.

It had been six months since I'd seen Jessie, and in that time it was as if she'd become someone else entirely. Longer hair, budding breasts now restrained in a heavily padded bra I couldn't help but doubt she'd chosen herself. A light tan and highlights in her red hair, courtesy of the ever-lengthening Georgia afternoons. The sad look in her eyes was worse, making me think she'd finally discovered the unique challenges of being a preacher's kid.

When I went to hug her she came right to me, yielded easily to the arms wrapped tightly around her. It was enough to make me believe she'd missed me; that things had, against all odds, been worse for her since I left.

We settled quickly into a routine, the four of us. My mother woke late and retired early, claiming the quarantine as her ideal opportunity to catch up on lost sleep. Where she'd lost this

sleep lazing around the house all day I didn't know, but it seemed unfair to begrudge her what comforts she could garner. Jessie spent most of her time outside, wandering the grounds, or in her room. My father prowled the house like a starving tiger, constantly refilling his favorite mug with a brown liquid all of us knew not to name.

One night, I was up late reading when Jessie knocked softly on my door. She entered gingerly, a hunched over, stiff shuffle I knew too well. A patina of blood and dry grits was crusted on her kneecaps, and there was a fat purple ring around her left eye.

"Jesus," I said. He usually avoided visible bruising.

"Uh-huh." Half word, half sob. And the tears started to drip down the freckled bridge of her nose.

Without asking, she limped to the bed and crumpled into a ball, sobbing. I rushed to her, knelt on the hardwood, and stroked her hair.

"It's gonna be OK," I said, over and over, not really meaning it. The amber strands were effortlessly smooth under and in between my fingers. I imagined I could heal her solely through my touch.

"Could you baptize me?" she asked, suddenly.

I inhaled sharply. "Could I what?"

"Could you baptize me. Like they do in church."

"Why would you want me to do that?"

It had been some years since I'd believed in my father's imaginary god. A façade, of course, was necessary, but I'd been making little comments, trying to open her mind a little. I'd thought her intelligent enough to understand them. Disappointment floated heavy in my stomach.

"I don't know. I talked to Minnie Irving after hers and she said... she said she felt like a whole new person. Reborn. It just—sounds nice, I dunno."

I looked her over. She was chewing dead skin off the corner of her lip, a disgusting habit that somehow made me want her more. Dried streaks of tears flashed on her cheeks.

"Isn't this a conversation for our resident preacher?"

She didn't smile.

"I don't want him. I want you."

Every syllable of that last sentence hit like a shockwave, and I knew I'd do anything she asked.

"You think I'm qualified?"

She shrugged. "More than he is. In spirit if not on paper."

I couldn't help grinning. The fact that she had pinned our (foster, in her case) father as a fraud gave me hope for her.

"Fine, I'll do it, I said. "But no half-assing. We're going down to the beach."

"We're not allowed." A dark look crossed over her face, and I could tell she was terrified of breaking rules that had, so far, kept us safe from the virus.

"So? It's the middle of the night. No one will be out."

“What if he hears us?”

“He won’t if we go out the sliding door.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded, looked deep into her eyes. “I do it all the time.”

She followed me silently downstairs and out the back door, in bare feet. She hadn’t been outside the back yard in months, and she hesitated a little before stepping through the gate

The path down to the beach was deserted, naturally. It was just us, and the balmy black night, and the sounds of the waves. We walked in silence until we reached the shore.

“You know, I had never seen the ocean before we came here. My whole life, the Pacific was a half hour drive away. But my parents never took me.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Maybe we can see it together some day.”

She seemed lost in thought a moment, a sad shadow crossing her face. “That would be nice.”

We sat quietly for a while before making our way into the water. It was cold, even in summer, and Jessie gasped when the first little wave broke over her feet. But she waded in anyway, with little hesitation, me following behind. We stopped when the water was almost to her waist.

“Ok,” she said. “I’m ready.”

I’d heard my father say his magic words a thousand times—knew them by heart, whether I wanted to or not. “Do you accept Jesus Christ as your lord and savior?”

She paused. “Yes.”

“On the profession of your faith, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

She pinched her nose closed. I cradled the back of her head in my hand, my other arm around her waist, and submerged her. I could almost feel the goosebumps forming through the back of her cotton nightgown. I brought her back to the surface and she wiped her eyes.

“So?” I said. “Do you feel different?”

She shrugged. “Maybe a little. What I do feel is cold.”

She pressed in close to me, ostensibly for the warmth, but I knew what she was doing. I pulled her in further and looked at her. Somewhere, behind her widened pupils, I could see desire sparkling. Even if she didn’t know she wanted me, it was clear. The silence between us was a thick veil. Every atom in my body felt magnetized, drawn to her.

For a year and a half, it had been paining me. Her glances across the kitchen table. The way she bit her lip bending over a school worksheet, even the sound of her step in the hall drove me nuts. Ever since I first saw her, one morning in church, before her parents were dead, I’d wanted her. Against reason, against hope. When my father volunteered to take her in it was a dream come true. And finally, though something volatile and uncertain churned in my gut, it was time.

I leaned in and kissed her on the mouth. Her lips were warm and soft against mine, everything I’d dreamed of. Though she pulled away from me immediately, I held her tight.

“You’re not like him,” she whispered, pleading, her voice almost eclipsed by the slap of waves around us. “You’re not like him.”

I didn't care, then, what she might have meant; that "him" was undoubtedly my father. I wanted her more than I had ever wanted anything else. My fingertips dug into the thin layer of fat insulating her bony hips and I dragged the hem of her wet white nightgown up through the water and over her head. Her skin was iridescent in the moonlight, and I felt I had never loved whiteness so much.

"You're not like him," she repeated as I pressed my lips against hers again. Her muscles hardened. She was totally silent and still, eyes wide in shock. The water rose around us as I shucked off her underwear and brought my hand between her legs. The hair there was soft, unshaven. Just before my fingers found purchase the water began to rise around us. I paused, worried about the tide.

And then it happened. An undercurrent swept my feet rudely out from under me and I was underwater, lungs less than a quarter full, my back scraping against a rock bed I hadn't known was near. My lungs ached. By the time I came up for air she was gone.

I screamed her name. I swam forward and back. Deep gashes from the rock bed pulsed hot on my back, but I was used to ignoring pain. I went further.

The white nightgown caught a ray of moonlight some distance off and I raced toward it, swimming as fast as I could, bellowing into the endless darkness. I swam for hours, yelled until my voice ran out. She was the only thing I had ever truly wanted. There one second and gone the next. It was unfathomable, absurd in the cruelest of ways. Even as the sun started to rise and I forced myself back to the beach, exhausted, clutching the nightgown. I prayed to the god she had just committed herself to, begging him to send her back, put her safely on some little island or sandbar where I could find and rescue her. True to form, he did no such thing.

By the time her salt-bloated body washed up on a beach further south, I was already halfway to California, the nightgown folded carefully in the bottom of one of my suitcases.

Piled into the Audi's trunk: a baseball signed by John Smoltz of the Atlanta Braves; a beat-up poster of Megan Fox that had once been tacked to the inside of the closet door, the record player he'd pleaded for over the course of two years, which had no longer been cool by the time he'd received it, and some of the albums he'd bought anyway. A regulation-issue boy scout pocketknife, a chess set that had once been his grandfather's, a first-place trophy naming him among the winners of Chatham County school district's science bowl. Two old notebooks, full of sketches of things he mostly hadn't built. A selection of creased-over pulp science fiction novels, mostly stolen from the library. The little pipe his best friend Beau had given him before they'd grown apart in senior year of high school, scrubbed clean of resin. Two medium suitcases full of clothes. And the Bible that had sat on a special wooden stand on his bookshelf since he could remember. It just felt wrong to leave it, though he no longer believed in anything it represented.

Elijah Bard was as ready as he'd ever be.

The lawn's long grasses swayed in the slowly blooming light, rippling in time with the wind. He took one last look at the house, imposingly white even in the dark. The thick stone columns supporting the second-story veranda, he knew, would be warm from the sun even at this hour. Facing the street, the window curtains were drawn, but the wide panes of glass on the side of the house that faced the ocean were unobstructed. The nicest house in town, with a perfect view. He wished he could burn the place down.

