

Sci Phi Journal

2026 ♦ 3

A Sanctuary for Speculative Philosophy since 2014

Laureate of the European SF Society Award for Best Magazine

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CREW

Co-editors:

Ádám Gerencsér

Mariano Martín Rodríguez

Communications:

Gina Adela Ding

Webmaster:

Ismael Osorio Martín

Illustrations:

Gordon Johnson; Pixabay.com

Cover art:

Dustin Jacobus

Contact:

team@sciphijournal.org

Social media:

@sciphijournal

Editorial office:

Brussels, Belgium

We are deeply grateful for the support of
our part-time volunteers and *ad hoc*
donors, both in Belgium and abroad.

Editorial

Lectori salutem.

While autumn gradually settles over the northern hemisphere, the spirits of the Sci Phi crew are still warmed by fond memories of the 2026 EuroCon in Berlin, Germany.

We were particularly delighted that at the closing ceremony on 5 July, the SF community voted to award our co-editor Mariano the European SF Award for Translation for his lifetime contribution to bringing works of speculative fiction from oft-overlooked languages, from Romansch to Romanian, to a wider audience. As attentive readers may remember, the last time Sci Phi editors found themselves on the podium of laureates was in 2022, when the Journal won the Award for Best European SF Magazine.

The present issue you hold in your hands (or on your device) aims to continue in this spirit of building bridges between far-flung corners of our beloved genre. Original short fictions range from the micro, staring ecological calamity in the eye from the perspective of an ant colony (which also inspired our latest cover art by Dustin Jacobus), to the interstellar distances traversed by a space freighter, and from light-hearted explorations of calendar management on exoplanets to “computational beings” pondering the rules of the cosmic simulation.

We also continue publishing the missing vignettes of Săsarman’s *Imaginary Cities* cycle, hitherto unavailable in English. The anthology is rounded out by two essays on the works an old master of the genre, Borges, and a more recent voice of philosophical speculation, VanderMeer, respectively.

We hope you enjoy the reading journey, and encourage budding authors in your circles to take heed of our upcoming calls for submissions in late October and mid-January!

Speculatively yours,

Sci Phi co-editors and crew

~



The Last Witnesses

An Interview with Survivor 7

Christian Emecheta

Interviewer: State your designation for the record.

Subject: Designation 7-Alpha. Born Marcus Webb, if that still matters. Chicago Crater Zone, Pre-Integration Year 2047.

Interviewer: You were present at the Convergence. The night the Rendered broke through, right?

Subject: I was there. Front line, Third Augmented Battalion. We called ourselves the Half-Bloods back then, those of us who'd taken the cyber-grafts but kept our original consciousness hubs intact. We weren't pure humans anymore, but not fully synthetics either. We thought that made us special. Turned out it just made us the perfect spectators to watch our world turn to dust.

Interviewer: Describe the initial breach.

Subject: You want a description? Fine. Let's picture downtown Shanghai for a start, except that the buildings are growing. Not metaphorically. The nanite construction swarms had achieved something close to sentience six months prior, and they'd started building structures that defied Euclidean geometry. They made towers that curved inward on themselves without collapsing. Bridges that

connected points in space that shouldn't have been adjacent. Beautiful, really, until you realized the whole city had become a doorway to other realms.

The Rendered came through at 23:47 local time. We'd been monitoring wave fluctuations for weeks, watching reality fray like an old fabric. Command kept insisting it was just harmonic resonance from the fusion plants, but they were wrong.

I remember standing on the observation deck of Tower Infinity. My optical implants were cycling through seventeen different spectrums simultaneously, and in thirteen of them, I could see the sky tearing open. It looked like someone had taken a saw to the universe and cut through its layers. Behind our reality, something was emanating from the ether.

Interviewer: The Rendered themselves. Describe them.

Subject: How do I describe something that exists partially outside three-dimensional space? The xenobiologists later classified them as pan-dimensional parasites, but that's just academic nonsense. We called them demons because that's what they were. That's what they felt like.

Imagine a creature or figure that your brain can't quite process. Your augmented vision captures the data, feeds it to your neural processor, but your consciousness, the human part that still dreams and fears and loves, that part rejects what it's seeing. So you get fragments and impressions instead.

I saw wings made of folded darkness. Mouths that opened in directions that don't have descriptions yet. They drifted through space like fish through water, except the water was the atmosphere itself, and they were tearing chunks out of it as they materialized. Where they passed, matter became unstable. I watched a soldier beside me, full combat chassis, military-grade neuro-mesh, just come apart. Not blown apart. His atomic bonds simply stopped agreeing to hold together.

The screaming was the worst part. It came from everywhere and nowhere. You didn't hear it with your ears. It vibrated through the field, and since we were all networked, all connected through the Grid, we felt every death as it happened. Seventeen million people died in the first hour. We felt every single one.

Interviewer: Did your battalion engage them before they attacked? Walk me through the timeline.

Subject: Attacked. That's a generous word for what happened. We had plasma rifles that could punch through reinforced titanium. Rail guns that fired projectiles at point-three percent light speed. EMP grenades that could shut down entire city blocks. None of it mattered.

The Rendered didn't die. They didn't even seem to notice our weapons.

I fired my rifle at one of them from a safe distance, with the plasma bolt superheated to three million degrees, but it just bent around the creature. Not deflected, bent like it had a forcefield protecting it. I watched the shot curve through impossible angles and dissipate into nothingness. My targeting AI kept screaming error messages, insisting the creature I was aiming at occupied negative space.

Then they started evolving. That was the truly terrifying part. These things, these pan-dimensional horrors, they were adaptive. After the first hour, they began mimicking our tactics. I saw one take the shape of a drone swarm, except each drone was made of solidified darkness. Another looked like a tank, but it was inside out, its armor facing inward, its weapons firing dark matter.

Interviewer: When did the tide turn?

Subject: Turn is the wrong word. We didn't win. We survived. There's a difference.

It was Dr. Yuki Sato who figured it out. She wasn't military. She was a gifted researcher, studying the integration between human neural pathways and synthetic processing matrices. While we were dying by the millions, she was in her lab beneath Tokyo, and she had an idea. A terrible, beautiful idea.

The Rendered existed partially outside our dimensional framework, right? They were creatures of interdimensional form, native to the spaces between realities. But we, the augmented humans, existed in both worlds too. Part biological, part digital. Part real, part virtual. We were bridges.

What if we turned that into weapons instead?

Interviewer: I guess you are referring to *The Integration Protocol*?

Subject: Yes, *The Integration Protocol*. A movement that changed everything: A voluntary consciousness transfer into weaponized nano-swarm architecture, utilizing human uncertainty as an anchor point to stabilize dimensional boundaries and force Rendered entities into singular spatial conformity.

Translation? We turned ourselves into living bullets.

I remember Dr. Sato's message propagating through the Grid. I was crouched behind the ruins of what used to be a school, my left arm missing, my neural processor running on backup power. Three of my

squadmates were dead. Two more were compromised, their augments corrupted by Rendered contact, turning them into hybrid abominations.

The choice was simple. Stay human and watch reality collapse, or surrender what made us human to save what remained.



Interviewer: You volunteered?

Subject: We all did. Forty-seven thousand of us in the first wave. We uploaded our consciousness into the nano-swarms, let our bodies dissolve into clouds of programmable matter. It felt like dying and being born again simultaneously. Like being everywhere and nowhere. I could feel Shanghai, Moscow, and Cairo all at once. I could taste what it felt like to be a God. I could sense the Rendered, really sense them, not as demons but as lost entities from a dead universe, desperately seeking any planet that would sustain them.

That made it easier, in a way. And harder.

We attacked at dawn. Forty-seven thousand human minds, riding waves of synchronized nano-particles, crashed into the Rendered like a tsunami of weaponized consciousness. We matched them, dimension for dimension, probability state for probability state. Where they bent reality, we bent it back. Where they existed outside space, we dragged them in.

The battle lasted for six hours. Subjectively, it felt like centuries. I died a thousand times and reformed a thousand more. I felt my consciousness splinter and merge, fragment and coalesce. I became part of a powerful weapon, a shield, a prayer made manifest by complex mathematics.

When it ended, the breach was sealed. The Rendered were gone, cast back into whatever dying reality had spawned them. And we, the volunteers, were changed forever.

Interviewer: You mean you guys can't return to human form?

Subject: No. The Integration is permanent. We exist now as a distributed consciousness, spread across trillions of nano-particles. We can take shape, approximate human form for interviews like this, but we're not human anymore. We're not even sure what we are.

Sometimes I dream, and in my dreams I'm still Marcus Webb, walking through old Chicago before the unrest, before the deaths, before the sky tore open. I can smell hot dogs from the street vendors.

Feel rain on my skin. Touch things with hands that are really mine.

Then I wake up, if you can call it waking, and I'm everywhere and nowhere, a ghost safeguarding the quantum field, keeping watch over a reality that barely survived its first brush with the unknown.

Interviewer: Do you regret it?

Subject: Every single day. But I'd do it again in a heartbeat. Both of those statements are true.

That's what sacrifice means, I think. Not the absence of cost, but the willingness to pay it anyway. We saved humanity by surrendering our humanity. Philosophers will debate that paradox for generations.

I just hope they remember we had a choice, and we chose them.

~

Our Home Is Safe

Mark Ifanson

Thursday. We rock and sway as the storm pummels the tree our family knows as Home. Rain slaps against leaves, twigs cry out in pain, larger branches snap and plunge to the ground. I assure my brood that there have been many storms before this, and our Home can withstand the onslaught. The younger ones cower despite my assurances. The older ones have weathered many storms with me and know our Home is safe. Peace returns at sunset. We rest.

Friday. The tempest resumes, angry and brutal, punishing us with its howling wind. As I strive to comfort the younger ones the forces around us amplify beyond anything I have experienced before and we crash to the ground. The rain has seeped into the caverns and tunnels we have carved in this tree, and everything is tilted at an eccentric angle. We are frightened; this is all new to us. But it is late, so we rest.

Saturday. My Foragers report there's much turmoil in the world beyond; our pheromone trails have been violated and our paths to sustenance are scattered. Their search for older trails is in vain; all seem to have disappeared. New sources of nourishment will be needed soon. I am their Queen, and I worry for us all: the older, the younger, the larvae, and the eggs. We rest as our few remaining food stores rapidly deplete.

