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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “Terror doesn’t know historical or national boundaries.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

HUMANIZING ROBOTS—AND VICE VERSA

Matthea Harvey discusses the futuristic imagery of her latest poetry collection.

By Jeannine Hall Gailey

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Matthea Harvey’s latest book, *Modern Life*, a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, is obsessed with devastated worlds and hybrid forms of life. In two extended abecedarian sequences, the “Terror of the Future” and “The Future of Terror,” Harvey explores the dysfunction between civilian and military populations in a stark, futuristic environment. In the “Robo-Boy” series of poems, a robot-boy struggles to define himself in human terms while confronting a brutal and confusing world.

Jeannine Hall Gailey: Are you interested in Japanese pop culture? If so, do you have any favorite anime?

Matthea Harvey: I love [Hayao] Miyazaki’s *Spirited Away* and Howl’s *Moving Castle*. There is such freedom of invention in both of them. In the same way that a strong voice in a poem can transport you anywhere, that distinctive animation style lets you surrender to the story. The characters are wonderful—I am a particular fan of the mysterious No Face, a black figure with a white mask face who seems connected to the Noh tradition, and the critterly Susuwatari, soot sprites that are essentially fuzzy black spheres with big eyes.

JHG: Do you think the images and themes of manga and anime have permeated our artistic sensibilities? Have cyborgs and post-apocalyptic landscapes affected your writing?

MH: I think many cultures are interested in post-apocalyptic landscapes and human-robot hybrids—we're always projecting ourselves into the future, aren't we? The post-apocalyptic world of "The Future of Terror" and "Terror of the Future" arose in the writing. My interest in hybrids may go back to the centaurs in Greek mythology and, in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the mermaids. I can't remember a time when I wasn't interested in hybrids. I recently found some mind-boggling photo-hybrids online by Khoa Tran—a cat-penguin, a horse-duck, and a dog-gull, among others. And I've just remembered how enchanted I was by Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies*.

JHG: When I first read your Robo-Boy poems, I immediately thought of the early-fifties Japanese anime series *Astro Boy*, which is about a boy-robot hero powered by nuclear energy who tries to save the world from various villains and disasters. *Astro Boy* ponders questions of free will and good and evil despite his robotic form.

MH: Robots are another old love. My first robot crushes were R2-D2 and K9, Doctor Who's robot dog. I didn't know anything about *Astro Boy* until you mentioned him to me, but reading about him and watching a few episodes, he's clearly Robo-Boy's cooler cousin. I particularly love that *Astro Boy* prefers the cube shape to the shape of a flower, and I liked the scene in which his skin suit is pulled over his robot body. *Astro Boy* (with his rocket legs and laser fingers) is much more powerful than Robo-Boy, though: He's a force for good in the world, whereas Robo-Boy is just trying to muddle through, like we are. I liked writing about him because of his different perspective on the human, especially those things we take for granted, such as fingerprints and experiencing the full palette of emotions.

JHG: One of the things I find most interesting is Robo-Boy's struggle to be both fully human and fully machine, a common theme in anime series such as *Ghost in the Shell* and *FullMetal Alchemist*, and in Miyazaki's works, such as *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*. Does Robo-Boy personify our discomfort and fear that technology is dehumanizing us?

MH: I wasn't consciously thinking about our fears about technology (though I dislike the slightest change to my computer). Robo-Boy's struggle is part of the whole book's concern with being in the middle of things—cat/goat, poetry/prose (I think the equator probably feels that it is in an uncomfortable position). In Robo-Boy's case, his struggle is as you describe it: being half-machine and half-human. Somehow, that struggle seems to magnify the human struggles we all go through: who am I, where do I fit in, etc. For that reason, and because I wanted his own struggle about identity to be mirrored in the reader's perceptions, I was careful not to describe his physical characteristics too much—I wanted him to shimmer between people's ideas of what a robot looks like and what a boy looks like. I admired how with Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*, you sometimes forget that Geryon is a red monster. But now let me contradict myself: Delirium Press published a limited edition chapbook of the Robo-Boy poems called *No One Will See Themselves in You*, and Doug McNamara did the illustrations. His Robo-Boy was quite mechanical (you could see the rivets on his head) but incredibly human in affect. That preserved the shimmer, I think.

I spent a good bit of the fall making cardboard robots and spray painting them silver on my roof (I had a Halloween robot book party when *Modern Life* came out), and it reinforced something that Scott McCloud talks about in *Understanding Comics*: how quick we are to see human qualities—for example, we see a face in two dots and a semicircle. It's a bit sad to think we're a species scurrying around looking for reflections of ourselves, but also sweet.

JHG: The post-apocalyptic tone in “Terror of the Future” and “The Future of Terror” seems to me clearly focused on the anxieties of Americans post–September 11. Roland Kelts, among others, has compared our bewilderment after September 11 to the bewilderment of the Japanese after World War II.

MH: The book was written post-9/11, and the terror and anger in the book are partly from that event, but I think the poems address that in a general way (paradoxically by being very specific). “The Future of Terror” and “Terror of the Future” series are set in an apocalyptic time in the future—I didn't imagine any particular country—so it makes sense that the anxiety in them could apply to any war-time. Terror doesn't know historical or national boundaries.

Jeannine Hall Gailey is the author of *Becoming the Villainess* and an editorial consultant at *Crab Creek Review*. Her web site is jeanninegailey.com. This interview originally appeared on poetryfoundation.org. Read more about Matthea Harvey, and her poetry, at poetryfoundation.org

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