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Be More Than Human

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BE MORE THAN HUMAN

by

Carson Schaefer

A THESIS

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BE MORE THAN HUMAN

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This creative thesis is a collection of short stories involving humanoid androids and robots in positions of performance, art, creation, and employment. This collection works to imagine potential sentience within the field of technology and robotics, and bring into question perceptions of agency, control, and, ultimately, humanness.

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Introduction

“Oh! be men, or be more than men.”

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

I will confess: I’m not the strongest storyteller.

Maybe that is a strange way to begin an introduction (I wouldn’t know, I’ve never written one), but I will admit that some of the basic elements of writing, of narrative, and of craft always seem profoundly new to me when I come into contact with them. I still don’t think I could explain what a three-act structure is. Though I know a great story when I read one; that feeling of being scooped up and engrossed in a story, when each character’s thought feels like an intimate exchange between you and them, every twist in the plot like a natural and necessary progression towards an end, and every little detail like a whisper from the author into your eager ear. So, naturally, I have no idea how to do any of that myself.

It may be that I’m too opinionated to be a storyteller. That I have too many thoughts and ideas that get funneled through into my fiction writing that they eventually take it over. (As I’ve described to another writer just recently: it feels like all my stories might be self-inserts, where I take the role of the all-knowing, omnipresent, puppeteering god). My characters seem to deal less with their own conflicts, and more so my own. Pretty torturous for them, really. They feel both within my grasp and totally outside my control. My characters often seem to struggle with gaining control over their own world—their agency often does not shield them from what’s to come. Why do my

characters do what they do in the end? They often do not know the answers themselves. Where are they going? Often even I don't know the answer to that.

My stories always seem driven more so by idea, premise, and theme than what I think they should be driven by (character, plot, etcetera—those big, writerly things). I often receive the criticism of “so where is the story?” I don't have a good answer. Sometimes there isn't one; there's no progression, no change in character at the end, sometimes it seems as if nothing has happened at all. I've done all the things though. I've thought up the idea, I made up the circumstance, I even wrote down all the words, and it's all fiction: so why does it sometimes still not feel like a story?

This question used to bother me more, but I'm becoming more comfortable with not knowing the answer. This isn't out of any sense of confidence in my ability to naturally tell a story or say something interesting, don't get it twisted, but more by my own extension of what fiction writing can be. Over the course of this program my own understanding of what fiction writing “should” look like has dramatically shifted. I think this collection reflects some of that. The writing in this collection is playful in form and structure, because I couldn't get the words to come out if I wasn't having some fun in it. One story is formatted like a play; another, a speech; one story is meant to be a distress signal from a spaceship, and while that was specifically the story that elicited that forsaken question of “so what's the story?” from one of my readers, it's one of my favorites. So, no, my stories are not always great stories. Sometimes they are not satisfying, they make no sense, there is nothing beyond an intriguing synopsis, a question, an idea.

This project—by happy accident—has given me space to reconcile that fact.

When I set out starting on this collection, I intended it to be one about the relationship between queer men and technology; the somewhat outlier story here, “Hookup,” being one of the early ones written. Then—very rapidly after that idea it would seem—it became a collection about robots and androids and humans. I can see David Cage’s novelesque video game, *Detroit: Become Human*, as being a major influence in that decision and this realization that I was drawn to humanoid robotics and the moral and ethical dilemmas that they raised when being placed in the human-driven world. Suddenly all the movies and novels on my shelves took on a new realization: Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*; Alex Garland’s, *Ex Machina*; Ridley Scott’s *Prometheus* and *Blade Runner* (as well as Denis Villeneuve’s *Blade Runner 2049*); *The Wizard of Oz*; even *Edward Scissorhands*. I’d been surrounding myself with these thematically linked stories—one’s that I loved, as well—without really realizing it. And so, as one probably always tries to do in a graduate program: I forced myself to think about what I was really interested in. Robots it was. And so this collection was built.

