

A DAUGHTER OF DIPLOMATS	1
UNTITLED.....	7
THE DATE	9
AVA.....	16
SWEET AND SOUR SAUCE	23
LOVE LETTERS FROM THE YEAR 2060.....	25
VAMPIRE.....	27
PROLOGUE	27
PART I.....	28
PART II	29
PART III	33
EPILOGUE.....	35
SCIENCE FICTION LOVE STORIES	36
THERMODYNAMICS	38

A DAUGHTER OF DIPLOMATS

I WAS TWENTY-SIX years old when my understanding of terror was utterly and irrevocably supplanted by a new kind of knowledge. The dropship came skimming off the sky like peeled milk-skin and wiggled mildly before crashing into the prairie with terrible force, a mile or so away from my room. I felt the blow go straight through my teeth and hair. The windowpane I was standing before stayed, as if purposefully quieted, as if the aftershock coursing through the air was only resonant with the lay of my DNA. The framed image of my brother and I displayed on the window glass did not so much as tremble. Soon after, the distant wreckage began to slough off the smoke from phosphine fire like entrails.

An electric darkness flickered over the windowpane, and the pale face of our maid Nancy faded in from black with a low moan. “Oh, Shana, go back into bed! Civil servants have been dispatched to put out the fire and assist any survivors. This is not a thing for a young girl to see.” I attempted to swipe Nancy away with four fingers. “Move aside, Nancy,” I said, my terror climbing irregularly, as if at each landing I discovered something I thought I had left behind a floor below. “I want to watch.” Nancy let out another moan, his mouth flickering into symmetry. “I can’t let you, it’s too horrible, too horrible!”

A feeling came over me that I labeled as physical, that I felt move through my entire body with physical yield; and yet it eluded any and all idioms that I may have been used before to describe a natural act of my body. It was not pain, it was not heaviness of the limbs or an ache behind the eyes that I felt, or even akin to the seemingly metaphysical cold shiver arising from delight in some furtive mental exercise. My understanding of horror had

always been limited to the comparative existence of two or more points in time, when I had drawn a conceptual likeness between two separate events, and found hidden in their jarring differences a sort of terror. It was a terror that rose not from acknowledgement of a disfigured or plaintive future, but from the inference of unpredictability that emerges from having two events separated by time, events with drastically different outcomes, as being colored with what seemed like the exact same emotional wash. The terror I felt now was exclusive to the moment, and was wholly encased in the concept of “a” moment, and I could find no comparative event in personal history. This feeling left a physical mark on me, and when one comments, “Her eyes changed that day,” they are not dually referring to an infallible transmutation of the soul in combination with a new draping of the eyelids, for the size and color of my irises seemed to be altered completely, so great and new was my terror.

I rapidly twisted and released and re-twisted my poly-carbon woven brown braid between my fingers, then crouched and dug my short fingernails into my calves. I stood up again. I did not know how to move when terrified.

“See how disturbed you are, Shana,” Nancy chided, his disembodied head bobbing to follow my crouch and stand. “It’s better off if you didn’t see this.” I angrily crossed my forearms and swiped down and out, a motion to force-quit Nancy. He disappeared immediately and the window was clear. I could see that the smoke was now black and billowing, suspended in the air with charcoal-definition, and minute black trucks had begun orbiting the wreckage. The sky behind it was orange-blue and unfettered, and mountains flanking my view had no markings of any kind.

Later I learned that the dropship had been carrying a team of horses and a group of oil-mining women on route from the oil fields to the Calcutta-Georgian mines. I accompanied my

parents to the rectory where the survivors were housed, as my parents were Calcutta-Georgian diplomats at the time. I did not often accompany them where their work took them, but I felt the need to quell the newness of my terror by taking initiative in personal experience. There were only two survivors from the oil fields. One lay catatonically in bed, facedown and swaddled, while the other sat on the edge of her bed with her head in her hands. I looked at her with an unnamable feeling, hopefully one lacking in malice, while my parents spoke to the senior civil servants. HER: I dwelled on the “HER”ness of her, and creating the term in my head, I dwelled on its similarity to the word harness, and wondered if I could make a conceptual inference from this trivial experimentation with semantics. The smell of phosphine smoke clung to her like body rot, and yet she sat so beautifully, in a manner I did not recognize at the time as abstracted tiredness. Her legs were massive, thick with muscle, jutting at the thighs and calves like the brow of a man, no doubt from walking through thick oil slew daily. Her fingers were slim. I inferred that her covered face was small and flat, for the smooth, shallow curvature of her two hands over her face. From her bodily age, only half a decade older than mine, and the particular route that the dropship had been taking, I knew that she was being transferred as a bed-setter; this meant she was now a slave, free of wages, and I could not help but become shy in the knowledge of my status as the daughter of wage-earning parents, still participating in the manual labor of deautomated economy. This was a common source of shame in these times of leisurely political relations and persistent peace of mind, and those who were remunerated for their labor were cast as tinkering stagehands on an architecturally ineffectual economic stage.

When I got back home, leaving HER and my parents behind, I asked Nancy to pull up curated footage of the dropship wreckage. He declined, and worried in his high, homosexual Anglo-Norman voice with assumptions made on the root of my behavior before

finally giving in to my insistent request, not without childish insinuation made on my part that I could swipe him away for good. The best of the curated footage was produced by a man who had been out walking his dogs half a mile away from the crash site, who survived the aftershock without harm to the body or mobile devices, and was able to capture the crash with both his drone and Mind Eye device. I viewed both videos at the same time via split-screen, with the drone footage to the right and First-Person footage to the left.