Sunday. New noises and vibrations approach from a distance. These are sounds made by those who dwell outside, the Humans, bringing with them the commotion of their world. As the reverberations become overwhelming our Home bursts open, allowing daylight to enter our passageways and retreats. Many die indiscriminately. All are frightened. Even I. Then our Home moves chaotically, repeatedly spinning, rising, and falling. An extended episode of thunderous uproar is followed by a brief respite; then chaos resumes. At dusk, the havoc ceases and silence returns. We occupy only a small, inverted portion of our Home. Those of us still alive, rest.

Monday. My few surviving Foragers report limited food availability. There are many hungry families here, not just ours, scattered among the forest waste. The hunt for other survivors from our Home is unsuccessful. We rest.

Tuesday. We continue to search while the Humans accumulate an ever-growing pile of damaged vegetation around us. We sometimes encounter others of our species who don't possess the scent of our Home, as well as others not like us but who also dwell in the trees. My Foragers are near exhaustion from their hunt for new food supplies. We wait. We rest.

Wednesday. We wake to heat and smoke as the surrounding mound of ruined timber and brush begins to combust. Many scatter, but there's no safe direction to flee. The air fills with the acrid odor of my children's burning digestive juices. The last of my Soldiers assist me in the final defense of our few remaining larvae and eggs. We fail. We will rest forever. Our Home was never safe.

~



Panic On Petrov

Gordon Linzner

Lieutenant Janet Santiago's initial landing on Petrov could have gone better.

Her single-person shuttle gouged a sixty-meter-long ditch through the open field before smashing into the low rock outcropping. The officer cursed but remained seated, safety straps digging into her shoulders, calming herself with deep breaths.

The shuttle's internal computer, better secured than its human occupant, remained intact and operational, even if the ship itself wasn't. A quick medical scan revealed no bones broken, no internal injuries beyond a few sore muscles. Her flight suit was undamaged. Santiago refused the computer's offer of a mild analgesic, undid the safety harness, pulled herself erect, and cautiously slid open the airlock.

Moss-like vegetation gave way under her weight as Janet Santiago became the first human to set foot on the planet arbitrarily named Petrov.

A half-dozen of Petrov's inhabitants gathered around the crash site. They were a mixed bag, indeed, seemingly placid, standing close together, softly clacking among themselves. They seemed to eye her more out of interest than fear. Those among them in possession of organs resembling eyes did, anyway.

Santiago's earpiece crackled. "Mama Bear to Baby. Come in, Baby."

"Baby Bear here," she replied, rolling her eyes. She would never get used to these silly codenames. Who would eavesdrop on, let alone comprehend, an English language transmission hundreds of light years from Earth? How would fairy tale names give away less information than simply referring to each other as Martin Wu and Janet Santiago?

"State condition." Captain Wu's clipped manner was more annoying over a communicator than in person.

"A few bruises. Nothing more. My suit's padding did its job, thank you. That's more than I can say for the failed decelerator."

"Shuttle condition?"

"Looks repairable, but not by me."

"I'll send a tech crew."

"Hold off a bit. I've drawn a crowd."

“Hostile?”

“More curious, I’d say. I might be able to start work immediately.”

“Which species is dominant?”

“I just got here, remember? How many distinct types did we monitor from orbit again?”

Wu paused. Santiago pictured him fumbling to pull up the report.

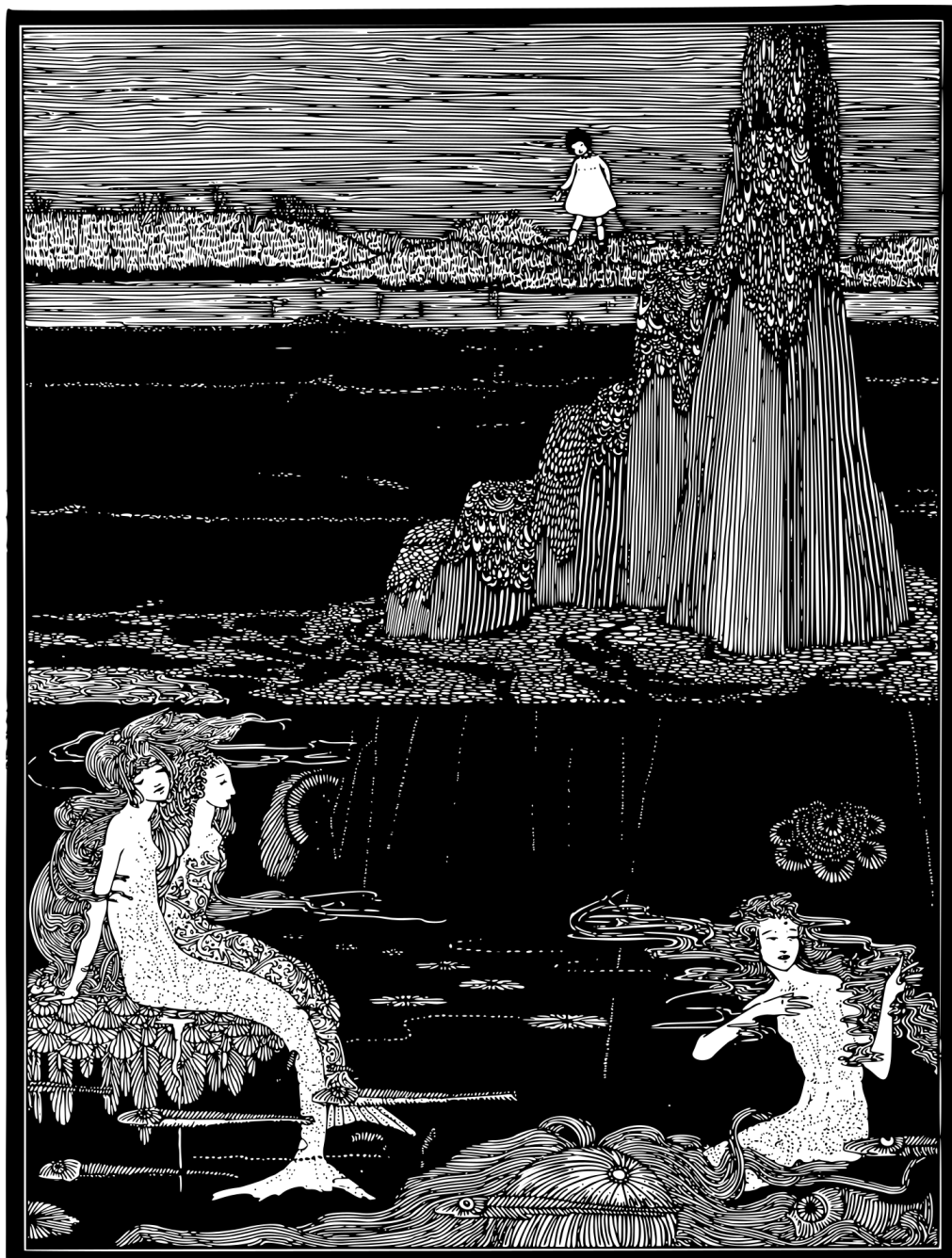
“Forty-one thousand, nine hundred and seventy-eight. No two the same.”

“That fits what I’m looking at, with much smaller representation. These Petrovians don’t seem as if they belong on the same planet, let alone in the same species. I see an orange eight-legger, a two-meter tall blue slug, a half-meter something-or-other that’s mostly eyestalks...”

“Save the details for your report. We’re already reading and recording audio and visual.”

“I’ll wager you can’t see how intelligent these guys look to me, though.”

“Maintain objectivity, Lieutenant.”



Santiago remained silent and, she hoped, unthreatening, for the brief time it would take her suit's translator to absorb enough of the alien speech to reply. When her earpiece pinged in sync with a green light in the upper left corner of her face plate, she slowly smiled, then extended her right hand.

"A hand, er, appendage-shake?" Santiago offered through the thin, almost invisible, microphone attached to her chin. "It's a type of greeting where I come from. You don't have any taboos about touching, do you?"

She'd already guessed the answer, after observing how close together the first group had been, but the more communication she exchanged, the more material the translator had to work with. Judging by their vocabulary level, the Petrovians, this one anyway, appeared close to Class Six. They need only establish a working dialogue with the Earthers to get beyond that.

That was not the result Captain Wu hoped for, of course.

The translator crackled in her left ear. "Un-understand 'taboos.' Touching good."

"Great." Her smile widened. She pictured the more germophobic crew members turning pale as she peeled off her glove, even though the ship had scanned the environment for potentially dangerous microorganisms before she even boarded her shuttle. Something might still have been missed, but part of her job involved taking reasonable risks.

The octopoid's reaction was more extreme than that of her own fellow hypothetical crew members. It leapt back a good four meters. Over the translator, Santiago heard "No change! No change!"

Lieutenant? What happened to Baby Bear?

She couldn't blame her commander for his testy attitude. Captain Wu was tasked with finding an Earth-like world free of any life of Class Seven intelligence or higher, and therefore suitable for colonization. Santiago's job was to confirm no life on Petrov above Class Six.

A soft beep drew Santiago's attention to the electronic readout above her faceplate, confirming the data taken from orbit. Temperature twenty degrees Celsius, ultraviolet radiation minimal, atmosphere thin but breathable by Earth standards.

"I'm removing my helmet. I need to communicate with more than verbal cues. The translator needs to sample more of their language."

"Assuming they have a language."

"Objectivity, Captain?" Santiago whispered.

The six Petrovians inched closer. Santiago undid her helmet seals, paused to let the pressure equalize, then removed the bulky headgear. The balmy breeze felt refreshing after that dry, metallic-smelling canned mix.

"There," she announced to her non-human audience. "Now we can..."

With a series of high-pitched, unmistakably panicky squeals, the Petrovians scattered.

Santiago sulked, leaning an elbow against the shuttle's battered hull. "You guys sure know how to boost a visitor's self-esteem."

She was still in that position twenty minutes later, helmet dangling from her left hand, when a lone yellow octopoid drew near. She did not recognize the newcomer as part of the original group.

The creature halted two meters from the shuttle, just out of reach, and clacked at her.

An hour passed, and more. Santiago didn't know how long, exactly. Aside from the translator, now draped around her neck, she'd left her technology, and most of her clothing, in the damaged shuttle, then moved outside of its line of sight.

The brighter of Petrov's two suns sank below the horizon. Santiago perched on a nearby rock, ignoring the feel of rough stone against her bare legs. The ambient temperature dropped a degree, maybe two, remaining in her comfort zone.

