

STANDING ON THE ASTRO-TURF

By Eustacia Cutler ©

An elk in rutting season mistook the fog horn for a mating call. Dreaming of bliss, he followed the call to its source and ended up facing a lighthouse keeper who was laughing at him. Astro-turf can fool us into feeling like real grass, but floating dandelion seeds will never sprout dandelions in it.

Of such is the nature of the manufactured world.

The same is true of the virtual world. An MIT computer genius can program a prosthetic arm that carries out every predictable motion an arm can make. With the same circuits he can build a robot that seems uncannily human.

But after a bit you sense that the robot only responds in the pattern of its programmer: shy in the ways that the programmer is shy, pompous in the way his friends tell him that he's pompous. As yet no one can program spontaneity.

Spontaneous and random belong to life.

The real world is sparked with both. We listen to each other, wake up to new ideas, change our mind and move to a different residence. In a word, we grow-- along with elks, dandelions and the ever evolving zeitgeist.

And that includes those on the autism spectrum. Though they love computer programs rather more than we wish they did, they themselves are alive with possibility.