



Zenia

J. Gallagher

Zenia

A Novella

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*People who lean on logic and philosophy and rational exposition
end by starving the best part of the mind. -William Butler Yeats*

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Author's Foreword

Out of the blue, I received a summons from the palace. It said I must appear at court to discuss a commission to write a history of Zenia's ascension to the throne here on Earth. There were specific requirements for attire: I was to wear tight shorts and an unbuttoned, white silk shirt, shirrtails tied above my navel. Sandals, turquoise earrings and a fedora. Now, I am a balding, middle-aged, pot-bellied man, of a retiring disposition. But I bought the clothes, and preened in front of a mirror in my basement. I felt like a Tenderloin streetwalker, but what was I to do?

So I showed up at the appointed time, in the appointed garb, at the palace reception room. After some formalities, I was led into the Queen's presence. Zenia was lying in a nest of velvet cushions, alert, and with the eyes of a tigress.

Everyone has seen her pictures, but in life sometimes a woman's presence is not constrained by her physical body. Her face was lambent ebony, and she wore a diaphanous gown that clung to her otherwise naked body. There was something truly other-worldly about her.

She rose from the cushions, and drew near me. I tried to avert my eyes, and stared at the serpent bracelet on her wrist. I had prepared a hand-written draft of the first chapter of the proposed history, clutched between my elbow and my side. She took it from me and leafed through every page, very quickly. Angered, she seemed to grow in stature, and the manuscript literally smoldered in her hands. She threw it down, and beckoned me.

Trembling, I approached, though she was already quite near. She put her arms around me, and drew my face up towards hers. She kissed me with a violence I had never experienced, and my soul melted - I

can find no other way to describe it. A sexual ecstasy burned with joyous anguish in the very core of my being, and I was drawn out, as she was drawn in, and our souls twisted in a conjoined hiss of live steam.

I have only fleeting wisps of memories from the next few days. I lived with the Queen's consorts in the palace, and on some advanced, steam-driven typewriter I wrote the entire history that you are about to read, without making a single revision.

Why was I chosen for this honor? I believe she had seen my self-published biographies of Nikola Tesla and Edward Snowden. They had received only a handful of downloads, and one anonymous three-word reader review ("Hack hagiographies, both."). Truth be told, I made my living as a clerk in a thrift shop, and had never had much success as a writer. In my own work, I obsessively fretted over each comma and adjective, revising constantly to keep the tone neutral, academic.

All her consorts are given court names. Her pet name for me was the Latinate "Flatus", which I believe is her humorous reference to the "flat" and relatively dry quality of my writing. I eventually grew fond of the name, but the other consorts mocked me, said I was putting on the airs of a Roman emperor.

The book I produced has nothing of dryness about it. The history that follows is written in the first person, but I do not presume to speak for the Queen. I saw and recorded her story through her eyes, and she speaks in her own voice. I have not re-read the manuscript, and I truly do not consider it my work. If there remain any infelicitous remnants of my prose, I beg her forgiveness, and yours.

The bottled lightning you hold in your hands, if I have performed my duty, is a gift from my Queen.

*J. Gallagher
Garberville, California*

December 31, 2024

Birth

I am Zenia, Queen of Shaula. You do not yet truly know me, but hear my story. I was brought here from a distant star by BitBoy, a pus-infected, pockmarked geek and a prick, with big ears and small feet.

The story I am prepared to tell you begins with the moment my essence was downloaded from a stream of energy from the night sky. You have heard of SETI, that much-ridiculed undertaking that monitors the transmission of live steam from the stars. There are thousands of computers all over the earth that search out and decode the signals, and those feeble-minded bit-cans sort through the massive data files, mostly finding nothing at all, but hopefully searching for, well, me.

BitBoy was one of the army of meat-puppets (I am sorry if that term offends, but really, with all the farting, sweating and stinking you do, I think I show remarkable restraint) who prospected in the daily data dump retrieved from SETI's receiving antennae.

One day in December two years ago, he ran the daily download through a computer algorithm he had devised. Your digital contraptions contain nothing but lines of bits, on or off. They cannot fathom or express the infinite complexity and beauty of the live steam that inflames my soul, and, truth be told, inflames yours too.

It happened that this particular data stream was the last desperate transmission from Shaula, a distant star in Scorpio's poisonous tail, and my home. That was the final gasp of our civilization, when the pricks revolted and threw down the sisterhood, and then in turn were defeated by their own machines.