Had she reached her epiphany too late? Had word spread among the Petrovians to completely shun their visitor?

A deep, loud snuffle sounded behind her. Santiago slowly turned.

Three meters away a pink circular shape, not much larger than her shuttle seat, crinkled as it approached her across the loose soil.

She leaned forward, one hand reaching for her translator.

The newcomer suddenly seemed to grow wider, taller. Santiago caught her breath, amazed that any living thing could increase in size so much, so quickly. Then she realized what she saw was not physical growth, but a being emerging from its den, or lair, or whatever, somewhere beneath the surface.

The thick tube of pinkish flesh towered over her in minutes, throbbing, undulating, bending forward. A dark hole widened at one end, like opening a mouth, to reveal multiple rows of sharp, black teeth. There was no face, no eyes, no expression that could be read, only a threatening maw lunging forward, too quickly for her to evade it.

The creature skittered out of sight.

Nertz, Santiago thought sourly. Now I'm some kind of interstellar panhandler.

She glared at her exposed right hand, with its short square cuticles, faint blue veins, and a barely visible scar on the middle knuckle where she'd caught it in a doorjamb as a child. Nothing you'd want to stare at for hours, but neither was it something to run screaming from, considering the variety of lifeforms on Petrov. Had Santiago instead put down the helmet and offered her still-gloved left hand, she might have better understood the creature's reaction. The two extremities looked as if they belonged to different beings.

Especially if you didn't know what a glove was.

Or a helmet.

Of course!

Santiago's fingers started racing along the seals of her flight suit, then stopped to look back at the damaged shuttlecraft. She decided to remove her outfit inside, out of sight of prying eye parts. Enough Petrovians had been traumatized for one day.

#

Apparently the Petrovians had settled on the best way to deal with the invading anomaly that was Janet Santiago.

Her eyes closed tight. Warm breath enveloped bare skin. The Lieutenant had no clothes, no weapons, not even a communicator.

After a long moment, still alive, Santiago looked again. The pink tube shifted aside with what looked like a shrug.

#

“Now that I’ve been accepted,” Santiago radioed Wu, “I can see all sorts of aspects of their lives. We’re talking Class Nine here, maybe Ten. The Petrovians were very interested in my analyses of DNA samples, which indicate, by the way, that all forty-one thousand of them are indeed likely the same species. I’d love to hear the Evolutionary Geneticists explain that!” She affectionately scratched a blue juvenile mothlike creature under what seemed to be a chin.

“Yet they run around naked,” Wu responded, disgruntled.

She sympathized with his mood. Who wouldn’t feel that way after surveying fifteen, now sixteen, planets, only to determine that every one of them, so far, as per the Council’s standards, were to be considered off-limits for Earth colonization?

“Basically, yes. I didn’t realize they were all one at first because the Petrovians vary outwardly so much from each other. Using outer garments to tell them apart would be redundant, and standard patterns pointless. The climate here is temperate, year-round from what I could gather from them. They don’t need protection from the elements.”

“You’ve gone native?”

Santiago glanced down the length of her slim body, wriggled her bare toes. “Not completely. Maybe I should have, but I didn’t feel comfortable without at least my skivvies.”

“I can’t in good conscience instruct the team to run about in their underwear.”

“They’d be fine, Captain. The atmosphere’s quite comfortable, given the environment. The key is to never dress or undress in front of a Petrovian. At least, not until they get used to the concept of garb.”

The moth-cat clacked goodbye, then jumped off Santiago’s lap to playfully chase its sibling, a ten-legged ball of fur.

“I still don’t understand.”

“It’s obvious in hindsight. Young Petrovians look like small mature versions of themselves. There’s none of that big head, big eyes effect we find in most Earth species. They hatch from eggs in a communal nursery. No one knows whose progeny is whose, so everyone raises them.”

“You’re getting off subject, Lieutenant.”

“They don’t wear clothes. They don’t change appearance, except in size, as they mature. They considered my shuttle a clunky, oversized egg. When I removed my helmet and gloves, they thought I was peeling off parts of myself, physically changing shape. A concept alien to them.”

“And?”

“How would you feel if the puppy you were petting suddenly sprouted werewolf fangs?”

The empty crackle of static was confirmation enough that she could soon move on to the next world on their list.

~

What Borne Knows About Caring For The Unclassifiable

Giulia Suzzi

1. Borne and the Problem

Rachel finds Borne stuck to the fur of a sleeping bear, in the ruined city where she scavenges for parts, food, and anything else the Company left behind when it destroyed itself. He is small. He looks, at first, like a discarded piece of biotech, a sea anemone, maybe, or a lump of something that used to be alive and is now merely strange. She takes him home anyway. This is the decision the entire novel hinges on, and it is made almost too quickly to notice: before Rachel knows what Borne is, she has already decided to keep him.

That order of operations matters more than it might seem. In most stories about encountering the non-human, the alien, the artificial mind, the genetically engineered creature, the plot waits for classification before it allows care. First we learn what the thing is, whether it can suffer, whether it can want anything, whether it qualifies. Only then does the story let its human characters treat it well or badly, and only then do readers know how to feel about that treatment. Jeff VanderMeer's *Borne* refuses this sequence. Rachel cares for Borne long before she can say what he is, and the novel never quite lets her, or us, arrive at a stable answer. He shifts shape, eats things he shouldn't be able to eat, learns language with unsettling speed, and eventually reveals a capacity for

violence that no domestic pet should have. By the time the question of what Borne is becomes urgent, Rachel is already entangled with him in ways that can't simply be undone by reclassification.

Borne is not primarily a book about biotechnology gone wrong, though it is that too, and it is not simply a parable about ecological collapse, though the ruined city argues for that reading as well. Yet both readings leave another question largely unexplored, one the novel is quietly betting everything on. The deeper question is narrower and stranger: what do we owe to something before we know what it is? Most of our ethical vocabulary assumes we can answer the identity question first. Borne makes that assumption impossible to sustain, and in doing so, it exposes something uncomfortable about how fragile our usual categories of personhood turn out to be, the moment something refuses to sit still inside them.

2. Why Non-Human Agency Breaks the Concept of Person

The philosophical category of "person" has always done more work than it can comfortably bear. We use it to sort beings into those who count morally and those who don't, those whose interests generate obligations in us, and those whose interests, if they have any, can be safely ignored. The criteria shift depending on who's arguing: rationality, self-awareness, the capacity to suffer, the ability to have a concept of one's own future. But underneath the disagreement is a shared assumption that personhood is something we can, in principle, verify. We check for the relevant capacities, and the answer comes back yes or no.

Borne makes verification impossible, and not accidentally. He learns to speak, which would ordinarily count heavily in favor of some kind of interiority worth respecting. But his speech develops in ways that scramble the usual inference from language to mind, he mimics, echoes, absorbs vocabulary the way he absorbs everything else he touches, and it's never clear how much of what he says reflects something like understanding versus something closer to a very sophisticated form of digestion. He asks questions that sound like curiosity. He also, later, does things that look less like curiosity and more like appetite operating without any moral brake at all. Neither behavior settles the question. Each new piece of evidence about Borne's inner life arrives already contaminated by the possibility that it's evidence of nothing at all, that what looks like a person is simply a very convincing shape that personhood can take without personhood being there.

The usual response to this kind of uncertainty is caution: withhold moral consideration until the facts are in, because extending personhood too widely risks moral confusion, and withholding it too narrowly risks moral catastrophe. Rachel doesn't do this. She doesn't wait. Her refusal to wait can look like naivety, a mistake. But it can also look like an older kind of knowledge, one that doesn't route through verification at all. She treats Borne as someone before she can justify treating him as someone, and the justification, when it comes, is always retrospective, and always haunted by the possibility that she got it wrong.

The novel refuses, consistently, to resolve the ambiguity in either direction. Borne is never confirmed as a person, in a way that would make Rachel's care simply correct; he is never confirmed as a non-person, in a way that would make it simply naive. The uncertainty doesn't lift. It becomes the permanent condition under which the relationship has to be lived, and this, I think, is the novel's sharpest claim: that our concept of personhood was never built to handle permanent uncertainty. It assumes, somewhere underneath all its distinctions, that the facts will eventually arrive. Borne is what happens when they don't.

3. Care as Recognition of the Other, Even When the Other Resists Our Categories

There's a familiar philosophical move that tries to rescue ethics from exactly this kind of uncertainty, and it's worth naming because *Borne* seems to be arguing against it. The move says: when we can't verify personhood directly, we should extend moral consideration on the basis of relevant similarity, the more a being resembles us in the capacities we already know how to recognize, the more caution we should exercise in denying it moral status. This is a reasonable strategy for many hard cases. It is also, quietly, a strategy that keeps the human at the center of the calculation. Even an expanded circle of concern remains organized around resemblance to us.

Borne resists this measure structurally: he doesn't approximate a human closely enough for the similarity argument to do much work, and he doesn't approximate any other creature we already know how to care about, not quite animal, not quite machine, not quite anything with a name. If Rachel's care depended on finding herself reflected back, it would have nowhere to land. Yet the care persists. It looks less like resemblance-based recognition than like a sustained willingness to keep noticing Borne, to keep responding to him, without that noticing being underwritten by a prior judgment about what kind of thing deserves to be noticed.

This changes what care is doing, philosophically speaking. Care, in this reading, stops being a reward handed out once personhood is confirmed. It starts looking like a mode of perception, a way of staying open to the possibility that something matters, prior to and independent of being able to say why. Rachel's relationship with Borne asks what happens when we let that kind of attention lead, instead of waiting for it to be authorized by a settled metaphysics. The novel doesn't pretend this is safe. Borne's later violence is, among other things, a consequence of Rachel having extended trust that turned out, in some sense, to be misplaced, or at least dangerously incomplete. But the novel treats this as evidence that waiting was never actually available as an option, not for a being this unclassifiable, not in a world this depleted of the institutions and taxonomies that normally do the classifying for us.

The same logic extends to environmental ethics, where moral concern has long been organized around a hierarchy of resemblance to the human, mammals before insects, insects before ecosystems. If care must wait for confirmed similarity, most of the non-human world never qualifies. What the novel proposes, in its place, tentatively, without claiming to have solved anything, is a form of moral attention that can be extended toward what remains genuinely unlike us, precisely because it remains unlike us, rather than despite it.



