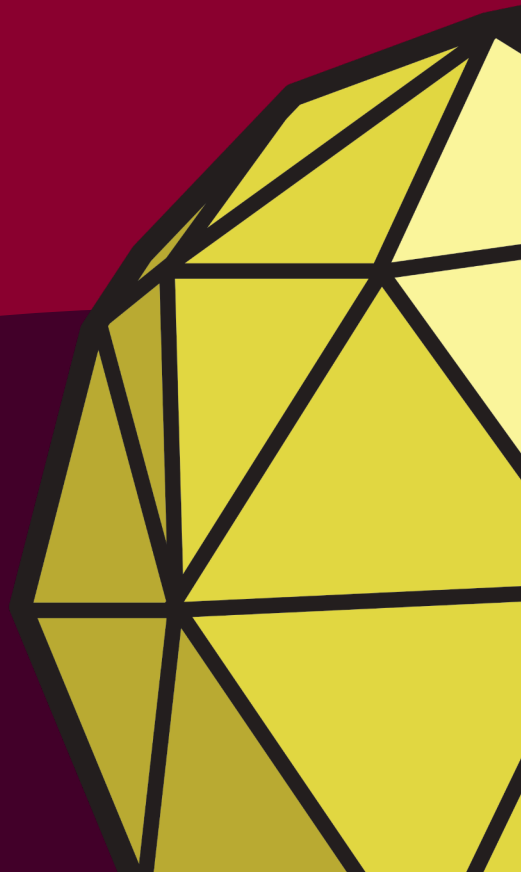
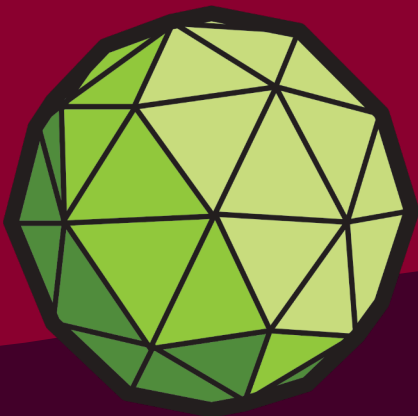


THE MECHANICAL BIRD PRESS

bulletins

*latest news from the underworld,
utopia and the universes in between*



drabble 1. *noun* a short story exactly a hundred words in length.

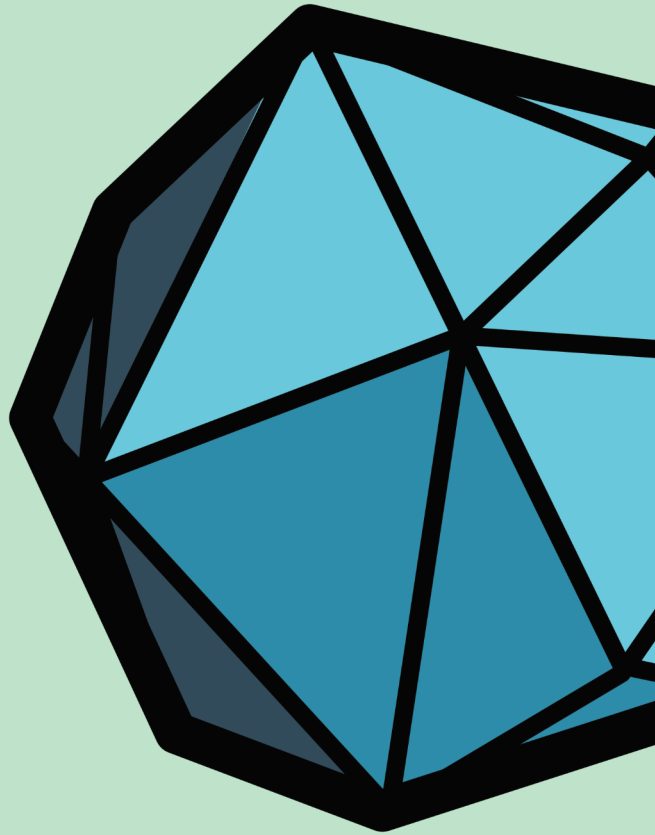
2. *verb* wade through muddy water.

bulletins

The Mechanical Bird Press
June 2024

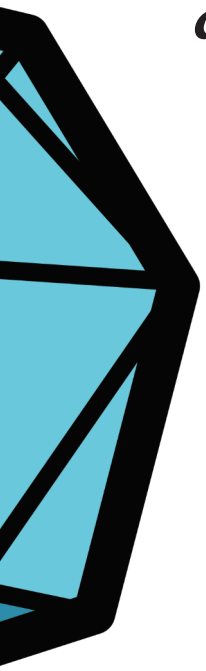
These stories first appeared in *Latest News from the Underworld*, released in 2020, and are also available online where they may perhaps be amended from time to time.

