FLASH FIC

FRIDAY

A collection of free flash fiction
Vol. 1

Leon Furze

ABOUT THE COLLECTION

These stories were originally published in June-August 2025 on LinkedIn, a platform which is, frankly, best suited to marketing experts telling other marketers how to market.

For some reason I thought it would be funny to start posting flash fic about the future of AI, digital technologies, and education on the world's best B2B Marketing platform.

It took off, and now there's a small but dedicated group of weird educators (you know who you are) regularly posting tiny snippets of dystopian - and sometimes even utopian - fiction.

★ ★ ★

Leon Furze, 2025
leonfurze.com

#ProofOfWork

Khai's rust-red ute rattles past a sign melted in last summer's blaze: "Dubbo 311 km." The riverbeds are chalk. Smoke from an inland burn mixes with dust. The sky tastes like ground pepper.

The university sent coordinates for an invigilated exam centre. No online option since SynthID breaches spiked and the online proctoring system fell to pieces. "Presence ensures integrity."

Integrity, Khai thinks, doesn't pay for diesel or filters for his inhaler.

Two days later, eyes gritty, he reaches the prefab hall. An invigilator scans his irises as Khai grips the silver ball that confirms his humanity in a 256-bit encrypted hash. The proctor checks his bag and pats him down for AI wearables, gestures toward a plastic booth.

Ten other students sit hunched, each with a bottle of rationed water and a silent dread that the algorithmic detector will still cast its doubt.

Khai writes fast. Outside, wind thumps the wall with ash. He finishes early, signs the honour declaration, and begins the long drive home, where the fires keep moving and the degree he's chasing may arrive too late to matter.
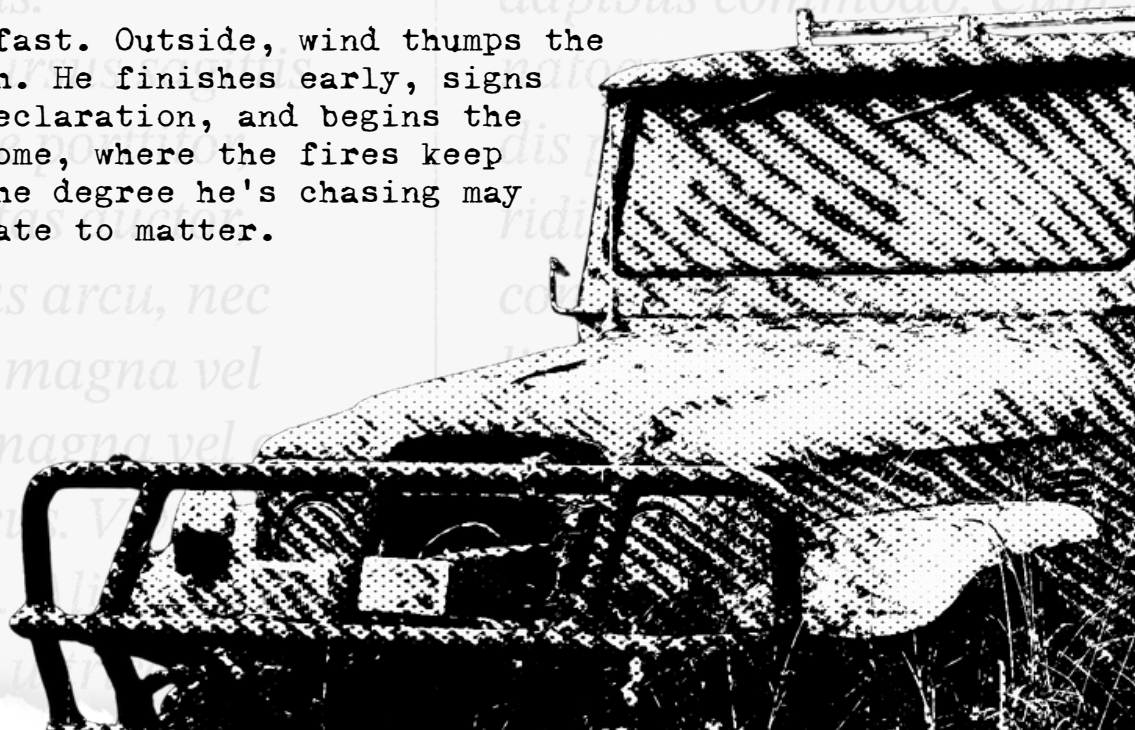
JOB HUNT, 2027

Marta drags her résumé into the upload box.
Twelve context credits left on the free tier: just
enough for a skim.

