

# The Art of Earth

by Greg Stolze

Erin didn't like that the extraterrestrials were called "Bobbleheads" even though the creatures themselves didn't seem to mind. Every other name people tried to give them seemed just as obnoxious, either greasily sycophantic ("Guests" "Visitors" "Space Children") or somewhere on the xenophobic spectrum from subtle ("Outworlders") to blatant ("Fakepeople" "Weirdlings").

As she stood, smiled and held her hand out to the first one she met, she had to admit that Bobblehead had something to it, at least for the current version of their appearance. The entity in front of her was exactly six feet tall with two arms and two legs, on a torso with a head on top, all human shaped. You'd never mistake it for a human though, not even at a distance, because its proportions were exaggerated, never still, flopping gently about in a nonthreatening, somewhat clumsy bumble. It had the right features in the right places, but its eyes were obviously a dry, brown-and-white version of the same soft, terry-like surface that covered its entire body.

It strongly resembled a sports mascot, or perhaps a Muppet.

"Hello! Welcome to the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art!" Erin said.

"Ehnngo! Ehnngo!" the thing replied. Its tones were artificial, the pure square wave forms of a synthesizer. The textured surface of its body was printed with the indications of clothing—lapels, a suggestion of pattern like an AI might produce if you asked it about plaid, a line of buttons affixed without any holes to go through. At her gesture, it ambled out of the office and into the museum, where it went aimlessly from exhibit to exhibit. She explained one artist or another, and sometimes it repeated her words or phrases back in its piping, inhuman pidgin. "Authentic lived experience" became "tenntic ivivteryents!" and "disrupting expected somber austerity" turned into "srupping speck ked somder sosserty."

For just a second Erin suspected it was making fun of her, at which point it suddenly stopped and slowly turned its whole body and unchanging, expressionless, false face to her.

"Vankoo," it said. "Vankoo shomee da art uv Erv."

# # #

The Bobblehead appearance was surely a costume, or a covering on an environment suit, or a simulacrum intended to look harmless. Erin could respect it—no one claimed the aliens were violent, except outliers on the internet and news sources traceable to Russia. Videos of Bobblers attacking people were clearly just humans in crude Bobblehead costumes—you could see they were wrong. The real Bobbleheads, fake as they were, had an inhumanity to their movement, as if their

legs and arms were articulated to impossible angles and proportioned outside of human norms. The only people fooled by the fakes were the ones who desperately wanted aliens to be invading Earth.

People tried to kill Bobbleheads. Of course they did.

When grabbed or tackled, Bobbleheads just fell over and squirmed their comical limbs, while their attackers fruitlessly struggled to open them up. Knives couldn't do it, on the rare occasion that someone got close enough to try—silly though they seemed, Bobbles were hard to ambush, and if approached aggressively, they vanished.

Even if you just yelled at them, sometimes they'd disappear. She'd seen videos of them going away, and even slowed down as much as human technology permitted, they were always there in one frame and gone in the next. Right after, a loud crack resounded if there was audio and small, light objects shifted towards their vacated space. Physicists with specialties in acoustics and the dynamics of air movement said it was exactly what you'd expect if something the size of a human was instantly replaced by vacuum.

They cracked out if shot, too. No one was sure if the bullets actually harmed them and they went away to get treatment in response, or if whatever technology they used let them move before the bullet struck.

When asked "How does your teleportation work?" they replied "Owus or epporradatun wuk?"

Lots of people claimed to have gotten straight answers from the Bobbleheads, but somehow never on record. Those "straight answers" almost always involved (1) the human being special and deserving money and/or sexual favors (2) numerous signs of schizophrenia or religious obsession, refocused on space aliens, or (3) white supremacy.

The first sightings to be retroactively confirmed were from 2014, when three Bobbles were filmed in the cheap seats of a Katy Perry concert in Argentina. It was only clear they were genuine Bobbleheads and not people in costumes when the crowd around them got rowdy from some unidentified provocation and, in the ruckus, the Bobblers disappeared.

