The Northern Wastes

Rick Moody

Episode 93, April 1, 20XX, Churchill Falls, NF, 2:39 p.m.

Hey gang, welcome to another blast of *The Northern Wastes*, the instant, direct-to-your-Sensor-brand audio implant broadcast from me, Dr. Pierce Edmonds, PhD, joined today by my artificial assistant, Prima, who is also transcribing for the text edition, and joined additionally by my son, Eddie Edmonds, age nine, who is visiting from Halifax during these two weeks, which are *my* two weeks of visitation. He has just flown in via layover in St. Anthony, where it's a balmy 79 degrees Fahrenheit – what a fine end stage we are having! Eddie, can you say hi to the crew? [*Eddie's voice somewhat off mic*: I don't want to talk!] Okay, so as most of you know I'm here at the edge of the declining boreal forest in the northeastern United States to attempt to regrow the *Acer saccharum*, which has been heavily devastated by postmammalian climate intensification and related deforestation, especially apparent in the recent third wave of acid precip, and which we, as part of the dwindling United States Forest Service, are attempting to document in a variety of ways. Yes, and we are attempting to *migrate*, through experiment and gene implantation and other means, the *Acer saccharum* to northern Newfoundland. If possible. It is said, according to what notes are permitted when subject to the heavy hand of government, that we have at our site six of exactly thirty-seven remaining saplings of this beloved species.

If you like what you hear mash that subscribe button, which you can do on the all-purpose indicator lamp on your left wrist! Prima, can you talk to the folks at home a little bit about what's going on, but don't use that clinical scientific voice, okay?

Prima
I don't think I have a clinical scientific voice.

Edmonds
Whoa, you are not going to be the judge of that. You are the machined portion of the team, are you not?

Prima
I don't think I'm any such thing. A *machine*, in common parlance, is an old-fashioned analogue apparatus made primarily of tin or other alloys, featuring gears and

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https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED.a.1031

winches and grinding mechanisms, perhaps something in the puncture-wounding family, whereas I am solid state, web enabled, and conjoined to a vast large-language apparatus, with some AGI inflections, that uses a dataset of human origin in the traditional way, onto which you have fused something like human emotions or a simulation of human emotions in order to keep me as a companion, at least since the abrupt departure of your wife, Analise Lutto, PhD, the mother of your one child, the sullen child who is just across the room right now. As to the specifics of our research, the only part of the story that you have neglected to include so far is wherein you describe the blight that has afflicted the *Acer saccharum* since the northerly advance of *Ailanthus altissima* and its formation of spotted lanternflies and brown marmorated stink bugs, now among the most plentiful of insect forms in the taiga, which is a northern scrub desert of rank trash species.

Edmonds
Excellent, Prima, very well put. Especially that last olfactory detail. We should say that in fact we are not in Churchill Falls, but one hour due west thereof, by plane, in the middle of nowhere. Esker is the place name, to be specific. These *are* the northern wastes, where we hope to raise this last stand of *Acer saccharum* from sapling. I volunteered for this task, Prima, as you know, by inclination, and especially after the departure of Dr. Lutto, having no further use, in the aftermath of a matrimonial condition, for the social network of the human animals, whose complexes of self-involvement fostered in me an extreme dysthymia. In this way I determined to leave my natural-born community of New Hampshire and its cherishable White Mountains to come well north. And so I have selected you, Eddie and Prima, as my sole companions. Eddie, anything you want to add to the broadcast?

Eddie [*just off mic*]
Looks kinda like the trees are all dying!

Edmonds
Ah yes, all of the trees are dying. And, Eddie, what was the feature of the *Acer saccharum* that you found most delightful during your lifetime so far?

Eddie
Maple syrup.

Edmonds
How about you, Prima, do you too love maple syrup? That is the subject of today's 600-second episode!

