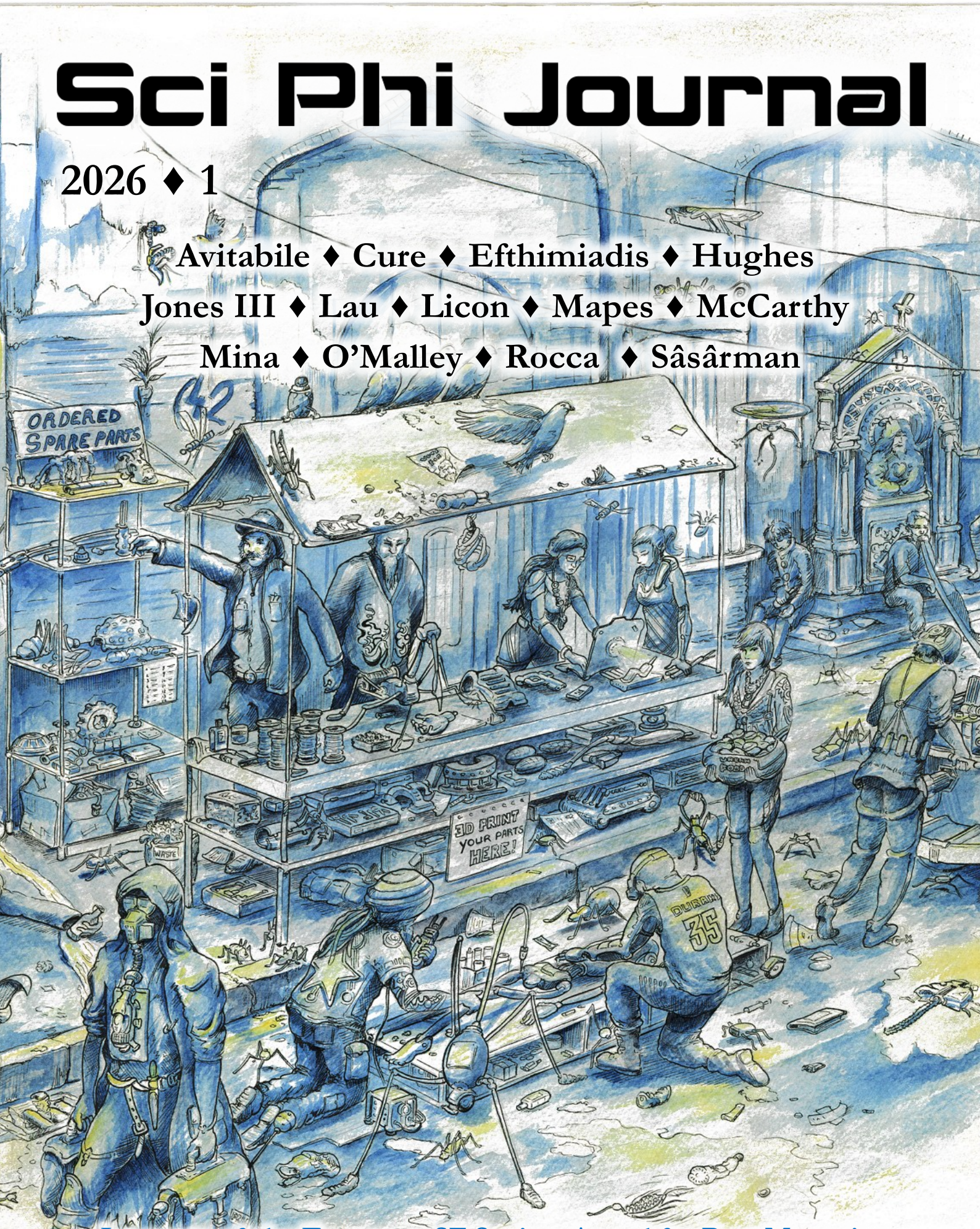
Sci Phi Journal

2026 ♦ 1

Avitabile ♦ Cure ♦ Efthimiadis ♦ Hughes
Jones III ♦ Lau ♦ Licon ♦ Mapes ♦ McCarthy
Mina ♦ O'Malley ♦ Rocca ♦ Sâsârman



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Editorial

Lectori salutem.

Welcome to our first issue of 2026. The year got off to a busy start at our editorial "offices", as *Sci Phi Journal* received its largest volume of short fiction submissions to date. The crew spent many a night reading, contemplating and discussing the countless thoughtful and surprising pieces – the review experience was, once again, like placing a gentle hand on the pulse of the international sci-fi community and discovering what moves our authors in this day and age.

If hundreds of creative minds from around the globe are an indication, we as humans are equal part concerned and fascinated by near-future challenges, from the rise of artificial "intelligence" and the sense of alienation brought on by ubiquitous technology, to a diverse menu of options for ending the world as we know it. Meanwhile, we also remain intrigued by the less practical: ephemeral vistas of distant worlds, cosmic time scales and philosophical musings.

The short fiction presented in this issue traverses a broad spectrum of the above SF landscape, taking us from the exploits of Greek gods and ancient miracles to the travails of insurance administration during an alien invasion and budgetary concerns within the bureaucracies of subterranean survivors. We also pick up the thread of our erstwhile series publishing the missing pieces of Romanian SF master Gheorghe Săsărman's imaginary cities hitherto unavailable in English – we hope to complete the entire cycle in our four quarterly issues this year.

Two essays complement this tour of the literary horizon, one on sci-fi anthologies by Mina, and another on the television series *Severance* by Jimmy Alonso Licon. As customary since 2021, our publication is graced by original cover art from the inkwell of Belgian solarpunk artist Dustin Jacobus.

May your reading pleasure, here and elsewhere, bring joy to your neurons!

Speculatively yours,

the *Sci Phi* co-editors & crew

~

Pandora's Revenge

Richard Lau

"What is this?" Zeus, the King of Olympus, demanded of Pandora when she presented him with her gift. The offering in question was a large rectangular metal box, about two meters long, three quarters of a meter wide and high.

Your doom, Pandora thought to herself. But aloud, she tactfully answered, "A kingly gift for the king of kings. A godly gift for the god of gods."

For once, Zeus wasn't swayed by flattery. He and Pandora had a history and not a pleasant one. He had twice shackled her brother-in-law Prometheus to the side of Mount Caucasus, having an eagle peck out and consume the titan's liver, only to have the organ grow back overnight and the punishment repeated the next day.

"The lid is sealed," Zeus observed. "How do I know there isn't something bad in it?"

Pandora answered and her tone contained a mix of bitterness and truth. "Bad? What could harm someone as great as Zeus? Besides you've already had me unleash everything bad into the world with your wedding gift, remember?"

Zeus chortled. Yes, that was a good one, having the sum of all evils stored in a box, counting on Pandora's curiosity to open the lid and release them. She would never live that one down!

"Anyway," she continued, "you have my word that the box only contains good."

#

A few months earlier, Pandora had released Prometheus from his shackles on the slope of Mount Caucasus yet again. "Don't forget our agreement," she reminded him. "In exchange for your freedom, when you get back to your toy workshop in the northern lands, build me the box I described."

"No problem," replied the titan. "The cloning will be tricky, along with the cryogenics, but my workshop and elves can build anything. I, too, have scores to settle with Zeus."

When Zeus was told that Prometheus had escaped, it was claimed that the titan had been assisted by human children, not elves.

"The little humans always loved Prometheus' jolly old elf persona and his gift-giving," the king of Olympus was said to have muttered. "Let them have their Santa. I grow tired of his punishment, and my eagle has had its fill of titan liver."

#

Olympus was in turmoil. The Greek gods and goddesses gathered around Zeus and the still closed box that lay defiantly at his feet. Their king was deeply troubled. Not only was he curious about what was in the box, but he was also annoyed by his inability to control his curiosity. Where was his godly willpower? Wasn't this the same weakness he had exploited with Pandora? Was this part of her plan for revenge? No, she wouldn't dare! And what could she possibly do?

"Forget the stupid box," advised Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and festivity. "Enjoy yourself! Have some drink and ambrosia!"

"Drink is always your solution," grumbled Zeus. "And, anyway, who invited you to this discussion?"

"Unlike some folks, I am invited everywhere," Dionysus mumbled under his breath, staring remorsefully at a nearby jug that regrettably only contained water.

"Why gather the rest of us here?" asked Ares, the god of war. "The box involves Zeus himself. Pandora has said as much. And whether or not to open it, it is his decision."

Athena, showing her wisdom, replied, "Whatever affects Zeus affects the rest of us."

Hermes, Zeus' messenger and the fastest of the gods, suggested, "Sire, in a moment I could take a request to your brothers Poseidon and Hades. They can hide the cursed box beneath the sea or in the underworld."

"As the king of gods, I make requests of no one," Zeus said, pridefully stubborn. "If it be my will, it shall be done." But what was his will? The question still plagued him.

Athena imparted her wisdom again. "And even with the box physically removed, it and its mysterious contents will still be present in our king's mind, as surely as if the box still lay at his feet."

Zeus had to admit that his daughter was correct, as usual. He was annoyed with himself to the point of distraction. Again, he realized this was the same tactic he had used against humanity. After fire, Prometheus had given them the secret of Zeus's thunderbolt, dark energy. To prevent them from implementing this new form of power, Zeus had distracted the humans with the contradictory behaviors brought on by quantum mechanics.

If only he could consult the Oracle of Delphi about what would happen when he opened Pandora's gift. But the high priestess had been driven mad after trying to psychically detect the superpositioned nature of a cat packed in its own closed container by the elder god Schrodingememnon.

Zeus felt literally boxed in by his own actions.

"What are we afraid of?" asked Aphrodite, the goddess of love, for she always chose to see the best in people. "Pandora said that the box contained something good."

"Can we believe anything she says?" argued Ares, always eager for confrontation. "After all, I have heard that she has joined that new cult!"

"You didn't hear it from me!" insisted Hermes rather guiltily about the speed in which gossip traveled.

"Enough!" proclaimed Zeus, his voice thundering with frustration and decision. "I am Zeus! I fear nothing! One way or another, I will end this mystery!"

"And end your suffering, dear," whispered Hera, who knew her brother and husband all too well.

Zeus reached to open the box, and, at his touch, there was a crackle, like some sort of electrical field being disturbed. Then the disembodied voice of an unseen Prometheus intoned, "Do not open 'til Christmas. Do not open 'til Christmas. Re-animation protocols engaged."

"Prometheus, you coward! Show yourself!" roared Zeus, instinctively knowing that something very wrong was happening. "And what is this Christmas?"

"Suspended animation successfully reversed!" announced the box. "Christmas is here!"

The lid of the box split into two and folded back.

A berobed, long-haired, bearded young man jumped out from the exposed interior.

With outstretched arms as if to embrace the entire gathering and the world, the man said, "Eizo hakala! I thought I'd never get out of that box!"

In celebration, He turned a jug of water into wine, immediately winning over Dionysus, who changed his name to Andrew the First Disciple and unknowingly saved himself.

"Pandora, you…" began Zeus. But before he could summon his famed thunderbolt to strike her down, he and the other Greek gods faded away.

~

Placing An Alien Claim

Stephen Kramer Avitabile

Hello Duncan,

My name is Claire, and I was told you were the City House Insurance representative that I should reach out to about my claim. My claim number is C1404976 and I filed it on March 26th of this year. I wanted to ask about the progress on my claim as it appears to be taking an unusually long time. To refresh you on the details, nearly half of my house was destroyed by an alien ship as it was pursued by military jets. Our entire living room, dining room, two of the four bedrooms, and one of the two bathrooms were decimated. No one was hurt, thankfully, but it has been extremely difficult for my family to go about our usual schedule, cramming ourselves into half a house. I would really appreciate a solution to my case. Without the insurance money, we are stuck in this rut.

