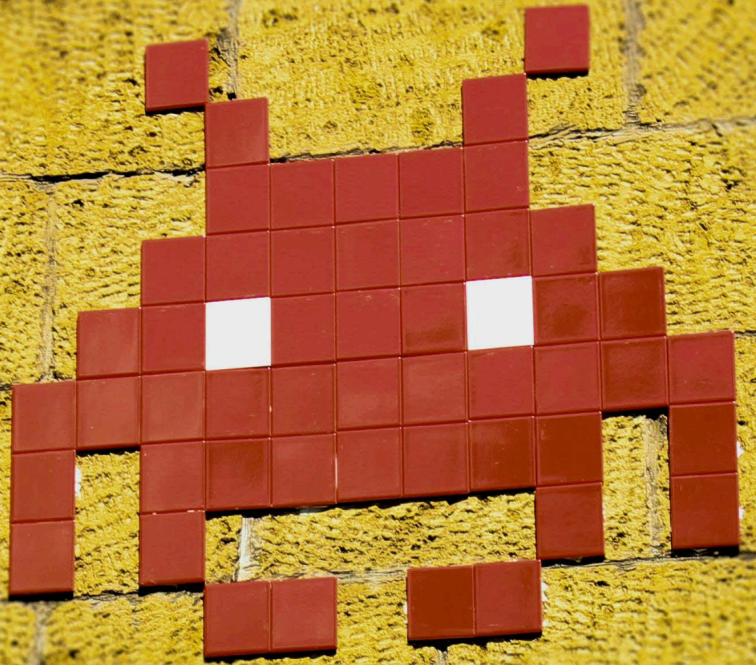


Issue 35 | Winter 2024

# The broken c | i T | Y



**Greetings,  
Starfighter.**

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# The broken



Winter 2024 Issue 35

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## In this issue:



Welcome to *The Broken City's* gaming issue.

It seems the magazine overestimated everyone's desire to tackle a video game theme. No matter—let's head to the Pizzaplex and see Super Mario save Salman Rushdie!

## Cover Art:

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## Contents:

### Poetry

Katherine Quevedo: 3, 4

Jocko Benoit: 5

### Fiction

Brittany Redd: 6

Douglas Cole: 7

*The Broken City* is currently accepting submissions for its summer 2025 edition: **Anywhere But Here.**

That's right, restless readers, the magazine is running a Travel issue. We want to hear about trips, vacations, exotic destinations and adventures abroad, wherever abroad may be.

Send your poetry, fiction, essays, illustrations and photography to [thebrokencitymag@yahoo.com](mailto:thebrokencitymag@yahoo.com).

Deadline is: June 1, 2025. Submitters will be contacted after that date, with news of acceptance or rejection.

# Five Date Nights at Freddy Fazbear's Mega Pizzaplex

## *Katherine Quevedo*

### Night 1

It starts over two cans of Sodaroni and two piping hot slices, the oomph of paprika and parmesan sizzling on our eager tongues, the gleam of electric neon youth in our eyes. The cheese stretches as we pull each slice away, as though reticent to part. The Pizzaplex thrums with laughter. Let's go bowling.

### Night 2

Part indoor amusement park, part mall, the Pizzaplex anticipates our every desire. Go-karts and minigolf. Friendly competition among painted terrains. We sate ourselves with pie and pop, watching holograms as larger-than-life as we are, as lively and effervescent.

### Night 3

We haven't sickened yet of salt and spice. This time: the arcade and laser tag. We flow with other merrymakers up and down the escalators, past gift shops and eateries, like blood cells through arteries and organs. The Pizzaplex ticks on and on in its celebratory might.

### Night 4

Tonight we enter the maze. We know we should help each other through, but rivalry has hooked us like sweets. Besides, when the walls keep changing on us, when winning the game, the point, the argument, gives you that nice fizzy jolt, why bother playing fair?

### Night 5

Congeaed cheese. Underbaked crust as doughy and sour as a wrong kiss. The Pizzaplex can swallow you whole, if you lose your way.

### Night 6

Because there's always a Night 6. We've withered and overstayed our welcome. You can say, "This place is getting old," when you really mean yourself. We miss having the right ingredients at the right time. (The Pizzaplex ticks on and on.)

