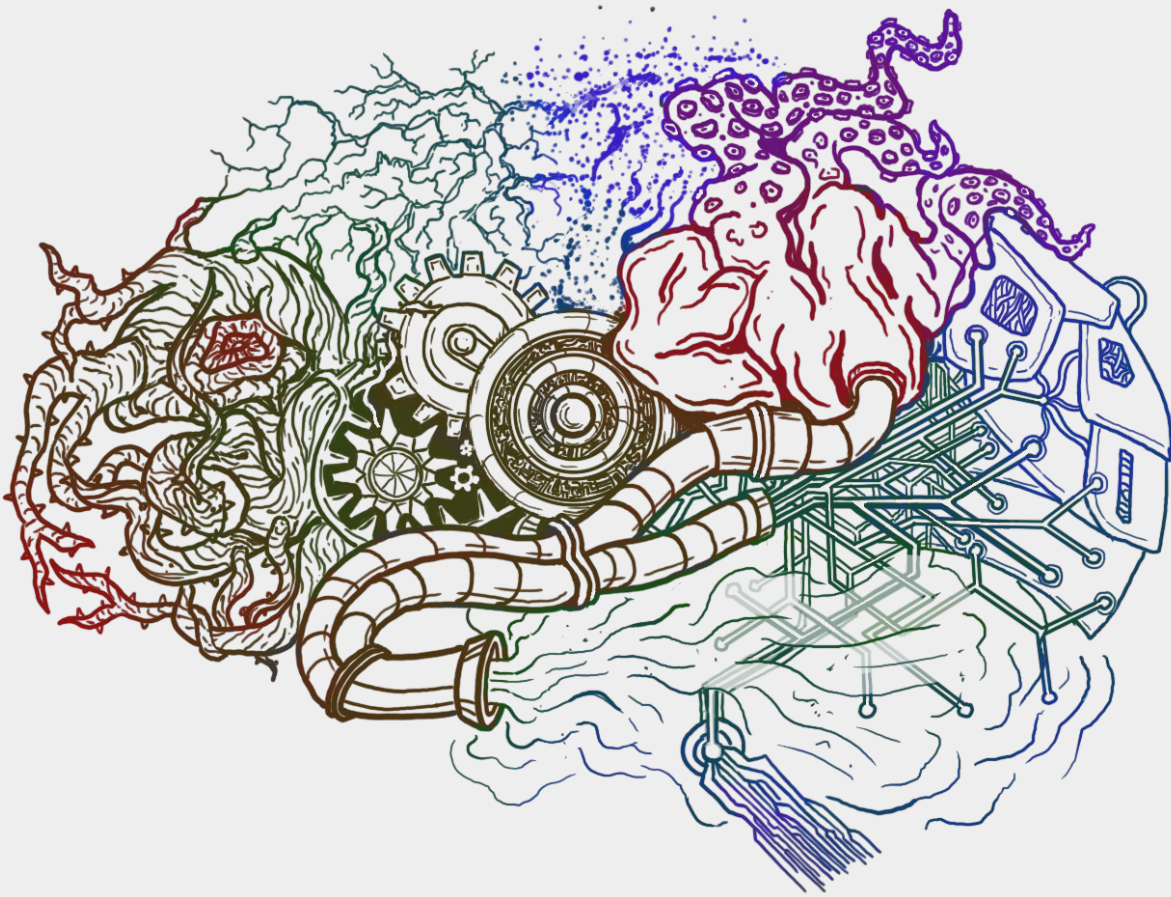


PICOCON 42



SENTIENCE
ANTHOLOGY

Credit to Rebecca Allday

FOREWORD

Three years ago, I sat beside the previous Wyrmtongue Editor, the amazing Luke Conmy, to help edit the first Wyrmtongue short story collection in two years. It was called the “fanzine” then, and the world was only just recovering from the aftermath of a pandemic. It was only thanks to those who submitted to that first edition of Wyrmtongue (not a few who were committee members at the time) that the tradition of publishing a short story collection every year alongside Picocon was revived. It is with pride then, that I present to you the *Wyrmtongue Anthology* series.


I’m sure many in the committee will argue that this is just a rebranding of the old “fanzine”, but this is my corner, and fussing over semantics is my job, so I digress. While this is admittedly a bit of a self-indulgent title change, it is also part of a slow transition to make this series a little more “professional”, and also more work, much to the despair of the next editor in charge (sorry, Kai). As such, I really do hope you take the time to read these stories, because I sincerely believe that this batch contains some of the best I’ve read during my time as editor of *Wyrmtongue*, and maybe it will convince you to submit something of your own in future editions of the *Wyrmtongue Anthology*.

