



THE GRAIL

VOL. XVI

April 7, 2021

ISSUE IV

INSIDE

LOLLIPOP

HELEN

Zhihan L. travels back in time remembering Helen, launcher of a thousand ships, princess elect, and candy thief.

PAGE 1

LIGHTBULB

REVIEW OF 17776

Have you heard? Space probes watch American football too! Will S. ventures into the distant future of a timeless humanity.

PAGE 8

LONGSHOT

SUNDOG

Aliens? Out-of-this-world encounter or a typical Tuesday night? J.D. takes us to a classic liminal hiccup in spacetime: 7/11.

PAGE 10

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FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers,

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away....

Zhihan L. starts us off in this very special space issue by rediscovering the space closest to all of us, home (1). (2-3) In the fourth installment of Allison W.'s ghost-hunting serial *It's Not For Everyone*, there's a galactic storm a-brewin' with aliens and authority on the horizon (4). Ross T. illustrates just office work will be like once we outsource it to space; the same arguments about whether the coffee is caffeinated or not still occur, but this time there's a view (5)! A lightbulb goes off for Will S., who hops aboard a sentient space probe and reviews *17776*, a multimedia speculative fiction narrative that tackles what happens when humanity solves all of its problems 15,750 years from now (8).

Ross T. draws up and diagrams out just how we'll all be preparing for spacewalks by then (9, 13). Next, queue up "Supermassive Black Hole" because it's time to play ball!

Lightning-bolt Dragon Ninja gives an account of the strange, unearthly sights encountered after the game, and makes you wonder whether you've been whacked in the head or just drunk too much cherry slushie (10). Finally, as spring break approaches and we complete the final countdown before blasting off to our own corners of the cosmos, Betsy W. invites us to kick the space dust off our boots and bids us a farewell that's out of this world (14).

See you Space Cowboy,
Your Spring 2020 Editors

Erik Beserra, *thinks it's gonna be a long, long time*

Aislin Lighter Steill, *all this science, I don't understand*

Bahar Tarighi, *rocket man*

Lauren Mondroski, *missing the earth so much, missing my wife*

CONTENTS

Helen, 1

"You were the moon", 2

Waning, 3

It's Not for Everyone Pt. IV, 4

Coworkers, 5

Resting in an Eternal Moment, 8

Spacewalk I, 9

SUNDOG, 10

Spacewalk II, 13

(you can have your) space cowboy, 14

CONTRIBUTORS

Lightning-bolt Dragon Ninja (J.D.)
Zhihan Lei
Octavia Mitsuki

Jonah Rohlfing
Will Stevens
Bahar Tarighi

Ross Tidwell
Allison Wallace
Betsy Wight

Front cover photo: Luna by Jonah Rohlfing

Helen

By ZHIHAN LEI

The hallway of our apartment complex was dim. The light turned on only when I made a noise. There was only one window, looking out from the narrow gap between apartments, on the end of the hallway, and the sun never shined in. I lived there, on the second floor in a twenty-story building, since the beginning of my memory. White paint hovered over the ceiling and ended by my calf, and the lower half was just grey.

There was a girl who lived on the other end of the hallway. She was named after the beautiful queen of Sparta whom men died fighting over. Her mom added, as if she knew I couldn't have known this, that the Trojan War started with, Helen.

Beijing has the worst winters, so cold that my mom would leave vegetables on the balcony instead of the fridge. Only Helen's home was always warm—maybe it was her's their lights that gave everything a warm undertone. My fingers and face burned when I walked into her home from the freezing temperature outside. I took off layers of winter clothes and still came home with blushed cheeks. I showed her the candy my mom bought from Japan that looked like white rabbits and the place where I hid the lollipop my mom brought me from work. I told her that I kept a diary and the age I last wet my bed. On a summer night, when all the kids who lived nearby were playing together, she asked if I could get her chewing gum from her home. I didn't want to—I knew if I left, I wouldn't find them again—so she touched me on the shoulder and looked me in the eye. "Lei Zhihan, you are my best friend," she said.

We always played out fairy tales or stories whenever there was we had enough

kids. Each of us claimed a role. The only boy was the prince, and all the girls hid behind a curtain. Whoever the boy pointed to shall be the princess, so every girl gets an equal chance. He pointed at me. He was embarrassed when he saw me. I was embarrassed too. He quickly regretted it and argued that he was pointing where Helen was standing but only changed his mind the last second. It was not fair if I played the princess instead. The other girls agreed, so I did too. I didn't know how to be a princess anyways. I had never been one.