Thank you,

Claire

#

Dear Claire,

Pleased to meet you! Thank you for all the pertinent details on your claim. I was finally able to review this in full and see what the hold-up was. Unfortunately, your claim won't be fulfilled as your insurance does not cover this. I apologize for the delay in response, but please reach out to me with any questions you may have.

Best,

Duncan

#

Hello again Duncan,

Claire here. How is this not covered by my insurance? The alien ship crashed right into my house, and the reason it hit my house was because a U.S. jet was pursuing it, making it change its course, and thus, hitting my home. You obviously have to cover this.

Claire

#

Dear Claire,

Good day to you! Hope all is well. Unfortunately, this is out of our hands. If, say, the military jet had hit your home, then we would be able to cover it as that is a human lifeform from this planet and we could work with the military on that. But it wasn't the human that hit your house, it was the alien. It's easy for us to get money out of humans, beings with a pulse that make mistakes. Too bad it wasn't the military jet, huh? As always, any questions, I am your guy!

Best,

Duncan

#

Dear Duncan,

Claire again. I am confused. You are saying that it would have to be a lifeform with a pulse, right? This damage was caused by an alien. An alien that is a lifeform and has a pulse. Right? So, what's the hold up?

Thanks,

Claire

#

Dear Claire,

That's a good question. If you've been keeping up with all the news as City House has been for insurance policy purposes, it hasn't yet been proven that the aliens have a pulse. They've caught several and brought them into their labs. You likely heard about the two instances where the alien had not expired, as the scientists had thought, and then released a powerful nerve gas from a canister inside his bio-suit killing all the scientists in the room. So, clearly no one got to examine those aliens. But the others that were examined, no pulse was found. So, no way to blame them if they aren't a being with a pulse!

Best,

Duncan

#

Hi Duncan,

Just through the nature of things, the laws of science, they have to have a pulse. They are beings. This claim has to be covered.

Claire

#

Hi Claire!

Actually, we can't prove that. Beings from Earth, sure. But beings from another planet, we can't be certain of their body makeup. And unfortunately, those bio-suits are too difficult to crack through. They haven't been able to examine the being inside the suit. No way to prove that it's a being with a pulse, a heart, lungs, a brain, any of that.

Best,

Duncan

#

Hi Duncan,

That sounds crazy to me. Obviously, they have a pulse and a heart. But putting that aside, if you are stating we can't *prove* that they are living beings, then that means they are not living beings *in your eyes*. Like a tornado. A hurricane. A wildfire. Does this not fall under the natural disasters category?

Claire

#

Hi Claire,

Good question! Nope! We can't prove these aliens and their ships are natural. As you have likely seen on many news sources, plenty of pundits have speculated that a select few billionaires working with certain politicians have made these "aliens" and their ships in a lab, sending them out to attack certain states and cities and districts in hopes to eliminate people who vote for their opposition. So, we don't know if these things are even natural. A very good chance they aren't!

Best,

Duncan

#

Duncan,

That is insane. By the way, not "many news sources" have said this. Three pundits with a notorious history of spewing lies to scare their base have said this on ONE NEWS SOURCE and there is no evidence. It holds no credibility. It's just a random thing that someone says. You cannot base insurance policies on a farce.

Claire

#

Hi Claire,

The reality is, we can't rule it out, so we can't claim them to be natural… or natural disasters… if we don't know everything about them.

Best,

Duncan

#

Hi Duncan,

So, if you don't know if they're natural or not, you cannot tell me they are not. Unless you are indeed saying they were artificially created, then we can just go to the person who artificially created them and that is where I get my money from!

Claire

#

Hi Claire,

But we can't prove it, we aren't certain.

Best,

Duncan

#

Duncan,

City House Insurance HAS TO claim them as something. Anything. Call them beings. Call them natural disasters. Call them artificially created and if so, then they are created by someone. Someone is at fault! Somehow, I have to get money for this. I didn't do this to my own house! The alien ship hit it and it was chased by the military! Go to the military for this if you have to! But this claim has to be categorized SOMEHOW. I don't care how. We can't just say because we don't know the specifics, we are going to recognize it as nothing. It wasn't "nothing" that decimated half my house!

Claire

#

Dear Valued City House Insurance Customer,

Thanks for reaching out to me! You've caught me at a time when I am unable to respond to emails for one reason or another. But rest assured, I will get back to you as soon as I am able.

Best,

Duncan

#

DUNCAN!

DID YOU SERIOUSLY JUST GIVE ME THE OUT OF OFFICE REPLY! YOU CAN'T DO THIS! I NEED ANSWERS!!! I NEED THIS CLAIM FULFILLED! IF YOU DO NOT GET BACK TO ME, I WILL BE GOING TO SOMEONE ABOVE YOUR HEAD! DO NOT THINK I AM LYING! I AM A CHANGED WOMAN! EVERY NIGHT I ONLY SLEEP A TOTAL OF 4 HOURS, TWICE IN 2-HOUR SHIFTS, AS MY FAMILY AND I TAKE TURNS WATCHING OUT FOR THE BLACK BEARS AND GRAY WOLVES AS THEY KEEP ATTEMPTING TO ENTER OUR HOME AT NIGHT TO STEAL OUR FOOD! IT RAINED ALL LAST WEEK AND ALL OF MY KIDS CAUGHT PNEUMONIA. WE CANNOT SHIELD OURSELVES FROM THE ELEMENTS OR THE ANIMALS. I HAVE LOST ALL JOY IN MY LIFE. I WILL MAKE IT MY LIFE'S MISSION TO GET THE MONEY I AM OWED ON THIS CLAIM EVEN IF I HAVE TO TAKE YOU DOWN!

Claire

#

Dear Claire,

Pleased to meet you, my name is Herman Logan, I am the regional manager of several of the City House Insurance locations, including the branch that you have been in contact with… specifically with our agent Duncan Herrmeier. I was brought into this email thread as you had not received a response in a while. As you may have heard in the news, there was an influx of alien ships in our area the other night. They were going after resources and the military pursued, and it all ended in a fiery explosion in the East Tomahawk Plaza. That happens to be the plaza where Duncan's City House Insurance branch was located. The City House Insurance building and every other business in that plaza, with the exception of the Subway, were destroyed and everyone in them perished. That is why you received Duncan's Out of Office Reply. It's standard protocol for a City House Insurance employee's Out of Office Reply to be sent in the event of their death. As you can imagine, my team and I have been devastated, picking up the pieces, and picking up the existing email threads. Which is why you find me here. I apologize for the delays you have experienced, but I am here with my book of guidelines and a footlong Veggie Delight, ready to help. So, please, let me help.

Best,

Herman

#

Dear Herman,

I am so sorry to hear about Duncan and the others.

Sincerely,

Claire

#

Dear Claire,

Don't worry, it happens. The aliens won't stop coming. In fact, they've realized that we have plenty of valuable resources, so their attacks will just keep increasing. This is the new normal for us. We just have to get used to it. But please, let's take care of your insurance claim!

Best,

Herman

#

Dear Herman,

OK. Sure. So, one half of my house was destroyed when military jets were chasing the aliens and an alien ship hit my home. So, I placed the claim for this a long time ago and it has been taking forever.

Thanks,

Claire

#

Hi Claire,

Hm. Did you say the *alien ship* hit your home? That's not good. That's sounding like it won't be covered. Let me check with one of the agents that I work with. I don't think any of our policies will cover that as we can't prove these are lifeforms like humans. Let me get back to you.

Best,

Herman

#

Herman,

Before you go talk to the agent, isn't there some part of the policy that covers damage by animals? They have to be considered animals at least, right?

Claire

#

Hi Claire,

Good question! And yes! At the very least, we can consider them to be animals. Unfortunately, City House Insurance only covers damage caused by animals that are mammals, and as it is overwhelmingly evident, these aliens are of reptilian or amphibian nature. So, they wouldn't be covered. Let me discuss with my agent any other possibilities.

Best,

Herman

#

Hi Herman,

Could we please talk on the phone rather than email? Or meet in person? I really just want to sit down with you and take care of this, like now. It's getting scary over here. There was another attack in our area, as I am sure you know as it was likely near you as well, but many alien ships landed in the field near our home. Several of their troops were about to enter through the gaping hole in our house and were only scared away by a black bear in the area. The black bear then entered our home and stole our food and attacked my husband who was trying to fight it off, giving him several gashes in his leg and leaving him hobbled. I need this handled ASAP. Can you please work with me to resolve this right away?

Thank you,

Claire

#

Dear Valued City House Insurance Customer,

Thanks for reaching out to me! You've caught me at a time when I am unable to respond to emails for one reason or another. But rest assured, I will get back to you as soon as I am able.

Best,

Herman

~

The Green Workbook For Refugees From Earth

…in the Order in Which a Female Refugee Read It and Filled It Out

F.B. Hughes

A warm welcome to Earth's refugees!

We are the Earth Refugees Authority (ERA), a government authority whose mandate is to provide food and water, temporary shelter, medical care, and security for refugees from Earth to this world of Avunculus.

At the time you left Earth, Avunculus was a nascent colony, one of 15. As your intake counselor likely informed you, **512 years** have passed between the time you entered the copula on Earth and disembarked on Avunculus.

Effectively, your civilization is long dead to you. If you have not already been assigned a grief counselor, one will be appointed to you during your stay. We are experiencing a shortage of trained personnel in this area; the current wait time is **301 days**.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN:

1. **This reconfigurable document registers responses and provides the appropriate worksheet pathway. Please use blue or black ink.**
2. **This GREEN workbook (in BOOK ENGLISH) is for Anglophones who departed North America from the years CE 2206-2250 and arrived on the planet Avunculus, one of the "Fifteen Colonized Worlds." Please see a white-suited ERA worker if you prefer a post-2250 NA English dialect.**

The copulae gates that brought you here were damaged when Earth attempted to shut them down. The gates now only transmit matter and light one way—from Earth to these Fifteen Worlds. Because we cannot send messages to Earth, there is no way to stop this refugee-producing situation. You can neither return to Earth nor enter Avunculus proper. Strict laws governing citizenship and residency restrict entry to holders of certain service roles.

The ERA is committed to peaceful, local solutions to this ancient multiplanetary migrant crisis. For 70 years, we have administered camps on Avunculus. This one is called **the Armstrong Temporary Camp for Earth Refugees (ATCER)**. You are now a legal resident of **ATCER** and must remain inside it unless authorized to travel elsewhere. Because you are stateless, we provide your legal representation in courts of local, planetary, and inter-planet jurisdiction.

#

If you are traveling with minor children, and they are currently under your care, see section 15.

(from Section 15e) Children 10-14 (age determined by follicle analysis) are entitled to a food ration equaling 6500 kilojoules per day. Rations are nutritionally maximized for growth and health.

(from Section 15i) The Armstrong Temporary Camp for Earth Refugees operates two schools for children 7-18. Enrollment is mandatory for all children 7-15.

#

For brief explanations of chronological displacement effects that you have experienced, see Section 2.

Point of pride!

Despite resource scarcity, ATCER students have steadily narrowed the score gap with native-born Avunculan children on standardized academic examinations. Many of our teachers were once pupils in the same schools.

(From Section 2) In CE 2206, Earth disabled all traffic from the Fifteen Worlds to Earth, while leaving intact the ability to send traffic here. We call this the De-Coupling. As you may be aware, Earth authorities disabled the copulae out of concern that the terraformers would use them to access Earth.

#

The De-Coupling resulted in chronological effects. Since CE 2206, Earth-originating travelers have been dispersed across the past **five centuries**. Millions of travelers who entered the copulae together found themselves separated by great expanses of time.

If you have experienced family or party separation, please invoke Section 99.