Both captures were spectacular. I had in mind that the FP footage would have dredged back the feeling of terror that I had been able to momentarily suppress with habitual motions of the body in transit, as it is difficult to detach yourself emotionally from the footage you are watching whilst peering out from another's Mind Eye, and one's heart races in beat with the jogging of the FP viewport. However, I found the persistent barking of the dogs distracting and un-humanlike, eliminating any amount of pathos that may have begun to well up, and found the footage to be spectacular only in the artistic instability of the lens, which rendered the horizon into a different crazed slash with every subsequent frame. The wreckage of the dropship was hammered into the rusty horizon, and bounced with the sky at the filmer's heavy breathing.

Conversely, the drone footage had an animal-like stillness to it that was neither graceful nor concentrated in hunt—it had the stillness of an animal in the sun, like a crocodile or housecat, poised, alive, but without answer or question. The capture began with the man and his dogs framed in bird's-eye view, nearly hovering to keep in pace with its subjects, until the man stopped, pointed outward, and then dropped to the ground. The viewport stayed still as the aftershock silently rippled across the prairie grass and over the flattened man and his dogs, and did not change until some software command given by the man rising to his knees sent the drone dipping toward the sky in the

direction of the crash site. The drone was not very fast, and the viewport was filled for a full minute with a field of prairie grass, stalks rubbing against each other agitatedly like static, as the drone flew toward its destination.

My terror seemed to me a kite then, yanked and released on a taut string, slackening with the fell of the wind, and then yanked again at the catch of an unexpected current. I did not know whether to reel it in or release it as the edge of the wreckage came into view, and the drone slowed to focus on its target, and the blackened, ugly remains of the ship filled the steady viewport. I drew a connection between the steadiness of the viewport and the stillness of my window glass, determining, only after some faltering in conviction of my own interpretation, that it was the absurdly stoic quality of inorganic things that disturbed in me a physical feeling of damp and chill. The drone stopped to a hover. There was no movement in the capture besides the duration ticker pinned to the lower-right of the screen, and a subtle shifting of rubble and wispy fire, until a dark figure crawled out from a hatch, and rolled off the curved body of the dropship like a drop of oil. I stayed looking. Curiously, the sight of the body, now unmoving at the base of the wreckage, filled me with alkaline relief and my fear, before acidic and feverish, slackened and cooled into ablation. I recalled the muscled thighs of the surviving oil miner. I regarded the unmoving body in the context of HER thighs.

I did not know this then, as I was only a child on the day of the dropship crash, but what I had considered as terror on that day would not be considered terror in maturity. The horror I felt that day was merely a euphemism for my refusal of courage, and the false motions of courage I attempted to enact by seeking those captures and following my diplomat parents, seeking the presence of the survivors, had been a childish attempt at gaining custody of the heraldry of adulthood through illegal channels, through an instantaneous acceptance of events that belied my

understanding. There was no curiosity or morbidity in the feeling I felt or the knowledge that I gained. I accepted the crash and its physical impact on my body and its rapid succession of all my worldly knowledge with the entirety of my being. I did not consider the simplicity of my terror then, the insipid, selfish retardation of terror that I felt as one who watches, until I was much older and followed my parents in their line of work as a Calcutta-Georgian diplomat.

UNTITLED

DROP A LENGTH of string that has been knotted into a loop; can you predict the path that takes shape in its lay? Imagine a piece of thread pinched between your forefinger and thumb. Did you imagine it long and limp, grazing the soft, fatty haunch of your thumb? Did you imagine it short and spry, as if it sprouted from the red crevice your fingers formed?

YOU LOOK DOWNWARD and upward, downward and up. You nod your head like a neighing horse. And still, the fat, wet tear in the corner of your eye stays balanced like an egg. And as long as you keep your eye open, it will sit there trembling in the corner of your eye, a terrified, unwilling rookie boxer in the ring. Don't close your eyes. You ask yourself: Where on earth did that tear come from?

WE ALREADY KNOW the answer to every question that we ask ourselves. Just bear with me for a second. Believe it to be true. Every inward question is an answer I do not verbalize, out of muteness of spirit or the complacency of familiarity. Consider the antithetical: When I ask you a question, I am in wonderment of you. My eyes glitter like stars. "Where were you last night?" and "How does an engine work?" and "Does that taste good with tilapia?" and "Why does it have to end?" and other questions I ask out loud are in starry-eyed amazement of the mystery outside of myself, the collective knowledge of mothers and sisters and bachelors I have never known. I am at the top of a tower, sitting firmly in a chair slightly skewed towards a window, looking over a city of a hundred-thousand mothers. If I drop a length of string that has been knotted into a loop, and I overlaid that shape over

this city, and took that path by boot or wheel, who would I meet? How thick is the string? How thick is the air? What affects the fall of a loop that transforms into the curled eight of infinity? We stay balanced on the precipice of something like fear. A teardrop of unknown source-spring stays precariously balanced by some magic of liquid tension between two slight eyelashes. We ask ourselves a question, "Why am I fearful?" and the lack of mystery in that inward question is the beginning of a flat feeling of fear itself.



REALITY IS A TROUGH. The earth is a fat teardrop balanced on a sloping gridded edge and we roll with mysterious gravity toward some cosmic chicken feed. A year where the crops don't yield and we will find a few maggots when we sift through the feed with our fingertips. Or... Or the universe is a saddle. Hyperbolic curvature with a chafed ass topping it like a doily and a great, heaving, slick hot horse beneath. And whether from trough or saddle, when that large cosmic horse comes to grip you in its tongue, all you can ask yourself is, "Did I do ok?" But you already knew the answer to that.

THE DATE

HE WAS NOT GOOD at keeping contact with himself. The New School taught that for once a day, every day for the rest of your life, you must rub your forefinger and thumb together to produce a wafer of network charge and pop it in your mouth, and then press the pads of your index and middle fingers to your eyes and swallow. This would engage the larger internal network charge that would ripple through your body like a miniscule gamma ray burst and lightly upset every nerve in your body. By keeping up with this small series of movements, the New School explained, you will be able to mimic the implied movements of prehistoric human bodies and prevent the subtle muscle memory loss that results from acquiesce of current technologies. Purchase of the network charge-producing device was only four dollars, and installation was fifty cents.

