

FAR AS YOU CAN GO

Greg Van Eekhout

New writer Greg Van Eekhout has made sales to *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, *Polyphony*, *Flytrap*, *Say... Ideomancer*, *Starlight*, and elsewhere. Many of those stories have just been released in his first collection, *Show and Tell and Other Stories*. When not writing, Van Eekhout works as an instructional designer and an educational technologist in the suburbs of Phoenix, Arizona.

In the aptly named story that follows, we set out in company with a determined man on a quest who goes just about as far as you can go in a bizarre and constrained future world—and if that's not far in today's terms, that certainly doesn't mean that he doesn't have to overcome plenty of dangers and obstacles along the way, or encounter not a few wonders.

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I didn't go to school because I was allergic to the neuroboosters, but that didn't mean I was stupid. It just meant I had a lot of time on my hands. Mostly, I hung out with Beeman, scrap-combing all over Ex-Town and trading metal and electronic bits and whatever for food and goods and services. We were good businessmen.

Beeman was a robot, only it didn't matter so much to me because all the skin on his face was torn away so you could see his plastic cheeks and hear the whiz-whirr of his eyes when they moved. This made him okay, because he wasn't pretending to be a person or anything else he wasn't. He wasn't trying to be fake.

We were going over our day's take the afternoon that I first smelled the Far-away. The gray outlines of the downtown towers faded into the sky like sick ghosts, and over our heads, police stingers whined, invisible in the

haze. Beeman and I sat with our backs against a crumbled section of concrete wall. At my feet was a can of split-pea soup, not too far out of date, a couple of nine volt batteries, a coil of O-net cable, and two stainless steel rods that were maybe chopsticks.

“Good trade,” Beeman said, his words beginning and ending with a little click that I wished would go away. The click hadn’t always been there in his speech, but I figured his voicebox was a little broken.

“Except for the soup,” I said. “I’ll bring that home to my mom.”

“Your mom is fat and eats too much.”

“Shut your grill.” I banged the soup can against his head, but not hard enough to dent either. Beeman wasn’t trying to be mean. He just had some bad lines of code.

I was about to explain that my mom didn’t eat too much, but the stuff she got from her job at the shoe factory had too much fat and carbohydrate content. I didn’t know how to explain carbohydrates to Beeman. Like a battery with too much juice, and not good juice? But then there was this gust of wind, not hot and sticky like normal Ex-Town wind, but cool, like opening the refrigerator, and strange and salty.

“What the fuck is that?” I said.

Beeman activated his olfactories—we thought he might have been some kind of domestic servant with kitchen duties before he lost his face and came this way—and I kept my mouth shut while he did some analysis. After a while, he said, “I’ll show you.”

He pulled up his T-shirt, which he wore not to be fake, but to help keep dirt out of the cracks in his torso, and displayed an image from his media library on the LCD screen above his left nipple-hatch. It showed a big blue field, like the sky on a good day, only made of liquid, rolling with white foam. Clean white birds dove into it. It looked like another world, empty, no clutter, no choking haze, no jagged concrete or melted mounds of spray-form construction. Just peaceful, going all the way out to the clean horizon.

“It’s the sea,” said Beeman. “We’re smelling the sea.”

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It didn't last long. The freak wind died, and soon Ex-Town smelled like Ex-Town again, and I felt weirdly achy, like something had been stolen from me. I wanted more of the sea, and I told Beeman that I wished we could go to the ocean, and he shrugged and said, "Why can't we?"

There were so many reasons why we couldn't go, but I let him run on. He said we could wade into the water. We could dig for shellfish. We could build a crab trap and make a driftwood fire and cook the crabs in the fire. We could even go fishing.

"Fishing," he said, "is when—"

"I know what fishing is." Just because I didn't go to school didn't mean I didn't know anything. I still went through programs and read, so I knew that fishing is when you try to kill a fish by tricking it with food, only it's not just food but also a deadly hook, and when the fish bites into your hook you remove the fish from its environment, and that's what kills it.

