

Jesus College
Short Story Competition 2023
Sci-fi/the future

Excerpts for presentation,
presented by Emily Winslow and Tabitha Siklos
on Friday 3rd March in the Master's Lodge

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Changed Cambridge

Last Tide by **Anika Goddard**, Undergraduate

Ushered through security on the Berlin-Birmingham maglev by my team, I emerged squinting into the sunlight and wrinkling my nose, as ever, against the smell of England. Birmingham has a shabby quality, like an old relative you'd rather put into a home. Already I was missing Berlin, with its interplanetary airport and thousands of miles of glass walkways and sky-gardens. Birmingham, like the rest of England, is now a utility asset only – but what an asset!

My amberjet was waiting for me at the old airport, far slower than the maglev but more dexterous and a good PR opportunity besides. And I like to see England from above. It's a testament to all I've achieved in my five terms as Minister for the Greenwich zone. The Atlantis Observation Park is one of my proudest achievements in England. A floating campus which can house forty thousand tourists at any one time, it's anchored at a safe distance from the ruins of London. It turns the augmented tides into a spectacle. The British coastline is one of the most efficient generators of power on Earth: every twelve hours, the tide rushes miles inland before retreating with a roar like torture through millions of turbines, and the turbines spin long reams of gold threads of power, and we wind them around spools to be jetted up to Charon, Ganymede, Titan or any of the other habitable worlds. It's put England back on the map – that's the slogan I want to film for my sixth-term campaign video.

'We're almost here,' Phloma said, shaking me out of a vague dream.

In the morning sunlight, the pyrospex wall that surrounds Cambridge looked like a crown of fire. Seventy metres high to brave even the freak tides, it made the city seem encased in a test tube. Some bacteria, some rotting thing. My predecessor entertained the delusion that anyone would be interested in coming back to see Cambridge. Stupid old man. This place is a money sink.

And my triumph – I rubbed my fingers together again and the deed of destruction sprung up to answer me. Pyrospex is incredibly strong, but when doused in a certain chemical solvent it practically melts away. Already, twelve automated T52 deployers had landed and were waiting around the city for me to give the order.

Photographer by Anonymous, Undergraduate

The water below is quiet; close to empty.

With the violet sky directly above it, everything around me is purple. Then the river sways and the mirror shatters, the beauty just a reflection, the real water an ugly, murky grey. The ground is all a fake platform, the real floor 50m underwater and littered with bodies. Even the sky is a synthetic dome, so the sun doesn't kill us, and the buildings are so high, the students travel on zipwires from roof to roof.

Dry concrete scrapes my palms as I descend the outside of the wall. I have never been a climber, but I have never had a building so old, it has ridges and lumps. I grow hot and I grunt but no one hears a nobody. I look over my shoulder, expecting the river to have risen like a shark trying to swallow me. It hasn't of course. The fallen bricks are still and strong as the water ripples all over the place; like fallen flower petals that have turned to cement.

I shudder and I jump, coming toe to toe with the uneven footing of the bridges' remains. Some stones are soaking wet, and all are so precariously balanced, vertigo starts to play my body like a puppet. But I have never been this low. I gasp, gawking up at the beautiful colours and angles closing in on me. The students swooping across the geometric skyline like eagles.

The Museum Keeper by Anonymous, Undergraduate

The Museum, Thalia thought, had probably once been a fine building.

The dismal grey façade had probably once been white. White marble, even, shining under the summer sun that had been rare in Cambridge even then. The columns, she reasoned, had probably once held the roof up, instead of obstructing the ground. The chipped and broken stone faces bobbing in puddles, they had probably once been stern and commanding, surveying the street like miniature gods.

Now the Museum was just a building that was hard to defend. It was full of holes, for one thing, and exposed on all sides. The thing about buildings that are hard to defend is that nobody goes in them. And that makes them perfect places to hide.

Thalia's legs ached as she picked over the shattered marble. She'd had to run from the lasers defending the old Engineering faculty. Those people had something to eat, and somewhere

to stay. Something to bother defending. But she could squat here for the night, and all would be well. Nobody would bother coming here.