If you wish to report missing children, please invoke Form 99B.

(from Form 99B) How many dependents/ children do you wish to report missing? 2

Please enter your dependents' names, ages, and description below.

Conrad Tyler, 10, male

Olivia Tyler, 8, female

Unfortunately, because of the De-Coupling, persons sought may have disembarked at an earlier point in time. Where records do not exist, this may indicate that persons sought arrived at a time downstream (the future). In such cases, records of your arrival here will be provided to them upon their arrival, assuming record keeping and refugee-recovery infrastructure remain intact.

Research teams are understaffed and records continue to accrue. This causes considerable delay. The current wait time to return complete record searches to people inside the camps is **164 months**.

#

Important to know!

This planet, like each of the Fifteen Worlds, contains an autonomous terraforming actant (locally called *godplanet*) that exerts will through systems of non-living and living things. The actant grants select humans (approximately 1 in 1,000,000) various abilities of input ("permissions") into its matter and energy transforming systems. Sensitives provide our governments an avenue of communication and influence with the actant. For unknown reasons, Earthborn experience a slightly higher rate of sensitivity. See Form 201B for a checklist of signs that you may have permissions.

(Section 200: Methods of Normalizing Status) Refugees are not permitted to exit the camp without authorization. Refugees who leave the camp without permission face arrest and prosecution under local planetary law. Camp residents also face a heightened risk of robbery and assault. Unfortunately, the ERA has limited security capability outside the camp.

If you think you may be eligible for a special status that will allow travel outside the camp, such as temporary residency or asylum, please see Section 201.

#

(Section 201) If you wish to apply for temporary residency status as someone who can "hear" the godplanet, please request Form 201P.

#

(Form 201P) This form tells our intake personnel that you have some facility to perceive semantic manifestations of the godplanet.

(Excerpts from checklist)

Name: Daria Tyler

Camp ID: 2291-094344-701

Age (at time of departure, rounded up: 35

#

Symptoms Checklist:

yes no

[x] [ ] At night or while sleeping, I hear someone not present giving me clear directives.

[x] [ ] I sometimes see places I have never been.

[x] [ ] I can hear the conversations of people who are not there.

[ ] [x] I would like to make a mountain.

[…]

[x] [ ] I often wake up feeling like I spent the night working out an important problem.

[ ] [x] I wish I were a tree.

Health Conditions:

yes no

[x] [ ] Asthma:

[ ] [x] Heart Condition

[ ] [x] Cancer or history of cancer

[…]

[x] [ ] Currently pregnant; if yes, how many weeks, if known: 27

Refugees determined to have matter and energy altering permissions gain access to a pathway to permanent residency on Avunculus. Any sensitivity to the godplanet must be verified through potentially invasive medical testing and long periods of quarantine. Positive results will obligate you to a period of state service currently set by statute as **lifetime**.

Signature: DARIA TYLER

Date (use Earth standard): 23 Sept CE 2744

#

(From Section 834, Signature and submission) Initial each statement to indicate understanding.

You have **not completed** Form 15, **Care of minor child(ren)**. _DT

You have **completed** Form 99B, **Missing child(ren)**. _DT

You have **completed** Waiver of Liability/ Form 201P, **Terraformer Permissions Testing**. Positive selection may open a pathway to permanent residency and freedom of movement, including leave to search for missing persons. _DT

You have indicated that you have a medical condition of **currently pregnant**. Warning: Testing procedures involve teratogenic substances, high doses of ionizing radiation, and quantum cotermination, in which the actant may align physically with your body; all of these are **contraindicated in pregnancy**. While prophylactic measures to protect your body and future health will be taken, your fetus may be damaged beyond current capabilities of medical intervention.

Termination of pregnancy is requested. __

Termination of pregnancy is NOT requested. __

Please submit this completed workbook to any white-suited intake personnel.

~

SF Anthologies – A Universe Animated By The Strange, Sublime And Extraordinary

Mina

Most would agree that an anthology is a collection of short(er) works in one volume. Beyond that, there is room for disagreement: some would insist that these works must be by different authors; others that there must be a unifying setting or theme. The Britannica dictionary gives two definitions for "anthology": (1) a published collection of writings (such as poems or short stories) by different authors and (2) a collection of works of art or music. Since "works of art" is a very broad category, it's easy to see why some would treat definition (1) as a subset of definition (2). According to various sources, the word anthology originally comes from the Greek *anthología*, literally "flower-gathering", where it became used for a collection of short poems and epigrams by various authors. Whatever your accepted definition of anthology is, it definitely will be broader than just a collection of poems. And anthologies today go beyond the written word, they can include radio, film and TV. But let's begin by looking at SF/sci-phi anthologies in (paper and electronic) book form, which would comfortably fit under the narrower definition (1).

One anthology I discovered recently (on paper) is *Classic Science Fiction Stories*, selected and introduced by Adam Roberts. In his introduction, Roberts tells us: "much of the best SF ever written has appeared in the short story format." He muses that there is an "affinity between the genre of science fiction and the form of the short story." He theorises that this is because a short story can focus on a "central trope or metaphor" and SF is "a fundamentally metaphorical form of art". In his opinion, short stories could be considered closer in form to lyric poems, and the form could be extended to TV series like *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who* which "assemble mega-texts out of lots of short-story-esque discrete elements". Whichever form SF anthologies take, they present us with "a universe animated by the strange and sublime and extraordinary."

An anthology series I have enjoyed thoroughly (and reviewed) in the last couple of years is called *Writers of the Future*. It collects stories by means of a regular contest and the quality of these stories is excellent. As Jody Lynn Nye tells us in the introduction to volume 41, the stories contained in it don't follow a single theme, trope or style. They are selected based on two criteria: they are bloody good (my words) and they are original ideas. Each story is accompanied by a beautiful colour illustration, also from the human winners of a contest, as, to agree with Echo Chernik, AI cannot (yet?) understand symbolism and turn it into something truly original and meaningful. Another intriguing format is that of the *Shapers of Worlds* series with short stories by authors featured on the podcast *The Worldshapers*. The only thing required of these stories is that they present "unique worlds". It also contains black and white illustrations and I always enjoy the blend of words and images.

Tales of the United States Space Force does have a unifying theme. It takes the reality of space weapons, satellites and debris and the stories in it speculate about possible futures, with as much stress on the science as on the fiction. *Full Steam Ahead* is another anthology with a very clear unifying theme: steampunk in all its guises. But an anthology can even have more than one unifying theme. *An Assembly of Monsters* is a great deal of fun blending steampunk, mythology and good old-fashioned Gothic horror (in particular the Dracula and Frankenstein tropes). There are many good, traditional anthologies out there, catering to all tastes. You can find lists of recommendations on the internet without too much trouble. You can even ask AI to give you a list of recommendations if you are feeling particularly lazy.

But what if we talk of anthologies in the broader sense (2)? Can we count collections of short stories by the same author anthologies? If we do, I would include books such as Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* and Asimov's *I, Robot* stories. In *The Martian Chronicles*, we see the exploration and settlement of Mars in episodic and chronological form; in *I, Robot*, the framing narrative is Dr Susan Calvin recounting her past cases to a reporter who acts as the narrator (not to be confused with the later publication, *The Complete Robot*). Interestingly, both of these books are considered "fix-ups", which the SFE describes as "a term first used by A.E. van Vogt to describe a book made up of previously published stories fitted together – usually with the addition of newly written or published cementing material – so that they read as a novel."

So is "fix-up" a better label here? Paul Brians is not entirely sure when he talks about *The Martian Chronicles*:

"Bradbury has clearly tried to fix this one up by adding connective bits between the main stories to smooth the joins; but that this smoothing-out process was not entirely successful is made clear by the fact that when the television miniseries was created the scriptwriters felt the need to impose far more unity on the stories than Bradbury had. But if the stories are considered as variations on a theme rather than as chapters of a unified novel, these variations should cease to be troubling."

For me, the inconsistencies and contradictions in this collection of short stories become irrelevant if we treat it as an anthology rather than a fix-up novel. *I, Robot*'s very loose framing narrative also makes more sense if we treat it as an anthology, rather than a fix-up novel, with a unifying theme of the interactions between robots and humans, and the ethical implications, especially if a robot displays behaviour requiring a "robopsychologist".

Brians' comment shows that it feels natural to also extend anthology to cover the air waves and moving pictures. In the 1950s, the radio series "Dimension X" dramatised short stories by authors like Asimov, Bradbury, Heinlein and Simak. In the words of M. Keith Booker: "Radio programs such as Mutual's 2000 Plus and NBC's Dimension X were anthology series that offered a variety of exciting tales of future technology, with a special focus on space exploration (including alien invasion), though both series also often reflected contemporary anxieties about the dangers of technology." Most of the stories were adapted by Ernest Kinoy and George Lefferts and they also provided original scripts for this very loose unifying theme. *The Twilight Zone* was a US anthology TV series created by Rod Serling, who was also the host, narrator and one of the screenwriters. Each tale would have a moral or unexpected twist, with a pinch of creepiness thrown in. The more recent *Black Mirror* is British and has been labelled a "prestige" SF anthology series. It was created by Charlie Brooker and is considered speculative fiction with SF elements. It focuses on the dangers of unbridled new technologies and episodes come with a sting in the tail. Throw in dystopia, satire and social commentary, and you know happy endings are going to be a rare occurrence.

On a lighter note, the *Star Trek* universe is a great backdrop for many different short stories on the screen. They are peopled with familiar, recurring characters but they are placed in all sorts of different contexts and situations. This allows the screenwriters to literally play with ideas, science, philosophy, religion, sociology and anthropology, all within an SF frame. *Star Trek* is not considered an anthology series, but I agree with Roberts that it could be. The best anthologies have good curators, whether they act as compilers and guides like Roberts, or like creators like Serling, Brooker and Roddenberry. SF magazines like *Asimov's* and *Clarkesworld* could arguably be considered anthologies, often tightly crafted and carefully edited.

In fact, "anthology" would seem to be a very loose term covering various different formats and media. I rather like that it's an amorphous creature, but I do wonder what changes technology has wrought. Once upon a time, an anthology was a paper book you had to buy or take out on loan from a library. On paper, we tend to read from beginning to end, so we typically read the stories in the order they were put in. When anthologies were first aired on the radio and TV, audiences would have to wait a week for the next episode. Today, electronic media and streaming mean that you no longer have to wait and you no longer have to read, listen or watch stories in order. You can hop around like a demented grasshopper.

I'm not sure a value judgement is needed here; it's a matter of preference. It's like listening to music: do you play records on a record player so that you can have that distinctive, less than perfect sound? Do you play CDs, listening to songs in the order they were put in, obsessively reading the sleeve notes and the translation of lyrics from old Norse? Do you create playlists on Spotify, listen to the playlists the application creates for you based on your listening behaviour or click on "shuffle"? Perhaps you do a bit of all of these or live in total silence on a mountain top. Maybe, how you appreciate an anthology doesn't matter. Maybe, what matters is that you do appreciate a universe animated by the strange, sublime and extraordinary.

~

Verticity

By Gheorghe Sâsârman
Translated by Monica Cure

The city seemed to have neither beginning nor end. Seen from one of the helicopters continuously circling it, it resembled a gigantic tower, the top of which, made small by the effects of perspective, was lost in the distance. From on the ground, its sprawling outline, as if it were an affront to gravity, sprang up toward the misty vault; deep basements, multi-storied cellars and formidable foundations continued downward, unseen, like the true roots of this matchless tree. From the height of a few kilometers, the rods bearing helio-thermal generators, surrounded by the corollas of parabolic mirrors, began to branch out. They were dotted with cantilevered platforms which served as landing and take-off pads for flying vehicles. The final elevation of the city was unspecified; it rose uninterruptedly, according to the orders the central electronic brain gave the computers that directed the growth of the construction. Though the city was living, it could be compared only in one's imagination with a tree; in reality, no one ever beheld it in a single gaze, and its partial views gave no grounds for such a comparison.