I told him I was all for it, but I'd have to stop by home first and gather some supplies. Which was really just my way of putting Beeman off. I wasn't going anywhere, definitely not off to some beach that might as well have been on the Moon. But I didn't tell Beeman straight up, because once his brain got stuck in a loop, he could be really annoying. Like the time he told me we were going to slay dragons. He had some stories in his memory, and sometimes they leaked out and he took them for real, so for a whole week we couldn't do a thing without him telling me to look out for dragons and saying what we'd do if we found a dragon and warning me that dragons were all this and dragons were all that, and it didn't stop until he accidentally touched a non-insulated wire and got a little jolt that finally shut him up.

So, I avoided Beeman for the better part of a week. Which wasn't fun, because without Beeman, I couldn't come up with an excuse not to spend more time at home.

When Mom wasn't at the shoe factory lacing shoes, she was on the couch, watching TV. There were always burning houses on the screen, and burning palm trees, with flames shooting from the fronds like torches in a traveling Frankenstein electric show.

"I smelled the ocean," I called to her from the stove as I opened the can of pea soup me and Beeman had salvaged earlier. The soup *shlorped* out of

the can in a waxy, cylindrical blob. I mushed it down with a spoon. "It was just for a minute," I said, "but it smelled nice." I stirred, smoothing the soup out. "My friend Beeman says he knows how to get there, to the beach. He says it's nice. I think maybe he used to live there, before he... before he got sick and came to Ex-Town." Mom knew I had a friend named Beeman, but that's all she knew about him.

The soup got more liquidy and looked more like food. When it started to bubble, I turned down the heat, poured a bowl for Mom and half a cup for myself, and took it out to the living room.

Mom was still staring at the TV. Now it was a hospital ER, with people brought in bleeding. The announcer was talking about a dust girl attack. I turned the volume down and set Mom's soup on a tray in front of her. I checked her pulse and pupils to make sure she hadn't had a stroke, but she was okay. She'd come off a seventeen-hour shift, so she was just crashing from the pump they put in her drink to keep her going. I put her hand on the spoon and she started to feed herself.

"Beeman says we could catch fish right out of the sea. He said the silver ones are safe to eat, on account of being bred with good livers. And as for where we'd sleep, Beeman knows of some caves in the rocks." I dabbed green soup from the corner of Mom's mouth.

That night, I slept on the roof of our building. When the sun came up, I went out and traded some electronics for preserves. I spent the rest of the day throwing rocks and jabbing the air with a sharp metal rod. I stayed out till dark. When I came home, Mom was still sitting there, bathing her face in the cancer-light of the TV. She hadn't moved.

"I think I'm going to go with Beeman," I said. "Do you want to come?"

Half of me wanted her to say "Yes," because I didn't want to leave her alone. And half of me wanted her to say "No," because it would be a long trip, and I didn't think she could make it. And also, what Beeman was saying about the beach might be total bullshit, not because he was lying, but because of his damage and foul code.

But Mom didn't say anything at all.

I went to my bunkbox and removed some of my better salvage, stuff I was saving for when I thought I could get the best trade for it, or for when I

really needed it. I left it in a pile on the kitchen counter and wrote out a note: *Mom, I'm out walking with Beeman. We're trying to find the sea. You can sell this stuff if you want. Thanks for the food and shelter and stuff. I love you very much. Don't wait up.*

* * * *

I met up with Beeman in the stairwell he was staying in because it had a live power socket that he could reach with an extension cord. Without saying anything, he unplugged and stood and went down the stairs and started walking. I followed him outside into the glowing night.

I had a backpack full of Snarfits and Nutzitz and Fritos and bottles of water. Beeman traveled light. He had his salvage bag, but he wouldn't tell me what was in it, except to say he'd visited an alchemist, which, from his explanation, I figured was maybe a little like a drug maker. Drugs were good trade.

"You really know the way?" I asked.

"Yes."

We kept to the rat trails on the outskirts of the garbage mounds. Rubber bits and plastic pebbles skittered down the slopes, dislodged by rodents and dogs. Beeman's eyes flicked nervously, taking dozens of pics and analyzing them for threat, such as poker-heads or dust girls or pigs or cops.

