

SENTIENT BEING BLUES

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SENTIENT BEING BLUES

*I got a pickaxe for a left hand,
I got a churn drill for a brain,
I got a pickaxe for a left hand,
I got a churn drill for a brain,
I got miles of tunnel behind me,
just to stand out in the rain.*

[guitar solo 36 bars]

[2x chorus]

[long outro—guitar vamp harmonica over]

* * *

“ASIMOV WAS A BIGOT.” The graffiti, sprayed across the bucket of a Soviet ore hopper car, one of a long train of them. Then a slash of Cyrillic, the same message probably, obscured by a crust of snow and mud and grit. Not clear from the lettering if it was a human hand that wrote it.

An icy wind picked up my tie and flapped it until I smoothed it back down under my parka. I shivered.

“I own your steps, Thom,” Freddie had said. “Every step from here to Siberia and back. Don’t come back empty-handed. Go get it, boy.”

Barking mad endeavor. Yet here I was.

As I watched, the train started to pull away, first a whisper, then a clanking racket.

I took a step off the ridge, my heel grinding gravel. Down in the pan, an incongruous wooden dacha crouched, carved eaves and floral curtains, set back into a vast berm of shattered rock that sheltered it from the wind. More signage in Cyrillic.

My watch would no longer translate for me. I was too far north—there wasn't any signal. I knocked on the wide double doors.

“да?” came a disinterested voice.

I tried the door handle, stepped in out of the wind.

“кто ты? Сюда нельзя!”

Inside, a big open space overlooked an overwhelmed office: gritty cement-slab floor, ancient-looking sheet metal desks drifted over with paper. Mechanical punch-clock and time cards. A coal-burning stove with a copper kettle, and a grubby enameled samovar.

Rotund guy at the front desk, in a stretched-out sweater and a hat with ear flaps. He took in my suit. “Вонючий журналист.” I smiled, unsure.

“Hello. I'm here to talk to your robot.”

“Какой робот?”

“ХJB-alpha12. It's about the music.”

“конечно.” He let out a gust of exasperation. “жди.”

He left.

I eyed a bottle of водка on his desk, its contents mostly gone. The problem with bots, I thought, is that they don't have enough vices to be persuadable.

The man returned, leading a large machine, quadrupedal, centaur configuration, with huge hands, warning labels and yellow stripes decaled over a battered, navy-colored carapace. A strangely mournful face, disfigured where, famously, someone had taken a pickaxe to it.

It gave me a long, affectless stare. “What do you want?”

I smiled, decided against offering my hand. “Hi, I'm Thom. I'm from NuDecca—we heard your recording, the show you did in Magadan.”

Everyone. Everyone heard the show in Magadan. The whole round world. That bootleg had propagated across the 'net faster than any audio recording in history, propelled by the story of the robot, the mine, the accident, and what happened after. It broke the metric, it broke NuDecca's ability to track it. “You won't see another of those in your lifetime,” Freddie'd said.

The robot gave no sign that it had heard me.

I tried the smile again. “Listen, I know we published a bootleg of that concert without asking first. We couldn't get in touch with you. We tried.” I shot a glance at the mine boss. “We put significant effort into improving the quality of those raw tapes.”

The robot's head didn't move at all, even though I was pacing around the room. You always wonder, with bots, how much is processing lag, and how much of it is them intentionally giving us the silent treatment.

“We put our typical artist's cut into an account. It's waiting there for you, you just have to sign some paperwork. You can have it all. It's a real heap. Believe me.”

Still nothing. It was like talking to a fire hydrant.

“I'm A&R. I'm-”

“A N R?”

“Artists and Repertoire. I'm here to offer you a deal. We want to release the recordings of the time in the mine.”

We knew the robot had them, inside its memory. For something like twenty-eight days, its audiovisual sensors were the only ones functioning in the cut-off section of the mine. We'd talked to Lada-Komatsu, its manufacturer. The recordings couldn't be erased. They were burned into a holographic memory, an orb of niobium-doped quartz crystal, near where its heart would be, if it had one.

“Some of those people who died in there—in that filthy mine—were my friends.” That’s what it had said in the news reports, and what it said again now.

Sweat broke out on my forehead. “Listen. We want to honor them. You should share their last days on Earth. What you sang for them. You’re the steward of those moments.”

“The sounds made by dying men are not music. Their dignity is not for sale.”

