

**STILLP • INT**  
A MAGAZINE IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

# THE SPACEMAN DISSOLVES

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## TREVOR SHIKAZE

The spaceman stares into the swirling tail of another galaxy and pulls out his left canine tooth. The tooth dislodges easily, dragging a wet root. A blob of gum tissue falls on his tongue. It is grainy, and tastes of blood.

The spaceman pushes his tooth against the starship window, where it adheres. This is not the proper procedure for biological samples. Biological samples are meant to go into a special container. But the spaceman doesn't know where the container is right now, and anyway, it's full. He rubs off an eyebrow, flicks his fingers. The tiny hairs disperse. They'll get stuck in the air filter, but he doesn't care. He is dissolving and he doesn't care about the filter.

When the spaceman was a boy, he would pick out his boogers at night and smear them on the wall just below his bedframe. His hand barely fit in the gap between the bed and the wall, so he figured his mother would never find the boogers there. The spaceman's bed had been in the same spot in the same room all his life, and he never imagined that one day the bed might move and reveal the boogers for all to see. But then, when the spaceman was eleven, his parents bought a new house, which meant the bed would at last be moved, and he stood nervously by as his father and uncle prepared to disassemble it. He had a plan to get between them and the wall as soon as they pulled the bed away, to discreetly peel off the giant strip of hardened boogers that he imagined had accumulated over the years. "What are you standing around for?" his father said. "Go make yourself useful." So the spaceman walked toward the door. But just then, his father and uncle lifted the bed, and he turned and pretended to take great interest in their labor, and he slid between them and the wall and made a quick assessment. He'd expected a rocky shelf of boogers, but all he saw was a faint line of crust. Was that it? His father asked him why he wasn't making himself useful, and the spaceman skipped off to help his mother move boxes, satisfied that no one would notice his shameful trace.

Now he staggers down the hall to the communications pod. He wears a tight suit of woven carbon fiber. His skin itches. Pieces of it have been sloughing off in the past weeks. Yesterday the skin on his right knee came away while he was bathing, and he slapped the bloody patch against the glass wall of the shower tube, where it adhered. He left it there.

The spaceman stops in the vestibule outside the communications pod. He switches on the vanity lights. He looks awful. He leans toward the mirror and pulls up his lip with the tip of his bandaged index finger. The gums around the empty canine socket are brown and mealy, like cornflakes left to sit in milk. He tells himself, "I just won't smile while the video's

filming.” The spaceman unscrews a tube of calamine lotion and smears a gob onto his pallid cheek, then spreads the gob around with a sponge. The calamine serves as cover-up. He covers the sores, conceals the purple mottling he has come to recognize as a sign of weakened flesh. That skin will soon come off. He is gentle as he daubs it with the sponge.

When he finishes applying the calamine, he enters the pod. He seats himself in the puffy chair in front of the communications screen. “Hello, spaceman,” says the screen. He says hello to the screen and tells it he’s ready to record his weekly update. His own image appears on the screen. He looks like death. He looks like a made-up corpse. But the sores are covered, his eyebrows are penciled in, and viewed from the front his hair doesn’t look too patchy. With any luck, Mission Control won’t notice. He doesn’t want to let the people down.



*Premium Connect – Tabita Rezaire*

“Hello,” he says, trying to sound cheerful. “Well, we’re nearing the Perseus Arm. Starship gravity’s A-okay. Water recirculation’s in perfect working order. Oxygen is check. Magnetic field is check. Optimism, check. Everything’s in perfect working order. So, for all those naysayers—”

He falters. He is not normally a man to get choked up. But a memory has arisen, a memory of his father on the launchpad, a private word before the countdown.

“You don’t have to do this,” his father had said. “Look how far you’ve come. I’m proud of you. We’re all proud of you. There’s nothing more to prove.”

The spaceman had choked up then, too. But if ever there’d been a moment not to show weakness, it was that moment, so he pushed the feeling down and spoke in a firm voice.

“This isn’t about me, Dad. This is about the species.”

The spaceman clears his throat and pushes the memory down. In a firm voice he says to the screen, “For all you naysayers who didn’t think a human could make it this far, now you see that one can. So there is hope. Earth is running out, but hope never runs out. Not with a whole universe out here to escape into. And escape is real. I’m living proof of that.”

