

ARTIFICIAL DAUGHTER

By Tina V. Cabrera

Editor's Note: This story is a sequel to the author's Artificial Mother which we published in Issue 3. We are publishing a revised version of it in this issue. It follows this story in the table of contents.

WHY I LIKE IT: Guest Editor JAMES MOORE writes:

If reading most popular literary prose is like drinking wine coolers, reading Artificial Daughter by Tina Cabrera is like drinking a fine port. It is thick and rich with flavor and meaning.

Tina Cabrera's unique style of writing puts YOU in the place of the main character. What you do, say and eventually feel are given to you in each power-packed line of story-telling. You find yourself in the middle of a number of yin-yang relationships; virtual reality vs "real reality", intellect vs emotion, even mortality vs immortality.

This narrative illustrates the conflict and marriage between intellect and soul. To accomplish this task the author pulls you into a world where technology is king and your father is the supreme intellect. Things get interesting when you explore your mother's past and what lies beyond facts and information. WARNING: if your vocabulary is rudimentary and if you're not up on your mythology, you may not get the full benefit of this story.

Reading Artificial Daughter requires effort and concentration. Don't blink! You'll miss something important. In fact, you can read this story over and over and get new insights from it each time. Enjoy the taste of this story as you drink it in. Hopefully you will derive a proper response to the main character's quote below.

"Had Mother come to believe this nonsense about death equating life and vice versa? What's the answer, Mother? Answer me now!"

Five stars.

ARTIFICIAL DAUGHTER (ThEM)

...the principles of change that have applied to molecules, cells, beasts, minds, and machines should endure even in the age of biotechnology, nanomachines, and artificial minds. The same principles that have applied at sea, on land, and in the air should endure as we spread Earth's life toward the stars. Understanding the enduring principles of change will help us understand the potential for good and ill in the new technologies.

-K. Eric Drexler (from Engines of Creation: The Era of Nanotechnology)

[Circa 2060—]

You browse the pages of the photo album with one hand and hold a mirror in the other so you can decide which of your relatives you resemble most; your memory is pristine except when it comes to the contours of your own face. Do you resemble EM as he was originally? Is that him standing next to the one who called herself Mother in front of the sushi place with one arm wrapped around her waist? Possibly, but probably not. According to Mother's diaries, your conception was the result of a formal transaction between two platonic friends. For all you know, he might have insisted that she erase any and all images of him as part of the agreement.

The photo albums pre-date the Singularity, so they must only contain photos of original Bios, though you can't be completely certain that none are like you In-Betweens. On the surface, though, you resemble your original human counterparts. Placing two fingers on the inside of your wrist, you imagine what it might be like to feel a pulse, then your hand roves to where your heart would have been. When you continue to assess what you see in the photos, in this one of Prom, is that tint of pink on her cheeks a real blush or the effects of makeup and lighting? You try to think of something embarrassing, like when you blurted out to EM that he was the only man you ever loved when he took you to the space museum. Your mirror face remains that slight hint of blue you can never seem to get used to.

On every leaf you see at least one snapshot of Mother and her identical twin so that turning the pages rapidly creates a slow-motion film of their evolution from infancy to adulthood. The twins start off looking identical (you can't tell who is who), but before long they each adopt their own style. Sitting on the bench of a vintage piano with unopened gifts on the carpet, one of the twins is dressed in black with matching jet-black hair. Her skin is pale and her lips metallic blue. The other twin is wearing denim overalls and her auburn hair is swept back in a ponytail. This must be Mother. The more edgy and cool twin has got to be her twin, which would make her your aunt. Glancing in

the mirror again, you are glad you share a similar taste in style and fashion with the latter.

