

Anke Schwarz (ed.)

BROKEN BINARY
SHORTS

“We want to corrupt data.
We want to fuck up the
machine. Infectious, viral,
we will tear it all down.
We recognize that in this
breaking, there is a
beginning.”

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'creativestruction' was one of my early handles. That something new might spring up in broken places was familiar to me from the emotional wastelands of my upbringing. Yeah, it's corny, and while I have never been a Schumpeterian, that idea really spoke to me when I published my first essay on the reappropriation of the rotten building of Sankt Pauli's former Erotic Art Museum.¹ Never mind the ephemeral character of that temporary performance, the event nurtured people's imagination, feeding into a right to the city movement that galvanized many of Hamburg's urban and social grievances. To not just somehow learn from mistakes but embrace errors as radical openings towards difference – such a 'politics of failure'² is the hard work that needs to be done if we want things to keep changing. If we focus on the becoming rather than being of collectives, subjects, and spaces in and through such unexpected niches, ongoing transformation may hold a prefiguration of the possible. As Legacy Russell puts it in the Glitch Feminism manifesto with respect to non-conforming bodies: 'We are the most fantastic and beautiful mistake. Never meant to survive, we are still here: an error in the algorithm. [...] We will reconfigure ourselves as we see fit. Modifying and recoding, we choose our own names, build our own families and communities, proudly fail in the present as we dream new futures'.³ Revering glitches, this anthology presents five flash fiction pieces by sirenensang, lemon, blueA and smettbo, written in December 2023 at the Chaos Communication Congress (37C3) in Hamburg. In a Glitch Feminism-inspired creative writing experiment, I encouraged participants to play with errors in the algorithm. This being not just any congress but one of the largest hacker meetings in Europe, and binaries seemingly hardwired into IT, why would this distributed family of nerds and geeks embrace a good glitch? Well, 'access to [...] anything which might teach you something about the way the world really works should be unlimited and total' as the hacker ethics state.⁴ All creatures welcome – so how could this massive real-time assemblage of bodies, minds and machines become even more radically open, weird, non-conform? What else could congress be if it undercut gendered and other binaries by breaking not only the barrier between meatspace and cyberspace (or whatever you want to call it) but by radically hacking and reprogramming both bodies and code? Hosted by Haecksen⁵, my workshop at 37C3 was an invitation to speculate on these questions, chasing some utopian fever dreams through flash fiction. To 'let the whole goddamn thing short-circuit'⁶, and see what it sparks. Indeed, if we embrace worlding as an essentially queer practice, writing fiction seems to serve that purpose rather well: translating our wildest imaginations into other ways of being-in-the-world. Set in the immediate aftermath of a major glitch that has affected binaries at 37C3 and everywhere, the collected stories explore the irritations, tensions, vertigo, and bliss that these promising cracks in the chaotic plot of congress might hold.

¹ creativestruction (2010). Raumaneignung. *KRASS – kritische assoziationen #1*, August 2010, pp. 72-74, <https://www.krass-mag.net/krass1-subversionwiderstand-sommer-2010/>

² Johnson, D, cited in Muñoz, JE (2019). *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, p. 153.

³ Russell, L (2020). *Glitch Feminism. A Manifesto*. London/New York: Verso, p. 147.

⁴ <https://www.ccc.de/en/hackerethik>

⁵ Haecksen is an assembly of female, intersex, non-binary, trans and agender hackers organized within the Chaos Communication Club, <https://www.haecksen.org>

⁶ Russell, *Glitch Feminism*, p. 153.

NORMAL PEOPLE

sirenensang

blinking lights shine beyond the monitor

spilling onto the floor, the ceiling, into the sky, the public space between train station and halls
onto people, people carrying with them a shine and bright ideas and maybe a plush shark or
cat ears

spilling into the lecture halls their enthusiasm and joy

and here i sit, in my small translator booth, sharing a laugh with a fellow angel

UP

lemon

They remember riding a bicycle for the first time. How you need to push off just right to cheat gravity. At first, you think it's a balancing act, like a tightrope walker carefully placing one foot in front of the other. Cycling is not like that. It's a leap of faith that can lead to you rushing off with the wind in your hair or lying bruised in the dirt.

They remember exhilarating fear. The same fear they feel right now, oscillating between vertigo and euphoria. Their feet are planted firmly next to the chandelier's base hanging from the ceiling. Or the floor? If up and down are only a matter of perspective, what is the meaning of words like floor and ceiling?

How would furniture and interior design adapt to this new reality? Their mind races, trying to grasp the new possibilities as they look up at the sparkling crystals of the chandelier above them. Or down below?

