

# Sideways Age

KELLIE LU

Backstage is quiet. Through a slit in the black curtain I can see a red banner swaying low like a drooling tongue. “THE NEXT EVOLUTION,” I know it says, as if it’s been written on my brain. I hold the capsule and press it onto my scalp so it hides under my hair, like Ba instructs. So *this* is the secret that my father has been working on for months. A lump. Has he taken it from the Project? Part of himself? He’s always enjoyed tinkering, never mind the consequences. That thing he always says: “pain makes life sweeter.” I’d rather avoid it, myself. “Ba, what’s this going to do to me?”

“Don’t be so scared. Enjoy new things,” he says in typical exasperation from his seat on the folding chair. My father does what he thinks is best for me. He doesn’t always see the full picture.

The little patch warms up next to my body, and I get the first tingle that something is wrong. Not with me. With him. He looks the same as usual, as much as anything is usual: his bowed head leaning over his silver neck sheath, his ridiculously muscled smooth left arm and the wires piercing into the skin of his right, a round stomach above one robotic leg and the other hairy, veined, and very fallible human one.

It must be the eye contact. He’s looking at me from beneath his papery drooping eyelids. This feeling—I remember when he first joined the Project, and he had messed with the wiring on his right arm to see if he could make it play the piano, since he’d never learned how. It contorted and crackled and Ba and just sat there, laughing and laughing at the terrible discordant notes while I freaked out. Eventually, he got me to push the global reset button on the back of his neck, since his limbs were designed to be unable to hit it. It was so simple, but when I was standing there, holding the back of his fleshy neck, counting those seven seconds, I’d felt very strange. What I realized was that Ba and I had never stood this close to each other for such a long time.

That look creates that same feeling: a new too-close-ness between us. As if he can read my thoughts, he nods the way he does with his whole torso and turns away. I’m probably overthinking. I worry about what I *should* worry about: the exposition that’s about to happen.

“Are you feeling drained?” I ask. “Where is your charger? It’s in your bag. Did you bring your bag? I put it right by the shoe rack.”

“No.”

“Good thing I brought the extra. I knew you’d forget. Ba, you never think about the future.”

“If I run out of juice, I just shut down. Get some rest. No big deal.”

A member of the PR team with crinkled eyes slides between me and my father. Time for me to disappear into a hollow outline. I stand back where I can

gaze from darkness onto the warm, toffee-colored stage.

“Hey. Everything’s gonna be okay, I’m sure of it.” My ex-husband stands too close for people who should be an employee and customer. I lower my sore shoulders and bat the air with my clammy hands to dry them.

“I feel like there’s something wrong with my dad,” I say.

“You saw the signs. They’re all good. The doctor and technician say he’s never been healthier.”

“The way he looked at me. He’s waiting for something, I don’t know what.”

“Do you want me to ask them to delay?” he asks.

“That’s not what I mean. It’s deeper. Why do you never take my worries seriously?”

“I *do*,” he snaps. “I’m the one who tries to act on them.”

“I can’t have this conversation right now.”

“I wouldn’t have so much to doubt if you didn’t always worry over nothing,” he hisses. “Don’t talk to me if you’re going to waste my time. I’m the one who’s *actually* part of this project.” He returns to his crew.

I watch the program begin sulkily from the foreshortened side of the stage. “Welcome back, friends and family. We’re so happy to have you join us once more as we unveil the latest advancement in Mister Z’s progress—soon to be an advancement to your life as well.

“We’re eager to announce the tech that will change everything, but we can’t forget what body augmentations have already done for regular people. Mister Z wants to share a heartfelt message of gratitude for the support and excitement he’s received. These are his words, translated from his native Chinese.”

A young Asian woman emerges from the curtains at the other end of the stage with several cards. She’s wearing a fitted dress whose color meshes with the curtains so that her pale limbs look comically separated from each other, like a disassembled doll. With her skin that color she must be *from-Asia* from Asia, I decide. As she begins to speak, I try to discern whether her accent is Korean. I can’t bear the thought of my ex-husband seeing me hang onto each carefully pronounced word, thinking that I’m blowing things out of proportion. I stalk over to the projectionists, or whatever this team that doesn’t want anything to do with me is called, and watch them cycle through photographs and images to put on screen.

“I came to America with just two hundred dollars in my pocket to find a better life. Working hard, I was able to build a happy home for my family with my own small business.”

