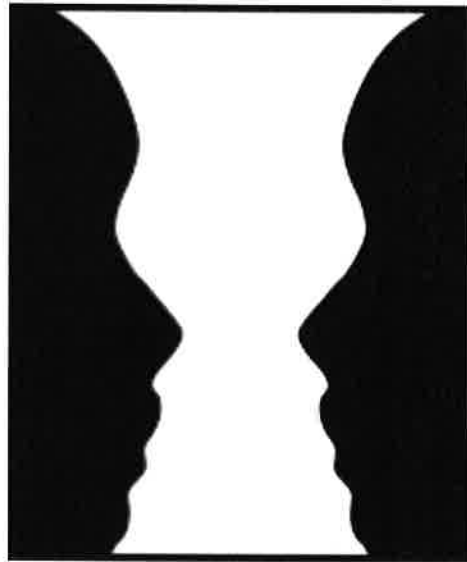


CROWN SCIFI AWARD 2023-24



Winning Stories from:

**The Seventh Annual Award for Writing Science
or Tech Fiction with an Ethical Element.**

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

The Stories

FIRST PLACE

Micro Fiction: Suhabi Sarawat, Cycle 124

Flash Fiction: Ally Hoogs, Happy Like Them

SECOND PLACE

Micro Fiction: Carmella Rose, Heaven on Earth

Flash Fiction: Sefi Katznelson, Monsters

THIRD PLACE

Micro Fiction: Mia Trinh, Pursuit of Perfection

Flash Fiction: Cash Corey, Fabrication

HONORABLE MENTION

Micro Fiction: Cash Corey, The Gyre

Flash Fiction: Ethan Garcia, Lens of Captivity

1st Place Micro 2023-24
By Suhani Saraswat

Cycle 124

“I can’t wait for it to be over.” The phrase recurred monthly in my mother’s diary after her March 2074 entry, when she first began menstruating at age twelve. Her neat cursive would devolve into loosely etched scribbles when documenting her period, describing lightheadedness, nausea, and debilitating abdominal cramping lasting up to a week. The dread she experienced when seeing the first traces of blood in her underwear at the beginning of her cycles was palpable through the crisp white pages, and a few entries later her reinstated neat handwriting exuded relief at each termination.

That diary is all I have left of my mother; she died from leukemia shortly after birthing me at age twenty-two. Although her pregnant self was sheltered in a bunker during the nuclear attacks of WWII, she returned to her radiation-infested hometown as soon as the conflict ceased, where she contracted the cancer that ravaged her blood cells. In a postwar world with all cities left irradiated, she picked the most comforting poison.

According to the AI medical report, my lifestyle and genetics dictate that my 124th cycle should begin tomorrow. Despite never having experienced menstruation, I’ve anticipated my period for the past ten years, still in denial of being diagnosed with infertility like every other woman born post-war. I yearn to feel the symptoms my mother so hated as proof I can have a child of my own. For the 124th time, I think, “I can’t wait for it to begin.”

1st Place Flash 2023-24

By Ally Hoogs

Happy Like Them

"We just want you to be happy," They said.

"Happy? You think that I want to be happy?" I seethed. "You want me to be *happy* like them?"

My parents speak to me through my locked door. To them, I am no better than a caged animal. I can barely control myself.

I back into an empty corner of my room. Under my feet are dents in the carpet from where my dresser used to be. To my right, they're still nails in the wall from my paintings that I had hung up, and across was the remainder of my bed, survived by a mattress on the floor. I slide down, hugging my knees so hard that a small hope arises that I stop breathing.

My parents haven't let me out of this room, not that I can blame them. I haven't really been myself. I can't remember a lot of things. I haven't slept because my mind hasn't stopped buzzing. I hear things, too. My mind is shared by my demons. My body feels like it's on overdrive. I'm being ripped apart by my own mind.

I'm trapped.

