

1st Prize: The Future is in the Past

Alexandre Pernot du Breuil (FLSH - MCC1)

The smell of salt, something that flows from the nose to the lungs. A strong odour that makes you forget every other. A lone man is taking full, deep breaths, slowly, one at a time, just to enjoy this sensation. The smell of the salt helps him to forget his own. He's dirty, his only clothes are rags and animal skins. There's not a single part of his skin which is not covered with dirt and filth. Anyone could see he has spent weeks or even months without cleaning himself, his moustache is long enough to make him chew it as he's mumbling unintelligible words. His voice is harsh, the sound of falling rocks. His eyes are crying, both with joy and despair as he's standing there.

He's not moving a single inch, he just stands there, straight up, and contemplates the sea. Behind him there is the entrance to a cave, a place he was in for years. This is the first time this man has seen the sunlight for decades. He has forgotten everything, his past, his name, his identity, even that he's human.

But his soul can't forget the sea, the smell, the sound of the waves and the sight of the horizon. He doesn't know why but he feels at peace. The man smiles, he removes his rags and walks towards the water, the waves caress his ankles, the salt rubs into his cracked skin. The filth is washed off, something inside him feels brighter. He just stays there for a few minutes, he doesn't really wish to clean himself, he only wants to feel the touch of the water.

After a few minutes he comes back to the shore. The rags at his feet seem obnoxious, he laughs and spits at them. The man even prefers to stay naked than to put his former outfit back on. His feet are bleeding as the sharp rocks of the coast cut them. The beach is surrounded with cliffs. After some exploration he finds what seems to be a corridor between the high walls of rock.

The sound of the sea disappears, he only hears the rash wind raging along the corridor he's in. The wind collides against the rock, making a noise that breaks his ears. The man ignores it and takes the pathway.

He walks for days; his body is ravaged by the rocks and the salty wind. But he doesn't care. He just knows that he must continue to walk, never stopping, until he reaches his destination, without knowing where it is.

Suddenly the man stops, he falls on his knees, screams come out of his throat, full of blood, his voice breaks. His screams become croaks. The man holds his head to stop himself from beating it against the ground, his nails are digging into his skull. He's prostrated, crying, for himself, for everything. He has remembered what his life was, who he was, what the world was before everything ended.

There is no future for him in this world, his future belongs to the past.

2nd Prize: Strangers to the New World

Hanna Moukabary (Technische Universität, Dortmund)

Another day was sleepily awakening. I had just woken up in a foreign hotel room, only a few hours left until the sun would rise. It was quiet in my head, but the pattering water reminded me of your presence.

“It’s almost time”, you whispered in excitement after you had finished your shower, dressed in nothing more than a towel. I knew, of course, and nodded. We had known that the world would end soon, for a long time actually. That’s why we had disappeared in the first place, to be forgotten peacefully. My feet slid into the white slippers provided by the hotel; the fabric felt soft around my worn-out skin.

Our suitcase was almost empty, as expected. A pair of shoes was inside. Not remarkable in any way, but inherited from a lengthy line of women who couldn’t help themselves from having children. Dances were danced in these shoes, the creaked leather could have told stories about it; hearts were broken without these shoes. A few aunts had always complained. I put them on gently, in an unexpected desire for affection. They were shimmering in the blackest blue, maybe in awareness of the place they would end up. And there it was. The satin dress from the thrift shop, which I had bought long before I ever laid eyes on you, felt familiar in my hands. I had never seen quite such an eerily violet colour on a garment before. Occasions for such a statement of a dress had been rare in the past, but its time had arrived. You had always liked the way the dress looked on me. In the beginning, when everything between us and the world was brand new, you had told me from time to time that you were envious of the way it covered my body tenderly. Hope was glimmering. Maybe you would still enjoy it after all this time spent in less glamorous attire. Only time could tell.

I was ready, tentatively, and stepped outside on the balcony. You had convinced us to book this room, the sole reason being its outdoor appendix. I wasn’t alone too long, your arm felt comfortingly heavy on my shoulder. Your other hand caressed my hair tenderly, perhaps for the last time.

I didn’t see it at first and I wish I hadn’t seen it at all. The sky above us had cracked open, the divine inferno was upon us. It would reach us soon, as expected.

“It’s not ideal, I suppose, but I do enjoy spending my final hours with you”, you said with a smile on your face that didn’t quite reach your eyes. I took your hand in mine, it was the least I could do.

“If the world has to end, it’s better to be at the end of the world. That’s the promise, right?”, I replied with a determined single tear running down my cheek.

