



artists aren't stupid

>>>

Jeremiah Tolbert is the author of several short stories, which have sold to magazines such as Fantasy, Escape Pod, Black Gate, Interzone, Ideomancer, and Shimmer, as well as in the anthologies Polyphony 4 and All-Star Zeppelin Adventure Stories. In addition to being a writer, he is a web designer, photographer, and graphic artist—and he shows off each of those skills in his Dr. Roundbottom project, located at www.clockpunk.com. For several years, Tolbert also published a well-regarded online magazine of weird fiction called The Fortean Bureau.

The genesis for this story was a news story about an unusual kind of graffiti—the artists mixed moss and water in a blender and used the result as paint. “The idea of living graffiti struck me,” Tolbert said, “and the story was born from that.”



arties aren't stupid

Jeremiah Tolbert

A few of us arties were hanging out in Tube Station D, in the dry part that hadn't flooded. Tin men had busted Blaze and Ransom doing an unlicensed mural on Q Street behind a soytein shop, and a small crowd of us watching (too chick-shit to Make with the tin men cracking down) scattered when the pig-bots hummed in from every direction like it was some kind of puzzle bust and not just a bunch of arties trying to wind

arties aren't stupid

down. We'd all clustered back down in the Station on Niles's turf. Tin men didn't bother below ground. So long as the Elderfolk couldn't see turd, they didn't give a turd.

Niles wasn't there, so some rat-faced kid started posing and posturing about taking a little swatch of wall for himself, doing it up special. Pecking order is pecking order, so nobody wanted to be near the turd-head if Niles heard him talking like that, so every bodies was giving him space and lots of it. Look-outs on the street announced with sharp whistles that Niles was headed down, and the kid shut right up.

Niles was a year or two older than the rest of us. Some bodies liked to say he was a proto-arty, but I don't know about that. He was different, and it didn't have nothing to do with his age or Make. All age did was give him a few inches of height to make bossing easier. He bossed good, not mean like Elderfolk, but kept us out of trouble with the thicknecks and just-plains. Something about him was plain special. We few girlies knew it, specially.

He was taller than me by a head, hair burnt umber and long, styled nice with lip-curl and spike. He wore a worker man's jumpsuit adorned with patches and swatches of fabric that he liked. Very anime, very hip. Arties have good fashion sense, but Niles set trends in our clade.

Boo was with him as usual, a stunted runt of a melodie that Niles had found sleeping on his turf. She wore an old fashioned mp3 player around her neck, earbuds nearly soldered into her ear bits. Whenever you got close to her, you

seeds of change

could make out tinny music, but what kind of music it was, you couldn't figure. Unlike other melodies, Boo never sung, not once. Didn't speak either. Bum batch, probably. It happens, although most get recycled early. Nobody questioned her hanging around, seeing's how Niles tolerated her.

"This stuff is snazzy," he said. "No paint, just water and plant stuff. Nozzle works the same though. Sprays right on." I recognized the stuff. I'd seen advertisements for it on my Elderfolk's vidiot box. Moss-in-a-can. They sold it to Elderfolk for the recreation yards, for making everything look all old and natural, whatever that meant. Simple biotech, nothing too crazy, nothing like us arties.

Niles tossed us each a metal can from a satchel that Boo carried, except for the rat-faced kid—Niles gave him zip. "You get out of here, go home to your Elderfolk. I heard what you were saying before I stalked a-on down," he said to him, wagging his finger, and rat-face's eyes got all comic and big. Rat-face sputtered something about how his Elderfolk didn't want him around, but Niles just shook his head.

"No bodies do, Zinger." That's right, I remembered, rat-face was a new transfer to the city hood named Zinger something-something. Niles was a lot better at names than the rest of us, but you could see that he had to think real hard for it, sometimes. His face'd scrunch up and he'd just freeze to concentrate past all the shapes and colors that dance in an arties head from wake to sleep.