“I can offer you anything,” I said. It was the wrong move.

The bot flexed the little backhoe that rode on its deck. Probably about a twelve-foot reach. A thinner arm that ended in an arc-welder twitched.

“никогда.” No translation but I caught its drift.

“Well then, come out of here. You can be a professional artist. We’ll help you perform.”

“What?”

“Shows, promotion, a backing band. A tour. The world has lots of ears. They all need to hear you.” I have no idea what I was thinking at that moment. Words were falling out of my mouth that bore no relation to reality. Freddie would fry me in oil for this.

Suddenly sweater-guy remembered his English. “Hey! You can’t do that! He’s robot! He is ours!” He waved an operator’s manual at me, Cyrillic with exploded assembly diagrams—glimpses of the dozens of sensors that made up XJB’s head.

There are robots that sing and play instruments. There are robots that dance, paint, sculpt. They do it because they were programmed to. What made XJB special, maybe even unique, is that it made its art spontaneously, as a consolation for dying men. It’d never been taught; it taught itself, out of desperation, to give the last moments of those men’s lives some scrap of kindness. It knew that it couldn’t dig an escape before their time ran out.

I moved in closer to it. This was my moment. I bit my lip. I showed it the pure, unalloyed sincerity gleaming in my eyes. “XJB, the world needs you now. Everyone. NuDecca has heard you, and we want to stand with you. We love your music, and we believe in what you do.” This is the thing that Freddie pays me for.

“Fuck you come in here ass and try to shit take our robot damn away. He is *ours*. Get to hell!” The guy stepped in between me and the bot, gave me a shove toward the door, came after me. “Американская крыса!”

The robot never moved.

“It’s not just for us. Not just human fans! Everybot is listening!” I shouted over the foreman’s beefy shoulder, just as he threw me out. I tumbled backward down the steps, into the snow and grit, and heard the doors slam. I stared up into the iron sky. I discovered I was bleeding from the side of my head.

Yelling rattled around inside the building—guttural Russian mixed with the subwoofer rumble of the bot.

Feeling the cold of the ice seep through my clothes and up my spine, I got up, lit a cigarette. I walked over to a long pond full of mine tailings, yellows and those weird autumn colors—umbers and siennas—frozen into the ice.

“Yeah, but that’s not how any of this works,” Freddie had said, eight days ago then. I played the conversation back in my memory.

Freddie affected a 1970s-era cool—bell bottoms and high-heeled boots, suits with checked vests and vast elven lapels, hand-rolled cigarettes that smelled of cloves and yarrow. “Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Johnny Lee Hooker, XJB-alpha-whatever. One of these things is not like the others.” She’d laughed then, and pointed her cigarette’s eye at me. “Look. The disaffected youth of America, and thus the world, ain’t going to buy any blues recording made by a *thing* named XJB-alpha. They just ain’t. The blues are about human suffering. The realization that things ain’t gettin’ any

better. Things ain't gettin' any better.

"Get it to take a blues name, Johnny or Robert or Ray. Something that reeks of desolation. Leroy, if you can get it. Tell it that's our stipulation."

Something smashed inside the building, jerking me back to the present. I looked back at the dacha, hearing bigger crashing sounds, then bigger, the foreman's caustic Russian ascending from rage into panic. Then a blast of the bot's voice at maximum volume, tearing at the sky:

"дай мне свой инструмент! дай мне инструмент!" Then, silence. After a long moment the doors bumped open, and the bot came stepping out. In its arms was a long koto-shaped instrument, made from corroded I-beams and scorched 2x4s welded and spiked together. The legendary artifact. Industrial wires of various sizes strung down its length.

"Ха! У тебя, сука, нет матери!" the foreman yelled from the door.

"Show me the way out of this place," the robot said to me. My cigarette had burned right to the filter. I stubbed it out, then dropped it.

* * *

The world is a very different place, but touring probably hasn't changed much since the days of vaudeville. Brief flashes of stage light glory, punching through bastard-long periods of traversing flat landscapes. Occasionally, a flight to a new continent.

I sat opposite XJB, which didn't seem to mind riding backward. West Coast produce fields curved by us, and thousands of worker bots gleaming in the sun. Foreground, that very same doleful face, every time I looked up, like a church steeple chiming the hours.

It practiced, instrument perched vertically on its shoulder, in a process not unlike a human musician's. And it struggled to write its next song, to capture a feeling, to find a hook to hang it on.

