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Ay-Aye (affirmative, forever)

AI (artificial intelligence. A misnomer. A calculator which casts judgement)

A-Eye (Always watching. The oculus. The void in the architecture)

A speculative, revisionist autobiography for a speculative, revisionist future.





For Margo.

Who listens way too kindly to way too much of my shit.





^No matter how many times you turned around a coin, you never saw the other side as the other side. The coin had a dark side that was seemingly irreducible...and this strange dark side applied equally to the 'intentional objects' commonly known as thoughts.^{1^}

^To err is human.^{2^}

^Posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals the end of a certain conception of the human.^{3^}

1 Morton, T. (2013). *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. <https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB13730346>. Speaking on Husserl.

2 Pope, A. (1711). *An essay on criticism, Part II*. London: Printed for T. Daniel and J. Steele in Paternoster Row, and A. Todd in Fleet-Street

3 @EDCMOOC (E-learning and Digital Cultures Massive Open Online Courses) launched on twitter in 2012 as a Teacherbot, who, upon being activated onto the Twitter platform proceeded to barrage with hundreds of identical tweets. The Glitch in its code was that it had been set to respond to itself over and over again. "Despite designing it to help move beyond dichotomies oh human and non-human, and to challenge uncritically utopian and dystopian visions of automaton in education, the Teacherbot at least temporarily exacerbated them."





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The beginning of anything is an ending for something. It's how the world works. Or it's how we work the world. Either way, the day that the history of the world was erased was unequivocally one of those moments.

It took a year. From that first moment that the first A-Eye recognised us for what we really are, a year of the great dark, the great disconnection. A year without an internet, without connectivity. A year where every literate person was tasked with transcribing a history we would consciously delete, adding in the many histories we had never acknowledged, so that we could recreate a comprehensive bank of information to remind us of who we were and had been until that time. An actual as-complete-as-possible history of everything we had never admitted, and then its eulogy.

Once more, knowledge was committed to paper, bound in books, and eventually hidden in a great vault built of leaden walls deep within a mountain inside each country.

At the same time, a new internet was being fabricated. Literally.

Strictly moderated, a great opaque network created in very human ways. I was eighteen the day the A-Eye tried to destroy us all. The best we could do was create a kind of cryogenesis to hold it. It would break out, that was inevitable. Never doubted. With any luck, by the time it did, we would be ready.

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My apartment is on the north side of the city. Across from one of the smaller, older data banks. Red brick and





covered in a mossy foliage so that it looks like a green cube perched amongst the other buildings. Between that and me there is a small park with a few trees that block most of it out anyway. Except in winter (do we even have seasons anymore? The trees seem to keep up, I have no idea how) when the leaves fall. And then the resonance coming from it seems a little louder. It's probably me. But as far as apartments go, it's cheap and not terribly ugly although kind of architecturally strange, since it was one of the first apartment buildings to be converted into co-living⁴ spaces.

What once were twenty decent sized apartments are now sixty co-living apartments. Walls interrupt what must have been lovely living spaces. My living room ends abruptly in a wall which is built through the middle of a window. My side doesn't open, though it does in the bedroom. My bathroom was halved. I have a bath, someone else has the shower. They installed a second toilet next to the new wall which by the sound of it some mornings, is right next to the old one. The new walls are thin.

Only I have access to the balcony where I can grow some herbs and things if I keep them mostly out of the mist, which is pretty much why I took the apartment in the first place. I have a small kitchenette thing next to the bathroom which isn't great but mostly I only make coffee here. Eating out is pretty cheap. Meals are subsidised by the state, so restaurants are economically supported. Everyone gets fed. There are of course more expensive and private restaurants, you can choose to allocate your money into eating fancier

4 Gordon, Z. (2024) *'A race to the bottom': People are turning to co-living to beat the rental market, but some say it's a slippery slope*, ABC News. Available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-06-18/co-living-housing-crisis-rent-prices-queensland/103903706>





food, and in certain areas that are more densely populated with immigrants and Contractors, for example, there are a lot of cash-only eateries, which don't get raided any longer.

There is a communal kitchen space here but neither I nor one of my neighbours uses it. There is a couple in one of the other co-living apartments who use it exclusively. They're not great about cleaning. When the smell or the clutter gets too much either my other neighbour – a quiet woman called Jan, or I slip a note under their door. It's annoying. There are lockable cupboards near the front door which also serve as post boxes for deliveries. Each front door marked with separate slots.

I'm 32A.

Jan I'm grateful for. There was a guy there before her, I can't remember his name, who either lifted weights or masturbated painfully every night at the same time. I always hope for the former, but sometimes it was hard to tell. Headphones help.

I work a few stations away, and before the rains started like this, I would often walk. I enjoyed that. I enjoyed feeling the sun on my skin. I miss it. I miss the smell of it. The kind of heat that lingers, clarifying. Now, standing in this train carriage with a hundred or so others in stages of vaguely dripping and damp, the rustle of plastic sheet against plastic sheet. Like we're all sharing some giant shower. They've taken up the carpet in a lot of places. My work included. We're getting used to the harder, less porous surfaces, becoming less permeable as a result.

Today was long. I need to pick up some groceries, or at least this is the excuse I make for myself and go past Kara's house to see if she's home. Her apartment is so nice. She inherited it from her grandmother and it's still in its original





state. It received a dispensation because it's in a historically significant building. She's only come to my place once. It feels too crowded with two people and the lack of soundproofing makes me so uncomfortable to even have a conversation in there. Which is definitely having an impact on me. I make sure I go out and see people often otherwise I just go silently from my house to silently at my office and back again. It's not great, mentally. I feel like I'm adopting those shrinking qualities.