You have not been able to commit to any one gender, nor can you identify with any of the categories—fluid, Cisgender, the list goes on—none of them are apropos. Yet, you are drawn to the androgyny of such classic figures as David Bowie, Boy George, Tilda Swinton, and the like. You try a new hairstyle every week because you quickly tire of each one as soon as you try it. Androgyny—or what it used to signify—is out of fashion, the kind that had emphasized the superficial or that relied too heavily on stereotypical binary masculine and feminine norms; for example, for a woman to be considered androgynous, she was expected to sport masculine attire and forego make-up. Nevertheless, you seek those few remaining establishments that recycle fashions—Mademoiselle Plus and Moderne Elle—for inspiration in how to present in real reality.

When you were born from the bio-bag, Mother did not name you, either because she was already dead or shirked her maternal responsibility. Father Em did not name you either but rather has called you Kid since you can remember. You could go by a number as your Trans friends do, but that would be boring. You also do not want to be called *Veronica*, *Simone*, *Annabelle* or *Amelia*, names of Mother's invention in her diaries. Her over-sentimentality turns your stomach; she claimed to already love you before you emerged; this from a literally heartless woman. There is no need for names as signifiers—just about everyone you know is okay with no-name. Besides, with verbal communication unnecessary, you can think any name you like. You can be just like Father EM, ever-changing and chameleon-like. Yet, you tell yourself that a proper name might help differentiate you from all the rest. Taking on a name might offer you some stability, even if artificially in the dizzying tide of confusing emotions that washes over you day by day. You easily blame Mother for your tendency for melancholy, for she clearly caved into depression and anxiety.

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Is death a tragedy? For Singularitarian Ray Kurzweil, it most certainly is in this sense: "When people speak of losing part of themselves when a loved one dies, they are speaking quite literally, since we lose the ability to effectively use the neural patterns in our brain that had self-organized to interact with that person."

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Mother MOSH (Mostly Original Substrate Human) has been dead all your life outside the bio-bag, but you have connected through VR plug-ins, BMI (Brain Machine Interface). You do so, not necessarily because you want to get to know her, but because you hope to connect to her twin sister and calculate where your personalities converge. The more you plug in, the more you perceive that Mother's memories and impressions almost all relate to her twin. Yet, even your super-intelligence cannot penetrate beyond mere thoughts and feelings. Mother's twin died long before Mother became MOSH and thus can only be accessed through a remove. Despite the gaps, you form an obsession with her even though she is Dead-dead while Mother is just Dead—still accessible by virtue of full immersion Experience Beaming. You'd rather that

it not, but the experience necessarily offers a composite of Mother, who expected you to completely transition at some point, she was so certain of her premonitions. She went so far as to predict you would become so enhanced, you would have no need of not only a mother, but of friends. But she was wrong about the latter. In fact, most of your friends are Post-Human and convinced you to have your original lungs replaced with the latest in technology—respirocytes to provide oxygenation. She failed to foresee the struggle you would have as a 2.0, an In-Between, a dying breed. She could not even conceive of EM's ambivalence; that he would take you in upon her passing but request that you not call him Father, or Daddy or any other such paternal label; how despite his aloofness, he indulges your wish to communicate from time to time the old fashioned way—verbally rather than telepathically. With the death of the one who called herself Mother and a fully transitioned 3.0 father, you could be persuaded to transition even more to keep apace, but no, you won't fulfill Mother's ill-conceived prophecy. For one, you could elect to have your old-fashioned digestive process replaced with nanobot technology, but you love the taste and texture of food. One thing she was spot-on about was that your intelligence would grow exponentially day-by-day; there is no stopping it.

By means of BMI, you exhaust all possible knowledge of the permanently dead, but you are dissatisfied. Your only living relative, as far as you know, is Father EM, the letters of which may stand for:

- EMpathy
- EMergent
- EMergency
- EMpty
- EMblamatic

The possibilities for why he calls himself EM are near endless. More importantly, what is EM besides enhanced plasticity? Considering he chose directed purposeful, technological evolution over biological and is almost all non-biological, his body comprised of nano-technology, you wonder whether it is even possible that you inherited any of his human traits. Does he even remember his history pre-Singularity? You've tried and failed to find a definitive answer to these questions through available research. In hopes of finding answers, you ask EM if you can be his apprentice.