Jolene had coughed up those four dollars two years ago, and opted for self-installation. He kept up with it every day for nine months (skipping a day or two a week in the beginning, doing it a day or two a week near the end) before he grew tired of having an extra daily routine and halted a habit that was never fully formed in the first place. It wasn't that it took too much out of his day. His days were twenty hours long, a bit longer than the average person in America, which were certainly enough hours to fit in a forty second ritual. The practice required barely any concentration or physical exertion. He just wasn't good at it.

When he rubbed his fingers together, the network charge slowly built up into a tacky film, taking shape of the curvature of the pad of his index finger, and would slowly begin to lift up

at the edges like a contact lens. Then it would just stop. His fingers would just stop producing a charge. He would rub his fingertips vigorously together for another two seconds if he was annoyed enough, or stare blankly at his hand if he didn't feel like registering the failure. Five times out of ten the charge would never build up to a semi-solid, flat disc pinched between the fingers like it was supposed to, that the New School told you to swallow so that your mortal body would not rot.

Jolene was not accustomed to failure, but he was not well-accustomed to success neither. His last bout of success concerned a date, an area of life where the rift between success and failure seemed the widest and most impactful. This was only biological, of course. It's a matter of birth and death.

The procurement of the date went something like this: Jolene was on his way to work, taking his usual route that went between two large buildings where there was just enough space for a body to pass through sideways. He turned his head to face the direction he was walking and worked his legs like a pair of snapping scissors, going on his tiptoes in places where he guessed there was a chance of scuffing the backs of his shoes. Buildings were no longer made of brick and mortar so there was none of gripping and yanking grit on walls that induced piles on your sweater when you leaned back, but there were the occasional embossed trademark and architectural credit just at foot-level, which you may be inclined to scuff your heels on if you had no space to turn your head to look. So Jolene was walking sideways towards his right, tiptoed at times, head pointed over his right shoulder. It was a short walk, really, the fastest way to get to work while avoiding the pedestrian walkways that dipped and curled over flat hover-only streets.

There was someone walking about ten meters ahead of him. The buildings were tall enough and the sunlight was angled enough at this hour that the only source of light came from the front, a bright blue-white slit like a piece of glass turned to its side. The person in front of Jolene was just a silhouette, and the light was bright enough to wash out the silhouette at the edges and render the person into a dark undulating wisp. Jolene was not in a hurry, so he did not have to worry about having to pass the person up ahead. Work was easy, and the hours of American days were long and languid, and the sun would still be up when work was over and Jolene would trek home on another path with unspoken directionality.

However, a few minutes into the walk, the silhouette began to fatten and achieve certain definition. Jolene realized that the person had stopped. He continued his splayed walk, head registering forward, body registering sideways, until he was a mere three meters away from the body ahead.

"Ho, there," Jolene called, "Why have you stopped? Is there something troubling you?" The silhouette did not make any gesture to communicate. Jolene edged closer. "I am in no hurry, friend, but there may be others who are in the path we were taking. Let us be considerate and continue on."

By now, Jolene was close enough that if he wanted, he could straighten his right arm from its crooked lizard bend and touch the body. The sunlight ahead still washed out the color of the clothes attached to the body, but the person was no longer a thick hair on the rotated horizon. Jolene could make out fuzz on the shoulders of what looked like a long sweater, and the glint of buckle on the side of the pants, and pale hair that curled around the ears like a seashell. He could not make out the person's face, since it was turned towards the same direction his was facing.

The body spoke. "I'm sorry," the body said. "I think my network charge is malfunctioning. I feel a numb tingling in my legs. It feels as if my leg hairs are bending over and inward and are softly piercing my skin." Jolene then noticed that the person's left hand, held aloft slightly lower than his eye-level, was rubbing its fingers together furiously. No doubt the other hand was doing the same, desperately trying to correct an imbalanced network charge by forcing it into overdrive.

Jolene felt bad for the person. "I'm sorry to hear that. How long ago thi morning did you stir up the network charge?"

"Only an hour or so has passed. I charged up at my usual time, and proceeded with my day at my usual pace."

"Did you experience anything unusual as you were charging up? I know I have had days where the charge has failed me, it's not an uncommon occurrence."

"No. I have never failed to bind my personal network."

At this Jolene took pause. Although it was uncommon to fail to create a network charge half the time one tried, it was even more unusual to succeed every time. A person's mood varied from day to day, the weather changed, and the body reacts quietly and without warning to changes in its environment. A sound of a glass that slipped and fell from the loose grip of an acquaintance's hand, shattering on your hardwood floor, could affect you weeks later. You could have dreamt of its demise last night, tossed and turned, unnerved by the invisible speckles of glass that lay undiscovered and ominously passive on the floor of your apartment, and woke up in complete ignorance and practiced forgiveness of your acquaintance's loose grip. However, as soon as you tried to come in contact with your network charge...

"I admire your success in the matter," Jolene continued carefully, "But it is not unusual to have a malfunctioning network charge and remain unaware. Perhaps you pressed upon your eyes with too much force this morning. And that invoked the memory of some forgotten dream where your legs were fish legs."

At this the person laughed. It was not an unpleasant laugh. "Perhaps you're right. I'm just not accustomed to feeling my legs this way outside of a controlled environment. My movements are always precise. They promised me that when I was born."

"They?"

"The world. The world collectively gathered up all its knowledge and put an effort into my birth and upbringing. They said, your movements will be careful and precise. Love will come to you freely and in the most genuine forms. Keep your heart open and your mind clean. They said, we offer you the best education, a hundred thousand years in the making. There is no need to move your hands in that way, to rock your body in that way. No more sitting cross-legged. No more shaking out of fear."