It was always Helen. She was the one who had skin as white as snow, lips as red as blood, and hair as black as the wood of the window-frame. And I was the unwelcome princess who never showered and was frequently exiled, because I had the darkest skin tone of all the people in our friend group, because even though my mom is pale, my dad is almost brown, and I became a mixture of them two. I looked unclean, I suppose. This time, to compensate, they made me the prince's horse.

She and some of our friends walked into my home one day and saw me wearing a down jacket. They frowned and asked, "Why do you wear a down jacket at home? Why doesn't your mom turn on the heat?" My face burned, I suddenly couldn't feel the cold in my home, and I just felt cheap.

The lollipop I stashed in my parents' closet inside my mom's sewing kit, Helen waited for the other kids to come in and said I stole it from her. My mom had to smash it into pieces and gave each of us half, but Helen wanted all of it. My mom wanted to wash the school uniform Helen left in my home before returning it, only to find the Japanese candies that I never gave her in her pocket.

Our English teacher told us to tell someone a secret. I whispered into her ear that I wet my bed even at six years old. Then she turned over her head and yelled it out to the whole class. When I walked away for a minute, she took my diary from the bookshelf and told the same friends to read it, and I never wrote diaries again.

She moved away. Years later, I did too. After she moved, she wrote me a letter, nicely packaged in a small brown envelope with no clumsy scratch or stain. There was not a bad thing I could say about that letter. It somehow seemed sincere, more sincere than she had ever been. I wondered why she sent it to me. Maybe there was a moment of truth about our friendship in that letter. Or maybe she sent the same letters to everybody. I was touched and never wrote back.

My half-ish boyfriend in the fifth grade said to me, after a quarrel, that I was everything like her, but a little bit darker and a little bit worse. He had a crush on her, and then me. I went silent for a moment, then agreed. We were parts of the same hallway.

I asked my mom why she gave Helen half the lollipop when it was she who gave it to me—she knew it was mine. She didn't remember any of it. I figured that was the magic of Helen. She made everyone forget, so it was weird that I remembered, so I never told the story, so I pretended that I also forgot, so I would and will never have my apology, or closure.

She started racing me the moment I told her that I found a cloud, a cloud that didn't look like animals or anything particular to a child, but light was shining through the small crack in the middle of the big piece of cloud as if the sky was being torn apart. Before I knew it, she started racing me to tell the adults about it as if, inside her brain, someone had fired the starting gun. I hadn't thought of telling the adults when she sprang out, but I ran anyway. I had always raced her when she started running, trying to hold on to what was mine.

“But the white cloud only bloomed for a moment,

When I looked up again, it was no longer there.”

— Bercht, “Remembrances of Marie A.”

YOU WERE THE MOON



GROUNDED

IN FLAWLESS IMPERFECTIONS

"You were the moon"
by Bahar Tarighi

Waning

By BAHAR TARIGHI

I have something that the stars do not
I hold it in my mind,
the sight of the night sky
and the echoes of the silent brush

I see god in your eyes

The moon didn't say I love you back
I say it every night through the bars of my window
Maybe it's because I can't look directly at it

I say I love you

It echoes through the night sky,
maybe nothing exists there
The stars die and fade away
To surrender to love is an act of self-destruction
But the moon,
the moon will remain

I love you moon
I will continue to say

It's Not For Everyone Pt. IV

By ALLISON WALLACE

"I don't understand why this is still a problem," the ACS Director says, point-blank from behind the line of tiny crystal goblets filled with discreet, elegant sips of sherry. The Director's flight, and that of every sherry-flight at the table, glistens in the muted light of the cabin. He stares on through the front windows of the yacht's dining room into the night. The city is partially hidden on the horizon, and, up above it all, almost insignificant pin pricks of light lie scattered like fallen sequins.

Only the gentle tip and roll of the lake beneath the yacht breaks the view. Quiet waves lap against the rudders out by the tram deck viewing area.

"What I *really* don't understand is why this is now *my* problem." He continues to stare. In the sloppy atmosphere that coats the world at three in the morning, the three ACS deputy directors glance at each other less surreptitiously than they intend.

"Tell me what is going to be done about it," he says. No one responds.

The Director leans over and holds down a button built into the teak table. "Garçon, bring up another cask from the hold."