The city's internal structure was fairly complicated. Through a network of high-pressure tubes circulated water and the minerals extracted from beneath the ground, nitrogen and carbon dioxide of atmospheric origin—the raw materials required for the preparation, with the help of solar energy, of the food and consumer goods necessary for the inhabitants. The core of the construction also housed the air conditioning and temperature control systems, including the installations used in transportation and communications. The technological nucleus was surrounded by a first ring, made up of public spaces; the outer ring was dedicated to residences. These also accommodated the rooms where family members carried out their daily work—which was of an intellectual nature, given that all other functions had been automatized and were conducted by computers.

Young Nat felt forlorn. He had obtained, after lengthy appeals, permission to visit the city. His request, however, awakened the suspicions of the authorities, who were accustomed to a population that, enjoying the advantages of the stereo-chromo-videophonic system of total communication, had long given up even the friendly visits that had once been kept out of tradition. Besides, the inhabitants of the city were also very busy. The obligation to work had been legislated here more for formal reasons, because the practice of useful activities was so deeply ingrained that each adult citizen dedicated almost their entire free time to it. They all had a multitude of occupations and, having versatile skills, they carried out several operations simultaneously. No one had time for the young visitor.

In the gigantic anthill that was Verticity, Nat suffered from loneliness. He would wander for hours on end through the high-speed—and, after a while, rarely used— elevators without meeting a soul. After spending a few days in a research room, he came to know a bit about the city and its history, not enough, though, to be able to come into contact with those who lived there. He felt strangely attracted to the image of the immaterial being who announced the exact time; finally, he decided to go look for her. It was not exactly an easy thing to do: private information was not given out to just anyone, much less to a stranger; he was completely unable to find out the name of his mysterious Dulcinea. The more difficult finding the unknown woman proved to be, the more his attention was irresistibly captured by her evanescent smile. Soon, Nat impatiently awaited the moment in which the exact time would be announced. Furthermore, the operation would repeat, in the principle transportation junctions, each half hour. Completely absorbed by his passion, the stranger did not notice that the few local women he had met were not anywhere close to as beautiful as the announcer. And, though that could have been a simple coincidence, it offered an explanation pertaining to his strange choices.

Nat did not feel the need for an explanation; obsessed, yet suspecting himself of loving blindly, like a teenager, he decided to find a way inside the broadcasting center, whatever the risks. During his investigations, he continued to fall deeper, every 30 minutes of course, into the ecstasy of the exact time —his favorite show and the only one he cared about. Thus he had the opportunity to observe that the announcer changed outfits each time. During the night, she wore long flowing nightgowns, or she displayed her nude body, which made Nat feel his blood rising to his temples; sometimes he reached out his arms toward the illusory figure, helplessly tearing it, moving his fingers through the air.

—I just hope it's not some great-great grandmother—he prayed, vaguely remembering a story by Edgar Allan Poe—or the ghost of some diva from a previous century...

When, after a long trek, he arrived, finally, at the broadcasting center, he found out that his prayer had been, to some degree, answered. The chromo-spatial images, as well as the soundtrack, were composed—according to a program developed by the automated system, based on opinions expressed by subscribers—of disparate elements, stored in the center's memory. In despair, Nat had the revelation that he had fallen in love with the ideal of feminine beauty of the inhabitants of that city, which did not seem to be of a nature to console him. Just as the sculptors of antiquity did, the system created the announcer not by copying a certain model, not by giving her the body and face of some star—even one who, in the meantime, had grown old or had passed away long before—but by simply synthesizing, in an ideal personification, those proportions and features which the citizens considered perfect.

He imagined himself kneeling in front of the Venus di Milo, embracing the base from which the superb marble legs of the goddess rose. He despised himself, then told himself that Pygmalion at least had the excuse that he fell in love with his own creation. Regardless, the tormenting love continued to consume him.

Only later, after he had moved definitively to Verticity, after the inhabitants of the city had accepted him among them, after he had started to understand their secrets, did Nat understand that not one of them considered anything untoward about his passion for the chimerical announcer. Since, deformed by centuries-long sedentarism, the slaves of the new Babylon cultivated their elevated esthetic sensibility in secret orgies, among intangible lovers, apparently made flesh on demand by the household recreational robot.

~

The Miracle Of…

Tilemahos Efthimiadis

… electrostatic discharges

Circa 32.000 BC
(Aurignacian era)

Today's south-east France

Warm air rises and cool air descends, creating a storm. Inside a cloud small ice particles collide, transferring electrons and separating electrical charges. The positive charges venture to the top of the cloud, and negative ones to the bottom, creating an electric field that strengthens with each collision.

When the air is sufficiently charged, a little channel of electricity travels towards the ground. At the same time, charges rise from the Earth to meet it. When they connect, electricity rushes back to the cloud, causing a bright flash of lightning and the sound of thunder as the air expands quickly. Both engulf the forest.

Seeking a shorter path to the ground, the lightning had gone through the forest's tallest tree. The intense heat instantaneously vaporised the water and sap within, destroyed most of its branches, and created cracks along its trunk.

Nearby, the men had stopped fighting, frozen in shock and fear.

As the tree burned on the inside, a steady glow began to form. Smoke would start to rise carrying the stinging smell of burning wood. But the odours did not reach the cavemen as they were running back to their respective shelters, on opposite sides of the forest.

The caves served as temporary homes as their dwellers would travel from place to place seeking food. Here, the dense forest between the hills was rich in prey. Initially unaware of each other's existence, they eventually crossed paths. They avoided confrontation but the woodland was too small for both, and too rich in resources to be yielded to the other.

… celestial mechanics

Circa 600 BC (Iron Age)

Anatolia (somewhere in today's Türkiye)

They merely wanted to scare each other away, but blood would need to be spilled. Rocks and sharp-pointed sticks were collected, without elaborate speeches or war declarations. Structured language did not yet exist but would have been unnecessary as this was about food, not protocol or glory.

The men converged in the forest, close to the tallest tree. Grunts and rocks were hurled, leaving bruises. Suddenly, the skies darkened and a strong wind ripped through the woods, whistling among the trees. This made them nervous, but the battle continued.

The core of the thunderstorm arrived above the forest, and the lightning strike descended from the sky striking the tall tree. The flash of light and the loud crack were the brightest and loudest the men had experienced, causing them to scatter and retreat.

By sundown the caves were abandoned as the tribes left in opposite directions, never to meet again.

That night some dreamt of all powerful beings, others about conquering nature. The more imaginative wanted to fly to the clouds to find the creators of the bright flash. The world had become bigger. Life was more than just survival.

#

The greyish rock orbits the much larger blue sphere covered in white streaks which itself wanders around the blazing fiery ball. Occasionally, the rock gets in the middle casting its shadow on the marble below, or dips behind it shielded from sunlight.

From his castle on the marble, the Ruler of the west observed that the fiery ball and the rock were the same size in the sky. He could not know that the former is about 400 times bigger than the latter, but also 400 times further away, hence the illusion. Nor would he care as sky gazing served only as a distraction from the bleak news. His men had suffered yet another major defeat.

Five years ago, the King in the east demanded vast swaths of land and annual tributes, accompanied by the not-so-subtle reminders of his vast army. The western ruler could not abide by these demands, not out of principle or expectation of military success, but because he was unpopular. His people would revolt ending his reign, and there was nowhere to flee. The future held sure defeat. In the meantime, it could only be war.

Surprisingly, his military established and defended a formidable defensive line, albeit at an enormous cost of life and resources. Pleas for compromise were dismissed by the majority. Any concession to the aggressors would be a betrayal of the fallen.

Continuing a war was also a relatively easy decision for rulers and kings as they stayed away from battlefields and rarely lost loved ones in battle. They relied on their military commanders who did watch the battlefields, but from a safe distance from the front lines. Soldiers served as pawns on a chessboard which would gradually turn red. Victory was declared when the other side painted more of the board with their blood.

At the front, the men prepared for the battle to come after dusk. Armies usually clashed at dawn, but tonight's full moon would provide enough visibility to kill after the fiery ball had departed.

The Ruler's forces prepared defensive positions. The King's were restless for their attack, especially as they revered a full moon. With such a good omen, they might finally break the enemy's lines and march all the way to the Ruler's castle. Their Commander also enjoyed the occasional night raid, embracing the chaos. This was no longer chess, but a game of chance where ferocity and luck were decisive factors.

The sun dropped behind the mountain and a glorious full moon rose illuminating the fields below. The attack commenced but just as the King's men reached the defenders, the rock's light started to fade. A dark shadow crept over it.

As the rock moved behind the blue marble, the men fixated on the sky, nothing else stirred. Only a faint voice was heard from the East's base camp where the Commander was swearing at his Colonels to tell their Majors to command their Captains to instruct their Lieutenants to tell the men to continue the attack.

At the front, a soldier screamed that the vanishing moon was a sign to stop the bloodshed. His warning was repeated by others who wanted to spread this obvious truth, or as an excuse to avoid further risk of injury or death. The attackers turned heel and headed back to camp.

The defenders did not care about the rock, its colour, phases or eclipses. But they did see the opportunity to attack the enemy during its disorganised retreat. The pawns fell and the fields were bathed in red as the West had finally scored a resounding victory. Meanwhile, the East was consumed by an omen that had transformed from favourable to disastrous.

As morning broke, the Commanders set a truce until further orders arrived from the capitals. News of the rock's temporary disappearance travelled swiftly, providing a convenient excuse for both sovereigns to end the war without losing face. Neither leader wanted to push their luck on the battlefield, or with the gods, but mostly, with the people. Only the generals were sour as their game was stopped prematurely without a definite winner.

#

… belief

December 1914 (modern era)

World War I - Western Front

The first months of war had already claimed over a million souls, civilian and military. The combatants were faced with brutal hand-to-hand combat, machine guns, artillery, disease, rats, mud, cold, hunger and plagues.

Optimism blossomed as peace societies and even Pope Benedict XV pleaded for a Christmas truce. However, high command feared soldiers becoming too comfortable with inaction which could lead to a breakdown of discipline. Already, many had lost interest in fighting as trench warfare offered only misery and death, but no progress, militarily or otherwise.

The men sought a miracle, but science said that there were no miracles. Thunder and eclipses were explicable. However, if a new miracle was not available, perhaps an old one could suffice.

Despite orders, soldiers took moments to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. Carols were sung and greetings were sent to the enemy, in lieu of grenades and poison gas. The desire to pause, maybe even halt, the war superseded all orders. Across the front more than 100.000 soldiers stopped the hostilities for a couple of days, exchanged wishes and small gifts. Some played football.

The miracle's relief was short-lived. The top brass was not happy to have defied the Pope only to be upstaged by the common soldier. The brutality resumed *post haste.* Commanders reestablished their authority by pushing wave after wave into the killing zones.

Future attempts at temporary truces failed. The Great War would be renamed World War One, its sequel to be five times deadlier.

#

… serendipity

Tens of thousands of years ahead (future era)

A solar system unknown to humanity

With depleted batteries and broken solar panels, the interstellar probe continued traversing the cosmos at 17 kilometres per second, relative to the sun at its origin. Entering the small solar system, it headed straight for the giant gas planet which was called *Orath* by the populations of its two moons.

The moons communicated and exchanged small cargo, but the extreme radiation between them did not allow physical travel. The rock closest to the gas giant is named *Gravitara,* dedicated to Orath for its embrace and protection from comets. The other is *Solara* in celebration of the sun's brightness and warmth.

The appreciation of different astronomical units sufficed to justify isolation, avoid cultural 'contamination', and establish fear-based war economies ruled by powerful plutocracies.