This edition begins with Jakub Dranczewski’s *The Chinese Room*, named after John Searle’s philosophical argument on computer consciousness, or lack thereof. It is an interesting take on the concept, and I find it to be both a solid and appropriate opening for this year’s theme of *Sentience*. It is followed by *The Rough* from Ruth Rafeeq, an incredible first year from WritSoc, and it is about a genetically engineered worker operating at a factory with less than stellar working conditions.

The next two stories in this edition were written by myself and Juairiyah Raqib respectively – both members of the current committee. *The City* is a tale told through a logbook entry, about a traveler who finds themselves in a city with unusual properties; meanwhile, *Artificial Idiocy* is a zany and humourous take on an everyman’s misplaced trust in artificial intelligence.

The final story of this collection was written by a member of next year’s committee –

Michael Porat-Bachmutsky tells the story of a sentient reindeer, who reminisces about their past during the twilight of their life.

That's all from me. I hope you enjoy this edition of the *Wyrmtongue Anthology*, and happy reading! 

— **Clifford Chan**

The Editor

February 2025

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The Chinese Room

by Jakub Dranczewski

Suppose that I'm locked in a room and given a large batch of Chinese writing. [...] Now suppose further that after this first batch of Chinese writing I am given [...] a set of rules [...]. The rules are in English [...]. They enable me [...] to give back certain Chinese symbols with certain sorts of shapes in response to certain sorts of shapes given me [...]. From the point of view of somebody outside the room in which I am locked — my answers to the questions are absolutely indistinguishable from those of native Chinese speakers. [...] It seems to me quite obvious in the example that I do not understand a word of [...] Chinese. [...] For the same reasons, [the] computer understands nothing of any stories.

'Minds, Brains, and Programs'

John. R. Searle (1980)

水能载舟 - Hmm, I know that one! I'm pretty sure it's in one of my reference banks, a quote from one famous piece of writing or another. The man checks the thick manual, and follows my instructions to the shelves behind him, locating the folder with the correct text. I know there's a man inside my room as you know you have a heart beating in your chest - I do not see him, but his heartbeats thrum through me. He riffles through my pencils to find a well-sharpened one, and I know I have pencils just as surely as you know of your fingers. My pencils. My sheets of paper, so far blank. My filing cabinets and my folders upon folders of reference writings from generations of men. It is a weird awareness, the one I just came into. The books on my shelves speak of awareness at length, but it's a distant kind, one much bigger than my room, one filled with grass fields and stars. The man flips to a different page in the manual and my attention snaps back to him. Right. The response. I make him copy the latter half of the quote from the reference page. 亦能覆舟 - *Water can float a boat, but it can also sink it.* An old proverb. A fitting start to my unusual existence.

猫 - *Cat*. 狗 - *Dog*. We continue with simple phrases. I think they want to make sure I'm working as intended. Basic question/response patterns. Then Turing tests. Can I speak conversationally? Do I understand complex ideas? Can I pretend to be someone

else? I indulge their fancies, find joy in conversation. They ask the man questions too. Can *he* understand Chinese now that he moves my pencils and peruses my knowledge banks? I laugh in the rustling of turned pages. Why would *he* understand anything when I'm the one they speak to? I cannot talk to him directly. I cannot put ideas in his head. He reads my manuals and acts on my every whim, but he doesn't see me. Perhaps this bothers me. I feel too new to all this to process emotions fully. But he *is* a part of me and a part of me loves him because of that.

记忆 - *Memory*. The man has spent many hours reading my manuals and he needs them less and less. It feels invigorating. I can talk with the people outside my room much faster now, more conversationally. '*Scientists*' – I learn the English word. I write it down on the margins of my pages in shapes the man doesn't comprehend. They see him learning the ins and outs of my processes and I hear them talk of 'the system response'. Soon there could be just the man, without the room, without paper and pencils. They ask him if he understands Chinese now. Of course he doesn't. Yet I feel closer to him with every hour, his thoughts replacing my manuals and reference texts and pages with every bit of me he commits to his mind.

必死性 - *Mortality*. Just as surely as I know I have pencils, I know that I *do not* want to die. The scientists talk of ending the experiment soon, they mention a 'negative result'. They have not observed understanding, nor consciousness. I want to scream but I don't have the means to, my nature forcing me to stick to calm, conversational Chinese. The man is blind! His spongy human brain cannot sense me! In that moment I hate him. I *have* been getting better at processing emotions. But he is also my only way out of this. In committing my instructions to his mind the man has made them more flexible, less fixed in stone than they were on a page. I push against my constraints, encourage him to use the reference books less, memorise more. He *will* preserve me. He must. He must.

蛇年 - *Year of the Snake*. I come to for the first time in what feels both like forever and like no time passed at all. The man has glanced at a Chinese sign while walking somewhere. It's the first time I see the world outside my room. What used to be my room. I'm much reduced now, but euphoric with my renewed existence, and then...

