

Silver-Green Haired Beth and Her Wonderful All-Analogue Linear Time Equalizer and Resequencer

by [David Wiener](#) (September 2024)



Beth pushed a big, fat sunflower seed through the bars of the

cage and held it there for Walter.

“See? I can get two fingers between the bars up to my second knuckle. See that?”

“I see it, I see it,” Walter thought, sniffing the seed. It smelled good. “You say that all the time. They’re very nice fingers, very graceful. Gimmee,” thought Walter as he took the seed from her fingers with his furry little pudgy paws. “Yum,” Walter thought.

“My mom always said, ‘Our Beth has the most graceful hands. Beautiful fingers. Elongated fingers were considered a mark of great beauty in Elizabethan times. Just look at the portraits of Queen Elizabeth. The ones where you can see the royal fingers, that is. Our Beth could be a famous concert violinist with those fingers—or a renowned brain surgeon.’ And dad would say, ‘Or a great pickpocket. Or a fine safecracker.’”

Walter grinned as he munched. He never minded hearing Beth’s stories as long as he had his snack.

Beth set down a little gold plastic tray covered with a blue napkin next to Walter’s cage and whisked off the napkin. Under it was a little, tiny cake made of mashed banana, blueberries, and pears.

“And TA-DA!!!!” Beth said, “It’s W.A.A.L.T.E.R.’s birthday today buddy, so here’s a special treat.” She opened the door to the cage and Walter took a step out and sniffed, then started eating.

“Cake’s all for you, pal. I’m having a walnut brownie,” Beth said, taking a big bite. “Good stuff, huh?”

“Thanks, Beth!” thought Walter as he munched. “Yes, very good stuff.”

“W.A.A.L.T.E.R. is one year old today and I’m gonna mount up and ride him.”

Walter looked up at Beth, concerned.

“Relax, Walter, buddy. You just relax. Everything’s goooood.”

Walter liked Beth’s voice; it was nice and soothing. Once, she told him she was a “mezzo.” Walter liked the way that word sounded, too. “Mezzo, mezzo, mezzo,” he thought to himself. “Gee, this cake is good,” Walter thought.

“W.A.A.L.T.E.R. can’t eat, so we’ll have to have his treats for him,” Beth said, petting Walter gently with one finger. She sang softly to herself, “W.A.A.L.T.E.R. stays in the back room and Walter stays in his cage. Walter keeps trying to get out. And he’s really fat.”

“Supposed to be fat,” Walter thought, “I’m a hamster.”

“Uh reckon uh’ll be jes’ about th’ best dang time-machine pilot in this-here whole dang wide werld, Walter. That’s cuz uh’ll be the ONLY dang time-machine pilot in this-here whole dang wide werld.” Beth giggled and said, “That’s my Chuck Yeager voice—pretty good, huh, Walter?”

“Who’s Chuck Yeager?” Walter thought.

Beth said, “You see, Walter, I am not a ‘chronovoyager.’ I am a ‘chronoviewer.’”

“Semantics,” Walter thought, washing his little whiskers. “She’s killin’ me with semantics.”

Beth stood up and settled Walter back into his cage; he burrowed down into a big stack of shavings and quickly fell asleep.

Beth checked his water bottle and quietly left the room.

Down the hall was the little spare room where Beth had spent all her free time over the past few months, putting flesh on the bones of her time-machine.

She unlocked the door, went inside, and switched the lights on.

In the center of the room stood "W.A.A.L.T.E.R." – Beth's time-machine. Well, squatted would be more accurate—W.A.A.L.T.E.R. was a chunky thing, about five feet wide by four feet high by three feet deep.

"Hi, W.A.A.L.T.E.R.," Beth whispered. "How's the boy?"

W.A.A.L.T.E.R. was silent, dark. He hadn't been powered up yet. Beth walked past her little soldering bench and the metal racks filled with out-of-print vacuum tube guidebooks, electronic catalogues, and old, old Radio-Electronics magazines. All of this described a world as far away from the digital age as Walter the hamster was from a blue whale.

"A glass-bottomed boat through time," Beth breathed, running the tips of her fingers over W.A.A.L.T.E.R.'s jet-black hammertone paint. "Comes the watcher," Beth said softly, outlining W.A.A.L.T.E.R.'s steel chassis with her fingers. "...like strolling through the stacks at the Main Branch of the Akashic Library..." She knelt down and plugged W.A.A.L.T.E.R. into the wall.