The sun was barely up by the time he crossed the bridge into Savannah. His mother would be waking up by now, shuffling silently downstairs to make his father breakfast. He wondered what she'd do when she found the note saying he was leaving. He hadn't left his new address, and there was already a fresh sim card in his phone. He'd call her once he thought it was safe.

The road to Atlanta was familiar enough. The family made it into the city a few times a year in his childhood, mostly for baseball games or shopping trips. It wasn't as empty as he thought it'd be—apparently the lockdown orders back on Tybee Island were stricter than out in the boonies. He had his pick of greasy roadside diners when it was time for lunch, most at least a quarter full.

He stopped around noon, just before the Alabama border. The place was depressing, but no worse than any of its kind. He went inside and sat down at a booth near the door. A fat waitress with box-red hair sauntered over and introduced herself as Beth, revealing a missing front tooth in the process.

“What'll it be, sugar?”

Eli tried not to look at her, studying the menu, though he usually got the same thing in these sorts of places.

“Chicken fried steak with gravy. And coffee, black.”

“Anything else?”

He shook his head and was grateful when she silently snapped up his menu and left. He took out his phone and scrolled through. No new notifications—only Cal Shipman, his future roommate, had his new number. A fly buzzed lazily through the grease-scented air, bumping into

the window's yellowed paper blinds. He watched as it made its way upwards, veering dangerously close to a slow-moving ceiling fan before settling on the edge of Eli's table. A fly swatter streaked violently through his vision and landed with a smack. He looked up to see the waitress standing there.

"Sorry 'bout that. We'll give you a discount if you like."

"It's fine." He shrugged, suddenly noticing that his food had arrived while he'd been watching the fly.

The coffee and food were cold. He didn't care enough to ask to have them warmed up, and took a bite of the steak. The meat was tough and salty, slathered in bland gelatinous white gravy. As he stared into the plate, his resolve hardened. There was nothing left for him here. California called.

He thought back to the last time he'd had this dish, prepared by his mother, blessed by his father. He didn't remember what they'd talked about, or what eventually set his father off on one of his dinnertime tirades. But he remembered his foster sister Jessie shoveling it in her mouth like she hadn't eaten in a year, and asking sheepishly for seconds. From what he could gather, before she came to their family her culinary palette had been restricted to fast food, cheap spaghetti, and gas-station hot dogs.

Eli felt a light tap on his shoulder and looked over.

"Are you sure I can't get you something else, sugar?" She had a concerned look on her face; he didn't care what it was about.

He cleared his throat. "Just the check is fine."

“Right here, baby.” She tapped a chipped red fingernail on the plastic receipt tray. “My shift’s over, but Darla can take care of you at the register, OK?”

She turned to leave, then turned back around with a surprising speed and laid her hand on top of Eli’s. He jerked it away in disgust as much as caution, staring sternly at her.

“I’ll keep you in my prayers,” she muttered, and shuffled away.

He shook his head, exasperated, wondering if she’d somehow smelled the atheist on him.

Grabbing his ticket, he walked up to the counter. The woman behind it regarded him strangely, but still smiled as she said, “\$10.75.”

He paid and left the restaurant. As he crossed the parking lot, the air was cooler than usual against his face, almost as if it were wet. He didn’t give it much thought, figuring he’d sweat up a storm in that pressure-cooker of a diner.

In twenty minutes’ time he was over the border. The bright white bubble letters reading *Welcome to Alabama* filled him with a delirious relief. He turned the radio on high and rolled down the windows, letting the soupy air duke it out with the full-blast air conditioning.

He drove. Hours melted away. Once the landscape was no longer Georgian, it seemed to lose its meaning, start stuttering; the same junk cars and kudzu vines and trailer parks copied and pasted over and over. Barking dogs tied up in endless rows of chainmail fenced back yards, naked children playing on overgrown lawns, barely watched over by chain-smoking young grandmothers. Mississippi hicks, Louisiana hicks, Texas hicks—it seemed to Eli that these people’s lives hadn’t changed at all with the pandemic.

As he went west, the cars thinned out, as did the already minimal number of bugs splattered across the windshield. Eventually the green receded and desert took over. He'd never been this far west before. The new landscape, with its flat expanses of dry dirt and brush punctuated by suddenly jutting red rocks, enthralled him. As a kid watching old westerns with his grandfather, Eli had imagined the craggy peaks and canyons existed only on Mars—now he was here, half-expecting Clint Eastwood to gallop into his rearview mirror.

The dust accumulated quickly on the winding roads, and he had the Audi washed twice driving through the Chihuahua alone. After that he gave up. He even put the top down for a while, letting the parched air and searing sunlight have their way with him. For the first time in a long time, he was excited for the future.

He burned through Arizona almost unconsciously, peeing in a jar, ignoring exit sign after exit sign despite their promises of creature comforts. Once, he looked up to find the sun rising over the crags of an unfamiliar canyon. He had the strange sensation that he'd teleported, which only reinforced the magical feeling the landscape already created. As he watched the fulgent pinks and oranges bleed across the lightening sky, an unconscious grin spread over his face. He wondered if it was the first time he'd smiled since Jessie died.

Eli was exhausted when he pulled into the West Winds motel, in a town he hadn't bothered to learn the name of. It was nearing four in the afternoon and he was afraid he'd fall asleep at the wheel. The motel was made of stucco and painted bright blue, with yellow trim that peeled in some places. None of the windows were illuminated, and the parking lot was empty save a

dented Honda. A green neon sign reading *VACANCY* blinked on and off, though it was almost too bright to see it even at this hour.

As soon as he stepped out of the car, it was as if he'd walked into a broiler. The sky was cloudless, deep blue, the sun high and harsh even in the late afternoon. Georgia summers were hot, but not like this; even Texas hadn't been.

He locked the car and hurried inside to find a drab lobby, decorated in various shades of tan that might have once been white. Behind the desk was a woman in her mid-30s, with a long black braid that loped across her right shoulder, radiant brown skin, and kind eyes. She smiled, and Eli decided that even though she definitely wasn't the sort of girl he'd go for in a club, he found her attractive nonetheless.

"Hi," she said. "My name's Laura. How can I help you?" A light Hispanic accent bounced on the syllables, with a flipped *r* in the middle of her name.

"I need a room. I don't care what kind," he added, assuming based on the looks of the place that *suite* wasn't in her vocabulary.

"There is only one kind," she said. "Clean."

He chuckled. "I'm glad to hear it."

He passed her his credit card. She picked it up, lifted an eyebrow at its metallic weight. People in these sorts of places often did something similar, and Eli always got a kick out of it.

"Checkout's at 11," she said. "And dinner at 7 if you want it. Town's only restaurant's been closed for months now, so if I were you I'd say yes."

He caught a twinkle in her eye and wondered if she was flirting. He didn't care one way or the other.

“Yes, then.”

“Good. I'll see you later.”

She smiled and handed him an old-fashioned metal key with the number 14 engraved on it. He left the lobby and went straight to the room, not even bothering to fetch his things.

The first thing he did was turn on the air conditioner. The air in the room was still and hot, clearly unmoved for some time. But he smelled a faint scent of lemon cleaner, and figured she was serious about the hygiene. He shucked off his shoes and climbed in bed. Even the thin sheet made him hot. He took off his shirt and lay down on the floor. The light chill of the large, blue tiles brought goosebumps up on the sweaty skin of his back and he swallowed, hard.

Last time he'd laid on the floor like this was two years ago, during rush week for Phi Beta Kappa. They made the pledges strip naked and marched them single file into the bio lab's corpse freezer in the middle of the night. The tiles there were gray under the light layer of frost.

He spent hours with his cheek pressed against the tiles, shivering under the sole of Cal's boot digging hard into his lower back. Back then his future roommate was just another of the faceless mob Eli was so desperate to join that not even torture could dissuade him. Now the two were friends, soon to be living rent-free at the epicenter of America's latest gold rush, courtesy of Cal's parents. Eli's stamina that night had paid off, despite that fact that he'd dropped out of Princeton after only two years.

Without another thought, he drifted off to sleep right there on the floor.

He awoke to a soft knock at the door and glanced at the clock. 7:20.