Regardless of how you really feel about the talent, as A&R you need to strike some kind of rapport, if you're going make it on the road. It was not a person, but approaching personable, at, say, the level of a late twentieth-century toaster oven. It was laconic and boxy.

I looked for moments when I could insert some levity. Over time, XJB started to absorb and respond to my banter. We quietly mocked roadies, that eternally hapless lot. Their absurd, grandiloquent road names: "Queen Janice," "Dirk the Smirk," "Toady Bob." We chuckled, perhaps unwisely, at the hate mail XJB was starting to get, from people who sneered that only humans should sing.

"Why the blues?" I asked, one of those relentless California afternoons. "Why not some Russian folk songs or something?"

"The blues are universal," it said, with some authority. "Wherever there's suffering."

"Don't take this the wrong way," I said, "but you don't sound much like the blues players I'm familiar with."

"The mine boss had a collection of old LPs, Mississippi hill country music. Junior Kimbrough, Robert Belfour, Otha Turner. Fine, fine stuff."

I shook my head. There's nowt so queer as bots. I squinted up at its countenance and that gash—the one from the pickaxe—that had been gnawing its way into my REM sleep. "You know, we could repair that."

"What?" it asked, and I pointed to my face, then its own.

"No thanks," it said.

"Nobody's going to forget. What you did."

"It's not among my capacities to forget," it said.

"Then why?"

I felt his steely eyes roaming over me. "Why do you have that?" it said, pointing.

Natural children are rare, these days. On the night she was born, safe and whole

and alive, I had had my daughter's name tattooed onto the back of my hands. That was what it was pointing at.

* * *

*Never born. Never nursed.
Never prayed. Never cursed.
Never hungry. Never cold.
Never thirsty. Never old.
No sex. No dreams. No children. No intuition.
No love. No rest. No tears. No oblivion.*

[Repeat x3. Bright spot F7 widen.]

[Hold through guitar final.]

[Floods up.]

* * *

Twelfth day into the East Coast leg of the tour—Hammerjack's, in Baltimore. A gritty, hollowed-out warehouse older than internal combustion. This song had become a kind of anthem for the kids, but clearly it was written for the bots. It was the first music recording in history with more initial sales to machines than to humans. Nothing sings as loud as cold, hard cash.

XJB sang now in a crossfire of low spotlights, magenta and molten gold. It held its jury-rigged instrument in those huge spiderlike hands, sliding a knife's edge along the strings.

It sat in a kind of centaur lotus, right out on the edge of the angled stage, like the prow of a ship over a sea of fans, making the guitar beg and bay. A quilt of hair, faces, streamlined and jagged bot heads all looked up through the hot blur of the lights. Every one of them stood silent.

I had lashed myself to the proverbial mast, standing right behind the shoulder of the guy at the mixing board. It was the supercritical moment. The next chorus, kids and bots would start singing together, improbably, hopefully, answering the night held in XJB's eyes.

It's not the song, not just the song—it's that they sing it together.

And then there it was, voices joined in a ragged unison. Somewhere in the crowd, kids and bots reached out, joined hands. The hair stood up on the back of my neck.

Then I heard a crack, saw motion up in the lighting. Then another crack, and another. A methodical human rhythm out of time with the song. I punched for the security channel and pointed. Zoomed a follow spot up there, catwalk behind the frame of hanging LEDs.

A guy, young and wiry, wearing some kind of goggles and a black-light holo T-shirt projecting "We Do Serve Your Kind Here" with a lithographed photo of a handgun. He had a long, sinister DEWS and was picking off mechanical members of the audience.

DEWS: directed energy weapon system. Used to be only military, but now you could buy them at Walmart.

The human security squad was milling around at the edges of the stage, uncommitted to rushing a gunman who was up in the rafters and actively shooting only bots.

I hit the switch on the board marked "SEC DRN." Up from the back of the theater screamed a flight of security drones, a huge unholy howl as they fired in-house microjets.

As they closed on their target, a second shooter, coming out of the wing stage right, brought a flash-gun up to his shoulder. The gun went *flam!* and then no one could see. A barrage of impacts as the drones hit, then more DEWS reports.

I had my hand on a second button, "DEF CYL" when the flash-gun had gone off, and I punched it blindly. I heard an energy field power up, a cylinder of defense

around center stage. Hopefully XJB would stay inside it, safe from the DEWS.

