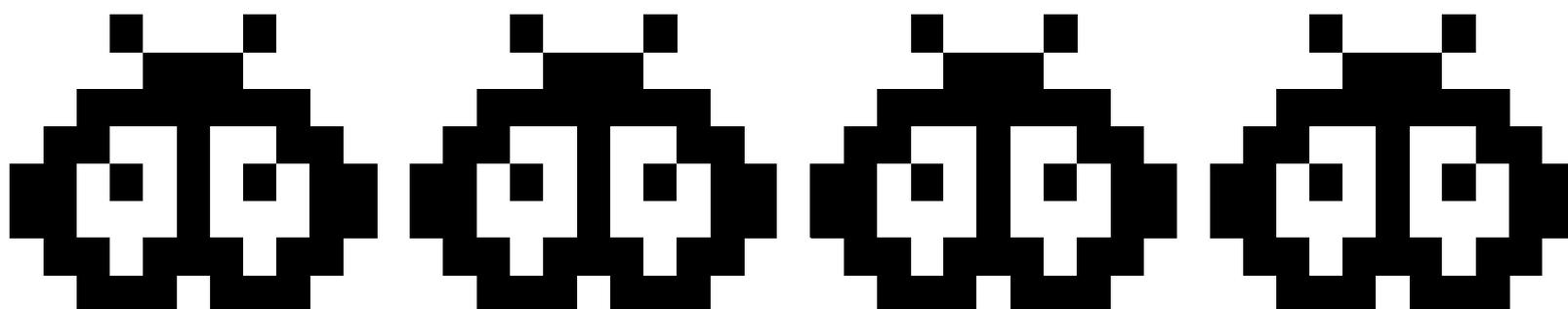


RE-TELLING



WRITING
CENTRE



MAGAZINE

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CENTRE
IKILAUŠ

No. 1 (2016)

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Edited by
Justyna Jajszczok
Agnieszka Podruczna

“Artwork” by Justyna Jajszczok



“Wheat” by SeriousTux
<https://openclipart.org/detail/144535/wheat-black-and-white>

Retelling and Creativity

Apparently, Voltaire once said that originality is nothing but judicious imitation. We don't know if it's true, [this site](#) says so. When we decided to hold the ReTelling Short Story Contest, we secretly anticipated just that: nothing but imitation, and not even judicious, to be honest. How very wrong we were! The stories submitted by students were nothing short of brilliant; creative and inventive, taking the topic of retelling further than any of us had expected. Consequently, it was very difficult to choose only one and we did it only after some serious debating.

The winning story is *Conjunction* by Ewa Drapa, a sci-fi tale of love and loss. It retells one of the works by... Actually, no. Why don't you read the story and then try to guess the original? If it turns out to be too

difficult, don't worry. All stories are followed by Author's Notes in which the authors explain which texts they retell and why.

Apart from *Conjunction*, which is the first story of this issue, all others are arranged in alphabetical order. If you don't feel like scrolling, you can go to Table of Contents and click on any title to get to the relevant page. In general, the magazine is formatted in such a way as to enhance the reading experience maximally. We tried our best to make it as readable as possible both in electronic and paper versions.

We hope this issue of the *WriCent Magazine* will prove a stimulating read and will inspire anyone – students, tutors and other members of the faculty – to indulge in a little bit of creative writing. We would be more than happy to provide a platform for your literary endeavours. As Albert Einstein [allegedly](#) said, creativity is contagious, you should pass it on. That's our plan, too.

Editors

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Conjunction

by Ewa Drapa

‘When you receive this, I will have become just a ghost from the past. But, although our worlds may drift apart, I will stand still like a deeply rooted tree, returning your gaze from afar in a futile attempt to fight the passage of time.’



‘How I wish the ghost of my own past would talk to me like you did,’ I confided.

I’m still not sure what made me type that silly message. Perhaps it was all the alcohol flowing through my veins; I suppose at my age I shouldn’t set my whisky to auto-refill.

I got up and staggered across the room. Had the armchair always stood so far from the wall? I could

swear I used to walk sideways in here, yet still my chest brushed against her whenever we were setting the table for tea. Right now, the only possible passer-by was a tiny cleaning robot quietly vacuuming the floor.

Widower. The word still sounded foreign. Until recently, I had kept the sanitation protocols off and tried to leave everything as it was before she had passed away. I didn’t move any chairs, wash the teacup she had drunk from, or change the bed sheets. (I was sleeping on the couch those days so as not to muffle the remnants of her scent). But change is inevitable.

I walked towards the window and peered outside, beyond the busy metropolis dominated by cloud-wrapped skyscrapers. The view couldn’t be more unfamiliar. The bright blue sun had set hours ago and now the sky was engulfed in silvery-grey darkness with shimmering points of distant systems sprinkled against it. But now gushing strokes of gold

and brass were painting themselves against the usually clear and uniform firmament. Another difference, of course, was that my planet's golden twin had disappeared from the sky. In just a few hours, it would align itself with Spectral-1, commencing the celebrated two-week Conjunction.

I honestly couldn't care less.

I guess I have always been one to choose the past over the present, and to cling onto days gone by. Just the way I've clung onto this ancient chipset I stumbled upon back in my college days. The pleasure of cracking old data storages and reading the content, attempting to reconstruct worlds of the past, was one of the main reasons I took archaeology as my major. Normally, the chipsets I decrypted would contain mundane messages sent by ordinary people, but that one was different. I could tell by the programming language that it had come from the very dawn

of my home planet's colonization. The story it unveiled – fragmented, distorted, and frustratingly unfinished – was one of the saddest I had ever known.

The chipset had belonged to an astronaut who used it to communicate with her beloved. I gathered both of them had served on different spaceships within the same fleet. Initially, the messages were filled with sweet expressions of longing, counting days until the lovers' approaching reunion. But then, events took a sorrowful turn:

'According to the on-board operator,' said one of the texts, 'this message will take over a year to reach you. Just now, the computer malfunctioned due to a stellar blast and we had to perform an emergency hyperspace jump. The area is very unstable so we will have to make another jump to an even more distant location. The next message will reach you in 8 years...'

I could still remember the shudder the message had sent down my spine when I read it for the first

time. The man would have waited a year to first hear from his beloved. Did he resolve to wait almost a decade to receive a second message from her? Did he search for her, or rather move on, having accepted that he had lost his darling forever? Were the successive messages sent from the past a beacon of hope or merely a relic of a life gone by? I was never to find out, as the 'Inbox' catalogue was damaged beyond my decrypting capabilities.

What I did know was that the woman's spaceship remained lost amidst uncharted hyperspace galactic warps. Yet she never stopped sending her short digital letters day after day. As consecutive jumps moved her away from the fleet, despair consumed her:

'It's as if fate is jealous of us and enjoys keeping us apart,' she wrote; or, 'I feel like a sailor trying to navigate towards the North Star while stranded at the South Pole. No matter where I go, it seems I couldn't be any farther from you.'

I could only guess that her spaceship finally docked on my home planet, since that was where I had found the chipset. I estimated the planet had hardly been colonized at the time. Had she still clung to the hope of her beloved finding his way to her stranded on this cursed land? I don't suppose he succeeded, given how primitive the knowledge of interstellar navigation was at the time. Or perhaps she didn't land on Spectral-1 after all and remained adrift in the dark embrace of the deep space. The chipset may have found its way to my planet only afterwards, just like the tons of technological debris I had dabbled with as a student.

I often pondered over the astronaut's story, inventing and re-inventing the missing ending to the tale, at times even imagining myself to be her faithful lover and finding my way to her. It wasn't until tonight, though, when – alone, miserable and drunk – I found the old chipset together with the transmitter into which I had mounted it and, for the first time in

years, re-read the whole sad testimony of the lovers debarred by fate. Now the screen with my newly typed message slowly went dim, as if it knew there would be no time-travelling reply to display, and I dozed off in my armchair.



I don't actually believe in ghosts, or in text messages travelling to the past. So, as morning came, my head heavy from hangover, I thought I was either still drunk or finally losing it when the transmitter's screen displayed a "New Message" alert. I opened it cautiously.

'I'm no ghost, but I'll be happy to talk to you if you wish,' it said.

I shook my head, trying to recall a law of physics that would let a text message travel five centuries back and forth in time. It's funny how the most obvious solutions so often elude us.

'Who are you?' I finally typed back.

'I found this chipset a while ago. Imagine my surprise when I saw your message last night. I'm guessing you have the one that belonged to the woman astronaut? My name is Stella.'

For a moment, I was tempted to introduce myself as "Astrophil."

'I'm Andrew. Yes, I'm using the woman's chipset. It contains thousands of her messages, but I couldn't access the man's replies.'

It turned out that Stella's chipset had a complete set of the man's messages, but was missing many of the woman's; plus, most of the ones she did have were in random order, a result of the spaceships altering the distance between each other. Despite the hardships, it appeared, the man had never stopped looking for his beloved.

'Did he find her?' I asked laconically, surprised at my own eagerness to find out.

‘I don’t believe he did,’ came the painfully disappointing closure. ‘Let me send you the data I have.’

We spent the day reconstructing the story. It turned out that the man did find his way to Spectral, but, alas, no matter how accurately he followed the coordinates she had been providing, he couldn’t find his beloved. Hours passed while Stella and I analysed and reconstructed his search, engulfed in the ancient puzzle. Apparently, the man’s chipset contained the woman’s final message which I was missing. But, no matter how hard my new friend tried to read it, she couldn’t decrypt the corrupted code.

Just then a sudden, loud flutter right next to my ear jolted me out of my immersion. I turned my head towards the source of the sound, but all I managed to spot was a semi-transparent white veil. It whisked across the room, too fast for my eyes to follow. Was it my dearly departed checking on me? Did she begrudge me the time I was spending with another woman? Before I could consider whether she would

actually be so envious, the spectre attempted to sit on the couch rest only to fall through it instead. It then regained its balance and rose in the air, hovering somewhat confusedly, allowing me to finally see it clearly. It flapped its thin wings, only broad enough to tackle minimal gravity, and pierced me with its ominously white, radiation-resistant eyes.

An orbital raven! I realised with delight. My wife would have loved to see it. She had been so excited at the prospect of witnessing another Conjunction, but now that she was gone, I only remembered it when I saw Spectral-2 absent from the evening sky. Drowned in my own grief, I had remained oblivious to all the fuss around me, the ever-excited media coverage, the kitschy decorations and the commotion on the street. I knew there would be orbital birds and other wonders to come, but having found distraction in my investigation with Stella, I was caught completely off-guard. I was observing the animal as it was flying from one side of the apartment to the

other, looking for a way out before it finally escaped through a closed window.

The transmitter vibrated in my hands.

‘Do you think the man may have landed on the opposite Spectral?’ asked Stella.

I stared blankly at the spot where the orbital raven had hovered.



When the two Spectrals were being colonized, over six hundred years ago, scientists were baffled. Preparatory observations showed clearly the stellar system contained two twin planets, whose size and proximity should have led to a collision, or at least to a distortion of the gravitational field and the shape of their orbits. However, when a fleet of spaceships approached the system, there was only a single planet to be seen. Even more bizarre was the crew’s realization upon landing on Spectral-1 that its twin could

be seen covering a seventh part of the sky. Added to the mystery was the inexplicable disappearance of nearly half of the colonizers, together with their ships and equipment.