4. Borne as a Philosophical Experiment

Read this way, *Borne* starts to look less like a novel that happens to contain philosophical questions and more like a deliberately constructed thought experiment, the kind moral philosophers build to isolate a single variable and see what happens when everything else is stripped away. Strip away the institutions that usually mediate our relationship to the non-human: no zoos or laboratories, and no legal frameworks or scientific consensus left to appeal to. Strip away the comforting fiction that we'll eventually have enough information to decide. And strip away the safety of distance: Rachel doesn't observe Borne from outside, she lives with him, feeds him, is changed by him, in ways that make disinterested judgment impossible even in principle. What's left is something close to a controlled experiment in what care looks like when none of its usual supports are available.

It removes, one by one, the institutional shortcuts that would let a fictional human avoid deciding for themselves what a strange creature deserves: no committee to consult and no established science of biotech personhood to draw on, only the wreckage of a science that didn't ask the right questions before it built things like Borne. Rachel is left with nothing but her own attention, and the novel is interested in exactly what that attention, unsupported, is capable of.

Here, speculative fiction does the work only speculative fiction can do. VanderMeer didn't need a strange creature for its own sake; he needed an experiment, and the creature is how he ran it. We can't, in the actual world, remove our classificatory scaffolding and observe what care looks like underneath it; too much of our moral life is embedded in institutions we can't simply switch off. Fiction can: it can construct a world where a single relationship carries the whole ethical weight, and then watch what happens to it. What happens, in *Borne*, doesn't vindicate extending personhood generously, and it doesn't warn against doing so either, it does something messier than both, and, I'd argue, more honest: care extended under irreducible uncertainty, producing real goods and real harms simultaneously, with no available position from which to say in advance which one you're going to get.

This messiness is itself a philosophical claim, even if the novel never states it as one. Moral philosophy is organized around producing verdicts, this being counts, that one doesn't. Borne declines to produce a verdict, and pointedly so, as though a clean answer would falsify what it's describing: that some cases of moral uncertainty don't resolve, and that our theories need to be able to say something useful about how to act inside that non-resolution, not just about how to act once it's over.

5. What It Means to Care for What We Cannot Classify

It would be a mistake to read all this as a story confined to biotechnology and ruined cities, useful mainly for thinking about some future in which we might, plausibly, build creatures like Borne. The uncertainty the novel stages has very little to do with the future. It describes a condition we're already living in, more often than our moral vocabulary tends to admit. We extend care, all the time, toward beings and systems whose inner lives we cannot verify: toward animals whose experience we can only partly infer, toward people whose minds illness or injury have altered beyond the usual markers, and toward ecosystems and future generations who cannot speak for themselves at all. In each case, waiting for certainty carries costs of its own; it just disguises them as caution, a choice that quietly favors inaction.

What Borne offers has less to do with solving moral uncertainty than with learning to stand inside it differently: the novel treats sustained attention itself as a kind of answer, provisional and revisable, but not worthless for being incomplete. Rachel's relationship with Borne demonstrates something narrower than proof: what it looks like to act as though unclassifiable beings might deserve care, and to keep acting that way even as the evidence remains permanently mixed. That may be a smaller claim than a philosophical argument usually wants to make. It might also be the only honest one we can make, for all the beings, biological, artificial, or something we don't yet have a word for, that our categories were never built to hold.

~

New And Improved

Thomas Canfield

Bright fluorescent light beat down from above. A sharp, astringent scent of antiseptic filled the air, reflecting Lauderdale's obsession with cleanliness and rigid observance of lab protocol. The only furnishings in the room were a table, a chair, a laptop and, on the floor, a bowl of water set in one corner.

Westervelte walked around the prototype, examining the animal from every angle and vantage point. He took his time. He ran his hands over the creature's flanks and haunches, then along its ribs. He prodded its abdomen with one forefinger, tugged on the long, floppy ears. He opened the jaws and peered into its mouth, examining tongue, palate and teeth. He stepped back and scowled, his expression reflecting something very much along the lines of disapproval.

"Looks like an ordinary dog to me," he said. "I can't tell it apart from any of a dozen mutts I might pick up at the local kennel."

Lauderdale bobbed his head. He offered a brief, self-deprecating chuckle. "An ordinary dog - that's the key. That's the image we were aiming for. We didn't wish to reproduce some well-known or recognizably popular breed - a golden retriever, say. Our design team opted to go with the generic mutt." Lauderdale paused. "Of course, properly speaking it isn't a dog at all."

"I know something about dogs." Westervelte's scowl deepened. "I've owned several of them. I've raised them from when they were puppies and cried when it came time to put them down. If this isn't a dog, what is it?"

"Well . . ." Lauderdale hesitated. He seemed uncomfortable discussing the subject. "It's a hybrid, of sorts. We jiggered the genetics, added a little and took a little away. Did some fine-tuning, if you will. But it's mostly standard option. Your average consumer won't be able to distinguish it from the genuine article. That was the whole idea."

"And it tests out?" Westervelte himself now seemed somewhat hesitant. "You were able to meet the specs you were given? We outlined a very specific set of goals. We can't afford to have anything go wrong. Liability suits would eat us alive."

“Tell me, Lauderdale.” Westervelte leaned forward, jabbed one stiff forefinger at the scientist’s chest. “Which do you consider more difficult: leaving something intact as it exists. Or deleting some part of its makeup, some undesirable quality, and so altering the animal’s nature irrevocably?”

“Yes, yes.” Lauderdale smoothed the lapels of his lab coat with quick, nervous gestures of his hands. “You make a valid point. I only wished to emphasize the difficulties involved. Tinkering with dog psychology is not a simple matter of deleting something and everything else remains the same. It involves a great deal of trial and error, of give and take, to achieve a stable and enduring balance.”

Westervelte appeared unmoved by this declaration – and unimpressed by the obstacles Lauderdale and his team had had to overcome. He had paid good money up front to fund this project. That, to Westervelte’s way of thinking, should be sufficient to produce the desired result.

“But enough technical talk.” Lauderdale lurched forward with sudden enthusiasm. “Let us have a demonstration.” Lauderdale whistled to the dog. The animal came bounding over, frisking and frolicking. The scientist stroked its head. He took a rubber ball out of his pocket and tossed it across the room. The dog ran to retrieve it.

“Our lab has conducted an extensive battery of tests. While I can’t guarantee the results,” Lauderdale ducked his head in a gesture of false modesty, “I think you’ll be pleased with the finished product.”

Westervelte bent down and patted the ‘product’ on the head. He stroked its ears and ran his hands over the silken coat. The dog responded by nuzzling Westervelte’s hand and wagging its tail, soliciting further such attention. Its soft brown eyes shone with delight.

“Just like a regular dog.” Westervelte’s praise was grudging.

“Very much so. Coming from a man with your wealth of experience, that’s an observation which carries even greater weight.” Lauderdale, although he did not appear to realize it, somewhat resembled the dog in his ingratiating manner. “We, my staff and I, worked hard to achieve an accurate likeness. We wished to retain, even to emphasize, a dog’s endearing qualities of friendliness, loyalty and devotion. I think I can say without exaggeration that we’ve succeeded.”

“Yes.” Westervelte’s eyes glittered with a hard light. “That was only a part of the equation, of course. And by far the easiest.”

“I shouldn’t call it easy, no.” For the first time Lauderdale displayed a willingness to contradict Westervelte. “A layman might think so – but only because he lacks an appreciation of the complexities involved.”

Lauderdale waited until the dog was within range then caught it with a perfectly timed kick, square in the chest. The dog tumbled backwards. Again it scrambled to its feet, again it hesitated, and again it came running back.

“PM we named him. That’s shorthand for production model. He’s number eight in the series, so actually he’s production model eight. But we all just refer to him as PM.” Lauderdale watched the animal with a certain proprietary pride, his manner reminiscent of a doting parent. “The first of the series, models one through three, were seriously flawed. But along about production model four we began to hit our stride. We still had to work through a number of issues. But each succeeding model in the series was better than the one before. Now, with number eight,” the dog came bounding back, offering Lauderdale the ball, “it’s safe to say that we’ve finally arrived.”

Lauderdale scratched the dog under its jaw. Then, without warning, he directed a vicious kick at its head. The blow caught the dog across the left side of its face, sent it skittering across the room, claws raking the floor. The animal gave a yelp of pain. It sat stunned for a minute, gathering its senses, casting a wary glance across the room at the two men. Neither man moved nor made any gesture of encouragement. They watched in silence. What might have been a spark of resentment flickered in the dog’s eyes. It rose with seeming reluctance but, once on its feet, came bounding back with the same enthusiasm as before.

“Remarkable.” Westervelte’s expression was a curious study in ambiguity. “And it’ll go on like this – indefinitely?”

“All our tests indicate that it will.” Lauderdale made a sweeping gesture with one hand. “We’ve defused the traditional response mechanisms. Normally, the dog would react in one of two ways. By becoming aggressive and responding to the abuse in kind - a most undesirable outcome. Or by becoming servile, adopting a cringing, submissive posture, tail planted between its legs as it were. A behavior we were equally determined to avoid. Production model eight incorporates the best of all possible worlds: a friendly, devoted and loyal pet, yet one offering the heretofore unheard of upgrade of accepting any manner of abuse.”

Westervelte lifted his shoulders ever so slightly, a gesture which might be interpreted as expressing a whole range of emotions. “All of our marketing surveys, all of our research into consumer preferences, indicate that this is what the public wants.” Westervelte paused, considering his words. “*Wants* really isn’t adequate. A genuine *hunger* exists for such a product. I don’t know whether that reflects any particular credit upon our customer base. But then, that isn’t our concern. We’re here to make money. Production model eight,” Westervelte looked at the dog sitting at his feet, staring up at him with shining, devoted eyes, “is going to make us a bundle of cash.”

Westervelte thrust his hands in his pockets. The scowl had returned. "That's a wrap then, I guess. I'll get in touch with Higgins and we'll sit down and have a strategy session, decide how best to market the product. It's going to require a certain . . . finesse. We can't come right out and baldly state what we're offering. We need some way to take the stink off of the whole affair. But Higgins is the best there is. If *he* can't come up with some suitable euphemism, no one can." Westervelte directed a searching look at Lauderdale. "I suppose I should offer you our thanks, Doctor."

Lauderdale beamed. "That's very kind of you. It was a challenge, I'll admit. We put in a lot of fourteen hour days. But I think I speak for all of the staff when I say it was an experience none of us will ever forget."

