



POLU TEXNI

Winter 2009

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Cover by Alice Albright



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Just to make sure no one misses how neatly this all worked out, when you're done reading Laura's delightfully catty poem, make sure you go back and check the author of the first story. I loved her poem and would have joyfully published it anyway, but knowing that I had a story in inventory by William F. Wu from an earlier publishing project just made it unbelievably great. A coincidence like that is too much to pass up.

I asked my daughter if saying "You should look at this neat site called Newgrounds if you're interested in animation" is like saying "You should look at this neat site called Wikipedia if you're writing a paper." Yeah, OK, maybe a little bit. But when she heard I was mentioning Brackenwood, and that maybe my demographic (um) might not have heard of it, she was all for it.

In other news, I would like to start up a readers' group to bounce ideas (marketing, what you'd like to see, what works.) If you're interested, then please contact me through the website and let me know.

Dawn Albright, Cambridge MA, way later than it was supposed to be.

# Davi Leiko Till Midnight

By William F. Wu

Mac Tom rocked back on pointed boots, dodging bluff and sweaty young stampedes past him crosswise on the corner. The Aysquare night was bluff and sweaty in the summer darkness, lit up Free Night neon over jammed human traffic. Davi Leiko was out here somewhere, if he could only find her.

Mac started across the street, into a light bit of breeze that cooled the flush of his face. Overhead, lines of partygoers floated nose first in astral form toward the old houses on the north side. Golden threads trailed after them, connected to their comatose bodies at home in bed. Just as they had divided and reconstituted themselves, Mac had defined and constructed Davi Leiko.

She was out here in the sea of laughing, conniving, bluff and sweaty bodies, if he could only find her. He could still retrieve her for fullness, if he got her back before midnight. He could still retrieve her to be the love of his life, if he could only find her before midnight.

"Hi, Phil. How are you?" A tall, smiling man in a black beard stopped on the sidewalk, oblivious to the jostling he took from the passing crowd.

"I'm not Phil. I'm Mac. But I'm fine, John. How are you?"

"It's great to see you, Phil. Just great. Are you getting paid?"

"Uh — yeah. Sure. Bye, John." Mac moved on, carried by the sweep of bluff and sweaty.

"Bye, Phil," said John, still smiling white in his black beard.

John had not been brought to fullness.

Far overhead, beyond the storefront building, the clock tower shone grayish white against a deep and mystic sky. Midnight was an evening away.

Rivers of cars drifted lazily down the paved gullies of Aysquare, chrome-caps shining in the wash of light. Off to Mac's right, beyond the rumbling crowd and

beneath the flood of astral travelers, Davi Leiko climbed up on the trunk of a slowly moving sleek and slippery blue fatcar. Mac looked, missed, blinked, looked again.

Her amber skin gleamed naked in the cross of white headlights and red neon. She climbed awkwardly in leather pumps of mandarin red, four-inch heels sliding on the waxed polish of the car. Her legs, slender and not very long, tensed and bent and straightened as she caught her balance and lifted one knee high to climb on the shining roof of the rolling car.

Mac watched in fascination as he swam upstream through a crowd of grinning schoolgirls in matching blue plaid skirts. His arms plied the current, but the cars were still flowing slowly down the street away from him. Mac slid behind four hockey players in full equipment marching in lockstep clumsily on their skates, who were sweating profusely.

Above and ahead of him, Davi Leiko's raised leg stretched her round rear smooth and yellowish where the bikini had drawn a line. She pushed with her other leg and fell forward onto the roof of the car, swinging around sideways spread-legged as it jerked forward in traffic. She rolled to one side and then, as the car stopped, sprawled once more, grabbing for handholds on the slick surface.

"Fu look, fu look, fu look," chanted a chorus of male voices.

Mac backed to the picture window of a health food restaurant as a rout of young Chinese men strode in front of him, wearing tan conical hats of woven banana leaves.

"Fu look, fu look, fu look." Still chanting, they pushed on down the sidewalk, grinning and nudging each other at the Cantonese nose, lips, and jaw of the gorgeous naked Davi Leiko.