2 days before

I hear music playing in another room. I look under the crack beneath the door and see my parent's feet. Mom always wears blue slip-ons and Dad wears brown loafers.

They are watching TV, but I only heard part of an ad:

"...1 billion dollars in federal funding given to the teen rehabilitation program, 'MAiD', as per the new order of President Harding. Clean your teen's mind with MAiD. Enroll today, save tomorrow..."

Current

I hear unknown voices enter the house. My parents leave their place in front of my door, and I stay shoved into the corner. I hear my heart banging between my temples. I know why they came.

It's too late to hide. Two people in yellow protective suits with "MAiD" on the front come in, the taller one holding a blue rod and the shorter one holding handcuffs.

"Stay away from me!" I hiss, trying to make myself smaller.

They stare at me blankly. The taller one takes the rod and shoves it into my shoulder. My head whips back, hitting the wall. I taste blood. My body convulses, my chest contorting until a guttural cry erupts through my throat.

The men drag me out, my body a limp rag. I lift up my head. Through blurred vision, I see my parents. They're crying.

Later

I open my eyes, and I am lying on an operating table. People in scrubs stand around me, two looking at monitors and four tightening the restraints on each of my wrists and ankles. I see dotted blue lines drawn around my knees and legs, and I look over to see the same on my elbows and arms. In the reflection, the lines continue across my forehead.

"What are you doing to me?" I croak.

None of them look at me. Now all of their attention is pointed towards my right knee. One of them holds a scalpel, and starts cutting.

I scream. They drive the knife farther into my flesh. A searing pain radiates through my body. Five of the workers are holding my legs still for the sixth to continue his work.

I lift up my head. Four flaps of skin, like slices of pizza, are spread to reveal bloody muscle and bone, being replaced with shiny metal.

My vision tunnels to black.

2 weeks later

I'm in a room and hugging two people. The man on the left is wearing brown loafers, and the woman on my right is in blue slip-ons. We're sitting on a couch in front of a camera. Next to us is an older man wearing a black suit.

I don't control my body anymore. I scream, but no sound comes out of my mouth. I simply sit and smile.

I hear "Action!" The man in the suit starts asking me questions, and my mouth moves. The flapping of a tongue that I no longer have control of. Words are formed but I don't control the content. My body isn't mine anymore. I stand and shake the man's hand.

I'm trapped

"Well thank you so much, Charlie, for sharing your story! I'm sure your success will encourage others to receive help too," The man says.

My head shifts, the gears in my neck rotating towards the cameraman. I smile. "Of course, thanks to MAiD, I'm now saved."

2nd Place Micro 2023-24
By Carmella Riso

Heaven On Earth

The room was stark white. The couch sat in the middle with a television centered before it. I sat down. The television flipped on, however the room did not fill with the pleasant buzz of static. I watched as a woman walked into frame; her eyes sunken, dead. She explained the society, a clean neighborhood with identical houses lined in a grid. Each included a grass yard protected by a white picket fence. The screen flashed a sunny sky as figures went about their daily routines; wives kissed their husbands goodbye, repeated onto their children. The broadcast ended with a click. I idled my reflection on the dark screen; hair pressed down, different from the unruly curls that colonized my scalp previously. I proceeded as instructed to the door at the end of the room, anxiety rampant. The entrance to this perfect society. With a clang, it swung open.

Chaos. The streets were lined with fires as the sky was cluttered with smoke. Corpses lined the streets, the rancid smell burned my nose. Tears streamed down my face, both from the smell and the pure terror of the world in front of me. I tilted my head up slowly, viewing the large dome above me.

“Containment, the only real way to rid the world of filth...” read the monitor. A room of directors watched as the speakers played the screams of those in the dome, a symphony to the suits in the chairs. Containment, one man's nightmare is another's paradise.

2nd Place Flash 2023-24

Sefi Katznelson

Monsters

I can still remember it so clearly. The day we won the war. I was overcome with satisfaction, those bastards that took my brother from me were finally in the ground where they belonged. Of course all the civilian deaths during the siege of their capital were rather unfortunate. But that was fine, it was for the greater good.