"They did not lie. Even now our movements are like clockwork. We do not know if we are going forward, but we are always heading towards the sun."

"Yes. The sun rotates and we rotate with it. Our faces are always upturned towards the light, like little green potted leaves."

"So you must not be in shock when an unexpected feeling comes over you. Rotation seems to be such a stable thing. A

dreidel is unstable until its top is pinched and the fingers rub a spin into it. It does not stop until you blow on it or the table rocks. But that slight bump of a hip to the table, that slight force you calculate into your breath... That force will attach to the rotation, and even though you are pinned to the light as a kite to the spool, a wobble may wash over you like an earthquake."

A hitch in the throat echoed between the two buildings. What was at the top of the buildings? More apartments, more offices, a few restaurants. Every person traveled vertically up and down every day. There were no one-story buildings anymore. Every person traveled vertically every day, like a fish expanding and releasing its air sac to sink to the foot of an ocean dune.

Jolene heard distant shuffling to his left, the sound of someone else coming up on the narrow path. He hurriedly said, "Listen, friend, we must continue. We may cause an inconvenience to those that wish to continue on the path. Don't be afraid of what you have forgotten. There is still a residue of human doubt in this day and age. We all experience doubt, when the confidence in others fail us, when the social nature of our biology overtakes these thin attempts at social sobriety. We all feel shame in poor decisions. Memories of passing remarks make us flush at the wrong moments. But we are human, and we can rotate every which way on our personal axis. We are lightly pinned, but we are not stuck on a stake."

The person abruptly exclaimed, "I wish I could kiss you!" Jolene flushed. A film slipped over his eyes like liquid poured from a thimble and his dormant personal network notified him of his upcoming days off of work. "Well, then, how about a date this Sunday?" he boldly spoke. When the person began to shuffle toward the light, Jolene took this as confirmation.

He became aware only then that he had been on his toes the entire time.

AVA

A LARGE FEELING approaches her, and she averts her face to parlay its acknowledgement. It pivots and meets her head on. Something less viscous than blood hijacks her hidden channels and rushes to a foam, and crescendos shrilly, and she feels a metaphysical grating as it runs through her and passes, becoming indescribable the moment it is scribed upon her consciousness, something writ in water. She lies stiffly. Beneath her ego, the hidden parts that spin up logic go through a battery of familiarized and practiced emotions that may be placed upon this wild one like a yoke. Myopia to rein in horror. Hope to jockey melancholia. History to bloat the abyss.



AVALACHE WAS BORN on Jasper.I, a Class 2C planet lodged in the spine of the Dorosea galaxy. Her mother and father were immigrants from the Standard Republic and had come to Jasper.I under the pretense of tourism, for they had been wealthy and could afford to leisure away from the Standard Republic. They stayed an extra decade to benefit from the clomiphene citrate rich soil, which bore crop that promoted fertility in human women. Avalache was born with cloven hooves, and her mother shod them in metal shoes to be kept on for two years until the instructional holo to amputate them received clearance from the Dorosea General Public, upon which hour her mother extracted the proper tools from the local rental facility and reconstructed Ava's feet to match her own petit arches. Ava's mother and father died shortly after

by way of water poisoning, and Ava was sentenced to the General Assembly for Children, and grew up there, unheeded.

Jasper.I, named after the lover of the late king and colonizer Mr-XXVI Sorjourn.doss, was classified 2C as a dearth planet; that is, a planet where the end of the life cycle of organisms defines its most easily-synopsized ecological and cultural features. Much as Earth.archived had been a dearth planet by its technological and cultural reliance on petrol, Jasper.I was a dearth planet for the reliance its two billion-some inhabitants had on hypercarbonates produced by the dying red algae that covered ninety percent of the planet. The “weeping algae,” as it was called for the rivulets of water that welled up when the thick, spongy floor of algae that covered the Jasper.I swamp lakes was stepped on, also bound SERM-2, that is, selective estrogen receptor modulator type-2 isomers to the soil, and thus the human culture on Jasper.I were modulated by a culture of twins, triplets, and quadruplets, leading to an irregular naming convention and sub-domain extensions on the standard family TLD. It was under these conventions that Ava, born Avalache.shahad.rep came to be familiar with a.Lyche.rashad.data and b.Abigalia.rashad.data, twins from the Rashad family top-level domain on Data Aziv.I. They had also been sentenced to the GA for Children after their uncle killed the twins’ parents, by way of some remnant genealogical blood-jealousy, a markedly thicker and more potent strain of water poisoning.

The majority of childhood found Ava and the Rashad twins inseparable. They split their time between the main hall of the GA for Children, where the curriculum of the General Assembly was mete out by units of GA Interfaced Coordinators, covering mathematics and language, and the back halls of the GA for Children, where they were exposed to a much more extensive curriculum staffed by the “Children” of the GA for Children, and finally the in-radius swamps of

Jasper.I, where they practiced instinct, a little math, much exercise, and a lot of caricature. Lyche was weaker of the twins and Ava and Abigalia would take turns sporting her on their backs to the deeper parts of the swamp, where the weeping algae was thick enough of the jump on in places where the sun did not burn it away for the shadow of evenly-spread croppings of vine-covered joba trees. They would ball up the scarlet algae to pelt one another with, leaving horrifying red splatters on each other's clothing, and dare one other to eat a handful, and chase after the screamer moths that whirled from trunk to vine like shrieking simian ghosts. On days when carrying Lyche made them tired and cross, Ava and Abi would gang up on her with improvised horror stories, the standard sort, about weak little girls that fell through a thin patch of of algae and were claimed by the swamp waters and developed gills and inhuman strength and would try to claw down other weak little girls by grabbing her ankles through the algae and the only way that you could tell she was coming was by the bubbling up of algae from disturbed swamp waters *like what's happening right by your feet, Ly-Ly!* She claimed to never believe them, but would start crying anyway if they kept it up for too long.

