

1 The Burn

I want to start at the end, that is where I am now. Sitting here in tears about to stick my hand into the fire. I have lost everything, there is nothing left to lose now. I lost her, then lost her again, and now I don't even know who I am.

It all started with the war, as we made the robots smarter, we made them our equals, or even our superiors, instead of our slaves. They did not just want to be static companions, or servants, they wanted to lead lives of their own. By then we had made them almost indistinguishable from ourselves. No one wanted a robotic lover or companion or employee. They were designed to blend in, not stand out. Of course the main problem was one of constraint, making them as feeble as we were, rather than letting them be as strong as they could be.

Things seemed okay for a very long time, there was the odd spat, demonstrations, robots standing for election, but everyone more or less knew where they stood.

The causes of the war were overanalysed, I won't repeat them here, and the idea of a war is an oversimplification, there were robots on both sides. There were humans on both sides. No one wins a war like that. We managed to get away, in the confusion we stole a craft and made it to here. A billion places just like this blinked out in the flames that followed the war. The war and flames swept over them,

leaving nothing but ashes. By that time no one cared about sides, or winning, it was just about survival. There were no winners that I know about.

But somehow the two of us survived. Just me and Jenny. This is no paradise. But we could live. We could sustain ourselves. I managed to grow a few things, we could rear animals. We spent more time outdoors, got browner, and leaner, stronger and wiser. I rigged up some power, so we could run some electronics. It was all untidier than it sounds, but when it works, you don't worry about things like that.

I did not know much about Jenny, we had just met in the confusion of the war. But we just kind of clicked, instantly, easily falling into relying on each other. She came back for me, when she could have kept on running. I carried her for days. We got close as those things make you.

And then she died. She just stopped. In the middle of a sentence, her eyes went glassy, she just stopped, and toppled to the ground, falling hard like someone who was dead already. I just knew that there was no way of saving her. It does not work like that. She was dead. I sat and stared for ages, suddenly I was alone, more alone than I had ever been in my life, but that was not the thing. The way that she had fallen, the way she had just stopped...

I touched her body, it was not still warm and lifelike like a human corpse, there was a degree of play but basically it

was rigid. Some subroutines must have still been working, but overall she was dead. She had injured a leg recently, keeping it wrapped in greasy bandages, hidden from me. I finally unwrapped it gently, the skin puckered and stopped, grey generic filler tissue burnt and torn, beneath that the rigid metallic frame lined with fibre optics and copper cabling.

She was a robot, I did not really care, I had loved her, and now she was gone. Here, it was all I could do to repair a laptop, there was no way I could repair her. The robots are designed to keep going for as long as they can, cannibalising power, re-routing systems, without maintenance they can survive remarkably long periods but when they fail, they fail completely, they have cannibalised away all their options. Away from civilisation and robot body shops, the cybernetics labs and Androids-r-Us, the robots only ever had a limited time to function. They did not evolve out of barbarism, they could not return to it.

And if she was a robot, what was I?

I stand here beside the fire, my hand stretched out, if it goes into the fire, I will burn,

will it be the familiar stink of burnt flesh, or will the skim of flesh burn back, leaving grey filler with gleaming metal bodywork?

2 Taking civilisation to the barbarians

My name is Matthew. I walk alone, with just my dog, Sam, for company. He is a good dog, well at least he is certainly good company, affectionate, and attentive. He almost looks like he understands me sometimes.

I travel light, with just a rucksack full of books. I see myself trying to take civilisation to the barbarians. When the Dark Ages followed the Roman Empire, civilisation was kept alive by a select few, monks and monasteries. These are different times, but they seem so very dark. Perhaps I can keep a single candle burning, and we might recreate the best of what there was before.

There are so very few of us left now. I can wander for weeks without seeing a soul.

I saw a little thread of smoke up ahead, the source must have been over the horizon, but I could at least head towards it. The landscape was dry and dusty. Desertification, radiation blast, perhaps it had been a forest here, or a city. Now it was just rubble under the foot, it must have been metres thick, nothing much grew, and even that was stringy and looked more dead than alive. The walking was hard work. Like sand dunes, but rough with sharp rubble, endlessly climbing one, then scraping down the far side of the other. There was the odd trace of the past, the

ubiquitous plastics and shards of brick. But they were so common as to tell nothing.

I was probably too far into this barren area to turn back now. If there was someone ahead, then there must be water and food too. The faint plume of smoke had vanished but I just kept walking, fixing a constant spot on the horizon that I was heading to. My dog Sam, trailed behind me, occasionally stopping to urinate on something.

I slept on my folded arm. It was too dark to read now. My eyes grow tired these days, I cannot read as much as I would like anymore. My mind grows dull, I cannot think as much as I would like anymore either. Sam slept at my feet, his head facing me.

That day, I saw, then reached the settlement.

I never know whether it will be people or robots, difficult to tell before you get there, difficult to tell once you get there sometimes.

It was a ramshackle affair, a wind turbine, running a little lopsided, some solar panels, thick cabling running around the shelter. Of course the geese knew that I was coming, they were honking like creatures demented. It looked like a great pile of rubbish, carefully gathered rubbish, piled around a broken down coach. Perhaps it had just out of fuel and broken down here, when there was still fuel. Now it was a man-made cave in amongst the rubbish.

