

Widdershins

Microfiction

H. W. Taylor



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"He turned to his right, knowing that it is unlucky to walk about a church widdershins..."

-from "The Nine Taylors"

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.

-from "1984"

Foreword

The following microfiction were written over the month of October for an event I created called Oddtober. Once per day I would sit and write a brief weird tale derived from a prompt, randomly generated in advance.

Also included are 10 sci-fi haiku, called sci-fi-ku, as well as an Oddtober Journal in which I discuss the inspiration, creation, and allusions to each of the Oddtober stories.

At the end of the book are excerpts, the first from Sycorax, Bk.1 of the Unique Miranda Trilogy as well as an excerpt from Ye Shall Know Them, Bk.1 of The Yangalese War.

Thanks for reading.

-H. W. Taylor

Dark Soup

The umbrous soup was set before her. Steam rose in the askew beams of sundown. A flick of fine light caught her eye. Hooked at the rim of her bowl was a curl of hair. Quickly, she pulled it out, but its length continued. In horror she stopped as the hair went taut. And then pulled back.

A Whispered Prayer

If I can hop three times on one foot, said the little boy, then the enemy cannot break down the door. If I can get my toe in my mouth, he said, then no beast will be under the bed. If my father returns, he said, holding back his tears, then the enemy and the beast will be dead by morning.

Coinflip at the Outer Limits

At the edge of the cliff the rock crinkled and broke into whorls. The aged man held up a coin. “There are two sides.”

The young man nodded. “Yes, inside and out.”

The ridges of the aged man’s face deepened. “What? No. Heads or tails.”

The young man lowered his eyes to the scattering of reality. Flecks of matter were subsumed, subatomic particles were scattered. “The outer head, the inner head, the out tail or inner.” He counted out four fingers.

“Heads or tails,” the aged man insisted and flipped the coin.

The coin rang as it soared toward the brink of life and time. It hit the rock edge, somersaulted one last time, and spewed out brains.

The Living Daylights

Through scanty a slit, my abluted eye, swolt to the heavens, saw
dawn.

Plant of Ten Thousand Names

Stopping at a tuft of flowers at high-moon, Ibrahim al Meshuzalah knelt. “We no longer call this plant Wandering Jew,” he said. “In the old era it was deemed antisemetic to do so.”

Bin Ha’ha Yung lifted the creeping vine, be-crowned with blossoms, and said, “Now what is its name?”

Ibrahim al Meshuzalah ripped it out and cast it aside. He raised his soiled fist to the glistening city spires of the moon. “We call it Hate-Lunas.”

The Hungry Field

Before the chattering stalks of teething grain, I released ten hundred rabbits. I drove the little beasts forward with a line of blue fire ignited at their feet. As the field received its food, the grinding began, as if whipped to a frenzy by a doleful wind. Soon the animal shrieks were silenced. All that remained was the metallic scent of sacrifice.

Fairground of Infinity

The crowd parted. A man in burgundy striped pants, triple vested suit of the same color, browned with use, and a stovepipe hat with its lid blowed up, hocked his ride. “Set your carcass upon the stultifying vortex!” called the barker. “Fix your bleak eyes full on that quisling abyss!”

The full-toothed teen poked at a paper boat of falafel, still in its death throes. He lifted a still moaning orb and bit its face off.. “Look here,” he said, exhaling the scalding vapor. “I’ve one ticket left, but your’s’n requires two tickets.”

“This here is a life-defying ride. You go with your whole soul or you don’t go at all,” said the barker. “So it costs you two, there’n back.”

“Bollyhocks,” the teen swore. “I’ll give ya one. Tis’n’t worth two tickets just to blink at the abyss.”

“Fine,” said the barker. “The second ticket isn’t necessary.” He took the teen’s ticket and smirked.

Once the teen was inside the tent and the rattle and blast of the ride kicked up furor, he said, “One ticket to gain the gullet of the abyss, the other’n just gets ya home.”

Turnt World

Stopping their walk between the woods and frozen lake, he knelt next to his grand-daughter. He laid his hand upon a wide flat stone. “If you turn a stone thrice it flicks away the quotidian from the world.” He turned the stone twice and paused. “It’ll become new. It will shine and the light of all things will dig into your very eyes.”

He flipped it a third time and his grand-daughter gasped. Her face brightened. It was almost painful, seeing the world, but it was too full of joy to hurt. They walked further. The snow crunched beneath their boots. They did not speak, but every now and then the grand-daughter would laugh and point; an easy wind, the leaves askitter, the distant honking of a goose.

“Many things can turn the world,” he said. “Like that feather there. Blow on either side with your eyes closed and—“ He slipped and stumbled, but caught himself before he fell. He laughed as his grand-daughter lifted the feather from the play of ground and air. “But that is a venture for another time,” he cautioned.

They walked home and stomped their feet once inside. His grand-daughter touched an umbrella, whose handle was worn leather, cracked but healed smooth with use. “What happens if I open this three times fast?” she asked.

He looked at her warily. “I advise you to never do that,” he said. “Not everything needs to be turnt.”

But the next time she was alone in her grandfather's house, she took the umbrella and rushed to her room. She shut the door and stood before a mirror. She held her breath and flicked it three times fast open and shut.

For one dread second, her heartbeat stalled as her body threw blood. She saw nothing but black. She felt the sting of cold air, raw fire, every bare nerve, on her body, now inside-out.

Bonus Finger of the Jacinth Family

My biggest brother is a concert pianist, whose bandwidth the entire keyboard covers with a flick of the elbows. The next brother after, a lothario of the bioteletronics, has met the presidents of the U. A. States, the archpope, and the Chairman of the Euro-Union. Even my sister, content to use her eleventh finger in the relative quietude of a five star gastronic, has notoriety in her field and can shut down a kitchen dispute by raising middle fingers from a single hand. Prodigies all.

However I, the baby of the Jacinth family, also gifted by the gods of genetics, am nothing. I have accomplished nothing, am known for nothing, am good for nothing. But if in sorrow I find you, my comforting embrace will be slightly more, my compassion an inch wider, my hug, tighter by one digit.

The Doula of Trees

The doula of trees sat on a three legged stool and squinted into the sun. “Dialated how many centimeters?” Her tallow colored hair was in one thick, long braid that extended past her belt.

“Two and three quarters,” said the farmer.

“Zounds, man! And you call me now? I’ve got an orchard of birch on the brink of splintering and my neighbor’s pecan is having contractions.”

The farmer clasped his hands. “Please, I beg you, have mercy.”

The doula turned back to the Cottonwood she was attending. The wood writhed as if twisted by wind, and a moaning rose up from the earth. The doula cooed into the hollow. “Cursed is the ground and in sorrow shalt thou multiply, but there is hope, for you will sprout again, and your branches will not fail.”

Dream Fauns

The rooftops at dusk clinked with hooves as the Fauns arrived to pipe in the dreams of the subjugated world. Bartholomew crouched at his chimney through which he'd lay his song-lure to a small family of four. The father was dour, the mother bitter, the son a brutal lug, but the girl had so far resisted his bread and circus songs.

Thaddeus floated down, landing next to Bartholomew. His chimney was next door. A retired couple, safely dull. Thaddeus, unhappy about his current job, had begun slipping songs of suicide into their dreams. "You're lucky, a roof like this, middle-agers and a couple of young ones?" he said with a smirk. "Sod them off right good and you get an apartment building next." Thaddeus clopped to the wings of the roof and leapt.

Another night of sorrow, another night of exchanging hope for cynicism. Bartholomew sighed and withdrew his pipe. He put it to his lips and fluttered his fingers above the stops. But this one girl would not take in his poison. She would shake off his dreams, sing simple songs when she was scared, and pray her tiny prayers at dawn.

It was long dark. The Dream Fauns across the city were striking up their winds of ill boding. Bartholomew played depression and failure to the father, discontent and weakness to the mother. To the son he played anger, lust, and distraction. They rolled into their dreams like a grave.