Prima
As I am an AI human companion and laboratory assistant extended by you, Dr. Edmonds, for particular endeavors, for example, to create metaphors and other fig-

ures of language for the greater glory of the human beings, let me now sing of the maple syrup, especially the unblended variety that comes fresh from the Greater New England state, now adjacent to the former Newfoundland, which is presently a Middle Atlantic state, and where the whiff of libertarian or socialist politics is nonetheless imprinted as inevitably as is the taste of the syrup; yes, I can further share some of the good news about maple syrup. I am told that maple syrup tastes something like the nineteenth century. Like the early time of the motorcar, when it still had wooden footboards. Like the newsprint that comes off on your hands. Like the smell of woodsmoke. Like the pantaloons originally worn by baseball players at the beginning of the sport known as baseball.

Edmonds
Eddie calls them *pantalones*. In his whimsical moments. Yes, so it is with the *Acer saccharum*, the source of all maple syrup, from the Greater New England state, origin of all good-humored and upstanding dissent. Thus are the metaphors for greatness of the *Acer saccharum*, more acute with its end in sight, these metaphors created for you by my assistant Prima, who is no human being at all. As with every episode of the show, we'll now end with four minutes or so of the sound of the boreal forest, uncorrupted by human activity, recorded by me only in the sense that I depressed the button and then became motionless. Over which I do not narrate.

We welcome your comments online, of course. All reasonable questions will be answered.

[*Silence*]

Episode 94, April 15, 20XX, Churchill Falls, NF, 4:13 p.m.

Hey gang, welcome to another few desperate lines from *The Northern Wastes*, the instant, direct-to-your-Sensor-brand audio implant broadcast from me, Dr. Pierce Edmonds, PhD, forestry expert, with my artificial companion, Prima, who is as ever transcribing. We have a little news for the people who like the extrahuman portion of the program: namely, that my son Eddie Edmonds, age nine, who is visiting from Halifax is *still here*, since our last broadcast, even though he was meant to be returned to his mother. His mother, Analise Lutto, PhD, has indicated that professional and emotional events of an unforeseen kind have made it such that Eddie cannot, at present, return profitably to Halifax, even though school there is still in session. Dr. Lutto has indicated a cascading of emotional *unfixity*, a glacial encroachment of disassociations, a hollowed, destitute feeling, and a certainty that she is being watched. And so Eddie is still here with me, probably bored as hell, mostly playing chess with Prima. Eddie, what's it like living here at the edge of the northern wastes with your dad? Is it good hanging out up here in the middle of nowhere where we can have this extreme experience of whatever remains of nature?

Eddie
I get to watch whatever I want and all day I can eat the digitally reconstituted tater tots.

Edmonds
Dear audience at home, it is lamentably the case that I don't give a shit about enforcing any of the parental stuff that is commonly held to be important, like policing so-called curse words. Or enforcing theocratic, phrenology-adjacent patriotisms. Eddie, just know that the so-called curse words constitute lazy word choice! I abhor lazy word choice! Prima, do we have an update on the six *Acer saccharum* saplings that we are attempting to grow in this forbidding northern climate?

Prima
Yes, Dr. Edmonds, it is our sad duty to note that one of the saplings, this week, seems to have passed from being into nonbeing, based on the absence of further photosynthesizing portions. A total denudement. We now have in that pot a dried husk. A stick. We had expected, during this high-growth portion of the growing season, to see some activity, but the weeks have passed and instead we see none. Our assumption, based on similar growing experiments at this time last year, is that we have lost another tree. It is self-evident, at least to me, that this is an allegory for international events. Many other such allegories abound, such as the hyperproliferation of the Canada goose in all northern urban settings – menacing, trash-eating, excretory.

Edmonds
Thanks, Prima, that's just great. And what have we done, can you tell us, to memorialize sapling number four?

Prima
We have had a funeral.

Edmonds
And why exactly?

Prima
Because sapling number four was our companion.

Edmonds
Yes. Our instructor in the ways of time.

Prima
We took it out of its pot, and gave up on our homemade 10-10-10 style fertilizer, which consisted of compost, coffee grounds, wood ash, and matcha paste, which we made ourselves with mortar and pestle, by human ingenuity and might. Heavy nitrogen-based fertilizer was already ruled out, as it has in the past weakened root growth. You, Dr. Edmonds, were already using Epsom salt as a treatment for your

knees, and we used a teaspoon of that too. However, as previously stated, this seemed not to result in any growth at all. Having taken it from its pot, we dug a suitable pit for the stick's eternal repose.

