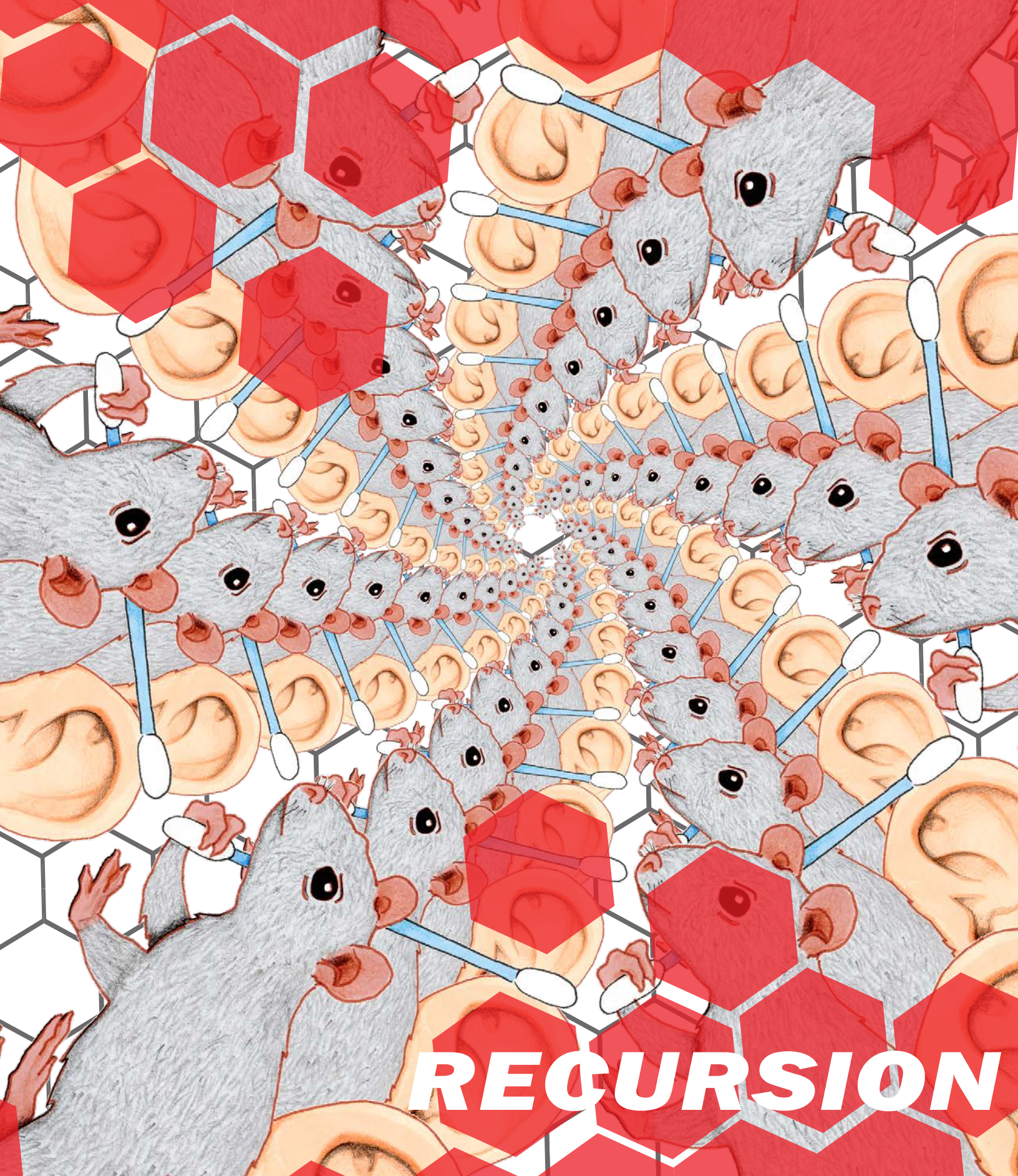


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RECURSION

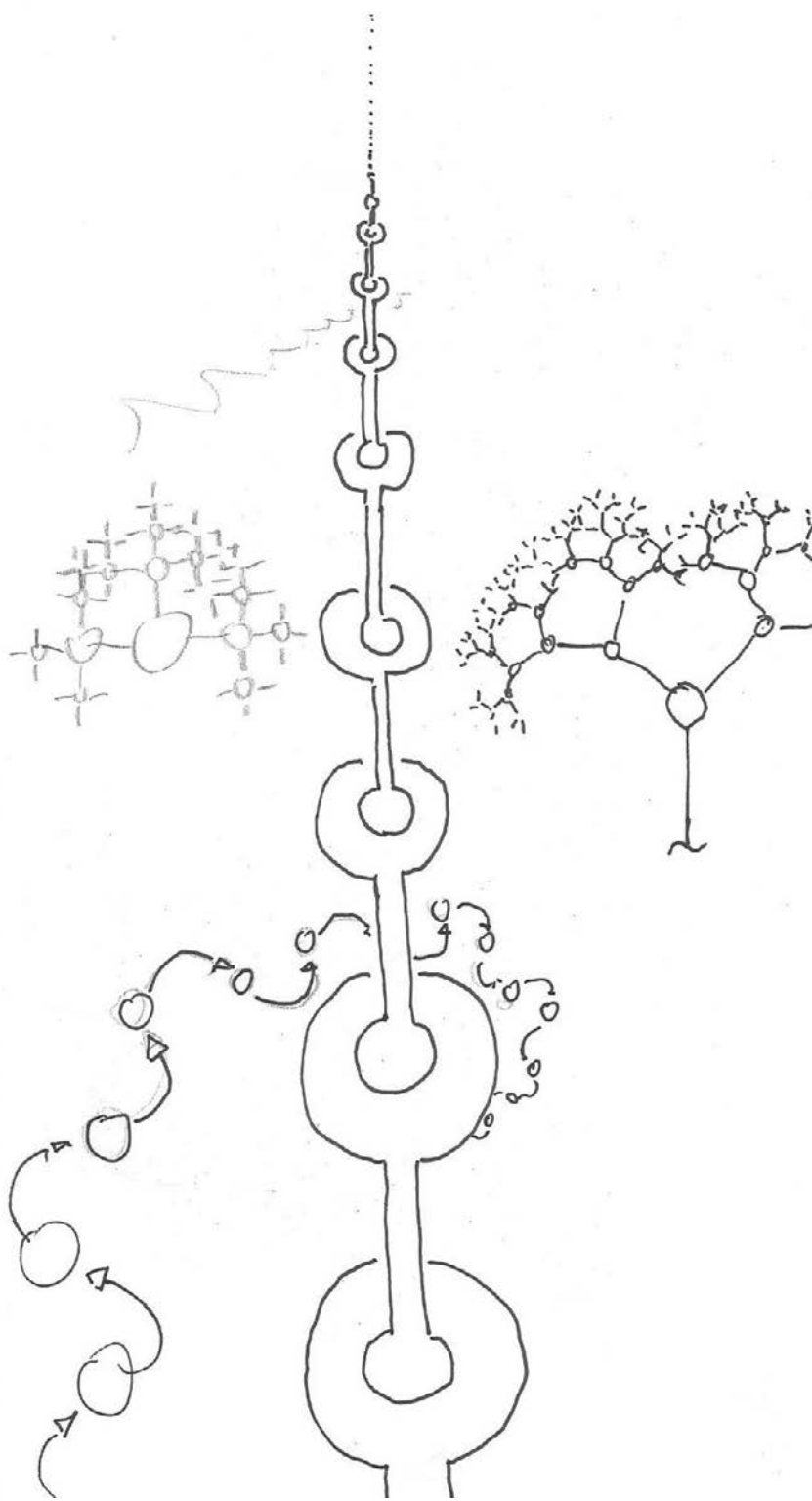
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Writing

Letter from the Editor	
Mike V.	1
A Night in Vienna	
by Furnacewriter	2
Hypothesis	
by Preternaturality	8
Progress is Inevitable	
by LUS	10
The New Right and the Clucking of America	
by bikerbuddy.....	14
Today is the First Day of the Rest of Your Life	
by Snufkin.....	21

Visual

Ratcursive Function	
by Sage.....	(Cover)
Recursive Horror	
by Nyahoo Studio	13
Separation	
by Cameron Zavala	19
Contributors	23



Letter from the Editor

by Mike V.

