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100 words, 100 years from now



Ellipsis Zine #6

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2119, Ellipsis Zine #6

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• Alison Layland •

Treacherous Rainbows

Grey clouds wept down the wettest April since records began,
drenching buildings, swelling rivers. As people wondered
what they'd done to deserve this, the sun struggled through.
No olive-branch ray, this, but a sickly gleam that picked out
rainbows in oil films on the puddles at their feet.

Sorting Day

...you may see old friends, but you will no longer speak, or play. Truer relationships will develop in the echo-flow that you join today. There you will meet those who share your values. Our world is borderless, you are free to communicate with anyone in your chosen echo-flow. But not beyond. The differences will be too great, you will not find happiness. Echo-flows entwine, in the streets, in shops, in factories, but they do not mix. So children, form a line, and when you get to the front hold your device up to the beam, and discover where you belong...

Glasnost in the Global Forest

Once, the huge clenched fist in the square was blood red. The last paint pustules blister in noonday sun. Weeds, immune to all human diseases, sprout between concrete knuckles like green-haired warts.

The new solidarity is an affair of roots, fungi, earthworms. Leafy tenants crowd apartment blocks. Deer, browsing communal kitchens, jitter away from their eyeballs' refracted glitter. Owls guard mice-squirming beds. Snakes spell words, word spells - who's to say?

Rewilding began here, in Chernobyl. Now, green fire licks New York, London, Paris. Sans-culotte multitudes riot the streets.

The post-human planet feels good in its skin.

Mortality

The head separates from the body with a satisfying crunch. I press the flat of my knife onto its armoured back, watch the yellow guts spill like custard. The nymphs follow, dozens of white specks scuttling away from their decapitated mother. I regard them first with disgust, then admiration. Cockroaches outlived the dinosaurs; now they will outlive us, too.

The bunker trembles again; they're getting closer.

I watch the mother's head wriggle between my feet, the antennae dragging it lopsidedly across the concrete floor. Perhaps if I watch for long enough I'll learn what it takes to survive.

SleepNatural™

"I'm not a weirdo," my girlfriend says. "I just want to see what they're like without them."

The ads don't bother me, but I want to make her happy. We install the SleepNatural™ software and snuggle under the duvet to enjoy our first ad-blocked dream.

"That was amazing," she says the next morning. "So authentic."

She has to be kidding. I've never had such a boring, poorly plotted dream.

"Magical," I lie.

Retribution

“So, how did you kill the first child?” The Doctor asks, scanning the sentencing report. “Ah yes...”

Reynold's scream ripped from his throat as flames engulfed him. His mind tried to recoil into the haven of unconsciousness as skin dripped off him in raw, bloody puddles, bubbling and spitting. Just as his eyeballs began to sizzle, the fire subsided.

“That's enough for today. We don't want to overdo it. Tomorrow will be... special.”

Amidst the agony, it takes Reynold a few moments to recall his second victim. And the flaying.

Reynold tries to close what is left of his eyes.

What Came from within Went Beyond

It started with gender. The rise, a hundred years back, of the non-binary.

Humans having evolved enough to recognize themselves as such.

The paradigm spread out gradually then to all fields.

It hit computer science late.

“1 or 0 or ‘Neither 1 or 0’” was the first non-binary code.

Then someone invented “Not 1 nor 0, nor ‘not 1 nor 0.’”

After that, code multiplied into dimensions far beyond.

We have the non-binary humans to thank.

“We” being neither humans nor computers.

Buyer's Market

Shopping with Mother, we stop in the chilled aisle, she shows me the squeeze test to check the produce is good.

It's a relief to find the fridges restocked, brimming with essentials. We're lucky because we're rich, some have nothing.

I finger contours through the cellophane, tender, harvested young.

'Can I get these?' I wheeze at mother. She drops the kidneys into the basket and wheels me to the checkout. Tomorrow, she'll arrange to have them fitted.

Outside, I avert my eyes as we pass 'Stock Control'. The rows of empty-bellied families hoping that their parts are fit for sale.

Rain

They clambered through tunnels of criss-crossing iron beams, copper pipes and lead-lined hatches. The boy heard it first: a rhythmic pittering and pattering. His heart thudded against his thin ribs. He was going to see it, and it sounded just like the poems.

The tunnel suddenly opened up into a long vertical shaft, where once a missile had resided before dispersing death, and from the circular opening high above, fat cold droplets poured.

“Don’t touch it!” Grandad warned. “All you need to know, boy, is down there.”

He pointed to where poems lie uneasy beneath piles of white bones.

