

IMAGES OF THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE: WORKS BY STUDENTS OF ENGLISH STUDIES AT NICOLAUS COPERNICUS UNIVERSITY

The course “Introduction to literary theory” (English Studies, BA programme, 2nd year) offers an overview of the major current approaches to the study of literature. In addition to exploring theoretical perspectives, students analyse selected works of poetry, prose, and drama. As a preparation for the analysis, they practice creative writing and compose haiku, a seemingly simple yet emotionally intense verse form that originated in Japan in the 17th century. The haikus presented here were created for the 2024/2025 course and provide just a small sample of the students’ creative abilities.

The other works presented here were created for the 2024/2025 course “Media, film, literature: Ecological explorations in literature, film and art” (English Studies, MA programme, 1st year). The course employs the approaches developed by ecocriticism to examine environmental issues, such as climate change, fossil fuels, consumerism, and the sixth mass extinction, and their representation in literature, film, and art. The painting and short stories created by the students reflect the gravity of the current problems, call for change, and imagine potential futures. Joanna Porębska’s “Solarlady” encapsulates the ideas of solarpunk, an artistic, literary, and social movement that offers visions of a sustainable future and ways to achieve it. Julia Chorchos’s “A Dream of Tomorrow in a World of Today” juxtaposes the grim reality of environmental damage against a sustainable future, serving as a warning for those living in the early 21st century. Bartosz Jastrzębski’s “Splatters” presents a compelling critique of consumerism and the beauty myth (WARNING: the story contains graphic descriptions of self-harm). Finally, Piotr Zimmermann’s “The ElecrOlimpic Charter” depicts a future world dominated by technology, where

modified humans have become the norm. While these works are just a sample of the texts completed for the course, they illustrate the range of issues students consider important.

Katarzyna Więckowska

HAIKU

Each passing moment
Bound by the eternal vows
A wave returns home

Golden leaves drift down
Whispering of days now past
Autumn fades to rest

Heaven's tears in spring
Splash of colour growing round
Arch against the gate

The wind of struggles
A crystal raindrop falls down
It's getting colder

Autumn leaves drift down,
whispers dance on crisp night air,
moonlight warms the earth

Wind whispers at dawn
Cold air in a dark, small room
Loneliness creeps in

blossoms everywhere
the world starts to live again
born from light and bloom

Hares hidden in herbs
Before they leave their hideout
Foxes start hunting

Smoke over the lake
Grind the grass, burn the paper
Now inhale exhale

Our hands entangled
Like green vines mixed in branches
Bees buzzing above

Stars above my head,
Winter should be gone by now
But the cold lingers

Snow in spring whispers
Hearts burn in a sudden bloom
Love melts winter's chill

I love my new life
It's beautiful, like summer
Moments—short, fleeting

Golden leaves falling
Sounds dancing with autumn wind
Sadness is showing

Women on the moon
Moonlight on the women shines
They glow in the dark

Sun is coming down,
Empty darkness hugs slowly.
No one else around

Flower and the sun
Kissing my cheeks and my lips
Making me a star

Birds fly overhead
Singing such helpless tunes
Soon they will all freeze

Autumn leaves drift down,
whispers dance on crisp night air,
moonlight warms the earth.



Joanna Porębska, *Solarlady*

Solarlady is a solarpunk-inspired portrait that combines themes of technology and nature. It expresses hope (an important theme in solarpunk) through strong, bright colours.

A DREAM OF TOMORROW IN A WORLD OF TODAY

Sixteen-year-old Erica lives shortly after humanity has rediscovered the benefits of nature and learned to use its resources while protecting it. Coal mines, once major energy producers, have been replaced by environmentally friendly alternatives. Hydroelectric power plants, wind farms, and solar panels are widely used, and people actively contribute to energy generation. A shift in human consciousness towards caring for the planet has led to innovative solutions, such as the development of a new generation of smartwatches that generate energy from the steps taken throughout the day. Those who participate often benefit from lower energy bills. These smartwatches not only promote energy efficiency but also enhance health and life expectancy.

The transformation is evident not only in energy production but also in everyday life. Plastic bags have been replaced by biodegradable alternatives, and most food is now organically grown, leading to people making more conscious purchasing decisions. Clothing is now made from plant-based materials, making recycling easier. Gardening has become a widespread hobby, alongside small-scale manufacturing, which aligns perfectly with the modern ethos of "living in harmony with nature." Abandoned coal-fired power plants have been transformed into green spaces, with lush vegetation covering their ruins. These revitalized structures enhance urban biodiversity and beautify cities. Sculptures crafted from recycled materials, combined with greenery, create a stunning and modern urban landscape.

