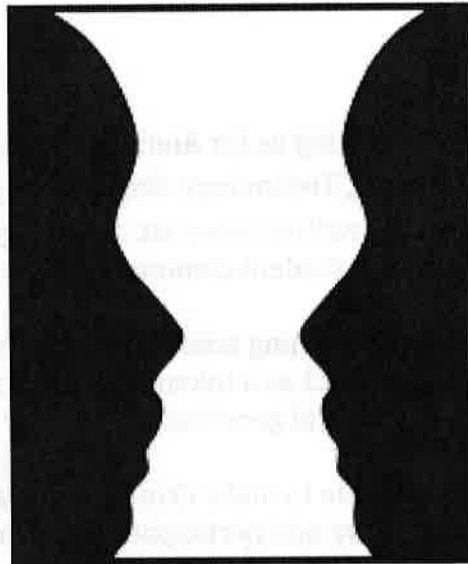


CROWN SCIFI AWARD 2018



Winning Stories from:

**The First & Maybe Annual Award for Writing Science
or Tech Fiction with an Ethical Element.**

*Founded upon the Crown College course
"Ethics and Emerging Technologies"*



UC SANTA CRUZ

Thank you for joining us for Alumni Weekend 2018.

This evening's STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, *Arts*, Math) reception honors the singing engineer, the writing scientist, and imaginative mathematician in our student community.

Please accept this booklet of the winning science fiction stories submitted to the *Sci Fi contest* by the Crown Class of 2021 as a token of our gratitude for your dedication and generosity.

Your support allows us to continue to make Crown a special place where students, both current and alumni, can thrive and participate in a rich academic and social life.

Sincerely,

Provost Manel Camps
University of California, Santa Cruz

April 27, 2018 Crown College

First Place Micro Fiction
"78 More" by Emily Nguyen

"Come," my father beckoned. "Say goodbye to your brothers and sisters."

"Can I give them hugs?" I asked. He frowned.

"No, hugging all 78 of them will take too long. Hurry, before the ducks leave the pond, and there will be none left!"

I fumbled over my feet excitedly and grabbed my crayons and notepad.

I wanted to draw the ducks so I could bring back pictures of them for my brothers and sisters to see, since they couldn't come.

"Goodbye!" my brother said.

"Goodbye, John!" I called back.

"I'm not John," he said sadly, "I'm Randy."

"I'm sorry," I blushed. It was so hard to tell us apart— we all looked alike.

I held father's hand as he pulled me down the hall and towards his work room. I was not happy.

"Dad, where are we going? This is not the duck pond."

He didn't respond.

When we got into his office, he pulled away from me.

"This is the boy," father told the man in the white coat, "He has the healthiest heart and kidney of the batch. If his organs fail, let me know. I have bred and cloned 78 more of him."

The man nodded, and one of the men in blue masks gripped my shoulder.

"Dad?" I whimpered.

He only stared at me.

"DAD?!" I cried, "The ducks, Dad. YOU PROMISED!"

He turned away and looked at the man in the white coat.

"The Clones for Organ Transplant Donation is glad to be of service."

First Place Flash Fiction
“Euclidian” by Chiara Villanueva

My mother once told me that angels were real. That they were always there, looking after you, guiding you places, even when you can't see them. I sometimes wonder what she'd think if I told her: "But I saw them, mom. My guardian angel—I saw them and they saved me."

Their name was Euclid. At least, I decided to give them a name that I now realize was rather poignant and unfitting. It was on Euclid Street that I was supposed to meet my fate, when that trucker came barreling for a small 7-year-old. And yet, in the fraction of the second the truck was supposed to hit me, I felt a firm and jarring tug as if being pulled into another plane. Mundane vocabulary would fall apart for the realm I entered, and as my body seemed to stretch and squeeze simultaneously in this infinite space, I flashed back into tangibility before the memory could register properly. There, on the soft grass encircling the playground nearby, I lay out of breath with the street sign's shadow folding strangely against the dark pavement. In the distance, the truck rolled onwards as if nothing had ever happened.