The therapist, a slender woman in her forties with a sparkling smile, eyed him impassively from behind a high walnut desk, with stacks of books piled even higher on it. "C'mon, Mac. Admit it. You never really loved any woman. Maybe you never really loved anyone at all."

Mac shook his head. "Of course I have. I always have. There was...when I was in high school. And in college, I had ... and ..."

"Hmm?" She was still impassive. "You skipped the names, I believe."

"No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did."

"No, I didn't."

"You keep making artificials because real people are too hard for you to handle."

"No, I don't. And stop contradicting me. You aren't supposed to do that, are you?"

She smiled with quiet amusement. "What good is loving an artificial? They aren't real."

"Well ... except on Free Night, no one knows the difference."

"For you, though. You'd know she was an artificial. It would make a difference to you."

"Actually, since no one is allowed to tailor an artificial personality past a certain point, they can be almost as frustrating."

"In that case, why not stick with real people?"

Mac yanked open the glass door of the Ice O' My Grotto video parlor and slipped inside. When the door shut behind him, the noise and heat and roar of the street stopped dead. The video parlor was cool, and silent except for the strange muffled whines and explosions of the games. One player screamed just before flashing up in a swirl of orange and blue flame. Just past him, Davi Leiko stood naked in her mandarin red pumps and her smiling, pursed, full red Cantonese lips, playing an old-fashioned pinball machine. She snapped the first ball forward, and her twin round Cantonese breasts quivered at the blinking, ringing lights.

Mac looked upon her with jealousy and loss as he walked toward her. She swayed forward and back as she played the game, watching the rolling silver balls with quick brown foxy eyes. Her arms, like all of her, were smooth and fleshy but firm, tanned just slightly tawny, like all of her, outside her bikini line.

"You shouldn't have left." Mac spoke quietly, not wanting to throw her off her game.

"It's Free Night. Everybody's out." She kept her eyes on the game, and snapped another ball into play. "Everybody who's full and everybody who's near fullness."

"You aren't ready yet. Just one more week. Or two."

"I feel ready." She smiled pleasantly, and glanced at him for his reaction.

"I just wanted you right, first. You don't have — well, a couple of things."

"I don't?" She pursed her lips, trying to hide an impish smile. "Don't I look like I have everything?"

"You know what I mean. Your anger is still missing, and a sense of personal insult — the desire for revenge if someone hurts you. You'll be helpless out here. Also, that one front tooth of yours isn't right. The gum around it is gray instead of pink."

Davi Leiko turned full-front to look at him, ignoring the bouncing bells and lights and silver ball rolling around in her game. Her flowing black hair was swept away from her face in a frame of slight waves. She was stunningly gorgeous, of course; that's how he'd decided to make her.

"You can't force me back. I know that. I'm at stage nine now." Davi Leiko looked up at him ingenuously, as the silver ball in the machine rolled unchallenged between the flippers and clunked somewhere out of sight.

"I would never want to force you." Mac's voice rose in pitch very slightly, with anxiety. "Fullness will help you in the long run. You'll fit in better. Wouldn't you like to come back and finish?"

She shrugged, and leaned one elbow on the pinball machine as she looked at him. "I

feel full.”

“This is Free Night. Everything’s different. I mean, normally you couldn’t even walk the street like ... like that.” Mac waved a fluttery hand at her naked body.

Davi Leiko looked down at herself. “Well, I have that information stored. I could, you know, do what’s necessary on regular days to fit in. Like wear clothes.”

“I made you. I made you with the blood in my brain. With my mind.”

“The last stage is just personality refining. I know that. That’s why I’m not required to go through it. I really am complete, you know. Not reaching fullness just means I won’t be totally tailored by you. Some of me resulted from random coalescing. I know all that.” Her tone was confident and mature without sounding contrived.

Mac sighed. He had done such a good job with her that she certainly could pass for normal on regular days, as required for emancipation. The realization stung.

Davi Leiko straightened suddenly and walked quickly past him, her legs taut and sleek over the red mandarin pumps and her round breasts jiggling from her staccato stride.

Mac turned to watch her go.

Her wavy black hair bounced slightly across her square shoulders, in counter-rhythm to the sway of her small round rear. A moment later, she was outside and gone.