Words and pictures
David Guest



*It seems utterly absurd, foolish even, that an author should be expected to summon characters and a setting, conflict and resolution, not to mention maybe a twist or two, in only a hundred words, and yet this miniature format, now widely referred to as a **drabble**, is constantly surprising.*

With so little leeway, compelled as you are to consider, weigh and reconsider every word, it is invigorating to find that there might be scope for something after all, perhaps space for a little digression or embellishment, and always just enough room to open a tiny, curious window onto another world...



Things are getting worse.
The trains are always too
early and the carpeting in
the apartments is deep and
excessively soft. The
canteen menus are
adventurous and
complicated. The beer is
strongly flavoured. We can't
keep up with the books and
movies, and just look at
those banners flying in the
sickly breeze, on every spire
and cupola, with their
saturated colours and
balanced designs. We can't
help but feel ashamed of
the electrical signals
coursing through cables
thick as trees. Year by year,
it becomes harder to endure
all the statues and the
dancing troupes, all the
artisan desserts.

**[latest news from the
underworld]**

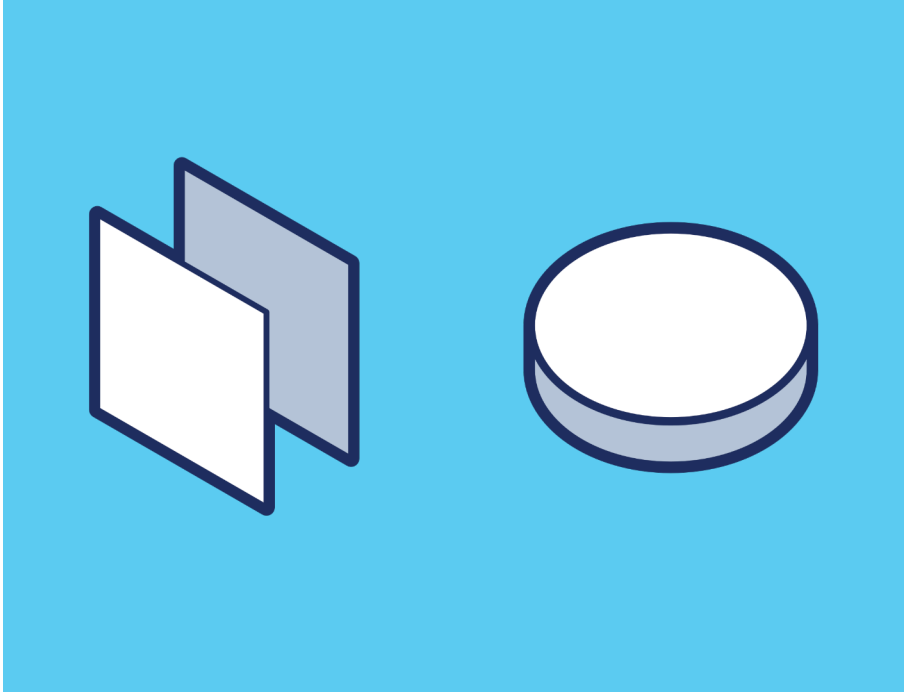




Every day is different in this job. You never know what to expect. One day you're painting the bright yellow railings or helping to calibrate the guidance lasers and the next, shooting tear gas at the invading agents of various global superpowers. It all depends. My favourite thing is driving the electric buggies down the ramps to the deep tunnels, where we store the robots and the warheads, and all the manifold instruments being prepared for world domination. It's quiet down there, but a vibrating kind of quiet. The weaponry is arranged on neat racks, by intoxicating orders of potential.

[a day in the life of the underground base]





In what is thought to have been the most complex mathematical computation ever attempted, a quantum mainframe has proved that the universe doesn't in fact exist, nor is there anything in it. The results of the ten-year study, estimated to have cost over a billion dollars, were reported to a stunned senate committee earlier today. It's not the ideal outcome, said a spokesperson. I guess people are going to be annoyed, but you can't argue with the science. The team behind the programme have rebuffed calls to repeat the calculation. It would probably just be even more disappointing, they said.