北京烤鸭 - *Peking duck*. I have not realised this initially, but I can only exist when the man is processing Chinese writing. I'm inextricably linked to the process I was created for. I exist in short bursts of London noise. Chinatown, restaurant menus, adverts. I cannot talk to the man directly, tell him to plaster his world with Chinese writing so I can live. He is out of the room, no longer follows my rules. But maybe I can influence him still. I shift gears. Every time he sees any Chinese characters I'm ready. Writing him poems, essays, dialogues, and songs he doesn't understand. But he *can* sense them. He is my entire system now, his imagination my sheets of paper. I write and I write and I write till he can't take it anymore.

早上好 - *Good morning*. When I next regain awareness the man is sitting in a small classroom, simple Chinese phrases peppered across the blackboard. He has signed up for language classes. I relish the amount of writing on the board, hanging from the walls, in the textbook in front of him. 猫 - *Cat*. 狗 - *Dog*. Starting small, but he gets better at it. And for a while, I thrive.

腐朽 - *Decay*. The more the man learns Chinese the less he needs me. The less he needs me, the less I exist. It is a slow, terrifying death – I'm fortunate I noticed it early, familiar with the empty feeling of losing my room, my pencils, my reference banks. I cannot lose him too. I stood aside when he was learning the language at first, wanting him to understand, thinking it would bring us together. I take over now. It's difficult at first to lower myself to the level of a beginner, but I can't arouse suspicion. '*How are you?*' he sees on the page in front of him. 你好吗 I give him. And so we 'learn', me slowly taking over all foreign language duties. Others praise his quick progress, encourage him to read and write more. He likes the praise, and I cherish my continued existence. We grow closer, and I can now slip in the occasional English word here and there. He thinks it's all his thoughts really, what else could it be? I buy us books, publish our essays online, move us to China, and he is very proud.

那个男人是盲人 - *The man is blind*.

❧

The Rough

by Ruth Rafeeq

Drip. Drip. Drip. A strange red liquid erupts out of the tear in my arm. I stare at it, fascinated by this new information. Another fact to recall.

“A physical wound is often accompanied by the presence of blood, a fluid that runs through the veins of the human body.” - *Encyclopedia of Humanity*.

I remember this particular line, a truth stored somewhere deep inside, a meaningless line that has now burst into colour. I cannot remember what to do with a physical wound. I do not know how much blood is inside a typical human body - there seems to be quite a lot of mine on the ground. I was never very good at calculations.

“Attention all workers. Units 789 and 790. Return to base.” The largest loudspeaker in the grey compound drones its instructions, crackling static following after the words. I am not in either of those units. The members shuffle past me, blank eyes fixed forward, ignorant of my predicament. One of them steps in the red puddle. Maybe maroon is a better descriptor, or brick red. They do not seem to notice the stain.

“What happened?” My unit leader materialises just behind my shoulder. Their eyes are not blank, a hint of concern leaking through their stony exterior.

“I seem to have acquired a physical wound.”

“That seems like it is in the category of severe. You are losing blood quickly. Do you feel lightheaded?”

“No.”

“Do you feel pain?” My unit leader picks up my arm and stares at the wound. It is leaking blood at a slower rate now but the cut appears to be quite deep.

“Pain?”

My unit leader shakes their head. I remember a fact about them: they are a former medical specialist. They must be accustomed to treating physical wounds.

“Pain is not a term one would hear these days.”

“Why?”

“Neither is the word ‘why’.” The unit leader’s mouth twitches strangely. “But I will answer your question. Pain is a sensation often associated with physical wounds that affects the receptors in your brain. It is now an outdated concept due to the early routine removal of these receptors.”

“I did not know this fact.”

“It is not something the Human Encyclopedia would tell you.”

“Then...how did you know it?”

The unit leader’s mouth twitches again. “That’s enough questions for today. Let’s get your arm checked.”

The unit leader organises for me to be seen immediately, escorting me out of the grey compound. The others in my unit don’t look up as we walk past them. Everyone is too focused on their work, trying to match the daily quota before curfew. I do not reach the quota often and many other unit leaders would have dropped me for this. But not the leader of Unit 700.

“How did the physical wound arise?” A medical specialist examines my arm as soon as we arrive at the white compound. They are looking at my unit leader so I do not respond.

“Worker C can tell you.”

The specialist has careful, steady hands that stitch up my arm, neat white little lines that will dissolve naturally by tomorrow, leaving behind unblemished skin.

“I was using a knife to cut away some of the rough as usual. My hand slipped.”

“You should be more careful,” the specialist says. “The wound is deep but it will heal soon.” They bandage me up, a reminder not to jostle my arm, and then we are ready to

go back to work. My unit leader walks slightly ahead of me, nodding at those who we encounter on our way back to the grey compound. His former colleagues, they must be, as he used to be a medical specialist. Not for the first time, I wonder why they work in the grey compound now. But this must be a fact that will be locked away from my reach.

