



Cyborg Legs
STEVE ORTH

CYBORG LEGS

DAY 1

I turn the switch to the left. This makes the light blink.

A man sees the blinking light and walks towards me. He sets a green plastic basket to my left. I turn the switch to the right. This makes the light stop blinking but remain illuminated.

I stare inside the green plastic basket. It's full of groceries. Pork chops, a bottle of wine, a box of tea, some apples, some brussel spouts. I gaze at them. Then I look at the man who brought them to me, a tall man, about mid 40's, wearing a grey suit that is one size too big for him. This man is my first customer of the day.

"Hello", I say.

"Hi", says the customer.

"Am I on the wrong side?"

"No. You're on the right side. You've done everything perfectly. I'm simply saying hello".

"OK".

I unload the customer's basket, each item one by one, very slowly. After I unload everything. I begin scanning them, one by one.

As I scan, I ask, "Did you find everything you were looking for today?"

There is no reply. The customer is looking at his phone. I shrug and continue scanning barcodes. If an item has no barcode, there is nothing to scan. If you've ever seen a cucumber you might've noticed that it has no bar code. So for these particular items, I enter in a five-digit code. Each piece of produce is assigned a code. The code for cucumber is 94062.

After scanning each item. I ask the customer, "Would you like a bag?"

The customer says "yes". I recommend a double bag to him. The products that he's purchasing might be a little too heavy for a single bag. A double bag will provide the proper support that they need. A single bag, in my opinion, would be much too flimsy.

After a short internal debate, the customer agrees to a double bag. I open one bag and set it on the bagging platform. I grab a second bag. I put my arm into it, until my fingers

reach the bottom. Then I insert the second bag into the first bag. Once the second bag is at the bottom of the first bag, I spread out my hand opening the second up inside of the first bag. This is the most efficient way to construct a double bag.

After I've made the double bag, I say to my customer, "OK. It'll be \$42.86."

The customer slides a card down a card reading device. As he does this, I begin placing his items into the double bag. I begin with the bottle of wine.

"It says waiting for cashier" says the customer. He's telling me what the credit card reader is telling him.

"Oh sorry about that. Here, let me hit a little button, here."

I hit a button that says, "CREDIT/DEBIT" on my touch screen register.

"Is it working now?" I ask.

The customer says nothing. So I assume everything is working fine. I pack all of his items into the double bag. Heavy stuff on the bottom, delicates on top. I place the double bag on the counter. I see a receipt has printed, letting me know that the transaction is now complete. I hand the receipt to the customer.

"Have a great day." I say to him. I emphasize the word "great."

The customer still looking at his phone, grabs the double bag and walks away. I take a deep breath. Then slowly exhale. I look down at my hands and watch as they tremble slightly.

I turn the switch to the left. This makes the light blink.

I average 41.2 customers per hour, at 14.12 items scanned per minute. I do this work for two hours. Then it's time for a ten-minute break.

I remove my apron and walk outside, where I drink some coffee, smoke a cigarette and look at my phone. This break takes fifteen minutes. At the conclusion of this break, I quietly return to my register. I sign back in the register. I turn the switch to the left and cashier for the next two hours until my next break, which is a 45 minute unpaid lunch break.

On my lunch break, I clock out. Then I grab my backpack and leave the store. I walk two blocks to this micro-park. I sit on the ground with my back against this one particular tree. I want to say that it's a Birch tree, but that's really just a guess. It has big scars all over its bark where some limbs must've been cut off. The scars look like carvings of eyes. There are over twenty eyes on my favorite tree.

I smoke a cigarette and then I eat some pistachio nuts, salami, a little bread and a cookie. I write a quick forgettable poem about giving CPR to a zebra. I smoke another cigarette and stare at the blades of grass. I gather my belongings and walk back to the grocery store. My 40-minute lunch is about 55 minutes. When I return to the grocery store, I clock in and go back to my register . I turn the switch to the left and cashier for two hours. Then I take a fifteen-minute-ten-minute break. Then I cashier for two more hours. I clock out at 8pm.