Cities have also undergone significant changes. They are now smaller, making navigation easier. Essential institutions are located close to one another, and numerous green spaces are available. Some buildings are covered in vegetation, contributing to the overall sustainability of urban life. Recycling centers and community hubs, where children can learn practical skills like manufacturing, are found on nearly every corner. Transportation has also

evolved. Initially, internal combustion cars were replaced by electric vehicles. Still, they soon proved problematic due to their reliance on rare raw materials, such as lithium, nickel, manganese, cobalt, and graphite, as well as the high fire risks associated with them. Today, hydrogen-powered cars are the norm, although most people still prefer walking or cycling.

Education has seen a revolution as well. From a young age, children are taught to care for the environment and participate in various charitable activities aimed at improving the planet's condition. Many workplaces organize monthly tree-planting events, contributing directly to the environment. The workweek has been shortened to four days, encouraging family time and personal well-being. Local communities regularly hold gatherings to foster social bonds and environmental stewardship, featuring workshops on sustainable living.

Erica's family lives in one such city. Her father works as a scientist for a smartwatch company, while her mother leads a charitable organization. Their small home, equipped with intuitive and eco-friendly devices designed by her father, reflects their commitment to sustainable living. Besides her charitable work, Erica's mother is a member of a political party dedicated to finding new ways to improve life on Earth. Erica herself is deeply involved in her community and has been committed to environmental efforts since she was a child. Inspired by her parents' achievements, she dreams of studying at a prestigious university and dedicating her life to building a world powered by clean energy and characterized by equality.

But all of this—this ideal world—turns out to be nothing more than a beautiful dream.

In reality, Erica lives in a world plagued by pollution, overflowing with garbage, and tainted by undrinkable water. Her parents work at a chemical plant responsible for much of the environmental destruction. Food is scarce, and people are forced to wear masks constantly, even while sleeping, to protect themselves from toxins. Years ago, the wealthiest fled to other planets in

private jets, leaving the less fortunate behind to face inevitable doom. Water has become so precious that expeditions are often organized to find it, though many who set out never return. Their families spend months or even years searching in vain for their loved ones. Erica, who has only known this bleak reality, joins other teenagers in the fight for a greener future, hoping that change is still possible. This could be our reality—unless we wake up in time.

Julia Chorchos

SPLATTERS

Cut. Splatters of red. Stitch.

“Have you seen the new *V-line Visage* trend?” How could she not. Billboards screamed promises of beauty with **razor-sharp** cheekbones and a chin so perfectly pointed it could **cut skin** or even glass. Social media flooded with influencers flaunting their newly reshaped faces, courtesy of the government-endorsed *V-fine* surgery.

“Human perfection is out. Inhuman perfection is in!” It wasn’t just a beauty procedure. It was a movement, an identity, a societal expectation. Sometimes she wondered what people were willing to do just to get on that operating table? How much? How long? How **painful**? Did these questions really matter? To her, they didn’t. Just like her desires didn’t matter to the government.

“Become the best you!” chirped the ads. A few years ago, the best version of her would be a world-known poet. An artist. A machine for producing valuable art. And now? The only thing she craved was to become the art. Look like a perfect product of the procedure. Become the product. Was that a downfall or just a simple change of preferences? She didn’t really know. Her mind was still filled with poetry, but her reality was filled with only one thought: “I want to be the face of society.”

The government called it an “investment in national aesthetic capital.” They offered tax **cuts** to anyone who underwent the procedure. Banks dangled loans with polished brochures featuring before-and-after transformations. Was that even legal? Well, nobody really cared as long as the money was right.

There was only one problem. She had no job. No stable income. No access to loans.

The rejection emails from banks piled up, each one **sharper** than the last. “Insufficient credit history.” “Unreliable employment record.” All the people on

the billboards already had the surgery. They moved through the world with their chins held high, their angular faces **cutting** the air with confidence.

She could only stand in front of her mirror every night, fingers tracing the soft, rounded contours of her face. Unacceptable. Weak. Pathetic. Only if you could imagine the fear mixed with excitement as she clutched the DIY surgical manual she'd downloaded from a shady corner of the internet. If they wouldn't help her, she'd help herself.

