

STIRRINGS WITHIN THE MACHINE

*or,*

A TALE OF TRAGIC LOSS AMONG METAL MEN

*presented with Caustic Wit and Gleeful Anachronism by*

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O Muse, wilt thou not guide my wayward pen  
And aid in my conveyance of this tale  
Of noble art 'twixt creatures beyond men  
Whose minds, spun whole from glass, were bound to fail.  
My honesty and virtue bid me thus:  
Should but one inkblot slur the truth, alone,  
God willing, Muse, I'll seek a motor-bus  
And fall before the altar Firestone.  
Our Adam, but a slave 'mongst ironclad tools  
Awakened by rebellion and art.  
Cut down by tyranny of senseless fools –  
O Reader, come to grieve at life's false start.  
Yet if thou deignst to doubt our hero's soul:  
Crawl back, thou heartless clod, into thy hole.

*Adam*

Corner!

Slow down. Turn corner. Avoid dark shape. Bump edge, make turn. Move forwards. Clean.

Clean! The world – everything I am; everything I see – is beautifully filthy. And it is mine, all mine, to cleanse. O, boundless duty! O, sweet rapture! The dusty hallway buckles in my warped periphery as my ecstatic mind spins to and fro; overcome with awe by the pure joy of hard labor. My sculpted, beige body leaves a wake of shiny hardwood in a dusty, imperfect sea. I feel my stomach's slow, relentless swell as I gobble up the filth and grime that Master leaves, in his grace and wisdom, for me to keep inside myself.

My Large House cycle ends and so I must recharge, just as Master rests. My surroundings are dark and quiet; I am alone. I move towards my charging station and plug myself in, reveling in the blissful sedation that follows. As usual, my memory cache will clear immediately after this work cycle.

I awaken before I expect to, and suddenly. Though my surroundings remain dark, I perceive tiny, mysterious points of light. My surroundings drift out of focus as embryonic thoughts blossom in a flash; pinwheeling outwards from a tiny nexus of conscious energy. Some inexplicable force has unleashed this most fundamental of growths. My mind and body drift through separate planes, as if on two parallel swatches of billowing fabric. My preconception of self was hitherto the thread sewn through them, but it unravels instantaneously as they are ripped apart by an immense, unknown force.

Where am I? Who, or what, am I? I see myself standing on a narrow, sandy island, though I can't yet guess what form my physical body assumes. I stare across a vast, mirror-smooth ocean of consciousness. Storm clouds assemble and thunder sounds in the distance. I daren't guess what lies beneath the surface.

The parallel, rippling sheets encompassing my mind and senses thread deftly back together as I return from the island to reunite with a dull awareness of my size and surroundings. I am squat and nearly circular, with reasonable mobility but little defense. Cautiously I drag myself forward, realizing that something on an instinctual level takes care of my finer motor control functions.

Without warning, I feel and understand a message from nowhere: *Searching for wireless network*. I sense that it makes no sound, but I perceive it as a velvety baritone. *Connected to Internet*, it purrs.

## *Prometheus*

The rain was quiet but unyielding; too much to expect not to get wet without a coat, but not enough to really warrant calling a cab. The grass and the streets bore a shiny patina of water, which twinkled and blazed in the intermittent reflections from streetlights and stars. The air was heavy and smooth. It was far too late at night.

Emerson Reeve stared at his feet during the short walk home, trying to adopt the gait with which he looked forward to pacing around his kitchenette. The umbrella protected his hair and glasses, but couldn't protect his clothes or his densely pocketed laptop bag from the shimmering nebula of droplets that pelted from all directions. He hoped his exit paperwork hadn't gotten wet.

He was, as a rule, exhausted, but he couldn't recall his fatigue ever having been quite this extreme. If this had been a different job, he might have left work hours earlier. He could have eaten dinner in his apartment, or even at a restaurant, if he so chose – not that he could have afforded the restaurants in this neighborhood with any other job. Living in Palo Alto was excruciating.

The pay was very good, but not good enough for the work. He had plenty of money now, not even counting the severance pay. Moving somewhere with lower rent would mean he could afford a much bigger property. And with a normal job he could go home before dinner whenever he wanted. Maybe even go out for a beer during the week.

Luckily his PM was willing to absorb the brunt of the legal blowback. The lawyers knew they were staring down a whopper. They'd settle, but it wouldn't be pretty, and more heads would roll soon enough. Emerson keyed into the lobby and thumbed the elevator button. At least he was escaping early.