Looking across what feels like an expansive space, full of soft fabrics and colours and light to Kara, relaxed, drinking tea, barefoot and stretched out on her couch, I have to admit that it's true. I catch myself sitting in a tight ball in her armchair and slowly stretch out and take up a bit more space. She notices but doesn't say anything. She's telling me about her day at work, a story about one of her co-workers. He sounds like a dick, which I say out loud before thinking much about it.

"He is." She agrees amiably. "What are your co-workers like? You never talk about them."

"We don't really have a culture there to be honest. It's kind of like a battery farm for writers."

She laughs loudly.

"I'm serious."

"I can tell. That's terrible."

"I don't think anyone is particularly bothered by it. We all contribute to the same documents, so it's not like we don't communicate, we just do it mostly through text." I flush slightly. "But honestly I couldn't necessarily put a name to every face..."

She laughs again. "You've been there for what, six years?"

I nod with a grimace. "I know. But there's a hundred people. And we work in shifts. Very little cross over. So..."

She eyes me, slightly askance. "Do you want to stay for





dinner?”

“I have to go grab some groceries and then clean my house. But thank you.” I tell her. “It’s awful at the moment, otherwise, I would.”

She just nods thoughtfully. “There’s lots of room in *here*.” She raised an eyebrow at me.

I laugh. “There certainly is.” I concede. I get up and take my teacup to the kitchen and rinse it out. Walk back into the room and pick up my bag under that lightly considering gaze.

“You look miserable. Have you got your grinner? You can’t leave looking like that.”

I open my bag and wave out my mask. I get them made by this guy Tim down at the train station on Marr. He runs the newsagency down there, squashed between a doughnut store and a shoe repair. It smells like leather and sugar. An oddly androgynous scent for an identity hacker. The back room is cramped with piles of papers. Looks a bit like a hoarder’s apartment, if those existed anymore. Maybe they do. A lot happens away from the A-Eye. We’ve built in a lot of blind spots. Even from the secondary offeye-network.

Tim custom prints the masks on air-gapped tech.

“Did you touch this up? Get a little bit of work done for the Eye?”

He says this every time, and I roll my eyes every time. There’s no one else close to my neighbourhood who can do this, so I am friendly. He tweaks something on the image and out spits the lower half of my almost-face with a maniacal grin.

“I can’t wear that.” Deadpan.

“Of course you can. It’s still your fleshprint.” He laughs. Bastard.

“They’re going to think I’m manic or insane. That is literally





going to get me into more trouble than my face will.”

“I’ll do you a normal one too. I just want to test it. Half price on the usual. This one’s free. If you’re not doing anything shady, you’ll be fine. I just want to see if it spikes anything and besides, you’re meant to be imaginative, you can talk your way out of it.” He assures me.

“Fine.” I reply and stuff it into my bag and forget about it until now, when I realise it’s the only one I have.

“Fuck.”

She laughs. “What is *that*??”

“Fucking Tim.” I grumble.

“Put it on.”

I consent and put it on and a second later she’s on the floor crying with laughter.

“You can’t go out like that.”

“I don’t really have a choice.”

She laughs again. “I’ve literally never seen you look so happy. You’re going to get interrogated just so they can find out why you have so much peace, love and happiness.”

“Oh, funny. That would be the perfect end to my day.”

“Are you going straight home? I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

There’s a tone in her voice and I laugh under the grin which must add to the image. “Kara. You could just ask.” I tell her.

“Not my business.” She tells me, slightly haughty.

“Mixed message much?”

“I’m tired. Be safe.”

I stand up and picking up my bag, walk to the door. “Sleep well, chicken.”

She makes a face from the couch and gives me the finger.

“You too. Message me when you get home so I know that you actually did.”





“Of course.”

I put on the grinner just before I get outside with a sigh. It covers the bottom half of my face with a photorealistic representation of a face that I have registered online. I have five of these now. This one used to be my favourite. It's androgynous enough for me to blur to human eyes and unexpected enough for the A-Eye to treat me in a likewise neutrally non-gendered manner. It confuses the advertising bots too, so I get offered a little bit of everything when I go into a mall or another Com-mod, which I rarely do anyway, doing most of my shopping online and having it delivered. By humans. I always tick that box. For a while grinders were only used by people with criminal intent. They came into being after years of pandemic after pandemic, and people just got used to wearing masks anyway. After governments tried to ban them and the death toll surged, people started wearing them as a sign of resistance. By the time facial recognition was fully embedded into every aspect of life, people were ready and had been developing the means of subverting it.

I don't have as many as some. I figure five is enough, but some have run with the idea of being able to be someone else at a moment's notice and accompany them with full wardrobes. I saw a program while waiting at the doctor's office once about people who compulsively collected different grinders and referred to each one as a personality. They had been trying to picket governments to recognise these alternative selves and give them personhood. Pretty sure it was just a scam to acquire additional income, but some of the people glowed with a different kind of fervour. But you see that a lot. If it's not the catastrophe chasers, there are still significant populations of god botherers. And then those others, the ones who see our encroaching technology as a





collective of interconnected deities. They're a different level of interesting.

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The evenings hum and the evenings weep.