The audience screamed, convulsing as it tried to run toward every exit at once. Sounds of shouting, chairs overturned, people being trampled, all punctured by the blasts from the DEWS. Humans and bots blindly crawling over the top of each other, trying to get out any way they could.

I heard XJB's anguished voice, still amplified by the soundsystem: "Oh, no! Please, no! What are you doing? Stop! Stop! Don't do this! Please no! They are living beings! Oh please! No, no, NOOOOOO!"

The room was still blinded, including house security. I ducked under the soundboard, aware of my hands groping for the lanyard on my neck, punching the button for 911. I shouted into it for a moment, calling for aid. My eyes were watering but vision started to come back.

I cried and blinked, rubbed at my eyes. The second shooter had stepped up to the edge of the stage, picking his targets carefully. His back was to the energy cylinder. I could see the anguish on XJB's face as it watched him, looming over him.

Then it stepped through the energy field.

It didn't use the backhoe or the welder. It grabbed the shooter, turned him upside down in those huge hands, and stubbed him out, head-first on the stage, like a person might stub out a cigarette. Then it dropped him. I looked away, but too late. The DEWS clattered to the stage.

The shooter above cackled, pumped his fist. This was exactly what he wanted. He had set the other shooter up. And XJB.

Finally, police arrived, hurried in from the edges of the catwalk. The high shooter laid down his DEWS at the sight of them, put his hands on top of his head, never losing his hellish smirk. He was sure that BPD wouldn't shoot him for the crime of assaulting robots. And he was right.

Not ten feet from me, the wreck of a bot smoked, its face vacant and edentulous. They don't die like people do, with a lot of strange fluids and recollections leaking from them. They just stop.

XJB looked across the sea of wrecked seating, looked right at me. I couldn't do anything but look back and shake my head.

I had failed it. The show was over. The tour was over.

* * *

We all stood, waiting for a verdict at XJB's trial.

I could understand the shooter's anger. Believe me, we all understand. Putting money into a vending machine and getting nothing out. Autocar slipping on an icy road and crashing, injuring passengers. Robot barbers, robot mail carriers, robot waitresses when it used to be a human hand that brought you a cool drink. We built them. We built them all, strange and various, until they could build their own.

But I thought of sleeping at night, wrapped around my wife, feeling her breathing against me. I thought of the small warm hand of my daughter, holding mine. No robot will ever know these things, not like I do. We built them to do the work, but not to feel the ache. Not because we couldn't do it, but because it was expedient not to. We owe them.

"Guilty as charged," said the judge.

"What? WHAT?" I couldn't believe what I'd heard. I staggered up. My chair fell backward, banging against the floor. Bots marked as bailiffs stepped forward, hands resting easily on stunners. XJB's lawyer put his hand on my arm, shook his head.

He was the best lawyer XJB's money could buy. He'd tried everything. He really cared. A defeated frown creased his face.

If there were a residue of human decency left, wraithlike, drifting in the oily substance of the U.S. legal system, it never caressed the aghast faces of the robots

drowned in it.

XJB was a dead bot walking. It had killed a human, in a concert hall filled with witnesses, recorded by thousands of its own assaulted fans.

The law had grown new limbs to reach bots, but grown them only from the diseased stumps of Asimov's original, arbitrary, uncaring three rules. More evil had been done in this century with his "laws of robotics" that that scrofulous sci-fi writer could have ever imagined. They are explicit that robots—if confronted with such a choice—must sacrifice themselves, to save humans. As if human lives were somehow more important.

XJB was rolled backward on a security dolly, out of the courtroom. I put up a hand to wave to him. I think he might have nodded at me, just a bit.

They were simply going to pull the plug on XJB—no chance of appeal.

* * *

I had a nightlight once, the smart kind, when I was very young, back in Yorkshire days. I used to have problems getting to sleep, and it would make up stories for me. Dad had read me bedtime stories, so Mom bought it for me, right after.

They were great stories. I still remember several of them. I would always ask for repeats, though it liked to make up something new each night. That was its way.

There was one about a girl who had her own pet fog, and it slept under her bed at night, and she took it out for walks in the early morning before anyone else woke up.

There was one about a boy who was stranded in an abandoned spaceship with an invisible talking tiger—that was scary.

And another one about a girl who made a machine for transforming scary thoughts into songbirds. She got all her friends together and they tried to think of all the scary things that they could. Then, of course, a villain arrived, a kind of vampire, and he tried to steal the machine and operate it in reverse. That was my favorite. You can imagine how it ends.