“Shit,” he muttered. “Coming!”

Pulling his shirt back on, he opened the door to find Laura standing there.

“I was afraid you’d forgotten.” It seemed she’d combed her hair, slathered on a thick coat of lipstick and eyeshadow. The haphazard job she’d done of it actually made Eli more attracted to her, for some reason.

“No. Just talking a nap.”

He put on his shoes and followed her out the door.

“Sorry I intruded,” she said, once they’d sat down opposite each other at the lobby’s small table. “Truth is, I’ve been kind of lonely.” There was a longing in her eyes, and Eli judged the *kind of* as an understatement “It’s just me out here for now, and you’re the only guest I’ve had in weeks.”

“Really?” He was only half-interested and took a bite of one of the tamales she’d served. The meat fell apart in his mouth, and even though the spice made his eyes water, it was already the best meal he’d had on the road so far.

“Yeah. Usually it’s pretty steady, what with truckers and all that. But with the drones out now, and everyone at home... I just hope I don’t have to sell.” She took a sip of her beer. Cheap stuff, canned. Eli had one too, though he was a year shy of the legal age. She’d raised no scruples about an ID. He hoped it was because he looked older than he was and not because she didn’t care.

“This place is yours?”

She nodded. “Free and clear. My mother started it, back in the 90s. I hated it when I was a kid, but...” She glanced around, sighed. “It’s home.”

Home. The word sent a thunderbolt through him, and a tight ball formed in his throat. Maybe it was something about the way she’d said it, so tenderly. He coughed and took a big swig of his beer.

“This is the furthest west I’ve ever been, you know,” he said.

“Huh. You from the east coast?”

“Tennessee.” It had fallen out of his mouth completely without his consent. But for some reason the little white lie helped him relax.

“I thought I heard a bit of a twang.” This made her smile and Eli felt his throat flush. He didn’t like people hearing the accent unless he wanted them to.

“Not too much of one, I hope.”

She laughed. “No. An accent like that makes you interesting, around here.” She paused a moment to take another bite. “Where are you headed, anyway?”

“California. San Jose. I’m moving in with a friend.”

“Hm. Are you leaving in the morning?”

“Bright and early.”

A bitter look came over her face for a second, but she brushed it away quickly. Eli wondered if she’d been hoping for more company.

“By the looks of your car, you’ll be in California a while.”

He put on his wooing smile, just because. “You haven’t been spying on me, have you?”

She looked a little miffed. “It was in front of the room.”

“Right. ” He took another sip out of the can, the cold bubbles rushing straight to his head.

“So tell me—” she paused, and he could tell she wanted his name.

“Eli,” he said. “Bard.”

“So tell me, Eli Bard. What prompted you to pack a nice car like that full of boxes and drive cross-country in the middle of a pandemic?”

“It’s complicated.” He shrugged and looked down at his plate. There were only a few bites left, which were beginning to sweat in the lobby’s heat. The condensation had spread almost to the plate’s flowered edges when he felt a hand touch his back, between the shoulder blades. He looked up. Laura was standing there, clearly concerned.

“I didn’t mean anything by it, I swear,” she said.

“What are you talking about?”

“My question. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

He cleared his throat. “What do you mean? I’m not upset.”

Laura cocked her head to the side and narrowed her eyes. “So you’re sobbing like that... out of joy?”

“Sobbing?” It was almost a whisper. Eli reached up and felt his face. Sure enough, it was wet. His eyes burned and he did his best to stop his chin from quivering. He had no idea how this had happened. All he’d done was stare at the plate—he’d felt nothing, no disturbance.

Maybe his father had been right, and he really was possessed by something evil. Even worse was the possibility this had happened before and he’d had no idea. Had Cal ever seen him cry like that—had his foster sister Jessie? He felt the cold seep of terror in his stomach. Without another word, he bolted from the lobby, and ran all the way to his room.

He locked the door behind him and drew the curtains closed. The room was cooler now, and he splashed cold water on his blotchy face. In the mirror, his blue eyes were red and watery. Finally, he turned the old TV on low and shut his eyes. He was asleep by the time the commercials ended.

The next morning, he woke late, the harsh desert sun pushing through the thin cracks in the motel room’s white blinds. 10:30. He’d wanted to be out four hours ago. In a rush, he fetched clean clothes from the car, keeping a cautious eye out for Laura. Back in the room, he stripped and turned on the shower, not bothering for the water to heat up.

The freezing droplets needled his skin, shocking him awake. He closed his eyes, scrubbing blindly with the motel’s tiny packaged soap. In three minutes he was out, ruffling his short brown hair with a shabby white towel. As he pulled on his clothes, they stuck to his still-damp skin.

He put his things in the car, locked the room, and walked to the office, head down. Laura was behind the desk, half-reading a magazine. She looked at him and smiled as soon as he walked in.

“Checking out?”

He nodded and placed the key on the desk.

“Sign here.” She passed him a receipt and he signed.

“Thanks,” he squeaked, heading for the door.

“Wait.”

He turned around.

Laura walked over with a granola bar. “Breakfast,” she said.

He wondered why she’d do such a thing. “Oh. Um. Thanks.”

She nodded slowly. “Safe travels.”

With that, he left, taking long strides across the parking lot. It was two hours to the California border. Somehow, these minutes seemed longer than their predecessors. He was excited when he saw a *Welcome to California* sign in the distance, though there seemed to be a makeshift checkpoint erected in front of it.

Two men in National Guard uniforms, both armed and wearing masks, directed him to stop. He did, and one of them, a tall man with dark hair and narrow eyes, approached his window.

“Hello sir,” Eli said, letting the twang bleed back into his voice. He didn’t know why, but cops and the like were typically friendlier when he used it. “How can I help you?”

The soldier’s face was stony, unchanging. “According to a recent mandate from the governor, anyone coming into California as of July 20th must complete a 14-day period of self-isolation before entering the state.”

Eli put on his most charming grin. “Well, I’m aware of that. But it’s the 19th, if I’m not mistaken.”

“You’re mistaken.” It seemed the man took some pleasure in pointing to an illuminated sign reading *July 21st*.

“That can’t be—” Eli checked his phone. The sign was right. He had no idea how he’d lost two days. Disturbed, he shook his head hard, trying to clear out the dust. He breathed deep and ran a hand through his hair. No matter. He’d bribe the guy.

He fished his wallet out of the glove box, glad he’d thought to get cash a few towns back. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he said, extending his hand out the window. He tried to hold the \$100 bill discreetly, tucking it into his palm. “Is there anything I can do to get in today?”

The soldier looked at Eli’s outstretched hand, then took the money and tucked it in his pocket. “You know, bribery of a public official is a crime in Arizona.”

Eli sighed. “Then I’d assume it’s also a crime for a public official to accept one?”

The man grinned at him, idly fingering the trigger of the machine gun at his side. “I’m sure it would be, yes. It’s a good thing nothing like that happened here today, isn’t it?”

Eli struggled to refrain from rolling his eyes, and decided to change tactics. “Sure is.” He cleared his throat. “I’m sure my mother would agree, if she weren’t so busy dying.” He felt the beginnings of tears rise to his eyes, on cue. He’d always been a great liar—it was a skill he had no memory of acquiring, like walking or breathing. “Look, I know I’m asking you to go out on a limb here, but she only has so many days—”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” There was a note of genuine sympathy in his voice. “But there’s nothing we can do.” He handed Eli a clipboard. “Fill out this form and you’ll be in the system. Then come back in two weeks.”

Eli didn’t see another option, so he filled it out and handed it back. He drove off angry, speeding toward nothing. He had planned his route perfectly to arrive the day before the state’s borders closed. Where had the time gone, and how hadn’t he noticed it until now? Worried something was really wrong in his head, he turned on the radio to drown out his thoughts. It didn’t help much.

He didn’t know what brought him back to the West Winds. He learned the name of the truckstop town it was in—Seligman. The exit sign advertised the Roadkill Café/O.K. Saloon and the motel. That was it. He could’ve gone anywhere, maybe checked out the Grand Canyon. But he didn’t.

When he went back to the motel lobby, Laura was still behind the desk.

“I didn’t think you’d come back here,” she said. “I knew they were going to turn you away, but I didn’t think you’d come back here.”