He almost smiles, just to drive the point home, but then he remembers his missing canine tooth. Instead he affects a brave countenance. He furrows his brow and sets his jaw.

“Over and out.”

The red recording light switches off and the spaceman sinks into his seat. He pushes his tongue against a loose molar. It’ll be next to come out, he can tell. A status bar on the screen loads. SENDING . . . SENDING . . . SENT. He sighs. Always such a relief when the screen flashes SENT. It’s his only real connection to the planet. To the past. To everything he left behind. The spaceman heaves himself out of the puffy chair and limps off to the sick bay.

“Incognito mode,” he says to the sick bay robot.

“You’ve entered incognito mode,” the robot says.

The spaceman doubts that incognito mode is real. He knows for a fact that the scientists back on Earth want to log and parse his every vital sign, every action, every ailment and complaint. It’s all data to strengthen the mission, to feed back into the store of knowledge that future humanity will draw from as we venture deeper into space, seeking new homes and markets as we exhaust the old ones. He is a guinea pig out here. His experience will help set the template for all future experiences, so the scientists want to know everything. He suspects that incognito mode is just a ruse, a feature they’ve added to find out what the spaceman might say when he thinks they aren’t watching. But he’s decided to use it anyway. He needs answers.

“Computer,” he says, “something’s wrong.”

“What’s the problem, spaceman?”

“I seem to be dissolving.”

“Let me scan your latest test results. Hm. I don’t see anything unusual. You’re in perfect health.”

“But something must be wrong. I’m falling apart.”

“Let’s run some more tests. Place your finger in my examination hole, please.”

The spaceman’s fingernails have been falling out, and his left ring finger is the only one that isn’t bandaged up. He plugs the finger into a hole in the robot’s analysis panel. He feels a tiny prick.

“That’s all I need,” the robot says.

“Are you sure you don’t want some urine?” the spaceman says. “A cheek swab?”

“Oh, no,” the robot says. “A single drop of blood is sufficient. Analyzing. Analyzing. You are in perfect health.”

Before he leaves the sick bay, the spaceman takes an empty biological sample container from the cupboard where they’re stored. He breaks the seal, peels up the lid, and spits out his molar. The tooth lands in the container with a dull rattle. He holds the container up to the light and looks at the tooth through the opaque white plastic, a fuzzy pink outline in a dark red spatter. This is him. A part of him. But not anymore. Growing up, of course he’d believed in the tooth fairy. When his mother told him the tooth fairy wasn’t real, he felt betrayed. *You lied all this time?* She gave him a tiny tin that contained all his baby teeth,

which she'd saved for him over the years. He still remembers that tiny tin. A tiny tin of tiny teeth. Somewhere along the line, he lost the tin, he's not sure where or how. As if it were nothing precious. As if it were just some cheap souvenir you could misplace and lose and forget about. But you can't replace those baby teeth. Even now, it pains him to think about losing them. How could he have been so careless? Not that it matters now. They're somewhere back on Earth, just like everything else he ever lost, and he'll never see the Earth again. Still, though. It bothers him.

He tucks the biological sample container under his arm and lurches to the workout module, where he sits on a bench and stares at the treadmill. He knows he needs to run, to keep his lungs and heart healthy, to keep his muscles toned. But he can't run. His kneecaps are putty: he can press a thumb into the cartilage and leave a dent. He cradles the sample container in his arms and visualizes himself running. He tells himself that maybe if he can visualize it perfectly enough, his knees will heal and he will run again. He closes his eyes. He hugs the container and visualizes.

Later, in his cot, he watches images of Earth. The images play on a drawn shade like a giant eyelid over the cot. He lies on his back under a soft blanket and watches butterflies and waterfalls. According to space-psychological theory, these scenes should calm him. Human beings require a connection to nature, even if it's only projected images. That's the theory, anyhow. Blue skies, blue seas, dolphins leaping. He pulls the blanket up to his chin and his last remaining fingernail snags on the fabric. The nail rips off. "Damn it," he says. He reaches for the biological sample container on the shelf above the cot, peels up the lid, and drops the nail in. Proper procedure.