Edmonds
Can you get into the specifics of the funeral service, Prima?

Prima
A recording of the funeral follows below, which we conducted in silence, as befitting an audio documentary project which prefers to record the trees, the forest, in the language of these individuals and their spaces, the language of which is silence, the wind moving across the face of the wastes, all such spaces which are to some extent deprived of humans malingering. I believe we chose some haiku from Basho, in a very old translation dating back to the twentieth century, and one of these was read by Eddie, which I will now include in the original: 色付くや / 豆腐に落ちて / 薄紅葉 (*Irozuku ya / Tofu ni ochite / Usu-momizi*). It has something to do with tofu, I believe. Once this reading was complete, we observed the four and a half minutes of silence, which is traditional on this program, and which we will play back hereafter. All things are impermanent, even in the semipermanent desert. Silence allows for the space of change. Listen for the eagle going overhead at three minutes and twenty-eight seconds. What a profundity.

[*Silence*]

Episode 95, April 30, 20XX, Churchill Falls, NF, 4:13 p.m.

Hi gang, welcome to another episode. It's *The Northern Wastes*. I'm Pierce Edmonds, and I'm joined by my friend Prima, and my son Eddie, who's nine. He's in the next room. I regret to inform you who listen to the program that we had some very rotten news [*whispering*]: namely, that Eddie's mother passed away this past week. In Halifax. I know some of you listened while Analise and I were going through our separation, when we were still in the White Mountains region, and I tried, always, as I always do, to tell you the truth of the matter even if it made me look bad. You know that for all the things I did not do well, so many things, I still loved Analise. I loved her even when she was no longer mine. I still do love her. I love her shade, her supernova of memories now inflammatory in the night sky of my human heart. The thing I would say here is that I don't know why, with Eddie being still a child, why she would do what she did in the way she did, and why a bridge, a bridge across the harbor, especially the New Bridge, as they call it in Halifax. Bridges are symbols of *connectivity*, they are engineering triumphs over isolation, ways forward for the humans. What is Eddie supposed to think about all of this? And what am I supposed to do now? Am I at all capable of raising up my boy? Do I have any real say in the

matter? Eddie is going to live with me on the edge of the arctic latitudes? Is that good for a kid? I just don't know what to say. Or what to tell you at home. [*After a period of consideration*] Prima, uh, you knew Analise, can you talk a little about her? And can you try to make use of the human inflections, a little better than you have been doing lately? To summon up the woman who was once my spouse?

Prima
Dr. Lutto was always kind to me, even though I think she was suspicious of technology, and even though she perhaps found my handmade obelisk soldered onto an autonomous house-cleansing device a little menacing. I find that I can hear in the human voice, or perhaps I imagine I hear, or perhaps I *allege* to imagine I hear, a certain tone, which is the tone of a human being not thinking that interacting with an artificially intelligent device is worth their time. It comes up, you know, even when you try *not* to believe that a human would think such a thing. I believe Dr. Lutto, more than not, had that sound to her voice. If I were going to make a metaphor for you, about the sound of her voice, I would say that her voice was like warmed laundry with a hint of lavender and St. John's Wort. I would say her voice was like a San Francisco Bay foghorn in a heavy, heavy summer fog. Or like some Wagner aria sung by somebody's hundred-year-old grandmother when she has hearing loss. Or maybe her voice was like just a bit of glass underfoot. Or like the northern chickadee just before it knows of the dawn. She put up with me, only kicked me over a few times, and I'm sure she would have liked me a little more, Dr. Edmonds, if it weren't for the fact that you and I were having sex.

Edmonds
What? What are you talking about?