Harvest by Lisa Rowe, Staff

In the Old City, the streets are silent, apart from a small gathering outside of the Corn Exchange where voices are raised, and a scuffle is breaking out. This act of raw aggression adds to the apprehension of their arrival.

As the young step down from the wagon into the old Market Square the church spires and the university buildings lean inwards in their grey sobriety, to inspect the crop; reflections on glass windows suggests bright eyes viewing them from every angle. A rollcall is made separating the fledgling flock. They're ushered apart by top hatted, tailcoated, guides.

Astra's guide is silent, until they arrive at the College entrance arch, when they bark, 'Welcome to Jesus College, your actions here will shape your future. Choose wisely 'and with that, disappear through a gap in the wall to a stone shelter beneath the archway. There was no invitation to follow. Astra, raising their head for the first time, sees the gate which stood sentinel at the College entrance. Stepping through the opening, a paradise was revealed.

Revelation. New colours, scents and sounds bombarded Astra's senses. It was the grass that most fascinated. A swathe of lush green, like the first sprouts of corn that were nursed into being, but so densely packed they appeared here as fabric. Instinct was to place one's feet directly on it, to feel on your instep the cool soft malachite surface. All were stopped from doing so by the polite, but directive, 'PLEASE KEEP OFF THE GRASS 'sign that did not say 'welcome'.

Echoes in the Chapel by Kate Coghlan, Staff

Choir practice is held in the music hall at 10am on Tuesdays. I take the lift down to the cuboid room on Level -3 with my friends. For events, projectors pattern the walls; rippling green for our 'Concert by the Cam 'and dappled stained glass for our 'Chapel Concert'. As we file in today, the Music Director says she's arranged a backdrop of pulsing Northern Lights for our upcoming Christmas performance. My friends chatter excitedly. I try not to roll my eyes.

My parents met inside Jesus College Chapel nearly 30 years ago, singing in the choir. It was the year that the kitchens were built underground and celebrated for their 'Green Innovation'. In

later years, the move underground was quieter. I was ten years old when my parents died in the Long Storms. After losing them, I treasured every photograph, video and musical recording from their time here and decided to follow in their footsteps. Their carol concerts were lit by the flickering glow of candlelight, their faces turned towards each other as they sang. Photos show them playing frisbee on the sports fields, posing by the horse statue in First Court on graduation day. Now the horse is displayed in a box in the archives room on Level -6, the lowest level, for maximum safety. The Cam has consumed Jesus Green and the sports fields and gnaws restlessly at the protective wall around the surviving overland buildings. The site stands grey and ragged like an old heron watching over the flooded fenlands.

The rehearsal begins and our rendition of “Oh come, all ye faithful” is note-perfect, but my heart aches because nothing can drown out the background whirr of the air-conditioning units.

Missed me by Anonymous, Undergraduate

These ‘roving, unpredictable club night experiences’ chose a random street, and set up a few hover speakers and a class A projector; noise had to make up for the lack of, well, anything else. People shuffled awkwardly in the narrow space, stepping over cans and plastic bags, trying to focus on the projected dance floor instead, a bunch of different coloured squares that cast their dancers in shifting lights. It was like living inside a kaleidoscope.

The music jolted out of our ears with a pop as we left the sound field. We were already walking towards **the clock** by this point, waving away portable ads that pattered after us on dangerously small engines. No wonder the streets were practically deserted. The brightness of their ‘2 for 1 on instabooze!’ or ‘10% off for students on focus pills!’ were floating trip hazards.

We all paused in the half-drunk solemnity of people on the precipice of something important.

A grasshopper-esque creature on top, eyes staring and tongue lolling as the jaw slowly opened. Glimmer and fear and dread; an ornately terrifying clockwork beast. It still looked fairly bright, but moved awkwardly, pained by the last kicking dregs of its imitation of life. The display of the Corpus Clock lit up and juddered into life with a creak that sounded a lot like a wheeze. It had been part of the university’s attempts to preserve the clock, having it activate only when it detected motion. But, considering the strain the movement was having on the poor thing, it seemed no one had bothered to check on it in a while.