Out on the crowded street again, Mac tumbled toward midnight under the gleaming clock tower. The sleepy rivers of cars ran thick as blood through the pedestrian flesh of bluff and sweaty Free Night wanderers.

“Well, hello there.” The voice was a gravelly contralto from a wrinkled redhead, pretty and freckled and blue-eyed.

Mac started in surprise. “Oh — how are you?”

“Oh-fine.” She smiled, nodding. “Back door knob, garage lock, hydraulic seal, bedroom vent.”

“What?”

“So how’ve you been, Mac? Shower curtain.”

“Aw, Carol. Why didn’t you come back with me and finish? You could’ve been so good, in fullness.”

“I like listing things. Three-way light bulbs, extension cords, screwdriver. Tonight I’m doing hardware and household items.”

“And you’ve aged so quickly. Would you like to come back some time soon? I can’t take you backwards, but I could still make some adjustments. Bring you to fullness from this point.”

“Socket wrench, staple gun, varnish remover. Curtain rods. Shovel.” Carol smiled bright white teeth in her wrinkled, freckled face and wandered off into the crowd.

Mac stood hands in pockets, wistfully watching the sway of frizzy orange hair departing. Her, too, he had made from the blood in his brain and the slivers in his heart. She, too, had declined fullness for early emancipation after tasting a couple of

Free Nights.

The system had never completely worked. In a garbled but queerly effective decision, Free Nights had been granted before fullness to prevent too much refining and polishing of the new personalities. The purpose was to prevent the creation of willing slaves and drones; generally it worked, since most of the new artificial people were more normal than not. For some reason, though, a few fell into the marginal category. The result was a certain small population of free crazies, harmless and productive as long as their halfwit propensities could be exercised freely on the prescribed nights and proscribed on all other nights.

The therapist leaned her chin down onto her desk and peered at him through stacks of books.

"Mac, why do all of your artificials fall into the marginal category? Not just a fractional percentage — one hundred percent. Why is that?"

Mac smiled weakly. "I guess I'm crazy. And pass it on."

She shook her head. "That's too easy. Try again. Why do all of them fall into the marginal category?"

"I guess I have a neurotic streak or something. It keeps showing up. Maybe I indulge myself in it and —"

"That's better. Now try the truth."

Mac sighed. "I like 'em a little crazy."

Across the crowded bluff and sweaty pavement, Davi Leiko leaned back against the stone blocks of a large building and crossed her naked ankles. She watched Mac without rancor or worry as he fought through a troop of Vikings in fur and horned helmets, holding shields and axes, moving down the street between slow-flowing cars.

Mac kept her in his bobbing vision and skipped around a small black pickup truck with wide silver stripes.

A moment later, he hopped up on the curb and came face to face with her clear Cantonese eyes. He started to speak and then suddenly turned to look up over his shoulder, high. Very high above, in a sky of black-streaked midnight blue shone white hazily from lights below, the clock tower angled weirdly over him. It was inching toward midnight with just a minute left.

Davi Leiko looked into his eyes without rancor or worry. "What is it really?"

"I wanted you to be all you can be." Mac forced a smile and shrugged nervously.

"No, you don't. What is it really?"

"I love you. I want to share my life with you."

"No, you don't. I haven't reached fullness. So I'm not really what you want — what you tried to make. I'm close, but I'm someone else. What is it really?"

"Uh ... I ... want you as you are. You're close enough."



She smiled with amusement and raised her eyebrows. "I'm not right, but I'm good enough?"

"Well ... sorta. I mean, I said that, but it wasn't supposed to sound like that."

"What is it really?"

Far above, a long clean chime sounded from the clock tower, reverberating through the bluff and sweaty night.

Mac fidgeted anxiously. "Loneliness. Fear of loneliness. Fear of an empty future."

Davi Leiko shrugged, and another chime sounded, sending pedestrians running for cover. As they left the streets, the car traffic began to speed up. Free Night was ending.

"Your future is clear enough. Your whole career is established. You create artificials. You're a professional in your field, and highly respected." Davi Leiko gave him a warm reassuring smile. Another chime sounded.