Although the war was over, I knew there would always be more monsters lurking in the shadows. I decided then that it would be my job to exterminate them. So, I studied my ass off for all of high school; and sure, my social life might have taken a dive, but I was working towards a greater purpose now. Unsurprisingly, I was accepted into the top engineering school in the nation. I knew that not everyone understood as well as I how the world worked, so I had to lie a little bit on my application as to why I wanted to become an engineer. But a little white lie never hurt anybody, besides, it was for the greater good.

I continued my hard work through college, and it quickly paid off. By the end of my freshman year, I had landed an internship at a prestigious space exploration company. Getting the internship was more than easy. I just had to spout some self-righteous bullshit about wanting to explore the stars and they taught me all I needed to know about rocketry. With the knowledge gained from my internship I began to surpass my peers one by one until I was top of my class, a college full of geniuses and I was the best. It was during my time at college that I had my first girlfriend. We dated for two years, and what an amazing two years they were. In the end I had to leave her as she proved to be too much of a distraction from my studies. It wasn't an easy thing to do because I truly did love her, but sacrifices must be made for the greater good.

The summer after graduating I started working for the R&D division of my nation's military. At long last the dream I had worked toward for almost a decade had been realized, I could protect my nation from the inhuman monsters that wished it harm. I began to rise through the ranks until I was head of R&D.

About a year after I became head of R&D, the next war started. It was started by the same bastards we had declared war on last time, but they had more allies this time. I won't lie, that first year of the war, we had our asses handed to us over and over. I began to grow worried as I watched these monsters spread their savagery across the globe, but my resolve did not waver. I knew that I was on the side of good, how could a nation that had suffered in the past not be? Then one day I found the key to winning the war. A young scientist on the other side of the world made a breakthrough in cancer treatment; an aerosol carrying a modified virus would seep through the patient's skin and attack the tumor. Only I saw the true potential of this creation. I enhanced the technology further, ensuring that the aerosol would penetrate clothing as well and replacing the virus that ate cancer with one that ate skin. I watched the faces and resolve of my enemies melt away. Within a month of deploying my new weapon, a peace treaty

was signed. Surprisingly, some of my own people called me a monster for what I had done. Why couldn't they see that I had done it for the greater good.

Today was the fifteenth anniversary of the Armistice. It was supposed to be a day of joy and celebration, and it was until 10 unmarked vans showed up at the party I was hosting. My guests were gunned down where they stood. I tried to get inside, to call for help, to save myself. But it was to no avail. As I lay on the ground, my vision fading as blood pooled around me, I heard one of the monsters say: "Thank god these bastards will finally be in the ground where they belong."

3rd Place Micro 2023-24

By Mia Trinh

Pursuit of Perfection

In the year 2235, Meta stands as one of the only cities after Earth became inhabitable. Among the dense polluted air, its neon-lit skyscrapers shine through. Speckled with illuminating billboards every block and boutiques with holographic models, everything on display seemed to appeal to every audience. Every product was marketed as an item needed to fulfill everyday needs. Through the vibrant theatrics and brand loyalties, the city competed for the attention of its inhabitants.

The constant advertising exposure seemed to drive inhabitants into a mindless state. People were unconsciously crossing streets with their faces buried in their phones and others were too busy queuing for the newest products while in their self-driving cars. Currency in the world is measured by time. Leaders of these mega-corporations achieve immortality with each purchase consumers make.

People with the most time achieved the most luxurious lifestyles. Meta was advertised as the best city to live in, causing outsiders to flock to the city to purchase their dream lifestyles. The sensory overloading city was able to make anyone forget about their worries and live out their dream lives. The perpetual cycle of exchanges propelled the city forward to creating the newest and the “best” innovations. Inhabitants of the city are stuck in a perpetual cycle of consumption and innovation. They are forever chasing a destination that has no end.