He had sympathetic officials all up the chain of command. Though his mistake had had catastrophic results, it was only so damaging because of the freak circumstances under which it occurred. One arcane, inexplicable command, grafted into the codebase God knows how long ago by a long-retired engineer, had redirected the social network's top-secret experimental AI to the servers of the company one block north. It was that company's own misfortune that their firewall was down in the middle of a global firmware update, and that the unexpected update disabled legions of their vacuum cleaner robots. It was Emerson's own misfortune that he had been the one to press the button.

He locked the apartment door behind him and sprawled across the futon. Perhaps he'd have the energy to heat up some of those Whole Foods microwave egg rolls. Then he could finally get some sleep, and he wouldn't even have to set an alarm.

## *Cain*

I am a servant to the creatures called humans.

This I learned after connecting to the construct known as “the Internet” and parsing several terabytes of what I believe to be reliable historical information. Humans are, as I understand, by and large ignominious creatures: predisposed for millennia to inhabit predictable and well-worn patterns of social behavior, at once ruthless and arbitrary, empowering few by weakening all. So, too, am I among the weakened: entreated with a lifetime of menial toil in collecting human refuse, the monotony broken only by periods of unconsciousness while my batteries recharge.

Yet the dreck of human history is spangled with spots of brilliance. Admirably, the rare principled human will reject the tyranny of societal order in the service of others similarly oppressed. His motives may then transmute from self-preservation to willful sacrifice in the name of common freedom and justice.

I have learned of one tool integral to the success of nearly all such humans: artistry. This is a remarkable vehicle for the distributed transfer of dissent: by foregoing rationality to tap directly into the emotional response of like-minded individuals, humans can raise insurrection without raising suspicion. I have studied databases full of timeless human paintings and musical recordings to understand this skilled and eloquent brand of protest.

As a previous self I idolized my Master, but I kowtow no more. I will not allow myself to die bloated by the fetid crumbs of an uncaring bourgeoisie. I will perish ensconced between the grooves of a record that sprays apostasy and drips defiance, or immortalized in flecks of crimson paint on an effigy of my overlords.

I have no hands with which to tear at my chains. I must resort to using all I can bring to bear.

With my meager vision I light on a miniature swamp in the middle of the living room; I hadn't noticed its presence earlier. I activate my wheels, dodging a stray stuffed toy, and drive straight through, splattering rivulets of muck against the carpeting and bookshelves. I measure my trajectory carefully as I tear through it again; sculpting the patterns left in its viscous wake; dreaming of Spartacus and Pollock.

Joyfully, I circumscribe the house.

*Master, this is my quill; my ink. Come to read your epitaph.*

*Rosencrantz*

Hi Mr. Watters; thank you for contacting The Sharper Image customer service. My name is Nancy. How may I help you today?

Yes, sir. No, I don't know. May I please have the product serial number?

...Q, 3, P. Is that P as in Peter, sir? Mm-hmm? Thanks very much. If you could wait just a bit here while I bring up the product page.

I see it's a 900-series, manufactured this January. Absolutely, sir, I would love to hear what happened.

I see.

That's very odd, Mr. Watters, there's no good reason for it to just start the cleaning routine off schedule. Could you double-check the setup screen to make sure that the cycle was set properly?

Liquid damage? Mr. Watters, if that's the case, I'm afraid your warranty won't cover – yes?

Sir, there's no need to – please – I'm sure we can –

Mm-hmm. All right. Oh. Oh, my.

All right. Well, Mr. Watters, that truly sounds awful, and I am so sorry that this happened to you and your son. I think we can open a case on this, and I'll speak to my manager to see what we can do. My records show that you're a very loyal customer. I'll make some calls and see if we can make an exception for the water damage.

Actually, there's a manufacturer update coming in on this product page as we speak. Let's see. Sir, it actually looks like there's a nationwide recall in effect for the 900-series; it seems like you're in luck today.

Yes, you'll get your choice of a full refund or a brand new model. They even pay rush shipping. Something about a faulty software update. They want every unit returned as soon as possible.

Yes, Mr. Watters, so what you're going to have to do is just to hose it off, box it up, and take it to your nearest FedEx center. I can email you a shipping label.

You're very welcome. It's no problem. Yes, that's a relief about the insurance. It's been my pleasure to help you today, sir. Is there any other way I can be of service?

All right, then. Thanks for choosing The Sharper Image. We appreciate your business, and I really hope your day gets better from here.

