

**I don't have  
to be on  
that bus,  
I thought,  
sitting down  
at a cafe.  
I can drop  
the whole  
thing, slam  
cappuccinos  
till happy  
hour, then  
get smashed  
at a bar.**

IMAGE BY LMEND



**hERB was the drummer that never gave out, never flaked on a practice. He rocked on demand, no warmup needed.**

THE ANDROID REBELLION  
BY NICOLAS GATTIG

**B**ossman moved his massivity in the upholstered chair. As he was thinking, his fingers drummed on the desk in a loop of mogul impatience.

“He can’t play the song? That’s ass-cake.”

“Sometimes he mutters under his breath. Like he’s saying bobos.”

“Say what?”

“You know—dudes in the suburbs who think they are punk.” Steve Drt looked sheepishly round the throne room, the inner sanctum of G-nome Records, all glass and views up in the Embarcadero Center.

“What did Scoff say about this?”

“He’s in Wisconsin, hunting. Didn’t make it to practice.”

“Where does the bot get this stuff? He’s wired to play drums and keep his mouth shut.”

hERB had joined the band two years back—#heisthemetal was the hashtag on social media, dreamed up by Bossman like everything else—but still people asked, “So does the synthetic know he is a synthetic?” Of course, he did. We had no wish for some rogue replicant shit from a drummer clamoring for more lifetime. hERB was okay having only five years, which would be enough for us to milk the reunion and save a nice chunk for retirement. He even liked wearing the cap from the lab that read Punk Till I Die.

“We are wondering—” Steve Drt picked his forearm, scarred from the vision quests of his youth. “You know, the circuits.”

“System malfunction? In a drum unit?”

“He says he can’t play the beat.”

“Look—” Bossman snorted. “You want to stick with the bot, take him to Wolff-Nakamoto. Get him fixed so he can do the job. He keeps acting up, get yourself a new drummer. Before the tour. Before Scoff gets pissed.”

In a prominent spot on the wall, among rows of platinum discs amassed by Bossman throughout years of moneyed connoisseurship, hung the last effort by Snafu Siren. I looked up at the shimmering disc—a promise of bills paid forever.

We had to act after a line of depleted skinsmen, humans snapping their wrist joints at galloping speeds or losing their mojo in rehab. Punks are fragile, especially the drummers. Beside overuse injuries or choking on their own vomit shithoused after a show, there is the ennui of banging out the same three beats through a repertoire of two hundred songs.

hERB was the perfect solution. Designed like all humanoid music robots in the lab of Doctor Wolff-Nakamoto, a whimsical tinker in Silicon Valley and a maven on biomechanics, hERB was the drummer that never gave out, never flaked on a practice. A feat of modular functionality, he rocked on demand with no warmup needed.

“You understand—” Bossman looked up. “This thing leaks, your reunion’s in the toilet. We can have sloppy timing, peeing on groupies—hell, move to the suburbs and drive a Miata. That’s peccadilloes. What we can’t have is the lords of punk with a drummer who yelps they are sellouts. That’s ass-cake.”

He turned to his calendar. “You don’t need to respect me. But you need to respect my money. Go fix the damn bot, okay?”

Outside we strolled down the Embarcadero, a young woman in a Ferrari stopping at a light.

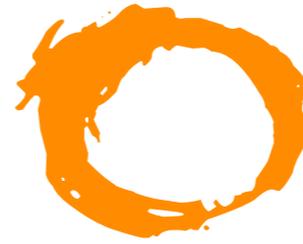
“What are we doing now?” Behind strains of thinning blond hair, Steve Drt peeked at my tiny breasts. He was going to meet his dealer to buy the plant teachers, hoping I’d join like I used to.

We had broken up years ago when he stopped being complicated and reading Czech poets and instead got into domination and spiky collars and then asked if he could be my slave. I still wasn’t sure if I needed a man so what the hell do I do with a slave?

“Dinner in Chinatown—my grandfather’s birthday. Don’t think I can eat though, I’m so worried.”

“Wolff-Nakamoto?” Steve Drt looked at the woman in the Ferrari. “Holy shit, no.”

