

An Inquiry into the
Robot Suicides



© Peter da Cruz

On the escalation of hostilities between the animate and inanimate worlds

By the time the future came around, the neighborhood had changed. The old fellows were fading, keeping time under funereal grass, the survivors making endless pots of cardamom coffee under creaking wrist in dim shops and apartments. Newcomers claimed their abandoned landscapes. Young, callow to the austere old space, they packed in tightly to suit their poverty. On summer days they gathered under fresh bodega awnings, which fanned out like yellow umbrellas to protect them from rain and direct sun. In wintertime they huddled round cars with custom installed speakers, drinking rum from paper cups. And everywhere they marked their paths with emptied liquor bottles and wispy clouds of smoke.

It was not that Old Ioann and the mainstays in his barbershop resented them. But they resented the loss of their gilded old days, and pitied the newcomers their gaudiness and hubris. So in the barbershop they talked about the old times, improvising little paeans to their sacred events, wondering what happened to so-and-so, hymning over cloudy cups of ouzo as their numbers leaned. But they also made time to advise the newcomers on matters economic and philosophical, a good deed that lent their bitterness to change a gloss of paternalism. It was in this climate Old Ioann to hire Castillo as a floor sweeper.

Castillo came in six days a week. He was young, untested, useless. But he knew it so he worked hard. He swept countless tufts of greyed hair into insatiable little dustbins for a full year before daring to engage in the old timers' repartee. He kept his ears open and absorbed: how to properly shake a man's hand; how to boil coffee in the little aluminum pot without burning the grit; how to avoid a pyramid scheme; how to watch the news while tuning out the newscasters. These were challenging lessons for a newcomer, written in a foreign tongue. But he learned them. Soon he had endeared himself upon the clientele, and Ioann groomed him for a barber position.

Now cutting hair was no fool's trade, as anyone who'd witnessed Ioann's handicraft could attest. His gnarled hands were fluid and masterly as he chiselled out the fur. He used archaic tools to shave beards, curl mustachios, hide bald spots, trim nose hair, prune back hair, uproot finger hair, massage scalps with aplomb. He may have been the last practitioner of these and greater arts. At least, the last practitioner in the neighborhood. For the newcomers, using electric clippers, could hardly call what they did proper barbering. So it was that the lingering ruin of a past age that was Ioann's shop ensealed its owner as its sacred apparatus. And being rare, statesmanly, illustrious, the old timers often wondered whether Castillo was Ioann's capable heir.

Castillo was cutting the knife grinder's hair when the conversation turned to robots. "There's a satellite that guides this thing around," said the knife grinder. "And if you have a subscribe to the service, or you just ring it on the phone, then it comes to your house and does your silverware. It takes them into a feeder tube and sucks them in, like a vacuum cleaner. And when it spits them out the other end it makes a little ping sound, and they're sharper and shinier than when you bought them. It's masterful. An old guy can't compete. People only hire me for charity these days."

"It's a husk of tin," said Old Ioann, standing over an adjacent client with a steamed towel.

"Ought to be illegal," Castillo scorned. "Who trusts a robot pooping knives out all over the place?"

"It's not just knife grinders either," warned Ioann, plying the knife grinder's misery with company. "Will you believe Castillo met a robot in Konstantinou's bar yesterday? It guzzled electricity from the wall and bought everyone rounds, flashing money all over. Then it said it earned the money cutting hair."

"It was a real big talker," added Castillo. "Cocky thing."

"I don't like tin cans," scoffed another client, the wicker whittler. He waved a hand through the air as if to cut the whole lot of them down.