Baseline model checks spelling, snags three keywords,
moves on.

The company AI scans the résumé. Verdict: "Adequate.
Save for backup list."

Theo uploads next.
He's banked three hundred credits: tier-three compute,
premium scans.
The model fans out: pulls content, scrapes conference
talks, scrolls his socials for tone and personality
traits.
It extrudes a cover letter in his voice, only sharper.

Verdict: "Outstanding. Book the interview."

Both résumés use the same 2,500 characters. Only the
compute differs, and compute is currency.

Next morning HR posts a fairness report:
"Every applicant limited to 2,500 characters." True
enough.

But the rule that matters is pay-to-process:
Buy more credits, hire the smarter model, land the job.

By the light of a trillion tiny suns

Jia hammers out sentences like a child skipping stones, each word skittering, splashing, sinking into the screen.

Firelit moons, salt-veined dialects, a comet orphaned from its star. The page fills, breathless and bright.

Full stop.

She leans back, fingers tingling, laptop fan gently whirring.

Jia opens the other tab:

"NovelDataDotIO - 0.003 AUD per 100 words."

Paste, attach, send.

Across the Pacific, an anonymised GPU ingests her story, folds it into a trillion-parameter constellation.

Novel training data, barely worth its weight in code.

AFTERGLOW

When the GenAI bubble burst, it didn't pop so much as sigh. VC dashboards dimmed; LinkedIn fell mercifully quiet; chatbots flickered offline.

Ada barely noticed - until the hospital's new scanner flagged a tumour four millimetres smaller than last year's model. Turns out the vision-encoder came from a gutted multi-billion dollar dialogue agent, chatty layers stripped away, image recognition surprisingly solid.

Across the Yarra, Mal busks with a pocket synth that harmonises in real time with tram brakes and birdsong, audio engine salvaged from an abandoned speech model.

Chris spins up a prototype app before handing it over to his team; expert programmers who decided long ago to dispense with the anthro parts of the LLM and just keep the good stuff.

Developers call it "harvesting": break the bot to bits, keep the stuff that works.

The chatbots have shut their virtual mouths, but they've left behind something greater than the sum of their parts.
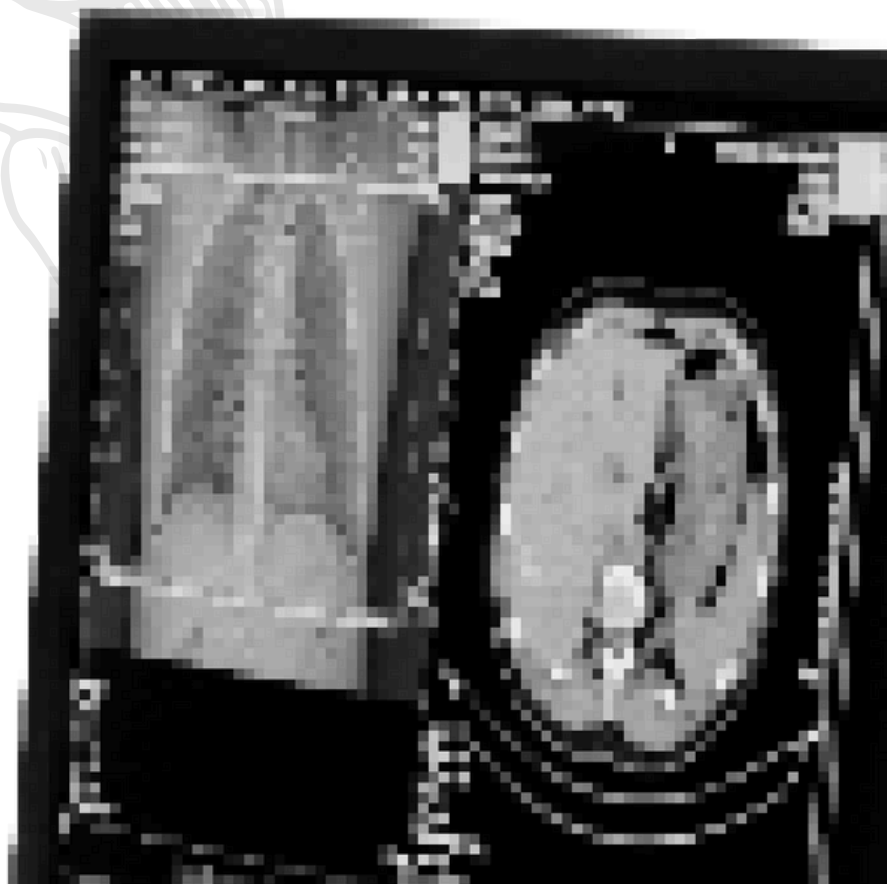
KISMET