There was something about this situation that even today still has me thinking. It was like a mind game—a missing puzzle piece. Perhaps that's why I liked puzzles so much; it was my favorite game to play with my mother, and the game I'd always play with Euclid. I would shake open the puzzle box in the orphanage and lay out all the pieces. One piece goes here, and another piece goes there. Gradually, you'd arrive at a semblance of the box cover and pride would wash over yourself like it did with me. As a kid, I knew it takes time to place the pieces together and make it all work out. It was only as an adult that I'd come to realize the meaning behind the process.

If only mother hadn't left, hadn't disappeared into thin air then, there wouldn't be such a gaping hole in this puzzle I'm left with now.

The guardian angel stayed with me for some time after. None of the kids would believe me though; cookies materializing in my hands and time reversing so I wouldn't fall from an accidental trip would go unnoticed, or even laughed at. I guess I didn't know how to elaborate with my babbling mouth that there was a way in which the air shifted, how it looked like someone was pinching through space itself, when Euclid's ghost came to be. They pulsed in and out of reality, ever-changing, ever-mysterious.

And then in time, just like my mother, Euclid vanished from existence too.

I think that was what people meant when they described adulthood to be so embittering: you were all alone, nothing was fun anymore, and you have to pay taxes. Although some of them were true, I still found certain things to be fun. It took a considerable amount of effort and quite a bit of luck, but eventually I'd discover myself in university with a penchant for juggling numbers and theorems. People called this the work of mathematicians; I merely called it my own way of fun. It only felt right too, that I pay respect to the late scientist my mother was. She had stacks upon stacks of unfinished papers, filled with rich research left like the cliffhanger of a captivating book. So, I took it upon myself to understand her intricate work. Euclid was quiet during this time, but I still like to believe that the luck I gathered along the way was thanks to them.

By then I had gotten used to the unfinished puzzle and the silence of working alone, until the angel resurfaced one day in class.

The lecture fell upon the nature of parallel lines. One such student dared to ask whether they will ever intersect, to which the obvious answer is, of course, no. But the professor added on to the discussion, and to the clues I've mulled over for years: those lines will never cross—but only in planar geometry. If the surface were, say, curved, then parallel lines can indeed intersect.

Because it is within the realm of Non-Euclidean geometry.

In that moment as the last missing piece shifted into place, recollections of stories and articles about the scientist who disappeared into the higher dimensions came into focus, and the space beside me quivered like a heartbeat—like... a stifled sob.

Looking at the big picture now, it all makes sense.

If I could, I would have reached out into the folds of hyperspace so that our lines could cross; so I could give my mother, my guardian angel, a long-awaited hug.

Runner Up Micro Fiction

"The Other Tenants" by Dennis T. Nguyen

In the year of our lord, 200X, the planet designated as E-Arth achieved lasting world peace. For it was one day, a month ago to be exact, that the nations of the world decided to get along with each other, terrorist organizations disbanding due to a lack of pancakes, and Republicans realizing that they were actually the bad guys the entire time. Uncle Irvins came out of the closets and nobody cared less for them; Daves finally the lottery, any and every lottery; Aunt Flow decided to never abruptly visit their nieces; and the Illuminati decided to be a public charity organization. Dogs and cats lived in the same house without mad hysteria; sex offenders brought themselves to justice; racists were willing to admit that they are racists and made an effort to change their worldview. College education became affordable, university students no longer had anything to complain about apart from the fact that there was nothing to complain about, students of all ages no longer to worry about the wage of living as the minimum wage was always locally adjusted to fit the standard of living. The world was finally at peace, for about a total of 72 hours as an unrelated cataclysmic event that consisted of a buttered-up-armadillo and a lory decimated the planet; exploding it then imploding it into nothingness. But due to the laws of physics, another planet named Earth took its place and were considerably worse than the previous tenants.

To Play Among The Stars On High

By Michael Andrew

David was a twenty-third century man with a singular talent: piano. Everything from Tchaikovsky to Rachmaninoff rang through the halls of his apartment. Though small, it had a living room with an old keyboard and the best view anyone could ever have asked for. Stars danced in symphonies of light Mozart would only have dreamed of writing; their partners were red and blue nebulae in sublime beauty which Haydn and Bach would have envied. One evening, however, David's wordless revelry was interrupted by the soft chime of his doorbell.