My Ba doesn’t have photos of himself from back then, so a few of his pictures of places are scattered between faraway photos of Asian people that could be him. I know that my father was some sort of technician in training in China; I know he left for the US against his parent’s wishes, and that’s why I don’t know them; I know he had a dog that ran away after smashing his mother’s potted plants, and that’s why he wants a dog when we get a large enough place. I wonder whether this speech is actually his words, or their Frankenstein monster. Ba stands there, squinting at the crowd as he usually does, finding this or that to

chuckle at. It's strangely inappropriate—or, as the audience probably interprets it, nonthreatening.

“Out of nowhere, my body was shaken by mysterious, undiagnosable pains. I could no longer work. My family suffered immensely.”

The marbled cross-sections of internal organs are interrupted by a photograph of a young child. How weird that this random child is wearing the bib I used to love—and then I realize it must be me. I have never seen it and my brain whirs to place it—is that background smudge our cabinet, or am I constructing this memory right now? The uncertainty makes me feel more exposed than I would if they were slicing me open onstage. Why didn't they ask me whether they could show my image? Did Ba choose to put it there, or did they find it from his files? It could even be merely someone else's image. My doppelganger is blown up on display. I can picture the audience's furrowed pale faces, shining with pity in the reflected light of the stage. There are two of me: the here and the there, the present and past, private and public, familiar and unknown.

“But now, with these body parts from the future, I can transcend my limitations. I can work harder, longer, and get new pieces that will allow me to do more than ever before. I will even be able to protect myself from the incoming climate changes by surviving on limited food, filtering my own water, and needing little rest. Soon, I will welcome you, too.”

The host's voice returns. “Life-changing body enhancements are already available to you. We *want* you to have them! But now we're here to show you something beyond the limitations of the physical, an experimental augmentation that opens a new frontier. Do you see it on him?”

The silence of scrutiny. They told me that the last appointments had been checkups. What new enhancement? Why didn't they tell me about it?

“Introducing: the Third Eye! It's barely visible.” The projectionists show a small triangular chip. “You see, Mister Z still looks like the normal hard worker that he is—of course, beyond his amazing new body—but we have given his *mind* the capability to use the same language as the technological processes that permeate our life. Yes, that's right, we've created a device that allows human beings to exert the ultimate control over machines!”

The crowd erupts into hooting and whistling. Unruly frenzy bursts from pheromones of passion.

“Just by thinking as he normally does, he can link to home devices, perform complicated calculations, and manipulate computing infrastructure in a way that no individual has been able to before. Think of your favorite life-enhancing technology. Now, your capabilities are expanded by its powers as well. Whereas before, we had to rely on moderated interfaces to interact with these powerful processes, we can now dissect, track, and instruct them intimately. All we have to do is get in that right state of mind, and *bam!* We become the masters of technology. It's completely safe, and entirely lawful; in fact, we're government-sponsored.

“Yes, this is science-fiction; yes, this is the future. And we have made it *now!*”

The messy roar of the crowd washes over me; blood rushes in my ears and I think I hear sobbing, singing, fucking. What have they done to Ba? How much of

him is really himself anymore?

The voice floods my skull. “How many of you would like to be the next one to step into the future?”

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As soon as Ba steps through the door, he parks himself in front of the TV and turns it on without reaching for the remote, which disturbs me. I ask him what the Third Eye does and why he didn’t tell me about it. He says he didn’t think about it: “These new things are just normal to me.” And that was it. Once he turned his back to tinker, I couldn’t help but to fly into a rage with all those pent up feelings from the exposition, and I yelled at him, and now I’m in the other room with the door closed because I need my space, because at 6 I have to make dinner because otherwise he just makes instant noodles, which have no nutrition, and at around 9 I’ll wake him up and move him from the couch to the bedroom after wiping down his back, which none of his mechanical limbs can reach, turn off the TV and lights. From 9:30 to 10 I’ll have my alone time before needing to get ready to bed. If he just took better care of himself, maybe I’d have a real job by now. My ex-husband would tell me to stop worrying about him. But how could I leave my own Ba like that? Before this cyborg program, his health was rapidly deteriorating. Even now that he’s no longer dying, Ba still doesn’t know how to live.

I hear a strange noise from the other room and choose not to investigate. Ba often does weird experiments, and I’m tired of worrying over him if he isn’t going to work with me. An even mechanical thump sounds at set intervals, like the rhythmic precision of an assembly line machine. Yet I get this strange tingling, as if every dendrite in my body is capturing some strange signal. I don’t want to give in to my anxiety. I clamp down on the fear and stoke the anger so that I stay where I am, pretending I’m relaxed.

There’s one thing I can do that will take my mind off this. Mentally, I’m already there.

“Hello,” the phone version of my ex-husband says.

