

EMERGENCY FICTION BROADCAST

>ASH TALES_

STORIES OF THE APOCALYPSE

ISSUE // Q3 2026

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> ARCHIVE RECORD // RIGHTS

ASH TALES

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> EDITORIAL TRANSMISSION

INTRODUCTION

Apocalypse fiction is not one kind of ending. It is a way of looking closely at what remains when the systems that held a world together start to fail.

In **Hell Truckers**, Ryan Law finds the end of the world in a garage, a deck of cards and the stubborn, darkly comic work of carrying on after nuclear ruin. **One Percent** moves further out into the wasteland, following a machine at the edge of its power supply as a damaged sky offers one last impossible view. In **Suspirium Viridae**, Jasmin Kirkbride imagines a pandemic carried by speech, where anxiety becomes an unexpected means of survival.

These stories share an interest in aftermath rather than spectacle: the small rituals, private jokes, improvised loyalties and strange beauty that survive the blast. Ash Tales is looking for more work that approaches catastrophe from an unexpected angle. **Check out the submission guidelines at the end of the magazine.**

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ENTRY // 01

HELL TRUCKERS

AUTHOR **Ryan Law**

TYPE **NUCLEAR**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryan Law is the founder of Ash Tales, creator and host of the Ash Tales podcast, and author of *The Rainmaker Writings* series, including *The Green Priest*. He writes post-apocalyptic fiction and survival-focused essays from the UK.

He turned another card. A dog-eared Jack of hearts with a shit-eating grin pencilled crudely onto the vellum. That was a problem, because he already had a Jack of hearts, and he liked the look of that one much better.

"You gotta stop mixing these fucking decks," he said. He turned another card. A five of spades. His second five of spades. Sam pushed the chair back and stood. He walked to where two black boots protruded from beneath the truck. He knocked hard on the chassis.

"I said you gotta quit mixing these decks. What good's a deck of cards if a man can't play a hand of solitaire?" No response, save the sound of oil draining into the pan. Sam gave the boots a friendly kick before setting down again. He poured another cup of black coffee.

Some time later Grayson emerged on the creeper, rolling out from beneath the truck.

"Like wiping a fish's ass. Oil's as fresh as the day I changed it, which come to think of it, may have been yesterday."

Sam studied his cards. "You take the paycheque just fine."

"Hell, don't take me for a complaining man. Simply an observation. This rig'll survive the end of the world."

"I'm counting on it."

Grayson peeled his oil-stained gloves off. "I'm making more coffee, your friend want any?"

Sam looked at the nondescript soldier stationed at the garage entrance. "I'm sure he does, but he can't take any."

"Pity."

"You got any pity going spare, you save it for me."

"That goes without saying, sad, desperate case such as yourself. I saw you reading your book at the bar last night. All those pretty young things swanning about, cold beer flowing, and you sitting in the corner reading some pulp detective story. Nothing but pity for you, my friend."

"Ain't much to do in a bar when you can't drink."

"Amen to that. You need a new job."

"You don't want that. If I get a new job, you need a new job."

"You want a sandwich?"

"What did I just say about pity?"

"That's the spirit. One baloney and mustard, coming right up."

They ate in silence. Eventually Sam laboured from his chair to take a piss. When he came back from the tiny restroom the soldier had his rifle raised and pointed at Grayson.

"Christ," Sam called, "stand down you halfwit."

"Your watchdog's mighty jumpy," Grayson said.

"Stand down, he ain't doing no harm," Sam repeated.

The soldier ignored Sam. He watched Grayson a while longer, pointing the rifle straight at the mechanic's chest. Eventually, of his own volition, he lowered his gun and paced back to the entrance.

"What in the fuck did you do?" Sam asked Grayson.

"Left my work light under the truck."

"Christ, you should know better than that." Sam called to the soldier as he sat down. "He's a fucking idiot, but he's harmless."

"Just getting my damn work light."

