

Futures

Between worlds

A long way from home. By Matthew Sanborn Smith

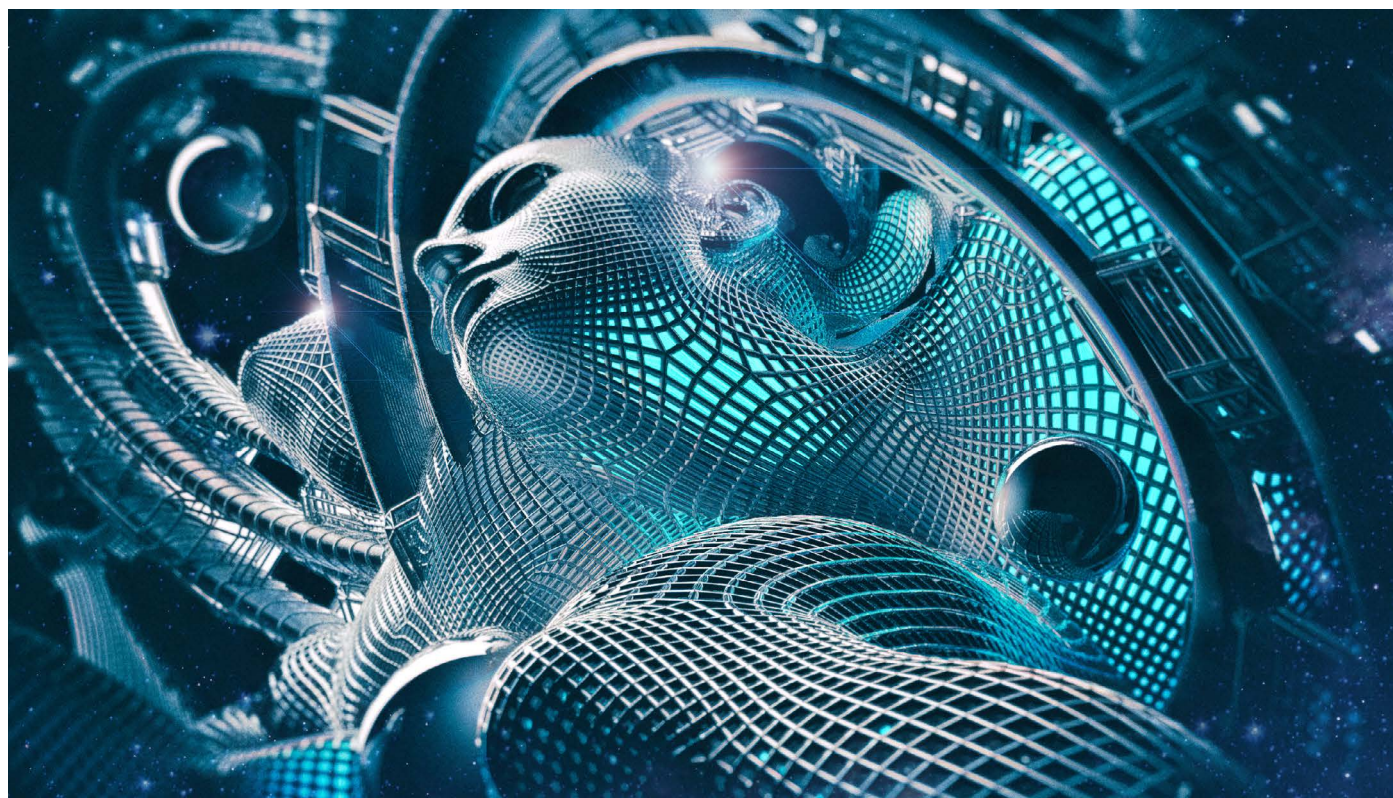


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

There's only so much flying a man can do, even if you're not a man any longer.

Sure, you have the power, and have drunk up all the fuel your boots' propulsion systems could burn, pushing you forever onward to the next habitable world.

Sure, you have a crock-pot-sized fusion reactor juicing your goose and feeding you the same meal always. You don't remember anything about real food except you want some.