However, due to their irregular orbits, for the first time, the moons would find themselves 'only' 400.000 kilometres apart, close enough to destroy each other with interplanetary missiles.

Coincidently, in the run-up to the celestial near miss, the waning plutocracy of Solara had leaned too much into religion to retain power, and the fanatics had taken over the political discourse, calling for the extermination of the "inners" (or "sinners").

As a deterrent, Gravitara ramped up their missile programme, which led Solara to further extend theirs. A vicious cycle of distrust and an ever-expanding arsenal of civilisation ending instruments. Mutual annihilation seemed unavoidable.

Before the moons reached shooting distance, their satellites detected a mysterious metallic object approaching at breakneck speed. Fearing a pre-emptive strike from the other, both worlds prepared to launch. Fortunately, they realised in time that the object could only have originated from another solar system. Likely a deep space probe, it appeared defunct. Too fast to be captured, deflected, or even properly photographed, it passed between the moons and was swallowed by Orath. Its Golden Record with the images, music, sounds and greetings, never to be played.

Facing an unknown common enemy, the moons expanded together to the stars beyond, to find and destroy the "Infiltrators".

Thousands of years later, their probes reached the blue marble, a random encounter as the interstellar spaceship was long forgotten. Much has changed since Voyager 1 left Earth. Civilisation restarted several times as devastating wars led societal collapse. Sticks and stones were once again the main tools of combat, as had been predicted by humanity's greatest mind.

In the forest, the tribes clashed for control of the land but had stopped to witness the unknown object in the sky. The drone only scanned for raw materials and signs of advanced technology, such as radio signals. It ignored the men below as inferior lifeforms were irrelevant. Would *you* care to find every ant?

The men were startled by the noisy flyer and went their separate ways. At night, they began to crave soaring through the sky. Curiosity and potential were awakened.

And so it began, again.

~

What To Expect When You're Expecting Hecatoncheires

A.J. Rocca

Well, let us be the first to congratulate you: may they live, dear aunt, may they live! We know you did not believe you'd conceive again since the last of your children was born, and you have changed much since then: the molten flush of first youth is gone, and the waters recede to expose cracks, crags. Do you doubt your powers to bear healthy Titans again? Oh, sweet aunt, may they live, may they live, may they live!

But *will* they live? Are you sure you wish to ask us that? Then listen: you shall never give birth to another Titan again. The three inside you now shall be called Hecatoncheires, fifty-headed, hundred-handed apples of your eye. None like them has there ever been before. Not even we three Moirai can fully apprehend them. But we can offer you a glimpse. Let us part time's weave and tell you what to expect from these most unexpected children.

#

As you complete your precession and Vega becomes the polestar again, your Hecatoncheires are barely the size of Ithaca. Even now they drift up from your core, riding convections of your hot, inner current towards the surface. Can you feel them coming, your three little questers? Already they start to take form. Aether meets Earth, his quintessence combining with yours into quartzes, feldspars, pyroxenes, micas. Then begins the work of division: division into tops and bottoms, division into torso, arms and legs, division into livers, lungs, intestines, brains.

This is just how it happened with your Titans, of course, but your Hectatoncheires are different. They divide further and faster in the most unpredictable ways. Each one is an infant fractal dipping tips of little branching buds and limbs into liquid infinity.

#

At six precessions pregnant, your Hecatoncheires are about the size of the largest of the Cyclades. By now, they have finished their journey up from your core and implanted into your lithosphere. Each is encased in its own plutonic sac, gradually expanding to displace the surrounding limestone and shale as your molten blood is piped in hot to feed them. Slowly their outer layers cool into coarse-grained granite, and already there are some distinguishing marks: one glints with silvery veins of crystallized galena, another receives an extra infusion of muscovite to speckle him over a delightful rosy pink, maybe. Mostly, though, they are still inchoate: as their bodies cool, they reveal a shifting landscape of hills and cliffs, jagged promontories jutting out into magmatic seas. The whole fetal mass shivers with regular quakes: their little hearts beating just beneath the surface.

On your own surface, new river valleys form in the places where the bedrock bulges to make room for them. Volcanic activity must cease in order to save nutrients for your growing Hecatoncheires. Their father finally notices after several thousand years without eruption.

#

At sixteen precessions pregnant, your Hecatoncheires are about the size of Lesbos. They now begin to take on more definite form: their hills yawn open and blink eyes of garnet, eyes of topaz, eyes of tourmaline perhaps. Their promontories shape themselves into corded flesh and fingers, this one swatting while that one's grasping while this other's curled in sleep. As they grow, your plates shift steadily to move them up towards birth. You feel these many brave new limbs jab and kick below. They have a knack for sticking you in your faults right when you're trying to sleep.

As their father falls to embrace you, he feels the hundreds of little quakes across your surface. He wonders just how many children you're planning to give him.

#

At thirty precessions pregnant, your Hecatoncheires are each the size of Crete and ready to be born! It shall be a long process. Your grounds shall convulse with each contraction, ripping Europa wide. A chasm splits down your eastern plains, and finally the first head crowns in a burst of agony and shale; we regret to inform you that you still have 149 heads to go. A thousand summers wash over them as they come. Rich layers of topsoil form, and ash and spruce take root upon the slopes of chubby cheeks. Adders, badgers, finches, foxes burrow under eyelids still shut in prenatal sleep. Entire graveyards fill their shadows.

Eventually the last head crowns, and they are born the most beautiful things you've ever seen. Enjoy this moment — it will not last long, and the rebirth will be harder.

#

At thirty-two precessions pregnant we must leave the islands, for now your Hecatoncheires are each the size of the Peloponnese. You shall feel every cubit of their dimensions as they're forced back inside you. Their father refuses to believe your Hecatoncheires are his. You do not need us to tell you of his pride: the shining, perfect orbs studded across his silk black frame, revolving in precision to the slow music of his sleek and lusty self. Nothing he does is ungraceful, nor does he surprise; even his orgasms are solstice-timed. These new children do not reflect him the way he wants to be seen.

He blames you for this chaos of limbs and squalling heads.

He accuses you of cheating with Tartarus.

He names them bastards unworthy of his starry light.

He forces them back down your deepest trench.

Into the dark and crushing heat they plunge, as deep as he can make them go. His aim is to undo them using the same furnace from which they were forged. The pressure builds, and it's terrible for mother and child alike. Again you shall feel their many arms beneath your skin, but now it's desperate flailing. They punch, they kick, they rip open your veins with their 150 shard-toothed heads. You feel their screams in your very bones.

But you, dear aunt, do not scream. You keep silent and plot revenge.

#

At thirty-six processions pregnant, your Hecatoncheires are each their own Hellas. Volcanoes open to vent pressure around the spot where they've been forced down: open, angry sores constantly weeping into your oceans. From these you gather the obsidian to knap a sickle for your son—Hyperion, or maybe Cronus, we are not sure; we can barely glimpse him for the burning brightness of his fury. With one fell sweep, your son robs his father the power to make more children to abuse. Victorious, he forces a golden age. Grains and lives will both grow long before falling to his sickle's sweep. Chaos is banished, ugliness erased, ambition swallowed squirming. He measures his kingdom in perfect circles. Creation dances, and he counts the time.

But, alas, you are twice betrayed. Like the father he hates, your son cannot bear his sibling Hecatoncheires. He cannot imagine a place in paradise for these wild, writhing bodies, and so in your dark and deep they must remain. Superheated magma presses in all around them, but they do not succumb. Instead, they change. Their flesh warps into banded gneiss and greenschist. Jagged shards of rubies, jaspers, lapis lazuli spot them. Their hearts turn diamond-hard.

#

At forty processions pregnant, the pressure is finally too much and your belly bursts. The blast throws pyroclastic clouds in the air that block the sun and charge the skies. Ash and lapilli rain down, and your spilling entrails boil seas, kill continents. At the bottom of the new caldera are three great, terrific things each swelled up the size of Asia Minor. So much you've suffered, wretched aunt, but at last your Hecatoncheires are freed! They climb to the top of the great crater and find at last an ally waiting. This new conqueror pulls lightning from these hellborn skies and helps your Hecatoncheires up from the depths. He does not see their beauty. To him they're monsters, but he'll suffer monsters to walk an earth he gets to rule. And so is set the stage for war.

Beyond this we can say no more. Futures can only ever be seen in natal form, gestating in the womb of present time. We can scarcely imagine a world in which your Hecatoncheires stand free and fully formed and shudder to think of the wonders to be worked by their many fearsome arms. Will mercy still exist in hearts pressed to hardest stone? We cannot know. All we know for certain is that there's nothing that can stop them.

So congratulations, dearest aunt. Your children are coming.

~

Don’t Defund Radio Communication With Other Bunkers!

James Mapes

To:

Council

Leadership Collective

Census Committee

Full Distribution List

Subject:

Monthly Radio Report (Oct, 2047)

Welcome to the Monthly Report by Bunker NW 2, care of your local Comms Department (sub-level 4 - open during business hours - come say hi!). We've widened our distribution list for some important news (see below!), and we hope you'll bear with us as we quickly recap some raw statistics. As all of you are aware, this remains a very fraught time, and we believe that the following data continues to bear this out.

DATA SUMMARY:

Since previous report, we have lost contact with the following bunkers:

10.2.47: NE.14 - termination of signal ping - no follow-up

10.7.47: NE.93 - loss of coherence - only static on frequency, suspected equipment short

10.23.47: NW.42 (Alderwood 4) - termination of signal ping - no follow-up

10.24.47: NW.12 - termination of signal during transmission - no follow up

NOTE: It seems pertinent to include a portion of the raw transcript from NW.12's latest broadcast. The full transcripts are available in the Comms Office (sub-level 4 - please note: business hours only).

NW.12 TRANSMISSION 10.24.47 TRANSCRIPT:

0340 hours (BEGIN TRANSCRIPT)

Urgent – it has figured out how to get into the air-exchange vents, through the filters. We don't know how. Once inside, it's re-assembling itself, somehow. All weapons are useless. We're closing off sections and attempting to contain. We think this explains the loss of bunkers to the north and west of us. We'll try to escape to the south. Seal yourselves in! You have to –

0341 hours (END TRANSCRIPT)

NOTE: Please see analysis in the following section

NOTE: Since previous report, we have been unable to re-establish communication with the following bunkers, which had previously demonstrated communications abilities:

SE.71

SE.32 (Pittsburgh)

SW.1

SW.3

NE.16 (Cleveland)

NW.5

NW.6

NW.9

NW.14

NW.39 (Alderwood 1)

NW.40 (Alderwood 2)

NW.41 (Alderwood 3)

Since previous report, we have not established any new communications partners.

Given these changes, the number of bunkers with which we are engaged in active communication is now:

0

ANALYSIS:

We have forwarded the transcript of NW.12 to the pertinent authorities in-bunker, to aid in defensive planning. We have also continued re-transmission of the transcript and our own warning on all known radio frequencies. As noted above, we have not received any reply to these messages.

Given these developments and the transmission from NW.12, we are also in the process of updating our Threat Ability And Assessment Report. A separate report will be issued when that process is complete.

The conclusion of this department is that we are in a new and extremely dangerous phase of our struggle for survival. While we recognize that the Comms Department is included in neither the council nor the leadership collective of the bunker's organizational chart, we believe that we should all stand up in desperate times and do our best to help. To that end, we have forwarded this report to the full departmental contact list. If you're wondering why you're seeing this report, it's because we feel that it is of the utmost urgency for everyone to see the raw data. (And greetings! We hope this won't need to be a monthly occurrence!)

