

Futures

Tabula rasa

Turning the tables on fortune. By S. R. Algernon

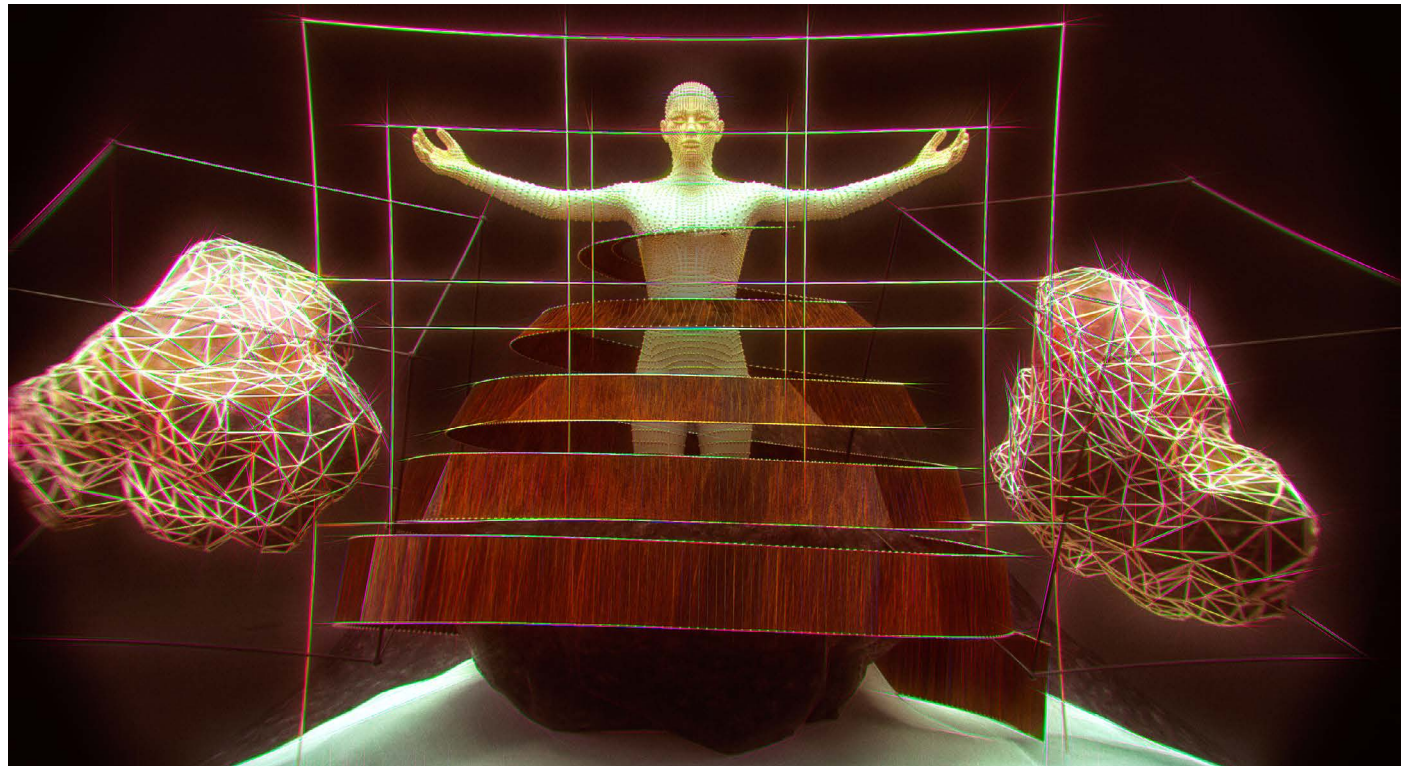


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

I sit with my hands clasped on a table that stretches into the mists. The feel of pine beneath my hands and forearms is the only anchor point I have left. A constant plank, if you will pardon the pun. Humour is wasted here, where my only companions are ghosts.

The Quantum Sifter hums behind me. The table encircles me and the sifter like a ring of Saturn, balancing the mass and preventing the table's gravity from pulling me forward and crushing me against its edge.

The oxygen that fills my lungs exists courtesy of the sifter's safety protocols. God knows where it comes from.

The sifter draws power from the multiverse. It will run to infinity. I will not. My stomach rumbles. Memories of holiday dinners, cafeteria trays, lunch counters and restaurants vie for my consciousness. The table ripples as the sifter struggles to keep up.

