



The Rubicon

Troy University Department of English
Student Literary Journal: Issue 4, Spring 2011

The Rubicon

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Submissions may include short stories, poems, literary essays, short plays, and non-fiction. Please include a signed *Contributor Contract* (see page 18 of this publication) with each printed work submitted. No hardcopy manuscripts can be returned or mail query answered unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Electronic submissions and queries are accepted at litjournal@troy.edu. Manuscripts of original student work are accepted throughout the academic year, although response time will be delayed during the summer months.

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1 Poetry

Disney Ruined

by Elijah David

My childhood dreams gave
My imagination villains
To stock my
Nightmare stores...

McLeach chases me down the dock
I fall to the sewer
Tick-Tock coming slowly back
Biting with crocodile teeth...

Shere Khan, the padded royal, with silent paws,
Stalks, finds me where I hide –
Glowing eyes and razor claws
Seek in hall. Bedroom. Cushions.

Teeth, eyes, claws. Ready, ready, ready...

Awake, ready to watch...

DeVile Furriers is pleased to announce their Spring Line-up:

Dalmatian.

Amorexia Nervosa

by *Elijah David*

All poetry concerns itself with love,
Sex, death or God, and each of these four proves

The Same: love begets sex, la petite mort,
Death yields to God, who is. Love. Like instinct born

In the womb; in mother and child a bond is made
Which outlasts life until the heart, naive,

Enters sex – Amorexia nervosa,
Soul-splitting, begot by love,

The death of soul and body, the old bond
Destroyed. From its ashes they rise to their God.

We have one subject for poems: it is called
By the many fearful love-sex-death-God.

The Only Elegy I Could Muster

by *Erin K. Murray*

Michael, I apologize for forcing you
into verses that never approached meter.
A pall of that heavy anxiety draped
over my shoulders after yours was lifted,
and I felt Catullus's breath on the nape
of my neck. I wrote sonnets for someone else.

And sincerely, I'm sorry for making this
verse free, shored against the contempt of mentors.
Some souls cannot be killed with ink and paper.
Instead, you reign in every realm. You became
that common fallacy: The weeping willow,
Slow, gray ascending clouds; elementary tropes.

A resurrection from a few hundred lines?
I tried. Days and days of syllables and rhymes.
My mind keeps getting better. The elegies worse.
You're more alive, Mike, when I don't write you down
or stay up drinking or praying or both.
You died barefoot in Oklahoma. I'm sorry.

I died, somehow, writing you back to life.

[] II

by Erin K. Murray

In my dream, our Mother gives me your crucifix,
The one that hangs above Melanie's door.
Infrequently, I can hear your voice
and smell patchouli. I never see your face.

Before the funeral, we forgot your laugh.
Shuffling the rosy-cheeked photographs,
and talking to the news reporter, it was absent.
We lay awake, guilty of taking you for granted.

We mocked the poor girls who loved you
and ate casseroles from strangers, already sick
of being grieving siblings. We let ourselves smile.
After all the mourners left, drunk or exhausted

Melanie screamed my name from the shower:
"I remembered! His laugh!" Suddenly it echoed
Off the yellow tiles and into our minds. May
the laugh of our brother be with us always
Forever and ever and ever.

Variety

by Erin K. Murray

The cadence of the night set by percussion
chased away by rapid synthesizer grooves,
cowbells and brass. We all lust after the girl
shaking the tambourine, coolly disillusioned,
staring at the blue gels on the stage lights.

Five white guys and a black woman on the bass
flinch in the smokey theater. The unaffected
white girl makes the bassist seem androgynous,
like an Afrobeat David Bowie. She smiles
the widest grin in between rippling solos.

REM Sleep

by Erin K. Murray

Waves recede in delicate locations,
the mind is nearly shut off, quiet.
Skin curtains draped over eyelids
twitch like kids throwing fits of objection.

It still operates, even by the night.
Worry found in grey-matter plots,
distilled in the cerebral sweatshop,
travels by freight, railways via the heart.

A body can cold sweat only so much
out before the sunrise. Curled up
like witch feet, a sleep posture of
another, more famous dream.

Regrets

by Regina Lynett Newsome

I've always thought if she was my third wife and I was her second husband we'd still be together.

I can't remember what she said to me. We talked about the awful hospital staff and how tired she was, but I can't remember what else.

