

Worthless

a short story
by Greg Egan

Yes, I'm complacent now, with my well enough paid job, with a wife I can almost talk to, with a three-year-old son all dark eyes and tousled hair and endearing clumsiness. We go driving on Sunday afternoons, through suburbs just like our own, past houses just like our own, an endlessly recurring, mesmerising daydream under the flawless blue sky. And I whistle an old song of yours, even if I never dare let the words past my lips:

There's nothing wrong with The Family
That a flame-thrower can't fix
And there's nothing wrong with the salt of the Earth
That couldn't be cured with a well-aimed BRICK

I switch on the radio (when I have a chance), I scan the stations (now and then), listening for an echo of your voice. Wondering if you've found a new incarnation. Wondering if I'd recognise it, if you had. Oh, some brain-dead bitch has stolen one of your best riffs, and chants meaningless drivel over the top of an endlessly cycling sample -- but my mind shuts her out, and my memory of you takes over:

Carve my name on your heart, forever
-- with the blunt end of a feather
You said, "I'll stay with you for a lifetime of pain
(just so long as it's over by morning)."

I know what they say, the revisionists, the explainers: you were a glitch, an aberration; a bug in the software, nothing more. People could never have truly wanted to hear your "maudlin" voice, your "mealy mouthed whining," your "smothering self pity."

I did.
I still dream about you, I swear. Do you blame me, if I can't hold on to my vision of you, lost on these dizzying sunlit plains, numb with contentment, the way I could when I was desperate, lonely, crippled? When I knew exactly who I was.

I still want you back. Badly. Sometimes.
But apparently not often, or badly, enough.

When they started making music straight from the Azciak Polls, everybody howled about the Death of Art -- as if the process was anything new, anything more than an efficient closure of what had been happening for years. Groups were already assembled on the basis of elaborate market research. The Azciak Probes were already revealing people's tastes in breakfast cereals, politicians, and rock stars. Why not scan the brains of the populace, discover precisely what music they'd be willing to pay for, and then manufacture it -- all in a single, streamlined process, with no human intervention required? From the probes buried in a random sample of twenty thousand representative skulls, to the construction of the virtual bands (down to mock biographies, and all the right birthmarks and tattoos), to the synthesis of photorealist computer-animated videos, accessible for a suitable fee ... the music industry had finally achieved its long-cherished goal: cutting out everyone but the middleman.

The system spewed out pap. People paid to hear it. Nothing had changed.
In 2008, I was sixteen years old, working in a fast-food franchise in Sydney's decaying red light district, scraping the fat off disassembled hamburger grillers with lukewarm water in the early hours of the morning. I lived alone, not quite starving on what I had left after paying the rent, too shy and misanthropic to take in a flatmate. Let alone a lover.

I was woken at four o'clock one Sunday afternoon, when the woman from Azciak called. I don't know what possessed me to let her in; usually I just waited in

silence for doorknockers to go away. She didn't look much older than I was, and her uniform wasn't all that different from mine -- but it fit a great deal better, and at least they didn't make her wear a fucking baseball cap.

I said, "Why should I let you put your shit inside my head?"

"So you can participate more fully in democracy." She'd been on a training course on the Gold Coast.

"Democracy is a placebo." I'd read graffiti in Darlinghurst.

"We'll pay you twenty dollars a week."

"Forget it."

"Hard currency: US dollars, yen, euros -- whatever you like."

I signed.

I spent a day in hospital; they didn't need to cut me open, but the scanning equipment they used, as they threaded the microelectrodes through the blood vessels of my brain, was bigger than my entire flat. Then, under local anaesthetic, they slipped the interface chip into a shallow incision at the back of my neck.

When the engineers arrived to plug their little black box into my phone, they discovered that I didn't have one, so they ended up paying for that, as well.

Once a day, the black box interrogated the chip ultrasonically, downloading whatever it had gleaned about my opinions in the preceding twenty-four hours, then passed the data on to the central computer.