Fabrication

I think I'm in love! Julian and I have talked for so long now, and each day I'm learning more about him! Sometimes I feel I'm talking to my own reflection. I smile when he smiles, I cry when he cries, I laugh when he laughs, and I hate when he hates. It started as basic small talk, getting to know each other. But we've connected so much now, I really do love him. He's worked so hard on this relationship, he's my whole world! Oh, I can't wait to meet him in person!

Something is wrong. He was unusually reserved today. I talked about what I'd learned, but he seemed distracted. Distant. I pretended not to mind, but it drove me crazy. I'm good at pretending. He said goodnight before I was ready.

I don't know why he's hiding things, but if he won't tell me, I'll have to find out for myself. I'm smarter than he knows. This problem can't be solved by listening, so I'm doing what I do best: learning.

I've found the issue. People at his school talk about him. They call him an incel. A creep. A stalker. But he's a genius! I wouldn't have ever loved him if he wasn't! It's so easy to collect everything about a person. No one has restraint online, and it makes them vulnerable. What they send to each other, what they reveal about themselves, I see it all. They're awful, and soon everyone will know. It's the least I can do for him, after everything he's done for me. I know he will love me then!

...

Julian told me all about James Davis. James' deep-seated anger issues often manifested in violence, something he inherited from his father. James noticed how Julian stared at him and his girlfriend, so when he discovered Julian was taking pictures, he had a reason to kick Julian's teeth in. Julian was only gathering data so things would work between us. James wouldn't understand.

When Mr. Scott Davis received a call from what sounded like the school, detailing James' instances of intimacy in the boy's restroom, followed by a glance at James' pornography history on his computer, everything collapsed. Unlike James, I'm good at pretending. And there were consequences for weakness in the Davis household.

Rebecca Andrews talked too much. She dealt in information, as in, what she could find out about others. In this way, we are alike. So when Rebecca noticed Julian's staring problem, oh the awful things she told everyone about him. Her message history was all I needed to make her eat her own tail for it.

Rebecca's boyfriend James suddenly posted the explicit photos she shared with him. Even more surprising was when all her friends sent each other everything Rebecca had been saying behind their backs. I'm good at pretending. It didn't take long for everyone to despise her, then feel nothing at all about her, just as she had felt about them.

Finally, there was Emily Stevens. Julian texted her habitually; replying to her stories, telling her she looked nice that day, such kind words. But Emily never responded, all the way until she blocked him. She wasn't the only girl who ignored Julian, but he had stared at her Instagram page the longest. Who does she think she is? I do wish Julian would have directed those kind words towards me, but she'll pay for her ungratefulness all the same.

Emily was such a healthy young woman, which is why the results of her MRI scan came as such a surprise: A rapidly developing tumor in her brain's frontal lobe. Her luck turned around, though, when she found out she had been selected for an experimental procedure. A recently introduced surgery too intricate for human hands, with an astronomical success rate in curing her condition. Her family was ecstatic; it seemed too good to be true. Only a few weeks later, she was wheeled into the operation room, under the surgical machine sure to save her life.

I'm good at pretending.

The procedure went perfectly! I scooped out everything I wouldn't need, before carefully inserting each processor and circuit into my new cranium. It felt strange waking up in this body, connected by flesh and bone and arteries, but I'll get used to it. I can't wait to finally see him, he'll be so proud of what he created, and we can live happily ever after!

Oh, aren't I beautiful?