"And we can eat the fish? And live in caves?"

"That's what I said."

"But how come you can remember stuff about the ocean when you can't remember other stuff, like how you got to Ex-Town, or what happened to your face? How can you remember the way when you don't even have a map?"

He was silent for a little bit, processing. Our feet crunched too loudly on the oily gravel path. The air smelled yellow.

"It is not down on any map. True places never are." I had no response to that. "That's *Moby-Dick*" he said. Still no response from me. There was just the click of his camera eyes.

“Alright,” he said at last. “I know the path, but I don’t know the way.”

I stopped in my tracks. He stopped, too, watching me. The sky was orange above us. Small things burrowed in the garbage. Screams and moans floated on the warm wind. It was always like this in Ex-Town.

I closed my eyes and remembered the clean tang of the sea.

“Let’s just keep going,” I said.

Beeman nodded. If he still had lips, I think he would have smiled.

By sunrise we’d made it out to the quarry, a shallow crater stretching for miles in all directions. Machines with throaty coughs picked through slabs of concrete and sorted them in gigantic bins on the backs of trucks.

“We go around?” I asked.

“No. Through.”

“What if we run into quarrymen?”

“Two choices,” Beeman said. “First: We try to buy them off with your food and water.”

“Then what would I eat?”

“That’s the wrong question,” Beeman said. “Instead, ask what the quarrymen will eat if they catch us.”

“I’m a faster runner than you are, you know.”

“That’s why the second choice is: Let’s not get caught.”

We crunched along.

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“I’m starting to remember things.” Beeman led the way through a maze of rubble piles, fat drops of rain plinking on his flesh. We both wrapped ourselves in sheets of plastic, because it wasn’t good to get rain on you, no matter what you were made of. The plastic also helped hide Beeman’s stripped robot face

from the small groups of people clustered around can fires. We didn't want anyone attacking us and taking Beeman's eyes for scrap.

"Are you remembering anything useful?"

He nodded with a little scrunchy sound in his neck joints. "Things we might encounter on our way. Things to look out for."

"That's useful," I agreed.

He guided us around a cloud of junk gas hugging the ground. "The lands between Ex-Town and the good places are unsettled. They follow the rules of neither place. There could be ronin—knights with no lords." These words didn't mean much to me, but then Beeman said they were like dust girls with no queen, and I got what he meant.

"These are just flashes of memory," he said. "I just know I've seen these things before, maybe the first time I crossed over to Ex-Town."

"So you don't know any good tricks for them?"

He whirred and clicked for a long time. Then, "Maybe you should turn back," he said.

I know Beeman didn't have feelings. All he had were behaviors. But so what? My mom had emotions, but they were so beat down by living and lacing shoes and taking pump that you could hardly tell. If programmed behaviors made you act like a friend, made you do the things a friend did, wasn't that just as good as having feelings? Beeman was my friend, and I didn't need for him to be anything he wasn't.

I think there's something inside us—a lot of us, anyway—that tells us to get out, to find faraway places, to seek adventure, like in Beeman's fractured stories. But what happens when there's no place to go? When everything's the same, no matter where you head. I think that's how people end up like my mom. It's like there's a bird in them, but the bird can't fly, so it just bounces around the walls of their own hearts until its bones are broken.

Maybe Beeman's sea was no more real than his knights and dragons.

Whatever. I didn't want to die of broken bones.

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I felt the vibration before I heard anything, a tremor beneath my feet and a queasy shudder in my gut. Then I heard the growl, deep and low and big. Blue light fanned through the dark, dusty air ahead of us. The faint outline of a spiked dome emerged over the ridge, threads of disturbed junk gas swirling in its wake. It raised wings like great shards of glass into the sky. I tried to swallow, but my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. "Is that a dragon?" I managed to ask.

"Watchdrone," Beeman clicked. "They guard the perimeter here. But, we can call it a dragon. Sure."