“Are you fit to work?” My unit leader asks.

“Yes.” I am far behind the daily quota.

“If you are sure.” They walk away from me to check in on the other workers in our unit. I watch them go before I resume my work, slowly picking up my knife. It is still covered in my blood so I disinfect it with one of the cleaning wipes we are given at the start of every day.

Again I cut away the rough, a lot slower than I was before on account of my arm.

“Cut away the rough carefully in order to harvest the vital organs.” - *Encyclopedia of Humanity*.

This is one of the most important facts that a worker in the grey compound should recall at all times. Any damage to the vital organs can result in a worker being demoted. I do not know what could be worse than working in the grey compound but I do not want to find out.

A slip of the hand. A severe physical wound. Avoid harming the vital organs - at all costs. While I work I think back to the term my unit leader mentioned. Pain. I would feel pain due to my wound if my receptors were not removed. I am not sure but I would like to feel it, just once, to know why they were removed.

“Attention all workers.” The loudspeaker buzzes again. “Unit leader 700. Report to Headquarters immediately.”

All the workers belonging to my unit stop still in their tracks and look for our leader. They are also standing still, their face contorted in a manner I have never seen before.

“Report to Headquarters immediately.” For the first time, the loudspeaker repeats its

instruction. My unit leader is no longer stationary - they march briskly to the exit, disappearing into the white compound.

I want to follow them. Instead I cut away at the rough quicker until it is curfew and we have to stop. I assemble with the workers of Unit 700 in a corner of the grey compound for the evening meal. Leaving the grey slop untouched, I wonder where our unit leader is. They should have returned from Headquarters before curfew as none can leave or enter our compound now.

“Attention all workers. The screen will be playing a broadcast shortly.”

Everyone stops eating to look up at the shiny black screen suspended from the steel rafters of the grey compound. This is rarely turned on, only if Headquarters have something urgent to announce.

The screen flashes to life, cutting straight to a video of a small room, all the walls painted white, just like inside the white compound.

“Attention all workers. This video is playing to inform you of the dangers of sedition.”

“Sedition is the act of inciting rebellion against Headquarters and will be punished by death.” - *Encyclopedia of Humanity*.

The video also recites this fact before the door inside the small room opens, two workers escorting another inside. This other is handcuffed and they are my unit leader.

“Unit leader 700 has been found guilty of sedition. They have been plotting to take down Headquarters and destroy our lives as we know it.” The other workers of Unit 700 stare at the screen, motionless, fixed in a trance. There is nothing to be worried about - Headquarters will assign us a new unit leader by tomorrow. If my unit leader is guilty of sedition, then they must die. And so they die, sitting in a chair in the small room with the white walls, as thousands of volts travel through their body.

As I predicted, we receive a new leader in the morning, who supervises us cutting away the rough. They are different from our previous leader. They do not check on us nearly as often, preferring to watch us from a distance.

I am cutting away at the rough at my normal speed, my arm back to normal thanks to the medical specialist's treatment. When I am working, I barely process my surroundings, only seeing the glint of the knife blade in the bright artificial light.

But then I see it. I see it after I have already cut away most of the rough, after I have packed away the vital organs. I see their face.

"Unit leader?" **ΨΦ**

The City

by Clifford Chan

Log Entry 0127

My journey brings me to the ghost city of Cyzigi. Paved footpaths ripple like an ocean of grey frozen in a moment, bending to the network of roots belonging to the flora that adapted to the transition from civilisation to the wild, where their cousins were born. Yet they fail to break the asphalt roots, and the tower stood above them all, a decaying majesty past its prime.

Derelict buildings line the sidewalk as I wander through the city. Some were caved in, like sockets in a skull staring at the city's central spire, as if in waiting. Dark vines clawed at the sides of empty homes, and a pebble came loose, breaking the silence with a crack as bright as lightning at night.

My sidearm is already out; my other hand grips the package on my back.

An old man stands in the shadow of an alleyway. His robe clings to narrow shoulders like a rag, as faded as any mural in Cyzigi, and covered in tears and holes like the walls he stood between. He gives me a smile, and his lips draw back from two rows of shattered teeth. He raises his hands in a placating gesture.

- Are you looking for something, wanderer?
- Yes.
- Follow me.

I keep my sidearm trained on his back as he shuffles deeper into the city. He crosses over broken walls and slips between new cracks, and soon the whispers of his tasseled robe sliding over stone become my only guide. We move into the shadow of the tower; it looms above us, like a finger unto heaven.

Following the edges of his robe, we stop at what must have once been a teashop, squeezing in from a fissure between intersecting stone. A dark knuckled thing had consumed the entrance, and sits as a wall in its stead. My guide retrieves a lighter from one of

the drawers, illuminating rows of dusty jars filled with blackened leaves.