Love

The Sunrise I Missed by Anonymous, Undergraduate

So very long ago, we used to debate. I said we should fix what we have; he said it's too late, we should start anew. Then, the closer we grew, the more we fought. The more I needed him, the more viciously I fought him. Finally there was one day, when we were sitting together on the stone wall along the Cam, staring into the crystal-clear but lifeless water running its course down-stream, he suddenly took my hand.

“Hey.”

I turned towards him, a strand of hair falling across my face. He reached to brush it away.

“Let's not fight anymore, okay?”

That was when I knew it was nearing the end. That was when I knew he was going to leave me. I choked up – couldn't speak – so I only tried to smile and nod. At that moment I suddenly realised (or perhaps finally knew for certain) that he was hurting too. That he'd tried to fight himself. For me. He put his arm around my shoulders, and we sat there, for only a moment or for eternity, I couldn't tell.

We never fought after that.

No Other by **Patryk Jan Bratuś**, Postgraduate

There isn't much they talk about these days. For what is there to talk about, when she is engrossed in the whole consciousness digitalization business? Her days pass on scanning brains of the nearly-dead (in extreme cases freshly dead) but nonetheless obscenely rich patrons, each paying millions to have their immensely vain memories copied onto a hard-drive alongside a semblance of their sentience, before it is safely secured in a vault some three miles under the surface of rural Nevada. An opulent fly in a piece of silicon amber, if you will.

“I might copy us too, you know,” she murmurs one evening, as they are both falling asleep. Doesn't even open her eyes, doesn't look at his face.

That night he cannot fall asleep. Something burns in his veins.

For now she – the loved one – is still there. When she gets out of the apartment, her hips swing to Brel once again. And when she puts on her black high-heels and walks down the corridor

towards the lift, it is once again one – two – three down the King's Parade. But these moments become rare. And sometimes, though he dreads the thought, it is not the same woman he recognizes in her body.

Sylvia Atricapilla by **Rachel Gardner**, Postgraduate

The book, the letter and a swig of luke-warm gin were the only things he took with him. It was much darker at street level; the light struggled to penetrate the dense haze that brooded over the Great Union's cities. It takes an hour to shuffle out of the domestic sector, with its identical rows of housing towers and its empty, indestructible streets. He posts the letter and keeps walking. Over the next three hours, the corporate centres shift into light industrial parks before finally petering into a thin urban sprawl. [...]

By the fourth hour, the empty-eyed Pre-Starve houses are few and far between. Instead, there lies the twisted remains of the great outdoors: all bracken and stumps. The sky is a textureless soot-grey, blank and pitiless. One ruined hedge gives way to another, the dead shrubs crawling over each other with bony, atavistic branches. The mists have all solemnly dispersed now, and the Fens lie spread before him. The charred ground rolls out to the horizon like cracked skin; the blackened crops push like stubble through the earth clods. He has arrived.

Artificial Intelligence

Self-Contradiction by Jeremy Baumberg, Fellow

The questions drop past continuously, whirring through like bird flocks whose silhouette-black cohorts alight in passing and flicker off again. WHAT FRUITS DO YOU LIKE? DO YOUR CLOTHES HAVE TO MATCH? WHAT MUSIC IS RIGHT FOR EARLY EVENING?

Very often the questions aren't clear, but there is no one to clarify and the timer remorselessly ticks out and moves on. It's true that thinking deeply doesn't help. A hall of mirrors amplifies the instability of self-knowledge, wherever that is buried. IS THE BETTER BOOK 'LORD OF THE RINGS', OR '1984'? And so on. Where do our likes come from, seems to be the subterranean theme.