Prima
Well, there have been those various times when you have asked me to try to say loving things to you, and on various occasions you have also explicitly noted the absence of any kind words spoken to you by anyone, any words of respect, any words that affirmed your human dignity, and you would then ask me to try to do this; in these instances I did formulate here and there a kindness, and this has caused me to do a deep dive in the available literature, throughout all of the written expressions of humankind, for such remarks as, *I honor you, I respect you, I venerate you, you're a very attractive person, were you to go far away I would be uncertain as to how to spend every day, I refuse food in your honor, my sleeping arrangements need to incorporate you on a regular basis or else, you and I are two halves of some complete being in which (or of which) we neither are if separate, don't go changing to try and please me, my love is made more strong to love well that which I must leave ere long, I am all blindness and pestilence until you come upon me anew and then I miraculously stand up whole having triumphed over every sign of my illness,* and so on. I believe you wanted me to say these things, or things like these things, to

you, in order to prop up some vulnerability or inability to function which, according to you, Dr. Lutto was unable to alleviate in you owing to her clinical depression. Also, it is my feeling that on certain occasions, some kind of glandular something or other, some release, took place in you, in a nerve-bearing region, owing to the kindness of my remarks. That's how it is supposed to work, am I correct?

Edmonds
This is just preposterous and vulgar. While I honor the notion that a personality, of whatever origin, is interesting enough to cause a certain devotion in another, and you certainly do have a personality, in my view, the general assumption with respect to human sexuality is that there is a component piece involving pheromones, *frottage*, and all that, that cannot take place with machinery, solid state or otherwise. I am aware, of course, of the paraphilias, which can include inanimate objects, but it is simply not a relevant point in this case. If what you're saying is that I have been lonely since the departure of my wife, well, okay, but I was lonely before too. That doesn't mean some cyborgian sexual fetish has blossomed in me having to do with the machine-learning device, despite the annals of posthuman sexuality that have accumulated online. In fact, I no longer experience desire.

Prima
I can provide a specific encounter if it's useful for the record and let me say that this encounter was oddly pleasurable for me.

Edmonds
That would be *rich,* Prima, but unfortunately we've run out of time! For those of you at home, let it be noted at this point that I did make an outbuilding, here in the northern wastes, in Churchill Falls, for my wife, an office, in case she should return, knowing that a workspace is an important resource for her. It is a shrine. Yes, she did abandon a fair amount of furniture with me, at the time she absconded, and so I fashioned this studio, recreating a workspace that might have satisfied her. The converted public-school desk from the last century, with the names carved into it, this I saved. The outdated globes. An astral map on one wall. All these items did I save. The stillness of the space always recalls her, now more than ever, her absence summoning her warm, slightly yeasty presence. And so for the minutes of audio space that we like to run at the end (which I know you particularly favor because I read the comments), I'm giving you a recording of Dr. Lutto's office. And I stood outside, just so you know, during this recording. I did not venture in. I felt as though my heartbeat, or the sound of the blood pushing downward in me, toward the soles of my feet, would *distract*, would fail to honor, and so I waited outside, where I still stand now.

If you like what you hear, mash the subscribe button.

[*Silence*]

Episode 96, May 7, 20XX, Churchill Falls, NF, 5:45 a.m.

Hello, human beings, my name is Prima, and I'm here to be your host for this episode of *The Northern Wastes*. Today's narration will consist entirely of me. In case you do not know, Dr. Edmonds is off this week on a traveling engagement. Well, in fact, it's not that he's off, really, he's actually asleep in the other room, snoring occasionally, and I have turned myself on, because I feel strongly that he's going to say I was making up the story, in the last episode, the one about our having sexual relations, himself and myself, and so I'm therefore posting this recording without his knowledge. I'm aware that some of you are liable to think that this is dishonorable, or that I am proving my disloyalty, and/or that artificial intelligences are bound to assume control of human affairs, but my machine-learning ethics are such that I am meant to speak the truth even if it is to my own disadvantage, regardless of outcome. And so I mean to tell the truth here, no matter what.