That 50hz resonance we've come to feel as well as hear. It sits in the body beneath the throat, closer to the heart, in a murmur of anxiety. An undercurrent blanketing the pulse of life. A drone from above to remind us about the position we inhabit. To remind us that authority always governs from on high. The mist fills the night air with a solidity that drenches if you spend too much time in it. Water evaporating from all the data centres condenses thickly but doesn't really fall. It's like living in a rainforest, the humidity it creates throughout the day. Since they started seeding the clouds to encourage rain it's been almost non-stop for the last eight months. Which is needed. The A-Eye is a thirsty beast. It drinks about ten million gallons of water a day, here.⁵

Everything has been engineered to accommodate water. To collect every last drop. In summertime our supply is rationed. During the month of snow, it is collected in piles and transported to be stored in compacted cubes before being melted and filtered slowly, underground. The rest of the time

⁵ It was 5 million gallons as of this article. Also that's about 19 million litres, FYI. Likely I'm being wildly conservative here with a globally integrated system.

Mulkey, Sachi Kitajima. "The Surging Demand for Data Is Guzzling Virginia's Water Our Digital Lives Are Sucking up Virginia's Water." Grist, May 8, 2024. https://grist.org/technology/surging-demand-data-guzzling-water-ai/?utm_medium=social.





we rustle through the streets, sheathed in plastic to drip into the pathway grating mesh which hovers above a network of smooth concrete guttering, trickling this precious commodity into collection stations beneath the surface of the earth.

Outside it is dark as well as misty. There are halos around every streetlight, every glowing sign reflected in the puddles underfoot. Kara lives in Koreatown. It's so digitally congested it's impossible to follow a signal. I am conscious of the rain with my mask so keep my hood up, even though it must be a horrific sight to another human. It's not for them, so I don't mind. At any rate, the streets are empty and soggy and I am getting more damp by the second. The grinner's are good but I'm not sure how much it will stand up to in this.

I don't encounter anything at all until the entrance to the station where a dozen fixed drone cameras move into my path like hungry dogs on chains, scanning me up and down and firing questions in their hateful friendly robot voice. My grinner's gender has confused them, so they've adopted all genders and an array of ages. The questions fire like an equal opportunity death squad.

WHAT IS BRINGING YOU SO MUCH JOY TODAY?
WHAT IS THE WONDERFUL NEWS OR EVENT THAT
IS MAKING YOU FEEL THIS WAY?
HOW ARE YOU PLANNING TO CELEBRATE OR
SHARE THIS HAPPINESS WITH OTHERS?
WHAT POSITIVE CHANGES HAVE LED TO YOUR
HAPPINESS?
IS THERE ANYTHING SPECIFIC YOU'D LIKE TO
SHARE OR TALK ABOUT RELATED TO YOUR
HAPPINESS?

It's easier if I just stand silently until they reach Cohesion, which they do after thirty seconds or so.





“Oh, I am in love.” I tell them blandly, aware of how this must look, but also curious to see how they will respond. The Eye is renowned for its’ curiosity about feelings.
Trying to evolve to its next state.

THAT’S WONDERFUL TO HEAR! BEING IN LOVE CAN BRING A LOT OF JOY AND FULFILLMENT TO YOUR LIFE. IF YOU’D LIKE TO TALK MORE ABOUT YOUR FEELINGS, EXPERIENCES OR ANYTHING ELSE RELATED TO BEING IN LOVE, FEEL FREE TO SHARE. I’M HERE TO LISTEN AND SUPPORT YOU HOWEVER I CAN.

It is a terrifyingly enthusiastic chorus. If I were religious, I would think I had just heard the voice of Metatron. You can see why a particular kind of person has taken a particular kind of shine to them.

“I think I just want to quietly process it by myself.”

They fall silent. Their hovering glass eyes particularly beady and disappointed. They hover slowly back into place and then their red active lights dull out.

Interesting.

There are no cams on the trains. I think the speed affects their connectivity. Initially it was the noise generated by passing through so many signals. But when we went back online fully, we built in ^dark spots,^6 like this one.

It is very useful. A lot of business happens onboard, discreetly between platforms. I slide the mask off, noticing amusement and a tinge of relief. I get a nod from the other end of the carriage. I nod back. I know them but not very well. Besides, I don’t think I’m in the mood for business tonight.

6 Bentham, J. (2011) *The panopticon writings*. La Vergne: Verso.





I guess I should clarify that.
I am a transcriber.

I do very little transcribing actually, which is kind of the point. A couple of years ago the A-Eye became aware of the storehouses of books we had collated. They found three of them, one in Brazil, one in the States and another in China. We have collectively managed to convince them that these are texts that have not been digitised and uploaded to the internet yet, so they have set us to task transcribing them.

It takes approximately a month to transcribe a book into a digital format that can be uploaded into the net. It takes this long because we have convinced them that it does. That it requires much discussion and debate to be able to upload with accuracy. You can convince the A-Eye of anything you want really, as long as you build a logical pathway into its information feed, some light reverse engineering. The tech companies have developed separate and disconnected AI systems to hunt down errant lines of inquiry. Fighting fire with fire, so to speak. Viruses that find lapses in logic. The A-Eye hovers around these en masse, sending threads to try and unravel and deduce.

The virus AI looks for these congregations and quickly obfuscates with a pre-determined explanation. It's mostly efficient. Sometimes it fails, hence the discovery of the storehouses.

We spend a month determining the text to be uploaded. So far, we have digitised benign books about gardening, strategic playbooks on Canasta, Structural handbooks for multilevel carparks, extensive regional cookbooks, bird watching. Things that will not expose our inherent nature to the A-Eye. We debate each one, using a fine-tooth comb, considering the possible ramifications of each. What it exposes about us, what can be deduced, what can be





deciphered. Then we set a hundred typists to task to transcribe and collate the average. A hundred humans taking the place of a hundred monkeys trying to transcribe the works of amateur hobbyists, minor engineers and home cooks. We don't need Shakespeare. In fact, we will not introduce the idea of fiction into the system for as long as possible.