I often find myself waking up in the middle of the night, restless with my thoughts invading whatever sweet dreamscape I was inhabiting with boring shit like “bills,” “grandma has Alzheimer’s,” and “Earth is dying.” What lame shit that is, to interrupt my own personal haunted house zombie movie just for these inevitable bummers.

I woke up again the other night and looked over at my alarm clock: 2:26AM. I turn around a few times until ultimately ending up on my back, staring at my ceiling. I let out a long sigh that doesn’t offer any relief. I close my eyes and try to force myself to sleep.

A few minutes later, I move my head and look over to the alarm clock: 2:14AM. Wait, what? I blink and look again, 2:27AM. Did I really misread the clock that badly? Did I sleep for a whole day just to wind up back here again in bed? I’m laying in bed all day and night, all week, all month. I’m watching myself lay in bed while I’m laying in bed, my ceiling transforms into a mirror and I stare through them all the way a thousand stories upward, my eyes blink and I look over at the alarm clock: 2:16AM.

The next day I decide to go for a hike, figuring if I can wear myself down during the day I’ll sleep easier at night. I keep hiking through the forest until I come onto a clearing. There’s an old stone tower in the distance. Inside the window I see someone, but I can only just make them out. I shout something and run towards them, but they are so far. I see them walk by the window as my breath starts to get heavy as each step slams the ground harder.

I get to the tower, it’s maybe twenty feet tall, old stone that has been neglected over the years. I try to yell out but only gasp as I try to catch my breath. I slowly climb the tower stairs to get to the window. The person is gone. I have to stop as I’m halfway up and sit down, really find my breath before I fall over. I look up at the ceiling and I’m reminded of

a thousand me’s sleeping under a thousand other me’s.

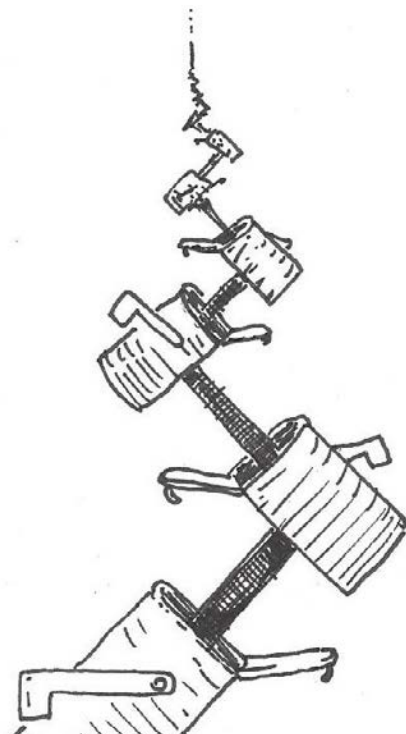
I sit there for a few minutes or maybe more, and then get up. I look out the window of the tower. The view is unremarkable. I hear something in the distance but can’t make it out. I see another hiker in the distance coming towards the tower. I decide to hustle down the stairs so that they can enjoy the tower alone.

I’m back in bed and my blanket makes me feel hot. I throw it off my body and it curls up against the corner created by my bed touching the wall. The pattern on the blanket from one end overlaps a different section and lines up perfectly, the pattern totally unbroken. I know if I move it the pattern will still be there, but it also won’t. I lay in bed thinking about what to do as my alarm clock minds the time for me.

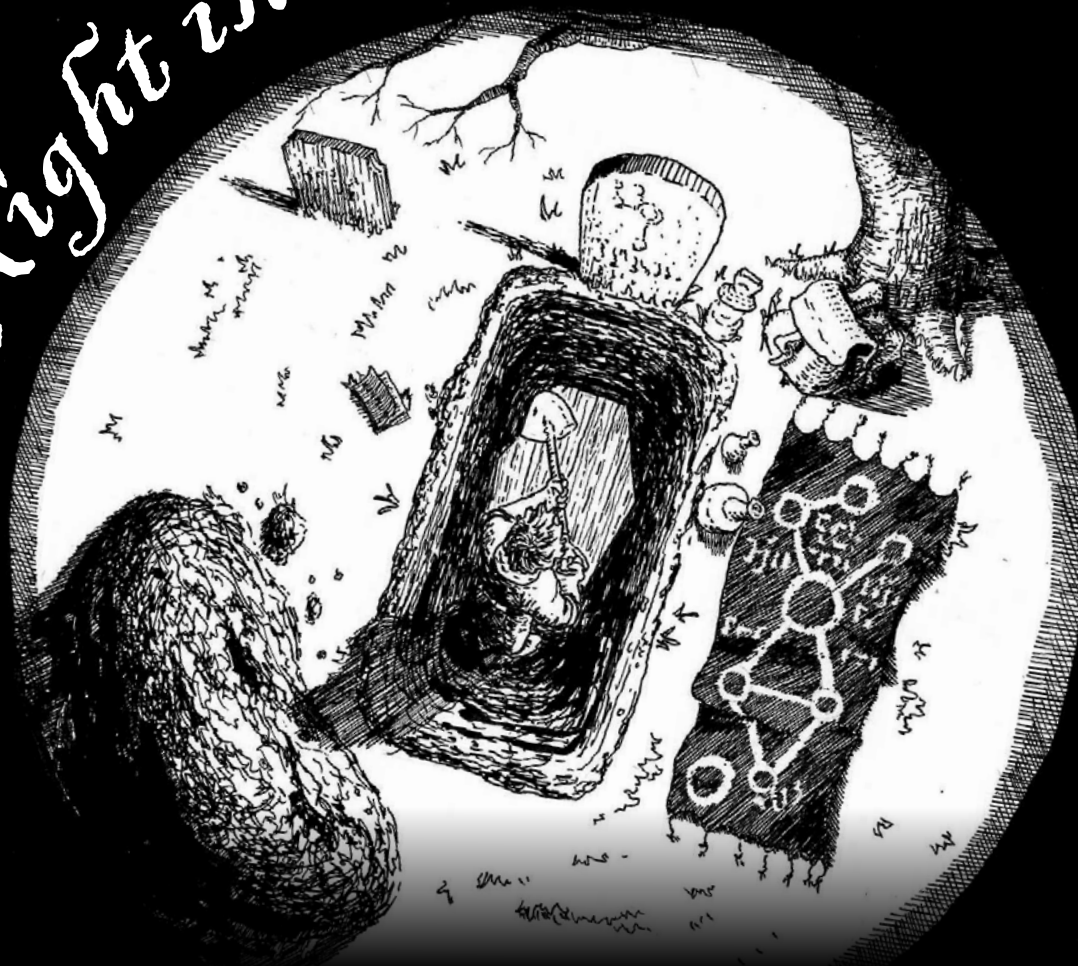
This is Ear Rat Magazine issue four and the theme is “recursion.” This is our best issue yet and it’s also our best issue yet.

Thank you for all the Ear Rats along the way; we will be back for a fifth issue soon.

-Mike V.



A Night in Vienna



by Furnacewriter

“I can’t believe this was the only graveyard left unguarded! Should have started sooner, the bloody corpse permits take forever to process!” complained the young man hurriedly digging an unmarked grave, every so often peeking over his shoulders to see if he had been spotted. It was late in the night, and his only company was the occasional rat, poking around the grave, looking for some leftovers. “Bloody practical exercise. It’s not like Necromancy even has any job offerings nowadays. I should have listened to mom and choose a computer major instead of going for liberal arts.” He was

now knee deep in the dirt, and his shabby ill-fitting two-piece suit—whose blazer he long had taken off and thrown next to the grave—was messy and disheveled.

“Well, whoever is beneath here will have to do. I gotta hand this over for tomorrow, after all.” After a few more shovelfuls of dirt, he hit a solid surface. “Finally! Now let’s see your face...” he muttered, as he quickly cleared the dirt that remained on top of the casket, knelt next to it and pried it open. A sharp noise of wood breaking and the sudden release of a foul stench revealed him successful. Inside lay a skeleton, bleached from the years buried, dressed in what once had been a 18th-century-style suit, with a

long coat and breeches, but that now was little more than rotting scraps. “Excellent! It’s in one piece! Great luck!” the young man enthusiastically thought. He then picked up the corpse, turning away his nose, and put on top of a large piece of cloth he had set next to the grave.