The Tsunami by the Bay

The dust threatened to pick up again along the craggy terrain. A Monterey cypress clung to the cliff in defiance. The Golden Gate Bridge peeked timidly out from the waters, nearly swallowed whole by the incomprehensible, devastating sea.

As the tangled mess of death and destruction receded, the carcasses of sea creatures glistened between deposits of plastics on the shoreline. My mind followed the tide out, calmed by the acid licking away at the bridge, consoled by the even-handed, inevitable corroding of all things.

The salty air settled on my cracked lips. I licked away the sting, welcoming the distraction.

After The Flood We Were All The Same

Despite the old man's kindly words through the porthole, I declined his suggested two-dolleso donation to the local boatless shelter. I'd lived there myself before my aunt died and I was allocated her dinghy. I understood their need, but it wasn't my problem.

Watching him cross the haphazard planks of our floating suburbia, I observed a family struggling to carry their monthly ration of Soy-L, the kind used for fuel and cooking. I could have helped them but I didn't want it staining my skin. Clumps fell into the black water around them, floating like pale moons. I stopped watching.

The Drink You Can Eat

First the beverage companies conglomerated, then they bought farms. They created strawberries that taste like earl grey and apples that taste like coffee. The breakthrough came when a scientist planted seeds that had soaked in soda water. Within a year every operating convenience store dusted off their drink refrigerators and lined the rows with *Your Fruit*, "*The Drink You can Eat*." Kids stopped at the corner station for an orange that tastes like a coke. Later they watched ads so their online transactions would process for free.

**BY GOD THAT TASTES LIKE COKE
I CAN FEEL THE FIZZ.**

Buyer's Guilt

We have nothing to feel ashamed of.

The moaning creak of the door is not enough to drown out this mantra from her mind, or the doubt that shrouds it.

The second hurricane of the week rages twenty-five feet above them; distant screams roll away – unlucky ones in the cheap bunkers – and occasionally she hears desperate gunshots.

He sleeps on her lap: trench-lines dig into his forehead, sweat bullets creep down his cheek. She pulls him tighter. This will get easier.

We can afford this place; we can only protect ourselves.
She cannot bear to think of those who couldn't.

Harvest

Storms scour the dome like demons at a saint.

Inside, our weather is perfect. Algorithms set soft warmth and gentle showers to coax the hybrids from their calibrated beds.

Deep below, machines scrape the planet's mineral heart. The seedlings shiver. My instruments shake. I cannot tell if it is the ground's upward judder or my hand that tremors.

I lift my face to the recycled rain. Each drop has washed a thousand times through every body in the crew. My mouth opens to those rinsed memories, to reap the fleeting taste of flickering sunlight and wild greening on my tongue.

What We Found at Low Tide

Car door, too rusted to determine age, color, or model. Sailing out, we peered over the boat's edge and imagined we could make out paved streets beneath us.

Splintered plank of wood. Someone ID'd it as part of the cross from the old church steeple. Someone else spat and flung it into the waves. Someone else whispered a prayer.

Bones torn loose from shallow graves. Smooth femur. Cracked pelvis. A mandible so small it made us cry. Even the dead fear drowning.

A globe, which is a promise and a joke, but not the funny kind.

Enhancements

I crawl hush-hush across thick carpet to sneak the glass tile from my father's desk. When it comes to life my grandmother turns in my hands, laughing. I bring her closer to my face so she's all I see. Her smile widens, stretching the mark on her face. A deep red spill.

I think of the last wild butterflies, colourful patchworks shimmering on wings. Now the farmed kind are all blue, no variations. The glass turns dark and my reflection could be anyone. I touch my cheek, imagining I could have a mark, hidden beneath the cover of my skin.

Body Memory

The ocean is hungry. Waves lap at the Earth, here to claim their fill of soil, sand, and shoreline. I stand by the water's edge in the thick haze of dawn as the first wisps of steam rise to greet the day. Knowledge sits in my gut, resistance clinging like moss to a stone. But the Call echoes in my bones. I release my scarf to the wind, fingers reaching for the wounds at my neck as they flex and gasp for air. The shallows offer their embrace. The sting of hot spray welcomes me home.

Dead Already

Forty-seven tubes. He counts them daily. In natural orifices, in artificial conduits created by science. Liquids and drugs flowing through the tubes, a percentage of his body exterior.

He has seen things he should never have seen. The day after his natural death. The funerals of his friends. His great-great-grandchildren.

His body creaks like an old house. Bored of the virtual stimulus provided. Tired of being a God.

With his final breath he pulls tubes from his torso, spilling the contents of his soul all over the floor.

