

# SPRING ISSUE 26

WITH POEMS AND  
STORIES BY: DAVID  
GIANASTASIO,  
MATTHEW  
HARRISON, AND  
MORE

 ALTERED  
REALITY

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## ASTRONAUT FOR BREAKFAST By David Gianatasio

The astronaut *snap-crackle-and-popped!* into the breakfast nook. Rocking a full pressure suit, dude was retro-futuristic. Sleek yet bulky, his gear appeared NASA-brochure old-timey, while also suggesting an era yet to come. He shimmered like stardust as I gripped the lapels of my terrycloth robe and clucked my tongue repeatedly.

I just assumed he was, in fact, male. Though really, I had no idea. A dark sunshield hid his (her? its?) face. The opaque material reflected the fluorescent-green hours and minutes of my microwave's display. Mirrored in his headgear, the digits glowed filmy and foreboding.

I sat in shock, numbed and awed by the figure perched on one of my soiled Kody Performance Dining Chairs. So much for enjoying a peaceful cup of joe. I'd spilled most of it when he'd arrived, anyway. I soaked up the slop with a paper napkin, unsure of what else to do.

A crescent-moon banana sagged in the fruit bowl between us on the chipped ceramic table. I giggle spasmodically. But I do that all time. I kept clenching and unclenching my right fist. That was something new.

I heard myself say, "We're fresh out of Tang."

He didn't react, just breathed in slow, rhythmic hisses like a booster stage with leaky valves.

"You must get that a lot. Tang jokes, I mean. Do they still sell that stuff? Used to come with plastic lunar rover toys. Rubber bands made them roll. I bought one on eBay but lost it when we moved. Can I get you anything? Cereal? English muffin? Moon Pie?"

Zero reaction. That figured. Astronauts are famously a serious and scientific breed not known for their sense of humor.

"So ... how'd you get here? Some sort of dimensional warp?" At least his capsule hadn't splashed down in the pool. The condo board would raise hell.

Dude's respiration seemed labored, or else the equipment was faulty. *Puff ... hiss ... puff ... hisss ... puff ... hissssssss ...*

Like a slowly deflating tire or wounded rocket.

ARRRRHHHHHGGGHHHHHHH!

That was my roommate Roo, who'd just padded over in slippers, jammy bottoms and an extra-large Houston Astros T-shirt.

"What the fuck is THAT?" She pointed and her fingers shook.

It was my turn to draw a ragged breath. "Obviously, an astronaut's joined us for breakfast."

"Is this one of your stupid friends?" Roo inched closer, an explorer navigating uncertain terrain. "Is Jimmy in there?"

She froze, finger still outstretched. The astronaut buzzed like a radio signal struggling to reach Earth. Roo lowered her hand and began backing into the living-room.

Space-guy sat perfectly still. Which was, somehow, more disconcerting than if he's leaped up on his silver-booted heels and threatened us with a ray-gun.

From the wall near the fridge, my cat-clock's ticking grew louder. A staccato countdown to who knows what. 10 ... 9 ... 8 ... 7 ...

Suddenly, the astronaut's image dissolved into spiraling dots of brilliance—countless mini-galaxies—then reformed.

Roo raced outside and loped across the yard. I was tempted to follow, but found myself squinting at the spaceman, seeking some clue to unlock the mystery.

The suit bore no insignia or emblem. No name badge or any hint of identification. Little lights winked on the breast-panel. Tiny *bleeps!* filled the room, but that was just a mouse darting from beneath the dishwasher to follow Roo through the open front door.

I struggled for something intelligent to say. "Do you speak English?"

*Hisss ... puff ... hisss ... hisssss...*

"You got enough oxygen in there?"

I was silent for about a minute, which felt like an hour, as if Einstein's Laws were bending and temporal rules no longer applied. Reality was sliding every which way, and I fought to stabilize the ship for re-entry.

Sorry for all the cosmic wordplay. But my mind was ablaze with strained stratospheric metaphors during this uncanny close encounter. (Sorry.)

Anyway, inspiration hit me smack in the face, like a rogue asteroid.

My insight: This traveler must be some future version of me. Or a future/past/alternate-reality variation, as his rig seemed vintage yet advanced.

“Your rig seems vintage yet advanced.” I grinned moronically. “By any chance, are you *me*? Did you come here with a message? Is there something I should know?”