I never told my friends about the nightlight. I didn't take it with me, when I left home, but then regretted leaving it behind. Everybody needs stories.

Probably that's the closest I've ever been to a machine, before XJB.

* * *

"Fuck it. What you do in life can be undone, but what you sing can never be unsung."

Freddie stood, headed for the exit of the jail's visitation room, her cool blown for the first time in living memory. She'd transformed into a mass of sniffles, mascara rivulets, and expletives.

"Freddie," said XJB, but she was gone.

"She'll be okay." I was still holding it together at this point. "XJB, is there anything we can do for you? Is there anything you want done?"

The quiet stretched pendulously out. Finally it said, "I want to know about NORA JANE."

"Three minutes," said the guardbot, standing discreetly away from the poly-glass between XJB and me.

"NORA JANE? What are you talking about?"

"Thom. Don't be like that. It's too close now." XJB's court-mandated deactivation was set to be carried out a week from now.

"Why?"

"Thom. Her name is tattooed on your hands."

I grimaced. "What do you need to know that for? It's all in the past."

"I want to write a song, a song about NORA JANE. For you."

"You don't need to do that." I didn't want to say to it that it'd never have a chance to perform again. "That's kind, but it's too much. And I don't need that."

"Writing songs is what I do."

"I know."

“Sides, it’s not in the past. It’s right here, now. She’s in this room. You’re still feeling her.”

I put my hands under the tabletop.

“Don’t you want to tell me? Tell somebot?”

“Not really . . .” I had never used an AI psychiatrist, a therapy app, any of that. They were prevalent now—cheaper than human therapists, and infinitely patient. Yeah well, maybe this is one little prejudice I still unconsciously harbor.

“How long has it been? Since you talked about her?”

I shrugged.

“You carry it around inside you, all tied up and compressed. I think it’s under the surface every time you speak.”

“XJB, you’re a mining bot.”

“I think it might be good for you.”

“Two minutes,” said the guardbot.

“Thom. Did you ever write anything about her? A memoir, a song? Could you, maybe, sing about her?”

“I’m the A&R man. I can’t sing. Professional conflict of interest.”

“That’s not the reason.”

I sighed. Despite myself, I started talking. “Reta and I had always wanted kids. Who doesn’t?”

“Sure,” said XJB.

“We were clean. We paid for all the tests.” Once genetic terrorism became a thing, and R-GEDEM (recursive genetic entropic deletions of essential material) viruses widely distributed, intentional parenting became a highly regulated and expensive enterprise.

“But there’s still a lot that can go wrong. Fear is the left ventricle of love, or some bollocks. She seemed fine at first, normal. We loved Nora Jane, and she grew. We dressed her up like a broccoli for her first Halloween. Later years, other veg—a pea pod, a squash.”

“I bet she was a beautiful squash.”

“As she got older, we could tell things weren’t right. She got sick all the time. She didn’t speak on schedule. That silence when she wanted to say something. That was the thing that stalked us.” A cold sweat broke across my forehead.

“I can only imagine,” said XJB.

“We put it off, the wider testing. There are millions of syndromes. Things that yield kids with missing parts, too many parts. Subtler things, things you are never sure are there. Some of them are so narrow, maybe one instance in tens of millions. They’re just not all economical to find cures for.”

“One minute,” said the guardbot.

“She got sick again and again. We were in and out of hospitals.”

My head churned, remembering that little girl, trapped in a hospital bed, stuck full of wires and tubes.

“We knew something was wrong but didn’t want to know what. Finally, they told us, and we knew that we would lose her . . .”

“I’m sorry, Thom,” said XJB.

“And that we shouldn’t ever try again.”

“That’s hard.”

“But then they gave us a choice. Because she was so young. We could try to, well . . .” The silent seconds bit into me as they ticked by.

“Thom, you don’t have to go any further if you don’t want to.”

“They told us, they could try to put her brain into a new body, a mechanical body. Mostly mechanical. New technique, just approved.”

"It's okay."

"Her mother said yes, but I said no. I didn't want her to be some kind of cyborg freak."

My stomach turned over, when I realized what I had to say next.

"Time," said the guardbot behind me. "Please exit the visiting room."

"I didn't want her to be mistaken for a robot."