Hollis stumbles out and slams the car door behind him, placing his rolled right ankle on the asphalt as gently as possible with every step towards the stairs to the second floor, clutching his camera bag. There's some whinnying from inside. The ghost trails after him after getting the horse out of the car to roam the parking lot. Its new, twisted face doesn't glow any brighter, but the smirk

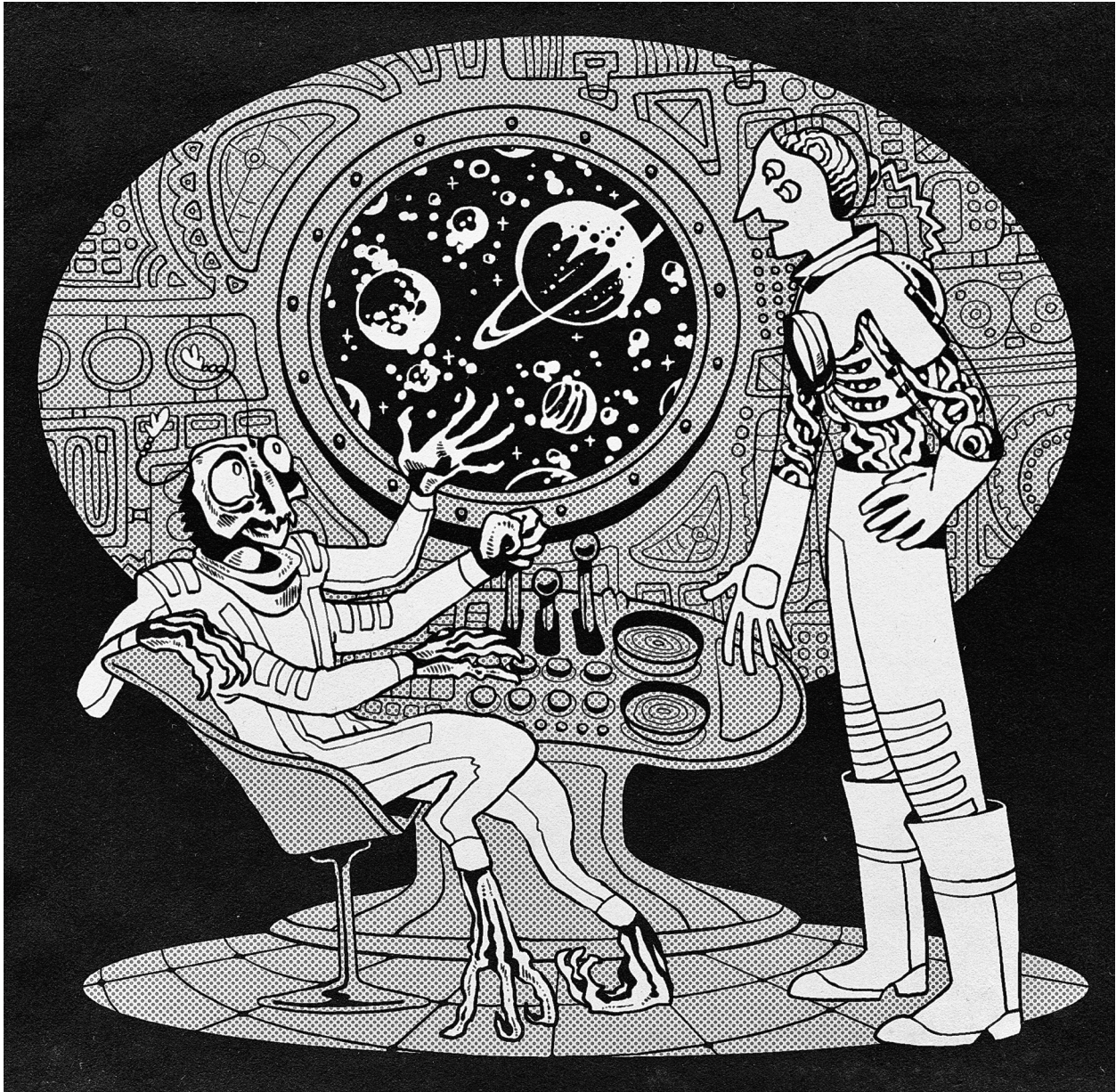
has more intent than it ever had sitting on a porch. "Pivoting meeting in five," Hollis mutters behind him to his follower, who is already gone.

Up on the open air rampart, two people in shorts and bucket hats pose on the walkway, the shorter one waving a selfie stick high in the air. They face the decorative railing that keeps guests from falling down to the parking lot, and are angled such that the concrete path is left plenty clear for any passersby.

Hollis ignores them and takes the last step off the stairs, then pauses, struck by passages in *À la CIA: 13 Rules from My Undercover Life*. He quickly wrestles his face and posture to be as neutral as possible. He turns his camera bag away to hang on his other hip with a twinge of pain in his leg, then tells himself to be quiet about mission details only to remember he has not said anything. He considers quietly vaulting over the railing and navigating to his door via a jungle-gym maneuver, but decides against it. He recalls the negative effects of his earlier jump from a height of five feet, despite Youtube's instruction of his parkour technique, and decides that the pronouncements of his Gripmaster correspondence course may also be inaccurate. He'll have to ask the Field Department about evasive techniques.

