BERB BY BERB

Ray Nayler

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BERB BY BERB

I see my first berb of the day before breakfast. I'm standing on the porch, drinking a cup of coffee and looking out over the Mojave to the east. Dawn has come. The desert is a hundred yellows: citron to pineapple, canary to corn, daffodil to flame.

Out at the edge of what someone else might call my "property" are my two favorite Joshua trees. They look like a couple of many-armed grandpas having a hand-waving argument over who can make the best pie. Nearby is a third Joshua, bent over to look at something lying on the ground.

Out here, at this time of year, that something's probably a rattlesnake. A nice Mojave green pit viper, trying to get its blood warmed up. Beautiful things—like a braid

of the most close-woven death you could find.

The berb is hopping up my front path. One hop right, one hop left, two hops forward. It's not more than fifty centimeters high, and is covered in green plumage that has an iridescence to it, as if it is not only reflecting but also providing light. Its agile head is violet.

I watch it come, finishing my coffee. This is my pre-breakfast cup. I call it my "stabilizer." Before the first sip, there's no telling what you might get in response if you spoke to me. But by the end of the cup, I've become predictable. You can confidently greet me without having me just walk away, or suggest how you might otherwise engage your orifices.

The berb hops its way up to about two meters from the porch. It stops and swivels its violet head up at me.

"Got any berb food?"

I shrug. "What do you do for it?"

The berb jerks its head to the side, probably catching sight of something shiny, then refocuses its attention on me. "Dancing."

"Dancing?"

"Yep."

"Well, that's something I might want to see. Let me check if I have some berb food in my shed."

"I'll wait."

I choose one of the old orange crates from the shed and bring it out onto the porch. The berb hops up and starts rummaging through it. I can tell I've picked the right box: the berb is making satisfied little clucking sounds. Finally it comes out with an old Ni-Hi bottlecap and sets it down on the planking.

"Mine?"

"Sure," I say. "But I'd like to see some dancing."

The berb hops down off the porch and scratches itself out a little circle in the dirt. Then it starts its dance. It leans over and rotates, with its head almost grazing the dust, looking up at me with one eye. It stops, shudders, then puffs itself out into a ball of gleaming plumage and does a rhythmic little shuffle-step, drawing a shimmying circle in the dust.

"Like it?" The berb asks.

"Yep. Just fine."

It's not a great dance, but the berb is trying. I set a second Ni-Hi bottlecap down next to the first.

It takes the two bottlecaps in its mouth and goes strutting down the path.

* * *

I leave my back door open, and everyone in Berbland knows it. So I'm not terribly surprised when I find Marjorie in my kitchen, eating a plateful of scrambled eggs she just cooked on my stove.

"My hypercooker's down," she says and points a fork at a plate of eggs and toast she's made for me. She's opened the notice from that week that came in my mail. "They ever change the wording on these things? '. . . still regarded as a hazardous area' . . . 'your presence implies you understand the quarantine restrictions' . . . 'should you seek resettlement' . . . I mean, they know we're out here for a reason, right? And that reason is we want to be left alone."

"Well, I guess a letter in the mailbox every month or so isn't exactly harassment."

"It's a reminder that they know our names and where we live. It's a reminder that they are keeping tabs on us."

"Maybe." I fork a warm mouthful of egg into my mouth because I'd rather not continue.

"Maybe," Marjorie says. "You say that a lot."

"Maybe. And yeah."

"Yeah what?"

"I'll take a look at your hypercooker in the afternoon. Make yourself a sandwich before you go—I can't guarantee I can get out there before lunch."

"I'd sure appreciate it."

We eat our eggs in silence for a minute. I don't have too much to say on most days, and I know Marjorie has plenty of things in her head she'd rather not talk about.

Finally she says: "I think you should start locking your back door."

"Why's that?"

"You know," she says.

"What do I know?"

"You know not everyone—or everything—out here is harmless. That unlocked door just seems like an invitation."

"It is. Because of that unlocked door I'm eating my own eggs, magically prepared by *you*."

"You know what I mean."

"I'm not going to live like that," I say.

"Like what?"

"Like Berbland is just as bad as everywhere else."

"As bad as everywhere else?" Marjorie's probably giving me some look, but I am gazing into my eggs. "It's worse. That's why we live here."

* * *

My second berb of the day shows up around 10:00. I hear it scratching at the back door. When I open the door the berb rolls crookedly into the kitchen. It bangs into a chair leg and comes to a stop under the table. This one is very small, the color of tarnished silver. I can see it's leaked fluid on the linoleum floor.

I keep doing what I'm doing—fixing a toaster I have vivisected on the countertop. I'm humming while I work. After a while I hear the berb humming too—the same tune, but with little variations on it, like an answering trumpet following a saxophone solo. We do a call-and-response while I finish with the toaster, then I lean down and peer at it where it's hiding under the table.