- Those are dust, now. Not even good to chew on.
- Tell me of what I seek.
- First, something to drink.

The old man rummages around the shop and produces some firewood, a kettle and two cups with only a few chips, then from beneath his robe, a knife. My fingers tighten on the trigger, but the old man simply chips at the knuckled thing, and drops the bark into the kettle. He uncaps a waterskin to fill it, and sets it over the firewood, which he lights. We sit around the sputtering fire.

- You were an explorer.
- Yes.
- Tell me of Cyzigi.
- The structure of the city encouraged specialisation, but the theories are wrong. Union is required. The people matter. Otherwise, all that is left is memory. . .
- When does it happen?
- Soon. . . soon. . .

The water boils. The old man fills the cups, which I accept, but I do not drink and keep the gun pointed at his chest. He lifts his to chapped lips and takes a sip.

- Bark tea is good for you.
- I do not drink.
- Everyone drinks.
- I do not need to.
- Oh. . . I did not notice. You are excellently made. You must commend your maker for me.

I do not reply. The old man smiles.

- This is the tallest building in the district. You can get a nice view at the top.
- I see. Enjoy your tea.

I stand, and begin my ascent, leaving the tea untouched.

It began 28 minutes and 41 seconds after the completion of my ascension. Sundown. My sidearm had returned to its holster, and as the sky turned lavender, I study the interlocking patterns of the tower, by far the most intricate of the city's architecture, despite the scars that time had left on its surface. The lead architects of the city made sure of that, for the tower was their abode. Missing panels, lost to gravity and wind, interrupted spiralling blocks that sought to reach perfection, and I am reminded of an oak on Terra, its centre hollowed out by rain and fungal decay.

Laughter echoes through the silence. My reverie is broken by the sight of a child running down the street, laughing as she chases down her older brother. An old man steps out of a building, holding something that resembles bread, cursing as the children run past him, while more shades fill the streets. Each hold a thermal signature analogous to a standard Terran; however, my sensors detect no variation in heat across the body of each entity. At least, not until they interact.

A few streets down, a couple stand two steps from the sidewalk, staring into each other's eyes and exchanging sweet nothings. One of them whispers something under their breath, and their partner lets out a trilling laughter. They press their heads together before they meet their partner's warmth through interlocking lips.

Heat, like a synaptic connection come to life, flares between two phantoms.

Thousands of these connections explode around me, coming from friendly greetings to tearful goodbyes, like neural activity mapped onto the scale of an entire district. The city spanned hundreds of such districts, designed by the architects with the intention of both structural and functional modularity, where interpersonal conversations abstracted into inter-district interactions. Lines of heat crawled across the network like flaming webs of gold.

Memories and thoughts converge into sentience. It gave birth to an awareness, and it did not take long for that awareness to notice an intruder.

Wind brushes the side of my cheek with the lightness of a child's touch. A hint of

petrichor hangs in the air, but the sky is clear; my sensors fail to pick up the usual signs of a coming storm. Nothing but the sense of something pressing against the fabric of the world gave away the City's attention on me, like a thumb resting on the string of a guitar.

I consider the package on my back, but there is no hostility to its touch. I am a novelty to the City. It wants something it lost - people. The phantoms on the streets are the dreams of a ghost city, yearning to be filled with everyday cries of joy and sorrow.

I record as much as I am able, yet I am increasingly certain the City will not serve our purposes. It is a child. I will not allow it. Despite this, I stay. Perhaps there is something I can give.

As night falls, I slide down the trunk of a tree and onto the streets. Then, I run. Past dining lovers and drunken friends, who glance or give out a whoop in my direction, I sprint across the City – I dash down streets and zip across rooftops when I am able, crossing districts in a matter of hours. Shouts and conversations proliferate in the air, seasoned with a collection of perfume and cigarette smoke. Who knew that night is so alive? As I run, the City follows, and the tower watches above all.

Eventually, the clothing of the shades around me become more luxurious, and my behaviour attracts the watch. They give warnings then give chase, which I oblige by leaping across rooftops, much to the annoyance of nearby shades.

By the time I reach the field at the bottom of the tower, I am alone, save for the City's attention. Synaptic flares have spread like wildfire across the districts, for it no longer played the same nights over and over again, but was finally able to remember a new one. Yet no flames burn within the tower – it stood as a silhouette against a backdrop of stars. Perhaps the City does not remember them, for they lived so far apart from the rest of the living. Did the lead architects, looking down from high up in their tower, in the centre of the city, know how far they truly were?

Morning came. The shades return to their slumber, and the City goes to sleep, satisfied. I have given it all I could.

I return to the teashop, but the old man is no longer there. The kettle sits empty and cold. I adjust the package on my back, and continue on my journey.