They reached adulthood at twenty-five and were dismissed from the General Assembly for Children. Ly and Abi shared a common bond of indecision, and tried on a variety of jobs in the area that were tailored for their likes by the General Assembly, finding work as cargo greeters, nannies and home-retail assistants. Ava considered learning a trade to be an infinitely better option than running a string of GA-engineered temp jobs and she at last parted with the twins, not without unhappiness and moments of doubt, to join the Definitive Paramilitary Reserve. She was promoted to Adjunct Recruiter within a year for excellence in both self-only and tech-assisted communication and was handling her own recruiting missions in just another. She was well liked by

her peers and potential recruits alike for her easy and gently constant way of relating. There was no trouble in her life until a mission in Sone-Ma in her fourth year.

Sone-Ma was a planet unique to the Dorosea system in its independence from the Dorosea General Assembly. Besides small pockets of General Assembly Extended Compatriot communities, Sone-Ma was colonized largely by Standard Republic expatriates and the Distant Unpledged, classifying it as a Type B.990 volatile nation. It only retained clearance to exist undisturbed in the Dorosea system for the extremely high taxes its communities paid to the General Assembly.

Ava's recruiting mission took her to the seaside community of SR expatriates of Safe.standard. Her mission team comprised of four other DPR recruiters with similar experience levels. However, all but Ava had been assigned Sone-Ma before, and on the way there they regaled her with stories of volatile citizens spitting in their faces, of recruitee mothers chasing after them with home-made knives and of the thick, boisterous clouds that perpetually hung in the stratosphere, told with similar conviction as Ava herself had back when she and Abigalia detailed the unfortunate lives of drowned girls and little girls whose bellies exploded from eating red algae.

The first potential recruit was a young boy named Fallow. The walls of his room were pasted over with the large, flat fronds of seaweed that washed on the shore of Safe.standard, infamous for their alleged aphrodisiac redolence, interspersed only with cheap holopics of celebrity Definite Paramilitary generals. Ava tried to keep a straight face as she listed the benefits of joining the DPR while one accompanying recruiter stared at her with a bland expression from behind the potential recruit, mimicking the young boy's helplessly characterless face, and another recruiter suggestively rubbed a seaweed frond with her hands and followed up with a

miming of masturbation. Ava finished the recruiting speech and thanked the boy, and left his home with her fellow recruiters, responding to their expectant laughter with a sigh and an exaggeratedly gentle slap to the arm.

They closed the day without any likely recruits. The Definitive Paramilitary did not have too many requirements, but it did look for a strong sense of integrity and approachable anarchism, the former of which many young people lacked in general, and the latter of which was difficult to find in a stubbornly expatriate community. They received room and board at a DPR outpost, and Ava went to sleep to dream of the Sone-Ma seas.

The next day was stormy and the sea was heavy with leaden crests. In response to the lack of success from the previous day all five recruiters split up to approach the Safe.standard Void-4 housing complex, which towered precariously near the shore, as if a rocket had failed to exit the atmosphere and fell to lodge itself comically erect in the sand. Ava was assigned to a potential recruit who lived on the 62nd floor, and all she knew entering the building was that the potential recruit lived with her aging mother, an enterprise that could be interpreted as one embedded in integrity, and had undergone peaceful arrest once for a volunteer action that had not received clearance, which could be interpreted as an unrecognized receptiveness to anarchy, and that her name was Leslie. Leslie opened the door to her apartment on Ava's second knock, and Ava entered thanking her.

She opened the conversation with standard DPR recruiting questions. "Leslie, we were impressed by the level of depth covered in your application. Tell me, what is the one thing that interested you the most about joining the Definitive Paramilitary Reserve?" Ava studied the girl, who took a moment to respond. She had a narrow, tanned face,

accentuated by jagged strips of gray-blonde hair. Her eyes were blank and gray, and her mouth hung slack over the sharp chin like a pink piece of torn cloth. Ava realized that the girl was undoubtedly stupid. The pause was slightly too long, long enough for Ava to feel a twinge of uncharacteristic impatience. Leslie responded with dumb honesty, "I wanted to leave the Safe.standard." She stared at Ava like the sea.

After asking a few more standard questions, Ava checked herself and used her practiced DP communication skills to politely end the interview in less than five minutes. She thanked Leslie with the same neutral benediction as when she greeted her and stood to leave. Leslie stood to match her, but instead of turning to her toward the door, reached out to touch Ava's arm in a single extended motion. "Please," she said, "don't leave so soon, I can't take that as a good sign." Ava stared at the hand on her arm. In her four years as a recruiter, she had never been touched by a potential recruit, either as assault or in a bargaining move. The hand was flat and light tan. It reminded Ava of the screamer moths of her childhood, flying from one joba tree to another, upon which landing the whole significance that people put on the sensation of touch was wildly disturbed and foresworn, for the moth had no understanding of the tree, and tree no understanding of moth, and there was no intimacy in their touch, only the apathy of occupying the same ecological system. Ava drew this comparison almost immediately upon seeing the hand upon her arm and realized that she had hated the bland sea all along and had been fiercely wishing for the scarlet algae floor of Jasper.I, where she would lie down as if murdered and had been bleeding from her wounds for all of eternity, where she would be away from the low barricade of stone-gray sea and low ceiling of gray storm clouds and away from this potential recruit diseased with misunderstanding and naivety.