It's an old, poorly constructed berb. Its movement mechanism is basically a tracked ball, and a couple of arms it can use to lift or guide itself along. Balanced on the top of that clumsy mechanism is a vestigial head with an array of visual sensors in an octagon, and a metal screen I figure might be a mouth. There's a small puddle of fluid underneath the berb.

"How about you come out of there so I can take a look at you?"

The berb hums a little trumpet solo and retreats further under the table.

Twenty minutes of coaxing later, I have the berb up on the countertop. A half hour after that I get the gasket it's blown replaced. I send it on its way, still noodling at its trumpet part of "Summertime."

I wipe down the linoleum and carry the toaster out to my truck. The Willys thumps to life, yawing a bit from a bad stabilizer, but straightening out once it gets up to fifty feet in the air. Soon enough I'm sailing over the undulating plain of cracked earth and Joshua trees we misfits call home.

Back in 1938, when the saucer crashed, the government tried to keep the whole thing under wraps. What you have to realize, though, is how hard keeping anything secret is in a country like America. What an American loves about a secret is walking around with it in their pocket until it gets too hot, and then handing it off to someone else. They tell that person not to tell anyone, but they know full well their confidante is just going to do the same thing they did.

Besides—everybody knows that, sooner or later, someone's going to get to write a book about the secret. And everybody wants to be that person.

So it probably only took a month until everyone in California was at the fence line, standing on the roof of their Chevy with a pair of binoculars, trying to see what they could see.

Soon enough, every TV show was flying saucer crazy, and every film. Meanwhile, the government did what the government does: picked at the saucer like a scab and argued over whose responsibility it was.

But once war was sighted on the horizon, it became clear who would take the saucer over: the army. And once they got hold of it, the real research got started. What they needed to know, and fast, was what advantage the saucer might give us over Tojo and Hitler.

The answer was: plenty. Death rays that could turn whole cities full of people into ashes, flying jeeps, medical miracles that regrew our soldiers' limbs—one thing after another hitting the newsreels, until they looked like a militarized Buck Rogers serial.

Which is all wonderful. But what nobody really likes to talk about is the accidents.

With the war on, and with America (rah rah, sis boom bah) winning and winning and winning some more, all that got talked about were the victories. American boots in Berlin. Then in Moscow. Then in Beijing, propping up Chiang Kai-shek against the reds.

Pretty soon, it seemed like winning was all war was about. And sure, people understood that winning came with a battlefield cost. But what they didn't understand—didn't even hear about, most times—is that we lost more people in factories and laboratories back home than we did on the battlefield.

Those death rays we reverse engineered could turn a whole city of people into ashes and leave the city still standing—but they also turned a whole brigade of American soldiers into ashes out here in the Mojave, and some of our best engineers with them. Friends of mine. People I still meet in the mess hall in my sleep. I still wake up screaming when they blow away like October leaves—stripped to the grinning bone, then the bone stripped, too.

It was the pressure that caused the accidents—the sleepless nights, the double and triple shifts, the relentless knowing that everything you were doing was either helping the boys and girls overseas or hurting them. We lived the war in a stupor of caffeine, barbiturates, guilt, and fear. It wasn't just General Hedy Lamarr standing over us—although she was ruthless in how hard she pushed us—it was our own sense that every moment we rested, someone out there died.

Many people's mistakes ended in disaster—the death ray disaster, a Willys dropping out of the sky like a stone during a test flight, the tornado that hit Los Angeles that we never even allowed the papers to print a story about—the list goes on and on.

In comparison, the berb accident wasn't so bad. It didn't kill anybody. All that happened was this: we opened up a cylinder of what looked like red dust. We did it properly suited up, sweating behind our rubber skins. We did it manipulating the cylinder in its negative pressure glove box, safe (we thought) in its sealed sarcophagus.

But once the cylinder was open, the red dust swirled, filling that chamber. We hit the alarm and sealed the lab. We followed the protocols. But when we turned around, the dust was gone. Just—gone.

A week of quarantine, passing tubes of blood through slots, then high pressure showers—and all the paperwork, which was worse than the quarantine or the showers. But we were all fine, and they found nothing.

* * *

I bring the Willys down near Norman's arch. Norman is standing there in dust-stained underwear, grinning at me. He's got his welding goggles up on his forehead. The white circles around his eyes, contrasted with the soot and desert tan staining the rest of his face, make him look like an owl. Behind him, the arch looms: twenty meters high, constructed of scrap metal—jerrycans, gears, axels, and more obscure organs and carapaces of dead machinery.

Past the arch is Norman's dented, dusty Airstream, with a torn tarp on poles out front and a couple of peeling Adirondack chairs in the meager shade.

Beyond the trailer is Norman's junkyard. For years he's been using an old army tow truck to gather up everything he can from the abandoned base and around.