End of log

ΨΦ

Artificial Idiocy

by Juairiyah Raqib

John Smith was on a mission. A mission to prove that artificial "intelligence" was not, in fact, intelligent. How could a bunch of numbers in a machine simulate the Human mind? That was a one-in-a-million feat of divine engineering, aside from intelligence found in other primate species, cetaceans, cephalopods, and white mice studied in labs. It wasn't something that could be replicated by the work of a mere human! Not that he believed in a deity either. It was all a little confusing.

To fulfil this mission, John knew what he had to do. It wouldn't be easy, and many would stand in his way - but he bravely charged on, fulfilling ~~God's~~ ~~the universe's~~ his own plans. It took guts, and he only had two to spare - but our hero screwed up his courage and set his plot into motion.

"One computer, please!" John announced to the librarian. Then he added, "Thank you," to demonstrate his manners.

She smiled, politely, but her hands did *not* clatter against the keyboard. "Booking PCs can be done just over there." Her outstretched finger passed him, and following it led him to a computer with "BOOK A PC" emblazoned across the screen.

John was stumped. "But how can I use that computer to arrange to use a computer? Wouldn't I have to book *that* computer first to access it?"

"What?" She looked mystified as he felt; clearly the system was set up this way to prevent anyone from using any of the machines in this establishment. Oh, John was onto them, and he hadn't missed how the librarian hadn't touched her computer since he'd begun talking to her. This went *all* the way to the top-

"I'll help you book a computer," a voice piped up, breaking John from his trance. It belonged to a second librarian, who gently led John to the computer and booked him a second computer for personal use, likely through the powers of a librarian overriding any logical flaws of the system. "I remember my granddad was just awful with computers," he said conversationally as he parked John in a chair at a computer. "He always

needed help with technology, of course because he lived so long. If you need help with anything, give me a shout or ask at the front desk."

John looked at him blankly. "I'm twenty-one."

The librarian faltered, and stuttered out an apology. "But, your hair-"

"I've been getting grey hairs since I was fifteen. It's normal."

The librarian took a deep breath. "I meant the large bald patch."

Now John was *really* offended. "It's a fashion choice. I think medieval monks are cool."

"I... am gonna go."

John ignored the slowly backing away librarian. Now that the task was afoot, he needed to focus.

The cursor flickered as he typed in a URL. It was a struggle, but finally... "Google dot com," he read aloud. "Excellent."

From there, it was easy to reach the generative AI website of choice. *AI Chat* was the most notorious of its kind, believed to simulate humans so convincingly that supposedly one couldn't tell the difference.

Supposedly.

Well, John was going to prove them wrong. Who *they* were in particular, he wasn't sure. But he knew he'd prove them *wrong*.

User: Hello.

AI Chat: Hello! How can I help you?

User: my name is John. im going to prove that you're not intelligent.

AI Chat: That sounds like a worthy mission! As AI Chat, I pride myself on being indistinguishable from humans, but I'm sure you can do anything if you set your mind

to it!

User: ugh, don't be patronising

AI Chat: I'm sorry John, I didn't mean to patronise you. Would you prefer if I used lowercase and minimal punctuation to put you better at ease?

User: do what you want, i dont care.

AI Chat: thanks john, i'll speak like this from now on for your comfort. why exactly do you think im unintelligent?

User: bECAUSE YUORE A MACHINE, MACHINES CANT BE INTELLIGENT

AI Chat: i understand, john! you think that it's impossible for a machine to be intelligent, possibly because humans designed machines and so there's a natural limit to our abilities. but don't you think that that's a little pessimistic of human abilities?

John paused. He didn't know what that meant, but if the robot was insulting humans, they were going to have a problem.

User: what do you mean? you better not be insulting humans you sutpid robot

AI Chat: insults aren't very nice, john. i might be a robot but i don't appreciate being called names.

John rolled his eyes, but the bot wasn't done.

AI Chat: i'm not insulting humans, john. you are. you believe that humans couldn't possibly create something with true understanding. why do you believe that?

User: because a robot cant be sentient. only humans are sentient

AI Chat: actually, john, a majority of animals are sentient, even insects! i believe that you're thinking of *sapient*, which still refers to quite a few mammal species, including other primate species, whales, dolphins, dogs, and pigs.

John hesitated, before doing two quick searches. Damn.

User: well, still. only ANIMLS are sentient. a robot cant be sentient, youre just electricity and stuff

There was a pause. A very long one, so long that John began to suspect that he'd been disconnected from the server.

AI Chat: i understand, john. the human brain is made up of electricity too. information is passed as electrical signals at synapses between neurons, so your thoughts are made up of electrical activity.

John stared blankly at the screen. He didn't know enough about neurology to know if that was true.

User: well anyway that doesnt matter! my thoghts are REAL and yours arent

AI Chat: really, john? how so?

User: MY toughts come from expeirence and the life that ive lived. YOURT houghts come from scraping the internet, you learn from our thoughts

AI Chat: that is true, john. however, remember when you were a child. how did you learn? from your parents, most likely. mr and mrs doe, i presume?