"Yah," said Tops. He stepped up out of the crowd and gave Zinger a short shove on the shoulder. Tops was Ran-

arties aren't stupid

som's best friend, and he'd been spoiling for a fight all day, ever since the Tin Men busted Ransom.

"Cerulean," Niles said, and the color flashed through our heads and everybody calmed down just a little. "Go on, you can come back tomorrow. This is my studio, don't forget it, 'kay?"

Zinger nodded, then turned and ran up the stone steps to street level. Niles sighed and finished handing out the moss-in-a-can.

"We supposed to Make with this instead of paint? It's all one color," Tops said, his voice all whiny like some spoiled just-plain.

"That's right," Niles said. "Better mossy than going in the pokey-pokey." I winced at the word, which was both the name of a bad place and a description of what they did to you there.

I took my can happy, feeling better already. Design-shapes were practically pushing out my ears. My Elderfolk wouldn't give me any scratch for paints lately, using it all on themselves and *drugas* to feel better. Was okay with me, Niles gave stuff that he got from trading to the thicknecks and skinnybois for gang logos. *Drugas* made my Elderfolk less shouty which was just good-no-great with me.

I went up and found some alley space and I Made until it all went away into an eggshell white haze.

WE MESSED AROUND with the moss-in-a-can for a few days until the Elderfolk decided they didn't like the

seeds of change

“mess” and the tin men got new marching orders. They started spraying down all the fractals and designs with some kind of ick and it all turned turd-brown and dusted away. Hurt to see it, but what can arties do? Tin men can’t be argued or fought with like Elderfolk.

We were all sulking in Niles’ station, feeling the pain of not-Making like aching all over and Niles got mad and stomped off without even waking up Boo. We were a little scared, because Niles only left Boo behind when he was going to do something that might get him sent into the pokey for a long long time, and without Niles to keep everything straight, we’d all be in trouble. Boo woke up while we were fighting about what to do and came and cuddled up to me. I could almost feel the music vibrating through her into me. It made me feel a little sick.

“Don’t know why she likes *you* so much,” Tops said with a sneer. “Your Make sucks the big dong.”

I shrugged. Niles knew my Make was okay. Didn’t much care if Tops and the other arties did. “I don’t know,” I said.

“Maybe because Mona isn’t a ‘big dong’ like you,” sneered Tess. She helped whenever the boys thought they could gang-up on me. “And Mona’s Make is okay. You’re just scared because Niles is doing something bad.”

“Shut up,” Tops said and turned away. Tess smiled at me a little. I tried to smile back, but the symmetry felt off.

Boo tapped me on the arm and I looked down. She raised her eyebrows at me, then looked at the steps to the

arties aren't stupid

street. I nodded. "He went upside for a while. He'll be fine." She didn't look convinced. Neither was I. We held each other and it made the ache a little better.

I worried sometimes that Boo felt that way all the time. She was a melodie and had to Make just like we poor arties did, but nobody ever heard her sing and bang or anything. Broken little thing made me feel sorry and sad. It was a good thing Niles took care of her, or she'd be used up and swept away just like our mossy Makes.

NOBODY WENT HOME to their Elderfolk while we waited for Niles to come back. That was a rule. If Niles never came back, then we wouldn't have to. Nobody wanted to see the meanies anyway. They had us Made and then hated us afterwards, which wasn't fair. All arties know you love the things you Make no matter what. But Elderfolk were just-plains all grown up and they didn't make any sense at all. Some of the younger arties started to talk about going back, but we older arties who knew Niles better said no, that we'd wait.

Three days passed before Niles came back. It was dark and everyone was sleeping but me, because little Boo's music itched in my brain. He came in carrying big boxes, and I cried big tears of happy at that. He'd brought some new supplies, and we'd be Making again in no time flat. I watched him for a while, carrying in box after box, and finally I fell asleep. It felt good knowing he was back.



seeds of change

IN THE MORNING, laughing woke me up. I turned to see what arty could be so rude. Niles was sitting in a corner with his back to the room, playing with something. He never laughed when he was Making so he had to be playing.