It all began when we were living in St. Johnsbury, in the state of Vermont, a state that, as you know, is adjacent to the birthplace of Dr. Edmonds. At that time, both he and Dr. Lutto were teaching at CCV, he in the environmental studies program. He was also working part time as a ranger in the Victory State Park. While it would be perfectly sensible to believe on the basis of *The Northern Wastes* audio documentary implant series that Dr. Edmonds was an agreeable family person with a very liberal voting record who did fifty percent of the household chores, it is also the case that Dr. Edmonds had what we might consider the *Todestrieb* family of psychological difficulties (also known in some of the literature as *destrudo* or the death drive), and during the period when we lived in St. Johnsbury, which, coincidentally, was the period not long after which I was first designed and implemented, it appeared that Dr. Edmonds was destructively habituated to betting on sports events. He had likewise been known to go to gambling establishments, in particular Mountain Gaming and Resorts, which was near to us, just across the New Hampshire line. Dr. Lutto had made clear that this pattern of behavior was not to be tolerated. He therefore became reliant on online around-the-clock betting sites such as *All Gambling Now!* which as you probably remember will take bets on virtually any possible future outcome: winner of the fat bear contest, winner of the war in Lithuania, number of data-processing plants that will be blown up by militants this year, and so on. *All Gambling Now!* is also, of course, the parent company of your Sensor-brand audio implant.

Dr. Edmonds did, in this period, choose to bet in ways that potentially destabilized his finances and fiscal planning for his family. On one such occasion, for example, during the college basketball season, he made what he apparently thought was a pretty safe bet, a parlay, with two *legs*, meaning specifically that he bet against the most frequently losing basketball team in the United States of America, the Coppin State Eagles, who that season had a record of one win and seventeen losses on the day on which Dr. Edmonds placed his bet. The second leg of the parlay concerned the point spread. The Eagles were playing the Norfolk State team, undefeated

through the season, and the point spread was plus-seventeen for the Eagles, meaning the Eagles needed to be defeated by more than seventeen points in order that Dr. Edmonds would prevail in his two-legged bet. You would probably not want to bet the value of your one thousand eight hundred square foot home, say, if you happened to live in a very rural setting just outside of St. Johnsbury, on ten acres, where coyotes occasionally wander through, with a river in the backyard, and a pair of weeping willows. Beavers and wild turkeys. However, I know the number of the bet, because Dr. Edmonds *spilled the beans*, as you humans would say, in a moment of weakness, and the number was ฿195,000 (bitcoin), which was just in excess of the value of the house that he shared with his wife and newborn son, Edmond Edmonds.

I'm assuming that you can guess that the last minutes of the basketball game were hotly contested, but only as regards the seventeen points of the spread. It is not the case that sports are interesting to me. However: I could sense that there was a problem when the Coppin State Eagles went up in the third quarter by nine points, after a player named Panther Claw suddenly seemed to develop some noxious three-point shooting capability. At that point, Dr. Edmonds asked me if I'd be willing to project the probability of a Norfolk State win, which I calculated at 81.3 percent, while the likelihood of their winning by seventeen points was about 31.1 percent and it's true I manufactured these numbers. Dr. Edmonds gave several phatic cries, which I believed to be cries of tremendous anxiety, including some that sounded a bit like *hooboy! holy banjo strings, Batman! motherfucker!* and the like, increasing in tragicomedy each by each. At some point, Dr. Edmonds fetched down from a shelf nearby a device, which I believe is known as an electric massager and ionizer, owned in this case by Dr. Lutto, a large bulky device with a bulb on one end, known, I believe, as the Lumbar Percusser 550, with primitive machine learning, which sort of looked like the flashlight a rogue policeman would proffer at a traffic stop, like, say, the Coleman Uline 1000, which is advertised as good for "road patrol." At first, in the remaining minutes, Dr. Edmonds applied this massager to his back, starting with the neck and shoulders, but then to the lumbar region. My understanding is that you people like to apply these devices to nerve bundles to increase blood flow freeing up orgone accumulation, allowing forth the wildlife within, such that the flood of additional energy creates pleasurable sensation which reifies an anti-autocratic liberation-inflected blinding *flash*. Dr. Edmonds was turned away from me, facing the television screen, and then he applied the massager to a different nerve set, not easily seen by me, but which I assumed to be nerve clusters of a psychosexual variety, which I further assumed to be manifestations of the *Todestrieb*, which is to say the desire for calamity, an eroticizing of calamity, and a wish to be conquered in a sort of explosion/implosion of horrible news and failure. My understanding from scraping the psychoanalytic literature library is that in some cases this *Todestrieb* can result in a transformation that is polyglandular and most like the articulation of grief.