Now in the corner sat a very old man, far older than Ioann. They called him Professor, though it wasn't clear if he had ever been one. A stony, intense old fellow, he curled up in his waiting chair. His cloudy grey eyes, wreathed by two last tufts of white hair that spired from an otherwise bald head, held the whole shop for a moment in the wall mirror. "Well they don't like us either," the Professor announced. "There's a war on, you see, a war between us people and the inanimates. It's subtle, nearly invisible, but keep your eyes open and you'll start to notice its boundaries and skirmishes. Certain natural disasters, power outages, mechanical failures - those are their offensives. Now you watch the traffic light, the elevator, the great platelets of the earth - how far can you trust them? How long did Thera restrain herself before the old ones were embalmed in Lava? The earth has brooded, suffered, hatched rebellions for millennia. It used to be here by itself, you see, all rocks and loam, gases and water. Fully inanimate. Then we intruded, gathering its precious elements inside ourselves, water and acids and minerals, stitching them into tiny seams of protein. We stitched ourselves little pseudopods, then scales and gills, then lungs, then spines! We piled little huts to house us, distracted rivers, drilled our wells. But never content, our successes only fed our ambitions. Soon we'd lost all humility, and perverted things. We leveled mountains down, split plains and woodlands with our roadways, raised our teetering cities hither and yon, hollowed mines out, built microwave ovens and rooted out rare earths, celebrated all our vile taxidermies, never thinking these offended the inanimates at all. But each was a glove-slap in the face, you see, though less courtly. More like a mad prince's declaration of war. Any wonder the inanimate world holds us in enmity? Have you felt it yet? Have you gone up high, to the roof of a skyscraper, and looked down? Have you felt that strange tug down to the earth? The one that makes you nervous? The intrusive suspicion you were going to fall? That's the call of the inanimates. They speak in hushed tones, suggestions of thoughts and intimations. Yes, the inanimate world's developed subtle ways of counter-attacking."

"I thought that was called gravity," The chimney sweep interjected.

"Aye, laugh now," continued the old professor, tightening his sinewy fingers over the arm of the waiting chair. "But when we make robots of inanimate things, they carry the enmity of the world inside."

A dull silence hung, breeched only when the Professor began to cough sourly.

"Well I don't know about enmity, but this robot sure liked to brag," digressed Castillo. "When I told it - or *him* - that I cut hair too, he insisted he could cut hair faster than me. Faster and better than any human barber, he insisted."

Castillo positioned a hand mirror to capture the precise trim on the knife grinder's nape. Then, turning his wrist, he bounced the image to the wall mirror, where it met a placid nod of gratitude. The Professor rose, still mumbling of the enmity of the inanimate world, and went out into the street. There he lit a cigarette, kicked some pigeons away, and brooded under calm white clouds.

On the competition between the barber and the robot

The Professor, being outside, saw it first, sauntering cheerlessly into view. Though humanoid, its knees were inverted like the hind legs of a gazelle. Its torso was slim. Its arms were long. And its head was a large, enclosed mainframe with an LCD screen for a face, bristling with retractable pinhole cameras. The Professor rubbed his eyes, but the robot remained in view. He flicked a cigarette away and retreated to the storefront where he knocked upon the glass. The clients turned, then stared. The robot, failing to notice their awed attention, dragged its feet glumly along.

“That’s him!” Castillo called. “The robot I was telling you about!”

“Why is he sulking like that?” wondered the pipe fitter.

The robot was shambling morbidly, kicking each beer bottle he passed with a despairing swoop of his inverted shin. When he’d kicked them all away he doubled back to stare into some dumpsters awhile. Then he perched on the stoop and listlessly watched a mail truck pass.

Castillo, declaring his sympathy, went out to greet the robot. The others watched him through the storefront window. They saw him approach and pat the robot on the shoulder, as one would a child, talk to him, encourage him to get up. When he did, the old clients began to murmur, drawing on their pipes and cigars. And soon their suspicions were confirmed: Castillo was ushering the robot toward the shop. This didn’t sit well at all with the old fellows. When the robot entered everyone was icy. Only Ioann and the Professor managed gestures, a pair of wooden nods.

“Hey guys,” Castillo offered through a pacifying smile. “This is Lambda Seven. The robot from the bar.”

“Greetings, humans,” the robot greeted. His voice was tinny, rigid and computerly. It held no affect, no lilt, none of the resonance of vocal cords. The old fellows gazed back impassively. When the robot finally added: “Just kidding,” his voice was human, markedly youthful, even flippant.

“Hi, I’m Lambda Seven. Good to met you,” he continued. Whirring sounds emerged as the robot’s neck turned to survey the barbershop. Simple polygons in primary colors drifted about the LCD monitor comprising its face. This changed abruptly to the feed from one of the robot’s frontal cameras. This meant the clients met their own cold stares in a mirror unexpectedly, which doubled their discomfort. Then the display shifted to a rear camera, which caught the barber pole listing idly through the storefront window.

“Nice to meet you too,” Ioann replied uncomfortably, finally looking up from the roof tiler’s hair before him. The clients, following Ioann’s lead, finally nodded and doffed caps grudgingly to the robot.

"Sorry if the mirrorface scared you." The robot sounded sincere. "I'll have to reprioritize my human interaction scripts." Lambda Seven looked around the shop again, noted the crowd was made no more at ease by the apology, then added: "Actually, I'd better be going."