Cut. Splatters of red. Stitch.

Crimson rivers, a silent twitch.

A wound speaks in whispered cries,

As threads weave where the lifeblood lies.

The first incision was a shallow one. She bit down on a piece of wood to muffle her screams. Her apartment reeked of disinfectant and desperation. She'd sterilized her kitchen **knives** over the stove, laid out rolls of gauze, and watched enough tutorial videos to know what she was doing. Mostly.

The pain was electric, radiating through her jaw and into her skull. **Blood** poured, sometimes shot, sometimes ricocheted. Down her neck, straight at the mirror, onto the walls. Staining her sweatshirt, painting on her skin, destroying the cheap interiors. How did she get the fillers that were about to go under her skin? Don't even ask. She wanted to forget it as soon as she got the bag with fillers. You would too. She tried to **stitch** the wound closed, but her shaking hands left the threads uneven and puckered. She stared into the mirror, trying to see the improvement through her tears. It would get better. It had to.

Cut. Splatters of red and yellow. Stitch.

Weeks passed. Her reflection became her obsession. She ate little, her jaw too tender to chew. She barely slept, haunted by the whirring of imaginary surgical drills and the ghostly praise of influencers. She had so little money,

because how could she work? Infection set in around her cheekbones, the skin swelling into grotesque bulges. She drained the pus with trembling hands, the sickly yellow fluid oozing onto her semi-professional yet trustful kitchen tools. The **piercing** pain was unbearable, but she couldn't stop.

"Pain is beauty," she whispered to herself as she **stitched** her face yet again. The refrain became her mantra.

Cut. A single splatter of yellow. Can't fucking stitch.

Months slipped by in a haze of agony and determination. She had stopped leaving her apartment entirely. Her savings dwindled to nothing, spent on black-market antibiotics. She didn't want to die. She wanted to be THE face. Maybe then her poetry would be noticed. The radio buzzed with **sharp** warnings about the latest government scandals: turns out *V-fine* was raking in billions while quietly brushing aside early reports of adverse reactions. "Baseless rumors," the officials claimed.

I can finally stitch.

She didn't care. Her face was almost perfect. Almost. She'd sculpted her cheekbones into **razor-sharp** relief, her jawline a sleek V that would have made any influencer jealous. But the skin beneath her chin sagged slightly, mocking her efforts.

One last cut.

Remove the stitches. Cut. A single splatter of red. Stitch.

The final result was everything she'd dreamed of. Her new face was breathtaking, a masterpiece of symmetry and **sharp** angles. She stared at her reflection for hours, running her fingers over the expensive, smooth skin. She imagined herself stepping back into the world, a phoenix rising from the ashes of her old self.

She opened her laptop for the first time in months, eager to post her transformation. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard as she scrolled through the latest news.

V-fine recalls all implants due to toxicity concerns.

Is it over? The latest trend poses a danger to human lives?

*Are all V-lined celebrities about to **DIE**?*

Her stomach dropped.

Reports were flooding in: necrosis, **blood** poisoning, organ failure. The materials used in the implants were breaking down, releasing a cocktail of **deadly** chemicals into the bloodstream. Lawsuits piled up, but the government and corporations were untouchable, protected by contracts and legal loopholes. It felt like they'd been preparing for it. They were ready. They were biting off the society's wound as much as they could until the wound got too infected.

The trend was over. Influencers posted tearful apologies as they scheduled removal surgeries. The new ideal was "natural beauty" all over again. How amazing, right? V-line faces were suddenly "dated," a grotesque reminder of corporate greed, and a clear sign of who could afford the surgery before, but couldn't afford the removal now. Unless they did it at home, like one specific prodigy of DIY surgery.

Her reflection stared back at her, imperfect in its alleged perfection. Were the edges of her jawline starting to discolor, or was it just her imagination? She always had a rich imagination. That's why she was so good at poetry, at least until her mind got filled with a different form of art. The thought of undoing everything she'd suffered for made her chest tighten with panic. The same panic that kept waking her up at night. The same panic she felt whenever she heard or saw a word related to surgery. **Blood? Cut? Sharp?** She couldn't bear them.

But leaving everything in could kill her.

Remove the stitches. Cut. Splatters of red. Stitch.