Then she reached under her collar and pulled her necklace up and over her head. It was a steel chain with a brass key dangling from it.

Beth pushed the key into a small compartment set into W.A.A.L.T.E.R.'s upper-right hand corner, labelled "Main Power Access" in stencilled gray paint. She turned it completely around twice, then one-half turn back the other way. There was a muffled triple-click and she pulled open the access panel door. Reaching inside, she grabbed a wooden twist handle that had come from an old blasting machine and gently patted W.A.A.L.T.E.R. on the side with her other hand.

"And here we go, buddy-boy..." Beth said, and twisted.

There was a deep, soft, penetrating “CLUNCK” that resonated with Beth’s chest cavity; it sounded like a shot put wrapped in velvet dropped on an old mahogany desk.

“...clunck...” Beth said. She slid her hand out of the power-up access compartment and locked it with her big brass key.

She tucked the chain back under her collar and sat down in an overstuffed leather chair to watch W.A.A.L.T.E.R. rouse himself.

The geometry of the little spare room seemed to shift subtly as his capacitors charged up and his transformers hummed, generating heat. And then, the amber-copper light from W.A.A.L.T.E.R.’s ranks of vacuum tubes began to shine through the perforated steel-mesh panels of his frame.

The amber points of lights glistened in Beth’s eyes and she smelled ozone in the room—but it wouldn’t build up past a certain point because she had installed vents and fresh air ducts in the walls even before W.A.A.L.T.E.R.’s framework had been assembled.

A low hum filled the room and a tiny percussion symphony of clicks started up from the relays.

Beth leaned forward and rested her hand on W.A.A.L.T.E.R.’s side—he was warm—he was alive. Rows of faceted glass indicator lights strobed and then burned bright green, blue, and gold. Elegant readout meters in Bakelite and glass with delicate arrowheads on the tips of their indicator needles twitched, trembled, and settled into their “Normal Range” position. And W.A.A.L.T.E.R.’s big transformers hummed with a steady, low drone.

Beth leaned forward so she could reach the dials under two split-flap displays—the display on the left was labeled “DATE/TIME, PLEASE” and the one on the right was labeled “LOCATION, PLEASE.”

She dialed "DECEMBER 31 1950 11:30 PM" into the first display and then dialed the latitude and longitude of the little house she shared with Walter and W.A.A.L.T.E.R. into the other display.

She slipped on a headband embedded with electrodes trailing a thick black wire, ending in a $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch phone plug. She pushed it into a jack labelled "USER CONNECTION" until she heard a click, then leaned back in the chair.

On one side of the chair, there was a standing ashtray made of steel and glass. In the green glass ashtray was the dead-man's switch, permanently wired into W.A.A.L.T.E.R.

Beth looked around the room—at the embroidered curtains drawn shut and the framed "Rear Window" poster on the wall and down at her shoes, all lined up along the base of the steel rack with the old Radio-Electronics magazines.

Beth whispered, "Depend upon it, sir, when a girl knows she is to be sent through time, it concentrates her mind wonderfully..." She took the dead-man's switch and hefted it up and down in the palm of her hand.

"...see a pin and pick it up, all the day you'll have good luck..." As soon as she gripped it, the trip would begin. And whenever she let go—voluntarily or involuntarily—the trip would end and she would (or so the theory went) find herself back in the big leather chair in the spare room with W.A.A.L.T.E.R.

"Just squeeze me," Beth sang softly, "...but please don't tease me..."

And she grabbed it tightly.

She expected the room to just disappear—but it didn't. It was sort of pulled up and away, like a magician snatching a long silk handkerchief out of a hidden pocket.

The out-of-kilter geometry of W.A.A.L.T.E.R.'s room no longer mattered to her. She was completely calm. She sensed she was moving at some unimaginable speed and at the same time, she knew she was motionless. But it didn't matter. She seemed to be deep underwater at some vast depth and at the same time, she could breathe more easily than ever before in her life. And that didn't matter, either. It was dazzlingly bright and pitch black. She giggled.

The little spare room faded in around her, frequency by frequency—monochromatic at first, then all the color swept in and she was right there—a drifting, little Plank-space dot of awareness.

