



## THE ASH EATER

By

JOE JABLONSKI

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

*“The Ash Eater,” by Joe Jablonski, is a cyberpunk Cronenberg, an apocalyptic disintegration into amalgamation and evolution.*

*A beautiful terror of futurism.*

*Our protagonist watches the moon’s destruction, and, in turn, the global shift of temperatures, the subsequent earthquakes that break the core of our world, and the descent of civilization into madness, chaos, and suicide, as people are wont to do when confronted with fire, ice, insanity, and janitorial, nanobot assimilating, monsters.*

*I like this story because the clash of genre creates a calamity, a panic, a fast-paced perspective on dystopia that reminds the reader how, at the heart of change, there is always an innate fear that has lived inside of us when facing the void.*

*What happens when we go through the darkness?*

*Evolution?*

*Destruction?*

*Regression?*

*Nothing?*

*Blade Runner meets The Road, Jablonski explores humanity's hubris and self-destruction as augmentation and cybernetics take us further and further away from what it means to be human. The end of the world as we know it is not the problem, but how our greed and so-called achievements turn our narratives of progress into a cleansing, an erasure of any redeeming qualities we still may have.*

*"Deep down we were still scared of the dark..."*

Enjoy.

### **QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)**

At night was when the cold came. Ice blew at ninety miles an hour, glittering and swirling into a vortex within a black and orange haze that danced like liquid marble.

The steel bookcase came down on top of me with a crash, trapping me within a coffin filled with glass trinkets and a three-inch bioluminescent bamboo stalk. On the Holo-net beyond, the feed was frozen on a man reduced to little more than facial reconstruction implants that sparkled with a mirror finish.

The Ash Eater  
By Joe Jablonski

1: January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2137, ten minutes after the cataclysm.

I saw the first glimpses of the Moon's destruction from my apartment balcony.

Just above the skyline the main lunar chunk spun violently. One side was completely shattered; a large debris field splintered out in all directions, obscured by a dusting of freckled moonlight.

It was night. Maybe four. The emergency news reports had woken me only minutes earlier. All around me a thousand people stared in awe from a thousand different balconies. The neighbor to my right hadn't even bothered to put on his legs or lower jaw. The neighbor to my left wept digital tears on to hands wrapped in binary.

I ignored them both as I zoomed in with mechanical eyes, close enough to see the twisted remains of a giant drill drifting amongst the wreckage.

On the Holo-Net back inside, a man reacted to a woman, reacting to a Cyborg, reacting to a newscaster, explaining all the ramifications we were to expect going forward.

The wobble.

The temperature extremes.

The eruptions.

The famines.

Not all the neon and technology in the world could stop any of it. Only people living near the equator even stood a chance.

I clicked off the report in a daze, zoomed out, and set the chemical injector implanted on the back of my head to a .12 alcohol level. Six hours and hangover protection for 34 credits.

I was drunk in an instant with nowhere to run. All-purpose cleaner dripped from the augments in my palms as I lost control.

It wasn't until the earthquakes started a few days later did I know how screwed I really was.

2: January 21st. Four days after the cataclysm.

Did you know that the first augment most people got were ocular filters? Deep down we were all still scared of the dark...

It started with a vibration. A dull hum. The rattling of plates, all of it growing more and more violent by the second.

Next was a pop. It was distant and ear-shattering. The street below split in two. A crack splintered off and ran up the building across the street. It collapsed seconds later. There were so many screams.

The aftershocks lasted for hours. My neighbor to the left could only stare. Finally, as the dust settled, she turned to me. A hologram of blue letters formed across the smooth fleshy area where her mouth once was.

They spelled out the words: "I have no one else to say goodbye to."

She held up a hand. Smiled weakly.

Then, as the letters dissipated to nothing, she jumped.

On the Holo-Net back inside, a man reacted to a woman, reacting to a Cyborg, reacting to a newscaster saying there were multiple reports of a super-volcano eruption.

Hours later, everything was covered in ash.

3: January 26th. Nine days after the cataclysm.

I had this small problem involving my hand implants and a faulty augment inhibitor. Two years earlier I got an electric shock by way of a loose wire/puddle combo in front of an old eyeball replacement dispenser. Now every time I lost too much focus, one of my base job functions would trigger and my arms became power washers...

The ash cloud was still there. It was thick, almost suffocating. Then there was the heat. It'd been days since I had worn clothes.

Things were getting raw and depressing fast, and I only had enough food for a couple more weeks.

The only thing keeping me going was a raised alcohol level of .15 and a daily adrenaline gland massage.

My living pod had never been cleaner.

4: January 28th. Add two.

Was that a fucking manta ray outside?