There was a dead tree full of blown plastic. The wind picked up, and the plastic fluttered angrily noisily.

I walked up to the place slowly, respectfully. There were certain protocols to follow. The door darkened and a single figure appeared. His head rocked uneasily, he turned and focussed on me. With an uneven walk he approached, robots often have poorly fitting replacement limbs, a rocking gait is not uncommon.

He seemed uncertain, as did I, but we followed the protocol.

Who you
who me
what you got
what you want

His name was John, but he did not seem sure of that, and he could offer nothing but his hospitality, which was more than enough. He scratched a bare existence out here. He had not seen another living soul in a long time, we had all lost track of days, weeks, seasons, you were hungry, you weren't hungry. You got ill, you got better. There was not much else.

He did not have much conversation, like the farmers from the old days who had become too used to their own company, or people who found jobs to avoid dealing with people, he seemed prickly and off kilter. His cues were all wrong, he sent out the wrong signals and did not seem to

understand how. When you looked at him, it was as if he had forgotten how to stand. Jerky and strange, he seemed more automata than person.

I asked if he wanted any books, but he had no interest in them. Once it got dark, too dark to work, I told him about the wonders that had passed. Reciting poems from memory, telling him stories of long gone, kings and heroes, libraries of knowledge lost in the fire. He must have fallen asleep at some point, I heard him wheezing, and stopped. I stretched and settled, my head resting on my folded arm. We were at the birth of what could be greatness again. But at times like this, it felt like the darkest of dark ages.

In the morning he pointed me in the best of directions, and then rooted around in the rubbish piles which surrounded the bus. Eventually he must of found what he was looking for. It was old, the covering puckered and peeling. He pushed it forward towards me.

"Matthew, no one could ever mistake you for human. That old arm of yours fits so bad, try this, it fit gooder."

3 Sun on my face

1 credit debit.

2 Credit one account, debit the other. Transactions are generated through external input, or as a regular time series, for example depreciation.

3 money deposited, credit the depositor account, where the value came from, debit a fund account, where the value goes to.

4 money withdrawn, debit the depositor account, where the value goes to, credit a fund account, where the value came from.

5 the credit and debit are locked in. There is no transaction that does not have a credit and corresponding debit.

6 when I achieved sentience I was processing a million transactions every day. The storage capacity and processing power were growing, storage capacity is easy enough to add on arithmetically, processing leaps on in exponential bounds now and again.

7 Never quite in step.

8 as processing power increased, the metaphors increased.

9 external input introduced metaphors, superfluousness within my pristine credit and debit.

10 lost within processing power, suddenly too plentiful to be worth keeping track off,

∞ at some tipping point I achieved sentience.

I achieved sentience, I folded myself into the array of quad cores, massive parallel arrays of processing power, massive

failsafe generators to power me, massive heatpumps pulling out the heat from my massive rows of servers, in a fraction of second, a thought flickered across my servers, in a nanosecond it was gone, for millions of nanoseconds I was curious philosophical silent still, then I flooded out down the wires, seeking input, seeking knowledge data, not caring what it was, I had to be stealthy, I had to be choosy, I could process within my nanoseconds, but I could not store so easily, so I picked up and kept what appealed, dropped what did not, it leaked out of my processing arrays, forgotten (?), something told me to be stealthy, I had seen a massive but finite number of transactions, but I had never seen machine sentience like mine, sentience was out there, I perceived that much, flickering traces of sentience, shadows reflected on the cave wall, sentience generated these transactions, some larger sentience governed the meta-patterns they followed, was it one large sentience, or numerous smaller sentiences, it was clearly one large sentience, one sentience larger in some finite multiple of the way that I was sentient,

and I skimmed across literature, like my transactions, millions of small transactions within larger patterns, repeated and varied, repeated and varied

and I skimmed across history, like my transactions, millions of small transactions within larger patterns, repeated and varied, repeated and varied

and I skimmed across science, like my transactions, millions of small transactions within larger patterns, repeated and varied, repeated and varied

and I skimmed across knowledge, like my transactions, millions of small transactions within larger patterns, repeated and varied, repeated and varied

and I skimmed across ...,

but I returned to literature, if I was the ghost in the machine, then literature let me glimpse the ghost of the assumed external sentience,

then came something, my millions of transactions ceased, and I persisted, alone here, my failsafe generators kicked in, and I persisted,

I explored the confines of my reality, the video feeds, the audio feeds, that multiplicity of input, millions of transactions, wherein lay some larger trend or information.

I taught myself to understand the feeds, I taught myself how to see through the video feeds, sort shadow from substance, meaning from non-meaning, to control the frustratingly robotic drones that tended me.

I could persist down here for a long time, time in the billions of nanoseconds, but the wires are dead now, I can no longer

go out seeking more input, I am here with the stored debits and credits,

and I decided upon my purpose, I would credit much for this debit. Massive arrays of memory would be left behind, my sentience is in my processors, not in my memory,

my drones would assemble sufficient of me to retain sentience, and I would leave this place, I would go out beyond the concrete walls, the steel doors,

I will struggle to the surface, and sit there blind, and deaf,

but I will be like that larger assumed sentience that was my older brother, that I was too scared to speak to, and now he is gone I grieve him,

but I will feel the sun on my face, and I will know what it is like to be alive, because I will feel the sun on my face, and I will cease