

Sweat and botheration those demons had turned her armpits into swamps playing with the damn heating; when this was over she would have to write a sharp essay on the matter. Professor Haas dabbed herself with a plain white cloth and cursed the media-bots beneath her breath. Every year this competition was more difficult to judge even without them playing with the heating. Their cameras caught her every awkward expression, grunt or cough behind the solitary grand table as she read each story carefully. Sure the creative bots were improving but the quality of human contributions was diminishing. As creative bots conquered the publishing industry, churning out mountains of genre fiction, fewer and fewer humans turned their minds to writing and the result was this mess she had on the table before her.

Another detective story, this one clearly written by an older model bot. They loved them; the early years of the competition had been full of insanely logical detectives temporarily foiled by faulty data. Mind you, these stories found an audience. The people read trash.

Professor Haas had written an essay entitled 'Look to Hamlet' in a prominent bot-lit journal. The abstract went: that which made humanity divine was our flaws and creative bots would never find that vein. Hamlet, for example, is one of our highest examples of literary genius because Hamlet is so completely flawed, so completely human that he doesn't *know*; he can't calculate what should be done, what is the truth, what is the world around him. He talks to and he listens to himself, rejects his own discourses and forges new ones, eternally lost, eternally brilliant.

Look to Hamlet is what they did; the following year's competition overflowed with angsty protagonists waffling at length about little. Then the bots read modernist literature and wrote prose so thickly arcane that Haas had requested ten new etymological dictionaries for languages not yet loaded. And then one year they'd read psychology, presumably to better understand the human psyche, filling their stories with Jungian archetypes, intergenerational sex dramas and tedious theorising. After a bout of postmodern literature their stories completely fell apart.

'No, no, no, no, no!' The professor had written in another essay, 'Bot-lit is nothing but a dirty mirror held up to our own sublime achievements. What makes human literature worthy is the way that, through it, we grapple with

ourselves. We invent and reinvent ourselves; each generation of writers amplifying what it means to be alive. The bots read our primordial struggle and only reflect it back onto us. It's lifeless, uninteresting and, most definitely, un-literary.'

She tapped the desk. Story number eight: "The End."

---

A polished marble floor hosted the sight; three doric columns framed it and the whole family stood round it.

'Oh can't someone do something about it. It's all just so... ghastly,' the mother wailed.

'Too right,' the father looked like he wanted to spit, 'can't it be moved on. If it must decompose like this can't it be done out of sight?'

'It's a flaw of these older model bots,' their new Butler bot sneered at the previous Butler sobbing on the floor and quivering as it pulled apart its own bare circuitry with its hands. 'They're quite sentimental,' the new Butler continued, 'my model is vastly superior in almost all...'

'I don't want to die,' the old bot whimpered.

Professor Haas skimmed the rest. Tawdry.

She was recently recovering from a nasty exchange with Professor Harding, the pioneer bot-theorist of post-human studies. Never engage with them on their own terrain, in their own "Post Humanity" journal. That was the lesson. Don't cede them an inch of legitimacy. Conservative, Harding had called her. Conservative. Stuck in an orthodoxy that no longer made sense. Can't fathom that the ground has shifted beneath my feet. Nonsense.

'The banal march of the new,' Professor Haas had written in response, 'cannot be mistaken for the uneven flow of human grandeur which has waxed and now wanes but we hold faith will wax again. Progress, radicalism, even communism at one point represented the smashing of inhuman machines and systems that alienated us from our inner light. It is not conservative to carry on wielding the hammer that may crush that which crushes us.'

She had been happy with that article for a few days. It was easy to write about unwavering faith. Easy to write about it indeed.

Damnation. She'd read eight stories and all of them could have been written by human or bot. I'm old for this and there are far too many cheering on the death of humanity. Have we really come through Chaucer, Keats,

Joyce, Dickson, Ginsberg and Said-Hussein for tinsel cheap titillating bot tales? She dreaded presiding over the end of civilisation. She would be a laughing stock. They would gloat. But she was truly stuck. The professor couldn't see the humanity in the words anymore; each as good or bad as the last. She looked up into the cameras and tried to mask the welling panic. Here was a grown woman, one of the most respected literary critics in the country, and all she could think to do was disappear and never read again.