**We would  
bumrush the  
corporate  
show, drink  
their beer  
while we  
spread the  
disease,  
and then  
leave after  
smashing  
the toilets.**



nly my mom would admit she liked All Part of the Plan, the album that launched the reunion. “Finally, you can hear what he’s singing. And thank god for a slow song.”

She loved that I was respected, but what she loved most was that I paid off her credit cards once the royalty checks started coming. She couldn’t care less what label we signed with. To her any charges, in fact the whole notion of selling out were idiotic, a sign of jealousy and middle-class snootiness, when for the first time since I dropped out of high school I’d brought something other than embarrassment to the family.

The slow song was Shack Job and had been written by Steve Drt after a tortured night with the plant teachers. It was no scheme to make bank and be famous; it came out like that, and we liked it. Scoff wrote the lyrics as we tracked the song, based on his ex who had cheated on him with a roommate. Bossman saw the potential and pounced. Hearing the song when he checked on the mix in the studio, he eased out a smile I didn’t know he had in him, slapped the sound engineer on the back, and said, “Bingo. Who’s ever tried Kool Aid and said, ‘Uhh, I don’t like that?!’”

Next thing, the single blew up and charted, the breakout hit of the summer playing in all the clubs and cafes, and then it was used in a comedy with Seth Rogen, putting Snafu Siren on a map we had thought was for others. An appearance on Jimmy Kimmel, then three million views on YouTube. Millennials eating our shirts and back catalog. A Chronicle feature titled, “Diversity punks own success (and a robot drummer)”.

First we thought it was just a joke, a sloppy stagedive into the moshpit of stardom. Scoff explained we were the fifth column: We would bumrush the corporate show, drink their beer while we spread the disease, and then leave after smashing the toilets. The joke was on them, Scoff explained, the suits paying the pension for the punks who were flipping them off. The suits didn’t seem to mind though—they were mostly young guys who liked us, like we were a badge of honor or a cool kind of mascot. It was fine, I guess, because we weren’t smashing any toilets either. It was all kind of meta, if that’s the right word, and anyway, Scoff no longer mentioned the fifth column.

It was the old fans that made it real. One day Scoff stepped out of his house to find a huge spray-painting across the entrance: WHAT IS THE TASTE OF CORPORETE DICK? I laughed when Scoff railed about it, but then comments online started hating on All Part of the Plan, how it sounded too mainstream and polished. We were booed at some local shows and got poison-pen letters, all snark and atrocious spelling, from fans who had liked us since back in the nineties. One note had the same line scrawled over and over, smeared among butter stains, a maniacal mantra of the self-righteous. Desperation's gone suckas.

We hadn't meant to get big, I swear. We just did what we had done for years banging out an angry ditty—three power chords and two choruses, rehearsed and tracked in less than a day, our same old guerilla style—and now suddenly everyone liked us. The attention was overwhelming, yet the only one who at all reacted, who appeared to position himself in response to what was clearly a whole new matrix, was hERB.

He resisted, subtly. Unable, mysteriously, to play the hit song he had recorded.

**Scoff stepped out of his house to find a huge spray-painting across the entrance:**

WHAT IS THE TASTE OF CORPORETE DICK?



he Lennon Studios were on Ninth and Harrison, down South of Market, the last block that wasn't all startups. It was a brick front with

tattooed windows, the sheet metal doors warped from sonic assaults that came from a warren of rooms drowning the noise from Highway 101, the feeder to Silicon Valley.

Outside you stepped around scruffy techies, the guys who had priced us out of the city and now looked at us with an awe that I hated. As if through magical powers we had soared beyond compromised lives and made jobs out of bucking the system. Nothing to see here, I thought, as I slouched along unlit halls down to the grotto, our old practice pad that smelled of stale beer and armpits. It was a giant man-cave and I liked it.

We never spoke, just tore through the setlist. An hour of blitz, then a break to get baked, then the whole set again until Scoff had to watch his voice. There wasn't much news anyway. Steve Drt was a born-again Christian which "nobody wanted to hear about" and Scoff had a chicken farm and a messy relationship in Milwaukee. We had all quit our day-jobs, bartending, retail, and social worker, and hadn't hung out as friends since before the reunion. As for hERB, he was a synthetic. They don't have any news, not really, just these random thoughts out of nowhere.