She sat in front of the mirror, her primitive scalpel in hand. Her reflection blurred through her tears. The thought of more pain, more **blood**, more **stitching**—it was unbearable. She'd spent a year **carving** herself into this shape, isolating herself from the world, sacrificing everything for a fleeting ideal. Now, she was expected to destroy it?

Her hands trembled as she touched the scalpel to her skin. She couldn't bring herself to **cut**. Not yet. Her body shook with sobs, the weight of everything crashing over her.

Finally, she set the scalpel down and whispered to her reflection:

"I'm tired of stitching myself."

I'm tired of stitching myself,

Torn edges no thread can heal.

Each pull a reminder, each knot a weight,

A peace that never feels real.

Her grave was simply ugly. It was made of the cheapest stone possible, as there was no one to pay for anything better. However, when one social worker came to her empty home to investigate the case of a dead young girl with some horrible facial wounds, he saw a scrap of paper splattered with blood and scribbled with four lines of pure pain and disappointment.

That was the only good part of the story: her poetry finally got noticed. Her last poem was engraved on her tombstone. Commissioner? Anonymous. Just like her art used to be.

Bartosz Jastrzębski

THE ELECTROLIMPIC CHARTER

Every country is eligible to select and send its athletes to participate in the event. The primary competition is team-based—country teams compete to see which team generates the most energy by the last day of the ElectrOlympics.

As of 2089 the ElectrOlympic's events are held in the following sports:

- marathon run,
- sports gymnastics,
- 100m sprint,
- 1km run,
- skateboarding,
- fitness racing,
- functional fitness,
- powerlifting,
- olympic weightlifting,
- basketball,
- rugby

The ElectrOlympics are performance-oriented; thus, the ElectrOlympic Judge Committee allows for the use of modern technologies to enhance the athlete's performance. Medals can only be granted to athletes who are physically present at the podium during the medal ceremony. Countries that end up on the ElectrOlympic podium by the end of the whole event will receive significant investment from OsTech Industries.

Facing the natural

Streets were extremely busy that day. Everyone had to see them before their departure. You could think that half the city gathered in front of the Gimnasio Estatal. The people wanted to gaze at their champions before they departed for

the land of extreme heat and luxury. There was no denying that the entire populace of Bogota was aware of what was about to transpire in a few days. Colombians were 4th in this year's ElectrOlympics, with only a few events to go, the weightlifting team had to step out of their usual competitor's shadows if the funding was to be secured.

The last physiotherapy sessions had just ended when Alejandro walked out of the changing room. He felt comfortable about his first start in such a big international event. After a great season and a strong start at the world championships, he felt honoured to have been picked as a representative for the -85kg class. He knew he had improved both his snatch and clean and jerk substantially this season. There is no better feeling for a weightlifter than peace of mind a few days before the competition.

– The final briefing starts in ten minutes – An assistant coach could be heard in every corridor of the gymnasium. Alejandro made his way towards the conference room.

They were all there. The entire team. The twenty strongest and most powerful men and women of Colombia.

– Tomorrow we depart for Sahara City. Make sure to relax this evening, the flight might be taxing. We'll meet near the airport entrance at midday. Double check your gear before you leave for the airport. – Reminded coach Diaz. – The others already did their part. Our fitness racers and skateboarders do not stand a chance with the top nations, even if they pulled off a miracle, so it is up to us, weightlifters, to secure this year's podium and give back to our nation. We have not had such a generation since the 2016 Olympics. The whole nation believes in you! – The coach could not have better described the atmosphere around the venue. People gathered in front of the Gimnasio Estatal were almost ecstatic when the first pairs appeared in the gymnasium's doors.

– Make some noise for Alejandro Mendoza! The -85kg contestant! – A man screamed through a megaphone as the crowd cheered. Mendoza felt ringing in his ears as he walked by the barriers separating him from the crowd.

The next day, the whole team was already on their way to Sahara City. It has been years since Midnight's end, but the story of the city's foundation was still shrouded by the same mysterious mist that shrouded the invention of the technology their entire modern livelihoods depended on. A luxurious enclave in the middle of the largest desert on the planet. A city independent from all nations. The UN's safe haven. Sahara City has been given many names throughout the years, but it is mostly known for two things. Housing the HQ of the largest energy corporation on Earth—OsTech Industries, and being the host for the famed Olympic Games offshoot—The ElectrOlympics.