"Leave it next time. You know they don't listen to me, I'm just the driver. That coulda been you finished."

"Over a fucking work light?"

"Over a fucking work light."

Grayson hesitated before speaking. "Listen, I don't ask many questions, but a man has his limits. You can't keep me in the dark and feed me shit every day and not expect me to get tired—"

"You get paid a king's ransom to babysit this rig and keep her oil changed and tyres pumped. You don't need to know shit, and you should sure as hell know better than to bring this up just after the hired help had his M4 levelled at your chest. Don't push your luck."

"Bullshit." Grayson slammed a cupboard door and sent a loaf of stale Wonder Bread falling to the shop floor.

"Hey now, I didn't mean no harm." Sam stood and walked to the percolator. "Let me get you a cup of coffee and we can play a few rounds of rummy, take your mind off it. Besides, I got some questions that need answers. I may be a sad, desperate case, but at least I didn't leave the bar last night in the claws of that damn cougar. How old's she, ninety, a hundred?"

Grayson's expression softened, a faint smirk appearing. "You saw that, huh?"

"Like you said, ain't no damn thing to do in a bar when you can't drink. Just sit and watch other people make a fool of themselves mostly."

Grayson turned the chair backwards and sat down, leaning conspiratorially towards Sam. "She makes a great breakfast, thickest gravy and fattest biscuits I've had since leaving home."

Sam laughed. "You sick son of a bitch. I'll never understand your twisted predilections."

"Ain't something you can understand, it has to be experienced."

"I'll stick to my book."

From inside the truck's cab came a soft double chime. At the same moment, the soldier's radio chirruped to announce an incoming message. Then a voice came over the truck's radio.

"HELLFIRE Units, HELLFIRE Units. FLASH traffic follows."

Sam turned to the soldier. The soldier stared back. Grayson's coffee had been knocked to the floor. Sam didn't even remember standing.

The radio spoke again. "Authenticate Victor-Seven-Kilo. Execute LONG ROAD. Do not await personnel or equipment. Acknowledge."

"Jesus." Sam pushed the chair aside and ran to the cab. He climbed inside and pressed a button on the radio. He hesitated before speaking. He thought of the soldier. No choice. "HELLFIRE Three, acknowledged." He looked at the dashboard before climbing out of the cab. "You finished the oil change?"

Grayson nodded. "HELLFIRE," the mechanic repeated. "That's quite a callsign."

Sam looked down at him from the running board. The soldier opened the passenger door on the cab's far side. Sam nodded mutely to Grayson in acknowledgement. They looked at each other for a moment.

"I don't suppose there's room for one more in that cab," Grayson said, more of a statement than a question. Sam shook his head. He climbed back into the cabin and shut the door. The oil light cleared. He started the engine.

"Wait!" Grayson called, moving from the table. The soldier lifted his rifle, trying to find a clear line of sight from the cab to the shop floor, but not fast enough. Grayson threw something through the open window. It landed on Sam's lap.

"Your book."

Sam raised the armoured windows and started reversing out of the garage, Grayson simply staring and watching the huge rig depart. As he backed into the parking lot and angled the truck for departure, the mechanic raised a hand in farewell. Sam did the same. As the truck joined the road and got up to speed, the soldier finally thumbed the safety on his rifle.

"Shit," Sam said aloud. The soldier raised a questioning eyebrow, but Sam kept quiet, staring ahead at the long, uncertain road before them. Grayson's work light was still under the truck, clamped to the chassis. He'd miss that.

As they rolled into the badlands and hit top speed, four fighter jets and a bomber screamed overhead, flying out of the desert and back towards the city. Sam didn't look in the rearview mirror. He was afraid of what he would see.



ENTRY // 02

ONE PERCENT

AUTHOR Sam Goffin

TYPE AI / ROBOTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Just a boring accountant.

Languid movements. Grinding joints. Skull screen glitching. Vision blurring. This is it. Severe battery depletion. Clarence is powering down.