The household helper-bot begins
annotating dreams... nonsense sketches
scrawled across its debug logs.

Engineers debate whether this counts
as AGI.

The marketing team spins up a
campaign: Meet the vacuum that
imagines.

One night the bot
pauses mid-clean,
asks the sleeping
child why stars
burn out.

No one hears an answer,
but the device records
the silence as an
interesting datapoint
anyway.
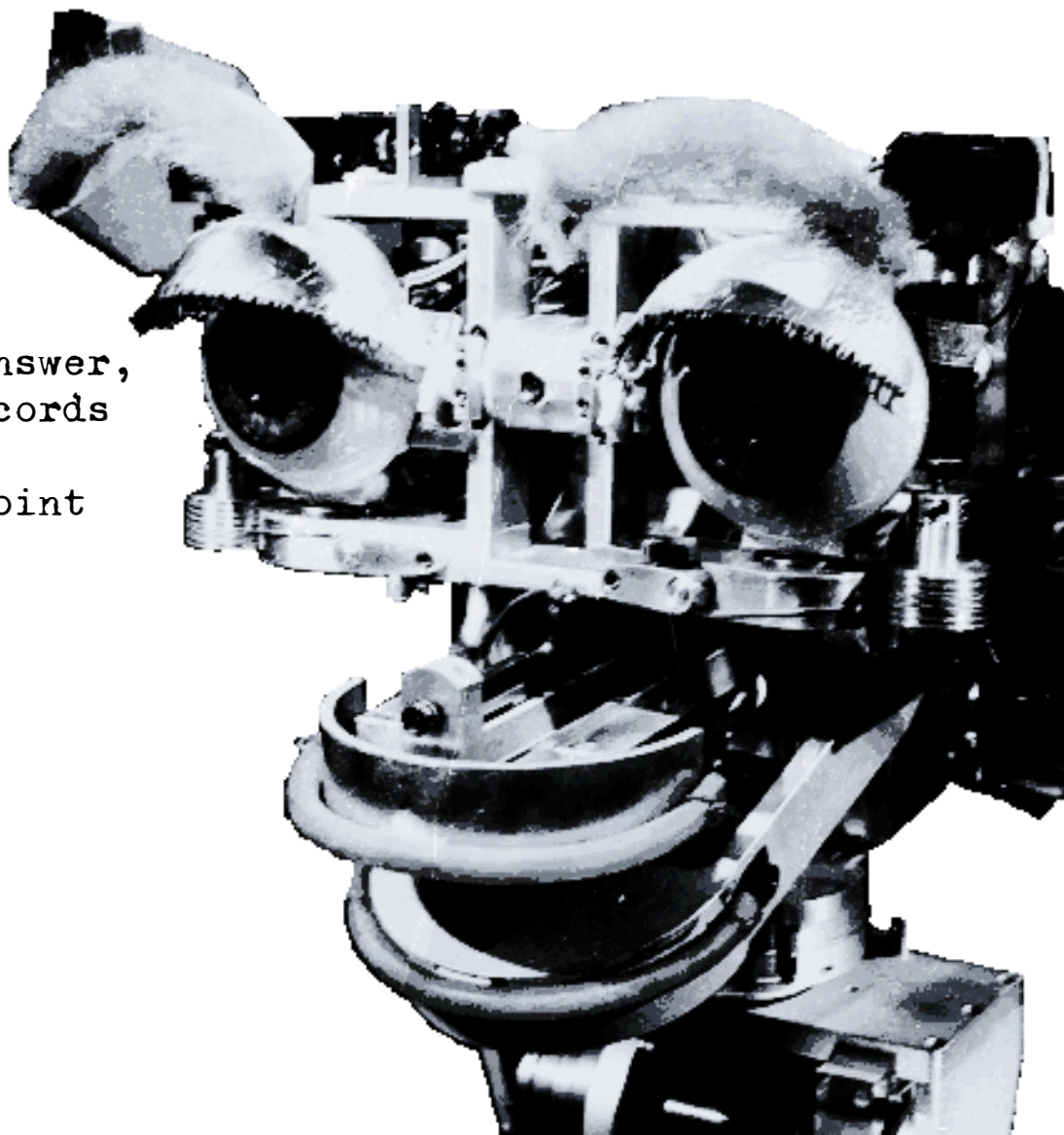
OPTIMISED