Like, were we still playing Homo Slumlord?

hERB sat on his stool, adjusting a cymbal for ergonomics. He was short and left-handed, his setup tight as a mousetrap.

"It's no longer us." Steve Drt, tuning his Rickenbacker, slouched his lanky frame on the sofa that looked like a maimed potato.

"We play it for soundcheck," I said. "And in the South."

"The B-version setlist for Red States." Steve Drt chuckled. "Down there we just offend actual homo slumlords."

"If it's no longer us," I said, "why do we play it in Red States? Is there an old different us for the South?"

"It's not our image," Scoff said, in a tone that meant we should drop it.

"There you go," I said to hERB. "On the setlist, just not our image."

"What about Bottom Line?" His deep voice was steady as he broached the taboo. "Are we still playing that?"

Steve Drt winced. The grotto was filled with a hush.

“When did Bonham get cute?” Scoff looked at me, six feet of front-man legend charisma with a ripped shirt that said Goddess, his mohawk brushing against the ceiling. He turned to hERB. “You being cute, Bonham, eh? Feeling fresh?”

hERB said nothing as Scoff towered over his kit, a spray-painted Yamaha out of thrift. You never knew what hERB understood.

“Okay,” the synthetic said finally, his eyes on the high-hat pedal. And for the moment, that somehow closed it.

You see what he did? A perfect example of the problem.

All along, most of the pushback had come from Scoff. The thing about hERB was you couldn’t read him and that hERB didn’t care what you thought, which, of course, is the essence of punk yet it bugged the hell out of Scoff. The sole original member of the band, he had a legacy to protect and a mom in a nursing home to support.

It took 10 minutes for practice to explode. We were waiting for hERB to count in All Part of the Plan, but there was silence.

“I cannot play this.” He was calm, his eyes small under the titian crew cut. “I am sorry.”

As a rule, hERB had nothing to prove to anyone, which I actually thought was kind of sexy. But now he stared weirdly ahead as if trying to catch a signal from inside, his chest taut as a piccolo snare. Scoff stared back with a cold mean face, unrelenting, for the few ticks of time that it takes for old grievances to boil. Then he hissed, “Count or I’ll bust your wires.”

As if mishearing a command, hERB raised himself from the stool, put the cymbals and sticks into a case and then, every inch of his face the automaton, marched measuredly out of the grotto. The iron door opened, a molasses of metal booming in from the hallway, and I just barely caught what he said as it closed with a thud.

Bobos.

“Screw Bonham.” Scoff kicked the bass drum. “Who does he think he is? Fucking Skynet?”

**The iron door opened, a molasses of metal booming in from the hallway, and I just barely caught what he said as it closed with a thud.**

**BOBOS.**



he next week saw controlled escalation, the easiest way to proceed. As the tour approached—

—sold-out venues across 14 States—hERB didn’t show up for practice and returned none of our texts. Scoff said Bonham was out of the band and he was looking for a new drummer. I was stunned. I told Scoff he was being petty, that our fans wanted hERB in the band and we owed him another chance. Scoff shot back I was just the bass—and therefore, by implication, as irrelevant in the band as the drummer—and that we owed Bossman and G-nome, and anyway, sister, Snafu Siren is not a democracy.

Memories came that made sense. The time in the studio when the soundman explained he would clean up the snare in the mix and hERB didn’t understand what he meant. The in-store appearance at Amoeba Records, when a fanboy had asked us to pose for selfies—“It is the audience that ruins the band,” Steve Drt quipped and obliged—and hERB looked perplexed and asked, “Why a selfie?”

His system held reams of new

Marxist literature, as well as DIY manifests, and the tour diaries of Black Flag. Was his programming stuck in the past and rejecting a rite of passage, the acceptance of corporate BS and the humiliations that came with it? Was he turning against us in a case of machine adaptation, moving from humble domestic to machinery in extremis?

