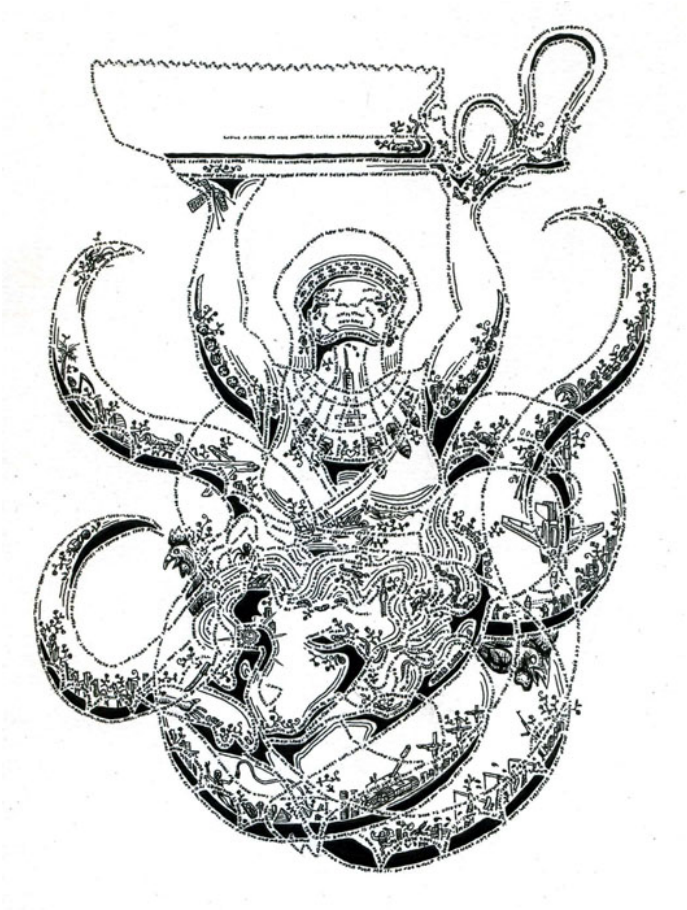
SHORT STORY

Deep Blue

by Philip Steiner



"Allat and Her Bone Saw" by Joseph Reyes

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Impenetrable darkness surrounds Ahmed thousands of meters under the surface. He cannot move, nor breathe; there is no escape from the deep sea and its hideous creatures lurking in the shadows. Yet, he is not in need of oxygen. *Where am I? How did I get here?*

A stream of questions surges through Ahmed's consciousness like a swarm of anchovies; always restless, always moving. Panic ebbs and flows in his mind; a conflict that cannot be resolved. The pressure of the deep sea threatens to squash his lungs and make his eyes pop, but it never does. There is only pain.

A symphony of alien sounds surrounds Ahmed. The angelic voices of mighty humpback whales mix with the arbitrary clicking of sperm whales, blending in with a conglomeration of low-pitched drones, buzzing and bubbling noises. There is no smell underwater, and in this situation of overwhelming sensual torture, Ahmed does not need his olfactory nerves going haywire too. Still, none of his thoughts could be clear enough to penetrate the critical realm of his brain to question such things anyway.

The sound of swimming objects is drawing closer. Small bulbs of blinding light approach Ahmed. Grotesque muddy faces armed with overlong teeth move past him, indifferently skimming his skin. One of the ghastly creatures halts right in front of his face, its empty transparent eyes inspecting him, seemingly lusting for his very soul. *Allah, please have mercy. How do I deserve such treatment?* The anglerfish comes closer, almost touching Ahmed's nose with one of its sharp fangs. Out of the corners of his eyes he can see other abominations gliding past his meager figure. The physical sensation of myriads of different scales and slimy skins scraping and worming over his body joins the pain; taking place between the anguish and the fear. They become one in overarching torment, a triumvirate of pure agony. The screen freezes.

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"Look closely, my dear students. Suck in every precious detail of this state-of-the-art simulation. Observe the vital signs displayed at the edge of the screen. Concentrate on the activation patterns of the different brain areas. Listen closely to the inner monologues rendered audible by the speakers. Study the memory fragments shown in the next section. Learn."

Dr. Martin Tremblay, head programmer of SimCom, observes the mixed reactions of his students with euphoric curiosity. Some have turned away from the screen while others gaze quietly, their faces filled with the expression of wonder.