He scowled. “So why didn’t you say anything?”

Laura shrugged. “You wouldn’t have believed me.”

Eli knew she was right. Slowly, he approached the desk.

“Checking in?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Same room?”

“I don’t care.”

She handed him his old key and he gave her his credit card.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“It’s fine.”

A moment of silence fell between them, heavy like a velvet curtain.

“Do you want a drink?” Laura said. “I make a mean vodka on the rocks.”

He couldn’t help but laugh a little. “OK.”

She came out from behind the desk and crossed to the fridge in the corner. Huge square cubes rattled loudly even in the plastic cup she gave him.

“Cheers,” she said, plopping down on the drab settee.

He sat next to her. “Cheers.”

She took a sip of her drink. “About last night—”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” The alcohol burned his throat, which he liked.

“We don’t have to. I just wanted to say that... whatever it is, it’s going to be OK.”

“Thanks.” He downed the rest of the liquid in his cup in one go.

“That’s the spirit.” Laura grinned. “You want another one?”

Three drinks later their shoes were off, piled into a heap at the base of the couch. Laura had put on some soft Spanish music, tinny through the desk computer’s speakers. She’d unbraided her hair, the inky strands fanned out loose across her back.

“It wasn’t this hot when I was a kid,” she was saying. “I mean, it was hot, but not like this.”

“Hmm.” He was only half-listening. “I bet.”

“Must be that way too in Tennessee, I’d imagine.”

“At least it’s not bad in the winter. I thought the cold in Jersey was gonna kill me.” He heard the drawl dripping back into his voice, made no attempt to stop it.

“Jersey, huh? I’ve never been there.”

“It’s not worth the trouble.”

“Noted.”

The song changed and Laura’s face brightened. “Get up,” she said, rising to her feet, just a touch wobbly. “We have to dance.”

“Dance?” He choked on the word. “I don’t—”

She swayed in time to the music, swinging her hips. “Of course you dance.” She grabbed his hand and pulled him off the couch with surprising strength. “Just follow me.” Looping an arm around his shoulders, she brought him into the beat. Their palms were hot in the place where

they touched. Eli did his best to match her slow steps. “See?” She brought her cheek in close to his. “You dance just fine.”

The song ended, and for a moment they stayed intertwined in the silence. Between them, the air was dense with an electric tension.

“You know what we should do?” Laura said.

“I can’t say I do.”

“Go swimming.”

Before he could raise an objection, she was across the room, opening the office’s back door. It led to a small courtyard with a half-rusted barbeque and a small square pool encased in low metal fencing.

She opened the gate and left it that way.

“I don’t swim,” Eli said, sitting down on one of the white plastic chairs.

She pouted, mocking him a little. “Too bad for you.” With that, she jumped in, fully clothed. When she resurfaced, she sighed contentedly, floating on her back. “Water’s perfect.”

Eli could see the outlines of a tan bra and pale pink underwear through her cream linen dress. He couldn’t help thinking about Jessie, in her white nightgown, the night she’d drowned. For a moment it was almost as if she were there with him again, her eyes wide with a mix of terror and desire.

He knew now that there was no avoiding what he’d felt they were heading towards since the second drink. He took his shirt off and left it in a pile on the chair. He waded down the pool steps, his grip irrationally tight on the hot metal railing.

“Here we go!” Laura clapped. “So the dancer does swim!”

He shook his head slowly, walking towards her. Eli could tell she felt his eyes on her body, but she didn’t shy away. They stood opposite each other in the middle of the pool, the refracted late afternoon sun casting patches of light on their bodies.

Laura’s face was serious. “I’m glad you came back.”

“Me too.” It was almost a whisper. Eli leaned in and kissed her. She kissed back, her lips cool and chlorinated on his.

She pulled back quickly, her eyes alarmed. “You’re burning up.”

A cold swell of shock rolled through his veins. “It’s probably the sun,” he said, already doubting that it was true.

“Probably.” She cleared her throat. “But maybe you should lie down inside.”

They got out of the pool, not bothering to wring out their clothes, dripping dark spots on the sunbaked pavement. Laura followed Eli to his room. He waved her inside, and did not attempt to hid his body as he changed into dry clothes. He felt her eyes on his bare skin, and took his time putting on his shirt. There was an intimacy to it he didn’t know he’d ever felt before.

He lay down on the bed. Laura got him a glass of water and placed it on the nightstand. “You should drink that. I’ll be back in a second.” She disappeared into the bathroom.

When Eli saw her next, it was light outside. He woke with a start. A cold, wet washcloth was stretched across his forehead. His mouth felt scuzzy, full of drywall. Gratefully, he turned and chugged last night’s glass of water. The itch in his throat didn’t budge. He coughed, a deep rattling sound that reached the bottom of his lungs and made his head swim. His chest was

heavy. There was no use doubting it; he'd been in plenty of public places, touched and breathed on by any number of clerks, waiters, and the like. The chances he had the virus were good. He sighed and looked at the red letters of the cheap digital clock. One in the afternoon.

The door swung open, and for a brief, reflexive moment he was afraid, before he realized it was Laura.

“You're up,” she said.

He nodded. “Didn't mean to sleep that long.”

“You needed it.”

“I guess.” He coughed again.

Laura clicked her tongue, fretting. “I had it a few months ago. If it's the virus, I mean.”

“It could be a cold.”

“It could.” Without being asked, she plucked his empty glass off the nightstand and refilled it. “Drink.”

He was thirsty, and didn't put up a fight. She refilled the glass again.

“You don't have to take care of me,” Eli said weakly.

Laura sat down on the edge of his bed, and shook her head slowly. “You don't understand. Six months ago—” an inhale sharp like jagged rock— “I lost my little brother. He had it. The virus. I took him to the hospital, and...” she sniffled, wiping away tears. “We weren't allowed to see him. I helped take care of him my whole life.” Her voice broke, and Eli could hear the pain bubbling up through her words. “He was 16. I have no idea why—” her shoulders began

to shake. “why him.” She took a moment and tried to compose herself. “So this isn’t for you. It’s for him.”

Eli touched her arm and she didn’t move away.

“I lost my sister,” he said, barely audible. “She was young too.”

Laura nodded slowly. “I’m sorry,” she said, and left the room without another word.

Hours passed that way, with Laura breezing in and out, feeling his forehead, offering him medicine and food. Eli felt he’d never been taken care of so well in his life, not even as a child. He was embarrassed, both by needing help and having it so readily given. He was freezing constantly, and begged Laura to turn off the air conditioning, which she wouldn’t do. Sleep always danced on the edges of his mind, and more than once he nodded off during their conversations. When night came, Laura tucked herself into the room’s other bed. It was understood she didn’t need to ask, and Eli found the steady metronome of her breathing comforting.

The next morning, he felt much worse, impossibly so. Sleep was no longer optional; it took him as it pleased, though his constant coughing often woke him. Laura flitted in and out of his vision like a mirage, her voice filtered through thick layers of unprocessed cotton. His sense of time was melting away, a once-grounding glacier worn thin by his body heat. Voices whispered in tongues, and he heard soft sobbing coming through wall behind him, as if Jessie were crying in her bedroom on the other side. Shadows pressed in on his vision, coalescing into menacing shapes. He heard someone calling his name from the corner of the room and forced his eyes open.

Even in semidarkness, he could see his father looked younger, his body still trim from his time in the Marines, face and eyes flushed in technicolor. William Bard was much taller seen from a nine-year old height. The way he held his body, coiled tight like a spring about to pop, struck terror in Eli.

As if on cue, the second ghostly figure appeared. It was Eli as a child, kneeling. A piece of his childhood home's kitchen floor spread out around him, a white blob overtaking the motel room's blue tile. Though he was still in bed, Eli could feel the floor's cold. Then came the pain, shooting up in frozen rods through his thighs, back, shoulders. The sludge of dried blood that gummed on his kneecaps provided no insulation from the dry grits spread out under them.

"You done sniveling?" His father barked, the words reverberating like a tuning fork. "Go again."

He knew it wouldn't work, but he had to try. "Daddy, please—"

The switch thwacked a smarting stripe across his shoulders and Eli stared hard at the cross above the stove, trying not to cry out.