Alejandro knew little of his teammates. The closest he had to a friend in the team was Casper Figueroa. A man of extraordinary technique, who rose up the ranks of Colombian weightlifters just this year. Both he and Alejandro were invited to the team as replacements for former representatives of their weight classes, who had retired. They both shared an ambition to outlast the previous lifters.

– Mendoza! What day do you compete? – On the plane, facing them sat Oliver Aleora. Alejandro looked at his teammate. Olivier was a mountain of a man, much bigger than Alejandro. Veins were clearly visible on his neck. "Incredible what they can achieve these days," thought Mendoza.

– Sunday. You lower weights go first. – He answered. He has heard of "the modern training method," but has always stuck to the classic techniques and methods. However, seeing Aleora in this shape, Alejandro considered giving the new method a try next season.

The Land of Luxury and Sand

As they left their plane behind them, the Colombians made their way into the vast Sahara Main Airport. Railings of gold made their way across the walls of the building's corridors. As they moved through them, Alejandro and his teammates arrived at the central terminal. Three large palm trees were at the center of the large room. Alongside its walls, countless food stands,

merchandise vendors and airport information terminals were available to every traveler, for the right price that is.

Outside the terminal, they were greeted by the sight of the ElectrOlympic village. Every nation had a place there. Hotel Vertigo for the Russians, Italians, Iranians, and the Portuguese; the Brazilians, South Africans, and Poles in Hotel Plaza, and the Haitians, Mexicans, French, and Japanese in Hotel Sky. The village was buzzing with life and a perfect place for international integration. Soon, the Colombians found out that the hotel they were meant to stay at was Hotel Kuzim. Waiting for them inside was the Bulgarian team.

The hotel's interior was a true testament to the post-midnight architecture. Walls made out of woodbrick and algiglass surrounded the lobby Alejandro and his team entered. The reception desk made out of a giant log greeted them as warmly as the receptionist behind it.

– Welcome to Hotel Kuzim! We are happy to host the strongest of all Colombians – said the receptionist. – Your room keys can be found on the left side of the counter – he pointed to a stack of keycards laying on top of the reception desk.

Alejandro made his way to the room he was assigned to. While traversing corridors made out of hollowed sequoia trunks, he reflected on the process of their construction. It was hard to imagine that these trees were once endangered. He imagined anthropocenic people viewing them as some kind of natural monuments. Now they were mere building blocks.

When he entered his room, Alejandro was greeted with a beautiful view of Sahara City. The generations that used to be would have never suspected such marvels at the center of the biggest desert on the globe, but there it was. Skyscrapers, cultivated from trees, filled the view with the green of their leaves. The streets beneath them, while filled with traffic, did not produce any noise. Alejandro could not imagine the world without the marvel of the hydro-engine. Looking at the city, he appreciated that he was born in such great times.

- Can I enter? – The tranquility of the moment was interrupted by a sudden knocking sound coming from the door to his room.
- Come on in – Responded Alejandro – You are from Team Bulgaria, aren't you?
- Yes, I am Alexij. I have heard that you are also a middle-weight. Alejandro, right?
- Correct.
- I have taken a peek at Sunday's starting list. We are in the same group.
- A or B? – Asked Mendoza.
- A. Welcome to the best in the sport! – The Bulgarian shook Alejandro's hand. He was well-built and visibly shorter than the Colombian. He reminded Alejandro of the Bulgarian weightlifters from legends. – I am making a tour around the village, trying to meet and greet every fellow competitor I saw on the list. I like to know my rivals.
- How did you know where to find me? – Asked Mendoza.
- You'd be surprised how talkative people are around here. The receptionist simply told me where to find you. Apparently, there has been almost no crime here for the last decade. – The Bulgarian responded with a smile. – Anyway, it was nice meeting you. See you on Sunday, Alejandro!

Hall of Fame

When he woke up, Alejandro felt refreshed after a long night of sleep in the comfortable bed of his hotel room. The lower weights started their competition in the evening, so he decided to attend the fitness racing finals, which were to take place in a few hours. He had to attend his pre-competition workout before, however.

During his morning routine, Alejandro was accompanied by the sound of the news coming from a widescreen TV mounted on the wall opposite his bed. The broadcast was mainly focused on covering the ElectrOlympics.