After two hours, there is a five minute break. Pacing helps, but the door won't respond to voice, so there's not much else to do. The room is warm white, and body warm. It's not clear what this session is for, it seems so fragmented, theme-less, distant from decision-forming. Even the AI questioner seems confused sometimes, hesitating over the next enquiry, as if choosing the lesser of two evils. Or philosophically emphasising the subtlety of their path through your thinking.

Now we are ready to start the main part. This time it turns out there is no time limit, no confinement, no boundary in how long it takes or where we will go. The AI starts patiently, empathetic with their knowledge of your past. They ask not only for the reasons why this is such a hard decision, but why it matters, and where it takes you. Movements, portents for possible lives that emerge from deciding one way or the other. Binaries, cascading more binaries, branches building twigs and roots of possible future tracks. It has been only a few years since this method has been proven to enhance life satisfactions, years in which the AIs have demanded their increasing use to subdue the mental stress they are called on to relieve.

Why resist then?

Holores by **Claire Gilbert**, Visiting Fellow

Even during the worst of it, all over the world the Artificers and the Inventors and the Entrepreneurs, funded by penitent billionaires, worked away until machine learning took over and the great singularity of Holores emerged and it was turned to good use, to make the human condition bearable, and it seemed like a great achievement because it looked as though hunger and destitution were a thing of the past.

Right from the earliest days of seeing how artificial intelligence worked we thought we should regulate it. We tried to write rules into Holores as it evolved under our fingertips, but very quickly that stopped being possible because Holores could overrule the rules when they prevented it from fulfilling human desires. The first rule was that Holores has to serve humans, you see. That felt failsafe. But it didn't account for our fallibility.

We told ourselves we could use the power we had for the good and we didn't see how the good kept slipping from our grasp as our attention was pulled this way and that, evil mixed in with good, this thing to buy or that, you couldn't tell the difference after a while and we got soft, saying yes to Holores relentlessly providing us with what suited our preferences, not checking our preferences, not noticing that we had started to believe that because they were *our* preferences they were right. Like tyrants do.

Life is Random by **Leonie Lorenz**, Postgraduate

With a sigh, she turned off her computer and left her office, her current model still floating around in her head. Humanity still hadn't solved the problem of generating truly random numbers on computers. How was she supposed to include true stochasticity in her models under these conditions? Just over the last few days, she had been running tests on a random number generator again and had managed to find a pattern. Obviously, a pattern was the last thing you wanted to find in a list of random numbers. 5, 3, 4, 2, 6, 1, she murmured. That was a recurring subsequence in the supposedly random numbers she had generated. Not entirely impossible that this arose due to pure chance of course, but highly unlikely. It was a little concerning.

Now, she was turning on to Primrose Street where her daughter lived with her husband and little son. Her 5-year-old grandson Mike could hardly wait until she had taken off her shoes

and hung up her jacket before he was dragging his grandma into the living room to start their weekly round of Ludo.

Mike was always the one to start and he was allowed to roll the die until he would get his first six. Being as excited as always, he began. A five. A three. A four. A two. A six. He placed his piece on the first position and rolled the die again. A one. She shuddered. No. This could not be true.

5, 3, 4, 2, 6, 1.

She grabbed a different die from the box and gave it to Mike. "Please, could you start over?" He looked confused but didn't complain, probably because of the tone of her voice.

5, 3, 4, 2, 6, 1. Again.

Now she was certain that none of this was real. Humanity still hadn't solved the problem of generating truly random numbers. And she was caught in a simulation.

Horror

The Black Pill by Anonymous, Undergraduate

Nika's eyes fluttered open, hesitantly, and still overcome by sleep. But the pain she felt in her chest became more vicious with each second which passed. She tried to brush it off by putting it down to a long night, and rolled over, closing her eyes tightly once more. Five seconds later, a tsunami of nausea gripped her. Nika sprang up from her bed and ran into her ensuite. She fell to her knees over the toilet and vomited more than she ever had in her life. Her fingers gripped the seat of the toilet, turning white. Meanwhile, the pain in her chest was only growing, and had now spread into what felt like the depths of her organs.