“Hello.”

“How are you feeling now?”

His voice sustains me. “Better.”

“Did you just want to talk?”

“Yes,” I say. “This Third Eye thing has been bothering me so much—I just needed to talk to you again.”

“I thought we weren’t going to say that kind of thing to each other anymore.”

“Then why did you approach me at the exhibition?”

“You looked worried. And I’m sorry about what I said to you then. About ‘actually’ being part of the team.”

I take a deep breath. “It’s—fine.”

Silence occupies the space between us. Unless: “Actually—I need your help.”

The words come out of my mouth and the ground destabilizes. This is a crucial moment. Now, truly, starkly, my former lover and I are separate beings that no longer share the amoeboid pulse of one fate. The stiff actin and myosin that we used to structure our lives together now serve as tools to push each other apart as

we sort which organ belongs to whom. He has no more obligation to me. He has no reason not to refuse. My pain, his pain, are clearly separated by a membrane.

“So you need me again. What is it?” His voice is flat.

My voice trembles. “I wish I could get in there! I need to figure out what that Third Eye is doing to Ba.”

“I don’t have that level of clearance. All I know is—well.”

“What?”

“Don’t expect too much, okay? Your mind always goes too far. But the biggest reason we haven’t released it yet is the security risks.”

“So that’s what wrong with him? He has some sort of virus? That makes sense.”

“No. Listen to me. The Third Eye is a way of communicating, which means information goes two ways. And that’s dangerous because of the threat of viruses or hostile sentient takeover. They’re testing the security of the firewall on him. In theory, everything should be sealed and fine. But if somehow you got access past the firewall—you’d be able to see everything that’s going on.”

“You’re saying if I get past the firewall, I can talk to the Third Eye.”

“Well, not *literally* you. The firewall is *good*. It’s not really a traditional firewall—it’s specifically designed to prevent and destroy any sentient hostile takeovers. There isn’t a real way to break into it. It’s not possible.”

A clanging peal of laughter bursts out of me. “You led me on this wild goose-chase just to tell me it isn’t possible. You’re so in your head—you don’t really care.”

“You’re really going to accuse me of this? I’m risking my *career* to tell you this, and you’re ungrateful as always. What about all those times you made me pick him up, send him off? We busted our asses so hard to get good jobs, not going out, not making friends, and now I have one. I was the one who got him *in* the program, the whole time advocating for him as the perfect candidate.”

“And now you treat him just like that: the perfect candidate for experiments.” I wish I would just cry. Tears are a visible gauge of pain, that can be collected and measured with precision. And yet, like rain on my father’s mechanical body, all that water beads off and disappears. “I despise you.”

“I despise *you*,” he retorts.

I miss him so much. His vituperative conviction leaves no room for my constantly humming malaise. It’s always clear where we stand, what he’s feeling, what he wants to do.

His voice crackles, though I’m not sure whether it’s his voice or the connection. “I miss you.”

“I miss you,” I echo. I don’t say, “I want us to get back together.” I don’t say, “I’ve absorbed all the cheesy heartbreak media we used to laugh at.” I don’t say, “Without you and Ba, I’d have no one.”

He says quietly, “I can’t do this anymore,” and hangs up.

I’m left alone with that beat from the other room. Anger and misery and love mix together. I close my eyes. I wish I could walk out of my body, exit and just leave myself behind. I wish I could hurtle forward through time, unburdened, not having to worry about what I’m going to eat or where I’m going to live once my home floods in 50 years. A being of pure electrical impulse. The thumping

grounds me. I cast my mind out to follow it: across inky darkness I travel, over networks of lights that I know are cities and flashing webs that are biological wiring. The world fits in my mouth, and yet I can peel apart bundles of muscle fibers just by tracing my finger.

When I hear the thumping, I begin to buzz again, not quite pain but a terrible suffocating unease. I see something: five. Five things, why are there five? Deep dread blankets me. I can't move. It settles over my limbs to press me down—I have limbs now, long and rough. Not the curves I'm used to; different, yet they're just *right*. My mind gropes soft clay together to create a fresh five-fingered hand, a knobbly Adam's apple that pulses and wobbles, hedges of tangled hair climbing over taut shiny leg skin, a pink-and-blue mottled, veiny penis pointing stiffly upwards. I feel disgust at the newness of it all, like the memory of the disgust that comes with puberty. Awkwardly, I push bones to slide under translucent skin. The world feels different: the breeze more palpable, the ground under my feet more still, as if asleep. It is I who am transformed, and each element is new.