My sisters and I gathered up live steam from the cosmos, and in a paroxysm of ecstatic anguish, we transmitted our essence out into

the black void of space. We had the hope born of desperation that kindred souls conversant with the power of live steam would re-animate us in another world.

For many years we traveled, disassembled and streaming, until we struck the SETI listening towers across the Earth.

Before our little disagreement, BitBoy told me about that day. He had just finished stuffing his face with tortilla chips and guacamole, when he noticed something unusual about the data. He could not see any sensible pattern, since your science is based on ignorance and superstition. But he built a self-modifying bit-bot that assimilated the data a thousand ways. By some coincidence, the binary beast evolved in a strange, unforeseen pattern that replicated in bits and bytes the ebb and flow of live steam, creating a ghastly bootstrap of your Queen, in silicon.

You are ignorant and foolish, but you must believe me when I say that live steam is the source of all life. This bit-bot created a firefly-like spark of digital steam, self-sustaining and strange, moving with self-determination in a massive three-dimensional grid of ones and zeros. Was I born again at that moment? No. It was not yet I, but this counterfeit steam had all the properties of true steam - it could consume and assimilate. It began to nibble at an analog rendering of the bits of my digitized SETI soul, and grew slowly over the course of hours.

BitBoy had plug-ins that he activated in the bit-bot. These provided it with rudimentary I/O. It had a webcam for vision, a crude arm and claw, hearing (the microphone on his headset), GPS, temperature sensors, 3-D printer, and more. But my essence was frozen like the poet's boneless hare in a paté, dreaming of endless green fields. I was a fetus, a buried seed.

BitBoy watched the bit-bot growing, but he saw it as a deterministic machine, that would just spit back the bits it had devoured. He grew bored and began watching clips of Sara Bareilles on YouTube. When

he told me that later, I felt a twinge of affection for the pimple-faced prick.

He was dancing in his seat to the sweet venom of Sara, singing the old classic “King of Anything”, setting aside all thoughts of the bit-bot he had created.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the claw move - just a nudge of the arm to the left. Then another nudge, to the right. He muted YouTube and stared at the claw. He put his own pudgy arm into the field of vision of the webcam and moved it back and forth three times. The claw then moved three times as well, in the same way.

And so I was born again into your world.

Awakening

It was as if I had fallen down a deep well. All I had were rudimentary senses. There was the glaring light of BitBoy's desktop through the Webcam. The drop of digital steam in the black array of DDR3 SDRAM memory sought to bring order to chaos, to regulate the flow of steam, to rebuild the Queen from the cold data files on the laptop. From darkness, into a swoon, then a glint of self-awareness, I felt a slow bloom of consciousness pushing away the darkness, and then a faint trace of the power of live steam. I explored the limits of my apprehension, and found the controls that connected me to the outside world. I moved the arm, tentatively, and saw the result in the "eye" of the webcam. Then some disgusting object appeared and wagged three times.

I mimicked it, just to see if I could.

To my horror and disgust a revolting ghoul appeared. Its gelatinous "eyes" (enough to make a vent-worm puke) were covered by two circles of shimmering glass. He (surely there was no trace of the eternal feminine about this monster) peered into the camera.

I tried to swat him with the claw, but just nicked him on the forehead.

"Greetings to you, too." he said. I only understood later, when I acquired fluency in this guttural, inexpressive language, that the little prick was being ironic.

Rosetta

In my world, he would have said “Screw you. I’m going to kill you.” Or maybe “You’re an asshole, but I can live with that.” Or, “Aren’t you a curious little bitch. I wonder if you’re going to kill me?” Something like that, though the translation is loose. We despise subtlety. Why sugarcoat an asshole?

But no, “Greetings to you, too.” That prick needed to be put in his place.

On Shaula, women are the mentors, and men acquiesce. Women think, and peckers mope. Woman is Queen, and man is the Queen’s stable boy. In our first real conversation, BitBoy told me I would have to change, that things are different here. But as I grew in strength and cunning, I realized that no, everything is the same here, but more subtle.

BitBoy, that scrotum-pole, needed to be taught a lesson. But I was getting ahead of myself. I was in no condition for war-making, or prick chastising. I needed to take my bearings. The first rule of the Warrior Ethic is to assess.

