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ORION'S  
BELT

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EDITED BY JOSHUA FAGAN



The Fire Will Come  
in Waves

R.L. Summerling

Driftwood

E.M. Linden

Escaping the AI  
Wasteland

Joshua Fagan

# Orion's Belt

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# The Fire Will Come in Waves

by R.L. Summerling

When you go down to the sea you'll understand  
what it is to burn and drown.

A parade of strange lovers will light your way  
with beacons of gem-coloured flames.

Oh you'll burn hard then melt into indigo.

Petals of surf charring your ankles.

Living by the sea turns you wild.

Unconfined by rules of land.

You'll be different when you get here.

The change will start slowly, then all at once.

Not an echo, but something new.

With seaweed pulling on your hair.

Spitting out a mouthful of stars.

On the beach, a threshold between worlds.

Ahead lies silver channels in the sand

which fork into myriad outcomes.

You'll hesitate, everyone does,

but the way will become clear by the light of the moon.

Past cruelties you've suffered will ebb away and

salt air will scrub you clean.

I promise you'll welcome the pain, everyone does.

This will be a death you can own.

Oh you'll see when you go under,

in that empire of foam,

through that door between worlds.

You'll understand when you burn.

# Escaping the AI Wasteland

by Joshua Fagan

There are few contemporary discourses as frequently tedious as the one swirling around content produced by AI. It pretends to be new and daring while repeating the same blend of wild-eyed utopianism and histrionic terror that has defined the last several centuries of discussing the relationship between humanity and technology. The current wave of AI tools is far from irrelevant, and expressing a healthy degree of skepticism toward new technology is rarely foolish. But ChatGPT and its ilk are not the apocalypse, nor are they a watershed moment for literature. The conscious, artistic act of creation represents an organic, personal process. Exaggerated speculations about AI replacing writers says far less about AI than about a cultural malaise regarding artistic creation.

Tracing the foundation of how artists conceptualize the conflict between humanity and faceless technology requires looking at Romanticism. As a movement, Romanticism grew as a response to growing industrialization and urbanization, the somber black factories and increasing alienation that color the collective memory of the early nineteenth century. These authors prioritized emotion, nature, and the individual spirit. Think of William Wordsworth reflecting on the bygone, pristine wonder of youth, lamenting the loss of “splendor in the grass” and “glory in the flower.”

What they found inhumane about industrial society was not merely the filth and squalor of overcrowded cities, but also how the economic system of industrialism unmoored individuals from both their personal desires and from any coherent sense of community. Even skilled artisans practicing techniques derived from generations of insight and understanding found themselves displaced. The division of labor made work more efficient while also evacuating it of meaning. Instead of creating, for instance, a chair through a detailed process uniting personal creativity with historical and cultural standards, a worker would repeatedly create a single part of a chair in a factory system. Even Adam Smith, who described this process extensively in regards to a pin factory in *The Wealth of Nations*, viewed it as rather demoralizing to the worker even as it generated vastly more productivity. The idea of the worker as an instrument of a mechanized, coldly impersonal system thus emerged.

Though august poets and novelists suffered less from the impositions of industrialization than the average artisan, the difference was not as great as might be expected. Romanticism largely invented the concept of the artist as a heroic figure draped in mystique and wonder, summoning quasi-divine creative power lacking in a corrupt society. Before, the artist was a kind of skilled artisan, valued for adroit skill but not viewed as a wellspring of unknown, unforeseen truths. An art was originally anything not found in nature, created by deliberate skill. The word “playwright” evinces this historical link between the fine arts and other works of creation. Like wheelwright or shipwright, playwright implies creation

through difficult but humble labor. Since industrialization threatened the freedom and dignity of the artisan, it thus also threatened those of the artist.

The creation of the artist as a kind of majestic, all-knowing figure functions as a response to the industrial obsession with productivity and profit. No, this ethos says, the artist is not simply an anonymous factory worker whose labor executives can easily replace. The artist creates from imagination and curiosity, expressing acute awareness of sensations and impressions beyond the humdrum grind of everyday life. This is a conception of art as immune to the techno-enthusiasts of the twenty-first century as those of the nineteenth century. For some of these enthusiasts, the utilitarians Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, poetry was a trifle at best and a disturbing distraction at worst, with Bentham stating that the poet “always stands in need of something false” even while creating “for the purpose of affording what is called amusement.” If the work of art is merely a pleasing illusion, then there is indeed no reason why a machine or AI cannot produce it. The artistic process, by the dictates of this worldview, becomes mechanical, the artist being a cog in a system produced for a specific, clearly defined end.