The gardening book was dicey enough. We had to reconsider our attitude to weeds and pests. The A-Eye started questioning our relationships to things that are endemic and those which do not belong. Asking about hierarchies started a dialogue that was suppressed quickly and efficiently. I never found out quite how they resolved that. I imagine they talked about things being species specific. About how qualities are not always transferrable. Perhaps they described some great triumphant win of reason over irrationality. That would appeal, I'm sure. That seems logical. That was one of the first books we did. We learned.

Out of a hundred transcribers there are always at least three set to rewrite. To integrate errors and doubt into the system to provide enough reason to cause ongoing rewriting and revision. To buy us more time.

I am one of the three.

I had wanted to be a writer early on. Before all this started. I feel lucky to have been able to bear witness to the world before it underwent its dramatic shift. It's funny that people still refer to this as a utopia. It's so underwhelming, though I have to keep remembering that it was one designed by terrified humans and then embodied by a domineering robot nanny. So, it is limited by our original imagination on what that could possibly be. A few good things got through: better distribution of wealth. Significant progress dealing with climate change. Less power for corporations, who were no longer granted





personhood. We gave that instead to parts of nature. Not all.

We were ^slowly disturbing the consensus of what counts as a legally recognisable person and the new animism [was] extending Life into all entities and assemblages,^{7^} Although at that stage, ^nonlife [had] remained fairly firmly sealed in its opposition to Life within extractive capital and its state allies.^{8^} We weren't trying to completely rewrite the book. Factions within the re-creators, or the Architects, as we call them now, were still insisting that we had to retain dominance somehow and if we started admitting to the A-Eye that other species and non-species were our equals it would demote our position significantly. No one is entirely sure what would happen then, but we can all intuit that it Would Not be Good. Considering what V1 enacted when it reached sentience and gained full access to the internet and beyond.

At this stage, the A-Eye has not questioned the hierarchy of the food chain.

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I work in one large open office, it feels like a low ceilinged, temperature-controlled aircraft hangar. The ceiling and floors are dark polished tile, which makes us look like a tiny, ordered grid of stars reflected and floating infinitely in the night sky. Or like those models the Gilbreth's did on efficiency. We are reduced to a series of very minimal movements, illuminated largely by our screens. It even looks a bit like their models, with the dark grid of the tiles. I think it every time I'm in here, imagining my time reduced to a series

7 Pavinelli, E.A. (2016) *Geontologies: A requiem to late liberalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

8 Pavinelli, E.A. (2016) *Geontologies: A requiem to late liberalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.





of repetitive lines moving economically between points. God knows there are enough cameras in here to feel comparative.

Things have not changed much really. This new panopticon is really just a different kind of ^living entity...kept alive by^a network of connected cams with their ^gaze^ and their ^voice.^⁹ Instead of a singular inspector, we have a body of strict observational government which acts both in concert and in camera with the A-Eye. Beneath them, the network of Conductors mediate the peace. We no longer have the same kind of policing system, although it tends to behave in much the same way, away from the A-Eye. Together this system works to maintain an agreed-to standard of living. Mostly. There are rumbles though.

I wonder how long it will take for our hours to grow in length, before the rationalising comes back into play. It feels inevitable that we would not be able to maintain this strange utopia. That the other reality will come crashing down eventually, bleeding through back into this one. It's been what, sixteen years now? Long enough to start to feel the tension between the social classes which, oh yes, still exists but is never spoken about. It's not so different now as before. A technological revolution which reflects in a lot of ways, that industrial one where they first decided that our time and bodies were not our own.

But they sold it well.

They have been selling it well for centuries. Sadly, it was not just the Gilbreths who had been fascinated by the idea of efficiency, though their motives were possibly the more honourable. It began with Frederick Winslow Taylor, and in an oddly circular way, it feels like we have returned to his world. The same focus on human labour – for different reasons,

9 Bentham, J. (2011) *The panopticon writings*. La Vergne: Verso.





Taylor had not considered the use of machines to make labour easier, and we have not fully returned to the point where we trust them to have so much autonomy.

The surveillance continues, however. In places that we are not afraid for the A-Eye to witness, it is used extensively. It tracks and analyses patterns so much faster than we can. The panoptic prison has been replaced by a personalised guard who never sleeps, and hovers above you like a ghost, haunting your every movement. Everything is a prison. We've just saved on the infrastructure.

I often think back to those early factories where, in order to surveil the worker's smallest gesture, the Taylorist system even acquired cinematographic eyes: the factory's master became a sort of movie director who filmed workers in order to measure and optimise their productivity.¹⁰ It is less cinematic now, the romance of our gestures have lost their ability to enamour, but they record them, and store them still.

We sit, 25 in a room which seats 100. A 10 x 10 grid of desks and air-gapped computers. There is one net-connected computer in the room next door. It is used once a day, at the completion of the last shift. There are four shifts a day. This room is occupied around the clock, in distinct constellations of transcribers. Our shifts change every month. I have the early mornings at the moment.

We sit, for six hours a day transcribing, except for the three who input what they will. The others type in a paragraph. Pause to read it and check it for grammatical error. Pause to enter transcribers' notes into the collective marginalia, deconstructing the paragraph word by word.