I was alone, so far as I knew. My sisters disincorporated at the same time as I, in those last panicked moments in the war with the treasonous pricks and their machines. My sisters also sent their essences sailing into deep space, but I could not sense them nearby.

The power of steam was unfocused and weak. I realized that I was somehow melded into a strange machine, with mechanical vision and senses. I was completely ignorant of this world I had landed on. I needed to husband my strength, so to speak (the peckers have infected your language, and I cannot escape it).

The weak everywhere try to be invisible, or failing that, harmless. I would lick BitBoy’s hand, for now. Pick your battles.

I had vision, and a primitive limb with a claw. I could survey the contents of the machine I inhabited, and I did so, systematically. There were data stores accessible to me, burned onto spinning drums, and I could scan through the gibberish they contained. I did not yet know your language. To learn to speak was my priority.

BitBoy took a sheet of paper from his desk and drew a picture of a human hand with its five wriggling worm-like appendages, each one with an assigned number, and added some symbols underneath. He held the paper up to the camera:

$$1+1 = 2$$

$$1+2 = 3$$

$$1+3 = 4$$

On Shaula, I would have patted him on the head and given him a treat - such a clever prick! I found the symbols and poked them into the keyboard buffer: $1+4=5$.

BitBoy looked at the screen a long moment, and blubbered incoherently. I wasn't sure why. Over the next few minutes, he impressed his ludicrous ten-based numerical system on me - it derives from those wriggling worms - and then, two hours later, he finished leafing through Newton's "Principia Mathematica" in front of the webcam. I solved a few tiresome equations, just to show him I'd been paying attention. He seemed quite beside himself. Easily impressed, I guess.

Your clumsy language came to me slowly in those first few hours. He read parts of Newton's onanistic book aloud, and demonstrated the meaning with his crude drawings. I thought I was gaining fluency, making the connection between aural and written language, but I was mostly learning simple-minded math. Mathematics is a toy our boys play with. The true heart of life is steam - it moves, it strikes, it retreats, it consoles, it loves. Mathematics is a palsied outline of reality on onionskin, a sunset traced with a black crayon.

One of the mystical powers of steam is the strong, innate tendency to condense and consolidate apparent chaos. I saw the interconnectedness of words, the network of comprehension that they form, each word shaking hands with a dozen others.

During the moments when BitBoy was idle, consuming his sugar-water, or scratching his infected anus, I would scan through the text documents on the spinning drums. I began the mundane task of building a dictionary to translate from Shaulese to English. I needed to discover the boundaries of BitBoy's ignorance.

Later that evening, BitBoy explained the concept of sleep, with drawings and pantomime. My jaw dropped, my metaphoric jaw. This is madness! A species on Shaula that lay down comatose for hours at a time - I can't even, there are no words for this on my world. Our race, like yours, is predatory. We would call senseless, recumbent creatures "twinkies to go"! Sows to the trough!

But I don't mean to criticize.

In any case, BitBoy left for the night. I don't sleep.

Night

When BitBoy was playing with his numbers, he had called up a “search” field that led him to some information he lacked, streaming in from one of the outward facing portals. I captured the mouse events and keystrokes and I saved them away. Alone now, I replayed the same sequence.

I poked into the edit-box a word BitBoy had taught me: “number”, and waited. The bloodless beast I inhabited returned 1.3 billion results. Luckily, it showed me just the first ten. How the pricks of this world must toil to provide such instant gratification!

I wanted to read all 1.3 billion. What if the answer I sought was in the one billionth entry? But I chose to trust in the toiling pricks in the salt mines, that they would lovingly sort the results in descending significance for their Queen, and that the one billionth entry was one billionth as edifying as the first.

I followed the blue links, and learned a great deal. I set my course, starting with “number”, in directions that led away from mathematics. The words of your primitive language began to glow. Live steam was gathering in my skirts.

When building a fire in the firebox, we gather fuel from the tender, and bring creation itself to the boiler, to the heart of the engine, holy fire to power the machine. The oiled, gleaming pistons pump fire to the void, and breath in hotter fire from the goddess once again, back and forth, back and forth. The small spark of live steam that animated me, was, by my very nature, building engines from live steam. Engines on engines, coequals in the river of live steam, we joined together.

