

BOTS: A LOVE STORY AND A DREAM

Michael Hemmingson

“Bots”, a story set very much in the sexual present, is the work of a young novelist, playwright and poet whose reputation is now spreading beyond his native California. Michael Hemmingson is also the author of the novel The Naughty Yard (1994) and Stories Jam Packed With Sex and Violence, published last year by the splendidly named Cyberpsychos Press.

Dreaming of Kyoko

And sometimes I dream of Kyoko; these are the kinds of dreams I like. Kyoko reverie: I see her naked, see her clothed, see her standing on a hill, slight breeze tousling her hair; she's in her shorts, maybe in one of her flowerprint neo-hippie skirts. The dream shifts to her in skirt, sitting behind one of her computers and writing scripts for bots, simple or complex designs in Fortran or C, hair over her face, fingers moving fast over keyboard, these bots I like to think of as her children without a father. I know now I can never be a father to a bot. I dream of Kyoko naked behind her computer; and when I open my eyes, I see my dream Kyoko is not in this dream – Kyoko is here, in her room. She is sitting behind her computer – in a T-shirt and pink panties – and peering into one of

her CPUs. I ask her what she's doing, it's three a.m., come back to bed, and when she looks at me, it's like I'm a stranger: the intangible lack of regard, as if to say who is this guy in my bedroom, in my bed, in my home? Who is he to talk to me? She turns back to the screen for a moment, then glances my way again, now smiling, recognition having returned to her small dark eyes like a hard drive booted up and ready to play. She says in her strained accent: "Oh, nothing, doing nothing." She stands up, comes back to me, returns to her bed, pulls the sheets away, slides her smooth skin against mine, purrs a bit, sits on top of me, looking down, hair in her face, then lies next to me, one muscular leg sheathed over my stomach, her three computers still on, our bodies aglow in techno-illumination from the computers' green and blue background screens. Kyoko moves up to kiss me, her black hair falling over my face, a cascade of oriental dreamscape as taut and precise as haiku, and I grab her, pull at her panties, glad that this is all real, no bots between us.

Digitally Clean

In the shower I still dream of her, sleep in my eyes, her scent on me like spring's new lilacs spread on a floor – and I'm rolling in them, these petals, I'm rolling around in Kyoko – I have Kyoko all over me. I rub Kyoko into me, her essences invade my skin like a computer virus: I am an accessible system with no security zones. I open my eyes, see that I am touching myself, I am erect, here in the shower, soap all over my body – not the lilacs that I dreamed were Kyoko. I feel ridiculous. I don't need this dream – Kyoko is not a sacrosanct icon – she's in the other room. I need to wake up.

She's behind one of her computers when I come out. She's wearing a halter and shorts. She types quickly at her keyboard. There is a large paperweight on the desk; I have always liked that paperweight. I see scrolling text – don't know what it is, don't care. My mind is in the lower brain, beguiled with abject intentions, the animal in the technological sprawl. I still have my erection and, yes, it hurts. Never has it hurt before and this scares me, makes me think of new possibilities. I lie on the bed, naked and still wet from the shower, and call to her. She smiles when she sees my erection. She says: "Let me finish," staying at her computer for another ten minutes which seem, to my mind and my tumescence, like ten

eternities in the termite pit, lost to dream all the dreams I fear, the dream of her, this image of my lover ensnared forever behind the computer. And when I strain to see what she is writing, I see that it is a script for another bot.

Stepping away from the dream, Kyoko comes to me, purring again. She steps out of her shorts, climbs on top of me again; and I feel her, feel that she is wet. I wonder whether her excitement is due to me or to her bots. She uses one hand to guide me carefully into her, making that small high-pitched sound she always makes whenever our connections are successful, her other hand at my face, two fingers into my mouth, these fingers that have been busy at the keyboard. I can almost taste her bots. I close my eyes for a moment, bogged in the sensation of her body on mine, feeling her amiable interior, and when I open my eyes, I see that her eyes are now closed. One of her computers beeps but neither of us pays any attention. I feel a moment of triumph: it is one of those rare times when I am more important than her machines. She moves slow at first, shaking her head a bit, letting her hair fall over her face. She bends down, brushing her hair over my visage. I reach for her halter, pull it down, hands over small, pert breasts, dark nipples erect under my gaze. At first use my palms, then taking each nipple between thumb and forefinger, tease them to expand like mushrooms from the wet earth. Her breasts pulsate. I feel the blood flowing through, hot and fast, and I know, yes, yes, my Kyoko is beyond the dream and the machine, she is real. Kyoko gyrates faster, her pelvis slamming into mine. Her breath heavier, she mumbles Japanese words I do not understand, these words I often hear in and out of the presumption that has become my life. Kyoko opens her eyes, shrieking, crying a bit as she always does, her eyes dismal, slicing into me, hacking into my wraith borders.