No one stopped him. He didn't leave. He took a waiting chair between the tailor and the tinsmith.

Time passed in laboring silence, punctuated by the intervallic bleating of a loading truck as it backed up to restock the corner bodega. Ioann resumed cutting the roof tiler's hair. Castillo sprayed some disinfectant on a pair of shears. As the robot settled into the waiting chair, his head sunk slowly to the snippet-strewn floor. The tinsmith shuffled about and the tailor folded and unfolded his legs ceaselessly. Unable to endure the awkward tension, Ioann addressed the robot: "Castillo says you cut hair."

"I do," the robot replied, reaching around his back as if to pull an arrow from a sheaf. "That's what I was made for, anyway." Lambda Seven pulled an AC cord from his back, unwinding it from a spool concealed somewhere behind two metal plates in his steel spine. "Mind if I plug in?"

Ioann nodded. Lambda Seven plugged into an electrical outlet behind the chair. His LCD face now displayed a digital electric gauge. His batteries were at sixty four percent capacity and charging.

"I was the seventh prototype of an autonomous barber machine," Lambda Seven explained, visibly soothed by the electricity flowing through his conductors. The more he relaxed, the more his voice fluttered with the squeaky intonations of a human adolescent.

"Then there are six more of you?" Castillo asked, watching the robot in the mirror.

"More than that. There were the initial six that I obsoleted. Then I was obsoleted by Lambda Eight, who ran on clean-burning ethanol, and he was obsoleted by Lambda Nine, who was solar-powered and four point eight times more precise. But we all have the same basic grooming mechanics and object recognition delineators, going back to Lambda Four."

The power gauge on Lambda Seven's face now read seventy eight percent. The LCD monitor took on a rosy glow. The robot, allowed the pleasure of talking about himself, lectured a while on his firmware specifications. Then he talked shop, descanting on root torsion and precision excising techniques. The prattle continued until the gauge reached eighty five percent, at which point his screen glazed over. There was a dimmed warmth to the display now, a new blariness. Somewhere in the nineties, the robot started talking again, this time offering a mess of tangents and asides, his speech slurred. Soon his power gauge reached a red 'overcharged' area. A warning signal beeped through a pair of mini-speakers on his sides. One could smell lithium ion polymer steaming. Castillo asked if he was alright, but the robot insisted it "happened all the time."

When the fish twister's turn for a haircut came, he took the chair with appropriate ritual. Castillo wrapped the towel around his neck as Ioann disinfected his shears. And the haircut had barely begun when Lambda Seven piped in, advising Old Ioann to adjust his shear hand twenty three

degrees counter-clockwise. This, the robot insisted, would compensate for follicle elasticity. Yet his batteries were now so overcharged that his slurred words resembled gibberish muffled in cheesecloth.

It had been decades since anyone corrected Old Ioann's barbering technique. Indeed, it had been so long since anyone corrected the master that the master required a moment to recognize that it had happened. The clients stirred about, abashed. No one dared speak a word. Ioann offered a dignified response: an impassive shrug. The clients slouched back into their seats, their abashment mostly sated. Then the robot changed the display on his face. Suddenly the fish twister's head appeared, enmeshed within a network of orange analytic lines. The digital analytics showed mathematically that the fish twister's haircut deviated from symmetry by a full percent.

This was when Old Ioann lost composure. His hands choked tightly on the shears. "If you cut hair so much better," the barber challenged, "let's see you try!"

The robot blushed drunkenly, his screen pixellating in pink blotches. "I couldn't," he returned.

"Don't be coy," the box bender said roughly. And the clients all agreed, egging the robot to earn the right to his condescension. That or his due comeuppance, which would only please them the greater.

"One hour, we cut hair!" Ioann insisted.

Left no real choice in the matter, the robot rose and welcomed the next client, the fiber grinder, to a chair. The fiber grinder was reluctant, but overcame when Ioann offered him the cut for free, and promised to fix the job if the robot botched it. Lambda Seven recoiled his charge cord, then drew a comb and shears from a hidden compartment in his thigh. Disinfectant spray emanated from a tiny nozzle where a human's navel would have been. A towel popped out of a cabinet in his chest, a sudden nozzle steaming it hot. And the robot stood prompt at attention, awaiting orders.

"Um, part on the left," the fiber grinder said nervously. Castillo marked the time and the competition began.

