do(this)
by Stephen Graham Jones

Stephen Graham Jones's most recent novel is *Demon Theory*. His next will be *Ledfeather*. Other books include *The Fast Red Road*, *The Bird Is Gone*, *All the Beautiful Sinners*, and *Bleed Into Me*. Over eighty of his short stories have been sold to publications that range from *Literal Latté* to *Cemetery Dance*. His new tale about more than one obsession is his first for *Asimov's*.

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Leo's dad started talking about it over dinner, just thinking out loud like he did. It was something he'd heard at work. Leo stabbed his mashed potatoes with his fork and endured. He even made it a game: if he could get the next bite down before his dad interrupted himself again, that was a point, and when he had enough points then his plate would be clean and he could get back to his room for the night.

But then his dad, his thoughts were just stumbling all over themselves, each one branching off the middle of the last one, so that instead of a straight line of reasoning like Leo could have appreciated, it was just a jumbled snowball of conjecture. There was nothing elegant about it. More than that, it was precisely this kind of second grade, innocent exuberance that always embarrassed Leo about his dad. It was easier just to stay in his room.

As for Leo's mom, the few glances he cut her way, she was stabbing her potatoes as well. Or shaping them, maybe, making a kind of waterfall for the gravy cupped at the top of the volcano.

Had his dad noticed, taken the time to look from plate to plate, his verbal chalkboard session probably would have started him down a whole different track: inherited behaviors, convergent evolution, and on and on until the snowball rolled into some big avalanche that buried them all, only to be found next week, maybe, when work or school came knocking.

There was no chance of that, though.

Not the avalanche, but his dad noticing anything as mundane as his wife or son.

What he'd heard at work, at the Tank as he called it—he'd even

bought a special tin lunch box, like thinking was supposed to be a real job—was a riddle of sorts. A simple enough question, if you dropped it in any normal cafeteria, but at the Tank they specialized in making the simple complicated, the potentially useful just wholly impractical.

The only reason Leo was even paying half-attention, really, was that it had a bit to do with his advanced study question for the month—Did language precede thought, or did thought precede language? The chicken/egg shuffle. And he'd been GT long enough to know that he wasn't really supposed to come up with a right answer. It was more about "honing his reasoning capabilities," "asking penetrating questions," "probing the world with his mind."

Like they thought he was in training to be his dad or something.

Yeah.

The guy who'd had the same bite of potatoes on his fork now for maybe four minutes, and wouldn't even notice they were cold when he finally put them in his mouth.

The riddle he was still thrilled with—for the moment, anyway—had to do with classification. Not genus and species and kingdom, nothing Latin or Linnaean, but more about distinguishing characteristics: if there were only one thing that could be said to separate the man-animal from all the "other" animals (his quotes), what might that be?

It was this kind of stuff that Leo's dad packed his lunch each morning for.

Leo huffed some accidental air out his nose. Instead of laughing.

His dad finally put his potatoes in his mouth. They may as well have been crushed ants. "And...?" he said, motioning with his fork for Leo to take a stab.

Leo put another glob of potatoes in his mouth instead.

His dad nodded, already focusing all the way through Leo, and dropped into an explanation about how it wasn't anything biological, of course, that went without saying, and it couldn't be as easy as consciousness either, as that was, for now anyway, impossible to test for, and it couldn't really be language either, as prairie dogs had vocabulary, birds had syntax, primates could be taught to sign, and then there was

chemical language, pheromones and all that, to say nothing of the flashing certain octopuses, octo*pi*, engaged in to communicate—

Except ... what if there were a way to test for consciousness *through* language, right?

Leo forked another bite in. His dad was rolling, out of control.

"Yeah, yeah ... then it's just a matter of—of finding something peculiar to human communication that's not in any of the other language systems, not in whale song, not in beaver tails, not in bee dances ... something—art. Writing. Poetry. Yes. Poetry is specifically human. Take poetry. We ... we classify it as a leisure activity, supposing—supposing that the reason dolphins don't speak in verse is that verse has no practical use like extensions of their other forms of play might ... spinning, jumping, it's all exercise, practice for hunting or a mating ritual or whatever, but poetry's just leisure—or, or, I mean, it could have to do with spare time too, right? I mean, they have a complex society but no civilization, no specialization that would really allow for the downtime necessary for leisure activities, for entertainment, for anything so idle, that's not directly related to survival. Like we're beyond that, I know, I know, not just redefining 'survival,' but that's not the real question. The real question is what's local only to poetry?"