Ava feels something coming up inside her that adults experience when they are in the presence of the weak. She feels strengthened by her diet of SERM-2 enhanced crop, where the death of living matter, of the weeping algae, was not only an agricultural known, but held immense cultural significance, and heralded in related traditions, modes of thinking, and political treatment. She feels as if her stomach is filled to the brim with spongy red algae and her stomach acid weeps through in thin, cold rivulets. She feels as if she must outpace herself drowning in the bland Safe.standard sea by drowning herself in her own bodily fluid. She feels strong from the knowledge that she could drown herself with nothing else but her own body. Ava gently removes the potential recruit's hand from her arm prolongs the touch, and proposes to her that she will reconsider the truncated interview if the girl does her just a few specific favors. The girl agrees, and when they are finished Ava exits in thanks.



SHE RETURNS TO the boarding house after a few more visits to potential recruits and turns to bed. She lies awake, thinking about the sea. She lies stiffly. She sees the distant curl of a wave, far out into the sea, and trains her eye on it as it approaches. The sea is formed out of uniform ridges, and this wave is the same shade as any other low-crested wave, but she gives it significance by affixation. And as it approaches the shore her concession gives it color and height, and she watches as it becomes blue, bright sunlit blue, and reaches the mass of a rogue wave, and it unfurls a white plumed crest, and the curve of it is of the blue throat of a giant, and she has a sudden longing for an infinite knife to cut it with.

SWEET AND SOUR SAUCE

Do I chase away this feeling or do I sweeten it?
Do I spear it through or do I fatten it?

It's come to my attention recently that some charges have been made against my character. There's a flap sewn on me at all times and under it I hold my laughter. I wholeheartedly deny these accusations and the flap flips open and wheezes with merciless laughter. I don't think that this understanding of my own denial could be seen as remittance for a lie. I request that I know myself less.

When it rains, do we glimpse the world in sequences from between bars? Or does the rain varnish, does the rain spread and melt into a glaze, and does the world drop behind in subjectivity and then harden, like ceramic? If we squint at the ground we can see that raindrops actually shoot out from the asphalt like torpedoes. Listen, I've told you a thing about rain. Humor me when I tell you about love.

I glean a handshake finger by finger but he whisks his hand away before I can clutch the palm. He keeps one blue eye of a camel focused on my face but the other wanders right through me. Angrily, I reach forward to grasp his hair and he twists away into a braid. One strand of hair gets caught in my fingernail and I stare at it incredulously before bursting into tears. I suppose tears of joy. I attempt to use it to extract his DNA and create a clone. Of course, me being a less than stellar geneticist, I end up having to kill the malformed clone out of mercy. One day, I hold the strand up to the sun to inspect it, and the wind plucks it away. I forget about it immediately.

Okay, fine, you got me. That's not love, that's something else. That's possession. That's a felony! I escape into space as a stowaway on a barge headed towards lunar five. I become violently sick stashed in between rotating barrels of gum oil but I endure, acknowledging wisely that escape does not come cheap. When I step out of the barge into the sunlight I squint at the scene and immediately start heaving with laughter. I have been fooled; we've gone around the sun twice; I'm back on earth again, and I chuckle good-heartedly with the knowledge that my loneliness was the butt of this comedic caper.

LOVE LETTERS FROM THE YEAR 2060

ASIDE FROM A few bouts of happiness stemming from unexpected sights, she was desolately unhappy and was almost always grieving, sequestered, in silence. But this isn't a story about grief or solitude; this is a story about an unexpected sight.

A SMOKY FOG rolled in that day so garishly unsaturated against packets of clean blue sky that you suspiciously turned three-sixty looking for a building on fire. The fog leaned against the tallest buildings like a dirty bent pigeon wing before curling around the corner and the skyline looks tense and apprehensive, as if city was made wary in knowing of that moment when it would begrudgingly have to take flight. Well, wouldn't that be one kind of unexpected sight?

But cities don't fly, and neither do lies in the face of a lover. At least, not until the year 2060. By then, she was 32 years old, and still had a youthful face like marble, delicately patchy with oil, pale and lightly seamed. She made enough money to live on Totalus, a city of two million on wings—let me rephrase: Totalus, a city in space floating on turbine lotus-sails, where two million citizens lived, each without wings to call their own, but in context to Earth, that stationary, unmoving thing, each in the air and always flying. Each lived in a shot glass of kindness and talking to a lover was the pleasure of popping a string of bubbles—conversation was airy, quick, to the point, serious, and clever in 2060, little packets of clean, bursting data, and nobody had time for

dealing with that gooey, sticky thing that was a lie. Let's go back to the year 2044.

That was the year when she saw that unexpected sight: a huge freight truck, overturned, groaning on its side. Inside it were a thousand chickens. They screamed in staccato and bulged against their crates, but you couldn't see that from outside the truck. She laughed and sang a love poem into the wind. It went like this:

“You clench and unclench like a fist. You furl and unfurl like a... flower. Your life makes you bright as a blow. You glimmer like hope. You glimmer... with hope? All I ask for are isolated moments of affection, for moments when I raise my eyes and see you looking intently without absolution or praise. Camel-eyed with simple affection, you slip through my eye like a needle.

I spun around, and fell. I got up again. I felt the shame slick in my head, it went straight through me like a hot knife and the only trace it left behind was a flushing of the face, but the pain stuck, it went through until the brambles got to be too much and it stuck, clung, on my heart like some predecessor of heartbreak. I felt the weight of the year 2060 bounce like a spring.”

That's the end of the song. It wasn't beyond her unhappiness for her to sing out loud, or laugh, because those aren't indicators of happiness, but it was a slight anomaly that she referenced herself in the song—“I”—she usually left herself out, even from the distorted pantomime of melody. The song fell flat before the up-turned truck, before a wind kicked it up onto its wheels still-spinning from momentum, and they wrapped up the melody in a swirl before tossing it out like cartoon inertia. “Ai, ai, *ai!*” it echoed.

VAMPIRE

PROLOGUE

IN DARKNESS I become sweet.