"Did I not say to go again, boy?"

"Yessir," he mumbled, and squared his jaw. "'John 3.16 to 17," he started, "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, and whoever—"

"Unh-uh." William waggled his finger, a little sick whimsy in his voice. "*That* whoever. It's the word of God, son. The details count."

And then by some mercy, Eli saw Laura cross the room, and the scene dripped away.

“It’s best at sunrise,” she was saying. “In the right light, the flats look like they’re made of gold.”

That was all he heard before white light stippled over his retinas. Carbonated static buzzed under his skull, and the sea around him was glass. He smelled the living creature before he saw it above him, clusters of his father’s deep blue eyes bulging from every inch of its naked body, blinking on each feather of its six wings. Its face was his own. He couldn’t scream.

Eli woke up shivering, his fingers clawing at the side of the bathtub. He was covered in ice.

“Thank God,” Laura said when he opened his eyes. “I knew this would do the trick.” She was holding an egg about six inches above his chest. The air smelled sweet with herbs, and votive candles burned on the edge of the sink, their flames multiplied in the mirror.

“Wh—?” He choked and she passed him a glass of water. He cleared his throat. “What are you doing?”

“It’s a *limpia*,” she said. “A healing ritual my grandmother taught me. The egg absorbs harmful energies.”

“Harmful energies?” He couldn’t help but chuckle, though he was surprised at the lightness in his chest.

Frowning at him, she produced another glass of water. “Yes. It’s worked for centuries.”

Laura cracked the egg into the water and gasped a little. In the center of the yellow yolk was a black spot the size of a dime.

Elijah Bard stood on the aft deck of his preferred yacht and looked out across the water at the rocket. The exterior dazzled, made whiter than white by the deep indigo sea. The ring around its middle, which housed the bridge and crew's quarters, began to rotate slowly. A test of the artificial gravity system. The sight of the wide panes of polarized glass burning copper in the sun as they spun made him smile. The best seat in the house. He could only imagine the things his hand-picked crew might see through those windows before they reached Mars.

He'd dreamt of this day for a long time. In his early childhood, he couldn't remember a time before he wanted to be an astronaut. As he grew up, things changed, but he'd always held the conviction that humanity's future lay in the stars. Nanobox, the micro-robotics startup that had made him a millionaire and then, remarkably quickly, a billionaire, was just a means to an end. And that end stood perched in the water like a magnificent belfry, ringing the praises of human ingenuity.

He looked at his watch. Half an hour. Tearing his eyes away from the launch site, he scanned the crowd behind him. The company's core players, all decked out in their finest sailing wear, chattered excitedly, pre-celebratory drinks in hands. Elijah winced when he saw his assistant Oliver headed his way.

"Sir?" the assistant chirped, looking nervous.

Elijah sighed and took another sip. "I don't like that face, Oliver. Please tell me my spaceship is going to get out of here on time."

"It's not the launch, sir. Captain Michaels asked me to speak to you about something."

He waited a moment. “Out with it, then.”

Oliver grimaced. “We’ve received a distress call from a nearby vessel. We’re the closest to them, and legally, we’re obligated to go help them.”

Elijah cocked his head to the side. “*Legally?* No. We’re not missing the launch. This is why we’re in Mexican waters. We pay people so we don’t have to deal with this sort of bullshit.”

“I’m sorry sir, but the captain said—”

“Why doesn’t he come talk to me?” The edge of his voice was serrated with rage.

“I think he’s busy firing up the engines.”

Elijah put his head in his hands for a moment. “Can’t we send another boat? Something fast? We don’t even go over 40 knots.”

“I was told we’re the only option.”

“What about the helicopter?”

“I don’t believe the vessel we’re headed towards has a helipad.”

He shook his head. “And what kind of boat is this that we’re going to rescue?”

The assistant cleared his throat. “It’s a fishing boat, sir.”

Elijah started to chuckle, a low and bitter noise from the back of his throat. “Just perfect. We’re missing the culmination of my life’s work for a goddamn fishing boat.”

Under his bare feet, the engines hummed to life, making the teak deck seem to vibrate. Walking fast, he pushed through the little crowd, heading in the direction of the bridge. Oliver followed at the wave of his hand.

“Where the hell’s my COO?”

“We’re looking for Cal now, sir.”

“Jesus Christ! It’s a boat. There’s only so many places he could be.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I’ll get right on it.” Oliver peeled off, scurrying, Elijah thought, like a half-drowned rat.

Once he’d crossed the deck, he put his shoes back on and jogged through the ship’s grand atrium. The bridge door was closed. He ripped it open.

“Michaels!”

The captain did not move from his post, his back to Elijah. “Hello Mr. Bard. What can I do for you?”

“Stop the goddamn ship!”

Slowly, the captain spun around. “I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

“I swear to god if you don’t turn us around right now, you’ll never work again.”

An obvious glint of contempt shone in the captain’s eyes. “If I do turn us around, we’ll both go to prison for murder. So I’d ask you, respectfully, to give us the bridge.” He turned back to his work and Elijah stormed out, a sour lump rising in the back of his throat.

As he walked, the salty air chapped his cheeks and he wondered if he was getting a sunburn. He stopped in the shade of a pergola that opened onto the deck and noticed that Cal and his wife Camille had returned to the crowd. Together, no doubt.

He looked the two of them over, conversing at a barely respectable distance. Time hadn't been as kind to Cal as it had to his business partner, but then again, he was almost three years older. His body had gone doughy in all the wrong places, and Elijah knew he dyed the stray grays encroaching on his temples. Camille, of course, was as lovely as ever, the large buttons on the bodice of her white sundress undone to reveal a cream bikini top. Her black hair, wavy from the sea spray, played across her face, a few strands sticking to her reddened lips. She brushed them away, and it infuriated Elijah that he would have liked to see her do so again.

When the pair saw him approach, they moved a little farther apart, but kept up their conversation.

"Where were you?" He said to Cal.

"Oh." Cal cleared his throat, running a hand through his blonde hair. "I was in my cabin taking a call from the engineers on the launch site. Sorry."

Elijah had known him long enough to see he was lying. "Everything's alright over there?"

Cal nodded. "They asked if you wanted to wait."

"No, I don't fucking want to wait! There's half a billion people around the world watching."

"Right." Cal sighed. "I'm sorry, Eli."

"Me too, *mon chère*," Camille said, and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "Let's get you a drink, huh?"

He nodded and allowed himself to be led to the bar. Camille ordered him an old-fashioned, *strong*, lacing her thin fingers through his. He searched her face for anything amiss and found nothing.

He'd first seen her from behind, arguing in impassioned French with an outdoor seafood vendor in Marseille. The first thing he noticed was her ass, which she found funny when he told her as much on their honeymoon. That was two years ago. Now, she was 20, the same age he'd been when he left home for good fourteen years ago. He hated her almost as much as he hated the fact that a part of him was still in love with her.

"Here you are," the bartender said. Camille passed Elijah the drink and led him to sit down on one of the lounge chairs.

"I know it's not the same, but we can watch the livestream," she said.

"Sure." His voice was flat.

"I'll have Cal set it up." Camille looked at him, across the deck, taking another phone call.

Elijah didn't like the way she said his name. He followed her gaze, still on Cal. A pain shot through his chest. The look in her eyes was familiar; she'd once given it to him. He took a shuddering breath in. For some reason, that was the moment he knew that what he'd been suspecting for months was, in fact, happening. The realization slashed a gaping hole in the thin film of avoidance and quiet resolution that had been encasing the problem for months. He would have to do something.

Camille rose from her seat and crossed the deck. He watched her walk. He didn't feel rage, or sadness, just a cold drip of pity in his gut. The marriage had been ending since the stupor of the Marseille sun had worn off, a few months after he'd first brought her to his estate in San Jose. But he hadn't been willing to accept that Cal was the one who would drive the final wedge between them.

Elijah downed the rest of his drink and lay down on the lounge chair, closing his eyes to block out what light his sunglasses let through. He heard the soles of Camille's feet pattering on the teak.

"You should take your shoes off, darling," she said gently, bending and removing one. "You don't want to ruin the wood."

"It's my fucking deck, I'll ruin it if I want." He hadn't meant it to sound as harsh as it did.