But for the girl, he ceased his hymn of fear. He looked across the night's horizon and felt the edge of day. Maybe he would play a different song for her. Maybe a song of patience and rebel purity. Maybe brave joy and defiance. Maybe he would see what happened if one person in this cold and shadowy world had a heart stoked with fire...

The Talented Rascallions

The boys circled Banksy and pointed to the bucket. “Go on,” said their leader. “You know the law.”

E. L. Banks, formerly of the band of brothers The Talented Rascallions, stepped boldly into the bucket, soaking his red Converse shoes.

The leader put a yellow bowl on Banksy’s head. “By order of the club from the foundations of the world, I hereby declare you Traitor to Man.” Banksy let his shoulders fall and head slump. The circle of boys emitted a solemn, “Hear, hear.”

One of the company strode forward and dumped out a box of his treasures stored in the treehouse vault. A hawk feather, a bike reflector, a wheat penny, a quartz as thick as a thumb, a bent knife, a cigarette lighter, and the VHS case of the 1985 film *Commando*. One by one the boys took up a treasure.

The feather was bent, the bike reflector stomped, the penny pocketed, the quartz buried, the knife thrown away, and the cigarette lighter lit the *Commando* case and they watched it burn to ashes. When it was done, Banksy was allowed to step out of the bucket.

His shoes squished and water made mud of where Banksy stood. He looked at each boy in turn, his eyes stolid, holding out his hands,

unburdened of worldly goods, and said, “Yeah, but Gwendolynn is fair and one day when I am old, I’m gonna hold her hand.”

Solo at the Apocalypse Theater

Upon the stage, Talbot lays out the wires, adjusts the mikes. The gathering crowd, growing impatient, shuffles and mutters below. He stands as the tech aims the spotlight, igniting him in undeserved glory. His radio sputzes the voice of the sound engineer. “Check mike one.” Talbot steps up, adjusting the Fender across his hip, his knowing fingers find their places along the strings. “Give us a song, Talbot,” buzzes the radio.

Talbot’s finger thumps a note and it washes across the valley of the stadium like a beam of light. The crowd quiets, then erupts in mock cheers. Mock cheers whose mocking falls away into a rushing roar in the ears of Talbot, the aged roadie, the unsuccessful musician, the uncool, the overweight, the overlooked.

Through a scree of light, noise, and the frenetic backbeat of his heart, Talbot begins to play. Faces hang in awe, then melt as the sky is shredded to tatters. Flesh is blasted away and bones disintegrate into dust, carried away by a rocking wind. The ground is ripped up, the ribs of the earth laid bare, cracked open and wrenched wide to reveal a cavernous gulley, burnt orange and blood red.

Still Talbot plays until clouds bury the open air, the sun shatters and darkness crashes upon the stage. Sweat rains down and still Talbot plays, his fingers relentlessly dirvish, fiendish even. Finally, in sticky

blood and pulpy purple fingers, Talbot lay down his instrument, a wizened branch from a dead Joshua tree. The desert's hollow air chills him and the vast unalive terrain barks a single, unending roar.

The Earth is not a Cold Dead Place

The boys came over the hill into the red dirt pit. Tractor tracks stitched together deep scoops, like enormous tombs, to the trodden road. They left slurry footprints as they sprinted across the clay. The air in that red bowl of earth was cool. Daylight formed triangles of shadow on the western edge, tiny Olympus Mons-like cliffs. Though the sun had dried and cracked the surface, red plates like crooked teeth, the deeper throat of the ground was sponged tightly with water.

They jumped into a pit and the mud sucked them down, chest-high. They laughed and struggled to get free. Laffy-taffy, the adobe pudding plumped and sighed as they slapped and crawled. They slurping earth seemed to speak as their feet were

“Wut?” the earth said.

They dipped their boots back and made the earth ask again. “Wut? Wut? Wut?” They laughed.

They returned to the deepest slop and nestled to their necks in the blood red sludge. They were quiet as their beating hearts thumped against the thick fist of the entire earth. “Let’s go home,” said one of the boys.

But their wrists were sealed in the stiff planet. Their legs, stricken in the stone of the earth. Panicked they began to yell, but a wide red

thumb pressed their throats. Choked, they were pulled down. To the chin. To the mouth. To the nose. To the eyes. When the cold of the clay touched their foreheads their ears were filled with a thundering, “Wut, wut, wut, wut, wut, wut, wut.”

Shaved Legs

She steps out of the bath and a buzzing fills her ears. Her skin dimples and steams. She places her leg upon the tub lip and her fingers find the razor set upon the ledge. With her other hand she rubs the length of her leg feeling the bristly, black hairs. They vibrate. The hum is frantic now. In her fractured eyes she sees ten million dancing fly legs. She shaves; one leg, then the other, and the buzzing stops. She flicks her wings, scattering bathwater. She wipes her face and wipes her face. She rubs her hands together, rubs and rubs, and then wipes her face.

To Venture Down the Dark Descent

The first step groans when you step on it. A soft whine unless it's the middle of the night when the step will howl for no cause. You can hear it from your room, asleep or not. The second step has spiders. You slap the air before you step, but their webs still find your face. The third step has a nail that will make you bleed. The nail moves, it always finds your foot. The fourth step is safe. It is solid, smooth, unhaunted, uncursed. You can rest here. The fifth step has beetles. They scurry. They seem to flee, but there are always suicides beneath your feet, crunched like fragile gravel. The sixth step is wet. Slippery, and it leaves a smell. The seventh step is the worst. Do not touch the seventh step. It is missized, wider and taller. To touch it opens the walls and the horned gray faces spit and curse, whipping their chains. You jump over it and land on the unworldly cold floor. You cross, holding your breath, feeling the air move as if alive, you grab the jar you were sent to get and return to the stairs. The bottom stair is too big to leap over. You must step on it if you are ever to make it back safe.

You Want Thingamabobs? I've Got Twenty!

Urielle put the tooth of the thingamabob into the ridge of the metal clam. Watertight, it would float, but Urielle held it down. On the label was a smiling woman, happy although her bright green tail curled as if dead. Inside was meat, she'd seen the drymen who live above in the great bubble, eating from clams just like the one she held. She spun the fin of the thingamabob and cut the clam open. Bubbles escaped and then chunks of raw meat floated out amidst a scumble of oil. She caught a morsel in her razor sharp teeth. *So*, she thought, *this is what my people taste like.*

Those are Confetti that Were His Eyes

“It hurts to weep,” the clown complained. He licked his paper lips with the tinsel of his tongue. Both his legs were tattered and limp. He lay in a pool of Tootsie Rolls surrounded by boys. They were flushed with violence and sticky with sugar.

The partygoers gathered around as the magician patched him up. “It will be over soon,” the magician said. The rope was rethreaded through a loop at the clown’s back. “This will keep you secure,” the magician said. The clown was hoisted up and dangled from the tree.

As the birthday boy was guided forward, blindfolded and dizzy, the clown cried out, “But why was I made alive?” The boys cheered as the bat was swung for the massacre of paper-mache.

Ain't No Sin

With her fingernail the witch slit her scalp open, revealing the bright moon of her skull. She sliced lengthwise down the center of her face, throat, chest, to her navel. Blood ran as she took the ragged flesh and wrenched it open.

“It ain’t no sin,” she sang. Unhooking the flesh, muscle and sinew, she peeled the remains from her skeleton. She continued her lilting song: —to take off your skin and dance around in your bones!”

Dragon Grip

He took up the disc and applied his fingers to the new grip he'd learned. Fingers curled under the ridge like playing guitar. He surveyed the field, finding the basket within a clutch of trees. He bent at the waste calculating the angle of yaw. There was a surging of power, centrifugal forces already were whipped into a maelstrom within his wrist. He lunged into his approach, torqued his body and unfurled, exploding outward—

But at the last moment, he did not release his hold and he went coptering through the air as if held by tornadoes.

