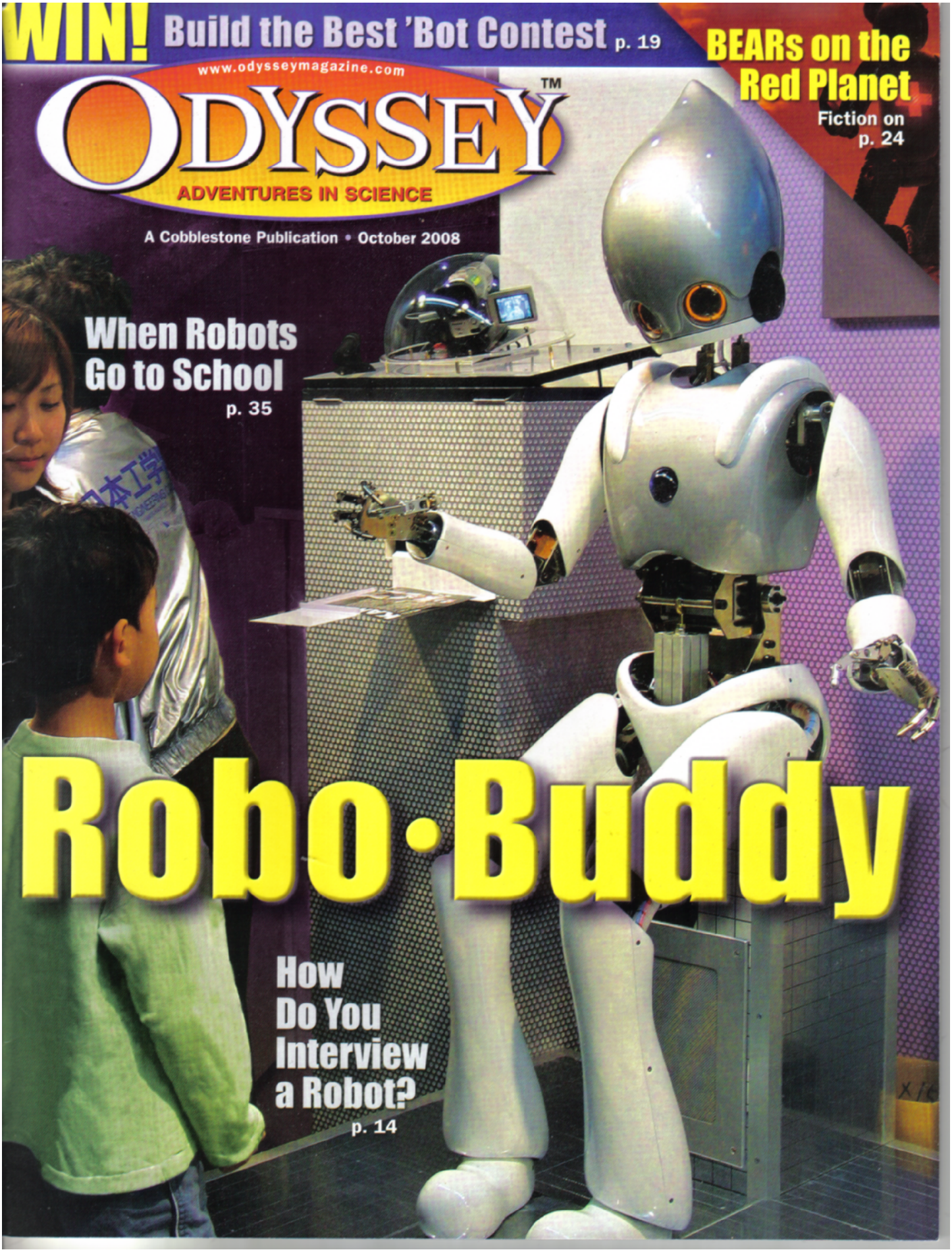
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BEARs of S

a short story by Angie Smibert
illustrated by Adam Hunter Peck

A dying soldier once told THEO that Mars was the color of butterscotch pudding, a favorite dessert from his childhood on Earth. Mars, though, he said in his last breath, was no more a treat than the robot was a teddy bear.

THEO975 extract Soldier 7900JH149. Coordinates 13.1.01S, 103.92W. Status grave.
Acknowledged.