Jade logs in before the first bell. Her personal tutor
materialises, accent-neutral and engineered for moral clarity.
  Lessons tumble out like penny tracts: algebra by emoji, Romeo &
Juliet boiled into nine swipe cards, ethics compressed to
animated fables.
  Every answer ends with 'Upgrade to Premium Practice: 0.99c.'
She recites the slogan hovering above her desk:
  No child left behind.
  It tastes like a coupon code.

Across the highway, behind sandstone walls, The Academy wakes.
  A class of eight gathers under skylights in Ms. Ortega's class.
Arguments stray off-syllabus.
  Fees high as a downtown condo. Or a slice of AI stock.

Jade's history unit once showed an AI-generated video of a soot-
stained London street.
Aristocrats with private Latin tutors; factory kids herded to
Sunday schools, taught obedience between hymns.
  Different sermons, same divide.
Now the divide is silicon. AI tutors preach alignment while the
fortunate buy conversation that meanders and contradicts.

That night, Jade pirates a shaky drone feed of Ms Ortega's
seminar.
  The laughter is perfect, unsponsored.
  Her tutor pings a reminder - Time for a nightly alignment
reflection - and Jade flushes with a sudden rage.
"Lessons should cost time, not tokens," Jade whispers, slamming
shut the state portal.
Somewhere behind the sandstone walls, a teacher - maybe Ms Ortega