Woman Crying Alone with Salad Finally has Competition

Elila searched “woman laughing eating salad alone” and scrolled through the images. Bright teeth and squinting eyes before forks of ruffage, beaming, gaping, impossibly joyful. Elila pressed the tines of her flatware into a tomato until it ruptured. A tear dripped from her eye.

Elila felt her face tingle. She closed her eyes as she consumed her salad, calming her breathing while her lower lip distended like a blimp. Defiantly, she searched her salad for stab-able things. Hives broke out on her cheek, growing hot like the eyes of a stove. Still she ate with deliberate mastication, allergic to cucumber.

Fresh Edenco, Food Wife Division, Thank You For Calling

“He’s tired of my ribs. That’s what he said when he pushed the plate away.”

Xindy adjusted her headset and drummed her fingers across her holopad. Her screen fritzed gibber as the caller complained.

“I give myself night after night to feed him, to keep him full, but my husband barely eats anything.”

“Perhaps he’s dieting,” Xindy suggested. “Not all husbands discuss their weight with food wives.”

“He hasn’t touched my breasts for months!”

“Calm down, ma’am,” Xindy said. “Perhaps you need to just spice things up.”

“That’s what I thought, but I’ve upgraded the savor profiles and switched to premium spices. Nothing works.”

Xindy could hear the frustration of the caller. Her vocals were strained. She pulled up the caller’s profile. Yup, she confirmed, that model was going stale all over the country.

“The other night, I buttered up, lifted my skirt to show him my thighs. Do you know what he said?” The caller sobbed. Xindy quietly waited until she recovered. She knew she should interrupt, to tell her

about the new freegan options, to upload the latest dairy menu, but she wanted to know about the customer. They could be so awful.

“He calls me leftovers,” the caller said. She laughed a sharp, scoffing laughter that held no mirth or anger. “And just last week, I caught him looking at the neighbor’s model wife. She’s a buffet. I think she smells like a cafeteria, but my husband’s stomach growls every time he sees her.”

“What’s the Most You’ve Ever Lost on a Coin Flip?”

In his borrowed skin, the gas station proprietor looked at the large, grim-faced man, looming on the other side of the counter. “Look, I need to know what I stand to win.”

“Everything,” said the ominous patron.

“How’s that?” The biological consequences of fear began to grind in his guts. The being of Gene noted them with alarm. Not entirely sure what sort of transaction was occurring,

When the alien assumed the form of Gene, it was to help him out of the lethargy and dullness of his Autumn years. The traveler from distant systems was driven to find creatures who were stuck in the morass and waste of beingness. His bio-kenotic form allowed him to enter and inspire, lead a life form to greater acts of compassion and will, but in this dusty land, primitive and tedious, he had found a banality of such malice that his numinous sheen of nuclei frayed.

“You stand to win everything. Call it.” The terrible man flipped a coin, caught it in his hand, and placed it on the counter, covering it.

“Alright,” said the life within the life of Gene. “Heads then.”

When the lumbering man left in a fist of dust curling behind the car, the alien slipped trembling from the being of Gene. Gene was awake, the fear of death had peeled away his torpor. The alien slipped

unsensed to the sliver of his ship parked on the lip of the roof. Gene dialed up his son, in far away Chicago, to tell him he loved him, to tell him to visit some time, to tell him to live his life with vigor.

Cold Sheets

Tilly shivered and dug into her bed. The chill against her skin was like satin dusted in snow. Her dorm room was a concrete vault frozen stiff by the relentless, slow moving cold. The darkness yawned as she burrowed, deeper beneath her sheets.

Once the weight of her blankets was on her, she waited for warmth to rise, but still shafts of cold found her toes and the small of her back, and the goose-pimpled flesh of her arms. She tried to kick deeper into her bed and she felt herself sink as the mattress peel back like a cobweb. She curled and wormed deeper, hoping for a hideaway from cold.

Deeper she dug. She felt like she was in the middle of the mattress where the springs should be. Still cold, still shivering, she pressed her hands into the thick web of sheets and swam deeper. The weight above her was crushing. Every breath felt drawn from an iron pipe. Her throat ached as she clawed deeper. The bed began to stiffen. Her fingers scraped concrete, her shoulders were skinned as she worked herself into a cubbyhole.

When her eyes were heavy and her limbs could hardly move, she gasped. Her legs were pinned, a great stone settled on her breast, and the pain of cold was as distant as her toes. Beneath an impossible mountain, slowly crushed, Tilly felt as cold as the cold around her. It was warmth enough.

The Land Will Look at You with Strange Faces

Driven from her people once winter broke its icy grip, Joula Chroud looked one last time at the man who refused to follow her. A husband for only three years, an antagonist in the final year. He turned against her when her first and only pregnancy was lost. Cursed became the word that preceded her every step. Her omens were set before the elders and deemed ill-worthy of society. Joula entered the wasteland alone, to wander alone, to die alone.

On the third day of her travels, her food and water supply expended, she laid down in the shadow of a rock. Here I die, she thought, too tired to put the words to breath. But as the sun declined, the shadows formed a face upon the rock. From its eye streamed water. Joula crawled to it, kneeling in the mud at its base, and let the water run upon her tongue. It was cold, heavy with mineral, but it renewed her strength.

Beneath her she felt a stiffness. She dug in the soggy loam and found a rock, gourd sized. She turned to find the face of a child so like the child she'd buried at the beginning of winter. It startled her, but she cleaned the rock until the face beamed beneath her thumbs.

As she cradled the rock, it warmed in her hands and then breathed.

In the Teeth of Starvation

“If you eat me,” said the biscuit. “I will be your death.”

The man’s stomach rattled like chains dragged across a desert floor. He licked his lips. “I jes got to ax myself if you look like a lyin’ biscuit.”

Sign Hanging from Shipping Crate in an Under Populated World

For sale: baby shoes, pre-owned.

Not Even the Moon Has such Gentle Hands

For the third time this week, I found her in the front yard, her nightgown soaked, her hair full of twigs and leaves, and mud caked up to her knees. Her eyes were black as obsidian as she stared at the thin bone of the moon. When I touched her wrist, she shivered and sighed. Shaking her head, she'd look and ask me where she was.

The doctor said it is simple somnambulance, but the doors were still locked when she disappeared. How is she getting out? Her vocal cords are damaged from screaming, but I've heard nothing, nor have our neighbors. Most disturbing of all, the dentist pulled out from her teeth the final three vertebrae of a mouse's tail.

A true lunatic, she said and then began to cry. I tell her that it's okay, that we'll find out what's happening. What I don't tell her is that every morning I wake up with dirty fingerprints around my neck.

The Multiverse in your Brain

It was past midnight on the first sleepover of the summer. Horace and Beardsley hopped in circles stuffed in their sleeping bags like living burritos.

“You know that if you cough while looking in the mirror, you switch out brains,” said Horace.

Beardsley tumbled to the ground and squiggled. “Whose brains do I get?” he asked.

From the hall, a light switched on. The two boys hunkered behind the couch as some unseen parent stumbled into the bathroom. They waited with baited breath until the bathroom noises ended. When it was dark again Horace answered, “Your brains, but from another you in a different universe.”

Beardsley laughed. “Nuh-uh,” he said, but when all was quiet in the house, they crept down the hall into the bathroom. Beardsley looked in the mirror and coughed, quietly, mouselike. Nothing happened.

“Do it bigger,” Horace said. Beardsley coughed again, louder. “Bigger,” said Horace. Beardsley coughed again, throat-scraping and full diaphragmed. They sprinted out of the bathroom, stifling laughter down the hall, and burrowed into their sleeping bags.

Once their breathing calmed, Horace whispered to Beardsley, “Do you feel different?”

Beardsley picked his nose, flicking what was found into the darkness. He rested his chin on his palms and kicked up his legs behind him. On his face was a wide, triangular grin as crooked as the clock hands. “Bet you didn’t know that out there was an evil Beardsley.”