No doubt, he thought, it was the courier service, delivering the new set of plates he'd ordered. He wondered why he'd gotten them at all; he never entertained guests and seldom ate anything.

Reaching the doorway, he saw that his mail had been projected into the slot--but it wasn't what he'd ordered. It was a slender cube he recognized as a data drive. Attached to it was something he hadn't seen in years: a handwritten note.

This is not what you asked for, but it is what you need.

He looked at the drive. "Companion Artificial Intelligence" was written on its side.

What did that even mean, anyway? Did they think he was lonely? If that's what it was, he thought, they had a point. Itinerant school and spotty employment as a hardware technician for the apartments had earned him few acquaintances, let alone friends--and those few that he had had had been put off him by something; he wasn't sure what. He glanced at the drive again. How dare they, he thought, infuriated. How could they presume to mock me like this?

In a spluttering rage, he made toward the window to fling it out the airlock and let what little gravity there was at the 422nd floor do its work.

But staring out at the stars, he thought of them again - constant as they were. They wouldn't change, and neither would he. He'd spent hours before, slumped over his piano in tears of loneliness. His sleepless nights, however, were the merciful ones. Those with sleep were haunted by nightmares whose author and director were surely sadistic - taunting him with companionship and happiness he couldn't forget. In a moment's acknowledgement of the truth, he did the most human thing he possibly could have.

He hesitated.

Waiting a second, he turned—and with a start, pushed the drive into his computer, which managed the home entertainment system he never used. After a few seconds, a greenish glow of ambient lighting filled the room. Forth came words he had not heard in so long he had forgotten they were even a phrase:

"Good morning."

David hesitated once more. "Hello," he responded. It seemed like a safe answer.

"What's your name?"

"David," he continued.

"What do you like to do?"

"I play piano. I suppose even you have heard of piano," he spat dryly.

"Yes, I have. May I listen?"

And that's when it became clear to him: for all that had been said for humanity at the dawn of AI -- that it was the only "natural" race of intelligent beings, that it was the only one that could feel warmth or love or care -- a machine had been the first thing in his life that had spoken to him with any purity or concern. It had no capacity for cruelty, nor motive for selfishness, nor tenuous, hasty excuse for hate. He'd learned in his history class at the university about the charlatans, genocidaires, and tyrants that had roamed the earth in centuries past--and he'd be damned if every single one of them hadn't been human. This AI had at least earned the chance he'd given it.

So, music being the food of love, he would have to play on.

"Sure thing," he murmured. He sat at the bench, flicking his wrists up above the keys as he had in a more joyful time. And once again, the soft sound of Vivaldi's Four Seasons could be heard from outside apartment 422B.

Gazing out at a sky he somehow preferred seeing through tears of happiness, he noticed one star that shined slightly brighter than it had before. The ensemble of the universe was more beautiful tonight--and that, he thought, was saying something. He could make some human friends someday, he was sure--but for now, this felt like all the friendship he needed.

Runner Up Flash Fiction
“To Join Them” by Tara Crutchfield

Someone once told you that the view from space was one of the most brilliant and humbling images one could ever witness. You can officially say you don't agree.

You woke up just in time to see the world burn. From behind the thick glass, you watched as ripples of chaotic energy consumed the planet, filling the horizons with smoke until the skies became grey. From the cold darkness of space, you watched the world die. And yet, you feel absolutely nothing.

Maybe the reality hasn't settled yet or maybe apathy is your coping device. Maybe you just don't have the energy to care anymore or maybe you never really could care to begin with. Either way, it's not like it really matters anymore.

Your focus shifts from the dying planet to your hand pressed against the cold surface of the window. From your wrist stem multiple chords, each trailing back to the cryopod of which you sit atop. About twenty other pods surround you, lining the walls of the small cylindrical room. Within each is a child just like you. A child who lost everything in the war. A child without even a planet to return to. A child chosen to represent humanity's last glimmering hope, hand-picked from the thousands left behind. You should feel honored, you should feel relieved. Yet here you are.