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EM has the reputation of being one of the finest VR designers around, his creations intellectually rich and stunning in their appeal to the senses; however, you perceive the majority of his games to be far removed from original human culture, which though marginal, lingers in the In-Between communities.

"I have some ideas. How about a game that would appeal to an audience of In-Betweens like me?" you say, finding it difficult to keep a straight face with today's projection, some combination of King Kong and Godzilla. "Even though our numbers are dwindling, I do know there's a niche market for it." He nods his large lizard-like head, "Sure." You cannot tell how he really feels about your idea because he has shut down all interface, and well, lizard faces lack human subtlety. You don't know why he gives in,

but you're glad that he has, for he would probably be unable to empathize; he has nearly forgotten everything to do with original substrate. You yearn for an option that includes monsters or demons like the ones you have studied from the literary archives.

"Looks like you're a fan of the Japanese monster movie classics?"

"Uh huh."

"Well then, I think you'll like what I have in mind for my first VR game."

What you have planned is role-play based on the mythical minotaur. The premise is for the player to fully embody the character as they understand it; each action generates the next scenario including secondary characters. The game works much like traditional Experience Beaming, the only difference being that the gamer plugs into fictional characters rather than actual persons. It takes you only one day to craft the game, and now you perform a test run.

Phase 1 begins with you the minotaur confronting your enemies. With colorless faces, some pray for escape from what they perceive as a monster, some flee from your ghastly appearance, others fall prostrate. *How will you react?* You are filled with righteous rage, stalking towards the detractors in the Temple of the Axes, casting several of your opponents into the sea. You cry out (this aspect viscerally imitating vibrations rippling down your throat, veins in your neck pulsing): "Not for nothing was my mother a queen; I cannot mix with commoners, even if my modesty should wish it." You continue your verbal tirade as you run back to your maze: "I am unique! Nothing can be communicated by the art of writing, so it doesn't matter that I cannot read!"

In Phase 2, you charge through the halls of stone and after running for what feels like hours, you fall dizzily to the ground. Your generated pulse slows, and you turn pale; you faint, then come to and vomit all over your bull body. *You caught the virus.* When you feel better, you look behind and in front. No one is chasing you anymore, so to keep the adrenaline fix going, you pretend you are being hunted. You arrive at one of many rooftops, from which you hurl yourself. You do this repeatedly until you are bloody. All this physical exertion makes you sleepy, so you doze off. When you wake, the color of the day has changed from blue to grey.

In Phase 3, you pretend there is another minotaur who is a mirror image of you. You show Minotaur 2 around your labyrinthian dwelling. You show him your vast wine cellar and open a bottle of red wine. You make a toast, and Minotaur 2 drinks first. You pour again and again until you both are drunk. *So, this is what it feels like to be drunk with the blood of the vine.*

The final phase makes you dizzy all over again, now that the other minotaur has taken its leave. In your labyrinth, everything exists many times; you run into the same wellhead, courtyard, manger, drinking trough, temple of Axes, the sea, the entire world of your house multiple times until the game seems to have no point at all, that is, until the end: After you have *freed* nine men who came into your house, you patiently wait for your redeemer to come.

All this time, Theseus has been coagulating and waiting in the sidelines. He speaks

to a ghostly form in the shape of a woman: “Can you believe it, Ariadne? The Minotaur scarcely defended itself.” *You* are of course still here—your mind, but the minotaur has vanished. Nevertheless, you respond, with righteous outrage: “My name is Asterion! And everything exists many times—I have created this huge house! I am not a monster! My name is Asterion!” And suddenly Theseus is EM with a face that alters rapidly, but you still recognize the figure as Father. Your senses are on overload. Theseus/Em/Father takes you into his arms and gently strokes your bull face. As you lay dying, you project: *I am an individual. I am still and will be indefinitely. Not for meaning, but for Existential continuity. I want to be like you Father; unlike Mother, we are survivors Father, aren't we? You are my redeemer. Now, take me, please, to a place where I can be free.* For his part, EM/Father/Theseus neither speaks nor projects, only his chameleon face becomes fixed with a pained expression.