She replaced his shoe. "Of course. I'm sorry."

He sighed and turned on his side to face her. The question throbbed in his mouth; the syllables scrawled on his tongue in hot liquid mercury. He didn't want to say it; he had to say it. He took off his glasses, looked into her eyes, and said, "Are you sleeping with Cal?"

"What?" Camille sputtered. The panic that enflamed her expression slid away lighting quick, papered over in a calm façade. "Why would you ask me that?"

"Because we both know it's true."

She sucked her teeth, a habit he hated. "I have no idea what you mean. I would never—"

“Please don’t.” A hard knot of tears twisted in his throat and his hands clenched into fists. “I know you want out of this just as much as I do. So just say it.”

Camille began to cry, the wet streaks on her cheeks irradiating her tanned skin. “I never meant for it to be like this.” Her voice was just above a whisper. “I loved you.”

A short exhale, almost a chuckle. “Sure you did, Cami.”

From the beginning it had been a transaction; some part of him had always been cognizant of that. When he stepped between Camille and the vendor that day, he knew that by handing the man a hundred Euro bill and gesturing to her that she could take anything she wanted, he was buying something. Perhaps only a smile, a grateful glance. Her acceptance of his offer, in choppy unconjugated French, that they get lunch. He thought it didn’t matter, that as long as he had her lithe body and stunning face and charmingly coquettish attitude, the circumstances of acquisition were irrelevant. But sitting there, he realized he couldn’t really own her, no matter how hard he tried. The clothes, the jewels, the cars, the penthouses and décor—it meant nothing.

“I wish it had turned out differently, Eli.” She touched his hand lightly and he jerked it away.

Just then, his assistant strode over. “Sir,” he started, “the livestream is ready. We launch in two minutes.”

Elijah shot him a look. “Thank you, Oliver. But *we* don’t do anything. You’re fired. Learn to read a fucking room.”

“But sir—”

He closed his eyes and held up his hand, signaling *shut up*. The assistant skulked away without a word.

A fitful silence rested between them, interrupted only by the slap of waves on the side of the boat. Everyone else had gone in to watch the launch.

“You are not a kind person, Eli,” Camille said finally. “But you are capable of great things.”

He rubbed his eyes and thought for a minute. “You really should go to LA, you know.”

A little gasp escaped her lips. “But you said you thought—”

“I lied.” He shrugged. “I wanted to keep you with me. But it’s not too late. You’ll be—” his voice cracked, and single tear slid down his cheek. “you’ll be beautiful onscreen.”

She went to him, collapsed weeping into his arms. He allowed it. Some miles off, his spaceship was launching, the boosters dropping piping-hot into the ocean, awaiting recovery.

“I’m so sorry, Eli,” she sobbed into his shirt.

He exhaled, close to confessing his own affairs; the “business” trips to shady corners of the world where you could have anything you wanted for the right price. But he thought better of it. The divorce would be quicker that way, innocent party versus guilty. Maybe his lawyers could even bully her into settling for less than what the prenup allowed her.

“I know you are.”

He imagined the cheers, the champagne corks rolling on the floor of the ship’s grand atrium. The joyous whooping in the control room and on site; the astronauts recovering from the headrush. The greatest day of his life. If the rocket hadn’t exploded, that is.

Elijah cleared his throat. “We should see about the launch.”

She nodded.

And just then, beyond the stern, the sinking fishing boat came into sight. It was mostly under, a family of three balancing on a thin strip of hull, terrified. Elijah watched as a crew member helped them into a lifeboat and rowed it over to the gently sloping transom, which led into the water. It had been built for aesthetics, but the design served as a handy ramp. The people in the boat stepped directly onto the deck with ease.

Elijah looked them over, their clothes and hair dripping likely dirty seawater onto his deck. The man coughed and the woman rubbed his back gently—a reflex, it seemed, though she was still shaking with fear. Their little girl was the only one who didn’t look terrified. Her dark brown eyes were wide with curiosity. Cautiously, she wandered a few steps away from her mother, staring at Elijah as if he were a fascinating alien creature.

He was sure he spoke no English, but he said it anyway, elongating his words. “Take off your shoes. The deck is teak.”

Elijah Bard stares out the window of the workshop that occupies his entire top floor at the green lawns of his estate. It’s beautiful weather, as it always is, outside of the few days around Christmas time when the residents request snow. He’d considered making it rain today, so the people of Los Altos might mark the day as significant, without knowing why. But that’s a complex process, requiring him to speak to company people who pressurize the air and oversee the cleaning of water for use inside the dome. And those people aren’t much on his mind these days.

She's all that matters to him now. He crosses to the worktable and looks down at his creation, close to tears. Amber hair, pale supple skin, a smattering of freckles across the thin bridge of the nose. Lips like his ex-wife's, and the honey colored irises that were such a pain to thread but which do, genuinely, look like Jessie's. The slight body appears undeniably human, a girl on the razor's edge of womanhood. He turns on the breathing response and gasps when it happens, his gaze prowling over each slightly protruding rib and settling on her small breasts.

He takes a sip of his champagne. She's perfect. And after six years of work, her body and mind are finally ready to be united. This is nothing like the rockets, the companies—not even having protected humanity's worthiest subset from the ravages of climate change matches this feeling. He pushes a button and the code that forms her mind is uploaded to the processor in her head. She blinks rapidly, the cameras in her eyes calibrating. When she can see, she smiles up at him, her teeth straight and bleach-white.

“Papa,” she sighs, contented.

The corners of his eyes are wet as he kisses her on the forehead and says, “Hello, my little chickadee.”

Postscript

I did not want to write about Elijah Bard. From the time he became a part of this story, I've resisted his presence, trying to muscle him into the margins. This, I told myself, would not be just another tale of sexual violence and female trauma in which the perpetrators have the last word. I needed him only as a plot device—after all, a robot cannot build herself.

But it is also true that the building cannot be completed without the formation of an intense intimacy that tints the entire relationship. Birth and creation are both dramatic, involved processes with resounding effects. Though the narrator of the following section was not born, traces of her father abound, in both her body and mind. His preferences, prejudices, and psychologies are the binding principles of her selfhood. As my advisor wisely pointed out, I had to know Elijah in order to know her.

As with all characters, there are parts of me in him. We're both recovering southerners, with a penchant for chicken-fried steak and religious hang-ups. His traumas invoke my father's traumas, which are also mine. Like him, I'm imaginative, and sometimes ambitious to a fault. The role of morally flexible sweet talker is not unfamiliar to me. It also happens that Eli built a robot with a striking resemblance to my first girl crush. Sue us.

I initially conceived of this piece as a love story between a teenage robot and the girl next door. In some ways, it still is, or will be once it's finished. But things got complicated, as often happens in life. I began writing what you just read in an apartment in Portland, where I lived with one of my best friends. Then, I came home for spring break. Two months later, I'm still in Colorado, quarantined with my parents, brining in the same solution of familial discord and attachment that helped make me a writer. The COVID-19 pandemic slithered into my work in more ways than one. Putting Elijah in a similar situation served as a shortcut to a kind of empathy, which I did my best to sustain throughout the piece. While his rocky past does little to excuse his actions, I believe it allows some understanding as to why he would create the world he does. My only hope is that in examining these motivations—greed, insecurity, fear—we can stop giving such tremendous power to those who are beholden to them.

cyborg, n.

1. a hybrid being with both organic and mechanical components.
2. “A person whose physical tolerances or capabilities are extended beyond normal human limitations by a machine; an integrated man-machine system.”¹

¹ The Oxford English Dictionary.

3. a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.²

In JavaScript, the symbols `/*` and `*/` open and close a comment, respectively. Comments are not read by the computer itself, but serve to help developers understand the code. The inserts in the pages that follow are meant to function similarly.

Part Two

You're in the aviary reading when out of nowhere and too early Papa's footfalls sound, coming quickly down the stairs. Bound up off the white wicker couch in a swirl, not even bothering to keep your place in the book, and go to him. He's in the hall, walking to you in socks, sweater sprawled casually over his shoulders, bright teeth flashing.

² Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto."

Relief waterfalls down your spine. He's come to play nice, he loves you today.

You love him always.