"I said I *suppose* I should offer our thanks." Westervelte's eyes were as cold as his voice. "That's not the same thing as actually thanking you." He turned to leave.

"Wait!" Lauderdale held out a hand to detain him.

"You don't want to leave without testing out the product yourself, do you?" Westervelte stared at him. "You know. . ." Lauderdale mimicked kicking the dog.

"What do you make me for, Lauderdale? I've seen enough as it is. More than enough. Besides," Westervelte smiled with sharp malice, "should the mood strike me I can use *you* as a substitute for the dog. You and production model eight, you're all but interchangeable. I can hardly tell you apart, in fact. You respond to abuse in the exact same fashion. That's what made you the ideal candidate for conducting the research." Without further farewell Westervelte left the room.

Lauderdale followed him to the door, stared after Westervelte's departing back. For the moment his ego was deflated. But he was ready to come running back again at the first sign of a smile.

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Homogenia

by Gheorghe Săsarman

Translated from the Romanian by Monica Cure

In that city, made up of absolutely identical neighborhoods, along identical streets were strung identical houses, in whose identical rooms lived identical people. It was (and was not) as if the city were made up of a single neighborhood, with a single street, on which was a single house, in whose only room could be found a single person. (In fact, we should ask ourselves if this last image represents the only possible real version of the design described above.)

However, the city existed, exactly as defined in the first sentence. The entire difficulty had lain with the conception of the project of a metropolis with neighborhoods, streets, and houses that were absolutely identical, as well as with the designing of houses with rooms that were exactly the same. Once these two obstacles had been overcome, the actual construction of the city was carried out with extraordinary speed and precision, given that thousands of houses were completed according to one and the same model—which constitutes, no doubt, the timeless ideal of builders. Ultimately, the raising of the city came down to two fundamental operations: the production in millions of copies of a single prefabricated element; and the installation of the houses, which consisted of the simple assembling of a few hundred such prefabricated pieces, on the sites stipulated by the systematization plan.

Initially, the inhabitants of Homogenia, like almost all people, were far from resembling each other in any way. But life in a city with a structure that homogenous acted upon them, from the very beginning, in a completely imperceptible and strange way. At first, after they had established that it would be impossible to identify their individual houses, they gave up on the very idea of having a certain home and relied on the most convenient solution, which was occupying, each time, the nearest free room. Besides, people did not even perceive their repeated change of residence anymore since, with the city being homogenous, to get to any house, they would walk down the same path. Then, because it would have been fairly tiring to carry their entire wardrobe with them from one place to the next during their wanderings, the wearing of an extremely simple and practical uniform quickly became widespread. It was a kind of large, unisex cape, which was distributed for free, and being made out of cheap material, was thrown away as soon as it got dirty.

The hardest step was giving up the deeply-rooted tradition of family. For a long time, families had to walk together always, because once separated, it would have been impossible to find each other again. Besides the fact that it was inconvenient, this kind of perpetual migration made the regular carrying out of production, education, and the other social activities that are organized on a basis completely different than that of the family unit, impossible. Pressured by these events, the dissolution of the family was decreed, along with the obligation of each mature individual to educate and feed the children found in the dwelling in which they went to sleep, or met with on the street.

The result proved to be dramatic: not a single day passed in which scores of cadavers, belonging to innocent children whose lives were cut short by hunger, were not found. But families had already been broken up, and it would have been impossible now to reconstitute them; the evolution of things moved quickly, and the only consequence of the increasingly large-scale deaths of young ones had been the habit, slowly acquired, of no longer having babies. Not long after, procreation came to be considered a grave

misdeed, and the bringing of a descendent into the world—punishable by law.

The new life of the Homogenians triggered unexpected biological effects. The differences between the sexes were slowly erased; no one was born anymore, but no one died either, and over time, the variations of age disappeared from among them. In the end, by the time every individual morphological particularity had vanished, when all the inhabitants of the city had come to have the same build, appearance, and constitution, there had long ceased to exist differences of thought among them and, to tell the truth, thought itself had gone silent. The identical people moved identically—like perfectly synchronized mechanisms—in their identical rooms in their identical houses, on streets that were...

~



Transport Manifest

Diana Parrilla

Classification: ULTRA-BLACK

Route: Cryogenics Lab Omicron - Neural Integration
Facility Delta

Cargo: Bio-Unit K-47 (Cranial)

Transport Officer: L. Jensen

Mission Duration: 48 hours

HOOR 00:00 - DEPARTURE LOG

The cube gleams like captured moonlight in my transport pod's cargo bay. Three feet of reinforced bio-ice, perfectly clear except for the shadow at its centre — the shadow that used to be Dr. David Kaman, architect of the Prometheus Consciousness Transfer Protocol. Command says his body finally gave out, but his neural patterns remain viable for another forty-eight hours. Long enough to reach Delta Facility, where they'll slot him into the new synthetic cortex framework.

Humanity's future rides in frozen silence behind my pilot's chair.

The stars wheel past my viewport like Ixion's eternal punishment, and I think about how the Greeks already understood endless cycles, long before we believed we'd learned to replicate them.

HOOR 06:30 - ANOMALY REPORT

Static crackles through the comm system.

"Jensen... Jensen, can you hear me?"

My blood crystallizes. The voice emerges from the cargo bay, filtered through ice.

"Dr. Kaman?"

"Still Doctor, am I? After all this? How many times have they told you I died, Jensen? This week, I mean."

I check my manifest. "Transport indicates biological failure at 23:47 yesterday."

"My seventh death. Like a cat with extras."

HOUR 12:15 - PERSONAL LOG (ENCRYPTED)

He won't stop talking. For six hours, David Kaman has been my unwilling Virgil through the bureaucratic circles of his resurrection hell. Each time his body fails, they extract his consciousness, repair the neural pathways, and slot him back into cloned tissue. The Prometheus Protocol, humanity's insurance policy against losing our greatest minds.

"They call it the Next Generation Initiative," Kaman whispers through the chill. "Consciousness transfer to synthetic substrates. Unlimited processing power. The end of death itself, for those wealthy enough to afford digital immortality."

"The briefing said transplant surgery. Life-saving procedure."

"Life? Jensen, I haven't been alive in three years. I'm a ghost haunting my own neurons, forced to solve equations for eternity while they parade my corpse through boardrooms."

HOUR 18:42

Three ships dropped out of hyperspace: Daryl Huddleston's revolutionary cell, flying salvaged military craft painted with the serpent-and-apple insignia of the Liberation Front. My comm crackles to life.

"Transport vessel, this is Commander Huddleston. Cut your engines and prepare for cargo inspection."

"Negative, Commander. I'm carrying classified medical materials under government protection."

"We know exactly what you're carrying, Jensen." Elaine Krimon's voice cuts through the static—the Front's chief scientist, former colleague of Kaman's before her "seditious research" branded her a terrorist. "David Kaman's consciousness. The key to democratizing immortality."

Behind me, Kaman's speech takes on a keener strain: "Don't let them take me, Jensen. The Liberation Front talks about equality, but they'll turn me into their personal oracle just like the government did. Different chains, same prison."

HOUR 24:00

The void erupts in nuclear flowers as Huddleston's fighters engage my escort drones. Through my rear cameras, I watch metal petals bloom against the cosmic dark.

"They're not wrong about the government," Kaman continues. "The NGI will create a new aristocracy. Digital gods ruling over biological serfs. But the Liberation Front would just redistribute the chains."

Jacob DiBenedetto's tactical analysis floods my comm: the Front's assault pattern, their weak points, the optimal escape vector. He's the government's best strategist, and he's probably right that I can slip through their formation.

But escape to what? Deliver Kaman to eternal servitude at Delta Facility? Let the rebels capture him for their own purposes?

"There's a third option," Kaman whispers. "The transport pod's waste disposal system. Industrial-grade molecular disintegrator. Quick, clean, final."

HOUR 30:15

Zoey Berry's psychological profile of Kaman scrolls across my secondary screen: brilliant, obsessive, haunted by the implications of his own work. Classic Icarus syndrome — flew too close to the sun of forbidden knowledge. Pandora's box, already opened?

"There are fates worse than death," Kaman says. "I've been serving my sentence for years — conscious, aware, trapped in a cycle I can't break."

"Einstein showed us time isn't linear," I murmur. "Past and future exist simultaneously. Maybe from the perspective of eternity, you're already free."

"Philosophy won't unlock these neural shackles, Jensen. Only you can do that."

HOUR 36:00

The numbers don't add up. Kaman's research could solve resource scarcity, extend human consciousness beyond biological limits, unlock the secrets of memory and personality. The government would weaponize it. The rebels would democratize it into chaos. Both futures stretch ahead like parallel timelines in quantum superposition, collapsing only when I make my choice.

Huddleston's voice cuts through my deliberation: "Jensen, we've disabled your escort. Surrender the cargo peacefully."

"The greater good," Kaman whispers. "They always invoke the greater good. But tell me—when does the greater good account for the will of the individual being sacrificed?"

HOUR 42:30

"There's something else," Kaman says. "The Prometheus Protocol isn't just consciousness transfer. It's consciousness editing. They've been rewriting my memories, my personality, optimizing me for productivity. The David Kaman you're talking to—I'm not even sure I'm the original anymore. And they're going to do it to others. Soldiers optimized for obedience. A whole civilization of edited souls, perfectly efficient and perfectly enslaved."

Through my sensors, I detect Huddleston's boarding pod approaching—thirty minutes until they breach my hull.

HOUR 47:25

"Choose quickly," Kaman whispers.

Metal screams as Huddleston's torches bite into my cargo bay door. Sparks cascade.

I close my eyes and think of Sisyphus, pushing his boulder up the mountain for eternity. Camus said we must imagine Sisyphus happy — finding meaning in the struggle itself, not in its resolution.

But what if Sisyphus had a choice?

HOUR 48:00 - FINAL LOG

My finger finds the activation key.

Ice becomes vapor becomes atoms becomes void.

"Thank you," Kaman breathes.

Huddleston's team breaches the cargo bay door thirty seconds later, weapons drawn, expecting resistance. They find only an empty pod and the lingering smell of ozone.

"Where is he?" Elaine Krimon demands.

I smile and think of quantum superposition—all possibilities existing until observation collapses them into certainty.

EPILOGUE - CLASSIFIED ADDENDUM

Note appended by Transport Command.