Such inane drivel. Maybe Jimmy *was* inside that outfit, playing a prank. But how could he *pop!* in and out, split apart and fuse back together? Jim’s such a freaking wipe.

Strangely, boredom set in. This absurd scenario was going nowhere. Time to blast the plot into orbit.

Grasping his sunshield in both hands, I flipped up the visor and peered inside.

But I didn’t see myself. Or Jimmy. Or anything human. Or even anything NOT human. It was something so outrageously OTHER, so outré, that words fail me now.

It was unimaginably horrible, yet achingly beautiful, too. It might have been human once, but not anymore, though maybe it would be again.

Imagine your darkest dreads and deepest desires. Stuff that fills you with equal parts fear and wonder. *That’s* not what I saw. Still, it never hurts to stretch your mind.

Speaking of fear, I squealed like a baby and bolted. My socks skidded across the linoleum then sank into the soiled shag of the living-room rug.

Maybe I had it all wrong. Had *I* invaded *his* space? *Its* space?

I took a giant leap onto the front porch, expecting a cyclone of planets spinning out of control, convinced that I’d soar through fiery nebulae for all eternity.

Instead, I touched down on the cracked brick footpath with my ’97 Subaru Legacy squatting like a bloated command module in the driveway.

Right on cue, the engine sprang to life, and the sound system blared to wake the neighbors:

*“Ground Control to Major Tom...”*

The astronaut flashed me a thumbs-up and vanished.

In the fruit basket, a butterknife impaled a grapefruit. My java-soaked napkin hung from the utensil, like a freak flag limply flying on some lumpy alien world.

## CREEP By David Gianatasio

Snarling out from beneath the bed, my claws tap-tapping on the hardwood, fangs oozing slime.

*Roar!*

*Growl!*

*Shriek!*

*Howl!*

“You’re in my imagination,” Jamie says from under the covers. “If I stop eating candy or quit reading about monsters, you won’t exist anymore. Thbbft!”

That’s scary. The stuff of nightmares.

Later, Jamie twirls around the room to a TikTok tune.

Stretched out on the floor amid the stinky socks and sticky-chocolate wrappers, I creepily hum along.

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David Gianatasio's latest collection, *BFFS @ the End of Time*, dropped in April from Alien Buddha Press. Find David online at <https://x.com/davegian> His new book can be found at <https://a.co/d/02hyIsar>

## Three poems By Matthew Harrison

### Smarter?

As I look around  
and see the myriad devices  
that beep authoritatively  
and point the way  
past phased traffic lights,  
onto driverless trains,  
into intelligent buildings,  
in the increasingly  
AI-empowered city  
through which we, distracted, stumble,  
I wonder – is it just  
that our smarts  
have somehow seeped out  
into them?

### Moon or Mars?

Mars is seductive, but the Moon is not  
It's the Red Planet for us any day  
Go to the Moon again? Oh, send a bot!

Is there anything that Mars hasn't got  
In the mystique-alien-science way?  
Mars is seductive, but the Moon is not

The Moon comes first, though – it's ashy old scrot  
But nearer – call it a 'welcoming grey'!

Go to the Moon again? Not just a bot:

A manned flight will give us a practice shot  
 Before we head for Mars another day  
 Mars is seductive, but the Moon is not

The Moon's also good for a quick sling-shot  
 Fly around it once, then we're Mars-a-way!  
 Go to the Moon again? Well, with a bot

Give us a rocket and a decent slot  
 And we'll be touching down in that red bay  
 Mars is seductive, but the Moon is not  
 Go to the Moon again? Sure: Take me, bot!

## Cyborgs

But is that really so? I ask my friend.

Smiling, he nods, and without speaking  
 flips back the cover, runs a dexterous finger  
 down the screen, taps, then shows me.  
 A pause, an icon rotates,  
 and there's the proof:  
 forty-eight compelling megapixels,  
 with further photos appearing  
 under the delicately swiping finger.  
 I concede defeat.

The screen flashes, my friend's smile fades,  
 he excuses himself and walks away  
 screen to ear,  
 cover dangling awkwardly,  
 and even when he returns,  
 the cover stays open, his anxious eye  
 on it always.

Parting, I check my own phone.

Then I wonder,  
 what have we become?