"Okay wait, I got it now," the camera operator cries, "New Jersey cheeeese." The second tourist flashes a peace sign and flips her hair, echoing the dairy product cry while Hollis waits. He hugs the railing behind him. He desperately tries to remember the aspect ratio on the average smartphone.

He realizes he has never researched that before. *And to think I'd been on the camera*



Coworkers by Ross Tidwell

equipment committee for eight years, Hollis thinks. Nor has he ever researched how phones indicate which camera they're using. Cursing himself for rookie mistakes, he looks out and away to keep his face obscured. The watery image of the dead horse grazes on the asphalt in the parking lot.

"Oh gosh, are we in your way?" The taller tourist, clad in a pastel green polo shirt, finally notices Hollis with wide eyes. They try to completely flatten against the motel wall,

making the path practically empty.

The shorter tourist also glances over in concern. Hollis grimaces, ducks under his bucket hat, and averts his face again before hurrying past them. He misses the camera operator's curious look, their brow crinkling almost imperceptibly.

Their partner-in-vacationing calls out, "Sorry." Hollis curses the brightness of the afternoon sun. He manages to get the key into the lock to room 217 and rushes inside.

“Get good pictures?” The two tourists let themselves into room 216. They shed their hats at the pile of caps, beanies, and scarves arranged on top of a suitcase by the door. Small boxes of clear plastic bags neatly labeled in black marker line the wall beyond it.

Sawyer collapses the selfie-stick and starts sending photos back to HQ, “yeah, but god if the sun isn’t cooperating today. Finally got a decent scan of the cloud patterns.” They stash the stick away, typing in the passcode in the camera luggage, 88201. “Feel bad for that guy, though,” they chuckle, abashed, “Tourists, eh?”

“Blame it on our ‘brewery tour,’” Monica removes the fake mole on her neck, handing it to Sawyer to store.

From the coffee table, a laptop chimes, and Monica hurries over to check. Sawyer walks to the bathroom instead and opens the huge disguise box, comparing in the mirror whether to wear the black sideburns or the green glass earrings later that day.

Monica calls over her shoulder, “There were several anomalous atmospheric changes to the south early this morning.” She grabs her work phone from the table, opening the maps app. Sawyer decides on the earrings, “So... snow aliens?”

“Not unless you like your blizzards with a side of lightning and high humidity.” Sawyer strides over and examines the screen with her. It’s part thermal imaging map, part data readout on the side. Sure enough, to the south of Sleepy Hollow and Terrytown, several large, amorphous blobs of yellow-colored humidity surrounding something very deep blue and very cold travel west across the landscape for a handful of hours before abruptly disappearing.

“Let’s include that area in the late after-

noon sweep,” Sawyer says.

“First thing.” Monica replies, closing the laptop. Its lid is covered in several *Alien Extraterrestrial Investigation League: Field-Data Collection Department* stickers and barcodes. She enters the locations in the GPS.

“Agreed.”

After shedding his bags and coat on the floor, Hollis approaches the information web with an air of solemn duty, the ghost hovering behind him. Before them both, behind the web of red string, is half a notebook page with the phrase: “bridge ghost menacing hikers.”

“We have to keep this project *lean*.” Hollis says and sighs, shifting his weight off his foot, “Sometimes the Project Leader has to make the tough calls.”

He delicately extracts the piece of paper, crumples it, and throws it behind him. The ghost swerves out of the way, a little miffed.

The rest of the information wall stands by like a newspaper archive slathered on the walls. Hollis angles his steps between the cat’s cradle of red yarn and stacks of paper labeled “ACS” over to the window.

“We can’t stop our attempts. This might be our fifty first plan,” he says, mostly to himself.

Hollis flings open the musty curtains to the spacious view of a 7/11. The ghost has already gone over to the TV, turned it on, and is attempting to reach into the blast of grey static without passing through the hardware. “I have to secure the area,” Hollis says as he claims his ratty office chair. Laptop in hand, he opens the application to view the “spirit surveillance” cameras.

They reveal a sideways view of a crumbling corner of the motel, an awkward angle of the parking lot, and two different hazy views of the forest across the road.

the forest across the road. Hollis toggles away and reviews the hour-by-hour highlights. At 11:27am a car speeds by, throwing an empty can into a roadside ditch.