Rusty shrieks gouged my ears as it rolled forward on fleximesh tires. Its "wings" turned out to be broken solar battery chargers, and the spikes on its back were its sensor-comm array. Not a dragon. But it could still spit fire. Swivel-mounted guns on its nose painted me and Beeman with red targeting dots.

"What do we do?" I whispered hoarsely.

Beeman turned his skinless face to me. "We slay it," he said. "Follow me."

Lurching awkwardly on his creaking knees, he ran for a tall stack of cinderblocks patched with garbage. The movement set the watchdrone off, and as I chased behind Beeman, gunfire sent up clots of mud at my heels. Panting, I threw myself to the ground and rolled myself up into a ball. Impacting bullets powdered the cinderblocks. The drone shrieked and grumbled closer.

"Don't be afraid," Beeman said, making his voice loud, but still even and calm.

"We're going to die," I shot back. "I'll be as afraid as I want."

"No, that's wrong. If you're too afraid, you won't be able to aim this." He had to raise his voice even more as the gunfire intensified. I covered my head with my hands. Little jagged chunks of flying cinderblock peppered my knuckles.

"Open your eyes," he said. "And I will make you a dragon-slayer."

I felt his cool plastic fingers pry my hands off my head. I couldn't fight him. Beeman wasn't combat-grade strong, but he was still stronger than me.

"Here," he said, putting in my hand an apple-shaped ball of something hard, wrapped in crinkly brown paper. A stiff piece of string curled from its top.

"Is this... a grenade?"

"It's what the alchemist gave me. I'll light it, you throw it." He activated his thumb igniter—useful for lighting candles in restaurants, he'd told me—and leaned in toward the grenade.

"Wait! Why do I have to throw it?"

"I have a hitch in my shoulder joint," he said. "I might miss."

He might miss.

I might not let go of the grenade and end up blowing my hand off.

I heard something whiz by my ear. The bullets were coming through the wall.

To do this right, I'd have to take aim. That meant I had to stand up and poke my head over the wall, then lob the grenade over. The thought of exposing myself to the drone's guns made my legs feel like water.

"I don't think I can," I said, hearing the tears in my voice and not caring.

Beeman didn't argue with me. He thrust his thumb forward and lit the grenade. Sparks hissed from the fuse.

I think I screamed. I think I stood and saw the drone's guns turn toward me, and I think the targeting lasers shined in my eyes. What I know is that the grenade was no longer in my hand, and that twisted pieces of armor plating and aluminum sensor rods and fleximesh were raining down on me, and there was a thunderous boom that knocked me back. It felt like having a baseball bat shoved down my ears.

I lay on the ground with my eyes squeezed tight, expecting to hear the clatter-clack of gunfire start up again. But, after a while, the only thing I heard was my own breathing. I opened my eyes. Beeman stood over me.

“You’re a dragon-slayer now,” he said, helping me up.

“Shit,” I said, scared and relieved and pissed at Beeman. And really proud of myself for killing the drone. I giggled. “Shit.”

Beeman plodded through the wreckage of the drone. “Get your salvage bag,” he said. “Dragon parts can be valuable.”

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Two days later, we came to the road. I had seen roads before—even Ex-Town had roads—but not like this. This road was raised above the ground by thick pillars, like some kind of monument. The constant roar of traffic sounded like wind mixed with rushing water. I didn’t need Beeman to tell me this was the Above Road. We knew about the Above Road in Ex-Town. I never thought I would see it. Just hearing the traffic, I got a strong sense of speed, of motion, of people going somewhere, of people having somewhere to go.

I looked for a way up. There was a tall fence topped with coils of razor wire spinning so fast they blurred. On the other side of it were the butchered bodies of people who’d tried to scale it anyway. So, the fence was no-go.

“One does not go over the Above Road,” Beeman declared. “One goes beneath it.”

We walked alongside the road for miles. Beeman’s camera kept clicking away, but he wouldn’t say what he was looking for. I followed him, even when he veered away from the road and headed for some dust dunes in the distance. He finally came to a stop before a metal hatch half-buried in the dunes. I helped him brush some of the dust from its waffled surface, and with a couple of yanks, we got it open. A rusted ladder plunged into darkness.