---

*Katherine Quevedo was born and raised near Portland, Oregon, where she works as an analyst and lives with her husband and two sons. Her gaming poetry appears in Sidequest, Dangerous to Go Alone 2, TOWER Magazine, the minison zine, Y2K Quarterly, and elsewhere. Her poetry has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Rhysling Award, and her mini-chapbook The Inca Weaver's Tales is available from Sword & Kettle Press. Find her at [katherinequevedo.com](http://katherinequevedo.com).*

## Through the Screen (A Warped Abecedarian)

*Katherine Quevedo*

Zapped into a game world  
you've previously known only on  
Xbox or PlayStation or  
Wii, now dousing you in cyan  
virtual light, you godlike  
user descended to a grid, you  
*TRON* deity, you Alice through the  
screen, the stuff of legends in  
*ReBoot* brought to digital life in a  
quintessential embodiment of  
polygons and pixels. Lateral mover,  
open your eyes to new shapes.

Navigate the space, but  
memorize your entry point.

Left, right, up, down.

Keep going. Those flung inside of  
*Jumanji* have learned the  
importance of calling out a name;  
howl your own (or claim a new one).

Glow—it indicates power.

Feel that surge? Go ahead,  
enjoy the novelty and allure of a  
dreamscape plying you with adventure.

Channel your inner Captain N.

But don't forget: Despite extra lives,  
a way home is never guaranteed.

## **Super Mario Vs. the Fatwa** ***Jocko Benoit***

A playful fib about the erotic adventures of the Prophet invited one fifth of the world to kill Salman Rushdie—who had already abandoned his culture, now unmoored from all the rest, becoming anonymous, incognito, nondescript, an expert on accents of hotel staff.

Some might turn again to God, but he found *Super Mario*—pesky carpenter nemesis of Donkey Kong, resurrected as middle-aged nimble plumber fighting evil creatures underground. Soon the writer dreamt grids, kicks, leaps, avenging suicide assassins leaping from all shadowy edges of his dream's screen—furious typing replaced by furious tapping.

Even as the pale writer takes baby steps under the uncomfortable sun, the little pixel man hears of not-so-distant fatwas from the clerics of decency who fear their children pray to the false god of leisure. He snaps his straps, his moustache twitches once, his cheeks take fire and he leaps toward the happy faces gone all Pac-Man that mindlessly chase ghosts and eat the fun of the world out from under everyone.

---

*Jocko Benoit is the author of three collections of poetry, the most recent being Real Estate Deals of the Apocalypse. His poetry has appeared or will soon appear in The Malahat Review, New Ohio Review, Ploughshares, Rattle Poets Respond, Spillway and many other journals.*

# Lament of the Quest Giver

## *Brittany Redd*

Another beautiful day, huh. Warm. Sunny. Not a cloud in the sky.

You know, I never thought I would get tired of the sun. When they told me I was being transferred to one of the beach zones, I was so excited! I mean, I had also just spent the better part of the last patch update in one of the frozen tundra zones, so I was naturally a little overeager at the time. Still, I never realized how tiresome perfect weather can be.

When I took this job, I kind of thought it would be a transitional thing, you know; a way station on the path to something bigger. A fun little jaunt to some faraway exotic place. These contracts are usually temporary and straightforward, so I didn't think twice. I was so stupid.

Always read the fine print!

Because of course a big new patch release means a freeze on transfers. And of course a new expansion zone means that the old "hot" zone is now a ghost town. And of course being contracted for an impossible number of quests in a newly deserted region means a lot of free labor! Ha! No wonder that quest manager was grinning from ear to ear when I accepted the job.

I used to love the beach. Sometimes, if I unfocus my eyes to the point that everything looks blurry, I can almost enjoy this view. I'm sick of that endless blue void; I just want to give myself over to it. I suppose that's why my programming doesn't let me step off the shoreline.

My name is Tabitha, by the way. Not that anyone ever asks. Usually "hot elf girl in the low-cut dress" is how questers refer to me. They don't even bother to wait until I'm out of earshot.

Anyway, you're the first quester to stumble my way since they did the dragon egg hunt event a while back and I'm only about half way through my contract quota, so what do you say we go hunt down some demonic seagulls?

---

*Brittany Redd (she/they) is a teacher and writer currently based in Thailand. Her work appears or is forthcoming in Funicular Magazine, Corvid Queen, and elsewhere.*

# The Ninth Wave

## *Douglas Cole*

I had visions way back, staring hours into the sea. Being face-on with the mighty dependent horizon, to me, was to witness a raw miracle. The plasticity of a calm ebb-tide surface so the colors of red-blue rich to pale-eye gray lay mirrored to a violet sky. You have to stay absolutely still in order to witness it. This kind of concentration isn't for the faint of heart or those who are easily bored. God, back then the sea was full of life. Now, it's full of wrath.