The Stranger

I feel like an outcast, at times, when Kyoko's friends, all Japanese, are around, or when she talks to friends or family on the phone. Besides a few key phrases, I don't understand Japanese; I have never been to Japan, my travel limited to Europe, North Africa. Kyoko has tried to teach me more words, sentences, phrases, passages that I could use and discern; I don't want to learn them – I have always been a lousy student. But I do always wonder what

it is she's saying. Sometimes on the phone she'll look over at me during her conversation and smile, laugh, wink; and I wonder if she might be talking to her friends about me. I know when I hear my name in the middle of that alien tongue that I'm the subject, but I wonder if she disguises her references to me in her language. I start to feel like I'm gathering a new file and data fork of complexes. I am ready for anything global. I would ask her to speak English more; but her English is limited, and I have to strain as it is to comprehend her words and sentences in her strong accent. I like the expression she gets when she's speaking English and stumbles on a word. When she can't find the linguistic symbol in my language for what she wants to say, she may interject something Japanese, or something else, maybe in the diction of computers. For all I know, she may not be speaking Japanese and could be forming the verbal equivalent of COBOL or Unix. When she gets upset because she can't find the words, I want to hold her – and sometimes I do – and tell her it's okay, that I know what she means (whether I do or not). I wonder if we ever really need to speak.

In my sophomore year, I had a Moroccan roommate who spoke very little English; we conversed in French. He started hanging around with a Korean girl. She didn't speak English well, nor did she speak French. It was amusing to watch these two attempt a conversation in English, a language neither had a clue about. Their language was the language of smiling, eye contact, touching, and sex, brought down to the most common, most natural method of semiotics.

"We have the rhetoric of fucking," my roommate told me. I envied him for it.

Kyoko's girlfriends are always giggling, shy, and they never look me in the face. Kyoko was once this way herself, when we met, and often still is; but she has become used to me, has become bold. She once said: "Each day I learn more and more to be American."

I have discovered since being with her that the timidity of Asian women is attractive. Before, I had preferred women to be open, in charge, never afraid to say what they want to say or do.

"They say I lucky," Kyoko tells me, "because I have American boyfriend."

I have noticed that many of her girlfriends, most of them quite pretty, do not have male companions.

"They too want American boys," Kyoko tells me, "but boys hard to find."

She giggles and says: "All the white boys are with white girls."

I have noticed since being with her that I seldom see Asian women with Asian men on campus, at least not in any intimate fashion. Our university has a large Asian population.

I have also perceived of myself how I have become more and more sexually aware of the Asian females here. I find myself attracted to a good number of them. But when I look at them, I know I am merely trying to find the elements of Kyoko they may have.

I ask her why I don't see the Asian girls with the Asian boys.

She laughs and says: "Why would one be in America and date boy of the same race when that is all we do back home?"

"What?"

"The men of my race ugly," she says.¹

"You don't really mean that," I say.

"I mean that," she says, nodding, hair falling into her eyes. "I come here, I want variety, I want . . . the different. This why I come U.S. for school. To get way Japan, get way crowds, from men I find so . . . *repulsive*? That a word? I saw that word. Ugly men. I come U.S. and say myself me I will find nice American white-boy boyfriend to be with and what joy now, now I have one."

And she smiles and kisses me and I feel myself starting to slip back into the dream.

"So that why you no see them with Asian boys," Kyoko says, "we all us want Anglo-Saxon men!"

She adds: "And Asian men bad lovers."

I tell her that those comments almost sound racist.

She laughs: "How I be racist against my own race? What I talk of is preference."

Her hair falls into my face more, she leans against me, touching me; and I know I am lost to our dream.

"Once I slept with a black," she tells me; but I kiss her to stop her from revealing any more. I do not want to know. I am jealous of anyone who has ever had her before me. Only now, as I come to terms with this feeling, do I know how much of a stranger I am in her world.

short for robots, little (or big) programs that do a variety of tasks at your command. I talked with her some, but she jumped from channel to channel, describing in virtual terms what she was doing to people – drinking their blood, tying them up, having strange sexual encounters. Her spelling and grammar were bad. I was particularly interested one day as she talked of how she hated men and was going to become a lesbian, although she'd still be a vampire with men. Another user in a different country asked me if I knew her, knew where she was on campus. I told him no – how could I? He showed me the commands that revealed her location:

`/whois Culla /trace Culla`

When I did this, I saw her e-mail account. This user also told me how to “finger” her, which would give me more information.