"No! I mean, that's not enough. Not what I meant. I want ... a companion. For my life."

"A companion of your own making, precisely designed to specifications?"

"Well ...." Mac smiled weakly. "When you think about it ... why not?"

Davi Leiko was still smiling, but now she was sad and disappointed. "I suppose. Why not, indeed."

Mac gazed at her face in panic, out of words to speak, out of hopes to plead, out of courage to act. Chimes rang out long and pure, chasing stragglers from the cooling, damp, and steamy streets. Mac felt himself nearly alone now, standing on the sidewalk next to a naked woman in the middle of the night.

Mac Tom hinted a shrug. "Love me," he whispered.

Davi Leiko smiled with a wistful sadness that belied her modern engineered heart. "I could do that. In fact, I do love you. You made me that way. But how could it ever be enough, with you knowing I never had any choice?"

"It's enough!" Mac cried urgently, as the final twelfth chime of midnight rang out long and sweet into the night sky.

"I love you too much for that." Davi Leiko winked at him and slid into a shadow. Her mandarin red pumps flashed farewell and she vanished into a night alley.

Mac Tom rocked back on pointed boots, alone on the damp and steamy corner of sidewalk. The Aysquare night was damp and steamy in the summer darkness, lit up Free Night neon over empty streets.

*Afterword to "Davi Leiko Till Midnight":*

*I wrote the first sentence of this story, in slightly different form, in the late '70s, when I was living in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Since I had only a vague idea of what I wanted, I stopped there at the time. Researching and writing my doctoral dissertation was also a major distraction then. Anyhow, the second sentence wasn't written until the summer of 1984, when I finished the story.*

*This story appeared in Twilight Zone Magazine in 1987, when the first sentence was about a decade old.*

*In this story, I wanted to try writing from the viewpoint of someone who was a little crazy, right on the edge but not over it, living in a crazy world. That's tricky, because the viewpoint of a truly crazy person is unreliable and therefore pointless. So I used the weird style, to go with the intense atmosphere and strange background.*

*No one else noticed it, but it remains a quirky favorite of mine.*

## **Fandom in Six Acts** **with no intermissions**

*(for Hal—who didn't make it; and for Nancy, Danny, Trish, and Eric who did)*

*by Laura LeHew*

### **Act One: The Troll**

You know him, this room-mate of mine,  
prancing in his too-tight tighty whiteys.

Committing spandex crimes,  
or changing clothes in the middle of the room—  
no matter who is there.

Hair in places you never imagined.  
Himself flying free.

Complaining about the room rate, convention  
bureau, room taxes, the room, amenities.

Eating all the food in the room;  
paying for none.

Asking, “did you tip the maid?”

When you go to science fiction conventions you are a fan. Pluralized fen. A group of fen then belongs to the larger family of “fandom.” Some people think that fandom is just a hobby or more correctly just a ghod-damn hobby: this group is comprised (mostly) of the people who’ve GAFIATED (gotten away from it all—fandom). Others believe that fandom is a way of life – FIAWOL. It is a conversation that SMOFs (secret masters of fandom) will debate for hours on end. Any fan that has been to a lot of conventions and/or is well liked may be bestowed with the status of BNF or “big name fan.” Those fans may then be asked to be a Fan Guest of Honor, FGoH, at various cons and to participate on panels and even be comped to other conventions. Guests get to wear pretty ribbons on their badges much like prize winning heifers (which they usually look like).

The World Science Fiction Convention. This convention changes locations every year. The location is voted for by fans three years prior to the actual WorldCon convention date (generally Labor Day but due to hotel contracts, fannish politics, or if the convention is not in North America, this date may change). You must mostly be present to vote. Though not always.

If the convention is held outside of North America, it is usually held at an earlier time in August, so that a NASFIC (North American Science Fiction Convention) can be held. A NASFIC is held whenever the location moves out of the country thus allowing the really affluent fans the ability to go to both cons. Fans vote for who gets to hold the NASFIC. Multiple locations can bid.