Caught up in my own thoughts.

Every time I play that moment back in my head I think out loud, "I should have touched you."

Her smile left butterflies in my stomach. I don't know if I ever made her feel that way.

She was happy to see me.

I didn't deserve it.

I missed her, but she deserved better.

It took me five years and a divorce before I found myself emotionally involved with my wife.

There was a time I couldn't remember what color her eyes were. Now she clouds my mind like perfume. These are the only memories I have of brown eyes and the scent of lavender.

I denied her intimacy. I never gave my heart.

This admission of my guilt will not absolve me – not that I want it to.

Texting

by Candace Turlington

Backlighted letters etched forever
Into ribs and reminiscent –
Words spoken passionately
And with intoxication
Memories, longing
Seep from nighttime eyes

The flesh never forgets
The feeling of another's flesh
Simply pushes it behind
Pressing matters of the world

But what happens when a word mentioned in passing
Reinvigorates the heart
And lust, and love
Mutiny against the rational
Should the pathos resolve
Itself to the desires of the logos?

Let aching veins lie
And wallow in their grief

laughing at an inside joke
shared only with her-
self
juicy and gruesome;
grotesque
in the best possible
way

she likes to watch the pigeons
pick and peck
spreading disease
with their tiny avian mouths

Veritissimo Bonissimoque

by Nathaniel Westfall

Thy voice is sweeter than a dove's lone cry;
 Thy scent assails me like the brightest rose;
 I watch thee and feel that my soul can fly;
 And Chronus be the only of our foes.
 Thy hair is as the Aztec halls of gold.
 The sky rests softly in thy gentle eyes.
 Thy skin shines brightly as the even star.
 "Nothing lasts forever," I was told,
 "Except the Earth and ever-reaching skies."
 But you my darling, shall outshine them far!

When in the course of time we both shall fade,
 Our beauty shall creep out among the rest
 So then our love shall be eternal made
 And shine on as the truest and the best.
 'Tis love that always saves our weary soul;
 'Tis truth that teaches – we shall never need;
 'Tis hope that guides us on our faithful way
 Just as the young are brought back to the shoal.
 Now we have made this vow – eternal creed
 That we shall never lead our love astray.

How can it be that love shall shine so strong,
 When all the rest shall fail for being weak?
 Where does such love as this then here belong
 Enraptured in the faithful and the meek?
 'Tis in all souls that endless love can dwell
 Where every human passion ebbs and flows
 And nothing but the raw emotion lives.
 So one shall save us from our darkest hell
 And carry us to where the Father shows
 His mercy and eternal living gives.

2 Prose

What is Life

by Amanda Graham

"Oh what is life, if we must hold it thus
 As wind-blown sparks hold momentary fire?
 What are these gifts without the larger boon?
 Oh what is art, or wealth, or fame to us
 Who scarce have time to know what we desire?
 Oh what is love, if we must part so soon?"

Ada Cambridge

I feel very old sometimes. I know my dad would laugh at me if I told him this – "You're 21. How much life have you had?" Ha. I know that's true. But I have an old soul, a young body and an old soul. I'm philosophical, existential, full of words and dreams. And this may not be odd, but I just feel like I'm different from most people my age. I see this when I try to share my beliefs or theories with others and they just don't get me.

I keep journals and notebooks full of poetry, T.S. Eliot, Walt Whitman, EE Cummings, Sabrina Ward Harrison, lines about eternity and emptiness and the like. I'm constantly reading books. My dorm is lined with countless classics, Kurt Vonnegut, Sylvia Plath, Jonathan Safran Foer. I read these books and these poems time and again highlighting and underlining words and phrases that, to me, somehow solve the meaning of life. Ha – Almost. 21 year olds are not supposed to think about these things.

There is a quote by Teddy Roosevelt that says "The only time you really live fully is from 30 to 60. The young are slaves to dreams; the old, servants of regrets. Only the middle-aged have all their five senses in the keeping of their wits."

This is my favorite quote. But it's such a quandary to me. It speaks so much truth... but... It doesn't fit me. I am not in the keeping of my wits. No. I am a slave to dreams. I am a servant of regret. Already. So I know I'm different.