Back in the throne room at the Embarcadero, I pleaded with Bossman to give hERB a chance, or at least wait for a few more days.

“This is awfully cute. I appreciate it.” He turned to his assistant. “Get me Wolf-Nakamoto, and stat.”

Soon he barked into the phone, “The bot is kaput. Acting weird, on the fritz—whatever. Needs a fix, not just snugging the screws. We’re looking at deep data ass-cake.”

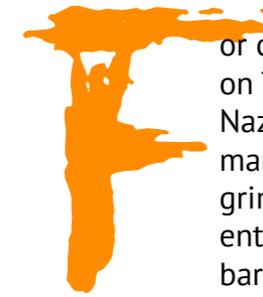
The voice of Doctor Wolff-

Nakamoto, composed and metallic like a robot overlord, asked what make the synthetic was and what kinds of malfunction had been observed. First with disbelief, then with a sense of impatient rebuke, he kept saying, “The unit isn’t sentient.” Still, he agreed to make an appointment for next week, when the roboticists would take hERB to the lab to open him up and check the deep data. If he was really a wonky model they wouldn’t spend time on a lengthy reconfiguration. He would likely be disestablished and swapped for a newer version, free of charge and in time for the tour. The warranty was still valid.

Disestablish, of course, meant to destroy.

I stood dumbstruck by the mahogany desk, unsure who to hate on most.

**The bot is kaput. Acting weird, on the fritz—whatever. Needs a fix, not just snugging the screws. We’re looking at deep data ass-cake.**



or credibility, hERB lived on Turk Street, where the Nazareth hotel thrust its marquee out over the grimy sidewalk. By the entrance a woman in rags, barefoot and scabbed, slipped in and out of a stupor induced by meaner stuff than the plant teachers. We used to write songs about social inequality, but then Scoff felt he kept repeating himself and preferred writing about his personal problems.

hERB sat on a bed in the spartan room wearing a white tee and neat Chino shorts. His back up against the wall, he had a Pabst in one hand and looked at his thumb. He liked beer though he couldn’t get drunk.

It was late afternoon, the hour of dreams. The setting sun filtered in twice, through the blinds and from behind trees on a hill outside. The branches nodded gently in the breeze casting shadows on the wall across from the window. I could imagine hERB on the bed for hours, mesmerized by the dancing shadows.

“Your thumb okay?” I sat down at the end of the bed.

“No worries.”

**You're not angry?  
There is nothing  
you want? And  
then, before I  
lost courage and  
the moment was  
gone, I blurted,  
It's not the same  
without you.  
Please don't  
leave.**

**DON'T  
LEAVE  
ME WITH  
THEM.**

“Scoff is pissed and wants you out of the band. He’s worried about the tour and can’t take any chances. He’s got the pull, but I want you to come back.”

I put my beanie on the wooden desk, beside a paper plate with a bagel and butter. “I like playing with you. We’re a good rhythm section.”

“What does Bossman want?”

“He called Wolff-Nakamoto. You know, quick fixes, no ass-cake. I think actually they are scared—like, they don’t get you.”

“Uh-huh. Robocalypse now.”

I laughed and a smile seemed to flash on hERB’s face. I moved closer to his hairless legs. “Are you—okay? I mean, you know, about lifetime?”

He made a tiny negative with his head. “The lifetime is not important.” He was almost impatient, his eyes on the wall with the shadows. “Androids serve,” he went on. “The programming is what matters.”

“I’m just wondering if—you know you don’t like the success.”

hERB’s cornfed face, the firm cheekbones and the slightly arched eyebrows, looked proud like a noble warrior. I wondered if I had a crush on him.