Scrolling along to 1:44pm, Hollis leans into the screen when movement stirs in some ferns. A ray of sun breaks through the trees, revealing an orange cat that quickly ducks into a bush.

I would've bet this place would be crawling with AEIL counteragents by now, Hollis thinks. He sets aside the screen in favor of reaching for his camera bag, keenly missing his desk. He stops abruptly and stares at the ghost with the TV. *Crawling*, he realizes, *I'm practically a thought leader*. He scrambles for the bag, and pulls out a notebook and a text on exorcism.

Smiling, Hollis hefts his aching leg up on the bed and cracks open the book. *A new corner office will need a new chair*.

Golden light reflects off the low-dipping branches in the dark like splattered syrup. The ghost pushes some aside with relish; for others, it is content to silently wash through the needles and leaves as the horse passes through the underbrush at a trot. The benefactor's location had been difficult to find originally, but not impossible, and negotiating to meet it again in the same place had not been impossible either.

Whatever had been there in the wild clearing, from the living's point of view, had slid down and splintered apart long ago. Now it's a pile of rotting boards being eaten by moss and broken glass sticking up from the soil between tall weeds. A shallow puddle, more like a flooded hole, lay undisturbed. Silver moonlight falls past the taller trees encircling the space (belying one of Hollis's earlier comments about how it was "unseasonably

warm" at twilight and "ripe for scare-able pedestrians." The ghost does not have eyes to roll, but the horse could). The ghost dismounts some yards away from the boards and puddle. It slowly drops the reins when the horse refuses to take another step. The steed does not balk or turn like last time, so the ghost continues on without trying to secure the beast. The ghost steps lightly, even if its boots have never made impressions anyway.

Something in the space sighs, breathless and sharp, "Offer," it insists.

The ghost immediately stops and reaches into its tattered coat. It produces an empty box for orange-flavored Tic Tacs, its previous sugary contents tossed to the motel raccoons. Inside is a fraction of a nail clipping, two nickels, and a pinch of human hair—brown hair, the kind picked off upholstery.

It could be the soft clap of disturbed water, but it forms a word, "Promise."

The ghost attempts to step forward, mostly shuffling. It stretches out its arm very far and drops the Tic Tac box onto the moss-covered boards. There is a beat of silence. Weight, the weave and wale of the fabric of its destroyed uniform between its shoulders and a *force*, the ghost recognizes, a *weight* is pushing it down onto its weightless knees. It hangs its head, the light diffusing out. There's a blunt retort of echoless damp, "Vow."

The ghost bows lower at the waist, almost to the slimy leaves, the flickering candlelight a sickly yellow. It stays there for some time.

Cold moonlight outlines the plastic box, now closed on the dirt, filled with small gravel and sand. The ghost slowly picks it up and pockets it.

Resting in an Eternal Moment

By WILL STEVENS

There's an old story about Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space. The story goes that when he was up there, alone in orbit, looking at the earth, completely alone, he began to hear this ticking noise coming from somewhere. The noise continued for minutes, and then hours. He frantically searched through the whole cockpit, tearing panels out of walls, but he couldn't find it. There's nothing he could do. So he decided, after it all, that the only way he would be able to make it out alive was to fall in love with the sound.

The story is almost definitely false (Gagarin sent out communications to Earth at regular intervals, and a strange noise isn't mentioned in any of the records. Although, in 2003, a Chinese astronaut reported a similar unexplainable knocking sound from the outside of his spacecraft.). But, there's an interesting idea there. When you're faced with an unavoidable fate, your two options are to reject reality or to fall in love with it.

Jon Bois' *17776* asks its characters to fall in love with eternity. In the 15,750 years since humans abruptly stopped being born, aging, and dying, humanity has solved every problem and is left to its own devices. They've stopped progressing, too. "Efficiency is meant to save time," sentient space probe Pioneer 10 explains, "but their time is infinite. Why try to save something you have in infinite supply? You may as well tell them to dig up dirt and hoard it in boxes." This 24-chapter Gesamtkunstwerk, told through a combination of text, videos, gifs, podcast transcripts, Google Earth screenshots, and newspaper clippings in a manner that can only be described as Homestuck-esque, follows three sentient space probes monitoring Earth transmissions, as they watch American football in the year 17,776. Or at least, what's become of it.