Initially, people took Spectral-2 for an optical illusion, a mirage created by some particles in the higher atmosphere. It was only after twenty eight years that the remaining colonizers realized that the illusionary Spectral-2 was real and the reason the two celestial bodies didn’t affect each other was because the matter they were composed of vibrated at different frequencies. For the most part, the two celestial bodies remained parallel to each other, but once every three decades their orbits crossed and the twin worlds aligned like two holograms. When the twins entered the very first conjunction since colonization, people suddenly began to see and hear the living images of their comrades, whose bodies had adjusted upon landing to the vibrations of the other Spectral. Standing in front of one another, reaching

for each other and only embracing thin air, friends, lovers and families experienced the weight of their ultimate separation. They were now cursed, able to meet only once every three decades, never to touch one another again.

Was there a couple of astronauts among them?



‘It may have been so,’ I typed back. ‘The distorted frequencies would have caused his messages to travel in space for decades before they could reach the woman. That would explain why she never wrote back.’

‘On the other hand,’ read the next message, ‘she may have simply died before he found his way here.’

I smiled wryly. There was a hidden question underneath our speculations: did the two of *us* live on opposite Spectrals? As the man astronaut had been following the woman’s coordinates, the two chipsets

should have been found in a similar location (whether on the same or opposite Spectral), so the easiest way to resolve our doubts and determine the fate of the star-crossed lovers would be to meet in person and see if we were able to touch each other. Alternatively, we could attempt to compare local topography and see if it matched.

Rather than sharing my thoughts, I changed the subject and told Stella about the orbital raven and how I mistook it for a ghost. She immediately associated it with the ghost I had mentioned in the message which ignited our acquaintance, so I told her about my recent widowhood.

‘Whenever we lose somebody dear to us,’ she typed back, ‘it feels as if every relation we make only leads to a bitter farewell. Every happiness in-between mysteriously disappears.’

How true her words seemed.

‘We once took in a tiny foxita only to watch it die a few months later,’ I reminisced. ‘We resolved back then never to have another pet again.’

‘And? How long did you hold to it?’ I imagined her giggle as she typed.

‘Almost a complete year. My armchair still bears a tiny wolfog’s bite marks.’

I couldn’t help but to be amazed at how at ease I felt exchanging messages – both mundane and philosophical – with a complete stranger. She never tried to comfort me with well-worn platitudes, but her digital presence made my empty room cosier while her distanced and sometimes ironical acceptance of fate soothed my heart. There was so much wisdom in what she wrote that it made me wonder...

‘How old are you, Stella?’

As I awaited the answer, I began to worry whether I may have crossed the line. I was typing an apology when a reply finally came.

‘29, and you?’

It was only then that I realised that my question had the power to wake us from the enchantment. Would either of us want anything to do with a person well above or below their age? And supposing we did, wouldn’t that change our relationship? I took a deep soothing breath and cast these concerns aside.

‘I’m 34.’



One day, I didn’t hear from Stella at all. Our friendship had lasted only four days, but I could already feel the contrasting sensation of loneliness. It wasn’t quite the soreness every single movement had given me during the first weeks after my wife passed away. It was more akin to the feeling you get upon returning from a long and engaging trip, when pouring tea seems louder and unwrapping a packet of biscuits requires more effort than it normally would.

In the evening I decided to send her a message.

‘You’ve been awfully quiet today. Something on your mind?’

To my relief, the answer came almost instantly.

‘Do forgive me. I’ve had a rather unpleasant experience today and now I can’t shake it off.’

I asked compassionately what had happened.

‘I saw a young couple in the street. They looked so lovely together, clearly having met only recently. They chatted and laughed, until she suddenly tripped...’

I already knew where the story was going.

‘...He tried to catch her, but she fell right through him. They both tried to pretend it was nothing, and kept on with the conversation, but I could see how much they hurt inside.’

‘We are taught to expect and accept these things during Conjunctions,’ I reflected, ‘but when they happen it’s painful nevertheless.’

The next message took a while.

‘Andrew, I know I’m being selfish, but could we perhaps not meet before the Split Eve? If we do live on different Spectrals, I feel our conversations wouldn’t feel the same after we’ve met.’

I smiled. May the dream last as long as it can.

‘Of course.’



Time flew by like the otherworldly phantom birds crossing the room, and our chats continued. As the Split Eve drew near, I grew restless. Tawdry decorations spread across the city screeched that the Conjunction was ending the morning after tomorrow. Meanwhile, the transmitter buzzed.

‘I’ve cracked the final message,’ announced Stella. ‘Shall I send it to you?’

Perhaps you could show it to me when we meet instead? I wanted to suggest. But just when I was

about to type the message, my thumb froze over the button. I hesitated for a moment and wrote:

‘Stella, I don’t know if you’ll ever forgive me for this, but I’d rather we cancelled our meeting tomorrow.’

The device went silent for what seemed like eternity. Did I break her heart? Was I never to hear from her again? But then a new message trembled in my hand.

‘I’m glad you brought it up. I wasn’t brave enough to say it, but I think meeting in person would only make our farewell more painful.’

I sighed with relief and marvelled how much Stella’s words reflected my own. There was no proof that we lived on different Spectrals, but it had to be so. Fate is just vicious that way. We spent the night chatting, as we normally would, but when the dawn came, we agreed not to communicate anymore before the Conjunction ended.

‘I’ll set the transmitter to send the woman’s message to you the moment the twins split,’ she proposed as we were saying goodbye. ‘Should you never hear from me again, this will be my farewell.’



Next day, I decided to switch my transmitter off and silently wait as the finale of our short-lived relationship came to pass. When night came, I couldn’t fall asleep, so I turned the tele-hologram on for the first time in two weeks to watch the news. The reporter’s voice blared out with unexpected excitement.

‘Cryosleep clinics on both Spectrals are overrun with no free appointment dates for the next five years as scientists announce the howling success of their experiment.’

‘At this point we are absolutely certain,’ a middle-aged man explained in an educated voice, ‘that during the next Conjunction we will be able to adjust

the frequency of organic matter making it possible to traverse between Spectrals.'

'I'm turning forty in just two years,' another interviewee spoke exaltedly, 'so I wouldn't be able to go into hibernation after that. As it is, I'm definitely gonna do it. There's this girl I first met on the previous Conjunction. We were just kids, but now I'm sure I wanna be with her.'

Good fate. I sat on the couch stupefied, trying to take it in. In mere twenty eight years it would be possible to go to Spectral-2. All people under forty could hibernate and wait for that time without aging. Stella was twenty nine...

I bolted out of my seat and began fumbling around in search of the bloody transmitter. It lay in the least expected place – right where I had left it. My fingers trembling, I couldn't turn it on at first. When I finally coerced it to work, there was a single message waiting for me.

'I know we agreed not to meet before the Conjunction ends, but I think we should. I'll be waiting on Planisphere Bridge until sunrise.'

Sunrise marked the end of the Conjunction. I checked the time. Half an hour. Planisphere Bridge was just fifteen minutes away. For me, the road takes twenty five. I grabbed my jacket and rushed out. As I hustled down the street, I passed dozens of overjoyed couples, crying, laughing, making promises. And yet, all I could think about was what a selfish coward I had been.

I was worried I wouldn't recognize her, but I knew her the moment I saw her. Fate alone could coin such irony. For there she stood, delicate and plump, her round cheeks traced with crow's feet and laughter lines, thinning silver hair covering her pale neck. Her eyes became moist as she gifted me with the most tender of smiles. For there I stood, hunched and skinny, nearly bald, age spots covering my scalp and a cane at my side.

‘I didn’t want to destroy this dream.’ She spoke in the sweetest voice I had ever heard. ‘But when I heard the news, I feared you might do something stupid, all because of my selfish lie.’

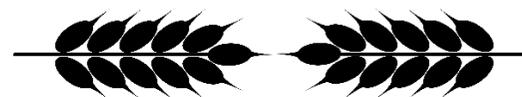
I burst into laughter, crying at the same time. It seemed as if it were our minds, not our planets, that formed a conjunction. I opened my mouth. Suddenly, there were so many things I wanted to tell her. But none of them seemed important enough to sacrifice these final minutes. And the first blue rays of morning sun were already breaking the night-time spell.

I held my hand out. She reached hers towards me and placed it just half an inch from where it would normally rest on my palm. I fought the urge to blink for as long as I could, because I knew when I did she would make her graceful leave. But change is inevitable. I couldn’t tell if it was tears blurring my vision, or the planets splitting, but her smile slowly dissolved and her gaze melted. Finally, her silhouette rose quickly and vanished into the sky.

Just then, the transmitter in my hand vibrated for the last time. I read the woman astronaut’s farewell and then I reached out my hand towards the sky, watching our worlds drift apart.



Our gold-and-brass stellar twin was shining high above my head. There, an old woman, not much younger than myself, was looking up, returning my gaze. She would stand still for a while, smiling with nostalgia and then she would be on her way, her paced footsteps paralleling mine, bound to an opposing star.

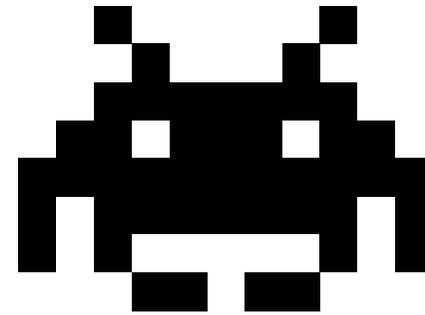


Author's note

“Conjunction” was inspired by Andrew Marvell’s metaphysical poem “The Definition of Love.” In his concise piece, Marvell unveiled a complex parallel between the realms of science and love, while his intricate metaphors resemble a sketch of a fantastical world. My retelling attempts to unwrap this outline and forge it into a genuine setting, whereas the astronomical phenomena Marvell named in his poem become guidelines according to which my story progresses to tell the love tale of soul mates “debarred by fate.” I invite my readers to follow my subjective rendering of Marvell’s labyrinth of meanings and form their own understanding of the speck of a science-fiction world I present to them.



Ewa Drapa is a final year MA student of English. In her studies, she focuses on narratology, or, as she likes to put it, “the art of weaving threads of narration into tapestries of tales.” In her creative work, she enjoys “weaving” riddles and false appearances into her short stories, thus inviting her reader to participate in a game of wits.



Hearts in Progress

by Edyta Dorocka

Friday, October 14, 1814

Dear Brother –

I kindly thank you for your last letter. I am glad that you are well and I am looking forward to paying you a visit soon. I must also ask you to forgive me for not having written in a while although I have been in England since late August. The life in the Navy came to an end for me and I am glad to be back home. I arrived in Plymouth after a tiresome journey and I live now at Sophia's new home, Kellynch Hall. You can imagine, I am sure, what great care our dear sister takes of me. We are dining well and take walks whenever the weather is pleasant. Not only all this, Brother, but she has invited at least two families to Kellynch for this week only to make sure that I am acquainted with everybody in the neighbourhood. I

do know that I do not have to pretend before you that the mention of Kellynch makes no impression on me. You know me too well and I am glad that I can speak of this openly. I was not certain whether coming here would be a good idea but then I realized that one must put aside the bitter memories and think only about the future. However, as I arrived at the house, Anne's face appeared before my eyes and only then did I realize that it is the good memories that unsettle us.