Two bits. Ordinary time. I still have my awards—watch and wear them like honor banners. I better get down those chords before they're gone. Where's the guitar?

I know. I know—shaking a fist at the eye in the sky. What a sight for you, soulless gatekeeper. Tattered robe. Broken urns along the patio. The circular driveway humped and rippled black asphalt with roots coming through, a boa swallowing an electric bolt. There, at least, grows life.

—When are you going to get someone out here to fix the gutters?

—I know. I know, I said, fingering the safety, strap over my shoulder.

—And the pool? Something's not right, there.

—I know. I know. It's gotten a little green. I wouldn't go in it if I were you.

—I wasn't planning to.

George wants the next installment, and I don't blame him. Although, I can't believe there's anything like an audience out there in the fuming cauldrons of the cities. Zombie heads. The undead. I'm not armed to the teeth for nothing.

—You have food?

—I'm fine. Benny dropped supplies last

week. Drink? I asked. It hit me like a bright idea.

—Just one. I have to get back through the border check before dark.

—Fucking border.

—Two when you count the one at Blaine.

—This place is like a prison colony.

—The plushest prison colony I've ever seen.

—Prison nonetheless.

—At least you're safe here.

—I'm trapped.

—No one bothers you.

—No one bothers me.

A handful of ice, three shots, a splash of seltzer, real lime juice, squeeze. By the time I have ten of these it won't matter anymore.

—We have to get something out there.

—I'm close, I said, but that was a lie.

The living room has a curved window looking out over the bluff. The rest of America out there. I'm otherwise surrounded. Barbed wire. Overlook towers. Roads running up to checkpoints. Armed guards. And this isn't a prison? Even with my Quickpass it's surveillance to the skin, inspection and judgment every time I go through. So I stay put. And out there the sea, the machinery chugging away at White Rock. Empty fishing boats listing on the sand at the out-tide, bobbing like bodies on the in-tide with the kelp beds floating up onto the rocks. And here comes a black squirrel leaping in whole notes over the grass field.

—Something soon.

—I'm close, I said, sounding like a drunk lover. Something soon.

—That's good to hear. It'll give you a rea-

son to get back out there. People want to see you. It gives them hope.

—How can a hopeless person give other people hope?

—You're not hopeless. You're just depressed.

—How do you know? I said, and for the first time in—I smiled.

—It's not how you feel that matters. It's just seeing you, seeing that you're still going strong, like some things still matter.

—That sounds like a hustle.

—Well then, it's a noble hustle.

—Throwing meat to the dogs.

—Oh come on...

—I'm sorry. You're right. You're right. Something soon.

—Good.

—Sure you don't want to stick around? I said, catching the glint of the eye out there. I've got some people coming by later.

—Sorry, can't.

—Malcolm will be here, I said.

—I definitely can't.

—Alright.

People drift in and out like clouds. One moment they're standing by the window, the next they're walking through the wall, through the trees. Ah! The magic chords came back to me. I better write these down. I could hear the shouts of men in the boats below. And there's the crooked pin of the eye looking in.

When I wander around the compound I feel like a shrunken head on a stick. I've had a stiff neck for over a week now. Something is wrong with my liver. These might be indicators of something dire. I wouldn't be the first to go down from an environmental agent. My food should be the finest, but I still pick at it as though it might snap at me. If I lose any more weight my bones will walk off by themselves. When I get to the edge of the compound, I feel the sensors tingling in my blood. No one goes anywhere around here without leaving a permanent record.

When Malcolm appears, a hole opens up in the sky.

The sun blasts through and you'd think god had arrived. Not in the form of Malcolm, though. Malcolm is just an archangel kicked out of heaven but still riding on his reputation. God is somewhere in the mix, and you get the feeling one wave will rise up with a face in it like a seal—very unthreatening and easy to overlook if you're not attuned, and I am attuned—and if you see it you receive the blessing of peace. Even if the hordes come battering through the gates you can walk right through them unscathed, unseen, lit by holy light. Malcolm's brother has the face of a playground instructor. He looks like he shaved five minutes ago.