My thoughts conjure ghosts, but they are simple perturbations in the quantum foam. If I think hard enough, someone real might take

shape, but I'm not ready for reality yet. I retreat to an abstraction.

The term 'bankrupt' comes from the Italian *banca rotta* or broken bench. Bankers who ceased to be solvent had their benches broken so they could no longer conduct business. They retreated from the marketplace, slunk back into the alleyways, but they were still real. The medieval world with its plagues and parochialism could at least count on the reality of the world, and maybe even the promise of an immortal soul beyond it.

I think of poker chips, and the hand that I was dealt. I put it all into asteroid mining a lifetime ago. Back then, I just used the sifter to boost yields, to shift the odds in my favour. I went bust anyway. Overconfidence. My brother-in-law and two of my former friends lost their investments. I could have swallowed my pride, then. I could have suffered a few awkward holiday dinners, a few I-told-you-sos. I would have had my life back, if only an impoverished version. That wasn't good enough. I wanted things the way they had been. I wanted my asteroid,

and I'd have broken any rule to get it.

Nature has its own rules, rules of statistics and entropy. These rules are not subject to vote, nor are they matters of opinion. We can ignore them if it makes us feel better, but when we do so, we only twist ourselves. Reality endures unscathed. When I'd heard Alexander Pope's phrase, "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread", I'd always taken it to mean that the fools would lose because they attempted a task beyond their abilities. I was no loser, no fool, so the old saying did not apply to me. I never imagined back then that the angels held back not for fear of losing but for fear of winning, and the terrible costs such victories would bring.

I asked for an asteroid, and the sifter obliged in a way I hadn't expected. The asteroid I'd longed for hit Manhattan a month later, three blocks from my office. Five quadrillion dollars of my legal property waited for me within a mile-wide impact crater. I was in Shanghai at the time, so I went back to the sifter. I saved Manhattan and lost Earth. I saved Earth and

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lost the Sun. So it went, until I barely even had protons for company. So it went, until now.

I think of a friend. A familiar face appears, but I can see that I have already lost him to a competing ideology. He sees me as a lost soul to be converted. Maybe I am, but the cost of conversion is a sliver of reality, and I have so little to spare.

I think of family, and the mist refuses to cohere. So many have gone, lost even more of their reality than I have. The plagues of the multiverse are so much worse than the worst of the medieval scourges. I could chase the fragments of my family through the distant corners, but only if I leave this table, and I have fought too hard for my seat.

I pound my fist against the wood, reminding myself that it is real. It is the only thing my mind agrees upon. *Cogito ergo id est.*

Maybe if I start with the table? I envision goblets, plates, place settings, the glow of candles. Napkins that my grandparents used at every family gathering. Why not? I have infinite space. I imagine turkey, potatoes, cod, rice, bread. Miso. Pad Thai. Paneer biryani. A turducken. They take shape first as ideals. The juices of the meat, the crisp smell of fresh fish, all the textures and scents and imperfections emerge. They are real now – or maybe I have simply lost my mind. Either way, I am grateful for the change.

Now I wait. My table is no longer broken. It is no longer just a gateway home, not just a plank to climb upon. It is here as my gift to the multitudes. I'm not chasing anything anymore, just sending a beacon out into the multiverse. A solitary feast is less probable than a shared one. Nature abhors a vacuum. Nature abhors

isolation, at least on a local scale. Nature will bring us together, if we can keep the dark matter from tearing us apart.

We are joined by the Universe, you see. It does not care about profit or loss, about faction or faith. It is here for all of us, like the banquet before us. There is room enough for all our seats.

And now I have found you. Won't you take a seat? Tell me what brings you to the fringes of the multiverse. We may not have a sun, or a moon, or even a sky, but we have more than enough time.

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THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

S. R. Algernon reveals the inspiration behind *Tabula rasa*

I wrote this story at the height of the COVID-19 second wave in the United States, and I was thinking about the combined effect of social distancing and political polarization. So many people were cut off from friends and family members, and it felt like we were losing the ability to connect with one another. In my short story *Election Day*, I used the Quantum Sifter as a device to show how we can find ourselves in strange territory with dangerous bedfellows by pursuing political absolutes and victory at all costs. In *Dreaming in 4th Londons* I used the sifter to find a cure for a plague. In this story, I wanted to search for a physical and emotional way back from where we've been, and the dinner table seemed like the best place to start. After all this is over, I hope that we as a country and as a planet can come back to the same table again, because there is a lot more work left to be done.