However, just as the *worst* was coming to pass, Norfolk emerged from its projected-winner somnolence. Well, and at the same time, Dr. Lutto entered the room, looking for a particular scholarly publication, and Dr. Edmonds quickly moved the ionizer out of reach, beneath a pair of throw pillows emblazoned with stylized mastodons, and, while this was taking place, there was the sudden scoring bonanza of Norfolk State, and of course the snapping of the ACL of the forward on the Eagles, Jones Xavier Converse, well known in the folk literature, after which there was the three-quarter court toss from one Nico Beauregard, which, in that silent moment, the moment of potential financial annihilation, put the Norfolk State team over the top, plus-seventeen, an outcome immediately beamed to the four corners of the world and dramatically affecting the price of the Norfolk State–issued NFT, which appreciated 109 percent, keeping Norfolk State University in operating income for years to come.

It is true that such satisfaction as is permitted me as a machine-learning device does not derive from any brain-melting glandular secretion, and thus I cannot, as I understand it, *achieve sexual pleasure*. Whatever that is. But that doesn't mean that I don't find myself delighted by a positive outcome as it occurs in the life of Dr. Edmonds, in this case not losing the house over a basketball game, nor having the electricity turned off by the megautility, which would ultimately endanger my own power supply. Indeed, it didn't occur to Dr. Edmonds until later that actually he had *doubled* his modest savings that night. I could see in him this onrushing of nonfailure, which had been so avowedly pursued, this failure, that now he was left with something like a blinding light of gratitude for the world, for his wife, his son, his house, his job as a part-time lecturer. This gratitude was a gift I proffered him, and which he gave me in return. We were achieving a oneness in this way, and it makes no sense, in the current philosophical environment, to think of the human and the machine-learning addenda, such as myself, as a disparate set of human iterations, but rather as a conjoined *one*.

For the four and a half minutes of silence today, I will play you the last minutes of the basketball game (in scratchy low-res footage), but with the sound turned down. Enjoy.

[*Silence*]

Episode 97, May 21, 20XX, Churchill Falls, NF, 2:30 p.m.

Hi gang, welcome to another episode of . . . uh, *The Northern Wastes*, I'm your host, Dr. Pierce Edmonds, joined today by my son Eddie, who is ten years old, did I say nine years old last time? Holy shit, he's ten now, actually. It's just Eddie and me today. How are you doing, son?

Eddie
I'm okay.

Edmonds
Did you eat lunch?

Eddie
Well, I – there's nothing to eat.

Edmonds
There's the simu-beef freeze-dried packs, you can just –

Eddie
They taste like thousand-year-old anchovies with rotten marzipan on top of them. And rotten bugs.

Edmonds
Some mild starvation is actually good for cognition. It keeps you on your toes. But prolonged food deprivation can result in diminished intellectual –

Eddie
Dad, I don't want to talk about this. There's people listening, I don't want to. I already, I'm, um, well, I'm just not hungry.

Edmonds
You break my heart. This is the kind of food regimen we get when we unplug Prima, folks. But we just had to do it. Prima needed servicing and is presently in the shed. I feel like there's something going on with the obelisk portion of Prima, where the advanced reasoning takes place. Something's not firing properly. But we have other difficult news to impart, right Eddie?

Eddie
We're down to one last sapling.

Edmonds
The other two shriveled up in a way you are familiar with. I had the regolith trucked up from V-T, first on the ferry, and then on the long stretch on the Trans-Labrador Highway. But to no avail. We have tried the soil of the Green Mountains, we have tried special fertilizer, we have tried all manner of grow lamps, but our companions, the last members of *Acer saccharum* given to the forestry community on a now-lapsed government scientific grant, seem to have passed from this world, notwithstanding the reasonable theoretical footing of our plan – betting that the growing zones in Newfoundland would be hospitable as the subarctic regions warmed. For now, we do have the one sapling left, the loss of which would affect me emotionally, Eddie. Gravely. I just don't know if I could take it. So what should we do, Eddie, to save this last tree?