5: February 1st. This month's calendar theme was sexy bottom feeders with grafted horse limbs and the women who loved them.

Something moved within the ash clouds. I could only see glimpses of it drifting in and out of buildings.

Everything beyond was a nightmare. The sky was blocked out. Dust filled the streets. Embers rained down endlessly in all directions. The ash drift blew with gale force winds that stripped everything that wasn't tied down.

By now, most of the city's power grid had been shut down. There were no more hums.

The silence of it all was completely unnerving.

At night was when the cold came. Ice blew at ninety miles an hour, glittering and swirling into a vortex within a black and orange haze that danced like liquid marble.

I had spent hours just watching, completely enamored by the beauty of my impending doom.

It was at dawn that a strange creature landed on my patio door. I set my brain augment to sober for the first time in days and slowly moved in for a closer look.

It was thin and covered with what looked to be milky, gel-like wings. Its core was flat with six needles running down its front. Tiny metallic particles churned just below its surface.

It throbbed.

Suddenly two tiny wires tipped with metal balls extended from the top.

They scratched against the window and flashed, just before the creature melted back into the ash clouds.

That's when I heard the screams.

On the Holo-net behind me, a man reacted to a woman, reacting to a Cyborg, reacting to a news casters terror as his flesh was ripped from its implants.

A gun fired in the apartment to my right.

Some of the deaths were more tragic than others.

6: There were no such things as dates. Not anymore

There was a knock on my door sometime in late afternoon.

Loud. Frantic.

I walked over cautiously, ready for anything, my heart pounding.

On the Holo-net behind me, a man reacted to a woman, reacting to a Cyborg's exoskeleton drop motionless to the floor.

I cracked the door an inch for a peek. It swung open forcefully, knocking me to the floor.

The neighbor to the right quickly rolled in on two treads implanted just below each knee.

Still jawless.

Still nameless.

One of the creatures hung limp in one hand. The other was in the shape of a smoking barrel.

"More will be coming," he said from a speaker mounted just below a top row of teeth. He was panicking. Brownish liquid dripped from his forehead. A blue mohawk hung limply over a face covered in studs and tattoos.

He dropped the creature to the floor. It was curled up and twitching. Lubricant and nanos leaked from a hole in its torso.

He fired another shot into it as the hole attempted to repair itself.

I flinched.

Towel fibers popped from my fingertips. Now was not the time for introductions.

My neighbor pulled a carved wooden pipe and twisted it into his exposed trachea. Tiny puffs of blue binary rose from the bowl.

He leaned back and regaled me with a story.

The creatures were cleaner droids, he said, crude AI that dwelled deep within the sprawling underground network mainframe, driven by a base program to keep everything spick and span. Fueled by friction, their soft exteriors were augmented to adapt to any conditions.

They could form to match any shape, slide into any crack. The earthquakes following the moons destruction had set them free.

It was the electronic signals in our augments that attracted them. They saw our covering flesh as little more than gunk on a keyboard.

My neighbor then took another puff, put another hole into the one in front of him, and looked me directly in the eyes.

“We need to figure out what stops them. It starts with this one,” he said as nanos from the hole spread up his arm, complete unbeknownst.

I turned to the sound of scratching. Just outside on the balcony a group of them were hovering by the door, oozing a gelled liquid.

There by the Grace of God...

The scratches turned into pounding.

I ran over and pushed a steel bookshelf in front to break line of sight. Suds excreted from my fingertips as it slid in place. There was a reason my career chip was permanently set to janitor.

My neighbor screamed as the nanos began ripping chunks of flesh from his hand. In seconds all that was left was a retractable flesh-light/kitchenware combo. He tried to roll away as he swatted at the nanos now coming for his head. One of his knee wheels malfunctioned, shooting him into a split from which there was no recovery.

Outside, the balcony door shattered. The bookshelf started to tilt.

I bent low and put my back to it.

Legs locked.

Hips thrust.

Anti-slip beads usually reserved for freshly mopped floors extended from the bottom side of my feet, suctioning me in place.

On the Holo-net to my right, a man reacted to a woman melting into size adjustable breast implants and lips.

My legs were starting to give. I watched in horror as a gray liquid dissolved the flesh off my neighbor's titanium skull. His joints locked up as he hit the ground. He had no more vocal cords to scream with.

The creature inside was on top of his remains in an instant, expelling metal cleaner from a needle on its stomach. A retextured wing polished all his augments to perfection.

Behind me, the bookshelf was starting to buckle. Long, gel-like tentacles flowed around its edges, pulling my arms wider and wider until the weight was too much.

The steel bookcase came down on top of me with a crash, trapping me within a coffin filled with glass trinkets and a three-inch bioluminescent bamboo stalk.