"How does it feel you might ask, right? That is what it ultimately boils down to. The reality of the experience," he proclaims in showmanish fashion.

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All eyes are on Martin, eagerly awaiting for him to share his professional wisdom.

“I see. You all want to understand what you are witnessing right now, don’t you?” Affirmative nods. “Some of you might find this simulation to be utterly despicable, inhumane in terms of morality. And some of you, I presume, see the scientific value of it, and maybe also the artistic one. Let us proceed and see if you can get the fundamental idea behind this project.”

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No! When will this stop? Anxiety is built up in Ahmed’s brain by malevolent, intelligent design. The creatures are gone. All of a sudden darkness encompasses him once again. Finally, he finds relief in loneliness. The pain decreases significantly, and Ahmed’s mind is freed from some of its shackles. *Let’s think about this logically. If I concentrate hard enough, I will surely remember how I got here.*

Vivid images appear before his inner eye: a happy childhood memory of their family garden in Damascus inhabited by armies of colorful flowers; bright purple hibiscus and a gentle, wrinkly old man hand holding his tiny arms, spinning him around. Punishment: you were a bad boy, ask Allah for forgiveness; God is great. First love, red lipstick completing an already perfect face; sexual pleasure, soft buttocks, tender breasts, hard rosy nipples, the first dive into the wet depth. Shame, fear, anger; it’s the word of Allah; no questions, only answers.

Ahmed is lost in thought, wandering lightly down the fragmented trail of his memory and identity. He neither sees nor hears the gigantic shadow approaching. A pair of titanic fins cut through the great depth. Deathless deep blue eyes; a massive black hole, absorbing every last bit of stray light, set to gulp down the feeble human form.

Distant echoes of a long-gone past reach his ears, paint pictures of traumatic events: Blood and gore; a skinny mother cat with dark, dried blood in her fur lies on the dirty roadside, her starving kittens greedily sucking on her empty tits; tangible gut-wrenching smell as he holds the hand of a companion perishing in defense of the homeland; aggression, pride, failure, behind bars of everlasting steel. A tall, white, shiny man puts forth inconvenient questions; denial; torture; acceptance; treachery; A small caliber barrel to the head, salvation.

Ahmed opens his oak brown eyes, gazing into the bottomless hole. *La ilaha illa Allah mohammad rassulu Allah.* He fades away, engulfed by the pitch-black void. Freeze.

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All eyes are on the screen, revealing utter disbelief.

“Death or life? That is the final question, my dear students. For each of us, naturally. Especially, at times when digital immortality seems so close at hand… with countless studies being carried out. We are not quite there yet.”

“Well, some believe we were granted access to immortality a long time ago, sir.” A handful of students chuckle about the witty remark, others frown or roll their eyes.

“Yes! No need to be ignorant of those cultural matters, ladies and gentlemen. Because… that is precisely the point! Precisely! Good old Ahmed in there, and his digital brothers and sisters, were created so we could study just that. Let me elaborate…”

Restless whispering, sighs and silent jokes fill the laboratory of SimTech. The noise builds up for only a few seconds, but too long for Tremblay.

“Silence! I will not tolerate such arrogant nonsense. We are talking science here, nothing else. Let me elaborate. According to a quite old pseudoscientific myth when a person dies, especially a religious person, something in their brain — presumably their soul — vanishes instantly, going somewhere else. As you rightly, or hopefully, assume, the mysticism surrounding this issue is of no importance. Yet, the deformation of the brain patterns is. I, or better we at SimTech are, carrying out these particular simulations to measure exactly this change in potential, both with non-believing sim-clones and believing ones. In the exemplary simulation you are watching, we are dealing with the latter. So, has one of you been smart enough to catch the actual methodological concept behind the rather lavish simulation at hand?”

A small dark-haired, eager-to-please looking girl with dark circles under her eyes raises her hand with lightning speed and croaks out:

“It’s about debunking that stuff isn’t it? For centuries humanity has had to put up with that stuff, like back in the Middle Ages, when no one could learn anything that was not just about that Christ guy who did that big-time miracle and then had his stories written down by those people, and later... later… later nobody was even allowed to read that, right!? Since no one knew that dead language but the priests did and the pope…”

“Nonsense! What’s it with that rubbish you are piling up there? Next!”

“Well, I do suppose it is about the fear he is experiencing, about losing his mind, but then…how do we get to the…”

“Next one!” Tremblay grunts as he cuts short the attempt of the huge, chubby, full-bearded student.