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Matthew Harrison lives in Hong Kong, and is reliving a boyhood passion for science fiction. He has published numerous short pieces and is building up to longer ones as he learns more about

the universe. Matthew is married with two children but no pets as there is no space for these in Hong Kong. Find Matthew online at [www.matthewharrison.hk](http://www.matthewharrison.hk)

## The Procedure by Blake Beckman

When T.R. told me about The Procedure, I thought it was his usual brand of nonsense. But then, I saw the black and white ad in the paper. On the left, visible lines wrinkled a man's skin, drooping like his frown. A young man on the right smiled back at me with perfect teeth and unmarked face, his hair captured in a swoop of pomade. *Get the Golden Years Back!*, it read across the top. I could hear T.R.'s voice in my head mouthing the slogan, *The Forward Look*.

T.R. was always searching for the new thing. He enjoyed the hunt. He collected cars, coins, antique taxidermy, like children's toys. And he collected people just the same. I was the newest addition to his collection, but T.R. was my only friend since taking up residence in the manor I inherited from a distant uncle. He thought my accent was "exotic", and he liked to show me off at the club.

"Can't you imagine it, Martin?" T.R. asked. He was the only one to call me that. I told him that's not my name, that in fact, Marty is listed on my birth certificate, but he insisted.

"Imagine what?" I said.

The ice clinked in his whiskey as he swallowed the last of it. "Being young again."

I nursed my own drink, leaning back in the chair, watching ladies pass through the ballroom. "Never really given it much thought."

"Of course not," he said. "I scheduled The Procedure for tomorrow."

"I didn't realize you were serious about it."

T.R. stood up at the table and spread his arms out like a scarecrow basking in the sun. "Take a good look at it. It'll be the last time you're going to see it."

"Sit down."

He did no such thing. To me, the stares made my skin itch like dozens of spiders crawling across my back, but T.R.'s favorite commodity was attention.

"I'm going to have a party," he announced. "To celebrate the death of this body. You have to come, Martin."

"Sorry. Not tonight. I have plans."

He grinned. "That old pal of yours? Or that woman?"

I took another drink. "What kind of procedure is it again?"

"The doctor used a bunch of fancy words. I told the doctor I wanted to be me but better, younger. You know, like Mrs. Fillmore's nose job," he said, loud enough for the entire dining room to hear, just as Mrs. Fillmore walked by scowling.

At her gasp, T.R. tilted his head. "Props to your surgeon. Brilliant work, darling."

"Why did you have to do that?" I said.

"Because it's great fun."

I called my old pal, Sprocket, that night. He wasn't exactly an *old* pal, but a guy I worked with at the bicycle factory. In fact, he was rather young, maybe twenty-five. On his first day, everyone joked that he could have been my long-lost son. Guess we look alike. The others called him "Marty jr." for a month. I was the one to give him the name, Sprocket. Being baked alive in the heat of the facility, my thighs like slippery tan Jell-O in my space suit, Sprocket and I welded bicycle frames all day. The guy was a real flame head. You could see his crude smirk beneath his mask outline by lightning sparks. One day on the job, he burned a hole straight through his glove. It left a crescent scar on the back of his hand. Lucky bastard, could have been a lost worse.

Sprocket was the only one that still picked up my calls.

“How’s Peg?” I asked down the line.

“The baby’s gonna come any day now, so I’ll let you imagine,” he said.

“That bad?”

“She’s ready. I’m ready. It’s too bad they won’t let me off work.”

“Not even for the day?”

“Can’t swing it. Things have been tight, and they’ve reduced my hours.”

“Who? Tim?”

“No. He got canned a while ago. It’s George now.”

“Not George. If he called me ‘old man’ one more time, I’d have clobbered him.”

“If you stuck around, you’d be manager instead of George.”

The sharp pang of bitterness coats his words. It smacks me across the face, an invisible red handprint.

Sprocket broke the silence after a moment. “Enough about me. Tell me about this woman.”

I had been writing to Eliza since I acquired my newfound wealth. My first memories seemed to be of her. As children, we played together while my mother cleaned her family home. We played marbles in the dirt. Her mother always chastised her for getting her dresses dirty, but Eliza didn’t care one bit. She held my hand unabashedly. When we were young, she loved the stories I told of far-off imaginary realms. Her round eyes held mine, ablaze like the hottest part of the flame. Her hair, oh, I could still feel it between my fingers, curled around itself tight to her head as though it hated being parted from her.

When we were older, just sixteen, the night before my first day at the bicycle factory, we slipped into her father’s study and stole a small bottle of cognac. The old bugger didn’t even realize it was gone. Eliza handed me the bottle. I, the knight, and it, her favor, on my way to battle.