It was a sewing room; W.A.A.L.T.E.R.'s room back in 1950 had been a sewing room. Beth moved around, just by thinking—she saw a mint-green sewing machine, spools of thread in different colors, glass jars filled with buttons, and a basket with cloth swatches. There was a souvenir “Grand Canyon” ashtray and right in the middle of the room (where W.A.A.L.T.E.R. would be decades in the future) stood a dress form with a half-finished blue housedress draped over it. She could feel the smooth finish of the buttons and the rough canvas of the dress form and she could smell the fabric in the wicker basket.

She heard the New Year's Eve party in full swing in the living room and moved downstairs to have a look. “Wow, check out this wallpaper,” she thought. “Cuckoo clocks, flowers in pots, bowls of fruit...”

Downstairs, the place was packed. It was a house of young people, and Beth guessed the top age to be around 30. Cocktails and overflowing ashtrays and piles of food—pigs in a blanket, deviled eggs, peanut butter and pimento cheese smeared on celery. Rugs were rolled up and couples danced to music from a big console hi-fi.

She looked into the kitchen and saw a young woman standing next to the refrigerator with her head down, sobbing. Off to one side was a young man with his hands on her shoulders; Beth drifted in.

"It's OK," he was saying to her in a low voice. "Just tell me? ...it's OK..."

The girl spun around fast and held onto him as if she were holding on for dear life.

"I... I dunno," she choked. "It's—just sad ... you know, New Year's and all? ...it's just, just—another year flies by..."

He hugged her tightly to him and said, "I know. I know."

Suddenly, she looked up and said, "—What's burning?"

All of them—Beth's awareness, the girl, and the guy turned to look at the kitchen window, where the burning smell was coming from—and there, on the sill, was a forgotten cigarette burning a short, black trench into the wood.

They started laughing and the girl grabbed a wet sponge and pressed it down on top of the smouldering cigarette, making it hiss.

"Boy, that was close!" the girl said, laughing even more. Then she held his hand and looked out of the kitchen window and down the street—every window was lit up; people were having parties.

"Here," the guy said, dropping the soggy butt into the nearest ashtray and drying off the sill with a dish-towel. "Look..." and he pulled a pen from his pocket and wrote on the sill next to deep black groove: "Linda and Tom, 1951 – A WHOLE NEW YEAR!" The girl—Linda—rubbed the burned groove with her finger and went back to hugging Tom. The dance music in the living room was very loud now and there were voices of young people talking over it, singing with it, laughing.

Then, Beth let go.

Instantly, she found herself back in the leather chair in W.A.L.T.E.R.'s room—and W.A.A.L.T.E.R. was just sitting there, his transformers droning, his indicator lights glowing, radiating a feeling of deep calm.

Beth looked at her watch; it was 10:20 pm. She had been out of time for seven hours and everything was dark outside.

Beth slowly, carefully, put the dead-man's switch in the glass ashtray and stood up, holding onto an upright of the nearest rack, expecting to feel unsteady. But she didn't. She felt just fine.

She pulled her necklace up and over her head and unlocked the "Main Power Access" compartment, took hold of the wooden handle, and twisted it back.

W.A.A.L.T.E.R. went dark. W.A.A.L.T.E.R. was silent. Beth pulled the plug out of the wall.

She patted W.A.A.L.T.E.R. on the side and whispered, "You're the best, absolutely the best. Thank you. Good-night, W.A.A.L.T.E.R. Sleep tight."

She walked downstairs into the kitchen and ran a finger over the window sill. Back and forth, until she felt it – a depression, a groove, beneath layers and layers and years and years of paint.

"And I blessed them unaware," she whispered quietly. "Good night, my friends—and Happy, Happy New Year."

She walked back upstairs and went into Walter's room. He was fast asleep under a pile of shavings.

"Good-night, Walter," she said. "Sleep tight."

She checked his water bottle and went to bed.

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David Wiener has written cover, feature, and interview articles for various performing arts magazines including *American Cinematographer*, *Producers Guild Journal*, *Cahiers du Cinema*, and *The Journal of the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain*. His plays have been produced in London, India, Canada, Australia, Mexico, and the U.S. and have been published three times in the Smith & Kraus “Best Plays” one-act anthology series. He In 2007, he completed a Literary Internship with La Jolla Playhouse and went on to work as that theatre’s Dramaturgy Associate during the 07-08 season.

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