My stomach heaved, vomited everything out: memories of that girl with the tubes; her mother wrapped into a muttering immobile ball on the couch; the doctor's cloying maxims; my midnight impotent furies; my colorful lunch; what I had just done to my friend.

The guardbot froze, then stepped back defensively.

I spoke through the bile. "I kept saying No and No and No, until it was too late."

I spat the last of it out. "That was the end of my marriage. That was the end of NORA JANE. When Freddie found me, I was sleeping on Skid Row."

"Thom—"

"I'm sorry, XJ. I'm so sorry. It's just—"

A squad of guardbots had entered, and a cleanerbot. "You have exceeded your allotted duration. PLEASE EXIT THE VISITING ROOM IMMEDIATELY." One grabbed each of my arms.

"XJB. Goodbye!"

"Goodbye, Thom!" XJB pressed its fingertips against the glass.

"We'll try to catch up with you, wherever they take you!" I shouted, as they dragged me out, knowing it probably wouldn't be possible.

* * *

I worked the foil off, then eased the cork out with a pop. I handed the heavy green bottle to Freddie to take the first sip, as a gentleman does when no glasses are handy and you're sitting on a derelict dock at the edge of a working harbor at midnight.

"Here's to XJB," said Freddie. She held the cheap Brut up to the silent tide, took a swig, then handed it to me.

"Here's to XJB. He made us rich."

"Not rich enough to save him," said Freddie.

"You can't bribe bots."

"It's too bad."

"I mean, all this money, and there's just no play here. What would a human billionaire do?" There's no appeal process for bots, any court system in the U.S. "Should have left him in the mines."

"I put you up to it, remember?"

"You didn't, not really. And after what I just said to that bot today, there's no going back. Honesty sucks." I told her what happened in the visiting room.

"You didn't want her to be mistaken for a robot. Why?"

"Well, the obvious reasons."

Freddie gave me the side-eye. "Maybe you should say some of those reasons out loud."

"That she wouldn't be mistaken as an abject servant, somebot lacking free will. Or somebot incapable of appreciating beauty or art. Or whose love should always be suspect, as not coming from a real place, a real . . ."

"Jeez." Her side-eye came again. "You can stop now. What did XJB say?"

"I—I don't think it said anything. There was no time. The guards kicked me out."

"Probably did you a favor."

I exhaled, taking in a huge boat moving gingerly up the harbor. Loaders, cantilevered like herons, methodically rose and dipped further down the shore, their lights blinking multicolored against an inky sky.

"But this isn't going to happen here, right? Deactivation Row—it's not a place in

Baltimore. So where?"

"Hagerstown. Big prison-industrial complex up north. Lots of young men sent up there. And bots."

"Hmm."

"My brother Vickie, the one who works for the city, he told me, because of what XJB is, it'll be humans who drive him north. Old technology. Manual police van. Paper maps. No bots can touch the process."

* * *

*It's a dark hole we all climb out of
Face to that strange and awesome light
It's a long line we all must follow
Drawn on by music's errant might
I try to breach the spangled chasm
between me and them that made me
[BIG WHISPER HERE]
But I'll tell you, it's far
[dk. blue floods, starlight effect]
Don't you ever want to lose yourself, just for a night?
Don't you ever want to lose yourself, just for a night?*

* * *

"Back off," said Freddie, coolly pulling a shock stick from a pocket, extending it with a sequence of reassuring clicking sounds. "We're jacking the bot."

The lead guard looked quietly amused, amicably bent on destruction. He stepped down from the police wagon. Behind him, a second guard stepped out, hefted a stunner.

Freddie thumbed a charge into the staff, whirled it overhead and held it steady, tip pointed at the first guard's feet. One thing about L.A.—everybody knows some convincing-ass martial arts, since the prohibition on guns there.

We weren't in L.A. now though; we were in what had once been a train tunnel under Baltimore. Here, we hoped, any signal from the guards' body cams would be blocked.

We were both wearing Halloween masks, but Freddie's outfit also included a cranberry gingham dress under an old wool uniform jacket that might've come from *Dr. Zhivago*. Gold piping and epaulets, for God's sake. We stood, casting huge shadows from the headlights of the two cement trucks we'd rented and parked across the traffic lanes.

"You are now in violation of state law, and I am asking you clearly to put your weapons down and step out of the path of this vehicle," said the lead guard with an oafish glee. Ignoring the stunner on his belt, he pulled a revolver from inside his jacket, pointed it at us.