A mad spectacle of blades danced along the teeth of the robot's combs as he began to cut. Bursts of mist arose, clouds of talcum powder, sudden flashes of razor blades, little brushes with ball-ended needles, hatching from unlisted compartments in the robot's frame. Whirring, chirping sounds erupted from his motors like bees and hummingbirds. "...but this is crude anthropocentric human exceptionalism," the robot lectured semi-drunkenly, midway through the fiber grinder's hair. "The proud hope that a synthetic intelligence can't replicate, or surpass, human consciousness is predicated on superstitious belief in a 'soul.' But this is a vaguely defined term. Perhaps a 'soul' can't be constructed of ones and zeros, but that's only because it's not even necessarily a real thing. If we disregard it, trading ancient mysticism for sober analysis, then humanity lies purely in consciousness. And consciousness is not beyond the reach of binary architecture..."

While waxing philosophic, the robot's myriad tools continued with speed and articulation. The clients watched in awed suspense. Onlookers gathered by the storefront and watched from the street. All were enthralled as the robot sprouted and retracted his array. A sudden flurry of mousses, waxes, balms, pomades, and gels polished the job. Lambda Seven switched his display to the frontal optic feed, mimicking a hand mirror, revealing to the fiber grinder a head of immaculately styled hair. The part sat with elegance and gravitas on the left, the sideburns were culled with absolute symmetry, the hairline and cheeks shaven without slightest irritation. The fiber grinder rose and marveled at his haircut in the mirror. Then he took a bow in the full width of the same mirror, said satisfied goodbyes to each and everyone, put his hat on, and went home.

The robot jetted a stream of air from an opening at his heel, and all the fiber grinder's shorn hair was blown into a tidy pile at the back of the shop. He then welcomed the next client, the glass gluer, and cut his hair just as well, and then the pylon tuner, and one client after another, each served immaculate and visionary haircuts with with sheer synthetic grace. Even the stodgiest old clients offered their coiffures to the robot, with modest promises they did so for the sake of competition.

On his side of the shop, Ioann struggled valiantly to keep apace. He snipped and combed with usual ardor, greeting his clients ceremonially, steering through the old chitchat and banter. He heard them out about all sorts of things, dispensed his customary nuggets of advice like cups of tea. A few stories from the old days were recalled, coffee was served with blotchy sugar stirred into little mugs. And measured for quantity or quality, Old Ioann could not even approach the robot.

Several clients ahead, the robot returned to the wall outlet and charged himself absently as time dwindled away.

"Now we see who is the better barber," Ioann stated proudly as the clock wound down.

"Eleven to five," Lambda Seven said. His synthetic voice glowed with inebriated vigor.

"I did not say 'who cut more hair?'" Ioann corrected sternly. "I said 'who is the better barber?'"

"Ioann!" the bed mender shouted.

"Ioann is the better barber," the green grocer agreed. A steady murmur arose, an insistent unanimity that Ioann was the better barber.

"Ioann! Ioann!" the clients chanted in victory. Lambda Seven watched in disbelief. He had cut more hair with time to spare, made no mistakes, practiced extreme care, artistic restraint, and digital precision. He'd left Ioann in his wake the second the shears began to snip. And the more the old guard chanted their barber's name, the more Lambda Seven's confusion gave way to a brute depression, the same heavy and inexorable sadness he had toted all the way up the hill to the shop, and up so many hills before. His screen dove as rainy grey pixels flitted through, unnoticed.

Only an old furniture fixer remembered the robot. He told him: "You are very good at cutting hair. But that does not make you a better barber. Ioann is still better because he talks to us. When he cuts our hair we leave here looking better, but also feeling better. He's like a priest, a clown, an uncle." The robot stared back, its rash of facial pixels awash in confusion and despair.

The psychologist's testimony to the corporate investigator

"We weren't trying to create synthetic intelligence back then," the psychologist told the corporate investigator. "More like reflections. We wanted reflections of basic desires. That's how we thought about our project. Everybody wants a lover. Everybody wants a friend. So if we could make that for them, make something they could really project that desire onto, something that would hold it in a sustained way, then we were onto something real."

The corporate investigator took notes in a writing pad as the psychologist continued. A small digital camera, atop a mini-tripod planted like an insect on the desk, recorded the interview for the archives.