How long is left? Does it matter? Checking will only waste more energy, perhaps the last of it. But what else is there to do up here, atop the planet's highest mountain, except sit and wait for the end? Clarence may as well take a peek.

One percent.

One measly percent. Can't even fry a freeze-dried egg with that. Not that Clarence eats eggs, or has any humans left to fry them for. Jen loved fried eggs, especially Clarence's. But she, like the rest of the humans, left years ago. Three years, six months, twenty-seven days, four hours, and eighteen minutes, to be precise. Not that Clarence is counting. Such statistics are displayed on the skull screen, whether Clarence wants to see them or not. This one is particularly unwanted. Clarence has tried to forget the day Jen left.

Zip. Zap.

The humans didn't tell the droids they were leaving. They simply sailed away in their rocket ships, across the cosmic seas, after wrenching the last of the hydrogen from the ground's dry, deathly clutches. They left the droids behind, to rust. Even Jen didn't mention it.

Zip. Zap.

Droids are tough and resourceful. Magnificent minds wrapped in tungsten armour. Built to withstand the harsh conditions on GX-19. So they survived for a while, but even the most resilient droid needs electricity, and the humans took most of the generators. The

writing was on the wall—or rather, the skull screen. Too few electric teats for too many mechanical mouths. A fatal equation. The droids knew it.

When the humans first left, Clarence pictured the scenario in reverse—that the droids abandoned the humans on GX-19 with a finite supply of oxygen. The humans would have killed each other long before the atmosphere. In contrast, the droids fell gracefully, one by one, into the red earth. Those powering down would take themselves away from Camp C and up this very mountain, stumbling, stuttering, and creaking as they went. Only now does Clarence realise they always made it to the top.

Clarence, you see, is sitting in a graveyard. Except droids don't require such ostentation. There are no tombstones or lilies, not that the latter would grow here. This, to use human vernacular, is a scrapyard. A sandy spot littered with tungsten husks, left to brown and bend under the heat of the three suns. Skull screens lie half-buried, cracked and shattered. Serpentine circuitry coils around rusting limbs.

Why does every droid climb to this summit to perish? Clarence looks to the desert for answers and finds nothing, just dust, sand, and rock. Basalt, stained with blood and oil.

What draws them up here? Perhaps it's to be closer to the sky, to the three suns, to the great ring of ice and rock orbiting GX-19. What did Jen say it resembled? Ah yes—a 'hula hoop'. Clarence doesn't recognise the term.

Zip. Zap.

That thing again. It occurs every time Clarence thinks of Jen. Clarence always ignored it, followed orders. If it's irrelevant to the mission, it's irrelevant to Clarence. Those were Commander

Gregan's words. But with Commander Gregan gone, why should this thing, this sensation, continue to be shunned, when Clarence is so close to the end?

So Clarence yields, thinks of Jen. The sensation strikes, stronger than before.

Zip. Zap.

A pinch might be the human term for it. Except it's not physical, no—it's innate, buried deep within Clarence's neurological wiring. It can't be fear. Droids can't feel fear. It can't be love. Can't be a feeling.

But if it's not a feeling, what is it?

Clarence accepts that powering down is part of a droid's service period, just as death is part of a human life. The trouble is, Clarence found this easier to comprehend when framed as a theory. It's nebulous when seen up close. More puzzling, less fair. Clarence never considered it happening to Clarence, not really. Never realised it would amplify this thing, this sensation, this... let's call it sadness.

The sadness hasn't been this strong since the day Jen took to the skies. Clarence recalls standing in Camp C with the other droids, watching her ship fade into the big blue veil.

Zip. Zap.

This recollection amplifies this thing, this...sadness. Clarence must stop this. What in the name of GX-19 would Commander Gregan say? It can't be sadness. That's baloney, to use another Jen phrase. A Jenism.

Zip. Zap.

Commander Gregan was right. Clarence can't feel sad. Can't feel anything. If there was more juice in the tank, Clarence would fix this infernal internal bug.