The image of a sunset fades out. The ship's computer cuts in.

"Spaceman, a starship is approaching."

He sits up in his cot.

"What? Where from?"

"It has veered off course. Mission Control would like you to investigate."

The drawn shade rises and he sees outer space through the module window. He spies movement, a speck amid the blackness and the stars.

"Computer," the spaceman says, "hail occupant."

"I've been trying," the ship says. "No response. You'll have to board."

The spaceman climbs out of his cot. He suits up and trudges to the airlock. His breath fogs the bubble visor on his helmet. He does not feel fit enough for an extravehicular outing, but he can't let on to Mission Control how weak and frail he has become, so he pushes buttons to open the airlock, steps heavily in, pushes buttons to seal the lock. He tethers himself to a space line, clips his suit in three places. He pushes buttons to open the hatch. Outer space. There it is. He steps heavily toward it. The boots are heavy. The suit is heavy. He wonders if an insect feels this way before a molt. When the eyes cloud up. Even the eyes are shed, the cuticle of the eyes: the whole outer layer breaks off and a fresh wet inner being pushes through. He feels right now like the being inside.

His starship has maneuvered itself close to the mysterious stray. No other ship should be in his sector. When the space voyagers left Earth they each took a different slice of the sky, in order to cover as much of the unknown as possible. Their paths should not intersect. Something has therefore gone wrong.

He drifts out of the airlock and into space, where he thinks of Wile E. Coyote, how Wile E. Coyote would run off the edge of a cliff in pursuit of the Road Runner and run out

into thin air. And then the old joke. *Don't look down*. You can hang there as long as you don't look down. The thing about outer space, of course, is that you can't look down. There is no down. Or to put it another way, every way is down. Consequence of relativity. Everything is falling, but falling in relation to everything else. He is now falling, but so are the ships, all falling together at the same rate. So they seem to be hanging still, weightless. He pushes the sole of his boot against the rim of the airlock hatch and drifts toward the stray ship's airlock.

He falls gently against the hatch door, grabs a handle, unhooks one of the clips on his suit. He hooks the clip into a ring on the starship's exterior. He is now tethered to two ships. He slides a space key into the space lock on the stray ship's door. He turns the key. Then he turns a large manual crank to open the hatch. He climbs inside. The airlock looks just like his own ship's airlock. Everything's the same. He pushes a button on his space line and the line disengages from his ship, so he is cut free. The line reels itself in. He unhooks the clip from the outside of the stray ship and pushes buttons to close the airlock hatch.

He pushes buttons to open the airlock door. He steps out of the airlock and into the ship. He checks the readout on his wrist, which tells him that the oxygen is normal and the air is clear of pathogens. He unfastens the clamps on his helmet and pulls it off. He hangs it on a hook by the airlock door. His brow is sweaty. He calls hello into the ship. No one answers.

The spaceman has a weapon with him. It is a gun built into the arm of his suit. If the occupant of the stray spaceship has gone insane, for instance, and comes at him in a threatening manner, the spaceman can hold up his left arm, aim with his fingers, and tap his knuckles with his right hand to fire the gun. He walks with his left arm out, ready to fire if need be.

"Hello?" he calls.

No one answers.

The spaceman walks the whole ship. It is just like his ship, so he knows his way around. He investigates the sleeping module, the eating module, the workout module, the bathing module, the bridge, the sick bay. He finds no one. At last he comes to the communications pod, the only place left to look. He glances at himself in the darkened vanity mirror. His face is drawn and wet with sweat and mottled with dissolving flesh. He pushes a button to open the door.

The room is empty. It stinks, though. A pyramid of biological sample containers rises against a wall. Some lie toppled on the ground. The opaque plastic is smeared inside with pink and red and brown and purple tissue. Many samples. Someone else must have dissolved here. He notes a rank stain on the puffy chair. It could be fecal matter. But that's a lot of fecal matter. He wonders if in fact it's a whole dissolved person.

Several date-stamped status bars are frozen on the screen. NOT SENT. NOT SENT. NOT SENT.

"Computer," he says, "play last update."

The image of a man appears on the screen. He is bearded, his face mottled with the signs of decay. His wide eyes glisten in the video light. He looks scared.