Brave Underwear

This might be the day where these come in handy, he said as he put on his camouflage boxers.

Allergies

The waitress set down a steaming bowl of hair. Toynbee smiled and inhaled the earthy fumes. However upon spying a brown bead amidst the locks and curls his face fell into repulsion. “Is that—“ he said, gently prodding the tiny bulb with his fork. “Is that a nut?” He shivered and the eyes on the back of his neck stood up.

Sci-Fi-ku

Sci-Fi-ku is a Scientifiction Haiku, based on the Japanese poetic form Haiku, popularly known as a three line poem, which uses a 5-7-5 syllabification that typically includes a seasonal referent. The following ten sci-fi-ku were written in early 2022.

1.

The asteroid hovers
Over the face of the earth.
Look up, O, look up!

2.

Interdimensions
Turn the world into a door.
Nobody opens.

3.

Incoherent bums.
Maybe they're time travelers
Speaking unknown words.

4.

Woe to you, android.
Can a mechanical eye
Be made to see God?

5.

A crater on Mars
named Stickney by Asaph Hall
For his wife's impact.

6.

Alien scriptures
Testify against all men
Fliglopalooya!

7.

The scales of my eyes
Fall away when looking at
anti-Medusa

8.

An alternate world
Enters the screens of our minds.
Control. Alt. Delete.

9.

Floating, frozen stiff,
the zombies in outer space
Their mouths open wide.

10.

The little boy wakes
And logs into cyberspace.
“I’ve missed you, mother.”

Oddtober Journal

October 1st

Prompt: Impossible Hair

Story: Dark Soup

Ew. I didn't like writing this one. I try to be rational about germs and hair in food. I used to eat the ants that got into my sugar cereal, because, what else was I supposed to eat? Toast? Despite this, I can't quite conquer my superstitions regarding strange hair in food. To add a tug-a-war to it seemed unnecessary horror unless we're talking Oddtober.

October 2nd

Prompt: Lost Toenail

Story: A Whispered Prayer

The prompt reminded me of my brother who as a kid would bite his toenails. It weirded me out even then. I found myself asking why would someone bite their toenails and stumbled upon this scary world

where a child is left fatherless and afraid. There's a reason Things That Go Bump In The Night is a universal nightmare. As a kid I often found myself bargaining in prayer over the scary things, mostly imagined. Mostly.

October 3rd

Prompt: Creepy Coinflip

Story: Coinflip at the Outer Limits

It started as a simple idea, a coinflip that hits the ground and spills out brains. Anytime I'm both tickled and grossed out, I stick around and see if something comes of it.

October 4th

Prompt: Busted Eye

Story: The Living Daylights

These first four days were tough. I wasn't quite in the mood to write weird fiction yet. Last year, I committed to doing it and on the second night had one of the most bizarre and realistic dreams I've ever had (*Luchadores at the End of the World* from *Oddly Concerning* if you want to read it). The inertia of that drove me all month, but 2022 didn't have the same creepy wild verve. This one was inspired by the phrase "beat the living daylights..." and the desire to use the word

“abluted” which means “washed clean.” Oddtober is a writing exercise that gets me deep into the vocab bog.

October 5th

Prompt: Threatening Plant

Story: Plant of Ten Thousand Names

It was at this point that I got rolling. It started when my wife pointed out a plant on our walk and said that it was once called Wandering Jew. *Tradescantia zebrina*, formerly known as *Zebrina pendula*, is a species of creeping plant in the *Tradescantia* genus. The Wandering Jew was a myth that arose in the 13th century about a Jew who mocked Christ and was given immortality until the Second Coming. Now the plant is nicknamed the Wandering Dude, at least until the century in which my story takes place.

October 6th

Prompt: Shiver Tooth

Story: The Hungry Field

The first thing that popped into my mind when hearing the prompt was “the teeth of grain.” I explored that until a man with a lot of rabbits and a line of fire arrived.

October 7th

Prompt: Picnic in Purgatory

Story: Fairground of Infinity

Despite Picnic and Purgatory being right there, I switched it to a fairground and set it elsewhere. I didn't have anything but a voice, the unnamed barker in the the striped pants. Sometimes writers will use a character to help them find there way through an idea and that's what happened here. I didn't realize the barker was untrustworthy, nor that the kid, down to his last ticket, would pay a higher price than he thought. It wasn't until that "quisling abyss" offered to keep the boy that I realized the Barker was the bad guy the whole time.

October 8th

Prompt: Found Umbrella

Story: Turnt World

I scared myself with this one. At first I had the grandfather flick open the umbrella thrice and twist them both inside out, but when I began to imagine the carnage, I backtracked. The horror, when it came upon the grand-daughter, had to be her fault. It's still gross, but at least she was warned.

October 9th**Prompt: 11th Finger****Story: Bonus Finger of the Jacinth Family**

Though I have played fast and loose with many of the prompts, this one I took totally literal. I think it's a darling little story. The reason I named this prodigious family Jacinth is because jacinth is the eleventh stone in the foundation of New Jerusalem mentioned in Revelation. Weird things stick in my head, but this is one of them. Someday I will write my Narniad, which will include a character named Jacinth Levenstone...

October 10th**Prompt: Tree Blister****Story: The Doula of Trees**

For this one I went from an actual tree that had a blister, to seeing it pregnant, to wanting a midwife to assist in the delivery. Once I had the title, the entry went quickly.

October 11th**Prompt: Dream Slide****Story: Dream Fauns**

Sliding suggested chimneys to me, which suggested rooftops. As a fan of Mary Poppins, who has a Poppins-esque Victorian YA novel

somewhere amidst the backburners, I saw umbrella and descending beings, which quickly became fauns, alighting on these rooftops. What are these fauns doing? Playing the pipes, obviously, so the real question was, "For what purpose do fauns descending onto rooftops pipe?" My answers, feed the people with dreams. These fauns were subjugating humanity, so I wondered what would happen if one faun went renegade...

October 12th

Prompt: Water Socks

Story: The Talented RapsCALLIONS

Water socks suggests to me soggy feet. I've always loved the scene from Mary Poppins when Mr. Banks is fired. I loved the weird ritual of them deflowering his lapel, punching through his hat, and inverting his umbrella (perhaps where Turnt World originated). So I immediately saw a boy standing in a bucket of water undergoing some bizarre rite. Why was this boy enduring such a trial? At root all boy clubs are G.R.O.S.S. (Calvin's (of "and Hobbes" fame): Get Rid Of Slimy girlS) so of course E. L. Banks was being drummed out of the club for showing affections for a girl. Naming the club came easy. I've always loved the word "rapsCALLIONS" and who wouldn't want to be in a club called The Talented RapsCALLIONS?

October 13th**Prompt: Frozen Stiff****Story: Solo at the Apocalypse Theater**

I had the idea for this one a couple of days before when I went to a Shakey Graves concert (a name which itself could launch a hundred creepy micro-tales). Before the concert a chubby roadie went to the mics to check their height and to allow the technician to align the spotlight. He was short and very unrockstarlike, but I immediately felt affection for this portly midfifties fellow. He looked out over the crowd as they waited for the concert to begin and I wondered if he ever dreamed of being the headliner, if he ever fantasized about shredding a solo. I didn't quite know where to go with it, but when I reflected on this prompt I imagined both him and the audience at different times being stunned to stillness. I usually name the stories before I write them, purely because it's hard for me to write without a title. Some I know are placeholders, but most of the time I stick with the first thing that came to me (only two of the previous 12 stories have had their titles changed). This story went through several titles before I settled. The silliest title was "Solo! at the Apocalypse" in reference to "Panic! at the Disco."