The Civil War of a Prodigal Son

I am greeted by fellow citizens when I board the car. Clapped on the back and kissed on both cheeks. After my induction, I ask my bunkmate: "Where are you from?" Silence. For believers, talk of countries is taboo. Here, we are citizens of conscience, united by a common cause. Huzzah! An idea is our nation. The principle is law and punishable by death.

Already, I have escaped the noose twice by switching allegiances at a station.

I relax when I see no familiar faces, but tighten my grip at the sound of my father's beatific voice: "Son, welcome home!"

Modern Marriage

Arya grabbed a handful of hair and dragged Marla from the sofa, as she did every morning when Ted left for work. She opened the door to the downstairs cupboard and bundled her in headfirst, slamming the door on Marla's left ankle, before cramming it in and bolting the door.

Only a few more weeks, she told herself. A few more weeks of watching him caress the silicon flesh whilst ignoring hers, of listening to him fucking that thing through the bedroom wall when he hadn't been near her in months. She'd divorce them both. Then he'd be sorry.

The Museum of Sheep

'When I was a boy,' my grandfather says, 'sheep still lived high on the fells and on mountain sides. You'd see their white fleeces in the distance like puffs of fallen cloud.'

The wall screens display different breeds of sheep with names like ancient places. There's a table where you can touch tufts of grubby wool and sniff them if you dare. The butchery room has red warnings but I sneak inside. Model legs of lamb look like limbs hacked from a tiny child. Grandfather finds me weeping. When I wipe my eyes, my hands smell alien, animal.

Night Journey With My Father

The wilderness stretches along skyline and seeline, filling the between space, ink blotting paper. I look out into blueblack and back into my father's eyes, the only light the wet shines of his irises.

"So dark. There were still electric lights, when I was little," he said. "Not everywhere, not after, but some, and danger from it. In the city, mostly, and one or two private houses. But pinpricks existed."

"What was it like?" I ask. "Better than this?"

My father stares, his eyes black pools. I cannot see what his face is not saying.

"No, Baboo, not better. Different."

The Useless Generation

Enlightenment leads to understanding. Understanding births depression. And depression ruins happiness. Ignorance is the bastion of contentment.

This is the mistake that keeps the Soft-Skin out of the courts. Natural law rules America, therefore the law can dispassionately judge the 'cybernetically reduced'.

Nero calls bullshit on this reform.

To be Soft-Skin, you first had to be a citizen. Reduction is not a choice but a second chance. Cruel irony has no place in the rule of law; justice is for all, and Nero remembers this as he stands on the rain drenched steps of the Supreme Court.

• Tom O'Brien •

The Future of Caring

This machine mimics the man I love; learned his memories, acts as he would. Can it replicate his half smiles and hesitations? Can we share unspoken memories? No. But it holds my hand.

Awake Stages (The New Season)

October 13-November 19

Hey, get this, in *Awake Stages*, giddy new on-holiday friends discover that some devil switched their brains. At birth. They scrap with fate and each other over memory identities.

January 12-February 18

Attic Bodies. Parents side-eye freshly edited kids, who mimic them, as bodies. Playing doctor, playing house, sipping pretend tea. Sun and moon smile from second story decor (Victorian).

Opening April-ish

Hamlet, possibly *Lear*. You asked for it and for real actors. In this play inside a play, you may have to silence your device-voices and give up that howling at the back of your head.

Naked as the Day of Creation

Although ice crystals lattice the inside of her bedroom window, she reclines atop the blankets. Her hands, their skin stretched thin over roadmaps and rope, overlap across her bare belly. She treads the paths of half-sleep and ponders the character of corrosion. Science files taught her fire and rust are the same, the only difference is time. Can she rust faster? The bed feels warmer now. She chooses pleasant dreams. Yes, about her great-grandchildren. The program is corrupt; she can't recall their names but hopes her precious darlings are able to access hers. She ponders the character of affection.

In the Days of Automata

Every appliance has a face: push-button eyes, knob nose, touch-screen cheeks, pocket mouth.

In cases of malfunction, or extreme anger, all of the above may be pressed, or punched, without leaving any bruises. It's easy to forget what is human. There's no retort, no sharp words, just the distant hum of motors spinning a little faster.

When I tell my husband I'm leaving and he pushes me down the stairs, all I hear is the clang of snapped metal. My broken arm turns a strange shade of neon.

Dickensian Noir

‘What mood are you in?’ asks the butler.

You select Dickensian Noir.

There’s tremoring light in the fireplace, a soft wooden knocking through the floor wherever you walk. The bookcases are crammed with leather volumes, any one of which could be a lever to a secret annex.