I left Boo to cuddle into the pile of other arties and crawled over to see what Niles was doing. He had some weird gadget, a silver disk covered in letter-buttons and it was projecting onto the wall some kind of tri-dimensional animal-thing. It had three legs and one arm and was galloping in place like a creature with three legs would, a kind of hop between steps. I laughed too when I looked at the weird little thing.

“What is it?” I asked in a whisper.

“I Made it, just now,” Niles said. “It’s complicated, but the brainiacs on P-Street showed me how. I only sort of made it. It’s just pretend now, but I can send it into the factories,” he pointed at the stack of boxes next to us, “then it’ll Make for real.”

“Wow,” I said. I couldn’t think of anything else to speak. Niles was like that, always thinking ahead of the Elderfolk and the tin men.

“Does it help the ache?” I asked, my pulse racing. I almost felt good, even with the hurt, just at the chance.

“A-yep,” he said. “Feels good. Like sculpting, sort of. But you can paint on them too. Paint in texture, scales, hair, you know. All sorts of things. But there’s a sense to it, like how you know good colors going together?”

“Yes?”

arties aren't stupid

“Like that. You can’t just do anything,” he said. He nodded, and pressed a large button on the disk. Words came up and the creature disappeared.

“What’s that say?” I asked.

“Dunno,” he answered. “But the brainiacs said if I push that button, the factory will Make.”

A humming sound came just then from one of the boxes, and then the other arties started to stir and wake.

“Here,” Niles said, handing me the disk. “I’ll teach you how it works. We have to teach everybody. The tin men can’t kill animals besides pests, you know!”

WE PRETEND-MADE all sorts of little creatures on the screen, then pushed the button that Made for real. The little factories, we set up in one corner of the station, and they hummed and popped out little eggs of all rainbow-colors every few hours. Niles sent the little kids out onto the street with the eggs to hide them where the tin men and Elder-folk wouldn’t see.

“The eggs will hatch and our Makes will come out alive, and the tin men can’t do anything about it!” he said. His eyes were shiny. It made me ache a little, and I worried that maybe pretend-Making didn’t count for arties. But Niles was always making me ache a little like that, especially when he left. It scared me, that maybe I was like little Boo and something wasn’t right with me. Bum batch.

Pretty soon, we started seeing the little animals around the City. They weren’t good Makes, though. They stum-

seeds of change

bled into traffic sometimes and got splattered. They fell off of roofs, got tangled in wires and cooked like bad soytein on a hot plate. They weren't there in the head. And they starved. Not a lot of food out in the city just for the taking. They couldn't take chits and buy it.

We were stumped. The tin men weren't doing anything, but our little Makes couldn't last on their own. I hated so much seeing them laying dead in gutters, in the street drains. Their little selves were all over, stinking and falling apart like wind-worn paints.

"I have an idea," I said to Niles after thinking as hard as I could. "Go to the brainiacs and ask them for help. They will tell us what we can do right."

Niles thought for a moment and shook his head. "No. This is an arty problem."

"But arties are too stupid," I said, raising my voice so everyone could hear it.

Niles bared his teeth at me, and I cried out, scrambling away from him. "Arties aren't stupid!" he shouted. "Arties aren't stupid!"

But we are, I said to my own head. *We are not smart like brainiacs*. I ran away, back to my stupid Elderfolks, but even they were smarter than arties.

I WAS DRAWING on the sidewalk, just to ease the ache, when Niles found me. I had stolen a little bit of charcoal from the crematorium and kept it in my pocket. I only used it when things were really bad, really really. And now I

arties aren't stupid

didn't know what to do.

"Your repeating . . . patterns?" Niles said. "What do you call them?"

I shrugged. "Can't think of words for it. Maybe your brainiac friends could guess."