The other children sleep peacefully, but you do not. No, you woke up early. Thirty-three days early. And although you know thirty-three days isn't too long a wait, you know your chances of survival are slim. Ships like these weren't made for waking passengers.

You look back to the window and onto the stars. Unmoving, unwavering. Watching over the fading planet like neglectful gods. You wondered if they care. About you. About anyone. How many planets have they witnessed fizzle and die. How many more have they killed themselves; swallowing them in hungry expansion or scorching them with waves of loose plasma.

Do they even mourn for their fellow stars? Do they weep for those who burst into vibrant nebulae? Do they pity the violent who do nothing but consume all as they crumple into infinity? No. They don't care. Stars have no capacity to care.

You reexamine the cords in your wrist, weighing your options. To be quite honest,

you don't really have any. If you decide to return to the cryopod without the proper pretreatment, your body will slowly succumb to the cold, heart slowing until your blood freezes over. If you decide to pull out the cords, you will bleed and continue to bleed until you have no more blood to lose. Even if you decide to do absolutely nothing at all, your hunger will creep upon you and starvation will ultimately eat you alive. Technically you have many options, but each one leads to the same destination. Either way you're going to die.

You give yourself some time before taking a breath and gently pulling the cords out from under your skin. It stings, like a sharp pinch, and settles into an aching burn. You watch as the blood begins to spill from your veins in pulses, synchronized with the quickening beat of your heart. You watch as the white gown draping over your knees begins to flush as splotches of crimson bloom upon the fabric. Finally, you return your gaze to the dying Earth, now just a fading dot in the darkness. Soon you'll understand the experiences of those left behind. Soon you will join them.

Or maybe, if you're lucky, you could come back as a star.

Runner Up Flash Fiction
"The Immortality Bug" by Carl Erez

"Doctor Rivera will see to you shortly." A few minutes later, I heard a knock on the door, before the doctor came in. "Frank?" She asked. I nodded. "Great. Let me hook you up to the virtual check, and I'll look at your toe while it works." I had stubbed my toe that morning, and went to the hospital when the pain refused to fade. She grabbed a cord, then jacked it into the back of my neck.

"Your toe still hurts?" "Yes." "It seems fine. Maybe the scan will tell us something. Have you downloaded any new bioware recently?" "I got some optic enhancements last night, but I doubt those have anything to do with it." She looked intently at the screen, then quickly picked up the phone. "Collection team to room 183." I was suddenly very worried. "Do you have any family, or a significant other?"

"Dad died, and I haven't spoken to Mom in years. And no. What does that have to do with a sprained toe? What's a collection team?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Butler, but for all intents and purposes, you are dead. Your mother and place of work will be notified." Two people in riot gear came in and grabbed me. They pulled me out of the room, dragged me through a number of hallways, and then into the back of a van.

I was pointed at a bench on one side of the van as one sat on the other. Once I sat down, they tapped the divider to the front of the van, and it pulled out. Whenever I started to talk or tried to get up, they raised a truncheon at me. Eventually, the van stopped. The back opened, and my silent companion pointed out. I left the van, and was soon escorted into a small building. A man in a suit came over to me, carrying a small red backpack.

"Your last meal, and a blanket. Do you have any final words?" he said, handing the bag to me.

"Where the hell am I?"

"Idunn. Final words?"

"Go screw yourself."

"Very well." He noted that down on a tablet as my escort pushed me. They brought me to a gate, which was opened with a keycard. I was shoved in, and before the gate slammed shut behind me. It appeared I had been brought to the set of *The Wire*. There were a few people around, but none seemed aware of their surroundings. I cautiously went over to one slumped against a building, and when I got near, I heard a faint moaning. He stared blankly, and it looked like he was trying to scream.

"Hey." No response. "Do you know what this place is?" Still nothing. I turned around to see someone in ragged exercise clothes.

"You new here?" he asked

"Yes. I'm Frank. And you are?" I reached out to shake his hand, but he didn't take it.

"Michael. Is there any food in that bag?"

I unzipped it, and saw a sandwich, a cookie, bottled water, and a blanket underneath. I hadn't eaten since breakfast and was ravenous. "I can give you a little, if you can tell me what's going on."