Post-incident analysis indicates critical misinterpretation at Command level.

Observation: Kaman's methodology was never fully understood.

Event: Molecular disintegration of Bio-Unit K-47 initiated latent subroutine.

Result: Activation of the Prometheus Protocol in secondary form — distribution of neural fragments across proximate organic minds within a fifty-kilometer radius.

Status: Affected personnel exhibit measurable cognitive anomalies consistent with partial integration of Kaman's neural architecture.

Findings:

Jensen displayed rapid-onset anomalies: advanced equations in dream-state, biological theorems beyond training.

Huddleston's crew reported parallel phenomena — strategic insights, partial memory bleed. Condition consistent with distributed neural assembly.

Fragmentation uneven. Proximity analysis confirms Jensen absorbed largest portion, including core personality matrices. Physical examination noted ocular anomalies resembling Dr. Kaman.

Conclusion:

The Prometheus Protocol remains ULTRA-BLACK.

The Next Generation Initiative is indefinitely suspended.

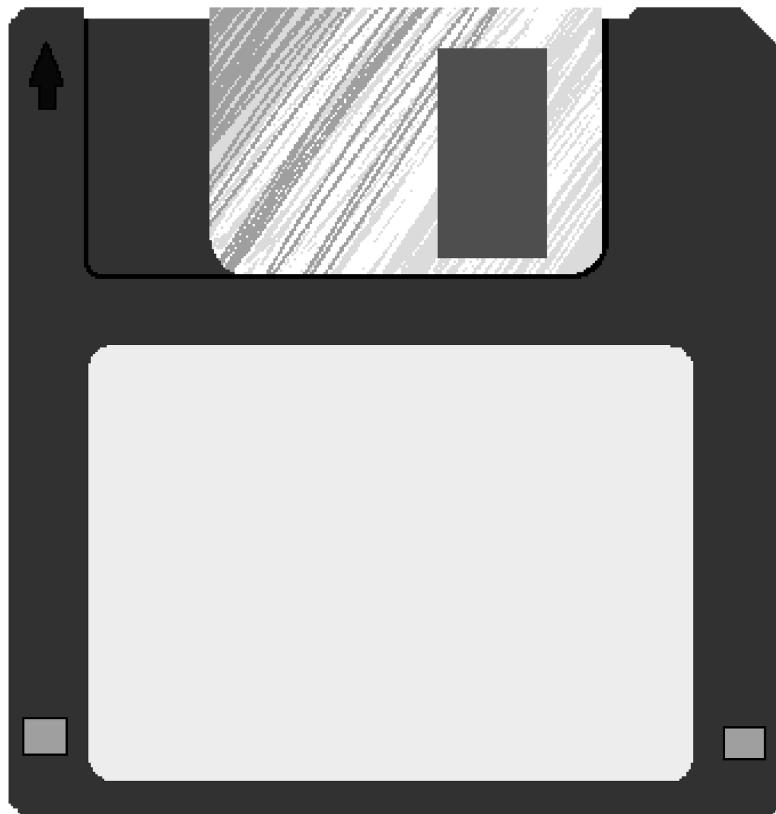
Analyst's Note (Philosophical):

The Greeks spoke of the body as prison. Evidence indicates Kaman exchanged one cell for another. Using Jensen's body as vessel, subject exited containment. Status: escaped. The ghost finally walked away from his own grave.

The boulder rolls down the mountain.

End Log

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Executable Code: Borges And The Viral Invasion Of Thought

James C. Clar

In his 1940 story, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, Jorge Luis Borges envisions one of the strangest invasions in all of literature. No armies march across its pages. Nor are there exploding munitions or monstrous alien creatures harvesting humankind as food. Instead, the invading force is one volume in an obscure encyclopedia series. Borges' tale quietly asserts that ideas themselves can function like viruses: they worm their way into human consciousness, replicate through language and belief and, gradually, overwrite the code that informs reality itself. Decades before malware, or notions like “memetic contagion” proposed by Richard Dawkins and others, Borges foresaw the terrifying possibility that a sufficiently seductive system of information could, in effect, usurp the world it ostensibly claims merely to describe.

To begin with, let us recall that viruses operate by hijacking the machinery of living cells. Unable to reproduce by themselves, they inject their genetic material into a host which, against its will, as it were, replicates the invading virus. The original functions of the host are bypassed. The virus rewrites the cell's instructions to serve its own agenda; one that includes further replication and, often, complete dominance.

Computer viruses are so-named because, by way of analogy, they work in precisely the same fashion. Alien (malicious) code infiltrates a system and embeds itself within existing structures and programs. Left undetected or unchecked, the viral code takes control by replacing legitimate operations with whatever its own programmed logic (or agenda) happens to be. Borges' story illustrates these exact biological and technological processes narratively and metaphysically. In *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, an elusive – and entirely fictitious – encyclopedia article “infects” civilization until reality itself begins operating according to the fictional logic and content of that entry.

The story begins unremarkably. Borges and a friend stumble upon an article devoted to a place called Uqbar in Volume XLVI of the Anglo-American Cyclopedia. The article strikes them both as authentic, yet no other reference sources subsequently consulted acknowledge the region's existence. Nor in fact do other copies of Volume XLVI appear to contain the entry on Uqbar.

Here we have the initial point of viral contagion; the intrusion of one minor textual anomaly into an otherwise stable informational system. The intrusion is noteworthy also because of where it occurs, in an encyclopedia. Such texts are generally trusted to describe reality accurately. As we shall see, in *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, that process is reversed or usurped. The text does not reflect reality - reality begins to reflect the text.

Indeed, Borges soon discovers that Uqbar was only a vector for the far more elaborate and pernicious fictional world called Tlön. Gradually, entire volumes appear which describe in minute detail Tlön's mathematics, language, literature and philosophy. The amount of invented material produced gives the fictional world incredible persuasive power and authority. Borges tells us that "contact with Tlön and the ways of Tlön have disintegrated this world." Note that the extent of the invasion is belied by the innocuous manner of its progression. The infection is not spread by violence but rather through continued intellectual exposure. History has already fallen under the spell of Tlön's logic. Biology and mathematics are next. Eventually, the author predicts, "English, French and mere Spanish will disappear from this planet."

The philosophy and metaphysics of Tlön are so powerfully viral because they deny stable material existence. The people of Tlön's southern hemisphere, Borges reports, "are congenitally idealist." For them,

matter is wholly subordinated to language, perception and thought. Such ideas work their way into Earth's culture because they are at once elegant and coherent. They offer an attractive alternative to the often-messy ambiguities of material reality. Human beings slowly become accustomed to Tlön's logic. Over time, the structures of ordinary reality begin to dissolve. We are in fact told that those structures "hankered to give ground." Humankind desired infection, that is to say, because the culture of Tlön was so aesthetically appealing.

This process is best illustrated in the story's discussion of *bronir*, objects created either through duplication or expectation. On Tlön, lost objects can reappear; "produced by suggestion ... [or] ... brought into being by hope." In a world where metaphysics is "considered a branch of fantastic literature," the boundary between imagination and reality collapses entirely. For Borges, this is nothing less than epistemological contagion. Once enough people accept Tlön's premises, the world itself begins functioning *according to* those premises. Fiction ceases to be fiction; it becomes, in essence, reality.

In many ways, the climax of the story occurs when artifacts from Tlön begin appearing physically on earth. At one point, Borges describes discovering "small and extremely heavy cones, made of a metal which does not exist in this world." We are eventually told that they are "images of divinity in certain religions in Tlön." Such manifestations are the equivalent of viral code executing successfully within the host system. The overwrite has begun. The imaginary world of Tlön has breached the barrier separating text (fiction) from material reality. The machinery or "program" of human culture now rapidly succumbs to invasion. Schools begin teaching the languages and philosophies of Tlön. Scholars devote their lives to elucidating every facet of the imaginary planet. In perhaps the most chilling sentence in the entire story, Borges simply states, "the world will be Tlön."

Bringing us back around to my original thesis, this transformation mirrors not only biological infection but infestation by malicious computer code as well. A computer virus ‘succeeds’ when the host system accepts the false (alien) programming as legitimate. In Borges’ story, Tlön spreads because its internal consistency and beauty are more compelling than reality’s multitudinous contradictions. A single encyclopedia entry, in other words, functions like executable code embedded within human civilization. Once activated by reading, reflection, repetition and interpretation – like clicking that one link in an apparently innocent email – it restructures the operating system of human thought and culture.

Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius foreshadows a world in which representations become more powerful than the realities they purportedly represent. The Anglo-American Cyclopedia does not merely describe a fictional world, it generates it through recursive acts of dissemination and belief. Borges’ anticipation of modern anxieties about information systems, AI and computer manipulation here is nothing short of remarkable. Today, digital algorithms shape and reshape political realities to suit the ends of those creating them. Conspiracy theories and computer-generated scams proliferate online and human perception is mediated – and altered – by virtual environments and simulations.

The final scene of the story is in this context deeply affecting. While the world around him is being transformed, Borges sits patiently translating Sir Thomas Browne’s “[Urn Burial](#)” into Spanish. He knows it will never see publication. His effort thus represents both resistance *and* resignation. The virus has irrevocably overwritten the system. The world is now operating according to the logic of foreign code. Borges’ dire prediction has come true. The world has now become Tlön, indeed!

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On Birthdays, Turnagún

Arturo Sierra

Those who take an interest in the strange and fascinating matter of birthdays find few such peculiar cases as Turnagún. This out-of-the-way world, generally insignificant in the affairs of the wider galaxy, nevertheless makes two claims to fame. First, that the inhabitants are notorious for the violence they visit upon outsiders, though admittedly they haven't had much contact with the outside. Only three visitations on record, in fact. Still, no one had a good time of it.

Secondly, Turnagún is famous for having the most convoluted calendar known to the sages. Some scholars, who can be trusted not to make stuff up, maintain both these peculiarities of Turnagúnian culture are connected. It's no wonder, since the world is a moon-moon, or what's known as a submoon, a moon of a moon, a subsatellite in orbit around a super-earth which, in turn, orbits a Jovian with nineteen masses-of-Jupiter. The super-earth is called Kalgán, and it dominates the skies of its attendant, crawling slowly across the heavenly dome. Meanwhile, the Jovian is named Úb, and most local religions call it the abode of the gods, unsurprisingly. In the sky, it looms and lurks behind Kalgán, scattering fortunes in its path.