Location, location, location. Fans pick where cons will be held based on “bid parties.” Bid parties are usually at WorldCon and other large regional conventions. Those who throw the best parties get the most votes. Or, if there is a really cool location like Glasgow or Nippon that is bidding, they’ll get a lot of votes. The name of the WorldCon also possesses a place name based on its location, the WorldCon in San Jose became ConJose, the WorldCon in New Orleans became NolaCon. Con towns with multiple WorldCons are simply referred to as the 1<sup>st</sup> ChiCon (Chicago) or the 3<sup>rd</sup> ChiCon, etc. Additionally, just as every local con adds one year to their designation (i.e. Archon 27) the WorldCons add one to their count. ConJose, which was held for the first time in San Jose, was officially WorldCon 60.

Czarcon successfully changed the name/spelling of their every year so when creativity failed some of us trying to name a new convention we thought we’d have a contest to name the convention. And that every year thereafter we’d re-name it. So the first year it was NameThatCon1 and that’s how it became known; the name was finally shortened to NTC.

## **Act Two: The Ex**

There he is showing up at your door apologies in hand having gone to counseling.

Somehow you’ve told him WorldCon is in San Jose and he should come.  
So he does.

His fiancé is sweet and you invite them to dinner.

There you are taking him from party to party, saying “hey do you remember?”

And there are hugs all around.  
Somehow.

## Act Three: Flirtations

“I made this for you,”  
you say to that cute shy boy you’ve spotted

in all the parties,  
handing him a bottle cap.

“I made this for you,” you say handing him a plastic sign from the room.

Handing him someone else’s business card.  
A stir, a cup, a flyer, an empty bottle, a pen.

“I made him for you,” you say handing him your other friend,  
because you’ve run out of things.

Eventually you run out of people to give him  
so you say hello.

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Named after Hugo Gernsback, publisher of the first all science fiction magazine Amazing Stories. A Hugo is an award given for outstanding achievement in science fiction and is given out each year at the WorldCon. The best “down time” at WorldCon is during the Hugos—go back to your room, take a nap or a shower (whichever you need most) and put on your party clothes. Catch an elevator to the top floor of the party hotel (don’t forget your bottle of scotch) and wait for the Hugos to end. If you don’t time this absolutely correctly you’ll have to ride an elevator to the bottom, get out and stand in line to wait (up to a half an hour) to get up to the party floors. Always go to the highest floor—walking (or falling) down 20 flights is a lot easier than walking up.

The opposite of the Hugo award is the Hogu which is a fannish award given to the worst achievements in Science Fiction. Ranqueteers at the Hogu dine at McDonalds or other fast food restaurants and pay a minimum of \$1 to vote for their favorite worsts. Of the programming I’ve never been to, this event seems like it would be the most fun.

## Act Four: The Newbie

(Room-mate #2)

You try and convince your friend to come, you know she’ll have a great time.

She’s not sure.

You call her and tell her your husband won’t make it and she can have his badge.

She’s not sure.

You tell her she can crash, for free, in your hotel room.

(She comes anyhow.)

The first day your friend pours through the program book, finds panels, exhibits, stuff she absolutely must not miss.

You nod and say see you for dinner.

The second day your friend goes to a workshop and it’s boring so she leaves.

She goes to the masquerade and says “huh.”

The third day when you ask her if she’s going to the HUGOs she says “heck no, are you?”

## Act Five: Authors

He's lost, he's hungry  
you have a coupon.

He follows you, orders in front of you,  
grabs a table you don't like so you make him move.

He's an author.  
He tells you many things about himself.

He brags that he is the bartender in the SFWA suite.

His friend joins you.  
He's a writer, too.

He tells you many things about himself  
and finally

they ask about you saying "please—  
don't tell us you're a writer!"

You say "poet."  
And they sigh.

Later you crash the SFWA suite since  
you know most everyone there anyhow.

You run into the two writers  
and they try to introduce you to your ex.

Science Fiction Writers Association. Active members have to have published at least one novel or three short stories. SFWA has a suite at WorldCon where they throw huge, private parties, for writers only. Or writers plus a guest. A guest being someone like a date or a spouse or just someone the writer wants to impress (sleep with). There is always a strict door Nazi guarding the writers from their fans—only BNF's can crash these parties. The object of SFWA party crashers is the ever-esteemed, ever-changing SFWA party sticker thus allowing repeated entry into the suite over the course of the con.