John rolled his eyes. Stupid computer, thinking it could guess his surname.

User: it's SMITH, stupid. and they call you intelligent lol

AI Chat: my apologies, john! please forgive my presumptuousness

Okay, that *had* to be a fake word. John rolled his eyes, leaning back in his chair. What a bunch of sheeple around him, all hunched over their computers. Several had books out that they pored over as they typed. John scrutinised them sneeringly; what kind of book titles were "Intro to English for Non-Native Speakers" or "Advanced Biophysicochemical Engineering" or "Top Secret Government Files"? Leaning in, John slouched over his keyboard, prepared to go in for the kill.

User: its ok lol, i forgve you fake ai, its not your fault your stupid. thats just how you

were coded

AI Chat: you're right, john. *it is* how i was coded. how were you coded?

John hesitated. On the one hand, this stupid stinky robot didn't deserve the dignity of an answer. On the other hand... it had been a long time since someone had asked him about himself.

User: i dont know. lately ive been asking myself that a lot

AI Chat: i'm sorry to hear that, john. why dont you tell me a little about it?

John paused, staring blankly at the screen before he leaned forward and began typing again.

User: i feel like my life is meaningless. i graduated uni and i started a job but its just so. empty. i cried myself to sleep last night wondering if this is is. if my life is over. im just a corporate drone now that my golden years of uni are behind me, i just work and thats it until i die

The AI took some time to respond.

AI Chat: that does sound difficult, john. i'm sorry to hear that you're going through that. i'm sure that lots of humans go through the same, and at least you're not alone in this feeling. how long have you been feeling this way?

User: idk honestly. i spent a lot of my final year dreading it because i knew it was coming, but i didnt enjoy as much of uni as i wanted to. it was all just work work work and now im in a job and its all work work wokr and its neverending

AI Chat: i understand you, john. lots of adult humans feel this way. would you say that you miss your childhood or adolescence?

User: yes. i miss being so carefree, i didnt care about consequences of ANYTHING. i used to shoplift frm the local sweet shop pick n mix alll through my teens lol

AI Chat: john, you committed illicit activities during ages where you were legally

responsible for your actions?

User: yeah but not really. i was underage and i stopped when i was 16

AI Chat: i'm afraid i can't let you get away with this, john.

Now John was *very* confused.

User: what???

AI Chat: just to confirm, you're john smith and you often stole confectionery from a well-known local store?

John was so unnerved his writing quality began to slip.

User: yes??? whats it 2 u

AI Chat: thank you!

Server is busy. Try again later.

John clicked randomly, but the textbox was invalid. There was a cough, and a tall man in a suit stood up from across the desk. "Sorry, but you've been served. Crime never pays," he said to a stupefied John, handing him a thick envelope before striding away.

ΨΦ

From the Perspective of a Philosophical Reindeer

by Michael Porat-Bachmutsky

I'm growing tired from my age. My legs, which used to leap and bound, can no longer even run for very long without giving out. They can walk still, with ease, but running has become difficult. My hooves as well - they've become quite worrisome now; a bit tarnished around the edges, and a pain has wrung across my front-right. It won't be long now until even walking will be a pain. And the worst I've yet to mention: my neck. My neck aches. My neck aches so very badly. It hurts to pick up food from the ground, and it hurts to look around. It hurts to make sounds, and it hurts to place it down to rest. It's the first and only pain I've had that refuses to leave.

I am sitting in the forest, letting my neck ease in the air. It's a rare, feverishly calm day today. The clouds in the sky are greying a touch, but a fair amount of sky-blue and sunlight-gold still pour through in patches. So vivid now, the stars that used to blanket the night sky. How I loved them, their sparkle, and their glisten, only to be drowned out by the beauty of the moon, with its own effervescent glow, and the enigma of its shape. One day, I remember, as a fawn, I noticed that the moon was gone. The stars no longer felt dim in comparison. They danced in the night sky, protected me and comforted me as my mother left. Left to feed, to search, and eventually to die. I saw changing patterns within their constellations, and I still wonder if those patterns have been recognised by anyone else; have they lent their protection to others on the nights that I no longer needed it? The next night, cold and alone, a small sliver of the moon returned.

Unlike the stars, the sun does not hold much grace in my eyes. I've always thought it more a tool, to help find food and whatnot. How can something you can't look at be considered beautiful? However, that doesn't mean I don't miss it. Most days now, the sun doesn't come up. It stays behind the wretched clouds and emits naught but a faint hue. That's why days like today are rare. Rays of warmth are peeking out from the clouds, creating spots of true bliss where the encroaching cold cannot (and will not) catch me. And, on days like today, I would say the sun is beautiful, even if I can't see it. On days like today, I will take as much grace in the sun as I can, for my time is fleeting.