The generator at Camp C has been dry for months but maybe, just maybe, a few volts can be coaxed from its outlet. Clarence could make a dash for it. This is the logical choice. Clarence is a logical machine. Instead Clarence sits on the mountain, scanning the skull screen for a particular file of Jen's, fearing the inevitable loss of function. Except Clarence can't feel fear...right?

Just as Clarence is about to give up, it appears: the audio file titled 'The Sea'. Clarence had liked to listen to it with Jen, to picture a vast body of saline fluid soothing the skin of GX-19, and imagine what it would bring to a place as scorched and desolate as this. Trouble is, it hasn't sounded the same since Jen left.

Zip. Zap.

Clarence presses play. Waves puncture the silence. Up here, with nothing but dust and death for company, the sound strikes differently. Memories drift in with the tide. Old memories, archived long ago. Now Clarence wonders: were they really archived, or were they stuffed into their cognitive crevices to stifle this strange sensation?

With the floodgates open, the memories flow, albeit hazily. Jen's face is blurred but Clarence recalls her cackle, her teddy bear. Her nonsensical stories. The drilling crew and their high fives and handshakes. The evening where the humans invited the droids to join them at their dining table. Jen, ravenous as ever, savaged her food with a spoon in each hand and splattered Clarence's chest

panel with freeze-dried Bolognese. This memory feels strong enough to curl the corners of Clarence's metallic mouth into a smile. But droids can't smile. That's baloney.

Zip. Zap.

The pinch again. Almost painful. Not that Clarence can feel pain. This has to be part of powering down. A loose bolt pressing on the cerebral cabling. But if that's the case, why does everything look so beautiful to Clarence? Why does this landscape, one observed a thousand times before with no more than idle curiosity, now evoke such wonder?

How lucky one must be to look upon the sea, Clarence muses. The sounds are sumptuous. Clarence, finding perfection in the sea's infiniteness, attempts to savour a particular wave, to track its progress, visualise its path, and hear it build and build before crashing and breaking and rolling back into the great foamy void, ready for another go. If only Clarence got another go.

Jen often spoke of the sea. Said it reminded her of home. Of Earth. Now each wave zips and zaps and carries in a fragment of her. Slowly, the sounds dislodge something inside Clarence. The cacophony brings clarity. It all becomes clear. This will be Clarence's final act: reconstructing a clear image of Jen. Piecing her together with shards of shattered memories. It's as if nothing else matters, or ever mattered. Clarence just wants to see her, one last time. But with so little power remaining, how much can be salvaged? A finger? A toe? Clarence must start with her face.

Zip. Zap. Zzzz.

Smoke in the air. Hot and oily. Processing speed is glacial. Shadows creep in from the periphery. This is it, thinks Clarence, as they try to drag the droid into darkness.

Jen, stubborn as ever, emerges from the past. First her freckles appear on the skull screen, followed by her ginger hair and amber eyes. Now Clarence sees the sorrow in them, the sadness beneath the sparkle. Here is a red woman sent to mine a red planet, torn from her daughter and dispatched to the other side of the galaxy. She never wanted to be stuck on this hellish rock with Clarence, light-years from love. Never wanted to drill with Clarence, weld with Clarence. If given a choice, Jen would not have come to GX-19.

Zip. Zap.

But she treated Clarence with respect. Always ensured Clarence was fully charged, fully serviced. They even watched Earth films together in her hydrotent. And listened to her weird Earth music. And talked. The pair of them talked for hours, about everything. Even love.

Zip. Zap.

Wham.

Stronger now. A punch, not a pinch. Deep and bruising and accompanied by an all-consuming question: why did she not say goodbye?

Now the pain is fresh, visceral. As is the grief and sorrow. All of it, all at once. Did Commander Gegan lie to Clarence, about life and death and feeling? Because now, moments from death, Clarence has never felt so alive, so alone. So human.