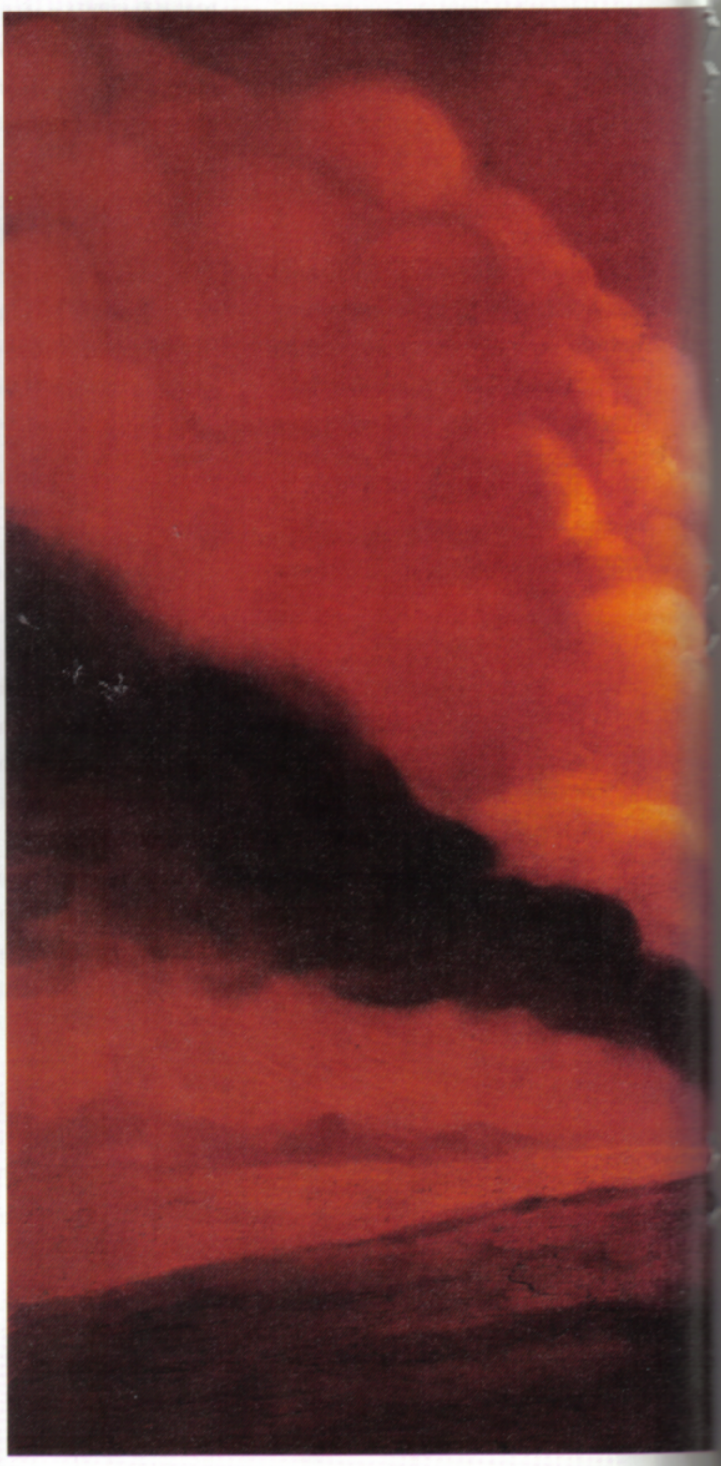
Battlefield Extraction and Retrieval (BEAR) unit THEO975 rolled out of its solar charging station outside the Tharsis Colony base on the Northern reaches of Syria Planum. The robot unfolded its lower half to stand nearly seven feet tall on its two legs, which were covered with tank-like treads. Kneeling in drive mode, the BEAR could move easily across dunes of fine red dust or plains of crunchy volcanic rock, while carrying a thousand kilos.

THEO975 scanned the terrain. The quickest route would take it across relatively flat ground until it reached the impact crater where 7900JH149 had fallen. THEO noted a dust storm on the horizon.

94.193% probability of live retrieval.

THEO crouched into drive position and raced across the barren plain in 10.23 minutes.

At the lip of the crater, THEO paused to assess the tactical situation. The dot that was 7900JH149 blinked dimly on the robot's heads-up display. The soldier was pinned behind the mobile mining station along with several other humans. An armored vehicle fired upon their location from the plain above. A shot ricocheted



yria Planum

1963 • Rancho Arm is the first robotic arm to help the physically challenged.

off the large, red cross on the BEAR's chest. The cross and the unusual shape of its head were supposed to distinguish it from mining and construction robots as well as the outlawed combat droids.