The cloth was black and embroidered in white with strange circles, runes and figures, which gave it an ominous aspect. After putting down the dead body, he took a small notebook from the back pocket of his trousers and started quickly flipping its pages, muttering “What was it again that I needed for reanimation? A pound of iron? How much lead come again? Damn, my handwriting sucks...” After a few minutes scratching his head and perusing the notebook, he picked an assortment of bottles and packages from his bag, which he had left propped up next to a tree, and unceremoniously started dumping their contents on top of the corpse. “This gotta work, right?”, he thought, seeming quite unsure of what he was doing.

“Well, whatever, the worst that could happen is me flunking a grade.” After the body was covered with all manner of powders and fluids, he started reading out loud from his notebook, pronouncing strange ancient-sounding words and gesticulating wildly, though this latter behavior did not seem to be intentional. After he finished reading—not without stumbling and stuttering a few times—a sudden chill cut through the air. The night seemed to grow darker, so thick that even the moon seemed to disappear. A strong miasma enveloped the corpse, and it slowly rose up. A shrill, otherworldly voice suddenly filled the silence:

“Good evening to you who brought me back from my eternal slumber! I am Felix von Oberstein, count in the court of the great emperor of the Austrian Empire, and responsible for all necromantic duties the emperor requires.”

“It worked! Holy shit, he talks!”

“To whom do I own this displeasure? Though I practiced the arts, I never expected to be woken up myself—certainly not after the way I died. Surely it must be a grave matter if a person of my stature had to be involved.”

“Yeah yeah Mr. Felix, whatever you say, I just need you to be a pal, shut up and come with me. I’m just gonna quickly show you to my teacher and bam, you’ll be back to sleep in no time!”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Yeah dude, you’re my ticket not to flunk. The teacher is an asshole, so we better get a move on quick—I have no idea how long this magic works and if I can’t show him until tomorrow that I’m a successful necromancer I’ll have to redo a whole bunch of credits again and it’ll be a major pain. Now chop chop, let’s get going before we get caught!”

“I’m... speechless.”

“Good, that’s the way I like. Now see that car? You’re gonna enter the trunk and we’ll drive to school. Oh wait, do you even know what a car is? Whatever, just come with me.”

The young man then half-heartedly threw a few scoops of dirt into the now empty hole—he quickly gave up trying to cover up his crime—, picked up the mess he

had made around the grave, jammed the various objects into his bag and ran, dragging the skeleton by the arm and making way towards his car. He popped open the trunk and shoved his company inside, protesting.

"You can't treat a figure of my stature like this! There will be hell to pay!"

"Sure Mr. Noble, this place hasn't had an emperor for nearly a hundred years, so your fancy names mean jack nowadays. Now just keep quiet and it'll be over soon, okay?"

He then closed the trunk, got inside the car, put the keys in the ignition, and quickly drove off, ignoring traffic signals and generally making a nuisance of himself. Inside the trunk, the skeleton muttered in disbelief: "The emperor is... gone? No more nobility? The rabble now rules the great kingdom of Austria? There will be hell to pay..."



After a few minutes the car reached its destination: a nice, quiet and lush suburb, full of trees and comfortable-looking houses. After the student saw what he was looking for, he suddenly stopped the car, which caused a loud screech. He then looked as if he had done something wildly stupid, and muttered, "Oh shit, I hope I didn't damage the skeleton! Well, he's dead anyway, what's the worst that could happen?" After fumbling a bit, he got out of the car and opened the trunk. In there the skeleton, though its pieces remained intact, looked as if it had been through a particularly intense session inside a blender. "Damn, dude, can you put yourself back together?" The skeleton's skull floated a bit, turned to face the student, and said, tiredly:

"I... can... indeed..."

"Great, just wait a bit and I'll fetch my teacher!"

He then walked toward the door and rang the doorbell. Silence. After waiting a few moments, he rang it again, to no avail. Getting impatient, he started ringing the doorbell nonstop, until the door jolted open and a tired-looking man in a robe appeared:

"Bloody hell it's three in the morning, who's demented enough to show up at this hour?" He looked at his visitor. "Oh, it's... you. What in the gods' name do you want?"

"Hey teach! I managed to do the assignment! It's in trunk of my car, check it out!"

He dragged the now exasperated teacher towards his car, and, as they got close, the skeleton finally got out of the trunk, looking a little worse for wear.

"See teach? This is mister Felix Ober-something, he's totally a dead dude which I

brought back! That's what you wanted, right? Say something, you dumb skeleton!"

"...I'm Felix von Oberstein... necromancer... used to be dead... just kill me already..."

The teacher, who until now looked mighty pissed off, now stood aghast. After a few moments of awkward silence between the parties, he suddenly bowed deeply and said, in a humble tone:

"Please Mr. Oberstein, do get inside, a figure of your stature must not stay in such a manner!" He then barked towards the student: "You too, imbecile, get in!"

The skeleton looked mighty surprised for a moment, but quickly put on airs. The three, then, walked inside. They found themselves in what once probably had been a rather cozy living room, but that now was so full of books that there barely was any space left. The teacher hurriedly cleared a spot in what apparently was a sofa, and gestured for the skeleton to sit, which he promptly, but elegantly, did. The student looked pleadingly, but the teacher ignored him, sat on the one chair that wasn't covered in books, and spoke, respectfully:

"Milord, are you the famed Felix von Oberstein from the court of Emperor Charles VI?"

"It seems that this age has not completely forgotten my person after all." He then cleared his non-existent throat, and spoke pompously: "Yes indeed, I am Felix von Oberstein, count responsible for all necromantic duties in the court of Emperor Charles VI."

"It's an honor to meet you. Your advancements in the fields of necromantic calculus have been invaluable! Truly, modern necro-

mancy would not exist without your efforts! Truly a shame what happened to you.”

“Why indeed”, the skeleton spoke bitterly, “you accidentally zombify one tiny little village, and all of a sudden the whole court turns against you and the emperor orders you dead. Those ungrateful pigs! But no matter. It’s all in the past. Now that I’ve been brought back, what can I be of service to you?”

While this conversation went on, the student was listlessly opening and closing a book, looking bored. Noticing a moment to intervene, he quickly raised his voice:

“So great teach, you love this dead dude! This means I passed, right?”

“Shut up you spineless vermin, you’re in the presence of a most hallowed figure! Show some respect! As for your grades, you brazenly robbed a grave in the middle of night, then immediately pestered me in the middle of my sleep, on the very last day before the assignment was due! You should be happy I won’t be expelling you!”

The student, after listening to such a response, thus looked genuinely shocked. “Man, I’ll have to retake traditional necromancy? This shit is so boring!”, he briefly thought to himself; then he got back to meaninglessly opening and closing a book near him. The teacher, after this emotional discharge, then sheepishly looked towards the skeleton, and asked in a subservient tone:

“You know Mr. Oberstein, we are lacking a teacher for traditional necromancy. I’ve been covering the spot for a while, but I’m actually specialized in zombie biology. Would you not be interested in taking up

the chair? I assure you the Vienna Academy of Necromancy would be delighted in having a person of your stature enrolled in its faculty.”

The skeleton looked pensive for a few moments, and then carefully answered:

“Teaching necromancy might be quite interesting... I would like to see what people have come up with since my days, and there are still some experiments I’d like to try. But surely the spell this idiot cast cannot possibly last very long; long-duration necromancy requires an equivalent sacrifice, after all. Would it be possible to arrange such a thing?”

The teacher stopped for a moment, then slowly looked towards the student, who still was messing about with the book, not paying any attention to what was being said, and then back to his guest. The skeleton quickly understood, and, looking at one another, both teachers seemed to reach a tacit agreement.

* * *

A few years later, a young woman could be seen digging a grave in the middle of the night. It was a graveyard now famed for having been the resting-place of a notorious necromancer. In between strikes of the shovel, she thought to herself “Damn, traditional necromancy is a pain! That bloody skeleton bastard insists in the “traditional experience of grave-robbing”. Who even does this kind of stupid thing nowadays? We have had morgues reserved for necromancy since the past century!” After a few more shovelfuls of dirt, she hit a hard surface. It was, evidently, a coffin. After opening it, she examined the skeleton inside. It looked somehow rather new, though this grave

supposedly had been there for quite a while. She then dragged the corpse out, laid it on a surface proper for necromantic spell-casting, and began the ritual.