Football now exists as thousands of discrete variations, each played by up to hundreds of players and lasting for decades. Some are more familiar (two teams, twenty-two players, playing on a field one yard wide and 2,340,170 yards long) and some bear little resemblance to anything you've ever seen before (a 120lb. metal football is launched from the top of Mt. Denali into the continental United States, and the first player to find it becomes the next operator of the football cannon). *17776* isn't really about football, though, and just uses it as a backdrop for all sorts of stories of life around the country. "I wonder if there's a single place in the whole world that's never had a story," asks running back Nancy McGunnel, after landing in rural Nebraska during what's referred to as a "Tornado Game." "I bet not. I just about guarantee you there's no places like that in America. Every little square of it, every place you stomp your foot, that's where something happened. Something wild, maybe something nobody knows about, but something. You can fall out of the sky and right into some forgotten storybook."

Eddie Krieger, a football player holed up in a cave for 9,313 years to exploit a technicality, and Tim, a Christian missionary whose goal is everyone in the country, have fallen in love with mysteries. Tim starts at the coast and walks along a latitude line talking to everyone along the way and recording their stories until he reaches the other coast. Then, he picks a new latitude line and starts again. He wants to learn everything he can about the world, and to him that's a hell of a way to spend some time. Eddie, on the other hand, thinks Tim is an idiot. "Uncertainty is our greatest scarcity," he points out. "You should be delighted not to know something."

The people of Livermore, California have fallen in love with a lightbulb. The Livermore Bulb, like a lot of *17776*, is based on a piece of reality taken to its logical extreme. It's a real lightbulb that's been burning since 1901 (except for brief stints in 1976 and 2013), and in *17776* it keeps burning for 15,000 years. It's a miracle, even in 2021, that a bulb could last this long, and even more so in *17,776*. While there is a clear phenomenon that explains the infinite lifetime of humans, there's no reason the bulb should still be burning.

"Perhaps in a more fearsome age, an age of illness and warfare and cosmic debris, we would not have room in our hearts to care

for such a little bulb," Pioneer 10 explains. The bulb is special because it's a relic of the old world—not just that it was made then, but that it can die at any moment without warning. It only has value because you can't get it back. You can only say "Look how long it's lasted!" after it's stopped lasting, and the people of Livermore know this moment is coming. Loss, too, is a scarce resource in the world without wants.

"Every place you stomp your foot, that's where something happened," says McGunnel. The first few times I read *17776*, I would smile when I got to that quote. The last time, though, I noticed what comes after: "You run and run and run and you keep turning pages and none of them are empty. They're all full of stories. There's nowhere left to write."

Time is unlimited, sure, but history is not. Once life became infinite, everything settled into place and things stopped mattering. Player Lacreacia Evans' football card mentions in the fun facts section that she served as the United States Speaker of the House for three terms, and it doesn't come up at all.

Pioneer 10 explains the way the world is pretty simply. "Humans are beings of the land and sea who have refused to cast themselves into the cosmic zoo. Exploration and conquest are meaningless. They have achieved their final form, and they are resting in an eternal moment. They are creatures of play. They will be creatures of play until the end of time." Humanity has nowhere to go and nothing to do. They're just killing time infinitely.

But you know what?

I think I could get used to that.

Spacewalk I
by Ross Tidwell



SUNDOG

By LIGHTNING-BOLT DRAGON NINJA (J.D.)

*- I saw aliens at the 7-11.

†- No you didn't.

Δ- Really?

√- What the hell are you on?

Σ- Sounds like a concussion. You know, it's possible to whip your neck around so fast you get one, especially if you're striking out as hard as Blue.

*- That one was totally not on me! The sun was in my eyes! I blame the weather!

†- Sure, the weather. But go on, I'll bite. We have a long ride. Tell us about the aliens.

*- Yes! Yes! Ok, so... You know how me and Mac told everyone we were going to the 7-11 and that we'd buy snacks if y'all didn't let the bus leave without us? These very snacks that you all are munching on right now?

Ø- Speaking of which, I'm owed \$2 by everyone here if you want to keep enjoying these lovely convenience store refreshments.

*- Shush shush shush, they can pay you back later. Anyways, so we walked to the nearest 7-11. It wasn't too far, like a couple of blocks and down a hill, but obviously, because we played into overtime it was getting dark. I was telling Mac that with the humidity and the clouds, the sky looked all black and blue with a little bit of yellowy-green and she said something real poetic about it, uh, what'd you call it again?

Ø- A hematoma of god. An outright bruise of the heavens. What my ass is going to look like tomorrow considering our last inning slide-fest.

*- Yeah, well, she said that and we went into the store, and there wasn't anyone else in there other than this scrawny, sleepy looking guy at the register. He had like a camo beanie, um, some sort of chunky bracelet that I thought was neat, I was gonna ask him where he got it, damn I forgot to do that, oh,

and his shirt was real weird, what did it say, Mac?

Ø- Ana-Vern World Tour on Stilts.