But, even with this seeming storm cloud constantly looming over my head – I'm different in another way. I am a very happy person. I'm optimistic, hopeful, smiling. I bet that most people would be surprised if I told them some of the things that I've gone through because I probably look like I've never tasted a bit of sadness. But I have. I know what death tastes like – loneliness, hopelessness, despair, longing. And I know that I'm not alone in this. I look around me and I see that a lot of people know sadness well, if not better than I do. And I also know that these things will never change...

Because this is life.

My favorite book is by Leah Stewart. It's called *The Myth of You and Me*. The ending says this – “My father once told me that a happy ending is just the place where you choose to stop telling the story. More things are still going to happen, of course, some good, some bad. Some things never get any better. When people die they stay dead. None of us knows why we love, or why we stop loving, or why everyone we love we lose.”

So why am I telling you all of this? I know I'm probably being very “glass half empty” at the moment, but the point of this writing is not to tell you about the hardships or miseries of life – It is to share my philosophy of life. My outlook. The reason I believe that I am different.

The summer before I came to college I read a book called *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera. This is quite an incredible book in its own right, but the chapter that ultimately would change me forever included a reference to Friedrich Nietzsche – a famous existential philosopher I would later study in college. The theory is called “eternal return” and among other things it basically states that anything and everything that can or will happen to you has already happened to someone else throughout the course of history.

Now that may not hit home with some of you like it did me, but let me elaborate.

Anything and everything that can or will happen to you in your life – and I'm not talking works of science or landing on the moon – but emotionally – heartache, death, the like – everything that will happen to you has already happened to someone, somewhere, sometime throughout the course of history.

Now I understand that some people would like to think that they are at the center of the universe. That their problems, concerns, woes, are or should be at the forefront of everyone else's mind, or that because of some small occurrence the whole course of time has somehow been altered; but I, on the other hand, like to be reminded of my seeming insignificance. My little speck of a life in the broad scope of all humankind. This theory made me realize that these emotions and these hardships that I go through are not new; they are just simple recurrences in time. Not so “life altering.”

Two years ago my best friend, Christopher Mason Mann, a 19 year young boy with dreams of being a culinary chef, died of cancer. Rare spinal cancer. There was only one recorded instance of this kind of cancer that the doctors could find, and she had died too. So there were no protocols. No guidance. They didn't know what to do for him. There were no answers as to how to stop it, no reasons why it happened.

He died on an ordinary Saturday. The world didn't stop. His struggle didn't cure the cancer. He was buried in the same small town that he had grown up in. And as I sat in the semi-filled church at his funeral watching all the cars and all the people outside continuing to carry on with their lives not affected by this boy's death – I couldn't help but think about how unfair it all was.

A few months before he died, we went swimming at one of our friends' houses. The moon was exceptionally beautiful that night, and we just floated around and stared up at the stars.

“I'm not afraid anymore,” he said.

And now we come back to Friedrich Nietzsche. There is no way that I could have come out of this experience, the loss of my best friend, in any way hopeful to somehow persevere to live happily for the rest of my days. I was not like him. I **was** afraid. I was afraid to face this new world, this unjust, cruel, unpredictable, and forgetful world. One where “we love, we stop loving, and where everyone we love we lose.”

But as I floated around in that pool, beside a boy who would soon leave me, I couldn't help but think about eternal return. Somewhere, at some distant time, someone felt just like me, just like him... And one day it would happen again.

There are some things about this life that we can't change. Some things will never be different. Everyone wins sometimes. Everyone loses. A song I heard once said “The race is long, and in the end, it's only with yourself.” But... this view, this philosophy, this thought about our experiences makes it just a little bit easier for me.

It gives me hope.

And, as the good book says, “Hope does not disappoint.”

Get My A and Get Out

by Candace Turlington

“Everybody was equal. Miserable but equal.” She paused, and a look resembling nostalgia washed over her eyes. Or was it a longing for something she had never truly had? “Everybody was kind of happy.”

I love the way she pronounces her Rs. Not quite a roll, but not like mine, not in the slightest. She’s the only Russian woman I’ve ever met, and I can’t shake this curious fascination with her. At times I feel it developing into a morbid obsession, but I suppose it’s only natural to want to know about things different from yourself. I listen to the other students, and I don’t get it. They can’t understand her accent. She gets on their nerves. They don’t like her. Am I the only one who wants to know more about her life? I want to know about her childhood, her family, her home.