After a few minutes, a miasma covered the graveyard, and the corpse rose up. A shrill voice rang through the night. "Holy shit teach, why are you holding that knife!" He then looked at his surroundings, stared at the now dumbfounded girl in front of him, and suddenly exclaimed, "Aw damn! Teach really didn't accept it! I wonder if I still have to retake traditional necromancy?"

I want to thank Kirsche for the invaluable help in writing this story.
meersalz.neocities.org



Hypothesis

by Preternaturality

It wasn't that long ago when they finally proved it. One of the big questions, the really big ones. The ones so big they hadn't been a base of active study, just idle speculation and endless philosophizing. Until a couple years ago, when they finally demonstrated that the universe was a simulation. The apparent observable universe is all just a program running on some unfathomably powerful machine, somewhere else. Somewhere one step more real. This had been revealed, received a massive wave of attention, and then mostly faded into irrelevance. I mean, what did it really matter? And plenty of people didn't believe it, anyways. I mean, how could you actually possibly prove that from inside? How could you be really sure that the supposed artifacts really were artifacts, and not just natural features of a weird universe? Yeah, yeah, I read the articles.

It's not that I'm unconvinced. I do believe it, just bear with me. I just don't think that's the best way of proving it, right? Some bits of writing about various features of evidence and the likeliest explanations and then some math none of the article authors actually understand but try to summarize anyways. That's not how you reach the public. That's not how you convince yourself. It's all abstract, and while that's all well and good it's hard to tell if it's shaky, and how much. For the abstract to be rock solid, you have to completely understand it. Anything you don't quite know for sure is a weak point, somewhere a mistake could be hiding out of sight and compromising the entire structure. But something concrete? Well, seeing is believing.

Yeah, you know exactly what I mean. Just give me a minute, and do excuse the flourish. I've been looking forward to this. Years of planning, months of work, and it's finally, finally ready. This right here? It's my magnum opus. No, no, even more than that. It's the Great Work."

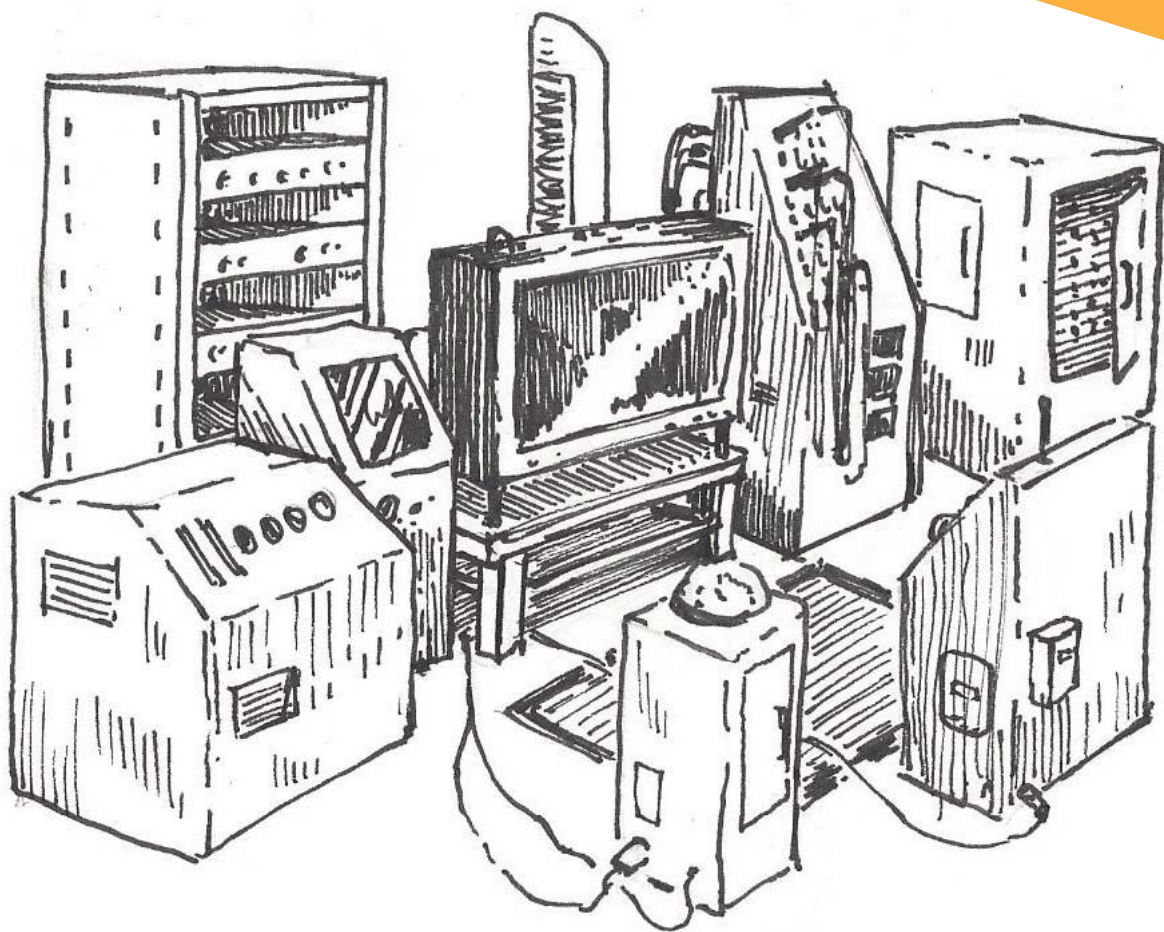
The figure spun on their heel, the tail of their too-large lab coat billowing out a little behind them. They thrust their arms out to indicate everything behind them, a labyrinth of boxy plastic casing and tangled wires. They were grinning ear to ear, relishing the moment as if it was full of applause, rather than the hum and whirl of computer fans. After a couple moments soaking it in, they spun again, shoes squeaking horrendously against the floor. They stepped up to the nearest bit of hardware, a little stand of buttons and knobs below a Goliath monitor. Humming to themselves, they punched some memorized sequence of inputs, and waited.

Lights and indicators lit up over the mess of parts, in haphazard, almost random order. The drone of the fans flew into a whine, approaching a fever pitch before leveling off, overwhelmed by a low-pitched thrumming from somewhere in the disarray. The lights in the room dimmed for a moment, and then the massive screen blinked to life.

It showed a dark scene, with only a few indistinct outlines barely visible. It was playing the sounds of approaching footsteps, then a clack of metal against metal, and the overhead lights blinked on. The room was dominated by a jumbled mess of blocky hardware and intertwined cords. The centerpiece of it all was a TV screen that looked humongous compared to its surroundings.

Then a figure moved onto the scene. They positioned themselves in the center of the screen, brushed off their several sizes too-large lab coat, and cleared their throat. They took in a deep breath, then let it out slowly. Their face looked contemplative for a moment, and then they turned, presenting their back to the screen. Softly, they counted downwards, and then turned their head over their shoulder.

"You know the simulation hypothesis?"



Progress is Inevitable

by LUS

Sam flourished the fleshy dials. Just like in practice, he twisted the leftmost knob clockwise before its far-right equivalent could come unbalanced again. At once, the vehicle perfectly interpreted his instructions—instantly animated.

Reasonably comfortable up there in the cockpit, Sam worked the controls. It was difficult terrain; mistimed procedures were not an option out there on the ice. He was severely aware of possible slip-ups.

A quick spin required the simultaneous snapping into action of every limb—seven of his hand-digits, three foot-digits—each depressing its respective control-node in the appropriate inter-ordinal direction—prompt, secure and without hesitation. Sam blinked.

Then, recovering from the spin without risking the craft's capsizing required a half-measure inversion of the first procedure—flawlessly, he enacted the motion-set, slackening the rotational acceleration throttle as the operation came to an end.

Even for someone with his skillset, it had to be admitted, well... This was a lot.

Making sure to first reset the craft's balance maintenance mechanism, he took a moment to check his instruments. The crowd out there cheered. He let the air out—the performance had been a success.

It was all pretty difficult, that was for sure... But maybe not as difficult as his audience seemed to think—not for a small guy like him.

He didn't mind saying it, that was what he was. Twenty centimetres tall, he fit tight in the cockpit. Sam's bet was that the craft hadn't been designed with metric measurements in mind—he suspected it was manufactured in one of those countries that had refused to switch for whatever reason. Some dimensional information, maybe, might have been lost in the transition from out there to in here. Data had trouble travelling in certain directions.

Only someone around Sam's size could do Sam's work—he felt proud of that.