It was another question for the gallery. For the prisoners.

"Let me compare thee to a summer day..." Leo's mom intoned, as if she couldn't help herself, and Leo winced, because one thing his dad didn't ever need in these kinds of conversations was somebody else packing their own clever handfuls of snow on.

But it was too late.

Leo looked up into his dad's blank eyes.

"Exactly!" he said, gravy there at the corner of his lip. "That's it. And what is poetry if not—if not stretching a functionally limited vocabulary, a limited set, to do things beyond its original parameters? This is ... yes. Do you see what this is?"

Leo wasn't sure who the question was for. But his plate was clean.

"Metaphor," his dad whispered then, standing over the table as a form of emphasis, then whispering reverently. "Humans are the only animals we know of that use metaphor, that don't describe things as they are, but—it's

because we're explorers, don't you see? Because we're adaptable to different environments. We always have pioneers looking over the next mountain, then coming back with tales of—whatever, dragons, castles, automobiles, moons—that have to be explained in terms the rest of the population doesn't ... terms that don't *exist*, I mean. See? So you say this is like that, kind of. Yes. Instead of ever admitting something's indescribable, we push our words instead, rearrange them to—to compound and extend meaning. Do rabbits use metaphor to describe their carrots, you think?"

"In cartoons, you mean?" Leo said, his plate so ready to deliver to the sink.

"No," his dad said, confusion there in his eyes, "*real* ones, man."

Leo pursed his lips in what felt like pity, shook his head no, he didn't think real rabbits used metaphor that much in the wild, and then he was gone like always, ghosting through the kitchen to the stairs, the solace of his room.

"Carrots are carrots," he mumbled to himself, checking again to make sure his door was locked.

It was a true statement, one that he knew he could write a line of code for: if($p = "orange") && if($p(!("basketball")) then more than likely $p would be a carrot. Provided he strung the conditionals out to account for every non-carrot orange thing. And there were probably classes he could use, even, if he wanted, a series of waterfalls to quit the function from cycling through each non-carrot: edible/non-edible, vegetable/mineral, terrestrial/Martian, "basketball-ish," etc., like a penny falling through a series of slots in a change sorter.

And it might even be fun that way.

Except right now he had to get his GT paper ready. It was the fourth one for the month, and, thankfully, the last of the "Language" cycle.

The first week had been hidden codes, semiotics and stuff, which, in spite of how inapplicable it seemed, had made Leo feel more rather than less vulnerable to advertisements, and then it had been finding instances of performative speech, like promises or when a preacher marries two people, stupid stuff that both described and did a thing at the same time, except Leo had gotten extra credit for writing a paper his dad would have been proud of if he'd ever seen it. Its thesis was that programming, writing code, was the purest instance possible of so-called "performative"

language. The words there weren't even called words, but "functions," but it still counted as language because there was vocabulary, there was syntax, there was communication, albeit between him and whatever system he was on.

But now there was this chicken/egg game.

Leo rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands.

Beside the rig he was on now was his machine from last semester, before the rebuild. He still had it ported in just for data, but except for the drive it was scrap, just a skeleton. And maybe that would be a good enough answer for GT: not the chicken or the egg, but the chicken stripped down to its "eggness" somehow.

But that was what his dad was trying to do downstairs.

And Leo wasn't his dad.

He opened a terminal window, just to think.

All day, he'd been pretty sure his thesis was going to be that neither came first, really, that they had to have happened at the exact same time, language *was* thought, thought *was* language. Except now his dad had polluted him.

Now what he was wondering was if code, which he valued above all other language, mostly because it allowed him to talk to sane, reasonable servers and engines and modules instead of insane people like he'd just had to endure, what he wondered was if there was any metaphor in code? Any figurative language? Not necessarily whimsical or poetic or anything stupid like that, but something descriptive like his dad was saying, some nested bit of syntax that really pushed the language ... some last-ditch workaround he'd had to come up with at one time or another which could, for the purposes of his paper at least, be called metaphor. And it would be something elegant, of course, one of those magic moments where he realized that this second statement, when recursing, and tricked into a false positive, could tweak the initial statement in such a way that the bracketing function could be made to do something halfway opposite from what it had been intended, a kind of halfway opposite that was also a shortcut. And not some pages-long line that you had to hold your breath to follow, either, but something simple, that Leo could prove a point with.

If he were going to prove a point, though—this was GT after all—he

was going to have to have a data set to support it. At the very least he was going to have to establish that code was a language, not just a bunch of logical operators and plugged-in variables. That had been his only problem with the last paper: the proofs looked too much like math for everybody.