After you unplug, your head throbs and you feel dizzy in real reality. EM grasps your elbow and fetches you a glass of water. After you comport yourself, you feel the need to explain yourself. Your voice excited, you say, “So, I went with Borges’s sympathetic version of the mythical minotaur. In Greek mythology the monster is unnamed, whereas in Borges’ version he goes by the name Asterion, which means ‘the starry one.’ This makes sense. I love Borges’s writings. I am pleased with the flexibility that I built into the game; the gamer has utter freedom to enact the character as they see fit.” What you do not say is that coming out of it, you are more self-aware than before; you thoroughly empathized with the half-man half bull’s plight. You did because like him, you are a hybrid of sorts. And you are lonely. You seek redemption in one who donated his nano-sperm to create you but hesitates to take on all that encompasses fatherhood. How would EM play the role; would he choose an empathetic humanized version of the minotaur? Or would he choose one like his monster projection—cold and reptilian. Whatever the outcome, he is your Father, your progenitor, even if artificially.

“Before approving my game and adding it to the catalog, would you please join me in a test run?” You suggest that he inhabit the minotaur and you Theseus and Ariadne.

“Won’t it be easier if we both turn on Interface,” you ask.

“No, that won’t be necessary,” he answers stubbornly.

With no BMI, it will be difficult, but might EM’s actions betray his true nature in the guise of a virtual game? Will you glimpse a glitch or slip of the virtual mask?

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That everything changes is the basic truth for each existence. No one can deny this truth, and all the teaching of Buddhism is condensed within it.

-Shunryu Suzuki (from Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind)

While you continue to explore the constantly shifting enigma that is Father EM, you wish to have nothing further to do with Mother. You decide to rid yourself of all that she left for you, such as the antique handheld mirror, her library of books, and yes, even her diaries. This might seem an extreme gesture and a waste of good literature; however, your photographic memories remain filed away for as long as you exist. How long you

exist is completely up to you, as it was for Mother, an In-Between like you; at a time when science had cured all terminal diseases, she chose mortality.

As you sift through her books, you place them in either the “recycle” or “donation” pile, but first you speed read the “fact-based” texts to build your mental repertoire; among the collection, you come upon a title that grabs your attention— *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki, First Master of Zen Center, San Francisco and Carmel Valley, California, a book on meditation, thirty-fourth printing paperback edition. Despite its age, it is preserved well (in a dust-free book cover), which means it must have been important to Mother.

The book is divided into three parts: *Right Practice, Right Attitude, and Right Understanding*. In Part 1 is a chapter called “Breathing.” You turn to it and quickly scan the two pages, which explain how to properly follow one’s breath in Zazen meditation. Well, that is useless. You cannot try this part of the practice, so you skip to “Control” and “Mind Waves.”

Master Suzuki suggests that one not try to stop thinking, but rather to let it stop by itself. If you just let thoughts come and go, they won’t stay long and in five or ten minutes your mind will be completely serene and calm. Yeah right, you think, stopping my thoughts is like trying to stop a bullet train with a tennis net. You try to force your mind into line with your eyes, which stare on the spot on the wall straight ahead. Thoughts come rapid fire still, so you close your eyes, hoping that the darkness will lull you into emptiness. With no in-breath or out-breath or any kind of breath to follow, you decide to enunciate words aloud—*ThEM, ThEM. Th for Thing, EM for EM. Thing for specificity, individuality. EM for Father EM. I am an individual and so is EM. We chose immortality, not for meaning but Existential continuity*. This is your mantra. You latch on. When a thought interferes you calmly ask it to leave. Stay serene, stay calm. No breath, no pulse. *Nothing comes from outside your mind. Nothing outside yourself can cause any trouble. You yourself make the waves in your mind*. You open your eyes and sense your face contorted and twisted in a rage. Tears flow down your cheeks, yes, tears ought to replace the heart as symbol of deep human feeling.