The vehicles and scrap behind the trailer, blasted and cracked in the sun, remind me of things I don't want to think about. Maybe they remind Norman, too.

Or maybe he has worse things in his head. Norman is one of the "Last Boys"—the ones they liberated from the camps in the Philippines.

Plenty of vets have a love of America so flag-waving and strong it comes off as a sham. They get weepy at the sight of the flag, and jerk their hands over their hearts every time the "Star-Spangled Banner" starts up, like action figures with a button on the back.

Not Norman. He was a skeleton sheathed in suppurating wounds when they found him. They were dragging him toward a pile of his dead friends when he made a sound.

You can see Norman wince whenever he sees the stars and stripes. Even a decal on the back of someone's truck is enough.

I remember once, before they locked the quarantine down, we were in town watching a newsreel. They showed that bit with General Macarthur flying his jeep low over the surf, almost touching the tops of the waves. Jumping out onto the yellow sand, back in triumph on the islands he'd abandoned.

"I have returned."

The boys he left at Bataan and Corregidor died by the thousands. The ones who survived—the Last Boys—never forgave him.

Norman shoved his way out of the theater. At the end of the film we found him out in the landing lot, standing on top of his truck, staring up at the stars.

When I walked up to him that night he said, "They never grew up, and they never grew old. But we'll never grow up either. We're still right back there on the island."

There under the arch, Norman grins at me with the vat-grown teeth the VA fixed him up with, to replace the mouthful he lost in the camp. "You put her back together? My Suzie?"

I have the toaster under my arm like a chromium football. "I'm not giving up this hostage for anything less than a cup of your finest coffee and a loaf of brick oven bread."

"That's a done deal."

"And put some pants on."

"Too hot!"

* * *

The first of the berbs showed up a week after the lab accident. It was evening, and a lieutenant full of malice was drilling his platoon around the yard.

I don't know who spotted the berb first, but pretty soon there were five of us out there, and then ten, and more, gawping at it.

It was following the troops: a little red ball of dust, screws, bottlecaps, and paperclips. It swirled behind them, half-formed, transparent enough that you could see the desert through it. Then it dissipated, leaving a scattering of trash and no other trace it had been there at all.

"Looked like a li'l berb," one of the troops said, half dead from exhaustion, the word shifting in his parched southern mouth.

The mispronunciation became the name.

And it made sense. Because that's what they seemed to be—mispronunciations. Happenstance, mutations. Like a child struggling with a new word. Or the clumsiest sort of nature, trying to put life together.

We saw them more and more around the base—a rusty swirl of spare parts and trash, hopping or staggering along. And sometimes something more complete, rolling along the ground or stumbling around on clumsy legs.

"Dust making nonsense out of trash," someone said to me in the mess.

"But there's mind to it," I said back. "A thinking."

It was only a year after the homesteading act, when me and the other vets came to the Mojave to lay our claims, that I heard the first one talk. And now you didn't see the dust: they were fully formed. Some better than others, but all of them complete.

So much for dust making nonsense out of trash.

"They've been stealing from me," Norman says as we settle into the Adirondack chairs.

I balance a plateful of bread and jam on my knees. "What are they stealing?"

"Bits and pieces here and there. I hear them rummaging around at night. Once I came out here with a flashlight and saw a kind I've never seen before. Basically just a set of tools walking around. Made to pull things apart."

"You speak to it?"

"It ran off. Rolled off, more like. Like a tumbleweed of wrenches."

"Next time, talk to it. Tell it not to take things without asking. Tell it to give you something in exchange."

"You really think they listen when we're talking?"

I thought of the leaky little berb trumpet soloing "Summertime" under my kitchen table. "Some do."

"Pretty soon they're going to be taking more than just junk."

I look around at the dented Airstream, the battered faces of the abandoned army vehicles.

"Something here you're worried about losing?"

"As long as they don't touch my arch, I guess I'm fine. Or my Suzie. Where are you headed?"

"Out to fix Marjorie's hypercooker. Then maybe I'll call it quits for the day."

"How's the coffee?"

"You know well enough. Stop making everyone say it."

Norman's coffee is the best in Berbland. When I asked him what the secret was once, he said, "Salt."

Just that. But I tried that, and ended up with coffee that tasted like a tide pool. I guess the same thing doesn't work quite the same way for everyone.

* * *

That night I wake up in the half-dark, with the desert moonlight pouring into my bedroom window. As usual, I remember only parts of the nightmare—the sharpest slivers of it.

I think, at first, that it is the dream itself that woke me. But then I hear a crash—a pot banging onto the linoleum floor. Then a drawer full of utensils, dumped out. Other sounds my mind can't shape into sense.

Was I afraid, in this moment? Did I sense that something was wrong? There is fear in this memory, but I cannot tell where it comes from. Is it the lingering fear of the recurring Manchurian nightmare—the roof-tile littered streets whirling with devils of human ash? Or is it a premonition? Or was the fear inserted later, in retrospect?