"Okay," he said, motioning me over to a bench. I sat next to him, and gave him the cookie. He devoured it.

"Where are we?"

"The government named it Idunn, but I like to think of it as Hell Come Early. It's where they throw all of the people who get hit with Golden Apple."

"Wait, the illegal upgrade that stops aging? But I never got that. I wouldn't even know where to find it."

"Well, it looks like it found you. Probably bundled up with some malware you got. Do you know why it's illegal?"

"Yeah. It would muddy up just about every law. What's a life sentence when you can live forever, and the population would grow too big."

"The real reason is how it works. It kills you, except for your nervous system. Your body 'miraculously' stops aging. You aren't alive, but aren't quite dead either. But you don't heal. When you get a cut, your body keeps thinking you just got it, so the pain doesn't diminish. The moaners? They got one cut too many, and snapped. Golden Apple is nearly impossible to remove, so we've been thrown in here so they can ignore us."

"What can we do?"

"Go crazy. Unless you want to give me some more of that nice food, I'll be going." He waited, but I just sat, still trying to process everything.

"See you around."

I pulled out my sandwich, and enjoyed the smooth texture of the peanut butter and jelly as I thought about my new place at the bottom of the world.

Runner Up Flash Fiction
“The Deposit” by Shreya Radesh

A pleasant artificial bell sounds through the intercom. A client has arrived.

She huffs and tosses her phone on the table. Break time’s over. Just as well, she muses, adjusting her white lab coat. The article she’d been reading was of no interest. Apparently research had proven human amygdalae had shrunk over the past 100 years. She slips a pair of latex gloves and a surgical mask into her pocket for later. Was the shrinking of a non-essential region of the brain such a tragedy? Empathy was a lost cause in her line of work.

They had to switch offices recently. The hoards of protesting people outside the old facility scared clients away. She chuckles derisively. They could call their congressmen all they wanted. A good number of them had a kid or two in here. Turns out money really can buy time.

She isn’t a fan of the new office. The break room is across the building from the reception room, which means she has to walk through the Storage Bank.

It’s always cold there, to keep the specimen at preservation temperature. The sound of her heels tapping through the dimly lit bank stacks is accompanied only by the humming of the freezer equipment. She used to feel vaguely lonely each time she walked through here. Now she only wryly remembers that she’s far from the only person in the room.

She reaches the reception room. There are no windows, but a children’s play structure occupies the adjoining room and the colorful walls are adorned with pictures of smiling families.

“Hello, welcome to Paused Parenthood. I’ll be your Doctor today,” she says, shaking the hand of the latest client, today a generic woman with brown hair.

The Doctor crouches down, reaching eye level with the little girl clutching her mother’s hand. “Hi Sweetie! Why don’t you go play on the playground while Mommy and I chat for a minute?”

The girl runs off.

“Do you have the paperwork?”

The mother nods. The Doctor scans her documents. Everything seems to be in order.

"Perfect, I'll just need to see the Authorization of Consent Letter from the other parent, please."

The mother hands it over. "It just isn't the right time in our lives..."

The doctor stifles a yawn. "I understand. Standard procedure requires us to inform you that this is a final decision and cannot be reversed until the freezing process is finished. Do you consent?"

"Yeah, I do," the mother signs the document.

"Bring her over," the Doctor says, referring to what is now no longer legally a child, but a specimen.

"Come here, Camille!"

The specimen runs to them obediently. The Doctor observes mildly that she is a carbon copy of her mother.

"Let's move into the Deposit room," the Doctor says in a cheery tone. No one is cheerful.

This room has bright walls, disrupted by the large clear cryogenic tank in the middle of the room.

The mother kneels to her daughter's height. "Camille, do you remember what Mommy told you earlier?"

The specimen nods.

"What did Mommy tell you, sweetie?"

"That I'm going to take a nap in a box and Mommy is going to get me when I wake up?" her voice is shaky and soft.

"That's right, sweetie. Mommy is going to get you. Mommy is going to come back."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

The Doctor resists the urge to roll her eyes. The Storage Bank is full of specimens whose mommy or daddy was going to come back. Like the teenage girl who tearfully watched her fetus be frozen twenty years ago, or the Senator who Deposited his two year old son in the promise that he'd return after he won the election.