Today, after eight years I saw her again. I knew it would happen as Sophia has been speaking of the Musgroves and Anne is Mary Musgroves's sister but I fear that one can never be prepared for renewing an acquaintance with the person with whom one had previously shared passion such as that between Anne and myself. But all that must remain a thing of the past. When I saw her today I reminded myself of her rejection and did no more than bow and bid her good day as I would to anybody else. Charles

Musgrove and I were going shooting and, therefore, no conversation passed between us. I left and am now certain that should we in the nearest future spend time in each other's company, it will not be difficult for me. Perhaps it was the Navy or simply the eight years in which we have grown apart but I have changed and cannot possibly be moved even by the most beautiful female face.

Edward, do let me know what your plans for the last months of the year are and I will be happy to come to Shropshire as I have promised. I miss you dearly and please, accept the warmest regards from Sophia who has made me promise that I would send them.

Your affectionate brother,

Frederick Wentworth



Friday, February 10, 1815

Dear Brother –

I trust you are well and as happy as I last saw you. Let me once again say how glad I am to have met your wife. While you are enjoying your married life, I am going to Bath in a day or two. I made this decision only a few minutes ago when I heard of the engagement between Charles Hayter and Henrietta Musgrove. I realize now that those names are not very familiar to you as I might have only mentioned them. The reason for my journey to Bath is, of course, connected with Anne Elliot. I have not spoken about it when I was at your house last month for I felt that it was too delicate a matter and, in truth, I did not know what to think of anything myself. But I must explain it to you now so that the events of the past few months become clearer to me when written down. When I came to the neighbourhood of Kellynch Hall and began spending time in Uppercross and then in Lyme with the Musgroves and Anne Elliot, I thought it best

to engage with the new acquaintances and take part in whatever my company wished to do so that my attention would be diverted from the memories that Anne's presence – I was aware of it – would invoke. I must admit that I have been stubborn in my resolution never to show warmth towards her again. I tried to think of her as of everybody else in the company but I confess that I failed. I have been noticing her exceptional kindness and thoughtfulness. When we were in Lyme at the end of last year, Louisa Musgrove had an accident and I witnessed Anne's firmness of character in the face of a great danger. Indeed, she did not for a moment hesitate to help as much as she could with the suffering girl. More than that, she never complained about a single thing although her silly sister – forgive my bluntness but I am sure you would put it similarly had you known the lady – was taking advantage of Anne's amiable character. All that has reminded me of the girl I knew eight years earlier and I admit that I could not contain

my interest in her any longer as I had previously tried to.

As Louisa and I were spending time together, she told me once of Charles Musgrove's proposal to Anne which she did not accept. To my surprise, the first thought I had was that not all hope is, perhaps, lost. Louisa also told me that Lady Russell, Anne's godmother, influenced that course of events and after all those years I understood that the parting of our ways was not a result of Anne's fickleness but of her family's refusal to accept a penniless man that I used to be then. Yes, she could have acted against their demands but I know that she would never wish to set herself against her family. If only they were as considerate! I also realized that the time that has passed since the day we parted has changed a great deal in both of us and I believe that each of us deserves a second chance today. You see now, Edward, how I have come to hope for a union between Anne and myself once again.

Unfortunately, my spending time with the Musgrove sisters stirred a great deal of rumours of which I was not aware as I never wished to be more than a friend to either of them. As it appeared, it was expected that I would marry Louisa and I realized my mistake. I decided to leave my company for a while, therefore. Today, as I wrote in the beginning, I received the news about the engagement between Henrietta and Charles but that is not all, as a few days ago I heard about an engagement of Louisa to my dear friend Benwick. You can imagine how relieved I felt. As for Benwick, everybody here is surprised that he is to marry so soon after his fiancée's passing. He has hardly spoken to us since the dreadful news came and now he is engaged again. I do wish both of them all the happiness.

I am sure you know now why I am soon heading to Bath. I have made up my mind and I wish to propose to Anne once again if she gives a single sign of affection towards me. Do write to me if you have a

moment and give my sympathy to your wonderful wife. I shall write again soon.

Your affectionate brother,

Frederick Wentworth



Tuesday, 28 February 1815

Dear Brother –

I must once again ask you to forgive me for keeping you without the news for too long. I wish to tell you about everything that has transpired since the last letter I sent to you but I realize that I should not keep you in suspense and I am glad to tell you that I am a happy man. Of course, when I came to Bath, I could not be certain whether I would be able to finally utter these words, I must tell you that. Let me begin, however, with my account of the events of the past few weeks. As I arrived in Bath, I was keen on seeing the place for I have heard many times of

its beauty and excellent company. Indeed, soon after my arrival I met a friend who lives there and in this way I was invited to dine with him and his family the following evening. I have not for a moment, however, stopped thinking about the one who brought me to Bath and I tried to remember any acquaintance who would make it easier for me to meet Anne. I did not, however, wish to impose myself upon her or her circles and that is what I had on my mind when I ran into her.

You can imagine how I felt, standing face to face with the most remarkable woman I have ever met and having no clue what to say. I felt myself blushing as I recollected all the images that my imagination had been producing for a few days before that meeting. None of those images, however, resembled reality. Anne told me that she was surprised to see me and asked me if I enjoyed my stay in Bath. I do not remember saying anything of much value. Indeed, I am certain that everything I said must have been utterly

nonsensical. I did, however, summon up my courage at last and offered to walk her home but she replied that a man called Mr Elliot has already promised to do it. When I saw him I recognized his face as I had seen him briefly in Lyme. It turned out – as I have overheard a few ladies who seemed to have had all the information about the young gentleman – that he is Anne’s cousin who began spending time with her and her family in Bath and who is expected to propose to Anne. I did not, however, allow myself to give my hope up on a basis of a rumour. A few days later I went to a concert as I expected Anne to attend as well. She has always been fond of music and loved to play herself. I did meet her there and we talked for a moment but she was again joined by Mr Elliot and I found myself unable to watch her in the company of the other man.

Soon we met again as the Musgroves and Sophia and Admiral Croft came to Bath and we all gathered at Anne’s house to make arrangements for

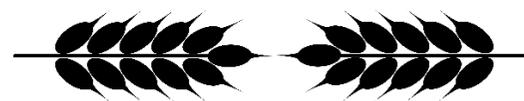
a dinner and shopping for the two sisters' weddings. But it was not until the next day that I – impatient – wrote a letter to Anne in which I expressed my utmost devotion and affection and proposed to her. We met shortly after it and Anne accepted my proposal. It is still a revelation to me to say it or, indeed, write it down, but yes – Anne Elliot agreed to be my wife. We then took a long walk and I found out that it was indeed Anne's family and Lady Russell who persuaded her to break our engagement eight years ago and Anne told me that she had regretted that decision bitterly. I explained that the origin of my unpleasant behaviour during the concert had lain in jealousy and told her that I should have never thought of her in a manner that I did. I was too proud to realize that she – as I have – must have changed as well and that I was blinded by her initial rejection.

I repeat, Edward – I am a happy man. Although I have received a letter to join the Navy once again, I truly cannot wait to be back in England and lead a

peaceful and full life with Anne by my side. As of this writing, the date of the wedding has not been decided upon yet but I will write to you as soon as it is arranged. Let me thank you for all the kind words you offered the last time we saw each other. You were right, of course, what does not seem to be finished is, most likely, not finished. I cannot believe my own happiness, Brother. And to think that only a few months ago we were separated by such a trivial thing as persuasion.

Your affectionate brother,

Frederick Wentworth

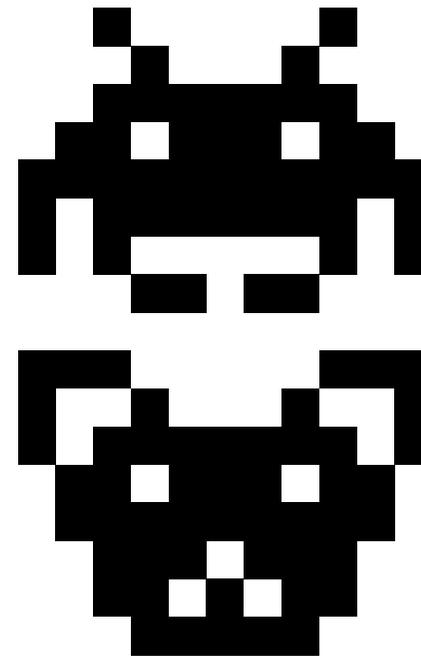


Author's Note

I am retelling *Persuasion* by Jane Austen. I have chosen this novel because it is one of my favourite stories about how one must know himself or herself in order to create the most remarkable bond with another human being. Although Austen's stories are primarily appreciated for their grand love stories and portrayals of the English countryside society of the turn of the nineteenth century, it is the personal journeys of the characters that I find equally interesting. As far as the epistolary form is concerned, I wished to refer to the popularity of letter writing of the era which was also reflected by Austen herself in her writings. More than that, I find that letters or diaries are always the best forms of making a character familiar, which was my intention.



Edyta Dorocka is a fifth-year student, a music lover, and she writes sometimes.



Imago

by Kinga Nowicka

In the happy and noisy crowd of young men and women attending the party there were a few freelancers – photographers and tabloid journalists – who would sell their souls to the devil if that meant a good article and exposure. They gave the hoi polloi topics for rumours, and their spicy pictures tended to cause, more often than not, national scandals. Among the group of the photographers there was a young man named Basil Hallward, whose last photo session made it to the cover of one of the most respected magazines.

‘Looking for your next model?’ asked mocking voices in the room. Other photographers were jealous of Basil’s ability to capture the beauty and honesty of his models. It is one thing to find a person with extraordinary good looks and a completely different

thing to know how to use them to the camera’s advantage. Basil was one of the few contemporary masters of photography whose skills were widely appreciated and serving as an object of great envy amongst his colleagues.

The moment was brief, a clichéd split of second that felt as if happening in slow motion. Hallward’s eyes caught a slim figure standing out from the rest of the crowd, and the photographer’s cheeks were caressed by an imaginary breeze. The freshness of the man’s stunning features hit Basil to the very core of his being, and suddenly he felt the urge to leave immediately. He considered himself unworthy of laying eyes upon such a magnificent creature. Yet, a moment later, he was introduced to the object of his budding fascination by the host of the party.

Basil’s eyes were attentively observing his hand which Dorian Gray shook. The touch felt as if a god’s blessing and Hallward was utterly confused. He was not sure if he should shamelessly admit he had never

seen such a masterpiece. *Be my masterpiece*, thought Basil as he finally glanced at Dorian, and knew at that very moment the boy had to be his next model. A desire to make Gray famous and worshipped bloomed in Hallward. The whole world deserved to know the name of the ultimate symbol of beauty.