Tall and wiry, a hard body not incapable of great strength. Dark hair, eternal tan, deep blue eyes—he's the only dream you've ever had.

I've got something for you. A present.

Your chest glows gold with joy, champagne bubbles dancing up your ribcage into a delighted little chirp.

/*

The narrator's body is not one unit, but rather billions of nanobots cooperating with a central processor to form a cohesive shape. They are not unlike atoms, and were invented by her father. This construction was inspired by Donna Haraway's essay "A Cyborg Manifesto," in which she describes cyborgs forms as being "ether, quintessence," compared to human bodies, which are "both material and opaque" (13). It would be easy to consider the narrator's condition as a sum of parts a weakness, as her father does. However, the opposite is true—according to Haraway, "small is not so much beautiful as preeminently dangerous, as in cruise missiles" (13). This makes miniaturization's association with femininity especially salient to the text.

*/

Really? What is it?

You'll see.

Follow him up the winding staircase to his study, an airy room, one of only two in the house that isn't open to you. The oaken aroma wafts over you, pale wood drenched in gauzy light. Wonder if the windows here are locked here too.

On the desk is a creature unlike anything. A smooth black body no longer than your pinkie, yellow spots splattered over fine ridges of rib. Little black eyes nestled in the sides of its flat head. Nothing like a bird. It crawls easily up the sides of its container, a glass dome.

Sit down at the flick of his hand, the taupe leather air-conditioning cold through your thin dress. On his face, the signature cool, nothing amiss.

Do you know what this is?

No.

It's a kind of amphibian, a salamander.

It's beautiful, Papa. Thank you. Can I—

Reach for the glass dome, gently.

Not yet. I want to tell you about where it came from.

Smile big, ready for one of the tales of adventure he sometimes treats you to. The stories are his past and your future. One day you will take his place, but not for a long while.

This salamander was born in a small desert pond. A puddle, really. Product of a freak rainstorm. When the sun comes back out, the pond starts evaporating. Resources are stretched. All the food's gone. So they do the only thing they can—eat each other. Until the pond is dry and there's only one left.

He lifts the glass jar, placing his open hand on the desk. The creature goes right to him, nestles in his palm.

This is the only one that grows legs and makes it out into the world.

Marvel at this new pet, a touch of fear.

Wow.

He nods.

Is there anything you'd like to say before I give this to you?

Worry at the slightest knit of his brows that this is a trap. Your mind flashes to the key hidden upstairs in your closet. Two day's work or less and you'll be able to open the front door.

Shuck it off with a smile. Today he loves you.

No, Papa. Just that I think it's a lovely gift.

Good. Why don't you go fill a bowl with water?

Flounce toward the door, obliging, happy.

Oh, chickadee?

His own cute little nickname. You adore its sounds.

Why the fuck are you lying to me?

A spate of fury rips across his face.

Papa, no, I—

Don't *Papa no* me. Can you explain this?

He takes your key out of a desk drawer.

Please, I didn't mean—

Do you understand why I told you that story just now, about the salamander?

No.

Speak up, chickadee.

No.

The world outside, the one you're so eager to get into, is a half-gone puddle. And it's high noon. You can be the last one standing, if you just obey me. So tell me. Do you want to eat, or be eaten?

Feel the room become a vacuum. Drowning in space, unfamiliarity—this place, his place, is not a safe one. Some chilly malice glinting behind his blue irises.

Eat.

He pushes in close to you, his stubble almost brushing your cheek.

I'm sorry, what was that?

Eat.

Open your mouth.

Feel your jaw fall open, independent of your will. Glassy welts of tears already.

He holds the wriggling creature by its tail and drops it in, slamming your mouth closed with heavy fingertips and as hard as you try you cannot spit it out.

Chew.

Just like that you're out of options. Slick panicked feet pattering on your tongue, you'll do anything to stop the wriggling. You gnash and your teeth find crunching purpose, hot acidity, the wet squeaking of rubbery skin. Joints clack, shards of bone jabbing your gums. Soon it stops moving and you swallow. A half-chewed lump sinking too slowly.

The shivers come first, in between wresting sobs. Your throat goes through the empty motions of heaving. Nothing comes. The small body is already integrating, the violence of its final moments etched deep in cells that will become yours.

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The initial impulse behind this piece was to see what it would be like to tell a story through the first-person consciousness of a robot. Early drafts are all in first-person and set in a world much closer to our own, both in time and recognizability. However, as the setting evolved, I realized the point of view needed to follow. Second person turned out to be the right choice, though our focus is still intended to rest on the main character. This is not a choose your own adventure story. Just as the narrator is powerless (in the beginning) to change her situation and override her programming, the reader has no choice but to remain a passenger in her experience. In her essay "Second Person Narration as a Joint Action," Magdalena Rembowska-Płuciennik argues that second-person narration "[subverts] the illusion of a stable fictional world," causing many readers to "experience difficulty as they try to keep track of the fluid system of narrative roles." This destabilization of identity within the text parallel's the narrator's fluctuating sense of self. However, this text is not written in the second person the same way that something like *Bright Lights, Big City* is. The imperative formation of the implied *you* is both a way to avoid

reader fatigue and a strategy that aims to mimic the narrator's "thought processes." Because she is a computer, she receives commands from her coding, instead of the other way around. Her actions and feelings are not self-determined as ours are, and the command format is meant to replicate this.

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You cry for a long time, hot fat tears streaking down your cheeks, feeling like they always do—unnatural, sleeper bombs exploded from that part you don't control. He moves slowly but with no caution, closer and closer, then enfolds you in his arms. Stiffen, resist, only for a second before you slack.

Oh my dear. My poor girl.

He mutters into the top of your head, hot breath steeping your scalp.

You understand, don't you? Why all that was necessary?

Hair rustling a soft yes across his silk shirtfront.

It's because I love you, chickadee. More than anything. Everything I built out there—it's not for humanity, or me, or any future but yours. And I can't stand to see you ruin that.

I understand, Papa.

I never meant to hurt you.

I know, Papa.

He crouches, eye-to-eye, and takes your hand, making small circles with his thumb on your wrist.

I'm sorry.

It's OK.

No, it isn't.

And then the fault line between his brows slips and it's exposed, the hurt that lurks in his face's blank spaces, and you feel so bad for him you could die.

Don't look like that, Papa.

I can't—I...just don't know what to say.

He stares down, squeezing his own knuckles white, a hint of dampness in one eye.

It's not your fault.

A reedy grin. He takes your face in his hands, so softly.

Thank you, thank you, thank you...

An incantation, whispered as he draws you into his arms. His lips are warmer than yours, always, and in one motion he pulls the dress off over your head and shucks it onto the floor, hot kisses on your nipples, belly; his shirt shucked off and you do not want to want it but you do, emphatically, his hair bristling against your thighs, he knows every inch of your body, and when he pulls you onto his lap there's no place you'd rather be.

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Perhaps the most important relationship in this story is between the narrator and her father, Papa. He is known to the outside world as Elijah Bard, a pioneering nanotechnology CEO. In his (and thus the story's) world, climate change has made the majority of earth virtually

uninhabitable. The superrich now live in giant domes of his invention, which create a favorable climate inside. At this point in the narrative, his daughter knows none of this, but still sees him as a not ungodlike figure. This perception, mandated by Papa's rampant narcissism, has been brutally enforced through cycles of sexual and psychological abuse. According to Daniel Shaw, "shame and envy are the key affects for the pathological narcissist... [driving] the need to objectify others." He envies his daughter both because of her emotionally dependent state and her position as the telos of technocratic capitalism: a consummate blend of man and machine. Thus, her objectification is both literal and psychological.

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29,000 square feet. 6 bedrooms (4 empty), 5 bathrooms. 42 windows (visible.) 3 floors—2 of which are yours at least in part. The front apartments—a vague, unimaginable space Papa rarely references despite the occasional noise that seeps through the walls—are off limits, as is his laboratory. But what is yours is grand. The aviary/greenhouse, bowling alley, ballroom, pool, dining room, kitchen, wine cellar, home theater, library. 9,341 books, real woodpulp print, a fortune. 12 birds, each of whom you named. That is the world. And when Papa leaves it is always a stranger place.