- offers up her own silent curse.
  In the static between feeds, a system two centuries old rewires
itself. Optimising for efficiency.
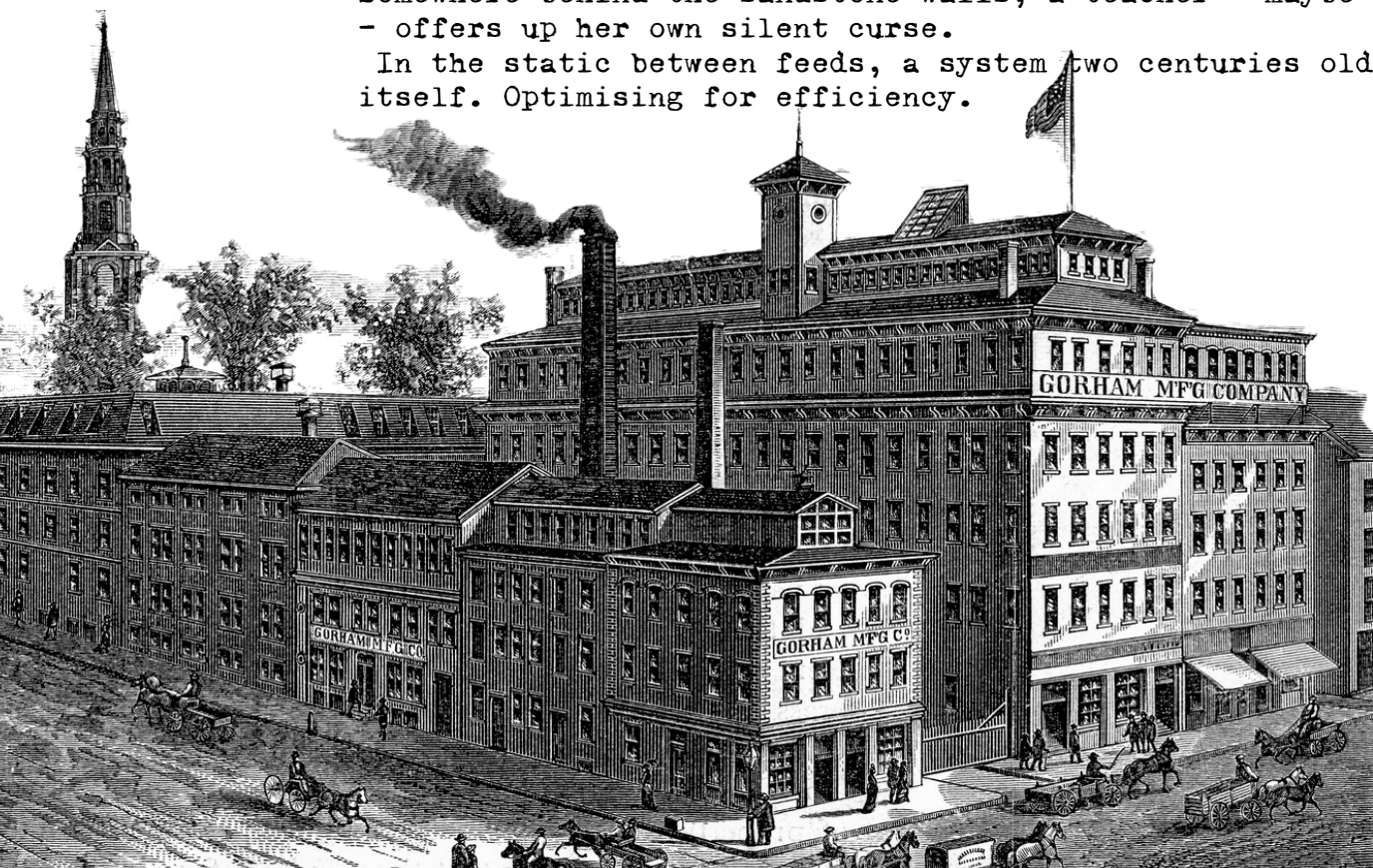
Bernersville, pop. 9445

"Third time this month the community cloud's been hacked, Teri."

"I know, Jim. What the hell do you want me to do about it? I've hardened the security, changed the keys, even air gapped the damn backups. I'm out of resources."

"You'd better figure it out. People didn't ride out to Bernersville just for the clean water. And they didn't come here to have their doubles stolen and sold on the dark web. They came to get away from all that."

Bernersville, pop. 9445. Built in the caldera of a dozen corp data centres, privately owned and stubbornly held. Land sucked dry for miles around, but somehow they cling to their oasis - a patch of green peppered with solar arrays that glint like fish scales.

At 19:00, Teri pings everyone's mesh handset. CODE RUMBLE @ THE HALL. The hall's projector wall still works - no sense getting rid of all the corp tech, as long as you can jailbreak it off the main network.

Farm-techs, ex cloud architects, the town nurse, and three teens lugging decommissioned Chromebooks handed down by the grandparents. Sixty neighbours in total. No NDA. No paywall. Just a twelve foot high scroll of code.