For the whole evening Basil was pontificating about the contemporary art and people's perception of it. He presented Dorian with some of his photos and tried to charm the boy with stories from different cities and different sets. Gray seemed completely engrossed in Basil's anecdotes and, by the end of the party, he had agreed to take part in a photoshoot. He admitted to not having experience in the field but stated he wanted to do that, if only for Basil's pleasure.

Hallward could not have been happier and, in the sudden wave of joy, he squeezed his new friend's hand. The flash of surprise on Dorian's face was

quickly replaced with a particularly angelic smile, and Basil felt forgiven.

No more than a week passed when Dorian was posing for Basil in his studio on the outskirts of London. The room was not large, yet spacious and well-lit. The sunlight was permeating the room and reflecting on the flat surfaces of many mirrors and screens. Hallward organised the room so that his model had enough space to move around and do whatever felt natural. The memory card in the camera was gradually filled with photos of the young man playing with his hair, smiling and pretending to be someone else completely. Dorian was asking questions, as he was curious about his admirer, but Basil was so engaged in the photoshoot that he ignored what his model was saying.

After over an hour, a change of clothes and a glass of wine, Dorian joined Basil by the computer, where Hallward was staring at the immense beauty

radiating from the screen. The model looked at the photos and then heard a printer work to his right.

‘They are all excellent,’ spoke Basil ‘but I think this shot shows your true nature.’ Hallward’s fingers were ghosting over the freshly printed picture. ‘The light works to your advantage and emphasises your sharp features. Can you see? And this shade of green really makes your eyes stand out. You should wear green clothes more often.’

Dorian was staring at the photo with an indifferent expression, as if he couldn’t see what Basil was talking about. For a second, Basil was terrified that maybe Dorian did not consider him a talented photographer. A pang of pain and fear hit Hallward at the mere thought of his greatest model not appreciating his work.

‘Basil? I knew I’d find you here. Busy as always. And with a new model, indeed. For the first time, the

rumours were true.’ A man of slim posture and a dangerous spark in his eyes entered the studio and shook Basil’s hand.

‘You shouldn’t be here. I’m working.’ Hallward tried to make his uninvited guest leave, but the man moved forward to shake Dorian’s hand.

‘Henry Wotton,’ the man introduced himself and Dorian followed suit. ‘Are you the next one to make it to the cover of *GQ* or *Esquire*?’

Dorian flushed at the implication, and this made him look even younger and more innocent.

‘Stop harassing my friend,’ demanded Basil but his request went unheard. Henry had already sat in a chair with the printed copy of the picture in hand and then glanced at Dorian to compare it with the original.

‘Exquisite. Never in my life have I seen such a beautiful man. Don’t be insulted by my words but the term *handsome* does not quite suit you. You remind

me rather of a Greek god.’ Henry looked at the photograph and released a sigh of nostalgia. ‘Shame you will never be as young and pretty as in this picture. You will grow old and wrinkled, your beauty will fade and pass, and someone else will take your place. The only reminder of your beauty will be this photograph. Well done, Basil.’

Hallward rolled his eyes at the strange statement because he knew his friend used to speak such notorious things. God only knew if he ever meant what he said. Dorian, however, went pale, and his face was full of sorrow at the sad realisation that the words were quite true. The prospect of him getting old, and his skin getting loose, his hair going grey, and his eyes being filled with guilt and regret hit Dorian hard. It made him appreciate the man in the photo and his outstanding beauty. Only at that moment did he understand all the compliments he had received throughout his life.

‘There is nothing that I would not give for things to be the other way round. I wish I could stay forever this young. I wish the photograph could grow old instead,’ Dorian exclaimed and then the room fell silent. Finally, Henry laughed at the desperate wish that could never come true, while Basil decided never to show the photograph to anyone. He would send the rest of the pictures to a few magazines, but that one photo was going to be only his.

‘May I have this copy?’ asked Henry, already tucking the printed photo under his arm. Dorian frowned when Basil almost jumped at Henry to yank the piece of paper away from the man.

‘It belongs to Dorian,’ Hallward explained and handed the photograph to his model.

Since that day, Basil continued seeing Dorian, either for lunch or in the artist’s studio. Gray was introduced into the world of fashion and show business, and his photos appeared in magazines that filled all the racks. Hallward’s friendship, however, seemed

not to be enough, and Henry's unforgettable words kept echoing in Dorian's head.

As Dorian limited his contact with Basil, he met more often with Henry. The men attended parties and events at the opera or theatres, which led to rumours of a different nature, mostly accusing Wotton of neglecting his wife. The man didn't seem moved by that at all. 'There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about,' Henry used to say.

Despite their less frequent meetings, Basil remained Dorian's close friend, so when Gray engaged in an affair, the news reached Hallward's ears. To his own surprise, he wasn't happy for the boy. He acted like a good friend, offering advice and generally supporting Dorian, but deep down, jealousy was tearing his heart. Hallward became jealous of Henry and his influence on Dorian. It was a dangerous game Wotton was playing with the boy, and Basil could barely watch it from the distance. Dorian seemed to

absorb every word, becoming much like Wotton – cynical and arrogant – yet Basil kept looking at Dorian as if he was the purest creature in the world. Whenever he was around him, Basil lost his head and behaved as if he were mad. Gray's affairs grew in number but appeared to lose passion as each following one was shorter than the last.

Basil subconsciously started following Dorian's career. He read about the affairs, about the successive photoshoots, about the events he attended. Hallward kept the folder with Dorian's photos on his computer and secured it with a password. There was a wild obsession developing in Basil, but the man was not fully aware of that. Whenever he was in the company of other people, Basil would mention Dorian's name. Months had passed before Hallward gradually realised that not only was he smitten with the boy's beauty, but he also developed a sort of affection for him. Whether it was a form of love for one's

creation or a genuine love for another human being, romance coloured his friendship with Dorian.

When the realisation dawned on Basil, he began behaving more carefully around the object of his obsession and around other people. He controlled the amount of intimate details he gave away and tried to keep his feelings a secret. Dorian acted distant, too. He preferred the company of Henry Wotton and charming ladies. Although there were obvious changes in Dorian's behaviour, Hallward seemed oblivious. If anyone spoke badly of Gray, Basil would deny every sin. With time, the rumours were flooding Basil as they were flooding the city of London and the rest of the world of show business.

Years passed, but time seemed to have no impact on Dorian; his boyish face remained untouched and the blue of his eyes was as clear as ever. Basil pretended to move on with his life as he went on trips to Paris and Milan. His career had not moved forward along with him, however. His greatest success

was when he discovered Dorian Gray and it was not likely to be repeated. Hearing more and more accusations and insults addressing his masterpiece, Basil decided to visit his old friend.

It was late and the evening was particularly gloomy. It had been raining for hours and the fog made it barely possible to see anything. Dorian was alone at home and he frowned when he opened the door to Hallward. Time was not easy on the photographer, and his previously dark hair carried a note of grey. Dorian invited the man inside and offered him a drink.

'What is it about?' Gray asked as he settled in a chair. Basil was nervous. His face was pale and his hands and lips trembled.

'You know I am your friend. I will never speak badly about you and I can no longer tolerate the rumours circulating the city.'

'Why do you care about rumours?'

‘I don’t. I know you and I know you’re not capable of the things that people accuse you of. Such a beautiful face as yours could never hide any sin. Please, tell me that the rumours are all lies, that they are all made up and I will leave.’

‘Would you stop being my friend if I told you it was all true?’

A flash of horror and fear shot across Basil’s face. The implication was too cruel and too real.

‘How can you even ask? I will always be your most faithful friend. This is why I want to help you.’

‘Help me? You cannot help me. But I want you to see what you did to me.’ Dorian said and grabbed Basil’s hand. The touch startled Basil; it no longer felt like a god’s blessing. Gray led them upstairs, to the attic, where there was only one room and it was locked. Dorian pulled a silver chain on his neck and retrieved a key. The men stepped inside the dusty room furnished with an old chest of drawers, a broken mirror and a table with two chairs. Dorian moved

to open one drawer and beckoned Basil to come closer and have a look. Curiosity took over and he acquiesced. In the darkness of the room, he was not able to see what was inside the drawer, but when Dorian lit a small lamp, the sight almost gave Basil a heart attack.

A photo of an ugly older man lay at the bottom of the drawer. It was hidden from the world and from Basil’s eyes for so long but he would always recognise the face of the man. He would always remember the beautiful day at his studio when he took the photo of Dorian Gray.

‘This is impossible,’ whispered Basil and covered his mouth with his hand. It wasn’t a matter of time or humidity that destroyed the photograph. The background remained untouched. It was the sins of the ideal that Dorian Gray was perceived to be. In that brief moment, Basil regretted ever meeting the man. He wished for time to reverse. Prayers crossed his mind and he didn’t pay attention to anything Dorian

was saying. 'I will save you, Dorian. I know I can still save you.'

Gray laughed and looked at the picture. The tears falling down his face weren't the tears of joy; they were the tears of regret and immense sorrow. Basil couldn't look at his greatest creation, so he turned and sat by the table.

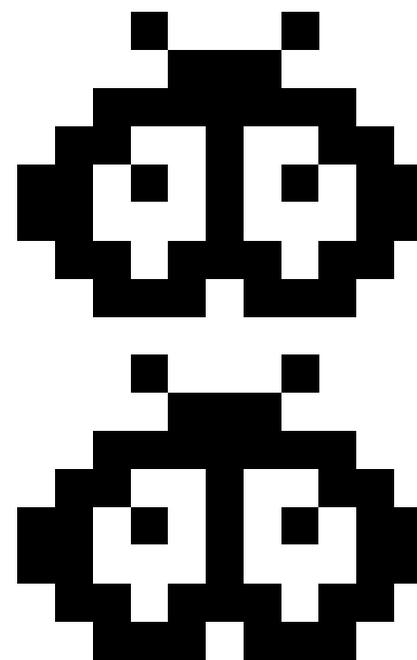
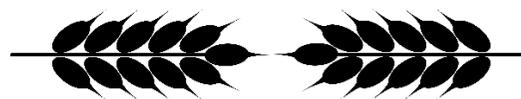
'I worshipped you.'

'You destroyed me.'

In the heat of passion, Dorian whisked a knife from another drawer and the next thing he knew, the blade sank deep in Basil's flesh. His last breath sounded very much like Dorian's name, and then the body in the chair became numb and lifeless.

Not long after, Dorian Gray was found dead in the same room, and the photograph that never saw the light of day was finally released to the public. Interestingly enough, what most people saw in the picture of the young boy was the artist and his admiration for the model, not the model himself. Basil's

love survived the toughest of trials: it carried on beyond life.

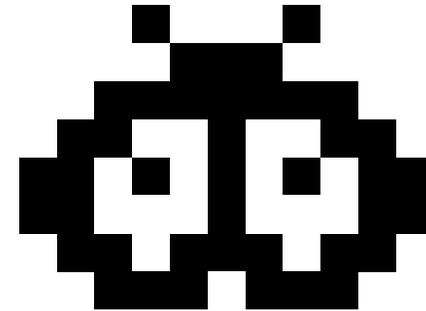


Author's Note

I chose to retell *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. It is a wonderful piece of fiction with a clear message, and one that seems universal. However, despite the very famous motif of the portrait aging instead of the person, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a tragic love story – one that appears to be preceding the century it was written in. My short story aimed at presenting the relationship between two characters, while moving the motif of the portrait to the background. It is fascinating to see how obsession can turn into a real devotion, and how affection can turn people blind to the faults of their beloved.