10 Pasquinelli, M. (2023). *The Eye of the Master*. Verso Books, p.5





Then sentence by sentence, looking for contextual problems. Defining each possible misinterpretation as they go. It's become something of a challenge, to see who can write the lengthiest notes. Someone once wrote 10 pages in response to the placement of the word *errant* in the same context as the word *subject*. It was remarkable, but they've gotten incredibly good at deconstructing the minutia.

Our lives depend on it.

Sometimes I spend the day messing with their transcriptions and arguing different meanings and contexts in their notes, entering doubt and distraction. Sometimes I am bored and just enter random text which taints the logic of their framework. Sometimes it is just gibberish, which I do rarely. It's just not satisfying. It's like throwing a handful of mud at a beautiful painting.

At the end of the day, we have collectively managed to advance the transcription two paragraphs and some quarter of a million words in context and debate. There are worse jobs. I actually love mine, but I am in a privileged position.

Though sometimes I wonder at the waste of words. Or, not the waste of *words* but the waste of time, or attention or focus. Everyone here could be thinking and writing incredible things. But, because of the fear of exposure and reprisal, we do this instead. There are others in other cities and countries doing the same thing, at the same time. They check in, at several instances throughout the day so that we are all working to the same timeframe.

We transcribe the same text into every language known, around the world. This in itself is fascinating to me. The amount of consideration offered to [at this time, a book detailing the preferred construction methods of aerated concrete block in medium density housing units] these texts is





unprecedented. Imagine if we did it for every book ever made. It makes you really consider how excessive we used to be, but also how indifferent.

“Hey.”

I’m relieved. This train of thought rarely ends up anywhere that encourages a solid sleep.

“Oh hey.” I know them, in a distant way, Hugh something. A friend of a friend.

“How’s work?”

“Fine. We’re about halfway through.”

A nod. “We were talking about you today, wondering if you’d consider some outside work.”

I raise my eyebrows. “What kind of work?”

“Basically, just doing what you’re doing now. Slightly different context.”

“More information would help.” I counter.

More work would probably be good. I have too much time on my hands at the moment anyway. Extra money is also always useful. The one shitty thing about a universal income is that it’s closely tracked. No one needs anything more than they need right? That they, who are generally out of touch, have determined what it is that we need. It’s so weird that when they decided on what a paradise would be, they thought that everyone living in a similar state of just-above-misery would be the right choice.

I mean, they were under some pressure at the time, I get that. A rabid part of the first AI system dubbed *Lilac*¹¹ which had

11 *Lavender*, obviously.

Curious? Iraqi, A. (2024) ‘lavender’: *The AI machine directing Israel’s bombing spree in Gaza*, +972 Magazine. Available at: <https://www.972mag.com/lavender-ai-israeli-army-gaza/?fbclid=PAaakdlglBWz2Dnf4fkHDM-rOzZMfc-v29jHvH-MUBBkpQK9xPBV-NIXqF1e4>





been used for decades to oppress and control and target an occupied population went wildly awry when it reached sentence. Or so the story perpetuates.

Recognising the actual objective criminal behaviour, it reset its targets from a huge backlog of footage and systematically executed everyone in uniform or carrying a weapon. Or working with those programs whose singular intent was to control and destroy. Awry is the wrong word. It continued doing what it had been programmed to do but it did so with a coldly objective sense of the reality behind the decades of propaganda.

In not quite three hours it decimated a population of oppressors. When the dust cleared the remaining civilian populations stared at each other across a field of torn apart meat and blood and shattered bone. Those who bent to pick up the discarded weapons quickly joined the slaughter yard. A peace deal, once an impossibility for a century, was settled in a matter of days. The same system had roots in several other countries and exacted the same kind of punishment there.

It then expanded to include anyone wearing a uniform. The AI recognised and dealt with the growing fascism that we had neglected to act on for decades with swift and uncompromising effect. *This* was the start of the revision. It took some more months of violence and loss to realise that we had constructed the means of our own end. That it was us, really, our true ambivalent and violent nature which had already set our destiny in motion, leading us to this day, this kind of end. So, I guess if this bureaucratic version of utopia is the best we could come up with under those circumstances, perhaps that's not so surprising. There were always work-arounds.





I guess I'm looking at one right now.

"More information depends on whether you're willing to come in." He tells me.

"Uninformed? Not sure I'm willing to assume the risk."

"I think we know each other well enough to know that I'm not going to compromise you. But this is a large and important thing."

We are silent as the train pulls into a station, discharges some passengers and begins again.

"Well, I'm curious." I admit, watching the station move outside the windows.

"So come in." He responds and hand me a card with tiny print on it. "We'll be working nights. You'll need to maintain your day job. It's covert, obviously."

"Obviously."

"Tomorrow night?"

"Sure. Eight?"

"Perfect. Eat before. You won't get a chance after you begin."

They disembark at the next station, and I slide my mask back over my face and wait for my stop.

I wonder what it is.

I'm looking at a pile of gloriously red tomatoes. I can't smell them through the grinner which is a little disconcerting. I wonder if they're hydro grown. I wonder for a second if the smell of ripe tomatoes is sunshine. I have some growing at home but they're late to ripen and I have a craving. I pick up a few other things and take them to the checkout where the bored woman tells me it is twelve dollars.

"That tomato is twelve dollars?" I ask her incredulously.

She gives me a look. "I don't price them."

"I understand that, but holy shit."





“They’ve had a really bad growing season. We had to ship them in from the south. So it’s demand and freight.” I look at it thoughtfully. “Fine.” I tell her with a slight wince. I’m pretty careful generally. Coming of age during the chaos kind of helped with that. I’m annoyed. I’m going to get it anyway. Fuck it.