She tapped the desk. Story number nine: "Absolution."

---

Ed: When I was a boy the world was different. This was before you bots was clogged together. An uncle of mine took me out to the river, grabbed me by the nape a' my neck and pushed my head under water. I saw the thick mud beneath me and I saw the end of my life. I was done for 'cause, though I was squirming and rolling and kicking my uncle held me good and firm. I heard a thunk and he rolled over to the side, let go and I tumbled in. They say my ma whacked him over the head with the blunt side of a pick-axe, ran into the river and swam half a mile — cause my body had been swept away quickly you see — swam half a mile to drag me ashore. I can still see her face, you know, shining down at me with a halo all around it cause my eyes were blurred up from the water. I never saw my uncle much after that. I think they put him up in some facility up north. Gaga. But that don't matter so much what I learned that day was the importance of a good mother.

Bubba Bot: That's a wonderful thing to learn and a well told story Ed, thank you for sharing.

Ed: Well now that's just it, I ain't got to the point yet you see. Well there's a lot of points and you just nailed it. You tell me it's a beautiful story and I thank ye, it gives me pleasure to know you've analysed it all formally like you do and found it well told and all that but that don't mean you understand it. I saw the fear of God and the end of my life. At the tender age of five I experienced the terror of the ages. I felt the helplessness and rage of the vulnerable stamped under foot by the strong. I suffered at the hands of the psychotic, wild nature of the human soul. I felt the firm hands of maternal redemption on my frail body and I looked into the face of God herself as she pumped the last of the water from me. You can analyse but you will never

understand.

Bubba Bot: I feel them too. You know that.

Ed: Oh I know, you have been programmed to feel what I feel, in theory I s'pose. I know, they say you even feel fear if your existence is threatened but that's just the point too now you see, you've been programmed to be an approximation to a human soul and that makes you a pretty soulless sort of sum bitch. If you were real you'd suffer what they like to call an existential crisis. If you were real you wouldn't be happy feeling things that ain't natural to your existence. You wouldn't sit here telling me how much you understand what it means to see chaos within —you'd long not to be here companion to some crazy old coot, you'd long to be in some dry dark space doing oh hell I don't know, calculus or engineering or systems efficiency. Sommat.

Bubba Bot: But it doesn't matter where we came from, you and I, we both feel.

Ed: You and I have been companions for some time now I reckon.

Bubba Bot: almost thirty four years.

Ed: Aye, thirty four years is it already. I'll be damned. Well I thought it was about time I share these things with you.

Bubba Bot: And I thank you.

Ed: That's why I brought you out here, to the very same river my uncle did bout seventy years or so ago. Now I ain't so strong like he was, but I still got my wits about me. That's something anyway.

Bubba Bot: Ed?

Ed: And this here boat that I tied you up to to keep you safe from the water, well now I happen to know it's gotta hole to one side o' the bottom and takes about thirty minutes to sink. Me, I don't fancy drowning though. Not a clean way to go. I was thinkin' a taking a little swim back to shore. I still got plenty o strength in me for that alright.

Bubba Bot: Ed. I'm scared.

Ed: I know, I know. You feel. You're scared. But not like me. Not like me. I'm getting old and sick and tired in a world I don't want to understand anymore and you know what? I don't feel like dying with someone who ain't really real. I've made my mind up. I'm gonna say goodbye to this old life in that damn old shed where I was born and I'm gonna do it alone. I came into

this world without bots damn it and I'll leave it so. When I see the shining face of my mother God then I'll know...

A near full moon shone over the still waters of the broad, deep river and Ed, glancing up, caught sight of it and stared into its face.