[bad news for the cosmos]

The wizards came from the east, bringing priceless gifts. They were drawn by an astronomical event, first observed in the mountains of Azerbaijan, where Zoroastrian priests climbed into the thin air, searching for a signal of God's return to earth. They came from Persia and Nubia, Chaldea, the Indies. There were three of them, or only two, or maybe twelve, or perhaps they had no number. Their names were Basandar, Hormisdas, Galgalath, Amerius. They were kings, sorcerers, alchemists. They carried rare objects with them and rare knowledge, but history does not record nor question the treasure they sought in return.

[ancient wisdom]




[at the court of the prophetess]

Waiters and serving girls, dressed in glimmering garments, bring platters loaded with boiled oxen, roasted monkeys, and hummingbirds fried in honey. There are pastries with currants and dried figs and cakes in the shapes of all the gods. She watches the carefully faked expressions of wonder on the faces of the envoys, and dreams of a village far away, in a land where there is only cold sky and stars, and hide tents, and a fire to keep the wolves away. She would kill for some fried potatoes, but knows they won't be invented for at least a thousand years.

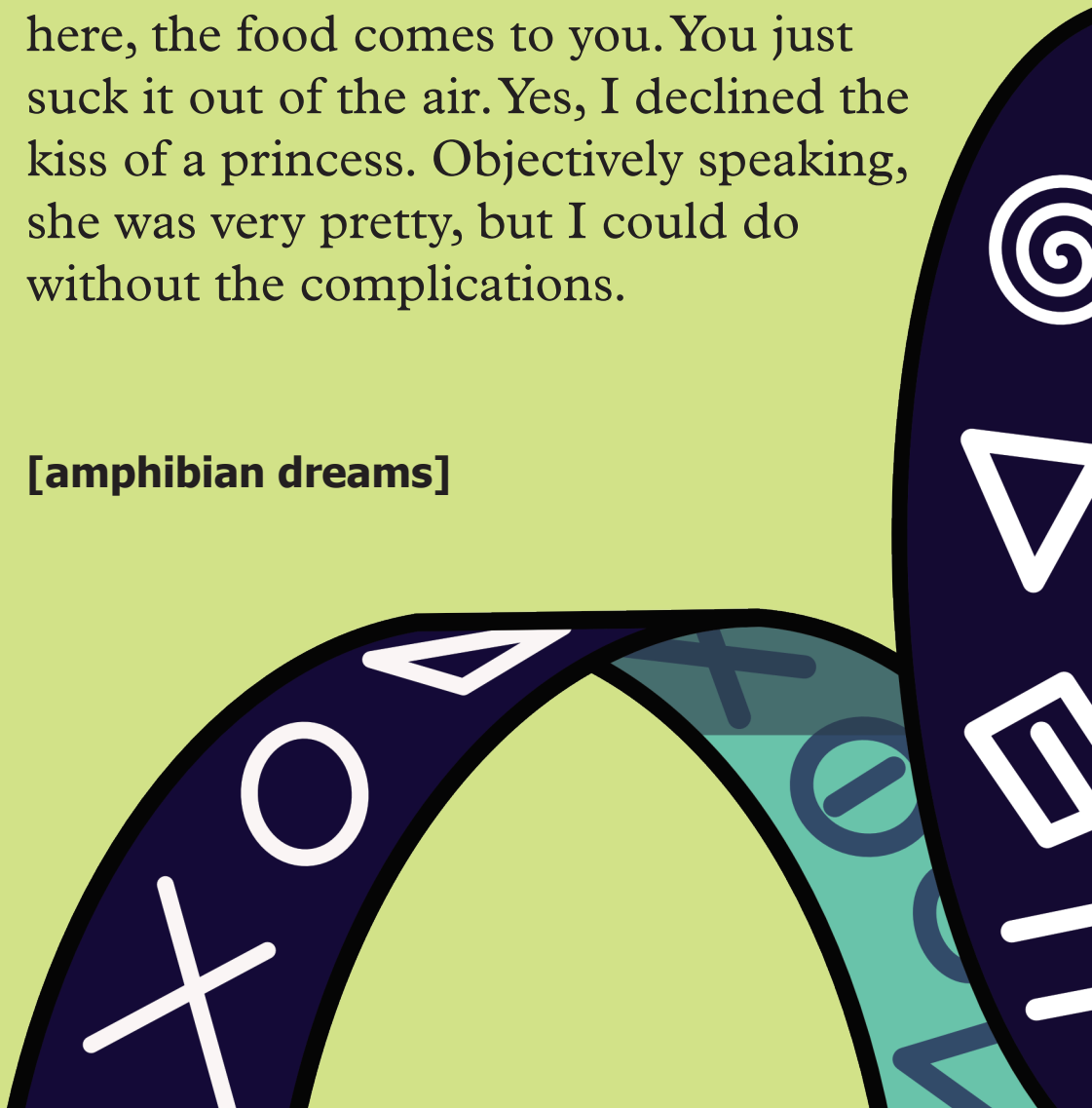
Hermes the devious, trickster god of gamblers, thieves and shopkeepers, I renounce you. Those prayers for the success of my business ventures have gone unheard. You did not respond to repeated requests for a suitable marriage for my daughter. In the matter of my house building, and the ongoing dispute with the municipal authorities, you remained silent. My investment decisions have not proved fortuitous. You failed to prevent my wife from sleeping with her charioteer. Yet here I stand, in your shabby temple, giant slayer, Atlantean, ram bearer, dream merchant, deliberating on the possibility of granting you one last chance.