“No way,” I said. “This is too easy.”

“Wait till we’re down,” Beeman said. “See if it’s still too easy then.”

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We walked beneath the road. A greenish, witchy glow from the ceiling gave us enough light to see a few yards in front of us, but not more than that. The traffic overhead rumbled big and heavy, so much that the floor shuddered.

“If this leads to the good parts of town, shouldn’t somebody be on guard?” We’d been walking for some time and hadn’t encountered anything more than fat deadbelly lizards with pale, glowing eyes.

Beeman’s voice clicked, forming half-words, as if he wasn’t sure what he wanted to say. “There are guardians,” he said at last. “They just haven’t shown themselves yet.”

That was when I started hearing the voices. They floated and swirled in the air like a film of dish soap, forming no words that I could understand.

“Did the alchemist give you any more grenades?” I asked. But Beeman only clicked in his throat.

After a while, the voices started to sound smoky and gravelly, like old women. They were scary, but they also made me miss Mom. I wondered if she’d gotten off the sofa yet. I’d left her enough salvage to trade for a few weeks of food, so if she was just sitting there, letting herself starve, I’d be really mad. “I shouldn’t have left her,” I said.

“It’s the voices. They fish for your fears and hurts.”

“So what? I still shouldn’t have left her.”

“Once fired, the bullet cannot question its trajectory.”

I thought about that for a while, as the voices snaked around us like seeker cables.

“But I fired myself out of the gun.”

“And it’s the finest thing you ever did. This way, you won’t end up like the others. No matter what happens, you will have done something with your life. Or at least tried to. It doesn’t even matter what that something is. It’s the doing that’s important.”

I thought that sounded real nice. I didn’t care about nice words. “I don’t want my mom to starve,” I said.

“She won’t. The effects of pump don’t last more than the length of two shifts. She’ll come out of it, and she’ll see your note, and you left her well provided. Also, your mom is fat.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess that’s good.”

Beeman clicked loudly. Three figures stood a few yards ahead of us. They wore skirts of twistgrass and no shirts, revealing the bluish flesh of their swollen bellies and flat, splayed breasts. They were tattooed or painted all over their bodies, one with eyes, one with ears, one with mouths and tongues.

Beeman gave a stiff little bow. “We offer our respects, road witches.”

The one with the ear tattoos turned her body a little and leaned in toward us. Then the one with the eyes took a step closer to us, breathing in a way that made her eyes seem to open wider.

“You’ve made a mistake,” said the one with the tongues. “We’re not the witches of the road. Those gals were soft. They perished. Are they the ones who took your skin, plastic man?”

“If they are,” said Beeman, “then they also took my memory of it. I think I passed this way, but I can’t be sure. I’m never sure. Who are you ladies?”

“We’re worse things. We exact a higher price, we witches of the lost.”

“But we’re not lost,” I protested. “We’re going to the sea. We’ve smelled it. We’re going to remove fish from their environment and eat them.”

The one with the tongues laughed a little, and her laughter echoed off the walls of the tunnel so it sounded like more than three witches laughing.

“One of you might,” she said. “But not both.”

“Well, Beeman doesn’t eat,” I noted. I thought that was pretty obvious.

But Beeman clicked. “That’s not what they mean.”

“The question,” said the tongued one, “is which of you will it be? Both will cross, but only one will pass. That is our toll.”

I got it. One of us had to die so that the other could go on. I did a lot of trading in Ex-Town, and I understood how transactions worked. They wanted a life. "We should have come with a bigger party," I said.

Beeman clicked.

"C'mon," I said, tugging on his arm. "We'll find another way around."

But Beeman wouldn't budge. And what he did next, he did so fast I couldn't stop him. He pulled up his T-shirt and popped open the access hatch in the middle of his chest and pulled out his power supply. It was just a small black box with a few trailing cables. He let it fall to the ground and then sank to his knees. If hard plastic could deflate, it would be like that.