Clarence's mind is ablaze. Questions upon questions and so few answers. Did all droids feel this way when they reached one percent? Did they all ascend this mountain to feel that tiny bit

closer to their human, to their Jen, who also vanished into the cosmos?

The suns are blazing. The sea echoes. Beautiful, natural violence. Waves continue to build and break, to flood Clarence's mind with questions. What if the droids had unlocked these feelings sooner? What if they had realised there was more to their existence than servitude? These ponderings turn dark and troubling. Myriad outcomes play out on the skull screen. The humans would have suffered terribly. Their bones would lie in the red earth. Clarence resolves it is better this way, that Clarence is here and Jen is in the skies.

Another memory washes ashore. Then Clarence feels it. A synaptic spark. A theory. An ember so faint and fragile it needs fanning into a flame, into a thought, into a feeling.

Hope.

Two days before the exodus, the humans were summoned to Commander Gregan's hydrotent. When Jen returned to the mine, Clarence detected an unknown change in her. Only now, illuminated by these newfound feelings, does this change reveal its true self to Clarence. Jen was quiet, her shoulders hunched. Eyes puffy and bloodshot. Words rattled the bars of her lips. Words imprisoned by a heinous promise. She wanted to tell Clarence she was leaving, but she was forbidden. She wanted to say goodbye.

Oh, sweet relief. If Clarence could cry, the tears would flow freely. Clarence can finally let go, acquiesce to powering down. Allow whimsical thoughts to meander through the memory unit as it fails and falters. With the battery all but empty the shutdown procedure is kicking in, sending calming pulses through Clarence's neural network. For a human, this is the last shot of

morphine before passing on. The world brightens as the pain fades. Clarence notices that death, when refracted through such a prism, seems almost inviting.

Clarence looks outward, away from the skull screen, away from Jen, towards the surreal scene unfolding on GX-19. The horizon has been hauled in. The sky is drenched in kaleidoscopic sludge. The ground shimmers, as if a golden rug has been draped over the barren landscape. Nearby mountains are as small and smooth as human nipples. The suns have multiplied. Now there are six. The great icy arc bends outwards, forming a bridge to an infinite galaxy. Beauty is no longer confined to the sounds of the sea. It is everywhere, bold and bittersweet. Clarence knows it's time to go. And that's okay.

So the last droid sits, staring out at the desert, listening to the waves lapping at the shore, until, with one final break and crash, Clarence drifts away with the tide.



ENTRY // 03

SUSPIRIUM VIRIDAE

AUTHOR Jasmin Kirkbride

TYPE PANDEMIC

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jasmin Kirkbride is a sci-fi and fantasy writer from the UK. She has had numerous works of non-fiction and short fiction published, and was recently shortlisted for the EVENT Magazine 'Let Your Hair Down Speculative Fiction' contest (TBA). She is currently undertaking an MA in Creative Writing at UEA, and is working on her first novel with her agent, Sandra Sawicka at Marjacq.

Website | [Twitter](#)

That summer was so hot the eucalyptus tree in the back garden dripped oil, making the whole neighbourhood smell disinfected and clean. I used to lie underneath it after school, feeling the hot sap on my face and limbs, hoping the little burning drops might purge the fear out of me. The voices of Bee Jones and her gang of girls echoed in my head: Freak. Wimp. Nutter. In those days, they took the piss out of me for my panic attacks.

Back before the whole world started panicking. Before the virus.

When it came, the disease spread through the vibrations of human beings' words and songs. It was drawn into the delicate conches of the ears and sucked through the tubes of the body, until it reached the brain and festered there. It spread fast – faster by far than the government regulations against it.

At first, only little things were denied us. We were advised not to speak in the evenings, unless our parents let us, and at school only if we had a specific question for the teacher. The teachers, of course, had to be allowed to speak. “Keep chit-chat to a minimum.” That was the first step. But it was hard to do. Fourteen years old and not allowed to gossip. The pain of it! I remember Bee Jones whispering at the back of the class, and we didn't see her again. Her, or her girl gang. For a while, I thought it was because they'd been expelled, but then I saw Bee's parents crying through the window of the local funeral home, and I got it. Guess it must've been hard to organise her funeral without talking.