—You're slipping into squalor, Malcolm observed. Some nerve, considering his racket. The walls were already starting to droop. The brother carried in his crisp-cut and flat-pressed almost military double-breasted coat the chemical smell of Vancouver and the sick hovel scent of small rooms, pipes, spigots that release no water..

—Are your neighbors cool with this? the brother asked.

—What neighbors? Malcolm said. He had been here before.

—I have neighbors, I said. You just can't see them.

—What? Out here? Malcolm said, and he went to the curved window as if he might catch them crawling across the lawn with knives clenched in their teeth.

—Techs, I said. Or who knows. They fly in and out. We're not social.

—Elites, the brother said.

—I take that back, I said, I do know one, a chemist. He grows his own food. He lives in a terrarium.

—He'll come unhinged when he sees what we have in store.

—Put away your street, Malcolm said.

I've shelled out enough money to Malcolm over the years that he calls me brother.

The others appear like gnats at dusk. I keep my firearm strapped on tight. I've been ripped off. I'm getting ripped off right now. I don't care about the stuff. I just don't want anyone trying to stay.

Girlfriend? Whatever. The rec-room downstairs becomes a jungle, a torture chamber. Some people will do anything for money and call it fun. Some have to do what they can to survive. Some lose sight of the difference. I just



know at one point I latch on and someone's taking everything I've got and I'm not alone in dripping with ooze. Paint it up in shadows and chakras all you want, it's still a garden of earthly delights. Why do I let Malcolm bring this plague to me? It's the end of the world follies.

—So is this America?

—This is America, I said.

—How much of it is American? She looked puzzled.

Nothing like small talk after mutual degradation.

—The whole point.

She shook her head. I know, it's hard to fathom, the absurdity of lines, divisions.

—If you go back to the main road, I said, and go east it will lead you to a dead end. You can turn left there, but the road you're on goes back to the checkpoint. But the road itself is the border. Some of it is fenced, but not all of it. There are places you can just walk across.

—What if you get caught?

—They'll arrest you for crossing illegally, I suppose.

—What keeps people from just going back and forth?

—Who knows. They might. But on the other side it's marshland. Hundreds of—tough to cross.

—Have you ever crossed it?

—No. Then you have the ocean on the other three sides here, I said, pointing to a hairball of mist and vapor trails. That's America, too. And out there, I said pointing west, the big island is out there. That's the place to be.

—Why? What's the big island?

—You haven't heard of it?

—No.

—Clean, uninhabited. It's an experiment as much as it's the place that time forgot. Once, it was considered a wasteland. Nowhere. Now it's the Garden of Eden.

—Then why doesn't anyone go there?

—Forbidden.

—Forbidden?

—Absolutely. Off limits. Patrol boats monitor the coastlines, there and here. It would be a miracle to get through.

—How can it still be clean?

—Experiment. The first test site. With a blank slate like that, you can write your own mix. I don't know. Maybe

it's a myth.

—How long have you been here? In this place?

—I can't remember.

She had other targets. They always do. Back at the curved window I could feel the stinging eye. The sun was smoldering down now into a bank of marine clouds all punched up like negative reactions in slow motion, purifying as they climbed, as though height were a baptism. That romantic vein brought me riches at one point. Snake oil never goes out of style. Even I with Teflon codes was swimming in toxins. What kind of hope am I supposed to bring?

Malcolm dishes it out like a schoolyard bully. I can see the psychic blows to the head on his brother like a halo of punishment.

—Never! Malcolm said. You never made it to Orcas.

—I did, his brother said.

—Impossible! The currents would yank you out to sea.

—Nevertheless.

—Liar!

—I've always been a strong swimmer.

Now this small cut-throat sinner had my sympathy.

—What about the patrol boats? I said.

—I started here, he said.

—So?

—So, if you don't touch another boat or land before you get there, you haven't broken any laws.

—Lie! said Malcolm.

—That actually sounds true, I said.

It is true.

—How long did it take you? I asked.

—I did it in fourteen hours.

—Absolute liar.

—And what about the currents? I asked.

—I left on the out-tide, so I arced into the straight, but when the tide came back in it swept me right up to the island.

—The patrol boats didn't stop you?

—I cleared it before I went. They don't care if you go to Orcas.

Could be done. I think it could be done. Standing at the edge of the bluff, I look down into the golden waves

coming in into the inlet. Last light. In a few more hours it'll be high tide. Orcas is even farther away. On the out-tide the current would work in my favor. Could be done. And so we back-dive into night, the stars shuttling into position.