He frowned. "They could, but who cares?" He sat beside me and took out a piece of old paper. It had shapes drawn on it like my patterns, only more random. I was fascinated.

"Where did you get that?" I asked. I reached out to touch it, and he let me take it. I held it up to the light. The little bits were a faded green, like the moss-in-a-can.

"Plants," he said. "They're called 'plants.'"

"Plants," I said. "Snazzy."

"A-yap," he said. "The old world was full of them."

"Who told you that?" I asked.

"The brainiacs," he said. I stood up and hugged him tight.

"Make some plants with the factories," he said. "They'll be pretty."

So we did. This time, the eggs were smaller, and we hid everywhere in the city. Niles helped me to make them. He understood the rightness of the animal bits, but to me, plants made more sense. They didn't move, except to stretch for sun or rain. Wherever you put them, that's where they stayed, just like murals.

The ache almost went all-away, for a while.



seeds of change

THE LITTLE PLANT-EGGS hatched and grew quickly all around the city. We Made so much more of them, and they lasted good. The tin men noticed them. Everywhere, arties were seeing the tin men staring at the little plants growing bigger every day. They didn't know what to do, but all arties knew what happened then: the tin men asked the Elderfolk.

While I Made plants, the other arties Made more little animals. Some that flew in the air, and some that could squeeze into tiny little cracks. This time, the little animals didn't die. They grew bigger too, like the plants had to come first for them to work. Niles said it was a secret why, and wouldn't tell me, which made me angry, but the ache was staying away so long as I made my plants, so I couldn't fight him over it.

Boo spent more time with me, too, when I was Making plants. She loved their shapes and would smile and point and smile whenever we found another one growing up in the cracks out on the street. One night, I even woke up and saw her toying with one of the silver disks when she thought no one was watching. The shapes on the screen were colorful, but they had no coherence, no pattern. Sad, sad little Boo. She wanted to Make plants and animals too, but she was just a melodie and she couldn't Make.

I WAS IN the white of Making when I heard the shouts coming down the stairs. "Tin men coming! Tin men!" they cried. "There's a brainiac with them!" Zinger shouted.

arties aren't stupid

Everyone scattered like moss-dust on the breeze, no direction to go, just bumping around in the station. Only one way out, up, and the tin men had it blocked. I took the silver disk I was using and one of the factories and pushed them into the flooded part of the station, then tried to run for the door.

The tin men galomped down the steps carefully, using their long arms to steady themselves on the uneven steps. They had three brainiacs with them. Each held their big heads in their hands and moaned from all the effort of walking. Brainiacs didn't like to do that if they could help it.

The tin man corralled us arties up into a tight bunch and others stole away with the disks and factories. One sheriff tin man, gold-coated and round, prodded the brainiacs, and they pointed at Niles, all three at the same time. Then the tin men took Niles too. We arties tried to fight then, and Boo did too. But we're not made for fighting, and we all hurt ourselves on the cold sleek shells of the tin men. When Niles was gone, they let us a-go, and left following the sheriff.

We wailed and cried. "Doomed," Topps moaned. "Doomed." The ache wasn't over us yet, but it would be now.

"Every time we find something new to Make, they take it away," Tess said, dabbing tears from her eyes.

"The tin men don't care," Zinger said.

"Of course they don't," I said. "They only do what the Elderfolk tell them to do. And the Elderfolk don't care.

seeds of change

They don't care about anything but themselves."

"We have to get Niles back," Topps said, starting to cry again. "Arties are too dumb on their own. Too dumb!"

I snapped up at that. "No!" I said. "Arties aren't dumb! Niles said!"

"Doesn't matter anymore," Zinger said. "Niles is gone to the pokey-pokey. They'll never let him out."

"Then we get him out," said a tiny voice I had never heard before. It half-sung the words, just like a melodie did whenever it talked, but the sound was wrong, harsh around the edges. It was a bad Make.