A small subculture had started documenting them as far back as 2008, but only in a friend-of-a-friend, urban legend, cryptopasta kind of way. Despite their goofy, floppy, undirected behavior, about ten percent of the population was genuinely terrified and insisted that something ugly and obscene had to be inside, powering those odd moves, going to museums and concerts and state fairs. Theories covered everything from Greys to Faes to Yetis.

Another group was desperate to learn their secrets and make huge profits off of what *had* to be incalculably advanced technology, and they were probably even less happy than the scared. The Bobbleheads wouldn't participate. They didn't

hand over devices or schematics. They didn't answer questions, and they tended to leave as soon as the researchers got frustrated or upset. It was almost as if they were bored with it.

Bobbles bought stuff though. In fact, they bought so much stuff that the international markets in gold, silver and platinum had crashed deeply, since cubes of those elements were the preferred Bobblehead medium for exchange. But they didn't want stocks or NFTs or political access. They exchanged their cubes of incredibly pure precious elements (which just *appeared*, cracking in loud and instant) for, mainly, arts and crafts. Hundreds of people reported selling their paintings, antiques, old childhood toys and family heirlooms to aliens, usually for the object's weight in gold but sometimes for much more. One quartet of Bobblers acquired an aging merry-go-round from a small traveling fair in exchange for a block of platinum exactly one meter on a side.

Platinum prices crashed at the news, but the seller still got a little over \$400,000,000 for the block, once a geiger counter determined the material wasn't dangerous. (It was actually less radioactive than most metals native to Earth, though the composition and waves of its field indicated that it was definitely not terrestrial.)

# # #

"OK, you gotta tell me how it went!" Of all Erin's friends, Harley was most interested in the aliens. Not coincidentally, Erin also thought of them, affectionately, as her weirdest friend. An old pal, one of the last who'd known Jordan, and the first to use the phrase "Space Children."

"It looked at art. I mean, I guess it did, it... pointed the front of its structure towards the exhibits and kind of auto-tuned my own words back at me. It was a strange experience."

"For them, that's actually typical. Did it offer you *gold*?"

"Yes," Erin sighed. "Also something that I think was maybe rhodium? It kept saying 'roweeum, roweeum' as it gestured with the block at one of the big Nick Cave wall pieces. I tried to explain that I couldn't sell the artworks."

"Perfect," Harley said, smile gleaming. They had an emerald embedded between two teeth, deliberately placed to look like a piece of spinach until it caught the light.

"Yeah. What are these things?"

"I think they're transterrestrials!"

"I'm... not sure what that is?"

"OK, an extraterrestrial would be a space alien, something from far, *far* away. 'Extra' meaning 'beyond,' they're from beyond Earth. But extraterrestrials would still be part of our observed universe and Newtonian physical laws. But people who get into the odd, deep weeds of UFO reports find so much stuff that makes no

sense whatsoever. Like, why would an alien travel so many light-years and bring a guy pancakes? That one happened.”

“Or the guy was badly delusional and only *remembered* an alien bringing pancakes.”

“I love that you’re so skeptical on the very day a fuzzy man-thing offered you a fortune in elf-gold,” Harley replied, and took a good pull at their Negroni. “So ‘trans’ means ‘across’ or ‘shifting’ and a transterrestrial would be something from across Earth—or, in my meaning, orthogonal to our understanding and experience of the universe.”

“Like... other dimensions? You were talking about this at Ray-Ray’s Christmas party, right?”

“It was a Yule party, but it’s in the same thought-space. They are beings of another order of existence, able to impinge themselves on this one, on our world, maybe only in part.”

“What are you basing this on?”

“Well, there’s little to go on, everyone agrees on *that*,” Harley replied. “But the lack of vehicles is suggestive. Taking on the appearance of something that’s just human enough to make us comfortable, while not human enough to be creepy or threatening or, or *comprehensible*? What’s up with *that*? Did you hear about the Bobbleheads in the power outage at the British Museum?”

“Hm? No, what happened.”

“*They kept looking at the art*. Even when it was too dark to see much of it!”

“So you think they’re... what, faking interest?”

“It’s hard to say! They show up at concerts and galleries and dog parks, not at battles or the UN or TED talks. Culture seems to be their *only* interest.”