Russia.

I’ve always wanted to go, or at least learn the language. It’s beautiful to me. Guttural and strong, yet feminine in its own right. The idea that I would have to learn an entirely new and foreign character system makes me apprehensive, but I’m still intrigued.

I know very little of the culture or the political system there. Here we are taught it is a Communist country. She says in Russia they are taught they live in a Socialist nation, working towards Communism. Here, we’re taught to think that’s a bad thing. In Russia they praise it. I guess it all comes down to perspective.

But I guess my whole issue here is whether or not it would be appropriate to try to get to know her on a personal level. She has her younger son with her here, but her husband and older son are in Russia. Kirov, to be exact. How often does she talk to them, or get to see them? Does she have friends here? Is she lonely? Do she and her son speak Russian or English at home?

I should probably not bother her with my endless questions. I’ll just keep listening to her accent and wondering what it would sound like in a more social setting. I’ll keep wondering to myself how much of her wardrobe is from Russia, and if she got that fashionable hairstyle here or back home. I’ll keep all my questions of Russian winters to myself, along with “What do kids do for fun?” and “What is an average family like?” I will ask her nothing of the religious practices or customs in Russia, nor will I ask her how Socialism actually works in a nation that claims to have it under control. I won’t ask her what she thinks of our democracy, or for details of the public health care in Russia. I will stifle the urge to ask her if this career, teaching, is one she chose, or one that was forced upon her by society or someone else. I will continue to wonder in silence if, regardless of how she came into it, it is a career she enjoys. Instead I will continue to strive for my A, and move on upon completion of this semester.

The Fall of the Arotere

by Cleveland Daniel Wright

Tocula sat in his thick-cushioned chair, staring out of the bay window and breathing at a deliberately slow pace. His face was flushed across his broad cheekbones, down to his scowling jaw and all the way down his long ears. He was not a man for outrage, and here was hardly the place or the time to change that. The flecks whipping up off of the storm-thrashed breakers that landed on the glass calmed him somewhat, the anger settling into the bottle he had been trying to force it into these past hours. With a final exhalation, he stood, turned on his heel and faced the bodyguard standing obediently at his door. In the moment of silence that followed, his guardian raised a brow.

“Gather the Crowns.”

With a curt nod, he departed through the door and down the staircase, leaving his master in his study. Tocula returned to the window, staring out toward the sea for a moment before turning his eye on the wall behind his writing desk. Five items hung there; all relics of his family’s lineage. A long rifle from the desert folk, horns of some gigantic beast killed with the self-same weapon, a trade agreement set behind glass in a frame that bore the signature of his great-great-grandfather, a ship painting by his mother’s favorite artist and a long, straight sword given to him by his great uncle that still sat in its sheath. He took the blade in his hands, slowly sliding the weapon from its home and laying it to rest in his palm. The metal was the same sickly green as all of its kin, and the handle would have been fit for the hand of a warrior had it not been crafted so fine. After staring into the well-honed instrument for a moment, as if expecting a reply, he returned it to its sheath and fastened it to his belt.

Over the next two weeks the sword never left his side as he awaited word from the other families. As the word came, a date was set and soon seven of the greatest eight sat in the Nalecti house. They knew why they were called, and without provocation they set upon the missing house like starved hounds. Tocula did not speak as his guests berated the Arotere family, telling of how they too had lost their outstanding trade routes and how many ships had gone missing from their respective fleets. He let them whip themselves into a small fury before Ibram, son of the Thomanolov house, silenced the room with a question.

“What do you think we should do, Tocula?”

His reply was slow and deliberate as he unfastened the sword and sat it before him on the table, letting each of the others look upon it a moment before he spoke, “We kill them.”

It was an empty silence that poured over the room after those words, but not one of protest. He had spoken what they all had wanted to ever since the Arotere had begun their undercutting crusade. They had all lost far too much money to have mercy on them, but no one had dared provoke an assassination first. The family heads looked to one another, eventually murmuring their approval and nodding.

“How shall we do it?” asked Ibram.

"In front of as many people as possible," said Tocola, as if he'd prepared the response, "Tell your men to wait until they are in the streets before a crowd. Theirs will be a public execution; an example to the rest."