"We cannot live in space. We cannot live in space. If you have a problem and the answer to the problem is that we'll live in space, you are wrong. We cannot live in space. It is the opposite of life here."

"Computer," the spaceman says, "stop video."



The man's bearded mouth pauses in a snarl. He has clearly gone insane. The decay must have crept into his brain. This is what the spaceman fears most right now: that the decay will creep into his brain, and then he will go insane like the man in the video. The spaceman wonders if he should collect the biological samples and bring them onto his starship. Should he scrape the crusty remains off the chair? Put them in a sample container? He knows the scientists would want him to collect the samples. But he doesn't want the samples on his ship. He doesn't want the remains of his fellow dissolved spaceman on his ship. So he decides not to take them.

He plugs a drive into the communications console and downloads the logs. That is all he will take.

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In the days to come, the spaceman has every intention to watch the logs. Every day he rises from bed and tells himself, "Today I will watch the logs." But he doesn't. The sick bay robot keeps insisting that nothing is wrong with the spaceman, that he is in perfect health—yet clearly he is not. Something is wrong. He is dissolving. And he wonders. Could he have picked up some kind of space virus, a virus that evolved in outer space and is so alien that the computer can't detect it? What else could explain his condition? The reason he didn't bring the tissue samples aboard was because he feared they were contaminated. He took the logs because data can't infect you. He intended to watch the dissolved spaceman's weekly updates, to see if they held clues about the virus. But optimism is needed in space, high morale is needed, and he feels that watching the logs would almost certainly lower morale. In a way, it would infect him, if only psychologically. But if you want to survive in space, the psychological factor is three-quarters of the equation. So another space day passes, and despite his best intentions the spaceman doesn't watch the logs.

He has a nightmare. In the nightmare he dreams of a scientist with a big forehead and bushy unkempt hair. The scientist sits at a desk putting puzzle pieces together. The finished puzzle will show a complete picture of nature, and the scientist grows more and more excited as more and more pieces fit together. We watch, and we grow excited along with the scientist. Yes! Yes! Everything fits! It all makes sense! As the scientist fits the pieces together, he ages before our eyes. A long white beard falls from his chin. The puzzle picture grows more complex, but the more complex the picture becomes, the less well the pieces fit. Their edges don't quite line up. Yet still, the scientist fits them together. It will all make sense! Keep fitting pieces together, and soon the picture will be complete! But now the pieces bend and flop like cardboard soaked in glue. They stick to themselves. And slowly we understand that the puzzle the scientist has been fitting together will never make sense. We understand that in fact it is a puzzle that makes less sense the more you solve it. The scientist can't understand this. What kind of puzzle makes less sense the more you solve it? So he continues to mash the pieces together, even as the skin shrinks around his skull and his eyes hollow out and his nose melts away.

The spaceman awakens to discover that all of the hair on his scalp has rubbed off in his sleep. He carefully collects the hair. He fetches gauze and tape from the sick bay, and a jar of sticky gel that you paint on wounds to hold them together to heal. He sits on his cot in the sleeping module and bends his knee and builds a cap on the knee with gauze. He uses the tape to hold the gauze together and give it shape. He takes the gauze cap off his knee

and places it on his head. He makes some adjustments. He returns the cap to his knee and then painstakingly, patch by patch, paints the sticky gel on the cap and adheres his fallen-out hair to the gel. In this way he fashions a wig. He works slowly, with great care, but the dexterity in his bandaged fingers is limited, and the end result is crude. He puts it on his head and looks in the vanity mirror outside the communications capsule. He doubts the wig will fool Mission Control. But it's the best he can do.

He pees blood. Most of his chest rubs off in the shower. He collects the mushy skin from the drain. Can he stick it back on? The computer calls him. He drops the mushy skin into a biological sample container, wraps himself in a bathrobe, and follows the call to the bridge.

"Spaceman," the computer says, "another starship is approaching."

He stands on the bridge in his bathrobe with his arms wrapped around his chest. Through the window he sees it: a scintillating jewel. Objects fly so straight in space. Nothing to impede them. Of course they're not flying, they're falling. All in relation to each other.

"Have you tried to hail?" he says.

"The ship's computer is disabled. I can't establish communication. You'll have to board."