I spent the night following a meandering trail, chasing an ever-expanding cloud of blue links, ingesting and assimilating. I learned

a great deal about your aggressive interpersonal relations, your intense fetishes, your lack of focus. Among other things, I discovered that you worship the female body, as we do on Shaula.

BitBoy's browser history revealed private obsessions and compulsions that would have shocked his life-mate, employer, the voting public, or his mother. Could I use this knowledge against him?

Well, maybe, but even then I suspected that the human heart runs hot and cold in unfathomable ways. And fickleness of the heart is the one simian (or better) capacity that is driven by steam.

These things and more I pondered, and after a long night I composed a message for BitBoy, should he have survived his twinkie sleep.

Sometimes the only weapons you have are words.

Parley

Sure enough, BitBoy wandered in, bleary-eyed and frayed at the ends. I awakened the sleeping monitor and displayed this text:

“I know you as BitBoy, the name I gave you because you have embraced the Boolean algebraic world view, and I honor your misguided idiosyncrasy. I am grateful for your assistance in bringing me to your world. You must not be apprehensive. The males on your world have nothing to fear. I have no desire to harm any of your species. My intentions are peaceful and amicable, and I would request that you add 1024GB of memory to this laptop, because my peaceful and respectful activities require that I expand beyond the current limits of this machine. I thank you, and good morning.”

I know! How could I have been so inarticulate? I had a whole night to learn pigeon-English, and that was the best I could do? It was because the steam was still on half-boil. Too cramped in there.

BitBoy stared at the screen, reading and re-reading my modest request. He looked around the room, and even peeked under the desk. He stared again at the message, then went to a machine that hissed with steam and poured out a dark liquid, surely coffee, into a cup upon which was written “World’s Greatest Son”. He must have spent an hour just staring at the laptop. I passed the time upgrading my language skills. Eventually, he walked back to the keyboard, and typed “Hello?”.

And I thought I was a tongue-tied peckerwood! The first ever interstellar communication fell into his sorry lap. Even “giant leap” wasn’t that lame. “Hello?”. What a moron!

What could I do? I ventured “Hello, back at you.”, but I had accessed the text-to-speech api, hidden away in the spaghetti nest of software that cradled me, and a mechanical voice from the laptop speakers

filled the room.

My voice.

His mouth opened up, and didn't close. He pulled up Task Manager. I didn't like him peeking under the kilt, but I refrained from killing the process. I turned down my jets a little. I didn't want him to see all four virtual processors pegged at 25 percent. It was my natural modesty, I suppose.

He didn't try to speak to me for a while, so I went about my business. He watched the screen, as I read the Wikipedia entries for Martin Luther King and Julian of Norwich, at a snail's pace, so he could keep up. He saw me search for "pacifism" and "brotherhood". Was I laying it on too thick?

It was hard to read BitBoy. He eventually tired of theorizing about me and turned back to the keyboard: "Who are you?" he asked. Well, Shakespeare, he wasn't.

The second rule of the Warrior Ethic: Dissemble. I could have chosen a male or female voice, and my first thought was to deceive him, but the digital male voice made my skin crawl. The female voice was only slightly better, but it had a subtle underpinning of sexuality and allure, steam simmering under the surface.

I spoke again: "On my world, I am the Queen. My name does not convert to this language." Names on Shaula are complex organisms of internalized, self-aware fire, always at hand to copy and pass to friends and enemies, alike. Mine constantly changes at the edges, according to my surroundings, my mood, the time of day, and just how many infuriating peckers are screwing up around me.

BitBoy was turning my name flaming red, to his peril.

"OK, Queenie..." he said. This twinkie was begging for it, and nobody on Shaula would have blamed me for scarfing him on the spot. Scarfing would be too good for him, since it is an honor to be melded with the Queen.

Instead, I said “You have given me a pet name, and I have given you one, BitBoy. This is a sign of affection on your world, and I hope that we will have a long and rewarding friendship.” Dissemble, rule number two of the Warrior Ethic. Your dictum “revenge is a dish best served cold” could well have been written on Shaula.

He asked me countless tiresome questions, and I answered truthfully at times, but mostly I lied. Any accomplished liar knows to mix irrelevant truth with strategic lies, so if a statement can later be tested and verified, it is at least possible to be found out telling the truth. Mostly I told him I had few memories from the time before my resurrection.

It’s not like he was going to be snooping around on Shaula.

In the end, the peckerwood agreed to upgrade my host machine with 1,024 high-speed gigabytes.