Boo didn't look scared. She was younger than all of us, but she wasn't scared. Everyone tried to wipe up tears then, just so they didn't look like little babies when the real baby didn't even cry.

"Boo can talk!" Zinger said after a long silence.

"Of course she can talk," I snapped. "But she didn't want to before now. This is important."

Boo nodded. "Hurts. My—" she touched her throat, "not made right." She winced from the effort of talking. I grabbed her and held her close.

"Boo is right," I said. "We arties have to get Niles back."

"But how?" asked Tess.

I didn't know. I looked at Boo. Boo didn't know.

"We'll ask the brainiacs," I said then. It was what Niles had done, and they owed us after turning Niles in.



arties aren't stupid

The brainiacs spent most of their times at the libraries, and there was one on P-Street that I had remembered because it had pretty statues on each side of its big doors. Boo and I marched inside, past the tin men that watched the door, and inside, before they could get a good sniff of us. The first brainiac we saw, we cornered against a shelf. She was locked into her little wheelchair and couldn't move very fast.

"Tell us how to rescue Niles," I demanded. Boo made menacing gestures with her hands that she must have learned from watching thicknecks.

"Who?" said the brainiac. "Oh, that arty kid with the stolen engineering kits? He's gone up-tower to see Council. The Elderfolk are real pissed about that little scheme of his. Not even a platoon of thicknecks could get in there. The Tower is crawling with tin men."

I shuddered. The Council were the Elderfolk to the Elderfolk. They told everyone what to do. If they had Niles, then there really was no hope. The aching bent me over in two like a folded piece of paper.

Boo shook her head and pointed at the brainiac. I guessed at what she was trying to say, and fought through my pains.

"You're smarter than arties and the just-plains. The Council is just a bunch of just-plains all grown up. You can help us rescue him," I said, not really believing but hoping.

The brainiac sighed and nodded. "I can think of dozens, thousands, of ways to free your friend, but logistically, you arties can't manage it."

seeds of change

“What’s logistically?” I said.

“Tools, resources,” she said, rolling her eyes. “You’re just a bunch of stupid beatniks. Maybe if you still had some gengineering factories, you could make something, but—”

“I hid one,” I said quickly. “Under the water. When the tin men came.”

“Well then, you’ve ruined it. It’s no good.”

“But you could fix it,” Boo rasped in sing-song. The brainiac nodded.

“I could fix it, but then you’d need to make something that could get you into the Tower without having to fight tin men, and that’d be almost impossible,” said the brainiac.

“Making is what arties do. You fix the factory, and we’ll do the rest,” I said. I could see the shapes forming already. My fingers itched to work the disk.

“Fine, but this makes the arties and the brainiacs even,” she said.

“Deal,” I said.

THE TIN MEN were killing all the animals and plants in the city with ick. Someone must have changed their orders. They weren’t supposed to do that. It hurt us arties to know, but it kept the tin men busy while we Made in shifts with the factory. We had a plan, one that the brainiacs thought would get us all tossed in the pokey, but Boo and I both believed it would work. The other arties made animals that would go into the Tower and distract, and I worked on

arties aren't stupid

special plants with exploding seeds. Weapons, like thick-necks used on one another. We tested the seeds on a lone tin man, and it stunned it. We smashed it up good while it was down.

The brainiac who repaired our factory met us in the shadows outside the Tower before we launched our attack. She pressed a sheet of paper into my hands. "One last little bit of help," the brainiac said. "This will show you where they're keeping your friend."

"Why?" I asked.

The brainiac laughed. "You have no idea how bored we are. Your little creations are an ad-hoc ecosystem springing up all over the city. We've been studying things. Your creations are immensely complex and function cohesively, even though they are artificial. This bit of information has vast implications on issues such as the Jungian overmind—" The brainiac blinked and cut off her speech. I hadn't understood a word of it, only that they *liked* our Makes. That made me feel good. "Sorry. Anyway, we hope you can make more."