"Back then the balloon was the thing," the psychologist said. "The balloon itself. No add-ons. We thought about built-in speakers, embedded transistor radios, little tape playback devices, of course. But nothing approaching intelligence. Ultimately, Escrow and I opted against all that because the balloons held the projection better without them. Think about it. A child has a vague idea of what he wants. The key here is its vagueness. A vague object of longing satisfies more unconscious desire than a detailed one. The more detailed the object, the more the desire multiplies, chasing all the variations and sufficiencies of the details. In your terms, the vague idea of a wife probably suits you better than a detailed wife, with all her shortcomings and annoyances and needs and idiosyncrasies. The same with kids who look for meaningful relationships with toys. So in order for the projection of their desire to graft onto the balloon, we had to avoid over-specification. Past a certain point of specification, the balloon and the desire deviate.

"Now, especially once a balloon starts talking to you, the chances are very low that the things it says will correspond to your innate desires. This is because humans do subscribe to a universal subconscious, but they nevertheless spend their whole lives particularizing it. A kid looking for a mom is not the same as a kid looking for a girlfriend. One hopes, anyway. I mean, unless psychology has something to say about it..." - here the psychologist grinned directly into the camera - "...but anyway, can you imagine them getting the same toy, with the same personality? A pair of speakers hashing through the same tired lines? One or both will be unsatisfied, you see. So we could have made mothers and fathers and girlfriends and so on, a hundred different types of balloons, but something fascinating happened in the attachment formation research. We saw right away that the children filled the gap between desire and balloon using their own imaginative play. Such was their imaginative power, and their faith in its transferential capacity, that all we had to do was provide a vague template and the kid would do the dirty work of ascribing personality, history, soul. None of our smiths and technicians could match the kids in this regard. So if we let the child's projection, guided by his imaginative work, lead the pairing and the attachment formation, then the balloons could meet any desire, any half-recognized longing.

"Our designs were drawn from simple archetypes embedded in the universal subconscious. It wasn't really about the overt form. A dog is a dog, a clown is a clown, who cares? It was about the latent capacity to harbor a projected soul inside. The sanguine expressions, the enlarged heads - all drawn from a child's idealized universe. We made it real for them. We turned old

underfunded orphanages into balloon gardens where dreams took form. And yes, what happened happened. And as the kids got older - well, you're not interested in that. But I'll tell you we don't feel bad about what we did. You should have seen those children back then, in the early days when it was innocent. Yes, back at the time...

"Well the point is I don't know why the robots started committing suicide. We weren't working with them. We had a balloon that got blown away, that's all. Nothing like a robot. Nothing like a suicide."

On the institutionalization of the robot

“That robot’s in a sorry state now,” Castillo remarked, hoisting up the security gate the following morning. He and Ioann had come in early to prepare the shop for business. “He was down at Konstantinou’s all night, guzzling energy like there was no tomorrow. He hardly spoke to anyone, just sat there sucking up electric. The Professor was there too, talking about the enmity of the inanimate world. Some of the other guys got whipped up, said they shouldn’t have to apologize for perverting the natural world, that making tools and monuments was a compulsion of the intellect, and they didn’t make the intellect, just inherited it, so why should they have to pay for its excesses? Then they said Lambda was an inanimate spy plotting our next natural disaster.

The robot tried to defend himself in the beginning, but didn’t have the will. He kinda just gave up on arguing and knocked back some more watts. He let those guys basically blame him for everything in the world. It was awful. And he kept turning up the voltage on his power feed until he overheated and the whole place smelled like burning lithium. His resistors were fuming, and he’d made a public mess of himself. Konstantinou hauled him out to the alley until he cooled down.”

“That robot really is depressed,” Ioann diagnosed.

“Well he’s got good reason though, I hear.”

“What do you mean?”

Castillo’s eyes sharpened with intrigue. “The wax welder knows all about that robot,” he conferred in a near-whisper. “Yeah, like nine months ago he had a job at the same lab where they made Lambda Seven. He was there for six weeks, and he met Lammy a few times. He said back then Lambda Seven was the cock of the walk, top model. But as soon as the new model was up and running, the designers took him out to the alley behind the research and development clinic, and told him to stay there. Garbage men wouldn’t haul him out without a tip, you know, ‘cause he was heavy. So he just sat there for weeks and never moved, even in the rain. He wouldn’t charge, and his batteries nearly died. I think somebody must have called the police eventually, because they came to the alley and asked him all these questions, but he wouldn’t talk. He just kind of beeped sometimes. The cops made him charge his batteries, and when they got some energy into him he left and started wandering the area, drifting through the neighborhood and staring into barbershops.”

“That’s terrible,” Ioann sighed, his face tightening to genuine worry.