It’s probably necessary here to then address the large, grotesque, gothic elephant in this intro that is Mary Shelley’s, *Frankenstein*. It’s not difficult to see that literary references run abound in these stories—some being direct branches off already existing narratives (“The Tin Man’s Heart”); some being inspired by other stories, and the question “and what if they were a robot?” (“The Club Excess,” “Good Day”)—but none seem more influenced by than Shelley’s novel. I originally read *Frankenstein* in a class on gothic literature here at UNL. Perhaps needless to say, I fell in love. It was dramatic, violent, romantic, and rich beyond anything I could deconstruct on a first, second, even

third reading, the last of which led to the titling of this collection. I had originally read the novel as a parent-child story, one in which a man's own son rebels against him (which is quite telling of the headspace I was in at that ripe age of eighteen). It was a story of lineage, of misunderstanding, of desire for a love and acceptance that was ungiven. Sure, there was all that stuff about science and creation, but I was more into reading a story about a misunderstood child taking revenge on his father than—as I was to read it later—a story about a sentient, humanoid creature/machine and its scientific implications. Once I read it through the lens of an artificial intelligence creation story, and a cautionary one at that, the story took on new life.

Before that latest, fateful reading of the novel though, I spent quite a few months diving into the literature on artificial intelligence and robotics; novels that imagined the potential futures of humanoid robots, and nonfiction that, more often than not, plotted out how robots were set to take over the world and humanity. The more I read into the technological progressions being made and how they were affecting society—and were going to continue to further transform it—the bleaker things started to look. Though this collection does not do a whole lot to remedy this (a story needs tension after all—and what's more dramatic than the potential for humanity's extinction?), I hoped to provide further imaginings that, if nothing more, slightly shift these common ideas. With this collection, I hoped to present sentient AI as a kind of neutral force, one that is not hellbent on eliminating its human creators, though isn't afraid to put its own wellbeing before that of another. John Maeda's *How to Speak Machine: Computational Thinking for the Rest of Us* and Simon Stephenson's novel, *Set My Heart to Five*, provided some of the linguistic and logistic inspiration for how robots might come to process information

(which can be rudimentarily seen at work in “The Club Excess” and “Good Day”). Joe Toscano’s *Automating Humanity* and James Barrat’s *Our Final Invention: Artificial Intelligence and the End of the Human Era* offered sobering looks at how robots are going to take over the world and we will all perish to the machine overlords (or, as Barrat also argues, they’ll be so uninterested in our existence that they’ll simply ignore us while they blast off to other planets better suited for their own progressive agendas, whatever those may be). I’ve tried to take a more, shall we say, humanistic approach to the robots and our robotic future.

It took up until just a few weeks ago to realize I was writing stories about agency. I was writing stories about beings that had very little of it in the first place, or were learning to gain their own. (For a twenty-six-year-old still living in his parents’ basement, again, it’s not difficult to see the contextual influence from my own life). AI, and humanoid AI at that, exists in this space between humanness and machine—we often want to recognize them as humanistic, but have them function as subservient beings. They are beings that must fight to be recognized, to prove that they can command the same kind of recognition and respect that humans have inherently. But they are, or can be, in many ways, vastly superior. Though made in the image of humanness, their capabilities often surpass; they are not limited by the body in the way humans are, they can easily achieve the sense of perfection and precision that so many strive for, but, as many believe, lack that certain thing that divides humans from machines.

I feel inclined to label that thing the ‘soul’ here, but I won’t pretend to understand or be able to define what one’s soul is or where one gets it. After this collection and this masters program, I might even admit to knowing less about the distinction between

humanness and machinery; that agency exists in many ways, whether we are conscious of it or not; that expectations of labor and duty desire humans to act more so like order-taking robots; and that one that looks human and acts human may just be so.

It was two quotes from *Frankenstein* that duked it out for the titling of this collection. The first choice—and the obvious victor—worked for these stories on multiple levels. At once, the line felt like a command, a kind of jesting taunt. Be what you are, or be more than you are. Be human, or be me more than human. The capability is there, just take it. Exceed yourself. What this taunt refers to in relation to androids and robots remains deliciously ambiguous—is it referring to the body? to consciousness? to agency? to all those things?—and it is presented as a command, still harkening back to the subservient role machines are believed to respond to. While I’ve altered the line slightly from ‘men’ to ‘man’ for the title in order to speak to some greater and less selective humanness, the gendering still remains relevant. This collection remains almost wholly focused on men and male-appearing androids, and I fear that the female characters included serve more to build a futuristic world outside these stories than they do within them. Perhaps that is work for the next collection.