She could no longer identify it as coming from a singular source, she just felt pain overwhelm her. Nika felt weak in her body, but the force with which she felt fear in her mind was strong. This wasn't normal. What was happening to her was greater than any possible hangover. This was Nika failing.

Bliss by Bex (Rebecca) Goodchild, Undergraduate

Halfway through recording my results from today, I decide to call Mum and Hannah. It has been weighing on me since lunch. A desperation to hear their voices. Naomi and I can't stop our tears despite the nurse saying we were fine. I hope mum won't notice over the phone. I scroll through my contacts. Then again. Then the search bar. No results. I feel sick. My hand flies desperately through the list of names over and over. My throat feels constricted and my tears continue to fall, wetting the screen. I look to Naomi who is already staring straight at me. Her tears have stopped, and her eyes pierce into mine. Anguish. In a matter of seconds, she is on the other side of the room desperately trying to open our 3rd storey window. I realise that she wasn't looking at me in the first place. I want to stop her, but I can't move.

Looking For Shelly by **Deborah Omolegan-Obe**, Undergraduate

It was dark when she first entered, but the light from her flashlight was enough to guide her. Vera had purposely chosen to investigate at night because nothing bad ever happened in the daylight and she wasn't looking for anything good. She was walking into danger, and she could smell it. It was the smell of burning sulphur, the stench hit her with a force so strong that the hairs on her arms stood up. Her whole body was alert and ready to defend herself from the threat before it consumed her. Vera was here, underground, surrounded by syringes and broken test-tubes for one reason. She had questions, and the answers she sought were a person.

Feel No Evil by **Deborah Omolegan-Obe**, Undergraduate

She wanted an answer for the awkward feeling she sometimes felt when people turned her down. She wanted an explanation for the awkward thump in her chest when her doctor read the data from her motion mask and noted a close miss of expressed emotion. She wanted to understand why when she saw her grandmother wobbling up the stairs, she felt some tug in her heart. Ezra was not foolish, she knew she would not get the answers from Dr Boa, but if she was capable of being hopeful, she would have hoped that Dr Boa would tell her everything she wanted to hear.

But of course she didn't. To everyone Arthur could never be anything but right.

On her way home from school Ezra imagined life before Arthur, she imagined a world where children ran free without masks, where doctors diagnosed broken bones rather than broken minds. Where people ran wild killing and stealing and dying of broken hearts. A world of disorder. There was something appealing about this.

Enhanced by Arabella Tedder, Undergraduate

“But times are changing Dana, you know that, and I know that. And I respect you, you know I respect you, so I’m going to be straight with you: it’s no longer enough for you to be working with non-Enhanced fingers. You’re a secretary, it’s your job to type, and you know it’s bad for the company’s image if our employees aren’t Enhanced too.”

“Sir, I don’t really have the money for”–

Mr Yates cuts her off, raising his hand.

“Now, I respect that you might be in a bit of a tricky financial situation,” he continues, “but surely you have some savings set aside for new Enhancements?” Dana opens her mouth to protest; Mr Yates cuts her off. “Your colleague, Iris, dipped into the money she was saving for a deposit on a flat, and was Enhanced over the weekend – such dedication! Maybe you could ask your parents for a loan.” He smiles, his cold, white teeth glinting like the stones on his watch and the memory enhancer at his temple. The roiling in the pit in Dana’s stomach sharpens.

“Mr Yates, sir, my parents died last year in the Grantchester factory accident.”

“Ah yes, nasty business, couldn’t have seen it coming,” he flashes her icy white teeth.

“Well, think over it this week, and hopefully you’ll make the right decision for your career.”

The Sea Child by Hannah Copley, Postgraduate

He was quietly interrupted by the young boy - *“Where is Cambridge?”*

“Well my boy, nobody really knows now, because it’s one of those places the sea took back from us - so - way out there under the water I think”.