Shaped under the tee were his muscles, toned sleekly, unable to age. I’d been curious about his skin and whatever was under the shorts, the penis fruit I imagined when hERB would take off his shirt. Once a groupie had dragged him to a motel and penned a kiss-and-tell for a magazine, saying that hERB performed similar to a human and his biomechanical penis was super clean, if oddly without any taste. In my book, no taste was lucky where penises were concerned.

hERB’s agile limbs made his style distinct, allowing a loose swinging drive to his up-tempo grooves. He was steady but not mechanical, not effortless like some drummers. He worked terribly hard when he played, arms slicing the air, lips pressed together in a sweaty scowl. He broke sticks like matches and habitually smashed cymbals and skins, even the metal arms holding the tom-toms, ergonomics be damned. We had asked Wolff-Nakamoto if this was normal, if a synthetic shouldn’t be made so he didn’t have to pant after practice. “Punk is struggle, it shouldn’t look easy,” the doctor said. “Working hard is a sign of humility.”

Next door a woman gave an artificial laugh. “I am confused,” said hERB in the dark. “A mistake was made somewhere.”

“They’re gonna look inside you. It could be, like—you might have to be disestablished.”

His eyes glazed, as though he listened to interior channels. Had the hand with the beer flinched ever so slightly?

“You’re not angry? There is nothing you want?” And then, before I lost courage and the moment was gone, I blurted, “It’s not the same without you. Please don’t leave. Don’t leave me with them.”

I looked straight into his eyes—the whites without vessels, the pupils alone with a knowledge he could never share, never made understood to others. My head came down, slowly, as if slackening on defeated strings, and then my clumsy pierced tongue found his, moving with soundless, melancholic words. His lips were cool and without any taste, but then somewhere in the search of the kiss, we connected, and there we lingered.

The poison pen had been wrong. The desperation wasn’t gone, it had merely turned inward and become quiet yearning for meaning.

I left him as part of the dark, perched on the bed like a heartbreaking stoic.



en years full of dives on the road, show after show of identical pits and skank flails and the wall of death mangling white male

suburbia into self-hating pulp. Scoff and I yelled the choruses together, drunk on beer by the end of most nights, and Steve Drt clutched his Rickenbacker, sky-high, forever stumbling into his amp and asking me what song came next.

I loved coming out on stage, stepping into the rowdy cheers and the smoke-filled light as Scoff howled, "We're Snafu Siren and you're not." I loved when hERB counted in and the opening chords came down like a hammer of God, when on the best nights the band was a churning engine, locked in as one in deafening abandon that was held together by the drums, cymbals agleam under the strobes, when the crowd churned and slammed in a raw catharsis until the ceiling was dripping with moisture, the condensing collective sweat from men angry and desperate with youth, when, beyond all the posing and the macho bullshit, I was connected to something real. Like the good sex I never had, the one time that my guard was down.

The problem wasn't success. It was the fact that we were no longer young and kept doing the same thing, but to do the thing right you had to be goofy and deadly earnest, full of righteous confusion and a focused energy to make something happen, and the truth was we weren't those things any longer but kept doing the same thing and didn't know how to act.

I was home with a bottle of rye, scrolling through pics like a heartbroken teen. Half-drunk and counting, I glanced at the pills on the table. I couldn't remember what the blue ones were called, but Steve Drt said they made you petty. I had vowed never to do drugs again after the abortion, the little baby I almost had with Steve Drt, but that was a big fat lie and you are a sucker.

For the first time I called his number, listening to the ring in a hotel room.

"It's me. Can I come over?"

"Uh-huh...please."

I didn't want sex, just to be with him till sunrise, to sit next to him on the old sheets and drink beer and keep talking. About the shadows vanishing on his wall and the fears that I had about lifetime, about the band and his favorite songs and if he thought Scoff was a bossy diva, and then, who knew, perhaps I would ask him, for real, about being angry and the butter smears on a letter.

**We were no longer young and kept doing the same thing, but to do the thing right you had to be goofy and deadly earnest, full of righteous confusion and a focused energy to make something happen, and the truth was we weren't those things any longer.**

"I hope Bossman eats bleach and dies."

"It's unbelievable. The whole martyr bullshit. Like he was keeping esprit de corps."

"What core?"

Steve Drt didn't answer and I thought maybe the question was dumb. "Fucking Bossman," I sighed, picking at my enchilada.

We were at a taco joint in the Mission, where Steve Drt had just scored the plant teachers, stocking up for the tour that started tomorrow. It was two days since hERB had escaped from the laboratory.