- The fitness racing is coming to a conclusion today. There are only 10 pairs standing after 3 days of fierce competition. Currently leading the competition

are Daria Olenkowicz and Łukasz Stalski from Team Poland. As of now, they have generated 2500 kW. – Said the news host with excitement.

– That’s an enormous amount! – Said the co-host.

– You are right. What is worth noting is that their suits operate at near maximum capacity from the moment they reach the ten-minute mark in each race. These guys just don’t stop.

– It seems that it’s all in the family. Pre-midnight Olenkowicz, her great-grandfather, was a fitness star after all.

– He sure was. – Recalled Mendoza. He always liked watching fitness racing and remembered reading the pre-midnight records of the fitness stars of old. Among them, he remembered the Polish juggernaut—Bronisław Olenkowicz. He was excited to see the racers compete live today.

An hour later, he was already in the Colombian gym. Coach Diaz was already waiting for him there. Warm up went as usual, thirty minutes of mobility exercises, activations and warm-up lifts. Then came the full lifts. Mendoza did a couple of lighter snatches, two sets of 100 kg, two sets of 110 kg and a set of 115 kg. They took a two-minute break.

– Look, Alejandro, the government believes you can take first place tomorrow. They believe that you are the golden boy. But I have to be honest. Your chances are slim at best. You are not enhanced. You don’t take anything, you are not subject to any kind of therapy. The doctor believes you are a “special case,” and I see his point, your form and technique are perfect, as perfect as it gets. Your recovery is always on point. But I can’t shake the feeling that the others just play a different game. – Coach Diaz stood in front of him with a grim face.

– The doctor took care of everything: my diet, my recovery, my nutrition. He said he has found a way to make me compete safely, and I trust him. – Replied Alejandro.

– Welcome, gentlemen! – The gym doors opened. Through them walked a slim man in a dark coat. His glasses reflected the white light of the lamps that lit the room. – How is my greatest patient doing, coach?

– Perfect, as usual, doctor. – Diaz almost stood to attention. Alejandro never realized this, but the coach always spoke of the doctor with utmost respect.
– May we have a word in private, Mr. Diaz? – The doctor said with a smile on his face.

They walked away, and Alejandro could only suspect what the conversation was about. The doctor kept pointing at Mendoza while Diaz simply stood there. He was carefully listening and nodding his head every now and then. Alejandro kept practicing his clean and jerk during the whole thing. A stream of thoughts went through his mind. Why would the coach tell him something like that right before his competition day? Could he really outperform his opponents as a complete natural athlete? What if he fails? Why does the government care so much for his performance in particular? He couldn't bring himself to dwell on any of those questions for too long; he needed peace before his debut.

A few hours later, Mendoza was entering the fitness racing arena. A colosseum-like venue has been cultivated out of trees, and giant bushes with a circular running track at its centre. Inside the running circle was the fitness arena. A spot with ten sleds, another station with a wall ball cage and a station for a farmer's walk were easy to identify. Right next to the finish line was a power reading station where the athletes would input the power stored in their microbatteries after the competition. The entire venue was powered by the energy generated over the past three days of competition. Even as a natural, Alejandro could not deny the effectiveness that a combination of the new technologies and the marvels of modern sports pharmacy could achieve.

There they were. The ten pairs, already wrapped in dark, slim EndoSuits. Brazilians, Americans, French and Chinese pairs were located closest to Alejandro. Among all the competitors were also the two Poles famous on television in the morning. A Colombian pair also made it to the finals, but they were speculated to be last in this race. To think that each pair would generate enough power to sustain a small family household in the next hour was preposterous.

Around the stadium, Mendoza saw medical staff in unusually high quantities. Fitness racing was a moderately dangerous sport, but he counted around ten ambulances dotted around the stadium. He did not recall seeing such a large number of medics in the live TV coverage. The beeper went off, and the racers were off. For the next hour, they would compete in a series of fitness challenges interrupted by one-mile running sessions. After the first mile, the competitors would get on rowing machines. The first pair to reach this station was naturally Team Poland, with the Americans and the Chinese right behind them. Surprisingly, the Colombians came in fifth place, being right behind the Brazilians. This situation would continue through the next mile and the ski-erg machine. After the third mile, the Colombians dropped to sixth place, being overtaken by the French pair.