You decide to keep this nonfiction book for unlike those of the sciences, which your mind speedily processes, the meaning of the simple words and sentences in this book elude you. Even when you slow-read. You return to the highlighted parts accompanied by Mother’s sporadic handwritten notes in the margins. Under the heading *Nirvana, The Waterfall* highlighted in pink: “our life and death are the same thing. When we realize this fact, we have no fear of death anymore, nor actual difficulty in our life.” In the margins: “How? How can life and death be the very same thing?” The very same question you ask yourself now. Had Mother come to believe this nonsense about death equating life and vice versa? *What’s the answer, Mother? Answer me now!*

At Yosemite National Park, Master Suzuki beheld the great waterfalls. And there he was granted the most beautiful, salient metaphor to represent life and death. He notes that the water had at one time been one, but now it comes down in separate tiny curtain-like streams. On the way down, each drop of water comes down with great

difficulty, for it takes a long time for drops from over 1300 feet high to reach the bottom of the waterfall. Human life is like this, says Master Suzuki: "We have many difficult experiences in our life. But at the same time...the water was not originally separated but was one whole river. Only when it is separated does it have some difficulty in falling. It is as if the water does not have any feeling when it is one whole river. Only when separated into many drops can it begin to have or to express some feeling." In addition, "Before we were born, we had no feeling; we were one with the universe. This is called 'mind-only,' or 'essence of mind,' or 'big mind.'" *Imagine that, mind only.* "After we are separated by birth from this oneness, as the water falling from the waterfall is separated by the wind and rocks, then we have feeling. You have difficulty because you have feeling...When you do not realize that you are one with the river, or one with the universe, you are afraid. Our life and death are the same thing. When we realize this fact, we have no fear of death anymore, and we have no actual difficulty in our life."

Until now, most things have been easy. You have grown quite bored with your split-second ability to comprehend, most of which you find useless for everyday living. Even reading the thoughts of others has grown tiresome. What you want now—you want to understand what Master Suzuki means; you want to sift through the language for understanding beyond mere words. It will be useful to search the archives related to Zen Buddhism, yes, but you want more. You will make the trek by leg to the site of Master Suzuki's now enshrined Zen Center in California, as an original human fascinated by Buddhism might have done. You will visit his final place of residence to probe for understanding, unaided by Interface or any other form of technology.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I wrote "Artificial Daughter" as an installment in the series of narratives tentatively titled ThEM (and Other Transhumans). This series includes the piece "Artificial Mother," which Fleas on the Dog published in Issue 3. My goal is to gather distinct but related pieces (fascicles) under the theme of Transhumanism and the Singularity. In this piece, Artificial Daughter is partially transitioned into a transhuman, aka In-Between, and seeks self-understanding and connection with her nano-technological father EM. Despite her super-intelligence, she longs for meaning beyond mere knowledge and information, and she seeks this through connection with Father EM and by exploring Zen Buddhism. Finally, I continue to use second-person POV in this piece as I did with "Artificial Mother," because I think it best suits what I'm trying to accomplish, which is to pull in the reader to connect intimately with the character and her (un)familiar world.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Tina V. Cabrera currently resides in the ATX area with her husband, dog and two cats. She teaches as Assistant Professor of English for Temple College and devotes her free time to writing and making art. Visit her website at tvcannyncanny.com Her stories 'Waking Hours (Fiction) and 'Waking Hours (Anti-fiction) were published in Issue 6 (Fiction). Her collection of

short stories **Giving Up the Ghost (and other Hauntings)** was reviewed in the same issue (Nonfiction).



EDITOR’S BIO:

James Moore is a husband, father, grandfather and oh yes, a writer. Even though James is a relative newcomer to the literary world, he is working on several projects simultaneously. His current works include a feature length movie screenplay *Kiki Diamond: Bounty Hunter* and the screenplay adaptation of *Charlotte: The Price of Vengeance*, his debut novella.

James types out his inspiration at a small dining room table in Virginia Beach, VA with the love and support of his wife Donna. His story *Vacation in the Shade* appears in this issue.