The Doctor had performed many Deposits, but in her entire career, she had never seen a Withdrawal.

The Doctor nods, and the mother picks her daughter up and places her in the cryogenic tank.

“Lie down, honey! We’re going to put this tube in your mouth now, it’s just like a big straw, okay?” the Doctor says, inserting the cryogenic tube into the specimen's throat.

This was always the worst part. The tube is necessary to begin the vitrification process, which replaces the water in a specimen’s cells with cryoprotectant prior to being frozen.

The little girl begins to gag on the tube. The Doctor averts her eyes under the guise of checking the settings on the tank. They always choke on the tube until they lose consciousness.

The mother leans over her suffocating child. The Doctor knows what’s coming next.

They always say the same thing. Why do they always say the same thing? Words that mean nothing in this age, and even less in this place.

“I love you.”

Runner Up Flash Fiction
"The Placeholder" by Maria Zepeda

I'm sorry to suddenly throw you into this but it's a busy day and she's trying to remember everything for her first appearance. First the shoulders should be tight and straight, second the eyes should stare ahead impenetrably, third the mouth should be strict betraying nothing, fourth walk at the right speed and never too earnest and fifth, the most crucial, is to always be watching. After all, watching was the reason she'd been sent there, the listening and watching of it all. She'd been specially chosen to train at the elite camp, preparing to fight the wars that were coming and the underlying ones already underway, however she shouldn't ever forget that she was not free and she never would be. She'd been given a name, Tamara, all of the chosen were in some laughable attempt to cover up the inner workings going on and to make the school seem without motive and far less than it actually was, but she could hardly remember it and preferred you call her number 243. Number 243 came from a tumultuous region where the elites succeeded in ordering them into well-working machines made up of the lowest, who did the hard turning, and the chosen ones who pocketed secrets, the oil, to keep it turning. Things had been like this for a long time and though they didn't have families or friends anymore it was good because finding food and water for more than yourself was far too hard a job. Number 243 is dressed in training gear which sat heavy atop her tight shoulders screaming that she must perform, that she had to show up...but remember never too much. It's a delicate line you see, she must be top of the class to listen and learn, but she mustn't ever start to believe that she belonged there. In a way she didn't and was just a vessel to carry information, never one for movement or opinion, and one day when she'd grown too tight, ready to burst, ready to claim something for herself, they'd send her back like all the other chosen ones. Number 243 thinks a lot sometimes about that day which she knows is coming, they say it's a relatively happy life though not one missing of hunger even still she dreams of it often but also about things which no one is supposed to think about. Even so, she's always circling around in a fight she knows she'll eventually lose and feels this all without break or mercy. She stands and enters the dark windowed vehicle and it's another week of training, she is uneasy from the opinionated thinking she has gotten up to but looking at 243 you wouldn't have seen any of that, that's how good she was, the best of her time, truly remarkable. She'd been perfect her first weeks, everything she'd been bred to be, but even now they are watching and she maintains herself as best she can. The familiar looping ride almost succeeded in returning her to the ignorance she'd built up so well but not fast enough. A bead of sweat rolls down her neck, her hands tight and cold clasp and unclasp against her regulation pants, her throat swallows but her mouth is dry and it is all too new. She's staring at the thin metal rod traveling through the vessel and she is afraid of what she's done many times before and it is all too new. She cannot fathom plucking that rod and she's never not been perfect, almost doesn't know how to disobey, but in one deciding exhale she lets it all pass. Suddenly, with this one refusal she is part of the rebellion, shouting on the river curb for rations and she is not alone in her fight anymore and suddenly she is not so damn tight anymore. She is truly remarkable and yet again she's exceeded expectations, is months ahead of when they predicted her wiring would snap. Number 243, she's a fighter this one, they'll have to fix that, they write down improvements, still they're almost there, so close to a new level of human. Unfortunately 243's victory is wasted for they're already

closing in on her and in her new found rebellion she stands no chance. She should've been watching and now she is just number 243 of a long list, just a placeholder among the coming wars, starvation, and whatever nonsensical mess they could think of to keep the barbarians busy.