The compound glowed like a radiated birthday cake. And what a disgrace, moss and leaf mulch sponged up along the walkways and the lower edge of the windows. One side seemed to be sinking. People naked in the poison hot tub and the green putrid pool. Insane. And that's not my music. Smoke. Faces moving with open mouths through the rooms. The glass amplifying everything, like looking into a fish tank. Malcolm's crew, half hired, half led by their pineal glands. Were any of these people happy? Were any of them good? Was I? And even if any of us were, what could we do with it in a world like this?

And a cowl of orange light and black shadows rose up behind the compound like the advancing hues of some tremendous anger, an avenging fire coming out of the forest out there beyond the rumpled horseshoe driveway. And inside that firelight the compound glowed like a smoky diamond. I was unsure if that angry spirit rising up was from out there or from somewhere inside me. As if I had made it or summoned it. Maybe I had carried a matching ember inside me all along. A fire nonetheless advancing through the ragged maples and fall-dry birch trees to snarl and take down and gobble up everything on the peninsula, then sit like a fat wendigo sizzling out as it slips into the sea—what had Malcolm given to me? Paranoia might go with the territory, but this was a rage and chaos of an altogether different order and magnitude.

So I stared it down and watched it hit against my will and feed like an enormous nursing ghost at the hard-pounding heart action inside my chest and the boiling acid pool of my stomach, turning inward, back upon itself and in the process devouring my very self in its flames. And it was at that moment I felt the iron pith behind every bad choice I had ever made, and all these people and the pistil of the compound were heads on the hydra of that ugly force. I had to get out of here. After all, the forest was eating the compound bit by bit. Weren't the moss patches miniature tropical jungles? And wasn't I, as I walked across the grass, soft and giving like an enormous mattress, also walking

over the rugae rippling me towards a deeper absorption? I had to get out of here.

How did Malcolm's brother still look like a salesman? Standing on the corner of the west deck above the bobble-heads yellow-lit in the hot tub lights and shouting to me,

—Have you seen Malcolm?

—No!

—Now where has he gone?

—Drunk in the rumble seat! somebody yelled from the hot tub.

I didn't even know this man's name, and now he'll forever be a half-sketched character in a fever dream.

I took my one-person kayak down from the hooks where it hung on the side of the house and dragged it hissing through the grass to the edge of the bluff. My property is on a rise with a steep drop-off, no proper trail down to the beach. I could imagine just climbing into the kayak and riding it down the hill through the blackberries and the salal and out into the ocean, but I wasn't that far gone. Instead, I let the kayak down the hill before me, holding it by the short rope tied to its bow, letting it flatten a slight trail for me that I side-stepped down.

At the bottom of the bluff, I dragged the kayak through the first slime, the cove seething now with high-tide whispers, my shadow falling behind me like a ferocious destructive ignorance. And I pulled the oar out of the hold and pushed out over the waves and into the water. A raven moon rode shotgun overhead, and who could say I wasn't renouncing the world? With every ninth wave I saw the night birds carrying the souls of the dead. And I passed through a shallow where I swear I saw the side of a derelict leaning as if to show me the name across its bow: Intermezzo. Dark mackerel clouds floated above with eidolon faces, and somewhere unseen that electric eye burned.

I paddled on through the big waves in the dark, the moon's white tail stretching out before me. I heard the patrol boats out there buzzing like hornets. I kept my head down, stroke for stroke, and made my way imagining that isle of delight where the birds sing matins and where those who make it know precisely the hour of their deaths and so are free, no more sickness or sadness of soul. I paddled

hour after hour, all night, my hands gone numb from cold, the wet skin blistering on my palms. I went on, thinking I've gone too far to ever return. I must go on. Truly, it was a miracle that I wasn't spotted and picked up by the patrols. And all my anxiety, all the poisons in my blood flowed out of me, as I imagined, out of the dark, the black mass of the island appearing up ahead, its green plumage glowing, yes, there up ahead and within reach in the first light.

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*Douglas Cole has published eight poetry collections, including The Cabin at the End of the World, winner the Best Poetry Award in the American Book Fest, and the novel The White Field, winner of the American Fiction Award. His work has appeared in journals such as Beloit Poetry, Fiction International, Valpariaso, The Gallway Review and Two Hawks Quarterly. He has been nominated six times for the Pushcart and eight times for Best of the Net. His website is douglastcole.com.*



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