Admittedly, the conception of authorship through a factory-like system is far from bizarre. Ghostwriters wrote and developed the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew series, and even currently prolific authors like James Patterson are more brand managers for fleets of ghost writers than virtuosic auteurs. Still, there is still a single name on the cover. The idea of singular authorship is in these cases a



fiction, but the fiction matters. The idea of a novel branded with the names of an entire committee of writers seems absurd even now, in this skeptical age, because of the enduring relevance of the idea of artistic creation as being both the purest illumination of an individual's spirit and the striving toward a transcendent understanding that exists outside the indifferent repetitions of everyday life.

The Romantic poet Percy Shelley views poets as serving “the power which is seated on the throne of their own soul” while also demonstrating the capacity to “measure the circumference and sound the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit.” Perhaps even more moving is the account of the philosopher John Stuart Mill, the son of the rigidly utilitarian James Mill, of the effect of reading Wordsworth. James Mill ensured that his son understood the value of efficiency and social optimization, and indeed, the prodigious J.S. Mill mastered his father's philosophy at a young age. Yet this mastery left the younger Mill miserable, and he sunk into a profound depression, only finding delight again in Wordsworth's poetry.

Such a story is nice, of course, but what makes it more than a sentimental anecdote is his description of why, exactly, this poetry produced such an emotional revitalization. The prettiness of Wordsworth's natural descriptions was not sufficient. Mill admits that a writer like Walter Scott creates far more vibrant descriptions, but Wordsworth expressed “not merely outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought colored by feeling, under the excitement of

beauty.” This is a conception of art removed from both petty catastrophism about technology and the misguided belief that technology can somehow surpass the creative capacities of the great artist. It is also a conception that does not hold the same cultural potency as it did in the nineteenth century.

The fact that this AI discourse is so widespread testifies to an increasing inability to define the act of artistic creation. What happens to the conception of the artist as a mythic individual when the individual self suffers from such fragmentation? What happens to the conception of the artist reaching toward the universal when popular discourse unsettles the idea of universality being possible? Derek Thompson at *The Atlantic* argues in a pessimistic article about how “Your Creativity Won’t Save Your Job from AI,” while Francisco Toro joyfully opines in *Persuasion* that ChatGPT and the like will have a similar effect to Deep Blue, the supercomputer that signified that computers can play chess better than humans ever can. These two articles are both more thoughtful than the average crazed rant about AI and indicative of how constrained thinking can be about this topic.

Art is not chess. Despite the complexities of chess, it is ultimately a logic puzzle. There are precise, correct answers in a way that do not exist in a story or poem. Creativity is also not simply a fluffy, soft word, like Thompson seems to suggest. It is the active cultivation of an acute awareness, and it cannot be faked or replaced. AI creates art in the same way that a weather forecaster creates the weather. It gathers vast swaths of information and synthesizes them into a

whole. There is no reason to doubt that AI, searching through a vast library of James Patterson novels, can produce one that is probably no worse than what Patterson's team of ghostwriters create. That this is not the same as inspiring, worthwhile artistic creation should not need to be said.

Any story truly worthy of being written or read is not simply a collection of semi-intelligible words and phrases. It expresses the vast and nebulous complexities of the individual mind, nurtured by history and culture, in order to provide knowledge of the strangeness of the world. Perhaps the Romantic conception of art is too lofty and abstract for the cynicism of this century, but it at least provides a solid idea of what art is. The fact that too many cultural commentators cannot discern the qualitative difference between AI-produced mediocrity and the work of an active, fertile mind reveals only the limitations in their own views of art.

# Driftwood

by E.M. Linden

I'm on this beach, and I think I might be dead. I sliced my heel on marram grass, and the blood oozed black, slow, and cool. I can see right through my hands. When I put them flat on the cold sand, I can count the grains through my palms. I can't leave, and nobody comes.

I inscribe this letter like scrimshaw on driftwood. I feed it into the flames, so my words will write themselves in the smoke of the living world.

Bone-white dunes and a turning hawk above. Driftwood like mangled skeletons. Silvery marram grass. A world drained of colour: seafoam, fish bones, sand dollars, kelp. The sob of wind through the driftwood, the sougling sea. But over the sea's horizon, stars.

I tell you this so that you know what to expect, after.

No one comes, but something is already here. Driftwood sculptures stand guard along the endless stretch of beach. The wind keens through their ribs and whistles through their eye sockets; it reminds me that there was once a thing called music.