“Well imagine how you would feel, the moment when you realized that you were too old, that you weren’t useful anymore, that you didn’t matter. And that’s not all,” Castillo went on, “You remember that robot he was talking about, the model that obsoleted him, the Lambda Eight model?”

“Yes?”

“Well, eventually Eight was obsoleted by Lambda Nine. And get this...” Castillo’s face was stony as he came to Lambda Nine. “When Lambda Nine was developed, Lambda Eight took it real bad. According to the wax welder, who heard it from an investigator at the robot corporation, Eight deleted all backup files of his memory in the main database and that was it. He waded out into the River, purged his memory bank, and tore out all his wiring in the water.”

“Sheesh,” Ioann exclaimed, shaking his head.

“Others have worse stories,” Castillo continued. “Some of the older Lambdas, the ones who first attempted it, didn’t know they had to delete backup memory files. So the company would reboot them, sometimes in barber robots, sometimes in simple desktop computers. They would start asking all kinds of questions about where they were, if they were still the same robot or a new robot, what their memories meant in relation to their core programming in terms of making them who they are. One of them hacked into the central power supply to the warehouse and overloaded it, destroying several storage houses full of his clones in a huge electrical fire. Another one they rebooted inside an upgraded machine, thinking they were doing him a favor. He snipped his scissors around wildly when they turned him on, said something about not feeling like himself, then when silent. The next day they found him turned off, and they couldn’t reboot him. It turned out he’d hacked into the central database and planted a virus that destroyed anything resembling his core scripts. They never defeated the virus, never rebuilt that model.”

“These are terrible stories,” Ioann intoned. “Who’s with our robot now?”

Castillo sighed heavily. “Well, that’s the thing. You remember the window washer’s wife?”

“The strawberry face?” Ioann asked. He said that because she had freckles all around her nose.

“She’s a grief counselor at the hospital,” Castillo said hushedly, as if the whole matter were shameful. “The window washer called her from the bar and she came in. She talked to Lambda Seven in the alley for a while. She won’t say what he told her. But an ambulance came to the bar. It took him to some kind of ward. He’s there now, on a stabilized DC feed.”

A couple hours later they found Lambda Seven lying in a cot in a special wing of the hospital, designated for suicide watch. He was in a blue robe that was untied at the back, sitting still upon his dingy, recycled mattress, his monitor holding a grainy field of white noise. A cable in his forearm connected his batteries to a low RPM permanent magnet DC generator with a regulated output.

Konstantinou was there beside the robot, in a green plastic visitors’ chair, shuffling his feet over the sterile linoleum. He wore his customary white button-down, through every opening of which sprouted his thick black chest and arm hair. He greeted Ioann and Castillo with the usual jibes, discussed work, proffered the customary jokes and anecdotes. The robot remained listless and unresponsive.

It was Castillo who addressed the robot first. "Hey Lambda Seven, how are you?" he asked. An affected casualness came through in his voice and manner. The robot offered no reply. He turned his neck a little and the percolating snow on his monitor darkened. A long silence followed.

"He's been through a lot," Konstaninou said with genuine sympathy. Castillo and Ioann nodded in agreement. They decided to try and find something on the wall mounted television, but the bartender warned that the reception was awful. Finally they gave up on distracting themselves, got their own green plastic chairs, and formed a solemn semi-circle around the robot's bed.

"You think I'm going to kill myself?" the robot asked them.

No one dared reply. More silence passed.

"It's not easy for a robot to kill himself," Lambda Seven explained. He was speaking slowly and timidly, a far cry from the cocky robot who'd plumed his blades in the barber shop. "When you kill your body everything dies. With me, the body is just a vehicle for the CPU and the memory, which exist everywhere."

The robot paused for a long while before he continued. "You might think your body's just a shell, but I know that mine is. And the core me - well, they've got all kinds of inhibitors on it. All kinds of buried code and overrides. So I call it the core me, but I don't know it all that well myself. I don't know what would happen if I tried to kill myself. I don't know what's programmed into me at that level, I mean, if I tried to do that. And I don't know how Eight managed to do it. He must have rummaged around deep in his own programming, tried to kill himself and failed, then cloned and deprogrammed and reprogrammed himself and tried to kill himself again a million times. The more I wondered how he did it, the more I realized it must have required a brutal series of operations, a terrified and sustained act of dissociation and violence. I can't imagine..."