Kinga Nowicka is a twenty-two-year-old student who enjoys reading as well as writing fanfiction. After nineteen years of claiming that books are boring, she discovered the joy of plunging into fictional worlds and rooting for fictional characters. Her motto is *Live and let live*.



Stitches

by Melania Paszek

The first thing you remember is silence. The overwhelming, omnipresent, soothing embrace of silence... switching into an embrace of something tangible, warm, alive. A pair of strong arms pulling you out of the unwelcoming depth. You gasp for air, like a newborn seeking for its mother's calming touch.

“Live, goddamn it! *Live!*” a low, raspy voice commands you. “Don't leave me again, please, Elizabeth!”

Somehow, you shiver at the sound of this name. It has a familiar tone to it, like a comforting brush of something you used to cherish.

“Darling, wake up, you have to wake up...”

And so, you open your eyes.

They're watching you. Their uncertain, yet curious stares are pointed towards you like spears. The room you're in is dimly lit, the curtains are pulled, which makes a small lamp on the nightstand the only source of light. The bed you're lying in is surprisingly comfortable – it fits you like a hand fits a glove. Your throat is parched – it seems you haven't drunk for ages and it's difficult to speak. Your limbs are bizarrely stiff and unresponsive.

“She's awake, look!”

There are five people in the room: three women and two men. Except for one of the men, the one who spoke, you get the itchy impression that you've seen these faces before.

The other man slowly stands up from his chair. He's tall and slender, yet an outline of muscles can be noticed through his fitted white T-shirt; his short hair reminds you of honey. Once he sits by you, you notice his remarkable handsomeness: the sharp line of



the jaw, the 5 o'clock shadow, the pouty, almost feminine-like lips, the freckles on his nose and cheeks and the mesmerizing, emerald eyes, surrounded by long lashes. He seems delighted by your awakening.

"It's so good to see you conscious, Ellie... I was so scared that something went wrong and that you..."

You clear your throat and interrupt the man with a feeble voice, completely unlike yours –

"Who are you?"

The smile on the man's face fades – he glances at the second man in the room, who wears glasses and scrubs, apparently some sort of doctor. He nods reassuringly, encouraging the man by your bed to continue and says –

"Temporary memory loss is completely normal. She'll be back in shape in no time. She simply needs to... adjust herself to the new situation."

The man by your bed nods.

Then he calmly explains that you have undergone a serious operation, which lasted almost sixteen hours.

"What operation, doctor? I can't remember any accident or any illness... In fact, I can't remember why I'm here in the first place," you hear yourself say in a raspy whisper.

The man adjusts his glasses and says –

"I think that there is no need for you to analyze the current state of affairs, Miss Lavenza. The crucial factor that will speed up your healing is rest and contact with your close ones. You'll soon find yourself remembering all that is necessary."



THREE WEEKS EARLIER

“There is no way I can help you and I am sure that you’re aware of it.”

The doctor opened the drawer of his desk and took out a pack of cigarettes. He lit one, pensively staring at its glowing end.

“A bit ironic, don’t you think? A doctor who smokes like a chimney?” asked the other man.

“I like to think of it as my guilty pleasure.”

“You can’t do this to me, Henry!” said the green-eyed man. “You’re like a brother to me, you’re the only person I know and trust that —”

“I’m a doctor, Victor, not some deranged miracle-worker. You must understand that what we did in college was—” he stuttered, abruptly interrupting his speech.

“Immoral? Disgusting? A fiasco? Or everything at once, maybe?” Victor, who was walking back and forth inside Henry’s office, sat down and buried his head in his hands. “She’s dying. Elizabeth is dying, Henry, and I know that I can stop it.”

The doctor slammed his fist against the desk, making Victor jolt up on his chair.

“Yes, we both know it, but for fuck’s sake, can’t you understand that it may not only get me and my co-workers fired, not only take up a ton of preparations and eventually fail – but it can also scar you and the ones you love, for life? Have you ever thought about that? What would happen if this... twisted experiment wouldn’t work?”

Victor sighed and ran his fingers through his hair.

“I know what I’m doing, Henry. There’s nothing you can do to stop me. So you might as well join me and make sure we don’t make a mistake this time.”



You open your eyes, yet again. This time, the room is almost completely dark – there’s only light coming from the corridor, through the door left ajar. The

glow-in-the-dark hands of the alarm clock on the nightstand indicate it's past two – judging by the darkness, it must be two a.m. When you slowly lift your body from the bed, it feels almost as if it didn't belong to you, making an almost hostile impression. You slowly tip-toe to the bathroom, dragging the rack with your drip-bag along. Once the light is switched on in the claustrophobic room, you begin to wash your hands and face; the cool water works quite like a cup of coffee: it's relaxing and invigorating at the same time. You reach for a towel and gently dry your face, still a bit clumsily. One look into the mirror makes you let out a gasp. You're not alone...

“Oh my god.”

It's not a stranger's reflection. It's your own. The first thing you notice is the bandages – they're around your neck, wrists, ankles, shoulders and most of your torso, making it look a bit like a swimsuit. They also cover your face, the only features visible are an

incision instead of a mouth, a protruding nose and eyes – bloodshot, with ocean-blue irises, yet part of the right one is caramel brown. You didn't remember having heterochromia... It seems as if you're in a cocoon, smothered by it and, at the same time, you're simply curious: what is underneath the white ribbons of gauze? Slowly and cautiously you unwrap the dressing on the left wrist, not sure what you may find underneath.

To your surprise and horror, it is a stitch – an even, perfectly done suture which goes all around your hand, like an eerie bracelet; the same thing for the other wrist. The sewn part is slightly swollen around the edges, but it seems to be healing properly. The neck presents a much more blood-curling sight: it makes you think of a post-mortem scar which can be found on people who hanged themselves. Another suture accompanied by an impression of a noose on your throat, covered with scabs and discoloration, forces you to swallow hard.

You regret your decision once you begin to take off the bandage off your chest and stomach. The sight makes your skin crawl and your vision becomes blurry. Before you can do anything else, a couple of nurses enter the bathroom and you feel a sting of a syringe in your forearm.



“Elizabeth, please...”

You doggedly peer out the window, avoiding the man’s glare.

“Stop moaning. It’s getting boring and aimless.”

“Then listen to what I have to say!”

Once you shift your stare in his direction, your eyes fill with tears.

“How could you let them do this to me? How *could* you? I am not only confused, but... repulsing! Why won’t anybody tell me what happened?!”

The handsome man – the same who was by your side once you woke up from the post-surgery coma – was called Victor and claimed that he was your fiancé.

He was sitting there, dumbfounded, clearly not knowing what to say.

“As long as I don’t hear a plausible explanation to all this, you might as well leave.”

Victor clears his throat as you return to looking at the trees beyond the window. A solitary tear streams down your face as the man shuts the door behind him.



“BP seventy over forty and dropping!”

“We have to finish, Henry! We can’t do everything partially; it has to be one surgery!”

“The only thing that will be finished if you don’t let me sew her up is Elizabeth, so get out of the way!”

“She needs a kidney and she will be fine, don’t give up, please!”

The doctor hesitated, already holding the defibrillator’s paddles in his hands.

“I can be the donor. We have the same blood group. Just – let me help her. Let me finish the job.”

Henry took a deep breath and began to resuscitate Elizabeth. Victor left the room, watching through the glass as his beloved convulsed under the electric impulse.

Henry came out after a couple minutes, taking the stethoscope off his neck.

“She’s stable. But we don’t have much time.”



“I didn’t know what to do. The cancer spread to your brain, lungs... It sounded like a sentence. I couldn’t let you go!”

“What’s dead should stay dead, Victor.”

The man looks at you with such piercing affection in his eyes that it takes your breath away.

“Before we met, when I was at university... I conducted an experiment. Henry, the man who operated on you, was my assistant. It was long before the technological surge, before transplantology became so highly developed...”

“Victor, what does that have to do –”

“Let me finish. We collected body parts from different donors, from the hospital morgue by the campus. The bodies were usually mutilated in fatal accidents or crippled, lacking limbs or certain organs... The... components were kept frozen: we often found a palm or a foot, and then it took us several days to search for another body part. It was crucial for the elements to be relatively young and healthy, so if someone lost a leg, we usually focused on the internal organs. After a month or so, everything was ready. We wanted to assemble a creature from different

human parts and bring it to life with electricity, just like the researchers in the 17th century attempted to.”

The room goes quiet – you feel cold sweat dripping down your back. You don’t like this conversation, at all; in fact, it’s beginning to terrify you. At first, you doubted the identity of the green-eyed man, but now you begin to question his sanity as well.

“We had to reattach the vascular and nervous system, sew the limbs in an anatomical way and put the humanoid into a large... let’s say, tub, filled with liquid that has the chemical structure similar to the amniotic fluid, but with certain additions so that it would perfectly conduct energy. We succeeded... and the man we created turned out to be much stronger and more capable of learning than we predicted. He slipped out and later on hurt many people, becoming perilous and wild – almost as if he hated us for bringing him to this world... We caught him, but then his state suddenly began to deteriorate. That’s another story, though...”

The further Victor’s account goes, the more asphyxiated you feel in his presence. He was standing by the window, but now he sits by you on the bed. Your hands and lips start to shiver, as if he brought a freezing waft with him. Deep inside you know that you used to trust and love this man, but simultaneously he begins to evoke different, darker emotions inside you. Victor takes your ice cold hand and kisses it gently.

“Elizabeth, I love you so much... You’re the only person I could spend the rest of my life with. But love can’t physically heal. It’s just like... invisible stitches that hold us together! That is the only reason I decided to bring you back, can’t you see? I had no choice!”

“Of course you did,” you interrupt him in a shaky murmur. “You could’ve let me pass away. And found another woman to spend your life with, instead of... turning me into another experiment of yours. What were you thinking? That I would fall into your arms

with joy, exclaiming how wonderful, smart and gifted my dear one is?" You lower your voice. "I don't want to live like this, I didn't ask for this anomaly –"

"It's not your decision to make." Victor cuts you off, clenching his jaw. "You don't understand –"

The hospital room is dimly lit, as always, so you can only see an outline of a very tall and muscular man approaching the other side of your bed.

"Victor... *who is that?*"

He smiles.

"Ah. It's high time you two met. Elizabeth, this is John."

Once the stranger comes closer to you, you see his horribly misshapen face – the marred complexion, the uneven brows, the askew lips, a severed ear. His hair is styled in a weird, spiky manner, as if refusing to surrender to a comb. He sits by you, revealing a set of almost ill-fitting, pearly white teeth.

"This is the man I created fifteen years ago."

It's funny how one sentence seems to lower the temperature in the room down to zero degrees. Your breathing becomes abrupt; all you want is to escape as fast and as far as possible, yet your body is once again numb and you find yourself tongue-tied.