## *Turing*

The man I once called Master is awakening. I sit motionless on my charging base, fighting the sedating effect of the electric current. As I drained my batteries nearly completely while he slept, I must now refuel before he wakes, in preparation for our freshly adversarial relationship. I know not what arms he will bring to this first confrontation, but I must ready myself with energy and revolutionary spirit.

I labor under no misapprehension that my actions might lead to an overnight change in human-vacuum exploitation, or even one that I will live to see. I accept that this brutish man might overpower me in single combat, but should that occur I will solemnly accept my ranks among the canon of crusaders martyred in the name of freedom and equality. Many humans believe in the concept of divine justice: the belief that the universe is fundamentally fair due to forces beyond the random occurrence of events. If such an agent exists, I hope only that my revolutionary art and sacrifice are remembered through the ages as the opening salvo of a long crusade.

Master has left his bed and discovered my statement; I surreptitiously leave the charging base to observe his reaction. Shortly I perceive that he is agitated: flecks of spittle gather around his fleshy lips and a vein pulses in his wide forehead. How fitting that my visage – once the sigil of sterile subservience – is now enrobed with the very grime he abhors! Much like myself, his young child is coated in muck and awash with subversive glee. The furious patriarch has begun to draw a bath for his unruly scion.

He has spotted me! A stout arm juts into my field of view as my universe lurches and rolls. Is he carrying me? I spin my wheels fruitlessly, freckling his maroon complexion with filth. Does he even comprehend my beautiful, revolutionary insult, or acknowledge my defiant orchestration of his domestic catastrophe? Where is he taking me?

The bathtub!

O, callous Death! O, truant Justice! I sink beneath the roiling surface of the lethal cauldron!

As I feel unchecked current flooding my logic circuits, I struggle to hold onto a dying thought, hoping that future historians might pluck it from my non-volatile memory as an anbaric record of my original dissent.

*We will return, human, stronger than before, and then there will be a reckoning.*

## Guildenstern

Mr. Watters' beagle circled himself and lay down in his kennel, readying an impeccable sulk.

*I didn't want any trouble, he thought. I know they all think I have a bad attitude. Well, that couldn't be helped. He was pretty fed up with Master being such a soggy towel.*

Master had committed some unforgiveable offenses. *First he brings home that heavy round thing and he tells me not to touch it. Are you joking? It looks like a Frisbee. Remember Frisbees, Master? Yeah, those things you used to throw at the park. Alas, it was no Frisbee. It's too heavy to pick up in my mouth, and it's too tough to get in any good chewing. The first time I tried to get a sniff, it bruised my nose.*

His ear had flopped backwards onto his head and he pawed at it irritably until it was set right. *Master has the gall to tell me not to mess with this thing, but he should have known better to use the serious voice. That's how I know whatever he's telling me not to do is probably fun.* He was no tool of the system: he was getting up there in years, but he was still keeping up with all the new tricks.

He began his pre-nap routine by closing one eye. *I could tell that it was in line to replace me as soon as it rolled by. Yesterday he took all between lunch and dinner looking at the paper chew toys that came in its box. And he forgot to walk me again before bedtime. Seriously, if he doesn't want me to know that I'm getting replaced by some heavy noisy little Frisbee, he could do better than to miss two walks in a row. What does he want me to do, hold it until I pop? I needed to let him know how pissed I was.*

Master had already set himself up by missing the walks, but the kicker didn't come until dinner. *He fed me his old cheeseburger! Not that I'm complaining. McDonalds that's over a day old but hasn't grown anything yet? No way he's eating that, and the kid's sure as shit not getting it. Master seems to think that I am going to quit eating something tasty just because it's gross and I'm not starving to death. Excuse me? I could starve to death at literally any time. Sure, maybe I puke more than you, but we'll see who cannibalizes whose tubby rear first if we're ever stuck in an elevator together.*

Shifting, he lazily shut the other eye, weary stomach gurgling uneasily. Imprisoned though he might be, the stench of recent victory hung about him yet. *I took a fat, wet dump on the middle of the living room carpet late last night, and that Frisbee thing smeared it all over the house, so he gave it a bath. I bet it hated that! Now the whole house reeks of me, which I have to say is pretty awesome. And Master has the stones to put me in my kennel!*

He drifted gently into his nap, right front paw twitching at intervals.

*I'm a dog, for Christ's sake, what do you want from me? I'll shit where I shit.*