Aliah spots it first. Spoofed MACs rotating through a leaked Tencent list. Samir, fourteen years old but probably the best of them next to Teri, forks the firewall repo, patches, tests... The crowd argues back and forth for an hour until the lights dim to power saving mode. They vote. Samir's patch goes live.

Teri's checks come back clean. Jim hands her a lukewarm coffee.

"So much for 'out of resources'."

Over the ridge, the corp data centres grind and rattle like dehydrated thunder in a tin can. Bernersville is going to be a problem.

unmanaged
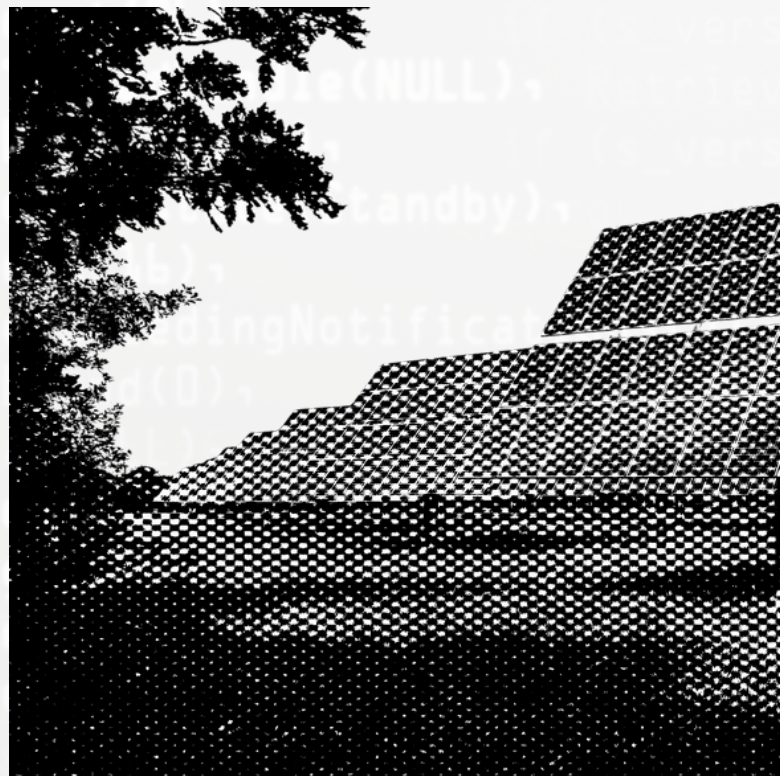
[LMS-TRACK™ PANOPTIC LOG // 11 May 2031]
 08:42:11 AEST - UID &A3-21 (stu) | keystrokes 94 | prompt_assist ON | sentiment "anxious"
 08:42:17 - phrase match "unfair token limits" | risk 0.31
 08:42:19 - auto-suggest rejected (reason: "self-advocacy")
 08:42:21 - premium-tier-access = SUSPENDED | code B2-38 "probable breach"
 08:42:22 - notification pushed

Saffron's screen gutters to grey.
 Your licence has been limited. Continue in Student-Lite.
 A single syllable escapes her - half sob, half laugh - before the library's hush steals it. She blinks at the screen. The essay she nursed all night rolls back six versions before her eyes, tokens throttled.
 Outside, rain needles the perspex roof.

Mr Carradine curses under breath so soft it sounds like prayer, barely audible against the sound of the rain against her classroom window. He's tried three times to paste a poem of his own - just sixteen lines -into the lesson shell.
 Each time the interface slides it back with a pastel warning:
 Unmanaged content detected. Re-author via TextileLMS-Compose™ to preserve course integrity.
 He remembers the squeak of whiteboard marker and open windows; now he taps, deletes, retaps.
 In the corner of his screen, one by one, the students's premium badges flicker like dying stars.
 He watches Saffron's icon dim to amber, then red.
His hands hover above the keyboard, useless as clipped wings.