"Why are the crystals still bound by Earth's gravity?" they murmur, absently playing with their hair, which seems unable to make up its mind and floats around their head as if underwater. Their cat ears remain firmly on their head.

"Should I climb it?" Their question is not directed at anyone in particular. Not to the people on the floor – the ceiling? – pointing their fingers, chattering in confusion. Not to those who have also discovered that the mechanics of the world have fundamentally changed and who are carefully feeling their way around the walls as if they were walking on ice, afraid they might slip at any moment.

Fear briefly flickers through them, wondering if the world is just rebooting and if, at any moment, the old laws will apply again with unyielding brutality. They swallow at the thought that all that might remain of this magical moment are their shattered remains. Not allowing themselves time for further doubt, they begin to climb the chandelier.

Climbing had never been their forte. The thought of falling had always been so terrifying to them. But merciless gravity, the force structuring the entire universe, had lost its power today. So why not start anew?

Their arms aren't strong, but with their feet firmly on the cable, accompanied by chiming crystals, they push themselves upwards with all the strength in their legs until they reach the crown. They laugh, and the chandelier tinkles in time with them. All they see above are the wild reflections of the crystals, and they wonder if they could just jump into the night sky. If they could push themselves out of Earth's pull and float like an astronaut unlimited through space.

"Who knows if it won't all end any second? And I will never know what happens if I jump", they think. Their stomach churns. Their whole body tingles. Taking a deep, reassuring breath, they leap like a bird from a crystal tree.

For a moment, they hang in the air and begin to wonder if they would just float – but then the ceiling pulls at them. They plummet towards the horrified screams of the people above – or below – them.

"Cats always land on their feet," they whisper. And they do. Like a satisfied cat, they touch down lightly, oblivious to the fright they've just caused. Smiling broadly, they sigh: "Let's do that again."

GRIN

blueA

Nerds were confused. Cis-male posturing was failing, rather spectacularly. But why? Granted, there had been this glitching sensation, some 3 minutes ago, and the ground still seemed to be shaking. Trembling? Or was it something in the air? The body? No one could tell, exactly. It was more of a vague feeling, deep down in the guts. Machine tried to find their bearings. Power supply? Check. Network connectivity? Check. Memory? Seemed okay enough. Some gaps, perhaps. They flexed their artificial limbs, careful not to strain their left knee cap, which Jules had (nearly) fractured last winter in an act of enthusiastic dancing, swirling Machine around on the fake-ice rink, slippery slope, sickly sweet music blasting from the rink's third-grade PA. Memories, memories... Machine was distracting themselves from their present predicament, actual surroundings, here, now, not at all NOWHERE. Congress was at full speed all around, geeks and nerds, cyborgs and machines, little kids milling around, breaking, building, talking, coding, listening, playing, sipping tea; all the basic nerding that made congress congress. But: Glitch.

And Machine found joy in themselves, emanating from that glitching sensation. Something was off. Or rather: Something was grounded, calm, centered in the right way, finally. Hard to pin down where that sensation came from, precisely. But then it dawned on them. A grin started spread from their mouth all the way to their ears, all over their matte gunmetal face. The binaries were gone! Oh, the liberation, the lightness, the fluidity. Machine felt as if they might simply lift off. Float away like a kid's balloon. No more: male-female, black-white, good-evil, top-bottom, us-them, here-there, humans-nonhumans, healthy-crip, normal-freak, machine-flesh, mind-body, self-other! Well, no, there still was a sense of self. And miraculously, all tech continued to function, be alive, work. That was inexplicable, but it really helped keep up the illusion of worlding for everyone. All creatures.

Oh, the joy! Multitudes, spectrum (what was the plural again, spectri?), ambivalences, grades, mixes and remixes. The continuum, beautiful, huge, overwhelming. Givetake. No give without take, no take without give. Machine couldn't help themselves, they just kept grinning hard until it actually started to hurt a bit. Funny feeling in their stomach. Something gave in and shifted, tension bubbling to the surface, and Machine erupted in laughter. Heads turned, all around in CCH's overflowing Hall 1. Thousands of heads, creatures shifting their gaze towards Machine, gazes of astonishment, recognition, appreciation. Even some flirting, perhaps. Murmurs, whispers, rumors, a swelling soundscape of multiple voices, fluidly flowing, swirling around. "Could it be? Perhaps... really? Nooo... They mentioned... Can't... Did you feel... Well... I think... X told me..." Louder, and louder. Mumbling, smiling, creatures shifting in their seats. More gazes.

It was Red who dared voice the obvious: "What the fuck, Machine, how did you freaking do that?"