And then it happened. In the middle of the sled station, one of the Brazilian athletes collapsed on the ground. Medics were rushing to the field. Alejandro could see the man shaking on the ground even from his faraway seat. The situation turned even more bizarre as the announcer urged the other pairs to keep competing, as the Brazilian pair was escorted off the stadium by the medical staff. Alejandro could hear the female Brazilian athlete screaming in fear as they went closer to the exit located somewhere beneath his seat.

It was not uncommon for fitness racing athletes to faint mid competition, even pre-midnight, when the sport was born. These cases would continue to occur from time to time in every electrolympic competition. Alejandro, however, could never shake the strange feeling he had after seeing each case. The man was in serious danger, and the competition simply continued as if this was normal? Alejandro knew he was safer than most of the other competitors in Sahara City, but the thought of a health breakdown always loomed in the back of his mind.

In the evening, Mendoza went to see his colleagues at the beginning of the weightlifting competition. The lower weights would determine the strongest of them, and medals were bound to be scored by the upcoming Colombian stars.

Among them was the man he got to know on the plane—Oliver Areola, who was a bit of a legend in the -75 class. Another upcoming champion from the Colombian side was Casper Figueroa, with whom Alejandro frequently trained. The -65 category was to be first. It took some time for group B to finish their struggles, but finally, the A weightlifting competitors were stepping out on the stage, Figueroa among them. Other lifters started strong; the Russian, a visibly muscular man with veins running all over his arms, snatched 110 kg, followed by the American with his 112 kg. More and more athletes completed their first snatch, and finally it was Casper's turn. He stepped out on the stage. As planned, he started from 125 kg, a massive lift for this weight category. His loud steps could be heard around the entire stadium as he approached the bar. Figueroa fixed his stance, got into the snatching position and pulled. The bottom speed of this man was incredible. After the bar went past his hips, the athlete snapped in a second to catch it overhead.

– Just like Oscar! – A man next to him gasped, clearly impressed with the Colombian's technique. Alejandro turned to him. It was Alexij. Now he could see him in clear light. The Bulgarian was visibly older than him, but was still of formidable size. – Do you know this lifter, my Colombian friend? – Asked Alexij.

– Yes, it's Casper Figueroa, we train together. – Replied Alejandro.

– Figueroa? So they are related! – Bulgarian replied with visible amazement.

– What do you mean?

– Oscar Figueroa, don't tell me you don't know anything about one of the most legendary Colombian lifters?

– Of course, I know, but no, they are not relatives. I asked Casper a long time ago about his surname, and he said it was just a coincidence. – Alejandro said confidently.

– I think you are mistaken, my friend. He lifts just like Oscar did.

– I know my friends well Alexij. I never got to know your full name, though. – Mendoza changed the subject of the conversation.

– Oh, my name is Alexij Nasar, and before you ask, yes, one of these Nasars. – Proudly proclaimed the Bulgarian. The number of famous surnames this year just occurred to Alejandro. He did not recall a similar number of legendary names from the previous ElectrOlympics.

Whatever it takes

His peace of mind was but a memory now. Alejandro could no longer unsee the patterns. Nasar and Olenkowicz were confirmed cases of sports lineage, but could Casper also be one? How could he not notice that throughout the year? Figueroa's form was too good to be mere talent. If he was so talented, why did he arrive at the ElectrOlympics only now? Why didn't he even make it to the regular Olympics once? As Mendoza pondered all those questions in the morning, the TV broadcast aired in the background.

– We are here with Daria Olenkowicz, the gold medalist in fitness racing. Daria, I have to start by asking how your teammate is doing. – The reporter started the interview.

– Thank you, Łukasz feels much better now, but could not make it to the studio today. We gave our best yesterday, and his body simply needs to rest now, but I assure you he will be back next year! – Replied the Polish athlete.

– That's good to hear, but don't you think that the competition sometimes gets a little too fierce – asked the reporter.

– It's natural for professional athletes to risk their health in order to achieve the best results, and the ElectrOlympics are the pinnacle of modern sports competitions. The game is worth the risk. As an athlete, though, I feel completely safe on the competition floor. I have trust in the medical staff that is always there with us to ensure that even in the case of an injury, there is no real danger. We saw the great work of the medical team yesterday in the case of Team Brazil, as they safely escorted the injured athlete and his colleague to the ambulatory care unit. As a matter of fact, the Brazilian is resting in the same room as Łukasz and from what I hear, they get along quite well!