Surprise: my contribution to the Azciak Polls didn't tip any geopolitical scales. The parliament of whores kept fawning to the Great Powers, cutting spending and raising prices whenever the IMF said jump, voting as required in the UN each time another Third World country had to be bombed into submission. I served Amazonian beef and Idaho potatoes to the cheerful, shaven-headed psychopaths from the USS Scheisskopf when they flooded Kings Cross on R & R, dressed in their pigeon-shit-speckled camouflage, looking for something to fuck that wasn't full of shrapnel, just for a change.

I was one of twenty thousand people whose every desire was accessed and analysed day by day, cross-tabulated and disseminated to the most powerful decision makers in the country.

And I knew that it made no difference at all.

Three Azciak creations were big, that year. I saw them all on the video jukebox which sat in the corner of the restaurant (and which lapsed into McPromotional mode when it wasn't playing requests -- a prospect which guaranteed a steady stream of customers more than willing to feed it their change.) Limboland sang about the transcendental power of rhythm; in their videos, they strode like giants over the urban wasteland, dispensing the stuff in the form of handfuls of rainbow-coloured glitter to the infinitely grateful mortals below, who at once stopped starving/shooting up/fighting each other, and took up robotic formation dancing instead. Echolalia sighed and moaned about the healing power of love, as she slithered across a surreal landscape of oiled naked skin, pausing between verses to suck, stroke or screw some convenient protuberance. MC Liberty ranted about a world united by ... unity. And good posture: all we had to do was walk tall.

One freezing, grey afternoon, woken by screaming in the flat downstairs, I lay in bed for an hour, staring up at the crumbling white plaster of the ceiling, convinced (for the thousandth time) that I was finally going insane.

There's only one problem with living alone: every thought rebounds off the walls of your skull, unanswered -- until the whole process of consciousness begins to seem like nothing so much as talking to yourself. As a child, I'd believed that God was constantly reading my mind -- which might sound crazy, but if it wasn't true, then who was this monologue for? Of course I had imaginary friends and lovers, of course I invented companions to "share" the endless conversation running through my head -- but sometimes that delusion broke down, and there was nothing to do but listen to my own rambling, and wonder how many pills it would take to shut me up for good.

I didn't even own a radio, but my neighbours were always more than generous with their own. And I heard you sing:

Don't you ever wonder
Who fills my empty bed?
Who keeps me cold in the darkest hour?
Who leaves the silence unbroken?
Don't you ever wonder
Whose heartbeat it is I don't hear?
Whose arms won't enfold me?
Who won't be beside me?
When life is unkind and unfair?
Won't you ever ASK ME
"Who's going to make tonight
The loneliest night of the year?"
Well, don't ask
You don't want to hear.
It's you.

My life was not transformed. I still wiped McVomit off the toilet floors every night, still fished the syringes out of the bowls (too buoyant to flush -- and if they weren't removed quickly, people reused them). I still stared at the couples walking hand in hand in front of me; still lingered behind them for a step or two, in the hope that something radiating out from their bodies would penetrate my own icy flesh.

But I bought myself a radio, and I waded through all the saccharine lies about peace and harmony, about strength and empowerment, waiting to hear you sing about my pathetic, irrelevant life. And I think you know how sweet it was, to hear just one voice of acceptance, just one voice of affirmation, just one voice -- at last -- that rang true for me.

And on those sleepless afternoons when I lay alone, creating myself out of nothing, treading water with words, my thoughts no longer came echoing back to me, proof of my insanity. I knew exactly who I was speaking to, now, in the conversation that defined me.

I was speaking to you.

"The Loneliest Night of the Year" came in at number six, with a bullet. Not bad, my friend. Half a dozen more hits soon followed, knocking your human competitors right out of the charts. The patronising arseholes now claim that this was all some kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, that people bought whatever the Azciak computers churned out, simply because they knew it "had to be" what they wanted -- even if, in fact, it wasn't. That's not what they said at the time, of course; their sycophantic paeans to your "freshness" and "candour" and "bleak audacity" ran for pages.