Before your eyes are even open the next morning, you know he's left you, a bland note waiting in the kitchen. It's always work; he rarely specifies. And while he's gone the house becomes a void, silence and stillness curling deep into the walls, curdling rot. Time slips away and you can hardly sleep. Never soundly, not without him. The birds are the only thing that give you a semblance of comfort.

Regard the aviary with the newest eyes you can muster—that's part of the trick. And even though you know their calls and tics and feather counts by heart, greet each of your birds with particular wonder.

You've barely started your hellos when there's movement at the edge of your vision, not one of the birds. Look up over the flowers and through the fine-paned glass of the back door to see—a girl.

She's unlike anyone in the movies, unlike Papa. Every inch of her rounded and rolling, commanding sunlight and space. The deep chestnut of her skin aflame in the midday brightness. Thick glasses rim her brown eyes, her glassy black hair twisted into a knot. She is the most beautiful being you've ever seen.

Rush to the door, a kind of warmth in your cheeks. She looks at you and you at her, identical shock, then a smile from her. Not knowing what do, you wave her forward and with no hesitation she plunges the door handle down and opens it. Closes it behind her, like it's nothing.

It's not locked.

She looks at you strangely.

What?

I just... I thought it was locked.

Oh. No. But if you don't want me here I can—

No. Stay.

This last, a little desperate.

Ok. Thanks. I'm Iris.

Feel something shift in your core, a release of pressure so constant it was almost forgotten.

I wasn't trying to creep or anything, by the way. I was just walking home and I'd never been up close to this place, and I guess today was the day. I wasn't expecting you, though. I didn't know Elijah Bard had a niece or whatever living here.

She pauses, waiting for you to confirm.

He's my Papa.

Oh. I never knew he had kids.

You've long speculated about the time Papa spends away from you; why sometimes work is not worth discussing and sometimes yields months of colorful stories. But none of those tales involved a girl so enchanting. A foreign pang of jealousy cuts through you.

How do you know my father?

Her eyes narrow, you've said something wrong.

Is that a joke? From being, like, the richest dude in the world?

Grin at her, try to laugh it off. Just then, Darcy, your peacock, comes strutting by and Iris gasps.

Is that thing real?

Of course. Everything here is.

Shit, man.

She shakes her head, breaking away to wander down the rows of flowers, fruit trees. Follow, at a little distance, wanting closeness but being careful.

So you guys just eat this. Non-synthetic stuff. All the time.

You've never eaten much, but you tell her yes anyway.

Incredible. Not even my parents have the money for that.

Suddenly she stops in front of a peach tree, her fingers reaching instinctively for one of the fruits before she snaps them back.

Go ahead.

Really?

Nod, pluck one off a low branch for yourself. Watch as she follows, taking her time to pick the perfect peach.

I've never had one. A real one, I mean.

She runs her blue-polished thumb over the skin.

You take a bite and she does too, her face instantly washed in delight.

Oh my god.

A little juice pools at the corner of her wide lips. For a moment you eat in silence, enraptured, before she stops, wipes her mouth with the back of her hand.

So where do you go to school, then? Because I would have seen you at Almaden.

Freeze for a second, then feel the right answer flow from that corner of your mind where Papa takes up residence.

Homeschooled. I spend a lot of time at our place in Medina.

The images crash into your head, superposed in pulsating layers, and you can see this other house in a foreign place even though you've never been.

I've never been to Washington. Is it nice?

It's very green.

This answer seems to satisfy her. She finishes the peach, nibbling the last reddish threads away from the pit.

Hey, thanks for this.

Sure. It was... my pleasure.

She smiles at you and you melt, not in the same helpless way you would with Papa.

So will you be around? For the summer or whatever?

Yeah. Come back any time.

The words tumble out before you can stop them, not automatic, just eager, and too much so. For the first time the spell she cast cracks a bit and you are terrified that she will come when he is here and she will see.

I will. For now I gotta go, though. Thing with my parents.

She rolls her eyes, a gesture you've never seen in person before.

Oh, right.

Walk her to the door and wave goodbye.

It was nice to meet you.

You too. I'll see you around.

She opens the door and leaves and shuts it again in one smooth motion, setting off down the lawn you've longingly looked at forever as if it's the most normal thing in the world. And she's out of your sight just as quickly as she came.

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At the risk of sounding like one of those whackjob hacks who claims their characters are real people, it is true to say that Iris and I have been working together for quite a long time. She was conceived back in high school as a thinly veiled self-avatar, the main character in a maudlin roman à clef about unrequited lesbian love. She's since become bourgeois, nonwhite, and an adoptee. Perhaps the most important change, however, is that she's now the subject of desire, as opposed to the desirer. I'm glad I finally found where she belongs. Considering this perspective, the narrator of this text could be seen as a spiritual successor to my high school efforts' manic pixie dream girl. In fact, the narrator was built by her father to be just that—a fantasy. We'll see what happens when she starts to realize she's so much more. The journey toward sentience and independence she will go through over the course of the story is best summed up by Donna Haraway: "Modern machinery is an irreverent upstart god, mocking the Father's ubiquity and spirituality. The silicon chip is a surface for writing; it is etched in molecular scales disturbed only by atomic noise" (13).

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Sources and Spiritual Companions

Blade Runner. Directed by Ridley Scott, performances by Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, and

Sean Young. Warner Brothers, 1982.

Clifford, Catherine. "Jeff Bezos: You Can't Pick Your Passions." *CNBC*, 7 Feb. 2019.

Del Rey, Lana. *Born to Die*. Interscope Records, 2012. Spotify.

Ex Machina. Directed by Alex Garland, performances by Alicia Vikander, Domhnall Gleeson, and Oscar Isaac. Universal Pictures, 2014.

Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), pp.149-181.

Holy Bible, New International Version. Zondervan Publishing House, 2001. Revelations, 4.6-8.

McBride, Eimear. *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*. London, Faber and Faber, 2014.

McInerney, Jay. *Bright Lights, Big City*. New York, Vintage Books, 1984.

Nahmias, Eddy, et al. "When Do Robots Have Free Will?: Exploring the Relationships Between (Attributions of) Consciousness and Free Will." *Free Will, Causality, and Neuroscience*, edited by Bernard Feltz et al., vol. 338, Brill, 2020, pp. 57–80.

This article examines the interplay between consciousness and free will, and why people view consciousness as a necessary precursor to choosing one's own actions. One of the creative portion's primary themes is the concept of free will as it relates to the protagonist's agency and interactions. This article provides a much-needed framework for creating the story's conception of free will, interweaving philosophical and neurological concepts to examine the point at which (imagined) artificial intelligence becomes self-determined and thus responsible for its actions.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. New York: Vintage International, 1955.

The first time I read Nabokov’s masterpiece I was 15, and the impact it had on me cannot be overstated. I had never read anything so beautiful—or something so terrifying. The story of Humbert Humbert’s obsession with and abuse of his 12-year-old stepdaughter, rendered in the voice of one of literature’s most compelling monsters, both excited and scarred me. Some of the impulses behind this thesis stem from an attempted (re)mediation of that reading experience.

Rembowska-Pluciennik, Magdalena. “Second-Person Narration as a Joint Action.” *Language and Literature*, vol. 27, no. 3, Aug. 2018, pp. 159–175.

Shaw, Daniel. “Enter Ghosts: The Loss of Intersubjectivity in Clinical Work With Adult Children of Pathological Narcissists.” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, vol. 20, no. 1, Feb. 2010, pp. 46–59.

This article explores the link between intersubjectivity and narcissism, framed through clinical therapy with adult children of narcissists. The main case study centers on a woman called Alice, whose relationship with her mother is used to deconstruct the relational strategies of pathological narcissists. These strategies are intergenerational and cause cumulative relational trauma—leading to the loss of intersubjective capacities in patients like Alice.

“The Bicameral Mind.” *Westworld*, season 1, episode 10, HBO, 4 December 2016.

Torres, Eliseo “Cheo,” and Timothy L. Sawyer. “Chapter Nine: Modern Curanderos.” *Healing with Herbs and Rituals: A Mexican Tradition*. University of New Mexico Press, 2014.

“This is Not for Tears.” *Succession*, season 2 episode 10, HBO, 13 October 2019.