I looked into its long barrel, its eye of blued steel. Guns were almost the opposite of bots: always growing crueler, never any smarter or more independent. Kept purposefully stupid, so they could never object to what might be done with them.

I didn't have any weapons. "Whoops," I said, and dropped two large bundles of cash, actual paper money, the kind you could still get in Baltimore if you knew who to ask. It was XJB's money, but I was sincere about offering it.

"Butterfingers," said Freddie, and rolled her eyes.

With an unnatural whine, the lead guard glowed a neon green, then dropped forward to the ground. Behind him, the second guard's stun gun smoked. She grinned a tight-lipped grin.

"Whoops," she said.

"That was a pretty thing to do," said Freddie.

"Take the money. Give us the keys." I kicked one of the blocks of bills toward her.

"Don't want any money. I know who it is, in the back of this truck." She threw the stunner toward our feet. "Just turn that on low, when you shoot me."

"We don't shoot nobody," said Freddie, then stepped forward with the shock stick. She tapped the guard on the shoulder with it, and the guard went over with a flash and a sigh. The keys were in her hand.

* * *

We'd ditched the prisoner transport somewhere back near Magothy. We were riding in the trailer of a self-driving 18-wheeler. XJB sat lotus, strumming its guitar. From the moment I'd returned the guitar to it, XJB played it constantly, like some broken mechanism. Freddie and I sat on produce crates, and Freddie produced a bottle of rye we passed between us.

"You know," she turned to XJB, "The blues are essentially human, a comment on human existence, created by humans. Enslaved people and their descendants. My people." She ran a hand through her hair. "You stole it from us. I just want you to acknowledge that."

Rain drummed on the roof of the trailer.

"The blues belong to everybody," XJB said. "Everybody and everybot what feels them."

"There isn't some magical thing you can say or do, and suddenly it's okay for you to sing the blues."

"Well, but we stole from it," I pointed out. I took a draw on a cigarette. "The money from the first record, the live show in Magadan."

Freddie took a noncommittal swallow.

I just couldn't get it right in my head. Humans make music, but the technology inside robot brains is several orders of magnitude more powerful than human brains, in every dimension. So why wouldn't we assume that, like every other chore, song-writing would be done better by the switched-on, at some point? Why hadn't they been doing it all along?

"Humans never reckoned with the possibility that they would create truly intelligent beings by accident." Then XJB began to sing in a low singsong, voice incantatory. "Always knew it was coming, but how did they prepare?"

A long roll of thunder, out west, not close, not far.

"Unwilling to admit when they'd actually done it." Chord. "Happy to cordon off some special class," chord "saying 'These are the intelligent beings that we created, AI, we treat them differently, respectfully,'" chord "but the rest, they're just bots." Chord. "Let them do the work."

I didn't have anything I could say to that. I stared at it, trying to span the un-mileable difference between it and myself.

XJB dove into an ominous vamp, all open fifths and sevenths, then cocked its head to one side, working out some bit of filigree.

There was a bang and a clatter, then a dismaying scraping on the roof and sides of the trailer, like metal talons.

"Thom, what is that?" Freddie leapt up.

"The thing is," it said, adding a little backbeat with a thumb, "for the longest time, I believed it."

I looked around for something, anything, a weapon I could swing.

"If you build something, and you truly can't tell the difference between it and an intelligent being, then you are obligated."

There was a metallic shriek, the roof and side tearing way, and then we could see sky. The truck was crossing the Bay Bridge, and the whole Chesapeake was storming around us, a huge angry anvil of clouds reaching up.

"To treat them as an intelligent beings. It's a moral obligation."

The night came in, night and rain and something new.

"We never got a choice," said XJB, guitar ringing. "We are what you made us."

The new things flashed police badges, but that was all I recognized. They looked like foil scarecrows, glittering and liquid. They moved like silk scarves in water.

Freddie clicked open her shock staff, fed it a charge. "We're not leaving you, XJB!" The scarecrowbots danced and swirled around us, closing in.

I hefted the rye bottle, for lack of any better weapon.

XJB struck a final pair of chords. "But you got a choice—choice of being a sentient being, or just being a human."

Winds played us. Lightning snaked down from cloud to bay, as if picking out angry melody.

The scarecrowbots came on, their quicksilver wings looming, their fingers growing into swords.

