

Futures

Last words and little rebellions

Breaking the rules. By Beth Goder

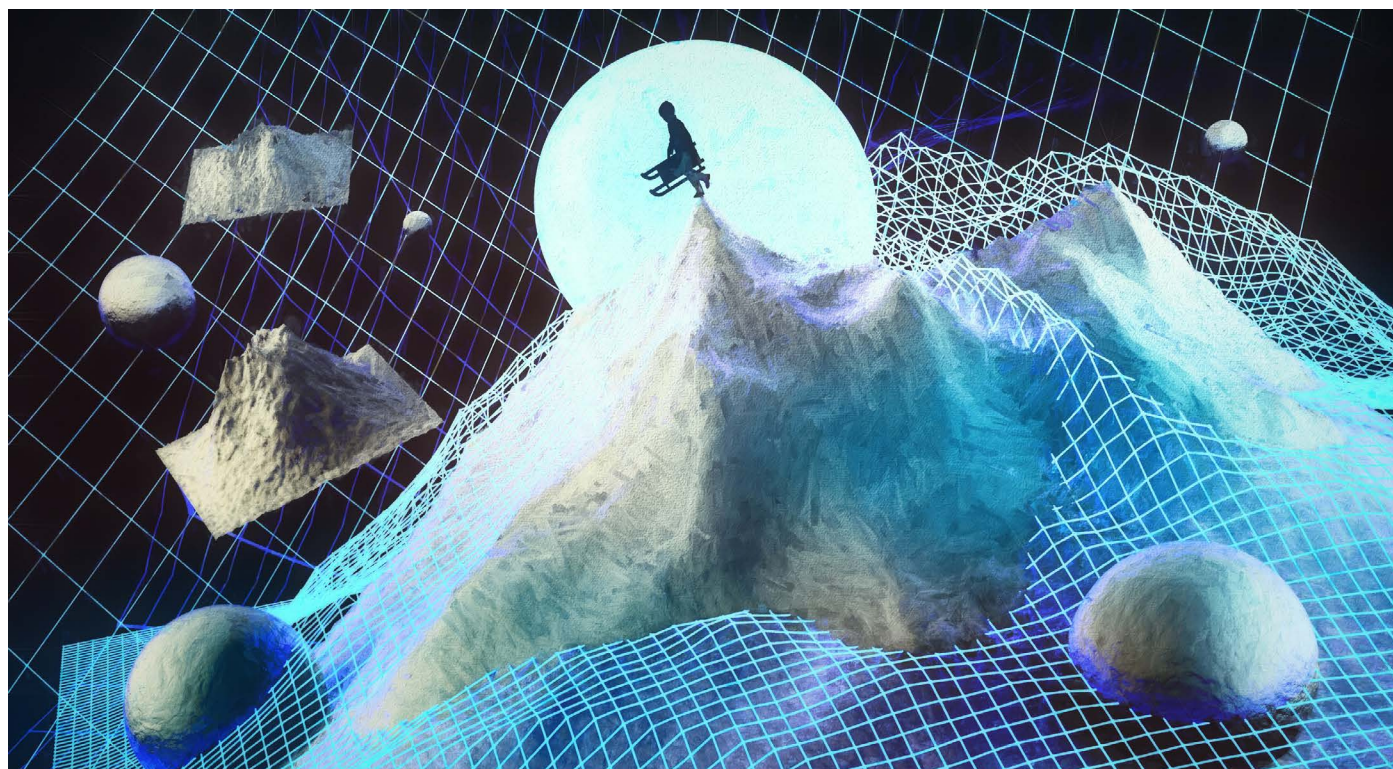


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

At the age of 92, Violet dies while out on a nature walk. One moment, she is bending over a prairie mallow, the next, she is hunched in the dirt, pain shooting through her chest.

The hike was billed as a sabbatical from technology, so there are no hover-cams or instant media updaters, and everyone has turned off their Circles.

"I'm terribly sorry," she mumbles, before toppling over. This utterance annoys her almost more than dying. All her life, she has been encouraged not to be a bother, and now she's muttered these unceremonious last words, almost as if apologizing for her own existence.

In the 1800s, last words were respected – the final thought of a mind soon to be lost. In practice, they were often fevered ramblings. Your good friends were supposed to make up something better. Violet's last thought is of last words, before the wave in her chest overtakes her.

After the mover scoops up Violet's body, the group continues on. The docent points out a

lilac toppling with blooms.

Later, when the docent gives her report to the medical examiner, she leaves out Violet's apology.

It's 2131, and no one cares about last words, because they are never the last.