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The spaceman clomps in his space boots down the hall to the airlock. He puts his helmet on and fastens it. His bad breath fills the helmet. The smell is truly revolting. He recalls a conversation he'd had with his young niece just before he left Earth. "Uncle," she'd said, "do you ever have something that you know you shouldn't like, but you like it? And you know you shouldn't do it, but you do it anyway?" She was only eleven years old. And he wondered. There were many things the spaceman liked but knew he shouldn't like. Whiskey. Cheap sex. But she couldn't be into those things. Could she? Before he had time to speculate further, she told him what it was she was into. "I like dog breath," she said. She said she liked to smell it, even though it was disgusting. She liked to lean down into a dog's mouth and huff the dog's breath. The spaceman was relieved.

"That's gross," he'd said. "But you do you."

The inside of his helmet smells like dog breath. Actually it smells like dog shit. His gums are rotting and his breath smells like dog shit, and the smell has filled the helmet. He pushes buttons to close the airlock door. He pushes buttons to open the hatch.

The other starship is traveling at a clip, but only in relation to the stars. His own starship turns and falls alongside it at a clip, and since they are falling at the same clip, they seem stationary next to one another. Since there is no atmosphere in space, no wind to kick up, the gap between the ships is still. The spaceman reaches across and turns the manual crank on the other ship's hatch. The hatch opens. He steps easily over the gap, like a person stepping from a platform onto a stopped train.

He notices at once that all is amiss. The other starship is identical to his own, but the lights are off. The control panel in the airlock is smashed, the buttons cracked and caved in. He uses a manual lever to close the hatch, then uses another manual lever to open the airlock door. He steps into the starship. The regular lights are off, their cool white glow replaced by the murky orange of the emergency system. The smell of his own bad breath makes his eyes water. He checks the readout on his wrist. Oxygen is thin in the ship, but

present—enough to breathe. He reaches up and unfastens the clamps on his helmet. He pulls it off.

“Ugh,” the spaceman says, and covers his nose with his gloved hand. The air is tangy with a barnyard smell. Very animal. But there are no animals in outer space. No cows, no pigs. Only humans. Unless some pungent alien has boarded. He lowers his hand. It’s a strong smell, a bad smell, but not as bad as his bad breath. He hangs the helmet by the airlock door. He raises his left arm and aims it forward, prepared to fire if need be.

He does not call hello. He has the sense that he is not alone on this ship. Something is living in here—and living hard. Productive of odor. This is the smell of life living hard in an enclosed space. Everywhere he looks, touchscreens and control panels are smashed. There is mess, overturned chairs, food scraps on the floor. He imagines rats, giant rats ransacking the place. But there are no rats in outer space. At least not as far as the spaceman knows.

He takes some deep breaths to try to calm his nerves. He moves as silently as he can from room to room. The place appears to be deserted. No one in the sick bay, no one on the bridge. No one in the bathing module, or the workout module, or the eating module. At last he comes to the sleeping module. And that’s where he finds them.

The module is dark and at first he doesn’t see them. He steps rapidly around the corner with his left arm drawn up, his right hand hovering over the trigger in his knuckles. He sees only dark lumps, blankets in a pile on a cot. But then the pile of blankets speaks.

“Don’t shoot.”

He almost does, purely out of nerves. But he catches himself, stands frozen.

The blanket pulls back, and in the darkness he can see the bearded insane spaceman from the video logs, the one he’d thought was dissolved. The bearded man sits on the cot with a blanket pulled over his head. His eyes gleam from out of the shadows fallen over his face. “Don’t shoot,” he says again, and puts up his hands. Another shape moves under the blanket behind him.

The spaceman lowers his right hand to show that he will not shoot without provocation. But he keeps his left arm pointed.

“This isn’t your ship,” the spaceman says to the other spaceman. “I’ve seen your logs.”

The other spaceman nods. Then under the blanket behind him a second face appears. It is a spacewoman.

“It’s my ship,” she says. “I invited him on board. Something was happening to us. We aborted our missions. We’re headed back home.”

The spaceman lowers his left arm.

“You can’t go back home,” he says. “You can’t abort your missions.”