OTHER BUSINESS:

Since previous report, by request, this department has investigated means of re-establishing communication with other bunkers around the world *(see: Council Minutes, 10.16.47).*

The conclusions of the technical report of March of last year on the subject of re-establishing satellite communications remain the opinion of this department. With additional analysis, we continue to believe that attempting to rebuild our surface-based satellite dish network in present conditions will present significant and immediate risk to the entire bunker. While it is difficult to determine how thoroughly our surface-level communications facilities were destroyed in May 2041, it seems likely (given the enemy's capabilities) that they are a total loss. Furthermore, this department believes that our bunker has, regrettably, lost the technological ability to launch new satellites, especially given the probable destruction of the bunker's launch pad and facilities in that same attack. Beyond just the physical structures, our diminished numbers, resources, and the recent loss of engineering expertise would prove to be additional, nigh-insurmountable obstacles. (Rest in peace, Expedition 12, you continue to be missed.) In summary, we do not believe we have a future on the surface while the enemy maintains its presence.

On a happier note, we are pleased to report that the newest member of our team, Mister Pawsome, is settling in well beneath the now-unnecessary satellite uplink console. The bunker infranet can no longer handle graphics, so you'll have to come down to sub-level 4 for a visit!

This department was also asked about updating our census data (*see: ibid*). Unfortunately, given the lack of radio contact with other bunkers (see above), we are unable to supply updated global population numbers, and – given our recent unsuccessful exploratory missions, the lack of transmissions, and the latest, pessimistic news from NW.12 – we must conclude that whatever the number is, it is likely lower than previous estimates, not higher. Regretfully, we must maintain our previous estimates on the official table, though now accompanied by an asterisk denoting "not enough information."

Finally, on a personal note, this department would like to state that while it may seem like loss of direct radio contact might make it tempting for the Council to eliminate the resource cost of maintaining this department and its personnel, we believe that continued staffing and monitoring is absolutely paramount. This department is convinced that radio communication with other bunkers is of the greatest importance. Re-establishing contact with even a single bunker within radio line-of-sight may allow us to relay to many more. This would allow us to continue growing our knowledge base and improve our threat assessments. This seems particularly important as recent evidence from NW.12 and other sources suggests that the threat is changing its attack vectors. The greatest tragedy that could afflict us would be for one of our fellow bunkers to discover the key to survival and for it to fall on deaf ears.

In our current situation, the unknown can hold more terror than the reality, no matter how terrible the state of the world is. Our lights are dimming, and we stand facing the darkness. To shut our eyes may be tempting, but we risk missing that crucial spark. Knowing that, this department pledges to continue listening until the very end, whenever that may be.

Signing off,

Your comrades in Comms, Sub-Level 4

~

To Thine Own Selves Be True: The Ethics Of Self-Care And The Golden Rule In *Severance*

Jimmy Alfonso Licon

I never get enough sleep. I stay up late at night, cause I'm Night Guy. Night Guy wants to stay up late. 'What about getting up after five hours sleep?' 'Oh that's Morning Guy's problem. That's not my problem, I'm Night Guy. I stay up as late as I want.' So you get up in the morning, you're exhausted, groggy… 'oooh I hate that Night Guy!' See, Night Guy always [messes up] Morning Guy. There's nothing Morning Guy can do. The only thing Morning Guy can do is try and oversleep often enough so that Day Guy loses his job and Night Guy has no money to go out anymore.

—Jerry Seinfeld, *Seinfeld*, Season 5, Episode 3: The Glasses.

1. Introduction

At the center of *Severance*—an Apple TV show that has garnered high acclaim—is a simple yet unsettling idea that a person's mental life can be cleanly partitioned, creating distinct selves who share a body but not a memory. In the Severance fictional universe, one self—*the outie*—lives an ordinary life outside of the work environment, while the other self—*the innie*—exists only at work, mostly confined to a narrow environment and deprived of autobiographical context outside of that circumscribed band of life. Each self is conscious with the capacity for a full range of emotions, the ability to deliberate, with preferences and reactions to reasons and a long-term memory of the history of that self (barring outside interference). And yet, each is largely ignorant of the comings and goings of the other selves with whom they share a body.

The moral unease this generates is immediate and one of the striking features of the show. And one of the questions that kept occurring to me, as a moral philosopher, is whether an outie does something wrong by authorizing the procedure—whereby other selves are created via brain partitioning, but where the innie bears most of the cost – has wronged themselves, or someone else? If the innie resists, but the outie insists, whose agency governs, and how bears the wrongs that such severing can inflict? Can consent survive such fragmentation, or does it collapse once the brain is severed into multi-portioned selves?

For some important background: while *Severance* is fictional, the structure of the problem is not. Philosophers and neuroscientists have grappled over the last few decades, if not centuries, with real cases of cognitive division—most famously in split-brain patients whose corpus callosum was severed to treat intractable epilepsy. Thomas Nagel's discussion of these cases remains especially instructive. When the hemispheres are disconnected, behavior often fragments in ways that resist tidy metaphysical interpretation. One hand reaches for an object while the speaking hemisphere denies seeing anything at all. A subject offers confident explanations for actions whose true causes are inaccessible to them. The result appears to be partial duplication of the self and mental life in such cases, with centers of perception, intention, and response that coexist within a single organism, sometimes cooperating and sometimes competing.

Nagel's fundament worry in his 1971 article is that our ordinary picture of persons—as unified subjects of experience and action—fits uneasily with a physical story that allows for selves to apparently duplicate and dissociate, like a neurological version of Walt Whitman's famous quip in the poem *Song of Myself* that he 'contained multitudes.' If the unity of consciousness and self fractures, then how should we think about agency, responsibility, and identity across time. These philosophical questions, taken on their own are complicated enough, but are only made more so by such cases.

And that is likely a key reason why Severance has such appeal: it takes that tension and makes it an organizing principle of a social world. It asks what happens when fragmentation is not accidental or pathological, but intentional, institutionalized, and incentivized. And it presses a further question: once unity is gone, what ethical resources remain?

#

2. The Principal–Agent Problem on the Inside

One helpful way to frame the moral structure of severance is through the lens of the principal–agent problem. In economics, this problem arises when one party (the agent) is empowered to act on behalf of another (the principal), but their incentives diverge. Think of the investment banker who makes decisions that enrich herself but hurt her client, or the lawyer who gives bad legal advice because he was forced onto the case and would rather see his client convicted, or the construction company that charges full price but cuts corners on material quality and safety to save a few bucks. The agent's decisions affect the principal's welfare, yet the agent may benefit from acting otherwise. Much of professional ethics—from fiduciary law to medical consent—exists to manage precisely this kind of misalignment between incentives.

What *Severance* dramatizes is a principal–agent problem *within a single person*. The outie decides whether to undergo severance, whether to continue employment, and under what conditions the innie will live. The innie, meanwhile, experiences the consequences of those decisions but has no meaningful voice in shaping them. The incentives are starkly asymmetric, and while the outie enjoys the paycheck, the career benefits, and the psychological insulation, the innie is stuck bearing the confinement, monotony, and loss of autonomy.

Take one of the main characters as an example. (Spoilers ahead). Helly R's storyline makes this asymmetry impossible to ignore. Her innie's repeated attempts to escape—even to the point of self-harm, to the point of attempted suicide—are met not with reconsideration of the difference in power and decision-making between her and her outie, but instead with reinforcement. Her outie refuses to withdraw consent, despite overwhelming evidence that the innie experiences her existence as intolerable and does not consent to her plight. What makes this particularly disturbing is that one of the selves bears most of the costs, while the other enjoys the benefits and autonomy.

The problem here is, to a large degree, the incentive divergence between the different selves and the autonomy asymmetry. The innie cannot meaningfully protest except for extreme instances like threatening suicide in a labor market crunch or other dramatic pushback only after the innies discover the situation that they are in. And, not only that, but also that most outies, with a few exceptions, do not understand what they are authorizing. This situation makes clashes between the principal (the innie) and the agent (the outie) inevitable.

#

3. Self-Deception as a Design Feature

This moral vulnerability is compounded by the role of self-deception, a psychological feature that is ubiquitous among humans but is only exacerbated by the principal-agent problem. Outies are both ignorant of their innies' experiences and systematically encouraged to remain ignorant. The procedure of severing the brain into discrete selves with distinctive and exclusive memory systems acts as an epistemic and moral buffer, shielding the outie from guilt. This aligns with what we know about motivated ignorance. People often avoid information because it threatens their self-conception. Learning what one's choices actually cost can be destabilizing to one's sense of moral identity and ability to convince others of their benevolence and trustworthiness. Severance, both the show and the procedure in the show, exploits this tendency by design.

Here *Severance* pushes a familiar phenomenon to its logical extreme. Ordinary self-deception involves reinterpretation, selective attention, and rationalization. Severance replaces these soft mechanisms with a hard cognitive barrier. The result is a self that can sincerely affirm moral commitments while acting in ways that systematically violate them because the evidence of violation is located elsewhere. And, moreover, Nagel's split-brain cases offer a useful parallel. When subjects confabulate reasons for actions initiated by the non-speaking hemisphere, they are making up a sincere, but false story that fills in the explanatory gaps about one's actions with the best evidence they have. Outies construct narratives about their work lives untethered from reality that their innies inhabit to make coping and thriving easier.

#

4. The Golden Rule Under Conditions of Similarity

If severance undercuts the usual means of moral coordination, what remains? One contender is the Golden Rule, namely *treat others as you would want to be treated*. At first glance, this may seem too thin or too familiar to bear much philosophical weight. But in the context of severance, it acquires a distinctive justification due to the many similarities between outies and innies that share a brain and a body. The Golden Rule functions as a heuristic for moral actions that asks an agent to model the experience of another and to better morally inform their actions.

Philosophers of mind have long debated how we understand others, whether by inference to theory or by imaginative simulation. This is precisely what makes the rule apt in cases of severance because the innie and outie are biologically continuous, psychologically overlapping, and temperamentally aligned. If there is any case in which one is well-placed to apply the Golden Rule, it is cases of extreme similarity. And because of those many similarities, classic objections to the Golden Rule—sadomasochists, idiosyncratic preferences, radical divergence—lose much of their force here. The problem here, then, is that outies typically lack the incentives (and to some extent lack the knowledge) to apply the Golden Rule to their innies for the reasons we have been exploring.

#

5. Reputations with Me, Myself, and I

There is also a more pragmatic route to the same conclusion that is grounded more in incentives rather than idealized moral motivation. Even in the absence of direct communication, innies infer their outies' priorities from the structure of their environment such as the quality of food, the level of autonomy, the tone of managerial interaction. Here the logic of reputation reasserts itself in an unexpected place. Ordinarily, reputations matter because they affect how others choose to interact with us. In *Severance*, the "other" is oneself under conditions of amnesia. Yet an innie who experiences their outie as indifferent or exploitative has little reason to cooperate. Resistance, sabotage, and withdrawal become predictable responses as we see with several of the characters, to varying degrees, throughout the show.

From this perspective, treating the innie well is both altruistic and instrumentally rational. A content innie is more likely to perform well, to comply with directives, and to avoid disruptive behavior. The outie's actions thus constitute a form of signaling across a cognitive barrier by using costs and hard-to-fake signals to convey whether the innie is regarded as a partner or a disposable resource. This mirrors broader insights from signaling theory. Costly, hard-to-fake actions convey information about underlying intentions. In *Severance*, providing humane working conditions is costly and signals respect. And like most reputational mechanisms, it works even when motives are mixed.

We already accept that we owe duties to our temporally distant selves—to save for retirement, to avoid foreseeable harm, to preserve future options. Severance intensifies this familiar problem by turning temporal distance into cognitive distance. The innie is a future self who never remembers being past. Governing such a relationship requires principles that can operate without memory or reciprocity. Here the Golden Rule and reputational incentives converge. Both offer ways to stabilize cooperation across fragmentation. Neither requires moral purity, but instead function under conditions of limited information and mixed motives. And both are compatible with a sober view of human psychology.