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“I think I’ve got it, Professor,” calls out a tall, curly black-haired Iranian Student.

“Okay, please enlighten your colleagues.”

“First, I suppose that you try to put the sim-clone in a situation stressful enough to push it to a point where it inevitably has to resort to its only remaining source of hope, God. Second, having reached that religious peak, you raise both the psychological and physical strain to the unbearable maximum, eventually cementing the certainty of death in the clone’s mind. Finally, you eliminate “good old Ahmed” at the point of resignation… catharsis, and you harvest the brain data. Am I right, Dr. Tremblay?”

“Superb, simply superb! I am delighted to answer in the affirmative, Ms.…?”

“Javadi, thank you.”

“Ah, Ms. Javadi. So, concerning your analysis of the methodological concept, you are absolutely right. I could have hardly explained it better myself. But… at what stage are we currently in the simulation?” A sarcastic smile appears on Tremblay’s face and he winks at Javadi in a playful manner. “Got you too, Ms. Javadi. I can see it in your olive-green eyes. You thought we had already reached catharsis. But no, we have not. We are not there yet, not quite. And actually, it is not just about eliminating the sim-clone. We will go further; put it beyond death. More memory overload, severely increased pain, and death followed by a subsequent resurrection after two seconds. Let the brain think it is dead when it is both dead and alive at almost the same time. Two measurements of the electromagnetic potential will be carried out: one when he is dead, the second when he is beyond that stage. Then we discard the sim-clone, delete its data. Salvation.

“But…, Professor,” says Javadi whose facial expression clearly shows that she does not feel completely comfortable about the simulation anymore, “that is far beyond any ethical stance on the issue.”

“I am well aware of that, Ms. Javadi. Still, a sim-clone is a sim-clone is a sim-clone; nothing to worry about. The legislation is quite clear in that regard. It is only data. Now watch, my dear students.”

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Horror and shock mark Ahmed’s face. *But… it… it has devoured me. Has it not? What… where am I… what am I?* As he turns around, he sees the shadowy figure; it has simply moved through him. *Nothing makes sense… nothing at all.*

Again, an ever-increasing number of deep-sea creatures gather around Ahmed, curiously investigating his body; myriads of weirdly-shaped eyes dissect every inch of homo

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sapien flesh. Ahmed closes his eyes once again, fleeing into the semi-conscious memory stream: Awake in the prison; flesh wound; victory? Songs of mourning on the street: a bright future; everyone is dead; father lying in the bathroom, half his brain decorates the tile work; mother, a starved corpse in a rocking chair — still rocking. Siblings, three brothers resting under foreign earth; love? Long gone.

An army of voracious creatures tastes Ahmed's flesh, gnawing, biting, chewing; swallowing him piece by piece. His empty eyes are set on something far away until they are chosen for the feast.

Voices and prayer. A well-known imam proclaiming oblivion and a new dawn, right as the majestic ball of fire rises above the horizon. Unshakable belief, nothing else. A boat: a gateway to a brave new world promising peace and prosperity. Hope: great expectations bursting into a thousand shards; rejection because of greed, fingers pointing at Ahmed's face, calling him names, denying to share their wealth. Loud voices, denouncing him, wrong god, wrong skin color, wrong childhood, wrong… smile? Another boat — smaller, overfilled with frightened faces, is sent back into the abyss.

Only his bones are left; his skull, the last fortress preserving the integrity of his human brain.

The boat capsizes; waving hands, shrill infant cries, retinas frozen in utter disbelief, unable to comprehend the inhumane treatment they have to endure. Stroke, stroke, stroke; swallowing seawater; stroke, stroke; more seawater runs down his throat; stroke; seawater flooding his lungs, vanishing sight. A body sinking down to the depths of the ocean.

Ahmed's skull bursts under the pressure of mighty jaws.

La ilaha illa Allah mohammad rassulu Allah. La ilaha illa Allah mohammad rassulu Allah. Allahu Akbar. Freeze.

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Illuminated by dozens of anglerfish, the restored body of Ahmed floats thousands of meters under the surface. His heart is beating, pumping digital blood through his arteries up to the brain. In cathartic shock it resonates, its chaotic electromagnetic potentials creating a collage of life and death, as they are subject to cautious measurement. Dull eyes transfixed by the unspeakable. Until, after only seconds, the body becomes obsolete and fades away. Dissolving bytes become part of the grand digital ocean.

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