After clocking out, I buy a 24 oz can of Pabst Blue Ribbon. It costs \$1.64 after my discount. I also grab a small brown bag and a large 20 oz. coffee cup with a lid. I leave the grocery store and cross the street. Once I cross the street, I place the beer into the small brown bag, and then open the beer. I drink as I walk towards the train station. This walk takes 15 minutes. I finish the beer about a half block away from the train station. Then I stop at a liquor store and buy another 24oz beer. I step off of the main street and drink from the new beer. Once I have finished 4-5 ounces of the new beer, I pour the remaining beer into the coffee cup and fasten the lid. Then I walk into the train station and take a train back to my apartment in Oakland, where I drink more beer and order Chinese food.

DAY 2

My shift begins at 7:30am today. I wake up at 6:20am, shower and get dressed. I leave the house at 6:40. I take the train to the Powell station stop, get off the train and walk 15 minutes to the grocery store. I arrive at work at 7:36. I clock in.

I put on my apron and nametag and walk to the customer service booth. I prepare the cashier department for opening. I put the trash, compost, and landfill bins in their proper place. I power on the monitors to every register, I set down plush mats by every register. After I finish these tasks, I walk over to my supervisor, Dianna. Dianna is 22 years old, studies marketing at San Francisco State, always has some purple in every outfit she wears and appears flustered at everything in the world that is not awesome. I tell Dianna that I need to use the restroom. This slightly flusters Dianna, but she agrees. I walk to the bathroom and into one of the stalls. I sit down and stare at my phone for a few minutes.

I return at 8:03 and the store is open. I walk over to my assigned register, turn the switch to the left and cashier for two hours, then I take a ten-minute break. On this break, I drink some coffee, smoke a cigarette, eat some yogurt and stare at my phone. The addition

of the yogurt adds about 4 minutes to my break. When I return to the sales floor, I say to Dianna, "Sorry I'm a little late. It's because I didn't come back in time." This is my attempt at humor. Diana uses her eyes to transport a telepathic message that says, "I'm pissed off that you always take too long on your breaks." I receive this message and return to my register, where I turn the switch to the left and cashier for the next two hours.

My average of customers per hour has dropped to 39.2.

At lunch, I clock out, grab my backpack, and walk over to the park to sit by my tree. The sun is out and the tree has absorbed a lot of heat and it's warm on my back. Sitting cross-legged, I smoke a cigarette; eat a Cliff Bar and some potato chips. I take out my notebook. A brown ladybug crawls on my left hand. I watch its movements for a little while and then I write a poem called Cyborg Legs.

Nobody believes me
when I tell them
 that I have cyborg legs.
 actual cyborg legs.
 a shark bit
 off my legs
when I was in the ocean (swimming)
The doctor wanted
 to try a new experiment,
I signed the waiver, and there you go.
 After the confirmation
 that my new legs
 did, in fact, work,
the doctor was found
 dead.
beaten to a pulp with what seemed
 like a sock(full)
of doorknobs.
His body was found in
 a trash bin next to a Conoco.

I know...it is odd.

Yes, I can
run fast.

“What a great poem.” I say to myself and the tree.

The poem takes about half an hour to write. My forty-minute lunch break ends up taking an hour and two minutes. Returning to the customer service booth, I say to Diana, “Sorry, I’m a little late getting back.” and then start walking back to my register. Diana stops me and says, “Yeah, well, you’re more than a little late.” I can hear a long brewing frustration come through. I look at her. I attempt to deconstruct any subtext in what she says. This is not a personal matter, I think. Maybe Dianna has been afraid of this particular conflict and is unsure of asserting herself to me. I can’t tell why Dianna would be upset by my 1 hour and 2 minute lunch break. I feel threatened by her acknowledgement of my tardiness. Looking her in the eye, I say, “I’m not feeling very well today. I think I need to go home sick.”

This statement ends the confrontation.

Dianna stops looking at me. Then she opens up a binder and hands me a sheet of paper. This sheet of paper is a form. This is a form called “Team Member Absence Form”. I fill out the form and hand it back to her. I leave the customer service booth. I clock out and leave the grocery store. I don’t buy a beer, because I just left work early due to illness. And a purchase of beer would appear that maybe I am lying about that illness.