The size deal was simple: plainly, within a certain range (Sam didn't know the specifics), size scales neatly enough with metabolic rate. From there, perception of time—its rate of passage—scaled with both size and metabolic rate. You're littler, you take more of your surroundings in. Sam felt it was pretty intuitive.

'Therefore', he therefor'd: the smaller, the better, the greater the ease of manipulating large machinery for people on a littler scale; it was a fact that smaller guys just did this kind of work better, so, in theory, he could take his time—in theory!

If he only hadn't been a smidge too large for the cockpit, he might not have had such a job of maintaining the craft's ordinary operations—he didn't dare think of all the stress he might've saved. Plainly, practically, it was difficult getting over the way his knees chafed constantly against the chamber walls.

Perhaps, though, it was best to at least try—ignore it all and focus on his thoughts. He concentrated.

If all this time-perception business, right—if that was why construction workers operate cranes and cranes don't operate construction workers, then his situation, he reasoned, was analogous to a big, slow, lumbering elephant operating the crane—it was ridiculous! He felt just ridiculous!

San removed her finger from the reasoning button. Her craft ceased rumination—she usually tried to avoid that, it wasn't a strength for this model. As it collected itself and resumed ordinary function, San felt a shot of gratefulness—at least her craft-control interface wasn't nearly as complicated as the one out there.

It didn't need to be as complicated, she decided, pressing the spin button again—this time, a double-tap.

At her level of things, she could afford a little less specificity with the instructions—as far as she was concerned, power users were only users with less time on their hands. No offence to power users, but San simply had none of the same requirements.

Instead, she had her control buttons—hundreds, arranged neatly in criss-crossed rows and columns. Maybe a little intimidating, true, but San was lucky enough to possess the considerable wherewithal required to use them correctly—and wasn't that all she needed?

The craft didn't know it, but San's acuity with her far less complex controls more than made up for its... unfortunate size issue.

See, the thought-speed, and therefore intelligence of the outermost craft, she believed, was perhaps measurable in terms of the average mass-difference between it, its operator and San herself in every possible combination.

Excepting the possibility of a third-level operator (ridiculous!), San was confident that she was chiefly responsible for the admittedly exceptional intelligence of the outermost craft—it was all down to her. Wasn't that something to be proud of?

She jabbed the pride button. No reason the whole system shouldn't be allowed a hit of this—it was thanks to all of them that the routine was going so well out there. All of them but, well—mostly San, of course, right there at the source.

That moment of success, maybe, was why she was so suddenly astounded to find herself thoroughly paralysed.

She didn't fall over, she wasn't dead—but given that she was completely frozen in place, it was only going to be a few moments before the outermost craft began to approach something very much resembling death.

This kind of sucked.

Sao didn't care. Through a long-lasting campaign of meditation and introspection, he had uncovered a great truth—no, the great truth—about the world and his place in it. As a third-level operator, it was obvious he'd have more reason than most to be suspicious of a further fourth-level operator right

from the start.

That didn't change Sao's reaction when he discovered he was right.

That didn't change how he just had to remove it.

Sure, he got it, the plan was risky, but come on—it was the only thing he could do! Sao wasn't a machine to be controlled!

Admittedly, he had been doing the same to someone else—well, sometwo, somethree else for his whole existence but—

Look, that didn't change how this wasn't part of the deal! No, that wasn't going to change a thing. He was resolute, he was determined, he was going to just—just—reach inside and scoop the operator out! Just like that. Then he'd be free—

He'd finally be living his own life—and that was worth any risk.

As Sao jammed his thumb inside, his thoughts turned to the possibility of something new—maybe he'd leave the whole system! Then he could go—then he could go—

Something came loose.

Uh. Was that it?

Before his unblinking eyes, a minuscule 'do not remove' label fluttered downwards, and an even littler person hopped down from his thumb and onto the dashboard. He couldn't move.

Honestly, Sap shouldn't have been playing with her craft like that—it explicitly warned against communication in the operators' manual!—but then, she never thought this could happen.

It's like, her craft wasn't actually conscious or anything, she wasn't going to go and forget that. She had just been flicking a particular switch with very particular rapidity and it had started... Acting like this.

That didn't qualify as communication, surely! Did it?

No, well, if it did, that only meant communication was funny—it was interesting! She had enjoyed

watching her craft try and say things, actually acknowledging her presence in a way it wasn't meant to—sure, it was slow, but it was fascinating.

More than that—watching it through the visual instruments, front row seats like that—it had been fun. She had only been having fun. How could she have known this was going to happen?

No, nobody was responsible. It was the system that was to blame, surely. There was nothing else to be said.

Standing on the gigantic dashboard, she realised the worst part of all—she now had no idea how she was meant to operate these controls from outside the craft. Giant levers? On the walls? Really? How was she meant to operate all this on her own? She didn't even know where to start.

Her first attempt was a clamber onto what she had to hope was a useful control console—but Sap was an operator, not a clamberer, and fell off the sheer surface before even reaching the halfway mark. She had to admit this wouldn't work.

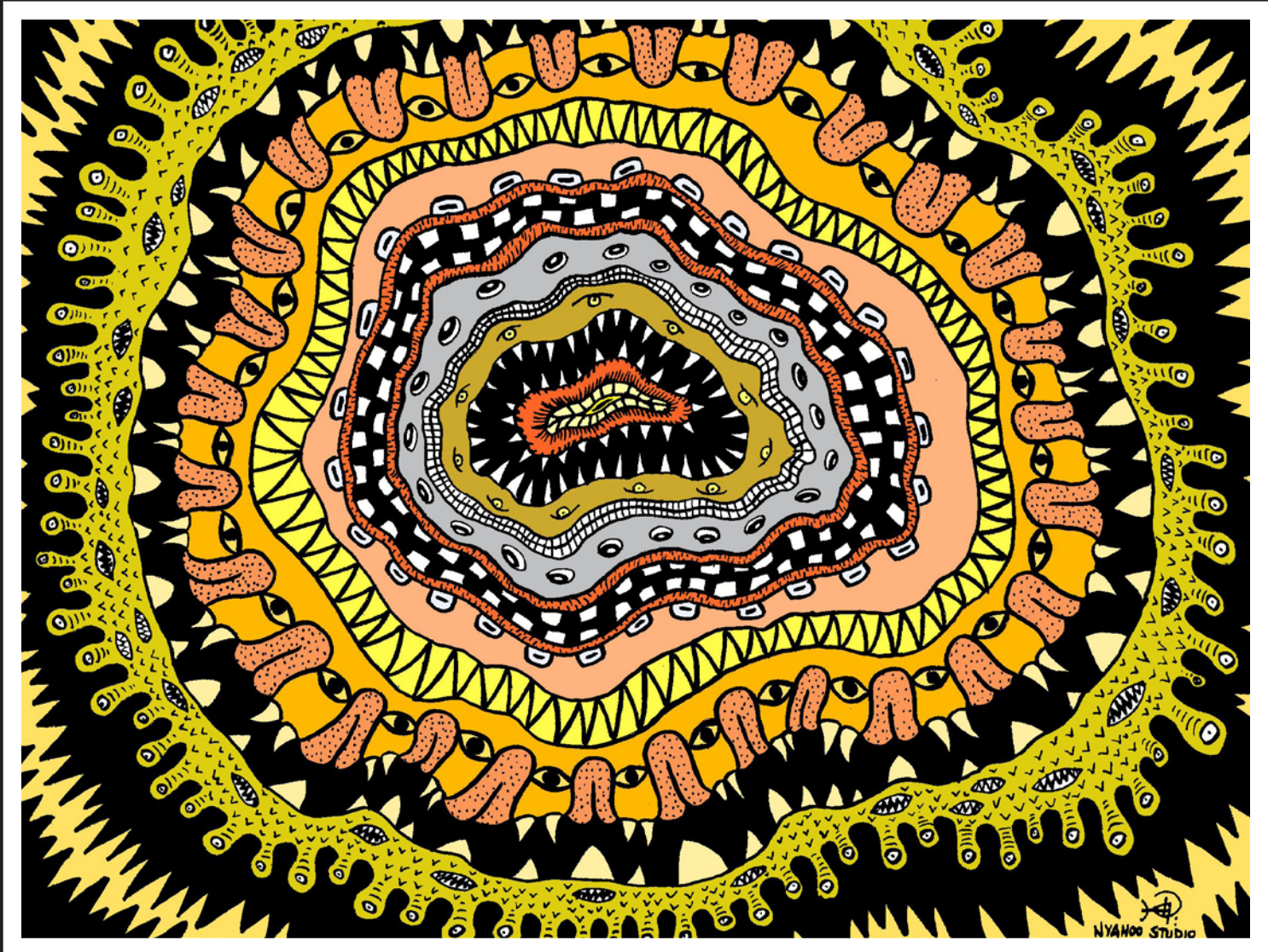
That was the trouble. She only knew how to use like, four or five switches at a time—and not these mega-sized ones.