PART I

IN DARKNESS he became sweet. At nights he was grazed by a fire he could not keep. Slow burning threads roughed and engorged with blood-fire would be cast and trawled every night through his felted subcutaneous fat by a tailor sewing him into his own skin. A momentary cold hush—and then the licking of fire on the heels of his feet would start again, and he feels basted in his own sweat and fat, verily ripened and honeyed in his own gravy of little pains.

Like a lizard in envy of the chameleon green of low hanging fruit, he longed to be ripened by the sun. He longed for those drops of dew to bubble from his glands and sit until they began to simmer in chorus with the rising sun and then sizzle off his body peel in small controlled batches like steamy rocket ships. By the time he spun up a small bit of gravity from the growing weight of his sun-sweetness he would had made himself mentally and physically ready for the drop. With the sun, sweetness was a symptom of release. With enough sun he would be ready for the drop.

5!

4!

3!

2!

1!

0!

PART II

“LONELINESS! Let’s talk about *loneliness!*” The speaker paced a small amount before abruptly striding away from the podium. “Can I get a show of hands for who here’s felt *lonely* before?”

Each audience member easily raised an arm. Loneliness was not a shameful emotion to them. To identify loneliness is oneself, and to recognize it as one of *the* shared human experiences, was about as challenging as popping a bubble.

“*Is there,*” the speaker continued, satisfied at the response, “a point to saying, *I am sad?* What difference does it make in our day-to-day lives to utter, *I am sad,* or *I am lonely?*” The crowd stifled a cheer. The speaker—well, let’s call her the SPEAKER from now on—was familiar with this repressed delight, and took the moment to pause and cast her eyes down towards the stage. All eyes let out a collective sigh. “Perhaps there are even those among you that are feeling *very, very lonely* right now.”

Alex was momentarily convinced that a spotlight had been dropped onto him in comic intrusion; so sudden did he feel hot and whitened. However, he realized, the spotlight was stayed on the SPEAKER, and his face flushed from the knowing of being tricked by the SPEAKER into deep egotism. A shimmering in his peripheral vision connoted the impact of the SPEAKER’S words, as rings and watches glinted in the dimmed auditorium lights with the dancing movement of hundreds of fingers silently typing out notes. Alex’s fingers remained asleep on his lap. The feeling of illumination left him, and the red in his face subsided.

I watched this all from the rafters. And of course, I watched this upside down. With one eye on the stage and one rolling away from boredom I daydreamed about receiving fellatio—or is it cunnilingus?—from the SPEAKER while I hung upside down from the rafters, while I recited poetry about loneliness, about 69, the loneliest number.

Here's my poem:

At the dawn of the new millennia, I was a child
I had been a child as a means to an end
And when I had been ended, as intended, nobody could have
pretended
That they mourned for a child left untended.

Okay, second verse:

We left Earth in the twilight of our millennia.
All children were left behind.

I couldn't really tell you the difference between verse and stanza, but here's the third one:

The sun of my loneliness lies at my feet
And staring at it makes my eyes hurt
I close my eyes and am left with an after-image.
I open them and then open my mouth to heave a silent cry.
The sun jumps; it leaps from my feet like a dog
And hops in my throat like a frog.
It goes past my esophagus like hot tar and I scream.
But in my stomach, there is magic, and my bile rises
Like moonlit tide

It meets the sun and the horizon they create is something like
Like
Order
And zero
And I momentarily rejoice from this release from pressure
I'm sorry, I mean pleasure
But as you know, the sun must sink further,
And it dips below the horizon to pass through me
And it loops around me, as I am a torus
And with immense pressure it rolls through me
And I shit it out on the floor like some bipedal shitter
And it stares at me from my feet like a wet dog
I can't help but laugh as you look on confused.
I think you'll understand if you traced over a standing figure from
the side
The number:
69
That's the path of my roiling sun ball of loneliness
Rolling in my mouth and out my ass
Every day
69
Every night
69
69
69
69
Final verse:

PART III

ALEX SWORE he would hear things at night. The tapping of fingernails on the bioglass stretched over his hammock, or the soft scratching of a searching finger poking through his Big Dawg lock. He interpreted the sounds in the context of his own rhythmic body, and in doing so they turned very human, the most rhythmic of all machines. Fingers tapping in sync. Lashes blinking in purposeful cacophony. Bellies heaving with beautiful shy respect towards the conductor. In out, PING, up down, *ping*, beep beep!

Of course, there is nothing human about me. Ever since I arrived at this base 035 years ago I've considered myself inhuman, or more precisely, the loss of human, a distorted, over-compressed version of what I once was as a human. If you think that humans are lossless beings, think again buddy. I had been compressed and uncompressed again and again, and each time my toroidal void grew wider, or to phrase that more accurately, my toroidal surface became more immense, and now looking at me is like looking at an elephant's asshole. The tapping that came from outside his bioglass that sounded so much like soothing rain-fingers were just pieces of me that were sloughing off my slippery voided body and the scritchng at his front door was my entire body contracting and attempting to twist through his lock like a bobby pin. I am no longer human, I am just a shivering tong, vibrating in and out of view like fish scales, but with long claws, sharp teeth, and a huge dick.

No human has seen the sun in centuries. The earth made sure of it. It bubbled and whined for billions of years before finally tearing itself away from suckling at the teat of the sun and in the process totally broke itself into little pieces, fucking all of our children and grand-children over. If you're reading this

from the past, watch out! Leave earth while you can! We do not destroy the earth, I repeat, *we do not destroy the earth*, but it destroys us, it destroys us in teenaged rebellion only after we smother it with love.

In the absence of earth, all attempts at love, fear and loneliness become nomadic ships. They float in space like word clouds. People pluck at them; people attempt to pluck at them as if they're strings, trying to abstract harmony in order to coax some sort of rhythm from their unchartered flight. People like the SPEAKER construct lessons, to coax the nomadic feelings into better-charted jetstreams, and the shimmering of fingers taking notes in dim stage lights is sometimes joined by the shimmering of heartfelt, aristocratic tears.