I arrive at my apartment in Oakland. I then leave again and walk four blocks to the liquor store. I purchase a twelve pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon and a small bottle of Ancient Age whiskey. I return home. I watch a baseball game on my computer, Kansas City versus Arizona. I keep the twelve pack on the floor by my feet. The beer doesn’t stay very cold, but this placement saves me the trouble of standing up and walking to the kitchen every time I need a beer. The game ends three hours later, with Kansas City winning 6-2. I drank seven of the beers and a third of the whiskey.

I open my bag and remove my notebook. I type up Cyborg Legs in a Word Document and print it out. I read it. Then I read it again. I feel a sensation shooting up my body. My blood thins out and my muscles are weak. I believe the poem is the cause. I email it to a few of my poet friends.

Before I go to sleep for the evening, I toss the last remaining beer in the fridge. I lie down in bed and put Carl Sagan's show "Cosmos" on the computer. Episode 5 "Blues For A Red Planet". I fall asleep within the first five minutes of the episode.

Day 3

I wake up at 11:30 AM, sweaty and exhausted. I can taste the remains of the beer and whiskey and cigarettes from last night. I can almost chew on it. I lay in bed for twenty minutes. I am staring off and reenacting my confrontation with Dianna. The scene plays out in my head over and over again. In this version, I tell Dianna to mind her own god damn business.

Finally, I get out of bed and hop into the shower. I cover my body with soap and then rinse off. I put a bit of conditioner in my hair. I work the conditioner all over my hair. I don't rinse it out. It helps keep my curls together.

I get out of the shower and dry off. I look into the mirror, my face is puffy and red. I put on a clean pair of grey jeans and an Oakland A's T-shirt. I sit at the edge of the bed and space out.

An hour later, I'm on the train into the city. I'm reading "The Wild Girls" by Ursula Le Guin. A savage throws a dying baby into a bush, when my phone vibrates. I remove the phone from my pocket. I have a new email from Paul. The title of the email is RE: New Poem! This is what Paul says:

"hey steve, thanks for sending this poem. it's interesting! i'm really curious about the parentheticals you use in it -- "(swimming)" and "(full)" -- i wonder if there's a subterranean, or subaqueous (!), connection between them -- one that perhaps the speaker of the poem is not quite attuned to -- i know that you're not supposed to swim on a full stomach, god isn't childhood a terrifying place, and this poem carries some of, how to say, the "flashy dimness" of the not-yet-developed mind in its casual enjambment and "cool" tone. here's a suggested revision:

*oh no i'm swimming
next to my own full stomach --
metal legs are cold*

i know the legs aren't metal until after you're done swimming, but i think your cyborg legs are more interesting (golly, have i said that word a lot today!) if they're submerged and malfunctioning. if i wanted to see a cyborg working perfectly, i'd watch a nature documentary or something.

I arrive at work at 2:25 and clock in. I put a piece of Juicy Fruit gum in my mouth, to mask any alcohol smell still lingering from my mouth. I walk by the store manager Robert. Of the many bosses that I have, Robert is my least favorite. He is in his mid 40's, wears vests with an un-tucked shirt and has baby teeth. He stops me.

"Hey, so how's it going?" asks Robert.

"It's going OK." I reply.

"Oh cool...so, hey...where are you today?"

"Where am I today?"

"Yeah. Where are you?" Robert and I then stare at each other for a very long five seconds.

"I'm here....in this building?....to work?"

"OK."

Does he smell alcohol on my breath? Does he know that I left sick yesterday when I wasn't sick. My body heats up ten degrees.

"And where is that grocery store?"

"Here in this building?"

"OK, work with me here, Steve. So what city is this building in?"

"San Francisco."

"Ding Ding! Jim, we have a winner!"

I stare at Robert, completely dumfounded.

"So why are you wearing an Oakland shirt, if you're in San Francisco?"

"Do I need to change my shirt?"

"Yes, do you know why you need to change?"