I saw "you" one night, on the jukebox screen -- rendered, plausibly enough, as four young men with guitars, bass, and drums. If I'd fed a dollar into the machine, I could have had a printout of their "life stories"; for five, an autographed portrait of the band, the signatures authentic and unique; for ten, the same with a dedication. I didn't, though. I watched them for a while; their expressions ranged from distraction to faint embarrassment -- the way some human musicians look, when they know that you know they're only miming.

So forgive me if I didn't buy the tacky merchandise -- but I saved up my Azciak payments and bought a second-hand CD player, and I hunted down a music shop which stocked your albums on "obsolete" disks, for a quarter of the price of the fashionable new ROMs.

Of course I thought I'd helped shape you. You sang about my life. I couldn't have written a bar of the music, a word of the lyrics, myself -- but I knew the computers could take care of those technical details. The wires in my head weren't there to extract any kind of talent; they were there to uncover my

deepest needs.

And they'd succeeded.

At the same time, I couldn't let myself believe that I'd somehow conjured you up on my own, because -- apart from the preposterous vanity of it -- if I had, then I was still doing nothing but talking to myself. In any case, surely one person, alone, could never have swayed the populist Azciak software. Among the twenty thousand participants in the poll, there had to be others -- hundreds, at least -- for whom your words rang true as they did for me.

I phoned the woman who'd signed me up. "Oh no, we couldn't possibly give you any names," she said. "All our data is strictly confidential."

At work, in a five-minute mid-shift break, I snuck into the manager's office and called another branch of the Azciak organisation. The voice that replied sounded human to me, but the icon flagging a sales simulacrum lit up.

"You want to buy a direct mailing list? What selection parameters did you have in mind?"

"What selection parameters are there?"

A menu appeared on the flatscreen of the phone:

- [1] Geographic
- [2] Socioeconomic
- [3] Ethnic
- [4] Aesthetic
- [5] Political
- [6] Emotional

I hesitated, then hit 6. The rest was easy enough; I just filled in the profile requirements as if I was describing myself.

The charge was one thousand dollars. I typed in the number of the French Fries purchasing account, and the list was downloaded into the phone. I copied it onto a floppy disk, then erased it from the memory.

You sang:

Here you are again
Caring about the wrong things, again
Everyone else makes mistakes, I know
But at least they make THE RIGHT ONES

Every day, I saw children half my age walking the streets of Kings Cross, surviving on food scraps, fighting each other for the privilege of selling themselves to the tourists. Every day, I read of the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people -- in famines, in civil wars, and the latest genocidal psychodramas, designed to bolster the delicate egos of the most powerful nations on Earth.

But I was powerless to change any of that. So I just closed my eyes and dreamt about love.

And a dream was all it would ever be. The truth was, I'd always known I was nothing, no one: an object in the shape of a human, not to be mistaken for the real thing.

The wonder of it was, I kept on existing, day after day, year after year. I woke every morning, and the whole bizarre joke -- the illusion of humanity -- still hadn't worn off. I had no choice but to eat and drink, to breathe, to shit, to earn money, to go through the motions -- but I always knew that to try to do anything more would have been ridiculous.

I had as much right to be loved as I had to sprout wings and fly.

I chose a name from the list, almost at random -- although when I saw that he lived in Adelaide, a twenty-hour bus ride away, I knew that was exactly what I'd wanted. Not that I'd have needed an excuse to keep my distance, if he'd lived next door. What would I have said to him? "I stole your name from a database. I know we have a lot in common. I'm an antisocial emotional cripple, a bisexual

virgin, a basket case. How about lunch? No? Dinner, then? Fuck that, let's go to bed."

His name was Ben, and I dreamt about him day and night -- conscious of, but undeterred by, the ludicrous nature of my obsession. I felt only slightly guilty for trespassing on his privacy; as long as he remained unaware of the fact, I'd done him no tangible harm. Besides, I didn't even know what he looked like, so when I pictured "him," tangled in the sheets beside me, it wasn't him at all. It was just another fantasy.