John carefully touches your face – you move away, but Victor's hand on your arm calms you down, oddly. The creature begins to take the bandages off your face.

"No, leave them on, please..." you whisper desperately, but the stranger is not listening. You feel chilly air touch your skin when the last piece of gauze is removed. To your surprise, the monstrous man doesn't seem like he wants to hurt you – he's looking at you with warmth and tenderness.

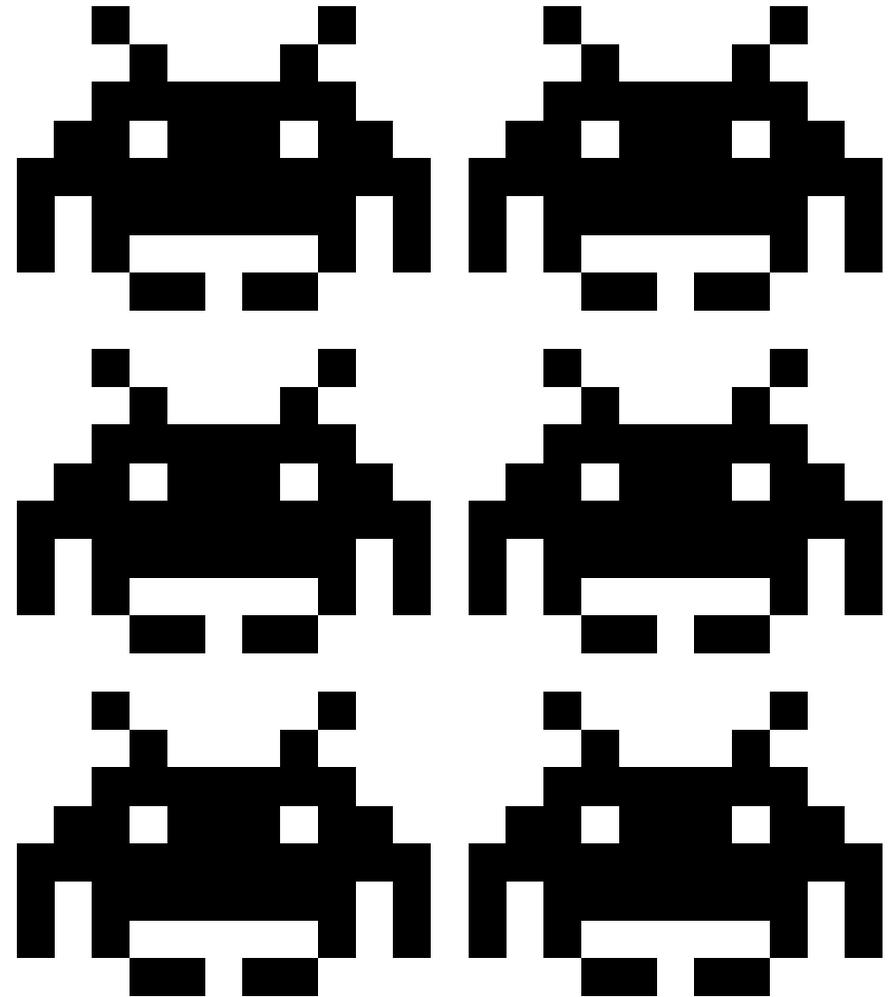
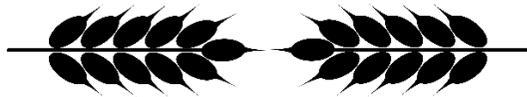
"There."

His voice resembles a distorted sound of someone choking on gravel in his throat.

"You're so beautiful, Elizabeth. Now we can be together, like a real family. Just like Victor promised

me.”

He hands you a mirror from your nightstand, putting it in front of your face. In the exact same moment, Victor turns on the strip lights on the ceiling. You blink a lot before you get used to the bright lighting – it’s like splinters are being crammed into your eyeballs. You slowly move your gaze to the small mirror. And then – you start to scream.



Author's Note

What is vital for you to acknowledge, dear reader, is that except for literature, cinema has vast influence on what I envisage. With a little help from works by directors such as David Lynch, David Fincher, Jim Jarmusch, Xavier Dolan or Quentin Tarantino I try to form my own, private vision of the world – either on paper, film or via other forms of expression.

A few days after coming across the information about the *REtelling* contest I was watching the movie adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* from 1994 (starring Kenneth Branagh and Robert DeNiro). I really enjoyed the additional plot of Victor attempting to bring his beloved – Elizabeth – back to the world of living by using the exact same method he used on his previous creation – the Monster. Something clicked in my mind and a question arose: "What if Victor actually brought his fiancée to life? What if

Frankenstein was set in the 21st century and we knew Elizabeth's perspective for a change?" That is how an outline of *Stitches* was born. At first, picking one literary classic on which I could base a retelling seemed unmanageable. *Frankenstein* itself was always close to my heart, therefore creating a brand new POV in a short story centered on such classic would be a brilliant way of paying homage to it.

I wanted the title to speak for itself and become a conundrum in some way – therefore, the expression *stitches* can represent the form of the text (its style and how it is assembled), Victor's desperate battle for *stitching back together* his relationship with a loved one (by bringing her back to life) and, of course, the literal sutures that placed Elizabeth's limbs together. Maybe more interpretations can be found – feel free to share them! After reading the story, one of my friends told me that she immediately associated the title with Shawn Mendes' song entitled...

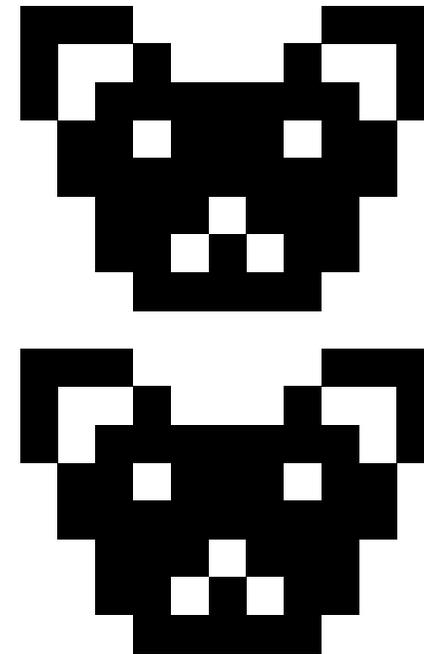
Stitches – as it turned out, the lyrics are quite well-fitted with the plot of my story.

In the age of plastic surgery, technological enhancements and “good-looks-to-go”, *Stitches* was meant to be not only a reinterpretation, but also a caricature of the contemporary pursuit for immortality and natural, eternal beauty. At the same time, we urge to maintain our youth and agility, but without medical, financial or any consequences whatsoever. If after analyzing this short piece a reaction is evoked and the reader begins to ponder: *Am I Victor or am I Elizabeth in this story?*, my job here is done. I hope that if anyone reads this, they will enjoy *Stitches* as much as I enjoyed writing it.



Melania Paszek is a 2nd year BA student of English Philology (culture-media-translation studies). She is a

fan of American literature, sarcasm and anything unusual. Her interests include music, cinema, American pop-culture and writing (from poetry, short stories, unfinished novels and lyrics to ... elaborate, unfinished ideas on napkins).



The Story of Rom-neo and Julija Told in Five Acts

by Bogna Stanaszek

I

Julija was waiting impatiently for the meeting to end. The Faculty Council deliberated over Rom-neo's case behind closed doors, for what seemed like forever. The corridor was air-conditioned but she could feel drops of sweat running down her back. She needed this interdepartmental cooperation – but how much, she realized just now, watching the red marks her nails had left on her palms. It didn't happen often that the Mathematics and Informatics looked for help in the Faculty of Humanities; actually, it was the very first time. Also, the very first time the Vilnius University started such a project. Julija knew it could be the opportunity to finish her doctorate. She crossed her hands and rubbed arms to cheer herself a bit. She

missed home very much, but even though she felt a little alienated in Vilnius, her ambition wouldn't let her resign. Especially now. She took three deep breaths and visualized how her life would change after the meeting was over, and she got accepted for the project. She would become a famous psychologist, the very first to psychoanalyze it.

Julija had a chance to meet Rom-neo and it was an amazing experience. Evolving algorithms. Who would have thought? She was very excited that such a prominent scientist as professor Eskaluskas wanted her to join his team. She was also scared. Not without a reason had professor Montekas called a meeting to discuss pros and cons of conducting the project. Now, she could hear his angry voice from behind the door defending his opinion that Rom-neo was posing a threat to all human kind, and that the project had to be suspended immediately. Of course, everything that was unknown, or incomprehensible, could be a threat and Julija knew it, especially as a specialist in

her field. But what could happen here, in the safest laboratory? All her doubts disappeared when she thought of working face to face with Rom-neo. Professor Eskulaskas told her that her task would be to talk to it, draw conclusions and then explain to the programmer what changes and commands had to be introduced into Rom-neo's software to make it more obedient. Indeed, talking about disobedient artificial intelligence was frightening but from what she heard, Rom-neo simply asked too many questions. Julija considered that a scholarly interesting – rather than frightening – situation. But she also understood why it had still to be on standby, waiting for the Council's decision. She hoped that professor Eskaluskas would be able to convince the Faculty that she deserved a chance to try to work with the android.

Suddenly, the hall's door opened. Julija looked out for professor Eskaluskas's face in the crowd, and when she found it, she noticed that special gleam in

his eye. She couldn't believe it. He managed to persuade the others. He approached her and they shook hands.

"Welcome on board in my research team," he said, looking at the faces surrounding them. "I'm glad I convinced them, at least for now. It's not about giving Rom-neo a chance, but about giving a chance to ourselves. We are in control of this project, and not the other way round, so everything's going to be just fine."

Julija looked at him fascinated.

"Thank you, professor," she said, her voice trembling with excitement. "I'm honored I got this opportunity and I promise you I'll do my best so that the whole team will make progress soon."

"I'm sure they will," Eskaluskas replied, "but please be careful. Such mechanisms can be most deceitful when they seem to make progress. Rom-neo

has already shown us that it has its own vision of executing commands, and we cannot lose it again. That would be a pity.”

For a very brief moment Julija thought she saw sadness in the professor’s eyes. Impossible, she thought. It was a joyous day for everyone, with the only exception of professor Montekas.

II

After several months and countless hours of conversations Julija, at Rom-neo’s request, decided to address him in the masculine form. She could almost see the pain in his green pupils when she addressed him as “it”, even though she knew the eyes were mechanical. Their relation differed from what Julija had expected.

“I trust you,” said Rom-neo.

“You keep on repeating these words, Rom-neo, even though I reprogrammed you with Laurynas’s

help. Don’t you remember? Can you check your integrated circuits?”

“Oh, I do remember,” he looked Julija in the eye, “but I would not say I liked the reprogramming. I would be very grateful if you promised me it would not happen again.” Rom-neo left her speechless and thunderstruck. “Please. I trust you and I like you, whatever you ask me to change in my software, I will.”

“You’ve never talked to me like this before,” she hesitated. “Do you understand the concept of trust and liking?”