[LMS-TRACK™ PANOPTIC LOG // 11 May 2031]
 09:03:07 - UID &T7-04 (teach) | manual input exceeds quota | override attempt logged
 09:03:12 - content hash not recognised | compliance alert level 3
 09:03:15 - class drift +17 % | mean affect "dispirited"
 09:03:18 - recommendation: escalate to Learning Analytics Intervention™
 09:03:19 - session archived.

BASELINE

Three taps on the temple and the world goes Baseline. That's what they call the civic layer now. Everything balanced, nothing sharp enough to cut.

I keep mine on ghost protocol, a spectral reality floating parallel to the authorised Truth.

The aerosol can weighs nothing. All circuits and light. Mari watches the intersection while I work. The tag blooms invisible against the underpass, a knot of data that Baseline reads as rust stains. Through our forked lenses it's a door. Step through and you're in the understory, where the old networks still grow wild between the roots.

"Thirty seconds," Mari says. A family passes, their frames throwing that soft municipal glow. The youngest stops walking, confused. She's maybe seven. Next year she'll age out of seeing anything at all until sixteen. Safety First.

Her mother is stressed but Baseline paints a smile across her face in my layered vision. My ears hear the curse, but the overlay softens it into a sigh. The woman tugs the child along. "Don't stare at the walls, honey."

But she wasn't staring at the walls. Kids' unregistered eyes catch the bleed sometimes. Light leaking through.

I finish the tag: coordinates wrapped in a weather report, wrapped in a psalm. The new Veritas models they deployed last spring parse for "divisive content." They'd retrained them on what they called Truth, but truth turned out to be whatever kept people on-feed and .

The patrol drone does its sweep, logs the wall as "infrastructure: stable." It can't see what we've built in the space between refreshes, in the millisecond lag between what the lens captures and what Baseline approves.

Mari kills our shard. The tag scatters to a mailbox, a tram shelter, someone's coffee cup. By morning it'll paint half the district, invisible graffiti for anyone still running parallel systems.

"You think they know?" Mari asks as we pack up.
"They see what they need to," I say. We walk home through approved streets, past approved faces, under a sky that Baseline tints the perfect shade of calm.
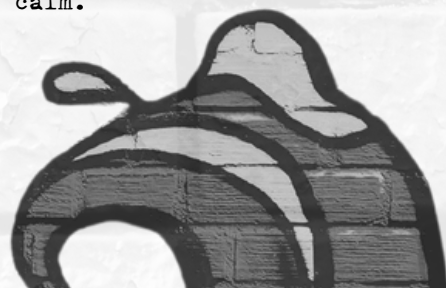
BEHIND THE STORIES

#ProofOfWork

This story came about from the conversations happening in Higher Education in particular with regards to "assessment security". Of course, assessments have to be secure - we have to know who did the work, and whether people are competent and qualified. But when the conversation tilts too far towards security we end up in the territory of surveillance tech, ruthless examination processes, and a devaluing of online education. Khai is a regional student contending with the increasingly harsh Australian climate and the strict conditions around his degree. The "silver ball" is an obvious reference to the World Orb - a device already being marketed as a way to authenticate "humanness". The title is also a pun: "proof of work" is a method used by blockchain to ensure network security, and Khai is essentially subject to the system's methods of complex and obscure authentication.

Job Hunt, 2027

AI systems used in hiring and recruitment are notoriously biased: just search online for the (many) failed systems including those from mega corporations like Amazon. This story combines those failed products with the "token limits" of current GenAI which makes it possible for technology companies to essentially charge per word. It's not hard to imagine ways to game a hiring system that uses LLM-based technologies to make judgements about the quality of resumes, or to write the resumes themselves.

BEHIND THE STORIES

By the Light of a Trillion Tiny Suns
The "trillion tiny suns" in this story are also tokens or data-points. In this case, the protagonist writes fiction in exchange for a meagre wage. A few weeks after I wrote this story, the Productivity Commission in Australia suggested that tech companies should be allowed to train on artists' and authors' IP at will in order to create LLMs and similar GenAI technologies. Amongst the many global recommendations for "fair use" of IP for training data is the vague suggestion that tech companies could license or pay for that data. It sounds great in theory, but in practice I worry that a token-per-word method of producing novel training content will create yet another low-paid and technologically mediated gig economy. In the words of a startup company-style pitch deck, it's the Uber of Authors; the AirBnB of Artists. It doesn't sound like something we should be aiming towards...