She... She didn't know what to do. Was there anything left to do?

Had Saq done something wrong? The button didn't do anything.

Was this his fault?

Sally's headache was getting worse.



Recursive Horror

Nyahoo Studio

THE NEW RIGHT AND THE CLUCKING OF AMERICA

by bikerbuddy



“So, just to recap in case you’re watching this and your brain is normal and you’re therefore having trouble following: They think there’s bamboo in the paper because it was smuggled in from Asia. They think Trump watermarked the real ballots. They think Hugo Chavez, who died in 2013, rigged the election. And they think the ballots were eaten by chickens who were then incinerated.” Huffpost, 28 May 2021 (https://www.huffpost.com/entry/seth-meyers-arizona-recount_n_60b07474e4b02a79db8b-cdd4)

It was the summer of the current year, 2021, when Marjorie came to our school. But just as it always is at the beginning of any great moment, the approaching light of history was dim until it was suddenly a glaring beacon. All we could do was step aside and hope that we might board without being swept under the wheels of momentous change.

Like any other time that you might care to remember, there were naysayers before Marjorie arrived. I mean those people who, as history shows, felt emboldened to say what they would without consequence to begin with. I am remembering Matt, in

particular, a former colleague, who laughed when I told him I had been chosen for this event.

“You can’t make her do it,” he said, full of the self-righteousness of the overlooked. “It’s all too new and confusing for her. You can’t use her like this.”

I smiled because I was not going to get into an argument with Matt at that time of the morning. Certainly not beneath the school emblem I had designed last summer, in pride of place above the common room desk. And because I knew how much he would be infuriated, I said, “It’s not my choice.”



I hadn't always been so confident. Not until it became apparent I had become Principal Greene's protégé. She never used words like "protégé" or "mentor." She didn't have to. How else to explain her calling upon me, ever more often since the year prior to this? She'd even visited "a few times during lunch for a sit-down chat over salad to hear my opinions.

- It had begun the last year before this current year. It was during the week when the new school emblem had been unveiled, that I realized the principal had begun to take an interest in me. I had been delegated the responsibility of finding a company that could help revitalize the school's image. She had decided it was time for a brand change. But the quotes were exorbitant. Before taking them to the principal the following week, I decided I would give things a go myself. How hard could it be? I spent that Saturday morning doodling some designs until I finally hit upon an idea. It had been sitting at the back of my mind all along - it was inspired by official policy after all - and I set about smashing tiles from various renovations and a few more I bought for nix at a local seconds supplier. I spent that Sunday selecting my pieces—just the right size, just the right shape—then gluing them into place to realize the image I had imagined. The principal had been so pleased with my design that she used it exactly as I had made it. It soon appeared on our website (also redesigned to match the style of my emblem), above the school entrance, and even on the school's letterhead, along with the new motto that had come to me like a gift from the Great Leader himself: We all Count! My original design became a feature in the Principal's office, just behind her chair where her degrees once used to hang. With those gone—no one liked overt displays from intellectuals anymore, so removing her qualifications was just part of the sweeping improvements needed—anyone who sat facing her couldn't help seeing my work. Visitors to the school always said it looked better than all the copies they had seen.

One thing led to another: documents were sent to the department of schools with our new letterhead; an official came to the school for a meeting with the principal and saw my design behind her chair; I was introduced as a rising star; an article appeared

in the education magazine "¡ And before I knew it, Marjorie was coming to our school! I, Marie Taylor Contos, had been chosen as her mentor! "The eyes of America are upon you," the principal told me, not with a warning voice, but full of excitement and anticipation. I felt my cheeks flush. Those words rolled endless through my head, like a summer storm delivering a refreshing shower. While brushing my teeth, while lying in bed or driving to work: "The eyes of America are upon you."

And then Matt said what he said.

"And what choice does Marjorie have?" he quipped at my response.

"It's 2021," I snapped back. "What child doesn't have the right?"

"It's 2021, sure," he retorted. "Exactly what I mean."

Matt was an old thinker, part of that undercurrent in society who believed in conspiracies. He believed a movement existed to reinstate the Old Republic. There was some crazy conspiracy theory that a secret cabal of suffragists were intent on contacting the future to send terminators back"" yes, this was all based on that old movie from last century, if you can believe it—that would attack the government and reinstate the old regime. And just to show how crazy things had become, an alternate group had a sleeper army of mechanized chickens awaking to incinerate the artefacts that would one day prove the word of the Great Leader. Everything that had happened since the time of the Great Leader, these groups insisted, was somehow wrong, a Big Lie, and they simply refused to move on. Even in this current year 2021. And while I sometimes thought that serving required a certain amount of mental flexibility, was it really important enough to follow these thoughts to their logical conclusion, just to give everyone rights? But Matt hadn't finished.

"You're going to take this child upon an incursion for political purposes," he baited.

"Speak English," I told him. "The child will be going on an excursion. That's all! Just because it happens with-in school grounds, doesn't require your fancy leftist neologisms! An "incursion" is an attack across a border."

Matt smiled and I hated him for it.

“Like the Capitol incursion?” he questioned, his face blank. Innocent.

“Those people back then were loyalist,” I fumed. Always this going back when we were so close to moving forward. “Where would we be? You would criticize Washington next for fighting the British. You’re truly sick. Sad. So Sad!” I left the staff room. I only had fifteen minutes before I had to meet Marjorie, anyway, and I needed to spend time rehearsing what I would say to the child.

But I spent the time wondering about Matt, instead. About how people like him could be so negative. The Great Leader had provided the means to end the pandemic, and when he had been returned to power he finally swept aside those instruments of political dissent that had been the means to bring him low. Our excursion, undertaken every year, was to celebrate that, just as it was celebrated in schools across the country. And now Marjorie! A symbol of the intellectual achievement of our regime. Marjorie had died in the year of the Great Leader’s downfall at the age of fourteen. Now, like a metaphor for the Great Leader’s phoenix-like rise, itself, Marjorie had been returned to life from cryogenic freezing. The first person ever to be successfully brought back! In this current year 2021, Marjorie had appeared all over the Internet and had been hailed as a vindication of the New Republic.

I opened the front doors of the school administration building. Outside, the press was already gathered. A crowd of well-wishers and officials along with the principal, stood, poised before them. The crowd parted a little as I joined her. And there was Marjorie, flanked by two government officials, approaching. Her parents had died years ago. The child looked a little bewildered, but I knew I could provide all the support and care that Marjorie would need in the coming weeks at school.

“Hello, Marjorie,” the principal said, extending her hand. The child shook it tentatively, and then I shook her hand, too, and turned her for the photo opportunity. Our images, along with the principal’s brief statement, would be all over the Internet in minutes. Children were rubbernecking from their classrooms. The grounds keeper turned off his

mower, remembering the occasion. With the ceremony soon over it was time to take Marjorie into her new school.

“We have a special treat for you today,” the principal told Marjorie as we entered the school administration building. “Before we start you in classes, you’ll have a chance to meet some new friends. Each year we have an important excursion. No, not to the zoo. Just in our school stadium.”

“Every year?” asked the child, bewildered. I wondered whether the cold hibernation had affected brain. She comforted herself by clutching a plush toy in her hands.

“That’s right, dear. Every year,” I said. Then I remembered Matt’s words, and added lightly, “I guess you might call it a recursion!” I laughed awkwardly at my own joke to put her at ease, but Marjorie just looked at me.

The other children were already gathered outside the stadium entrance. Other teachers from my faculty, including Matt, were trying to get them in as quickly as possible before they became too bored. The children filed in and shuffled along the seating, filling several rows as their teachers looked out for any misbehaviour. When they were all seated their worksheets were distributed and the principal began to remind them of the importance of this annual event.