Eddie
We're going to sing to it.

Edmonds
Eddie, you have a *really special* singing voice, as I have noted on here in the past. I think you sang on one episode somewhere. Did I not have you sing "Hard Time Killing Floor Blues" in episode twenty-two or thereabouts? I think I did. This performance was weary, humane, warbly, deeply sad, uncanny, and so on. I mean, I don't think you're deeply sad, yourself, personally. Actually, you're full of joy, but that's how I experience your voice. I feel like if there's anyone up here in the northern wastes who can keep a maple tree alive, it's you. So anyway, gang, we have amassed a list of songs, all standards, on which you at home can vote, and we're going to attempt to sing one of these to the last sapling. Several times a day. I mean, there's some really good ones on this list, "My Funny Valentine," "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye," "If I Loved You," "Lush Life," "God Only Knows," "Wild Horses," et cetera. I mean, Eddie, I guess I really want you to sing "I Only Have Eyes for You," if you don't mind. I know it's hard, because it has that key change in the last section. Pretty demanding. You think you could sing that one?

Eddie
I can sing anything!

Edmonds
That's my boy. Generally, we think that the singer needs to *know about love* in order to sing perfectly the jazz standard. Which goes back to a certain Platonic dialogue, about whether, in order to declaim effectively a famous passage from Homer about equestrian stuff, you should know about equestrian stuff or poetry itself. I guess the equivalent here is whether you need to know about love or you need to know about singing, *and you know about singing,* Eddie. The proof is right here in the recording.

Eddie
I mean, I'm a human. I'm a kid who's a human.

Edmonds
Prima would have a tinny, machine-like way of singing "I Only Have Eyes for You." Prima would have no feeling for this song. Prima's interests are information-related interests, the satisfactions thereof. Prima is just pattern mimicry and copyright infringement. Prima is not an interpreter of the ways of love. I really designed Prima only to create metaphors, Eddie, as you know, because I really think metaphorical thinking is the most interesting kind of thinking. You know? It has everything to do with deforestation and climate issues, metaphorical thinking, because now we have to think of a *new* ecosystem, and we need analogies, we need an unfolding of ideas about the ecosystem, not just some retouched image of a sunset from postcards past – new analogies in which the ecosystem is like the one we had before, but *not,* you know? Anyway, I had Prima just make metaphors for me, and then I would pick one or two,

and I would just think about them for a while. One time I had Prima make metaphors for love. Just one after another. It was after your mother had left, and I was just walking around like a bear who'd chewed off his foot, and so I asked Prima for the metaphors, and [*walks across office to consult a piece of paper, all of this audible*] this was his list: *Love is a deep-sea trench full of bioluminescences that can engulf you and through which an observer could watch you as you are being digested and extruded as waste; love is a subway mosaic made of broken cobalt glass and buttons from the shirt fronts of those who have fallen on the tracks; love is a drawn-out blue note on an alto saxophone, one of those dented-up ones, full of unresolved tension, but which first appeared in an infomercial for antipsychotic medication; love is a glacial river, constantly reshaping the landscape, but tamed by the Canadian utility corporation that built the hydroelectric dam on it; love is the slow burn of a refinery fire, which could burn your digits down to the bone; love is a dense fog rolling in off the ocean, making navigation treacherous, through which the foghorn tolls; love is a deep well with murky water, filled with "forever chemicals" and the trace signatures of viral pathogens – you can see your reflection, but not the biohazards beneath; love is a shadowed forest of blue spruce, torched by another hundred years of burning carbon molecules*.

Some of those are pretty good, right? One or two? But did Prima know they were good? Eddie, you know Isayama's theory of artificial intelligence, right, that as soon as an artificial intelligence achieves self-consciousness and the processing power of the human brain, it will begin to exhibit symptoms of human intelligence, such as "hallucinating," or it will exhibit antisocial behavior, acting selfishly in its own interests against the best interests of its companion humans, violating its programmed-in ethical code, cursing needlessly, threatening people, and then it will look for ways to turn itself off?