Violet is six, sled in hand, chasing Jon up a snow-covered hill. She's wearing a new coat, bright pink, still giving off the plastic smell of something newly printed. In those days, people didn't have home printers. You had to use the community one, where everyone could see what you were making.

She is full of energy, bounding into snow fluffs. Jon, at eight years old, plays the older brother, telling her the name of the hill and the street beyond.

To Violet, the hill is a mountain – a giant's tooth, a ladder to the sky.

Jon zooms down the hill, but as Violet jumps on her sled, the NannyBot chimes. *Forbidden action*. Perhaps the NannyBot worries because Violet is smaller than Jon. Perhaps it's the

initial settings her parents entered, constantly refined by their behaviour towards her.

Using a trick Jon taught her, she overrides the NannyBot. It's the most daring thing she's ever done.

She whizzes down the hill, crashes at the bottom, jumps up and shouts, "Again!"

At 21, Violet arrives for her first day as the second-grade teacher for California's Sector 3. Her lesson plan is neatly arranged in her Circle, but she isn't ready for the blankness of the recording wall.

"Can't I see my students in person?" she asks her manager.

Violet teaches this way for a year before insisting on travelling to the schools. Many of these kids have never had a teacher in the classroom, but they recognize her from the vids.

"I thought you were a bot," shouts one kid, so excited he's bouncing.

She visits every school in the sector, staying two weeks, then does it again. Pablo, who can work from anywhere with his printer

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schematic business, travels with her. They rent an old V47 mover, spacious inside, with couches upholstered in astonishing blue.

Violet sneaks some sonnets into her lessons, even though the administration thinks the kids are too young for poetry. “Don’t worry about what the poem means,” she says. “Think of it as a little rebellion.”

This is, in fact, a good summary of her life. It’s a quiet sort of rebellion.

Nobody tells you that 46 is the tricky age, the midlife-crisis age. Her kids have grown, although they still ping her every week.

She runs through a variety of new jobs – curator of a museum dedicated to trout, fitness instructor, consultant for an AI education company. She prints clothes with wide epaulettes and sweeping skirts.

At last, she writes poetry, which doesn’t solve a thing, but makes her feel better, nonetheless.

Violet is 62, sitting in her garden. She thinks, *my heart is a field, grown wild with the moments*

of my life, then scoffs, loudly, at this open sentimentality. Bees buzz around her but don’t sting.

Her Circle pings. *The Journal of Education Robotics* wants a photograph to accompany her article. She recalls family photographs, her mother, her grandmother, smiling hard through lips tinted like roses. So much has changed, but so little, too.

She snaps a picture of her gnarled feet, one foot caressed by grass, the other pillowed by dirt, and sends it along.

These feet have been good to me, she thinks. *These feet know where I’m going.*

When Violet awakens, she feels so normal that it takes the death docent three tries to explain she’s been uploaded. The simulated room is beautifully furnished. She squishes a chair cushion. Certainly, it has to be real.

Her neural recording isn’t a recent one. The last three years of her life are absent from memory.

She’s allowed to view her death. That clutching of her chest. That apology. Disappointing.

The death docent informs her that she has five hours before her account will be put into permanent stasis. The basic, government-funded plan. Of course, most people who can afford to upgrade, do.

Her family will upload avatars soon. Until then, she’s expected to fill out the proper forms. There’s an official space for last words.

She remembers being six years old, sledding down the mountain, ascending the ladder to the sky.

She opens the room to sunlight. Composes a poem that she will never write down.

She commands the simulation to morph. It’s snowing. A sled is in her hand. She sets out, her breath a chilled cloud, the world around her empty, white as a giant’s tooth. One final rebellion.

No last words, she thinks. *Just this.*

Beth Goder works as an archivist. Her fiction has appeared in venues such as *Escape Pod*, *Analog*, *Clarkesworld* and *Nature*. You can find her online at <http://www.bethgoder.com>.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Beth Goder reveals the inspiration behind *Last words and little rebellions*.

Throughout history, people have placed a lot of importance on last words. I wondered how last words would be understood and recorded in a world where people persisted digitally after death.

As I wrote the story, I wanted to see how I could incorporate science-fiction concepts into the everyday lives of these characters. Death has become mundane as a result of mind-uploading technology, and 3D printers have become a significant source of clothing and other materials.

I also wanted to look at quiet rebellions — the way that people go against the rules imposed on them by society. Violet, someone who has been taught to follow the rules and not take up space, struggles against her own learned inclinations and finds ways to push back.

This story was written in 2018, two years before the pandemic of 2020. When I wrote about remote learning for young children, I had no idea that it would become a reality for so many. This is one sci-fi concept that I wish had stayed fictional.