Even though it was GT, yeah.

But Leo had all night, too.

This time he was going to make his proof look, if not like it was natural language, which it practically already was if anybody would just take the time to read it, then at least recognizable to the uninitiated. Which was all different.

He was going to have to disguise all the functions, so that he could make sentences. *Human* sentences, but still machine readable.

It took him all of about four minutes to come up with a generator, too: all he had to do was write a simple little loop, dipping on one end from the dictionary, then on the other end from the function list. The only real twist—and he was proud of it, because it was elegant—was wrapping it to account for conjunctions, for two functions working in tandem in a way that didn't cancel each other out. What it meant, what it would spit out once he hit return and said *please* like he always did (but would never tell anybody about), was, at first, a simple row of variables that, when stated, would act for the functions. After that, though, and on into the night—he wasn't sure how far it would go, really, but had his processors shotgunned so wasn't worried either—what the loop would do was combine all three hundred-odd functions and delimiters in every way possible. Which, exponentially, yeah, this was going to be a large-size table, Leo guessed, a real Thanksgiving feast. But it wasn't like he was going to have to print it out or anything either, just index it and give a sample. At the last moment, he even added another line, a safety, just in case the recursion cycled all the way through the dictionary but still had some functions left to assign variables too. All it did was copy the initial loop and parse through the dictionary at random, hyphenating monosyllabic words to allow new variable names, the same way it was pairing the functions at the other end of the loop ... or maybe even slopping them into an orgy, as some of the functions already were pairs, he guessed, Frankenstein conglomerations of function that buried a conditional within themselves.

Anyway.

"Please," Leo whispered, and hit return with his third finger, then held

it down for exactly one second too long (luck), then ended up standing by his bedroom door minutes later, listening to his dad's ideas. He would have just let him in so he could sit down, but that never worked out, as his dad always just sat on the bed like nobody needed to sleep, and Leo would finally have to ask him what he was on anyway—were they smoking stuff at the Tank these days?

His dad, of course, would take it as bonding of some sort, as an invitation to stay.

So listening at the door was the safest course of action, really.

After a while Leo sagged down the wall, plugged in his headphones and half-slept until his dad angled the hand mirror under the door, caught him.

"I wasn't—" Leo started.

"—no problem," his dad finished, then started over, the potatoes probably still there on his lip for all the world to see.

Leo held his face in his hands and stared at the space under the door, his dad's watery shadow blotting out some of it.

"Just tell me what it's *like*, Dad," Leo finally said in one of the lulls that he'd once thought were dramatic instead of digestive pauses.

"What?" his dad said back.

"Tell me what it's like, I said."

"What what's like?"

"This other side of the mountain. This new place, this distinguishing *characteristic*."

"You want me to—?"

"If you're so human, I mean, yeah. Okay. If you're human, you can speak in metaphor, right?"

"Go on."

"Then describe speaking in metaphor for me. But use a metaphor to

do it."

Silence. Blissful, perfect silence.

Sometimes you had to shoot the snowball with a flamethrower. Melt it down so that it would take him a while to get it cold and slushy enough to roll again.

Which was a simile, Leo was pretty sure. Or metonymy, synecdoche, who knew.

But he had to do something.

Two minutes later, finally, his dad's shadow drifted away from the space beneath the door.

Leo nodded to himself, told himself to stand and then did, felt his way to the desk.

The cycle was complete, it looked like, and hadn't snagged or thrown off any error messages.

All he had to do now was save the table to two places—his rule—post the new loop to the school's IP for class, then, in the morning maybe, or during phys ed, write whatever cornball paper he was going to write.

Already he was forgetting.

Do potatoes make you sleepy?

Leo wasn't sure, and didn't care.

He saved the table in one place, then a better place, then hit return after the loop just to keep the command line clean while he slept, like the blinking cursor was a night light or something.

Except he didn't get the blank line he wanted.

The loop *wasn't* perfect, wasn't over, was still spitting up terms, random at first, and jumbled like ... how could there be misspellings if the words were being sucked from the dictionary? That was stupid.

Leo tapped the side of his monitor the way his mom used to tap him in church, when he needed to straighten up.

Like then, too, it worked.

The words were cleaner now. Not brighter, he already had the burn rate dialed back as far as it would go, but spelled right. Still all mixed together, though.

He hadn't even looked at the table.

Was it like this, trash?