I think I *should* have been afraid, but was not.

I push the door open with the irritation of a parent about to scold a child for making a racket.

The door isn't even halfway open before it's on me. I see something shift in the moonlight—something massive, as if half the kitchen is alive. Then it hits me in the face.

When the reporter showed up last year, I thought she was from a delivery company. She was too neat and polite to be a reporter. She put her hand in mine the moment the screen was open, said she was pleased to meet me. Before I knew what was happening she was settled in the living room with a steno pad open on her lap.

"You're not easy to find," she said. "For a war hero."

"I'm no war hero."

"Well . . ." and I could tell from her face that part of her agreed with me . . . "You're not easy to find for an inventor, either."

"I haven't invented anything in years," I said. "And I didn't invent that thing you're thinking of."

My head strikes the countertop as I go down, and then—hard—the linoleum floor. From inside a tide of phosphorescent stars, I feel the warmth of my own blood on my scalp. A force coiled around my ankles drags me along the floor.

"Fooooood," a voice scrapes in the dark.

You deserve this, the voice in my head says. *You know you've had it coming.*

"What do you mean by that?" the reporter asked. She was seated in the living room now, her steno pad in her lap. I had even poured her a cup of coffee. "What do you mean when you say you didn't invent that?" she continued. "Of course you are talking about the death rays—created by the team *you* led. You were the lead scientist. Surely you're not denying that?"

"I'm not denying anything,"

I should have told her to leave. I should have claimed state secrets, or told her I wouldn't comment. But instead I found myself saying, "None of us invented anything. What we did was reverse engineer things that were *already there*. We picked up another species' technology and turned it against ourselves."

I lift my head from the floor and I can see it, now, in the white light of the moon pouring through the kitchen window. Half of its body outside, trailing through the kitchen door it forced open.

I think of a Mojave pit viper, that braid of death I always, always feel the urge to reach a hand out to. And of other sleek and murderous things we fear in the dark. Tooth and claw. And, of course, our memories. Our guilt.

You deserve this.

Its iridescent metal feathers shiver in the moonlight. The sound is like rain on a metal roof.

"Fooooooood," it clacks. "Berb. Food."

When I finished telling the reporter the story, her face was a mask of unreadable white. I noticed her Rosie lapel pin, and I wondered how much she saw in the factories herself. I wondered what she knew before she made the mistake of knocking on my door, and letting me put these things in her head. Ten minutes ago, she stopped writing anything down on the steno. She realized, perhaps, that nobody would ever print the story I told her. No editor would brave it, and even if they did, no censor would allow it.

I told her my team and I didn't invent anything—that my team and I only reverse engineered what we found on that ship. But that is not entirely true, is it? We didn't invent the technology, but we shaped its use. We saw its power unleashed in the desert, when it turned the people we ate in the mess hall with every day to ashes.

And we didn't stop.

We knew it was deadly. But we never knew, in fact, whether it was a weapon before we turned it into one. Before we poured the war into it.

Once we had done that, the death rays seemed to take on a life of their own. We thought we were mastering them, but that was never the case.

A technology is a set of possibilities. You always think you can control it. That it is a tool that belongs to you. You alone. But by the time the Sun sets on that same day, you find out you can't. The death rays got away from us. They altered reality. I don't exaggerate: I mean that as a fact. They made new possibilities in the world.

Victory. Total victory. Roof-tile littered streets whirling with devils of human ash. The shadows of men and women etched on the Brandenburger Tor . . .

You deserve this. You've been waiting for it.

Maybe. But I still have things to do.

I reach my hand up to that swaying, clacking set of jaws in the moonlight. I place the flat of my hand against its muzzle. The berbs have picked up many forms they found. They imitate, they innovate. They are becoming. Which way will they turn? They have many bodies now, many possibilities.

The berbs are my accident. I know I can't control them, but maybe I can help them find their way.

I watched the reporter walking down the steps to her bullet-nosed convertible. It rose into the air and curved off over the Joshua trees. I read the paper for weeks—something I never did—but there was nothing. The war was over, and we weren't interested in remembering it. We were interested in replacing it with a better story. One without the Last Boys and the ashes of my friends.

I stand by the shed and listen to the berb in there, searching for the little pieces that will complete it, or help build a new, better version of itself. I hear it muttering, chattering and hissing in a language I recognize from other berbs—a tongue that seems to be finding a pattern all its own. A language that has little to do with us anymore. Mind, I think. Shaping itself. Finding its own way in a new world.

The living whip of its body winds out from the shed. It opens the serrations of its jaws and drops a piston in the dirt, then turns the terrible miracle of its face to me.

"Dance for it?"

"Yes," I say. "That's something I'd like to see."