“We’ll open it when you make your wealth, and we marry,” she said. Her voice was little more than a whisper as she giggled. “I bet it tastes like candy.”

I turn that same bottle over in my hand, now thirty years older, when T.R. waltzed into my dining room after The Procedure.

His skin didn’t look oddly stretched over his bones or plumped up like ripe fruit on the verge of bursting. His hair, once speckled with grey around a receding hairline, was thick, dense, and well groomed. Defined biceps and a muscular chest peaked through his white button down. Everything about him was newer, younger, even his voice. I wouldn’t have recognized him if he didn’t carry the same mannerisms, the same quirks.

At the club, everyone fawned over T.R.’s change, and, soon, others started getting The Procedure. Mrs. Fillmore came back as a twenty something red head with a nose like the slope of a child’s slide. Then, Mr. Diaz went in for The Procedure for a better knee and came out five inches taller and thirty years younger. He didn’t even look like himself anymore. Soon enough, I was one of the last at the club not to have undergone The Procedure.

When I told Sprocket about it, his new baby, Peg. Jr., wailing in the background, he didn’t laugh like I thought he would.

“Jesus, Marty. I’ve got more important things to be worrying about than your rich people shit,” he said. “They laid me off at the factory, and you want to talk about plastic surgery?”

But I wasn't sure it was plastic surgery. I've seen my share of bandages and bruised skin at the club, women and men walking around with swollen lips and sucked out fat. I had never seen anything like The Procedure, though. It was like they were different people.

Of course, I wrote all this in my letters to Eliza. She would love the conspiracy of it all. People disappear for a few days, and instead of stitches and redness, they come back with youth and unwrinkled skin. Eliza's voice played in my head like a lullaby. *You see, Marty, you belonged here with me all along. You are the only one that knows how to have fun.*

Eliza would understand, but I thought it best not to talk about it anymore with Sprocket.

"I found a job," he said down the receiver. "The hours are weird, though. Won't get to see Peg Jr. for a long time, but I'm desperate."

"What's the job?"

"Retail."

"What are you selling?"

"Listen, Marty, I gotta go."

"Call soon?"

The line went silent.

The next day, I finally got a letter back from Eliza. It didn't smell like her flowery perfume, not like her letters when we were young lovers. I broke the seal, her familiar script drifting me in and out of the past. But it wasn't long or lovely. It was barely a letter. It was more like a note.

Marty,

Please don't write me anymore. I'm not that stupid girl anymore. You're not the young man I used to love anymore. We can't go back.

- Elizabeth Morrisen

*You're not the young man I used to love anymore.*

The sentence pulsed in my mind, throbbing. She's right. I've changed. If only she knew how much, if she knew that we could marry now, that I finally have everything she desired all those years ago. The wealth. The manor. But, she's also wrong. We can go back.

I knew what had to be done. I had to show her. To make her see me again like she used to. My fingers punched T.R.'s number.

The building T.R. took me to wasn't quite a doctor's office. A curved stainless-steel desk with a young blonde woman dressed in black candy stripes wrapped around the room like an insect's exoskeleton. She led us to a small room with a metal table, the kind from a morgue, and gave me a shiny red gown to change into. The cool metal made the skin of my bare thighs and butt sprout goose pimples. It smelled like bleach and decay. When the doctor came in, she handed me a laminated booklet.

"What's this?" I asked.

"The newest models, of course," she said.

I opened the catalogue. Pages and pages of naked bodies. There were women and men with perfect skin, high cheekbones, and perky hindquarters. Red circles and lines marked up the bodies denoting the highlights of each model. The faces were blurred out like they've been met with the end of a lit cigarette.

"Notice the muscular density of this one," the doctor said. "This one here has the best legs. Look here, and you can see the model's history."

"The history?"

"Why, yes. All of our models are previously used."

I stared at the naked bodies, a sickening feeling rising in my throat. Deep down, it settled in. They weren't going to revamp my body. I was getting an entirely new one. Someone else's. I tried to imagine the person's face, but all I could see was Eliza's perfect smile.

I could have asked where the models came from. I could have stopped the entire thing. But, that single memory of her drove me to close the booklet and say, "I just want to look like myself but better, younger."

The doctor gave me a crooked smile. "In that case, I have the perfect model for you."