"Because I'm not allowed to wear this?"

"That's right. You can wear a Giants t-shirt, because this is San Francisco and not Oakland and we root for the Giants here in San Francisco. You can also wear a plain t-shirt, a

store shirt, a vendor t-shirt. All of those are acceptable shirts to wear. You got a hoodie or a jacket?"

"A jacket."

"Cool. Yeah, go grab your jacket."

"OK."

Our conversation ends. I go back to my locker and grab my jacket and put it on. I walk on to the sales floor when my phone vibrates. I have a new email from Brenda. The title of this email is RE: Poem! This is what Brenda says:

Dear Steve,

The poem is so strange because it reads as if the shark bit off your cyborg legs, not the legs you were born with and "lost". I wish I had an extra copy of Juliette Lee's Mental Commitment Robots because you'd find a lot there to generatively off-load and think about/through. I think your poem is driving at pious affect and how it is deployed in so many (too many) lyrical poems. But there is nothing to be sure about in your poem. Its quizzical nature is post-nature/culture.

Hope all is well with you (despite) the trauma to your legs—virtual or otherwise. A fantasy can suffer trauma also.

After reading Brenda's email, I look up and there's a man, a few feet away, staring at me. The man is about 6'5, wearing a bright green visor and a matching bright green cape. Under the cape is a worn out tweed sports jacket with a poofy blue dying flower in the lapel. He looks like he could be anywhere between 35 and 65 years old. He walks towards me. He opens his mouth.

"Pretty busy, are we?" the man says. He spoke every word slowly and carefully with a certain crispness to it.

"Huh?"

"Edible Flowers."

"Excuse me?"

"Where are they?"

"Huh?"

"Where are the edible flowers that you sell in this store?"

“Oh, they’d be in produce by the rosemary and thyme and that sort of stuff. But I don’t think we sell edible flowers at this store.”

“I’ve bought them here before.”

“OK.”

“Do you know how much they are?”

“No I don’t. Not offhand.”

“What a shock.”

“Excuse me?”

“A new field of work, maybe for you?”

I can’t respond. The man walks off in hot pursuit of his edible flowers. My mouth becomes very dry and my whole body begins to ache. My pulse gallops. I stand in the aisle for a minute, doing meditation-like breathing. I take a big breath and slowly exhale. I slowly walk to the customer service booth. I am assigned register 7. I turn the switch to the left and cashier for two hours, take a ten minute break, cashier for two hours, take a 40 minute unpaid lunch break, cashier for two hours, take a ten minute break, cashier for two hours. Then I clock out and go home.

When I arrive home it’s 11:30 PM. I open the fridge and pull out the can of Pabst Blue Ribbon. I drink almost half of it in the first gulp. I eat some two-day-old sweet and sour pork. I finish the beer and throw the can in the trash. I reenact my encounter with Robert. In this version, I tell Robert that the reason that I wear an Oakland shirt is because I live in Oakland. And the reason that I live in Oakland is because I don’t get paid enough to live in San Francisco. This totally stumps Robert.

I sit down at the computer to reread Paul and Brenda’s emails and see that there’s another email from Sophia. The subject is RE: New Poem! Here’s what Sophia says:

Dear Steve,

I want to say first off: this is really an interesting direction for you, really new, and that’s exciting. It seems both more personal and more estranged, in a way, than previous work. More emotional, yet simultaneously more guarded.

Is this part of a larger project? It seems like part of a larger project.

Obviously I’m unqualified to suggest any changes, but I have a few spicy, snacky, unnecessary inspirations to share with you regarding formal choices this piece makes.