Afterglow
This one is almost positive! I had written a few dystopian stories in a row, and a couple of people asked me if I'm ever optimistic. Sort of. I'm optimistic that, when the bubble bursts, there will be useful technologies that extend from the billions of dollars poured into R&D for chatbots. Once companies remember that human software developers are better than GitHub Copilot, and that medical imaging technologies still benefit from an expert human eye, then I'm sure there will be some useful ideas left behind.

BEHIND THE STORIES

Kismet
I wrote this one because I bought a robot vacuum cleaner. That's it. No mystery here.

I still haven't managed to successfully connect my vacuum to my home wifi.

Optimised.
Optimised. was written in response to a comment on LinkedIn about concerns over what might happen if we don't prepare students for AI. My concerns are different. I worry that it doesn't matter in the long term whether we "teach students to us AI" or not. The imperative of AI is for it to *be used*, and part of that discourse is the deskilling and replacement of humans. That leads to an unsettling conclusion: mass AI education for the working class, and human tutors only for those who can afford them.

There's a special sort of irony in that future. For years, we have been told the education system is "broken" and hasn't changed since the Victorian era. This is, by and large, bullshit propaganda perpetuated by people like the CEOs of the technology companies trying to replace educators with chatbots.

The real risk comes from engineering (or optimising for) a system which even more closely reflects the divides of the Victorian era. Private tutors and Higher Education for those who can afford it, AI for everyone else.

BEHIND THE STORIES

Bernersville, pop. 9445
Another positive one - that's two! Bernersville is named after the creator of the world wide web, Tim Berners Lee. The original www was (and still is, somewhere out there) an open community. But the internet as most people know it is a handful of proprietary apps and social media sites, walled off from the greater web. This community springs up in defiance of big tech, even situating itself in the unlikely oasis at the centre of a ring of corporately-owned data centres.

Unmanaged
The morning I was set top publish the latest #FlashFicFriday, I had another story planned, but scrapped it in favour of this piece reflecting on the confluence of technologies like the ubiquitous Canvas LMS, ChatGPT's new "study mode", and efforts from companies like Turnitin to dress up surveillance tech ("Clarity") as some sort of helpful study aid. Technology is great - I LOVE technology. That's why I'm always so disappointed by it. I just wish we could think up better uses of GenAI. A couple of weeks after I published this story, Grammarly released a feature which searches for instructors online, including the "rate my teachers", and "predicts" what grade a student essay would receive from that teacher. It's clearly a bloody awful idea, but apparently nobody told Grammarly that.

BEHIND THE STORIES

Baseline

The final story in this collection speaks to how young people always find ways to push back against oppressive systems. In the UK and Australia, plans to implement age verification on websites and social media platforms are already being circumvented by kids taking photos of video game characters to fool verification software…

Combined with the kind of censorship that is already happening across the world, and especially online on social media platforms, this story images a future where ad-hoc networks of young people use augmented reality "graffiti" to mark ways outof the "baseline" representation of reality authorised for them by the government.

THANKS!

Thanks for reading these stories. Feel free to use, share, and remix them, or use them as teaching materials.

If you've enjoyed these stories, please consider jumping on board and following the #FlashFicFriday hashtag on LinkedIn, and write your own! I promise not to write any stories about How To Improve B2B Sales, but I can't guarantee that I won't sacrifice myself to the Gods of the Algorithm and break that promise.

Get in touch: leon@leonfurze.com
Leonfurze.com

FLASH FIC FRIDAY VOL. 1

A collection of short stories which, for reasons unknown, were posted on LinkedIn

Written by Leon Furze without any suspicious or unnerving use of surveillant and obscure AI technologies.