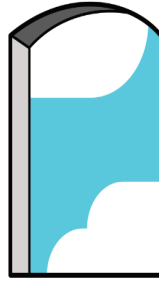
[listen to me]



I never thought I'd admit this, but I actually prefer being a frog. I get more time to myself these days, time to sit and think. It's nice to be out in nature a bit more and I find the sound of running water very soothing. Being a prince was all about ceremonies and processions, and interminable waiting for the next banquet to begin. Whereas here, the food comes to you. You just suck it out of the air. Yes, I declined the kiss of a princess. Objectively speaking, she was very pretty, but I could do without the complications.

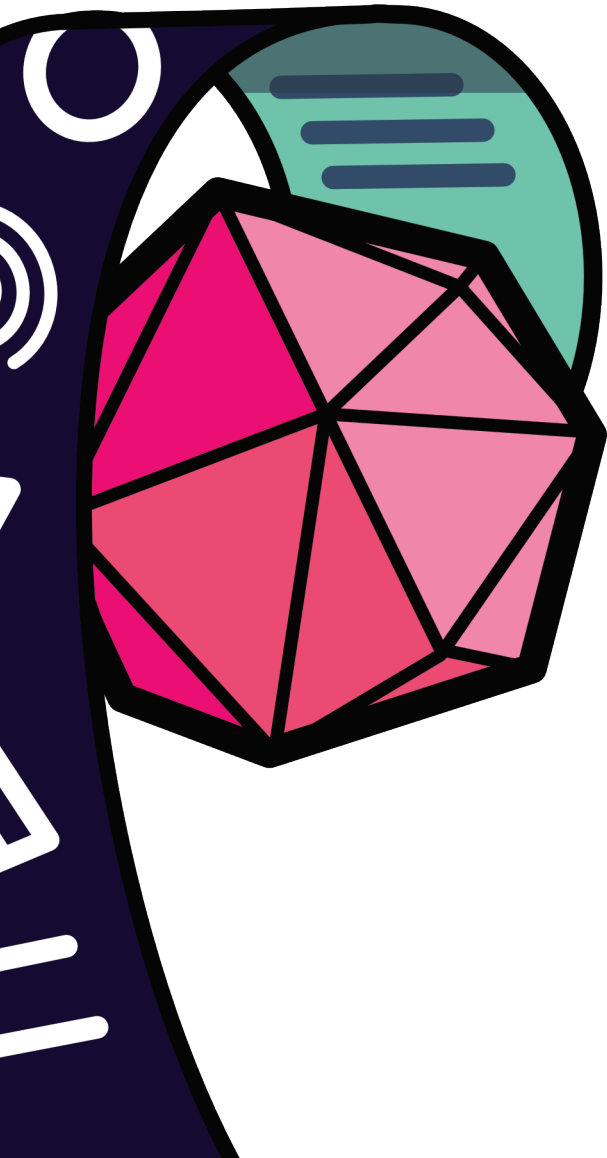
[amphibian dreams]





It's a good job, but it can get boring. There's a lot of hanging around, although I do have my own chamber, high up in the east tower, full of pretty gowns and music boxes. Basically, you wait for a customer to pass by. A handsome prince usually, or sometimes just a knight, then you lean out of the window and call for help. It's harder than it sounds. Sometimes they need a bit of persuasion, but once they cross the drawbridge, your work is done. I'm not entirely sure what happens to them after that. It's not my department.