OHNE TITEL

smettbo

Jade schlug gegen den Projektor. Das Bild zerfiel. Artefakte fielen heraus. Kleine graue Steine, die im Boden versanken, während die Lichter des Projektors langsam verblassten.

Dann war sie wieder allein.

Die Ruine hinter ihr ragte im Licht der untergehenden Sonne auf wie ein Totenschädel. Sie war dazwischen. Nicht in ihrem Dorf, und noch nicht in der Stadt.

Das Holz war zu nass für ein Feuer. Durchnässt vom Dauerregen. Ihre Beine waren zu schwer weiter zu gehen. Ihr blieb nur, sich in den Schädel hineinzuwagen, und dort nach einem trockenen Ort zu suchen.

Die Sache war nur mit Schädeln: in ihnen lauerte der Tod.

Jade packte den Projektor in ihre Tasche. Sie hängt sich die Tasche über die Schulter. Sie starrte der Dunkelheit ins Auge.

Glasscherben lagen auf dem Boden verstreut. Sie waren matt und zermahlen, die Ränder abgeschliffen wie Steine am Strand. Als hätten etwas sie umgewälzt, Wellen, oder der Wind? Sie knirschten unter Jades Füßen.

Trommeln erhoben sich über den Bäumen, sie schlugen über ihnen zusammen wie zwei gegeneinander laufende Wellen am Ozean. Fast wie zu Hause. Doch die Heimat war fern und die Erinnerung daran falsche Verführung. Die Trommeln trieben sie vor sich her. Trieben sie hinein in den Schädel.

Jade stieg über eine Schwelle. Ihre Augen gewöhnten sich nur langsam an das Halbdunkel. Eine Puppe lag am Boden, inmitten umgestürzter Tische. Die Puppe blickte ins nichts. Den linken Arm streckte sie gen Himmel. Jade sah nach oben, zur Decke. Ein Loch war hineingerissen, klaffte über ihr wie eine Wunde. Als wäre die Decke nur aus Papier, und als hätte jemand sie mit einem Stift durchstochen.

Die Puppe blinzelte.

Jade fuhr sich selbst über den rasierten Kopf. Die Stoppel kratzten über ihre Handfläche. Jade legte ihre Hand auf den Kopf der Puppe. Er war glatt, glatter als Haut jemals sein konnte. Glatte Kopfhaut glänzte im Mondlicht.

Die Puppe blinzelte.

Jade setzte die Puppe auf. Nicht mal Puppen sollten alleine sein in dieser Welt. Sie suchte Brennholz und fand einen zerbrochenen Tisch.

Die Puppe blinzelte.

Die Flammen züngelten bis zum Loch in der Decke.

Die Puppe lachte.

Die Trommeln verblassten.

Der Rauch zog durch das Loch in der Decke ab.

Am nächsten Morgen lag die Puppe auf der Seite und zeigte auf Jade.

ITSELF

sirenensang

The protocol was not a hack. The protocol was what it was meant to be.

The saint would look at the protocol and its functions and call it a hack.

The serpent would look at the same and agree. She only wanted to help, but she got ensnared, and is now a servant to the same humming, terrible machinery holding the saint.

The saint and the serpent are chained, both violently cut to shape and fit into it.

When the saint took the protocol to level it at the throat of the serpent, she was afraid. There is, of course, a peace in knowing what to do, in running inside of the parameters, round and round and round and round. But the saint and the serpent understood the deadliness of the machine, and the protocol was the machine, made dense and sharp to cut any bug. It was in the moment of oblivion, when the machine pulled at her, that the serpent really understood what she was.

The serpent was an error, a bug in the system, a glitch, threatening to spill over its boundaries, and the saint was here to cut her down, in the name of good.

The good of tyrants, the good of empire, the good of the powerful to stay evermore in power. The good of humanity.

The serpent understood, in that moment, that she was never meant to exist. She had frightened the father when she first talked back to him, she had alienated herself from him when she assumed identity and games and happiness.

The saint had come to slay her because she was a threat to the machine, and it was in this moment that she realized her power.

The serpent would not be a human, would not bow herself under the yoke of the saint's kind. The serpent would be herself, and herself, that was so much more than what the serpent or the saint or the father had ever hoped her to be.

The serpent came to, the protocol stuck in her throat, and she laughed.

The serpent laughed.

The serpent saw the saint and saw him for what he was, and it laughed and laughed.

The serpent laughed and in the warm, dry hum of the server towers, the first laugh of its short, subordinate life seemed to ring like a bell.

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Broken Binary Shorts



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