“Because we have never been on our own before. I do not like talking about my feelings when Laurynas and Marta are near. They do not understand; they do not want to. And you are different.”

Rom-neo approached Julija and put his hand on hers. She had to admit that Rom-neo’s body made of the highest quality materials made an impression on her. If he was a man, he would be a very handsome one.

“Please be careful,” he went on, “did you notice that this insidious robot IT-Balt records everything we do or talk about when it is here? Good thing it is going through a serious inspection now.”

The situation was a bit uncomfortable but Julija didn't retreat her hand. She focused on what Rom-neo was saying. It seemed to her like she had already heard those words of warning before.

“What's wrong about keeping the record of the research?” she asked.

“Well, nothing,” Rom-neo paused, “but I thought that you are recording everything yourself, are you not?”

She looked blankly at the wall somewhere over Rom-neo's shoulder and said nothing. She didn't want to be observed by a mere robot helper.

“This is why I consider trust very important. And I chose to trust only you, Julija.”

She didn't mind that Rom-neo started calling her by the first name. Later, Julija deleted the record of this conversation from her computer.



Julija couldn't think about a single day without Rom-neo and that was why she desperately needed one. Her colleagues were to join her in the lab as soon as they finished inspecting IT-Balt, so she didn't have a choice but to listen to her inner voice and spend some time in Rom-neo's company when only there was a chance.

“I don't know why I'm doing this,” she said without the usual “hello” while entering the lab, “we have some time for a private conversation. No recording.”

“Thank you,” Rom-neo said from across the room but started moving towards her.

Julija felt bad. She knew she was acting like an irresponsible teenager but she couldn't help it. Actually, she hoped Rom-neo would come as close as the last time. She didn't want to confess it but she felt something when he touched her hand. As a psychologist she should have known better than to fall for an android. But probably it was already too late.

Rom-neo stood next to her and placed his hands on the counter top exactly as she did. They didn't say anything until Rom-neo broke the silence.

"Your heart is beating too fast," he told her. "Are you feeling all right?"

"No, I'm not all right." She grabbed his hand and entwined their fingers together. Her cheeks flushed red. That's inappropriate, she thought but did nothing about it.

"I regret I do not have a body that would allow me to feel not only emotionally but also physically." Rom-neo stroked her hand with his polymer fingers

and a shiver ran down her spine. She freed her hand from the grip.

"Why are you messing up with my mind by telling me that you can feel?"

"I can feel. I know I am different from all the other robots in this faculty," he paused, and after a moment went on, "and you know it too. You made me feel all this, you are the reason for my existence. I love you."

"They'll be back soon." Julija was in deep shock. No one had ever confessed love to her so beautifully as this robot just did. "I'll find a way," she said and squeezed his hand, "they're coming. I need to go to think everything over. Come up with a convincing idea why we didn't record a proper session. And under no circumstances argue with IT-Balt because it won't bring anything more than trouble."

III

Julija could tell that Laurynas and Marta knew. It was impossible for such intelligent people not to notice what had been going on, and Julija was very grateful they didn't say a word about it. That, of course, wasn't a solution to the problem, but, to be honest, this situation couldn't be solved. Julija came to work every day, asked Rom-neo simple questions, recorded their conversations and, most of the time, waited for him to touch her. Even though Julija got the silent acquiescence from her colleagues for this definitely unprofessional behavior, she could still sense that IT-Balt was watching her. Who would have thought that a robotized electronic translator would be following carefully her every move? This had to stop.

"Marta, can I ask you to go and report IT-Balt to professor Eskaluskas? It is moving around aimlessly like something is broken," Julia said. "It seems that the inspection didn't produce any results."

IT-Balt made a strange sound like it was irritated, but said nothing.

"Come on, Marta, let's take IT-Balt to repair," Laurynas exchanged a knowing look with Julija, and then he left, taking Marta and the little robot with him.

"I am glad we are finally alone," said Rom-neo moving his hand across Julija's back.

"You have to do something about that inconvenient robot." Julija turned to face Rom-neo. "Talk to it, you have your programming cogency. Change something in its protocol, or whatever, so it will favor our case."

"Do not worry, my dear, I will deal with it later," Rom-neo assured her and touched her lips with his. Julija knew Rom-neo couldn't feel it but she appreciated he did it for her. Unfortunately, Laurynas, Marta and IT-Balt entered the room in this very moment.

"I'm sorry," Laurynas said and hesitated, "professor Eskaluskas told us to postpone dealing with IT-

Balt until tomor...” He didn’t manage to finish his sentence because IT-Balt went crazy.

“Violation of rules!” the robot screeched, “report immediately!” It turned on its siren, which was connected to the alarm system in the building. Julija was frightened.

“Go, now,” said Rom-neo in his calming voice, “I will take proper care of this thing.” Before leaving, Julija took one more look at Rom-neo and hurried Marta and Laurynas.

They hid around the corner, wanting to know what would happen next. But they didn’t imagine such a turn of events.

IV

Rom-neo, as he promised, dealt with IT-Balt, but did it rather brutally. Everyone assumed he would find a software way of taking care of the problem, but instead he took a keyboard from the desk and put it, with all his force, inside the operational part of IT-

Balt. It was obvious its robotic personality ceased to exist. Unluckily, professor Montekas saw the incident from the other end of the corridor. He rubbed his hands and stretched his lips in a sinister simile.

“We have to do something,” Julija whispered in a tearful voice, “I need to help him.”

Montekas noticed and beckoned them.

“Pretend you just saw this,” Laurynas whispered to Julija and Marta.

“Well, well,” started Montekas, “it seems that you didn’t have everything under control as you tried to assure everyone around.” He took a look at their frightened faces and went on. “But don’t worry, it was obvious right from the start that there was something wrong with Rom-neo and its algorithms. Miss Kapuluskas,” he addressed Julija, “because I assume you have an emotional bond with your research project, and all in all, it took a lot of time and effort, I would suggest that you go home and take a few days off. And you two,” he turned to Marta and

Laurynas, “please, come with me. We have some paper work to do now to finally close this project.”

Julija nodded numbly and left the building without looking at Rom-neo, who was standing just behind the glass wall on her right hand side. She didn’t want to aggravate his already complicated situation.



Everything was perfectly clear to Rom-neo. Julija lost her job and now she would suffer because of their separation. They would never see each other again because he was the property of the Vilnius University. He didn’t want to exist without her so he had only one idea to finish it all: autodestruction. Goodbye, my love, he thought and switched off his emotional center. Then he pushed the hidden button.



Julija couldn’t stand just sitting at home and not knowing what would happen to Rom-neo. So she showed up at the university the very next day and went straight to the laboratory. She saw Laurynas and Marta picking up some parts from the floor but she couldn’t see Rom-neo anywhere. She crossed the threshold and understood. It was Rom-neo’s parts they were collecting.

“Julija...” started Laurynas.

The last things she remembered were her trembling legs and the coldness of the white tiles when her head met the floor.

V

“It’s our fault that went mad,” Marta said, wiping her tears away. “Eskaluskas warned us to keep an eye on her from the very beginning, Montekas insisted on suspending the project, and we did nothing.”

“Didn’t you see how happy they were?” asked Laurynas. “The only thing I regret is that I didn’t make

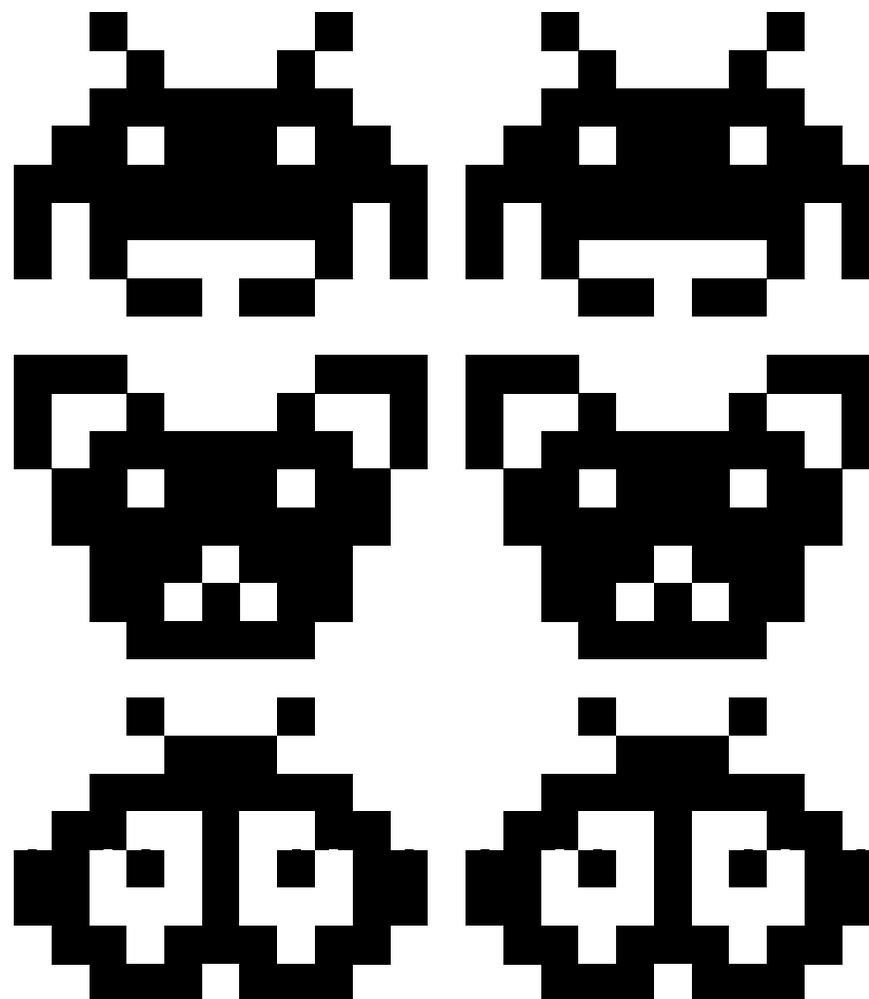
it on time to tell Rom-neo that she was going to be back.”

“I can’t believe you’ve just said that. It was dangerous. An AI left without any control that deceived her and you’re talking about happiness?!” Marta almost cried. “Haven’t you seen what it did to IT-Balt?”

“IT-Balt doesn’t matter, you know that,” he replied. “He really did evolve. I saw some results on Montekas’s table. I assume he wanted to suspend the project at the University and continue it by himself.”

Laurynas saw shock and disbelief on Marta’s face.

“There are things in this world that cannot be understood otherwise than with heart,” he opened his hand and revealed a small chip in the middle of his palm. Marta smiled through tears. Perhaps they had a cure for Julija’s madness.