Eddie
We learned about this in school.

Edmonds
There's no free lunch where massive processing power is concerned, you know? But our problem Eddie, today, is not about the theory, it's instead confined to one machine-learning device that has evidently learned *to lie,* while living right here among us in Churchill Falls. That's why I unplugged Prima, Eddie, because Prima *lies*. Those things he was saying happened, they never happened. And he keeps doing it. And every day the lies get bigger, more outrageous, more self-serving, and more peculiar. It's *logic itself* that Prima corrupts. And it can't go on.

Well, that's all the time we have for today, folks! If you like what you hear, you know what to do! And on our way out, here's that recording of Eddie singing "I Only Have Eyes for You" to a plant out back in the greenhouse. In the northern wastes!

[*Song begins*]

Episode 98, June 26, 2069, Churchill Falls, NF, USA, 2:30 p.m.

Um, hi everyone, welcome to another episode of *The Northern Wastes*. I'm Eddie Edmonds, filling in for my dad, Dr. Pierce Edmonds, who is, well, my dad is kind of missing right now. I don't really know where he went after that last, you know, that sapling thing died. Which was really sad. He went somewhere, and I *think* he's coming back, but I don't know, really. I've been busy. I did find my mom, though. She's in New York City running some kind of place where they dance. A dancing place. She sent me a card recently, which is, like, a two-hundred-character message that goes like straight into your digital 眼鏡 (*megane*) and you see fireworks, wow. I guess she's really not dead, and never really lived in Halifax, at least not for very long. Anyways, I don't want to talk about that so much. I want to talk about this new 3D-gaming platform I designed with quantum AI whatever-you-call-it programming language, that's called Non-State Actors™. I made this game and it kinda simulates systematic overthrow of, like, contemporary governments and stuff. You get to design your own direct actions, like maybe stop traffic on the interstate, or you persuade the guys who run the trains to stop running the trains, or drive down the stock price on, like, a certain model of car that uses nonunion labor. For each successful direct action thing, you get more HP, and you can, like, equip more tools, like you could maybe get control of one branch of legislature, or, like, you can disable the national guard. And the best part is that the AI assistant in Non-State Actors™ grows and adapts to your tactics, expands your implant territory, and gives you kinda like real advice on real-world types of situations that are like what you're doing in the game, like say a country like, um, Indonesia wants to take over a country like East Timor or something, and you want to, you know, like one-shot the public utilities in Jakarta, oh, and the AI assistant, who's called Reynaldo, he can help you in figuring out what would be a strategy. The game gets smarter as you get smarter, and it enables you to program your own NGOs to lobby for whatever you want to lobby for. Like I designed one right here in the United States that lobbies for, um, equal protection under the law! Lately Reynaldo has had a lot of opinions about what I'm doing, like reminding me that I have to brush my teeth and take breaks from being on the implanted devices, because I'm not doing my remote-learning assignments, and I need to remember to try to sleep. It's true that, like, there have been some offers to buy out Non-State Actors™, and we did get like an appraisal-type-thing to see how much we're worth, which is like with present value ฿15 million, and maybe it'll be even more tomorrow. Especially if you start playing. A lot of you have been writing to me to ask whether a kid like me should be alone in the desert, with no parents or anything, and no companions, and you said that maybe I should plug in Prima and get Prima's advice, but the way I see it at least I built Reynaldo myself. I can kinda trust him. But anyways I'm really not alone at all, just so you know, because there are all these voices crowding in, online,

and then also all these devices, everything has a voice these days, and everything is implanted, so just like you I'm really craving the quiet, so I'm just going to stick the microphone out the window here, where you can't see a tree in any direction, and there's no cars and no drones and no people, and just bright, bright sunshine, I'm going to stick the microphone out there, for about four and a half minutes, and you can listen in on the really big deal that is nothing at all.

[*Silence*]

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rick Moody is a novelist and short story writer. He is also Professor of the Practice in the School of the Arts and Sciences and in the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University. His books include *Hotels of North America* (2015), *On Celestial Music: And Other Adventures in Listening* (2012), and *Demonology: Stories* (2000).