Cease fire under Article 75 of the Olympus Mons Conventions. Battlefield extraction in progress.

The firing stopped. THEO slowly rolled down the crumbling walls of the crater. The BEAR had learned from experience that humans didn't always follow their own rules. One of its ears still needed to be replaced after a soldier shot it off during a rescue near the Coprates Chasma. As THEO approached the fallen soldier, the other humans backed away.

THEO accessed 7900JH149's medical records. Marcus Keith Anders, Corporal, 19, Tharsis City, Mars.

Corporal Anders, this BEAR unit will return you to base for medical assistance. Prepare for extraction.

Its voice was calm and soothing as it knelt by the young man.

THEO read the data from the medical chip in the soldier's pressure suit. Broken leg. Three broken ribs. Punctured lung. Internal bleeding. Concussion. The suit had been ruptured but had sealed itself at a reduced pressure.

THEO recalculated.

85.267% probability of live retrieval.

As THEO slid his arms under the soldier, the young man opened his eyes and laughed. It was a common reaction, THEO noted. The head of most BEAR units resembled that of an old Earth doll. Another design feature to comfort the soldiers. Or at least to keep them from panicking during extraction.

"Teddy Bears on Mars," the young man muttered. Then he coughed, splattering the inside of his helmet with frothy specks of blood.

75.001% probability of live retrieval.

THEO accelerated the extraction process. When the BEAR reached the crater wall, it extended itself to its full height and switched to biped mode to climb up to the plain. Its internal gyros automatically adjusted to the still live weight of Corporal Anders in its arms, keeping it balanced as it walked up the slope.

"Teddy Bear, what's your purpose in this stupid war?" the young man asked as THEO switched back to drive mode. It wasn't unusual for extractees to engage BEAR units verbally during retrieval. THEO was programmed to respond.

To extract and retrieve injured combatants.

"Alive?"

That is the ideal outcome for retrieval.

Corporal Anders coughed again, and his body twisted in spasms in the robot's arms as it rolled across the plain.

45.203% probability of live retrieval.

A mortar exploded behind them as THEO sped toward the base. Hot metal struck the BEAR's remaining ear. Anders's blood pressure dropped rapidly.

25.000% probability.

The low odds of the soldier's survival triggered an automatic response in THEO975's programming.

Do you have a last request, Corporal Anders?

These usually involved burial instructions or a recorded message to a loved one. THEO would carry out the request upon the soldier's death. On occasion, a dying soldier asked for a million credits or world peace. A built-in failsafe prevented THEO from acting on requests outside his area of programming.

"Teddy, retrieve all the other combatants alive." Anders gasped and then was still.

BEAR unit THEO975 transmitted the expiration of soldier 7900JH149 to the central computer.

Time of death: 13:34:25 MST. Last request affirmative. Deliver body to base. Carry out request.

THEO975 scanned the battlefield. It had delivered the body of Corporal Anders to the base. And THEO had determined that the soldier's last request was indeed within its area of programming. It was, in fact, the robot's primary function. Live retrieval. The central computer concurred.

THEO contemplated the coordinates of the 238 remaining soldiers, from this colony and the next, spread across the battlefield of Syria Planum. THEO cross-referenced tactical data with the topography of the area and the medical records of the combatants. It calculated the probabilities of live extraction if each one was injured.

92.789%
34.219%
5.004%
19.921%

THEO could not project 100% live retrieval for all of the soldiers. Even if all of the BEAR units were fully functional and fully charged, which they never were, THEO could only predict live retrieval of half of the humans now fighting on Syria Planum. THEO ran scenario after scenario through his already taxed BEAR brain while he recharged. As the burnt red Sun began to set, the solution came to him.

He rolled across the plain toward the blinking dot on his screen with the lowest probability of live retrieval. If injured.

Private Jones. . .Prepare for extraction.

"But I'm not wounded," a startled young man replied. "Yet," he added as a mortar landed a few meters away and dust swept over the butterscotch landscape.

100% probability of live retrieval.

Angie Smibert worked for NASA's Kennedy Space Center for over a decade, before turning to writing full time. Her work has recently appeared in *Crimson Highway, Pedestal, Flashquake, Heavy Glow, Bewildering Stories,* and *Boston Literary Magazine.*

1970 • Stanford Research Institute's "Shakey" becomes the first robot controlled by artificial intelligence. See it work at www.ai.sri.com/shakey/.