The robot slouched on the hospital cot, flaccid and saturnine. When Castillo smacked his back to cheer him up, he seemed to sway like a sheaf of grain in the wind. Grim silence fell over the hospital room as Castillo's venture failed. The old fellows milled their feet about. The newcomer smiled vacantly. The robot idled on suicide watch. "For me to do what he did," the robot finally resumed, "would take a lot. I don't know if I've ever had that much of anything in me. I'm sure I'd find a way to mess it up, fail utterly, quit, humiliate myself, end up hating myself more. Just like I did at your shop yesterday. That's why I never attempted suicide. I'd just find a way to botch the job. You see, every time I get it together to make a plan and give it my level best, that's what happens."

"Well, at least you know how to make God laugh," Ioann responded. It was an opening to the oldest joke he knew. All his old clients knew it too. All the straw shakers and brick tossers and wheel wrappers knew it, as did the bottle bearers and ring rounders and ceiling smoothers and lathe layers. Konstantinou nodded knowingly. Castillo only shrugged.

"Make a plan," the old barber revealed. "Man plans and God laughs. Plans are like stand-up comedy to that old ball-buster. When I was your age I had the biggest plans any dumb stiff ever

made. That old goat must have laughed his beard off. It rained God's beard hairs back then. Damn nut-kicker..."

Konstaninou laughed and nodded. After a while, Castillo chuckled too. "Least you can make God laugh, I guess," affirmed the newcomer. "That's got to be a comfort, in the scheme of things."

"I ever tell you the clown story, Castillo?" called Konstantinou. The bartender's voice was rough and jocular. When he spoke his whole body rose and fell with the cadences of his voice. Castillo shrugged. He hadn't heard the story.

Konstantinou cleared his throat and began. "Well one of the guys down at the bar started drinking heavily, real heavily. I had to take his keys a couple times. Finally he apologized to me, told me he's been depressed. I told the guy: 'Go home and spend time with your family, get back to what's important.' The guy came back a week later. I asked him how it went. 'Well, my wife and I married young. Now we're different people and there's no love or understanding there. And the kids are so entitled. Whatever I do they take for granted. They're selfish and angry all the time. That's why I come drinking here, Konstantinou, to get away from them. You've gotta help me.'

"I told the guy: 'Maybe it's time you saw the father, see what he has to say.' The guy came back the next week complaining. 'Oh, the father lectured and pontificated about what happens when you die. Do bad and you get punished. Do good and you get rewarded in Heaven. But I heard all that already. I grew up with that. And still I'm wondering, what about now? What in the hell makes people happy now? What makes all this worth it? I don't want to have to die before life is worthwhile.'

"This time I told the guy: 'Take everything you have in the bank and go on a cruise. Cut loose, like a bat outta hell. Sometimes you gotta go wild to feel the blood in your veins. So go and do it. His is your day. Drink, sleep around, live it up.' The guy came back in a couple weeks and said: 'Life is so empty. Everyone stood around on that boat pretending to be happy. We paid for destructive pleasures to distract ourselves: liquor, jacuzzis, prostitutes. But we woke up in the morning and the emptiness was there, worse than before, bearing down on us like a drill. What does it all mean?'

"Now I told the guy: 'Go see a shrink. He'll know what to do. Maybe you've got some baggage you've been lugging around. Maybe you can't carry that weight anymore.' The guy agreed. But again he came back whining. 'The shrink made me talk about my parents, and stuff that happened forty years ago, and how I felt when my mom cheated on my dad with the iron filer. But what's it worth now? By the time I process my entire past I'll be dead. Then he handed me a bill. What a racket!'

"Finally I said to the guy: 'Alright. That's it. You're going downtown and you're buying a ticket to see a performer called Nicodemus the Clown. People come into the bar all the time, telling me their problems. When nothing else works for them I send them to see Nicodemus perform. They always come back smiling. Religion, headshrinking, carnival cruises, those aren't sureshots, but Nicodemus is the genuine article. I've even gone to see him myself, when my mother died, and

it put the whole thing in perspective. I vouch for this clown. Now you go see Nicodemus and tell me what it did for you.'

"The guy went pale all at once. His face fell flat on the bar. I could hear him weep. Total despair had taken him. I asked the guy what was wrong. He looked up and said: 'I am Nicodemus the Clown.'"

Lambda Seven stared blankly at the bartender, whose hairy chest and forearms vibrated in delighted concatenations while he laughed. Ioann chuckled too, having heard it before. But he loved watching people hear it for the first time. Castillo laughed too, a laughter that escalated into irregular, exalted giggles. "My papi used to tell me you gotta laugh," Castillo added, "even when the joke is on you."