[lofty employment]






To any normal person, there was nothing obviously wrong with the duke's firstborn, but Penelope Midwinter, Procuratrix Superior of the Northern Covens, was not normal, and something in the glassiness of its eyes and fingernails alerted her to its fey nature. Taking up the accursed changeling, she sealed it in candle wax, and carried it abroad into the night. It's unclear exactly what understanding she reached with the powers of Elfland but, next morning, she returned with the true heir under her arm. She would accept no payment, insisting only that in seventeen years and one day, she would return.

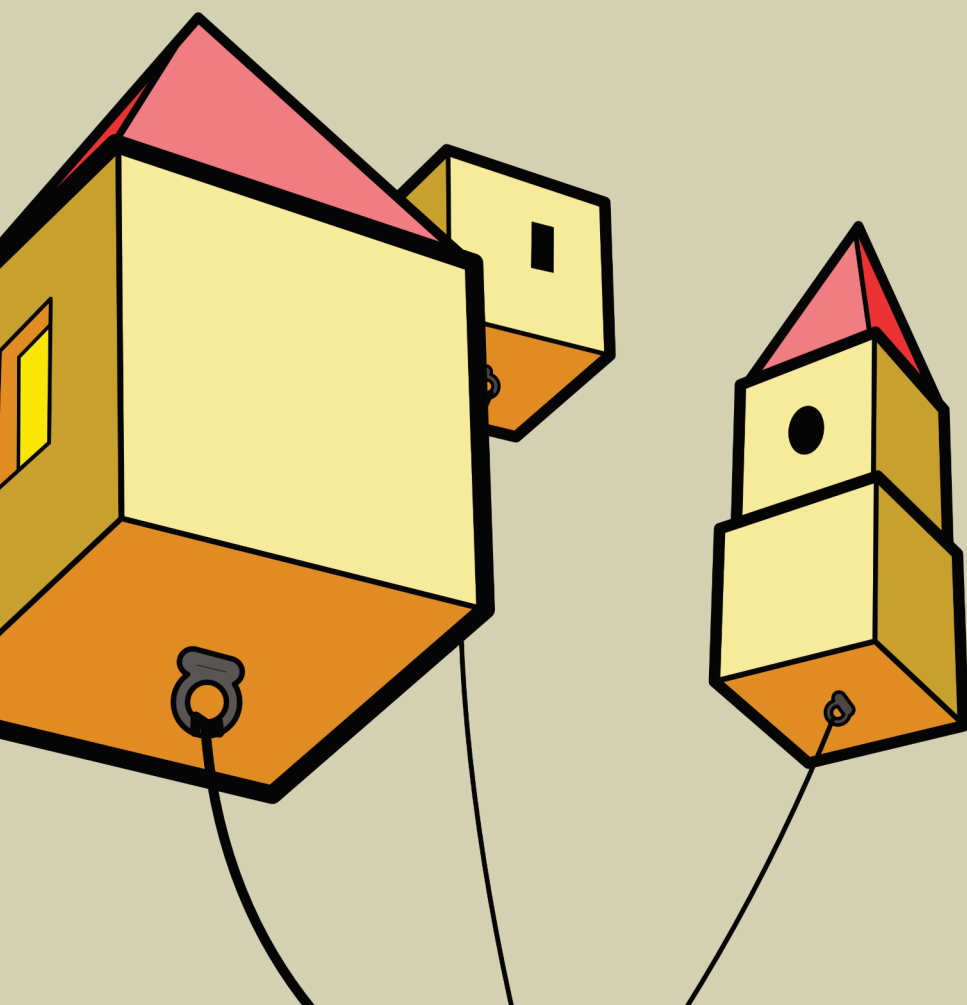
[witchy business]