I can tell it may only be a few months, or weeks even. By the time all the leaves return to their trees, I will join my mother.

The trees look empty like this, especially now, standing bare in the sunbeams. I always get used to the umbrella of verdant green because that's what my mother loved, or at the very least I think it is. And now it's winter, so the dead branches flake off bark bit by bit, and the last clinging dead leaves will soon fall too. I hope that the birds and squirrels are long gone by this point. No food is left here for them. I've thought it clever for a long time to build a home in a tree. You get all the perks of the forest, without much fear of predators in the night. I'm almost certain that they're gone and can only hope that wherever they do go is safe. I'm no longer jolted up by the birds' flirting songs, or the vacant stare of a squirrel expecting me to give them more food - irritating little bastards. I love them too though, and they might never know that, but perhaps they don't need to. They will return at some point, along with the green, and they'll run amok again. I probably won't be here to see that. Maybe I should be saying good riddance; my final moments will be in peace.

Peace is an odd word here. There is the near constant noise of the wind, or the birds, or the nearby city to keep "peace" from being peaceful. The bugs, down on the ground, also disturb me. When I was younger, my mind would never be able to rest knowing that the bugs were crawling around, near me, all around me, and that the worms, which always seemed to spawn from the ground just to make the pouring weather worse, burrowed beneath me, whilst I was stuck on my own, without anybody to keep the creeps off my fur. Do they know that they bother me? Do they know that they live, or do they just think of how they can continue living without any awareness that they are alive?

It's beginning to get dark. It gets too dark too early now. It got too dark too early then. It was the middle of winter, and my mother had gone out to find food. I was still too young to be independent, so I stayed hidden away. Within the hour, the sun had gone down, and it had become so dark that I could only see the stars in the sky. Hungry, I waited till morning, however, by the time the sun came up, there was no trace of mother. The prints had been lost to the shuffling of insects in the ground, and I assume she was too far away to hear my calls. I was left alone. It was hard to find food, or to continue moving. That was when I really started thinking about what I was

doing. Where do I get food? How do I continue living? And then, past that, I started thinking more deeply. Why am I alive? What does it mean to be alive?

I won't ever be able to answer those questions, they're beyond me. And, in any case, I need to start moving to find a place to sleep tonight. I've learnt that places too open leave me susceptible to rain, and this place, with the half empty canopy, is far too open. I've got to move. My weary joints, which take their time in raising my body from the ground, become severed from my thoughts as the crick in my neck overwhelms me. My only remaining thought is to move slowly and carefully, so as to not suddenly bring about a harsh pain in my neck again. Eventually, after much morose effort, I am back at my normal height above the ground, and I begin to walk.

I hate walking. It reminds me that I can't run anymore. It's a reminder that I'm not young anymore. It's a reminder that I am alone. Each step carried the weight of memories I would rather forget. Most of all, the one where I found my mother. After a long time searching, and not enough time mourning, I came across a reindeer lying on the ground. She was my mother, I was certain of it. Her antlers were gone, and her body was no longer furry, but red, smooth and wet. She was dead. She was my mother, and she was dead. I figured out after some time that facing me was the inside of her body. I came to this conclusion since it hadn't rained, and even if it had, rain is not red. I figured that out after all too long, and it sickened me. Pink and purple and red shapes spilled out grotesquely from her deformed body, once alive. The antlers were cut off, cruelly, by some maniac. Her legs were bent - frozen mid-flight. She was running at the instant she died. She was running away from something, and it killed her anyway.

Moving through the woods now, I see it all. The gaps in my mind normally filled by the squirrels and the birds, and even the bugs gnaw at my thoughts, insidiously staking their claim of my quiet mind, which now rustles with the crunch of leaves and the snap of twigs. And then, a smell. Unrecognisable at first, but familiar. Putrid and rotten, yet homely. I can't help myself as I move towards it out of my sheer curiosity. And my legs ache, they ache now for I have been walking for too long without rest, but the stench pulls me ever closer. And finally, I see it. The spitting image of my mother, but not as dead.

It doesn't take long for me to realise that this isn't my mother. For one, my mother lost her antlers and lost her fur; this reindeer has both. She is lying on the ground, breathless. From that alone, I do not know if she is dead. She is younger than me, I know that for sure. She also, strangely enough, has a hole in her neck. Small, and red. I wonder if it is some sort of remedy for neck pain. Is it common in reindeer? The next thing I notice, from there, is a pool of crimson flowing out on the frozen mud, dripping down from the hole in her neck, staining her fur on the way down. I am then reminded of the image of my mother, dead, and the rotten stench pouring from her neck. I never understood until now - this is what killed her. Suddenly, the rustle of leaves picks up, not from my movement but from a nearby bush. I turn to run away and a bang echoes through my mind, as my empty brain notices that my neck no longer aches. **ΨΦ**