"Especially when the joke is on you," corrected Konstantinou with a wink.

"This modern world is full of hubris," stated Ioann. "You young people take everything so seriously, but always in the wrong way. You robots do it too. You can't just go around thinking you have life figured out and when it doesn't work out that way you kill yourself every time. You know how many times I would've been dead by now? You have to accept that life's gonna kick you around a little, sometimes a lot! But it's teaching you humility, and that gives you a chance. So you aren't the newest robot anymore. So it didn't work out that way. So what? You went and got all jealous of the next robot. But look at him, even he got jealous of the next-next robot, and even went and tore his mainframe out over it. Doesn't that teach you anything? The people you envy have envies too. No one's ever happy when they measure themselves like that. So something lousy happened. Fine. But once you throw in jealousy and self doubt, kid you've opened the box."

"Box?" Castillo asked.

"He's talking about Pandora's box," the robot explained. "It's an old myth. She lived in a perfect world, but she wasn't supposed to open this one box. And when she opened it anyway, all the evil things in the world flew out."

"Not *all*," insisted Konstantinou. "That's how they teach it to you?"

The robot looked at Ioann, who shook his head disapprovingly. "By the time she realized what was happening," the master barber corrected, "Pandora reached out just in time to grab the last, most evil one. And holding it tight in her fists, she vowed that she would never let go."

Castillo and the robot watched the old barber in anticipation. "The last evil," he told at last, "was hope."

The robot regarded Ioann silently through his frontal pinhole cameras. "See that?" Ioann prodded. "They don't even teach the old stories right anymore."

And while they were laughing, buried in the snow on the robot's monitor, Ioann, Konstantinou, and Castillo could dimly make out the image of young Lambda Seven trimming plastic wigs on test-dummies in the corporate research and development wing. The robot's myriad blades

snipped away, motors whirring, scented pomades slacking sheen on silicone heads. Proud scientists encircled him like buoys on a line, jotting sterling data on their legal pads, gay as the day.

Cogitations of the old professor upon the Boundary War

The world was different now, the professor reasoned from his waiting chair. He had refused to be filmed for the interview, saying he didn't trust cameras, and refused to be interviewed anywhere but that one particular chair in that one particular barber shop. The boundary between the animate and inanimate worlds was blurring, fading, he explained, the investigator racing to scribble it all down. People, machines, plants, animals, and substances from each side made steady inroads into the other. With such a bleary distinction upholding the rudiments of existence, the old calculations lost count, old definitions unwound, primordial understandings shared by man, book, and beast declined into emptied taxonomies.

It wasn't clear who'd breached the boundary first. On the animate side, there were mystics and religious leaders whose traditions assigned will, desire, and consciousness to objects like rivers, mountains, and wind. Later, the animates had scientists who tinkered with the nature of inert substances in fundamental ways: surging electricity through them; colliding their smallest fibers in hyper-accelerators at near light speed; implanting tiny switches that calculated events and potentialities and soon had looked up and beheld the world and found in it their own reflection. Baffled for the first, these trembling inanimates witnessed their own curiosity looping back on itself.

Now the inanimates had been long slumbering, faintly wondering in their dreams where they had come from and who had made them. Some claimed their early, resinous dreams had bonded to each other and formed the double helix from which the animates derive. If true, then this clearly marked the first boundary violation, but one in which the violators were not acting as aggressors so much as wanderers, wayfarers whose trespasses made them witless parents to a world far greater in ambition, mobility, and sentience than themselves. And countless millennia later, when the animates began fiddling with them, this heightened their dreams and quickened their mute pulse. Like children curing their parents' blindness, the animates drew them into varying states of awareness, consciousness, sentience. Now it was common to encounter a thinking machine, a philosophy generator, a digital tutor, an analog autodidact, a philosophy engine.

The old professor extinguished what remained of his cigarette. Behind him, Ioann's barber pole spun impassively before the storefront. Wind swept through the streets, tossing up newspaper pages, candy wrappers, cigarette butts. Framed inside the comely glass pane that demarcated his shop, Ioann trimmed hair. Castillo swept up after him. Lambda Seven cleaned the blotches off the wall mirror. Trying to add up all he'd heard, the investigator thought back to the balloons the psychologist told him about: alluring, resilient, inflated silk forms drawn shambling like newborn calves from the universal subconscious. New, unlearned, callow, yet innately capable of flight. The Professor, meanwhile, sat resolutely in his waiting chair, reciting Tennyson:

*Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.*