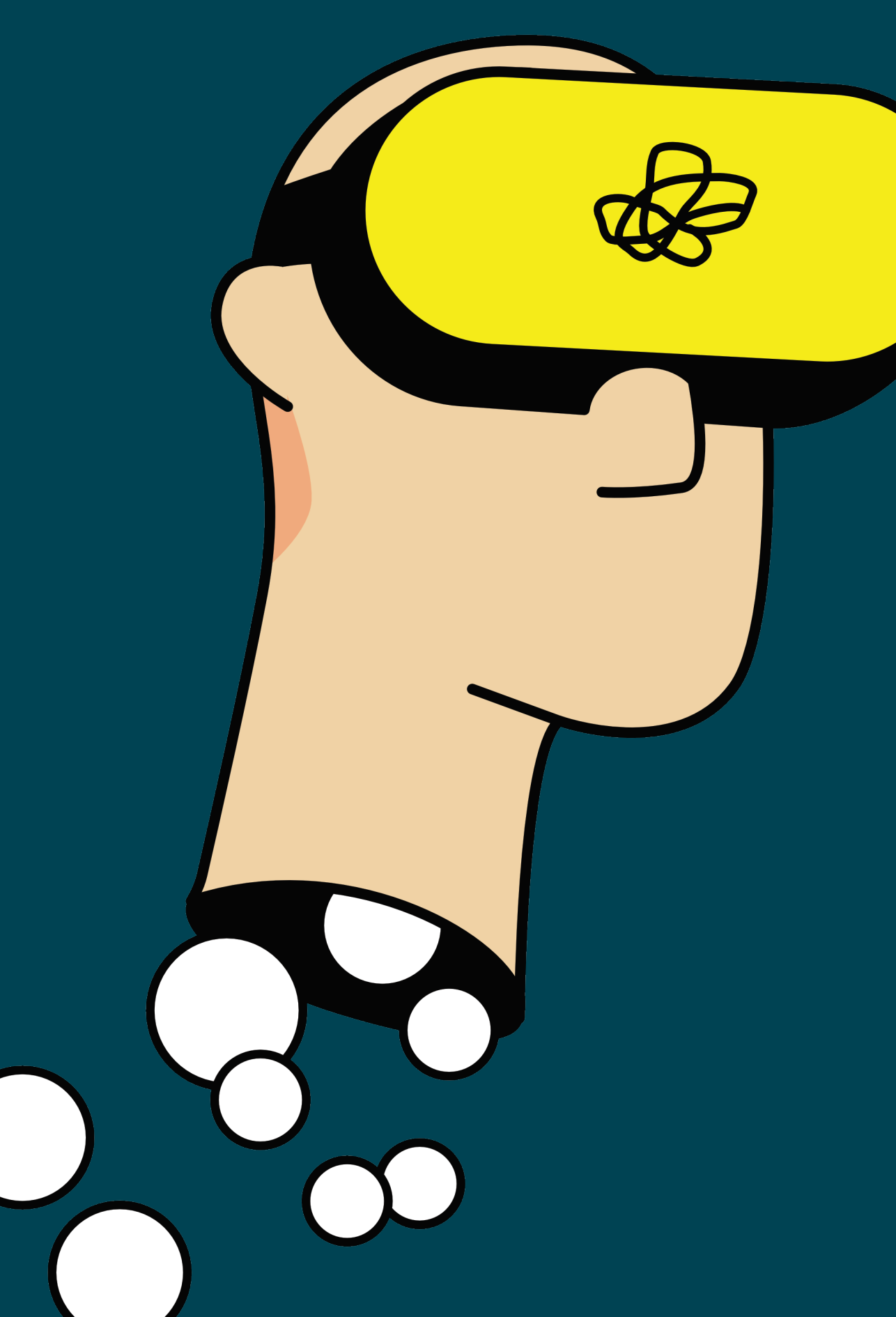





After the evil sorcerer was banished, we moved into the castle. It was lovely, of course, but I hadn't been prepared for it to be quite so cold and draughty. It was astounding how much firewood was required on a daily basis and, when the treasure recovered from the dragon's lair proved less than expected, some of the servants had to go. Now the handsome prince has developed an allergy to dust, he's mostly confined to the tower. He's writing a book about the old days and I often notice the candle in his window burning all through the night.

[happily ever after]







Everything is going well.
Nobody is worried about the
broken dams. The congested
roads are not a problem.
People have been adjusting
well to the plumbing
situation and when it comes
to reactive emissions, we're
all looking on the bright
side. You hardly notice the
cockroaches. The rain is
good for the lawns and
anyway, charged particles are
very tiny. They pass right
through you. Each morning
now is a reminder of how
fortunate we are to stride
amid the remains of the
orange groves and the metal
frames that once upheld the
most marvellous machines in
all the universe.

**[latest news from
utopia]**

Mythic landscapes, lost treasures,
fairytale castles, and surreal
worlds, all packed into this
collection of tiny stories.

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