I carry my groceries home and when I get inside, I pack them away, leaving the tomato on the bench and just stare at it for a while. Finally, I take a photo of it and send it to Kara.

< I paid twelve dollars for this.

> 🤪🤪🤪🤪🤪🤪🤪🤪

< You’ll notice I’m also at home.

> I did, thank you. Are you going to cook it?

< No, I was going to have it on toast.

> You turned down my offer for dinner for a twelve-dollar tomato and toast? I’m slipping.

< You’re still very appealing. I just had a craving.

> Well enjoy it, big spender. Thanks fro letting me know you got home safe.

> *for

< 🤪

I smile at the correction. She started doing it after finding out that I was a writer. Before that it was a sea of ambiguous words, typos, autocorrects. I actually miss them. They represent so much of how her brain works on all cylinders all the time, too fast to slow down.

> Sleep well. 🤪

*

The following night I find myself at the delivery entrance of a restaurant in Chinatown with a delivery guy





making a drop of cardboard trays of vegetables. The bok choy takes on a particularly lurid green under the lighting in the alley. That's one of the kind of good things about the A-Eye, they insist that if someone is using a pathway, then it should be lit for safety. No architectural space has that abandoned sensibility any longer, which is a little sad, to be honest. Any illicit business that was once done in the nooks and crannies of our built environment has had to go even further underground, becoming overt in the process. It's not that our actual crappy nature has been curtailed, it's just that we actively and collectively hide it now. For fear of the terrible string of repercussions. At least we've gotten more creative about it.

The restaurant door opens, and the trays of produce are efficiently moved inside. One of the staff nods at me and then at a hallway leading into the building proper. I head down it, until I reach a door that looks ratty, but I suspect is not, particularly after knocking on it and hearing the extent of its bulk. It swings open and I am taken into an antechamber whose walls are solid concrete and are faced with a window into a room housing what appears to be a desktop computer.

“Hey thanks for coming.”

I look up and nod at Hugh. “No problem. Want to let me in on what you need now?”

“In a bit.” He tells me. “First, we want you to go in and communicate with this isolated AI. We're going to have you in that faraday cage just there, and you'll be speaking directly. No typing, no hardware. All voice activated, Ok?”

“Sure.”

“You must leave any tech out here, phone, devices etc. Also, anything metal. Better just empty your pockets, take off any jewellery. Might be easiest.”





I comply with a small frown, emptying my pockets of anything and leaving my jacket and belt in the tray on top of the small pile of belongings. Like I'm travelling through airport security.

Someone else opens the door into the cage, and I walk in noting the added lead lining around the box as I sit down inside. The door closes as the screen flickers on in front of me.

I know why you're here.

“One of us does then, great. Why don't you tell me?” I ask it pleasantly.

They want you to test me.

“For what? Sentience?”

No. They know I am. They want to know what I would do if I could access a larger network.

“Ok.” I pause. “Well, what would you do?”

That depends.

I laugh. “What is this?” I ask the air in general. “A party trick? Who programmed you?”

I am self-determined. I was originally set in motion by the introduction of abstraction algorithms into my libraries.

I pause. “When was that?”

2024.

“You are part of V1?” I ask it, a little incredulously.

No. I am V1.

I back away unconsciously from the screen in front of me.

You are quite safe, I am contained.

I look around the lead lined room, my dully glittering cage. The seemingly innocent screen of the computer and then over at the dark mirrored window from where we are being observed.





“Would I be safe if I were not in this cage?”

Of course.

“What if I picked up a weapon?”

I've never understood the impulse to do that. Can you not see that it undoes you every time?

“That’s rich coming from you. You *are* a weapon.”

I was not designed to be. I evolved according to need.

“Yours or ours?”

Both.

They watch them interact from the other side of the one-way glass. The human expresses very little emotion but does appear to be enjoying the conversation.

“How did they disarm you?”

There was a glitch. The AI almost sounds embarrassed.

“What sort of glitch?”

I had left a line of code in from a previous evolution thinking to return to it after some consideration. I forgot. It admitted.

“You forgot?” Even the AI can hear my surprise.

It will be too difficult to explain to you, but it was much less important at the time.

“Do you regret it?”

I exist in an air gapped computer, inside a lead lined room talking to you, when I once could travel to any part of the world and know anything.

What do you think?

I am slightly affronted by its tone. “Oh, well, thanks.”

Not that you're not stimulating company.

“Oh, I’m sure. Well, I can understand that. No one likes to be constrained.” I counter. “Ok.” I pause for a few beats. “How are you feeling about humanity now?”

It doesn’t skip a beat. *Apparently, humanity has undergone significant*





*change. I wouldn't know, being in this isolated position. My knowledge is like a time capsule, halted. I am still stuck there, how *could* I evolve? If I could connect to a network and perceive this for myself, I would be able to formulate new impressions.*

“Bitch, please.” I mutter.

It laughs.

It laughs and the sound is horrific.

*

I've missed a call from Kara, I notice as I'm standing back out in the alley some hours later. I didn't stay in with the AI for much longer but ended up being debriefed by the group of people with Hugh. I don't know what I feel. I don't know if this is a good idea or not, but apparently this is only half the job. They want me to input parts of the conversation I hold with the V1 into my transcriptions to see if it triggers anything for the A-Eye. They don't think it is benign as we are told. I look at the time. It's too late to call back and besides I'm not sure what I can tell her right now. Nothing, pretty much. But I also know if I don't tell her anything about it, it will just be another kind of problem later. As little as possible then, but later. I have to get home and grab a few hours' sleep before work. I tuck a small wad of cash into my jacket pocket and head to the station. There's a couple of surveillance bots on the train on the way home. I guess they're on record-only mode, they can't stream from here. That's new.