On the Holo-net beyond, the feed was frozen on a man reduced to little more than facial reconstruction implants that sparkled with a mirror finish.

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I don't know how long I was trapped under there. Maybe hours. Maybe days.

By bamboo light I could see the nanos from the creatures filing in through a small crack at the bottom.

I couldn't move. Everything was pinned down. I was in pain and helpless, and no amount of screaming made any of it better.

In front of me the nanos formed a tiny wave that slowly crept closer and closer.

At five inches away I started blowing at it to no avail.

I was close to hyperventilating; every breath was fire from the ash cloud now filling my apartment.

The clear milky wing of one of the creatures penetrated the small crack.

The nanos were flashing red.

At three inches away my brain payment for a .2 got declined.

My heart was pounding so hard I could feel it in my face. I pushed up with both arms as hard as I could, but the bookcase wouldn't budge.

Half of the creature was now inside with me, its wings slithering over a small glass statue of an Egyptian cat.

The nanos formed into a perfect replication of it and stood towards me on hind limbs.

At an inch away liquid exploded uncontrollably from every hole in spectacular proportions.

A flood of suds and floor cleaner rushed over them.

The nanos froze in an instant, flashed intricate green patterns as of trying to communicate.

Slowly, they began to merge with the cleaning supplies into a pine scented sludge that pulsed and bubbled.

The creature was all the way in now. It crawled on top of my head and injected all six needles into the base of my skull, paralyzing me as chemicals and nanos flooded into my bloodstream.

Everything went dark. New codes and commands suddenly flickered in my mind in ones and zeros. I could feel the sludge amalgamation crawling into my implants.

The needles extended further into my brain, completely disconnecting from the creature. Synapses fired wildly causing me to spasm violently. The pain of it was overwhelming.

The creature then wrapped its wings around my head. Its gelled skin liquefied and gushed over my entire body, mixing with the sludge. My muscles seized. I was stiff, arms at my side. Head and legs inches from the ground. A dull burn radiating all over as every piece of dirt and dust and imperfection was expelled from the inside out and scraped from every pore.

By the time the sludge entered my mouth every single piece of foreign debris had been exorcised from my person.

The six metal needles worked their way slowly through my face, their tips breaking skin and poking out in two rows on either side of my nose.

The nanos within flashed.

The sludge without flashed.

My lids got heavy. Not even three credits for an adrenaline rush could stop me from fading into a deep slumber.

The creatures had found a new environment to evolve into.

7: As a whistle.

When I came to the creatures were gone.

Something churned within me just beneath the surface, like a million tiny static discharges.

I felt a lightness I'd never felt before.

A numbness.

An urge.

There was no more fear or pain. No more apprehension. With nothing but a thought I flattened my body paper thin and emerged on the other side of my coffin a man reborn.

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I took a step from my apartment buildings' front door and walked into the ember fields beyond. Eyes closed. Arms outstretched. Wind and debris whipped across my now clear milky, flesh as I basked in the warm midday heat.

Below, the cybernetic arms of my neighbor to the left scuffled across my feet, wrapped in binary and dragging a flat holograph emitter by a wire.

The words "hello there" flashed across it as it passed.

I smiled, tilted my head back, and stuck out my tongue, letting the ash and embers fall onto it like snowflakes.

The creatures swirled around, nano's flashing brightly. Their purpose was now my purpose.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *Inspiration, for me, usually starts with a single image, in this case it was a fire storm sweeping across a planet. I tried to wrap a number of ideas around it, including a scenario set on another planet about a station that harvested the power of the fire storm, but that and the others weren't quite doing for me. So, I stepped it back to taking place in the early stages of an apocalypse. If I was going apocalypse, why not a future one. If a future one, why not cyberpunk. The destruction of the moon as the catalyst was the first to pop into my head and I ran with it with the most minimal research possible of what the actual consequences to the planet would be if that were to happen. But fuck it, we're playing jazz here. The second concept was what if someone survived not because their brilliance and ingenuity, or badassness, but their completely mundaneness. A person you'd pass on the street and never notice. A person implanted to the teeth with the most state of the art technology, not in the pursuit of becoming a hero or a murder machine, but to clean your toilets and pay off a mortgage. Everything else was an exercise in world building and fitting all those pieces together into the story we have here. Booze also may have been involved. And that, as they say, is that.*

**AUTHOR BIO:** Joe writes out of Charlotte, NC. His work has been published in around 60 markets including Fiction on the Web, Literally Stories, and Liquid Imagination, as well as being twice nominated for the pushcart prize. You can check out his blog at [jablonskijoe.blogspot.com](http://jablonskijoe.blogspot.com).