“Upon arrival to the village I got chatting to one of the old fishwives, and learned that the Great Priest was often seen in his small wooden boat heading out towards the sea caves, always with a Sea Children alongside, his boat layered thick with animal skins and heading out around Candiru point. The fishwife told me that every Sea Child would come back unable to see, with wet hair and bloodshot eyes and their skin red raw. They would vomit for days afterwards, and the lining of their stomach often detached itself completely, coming up and out like the foul remains of a dead animal after the scavengers had scraped it clean.”

Into space

Fly by Night by Alexander Ellul, Postgraduate

I walked to the large capsule at the back of the room, ringed by a spotless curved pane of glass. Behind, the subject raised his eyes. Life signs bleeped all around, telling me his heart rate, breathing patterns, brain waves, chemical composition. But his eyes, deep yellow and slanted, were lifeless.

“It says here the Easterns are trying to set up bases in the inner solar system to give them a springboard into deep space. Apparently they’re taking 150 men and women to settle on Mars. They’re calling their new city Mars Capita,” Lora said. “Intelligence says that by 2200 there’ll be more of them than us out there. Absolute nightmare.”

“And after that there’ll be more of us, and after that more of them. So it goes,” I said.

She ignored that. Dr Cross got up from his chair.

“We’re the good guys, Kim, don’t forget that,” he said, clapping me on the shoulder, leaving most of his food. “But there’s no time to waste. We should get a move on.”

Dr Cross looked over the subject and inserted his hands into the attached glove sockets. Cross suddenly pulled his hands and the grips wrenched the Eagle’s wings open, near to ripping. There was no sound. The scream was gone by now, though the sound still rang in my ears.

“The problem is that the leg muscles aren’t strong enough. The subject can’t grip a screw tightly enough to twist it out, especially when it’s welded into the metal.”

“That can be fixed,” Lora added nervously. “We’ll implant titanium fittings and—”

“I don’t think so,” Cross added with a hollow chuckle. “There’s an option that’s missing from your reports, Lora, that I think is the best solution.”

Cross released the grips from the wings and brought them up to the head instead.

“I’ll have to break its will so totally and utterly that he’ll fly right into the engine.”

Cross looked at Lora. She looked back.

“H- how would you do that? For that we can use a drone.”

“No, we can’t, you moron. The crash has to look natural. If they find any evidence of our involvement there’ll be war. Kim?”

“Sure.”

“Good, good. I’ll prepare it for tomorrow.”

Major Moon Astroentomologist by Ella Curry, Staff

Hester awoke suspended in a rosy mist, her ship gently orbiting 442-b. The planet was swathed in an undulating cloud of dust thrown from its pockmarked, ochreous face. Hester pressed her face up against the glass, her misting breath blending with the surreal splendour of the scene below. It was only her shallow breathing, the empty echoing creak of the spaceship, and the low humming of the blood in her head that seemed to thrum in time to the shifting mist – until a crackling voice jarred her out of her stunned reverie.

“Come in, Major Moon,” was repeated three times with increasing urgency before it entered her consciousness. Hester fumbled around in a clumsy panic for her transmitter.

“I’m here, I’m okay,” Hester croaked, her voice strange after its long silence. She finished lamely, “Over,” forgetting her training in the enormity of the newness around her.

“Initiating landing sequence,” the voice replied, cold and detached, alien. Hester gazed in mute wonder as the ship broke through the clouds, leaving torn wisps of glittering pink trailing behind. The humming intensified, and she realised with a start that it wasn’t just in her head – darting amongst the dust were myriad glinting winged insects, some huge, some tiny, all gorgeous. Hester felt the tears come and wept for the sheer loveliness of it all.

The eerie finality of the ship coming to rest, the door hissing open, sent an electric thrill through Hester’s body, swaddled in its spacesuit yet still horribly, humanly vulnerable on this strange planet. The ground, red soil mottled with sprawling blue and purple plants, was strangely spongy underfoot, and with each cautious movement, Hester sent a plume of miniscule insects fluttering. As she bent to look closer, what she had taken for a twisted root uncoiled into a great millipede-like creature that unfurled vast silvery wings and launched itself effortlessly into the air, its body rippling and twirling like a dragon’s.