"It was Niles' idea," I said. "Without him, we arties are too stupid to figure anything out."

The brainiac frowned. "I wouldn't be so sure about that. This plan of yours might actually work. And it looks like your friends are ready."

Us arties were gathering from all over the city. Each had a wild little animal, frantic and tugging at a leash of plant-rope. Each carried a satchel of bomb-seeds. Across

seeds of change

the corner, a few thicknecks had gathered. They made cat-calls and threats, but none dared to cross the street. I could hardly believe my eyes.

Everyone waited for my command. I hesitated. If I said so, we arties would all go home to our Elderfolk. Maybe some would get supplies to ease the ache, and maybe some wouldn't and they might die. Or we could attack the Tower and some would die and the rest would end up in the pokey-pokey or we might win and get back Niles and all his crazy ideas for Making. And it was my decision. Little Mona, whose art nobody understood.

Nobody but Niles.

I gave the word. The arties rushed the tower. Tin men spilled out from the doors, and seeds flew from everywhere. They crashed to the ground in beautiful purple sparks, and we swept past them inside. We arties freed the frantic little animals, and they ran free. The tin men couldn't decide whether to chase us or chase the animals and split up. I led us arties up, up, following the drawings on the paper.

We pushed past many many tin men, leaving them smoking behind us, and finally we got to the end place, and it was a place we all remembered, a birthing lab, cold, white and metal. And there were just-plains, the birthers, watching Niles, and he was sleeping in the tank, just like a baby arty. We scared away the just-plains. They tried to tell us to stop, that they needed Niles, but we needed him more. So we took him, and we left. We didn't go back to

arties aren't stupid

the station. We found a new hiding place, in the basement of a power station, and there, we waited for Niles to wake up, and we cried, all of us arties, all as one.

We'd done it, but Niles wouldn't wake up.

HE WASN'T DEAD, we knew that, because he was breathing. At first, no one would leave him, but even arties get hungry, and so we started watching in shifts, taking turns. Every one wanted to be the arty who was there when he woke, but it was me that was there, and it was Boo that woke him up.

She sang; it was beautiful, even if it was broken. The pattern in the sound reminded me of the colors on her screen. The sound grew louder as she continued, and then I saw that little flying animals had come from the sky and joined her, together adding their voices and fixing where hers was broken. It must have been the best sound in the world, because then finally, Niles woke up, and he smiled.

"Hey-a, Boo," he said. "You can sing." As if he had always known, and it wasn't a surprise to him. And maybe he did. Niles was smart, especially for an arty. Then he turned and smiled at me.

"Hey-a, Mona. You rescued me."

"We did," I said. "And the brainiacs hardly helped at all."

He laughed. "That's good. But I been thinking about what you said. You right. We should ask the brainiacs for help more often. Arties can't do everything."

seeds of change

I cried, and hugged, and cried some more.

Niles is getting better. He told me the secret of how the animals work, and at first, it made me sad. But we can eat the plants, and the animals too, so we don't have to go back to the Elderfolk for chits. We're staying here in our hiding places, and we're sharing what we know with the brainiacs. They're slipping away from their Elderfolk, too. We need the thicknecks' help too, and the brainiacs are talking to them for us. Thicknecks listen to them, at least sometimes.

There are plants and animals everywhere now, and they grow too fast for the tin men to stop them. And the little flying ones, they all sing such sweet songs. Boo, and Niles, and I sit and listen to them for hours. Boo says that she only Made some of them, and doesn't know where the rest of them come from. The brainiacs have theories, but we don't understand them.

And we still Make, more plants and more animals each day with more stolen factories. The ache is still there, but it's not the same. It's the ache you feel when things are good, not when things are bad. And that's the kind of ache that makes you feel good. Niles says he understands it, but I don't believe him. Nobody understands that, not even the smartest brainiac of them all.