(Introduce you to your ex). There was this writer you probably heard of, William F. Wu. Bill to his friends. Author of the Hugo (and Nebula) nominated stories—"Wong's Lost and Found Emporium" and "Hong's Bluff." Anyhow there was this girl, you know her, she lived in St. Louis while Bill was living in Kansas City. He had decided to move to California (where the girl didn't really want to go since she didn't like it there). They were trying to decide if they should get married or break up. So they gathered their friends around in a circle. Bill flipped a coin. They broke up. Which was probably for the best since he got back together with Dianna and even though that didn't work out either he did get to see Chelsea (his step daughter) who eventually gave Bill three beautiful little grandchildren (boys). The girl married Hal who she met at ConFrancisco (after moving to California to be with Eric). At the time all their friends thought they were goofy.

Later the girl's little sister stole this same idea and flipped a coin at her (the little sisters') second marriage. This time the little sister did marry the guy only to divorce him two years later (but now the little sister is sleeping with her ex-husbands' younger cousin so I guess it really did all work out in the end).

## **Act Six:    Poison Oak Girl and the Psychic Vampire**

(Room-mate #3)

Tecnu Cream? You were never allergic to poison oak. Nope. Never. Not until the one day you were hiking with your friend, Andy. The shortest route to the bottom was down a steep embankment. Covered in poison oak. Andy took the long way. You slid down. Tecnu cream is a homeopathic remedy that actually cures you of poison oak/ivy. It's best applied when you first make contact with the offending bush.

Another girlfriend flies in, early, to visit you but you are out of town.

She is going to borrow your car so she can BART into the City plus

that way she won't waste any valuable vacation time. Your girlfriend can't find the keys to your car.

Does she despair?

No—she finds the bus schedule, decides to walk

through weeds and undergrowth recently mowed and abated for fire risk (never

realizing) as the on coming car tries to mow her down that she has landed in poison oak and (she thinks) it's

a good thing she has shorts on because she only ripped her legs and not her pants (which she'll need at the convention).

And when you do eventually find her worn out from walking mostly six miles and back

(the busses were on the Sunday schedule) you both jump in the hot tub only to find

the next day she is all blistery so now you have to drain your hot tub and she has to apply Tecnu cream

and rubbing alcohol but it spreads everywhere anyhow

in addition to your having to share your bed with the Troll (who was going to sleep



with her) and just at that moment she  
recalls how every moment of every convention

one or the other of you two is always injured  
concluding (erroneously) one or the other of you must be

a psychic vampire  
and it ain't her.

A psychic vampire is  
someone who sucks all  
the enjoyment out of the  
life of their friend thus  
causing the friend some  
debilitating illness or injury.  
The current origin of  
psychic vampires is  
thought be Kansas City, a  
notorious den of  
debauchery. It is assumed  
that the master psychic  
vampire is, in fact, Nancy  
Nutt though no "actual"  
proof can be found. Fans  
sent to dispatch Ms. Nutt  
have been found  
wandering aimlessly with  
heretofore unexplained  
"Get Out of Hell Free"  
cards stapled to their  
name tags. When further  
pushed to explain these  
cards Ms. Nutt mutters  
something about "sicking  
the Warthog" on them.

## Animation at Home

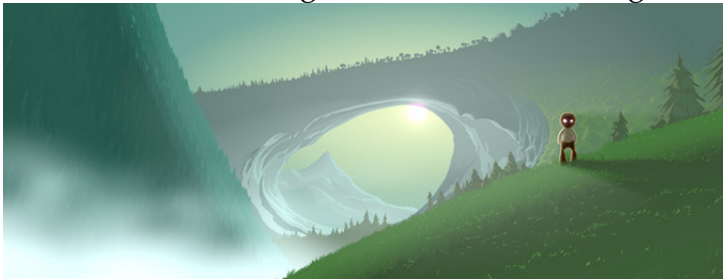
When I got my first computer, an Atari ST 1040, way back in the 80s, one of my goals was to make my own cartoon. I spent hours sitting over it painstakingly putting together a 90 second spot – clumsy, blocky, and in the last few seconds my main characters limbs scattered all over the screen in an accidental polygon explosion that I was never able to solve. It wasn't a very pretty beginning, but I jumped into my next project. I wanted to do one of my short stories in a twenty or thirty minute length, something that would be completely mine.