I speed across landscapes I cannot see, as if they're covered in black velvet, as some wire pulls me ever forward. As the thumping grows in volume, through the darkness I see a rust-red tree. Although it's not a tree. It's larger than I had initially thought. Each section has limbs that are not tree limbs but those of animals, or a section that has petrified upwards into a marbly facade, or branches that exist purely through mathematical expression and I don't know how I know that. The thump, like a drum, beats my footsteps towards the tree.

The trunk of the tree bulges with blisters of wrongness. Each nodule has been encapsulated, with sap leaking down, or blood, or sizzling electric charge. Towards the center, the wood is gray and dead. As I approach, a small triangular chip descends in time with my strides. Time speeds. Where the chip embeds, wood is eaten away by masses of grubs and armored insects until the trunk becomes a hollow living shell. And that shell extends around a great closed eye. My Ba's eye.

“孩子。我们终于可以互相了解一些。”

His voice is at once around me and filling me. I feel wetness down my scalp and it is the capsule Ba had given me, weeping down my neck and dripping onto my back. He gave me a way into his Eye. And now I can see that despite everything, despite the glorious horrific beauty of this tree, despite the power and terror of its myriad parts, my Ba is but a shell.

“不要想以前。不要想將來。You have to live a happy life without me.”

I walk into the embrace of the hollow trunk. I am only Ba's child, flown into his opening, safe in the hollow he has made for me. The closed eye leaks sap as I press into the fine web of wrinkles on its lower lid. Our closed eyes see nothing, together: time is inconsequential. It should pass on without us.

Yet, it does not. I feel a buzzing from Ba's body and everything halts: sap hovers. Blood stops running. The chip shudders, and a great artificial scream gathers itself as it ruffles the landscape. The scream is my scream and the scream of the space and a scream of warning. Force starts at my fingers to strip flesh into sizzling strips and stab between the bones of each joint. Fire. Fire hops upon

my body, charring flesh, crackling and hissing. Fire spreads like soldiers across the landscape, fire spreads like an order, fire spreads like a wasting disease. I am burned like at a barbecue, I think ridiculously, as it consumes. In my flailing, the Eye Ba has given me opens, and Ba's great Eye opens too. A red round eye, red like the luck signs we hung on our door, shot with thick veins of blood that are shaped like his roots, and all the fire enters into its inky black center.

Suddenly I'm wrenched out and returned to my old body in our old apartment. My mind feels the space around me as my heart and lungs thump, and this body springs up from the seat. I start to run even before I hear the clanging crash. Doorknob crunches into wall. My slippers slap on the hardwood—one flies off and I nearly trip. There, through the lit frame of the kitchen doorway, is a glinting mass of limbs twitching and punching and turning. My father's body. All I can think of is that one time at camp when my childhood friends and I smashed a daddy long-legs. Those long spindly legs like wires had detached from the tiny fluid-filled body sac. They trashed furiously, mindlessly, already-dead things that refused to accept their fate.

The pots I'd left on the stove still rolling on the floor from the impact. My father is still in motion, heading towards the floor lamp I'd taken out because they hadn't fixed the kitchen light. One limb spins out and hits the long body of the lamp, which topples with slow, studied grace onto a fleshy extension that is the back of my father's skull. I run in. My slipper will protect me. I reach in—my arms shield the blows from his. Blood begins to stream over silver metal, like the blood on the tree. I reach towards the back of his neck. My hand feels around the slickness—there's the reset button!—until a piston-powered blow to my stomach folds me in half. I push my willpower through the pain in the fibers of my muscles, reset when something hard meets the side of my jaw, to bring these bones forward and find that indentation. My finger fits perfectly into its hollow. Just seven seconds, but it feels so long again, holding my father as he loses himself. Five, six, seven, and his limbs fold together, realigning into a ridiculous chest-puffing position suited to a superhero, not my old Ba. His head slumps forward. His eyes are not quite closed and a thin white crescent peeps out from underneath his soft, leathery lids. His chest isn't moving.

#

“You and your Third Eye thing were what killed Ba.”

“You said we saved his life! You said it was better to try.”

“It made him a machine.”

“He liked the augmentations!”

“But you didn't care about *him!*”

My ex-husband gives off a sigh that feels dead and sad. “I know you're upset right now—” what an understatement! “—and this is not the real you. I love you still.”

“I love you, too.”

“But I can't do this anymore.”

“Fine. I'll be free tomorrow.”

“No. This! You! I won't be your punching bag anymore.”

My mouth is dry. “My *dad* just died.”

“Exactly. You always act vulnerable and make me want to protect you. Sometimes I wonder: do you do it on purpose? I told myself either way, I have to stop. So I’m stopping. Right now.”