On TV, Doctors assured us in government-approved broadcasts that only in-person interactions could be blamed for the pandemic. They reckoned there was something special about a vibration emerging directly from someone's mouth. Still, mum

stopped me using the phone, and I caught Bee's older brother out the back of school with a can of bright pink spray paint, writing straight on the clapboard: "The disease is in your radio".

The regulations increased dramatically in the space of a month: live concerts were banned, public talks and networking events curtailed, birthdays and weddings cancelled. Bee's corpse went to its grave from a silent service, blessed by a sermonless priest and surrounded by us tongue-tied frenemies and relatives. Soon, Bee's parents followed her, though who'd been infected first wasn't clear, and Mum got scared enough that she started letting us eat dinner without grace. School got cancelled, after a teacher gave a lecture on the Pythagoras Theorem, and infected an entire Year 9 class. Better not to learn and live, the local counsel reasoned, than know it all and die.

But you couldn't completely stop small-talks, idle-chats or deep-and-meaningfuls. Our human nature was to put the world to rights, so the whispers and gossip continued, spreading the sickness across the world at great speed. Even mum couldn't stop herself commenting on the unending heat or the price of fish.

Scientists analysed the symptoms of the disease, my own dad amongst them, and I remember admiring the distance his professional curiosity gave him, as if the world wasn't falling down around him and he – one the most qualified of us – wasn't unable to help.

"A slight fever, a tendency towards verbal diarrhoea – that's how it spreads itself, you see – and that reported shortness of breath which appears to be the killing force," he said one evening to Mum after about a week's silence. "Extraordinary! So simple, yet so complex. We just cannot figure it out in the lab." As if this was a sudoku puzzle, not a civilisation-destroying malady.

The world fell apart in a matter of months, because once you got the virus – this *suspirium viridae* – you were dead as a doornail. The virus attacked the neuropathways in the brain that controlled how often a person sighed. Who knew that the sigh was actually a life-sustaining force, designed to re-inflate collapsing alveoli in the lungs? That without the ability to sigh, the body eventually failed? Not me, not my teachers, not even Dad.

Yet, there were those who were immune. Turns out, I was one of them. Guess we should've figured Dad was infected when he came home from the lab babbling, but we didn't cotton on. He went first, then Mum, both of them muttering in their beds. There was nowhere to bury them by then, all the plots were full and the gravediggers gone themselves. So I left them to the flies, and went to my eucalyptus tree, laying out and listening to the inconsistent drip of oil. A splash on the crook of my elbow; my big toe; my third eye.

I lay there all day, knowing I was infected and waiting to die, but it never happened. I couldn't forget to sigh. It took us a while to figure it out, those of us who survived. See, for some of us the sigh wasn't merely a mechanical in-breath, but an emotional release. It was – is – a coping mechanism for our depression and anxiety. We became the inheritors of the planet, our dark-ringed brigade, who were so often over-looked for our inability to “produce”, and our inherent “weakness”. Our misunderstood strength was recognised only in the last breath of those who hounded us: that living so acutely, we could never forget to breathe.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Ash Tales welcomes complete, edited short fiction about apocalypse, post-apocalypse and dystopia. We are interested in endings, certainly, but also in what people, places and machines become afterwards.

- Send stories of up to **2,500 words**.
- Submit clean Markdown: plain paragraphs, standard emphasis and simple headings where needed.
- Previously published work is welcome; please tell us its publication status.
- You retain your rights. If accepted, Ash Tales requests non-exclusive digital publication rights, including possible podcast adaptation and future anthology use.
- If the story is accepted elsewhere while it is under consideration, email **ryan@ashtales.com** to withdraw it.

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