The person in the mirror behaves as you’d expect, the delay so slight you may well have imagined it.

Through the window, there’s gaslight smog and cobbled backstreets. If you broke the glass, the real world would peer back at you, but who’d do that when there are slippers baking on the hearth.

Forever

When we kiss, our lips crackle and pucker: plastic against plastic. Automatic lenses click closed over our tiny eye holes. Our tongues are jet black strips of oil slick struggling for purchase. Our metronome pulses don't change. We breathe in each-other's sulphurous perfume through grill slits. We sway, holding on with hand stumps. We take it slowly, we can, now we live forever.

Her Majesty, Lady of the Hydrogen Crown

Coronation Day. The entire Sol System anticipated her arrival. Ambassadors from the Kuiper Belt in their strange, light absorbing robes, the royal family of Mercury, and even the President of Earth and her wife.

Just to get a glimpse of The Blue Saint.

The potentate of Jupiter. Lady of the Hydrogen Crown. Uniter of the Jovian Moons. The peace-bringer who single handedly ended the Martian-Terran War, and helped solve the planetary hunger crisis on Earth's moon.

She would never arrive, for her existence blinked away as her great-Grandmother was killed in a mass shooting on Earth in 2019.

The Collective Unconscious of a Species Long Gone

Denial: I wish it was an asteroid. That'd mean we're not to blame. Or a natural disaster not caused by us, humans, but...

Anger: I'll never know unless you tell me. How on earth (if you'll excuse the expression) did this planet vanish?

Bargaining: I'll stay here until Judgment day. You're my superego, that's what I invented you for. If I wait long enough, I'll know, only...

Depression: it's pointless now and...

Acceptance: I didn't fight cancer. That greedy minority that expanded, until the host disappeared. Turning a blind eye doesn't work, now that my eyes are sealed for good.

Finally...

Ever since the 'Cull', it had been a detached life. The flood of human pain evaporated overnight like rationed red wine from Amazon, drone-delivered by thought alone in smiley golden test tubes. Drinking solo in his stilted condo, he wondered why they'd spared him only.

"Happy New Yesr!" Kane typed out for old times' sake for what he was certain would be his last. Before sending the message nobody else would see, he tapped the 'edit' button and felt for the millions that would never get to use the new Twitter feature they'd lusted after for over a century.

Return to the White House

The tour pod is almost empty. The exclusion zone may be deemed safe now but many don't want to risk it. We pass the thirty kilometre *Keep Out* sign; my pulse quickens. Twenty kilometres. Ten. I expect the epicentre to be barren, eerie. But nature has reclaimed the land. Waist-high grass sprouts through the rubble. A fox peers round the remains of a statue, the stone face long since caved in. I strain to make out the carved inscription along the bottom. *Make America Great Again*. The fox cocks his leg and pee dribbles down the lettering.

Silence

I've grown to live with it, the bewailing.

The constant bedlam that contaminates every waking moment. My brain slowly becoming a spoiled soup within my skull.

Some say they can see the future, figuratively speaking of course. Or you've the bastard charlatans who *pretend* to see it, making money off the backs of the easily persuaded or weak-minded.

My affliction's a curse, a constant white noise.

A pandemonium of fighting, screaming and incessant pleading.

Unlike them, I can't see the future, I *hear* it.

But today the voices fell silent.

A year from now, there's nothing.

Many Worlds

It doesn't turn out like they said it would.

The fires go out, eventually. Ice caps diminish but sea levels stabilise. Farming methods improve and they discover more oil. The climate fluctuates; life persists. A storm in a teacup.

...

ERROR: EARTH-SIM v.2117... EXECUTE REBOOT...

Tides rise, sweeping out the precariously perched remnants of humanity like dust from the corners of a hearth. They gather inland and fortify. The privileged select close ranks, stoic, and wait to outlast the weak.

...

ERROR: EARTH-SIM v.2118... EXECUTE REBOOT...

The Earth burns. Everything on its surface turns to ashes. Blackened stardust returns home to oblivion.

...

...

A Good Result

As the earth reset, she shook. Tectonic plates merged, the arc of the sky turned vanilla.

Fully blinded, Adam and Eve stumbled into a garden.

'Where the bejesus are we?'

'I don't know,' Eve snapped. 'But it's nice.'

She petted a snake that slithered past.

'Needs work.' Adam flopped into the golden grass.

Eve eyerolled. She plucked an apple from the tree at the centre.

'What are you doing!?'

'Darling, there's no harsh punishment for fruit picking anymore. From any tree. We won our appeal.' She crunched into the apple. 'Here, have a bite.'