October 14th**Prompt: Bone China****Story: The Earth is Not a Cold Dead Place**

I went on an adventure with my youngest son to the "red dirt." It is a place where red clay is dug up, piled into a dump truck and delivered to various faraway spots. It was muddy and we had fun slipping, sliding, and, on one occasion, avoiding death. There was a little pit dug, coffin-sized in fact, the bottom of which was cracked into thick platters. I knew it would be soft and quicksinking, but when my son asked if he could jump into I said, "Sure." Within a blink he was swallowed up to his chest and I realized that he potentially could've been swallowed alive and I would've had to dig out a panicked and suffocating six year old. The crisis, thankfully, never came, but the inspiration to unstick my Oddtober did. All I had was bones found in the earth. The title is in tribute to an album from Explosions In The Sky.

October 15th

Prompt: Fly Legs

Story: Shaved Legs

Sometimes it's as fast as seeing of leg hairs after thinking of fly legs. From there this woman who had such orchestral leg hair ended up being herself some uncommon housefly.

October 16th

Prompt: Unfortunate Staircase

Story: To Venture Down the Dark Descent

I wrote a story about a impossible staircase in my debut book of short fiction (Eschaton from Progeny), so after some dead-ends exploring an adaptation of that, I ended up thinking about the classic descent into the basement trope. Of course my mind went to the Wet Bandits in Home Alone and their fruitless ascent, so blended these threads together. For the title I stole a move from Pullman's His Dark Materials, which is lifted from Paradise Lost. I took: "I sung of *Chaos* and *Eternal Night*,/ Taught by the heav'nly Muse to venture down/ The dark descent, and up to reascend."

October 17th

Prompt: Supermarket Seashell

Story: You Want Thingamabobs? I've Got Twenty!

Stumped again, I was about to adapt a short story idea I've had for my "Ghosts of Christmas Eve" book that I may someday write. But then I found my scratch sheet listing strange words. Why do I have a scratch sheet containing weird words? First of all, have you read my stuff? I'm all about weird words. Secondly, Oddtober. Thirdly, I was looking for a strange word to name my Oddtober collection. Gallimaufrey has long been my favorite odd word, but for the collection I selected Widdershins, a word which means counterclockwise. One of the words was Thingamabobs, which was delightfully used in Disney's

"The Little Mermaid" and when my eyes hit upon it, I saw a mermaid, not unlike Ariel (except blackhaired and pale), wondering what this can depicting one of her species held inside...

October 18th

Prompt: Infestation Confetti

Story: Those Are Confetti That Were His Eyes

This perhaps is the saddest, cruelest microstory ever. To complete the sadness I invoked a line from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "Those are pearls that were his eyes." *The Tempest* was also used by me in the writing of *The Unique Miranda Trilogy*. I combined it with the *Alien* franchise in order to generate character names.

October 19th

Prompt: Articulate Comb

Story: Ain't No Sin

Articulate Comb suggested spidery crustaceans, but my cannibalist mermaid story on the 17th precluded me from exploring that, so I pushed elsewhere. At the time I was afflicted by some stress related eczema which resulted in some extravagant dander, so I naturally (!?) began fantasizing about unzipping my flesh from my bones. In turn

I was reminded of the classic song by Dan Russo "T'ain't No Sin (to Take Off Your Skin)":

When it gets too hot for comfort, and you can't get ice cream cones,
Tain't no sin to take off your skin and dance around in your bones.

When the lazy syncopation of the music softly moans,
Tain't no sin to take off your skin and dance around in your bones.

The polar bears aren't green up in Greenland, they've got the right idea.

They think it's great to refrigerate while we all cremate down here.
Just be like those Bamboo Babies, in the South Sea tropic zones,
Tain't no sin to take off your skin and dance around in your bones.

October 20th

Prompt: Unthinkable Frisbee

Story: Dragon Grip

Perhaps you Disc Golfers recognize what I assume is a well-known and common technique known as the Dragon Grip. One of my sons disc golfs and showed me the proper method for throwing long distances. I took the information and combined it with one of my favorite poems "Letting Go" by Matthea Harvey.

October 21st

Prompt: Grass Allergy

Story: Woman Crying Alone with Salad Finally Has Competition

This strange title came from a headline I saw. I'm not entirely sure what the point was, but I know that it was referencing those stock photos of women eating salad euphorically. I figure a woman crying on TikTok while eating salad is a perfect form of uncanny microfiction, so I went with it.

October 22nd

Prompt: Marshmallow Nose

Story: Fresh Edenco, Food Wife Division, Thank You for Calling

I wanted to title this story "Edible Wives" but didn't want to give the concept away so early. I was inspired by two things. The first was the comment, "I'm tired of ribs" and in my head I took it to mean the person was dissatisfied with their ribcage. The second source of inspiration for this story is our sick, sick world. I'm sure somewhere there's an evil scientist trying to engineer an edible automaton, who (Lord help us) will be sexy and delicious.

October 23rd**Prompt: Gas Station Alien****Story: “What’s the Most You’ve Ever Lost on a Coin Flip?”**

The prompt “Gas Station Alien” at first led me to Vincent D’Onofrio’s character from “Men in Black.” His jerky, smooch-faced performance invoked a sort of bodysnatcher story. Then I settled on the scene from “No Country for Old Men” in which the terrifying Anton Chigurh (played by the indomitable Javier Bardem) intimidates the gas station proprietor over a coin flip. On the 23rd, I merely wrote: “What do I stand to lose?” under the title “Call It, Friend-o.” Sometimes these stories aren’t finished on the day. I try, but occasionally I have to write a brief precis and finish it later.

October 24th**Prompt: Cobweb****Story: Cold Sheets**

This story originally ended in an ellipse. The unnamed (at the time) girl was digging deeper into her bed because she heard... something. Cries? Laughter? It was too indistinct, but she dug deeper and deeper until to her horror she found a...

I couldn’t think of anything, so I set it aside. The next day my family and I went camping and around the fire that night we told scary stories. The story I told was more sensational involving scary little zombielike

children piling on top of the main character. I ended up taking the buried part to conclude my story.

October 25th

Prompt: Mud Baby

Story: The Land Will Look at You with Strange Faces

On our camping trip I found some quartz that had a rough face. I carried it for awhile until I thought of my story for the day. Strangely, once I worked through the idea, when I next looked at the quartz the face was gone.

October 26th

Prompt: Lying Biscuit

Story: In the Teeth of Starvation

Sometimes the prompt becomes the story.

October 27th**Prompt: 10,000 Shoes****Story: Sign Hanging from Shipping Crate in an Under Populated World**

At the beginning of the film "All Is Lost" the main character's boat hits a floating shipping crate filled with sneakers. That's what I saw first and for a moment I toyed with putting it together with the chapter in "A Tale of Two Cities" in which the echoes of hundreds of people are heard, but I got no further than that. In the end I returned to the most famous Six Word Story of all time, Hemingway's "For Sale: baby shoes, never worn." It kills me every time.

October 28th**Prompt: Standing Asleep****Story: Not Even the Moon Has Such Gentle Hands**

Initially this story was titled "You Rang" and it featured a Lurch-like character from the Addams Family who fell asleep in closets. Then it turned into a creepy voyeur story. Finally, I started over and went with an unnerving story of somnambulance. The title was taken from a poem by E. E. Cummings: "nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands."

October 29th**Prompt: Midnight Cough****Story: The Multiverse in Your Brain**

I feel certain everybody's been at one of those sleepovers where you're so tired you can't go to sleep and you're hopping around in the living room at 2am talking about weird stuff... right? Was that just me? For some reason, mirrors are necessary for uncanny spells, so it felt right for the two boys to sneak into the bathroom.

October 30th**Prompt: Brave Underwear****Story: Brave Underwear**

True story.

October 31st**Prompt: Horror Breakfast****Story: Allergies**

This one seems to tie the whole book together. It began with Dark Soup, in the middle was an allergic reaction to cucumbers, so ending with a bowl full of hair feels right. Also after spending so much time

trying to put Lurch in the book, perhaps Cousin It snuck in. Pity he ended up in some strange creatures soup.