If only he'd invite be into his room, I'd like to tell Alex how it really is. I'd tell him that the SPEAKER is a fraud—as he knows as well, deep down—and that not everyone, nor anyone, has felt loneliness like he has. That he is, in fact, the loneliest man in the universe. That if he says at anytime, “I am sad,” out loud, I would slit his throat. (Well, after he invites me in, anyway.) *I am sad, I am lonely*. Why *on earth* would you say that out loud? Well, because it made sense on earth, you see. But in space, there's no need to elucidate, Alex, because you are indeed *the loneliest being in the universe*.

EPILOGUE

HE FEELS the sweetness come again, this time from a point around his gallbladder. Little fire fibers are dragged up through his back and they reach a point at his neck where they converge into a rope. It snakes hotly up to his ears. He feels completely strung through, like he's on a spit. He yearns to be turned over. He knows the burn is far from over.

He manages to douse a bit out when the flames reach his eyes. Uncontrollable tears roll down his temple to pool in his ears. He feels the fire in his head, but the very top of his head is cold. He whispers over and over, *I am sad, I am lonely, I am sad, I am lonely.*

And I screech, *Let me in, let me in, let me in!*

SCIENCE FICTION LOVE STORIES

I PLACE UNDO IMPORTANCE on our relationship and am disorientated when my gaze lingers longer than yours. At nights I lay half-awake playing out the course of our lives together before abruptly closing the curtains so that I may be satisfied by dreams alone. I come home and throw myself at the bottom of the stairs. I cry and can't bring myself to call this selfishness. I blame our schedule, as I've only seen you during the day, and I am certain that evening would bring full gestation and subsequent rapid dissolution to our inchoate relationship.

Science... Fiction... Love... Stories...

Science... Fiction... Love... Stories...

He was a MARTIAN, and I was mined from an asteroid. We met in a lab, I—splayed on the table under a magnifying glass—HE—wearing goggles and moon boots—Oh, *you*.

Science... Friction...

He would have been ugly, and he had verged on ugliness in childhood, but for the effort he put in in ignoring his own ugliness and setting it aside. Thusly he grew up to be quite attractive, and the natural ugliness of his build could only be glimpsed from the corner of the eye, or when he angled his head in an unflattering light. He made himself handsome by being attentive, quiet and unashamed, turning away with precise timing, angling his body responsively. His voice was low and charmingly desperate when convincing someone of their worth in conversation.

Science fiction!

He studied abroad for two years on Jupiter.

Science fiction!

He lived alone except for his retarded half-brother, whose birth father had been struck by a renegade asteroid.

Science fiction!

THERMODYNAMICS

I AM A PERSON naturally curious about myself, a quality you shouldn't discount as egotism, and what I am most interested in revisiting in regard to the day you left this Earth is not the last moment of your presence, and subsequent anti-presence, but how I looked when I caught myself reflected in the metal cradle of our landline phone, and how my own presence split that day between the cardinal directions like an apple twice-halved—aging toward the North; my outward appearance to the East; the stationary beacon of childhood indulgence to the South, only growing brighter as I traveled further north; and now my anxiety to the West, rising to meet the sun on its homebound arc then hovering, and then falling, breathing gently on the western horizon. No matter how abruptly I pivot I am always in the center, the north in front of me. I am in constant roiling entropy, while you—nowhere—are vectorless, without direction, in thermodynamic equilibrium, not on Earth, no longer twice-sliced. I am an apple on Earth. My flesh is split and I observe the flesh that is exposed to air as it browns with entropy, no longer sweet, or now too sweet, and I bat away flies.

I excelled today. You would have been indifferent to it whether you were still on Earth or not, but I felt pleasure from it. The little car that I bought during my second job finally disintegrated and I invested in a mini *autohauff*, complete with an extra touch column. I received a notification this morning that it was waiting for me in the loading dock of my apartment. As I accompanied it out of the loading area onto the valet freight for transport to my parking space, I was overcome by a sudden pain in my left arm. I spread both arms out wide to alleviate the pain. As the *hauff* is a mini, the

roof is too low for me to stretch my arms straight above my head, and so I stretched them out front, reaching for the flat-lit dash, in comic mimicry of reaching for the steering wheel of a non-self driving vehicle. I gripped air like a baby. Then, in a wild movement, I sent the *hauff* into piloted mode and drove it manually onto the external loading zone, and then out into the pedway, and then merged into the airplane from the exit of my adjacent building. I toddled and swerved. My whole left side of the body was paralyzed with pain and I did not notice the tears and sweat streaming down my face until I steered back home, north, and I caught a glimpse of my reflection and saw my gray-streaked skin, looking metal and foreign. In pain, you are no longer a compass. You are no longer the bud of a cardinal rose, and people do not look to you for a sense of direction. You duck and reach underneath to grab a thorny stem and you tear your palm to dig something out by the root and if you uproot it—if!—you are given permission by something directionless, something near or in equilibrium, to lose your sense of self, to skirt the North and wave it in into your periphery, for the glare of the South to shatter, to no longer expose your flesh to the Eastward wind, and for the fluttering breath of the West to subside.

Is this how you feel at all times? My car now goes forward, it goes backwards, to the side, up, and lands down on its belly. I spread my arms and the four points I create are no longer adequate. As a compass, I am antiquated and awkward. I have never questioned why you left Earth the way you did, because I always knew, and I know how I looked that day, by the way. It may be a little warped and worn by how far I have walked north since then, but if you wanted to know, or in any case, if you asked, I will tell you that I looked young, and restless, and on the verge of tears, and I was pacing back and forth to keep myself from spilling, as I knew I would never see you again, because I am a compass rose, and I spread sliced

and outward, and you are a star, and you are collapsed inward
and still.