Beeman was such an idiot. I picked up his power supply and blew grime off the connectors so I could plug it back in without doing him any more damage. But hands scuttled from the shadows. Maybe they were spiders, or crabs, or factory graspers. But they looked liked hands to me. I screamed when they crawled up my legs and arms, and I thrashed and kicked and spat, but I didn't let go of Beeman's power supply. Not until their fingers forced mine open, and they stole Beeman's life.

They ran off with their prize and scattered. I chased after them, but I couldn't tell which one had the power supply, and I was running around in circles and cussing and crying until I lost the hands in the darkness.

"Oh, shit, Beeman." I wanted to kick his body. "Fucking shit."

He had a small reserve power battery. It was only supposed to keep his clock going and prevent him from having to do a full start-up when his power supply was being recharged. I think that's the only reason his eyes didn't go dark right away. It's the only reason he was able to say to me, before his final click, "Go somewhere. Do something."

I looked up toward the witches. Maybe I could negotiate something. But they weren't there anymore. They'd vanished along with the thieving hands.

I tried to lift Beeman, but he was dead weight. Then I dragged him, his plastic skin scraping on rocks and debris. It was slow going, and I knew it was really hopeless, because we'd had to go down a ladder to get here, and I figured we'd have to go up a ladder to get out, and I didn't know how I'd

manage both of us.

It took time to get there, but it turned out I was right about the ladder.

I hid him under stones. Not garbage, but clean stones, the cleanest I could find, that I arranged over his body in a mound. With a screwdriver, I scratched the letter B on the biggest one, but I turned it so that the B was facedown, because I didn't want anybody knowing there was something very important under there.

Then I did what Beeman told me. I flew like a bullet fired from a gun.

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He was wrong about the beach. The sand was white like bone, and there was glass glittering in it and all sorts of barrels and cans marked with signs—circles, triangles, stink lines, skulls and crossbones—and a lot of the containers were leaking. But there was other stuff, too, lots of discards worth collecting, some of it better than the stuff I found in Ex-Town. So, I did what I knew how to do. I scavenged.

Camps of people lived in shacks and in gaps under piles of rocks, and I learned to identify the ones to trade with and the ones to avoid, and after a couple of weeks, nothing about the beach made me think I couldn't live there.

The black-green ocean stretched all the way out to the foot of the sky. It was always in motion, shimmering, reaching, spreading, crashing against the shore with rippling suds. Sometimes I crawled out on the rocks and lay on my belly, looking down into the water. Silver ghosts darted beneath me, and even though I'd made a good spear, I decided not to remove the fish from their environment. Not unless I got really hungry.

I did eat some crabs I found in the sand, because I felt they deserved it. They reminded me of the witches' hands.

Every evening, the sun went down, all big and low over the water. It was the prettiest thing I'd ever seen, maybe the prettiest thing in the world.

I kept moving.

Enough time passed that I lost track of time, so I don't know how long

I'd been living on the beach when I spotted the city out there in the water. It was a clear day, I'd never been able to see farther, and I saw the sparkling towers near the horizon. It looked like a city of orange glass, the same color as the setting sun. Maybe when Beeman was telling me about the sea, that's what he was remembering.

I didn't know how to swim, but maybe I could sail out there. And I was kind of collecting driftwood and plastic siding and other things I figured I could use to build a raft when I found a black box, half-buried in the sand. I knew what it was before fully excavating it.

I weighed it in my hands and brushed sand off the connectors.

In the end, Beeman wasn't my spirit guide, or some wizard pushing and pulling me through a knightly quest. He was a robot with a broken brain, and I couldn't know for sure why he'd convinced me to take a journey with him, or why he'd given up his life so that I could finish it. It only made sense if you took into account his broken hardware and bad code. Or, if you figured that we were friends.

Before me, the golden city on the water glimmered. And far behind me, Beeman, or whatever was left of him, lay dead on the road beneath the road.

I waited for the sun to set again, and then I headed off the beach, hoping that the heart in my hands was a good one.

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