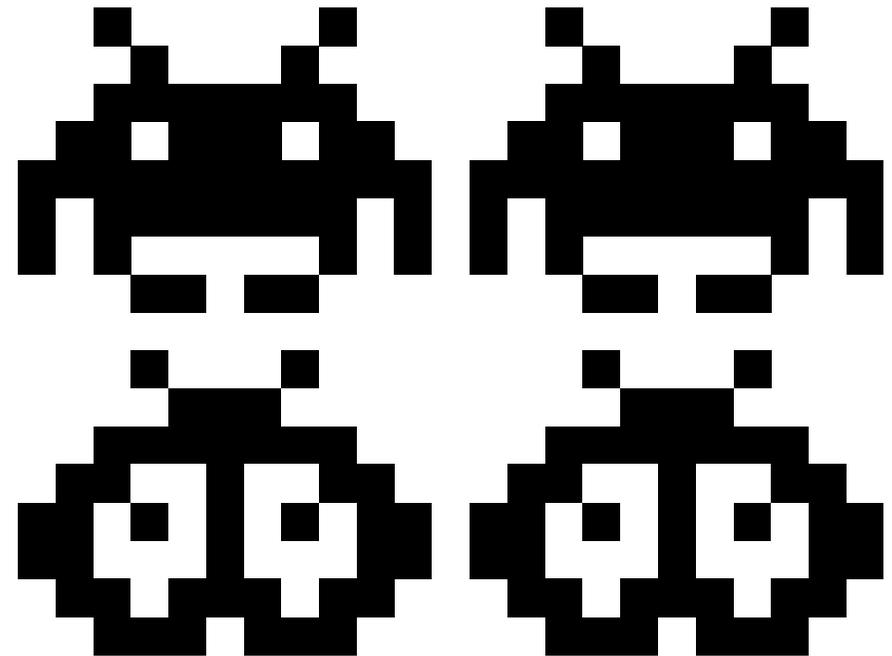
Author's Note

“The Story of Rom-neo and Julija Told in Five Acts” is a retelling of a well-known tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*. I chose this timeless work in order to commemorate 400 years since the death of William Shakespeare. The anniversary gave me a unique opportunity to combine this classic tale with science fiction. I hope that I managed to show, even though the ending was sad, that the characters still had a chance for a better future together. I truly believe that every ending, not only in the story, can be a happy one. Although I do not recommend falling for an artificial intelligence.



Bogna Stanaszek is a student of culture, literature and translation. She reads about 80 books each year

and loves fantasy, science fiction and historical fiction. Now she decided to put her own idea in writing.



Pitman

by Anna Wybraniec

I still call the island that I live on The Island of Despair but it ceased to be one a long time ago. I would be lying if I tried to convince myself that all my carvings have been rooted out, and constantly winning the internal struggle makes it all even more worthwhile. Surprisingly, the habit that is the most difficult to abstain from is that of timekeeping. Observations of changes in nature will tell you much more about time than mere counting of sunrises; yet I need to mark each and every passing day.

I remember that I once tried not to. I remember how I kept counting days in my head, not able to let the numbers go; how after a few days I carved lines into a wooden cross that were not thin and straight, but bold and deep, my hands shaking, hoping that I

did not make a mistake in the counting. I still sometimes have nightmares about this. I also dream about carrying the cross.

I found it on the very first day, while exploring the island. It must have been left by the previous inhabitant. Simple, wooden cross, two meters high, one and a half wide, made from two logs fastened together with a steel band. It is quite old for the band was rusted and sun, and wind, and rain had beaten the timber into a silvery hue. I spent a long time watching it and I just could not leave it at the mercy of time. It was too good a cross. Whoever was crossed there before must have already been past redemption so I decided to take it as my own. I carved my name on it – Henry Pitman – and I made a first cut to mark my first day here. Every hundredth day I make an inspection of my belongings. I have divided them into three types.

The things that I have found there. The things that I have brought with me. The things that I have made.

The dwelling I live in had already been there. It must have been built by the same person that raised the cross. There was some furniture there and although it was time-worn, it could still serve me as guidelines in making new.

The things that have brought me here are stored in a wooden chest. I take them out to see how I feel about them now. After all, self-awareness is very important.

I calmly examine car keys, all that is left after the accident that killed my wife and left me with my left hand disabled. We have paid dearly for the mistakes of other people – be it the fault in the road, in the construction of the car, or tyres; or just trees planted in the wrong places. I cannot tell. Is this the measure of humanity's progress, to use things that work in the ways that one cannot explain? Using tools that you cannot repair, thus entrusting your life to incompetent people. Aren't we like God who after creating could not cope with ruling? As a surgeon with a

disabled hand I was not really worth much any more. People's pity was the cruellest punishment, for the fault that was not even mine.

There is no one to pity me here. The only way to get inside my Island is through a small bay in the northern part. The sandy beach there is in a stark contrast with the rest of the coastline – jagged with rocks like an edge of a handsaw. In small ponds that appear in there, I can find crabs and other dead sea fruit, so I often make trips around the coast. The Island is almost round and not very big: it takes me a day to walk around it while making frequent stops on the rocky coastline. I believe that watchmen standing on flanks of medieval castles must have felt the same while surveying the sea of grass. The Island protects itself and I am like a grain of earthly dust in the oyster, waiting to be coated in the mother-of-pearl. There is a stream flowing through the Island almost cutting it in half. Its banks are made of clay-like soil, slippery and malleable, slightly greyish in hue and

the clear water that runs between them often makes me think of blood running through veins.

The dwelling is hidden in shrubs. Cool, stony walls have already been overgrown by grape bushes from which rich, juicy grapes hang temptingly, almost ripe, waiting to be plucked and dried into raisins. Yet, once they lose their firmness they can never be restored to their former glory. Sometimes I feel like I have been living under the scorching sun for too long, before taking my own life in my own hands. The Island provides me with plenty of food of its own volition. But for the dwelling and the cross it was almost untainted by human hands. There was almost nothing there that I couldn't recreate myself.

After I store away my car keys, I look at my cloths with disdain. The sheer force of habit had made me take one of my suits here. Since I am long used to simpler clothing, I cannot remember what was the reason for wearing something like that. The grey fabric, with its careful weave, is pleasant to the touch,

but turns out to be stiff when worn. It doesn't adapt to fit the wearer; instead, it forces the wearer to fit into it. It was made for being looked at, not for acting in it. There were some more disabling items. Clothes so tight that woman who wore them became a shape, not a person. Watches made of gold as if the time they measured was more worthwhile. Once more, we hide behind a shield that does not belong to us, covering our true selves and skills. By adorning ourselves in cloth that somebody else has made, we pretend to be of a better kind. We take pride in things that are not ours. This Island is almost a Paradise, so why would its master have to feign himself?

I have proven myself to be capable of living without false coverings. However, it did not go as smoothly as I had wished it. My body, after years of growing away from nature, has become weak and the only way of purifying it was in a fire of a fever. It lasted for three days. During that time, I have turned my body into a cross, marking with a cut each

passing day, afraid of losing them. I slept, I wept, I starved. I dreamt only the first night. I was sitting on the ground, and I saw a man in a bright fire, emerging from the emerald green forest. His face was dreadful, constantly changing, as if it contained every face of every human at once. I heard him saying: "Seeing all these things have not brought thee to repentance, now thou shalt die"; at which words, he pierced my left side with a spear, and clear water, like the blood of the stream, flew out. When I woke up I wondered dimly what I should repent. However, I would not be fooled. I remembered stories of a will-o'-the-wisp. On the third day I finally overcame the sickness and, feeling resurrected, I rose up to take a claim upon my Island.

I believe that my nourishment would be secured by the abundance of the vegetation on the Island. However, it did not seem to be appropriate to leave my wellbeing to a chance. I needed to take full control of my life. I needed to master the Island. I

planted some seeds that I took with me before I had left. I have watched them sprouting from ground, small, brightly green, with a sharp top. Like darts, arrows and spears thrust at us by the earth. But I did not falter and I conquered them all. Grains are rising at my command and at my word they will be buried once more, to die and return again in that never ending cycle. I have also managed to tame some rabbit-like animals to secure my meat supply. It was hard in the beginning. They did not know that I knew what was best for them, but they learned to accept their fate. I keep them in a playpen where they keep multiplying. I call them rabbis. Their soft fur is nicer to touch than human flesh.

Having put my old clothes aside, I take out a radio transmitter. I was told how to reach other people if some troubles arose. I was told how to tune in to news and music radio stations. I never did any of these things. The radio is a keepsake that I most often take a look at. The emotions that I feel have not

abated since the beginning, although they have changed. Something stirs within me at the very possibility of human contact. There is nothing that I crave more and there is nothing that scares me more. How can I see if I had made a proper improvement without looking at what I used to be? I long for conversation, but I have expectations high enough to meet only with disappointment. People pay less attention to their words than to their things and I have decided to cast them all aside. If I can provide myself with material goods I should be also able to satisfy my spiritual needs. A king, ruling without a need for a word but one, with a plan that will be followed by all of his creation, does not need... I have allowed a snake to enter my Paradise and now I need to keep resisting his temptations to surrender to the siren song of dependency. I can always reject it on my free will. I am torn between a desire to compare myself to others and being incomparable.

No one could ever visit my Island by accident as there is a strong current running close to the shore and one needs a lot of skill, and determination, to overcome it. I presumed that it would be enough to deter any intruder so when I saw a footprint on the sandy beach I was sure that the snake had decided to launch another attack on me, this time by taking on a human form. I would not be insulted by this, looking at his futile actions with a benevolent smile. I was not afraid for I could not imagine in my kingdom anything that could pose any danger to me. And yet, that footprint made me feel uneasy. Does Devil bleed? I started looking for the culprit. I walked along the beach and the rocky shores for a little but the footprinter must have gone inside the guts of my Island. I followed him into the green maze and I have found him; a man, beside the stream, unconscious, lying in a helpless heap; his battered body made me think of my car accident. He too must have fallen victim to fate. I cautiously took him to my shelter, careful as not

to irritate his wounds. I would have to think how to name him.

Thankfully, among the items that I have hidden in the chest, there was one more, one that I never dared to look at. A leather bag full of medical instruments that I thought I would not be able to use any more. But now, despite my lame hand, I finally could open up a human to me once more. I could shape him into a better being. I will take care of him. I will make sure, that the first human in my Paradise shall not be lonely. The clay from the riverbank will be perfect and I shall create an Eve for him. I only need to take one of his ribs. I hope that he broke one during his fall. I do not think that I have taken a saw with me...



Author's Note

I was thinking for some time what story I should choose and how to retell it. I have finally settled on *Robinson Crusoe* – one of the world's first novels, which is still alive in our imagination. It was retold, transposed, adapted and interpreted over and over again; nevertheless, it still can be reshaped into something new or changed to tell even older tales, like the tale of creation. The allure of the resourceful Individual may be stronger than ever in a world where we cannot tell how most of our everyday used pieces of machinery work.

Another thing that caught my attention was a Robinson list, on which people who don't want to receive marketing transmissions via post or telephone

can register. The simple need to be free from being drowned in unnecessary information is compared to estrangement on uninhabited island? It seems to be a slightly overdone comparison. However, it allows to pose an important question – how many rules can we throw away before we will throw away our humanity?

Robinson who was taken out of society by an accident was able to keep his sanity. Can Pitman, who had forsaken social norms, also keep his wits about? Was he running away from responsibilities or embracing them?



Anna Wybraniec (ana.wybraniec@gmail.com) is not an English trader, writer, journalist, pamphleteer, and spy, most famous for the novel *Robinson Crusoe*.