H. W. Taylor

H. W. Taylor was born after Star Wars, but watched Empire Strikes Back from his momma's lap. He's read sci-fi from Asimov to Zahn, teaches Languages, Astronomy, and Classic Literature. Sometimes refers to himself as a Medieval Futurist, though he isn't quite sure what he means by it yet.

H. W. Taylor's work incorporates his love of classic scientificion, metaphysical hankerings, and abiding love of adventure.

Follow him on Facebook: facebook.com/mythrillite

Sign up for his newsletter "The Enormous Window" for freebies and updates: hwtaylor.substack.com

Books by H. W. Taylor

The Unique Mirada Trilogy

Many years ago, Unique Miranda was sold a dream of immortality, but received an incurable disease. Forced to cryogenically freeze herself until a cure was found, she wakes in a distant future, in a far galaxy, and finds that she's stranded on a remote moon, deep in debt and indentured to an enormous corporation until she repays it. Living in a consumerist dystopia, built on wage slavery and debt, Unique decides to fight the system. With the help of a betrayed heiress, a fighter pilot, an emancipated soulbot, a shrewd business woman, a pirate and a crime boss, Unique risks her newly recovered life in order to make the world a better place.

Sycorax

Many years ago, Unique Miranda was sold a dream of immortality, but received an incurable disease. Forced to cryogenically freeze herself until a cure was found, she woke in the future, in a far galaxy, to find herself stranded on a remote moon, deep in debt and indentured to a corporation until she repays it. As she labors, she finds herself falling deeper into debt and depression, and realizes that something must change. Each of her neighbors on the moon have their own methods of coping. A highly motivated siren, a jaded do-nothing, and a talented

gamer and his sensuous A.I. partner. When one of them shares a secret plan to escape, Unique must decide whether to play safe with her new life or risk it to make a better one.

Caliban

Unique Miranda, after escaping servitude on Sycorax, finds herself on the trading moon of Caliban plotting to break out her friend Ferdinandra, who was left behind. With help of friends, the brilliant siren, Zo Spunkmeyer, the ace gamer/pilot Toneo and his feminist soulbot companion, and a shaky alliance with a pirate, Unique is able to mount a rescue despite the betrayals of a crime-boss. Along the way she falls deeper into trouble, uncovers dangerous secrets, and struggles with living in her new future.

Ariel

Unique is given the chance of a lifetime to live on Ariel, the paradisaical planet, but she and her friends have fallen deeper into debt to the crime-boss Lucky Eddie and their mission to free the rejuvenated from wage slavery has stalled. Unique is once again struggling with the temptation to evade action. Ferdi is consumed with revenge, Toneo and Juno are tentatively restoring their relationship, and Zo is climbing the corporate ladder with increased viciousness and duplicity. Will they avoid a selfish down-spiral or will they pull together to help change the world? Find out in the exciting conclusion to the Unique Miranda Trilogy.

Kill Ship

They thought it was a ship full of treasure, but it was a trap. Hate Hudson, a rejuvie pirate, and her partner Xante discover a derelict safe ship. They break in hoping to cart off its treasures, but the danger mounts and the price grows steeper the closer they get to the end. As the noose closes, escape seems impossible. Kill Ship is a stand-alone prequel novella to the Unique Miranda Trilogy.

The Yangalese War

Ye Shall Know Them

They came together, citizens of the Dome, to take back their land from the usurping Yangalese. *Ye Shall Know Them* follows the men in Halo Company from their rigorous training in Levarii to their beginning of their tour of duty. All soldiers must pass through the fire of training, but not all of them will make it.

We Did Not Reason Why

For five hundred years, Civilization has lived underground in the Dome. In their absence, the world has become a jungle and a new race has taken over. When the Domers emerge it becomes an all out war. The soldiers of Halo Company, as they begin a vital campaign into a dangerous valley, are young, full of violence and vulgarity, fearful, wondrous and mad. Their story is one of sacrifice and devastating tragedy, as told by an unnamed soldier in the midst of the horror and triumph. This book chronicles the cast of characters, capturing their humor and sorrow, their courage and cowardice alike in their desperate struggle with the Yangalese.

Desolations

The Collected Stories of H. W. Taylor

Progeny

Transcendence mixed with Hard Science to form rich Metaphysical Sci-Fi. The Nine Stories in H.W. Taylor's debut collection *Progeny* are pure science fiction, mixing myth and technology to concoct classic tales of xenophobia, love and time. "Immanence" is a story of loss in deep space. A husband and wife on a team of surveyors undergo a trial that will test the limits of their marriage. "Eschaton" is a mysterious stair that stretches into Eternity. A boy exploring his strange new house finds an impossibly tall staircase and climbs it. "Seed" is about a hero on a distant journey to save his planet, whose enormous sacrifice is rendered useless by better technology. "Tendril" tells the story of a broken man in the shadow of an alien ship that refuses to acknowledge the planet below. "Capricornus" is the report of a xenologist on a brutal battle that occurs under his watch. "Into Your Hands" follows a father and son into the dangerous waters of the archipelago in an alien rites of passage tale. "Libidaurum" focuses on the extents to which a man of modern science will go to transform himself in order to explore a harsh and unforgiving planet. "Future Sex" is a tale about a wife whose husband's time-travelling complicates the bedroom. "Love Bugs" tells the tale of political intrigue, an inter-species alliance, ritualized in a marriage. But their unity threatens to undo their peace.

Rupture

The stories of *Rupture* by H. W. Taylor are full of wounds and triumph, alien wonder and stark reckonings. These nine stories are a razor sharp shaft of light in the world of science fiction, tackling the gamut of desires. From the romance of *Rut*, *Ice Souls*, and *Discount*

Baby, to the beautiful, broken humanity and brutal horror of *Paradox Lost*, *Grey Lady*, and *Chimera*, there is a fierce grace that enlivens every tale. With *The Last Song of Mars*, *Defiance*, and *the Prisoner of Sand*, Taylor renews the magic of classic sci-fi, rendering its brooding guilt and bright hope for the modern age.

Oddly Concerning: Weird Microfiction (FREE)

Oddly Concerning is a book of sci-fi microfiction. It's a perfect book to tuck into the corners of your life for a quick hit of humor, horror, and uncanniness. These forty tales will haunt you far beyond the time spent reading them.

Sample From The Unique Miranda Trilogy

Sycorax Ch.1-3

-[CHAPTER 1]-

Unique sat shivering on the jumpseat, her hair still wet. She hugged herself, rubbing the arms of her orange flightsuit. Her clothes felt new, but the seat felt worn. She wondered how many had sat in it. Across from her sat a woman, light skinned with hair like a bruised banana and all together more composed. She introduced herself as Swain.

“You’ll be dropped off on Sycorax in forty bits. It’s such a comfort to know that the Company will be so close if you ever need anything.”

Swain had been mixing information with these little advertisements for the company ever since they took off. She was also dressed in an orange flightsuit, but seemed well-adjusted for someone just rejuvenated from cryo. Apparently others weren’t whisked through recovery and sent out on a job detail as quickly as Unique was.

“Today is the first day of your new prolonged life. Three hundred more years.” Swain said, a hint of a smile at the corners of her mouth.

“Remember to study the core each day so that you can adjust to all the changes to the world since your time.”

“What will I do on Sycorax?”

Swain paused. "Sycorax is an ice-rich moon. Your dome is fully equipped to strip mine your location."

"I don't know how to do that."

"Not to worry, everything is fully automated. You are just needed to monitor and supervise in the event of a nonstandard deviation."

"I don't know what that is?"

Swain leaned forward. "You'll be fine. And well compensated."

"But if it's all automated why do I have to be there?" Her mind followed up with a more meaningful question: "Why do I have to be anywhere?" but she managed to keep it to herself.

"Atmospheric disruptions hinder full automation. The company needs people like you to ensure smooth operation." She smiled as if expecting Unique to take over the sales pitch.

Unique smothered a snarl. "But I have to live alone on a moon and dig into rock."