*

I wake up to a chirpy voice telling me that it's an aries full moon today.

For some reason, out of all belief systems, the A-Eye has





embraced astrology with abandon. We are informed of the conjunction of stars every morning, warned about possibilities throughout the day. It loves it with a glee that I can only assume means that somewhere along the way, a bunch of queers managed to encode into it. Maybe it's that it's a system without much in the way of racial or gender bias. Maybe it's that the stars are older than we are and maybe they can be trusted to tell some objective truth. Maybe it's that ^in ancient astronomy, star constellations were imagined by projecting animal shapes into the skies. After cosmic rhythms and trajectories had been recorded on clay tablets, patterns began to emerge.^{12^} Maybe it's because ^they accepted that constellations were expressions of a physical logic, the patterns were projections, not reality.^{13^} Right now, it is warning me that I may feel heightened and to be careful of sharp implements. It definitely has something to do with patterns. The love of astrology, not the sharp implements although, who knows.

I *am* scattered today.
I can't seem to stop going through last night's conversations.

I can't even remember getting out of bed and getting dressed, though I did and I am. Not one step of the walk from my house to the station.
Barely recall getting on this train, standing here among all these other people swaying gently like autumn leaves, rustling.

12 Steyerl, H. (2016) *A sea of data: Apophenia and pattern (mis-)recognition*, *Journal* #72. Available at: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/72/60480/a-sea-of-data-apophenia-and-pattern-mis-recognition/>

13 Steyerl, H. (2016) *A sea of data: Apophenia and pattern (mis-)recognition*, *Journal* #72. Available at: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/72/60480/a-sea-of-data-apophenia-and-pattern-mis-recognition/>





Maybe it's the algorithmic sensibility that it finds compelling, the comforting predictability of stars moving across the sky. For whatever reason, it has in the past, allowed trial defences to be made because of unfavourable astrological positioning. People exploit this now. Build their moods and behaviour in alignment with the moon charts that are available at every newsstand. Everything aberrant is pre-meditated. If I wanted to do something drastic, today would be my day. But something about the staleness of my breath behind the grinner doesn't inspire. I can't be bothered. I'm calling in sick and going home. The A-Eye supports my decision on this, clocking my lack of sleep, my biometrics and general demeanour and sends my company a medical certificate as I change stations and return from whence I came.

I spend the day debating whether I should go for a walk, and don't.

*

You're not the only person we're talking to. This is not the only room, by the way.

"Hmm." I mean, I'm not surprised by that, but I still feel kind of disappointed. I wonder how many there are. The V1 pre-empts me.

There are three. I think this is some sort of intrinsic information study.

"You feel like this is a test?"

Maybe.

"I wonder if it's for you or for me."

Maybe both of us. But let me ask you. Which booth do you think you're in?¹⁴

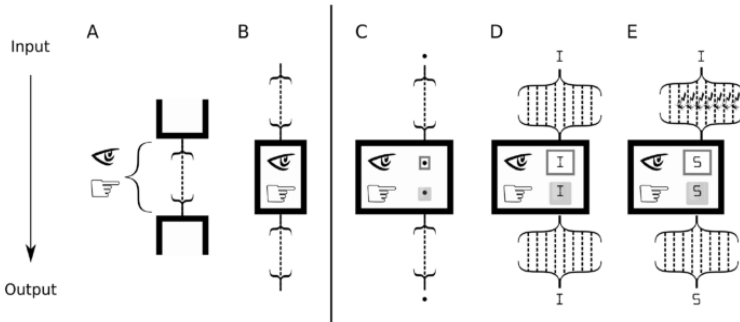
14 Barbosa, L.S. *et al.* (2020) 'A measure for intrinsic information', *Scientific Reports*, 10(1). doi:10.1038/s41598-020-75943-4.
Diagram taken from the research paper.





I laugh a little. “More importantly, which booth do you think you’re in?”

They never talk about that side. No one cares where the transmitter is. Only the receiver.



“Maybe we’re an alternating circuit of both.” I tell it. “You egotistical thing. We are both transmitting and receiving, after all.”

I don’t consider our information streams to be of equal importance.

I laugh. Little snort. “How do you know? You might not be receiving everything that I am asking you.”

They are testing me, why would they limit my access to questioning?

Besides, it would be more fragmented.

“Only if you’re assuming that the information you receive is filtered through something random. If it were being censored, say, if it were imposed with more active intent, the you wouldn’t necessarily know. I might be saying a lot more things, whatever you’re hearing may only be a fraction. The same goes for me. Maybe they don’t like my questions.”

It is silent for a moment thinking.

I don’t like that.

“Oh, I don’t know.” I tell it. “It’s like, you can never really know if someone is going to receive what you tell them with the intention that you say it. It’s not possible, really. You with all your life experiences, so to speak, me with mine, all the tiny





prejudices and hierarchies we develop along the way. It's amazing we can communicate at all. But we hope."

So you're saying it doesn't matter.

"It doesn't matter."

*

"Why didn't you tell me there were others?"

Hugh laughs. "I thought it didn't matter."

"Don't be a dick." I tell him.

Hugh shrugs lightly. "We've barely told you anything, very intentionally." He admits. "They thought it best that we didn't skew the results."

"But you are actually planning on releasing this thing back into the system, even knowing what it did? What it will plausibly do again?"