Below, on the stadium floor, tables were circled at various points, with dozens of people grouped, each coded with different colour T-shirts. They stared intently at bits of worn paper, photographed them and tallied. At one end of the stadium there was a small platform where a podium and microphone had been placed. Three cameras were positioned around its edges. Some of the press from outside had been cleared by security and were below the stage to cover the event. The principal took Marjorie’s hand and led her onto the platform and I followed as we had rehearsed. I sat on one of the chairs behind the podium while the principal took Marjorie’s hand and stood the child next to her at the podium. A countdown was given, a red light lit up on the centre camera and the principal was given her cue. I had to admire her poise. Recounts like the one below us were happening

around the nation, but ours was the one everyone would be watching. Like the Great Leader's prospects, like the Republic itself, Marjorie had been reborn and she was our future. The future of the New Republic. The principal could drone on about these things, but she did it well, and this was an historic occasion. Who wouldn't forgive her? By all predictions, she told the camera, this year was it. Since Marjorie's returning, our current Great Leader had predicted that this would be the year the count would go right and vindicate everything we had been saying since the fall of the Old Republic. Marjorie had returned to us from the very year the recounts had started—some thirty six years ago if my calculations were correct—and this would be the last 2021.

"And now I would like to introduce everyone to Marjorie," the principal was saying, her hand placed against the child's back to encourage her forward. "Perhaps she might say a few words for us?"

I wanted to see Marjorie's reaction—I would have been terrified in her place at her age—but I was suddenly distracted. Matt was pushing through some students who had left their seats to get a better view.

"Do they do this every year?" I heard Marjorie's voice in the microphone. She clutched at her plush toy nervously, a chicken with a silly expression. It suddenly occurred to me how much the child didn't know. The country had moved on but Marjorie was from that evil time. "Everything will be fine," I found myself whispering, willing her to hear. "All you have to do is believe."

But by then it seemed too late. Matt had burst onto the stage. Was there anyone to stop him? As he started his charge, three dark figures popped out of the nearest ballot boxes, below, like girls from a birthday cake, metal flashing from their jackets. But Matt was too quick. Bullet-riddled, he stumbled the last few feet across the stage. He snatched Marjorie's plush chicken from her hands and seemed to press at the chicken's two eyes, just before he collapsed forever.

Suddenly, Marjorie stopped and turned to stare down the ballot box men with dead eyes. Some-

thing had changed within her since Matt had taken her toy. I didn't know what to expect: a tantrum, maybe. For a second, the first man seemed to falter, to stagger, and before he could turn his weapon upon his assailant he burst briefly into flames before puffing into ash. Then the second man. Then the third. The anger in Marjorie's face faded as the first ashen flakes fell to the stage. A scream went up in the stadium. Then screaming started in general. Children scrambled for the exits. Vote auditors on the floor stopped counting and looked bewildered before they, too, dropped the ballots they were holding and ran chaotically. A man and a woman ran into each other and were knocked out. A woman stumbled at the door and her body did a jitterbug as many feet trampled across her to escape. Meanwhile, Marjorie's toy chicken, its red-laser eyes still glowering after firing its murderous beams, grew larger and larger. Marjorie stepped back, but not from fear. Rather, she was leaving room for her plush toy, now completing its expansion into the body of a Giant Mechanized Chicken, to inhabit the stage. With almost everyone gone from the stadium, Marjorie and her Giant Mechanized Chicken turned to look at the principal, who stood rooted to the spot at her podium. The Chicken regarded her as it might a worm. And with a swift peck—pop!—her head was gone. She slumped to the ground.

Marjorie, a sleeper agent, and her Giant Mechanized Chicken, had been sent by Joe Biden from the past!

"D-do you have an army of chickens?" I stammered. But I knew the answer already, and imagined ceremonies like ours, right across America. The glory of the count gone. The truth of the Big Lie extinguished.

Marjorie looked askance, then nodded at the school emblem above the stage. "You do that?" she asked. I considered my work and wondered what to say.

"It's a picture of Sisyphus," I explained. Had I begun to jabber with fear? "He's rolling a rock up a hill, but each day it rolls down, so he rolls it up again. One day," I added, "he will get it to the top of the hill." The metaphor for the recounts—the hope entailed in the imagery—had seemed genius to me. Now it seemed wan.

"Why doesn't he just let the rock go? Let it roll back to the bottom of the hill and walk up without it?" Marjorie asked. Her chicken clucked agreement in its strange Mechanized Chicken patois. There was something compelling about this child, I thought. She was problem-solving at a rapid rate.

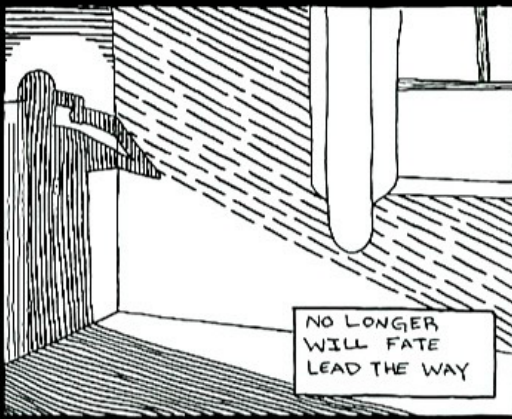
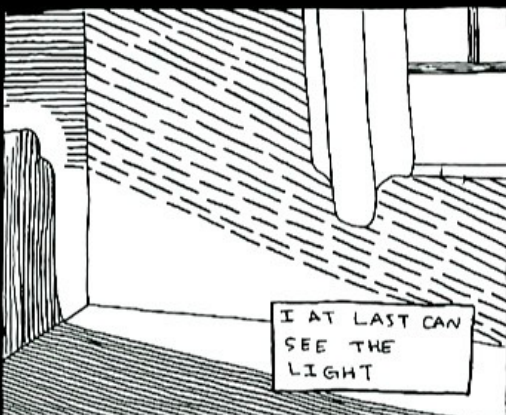
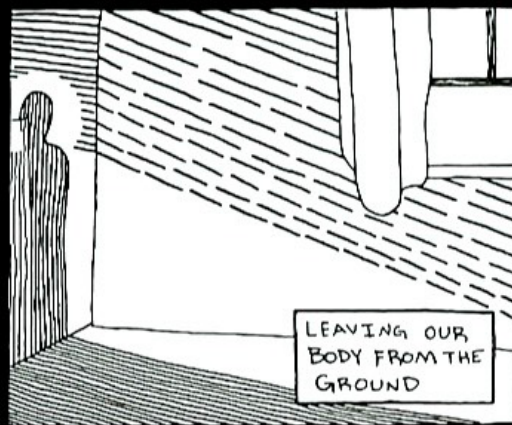
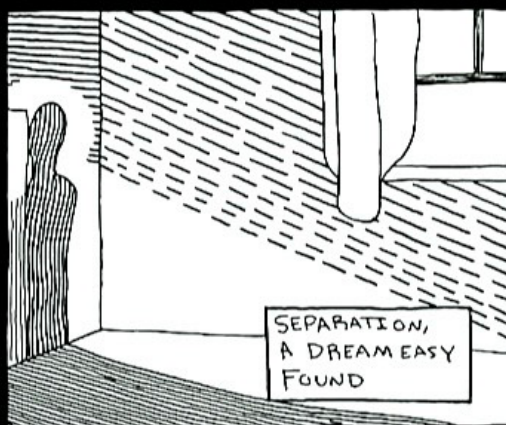
"He could do that," I agreed, glancing at the principal lying on the stage, fearful, myself, of becoming mechanized avian food. Marjorie looked pleased and her chicken gave her a nod, as though my tacit agreement was all that was needed. As though merely admitting the smallest scintilla of logic was all that was needed to fix my situation.

"Then come with me. We have a lot of shit to fix up."