She threw her head back and laughed. She waltzed clumsily, joyfully around, soon surrounded by a tumultuous cloud of curious insects too unused to her presence to be alarmed by it. And, on a sudden impulse, Hester tugged off her helmet. As she shook her hair free, she was scared by her own carelessness. But the trembling breath she took filled her lungs without pain, and her fear was overwritten by joy again at the first brush of the strange insects against her tingling face. She laughed into the emptiness of space, her ringing voice carried upwards on the wings of the creatures who shared this lovely planet with her.

Prizes:**Best psychological horror: Feel No Evil**by **Deborah Omolegan-Obe**

As she crossed the road Ezra caught sight of a child wailing, her mother was hushing her as she wiped the blood from her knee – it was only a small graze. People stopped and stared all around, this was why people rarely brought their children out, they hadn't yet learned how to kill their emotions. Ezra continued walking, she expected the world to resume, for the child to be hushed back into their home and the people to turn away and carry out their business. But this didn't happen, what Ezra failed to see the first time she looked was the child's face which was red and puffy, water streaming down her cheeks. She hadn't seen tears in years – children were mandated to wear their masks in public, so why had this child not done so?

The sight of the child made Ezra uncomfortable, she hadn't seen eyes like those in a long time, they were eyes without indifference. They weren't cold like her own, or like Dr Boa's.

If Ezra were in the times before Arthur Mackfield she was say she was shocked, or disturbed.

Her hands began to feel clammy, she couldn't take her eyes off the child's face that looked so much like how she felt when the world seemed to be against her, when she looked in the mirror and saw her limp hair and dull eyes, when she wondered how long she could keep this up – the blank day and night of life. Ezra couldn't never put these things into words, and through seeing the child she realised she didn't have to. These thoughts were never meant for words – they were meant to be water dripping down a red flushed face.

Ezra's phone buzzed

The notification read:

Expressed Emotion

Best physical horror: Enhanced

by Arabella Tedder

Dana walks out of the toilet cubicle, legs shaking, and rinses her mouth out at the sink. *Breathe in... and out... In... and out...* An ashen face stares back out at her in the mirror.

'Morning, Dana. 'Iris brushes past her and heads into one of the cubicles. Dana rubs her eyes, smudging the already fading mascara around them. *I've been working for Edison Tech since I graduated university. What other option do I have?* She fingers the silver ring on her right hand, feeling the cool metal pressing into her flesh. Maybe they wouldn't be too bad...

The cubicle door behind her opens. Dana flings the ring off in surprise and it clatters into the sink. Iris is standing there, looking even worse than Dana, and trying to avoid her eyes. Dana looks down at Iris 'hands (they are shaking) and the feeling in her stomach returns like a knife to the gut.

The boy on the train that morning had the typical arms of someone trying to get a job in a factory or on a building site, new and red and raw, but the pain and the swelling usually settles down after six months, even without pain medication (impossible to buy on the wages of those workers). Dana remembers when her parents both had an enhancing operation, the upper half of their arms puckered and crusting around the tools that replaced their hands, so much red skin it had looked like they had been burned.

Unlike the usual red swelling after an enhancement operation, Iris's hands are black. Cracks run deep in her skin, too many cracks for so early in the healing process. As she twitches, scratching absentmindedly at her palms, small flakes of ash-like skin drift to the floor. The cold metal *things* have no sleek Edison Tech logo emblazoned on them, and they are not quite shiny enough to be any product that Edison would sell. Something pale yellow oozes out from beneath where they are screwed into what used to be her fingers, and congeals in the blackened skin like blood. But it is not blood, because there is none left in her hands.

Iris's hands are rotting.

Best tragic: Echoes in the Chapel

by **Kate Coghlan**

The fire door to Pump Court opens without a sound. I've not been outside for weeks; we limit exposure during winter, when the worst storms come. I gulp at the air, tasting grass, dirt and burnt sugar. My arms prickle with goosebumps, and my shoes soak up puddles as I run towards the Chapel Tower.