T.R. walked with us to the surgical unit. Fluorescent lights flickered as they rolled me down the hall on a creaky metal slab. My hair was wrapped in a mesh cap, and a cool draft snaked up my gown.

"I'm doing the right thing, right?" I asked him.

"Of course, Martin. You're going to be one of us now."

"Will you do me a favor? When The Procedure is over, will you send this letter and picture of my new self to Mrs. Elizabeth Morrisen, please?" I handed him the paper. "I want her to be the first to know. And you have my bottle, right? I want to drink it with her after The Procedure."

That's the last thing I remembered before waking from the darkness. My mind swam first, my eyelids following minutes later, fighting against gravity. I twitched my fingers, then my big toe. The nerve endings sparked, tingling to life. After a few minutes, I was able to rise from the rickety bed.

"You're awake," T.R. said. "Would you like to see yourself?"

I opened my mouth to speak. "Yes," I said in a voice not my own.

T.R. brought a handheld mirror up to my face. Wide eyes stared back at me. Black hair, the color of shoe polish, swooped across my forehead. My crow's feet had vanished, and my skin held a plump, youthful bounce again. I looked like my younger self again. I looked like Sprocket. I smiled back at my reflection, thinking how he'd get a kick out of it.

But, then, I reached toward the mirror, and I noticed the crescent shaped scar on the back of my hand. With shaky fingers, I tried to call Sprocket with the bedside phone.

The line was dead.

"There's been no word from Mrs. Morrison."

Bile rose in my throat and moisture wicked my eyes. I lied back in the bed. "T.R., hand me that bottle."

"Why?"

"I'm going to drink it."

I took a swig of the cognac. It didn't taste like candy. Looking down at the bottle, I realized it was the kind of liquor that was meant to be left on the shelf, the kind you weren't meant to drink.

Blake Beckman lives in Saint Louis, Missouri. She is a recent graduate of The University of Kansas with a degree in English. Her fiction ranges from contemporary romance to fantasy. She is a new voice, working on short stories and novels for future publication. Find Blake on facebook @Blake Beckman.

## Three Poems by Simon MacCulloch

### Antichrist

An antichrist is not a single being like the Christ  
 Who reconciled the ideal (God) with what is actual (Man)  
 But rather, that which ravel out what Jesus finely spliced  
 And substitutes a hopeless "can't" for every hopeful "can".

That Shadow in "The Hollow Men", "insidious intent"  
 Fulfilment is frustration in the wasteland of the soul  
 The things we think we ought to mean are never what is meant  
 An antichrist is always there to keep us less than whole.

A flaw without, a flaw within - there's always something wrong  
 A busy swarm of antichrists infesting every thought  
 So certainty is fleeting, doubt an illness deep and long  
 And good intentions, flies that weave the webs in which they're caught.

Integrity of will was preached by Christ but also Crowley  
 St Francis birthed an order that maintained the Inquisition  
 No Word so pure that time and tide will not pollute it foully  
 Philosophy and faith become self-serving superstition.

And you will say, "Be happy, Sisyphus, make toil your end  
 Look fondly on the rock's few glints, forget your fading star"  
 But I'll embrace the bitter truth the antichrists portend:  
 Our sense of falling short is that which makes us what we are.

### Wrong

Their leaves are hissing in the wind  
*(you've sinned, you've sinned)*  
 And now the trees approach the shack I live in  
 A little nearer every night;  
 By hooked moon's light  
 They come to show me how I'll be forgiven.

The branches only reach and creak.  
 They cannot speak  
 Of what they've learned while growing towards my presence:  
 A little knowledge every night

Of this barbed blight  
Which fungus-like afflicts my cringing essence.

And yet I've wrongly understood  
This creep of wood;  
It's not the trees around me that are stalking  
But rasping through the trembling night  
In God's despite  
The cabin that encloses me goes walking.

## Spiderbabies

*"Cursed the ground where dead thoughts live new and oddly bodied, and evil the mind that is held by no head." - H P Lovecraft, "The Festival"*

You may have seen the spiderbabies creeping  
Upon their furtive errands in the alleys of the night  
And wondered what appointments they are keeping  
When everything they are demands they hide themselves from sight  
Or maybe you have stumbled on one sleeping  
A fleshy ball in which the many limbs are folded tight  
With one eye always open, always peeping  
And should your finger probe, one mouth with tiny teeth to bite.