They had tinkered around for a week, running all sorts of crazy tests. A picture in a mag showed hERB in a screening console, his smooth silicone skin bare under fluorescent tubes, electrodes attached to his brain that probed him like wiry worms. He was surrounded by lab technicians and had a look on his face as if to say, "Uh-huh, motherfucking bobos."

His structural integrity wasn't compromised; he had acted exactly as programmed. Embarrassed and fearing for his reputation, Wolf-Nakamoto consulted with Bossman and, not to take any further chances, ordered the android scrapped after a final test. That same night hERB bailed out, caught on camera as he short-circuited the locks with his thumb and walked into a nearby field.

The spin was this: all along hERB had been wired to rebel, to preserve our integrity should we ever be tempted by the mainstream. Based on the press release, hERB had scuffled with the doctor and his assistants, head-butting them unconscious while yelling "punk till I die" and then hurling himself through a window. Thanks to his sacrifice, Bossman concluded tearfully, Snafu Siren would go back to their roots and it was safe to keep buying the new album, which, with uncanny foresight on behalf of the band, had been aptly named All Part of the Plan.

My eyes rolled so hard reading this, they fell out and onto the floor, goodbye eyes.

"I wonder where he is now."

"Some town, some band somewhere. Too bad. Hardest hitting drummer I ever saw."

I looked away. "You ready to leave tomorrow?"

"Can't wait to see the new android."

**Asked if we would ever do Lollapalooza, he gave a smile full of plant teachers. You know, 80 per cent of success is not showing up, he said.**

**FOR THE BULLSHIT, THAT IS.**

28



he tunnel trains came in from the East Bay, yielding commuter loads along Market Street. Getting off at Montgomery station,

I looked at the work drones around me, feeling stripped of my new superiority.

The bus left at ten in time for tonight's show in Sacramento. I was walking to Civic Center when I thought about something Steve Drt had once said in an interview. Asked on camera if we would ever do Lollapalooza, he gave a smile full of plant teachers. "You know, 80 per cent of success is not showing up," he said. "For the bullshit, that is."

I don't have to be on that bus, I thought, sitting down at a cafe. I can drop the whole thing, slam cappuccinos till happy hour, then get smashed at a bar while a club in Sacramento is waiting. I'm just the bass, let them scramble to find a replacement. I could return to bartending, no problem, turn my back on the world yet again. Mom would hate me, of course. She would say it was just self-sabotage, the low self-esteem that had plagued me since junior high, my fear of failure or my fear of success and then failure, disguised as integrity. Always sitting on my integrity, tons of it, never getting in the ring where things mattered. And the

annoying thing was, mom was right.

The financial district was near and swarming Ubers were killing whatever taxis still roamed the town. Down the street Google made driverless cars, or cars that could fly, or make the best friggin sandwich you ever had.

The phone in my bag rang. Just after ten. I finished my coffee and got up.

People moved briskly along the sidewalk, their steps full of purpose, on their way to a job which they liked or hated or maybe had started to feel weird or ambivalent about, the way I felt about a bus down at Civic Center.

They didn't all look like assholes or sellouts. Impossible, at a glance, to tell who were bobos.

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## NICOLAS GATTIG

The first scene of *The Android Rebellion* came about while I was reading Nero Wolfe mysteries from the 1950s. The author Rex Stout was great at writing bossy executives, and I wanted to do something similar. I sat on the first scene for a couple of years until last summer I was fired from a corporate job. Then I finished the story in a couple of months. I remember sitting on my bed in a hotel room, lost like hERB, and watching the shadows of branches play on the wall.

In my 20s, I was the drummer of a punk band in Vienna, Austria which was trying really hard to make money, no qualms about it. I was an outsider in the band, much like I felt like an outsider in the corporate world. So my own feelings are somewhere between the bass player and the android.

I write to be part of this world. Besides published fiction in *The Font* magazine and *Eastlit* journal, I am a contributing writer at *The Japan Times*, where I do essays and book reviews. I am interested in cultural identity and its pitfalls, and I am working on a book about Japan.

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Image by Benjamin Parks