`/ctcp finger Culla`

What I located was a computer right across from me, where the Japanese girl was sitting.

She saw me staring at her and hid behind her screen.

“Culla?” I said.

I heard her make a sound. She tried harder to hide. I saw her virtual persona vanish from the IRC realm:

`***signoff: Culla (bad link?)`

I told her the nickname I was using: AvanTpOp.

She quickly gathered her stuff, placing it all messily in her knapsack, and ran out of the computer lab, face very red.

I felt bad. But I was damn curious. I remembered the science group I saw her posting to. I pulled that group out from the net news server and checked for any articles that had the same e-mail address. I found one, and her name: Kyoko Murakami.

I didn't see her in a lab again until several days later. When she saw me, she hunched, tried to hide again. I sat at the computer next to her.

“I'm sorry if I embarrassed you the other day,” I said.

She looked away. She was shaking.

“Really,” I said, “I don't know much about that, and someone told me how to use the command to show me where you were. I didn't mean to blurt out like that.”

Slowly, she turned to me, uncertain.

“So you actually send them, uh, out there into the system, they’re not in your computer, they go out and, return home?”

“Yes.”

“So would it be possible for, say, someone to catch this bot, like a fish in net, put a virus inside it, so that when it came back to you, the virus would attack your computer?”

She thought about this.

“Theoretical, it possible,” she nodded, “but why anyone want to do that?”

Serenade in C

Kyoko and I go out. I am realizing that we go out less and less, and our time together is either in the computer lab or at her apartment. She doesn’t like to come to my apartment because, she says, I don’t have a computer there, and she needs to be by her computers at all times. I am in competition with C and Fortran and Unix. We go out to eat, and I ask if she’d like to see a movie. She says no. I can tell her mind is on computers, on applications and shell archives. We go to the beach and walk near the surf. The sky is clear. I put my arm around her. She moves in close, I smell her hair, her skin, and I’m happy to be here. We don’t speak. She seems distant. We kiss, touch; she doesn’t want to make love on the beach. She says: “Not in public . . .”

We are alone in the computer lab at school and it’s late and she has her hand on my knee and we start to kiss and we look around. Yes, alone, and it is late, the lab will close in an hour. She says: “I want be dangerous,” and she pulls her panties out from under her skirt, she gets into my lap, she opens my jeans, taking me out, sliding me in, her skirt covering us, moving slowly, her arms around my neck, my face in her breasts (she’s wearing a white blouse); and I tell myself to come quickly, we have to be quick, what if someone walks in, a student or a security guard or maybe even the damn system administrator, we have to be quick, dozens of lone computers around us watching. And I thrust into Kyoko fast, hard. She looks at me surprised, closes here yes, that high-pitched sound coming out of her again; and I know I am drifting back into the dream, that I am a bot having a dream of being human and excitable. But when we are done, and I leave the lab to go to the bathroom, I start to lose the dream, I become aware

We both hastily dress. I run to keep up with her. We go to one of the labs, the closest one, and she sits behind a machine and logs into her account. She tries to get on IRC and I see this:

*****GHOSTS ARE NOT ALLOWED ON IRC*****

She makes a small sound, hitting her fist on the keyboard.

“What is that?”

“Banned me from server,” she says, “I try another.”

She types: /server

The same message appears. She tries again. The same appears.

She screams this time, balling her fist and sticking it in her mouth. People give us looks.

I grab her arm, take her out of the lab. She’s jumpy, looking around, eyes wide.

“Don’t understand,” she says, “why they do this me? I think of way of getting them, I will!”

“Tell me what the hell this is all about,” I say, pinching her flesh.

She looks surprised, then frightened. I have never been harsh with her.

I let go. I say: “Kyoko?”

She moves to me. “These people on sex channels,” she says, “I don’t know how war started, I tell them they are idiots and now they begin war. They make warbots to kill my bots, and now they disconnect me. I find another way, but I not understand why these people want to be evil so much. It not real, why do they be so serious?”

“What people?” I say, feeling the need to protect her, to harm anyone who might bother her.

“Who knows,” she says, “all over, everywhere, around the world, people. Bad people. One named Danny . . .”

I wonder what she was doing playing on sex channels when she has me.