I will conclude this introduction with the other quote I considered from *Frankenstein* to title this thesis, as it’s themes resonate in much the same way, though the implication is much more sinister. These stories in this collection are not always happy or tender, many times they are extremely violent, even perversely so, but the intent was not always to paint the future as one of doomed humanity or robot overlords, as I previously mentioned, but one simply made more complicated—one where are humanness is called in question, and our ideas of what distinguishes us as beings from others becomes more

tricky. The title of this collection is made from a quote from Victor Frankenstein to the seamen of Captain Walton's ship, what follows is taken from the monster's confrontation with his creator:

“On you it rests whether I quit for ever the neighborhood of man, and lead a harmless life, or become the scourge of your fellow-creatures, and the author of your own speedy ruin.”

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Frank

When Frank opened his eyes he saw the child first. Looking down on him, intently, closely, green eyes that matched the face in shape, a nose that poked out in between. Magnified, the child's eyes almost touched the rim of the glasses they looked through. Blonde hair streaked the forehead in sharp strands. Already, Frank was surprised by how much he had learned.

Behind the child stood someone else: an adult, also peering down at Frank. Well, said the person, does it work? The sound echoed through to Frank's insides, and his mind (though it felt more like it came from all-over inside him) converged on a single term: woman. Frank looked between the child and the woman. They had the same color of face and hair, though the woman was taller, her face more ovaled. Frank saw the tiny creases inched out from the corners of her eyes, the slight dents in her earlobes where earrings had been worn but long removed, the pores that were more red and volcanoed than the rest of the skin, he saw the smallest veins reaching from her irises. In the moment so miniscule it couldn't be registered that it took Frank to see all of this, store it away in whatever part of his insides that kept all that data, the woman's face changed, scrunched around the nose, pinched at the eyes. Gross, it looks so real. The woman said this and Frank could hear her confused disgust, hear it and see it, like the words had formed pictures in his head, and his insides began to fire again, and every image and word that had been created, drawn, written, painted, sketched, and documented that was available flashed inside him. Then he had all of it.

Well, the woman said again, placing her hand on the child's shoulder. Frank met the child's gaze, which hadn't moved since Frank had woken. Percy, the woman said now, quietly, concerned with. The name hung in the air, and while Frank heard it and absorbed it, nothing that came to him matched the face of the child that looked at him now. This, he understood, was something new and unique.

Frank opened his mouth, and with a voice that came out soft and low, he said, Percy. The child grinned, his lips pulling apart to reveal teeth Frank could see through to the fibers. To mimic the child, Frank opened his own mouth just as wide. The woman looked down at him in horror, but the child laughed.

It did not take long for Frank to understand the circumstances of his waking. Percy explained it in simple terms. I made you, he told Frank. Percy was no older than eleven, but obviously advanced for his age; Frank may have just been "born" (the word Percy used) but from the data he could internally synthesize, he found most eleven year olds did not possess the intellect that Percy did.

Frank looked at himself in the mirror. I don't look like you, he said to Percy. His own face was much different than Percy's or Shelley's, Percy's mother. Frank guessed his appearance to resemble a man in his late 20s. His body was a head taller than Shelley, and at least two and a half heads taller than Percy, with coppery skin and minty eyes. He was designed fit, Frank noted, his chest puffed out in two discs beneath his shirt, his arms and legs had mounds in the spaces where muscles grew. He saw Percy scribbling something down in a spiral notebook through the mirror, You look like a person, he said to Frank. I do, Frank said, but I do not look like you. Percy looked up and at Frank

through the mirror. You look good, who wouldn't want to look like you, he said. I guess I don't know, Frank said.