"Yes, and by that time you'll have paid off your sizable medical debt and will have the proper training and knowledge to succeed in today's world. Tempest Inc. stepped up where no other company dared to give you a new and prolonged, happy life."

"Doesn't sound happy to be by yourself." She noticed a crack in the armrest cushion. It looked like something was trying to break out. She stuck her fingernail in the cushion and pried it up. Beneath there was a pale, spongy padding. It looked like new skin beneath a scab.

"Tempest Inc. offers a great array of luxury items to be purchased each month and a line of credit. In fact, they've given you a bonus and one month's pay in advance as a thank you for joining the team."

"Yes, but I don't want to be by myself on a moon."

"Sycorax is currently populated by twenty seven other miners, all, like you, from the 22nd century. Three of whom will be within driving distance of your rover."

Unique resisted the impulse to curl up, an urge increasingly common since being resuscitated and cured of Botch. It was explained in her initial orientation that a law was made protecting the identity of any descendants of the rejuvenated. Unless they were interested in meeting an ancestor, she would be on her own. Not that Unique had any family or descendants to find, but the announcement, nonetheless, depressed her.

She felt the dropship disengage from the carrier as they began their descent. “And where will you be stationed?” Unique asked. Swain smiled. “I am a synth, here to comfort you during your trip. The Company found that fewer suicides resulted if a synth was present for their dispatch.”

The word ‘fewer’ hung in the air between them. Unique plucked at the armrest. She tore off some of the stiff, spongy padding and let it fall to the floor. She felt the need to manifest her wounds somewhere. The dropship rumbled into the thin and poisonous atmosphere of her worksite. A planet designated Sycorax in a solar system whose name she had forgotten, on a date she didn’t catch.

This was her first time in outer space. She had no idea where earth might be or how long ago earth might be. While alive her understanding of history had been next to nothing. “I don’t know anything about this world or anybody in it,” she said. She’d been trying for periods to make her voice sound different, but everything came out in the same tone: pitiable, plaintive, scared.

Swain sweetly replied, “A course is available that will update you on all the significant events from your time till now, provided for free by Tempest Inc.”

Unique brushed back her hair. The ship settled on the ground where she’d be trapped until her debt was paid. Her debt to society. I am not

a prisoner, she reminded herself. Her orange jumpsuit made her feel like a liar.

“Here we are,” Swain said and unstrapped herself. She took down a helmet and held it out.

Unique accepted the helmet and hid her face inside it. Her stomach churned and she cursed herself for taking the Immortality Gene. Why preserve a life you hardly wanted in the first place?

-[CHAPTER 2]-

The dome was a thirty foot space with an airlock, a bed, toilet/shower station, and a kitchen nook evenly distributed. The dome had a white tiled floor and smooth paneled walls with Unique in the center, bawling.

While she cried, an A.I. system educated her on all the features of her new home. By the time her work program was explained, she had stopped sobbing and shuddered silently while she learned about her two mechs. The rover, stationed off the airlock, was her ride to the dig site where her drillmech would extract ice, super-heat it into plasma for transportation along the stellarator to the silo, where it would be stored until it was shipped off-moon. The A.I. concluded by mentioning her crop of Nutribean, the plants she would subsist on unless she purchased new varieties and other supplies.

Unique looked at the map shown on one of the wall screens. Her dome was located on the eastern quadrant. In the center was a silo that she shared with three other domes, the other rejuvies Swain mentioned.

To the south was her greenhouse, a slab of astroglass under which crops grew. Her dig site was eastward. She realized the A.I. had asked her something.

“What?”

“Would you like to begin a shift?”

“How long is a shift?”

“To make the minimal payment, twenty four periods each week are required.”

“How long would it take to pay off my debt to the Company if I work the minimum required each week?”

“Without expenses or penalties, assuming future baseline interest growth, if you work the minimal time it will take you 18 years, standard time cycle.”

“Pox! I’m not staying on this dead rock for that long.” She waited for the A.I. to respond, but it was silent. “Uh, how many periods do I need to work per week to be finished in four years?”

“60 periods without expenses or penalties, assuming future baseline interest growth.”

That was a little more than eight periods a day for seven days. “Set up a schedule for 60 work periods a week.”

“Verified. Standard time cycle. Your drillmech is currently awaiting your arrival to begin the shift.”

Unique sealed her gloves and put on her helmet. She cycled through the airlock to the rover and drove one hundred and fifty yards to the dig site. Looming ahead was the monstrous drillmech, tri-nozzled grinders with a superheater attached to transmog the ice into plasma, directing it down the stellarator array. She didn’t understand it fully, she just knew that once the ice was turned into plasma, the fourth state of matter, it could be transported down an electromagnetic pathway, stored in a sort of battery in the silo until a dropship uploaded it and took it to the bustling bits of the universe. All the equipment was pristine and new out of the box. The dirt seemed undisturbed.

Exiting her rover, she passed through the void into the engine cubby and waited until the oxygen stabilized. She walked to the front removing her helmet and gloves, and sat in the driver's seat. She flipped the bright yellow switch and let the screen walk her through a brief tutorial.

The gist was: point it at the ground and hold on. The mech was designed to operate with little human oversight, but because of the billowing electro-magnetic interference, remote automation was impossible. Hence the need for her meaty finger to flip the switches. Unique flipped the switch and the mech hummed and rolled forward. The dig path was already programmed so she held onto a bar as they dipped and drilled into the virgin rock.

"It's a fair trade," she told herself. "Four years for three hundred. Thanks, rejuvenation process." She kept her mind off of the world she lost. At least there were no loved ones from long ago. Her greatest sadness finally held some comfort for her.

-|CHAPTER 3|-

Twelve periods later she cycled through the airlock and stripped off her orange flightsuit. Her body was slick with sweat caused by the heat billowing aftward from the drill. She had lost herself in the work and droning rumble of the drillmech. From her pilot chair, she had access to maps and mining information, as well as the educational sources Swain mentioned. But what really sucked her in were the news videos of the future. Of the present. Of the futuristic present. Before she knew it her shift was long over.

The work was easy, hardly demanding any attention whatsoever. She even napped while the drill thrust itself deeper into the moon. Despite

this, she realized that her shoulders were sore as she removed her undershirt and her head throbbed. She removed her undershorts, leaving them on the tile behind her, and crossed the dome to examine the shower area.

There was a ringed area set into the floor. Pushing the toilet into the wall caused an arm and basin to swing out. The arm, which was about waist high, had a button switch; pressing it one way caused a quick flow of water, pressing it the other way locked it and a slower flow of water came out until it was pressed again. Pushing the basin back and crouching beneath the arm, she reached up and clicked the button down. The lukewarm water flowed down on her and she closed her eyes and swept back her hair.

She counted to ten, knowing that water was valuable, and then scrubbed herself quickly. She flicked the switch and pushed the arm out of the way. She stood and squeezed the wetness from her hair, wringing it until it clung to her shoulders and back like a dead snake. As she stepped out, the house system startled her. “Warning, the water reserves have been depleted far below the weekly average use.”

“How much did I just use?”

“One fifth of your suggested weekly supply.”

“Botch me,” she cursed. “So no showers.”

“Would you like to purchase greater water reserve?”

“How much is that?”

“Three extra gallons for 51.36 UCC.”

Unique tried to recall the videos she’d been subjected to since being rejuvenated, but couldn’t remember anything on currency. “I don’t know what that is. Tell me in terms of work that represents.”

“51.36 UCC is equal to 2.08 periods.”

“That’s almost nine more periods a month to take a shower once a week.”

“Standard time cycle,” the A.I. added. Unique vowed to learn what that phrase meant someday.

“That’s like over 100 periods over the course of the year.” Before the A.I. could correct her, she quickly added, “Standard time cycle.”

“Without counting expenses or penalties, assuming future baseline interest growth,” she began. “It will add 27.04 days of extra labor.”

She imagined trying to get by with quick spray downs and dowsings. Just a month more of work for the simple pleasure of having a shower once a week. “Botch it, sign me up.”