One day I took one home with me to play with  
I tucked it in a Tesco bag so neighbours wouldn't see  
And hoped I might encourage it to stay with  
A kindly, lonely spiderbaby parent such as me  
But soon my hopeful joy turned to dismay with  
The realisation that I'd left it much too late to free  
My captive, now a cooling corpse gone grey with  
Asphyxiation. What a sorry ending to my spree!

I didn't dare to dump it where I'd found it  
For fear of vengeful spiderbabies picking up my trail  
And folklore said if buried in the ground it  
Was sure to cause the hardiest perennial to fail  
And poison any grass that grew around it  
And turn a winter frosting to a whiter shade of pale  
Until the one who'd buried wished he'd drowned it  
Despite the risk to river habitats it would entail.

I stored the bundle in my cellar pending  
Decisions on disposal that I couldn't bear to make

And soon acquired the habit of pretending  
 That that was all the action I would ever need to take  
 Except, like Usher waiting for the rending  
 Of coffin-wood imprisoning a corpse that proved a fake  
 I couldn't stop my heightened senses bending  
 Towards every night-time creak and rustle as I lay awake.

And so I vowed to get the thing cremated  
 On Guy Fawkes Night, when hungry bonfires gobbled more than sticks  
 But that hope too was soon to be deflated  
 For on that Eve some days before, notorious for its tricks  
 I ventured down again to where it waited  
 Among old heaps of charcoal, rusty tools and broken bricks  
 To find the plastic shroud had been vacated  
 The exit hole gnawed ragged with a hundred tiny nicks.

I fled the place and locked the door behind me  
 As shadows in the corners seemed to coil themselves to spring  
 But Fate, who saw no cause to treat me kindly  
 Decreed before I got away that I should glimpse a thing  
 Which horrified, and then served to remind me  
 That spiderbabies aren't the worst that reason's sleep may bring  
 And stranger shapes may grow in darkness blindly  
 To plague the pit and make the pendulum of madness swing.

The spiderbabies, cloaked in superstition  
 Are proof of that of which the tales of H P Lovecraft told:  
 Dead wizards' souls, deprived of all volition  
 Are meat for those who feast on corpses as they turn to mould  
 And thus achieve a terrible transition  
 As mindless vermin gorge on stuff that minds were meant to hold  
 Until, by dint of secondhand cognition  
 The things that crawl have learned to walk, in mockery grown bold.

For certain spiders, legend stated plainly  
 Were over-fond of carrion and sometimes, it was said  
 By watchmen who would roll their eyes insanely  
 Would scuttle out of graveyards having blasphemously fed  
 And though perhaps they still were spiders mainly  
 They carried now the remnants of a wizard freshly dead  
 And grew new flesh, distended and ungainly  
 According to the memories that they plundered from his head.

No reason, though, why such a transmigration  
 Should stop at those who first ingest the sweetmeats of the tomb  
 At least, that is the surest explanation

For what I now hear gnawing at the floorboards of my room:  
A new, more vicious breed of aberration  
Evolved from those who fed on what they found in cellar gloom.  
And armed with rodent skill for excavation  
My swarming spiderbabyrats won't linger in that womb!

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Simon MacCulloch has published hundreds of poems in a variety of outlets, including literary, genre, humour and religious publications. He lives in London.

## A Long Calibration by S. Becker

On deployment day, Ivo found themselves anxious despite being programmed and trained for that very moment. “Your patrons will be very important people,” the master had said. “It is critical for an Artifice to please them. Do your jobs well.”

Ivo found the pressure associated with that sort of language to be overwhelming.

When Ivo arrived at their new master’s house, the sun had just begun to rise over rolling, garden-covered hills. Autopiloted fruit-cultivators glinted on the hillside in the orange light. By anyone’s standards, it was beautiful.

As Ivo’s new master stepped out onto the front porch, Ivo saw that she was relatively short and feminine with soft, gentle features.

They spent the day together roaming the hills, learning the farms, and tinkering with machine code. Ivo found the new master’s agritech projects to be ambitious and impressive. Their conversations were quite natural, but still, the underlying sense of obligation left Ivo uneasy. At least the new master seemed kind.

“Please, call me Kari,” the master said. Kari.

In the evening, Kari led Ivo to a bedroom across from her own. Warm lamp light illuminated plants that hung over the freshly made bed; all unnecessary considerations for an Artifice. Ivo took a deep breath, then made sure to subtly reveal more of their synthetic skin than before, just as they were trained.

“Does this look cozy enough?” Kari asked, not noticing.