I couldn't help but feel that the poem wants to be pushed formally. I took the liberty of experimenting with the vocabulary, trying to dial up the core elements—water, loss, patient/doctor relations, what it means to survive— knowing that rather than take offense, like some might, you would understand that I'm invested in your project and want your poems to find their full voice! The following may be read more as a suggestive guide than a prosthetic "fix" or "solution":

PROSTHESY

*But I do have machine legs.
An ocean shark foreshortened me midswim
And when I drifted up and dried
My doctor tried out something new
And it worked. How to tell you,
Body who won't believe,
That my doctor died then, as if my wendings
Were enough, one man's life's work
Sieved into one man's pain
He left me his believer, and for him my legs,
Scant sacrifice, poor god.
Seas bruise the shorelines. I would be a car,
Swiftly to zoom where lanes rarely adjust,
Speed for my doctor, metal for my meat,
Bereavement for my engine to combust.*

After finishing reading Sophia's email. I jump into bed. I start up an episode of Carl Sagan's show Cosmos. Episode 5 "The Backbone Of The Night". I fall asleep during the opening credits.

In the middle of the night, I am awakened. Loud, startling thunder clapping outside. The windows shake from the sound. The storm feels so close, like it's emerging from the ground. The entire apartment vibrates. I look outside. Rain is falling sideways. Lightening flashes again and again. The thunder is deafening. I watch the storm for an hour. I am transfixed by it, almost hypnotized. My body feels cool and light. Finally at about 4AM, I become very sleepy. I rest my head on the pillow and fall into a heavy sleep.

DAY 4

I leave my apartment at 10:43 and walk to the train station. I pay my fare and take the escalator to platform 2. Standing on the platform, I check the electronic sign to see when my train is coming. The sign says, "SF/Daly City, 20 minutes, 41 minutes." This surprises me. Maybe last night's storm has messed up the train service. I find a bench and sit down. I pull out a book from my back pack, *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep*. I read the first paragraph where Rick wakes up to the sound of his mood organ. I'm intrigued but am having trouble concentrating. I look at the electronic sign again. "SF/Daly City, 21 minutes, 41 minutes." My face feels warm.

I decide to inform the store that I'm running late and take my phone out of my pocket. I find the phone number in my list of contacts and hit the green call button. Less than a second later, and before a single ring, I hit the red end call button. "What am I going to say?" I wonder. I pick up my book again and turn to a blank page in the back of the book. I take out a pen and write on the back page: Hi, this is Steve. There's a delay with BART and I'm going to be a little late, like 20 minutes."

I finish writing my script and look at the electronic sign again. It says, "SF/Daly City, 22 minutes, 39 minutes."

I once again find the store's phone number on my phone and press the green "call" button. I place the phone to my ear. The phone rings once, then stops, it then becomes static noise, like if you were trying to call a fax machine. I quickly remove the phone from my ear and press the red "end" button.

I wait a minute. Then I call the number again and the same thing happens. It rings and then transforms into a loud gargling static. I hit the red "end" button and put the phone in my pocket. Sitting on the bench, my face has gradually returned to it's normal

temperature. I turn to the back page of the book and with my pen, I scribble out the script I had written. And then I read.

It's 12:43 when I get off the train. I take the escalator and exit the station. I walk down 4th Street towards the grocery store. I walk past the Target, three Starbucks, two Peets, a Chipotle. There's construction on the sidewalk across from me. Everything is loud and crowded.

I get to where the store is. I get to where the grocery store usually is. But the grocery store is not there. There is no building there at all. It's not torn down or in ruins. It's simply..... vanished in the middle of the night. Or early this morning washed away with the storm. There is nothing there and in its place is a field. A large field full of tall fresh grass and daffodils growing in little patches.

I look at my other surroundings to make sure that I am in the right place. Everything else is, as it seems. There's the Nike shop, the Yahoo billboard. Everything is here. Except the grocery store is missing. I take my phone from my back pocket to call the store. Maybe there's someone I can talk to and figure where I'm supposed to go. When I take out my phone, I just look at it. It feels heavy in my hand.

I put the phone away and stare off into the field. The tall green grass and the daffodils are rocking with a small breeze.

I walk into the field and stand there. I try to imagine the layout of the grocery store. I try to figure out where register #6 would be. I think I find it. I stand in that spot for a minute. My body feels cool and sturdy. I look up at the sky awaiting some other symbol or maybe some metaphysical explanation. There is nothing in the sky but sky. I take a deep breath, slowly exhale, and then walk back the way I came.

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