Where normally this wouldn't seem viable, they knew that the other families would not turn against them. A lower house turning on a Crown family was as close to treason as their people could get. There was little dialogue following that, and many of the Siginos dispersed after some brief farewells, setting off to gather their hired blades. Not even a week after this shadowy meet, the first death was reported. The Baltocci family claimed the honor. One of the distant cousins of the Arotere house, barely related in name, was found dead in the streets of High Bay after first being shot in the back with a pistol and then thrown from the third-floor window of his shop. The second was killed by a Thomanolov; hanged from the railing of his second-floor balcony. The third was killed by one of Tocola's men; stabbed to death in the street as he'd requested and left to bleed out before a shocked crowd.

It was thus that the reports trickled in. One or two unlucky Arotere family members would be beaten, stabbed or shot every few days. As the lower rungs of the ladder fell apart, some of the more self-important members of the house fled, though many of them were caught in flight. Tocola was angered that some had escaped his men but raised a bounty on those who had gotten away, offering a hefty price for their heads. It did not take long before Arotere ships sat idle in the ports, absent of crews to man them, captains to guide them and owners to lease them out. Businesses—many of them generations old—became boarded up shacks on their streets. The end of the Arotere house became not only visible by the feathery torrent of crimson that stretched through the cities, but in the swift demise of each and every one of their enterprises that they had swindled, undercut and lied to in order to make prosper.

Soon, not many weeks after the killings had crept into the upper crust of the traitorous family, all that remained was their Sigino, their merchant-king, their patron, Octali Arotere and his closest retinue. The lot of them had been barricaded in the family's historical estate for days, and each of them was aware that their time was limited by the patience of the mercenaries camping on their doorstep. The heads of the other Crowns waited behind their thugs, delighted in knowing that Octali was awaiting his last violent moment with sweating, shivering and silent regret.

Tocola drew his men up first, crashing his way through the servants' entrance in the East wing of the estate. He was the only Sigino who charged in among the mercenaries, and he drew his pistol and sword all the same. He knew that Octali could hear the various pistol shots ringing up through the floor and the cries of his kin as they were shot and stabbed on the way up to his chambers. Tocola and several of his best men charged up the tallest of the staircases in the mansion, stopping before the large double-doors they found at their apex. He ordered that the door be broken down and his men dash in first, leaving only the damned Sigino for his blade. As the doors flew open under the boot of one of his hirelings, they found no resistance. There was no barricade, no lock, not even a bodyguard to accompany him. Octali Arotere sat alone in his office, still panting and afraid of death. Tocola entered between his men, sliding his pistol back into its holster and reinforcing the grip on his sword. Fearful, Arotere stood to meet him, as if ready to present some form of panicked protest.

Before a coherent syllable could leave his lips, the already stained blade slammed into him, crashing in under his ribcage. As suddenly as it arrived, it departed, ripped out in a crude reversal of the trust.

He was not allowed to fall to the floor however. Tocola made sure to grab the quickly dying Sigino by his hair and drag him over to the nearby windowsill. He dashed away the glass with his weapon and stepped up onto the precipice. With a guttural yell, one only the bottled-up anger of a desecrated generations-old trade agreement could bring to a man of his station, he tossed Octali out. He watched the blood-painted robes flutter as he fell all four stories down, finding the stone walkway below with a sickly thump.

Invention

by Cleveland Daniel Wright

The laboratory was dim and inhospitable looking and yet something—two somethings—quite alive lay within. A doctor, long forgotten by the world outside of the steel-reinforced walls of his research bunker, remotely operated near microscopic tools via the glowing computer screen that gently stitched and aligned the pieces of his greatest project yet. He stared intently at the bright panel, his ill-shaven face glowed the same color as the image projected by it. He hadn't slept in days, what little he slept anyway, for his literal brainchild was so near completion. The sweat that beaded on his brow was wiped away by his forearm, making sure his eyes never left the screen as one of the last few inlays sat directly in place. The machine he'd been operating finally stopped its monotonous humming as he slowly backed away from the monitor, panting as if exhausted by his work. With a keystroke, the entire machination backed away from the table, lurching backward and coming to a stop with a metallic whine.