And yet. I could never quite forget that he was real -- and that he was, I knew, every bit as desperate and lonely as I was. I'd imagined a thousand lovers before, and I'd shamelessly stolen the faces of a thousand strangers -- without believing for a moment that I ever would meet, ever would speak to, ever would touch, the flesh-and-blood versions. It was unthinkable.

With Ben, it was not unthinkable.

Not quite.

And you sang:

Meet me on a dark street
Away from their laughter and lies
No, you don't want to see my ugly soul
But my hands can still keep you warm
Meet me on a quiet street
The only stranger in town
And we'll step behind the railway line
And see whose love is blind

Alone in my room, I listened, and dreamed, and told you my dreams. Did I dream about love because you sang about love, or was it the other way round? Did you sing to affirm my life, or did I live to affirm your songs?

I don't know. I still don't know.

My theft was discovered, of course, and it didn't take much investigating to find the culprit. My own name was on the stolen mailing list -- and when the keystroke timing signature for the phone call in question was compared with the staff cash register records, only one person matched.

The manager didn't press charges, he just sacked me on the spot. (My comrades cheered.) I walked all the way home, giddy with freedom, intoxicated by every breath of the cool night air, staring up at the lights of Market Street's unrentable skyscrapers as if I'd never seen them before in my life.

I told myself: I must have planned it this way all along; one small shock to the system, that's all I needed, to snap me out this trance, to wake me from this sleep I've called life.

As I walked, I sang:

You never have lived
And you never will live
Because you've never wanted to
But in my arms
And in my bed
We'll find a substitute

First thing in the morning, I hocked my ancient CD player, put everything I owned into a suitcase (the Azciak black box included), and bought a ticket for Adelaide.

The bus driver said he liked both kinds of music -- Country and Western -- and he sure hoped that we did, too. Those of us who hadn't brought protection went through hell; I'd never thought I'd find myself ready to kill for a Walkman. I still had your songs, though, etched into my memory, and the closer I drew to my destination, the more convinced I became that you were with me, guiding me. It didn't seem like such a strange idea; you had no body of your own, no senses of your own. Only the songs made you real, and if they were in my head, then so

were you.

Yes it's true, I travelled a thousand miles
Just to be beside you
And it's true, I gave up a "life" of my own
Just to follow your trail
And if all I've ever been, and all I've ever owned
Is no great price in your eyes
Won't you give me
One last smile
Before you walk away?

Farmland and bushland, forest and desert alike were all reduced to sepia by the bus's tinted windows -- and in the late afternoon the landscape was swallowed completely by the glare of sunlight on the scratched glass.

When night fell, the driver regaled us with a non-stop selection of Nashville's greatest lullabies. I gritted my teeth and stared out the window. With the reading lights on all around me, I could see nothing but my own reflection; just after midnight, though, the last of them went out, and I watched the grey starlit desert pass by.

Spending money like a dying man, I took a taxi across the awakening city. I was sick with fear -- but cushioned by a mixture of adrenaline and lack of sleep. Part of me knew that the whole journey, the whole idea, had been insane from the start, and wanted nothing more than to be back in my room, dissolving into a miasma of loneliness and sensory deprivation. But part of me argued, fearlessly: How do you know you won't be welcome? If a stranger travelled half-way across the country to your door, wouldn't you take him in?

The building was shabby, dilapidated, demoralising, and utterly familiar -- and in a way, that filled me with hope, as if the more we had in common, the more likely he was to understand why I was here. I grew numb as I climbed the stairs, my senses retreating into my skull even as my feet kept working. I'd felt the same way as a child, when I'd climbed to the top of the swimming pool's diving tower. (I'd turned around and climbed all the way down again.)

What would I do, when he opened the door? I'd planned to speak a line from one of your songs, but I still hadn't made a choice -- and by now, half your words had deserted me, and the rest seemed impossibly clumsy. If they were stilted even in my head, how would they sound on my lips?