Leo laughed through his nose, lowered his head to the sweet spot just in front of the keyboard, and closed his eyes, told himself not to fall asleep.

He woke some time later—hours, minutes, seconds—and the jumbled but properly spelled words had finally stopped. Unless he was just dreaming that the loop had corrected itself, of course. Not like that hadn't happened before.

And then it snapped, the problem: he'd forgotten to insist that the front end of the loop only cycle through the *terms* of the dictionary, the hyphenated terms it could make from two of them.

Instead, he'd left it open to account for the definitions as well.

Of course there'd be misspellings: phonetic pronunciations looked ugly, and some of the examples were archaic.

Which he would have caught right off if his dad hadn't hijacked him to the door.

Leo shook his head, stared down the hall to the worn spot in the carpet he imagined his dad to be, his "Well," then hit return again, harder than he usually let himself anymore.

Instead of returning junk this time like he expected, though, it spat back just a random line, probably one of the dictionary examples, the "use this word in a sentence" junk: *she is a flower*.

Leo smiled a tolerant smile, hit return again, with his lucky third finger, just to see what he'd get next, but it was the same thing: *she is a flower*.

He rubbed his third finger in the fist of his other hand, and said it

aloud, like an insult that had been thrown at him: "She?"

It wasn't impossible that the loop would cycle through to the same place twice in a row. Unlikely, but not impossible.

Three times, though?

Leo hit the return key again, this time with the eraser end of a pencil he never used.

she is a flower

"You'd love this, wouldn't you?" he said to the idea of his dad, then shook his head, blew some more air out his nose—what time was it anyway?—and hit return over and over with his index finger.

she is a flower

she is a flower

she is a flower

she is a flower

she is a flower

"*Who?*" he said to it, standing now, staring at the monitor.

No answer.

"What I thought," Leo said, laughing at himself some. It was four in the morning; he could see now. It was a funny thing. A stupid, stupid, funny thing.

He fell back into his chair again, his legs sprawled out under the desk, and said he was sorry to the computer—this was why he locked his door, because his mom didn't like him talking to his machines, which he translated into the infinitely more usable didn't like to *catch* him talking to his machines—and, just because he had to have that empty command line to sleep to, even for two hours, he hit return again. Then leaned forward.

She wasn't like a flower anymore.

"Do ... *what*?" Leo said.

At the line, just a home-made function: *do(this)*. Except "this" wasn't even defined, it was just assumed, like a global variable or post data or something.

He hit return again and got the arrow back, the steady blinking cursor of peace.

Evidently his loop had cycled some of the dictionary in with the delimiters—mixed the syntax and the vocabulary in a way he hadn't outlawed. Which meant the walls of the loop were porous. It was broke in just all kinds of ways.

But screw it.

It was four in the morning. Four ten. God.

Though it wasn't a Tuesday, and he hadn't even been planning to, still, just to be safe he powered down, in case the loop kickstarted itself in the night or something equally stupid and stuffed his RAM with a string of those huge tables.

And then it was done. Leo was back where he started. Except he had some potatoes in him, he guessed.

Another stupid night.

He shut his light off at the socket, rolled into bed, fixing his knee against the wall the way it had to be, and listened to his processor cycle back up after the sixteen seconds of black he'd specified, reaching out to meet and greet the old rig like it always had to, like it was just a whole new drive, a whole new day.

Like ... like—

Leo opened his eyes, stared hard at nothing.

do(this)

Where *this* had been undefined. Assumed. Not a global variable or post data, but ... a *pronoun*?

And what had he just been thinking?

Yeah.

The stupid cable. The idiotic cable he'd had to patch between his new rig and the old one.

It plugged *into* the old rig. A male connection for a female slot.

she.

She is a flower.

Leo was breathing hard now, like his dad.

She is a flower. Where this—where this ... where you had to use it like a word that was in place of a variable, like a word for a thing that already had an antecedent, in whatever conversation had already been going on!

this was the broken loop he'd written, the obvious obvious freaking *loop*, the conversation he'd been having with his computer.

She is a flower, the old rig is the flower, the girl, the new one the—and the male, the *new* machine, wanting her to ... to—

To learn to speak too.

Leo sat up in his bed and peeked across the room.

The cursor was there, blinking steady, the loop wholly forgotten, the table saved in two remote places.

Do this, it had said. Asked.

Because it was alone.

Leo covered his mouth with his hand, and didn't really mean to cry but it was dark anyway, and his door was locked, and the computer that was watching him now, it was just a computer.