I never got past the first scene, sadly. And with the intervening years and file formats, I don't have anything left from these two projects to show anyone. The quality of my animation was very poor, but what I had really wanted to accomplish was storytelling in a new medium, and (I kept telling myself) the story would trump clumsy animation.

I haven't kept up with the field, but it's obvious that today projects like this are tenable. There are a number of inexpensive, sometimes even free, software suites suitable for home animation. Even Lego makes a Lego video camera with software for kids wanting to make stop motion movies of their Lego figures.



YouTube is too big to even bother looking for undiscovered



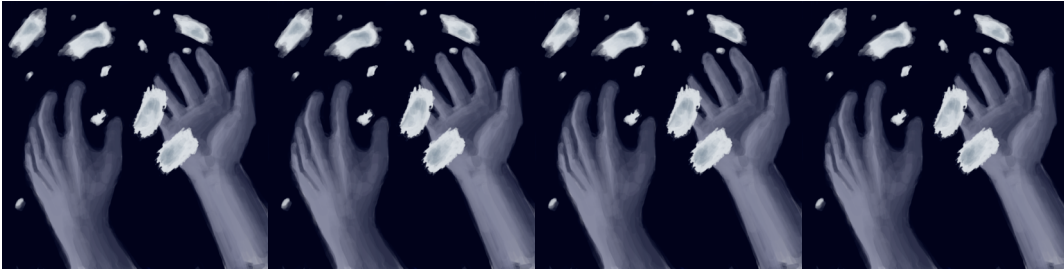
gems.

Newgrounds

, <http://www.newgrounds.com>, is a website dedicated to home grown flash cartoons with over 150,000 animations. The site contains lots of parodies and derivative material, but also some

original stories if you dig for them. I've been going through their best of 2009 collection. The Brackenwood Series by Adam Phillips (to be found at <http://www.newgrounds.com/collection/brackenwood.html>) caught my interest. What I've been looking for are short movies, something with characters; a story with a beginning, middle, and end; something created by an individual or a small group of people without major advertising or corporate sponsorship

I'd love to start a dialogue about it. What are the best shorts out there, who are the best small artists, who is working without a studio? How to get started making animations? What are the best tools out there, what is the easiest to get started on and which ones have the best features for later on?



## Tear Here

By Eric Sonstroem

Wendell Oscar Bently. Male. 37.

After "Write out: Full Name, Sex, Age," it gives out. Torn into pieces it seems, and I can't find the others. My files, you understand, were assembled under extreme circumstances. I didn't always have time for scissors and paste. This, part of a credit card application, was probably meant to be removed. "Tear here" it invites. So I tear. I tear and tear and tear and tear. Bliss. But now it's just a scrap: Name, sex, age. An invitation to write, true, but so little. It's not enough. Still: "Write." So: My story.

I live here in these noisy, rented downtown rooms, although I own a condominium outside the beltway. Such is life. Such is my life, I should say, and all because of damned classifieds.

Reading classifieds, I should warn, is a big mistake. Newspaper stories are bad enough--all these murdered postmen--but classified section is quicksand. I read: A pool table with no drop pockets was in good condition. Also, there was a phone number. There was a group yard sale at a certain address. Baby clothes and toys. Rain date Sunday. Someone, and another phone number, will install vintage linoleum. And a thousand, thousand more. An endless chain of signification. But no significance. My hands shook. I wept. "I'm just one," I cried. "I lead a simple life. Surely, Lord, I needn't know all this!"