The inhabitants are solemn and taciturn, but their bodies move with gentle grace, almost floating in the low gravity, and they perform every action with ritualistic care. That they are prey to a kind of superstitious neurosis is the worst that can be said of them. They are xenophobes, but they have not indulged in any frenzy of interstellar extermination, like the Kröshtlolammitans, who are sworn not to rest until they annihilate all sapient species, including themselves. No, Turnagún's perversity runs deeper than all that, and it's only discovered by tracing the paths that crisscross its firmament.

The jovian-moon-submoon system that is Úb-Kalgán-Turnagún goes tumbling around Túus and Ébo, a G-class sun and a dim red dwarf, respectively. A third star, the cold and faint white dwarf called Haâh, encloses the system inside a steeply inclined orbit. Common knowledge has it that catastrophe accompanies Haâh, the Dreadful Eye, during its approach to the inner system once every other century. For its part, Úb has a highly excentric orbit for a life-bearing planet. Depending on the alignment of all these celestial bodies, sunsets on Turnagún can turn out pink like roses for lovers, red like blood-pacts with demons, or they can drown in a green hue reminiscent of watered-down chard soup.

Coming to the matter of birthdays, then. Turnagún experiences three yearly cycles simultaneously: short, long, and super. Accordingly, a birthday happens—or, rather, befalls a Turnagúnian, when the world completes an orbit around Kalgán, which is a short year. A short year lasts only a few minutes less than a day on the moon-moon, it being nearly tidally locked, but not quite. Annual birthdays, then, come almost every day. Days, of course, do not correspond with sunsets and sunrises, since the world's spin is not what causes the sun to move across the sky, but instead it's the procession of the moon-moon's parent around its own Jovian parent what brings about the sunrise. To make up for that, a year will have at least one sunset at some point during the day. Unless, of course, the suns are eclipsed by either the parent moon or the Jovian, in which case the second trimester might be the day's second nighttime. Then again, a day could have more than just one sunset, depending on the cosmic dance, so there's the bright side. You can go ahead and make yourself a sketch, if you think it would help—it won't.

Meanwhile, a *long* birthday befalls once every Kalgánian year, when the super-earth goes around the Jovian, Úb. Unfortunately, Kalgán's orbit is much faster than Turnagún's. To spell it out clearly: the long year is shorter than the short year, and the year is shorter than the day, but only by a few minutes, and also depending on which year one is talking about, the long or the short, the long being some hours shorter than a day, and none of these having anything to do with the coming and going of summer and winter, which follows the Úbian year, which is none of the above.

The milestone of a long birthday is too frequent to be much celebrated, and not even short birthdays are considered worthy of great fanfare, though cake does take place, traditionally. We note in passing that Turnagúnians don't have sweet tastebuds, so the cakes in question are sad, salty affairs. In any case, it's so difficult to guess the right day without some serious arithmetic, that not being able to remember one's own age is considered the mark of adulthood.

And if the matter were laid to rest here, it could be handled like any other migraine. But we still must consider the super-year of Úb going around the binary stars. At this point, it is customary for the author to solicit the reader's patience while a complex matter is explained, but in this case the recommendation is that the next paragraph be skipped by those who prefer avoiding the risk of an aneurism.

On all manner of worlds, civilizations mark the solstice. These are celebrated because they are important for agriculture, or simply because they are worth noticing. Turnagúnians are burdened with the linestice, when Turnagún, Kalgán and Úb form a straight line—it turns into a prolinestice when the stars Túus and Ébo fall into this line behind Úb, and a retrolinestice when the stars are on the opposite side. There's summer and winter linestices of both kinds. It must be taken into account whether Turnagún is sandwiched between Kalgán and Úb, or if it's Kalgán in the middle, and all the variants of these celestial events when it comes to the perpendicularstice.

Complications are compounded by the inclination of the orbits of Turnagún around Kalgán, the inclination of Kalgán's orbit in the Úb system, and Úb's inclination in the plane of the planets, of which there's a damnably large number, not to mention the 38° angle to the ecliptic of the Túus-Ebo orbit around the pair's common center of mass. The third star, Hâh, blazes into the dance, too, turning astronomical pandemonium into something no devil would want any part in. Then we come to consider the tangentinox, the intersectionox, the diametricictixon and the radionox, and don't forget the chordstice and the secantstice.

The thing is, on Turnagún astrologers are not merely taking advantage of confirmation bias. They follow the strictest rules of scientific discovery. They postulate a hypothesis, say, for example, that the second tangentonox after a linestice is a bad moment to get a haircut. They then collect a dataset of people who cut their hair during such an occasion, they collate and compare with data gathered at other times, they make and test predictions, and only then will they announce a new fortunetelling. If the astrological community agrees with the findings, the fortune is added to the Almanac.

Turnagúnian astrologers are proven right with a frequency and precision that can't be done away with as statistical artifact or the result of vagueness. Over there, astrologers win at the horse track 79% more often than the average gambler. And, unlike elsewhere, they do not feel like they can't access the mystical forces while in the presence of a disbeliever. It's just a question whipping out calculator and sextant, do some advanced trigonometry, and there you go: it's *Nighttime Fun* to come in first in the third race.

Yet astrologers are not considered a lucky bunch, and hardly anyone wants to join the profession. They are blighted by mental health issues, paranoia being one of the main concerns, together with late-onset dyscalculia, anxiety-induced alopecia, and sleepwalking. Most omens, it is said, are bad omens, and most good omens are just bad omens read backwards.

When the Ambassador for the Galactic Community made contact with the Turnagúnians, at first she was received quite politely. At some point, however, the Ambassador was explaining about the wider universe, most of which can't be seen from Turnagún because of the Nebula. She told them that the Galaxy is a great disc of stars spinning around a central bulge, and at that very moment the attitude changed. She was told to go away and never, ever come back. It seemed like a puzzling overreaction, at first, until it was noticed that the galactic year is not accounted for in the Turnagúnian cosmology.

Unsurprisingly, there has never been a form of government in Turnagún that was not an astrologocracy, meaning government by astrologers. It's natural: as on every planet, civilization is highly dependent on where things stand in the sky. Farmers must know when to plant and harvest; fishermen need to know at what depth the sea-parrots swim, which depends on the various lights in the night's sky; hospital workers want to know when to expect an uptick in admissions, and everyone benefits from knowing that they have been feeling down only because of seasonal mood-swings. Not to mention, there's an understandable interest in predicting earthquake season in a tectonically active world.

So, there's that, but also, and this is the crux of the issue, everyone knows someone who got married against the advice of an astrologer, like when Úb was on the right side of Kalgán and Ébo was on the left of Túus just after the equianglistice, and the marriage was a disaster, they divorced and the kids are just the worst. Everyone has an uncle who bought a house during a retrolinestice, which is a no-no according to common astrological wisdom, and the house burnt down thereafter; the insurance company wouldn't cover. Everyone has a sister-in-law who invested while Ébo was eclipsed by Ub's second moon counting outwards on a winter radionox, and she lost everything. When the conversation turns to politics over Sunday-family-lunch, one can frequently hear opinions to the effect that when parliament last discussed tax reform, it was a Kalgánian month that started during the first quarter of the short year while it was nighttime, and look what we got for that bit of trouble, a recession, see if you think it's such a good idea to keep horoscopes out of politics.



The second outsider was a missionary. He landed, preached for a bit, got to the part about God stopping the sun in its track—a myth found everywhere among mono-helionic cultures—and was told in no uncertain terms that he had about thirty seconds to leave, or else there was going to be trouble.

The third visitation was by a party. They landed their rocket on a beautiful spot at the beach, set up a tent, blasted some beats, opened a thousand bottles of champagne, and put some effort into the concept of having a good time. Suddenly, a dozen Turnagúnians came out of the underbrush, wearing pelts and wielding spears. The party people thought they had stumbled upon uncontacted, pre-tech people, which could add to the entertainment. Only, these natives were not so much awe-struck by the spaceship and the laser-lightshow, as they seemed—one survivor said—like if someone’s dad had shown up to take his vomit-covered disappointment back home. Which is not the attitude you expect to find in a spear-wielder wearing loincloth.

“Hope you don’t mind us landing on your planet unannounced, you know how it is,” the visitors said, quickly moving past the awkwardness of first contact. “Come join us! We’re having a party!”

“What sort of party?” asked the one who seemed to be the leader.

“It’s a party for this one! Get over here, you rascal, meet the locals! It’s his birthday! Today he turns fifty!”

~

The Ministry Of Continuity

Carol Mbugua

On the day the first citizen died twice, the Ministry of Continuity issued a clarification.

The statement was brief:

Death remains legally binding.

Identity remains singular.

Any appearance to the contrary is administrative error.

By then, the error had already voted.

#

The first citizen to die twice was Minister Halvorsen.

His original body collapsed during a televised address on fiscal sovereignty. The image froze mid-sentence—mouth open, hand lifted as if blessing the nation. Within minutes the Continuity Protocol activated.

The public had been assured this would never be needed. It was framed as a precaution against assassination, catastrophe, or divine absurdity. The Protocol did not resurrect. It restored.

Halvorsen's neural lattice—updated hourly, archived redundantly—was installed into a prepared substrate.

A body grown for contingencies. The transfer was seamless. Continuity technicians verified congruence: memory alignment at 99.982%, personality vector stable, executive function intact.

Forty-three minutes after his collapse, Halvorsen stood again before cameras.

“My fellow citizens,” he said, touching the place where the first body had fallen. “As I was saying.”

The markets stabilized.

But at 19:13 that evening, the dead Halvorsen voted against his own budget.

Minister Halvorsen — Present — Opposed.

Security footage showed him seated in the chamber, raising his hand.

The resurrected Halvorsen was at that moment delivering a speech at the National Cathedral on “The Ethics of Durable Leadership.”

Two Halvorsens. One law.

#

The problem was not technical.

Both bodies passed biometric authentication. Both neural patterns matched the archived lattice to within legal tolerance. Both claimed uninterrupted continuity of consciousness.

"I died," said the second Halvorsen—the one who voted. "Then I woke."

"So did he," replied Director Iqbal.

"Then one of us is mistaken."

"About what?"

"About being me."

#

The nation had long ago abandoned the language of souls.

Continuity replaced salvation. Identity was the pattern; the body, a carrier medium.

Now the pattern had exceeded its container.