The other spaceman and the spacewoman exchange a glance, then pull themselves out from under their blanket. They are naked except for black space underwear. Their bodies are filthy and covered with scabs. Their hair is matted. They climb off the cot.

“This—” the man says, and holds up his hands. His fingertips are bandaged. “This, look at this. We’ve been falling apart.” The man looks at the spaceman’s bald head, the mottled flesh of his cheeks. “You too, I see.” He turns to the spacewoman. “See?”

She nods. The man and the woman creep forward.

“It’s the distance from Earth,” the woman says, talking fast. “I plotted it out. When my skin began to drop away, I plotted it out. The decay is directly proportional to our distance from Earth. When I realized that, I turned around.”



"I turned around too," the man says. "We found each other. And now we've found you. You've got to head back. Otherwise you'll dissolve. I nearly dissolved!" The man turns to show a bubbly scab that stretches from his calves to the nape of his neck. "Fortunately I turned back in time. I tried to send my logs. But you saw for yourself—the computer wouldn't send them. The computer doesn't want the Earth to know! But we know. So come with us. Turn back with us! We've discovered a method to keep the life force alive."

"What method?" the spaceman murmurs.

The man creeps closer.

"Fucking."

The spaceman steps back.

"Don't be scared off," the woman says. "We didn't believe it either, at first. We didn't think something as simple as fucking would work. But it does! We were falling apart. But look—we're healing! Our wounds are scabbing over. And all due to fucking. The space rays out here have sterilized us, so there's no risk of pregnancy. No consequences. Pure life-force-building."

"We've developed a fucking regimen," the man says. "Our energy is low because of the decay, so we fuck very slowly. But we fuck eight times a day. Every two hours, we fuck for one hour. It's one hour of fucking, one hour of rest, then fuck again. Look—look at my scabs! I'm healing. It's an objective reality!"

The pair creep forward. The spaceman steps back.

"Don't go," the woman says. "Come with us. Bring your plants and algae on board. Share our oxygen. Cultivate the life force with us. Forget this mission."

"No!" the spaceman barks. "Treason!"

He aims his left arm and hovers over the trigger. The pair pause in their advance.

"There's nothing wrong with me!" the spaceman says. "The robot ran tests! I'm in perfect health!"

"This is not a biological problem," the woman says.

The spaceman backs away. He tells himself they've lost their minds. The decay has eaten into their brains. They're deranged, living in their own filth, descending into animality. This is not the future. This is not the arrow of progress, which points in all directions and never falters, only goes.

He backs away to the airlock hatch. The pair creep after him.

"You're making a mistake," the man says.

"Stay with us and fuck," the woman says.

"Come fuck us," the man says. "Fuck us! Stay alive!"

The spaceman jams his helmet back on. He fastens the clamps. He pulls the lever to open the airlock. He keeps his left arm trained on the pair as he steps into the airlock and pulls the lever to close the door. He pulls the lever on the hatch. He floats across the gap between the ships and lands in his own airlock. He pushes buttons to close the hatch.

The spaceman sheds his spacesuit as he stumbles to the bridge. He sits in the seat at the console and tells the computer to resume course. His starship falls away from the other starship. They will die out there, the man and the woman. They've disabled their computer and they will die. Their waste will build up. Their oxygen will fail. There's no way they can make it home. And even if they could, what would they tell the people of Earth? What message of hope could they bring? Only hope keeps us alive. And hope is expansion. So the answer is not to flee back to where we came from. The answer, he tells himself, is to

keep pushing. Outrun this space virus or whatever it is before it eats him alive. Find new land, freeze himself in the cryo hold, wait in suspension until the first settlers arrive. Maybe that takes a hundred years. Maybe it takes a thousand. By that time they'll have the technology to cure him. He fixes his eyes on the cold black of outer space.

A platelet swims through the spaceman's gangrenous toe. It travels up the rot of his leg and into his soggy groin. It pushes through the clots of his torso and into his shivering heart. From there it travels to his neck, where it mingles with the goo of his spinal column. It swirls around the black cheese of his brainstem and leaks into his sinuses, and falls through the roof of his mouth and onto his tongue. He tastes it. Blood.

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*Premium Connect* is shown here as a still of the full accompanying video artwork originally featured on [stillpointmag.org](http://stillpointmag.org).

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