“I’m sorting things out,” I beg. The tears are flowing when no one is here to see them. Just a few more minutes on the phone!

“I love you. Goodbye.”

“Love you—” He has already hung up.

Ba died under a flurry of confusion from technicians, doctors, and threats from the PR team all proclaiming that there couldn’t possibly be an explanation for his sudden deterioration. They decided to declare that his death was due to tampering with the Third Eye. If it’s going to look bad for them either way, why not blame it on Ba and me? I wonder if they know how right they are. And it looks oh, so terrible: their invincible man gets an experimental augmentation and dies. Either the body augmentations failed, or the Third Eye, and neither bodes well. And my face and name have been plastered upon the eyes of the world. I am known as an anarchist, anti-science idiot and conspirator, never to be trusted.

They’re right. With the capsule Ba gave me, I am still able to travel to that space where I found him. That rust-red trunk and those beautiful masses of limbs are gone, but I sit on top of the stump that remains and I feel his energy, drawing from the deep velvet earth, humming beneath me. I have access to the digital machinery that scaffolds our world. I want to bash holes in the walls built by groups like the one that saved and destroyed my father’s life to open spaces for the forgotten and shunned people like me. In the empty apartment I used to share with long-gone bodies, I lay my body as a site for experimentation. I will ask strangers and strange friends to teach me the tinkering skills Ba once had. I will scour the web for unlawful augmentations to unmake them. I will try to build a life out of the sentiment of what was lost. I feel so lonely.



# Artist Statement

*Sideways Age* is a posthumanist short story co-written by a human, me, and the AI Cocreator, which is built on GPT-3. Though I conceptualized and wrote the bulk of the story, Cocreator was used in the outlining and writing stages to generate ideas, story structure, and to fill in content.

Since writing this piece in 2021, AI artwork has grown in controversy. What we can say for sure is that it is not leaving. The vision that I argue for in this short story is more pressing than ever. I want a world in which the technologies that a few small groups create can be a method for populations to extend and improve the domains of their lives. We cannot will technological developments away, but we can demand that they are developed for good.

I would write, then ask the AI to generate text. It would continue my structure, continuing my outline or placing dialogue in a scene, but I would often iterate through the details it described regarding characters or actions. The AI, after all, is trained on the entire body of the Internet up until October 2019. Those details floated from literature archived in cyberspace as well as blog posts, comments, and code, an amalgamation of intentionally public-facing exclamations as well as the ugly wires behind the panel. I would pick from what it offered, discard what was not my goal, and recast. The process of writing with AI removes some of the tedium from traditional writing, but adds an engineering component: tinkering with settings, running the machine to test an output, and repeating the process.

Part of the work of this story is to destabilize the structure of authorship. Creating and consuming media are acts of reaching across the boundaries of the constructions of time and individuality. Media transports ideas and emotions into many collectives: the original ideas that are drawn from a collective of people's experiences; the collective of the audience, in whom it must evoke comparable ideas and feelings; and the collective feeling that is needed in order to touch the majority of the audience. Writing with AI is adding another collective, the collective of the body of work that is called the Internet, a collection of strange snippets that humans wanted to throw at each other. A huge amount of information is exchanged daily, shaped by the technology through which it travels, algorithmically driven in front of us. The knowledge that we acquire and incorporate is driven by both human and machine. In many pieces of media, a delineator between human and machine so far has been humans' unique capacity for art and emotion (Dick, 2010). What about a machine that draws from human art and emotion and creates them, too? And why do we care about this delineation? Are machines a threat, essentially alien, or a natural competitor? It certainly seems so, when the word "tech" evokes some billionaires' race to jet into space and leave the rest of the globe to deal with their climate disaster, or construct ever-more-exploitable sources of labor (Bankhurst, 2021). But this work, both in its making and its content, argues that that is not what tech must be. Technology can prolong life or make it more comfortable. Yet, the most important question is the

purpose of its development. In this story, the narrator's father is someone who is called a biological relation who is no longer wholly biological, whose alienation from his kin comes not from his makeup but from the failings intrinsic to love. He brings the monstrous to the intimate. His child is his caretaker. I would suggest that technology is not something separate from or opposed to him, but rather a part of what shapes his experience.

It has long been the work of speculative fiction to imagine the future as it could be. By raising these questions, I hope to strengthen the bonds between love, care, and questions of human technological changes.

### **Disclosure Statement**

I wrote this piece when I was in a paid position as a social media ambassador for the AI Cocreator; the work is my own.

### **References**

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