Something came over the doctor's face; something of combined horror and wonder. Twelve years of work, of seclusion and utter silence, had culminated in the form that lay across the smooth, steel table. It was human, though perfect beyond any possible human form. It was gigantic, measuring at least eight feet tall and rippling with musculature only few people had ever attained. Its skin was smooth and cold to the touch; dead by all medical means. However, this being had not been killed nor had it died. It was born here. It had been built in the many years since the good doctor had been placed here by the government to continue his research in safety, away from the chaos and bloody slaughter that inevitably took place outside of the dense concrete walls of his new home. He'd not heard word from the government for nearly a decade of his seclusion and to be truthful, it had driven him to madness.

As the realization that his life's greatest work was now complete ran through him like a razor blade, the memories of the world outside his laboratory came rushing back to him. He'd nearly forgotten how life used to be. The first war was what he remembered best. He'd lost his wife and two daughters in the early months of the conflict, when the virus had only just begun to spread. They hadn't been taken by the virus, luckily he thought, but had been caught in the crossfire between the military and the advancing hordes of the infected. He knew it was no one's fault, but it didn't ease the pain the memory suddenly caused him. His eyes glazed over with tears, something that hadn't happened in several years. This creation was for them, he decided. The second war brought him here. The war machines the government had built to combat the infected swarms turned on them with such force, they were left no choice but to hide their greatest minds, like him, away in fortified locations such as this one. Much like they'd hidden their great minds, they too hid their greatest weapons, the greatest of which they had left in his hands.

It was only in its infancy when he had been placed here to finish it—alone at that—and when the transmission from the government had stopped, the constant retracing of steps and micro-assembly mixed with the utter silence of the outside world drove him to insanity. For months he abandoned the project, unable to keep his advancing

psychosis and his scientific mind separate from one another. At the end of his dormancy, however, a thought sprang from him. He was not sure whether it was born of lunacy or brilliance, and at that particular juncture, he cared very little. He was reminded of his years as a boy in Mexico when his father would take him to the wrestling matches where the luchadors would fly about the ring, colliding with one another in graceful fashion. He remembered the glory they earned in combat and god-like power he felt they had hidden behind their beautiful masks. He gazed down at the olive-drab clad, half-finished bionic body that he'd built and felt disgusted by it. It was boring. It was made to hold a rifle and shoot at the hordes and at the steel army. Bullets didn't work on the latter, and it took too many to be any good against the former and he knew that. This would not do. He stripped the project back down to the bare bones—quite literally—and started anew. He would build the greatest fighter the Earth had ever known, *el Ultimo* he thought, "The Last"; the last hope for human kind.

Here it sat. Its bionic heart and veins were ready to pump with the artificial blood he'd so carefully measured out and injected into it. It was ready for the breath of life to enter its lungs and allow it to destroy the greatest threats ever known. He strapped a gigantic defibrillator device to its chest, readying it to wake at long last. He paused a moment before passing a current through the massive cables leading to it. With an almost ritualistic carefulness, the doctor walked into the darkness of the laboratory and retrieved something he'd kept hidden away for years, unfolding it and returning to his creation. The mask had been hand-crafted from the various materials he had lying about the laboratory and scraps he'd found in closets and lockers. It was a vivid blue, just like the trunks he had pulled up about its waist, and its eyes were lined with white flames edged in gold. It fit like a second skin, just like a luchador's mask should, and was the last garnish on his masterpiece. He reached aside and pulled a lever as thick as his arm downward, completing the circuit and sending a rush of electricity through his creation powerful enough to send his laboratory into pure darkness.

All was silent for a moment. The only sound in the blackness was the doctor's breath, laden with anticipation and worry. He'd thought his project had failed before the silence was broken with a deep, guttural scream. His creation sat upright on the table and yelled at the top of its lungs, each of its thousands of veins glowing in the darkness with the neon-blue of bionic life. The scream was one of agony and horror; as if all the pain across the planet were laid upon it at once. It fell as suddenly as it rose from its slumber, just as the light returned to the laboratory and the horrified doctor who had pinned himself to the nearest wall. He wore a look of absolute terror as he gazed upon his creation, fearing that it still had not taken. Its chest rose and fell in a labored breath, and his expression was completely reversed and became one of joy. He leapt and screamed out in elation as his artificial super human lay on the table, the weight of the gigantic defibrillator alleviated by the push of a button.

Contributor Contract

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