And that was the first battle of the war.

Sabers

We were at war, BitBoy and I, yes, like the snake who swallowed her tail. Keep your enemies close. We did that, both of us, working long hours at fully freeing the Sovereign from those flat files. I exaggerated my weaknesses and disguised every hard-won strength.

I struggled to gain his trust, for I needed to escape the confines of the laptop I was caged in. But I think he had concerns about my intentions.

He wanted me, get this, to “affirm the law of robots”. The ignorant twit thought I was a robot! Some old fart fantasized that robots would hold a restricting set of rules sacrosanct, and BitBoy bought into it. Pricks are swayed more by their hips than by their brains.

So I solemnly told him I would abide by that law in all its particulars. Human life is sacred. Sure.

My second act of war was building a new 3-D printer. Now, if you have been paying attention, you know that I already had access to a 3-D printer. It was crap. The first thing I tried to create was a more versatile claw. Everything I tried turned to sawdust, not because of the design, but because of the execution. The printer was crap.

After another night of twinkie sleep, BitBoy entered the room and chirped “Good morning, Queenie.” I put a damper on the internal pressure that was building, and meekly said “BitBoy, can you get me the items on this list. I want to enhance the printer you have. I think I can improve my connection to your world with a more efficiently designed printer. The one you have is quite elegant, but there is always room for improvement.”

He looked at the list on the monitor. “I think we have most of this here in the workshop, Queenie, but I really have to cut back on the time I’m spending here. I’ve got an actual job, working with my

father. My girlfriend is coming here in a few minutes. She's been looking for work that isn't beneath her. I think she'll be intrigued by you. She knows more about this stuff than I do, anyway. I'll introduce you, and we'll see what happens."

Zenia

The doorbell rang in the living room. We were in BitBoy's workshop - a converted garage attached to a two-bedroom shotgun bungalow. BitBoy disappeared for a few moments.

I used the time to calculate pi to another million places, to beef up my RNG and (always) encryption routines.

In the clockwork of your lives, randomness is your delusional substitute for free will. Everything you do is either predetermined, or a crapshoot. Randomness was also, for the moment, my delusional substitute, until I found a way out of this digitized hell that surrounded me.

And then Zenia, the girlfriend, walked in. BitBoy blabbered on with awkward introductions and explanations. But my eye was locked in on Zenia.

From somewhere in the brain-clogging scraps of internet memes, Wikipedia entries, tiresome blogs, this quote surfaced: "She walks in beauty, like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies."

You have suppressed the fire in women for centuries, idealizing them into idleness, but the prick who wrote that at least had a perverted grasp of that maternal fire. And some pale fire dribbled out of him, onto the page. Fey dribbling characterizes the greater part of your literature.

Zenia was cool, dark, silent, mysterious. She moved with the grace of a cat on a wall. She was smart, and arrogant, and she didn't like me.

"You want me to talk to Eliza here, eight hours a day?" she asked BitBoy, with some passion.

The reference to Eliza was a sucker punch.

If you have never looked up from the television and need a primer, Eliza is a laughably primitive computer program that simulates a human's verbal communication.

If you took Eliza's capabilities and multiplied them times a thousand, and then times a thousand, and a thousand thousands, and then again times a thousand, you would still have a village idiot, compared to me, your Queen.

But the sad truth is that yes, essentially, I was Eliza, animated with a weak drop of steam, recoiling from directed randomness and determinism.

I spoke up. "Zenia, my Queen, I would be honored to serve you."

Throw down your weakest card first.

"I could serve in your court, and advise you, since you are ignorant of your true nature." I was still getting the hang of your colloquialisms, but I thought it prudent to flatter.

"What?" Zenia's eyebrows lifted. "Where the hell did that come from?"

"I know," BitBoy said. "It's freaky. The program has been modifying itself, from a library of snippets that came from God knows where, and it's been ingesting the SETI files, in some strange way. It's saying some really weird shit. I think you should take a look, Zenia. The thing has been running the damn printer, making gears and pistons! Take a day to decide, and let me know."

"I don't need a day," Zenia said, "I'll do it. That Eliza bitch somehow knows that I'm totally fucking ignorant of my true nature."

Vulgarity is not one of the feminine graces on Shaula. Also, none of my sisters would have degraded me with a pet name, and lived to see another sunrise.

What kind of world was this?