Warbots

I become worried – Kyoko doesn’t answer her phone, though I know she has to be there. I go to her apartment; I knock. I hear her inside. She won’t answer the door. I knock harder. She finally opens up. She looks terrible. Her hair is messy, unwashed, her face red, eyes puffed. I know she has been crying. She stand there, staring at me.

Danny began to attack her. He was convinced that it was Kyoko's fault that Erich had killed himself – he believed Kyoko had told Julie the secrets Erich had confided in her and had talked Julie into breaking up with Erich. Danny had operator status, and began to “kill” her off the servers so Kyoko couldn't use IRC. Kyoko couldn't understand how someone far away and whom she'd never met face to face could hate her so.

“It stopped for while,” she says, “but lately Danny has started up again, and got many others on IRC after me, telling lies. He make warbots to kill my bots, and now he sent virus into my system and ruined my data . . .”

Extremities Outside The Flesh

But I cannot get away from what we do in those brief moments, before she confesses, what she asks me to do.

“Slap me,” Kyoko says.

I just look at her.

She's crying and says: “*Slap me, wake me up, show me I am real!*”

I don't. I back away.

She attacks, biting and scratching again, and I slap her, I hit her; blood comes from her mouth.

“Do anything to me to make me hurt . . .”

The Moment of Death

Hence the academic grappling with his computer . . . memorizing everything in an effort to escape the final outcome, to delay the day of reckoning of death and that other – fatal – moment of reckoning . . . forming an endless feedback loop with the machine.

Jean Baudrillard

And it is there, the two of us lying on the floor still breathing hard, bleeding and bruised, her story now done, that Kyoko's eyes widen, she shrieks something in Japanese, she jumps, picks up the large paperweight on her desk and smashes it into the screen of one of her computers. The screen caves in – sparks. Kyoko cries out, turns to the next, smashes that screen. I move to her, fast, frightened, push her away from the computers. She raises the

paperweight, ready to hit me. I cover myself. She stops. We both breathe hard, tears run down her face. She slams the paperweight on one of the keyboards, then goes to the bed, tears at the sheets. She is not aware of me, absent in the elapsed, forfeited to the automaton, lost in the life she could not have in the flesh, the electronic actuality that escaped from the cyberorb and infested her palpable life. I am inconsequential as of this moment, I am like a piece of hardware – outdated, obsolete, discarded, the dream losing its edge—

“Hurt me,” she said, “make me wake up from this.”

Last and Final Dream

Where I go into the computer lab on campus with a baseball bat and, with a battle cry much like Kyoko’s, I begin to smash every computer there. With each one I destroy, I feel relieved, I feel the chains removed, feel more like a human being. Smash, crash, *boom* – I laugh and dance as I take the final blow at my would-be killers. So much is possible, so much is true, and even when the campus police come and cart me away and I spit in their faces and tell them there’s nothing they can do because this is just a dream and soon I’ll wake up, they get pissed, one hits me in the gut, I begin to vomit, they drag me into a car and take me to the station, somewhere in the heart of the school. Where I’ll wake up I don’t know, but as long as this mirage, now without my Kyoko, continues, I will continue to kick and shriek and demand my humanity back.

In Unix, no one can hear you scream.

Notes

- 1 I did ask her once if she ever read Marguerite Duras’ *The Lover*. She told me she saw the movie. She also brought up the matter of how we always seek the different. (“The French girl in story did not want French man,” she said, “but Asian lover; often French men go to Japan looking for Asian woman to have sex with.”) It later made me think of Duras’ work, how the Asian male lover is often prominent, as in the cult classic, *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*. According to Duras, and from some opinions I have read and heard, the male Asian is a good lover hard to

match. Of course, these opinions could be biased, since I heard them from Asian men. The Arab man will say Arabs are the best lovers, the German man will say German, the black man will say black, the Texan will say only men from Texas are the best. Preference is always the key factor, as Kyoko pointed out to me. Kyoko and I have experienced harsh looks from Asian men when they see us together, and she has told me some of them have angrily asked her why she is with me, a white American. "Really," she says, "they are upset because they ask me out once and I say no."

- 2 It was another one of those things that never last long. Her name was Candice, and she worked at a coffeehouse. She dressed grunge and loved the blues and everything was going pretty good for a while. A couple of good weeks of fun. But like many relationships, the excitement of the new fades fast and you realize you really don't care for being intimate with this person any more and that, in effect, you fail to fall into the dream with them; you get bored with being awake.
- 3 When I think of it, it now reminds me of the actress Solvig Donmartin who goes insane with her addiction to a technological gadget of recorded dreams, in Wim Wenders' 1992 film, *Until the End of the World*.