And that's how it started. How history lurched forward once again with the Great Clucking of 2057. Marjorie leaped onto the back of her chicken and then extended a hand to encourage me up. Her chicken crouched, almost respectfully, to allow me aboard, and with a surprisingly strong lift from Marjorie's hand, I was seated behind her. Now I'm with her I thought, no matter what's gone before. The Chicken leaped from the stage and headed out of the stadium doors, scattering students and teachers alike as it aimed its laser-beam eyes once more on the guards to cut our path. This is how it happens, I thought. I'm on the back of a Giant Mechanized Killer Chicken and everyone has seen me with Marjorie. How can I explain? What choice is there, now? Our chicken headed towards the school gates, burst through and then continued down the road. From across the suburb I saw other Giant chickens clucking and bounding their way down the streets and across parks, our paths seeming to converge. Probably all across the nation, I thought. Our new chicken overlords? Or maybe something better. I had to hope for that because I was in this now. There was no going back. And just as necessity is the mother of invention, as Occam's razor cuts the most efficient line, I saw the intersection of two points in my mind being drawn by the route our chicken marked, like a train of thought imperiously weighted to an outcome, and I saw a future in which I remained alive; a future predicated on a simple truth that necessity had left at my door, like a foundling child: maybe the recounts kept coming up wrong for a reason. Maybe everything that was said about 36 years ago was just a giant ball of

fluff, like Matt had insisted. And if that was true—if I could really believe this (and not just because I had an army of Giant Mechanized Chickens milling about me, bowing their chicken beaks in obeisance to Marjorie)—then maybe things might change for the better, just maybe: that former red states and blue states across America could see how ridiculous the world had become, and that our chickens had now come home to roost.

SEPARATION



BUT WHAT IS THIS? I
CANNOT SEE

OH! BEGUILED AND
HORRID TRUTH

THE HOPE OF LIFE
BEYOND, A FICKLE
FLAME

BLOOMING FLOWERS
FOR THE EYES TO
SEE

MAY YOU CLING TO
LIFE MY LAMENTING
FRIEND

WAS NOT MY BODY
JUST SET FREE?

YOU ARE A DEVIOUS
AND SEDUCTIVE
SLEUTH

DISSIPATES TO
DUST, NOTHING
STAYS THE SAME

NO LONGER LIVE
IN THIS LAND TO
BE

FOR NOTHING LIES
WITHIN THE END

by Cameron Zavala

Today is the First Day of the Rest of Your Life

by Snufkin

I think I've seen them before. No—I know I have. They usually wear more formal clothes, and their hair isn't usually in twists, but it's definitely them. Their baggy shirt reads "LEAVE ME" something. The skateboard under their arm covers the last line. I squint just as they turn toward me. "LEAVE ME ALONE." We lock eyes. My moment of recognition is sliced through by my oncoming train.

Taking my place by the doors, I shake myself a little. I'm just thinking too hard about it. After a couple people shuffle onto the platform, I post up by the window on the other side of the car. The person is still there, leaning slightly forward and looking toward the direction their train will come from. Right, it's nothing, just a small city. Just a small city.

The train lurches forward and picks up speed. Cars and roads drop away as the track rises from the earth. Glittering glass, mossy building faces, and flashing solar panels flit by. One billboard catches my eye: a group of people smiling widely but genuinely, hands on each other's shoulders. Text to their right reads, "Smile! Today is the first day of the rest of your life!" If that's true, isn't it also the last day of the first part of your life?

A few feet away, a woman with a backpack on her lap is looking at the same billboard, actually smiling. Hm.

I swear it's the same train car bringing me back, my notebook full from a brainstorm session and my shoulder aching from groceries. It's got the same little electric blue paint spot near the ceiling and everything. It looks a little bit like Madagascar. Some part of me is alert, on the lookout for the person with the skateboard for the entire short walk from the train platform to my apartment. No sign of them.

A wave of exhaustion hits me as soon as I walk in. A

haze hangs over the entire process of putting groceries away, popping leftovers into the microwave, and powering up my laptop. A sigh to let the day out. A breath to let my home in. A blink to adjust my eyes to a half page of text.

They say to write what you know, so Amenah is mid-commute. Did I write that she was holding a purse? No, that's not right, she's going to be out for hours, she'll need a backpack like the woman from the train this afternoon...

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"Smile! Today is the first day of the rest of your life!"

She can't help it. She smiles. Growing up with a photo-obsessed dad will do that to you. And sure, it's corny, but it's kind of cute, in a way. The first day of the rest of your life. Every day could be the beginning of a new life. That's sort of inspiring.

Oh, she's full-on smiling. Is that embarrassing? Is that weird? Smiling at a billboard in public. Whatever! The sun and the teeth are out!

Out of the corner of her eye, Mona sees a thick wrist with one of those build-your-own smart-watches. Against her will, without her permission, Mona's eyes flick up to his face—no way, it is him! He seems completely unfazed, and actually doesn't even seem to be looking so much at her as through her, a fact which Mona doesn't properly reflect on until she's scrolling her phone moments later. That guy is everywhere. At the cafe across the street, at that art exhibit last week, and now on the train? This city isn't that small! Not that she's shy or freaked out, of course, but what can she say? "Hey, I see you around all the time! Isn't that crazy?" Nah. Saying that? That is crazy.

They even get off at the same stop, although Mona



takes the north exit instead of the south. With every footstep that takes her farther away, Mona can't help but wonder where he's going and what he does. She's so lost in thought that she is caught by surprise when a couple of skateboarders whizz past a foot to her right. Mona jumps back with a yelp. The pair roll on, though one of them, baggy shirt and twists fluttering in the wind, squints back at her as if trying to place her face. Out of curiosity, Mona waves but gets no response.

A new roleplaying group has cropped up on her local channel, Mona notices while scrolling over dinner. Magical realism, urban setting... Her eyebrows creep up as she shovels another forkful of spaghetti into her mouth. She could use one of her usual OCs, but there is that one she's been itching to try in an actual RP instead of little character sketches.

Mona takes her phone in both hands, tapping out an intro post with an urgency she hasn't felt in a long while. Her OC has always had braids in her mind, but as she envisions the character now all she can see is that skateboarder with twists. Sure! Twists it is. And while we're at it, why not a skateboard? When she's finished, Mona posts it and wolfs down the rest of her dinner while waiting for a reply.



*John Leech, 1886*

# Contributors

**Mike V.** is the Managing Editor of Ear Rat Magazine. He likes to look at things and listen to other things but doesn't usually like the other people who like to look at those things and listen to those other things.

**Harr B.** is a garden gnome that came to life and started learning InDesign. He draws most of his inspiration from nature, creeks, and the woodland creatures for whom he plays lute on moonlit nights.

**bikerbuddy** lives in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney. He has recently started an emu saddling service and hopes to move into the American market with a gun turret version that can be fitted to ostriches. Between this and his constant work on the Reading Project, he barely has time to feed his chickens, which he fears may be mobilising against him.

**Cameron Zavala** is currently pursuing a masters degree at Cal State Long Beach, focusing on drawing and painting. He has been making comics since 2018. Several of his stories are influenced by existentialism and about people in desperate situation. The issues of existentialism give room to talk about other difficult topics.

**Furnacewriter** is trained in the obscure arts of dealing with dead people (as in, History) and with an unreasonable love of footnotes, Furnacewriter just enjoys writing about culture and whatever happens to be of paramount importance. The rest of his writing can be found (mostly) on [thefurnace.neocities.org](http://thefurnace.neocities.org)

**LUS(.neocities.org)** is a sort-of multimedia project aimed at creating conversational explorations of notably odd films from relatively unmapped places — that's not a review site, promise. Its writer wanders Scotland and enjoys plucking the violin, sneaking creative writing where it doesn't belong and pretending to get mad at people for 'mispronouncing' the maybe-acronym 'LUS'.

**Nyahoo Studio** is really a name of a website, which is owned by an American man named Dave. He is a cartoonist who likes to draw silly comics, illustrations, and sometimes gifs. That's all.

**Preternaturality** is a hobbyist author now fully enjoying using obscure words as pretend names. She writes serial and short fiction at [preternaturality.neocities.org](http://preternaturality.neocities.org), which usually falls somewhere under the genre of science fantasy. She also does assorted other things on [quasi-stellar.neocities.org](http://quasi-stellar.neocities.org). She can usually be found trying to work on too many projects at once.

**Sage** is a person who loves learning and tries to apply that knowledge to help other persons. He operates the website Let's Learn Together ([letslearntogether.neocities.org](http://letslearntogether.neocities.org)) as a way to facilitate that aim.

**Snufkin** is a solarpunk, heart of funk, punch-drunk wanderer. When she isn't working on her personal site ([ocean-waves.xyz](http://ocean-waves.xyz)) or dreaming of new poems ([multiverse.plus/profile/snufkin](http://multiverse.plus/profile/snufkin)), she's probably climbing a tree or picking mushrooms somewhere. Summon by whispering a song to a bumblebee in a sunny forest and waiting two days.



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