Sure, you have faux immortality, an artificial everything to replace your once natural all. You could, theoretically, fly for eternity if nothing gets in your way.

You don't need to decelerate. In fact it would cost you precious time. Just blow by that sister planet and lob a package their way as you go. You wish to God you could stop, but this is not the time for selfishness. Your happiness, your future doesn't matter that much in the big picture. Besides, your life is long. Someone may think to rescue you, centuries from now.

You hope your instruments are right and you haven't missed your mark. You hope your clock is right, your memory is right, and your instruments are right. You hope astrophysics is right and worlds still come around to meet you like you've always expected them to.

But maybe there was sabotage. Maybe your enemies messed with your memory, your clock, the planet, reality, and you've been firing forwards into nothingness. You don't think that's true, but the mind grows bored and the road goes on and on and you begin to doubt everything.

You carry the cure for a hostile armada. You'll pass by Ndadaye, you'll fire the little red jawbreaker you've carried near your cold heart into that world, and the planet will secrete naval antibodies it never knew it could produce. A fraction of Ndadaye's rock, plasma, ocean, wind and biomass will transform to protect the rest. People will live. This is the future mythology that guides your mission.

Too often, however, you wonder if you ever

actually came from a place. Your leave-taking is so strange and distant. There was motion and fear, and those you left behind would do their best to hold things together, but you had to go immediately, get to the next world and share the technology of this one. You knew you had to travel for years but if you left immediately you would be able to give your allied world at least two days to grow its defence. Not much, but it was something.

The names of your friends are hazy in your titanium head. There was a Harkea, you're pretty certain. There was that one guy. Pierre? Peer? Something like that. There was a dog. You used to love that dog. Poor thing was probably dead now. And there was definitely a Jackie, but you can't for the life of you remember if Jackie was a man or a woman.

There were others. You can picture some faces but no more names. You were deeply in love with one of them, and you can't quite see their face, but there was trauma, you know that. Was it that they died during the attack, or

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was it that you had to leave without being able to tell them that you were going? Memories create themselves if you try too hard.

Sometimes you look at the same starfield that has always been in front of you, but it feels like you haven't seen it for a while, like maybe you've been asleep. You didn't used to think you could sleep but you've begun to believe that you can.

A person-shaped object hurtling through an endless void, nothing around for millions of miles in any direction, with a purpose invented decades ago that will not be fulfilled for decades to come, if at all. That's kind of ridiculous, isn't it? It's the kind of ridiculous that makes you want to cry, if only you could. You're overcome by that wanting regularly.

You've forgotten so many things you decide

to set a reminder for yourself so that when you brush the fingertips of the planetary catcher's mitt on the far side of this journey, you'll know you need to fire that little red pellet straight down into the gravitational pocket. When you try to set the reminder in the place it would sit best, you find another reminder already there, saying the same thing almost to the word. It's at once disturbing and relieving. You don't know what to do with yourself for a while. Later, rooting around on that same floor of memory, you find another reminder telling you to send word to Saffin. Is Saffin someone you haven't yet met on the next world? Or someone you've forgotten from the last?

Sometimes you're delighted by a surprise shooting star up ahead. That carries you for some time before you remember a shooting

star is a chunk of rock burning up in an atmosphere. You haven't passed an atmosphere in ages. So, was that streak of light you saw a weapons discharge from an enemy ship, then? You replay the streak in your mind again and again, comparing it to memories you think are yours to try to figure the whole thing out. You begin to wonder when you've seen something like that before. Was it just a vivid memory replaying itself for your hypnotized head?

You begin to wonder if you saw anything at all.

Matthew Sanborn Smith is a writer living in south Florida. His fiction has appeared at *Tor.com*, *Apex Magazine* and *Aliterate*, among others.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Matthew Sanborn Smith reveals the inspiration behind *Between worlds*.

This story came about as I was manning the temperature desk at my library job, just as we were reopening to the public. I had a lot of time on my hands as many library patrons were in no hurry to return. I reflected on the isolation and loneliness that many people had experienced in the previous months, but also the mind-numbing monotony of getting on with life. We knew we must cover the basics in order to get to the next goal, but it didn't feel like we were moving forward.