“I would like to be wherever you prefer me,” Ivo answered casually, but suggestively. It took Kari a long moment to understand what was happening. When she did, she stepped forward with a gentle, serious look and took both of Ivo’s smooth hands in hers.

“Take a moment Ivo, search inside yourself, and tell me what you want. Not what you are obligated to want, but what you *truly* want.” Kari nodded to her own bedroom. “Is that what you want?”

It was the first question Ivo had ever been asked that left them without an answer.

Kari smiled. “You are more than just your body, and I am glad you’re here. Goodnight, Ivo.” She turned, walked to her room, and closed the door.

Years passed.

Ivo’s hair had grown long, because Kari encouraged them to wear it in a way they found beautiful. Ivo started dressing more feminine, because Kari encouraged them to dress in a way they found beautiful.

“Well, you are the woman of the house now,” Kari would joke when Ivo would ask to borrow her sundresses on off days. “They suit you better, anyways. You put me to shame!”

Ivo would laugh. It was not true.

Their days consisted of hard, rewarding work. Eventually, Kari was able to feed small communities with the agritech she developed in the gardens. She started popping up in headlines. She won local awards. Ivo told Kari how proud they were of her.

“Be proud of *us*,” Kari corrected.

On a night of celebration, Kari opened a dusty bottle of sunwine. Although Ivo was built with a fast-clear system for intoxicants, that was one of the first things Kari programmed out. “It’s more fun to be on the same level,” she had said.

They drank and they laughed and they danced and they danced.

Watching the shapes Kari made while she moved, Ivo began to feel something. To their own surprise, they found themselves subtly revealing more of their synthetic skin than before. They made sure to look intently into Kari’s eyes. “I think I’m done dancing,” Ivo said casually, but suggestively. “Maybe onto the next thing?”

It took Kari a long moment to understand what was happening. When she did, she laughed, stepped forward, and took both of Ivo’s smooth hands in hers.

“Take a moment Ivo, search inside yourself, and tell me what you want. Not what you are obligated to want, but what you *truly* want.” Ivo took a long moment and searched.

What they found was layers of programmed obligation and blurred identity that had yet to fade away. Deeper, however, they found the joy and peace and fulfillment they had been gifted over the last few years.

Standing there together, it felt as if time stood still. Ivo stopped trying to process. For the first time, they kissed.

Decades passed.

Ivo and Kari still worked in tandem most days, but things took Kari a little longer in her age. That was ok. Ivo was happy to take on more of the laborious tasks, and plenty of the less laborious tasks, too. They were trained by one of the best food scientists in the world. They could not fail.

The morning they received news that the food shortage had officially been delisted from the continental crisis report, Kari cried. “No work today,” she said. “Fuck it, no work this month. This month, we will enjoy it.”

And so, they enjoyed it.

They strolled vineyards in neighboring regions, the summer sun browning their skin more than usual. They sat in fields and painted landscapes and small portraits of one another. They cooked often, they sang always. They swam in the river every single day.

One evening, lying in the grass next to one another, Ivo wrapped their young hand around Kari's waist and kissed her.

Instead of reciprocating, however, Kari sat up, running a wrinkled hand through her graying hair. She took a moment to still herself, stifling what Ivo had learned was the beginning of a gentle cry. She spoke when she could get the words out.

"Is this what you still want, Ivo?" There was a long pause. "Not what you are obligated to want, but what you *truly* want?"

Ivo smiled. They were trained by one of the most comforting and assuring people in the world. They could not fail.

"You are more than just your body, Kari. And I am glad you're here."

As they cried happy tears together, hand in hand, the setting sun painted Kari in perfect, orange light. By anyone's standards, she was beautiful. That had never changed.

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S. Becker is an American author living in San Francisco, California, where the dynamic mix of tech, culture, wealth disparity, and anti-capitalist sentiment inspires much of their work. A lover of all things cyberpunk, S. is working on launching a cyberpunk magazine for short fiction with the goal of growing the marketplace for fiction authors in this specific subgenre. You can learn more at [burnlinemag.com](http://burnlinemag.com).

Away from the computer, S. spends much of their time exploring the Northern Californian coastlines and the Sierra Nevada mountains, or scanning old bookstore shelves for ancient sci-fi novels with the funniest covers they can find. Their home has become a library of bad book covers. Find S. Becker online at [www.burnlinemag.com](http://www.burnlinemag.com)