

META

Kira Symington

Dreams lap at the shores of my unconscious.

Uncontrollable waves hitting the sand.

Craash.

Craaash.

Crash.

And soon I would be rid of them altogether. It was strange to imagine a night without dreams, a whole world without them. **But they had to go.**

"What good were they?" my META therapist once asked me, their hologram fuzzy with static. And I could not answer; my mouth filled with the cotton of unformed words. *Words that felt dry. Jumbled. Sticky?*

What good were they?

I had wondered that many times myself; **they stole the time** I could have spent sleeping awake: learning new lines of code, networking... and *god, anything other than dreaming*. I was **half as productive, as connected, as human** as I could be. You know, like that myth that people believed back then; the one that went something like we only use 10% of our brains (or was it 2%?). Like that but true.

I only said it aloud once, but I sort of... liked losing control for a brief moment in time, the way one could only do in dreams. I liked living the unscripted fantasy and I liked not working; all of which were **symptoms of escapism**, as my therapist said.

Could you blame me? I had been (**soon no longer**) partially blind (in function) for so long. The META had escaped me, not the other way around. I was the one digitally disconnected from the whole universe of being, the augmented world, because my body, my frail spine, my sluggish nervous system, whatever the doctors said was wrong with me that I didn't listen to because I was sick, sick of hearing that **I wasn't normal**, that I was stuck on this lesser plane of reality, that I am utterly and terribly alone and now! Now **they could fix me**.

The appointment is in three days.

Waiting.

Waiting.

Waiting.

I could be patient. But I can't help tapping my fingers, my toes, and any other limb capable of tapping.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Like a metronome of anxiety, counting every minute, every second, every millisecond, I tap. I remind myself; *I could be patient. I could be patient. I could be patient.* And a thought interrupts the metronome, *I would be a patient. Ha! Clever, without even meaning to be.* I fight the smug, self-satisfied smile that crawls up my face like some sort of irrepressible balloon that pulls and tugs at the corners of my mouth.

Vanity. I try to pop it.

A bizarre twitching coils under the muscles of my face. Instead of the *tap, tap, tap*, there was now a *twitch, twitch, twitch*. I breathe in and out. *In and out. In and out.*

I wonder if the others, the ones that could see the world perfectly, as it

is, also felt anxious. Did they ever feel nervous? Were they ever struck by the horrible, stomach-clenching, shaking-hands, sweaty-brow nerves that I was? And did they ever feel the heights of relief as I soon would?

I had asked my therapist that once. They shook their head slowly, and, as if speaking to a child or someone very very old, they said that **the perfect connection of META cured any mental ills caused by the alienation of individuality.** *Alienation*, I taste the word on my lips. I roll it back and forth on my tongue. *Aliennnationnnn. Aliennnation.* *Aliennnnnn. Alien.* It tasted bitter like wine or horseradish, but there was a hint of something else. *A bird? A bird's wing? A blue, open sky?*

I think this alienation is driving me insane. I know my therapist would agree with more technical-sounding words, **"The only cure for the distress caused by the state of this lesser reality is META. META offers perfect relief to the troubled mind by the seamless integration of..."** *Yada yada yada.* I got the drift the first time.

But they were proud of me (so they said). I had made do with the META contacts for so long. **An imperfect solution for an imperfect person.** (They said the first part; I could fill in the rest).

But I hate the word perfect. I don't want them to call me that once I'm integrated. It disgusts me, even more than my condition. It tastes like rot and smells like something evil.

I fiddle with the case in my hands. It's sleek and black with little scuff marks from the times I dropped it, which I did often because of its godawful glitches. One moment I would be walking up technicolor stairs with gleaming, gold balustrades and the next, there would be this *fuzziness*

in my ears,

my eyes,

my head,

then I would be walking on dirty stairs made from a material I did not have the words for. **The real world, the augmented world**, would melt away, like a witch in water, into this ugly, physical *thing*. My castle transformed into a mudhole, my work into mindless machinery.

It was in those moments that my legs would trip over themselves, my case would fall to the floor with a *thunk!* and my arms would flail wildly in the air as I fell.

The physical world was, *is*, such a painful thing. Covered in bruises and a dust I hadn't known was there moments earlier, I would become keenly aware of the physicality of the people helping me up, their chameleon coats glitching in and out of existence, showing the raw flesh under their virtual skins. Their smiles flashing back and forth, sparkling white teeth transforming into yellowed chipped ones and transforming back in the span of milliseconds.