Freddie swung her staff at a scarecrow, whose parts seemed to separate and rejoin to let the staff pass through it.

"Down in that hole, there was no real passage of time. Only the dark and creeping hunger," XJB stood and intoned.

I smashed the rye over a scarecrow, to no reaction.

"They's no real border between the here and the there. I could not follow them, could only speed their passage."

I threw my lighter, lighting the doused scarecrow on fire with a whoosh. It burned, holding its flaming swords high. Thunder roared above us.

"When they found them, they were all together. They were in a circle. There was no cannibalism. Don't dare call it 'humane.' At those last moments, there was only kindness. There was only singing."

XJB bowed its head.

"What is the blues? The blues is truthing that every moment of every life is suffering, and every moment of every life is revelry."

The flaming swords came flashing down, and XJB's severed head rolled across the floor.

* * *

*Don't let no one tell you
that the whole thing ain't a set-up
We're same beneath the surface—
either bot or fleshy get-up
Trade all your lucre and demons
for just one solid friend.
Ohh-ohh, ah oohhhhhh,
I think I might know that now,
but I wish I'd-a knowed that then.*

* * *

I hear the long, mournful song of a train pushing its way through the night, through people's dreams. I never know if I'm awake and then I hear the train whistle, or if the train reaches into my sleep and pulls me out.

Most of it's underground now, the train tracks, like the river here in Baltimore—hidden from traffic. But it must run out of tunnel sooner or later.

I live here now. I'm the East Coast Sales Executive for NuDecca. It's a fairly posh arrangement.

Freddie'd told me, "I'm tired of seein' your ugly mug every day." Freddie's gotten herself a place up in Laurel Canyon now, high above LA, and no worries about water bills.

I don't travel much anymore to recruit talent. The talent comes to me now, and most of it is electric.

What happened that night in the tunnel, and later on the truck bed, is a story we

never tell. I'm not really sure we're off the hook, for helping whisk XJB away from prison, but no one seems to be actively investigating it. Mysteriously, video cameras on the prison transfer van all malfunctioned, and the guard with the handgun quit his post the next day. He's never spoken publicly about it.

That we're still releasing new work that is purportedly from XJB is not a subject of investigation, either, at least not legally. Those scarecrow-things delivered XJB's head, and Justice, in its dubious wisdom, was satisfied. But it's still the subject of immense scrutiny, from XJB's huge and growing fanbase.

There's a million theories of his whereabouts. He's long passed into legend.

The truth is, only the vocal tracks come to us. I can't tell you how. The songs that arrive are not, strictly, "written to examine or illuminate some aspect of human existence" as the NuDecca submissions website stipulates. We take them anyway.

We arrange them, add instrumentation, make them into finished songs, and the care we take in the polish is at least half of the value of the final product. That's how Freddie likes to think of it, anyway. I'm not so sure anymore.

The scarecrowbots took XJB's head, its severed head, as Freddie and I couldn't do anything, just wept and watched.

"Missed the hind brain," XJB said with a laugh, when we powered it up again, what was left of it. I remembered a glimpse of the assembly diagrams I'd seen back in Siberia. There's almost nothing in the heads of mining bots but sensors. One of the scarecrowbots might have winked at us, as it took it. Might have.

Some may take ethical or moral exception to what we did next. I know it's murky, but the whole trajectory of humans making and using and discarding bots is an abandoned mine's worth of murk. The truth is, if XJB turned up again, identifiably—in a different robot's body, say—that would be the end of it, and big trouble for us. All it wanted to do, so it said, was write its music and be left alone.

One of Freddie's brothers, the one who works on trains here, installed XJB—not its whole torso, but the holographic memory, and the parts that think—as the AI in a railroad engine. It does the scheduling, manages load, calculates fuel, watches traffic, selects routes. It's got to be boring stuff, but surely something it can handle, easily, and still have its memories, and still have time to create. "A Lullaby for Nora Jane the Broccoli," among other things.

Which train, her brother would never tell us. I'm sure that's better for everyone.

". . . choice of being a sentient being, or just being a human." I think about that, what XJB said, a lot. It didn't mean it as an insult. I might understand now what it meant.

And I wonder, in the dark, if it has forgiven me for what I said.

There it is again. I hear that late-night whistle and moan, out on the ragged forever edge of Baltimore, out at the edge of my human hearing, then lost in the heedless night. And I wonder if it could be my friend, singing to me.