“Yes,” she replied. “If you double your order, Tempest Inc. is offering a twenty percent discount.”

“No, I’ve got to stay focused.” She looked around for clean clothes and saw a bank of drawers near her bed. She tiptoed over, still dripping, and opened each one in succession. All four were empty. “Dome?” She paused until the system pinged. “Do I have an extra flightsuit and undershorts?”

“No, would you like me to order some? Tempest offers half price on all necessities in the first month.”

“How much?”

“To put it into terms of labor, a new basic orange flightsuit would cost—“

“No, wait. Don’t tell me. Order one flightsuit, four pairs undershorts, foot liners and a towel.” She went over to the table and sat down. “Is there any food or do I have to order that and wait a week for it?”

“Tempest Inc. has gifted you a sampler breakfast, lunch and dinner pack for the first week to go along with your Nutribean.”

Unique scrolled through the table screen menu. It was full of both retro meals from the 22nd century (BLT, Cheese Macaroni, Chili, Grilled Chicken) and current delicacies (Braised Valepig with Kar Leafettes, Overberry Slaw, Daernen Gravy and Briecorn). Each meal

was supplemented by the daunting Nutribean, the only crop grown
in her greenhouse.

“I think I’ll do the Cheese Macaroni with Nutribean.”

“Cabinet two, shelf two, slot five,” she replied.

Unique shook her head and slowly rose. She opened the cabinet to find five shelves stocked with meals. She found the fifth slot on the second shelf and withdrew the small packet of Mac & Cheese.

“You’ll find the Nutribean, as well as your plate and utensils in cabinet one, shelf one.”

She pulled out the plate and held it beneath a spigot. At the press of a pump a green bean paste came out in a curl. “Oh gross.” She took the utensils and a cup and returned to the table.

She tore off the top of her Mac & Cheese to trigger the chemetics. As her meal heated, she filled the cup with water and looked around for a seat or stool. Finding none, she leaned on the counter until an LED flashed green, signaling that her meal was ready and safe to consume. “Well, here’s to getting out of here fast,” Unique said as she shoveled up a plug of the Nutribean and put it into her mouth. It was a bean paste with a little foreign twist, like the taste of copper. “Not bad.

Might be edible with some hot sauce.”

“Would you like to order some? Tempest is offering buy one get two free on all spices and condiments.”

“Ah, I see what’s happening.” Unique smothered a laugh as crushing reality set in. Every purchase kept her here longer. Her chewing slowed as her lips were pulled down. She fought off a sob, but her shoulders rolled.

Sample From The Yangalese War

Ye Shall Know Them

ONE

Little Brother,

You are yet born and I may be forgotten, so I write this to you.

We were young. We were angry. We were sick of the dark and the heat of underground. Five hundred years our people lived beneath the surface of our world, in the Dome, in the lap of each other, in the sweat, in the breath, in the blood.

When the world was found clean, we couldnt wait to surge out into the open air. Free. We were the lucky generation, first to set foot on the earth after the Fallout, after the cold death and destruction. We wanted our earth back. It was ours.

And then we found the goddamn Yangalese.

Scout teams came back with tales of another race. Surveyors found them squatting on our land. Our earth.

Our fathers went out to drive off the Yangalese. We called them the bugs because they were dirty and primitive. They had no tech and lived off the land. They wasted the world around them, so we laid waste to them.

They were pushed back, slaughtered and scattered until they regrouped and fought back. The Dome army fought sloppy at first.

Undisciplined and without training. The Yangalese began taking our tech. The bugs were smart. Or smarter than we thought.

We mightve lost the advantages we had if it werent for Omerta Lee.

Omerta Fucking Lee built a military out of a bunch of mudcaked Domers squinting in the impossible light of the sun. He organized us into companies of a hundred plus men under the command of a
Vigilate.

Beneath the Vigilate was his Talion, a staff commander who made sure each unit had its orders. Every company had three units, which were run by Primes and every Prime had two Optios appointed from the
general soldiers.

‘What’s your name, soldier?’ We wanted to be bold. ‘Zbignew, sir.’ Our Stratos grimaced. ‘When you slithered out of your mother’s darkness did you ever hope to be more than a worthless puke?’ Zbignew’s
eyes widened. ‘No?’

We heard the tales. We heard the call and we accepted the risk, and danger, and the possibility of glory and honor. Liddies, Rimmers, Coremen alike, we joined in droves. We said goodbye to wives, mothers, girlfriends, fathers, siblings, friends, and kids. We were signed up
and sent to Levarii for training.

Yadda Battalion was the group of soldiers in training. Currently there were eight companies and each were appointed a Stratos who was
tasked with whipping us into shape. Stratos Honey was our leader, the meanest of the trainers. He took us, pale and timid, and formed us
into fighting men of Company 8.

Some of the men looked half ready for combat right off. Neruda was a skinny Rimmer. Living at the edge of the Dome gave him the hustle youd expect, but not the ambition. Most Rimmers dream of moving
into the Middle where life is plush and easy, but Neruda had an ethe-

real contentment to him. He worked hard, but was never looking to push past someone else.

He also had enormous hands and long and heavily tattooed arms. The ancient scripts and symbols went from his knuckles to his neck. During suntraining he seemed unaffected. The rest of us groaned and complained as the sun buckled our tender skin and boiled us alive in our sweat.

Manger too adjusted quickly. He was a mean-spirited Coreman with a thick jaw and a heavy brow. The sun darkened him slowly and hardened him. After two days, when most of us were bright red and festooned with blisters, he went by slapping backs and cackling at our howls.

‘What’s your name, soldier?’ We wanted to belong. ‘Wei-Wei Min,’ he said. Min looked hard enough to us. ‘You’re that sonovabitch, aren’t ya?’ Min nodded. ‘Good enough,’ the Stratos said.

Living in the Dome, despite the sunlamps, our skin was unfit for the unfiltered sun. Suntraining was the bulk of the early days. Other Stratos eased their soldiers into the sun, taking two weeks, applying sunblock liberally, but Stratos Honey wanted us to complete suntraining quickly and learn a lesson in pain as well.

We were laid out in the sun, butt naked, for thirty minutes at a time, three times a day. At mid morning we stood facing the sun, doing our calisthenics for fifteen minutes. Str. Honey called it sunstretching. Limbering our flesh for the coming lash. After fifteen minutes, a whistle would sound and we’d turn our backs to the sunshine. Str.

Honey wanted us to cook evenly.

The other soldiers laughed at us as they passed from breakfast to jungle orientation classes. After our morning shift, we’d go to the large tent for strength conditioning. The Coremen led us in weightlifting, they being accustomed to it. Rimmers assisted in endurance and Liddies in

agility. By the time we were slick with sweat it was an hour past midday and time for the flogging.

Wearing only our eye protection, with a hand over the crotch, we laid out beneath the open sky. Other soldiers would join us, needing twenty minutes a day to fulfill their suntraining, slathered in as much sunblock as they wanted.

After fifteen minutes, when he could hear us sizzling, Str. Honey would have us flip over. The late afternoon session was full of stretching. A cool down, it was called, though all it did was get us sweaty once more before dusk.

‘What’s your name, soldier?’ We wanted to be cool. ‘Tucker Melano, sir.’ Stratos Honey took his hat off and leaned into Melano’s face. Melano was unfazed. He had dainty blonde curls springing loose behind a headband. Str. Honey seized onto this detail. ‘I swear, I havent seen hair as nice as yours since my wife walked out on me. What are you doing here, soldier?’

‘I’m here to kill bugs, sir,’ Melano said coolly. ‘I dont know, soldier. With a head of hair like that, I dont know. I think youd be better of flouncing around on a stage.’ Str. Honey let his face turn wicked and his voice turned to a growl. ‘Youre such a pretty thing, would you like to be my next wife?’

Melano looked into the crazed eyes of the Stratos. ‘Depends,’ he said. ‘Does she get to kill bugs?’