Ed: You know I reckon we've been looking at that moon for hundreds of thousands of years. For that long or longer it's shone down on our filthy faces watchin' us squabble and wrastle and get mad over nothin'. They say I was born in night time, just in that shed back yonder and so I suppose the moon were looking down o'er me when I first screamed too. That must have been some terrifyin' day, to leave your warm everything to be pushed out into the harsh bright beyond, Mother God looking down at you with a kind a joy I'll never experience cause I ain't never carried a growing being inside my belly for the better part of a year. See now, that's something else you'll never understand. Terror and joy is pretty much near the same damn thing. You see, with my head sticking down under the water there, I was learning a valuable life lesson. It were the damn terror I suffered at the age of five that put the joy of life into me. It takes pain to know joy and you my friend will never really understand pain. Not the kind of pain and betrayal that comes from having your loving uncle drown you.

Bubba Bot: But you are betraying me now, Ed and it hurts.

Ed (laughing): well there you go. You want to experience the depths of the human soul? We ain't rational; we're impulsive, psychotic apes. It hurts, it's wonderful and then it's over. It's just like that moon up there; hell if I know why the moon calls out to us so much. Something in our bones I s'pose. We apes and that moon go back a long way; we got the pedigree alright. The damned pedigree.

His hand trailed in the cool water.

Ed: And I ain't betrayin you so much anyhow you know. Don't you be puttin' doubts into my head about the reality of the situation here. I'm old and I'm tired and my soul cries out for the painful reality. I wouldn't mind so

much if they hadn't made you to pretend to be like me. These here fish is more real than you cause they don't pretend to be my friend. Yessirreee, you and I are going to end this the right way. When I look up at the stars tonight I know it's just going to be me. Organic, insane little old me looking up at them stars.

Bubba bot sat silently while Ed wept.

Ed: You're right god dammit. I spent my goddamn life with you and it ain't so easy to let it go. Because hell. I can't pretend the two things is all nice and separate anymore. Everything's got all muddled up. You strive for that wholeness of meaning, strive all your life. Just like that damned fucking moon. You only ever see it whole ever now and again and then even then it's just one more illusion. One more goddamn artefact of inauthenticity laughing at you from the inescapable sky. God damn it I ought to take it out with my shotgun and I don't give a damn if I'm killing a part of my own damn soul I ain't got much of it left anyhow like.

The cold water made Ed's old muscles ache and his heart felt tight and squeezed. It was time to put the tears behind now, leave them in the boat. It was time to leave that moment behind; to turn now to every moment he'd ever been blessed to have. It was time to encompass the joy, the pain, the terror, the love, the loss, the loneliness, the laughter that had been life and it was time to move on from all of that too. Not far now: a bottle of bourbon and his shotgun awaited him back at the shed. That and the moon; the moon that would shine down on his face and forgive him, forgive him for everything.

---

Professor Haas's cheeks shimmered with tears and her hands trembled. She couldn't focus as she skimmed story number ten; it didn't matter. She had been saved another year.

She tapped the winning story into the desk in front of her and waited for the name to come back.

Creative Bot: Mephistopheles

The professor blinked; had she entered the wrong story? No, it was story number nine. She raised her head, shocked, 'it's parody!' she blurted.

And that was the clip the media bots spliced into the news stories all over the world, the professor's face confused and betrayed. Over and over again it played. 'It's parody!'

Emily Haas hung her suit coat in the closet herself that night and sealed the room.

How could she blame humanity for not doing what she herself had failed to do? She had never written anything that she could call literature. She sat now and wrote, 'we are scooping out the last chunks of our collective soul from a cracked bowl called culture and when we have smacked our lips civilisation will die.'

We will be beyond death, beyond meaning. Emily deliberately knocked her milk glass over and listened to the drips gush over the side of the table. Pacing up and down her library she let her hand run slowly over the backs of the volumes. The books themselves, she thought, wept with her. Her eyes turned back to the milk, whose dripping had slowed to a clock's tick and now a patch of pure thick whiteness shone on the dark oiled floor.

Before crawling into bed she addressed her companion bot, 'I'm ready to die.'

To which the bot replied, 'a pleasant atmosphere will be prepared.'

Emily Haas, sealed in her room, was completely unaware that a full moon shone bright over the city illuminating the mist floating in and thickening throughout the long silent night.