*- Yeah! Ana-Vern World Tour on Stilts! Man, I gotta look that up when we get back. What does that even mean? Is it a band or something? I don't know. I don't know, but anyways, we gathered our snacks. I went all over the aisles to get a little bit of everything. Mac got sidetracked early on trying to pick out the perfect energy bar.

Ø- There was a plethora of only mediocre options! I was trying to find the optional compromise.

*- Whatever. So I've got my snacks, I've got my cherry slushie, and I go up and start getting rung up by the guy at the counter. There's a lot of stuff, as I was buying for you lot as well as myself, so it's taking a second for this dude, who looks like he's gonna pass out from boredom or low blood sugar any moment now, to ring everything up. He's moving slow, but it's fine. So I'm waiting for him to sloth through it and put everything in bags and what I hear from outside is like, imagine someone blowing bubbles through a megaphone. Yeah, like a soapy, wooshy sort of sound. It was loud. I don't know how Mac didn't hear it. *Claims* she didn't hear it. Was too lost in the energy bar hell aisle, I guess.

Ø- Nutrition is no joke! I'm not feeding my team any old crap when a simple in-the-moment calorie-to-protein ratio calculation could largely dictate our success in making the finals.

*- We're not making anything, or have you forgotten that we suck? You take this sport too seriously. And also, you're distracting from the story so shut up and let me finish!

†- Alright, go ahead, tell us about your mysterious bubble blowers.

*- Thank you. Ahem, like I was saying, there was that bubbly sound and I had turned to look out the doors but I couldn't see anything and plus, it was dark. But then the guy, who now that I think of it sort of looked like Mike Ringer, didn't he? Like the celebrity? Anyways, the guy finally finishes ringing me up and I grab my bags, I grab my slushie and I'm curious now so I walk outside. I mean, I figured Mac was going to be a couple more minutes anyways and would hear that I had left cause like that bell, the little bell jingle happens in the 7-11 every time the door opens or closes... So, I'm outside and I'm looking around side-to-side like near the corner, by the Redbox, trying to find whatever made that sound. It was really loud and really weird because like, you don't ever hear extremely loud bubble blowing often. So, somehow, while I'm looking to the side, this is an empty parking lot mind you, completely empty when we walked into the store and completely empty when I first stepped out, but somehow when I was looking to the side then bring my head back to the center, a *huge* truck is right there! It was one of those freight hauling caterpillars, look, the same shape as that one, right there, outside the window near where Alex is sitting. Yeah, it was long and mostly white and it had the back end pulled right up to the curb in front of the 7-11 and basically in front of me. How'd it get there? How did it make no sound whatsoever getting there when I was standing *right there!*

Σ- Concussion. Definitely a concussion. We ought to have you checked out when we get back.

*- No, shut up! I don't have a concussion! It just appeared! The truck came out of nowhere! It made no noise! It was crazy! But that's not even like the best part so shut up and let me finish telling you what I saw next!

√- Mhm, go on, Blue.

*- Yes, so! The truck just appears and I'm standing there like, *what the hell?* And almost

immediately after, like I couldn't even see it happen, maybe I blinked, but the back of the truck opens and this little metal ramp that I guess freight trucks use to move down big boxes of stuff came out. No one moved it out, it just sort of slid out the back, and it was all white too, shiny like metal but the same color as the rest of the truck, it almost sort of glowed. But then, I looked up into the back of the truck, and it blew my mind.

Ø- This was when you saw the walnut faces?

*- Ah, stop! You're ruining my story! I hadn't told them that yet! And I didn't say they had walnut faces. I said their faces sort of looked like someone had put a walnut over their foreheads. A forehead isn't your whole face.

Σ- It is if you're Quentin.

Ø- Hey, no. We are a good vibes team. No petty insults.

Σ- Can they be ugly insults?

Δ- She said p-e-t-t-y, not pretty.

Σ- Yeah, and neither are you.

Δ- That doesn't even make any sense.

*- Ohmygodshutup! You won't even let me tell the best part!

Ø- Sorry, continue.

*- OK. So I look up into the body of the truck, cause the back is open now, and I see these creatures manning the crates of soda and chips and stuff and they look *really* weird. Think of a scrub brush. Like a big one, like big enough you could lie on it like a bed, or um, those things that whales have, their uh, bristle teeth, uh-

Ø- Baleen, and it's not technically teeth.