And I would choke.

Mouth agape.

No breath.

Then panic, dizzy, spiraling panic coursing through every last vein—*veins! How terribly aware I would be of their veins! Their real skin never had them, but the wrinkled, veiny hands reaching towards me, towards mine!*

The appointment is in two days.

Waiting.

Waiting.

I must be excited, they told me on our last holo-talk. It felt more like a command than a statement. Maybe it was. If it was, I must take it seriously. They were the ones with the title. Royalty had gone under a name-change. The duke was now a Doctor of this or that. The baronesses have several such degrees of importance. But what does that make me? The court jester?

I had looked at my therapist in that moment, building a tower of true sincerity and utter seriousness, *a feat that took much mental willpower, more than I imagined it took the average person*, and then! Like juggling balls spinning and twirling and flying and crashing down (with the sound of those cymbals that little toy monkeys smash together), my tower came tumbling into this *fuzziness*.

bzzz

phzzzz

fzzz

Their hologram had blurred in and out of being, and at once I could see that there was someone standing behind them, their holo-clothes, their META skin, their whole being stripped bare in a flash.

I looked around.

Someone in a pinstriped suit, now naked.

A floating dress disappeared like a magic trick gone dirty.

A bejeweled crown snatched out of existence.

*And they were all so unaware!
Unaware of their bodies!
Unaware of their poverty!
Unaware of their ignorance!
As naked as the day they were born, wearing imaginary clothes, walking
in imaginary castles, connecting with imaginary people!
Adam and Eve factory-made!
Never bothering to eat the apple.
Never bothering to open their eyes.
How funny!*

All that in one millisecond.

Then the glitch ended.

And I was utterly, truly ashamed of myself (**as I should be**).

I felt seasick, lurched back into reality so suddenly.

Stupid.

Mad.

I was alone, insane, laughing at a joke that wasn't there.

Not for much longer.

The appointment is in one day.

Waiting.

I did not sleep. I did not want to miss my unproductive dreams. **They were bad** for me, like eating until you were bursting at the seams and

then choosing to drink your day's allowance of water all at once like an idiot and feeling so filled that you might explode like a balloon or a missile or a shooting star.

Boom! Pow! Whoosh!

I still ate. Apparently, when you were fully integrated into META with the whole thing inside your brain like some sort of benevolent parasite or hive mind (a *parasitic wasp!*) so you can **live in reality** instead of having to use a shitty ancient version of the tech which only really worked on your sight and still glitched like hell because you were kinda born too different for the world to be nice or even exist for you... and I don't remember where I was going with this.

Sometimes my trains of thought run off the rails, whatever trains were. People didn't need to go anywhere these days. Not when you could work in your sleep. Anyway, **that wouldn't happen after my META surgery**, I'm sure.

Remember. It was something about food...

Steak, juicy and delicious.

It will taste better in META.

Bliss.

*There was that saying... how did it go again?
something... was bliss?*

Today.

The appointment is now.

They usher me into the waiting room.

I do not wait.

My ushers stand guard as they strap me onto a black table.

My body is spread in a perfect t.

Grave silence.

Sacred quiet.

They smile, and, although there is no glitch, I can see their yellowed (*sharp?*) teeth.

Their virtual clothes are blindingly white.

Their scalpels gleam.

Their hands are cold.

I feel small.

I feel scared.

And I don't know why.

They poke something in my arm.

It hurts.

I feel the ocean of my unconscious rise for one last time. My final dream engulfs me. And my heart thunders in my chest like the foamy peaks of the sea dashing themselves upon the rocks. I want them to slow, to be

normal, to be steady. I wonder why they throw themselves into formless oblivion. Why do they wish for their own destruction? I breath in and out. In and out. In and out...

Uncontrollable waves hitting the sand.

Craash.

Craaash.

Crash.

This time there are no others to take their place.

The blinding surgery light evaporates the ocean.

Dust.

Ashes.

Bones.

And utter silence.

...

...

...

"How are you feeling?"

"..."

"Perfect."

*Double-majoring in philosophy and English, **Kira Symington** likes to take philosophical approaches to her writing. Outside of her literary experiments, she is a general reporter and the opinion editor for UND's student newspaper, the Dakota Student.*