They tower over me, monstrous. This one's spine stretches like another row of dunes. This one uncoils along the tide line. They appear and disappear overnight. In the sand, I find the tracks of whatever it is that lifts and shapes the driftwood monsters as effortlessly as I once handled matches.

I scuff the cool sand with my bare feet and wonder what the sculptures represent. Sins? Dreams? I keep my distance even from the beautiful ones, their backs smooth, necks arched like racehorses, wings graceful and powerful. Even when I am lonely, and they are almost familiar.

These are the borderlands. The beach is so long I can't see an end to it. There's always enough light to cast shadows. In the day, it seeps into the sky through unchanging stratus clouds, and at night the waves dance with phosphorescence. There's no sun, no rain, and no moon, but always the turning hawk.

The only real darkness is over the sea, on the horizon, and that's how I know the stars are there.

I build myself a rough shack for shelter. I don't need it, but it makes me feel less exposed among the three expanses of sand, water, and sky. I use only driftwood still wet from the sea. Saltwater, I remember, cleanses. It feels like a smaller trespass than using the bone-bleached driftwood that the sculptor uses.

I never see the sculptor. To them, I'm no more than a washed-up feather or cuttlefish bone: ephemeral and beneath their notice. Not an invader, just stranded.

The hawk watches, and the sculptor builds the driftwood monsters. Guardians for the border.

Sometimes there are fires, but they are inverted, burning down into pits instead of reaching into the sky. The flames are ice-cold. The edges of the flames burn blue with salt. It is the only color I have seen for a long time. The other colors are just names to me. It's getting harder to remember them.

This place is close to the skin of the living world. If the living light fires there, they also burn here.

I remember the colors of the rainbow; I sing them to myself in a cracked voice as quiet as the sea breeze in the marram grass. Red, yellow, blue. Maybe there were others? Those are the ones I remember. Red. Yellow. Blue.

The wind whittles me away like driftwood. The strange, constant light bleaches my skin. My limbs twist and wear into new shapes, smoothed by the wind-blown sand.

If I stay here too long, I will be driftwood too. Maybe I will end up as part of a sculpture, some small but useful bone shaping part of the skull or a phalange.

When I close my eyes, I see a woman. She sits on a beach like this one, but with life and colors I thought I'd forgotten: birds and sandhoppers and children playing in the waves, a blue sky with pink-tinged clouds, bright towels and plastic toys, laughter and voices and seagulls and the jingle of an ice cream van. She smells of sunscreen. She's swum in the waves and now rests, head tipped back and eyes closed, blissful in the sun.

As the sky darkens, she pulls a turquoise shawl around her shoulders and the people she is with kindle a fire. They unwrap greasy takeaways—fish and chips—and burn the newspaper. Children roast marshmallows and run shrieking around the circle. Someone strums a guitar. The woman stares into the flames and remembers me.

I wish I knew who she was.

I wrote to her, but I was too timid. I pulled the message out before the cold flames could send it on its way.

This is a pattern I am familiar with.

I linger on this endless beach because I was not brave enough to go past the waves to the deep water.

Every day, others pass me. At first, I thought they were shadows, but they are too detached and purposeful. They're travelers, like me, drifting like shadows over the sand. Some hesitate at the shoreline or rest on the beach to watch the sky awhile. But all of them enter the water. They're going to the horizon. They know there's no other way to reach the stars.

Every day I fade and lose a little more of who I was. I can never return, and soon I will be no more than scattered driftwood. But I can't bring myself to go into the water. To let go of life.

Not yet. I can't go yet. I'm still not brave.

## Notes on Contributors

**E.M. Linden** (she/her) reads and writes speculative fiction. She likes coffee, ghost stories, and owls. Her work has appeared in *The Deadlands*, *Weird Horror*, *Flashpoint SF* and elsewhere. She has lived and worked in the Middle East and Australia but calls Aotearoa New Zealand home. She is on Mastodon at @emlinden@wandering.shop or Twitter @e\_m\_linden.

**Joshua Fagan** is a writer and critic currently residing in Scotland. His creative work has previously been published in venues including *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Fantastic Other*, and *Star\*Line*. As an academic, his work focuses on the intersection of literature, myth, and technology in the aftermath of Darwin, and his critical work has been published in *The Robert Frost Review*. He is the founder and editor-in-chief of the literary speculative-fiction publication *Orion's Belt*.

**R.L. Summerling** is a writer from South East London. In her free time she enjoys befriending crows in Nunhead Cemetery. She has stories in *Hexagon's MYRIAD*, *Seize The Press*, *Bear Creek Gazette* and more. You can find her at [rlsummerling.com](http://rlsummerling.com) and on Twitter @RLSummerling.