– Thank you, Daria. Now moving on to: A great energy crisis or a collapse of anthropocentric thinking – the Long Midnight analyzed by a philosopher. – Alejandro turned the TV off. Impossible, the Brazilian looked beyond recovery. He heard his friend scream in fear. How could a case of mere muscle fatigue like Łukasz be laid in the same room as a serious health breakdown like the Southern American? The ElecrOlympics seemed more and more bizarre to Alejandro now that he witnessed them in person.

There was no morning workout today. Alejandro spent most of the day in his room, before packing and leaving for the competition floor. Once he entered the changing room, he looked like a ghost.

– Hello, friend Mendoza! – His Bulgarian friend greeted him. He was ignored. Alejandro couldn't stop thinking about the strangeness of the situation. He is about to compete against a Nasar, descendant of the great Karlos Nasar, who shook the weightlifting world in the old days. He witnessed the granddaughter of Olenkowicz win yesterday. How was he to compete when he felt like being surrounded by giants?

The competition was about to start. Mendoza was already clad in the pitch black EndoSuit. Energy production was also a crucial part of the weightlifting competition, but it ultimately boiled down to the weight lifted by individual athletes. The smoothness of the technique played a greater role than before, however.

– I have seen the others warm up. – Coach Diaz grabbed Alejandro by the shoulder. – It is clear that the Bulgarian is going to be your main competitor. He is old, though. It is unusual that they made him compete this year; his kind typically doesn't last that long in the sport. – Added Diaz. Alejandro noticed that Alexij is older, but did not take him for an elderly man. – We can use it. Team Bulgaria made a mistake by appointing him. If you push him to his limits, he might collapse. You do not need to outlift him, just make him not reach the medal ceremony and the gold is ours. Give him a run for his money at the last two lifts. – The words of Coach Diaz rang in Alejandro's ears. How could his

coach even suggest such a thing? He was supposed to make a man who was so friendly from the first day collapse? What kind of sportsmanship was that supposed to be? Mendoza did not respond to his coach in any manner. He simply looked at Alexij, and he looked back, smiling.

After the snatch contest, Alejandro came in second as predicted. The first place was occupied by the Bulgarian. The final three lifts in clean and jerk would decide everything. Mendoza went for 185 kg as an opener. Alexij beat him and lifted 195 kg. Mendoza went to the weight table and declared 196 kg. When he turned, he was met with the gaze of Coach Diaz. He felt pressure building up in him. He turned around, looked Alexij in the eyes and declared:

– I change, 201 kg. – He saw the shock on Alexij's face. He knew that should he make that lift, the Bulgarian would be in danger.

Mendoza stepped on the platform. He looked at the other members of Team Colombia, who were cheering him up as he fixed his starting position. The bar lifted from the ground. The struggle was visible on the Colombian lifter's face. Alejandro received the barbell on his shoulders and squatted deeply. He felt the bar pushing him down as he struggled against it. He stayed in a deep squat for a few seconds, gasping for air as the 201 kg pinned him down. After a brief moment, Alejandro focused his whole will on standing up. He screamed loudly as he recovered from the squatted position. One final inhale, and he exploded the bar up.

– Good lift – screamed the head judge. The arena erupted in applause. Alexij was in peril as he knew he would have to perform a taxing 202 kg lift in order to overtake the Colombian. However, against all odds and to the surprise of Coach Diaz, he made it. He was, however, severely taxed.

– I know what you are up to. And know that I do not envy you, my friend. – Alexij said to Alejandro as they were standing by the weight table. Mendoza's coach has already declared 220 kg for the Colombian's next lift.

– He is spent. If you make it, he will have to try 221. He won't make it, and his snatch advantage will play no role. – Coach Diaz urged Mendoza.

He walked out on the stage for the final time. With 220 kg on the bar, Alejandro needed to gather his whole focus on this moment. Once again, he fixed his posture. Lifted the bar off the ground. Received it on his shoulders. This time, however, he felt that he would not be able to stand up. He pushed hard with both his legs, but the bar just kept pushing against him. He had to drop it.

The crowd erupted in applause, but it was not for his accomplishment, but to praise the great Bulgarian.

– I am sorry, Alejandro. – said Coach Diaz. – You had your chance. Now I am afraid I have to go see the doctor. – He was visibly unhappy, but also full of sorrow

– What about me? – Asked Alejandro.

– They will fix you for next year.

– What does it even mean?

Piotr Zimmermann