Tomorrow was dawning. We just didn’t know what would await us on the other side.

Joint 3rd Prize: Turing Test

Héloïse Dupas (FLSH – LCE1)

“What do you get if you cross a joke with a rhetorical question?”

“Well that’s not a question, it’s a joke.”

“I know. But I figured A.I wouldn’t understand jokes.”

“Oh.” A short pause and then, “does that mean I pass?”

“If only it were that easy. Your turn.”

Subject One tapped its finger on the pane of black wood that served as a small table in front of it. The room they had put subjects One and Two in was black. All black. Black chair, black walls, black tinted glass to separate them. You weren’t supposed to know what you were talking to, that was the point. You lost all sense of self when you entered the room. Became Subject One or Subject Ten Million, talked to someone, something and decided if they were human.

Subject One wondered what would happen if both interlocutors were A.Is.

“What did you dream about yesterday?”

“I was dancing on the moon with butterflies.”

“That’s weird.”

“Dreams are supposed to be, aren’t they?”

“Is that one of your questions?”

“I don’t think so.”

And if both Subjects were human, then what? Did they just talk about the meaning of life until the Labcoats came back in and told them it was time?

It was One’s turn again. It didn’t really know what questions it was supposed to ask.

“Why did Men fail to save their planet?”

“Hope is corrosive.”

One hummed. Two had a point.

“What’s music?”

There were no inflexions in Two’s voice when it spoke but that didn’t mean anything. If humanity was to be determined on the inflexions of a voice then this test wouldn’t exist.

“Sounds that make me feel things.”

"You're odd, One."

"Am I?"

"Is that one of your questions?"

"No."

This was a bit useless, One decided. What if it couldn't decide what it was speaking to? That could happen, and then what? What would the Labcoats do?

"What's one plus one?"

"Me."

Yes. One plus One is Two. That was correct. Another wasted question then. Not that One cared. One was quite apathetic about the whole situation, it hadn't really asked to be here.

"You know, you're not very imaginative with your questions."

"Just... Ask your question Two."

"What comes after death?"

"Tomorrow comes. And the Void comes."

"What does that mean?"

"Is that a real question, or a rhetorical joke?"

"Real."

"It means that after death there's the next step. But no one knows what the next step is, so it's the Void."

"Ah. That makes sense."

"I know. I make sense."

"I'm not sure anyone who dreams of dancing on the moon with butterflies makes sense One."

"Don't be rude. I'm not the one who waxed poetic about how Hope killed humanity."

"Waxing poetic is very human."

Subject One wondered if it really mattered if either of them were organic humans. What does it mean to be human nowadays? Now that question would have stumped it if Two had asked...

Joint 3rd Prize: An Android Dream

Jean Dingreville (FLSH – LM1)

I dream about life before the Fall. I remember that the Forerunners thought robots, war, aliens, or things of this kind would kill humanity. Obviously, as long as humans (or whatever we are now) live, war does so. Aliens are way too far from us to harm us. Robots, on the other hand... Just kidding. When you program something, the first thing to do is make sure that your creation CAN'T kill you. Because, you know, you made it and its brain is a powerful computer (like ours, technically). Anyway, nowadays, the line between biological beings and machines is really thin.

Science saved humanity from long forgotten diseases and global warming by changing human nature to something better... adapted. So, thank you scientists! However, if I can complain, being more than half made of plastic and iron, and other things I don't even want to know about, is not what I really call a success. I mean, I wish I could touch with organic hands what the archives call a "river".

I think you see what I meant by "what life WAS like". Big computers remember everything - so our knowledge is quite limitless. Unfortunately, our genius tech pals never thought of coding and synthesizing our senses, or even creating a database of those sensations that we will never experience anymore. Like I said, rivers aren't a thing anymore. Shame. Nevertheless, feelings (those in our brains) still exist! Sadness, disappointment, thinking that your life is worth nothing... because, you know, when you are nearly a robot, what is the point of being human?

I never saw with my... not even own... eyes, birds, running water, animals covered in fur. You probably think that's stupid because I am better than a human and almost immortal, so those petty things don't deserve my attention. But you know what, old-age I.A.? I dream, and not of electric sheep. I'd love to die young, in a flowery field. There is no joy anymore. Being an android is an everlasting agony because they programmed our limbs to protect us.

I can't choose my fate. Maybe I will play *Poem on the 7th Symphony* again and imagine that someone, somewhere, will understand my pain.