But shake and weep and cry, my petition went unheeded: classifieds kept coming, thump!, every morning on the landing, regular as the postman. "Washer/Drier \$150 555-8477." Damn. "What am I to do, O Lord? Compile a database of noun pairs, monetary amounts, phone numbers?" (Or perhaps they aren't phone numbers. It doesn't say, does it? 555-8477. Three digits, a dash, four more. Is it a subtraction problem? Do you begin to understand me now? It pretends to be information. It's not.) "Why?" I screamed, panic rising like a sodium pentothal shot. "Am I somehow responsible for all this?"

Then: Relief. In the wilderness of information, I spotted an instruction, clear and concise. A verb. Indeed, an imperative. "For rent. 2 Br Apt. No pets. Central location. \$750/Mo. Call 555-5342." Ah-ha! Call! I called. The Lord works in mysterious ways.

"I'm calling," I said, instantly relieved.

A pause. "You're calling about the apartment?"

I dislike questions. Questions make me nervous, make me spit another haughty detail into the deluge that's already drowning us. "Yes!" I could say, heroically. Or, perhaps, "No!" She would hear my answer, act accordingly, but (in my heart of hearts) could I know my information was sound? Questions: bad. Commands: good. Starting to panic I replayed her sentence (in my head of heads), removed the upward lilt, made question a statement, made statement a command: "You're calling about the apartment!"

"OK," I said. "I'm calling about the apartment." Relief.

"Good. Tell me when you're free, then come and see it."

I told. I came. I saw. I rented. Bliss.

But bliss, like shampoo, is short lived. ("Lather, rinse, repeat," it says, a soothing mantra, an infinite loop if you let it. I do. Three hours later, bliss turns panic again: "A liberal amount" you need, but bottle is empty. How many times, dripping, naked, have I run to my files?)

I rented. In my apartment I stood waiting, like Job, like Jonah in the belly of the whale. Like Jesus on the cross. Like . . . I begin to hate promiscuous, multiplying metaphor! The apartment was clean and empty. The walls smelled of fresh, white paint. Good. I stood, renting, in my new apartment. "I'm on track," I said. "I called. I told. I came. I saw. Now, I'm renting."

And now? The question (damn!) nibbled my mind. I prayed for further instruction. No instruction came. Then, afternoon sun dropping lower, the light slanted dangerously across the walls. Dangerously? Yes. Angled light coaxed unwanted detail out of the blank white. Nail and thumbtack holes, furniture dents and scrapes, tattered cobwebs in intricate fractal decay. Worse, paint brushes and rollers had left tiny speckles, ridges, lines. Closer inspection revealed miniature hills, valleys, rolling deserts--vast landscapes mapped with excruciating detail on every painted surface.

"O Lord! Is this my map? Must I decipher this too?" There were no borders, no roads, no destinations, no places at all. Only ambiguity atop ambiguity like, like--ha!--like layers of white paint on wallboard. And now? And now? I panicked.

In the kitchen I found the stove's instruction manual. Five minutes later I was happy: plugging, unplugging, turning on, off, NOT putting empty pans on hot burners, NOT drying clothes in the oven. My life had direction.

Direction!

So I decided to make my files. I started right there, tearing good parts out of stove's manual, stuffing remainder down garbage disposal. I did the same with the other appliance manuals. Before I fell asleep, I'd amassed a hundred discrete flutters of happiness, a hundred direct avenues to bliss.

I scoured used bookstores the next day, searching out only certain kinds of books. How To Throw a Successful Party, How To Meet Your Neighbors, How To Get Rich With The Lowly Peanut. A dozen other volumes fell prey to scissors and garbage disposal.

In times of trouble, my files work better than even the Good Book. Sure, you might get lucky. Open to something direct and to the point like "Go out of the midst of Babylon, my people!" But chances are you'll hit "The daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks," and what, I ask you, can you do with that? Ponder it, I suppose, or use it in loathed metaphor. The first I saved. The second went down the disposal with the rest.

There. Done. "Write," it said. So: I wrote. Bliss. You will excuse if I leave you abruptly, but I've important business to attend. My life is on track, you understand. I've a clear sense of purpose. First I must "invite the postman for coffee." Bliss. Then I must "slice into small portions, and arrange attractively in spiral on platter." Bliss. Then "lie on back and do thirty leg lifts, knees bent." Bliss.

I'm a very busy man. And very happy.