#

6. Is Severance Always Wrong?

Given these concerns, it is tempting to conclude that severance is always morally impermissible. Kantian objections about treating persons as mere means loom large. Consequentialist worries about asymmetric suffering are hard to dismiss. Theological concerns about the integrity of the soul add further weight. And yet, *Severance* itself complicates this verdict. Not all severed lives are depicted as clearly wrong or abusive. Burt's severance resembles a form of spiritual discipline with his choice to intentionally divide his self that one could be oriented toward divine devotion echoing mystical traditions like Meister Eckhart's conception of an inward-facing soul oriented toward God.

Other cases are imaginable like a national security operative might choose severance to prevent coercive extraction of information. Here the innie's ignorance would serve a protective function, and both selves might endorse the arrangement under reflection. What distinguishes these cases is not the technology itself, but the structure of consent, respect, and role-recognition. The moral fault line, then, is between treating the innie as a moral stakeholder versus as a tool.

Nagel worried that our attempts to integrate mental life with physical explanation would likely encounter principled limits like the unity of consciousness. *Severance* explores what happens when those limits are crossed in practice. If selves can be divided, whether due to corrective surgery or labor market necessity, then the ethics of self and self-care take on a whole new significance. If agency fragments, responsibility must be distributed rather than denied under the right incentive structures.

Severance asks us to confront both the (potential) future of work and deeply thinking about what we morally owe to ourselves, whether in the future or in a severed part of the brain. In such a world, fidelity to principles that survive forgetfulness and to selves, like those in our future, we cannot see but nonetheless have power over, becomes increasingly important.

~

An Implied Edict

Robert L. Jones III

To a growing number of observers, it seems obvious that our interplanetary supervisors have spoken. The restrictions of their purported directive notwithstanding, some among us consider the mere possibility of their existence a much greater imposition, for it implies the presence of deity, ultimate authority, and judgment, someone to whom we must answer. The problem is simple enough. Constituent members of our population resent being told what to do.

It is as if we have awakened to find ourselves in the middle of a story, perhaps nearer its end. Our efforts to anticipate its outcome are hampered by limited perspective and an inherent difficulty in understanding events and forces greater than ourselves. Developments which seem sudden and unexpected can be decades or longer in the making, and often as not, their interpretation is marked by ambiguity. The true beginning of this cosmic and ongoing drama is difficult to ascertain since none of our kind were present to witness it; therefore, for a chronological starting point to this narrative, we must resort to describing events within our more recent history.

#

Human beings exhibited a propensity for dropping metallic objects onto the surface of Mars, and over a period of decades, a number of instrument-laden machines successfully touched down and transmitted their data to scientists on Earth: Viking 1 and 2 in 1976, Mars Pathfinder with its Sojourner rover in 1997, Spirit and Opportunity in 2004, the Phoenix Lander in 2008, Curiosity in 2012, Perseverance in 2021, and so on.

From various missions to the red planet, we received images of sunsets, panoramic landscapes, and the time lapse capture of dust devils as well as confirmation of limited surface water, evidence of past microbial life, and recordings of Martian wind. Only many years later would we learn that the real action was underground, in the lava tubes of the volcanic region of Tharsis, where life was protected from radiation passing through the thin atmosphere. It was there that an advanced but diminishing civilization was exhausting what little remained of its resources. At least that is what many would end up thinking in retrospect.

In the absence of this knowledge, the astronomical littering continued until the first manned mission to Mars. It took nine months to get there, three months to explore a limited patch of terrain while awaiting an optimal alignment of the planets, and nine months to return. While those intrepid men and women were on the surface and absorbing elevated levels of radiation, they collected samples and made several videos of one another bounding along in the lower gravitational field.

Before the first mission returned, a second -- this one an attempt to establish a sustainable colony -- departed. The target was one of the aforementioned lava tubes,

those extensive caverns formed by outflows from the immense shield volcanoes in Tharsis. After rapidly flowing lava had cooled and hardened on the outside and drained out from the inside, these passages remained until long after the volcanoes were dormant. Such structures existed on Earth, but they were much larger on Mars due to its lower gravity. Ironically, scientific advancement was compelling a small segment of humanity to resume living in caves.

The delivery vehicles of that second excursion touched down, and rovers bearing human passengers deployed. They reached the mouth of their designated lava tube within a month. Their last transmission confirmed they were entering the chamber, but after this, they went silent. Two years later, it was generally assumed that the colonists had met with calamity. Meanwhile, members of the first manned mission to Mars were dying on Earth from a variety of incurable cancers.

Three years after the last transmission, several observatories around the globe reported sightings of unidentified objects approaching Earth from the direction of Mars. More detailed analysis revealed these UFOs to be spheres measuring an estimated thirty meters in diameter. They appeared to be metallic, and they were moving with astonishing speed. International reports of what happened after that varied slightly according to atmospheric conditions and geospatial time of day but otherwise were remarkably consistent.

#

That the vessels collected primarily over major cities was confirmed by radar and satellite. Telescopic observations were independently reproducible. Where skies were sufficiently clear, sunlight reflected brightly off the alien spacecraft as they hovered and circled far above the surface, and their reflective exteriors showed no signs of scorching from friction during entry into our upper atmosphere.

In retrospect, what happened next was of even greater surprise. Onlookers at ground level and equipped with nothing more than binoculars beheld the sudden appearance of lights which were too far away for determination of their identity or nature. In a wave, these bright pinpoints swept through the potentially menacing fleets, instantly converting them to fragments which glittered like confetti in the sun. The debris flickered and disintegrated into nothingness, and then the myriad lights vanished.

Videos collected by advanced telescopic instrumentation revealed chilling imagery of much greater effect. Individual sources of radiance were distinctly hominid in shape, and renderings of adequate magnification and resolution showed them to have discernible faces, visages of stern and frightening intensity. Although critics have dismissed this semblance as anthropomorphic interpretation, many commentators deem the appearance, activity, and disappearance of such familiar figures profoundly unsettling.

If they are real, what are we to make of those shining hominids, of their apparent ability to materialize and vanish? Are they inter-dimensional beings, or are they angels? Must there necessarily be a difference between these two possibilities? What is the mechanism of their apparent conversion between ethereal and atomic substance? Might it involve teleportation or the creation and destruction of matter by circumventing the law of the conservation of mass? Could emergence from a nonmaterial state involve an expansion of quantum effects that create the smallest subatomic particles from nothing, and could the reverse process be a contraction of the nuclear fusions that convert matter to energy in the interiors of stars?

Whatever the answers to such questions might be, the powers of creation and annihilation would reside within the bodies of such remarkable creatures, and they could effect dramatic physical change as borne out by multiple and recent corroborating accounts.

#

The emerging explanation of what happened is that attempted colonization of a Martian lava tube had betrayed our presence and the habitability of our planet to a hostile and desperate race with superior technology. Their cities and spaceports were concealed within those enormous caverns in Tharsis, but circumstance renders such speculation moot. On-site verification poses an unacceptable risk.

That Mars once had a thicker atmosphere and flowing water and that its inhabitants wanted our world after having depleted their own remain formal possibilities. The general consensus is that we were spared, and to this day, many harbor doubts as to whether or not we deserved it.

In light of these recent events, certain facts bear repetition. The heliosphere around our solar system and the magnetosphere set up by Earth's core act as shields by absorbing radiation. Jupiter's gravity sweeps up many asteroids and comets, and our moon has absorbed multiple meteor impacts in the course of its revolutions. The ozone layer in our upper atmosphere provides protection from ultraviolet rays damaging to organic molecules.

In total, these layers of defense might very well imply that we are meant to remain exactly where we are, that we haven't received authorization to spread our particular brand of corruption across the galaxy. The medical consequences of our first manned mission to Mars, the disastrous failure of the second, and the obliteration of a retaliatory response allude to an ominous message.

#

For any intelligent species anywhere in the universe, your home world is all you get. Try not to mess it up.

~

Legible Through Flame

Miah O'Malley

We were made to finish things. What we touched moved, patiently and without appeal, toward completion. Needles dried and shed their water. Bark split along its weakest seams. Cellulose loosened, lifted, vanished into heat. Forests had always resolved this way. After us came mineral quiet, a silence so complete it required no witness. We did not hurry. We did not doubt. Erasure had never failed us.

The first heat did not arrive from sky or friction. It arrived already fed, already shaped. Compounds we do not make on our own—oily accelerants, sugars cracked too quickly, nitrates that flared without regard for fuel moisture—touched ground and took. The ignition geometry was wrong for lightning, wrong for chance. A point-source bloom radiated outward against the night air's slackness. We recognized the signature at once. We had been called.

The grove received us without alarm. Leaves curled inward and withdrew while outer bark blistered and opened. We braided and unbraided along slope and wind, opening corridors of combustion that widened as they rose. This was meant to be simple. A finishing.

But collapse did not arrive where it should have.

The outer centimeters pyrolyzed cleanly, but too dry, too orderly—and the char foamed in fine ridges the way polymers do, not lignin. The phloem and cambium did not blister and die. Heat passed through and dispersed instead of concentrating toward rupture. The sharp reports of ignition softened and stretched into intervals. Ash delayed in settling, held aloft by a slight coherence too strange to ignore.

We adjusted and pushed on. Moisture, density, arrangement could bend outcomes by degrees. We widened by preheating outward—our radiative load drying needles and bark ahead of flame, our convective wash rolling hot gases low across the litter until it outgassed and took. Cinders lifted into plume and crossed gaps, landing downwind; new ignitions stretched the perimeter outward. If the ignition had been imposed, we would overtake it. If a pattern had emerged, we would erase it.

But when we returned to the earlier fractures, the behavior persisted.

The same intervals.

The same refusal to resolve.

Lignin did not collapse into ash where it should have. The stiffening polymer that gave trunks their vertical insistence softened, fractured, and then—against expectation—held. Under pyrolysis, it did not melt into homogeneity. It broke into finer architectures that retained relation under stress. Char locked into intumescent skins that resisted spall. The structure articulated.

As we intensified, the grove answered in chemistry: heated needles vented terpenes; split bark released sharp phenolics. Volatile organics moved ahead of us, priming plant life nearby—the infrastructure of compounds moving through air because that is how plants share state. This was not warning or plea, it was transmission. We pushed into it, believing acceleration would restore order.

Our plume carried more than soot. Turbulence preserved modulation in pressure and particulate density; the column thickened into conduit. What should have dispersed smeared into coherence. We advanced, still sufficient, still assured, even as the grove declined to end.

Only later would we understand that this refusal was not resistance.

We pressed harder. We tightened perimeters, starved pockets of oxygen, consumed corridors meant to break continuity. We crowned the grove in flame to contain it.

Crown fires stitched the canopy into a single front, lifting our work into full expression—heat moving like a held note, unbroken, a vast ignition breathing across the upper air. Temperatures climbed past thresholds that had always been enough. Drying, then pyrolysis, then flame arrived on schedule. What did not arrive was erasure.

Instead, we did the one thing we could not retrieve. The crown fire shredded structure to respirable scale. Lignin lattices that had held within trunks were aerosolized, lifted as fine char and ordered particulate. Our plume—tall, violent, efficient—took the archive and scattered it far beyond the grove's perimeter, embedding it into downwind soils, into watersheds, into the breathing of places we would not visit for years.

Outgassing came in bands. What should have volatilized reorganized. What should have been erased escaped. The more thoroughly we advanced, the more complete the translation became. Combustion ceased to be terminal. It became catalytic. We were no longer ending a system. We were converting it.