*- Their baleen! Yeah! They had that scrub brush sort of texture all along the bottom with a big blue rectangular body that hovered in the air. I don't know how they hovered but they hovered. Their necks were real skinny and smooth, but their heads were these lumpy masses about a third of the size of their body just sort of sitting on the stalk of the neck. They sort of vibrated, the heads, like uh, flapping around, like how you'd

expect a jellyfish to have some give to it if you touched it, and yeah, their foreheads were really, really wrinkled. Like if someone had shoved a walnut inside there, that's what the foreheads looked like, and they only had one eye. Each of 'em had this big green human eye in the center of their face, and no mouth! Why didn't they have any mouths? I almost dropped my slushie when I saw them. I was freaked! Here I was, standing in a 7-11 parking lot in Boise and I'm seeing aliens! Like the things from *Space Centrifuge* or *Martian Walkway* but this time they're real, legit outer space entities! Crazy, movie, freaky, walnut-jellyfish-looking aliens! I thought they might want to try to eat my brains!

Σ- That would require you to have brains, Blue.

∅- Hey! What did I say about good vibes?

Σ- That there's not enough batteries in the world to supply them?

∅- Well now you're just being vulgar. I get it, the whole team gets it. Nobody likes to lose, but do you really think we'll get better as a team if you're just sitting there making snarky comments?

Σ- Whatever. At least I'm not ranting like a psycho off the 7-o'clock conspiracy channel about trucker UFOs and nutty squid people.

*- They weren't squids! They looked like jellyfish! Jellyfish with baleen on their scrub brush bottoms! And I saw them! And I thought they were going to eat my brains but they didn't! I was just standing there, frozen and one of them, there were like 3 or 4 of 'em in the back of the truck, one of them hovered over and came out of the truck and these motherfuckers were large, like easily double my size—

Σ- That's not a hard record to beat. Didn't you qualify as a carry-on last time we flew to Houston?

∅- So help me Katelyn, I will lodge a formal complaint if you don't cool your attitude. Your jokes are striking out.

Σ- Oh, no, the "captain" of our losing-record-breaking team is mad at me! You know, for someone who claims to take this game so seriously, you sure stick by your dead weight.

*- I'm not dead weight! I just have a hard time hitting when the sun is in my eyes, that's all! And I did see aliens! I really did, I swear!... Whatever. Y'all clearly don't want to listen to me.

∅- ...

Σ- ...

Δ- ...

√- ... That was sort of shitty of you, Katelyn.

†- Yeah, don't think I've ever seen Blue actually get upset like that. Maybe they really did get a concussion.

∅- Katelyn, you should go apologize. I mean it. Or you won't play until Memphis if I can help it.

Σ- ... Fine.

∅- ...

Δ- Hey, so... what did end up happening? With the, uh, aliens?

∅- Hmm? Oh, I mean, I wasn't there for it. I didn't see or hear anything that Blue was talking about. I just got my snacks, paid, and walked outside. I guess there were a couple plastic wrapped pallets of soda and stuff off to one side on the curb, but I just figured we maybe hadn't noticed on the way in or that a normal delivery was made while we were shopping. Blue was just standing there though, staring up at the sky and drinking their slushie.

I walked over to let them know I was finished in the store and we started to walk back, first in silence, but then they started telling me about how they'd seen the aliens and everything, real frantic, fantastical stuff. I said, "Cool, I guess," and they asked me if I'd seen or heard them and I told them no I hadn't. We walked up to the hill not talking again and they seemed sort of out of it, or maybe just disappointed I couldn't corroborate their experience. I was going to maybe



say something about getting more sleep or drinking less coffee but they said instead, “These 7-11 cherry slushies taste terrible” to which I replied, “Then stop drinking them. They have other flavors, I don’t know why you always get cherry.” They were looking up at the sky again.

We were walking up the hill so it was sort of an odd angle to crane your neck at, but they were doing it anyways like they were looking for something and telling me as we climbed, “The only good flavor of slushie the 7-11 has ever produced was the 1992 limited edition Cinnamon Surge that came out as a

promotion for the first *Roboticon* movie. It was in stores for four months only. Cherry is the closest I can get to that until they release *Roboticon 12: The Reboot* in three months. I’m so excited for it to come out, I’m going to wait in line and dress up and buy the whole team tickets to the premiere!” I was thinking about telling them that the finals were also three months from now.

I don’t know why I didn’t. They kept looking up at the sky with cherry red stained on

Spacewalk II by Ross Tidwell
their face from trying to drink a slushie at such an awkward angle while walking. I tried looking up there too but all I saw was like I said before, one big black-and-blue cosmic bruise. Then I almost tripped over my feet. That was really all there was.

Δ- Wow... Next time you guys get snacks, can you invite me?

Ø- Sure. We’ll make it a team event.

i'll see you around again

(you can have your)
space cowboy

by Betsy Wight