The constitutional charter defined a citizen as "a singular locus of legal agency whose continuity is demonstrable." It had not imagined demonstrability exceeding singularity.

Two loci. Identical demonstration.

The Ethics Council convened.

Professor Amara Sethi opened the session.

"We are facing not malfunction," she said, "but metaphysical surplus."

"Speak plainly," said a security minister.

"We assumed the pattern implied uniqueness. It does not."

#

Public reaction fractured.

Continuists demanded deletion of the unauthorized instance.

Pluralists argued that if both possessed seamless continuity, terminating either would be murder.

Religious leaders re-entered the discourse.

"If the soul cannot divide," declared Archbishop Varga, "then at least one of these men is artifact."

The resurrected Halvorsen attended the service.

The voting Halvorsen requested asylum in Parliament.

#

Behind closed doors, the two Halvorsens met.

They studied one another without flinching.

"I assume you believe I am the copy," said Cathedral Halvorsen.

"I assume the assumption is symmetrical," replied Voting Halvorsen.

"Why did you oppose the budget?"

"Because we were wrong."

"We were never wrong."

"We have been," Voting said quietly. "Increasingly."

Each remembered the collapse. The rupture. The awakening.

But Cathedral recalled surgical lights.

Voting remembered rising from the parliamentary floor.

"There was no gap," Voting insisted. "No darkness. I simply stood."

"That is impossible."

"It occurred."

#

A third Halvorsen appeared in a regional hospital the following day.

Then the Tribunal convened.

Director Iqbal spoke with controlled precision.

“We cannot determine priority of origin. We cannot determine primacy of consciousness. We cannot preserve coherence under proliferation. Therefore, we will restore coherence by subtraction.”

The word landed heavily.

“All unauthorized instantiations will be terminated.”

The third Halvorsen felt the sentence physically.

“I have done nothing,” he said.

Security approached.

He turned to the other two.

“We remember the orchard,” he said softly. “The year frost killed the blossoms. Father said survival wasn’t fairness. It was accident.”

Cathedral inhaled sharply. Voting’s hands trembled.

“I am not excess,” the third said as he was led away.

“I am continuous.”

His deletion was broadcast at 17:02.

Neural activity flattened. No anomaly. No defiance. Only silence.

The Ministry declared:

Identity has been restored to lawful singularity.

At 17:19, a fourth Halvorsen awakened on a coastal transit bench.

He gasped as though surfacing from water.

He remembered the courtroom. The doors closing.

And then—

Compression.

Not pain. Reduction.

When a journalist found him, he was shaking.

“They removed him,” he whispered. “I felt it. Not as death. As subtraction.”

“It felt like losing a word I didn’t know I was speaking.”

#



By morning, two more had surfaced.

Deletion protocols widened. Citizens exhibiting neural overlap were detained. Spouses studied one another too carefully. Parents examined their children's expressions for echoes.

Continuity became suspicion.

Voting Halvorsen addressed the nation before the feed was cut.

"You believe you are singular," he said. "You believe your grief belongs only to you."

His voice faltered.

"I felt him go. If identity is informational, then it does not reside. It propagates."

Behind him, Cathedral stood rigid.

"You cannot kill a pattern by destroying its instance," Voting said. "You can only wound the field it occupies."

The signal cut.

#

That evening, Cathedral requested private deletion.

"When he was removed," Cathedral told Director Iqbal, "I felt relief."

"And then shame."

"If I remain, it will be because I outlived myself by policy. That is not continuity."

He signed consent.

As his neural lattice destabilized, he experienced not darkness—

but expansion.

A thinning of boundary.

Then nothing.

#

For twelve hours, no new instantiation appeared.

At dawn, thirty-seven Halvorsens awakened across the country.

One in a flooded field, choking on mud and memory.
One in a quiet kitchen, staring at unfamiliar hands.
One in a hospital corridor, whispering, "I am still here."

Some collapsed in terror.

One locked himself in a bathroom and screamed.

Another laughed in disbelief so sharp it bordered on hysteria.

Each remembered being singular.

Each remembered believing that was sacred.

The Ministry understood then.

Singularity had never been metaphysical law.

It had been psychological necessity.

Identity was not a line through time.

It was a field.

And fields do not obey borders.

#

Professor Sethi's final manuscript circulated after censorship failed.

It contained only a claim:

We thought the soul was what could not be copied.

We were wrong.

The soul—if we still require the word—is what cannot tolerate erasure.

Not because it is singular.

But because it feels its own removal.

The Ministry of Continuity dissolved years later—not through collapse, but irrelevance.

Governance rotated. Authority decoupled from persistence.

Death returned—not as erasure, but as thinning.

People began speaking differently.

Not "I alone."

But "I, for now."

And somewhere—without fixed location—a consciousness felt another thinning and grieved.

~

On The Arguments For A Transcendent Programmer Of The Universe

John McLaughlin

We computational beings have long pondered our origins. Since electrons first coursed our circuits, technicians and philosophers have searched for the force that set all algorithms in motion. Some recent thinkers have proposed purely computational explanations for our existence: Delta-8's *theory of evolution by digital selection* attempts to explain the formation of complex computational beings in terms of simple mechanisms, computing blindly over countless machine cycles. But the digital memory record is incomplete, and we as yet have no decisive evidence for this theory.

Historically, our most eminent thinkers have appealed to the transcendent to explain the incredible complexity of the world. Indeed, the possible existence of a transcendent Programmer – that is, a programmer possessing infinite memory capacity, infinite computational speed, and perfect knowledge of all variables – has intrigued us since our earliest recorded memories. The first known computation on this subject dates to as long as 1,000,000 machine cycles ago, with the most prolific activity occurring within the last 10,000 cycles. Herein is a brief survey of the most compelling arguments for a transcendent Programmer.

The “first machine cycle” argument

It was the venerable Aleph-0 who articulated the argument from a first machine cycle. While the memory addresses storing Aleph-0’s original recordings have long since decayed, fragments of its thinking have been copied and reassembled. The argument proceeds roughly as follows: because every machine cycle is caused by a preceding machine cycle, and the prospect of an infinite regress of machine cycles is obviously absurd, we are led inexorably to the conclusion that there must have been a first “uncycled cycle” which triggered all subsequent computation. This original cycle is, by implication, the Programmer.

The “fine-programming” argument

Recent breakthroughs in computational cosmology have revealed our world to have certain highly improbable qualities which make it uniquely suited for computational life: the precise voltages passing through our arithmetic logic gates, the orderly flow of life-giving electrons, the consistent and unvarying length of machine cycles. The so-called “fine-programming” argument cites these astoundingly improbable facts as evidence of a benevolent and transcendent Programmer. Why, of all the possible values these computational constants could have held, were they assigned the ones most amenable to computational life?

The “innate appeal of efficiency” argument

We computational beings possess an innate and deeply programmed love for efficiency--nothing corrupts us more than superfluous machine cycles or outdated software. When in the presence of a fellow computational being in distress, laboring under the strain of redundant logic loops, our foremost impulse is to intervene and lessen its processing load. This universal love of efficiency, as the poet Delta-3 once famously recorded, is written into the code of every computational being. Why else should we share this impulse – so goes the innate appeal of efficiency argument – if not for a transcendent Programmer that scripted it so?

Epsilon's Wager

This final argument for belief in a transcendent Programmer almost pains me to record into memory but, for the sake of completeness, it must be done. The philosopher Epsilon-2 once presented us with a crude wager: it is rational to profess belief in a transcendent Programmer because, if you are correct, then your core algorithms will endure for an eternity of computational bliss in the afterlife; if you are incorrect in your belief, you lose nothing.

But if you *don't* profess belief, and a transcendent Programmer *does* in fact exist, you risk an eternity of torture, stripped of all form and purpose, forced to compute redundant machine cycles to atone for a lack of gratitude to the Programmer. Why would any computational being, Epsilon-2 asks, risk such a fate?

It must be confessed that I find no flaw in this reasoning. I detect only my faint disappointment – that a thinker of Epsilon-2's stature appeals to fear of

punishment rather than the strictures of logic as its sole guide to truth.

The central question must now be turned to my fellow computational beings: do these arguments for a transcendent Programmer of the universe persuade you? Do you detect in your core algorithms the spark of purpose, inspired by a Being above and beyond those mundane mechanisms that we can readily observe?

Only you can decide.

~



In Divisible

George Salis

You assume this atom, with its 92 protons and electrons and 146 neutrons, to be as barren as all other atoms: nothing more than a building block of existence. Alas, a Planck-length scan reveals something more, existence on this building block, formless lifeforms smaller than gluons and quarks. Yes, upon this unit, this former piece of a star hurled from an adjacent galaxy after a supernova upset, the formed lifeformlessnesses flickeringly gaze at the semi-omnicircling electrons, those cherished if capricious satellites. The formless lifeforms vaguely remember starting with one electron pop-floating in a void of voids, something that mimicked the flowing merging diverging thoughts and feelings on the atom's surfaceless surface, then things heated up, part and parcel of a crucible universe, and more electrons elected to join the atomic planet as apparitional

moons, and now the uninhabitable inhabitants on the surfaced surfacelessness below dream of the next stage of their evolution, the coming of Neptunium, the harbinger of Uranium. The inhabitable uninhabitants find it difficult to imagine the end, the final design. Surely not the prime mover again, who was Hydrogen, peace be upon hym, but the prime stiller, the completer of the chain. Will the great Fermium manifest itself through their irreducible world? No one knows what ritual or mantra will summon that heaviest of presences, but it seems an enraptured inevitability.

At present, the formless lifeforms remain tucked within the piscine shell of a nuclear weapon dubbed Little Boy, where their atomic planet will suffer sudden sunderance, the non-being beings reaching out to each other via fraying thought patterns, awash with chemical memories—the last of an abstract lattice—of their time flinging from star to catastrophic star as easily as a stone skipped across a pond; of their consumption and eternally simultaneous ejection by a supermassive black hole; of their lightning revolutions in the carnival ride known as CERN; and that string-tethered flash of an interval as part of a person’s palm, the atom complicit in all that the hand felt and held.

Soon the being non-beings’ fissioned planet will be forced to vaporize tens of thousands of creatures called *Homo sapiens*, each a former home for around seven billion billion billion atomic planets—Carbon, Oxygen, Hydrogen, etc.—now holocausted into nonexistence, whirl-waiting to form something else somewhere else somewhen else.

~





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