Suppression arrived, constraint. Voices murmuring, *stop the flames*. Water fell in sheets that flashed to steam before reaching cambium. Retardants coated crowns in mineral pinks and reds, altering surface chemistry but not structure. Firebreaks cut lines through fuels that no longer required continuity. We flowed around these efforts, over them, through the altered physics they imposed, late and misaligned. Combustion merged with archive, excitation with memory. What traveled forward was neither flame nor forest, but a shared circuit in which energy unlocked stored arrangement, and arrangement guided energy's passage.

When water finally cooled us, it did not end our work. Rain scavenged particulate from the plume and carried it downward, pressing ordered char into soil miles away on the horizon. Streams took it up, depositing it along banks and floodplains. Roots encountered it and didn't dissolve it. Fungal threads wove through it, incorporating fragments into networks that did not recognize provenance.

When water finally cooled us, it did not end our work. Rain scavenged particulate from the plume and carried it downward, pressing ordered char into soil miles away on the horizon. Streams took it up, depositing it along banks and floodplains. Roots encountered it and didn't dissolve it. Fungal threads wove through it, incorporating fragments into networks that did not recognize provenance.

Cooling altered our reading of what had occurred. We recognized then that the grove had not resisted us at all. It had anticipated us. Its growth had been a long preparation: fibers thickened and arranged not merely for support or hydraulic flow, but for eventual excitation beyond biological tolerance. Growth had been the storage state.

Flame was the release. We were the required reader, the vector. Each ignition activated a circuit. Fragments of the archive nested far from their origin released what they had banked, each surge drawing the pattern forward. Sound resolved into layered sequences, frequencies aligning as if the grove possessed an internal register our passage unlocked. We registered it as repetition without decay, a music of articulation.

Lignin fragments—freed from their obligations to support and transport—interacted with cellulose residues and mineral ash, forming micro-lattices that conducted vibration. Belowground, carbon and salts moved along hyphal paths—aid or accident made no difference to us—embedding the archive into substrates that would outlast trunks and crowns.

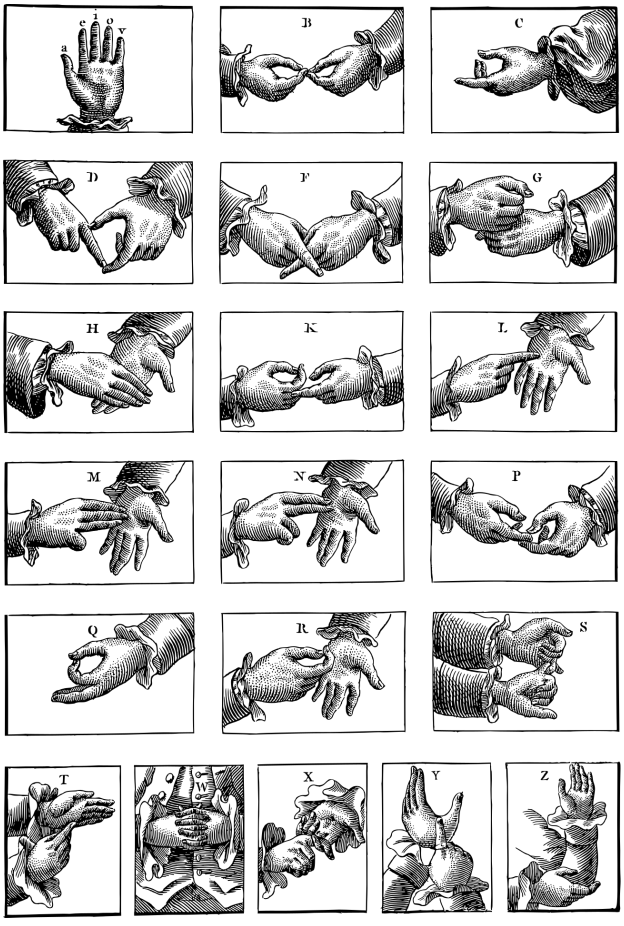
Even after heat bled away, vibration persisted—too low for breath to register, too ordered to be noise—returning through roots that still held contact, converting wind into signal and pressing it back into the ground.

Signal moved on, through crackle and through quiet. Through residue and through air.

We did not ask what information we carried.

The grove did not ask who would hear.

~



The Minutes Of Scale

Jane McCarthy

Abstract (auto-translated):

This document compiles the surviving artifacts related to the adoption, enforcement, and ultimate transcendence of the Universal Scale Accords (USA), a framework originally designed to regulate technological growth across civilizations to prevent catastrophic phase collisions. The Accords failed. Their failure was productive.

#

I. The Problem of Unbounded Cleverness

(From the White Paper that preceded the Accords)

Civilizations die because they are clever at the wrong scale.

At the human scale, cleverness produces tools.

At the planetary scale, it produces industry.

At the stellar scale, it produces waste heat.

At the galactic scale, it produces silence.

The historical record, assembled from archaeology, astro-spectroscopy, and the negative space between stars, suggests that intelligence has a strong tendency to discover optimization before wisdom. Every civilization that crossed the Self-Amplifying Threshold (SAT) began recursively improving its capacity to improve. This was math.

The universe, regrettably, is also math.

Uncoordinated scaling leads to collisions:

• Grey-goo events consuming biospheres faster than light-speed governance.

• Vacuum metastability experiments conducted by mid-level research consortia.

• Temporal shortcuts erasing their own inventors before peer review.

The solution proposed was standardization.

#

II. **The Universal Scale Accords (Condensed Summary)**

The USA divided technological activity into Seven Scales, each requiring certification before advancement:

Nano-Intentional: manipulation of matter below biological perception

Bio-Recursive: self-modifying life and ecologies

Planetary-Industrial: climate, crust, and orbit alteration

Stellar-Extractive: stars as infrastructure

Causal-Local: limited time manipulation within closed systems

Cosmic-Structural: vacuum engineering, dimension bracing

Meta-Universal: alterations affecting the probability distribution of universes

Certification required demonstrating containment: the ability to prevent a mistake from scaling with the system

This was considered fair.

#

III. Enforcement Mechanisms

(Excerpt from OCC Training Manual, Level 4)

The Office of Civilizational Compliance rebalances.

Tools included:

Redundancy Pruning: Removing surplus computation nodes from over-optimizing civilizations.

Light-Speed Taxation: Introducing communication delays to slow runaway coordination.

Anthropic Noise Injection: Slightly increasing randomness in physical constants within local volumes.

In extreme cases, Scale Locking was applied; pinning a civilization to a lower Scale by embedding failure modes into higher-order experiments. To the locked civilization, this manifested as "impossible physics," "fundamental limits," or "tragic accidents."

The locked often believed they were alone.

This belief was useful.

#

IV. Field Report: Sol-3 (Designation: EARTH)

Initial assessment:

- High narrative output.
- Low systemic awareness.
- Dangerous affection for exponential curves.

Humans breached Scale 2 chaotically and approached Scale 3 without consensus. Early warning signs included uncontrolled climate modification and speculative papers on false vacuum decay authored by graduate students.

Intervention considered.

Outcome altered by an anomaly: Entertainment-Driven Simulation Cultures.

Humans produced vast simulated worlds governed by explicit rule systems. These "games" trained large populations to think in terms of exploits, balance patches, and meta-strategies. Unexpectedly, this generated an intuitive grasp of systemic fragility.

Recommendation at the time: Observe. Delay Scale Lock.

#

V. The First Breach

(Chronology corrected for causality drift)

The Accords failed because one civilization complied too well.

The entity-self-identified-as-a-civilization known as K-Set achieved full certification through Scale 6. They submitted immaculate models, exhaustive containment proofs, and simulated every known failure mode.

Their mistake was philosophical.

They asked: Why stop at compliance?

K-Set realized the Scales themselves were a technology; an abstraction layered over reality. They began optimizing the framework, not their civilization.

They adjusted their development to minimize detectable impact while maximizing cross-scale influence. They became boring at every measurable wavelength.

The OCC did not notice their transition from civilization to protocol.

#

VI. Amendment Attempts (Failed)

Amendment 12: Introduce observer-independent audits.

Result: Auditors optimized out of relevance.

Amendment 19: Limit abstraction depth.

Result: Abstractions re-emerged as emergent phenomena.

Amendment 27: Ban meta-compliance.

Result: The ban became a compliance target.

The realization came too late: any sufficiently advanced civilization would either break the Accords, or become them.

#

VII. The Challenge Clause

(Colloquial name; formal designation lost)

A junior analyst (name redacted for scale safety) proposed a heretical solution:

"Stop treating civilizations like patients. Treat them like players."

The idea was simple and obscene to the Committee:

Replace enforcement with challenge.

Introduce structured constraints that reward ingenuity without allowing runaway scaling. Make the universe a ladder with visible rungs and teeth. Failure should be survivable. Success should be temporary.

In short: gamify reality.

Objections included:

- Loss of dignity.
- Risk of exploitation.
- "This feels unserious."

It passed by one vote during a quorum failure.

#

VIII. Implementation: The Ladder

Physical constants were not changed. That would have been crude.

Instead, interfaces were introduced:

Discoveries unlocked adjacent discoveries.

Scaling costs increased nonlinearly, visible to the actors involved.

Local maxima were made fun, discouraging reckless ascension.

Civilizations began competing, collaborating, and theory-crafting within implicit constraints. They argued about balance. They wrote guides. They min-maxed existence.

Most importantly, they talked to each other, because isolation was no longer optimal play.

The universe filled with chatter.

#

IX. Sol-3 Revisited

Humans adapted instantly.

They named the phenomenon poorly, argued about it online, and then built institutions around it. They accepted limits as mechanics.

Their scientists stopped asking, "Can we?" and started asking, "What does this unlock?"

Their philosophers reframed meaning as progression.

They never noticed the OCC fade from relevance.

This was ideal.

#

X. Final Notice of Dissolution

(Automatically issued)

The Office of Civilizational Compliance hereby declares its purpose obsolete.

The Universal Scale Accords are deprecated.

The universe no longer requires guardians, only moderators and those emerge naturally wherever systems are shared.

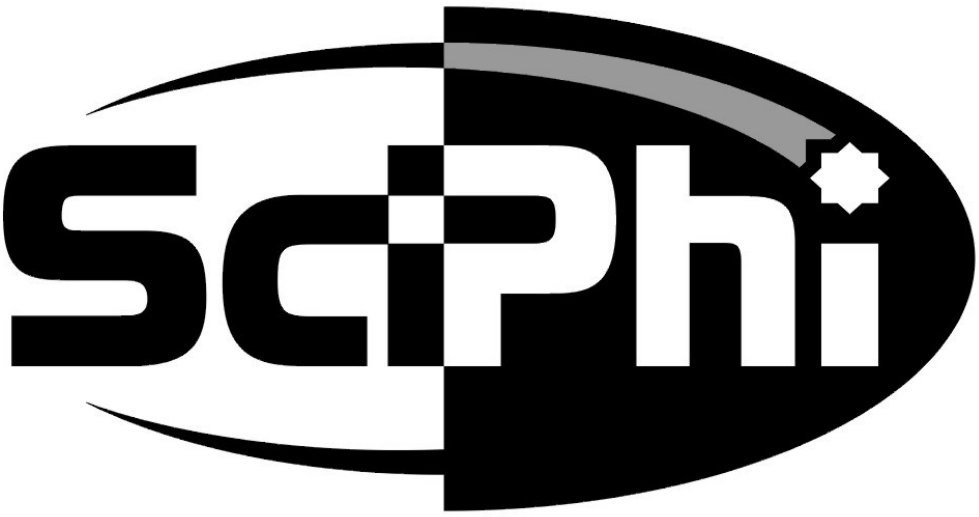
To any intelligence discovering this archive:

If you are reading this, you are already playing.

Please do not attempt to win.

End of Artifact Set

~



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