“Unless it’s all a big psyop,” Erin said, frowning.

“Explain.”

“Suppose you wanted to invade a planet and take over, and you could make these... man-suit simulacra. But they couldn’t fool everyone who paid attention...”

“Careful, you’re getting into lizard-people theory, which is really just antisemitism in scaly cammo.”

“Don’t wag your finger at me Harley, this is serious! You send in *two* groups of aliens. One’s disguised badly and makes a huge show of being harmless tourists...”

“...while the rest figure out our shibboleths and learn how to pass the Voight-Kampf test?”

“Well?”

Harley shrugged. "I feel like the cleaner explanation for why they go to art is that they want to be by art. If they wanted to invade us, good lord, against teleportation we're basically helpless. Crack! The president's in low Earth orbit, she won't be launching shit at them, which, oops, she wouldn't do anyhow because they don't have *vehicles or bases*. If they wanted to poison the water supply, honey, a square meter of cyanide is a lot cheaper than what they paid for a busted old merry-go-round."

"But if they're not seeing it, why are they looking at it? I mean, I saw what that thing was using for eyes, they weren't... there was no pupil dilation, they didn't focus, half the time the 'eyes' weren't pointing at paintings or sculptures."

"Perhaps they just want to be somewhere pleasant, surrounded by happy folks. They do seem to love people watching," Harley said, attempting to drink and discovering the Negroni was exhausted.

"They do at that," Erin said.

There was a moment of quiet as Harley signaled for another beverage. While the waiter was fetching it, they said "You remember how angry Jordan got when you called Chihuly 'the Disneyland of sculpture'?"

"Lots of people love Disneyland," Erin said, narrowing her eyes. Harley could be cruel, but never without reason. They wouldn't bring up Jordan just to poke a wound.

"Lots of aliens love Disneyland too. *And Dale Chihuly.*"

"They offered me gold for *Pink Seafoam Macchia*," Erin admitted.

"I knew it! They're tourists, Erin, with a tourist's common taste. They love the Eiffel Tower and the Bridge of Sighs and there was an actual *conflict* between them and aboriginal Australians when they kept trying to go to the sacred parts of Uluru."

"But if they aren't seeing... what's their interest?"

"Just because they don't perceive our way does not mean they see nothing," Harley said, grinning green-flecked as the new Negroni arrived.

# # #

"I thought you might like this," Erin said to the alien, holding up a plain brown envelope.

"Eike dis! Eike dis!" the Bobbler said eagerly, arms flopping. Sealed inside the envelope was a brightly colored Stefan Sagmeister print.

"I can't let you have it," Erin said, before it could crack in some small bit of gold or whatever. "What do you think of this one?" She handed over another envelope.

The alien moved aimlessly in response to the second envelope. It was empty.

“Or perhaps you might find this one...?” But it was already shying away from the third envelope, in which she had hidden a borrowed photograph taken during the liberation of Dachau.

“You don’t care what they look like, do you?” she asked.

“Wookwike? Duhu?”

Erin put the envelopes in her desk and produced something else, much smaller. The thing before her flopped closer. Even in its inhumanity, eagerness was visible.

“What do you think of this?”

“Dis! Dis!”

“This was my wedding ring,” she said, and its head lolled back from the object to her face, its appliqué-like eyes blank as the summer sun.

“My husband was Jordan. I loved him very much.”

“Uvv’d Yourdan,” the Bobbler said, and its mechanical tones were quiet and somehow had something of reverence.

“You feel it, don’t you? Our emotions.”

“Imojuns...”

“You don’t care about glass blowing or music or painting, if you even... perceive them. But our feelings. You can sense our feelings. Is that right?”

“Veelings.” The word was very nearly English.

“I will give you this ring,” she said, pushing it across the desk. “But I don’t want gold or rubidium or anything else in a cube.”

“Reeng.”

“It’s yours if you show me your real self.”

Like the Bobblehead, she leaned in, eyes intent.

“I want to know what you really are,” Erin said.

When it reached across the table, its hand did not flop at all.

THE END