When I reached the seventh floor, I didn't hesitate or retreat: I walked straight down the corridor -- and right past his door. What could I say to him? I couldn't tell the truth, or anything like it -- not straight away. I needed a pretext. I stood at the end of the corridor, frantically sifting clichés: Looking for some other tenant. Given the wrong address. Just moved in downstairs, and wondering if I could borrow ...

I couldn't do it. It made no difference how far I'd travelled, or how long I'd dreamt of this moment. I couldn't knock on that door.

If I ran into him, though, in the corridor, on the stairs ... if we struck up a conversation, I could tell him that I was new in town, searching for a place to stay. I'd come to this building to rent a room, but there'd been some mistake, it had already been taken ...

And he'd look me in the eye and say: I have plenty of room to spare. Let me show you.

It was half past seven in the morning. Ben worked in a music shop; I knew that much from the stolen data. He'd be on his way, soon enough. All I had to do was wait.

So I stood by the stairwell, swaying, dizzy with fear. I knew this was my only chance. If I failed, I'd vanish from the face of the Earth. If I failed, my loneliness would open up its jaws and swallow me. If I failed, I'd die.

I still don't know, to this day, what it was you wanted from us. Some kind of vicarious happiness? Some kind of second-hand love? Out of twenty thousand people, then, why did you choose the loneliest, the saddest; why did you choose

the ones with so little hope?

Unless in your heart, you knew that you were just like us. Just like me: a human-shaped object, nothing more. Not to be mistaken for the real thing. The door opened, and Ben stepped out. I was suddenly very calm. He didn't look threatening, or unapproachable. I'd been afraid that he might be impossibly -- unattainably -- handsome; he wasn't. I knew I could talk to him. Maybe it was my imagination, but I would have sworn that I could make out the faint scar on the back of his neck, proof that I'd come to the right place, proof that I'd found the right person.

He didn't look at me as he approached; he stared at the ground, just as I would have done. Desperate for guidance, I imagined myself in his place, imagined a friendly stranger trying to strike up a conversation. Then the fog cleared from my brain, and I knew exactly what I'd feel: suspicion, then disbelief ... and then sheer panic. At the first sign of the threat of human contact, I'd recoil. I'd flee.

I kept silent. He walked past me, down the stairs.

I found an unvandalised phone booth, took the black box from my suitcase, and plugged it in. It came alive at once, red lights flashing, dragging the overdue data out of my head in one long, silent scream.

Afterwards, I walked aimlessly, until I stumbled across a small café. There were no other customers; I sat there sipping coffee, staring at the jukebox in the corner. It was playing an ad for Pepsi, or the latest song from Radical Doubt; I couldn't tell which.

I put a coin in the slot, and then knelt beside the machine -- so close that the image on the screen became nothing but a blur of coloured light.

And you sang:

Dry your eyes
Don't be sad
You're worthless
Your tears mean nothing at all
If you live and you die
In a dream, in a lie
Who will ever be the wiser?
Close your eyes
Don't be sad
You're worthless
Your pain means nothing at all
Unseen and unknown
Alive but alone
Why end a life
That's no life at all?

You were right, of course. And I swallowed no pills; instead, I bought myself a map, walked out to the highway, and hitch-hiked all the way home.

That was your last song -- before the Azciak people fixed the glitch, corrected the aberration. The official story (from the PR release, to the torrent of instant "biographies", to the sleeve notes of the tasteful, black-lined, Memorial Collected Works boxed set): the lead singer of Worthless had overdosed on vodka and Nembutal, victim of a broken heart. I still have photos from the magazines of crowds of sobbing fans, carrying "your" picture aloft.

I never joined those tearful mobs. I never even mourned you in private. I don't know if you're still in there, somewhere; concealed, transformed, unrecognisable. It's not impossible, is it? (After all, would you recognise me?) And if you're not? If you really have gone forever?

Then here I am again. Caring about the wrong things, again.

And talking to myself.

© Greg Egan 1992, 1998

This story first appeared in the anthology *In Dreams*, edited by Kim Newman and Paul J McAuley, Gollancz, 1992.