Close up I see that its lower brickwork is eroded from below like a sandcastle at high tide. I've never been inside. I slow down, expecting to find Porters blocking my path, a gate with a padlock or laser-activated alarms. There are no obstacles, only a laminated 'Do not enter' poster adorned with the college crest. I lean on the pockmarked wooden door as I turn the iron doorknob, then let out a cry as it shunts open, and I tumble inside.

The scent is different in here, a yeasty archives aroma. The nave is dark, except for chinks where the sky leaks in through gaps in the roof and illuminates the dust.

I pass the tower crossing and enter the inner Chapel, heading towards a long lancet window above the altar, now empty of glass. Most of the choir stalls remain, and I slip into the first one. My heart beats loudly, happily.

I stand up, inhale deeply as if to sing, then hesitate... What if someone hears me? What's the punishment for trespassing and disobeying?

The stone tiles creak as if under the weight of a large audience. I breathe in again, imagine the opening organ chords, and then I sing, enjoying the echoes in the vaulted space, making the place mine, singing myself into its history.

I've never sung so loudly. I sing so loudly that the floor quakes beneath my feet. The imagined choir behind me raise their voices too, until they merge with mine to soar upwards and sweep through the stone arches with the birds. A low creak under my feet draws my attention back to ground-level. I spread my legs wider for stability, as I watch a crack spread across the tiles then creep up the bricks of the wall opposite. The crack grows into more cracks, like branches from a trunk, then twigs from those branches. For a moment, the wall bears the tattoo of a whole tree, before bricks start to tumble, one by one and then surrendering in clusters.

My legs start to tremble. I brace them to stand. The walls crumble inwards.

Best heroic: Major Moon Astroentomologist

by **Ella Curry**

“Your transmission is being processed,” the voice said in its dull monotone. “Please hold.” Its emotionlessness had no place on this planet of joy and wonder, Hester thought to herself, inwardly prickling at its intrusion. The voice came crackling back. “Your findings show a 98.3% match with our predicted values, placing human survival on Keppler b-442 in the highly likely category. We will of course need you to bring home living specimens for further evaluation, but this is reassuring news. We are now initiating stage one of Keppler b-442 colonisation, effective immediately.”

The warm glow generated by the praise froze, shattered. “Wait, colonisation? What are you talking about?” stammered Hester, wonder forgotten in the sudden flood of horror. “What – what about the insects?”

The voice replied, “You were sent to Keppler b-442 to ascertain its suitability for supporting complex life. The insectoid life forms currently populating the planet are only to be utilised as indicator species – our experiments on your specimens will have the additional benefit of helping us to eradicate them most effectively. Your information has assured the safety of this planet for human existence, and your return will be marked with honour.”

Hester saw things clearly with a cold and sudden certainty. She thought with a rising, stricken panic of the reams of information that she had already sent back, and the transmitter fell from her slackened hands. Hester knew what she had to do.

The muffled voice was still whining out “–Come in, Major Moon. Is your transmitter operational? Come in.”

Hester screamed and hurled herself against the wall, sending equipment flying. She threw open the door, and as the insects swarmed in, Hester cried out in a fear that was all the more convincing because she was afraid – not of this planet, but of the one she came from.

“ABORT MISSION. THE INSECTS ARE HOSTILE, REPEAT, THE INSEC-” Hester choked, her sentence descending into anguished screams that she gradually let fade, until “Major Moon, come in, repeat” was the only sound among the falling glass, beating wings, and weakly beeping machinery.

As the transmitter at last fell silent, Hester got up from the floor, carefully scooping the creatures that had crawled over her to safety. The finality of her decision had sunk in as she had

lain there, feigning death. She could never return to Earth. Her heart beat painfully, hot tears coursing down her cheeks as she thought of her parents – but she couldn't let this planet die.

The sky outside the ship was beginning to lighten, and Hester's pain mingled with great peacefulness as she watched the sun slowly rise on the planet that she'd saved. The dawn was more beautiful here than on Earth after all.