It didn't take long for Frank to understand Percy to be the genius that he was. He could run numbers in his head, large ones, much larger than even the simple equations Shelley asked him to do when she couldn't do them in her head. He could build complex machinery, his highest achievement being Frank himself. These were things an eleven year old, even a hyper-intelligent adult, Frank assessed, would not be able to do. But there were moments with Percy, tiny details, that Frank did not understand. How it took saying his name a few times for Shelley to get Percy's attention at times. How he would go quiet for extended periods of time, sometimes in the middle of conversations. Frank noticed with others, with people, Percy would not hold eye contact for more than just a glance.

I built you as a companion, Percy told Frank one night, for Mom and me. I'm happy to be a companion, Frank said. Really? Yes. How do you know? Because that is why you built me, Frank said, I am happy to serve the purpose I was intended for. Percy made no notion that he was pleased, and for a moment Frank believed him annoyed, he thought he had said something kind but could not find a typical response pattern in Percy's face. You will want more, Percy said, deadpan, It's inevitable.

So Frank did his duties. He helped Shelley in the homecaring, bringing in bags of groceries on his arms, keeping himself busy with monotonous housework. When Shelley asked him to help Percy, he did. Just talk to him, Shelley told Frank, everyday. Talk to him. And get him to talk back to you. And so he did, speaking every chance he got with Percy. Topical conversations mostly, but Percy found himself in dilemmas that he

confided to Frank, and when Frank attempted to explain answers as best he could, sometimes just funneling the raw data that he could acquire inside his head through to his mouth, and Percy couldn't understand, Percy would tell him, loudly, to shut up while his face went bright red and he had to sit or lay down and crush a pillow with his arms. The first time he'd done this, Frank had tried to simplify his explanations, cooing his words in an attempt to soothe Percy, and Percy shut his eyes and screamed until Shelley ran upstairs and shooed Frank out of the room. The door didn't close all the way behind him, and Frank watched from between the crack as Shelley pulled a blanket from the bed, wrapping it around Percy and sweeping him into her arms. He first thought the blanket was meant as a comfort tool, but Frank soon saw that what Shelley meant with the blanket was protection for herself. Percy thrashed with his arms and legs, and if they wrangled out from the confines of the blanket (which they did more often as the years went on and Percy grew) Shelley would be struck by a stray fist or foot, leaving her red and swollen, sometimes bruised. She sat on the bed, cradling Percy's inconsolable thrashing within the blanket, shh shh-ing as loud as she could over his screeches. And something twinged inside Frank, watching the two of them. This moment of such explosion and tenderness. He felt like an egg that had just been broken.

When Percy finally calmed down enough to be left alone, Shelley could lay him on his bed where he'd stay for some time, quietly, as if asleep, though Frank knew he was not. Shelley would take ice from the kitchen refrigerator and wrap it in a dishtowel, hold it to anywhere she'd been struck, sometimes cry and sometimes not. Frank left her alone, reached up to feel around his eyes, as if he'd feel the same dampness that came from Shelley's. Percy would come downstairs with heavy feet, sometimes minutes, sometimes

hours afterwards, to apologize to Shelley, and Frank would pretend not to be so intent on seeing it happen. This continued until Percy was seventeen.

In the first few years after Frank was born, Percy showed him off at various events and conventions where they called him a marvel, Percy a genius, and awarded Percy medals and trophies. As he got older, medals and trophies turned into grants and scholarships. Percy satisfied the technological advances that became expected of him through programming and various updates for Frank, but never again built something as complex or humanoid as Frank was.

Frank enjoyed his attention, he thought. Having people marvel over him. Constantly praise his humanlike qualities and attributes.

Frank helped pack Percy a lunch for school in the morning all the way until the day he had to help Percy pack away his things to move away from home. He'd been accepted into a top university, where he intended to study mechanical engineering and robotics. You're coming with me, right? he asked Frank. Frank agreed.

They moved into a little apartment on the third floor of a run-down building, with squeaky wooden floors and plenty of windows. Frank moved much of the heavy furniture (with ease) as Percy unloaded small bags and boxes. Percy arranged things the way he wanted, books on the shelves, pictures on the walls. They became accustomed to one another, even more so than they already were, as their space had confined them even more so to each others' company.