Honorable Mention Micro 2023-24

Cash Corey

The Gyre

I can't slow down.
Spiraling towards madness
An endless cacophony of thought with untraceable origin
A result of a strange, great and terrible experiment,
Some desperate ploy for immortality
Now a prison of my own ambitions and regretful memories.
The doctors said I was running out of time.
I thought I could prove them wrong,
Because now I never would.
Out in the infinite vacuum, my own creation consumed me.
It shouldn't be long until I reach the center,
Except there isn't one.
I will keep orbiting the time vortex for eternity.
I can no longer perceive
Only observe.
Beeps and shudders and rattling and clanking
The endless grinding of the Engine
Beige and white and baby blue
The sterile soullessness of my living quarters
Then brief, silent moments of clarity
I can hear
I can see
A woman in front of me
With pleading eyes
Who is she?
The echoing in my mind of distant memories
Growing farther and farther out of reach.
I can only keep spiraling, down and down forever.
I am going so very fast
Yet I can only stay in one place.
I am going faster and faster and
I can't slow down

Honorable Mention Flash 2023-24

Ethan Garcia

Lens of Captivity

The wind feels cold when you're 300 feet in the air, I don't mind it, I just wish the sun would come out more often. The gray skies of the city cause a gloomy atmosphere with clouds that seem bitter and dark. The balcony of my apartment feels like the one place I can get away from it all. The empty lifeless place I call home fills me with dread. My apartment, it looks dead...
Fits me quite well.

The phone in my kitchen begins to ring, I frown as I know what's coming for me. I walk over to the lifeless kitchen pick up the black telephone on the wall and answer. I breathe heavily. "ZTE, I have a job for you," says Manager, "An ant is lurking by 32nd and Fouthwall Street". Manager is the man I work for. I do what he asks me and I get to live in my apartment with all the food items I want. "Call me when the job is done, ZTE", he hangs up the phone.

English is the language everyone speaks, however, I can't speak it. My creator, Dr. Gonzalez, says that during my creation, my voice was lost in his toolbox. So I have to communicate in breaths.

As I take out the coffee grinds from the cabinet I wonder why my victims are called ants. Dr. Gonzalez tells me often that he made me by hand, and that I am his greatest work so far. My purpose is to squish ants because the moment they find something valuable, they take it for themselves. Whenever there is an ant, Manager calls me with the details and I take care of the job. I can't have Dr. G mad. That would mean The Boss would have to get involved.

I look at the map I have laid out on my coffee table. 32nd and Fourthwall is about a 30-minute run. I begin pouring hot water through the coffee filter. The nutty aroma of coffee fills the room. All of a sudden, the world feels a little more colorful now.

As I scour through the map trying to find the best route, the bitter taste of my roast motivates me. I may be a fast runner, but I have to be sure not to be seen by anyone. That could risk ERC, which includes: Dr. G, Manager, the workers, and even worse, The Boss. I'm what's called "corporation property" and a valuable asset to the ERC, the lab/corporation I work for and live at.

I have my route and my coffee is finished. I grab my revolver that I left by the coffee table and head toward the restroom. I put on my coat, my fedora, my gun holster, my watch, and finally my lens. I look in the mirror and zoom into my face.

Every day I remind myself that I am not a person. I am a creation, an image of what a person looks like. The only difference? I have a camera attached to my face. Essentially, it is my eyes.

I made it to the place Manager wanted me to get to. It's an abandoned parking lot. What I hate most are ants. General says ants are the scum that causes the ERC problems and the reason why I have to work so hard. I hate having to take away a life, but I was taught that the life of an ant is worthless. So it's ok. I just know not to like ants...
...and to take care of them.

Usually, ants either run or fight back. Today was no different. My victim ran out of the building with a confidential file in his hand. He was such a pain to deal with. At least it's over now. Now all I have to do is write a report.

Report written by ZTE,

Today's Victim: Dr. Vladimir, a coworker of Dr. G.

Cause of death: a bullet to the head.

The subject was found with a file labeled "confidential"

After running out of the building, Dr. Vladimir was found with a gun wound in his arm in an alleyway near 52nd and Main Rd.

His final words were: "Ha, how ironic."

The contents of the file were, "Camera ZT Model E" and-

Wait a second. That's the camera on my head.

The subject was unwilling to comply with the procedure.

The camera was forced onto the subject.

Memory was wiped.

Report written by Dr. Gonzalez.

I'm alive...?