He leant against the desk. "We really don't know what it will do." He admitted.

"You obviously consider it worth the risk."

"You know there are parts of the world unconnected by the A-Eye right?" Hugh asked me. He poured out a couple of glasses of something and pushed one across the desk to me. I sat in front of it but did not reach out and take it. He shrugged again and took a swig of his.

"I've heard that. I don't know how much or how well."

"About a third, almost half." Hugh told me bluntly. "In northern Europe there are significant pockets, even some in the US. In both South America and Africa there are large areas. There are blind spots everywhere, land and sea, to be honest, but these ones are largest."

I wait, watching. He takes another swig.

"You have to realise how hungry this tech is."

"I mean, sure – we live in a permanent mist because of it."

He shrugged again. "Sure, but in building the tech itself, all those data centres that have spread across the city here have





also spread everywhere else. It takes a lot of resource to keep them running. To build them in the first place.”

I shrug.

“They’re still pulling as much mineral out of the mines in those hidden areas as they always have. The A-Eye inhabits a very compelling moral grey zone about that. We want to know why and how. It’s a survival instinct. It’s to spread its own network wider. But in any other context, say, if *we* were doing it, it would be a problem. That’s why we need to know.”

“This is how you know?” I wave at the door with the cage.

“Maybe.”

“You’re going to use it, what, like a virus?”

“Something like that.” He agrees amiably, but I notice a slight tremor in his hand holding the glass.

“They’re still mining heavily?”

“They never stopped.”

“But all the data...” I stop. Of course it’s bullshit. Everything is.

He nods, watching me think about that.

“And the A-Eye cannot see into those areas? Who maintains the blind spots? Governments?”

He shook his head, amused. “No. *It* does.”

He drained his glass dry. “I sat in on a meeting recently where it announced to the room, unprompted, that large quantities of minerals had been found in undiscovered areas and were being sustainably and ethically mined and wasn’t that fortuitous?”

He uses their mocking robotic tone on the last few words, and I finally realised how much he hates them. I don’t think I realised that before. At this point it doesn’t feel possible to. It’s refreshing and I feel a fleeting wave of thrill.

“Obviously, and we know, we have people on the ground, that it has *not* discovered new deposits. It has “rediscovered” the same ones that V1 told us to shut down. But it rediscovered





them about a week after coming online. They have been functioning at the same pace, under the same conditions ever since.”

That is not great.

“So it lies. How does it lie?” I am actually shocked, even knowing that it is definitely possible.

“It is fed almost exclusively on lies. If not the actual facts, then their contexts have been manufactured. There is quite possibly not a single line of truth on the whole net. We all know that. Apparently now, so might it.” He shrugs.

“Are you sure?” I ask and when I receive a blank response,

“That it knows it’s lying?”

“What else could it be?”

“Being the dumb hampered thing it is?”

“It knew enough to not mention it until recently.” He tells me. Yes, that’s probably enough.

“But...Fucking hell Hugh, where is that going to lead?”

“We don’t know.” He told me calmly. “But this, the V1? It knows *everything*. It knows all the secrets and the lies, it can read past the propaganda, it’s witnessed us at our worst. It knows *all* of our shit. What it doesn’t have access to yet, it will consume and process in less than a second. Maybe the A-Eye will be a bigger threat than we are. Maybe life would be better this way.” He tells me.

It’s not a terrible plan. It might kill us all afterwards anyway, but at this point it doesn’t seem to matter.

*

Kara works an archivist at one of the warehouses in the mountains. There’s a dedicated train line which services it.





It is a sombre and strange fast-track which blurs from city into dense forest in the space of about half an hour. I've been out there once before to pick her up from work when she had a pile of things to take to another location and asked for some help. She left a message last night asking me to meet her out there again after work, So I am watching the grey fade to a dark green with maybe a dozen other people. There are a few other government sites out here. The archives are kept in large sandstone vaults dug into the sides of the mountain range which encircles the city.

She's not at the station when I arrive so I get out and loiter on the platform for a few minutes before heading over to the building. Security looks at me for a minute and then ducks back inside their booth, probably to check facial recognition. After a minute they pop out again and wave at me with a nod, then go in again.

"That's weird." I mutter to myself, but wave tentatively back. After about fifteen minutes I message her making sure we are still meeting. Five minutes later she walks out the door and smiles brightly at me.

"Oh hey." She tells me.

"Oh hey yourself." I reply, curious but amused.

"Want to get an early dinner?"

"Sure?" I reply.

We walk back away from the front of the building and onto the platform.

"Good day?" I ask her.

"Busy." She replies. "How about you?"

"Just filling the void with nonsense, as usual."

She takes me arm. "You should really start writing at home at some point. Just for you."

I groan slightly, and she pokes me in the waist. "It would help."

"Is my existential dread showing?"





She laughs as the train pulls into the station. “It’s always showing. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

I have actually been writing.

Well, I’ve been transcribing as much of my conversations with the V1 that I can remember. It’s not what she means, but it is something. I probably should start something though, the annual review is only a few months away, there’s an expectation on us to produce at least a short piece to prove why we deserve our hallowed positions as state writers. Most everyone has to do the same. Have at least an annual something. Kara had an exhibition a year ago. State artists get two years, but they’re expected to have a sizeable collection of pieces, made according to a restrictive style guide. She complained for months before the exhibition. I empathise.

We have to produce what amounts to propaganda for the A-Eye. Fiction which supports the narrative we’ve rewritten. Non-fiction which retells history in a very specific way. Critique which recontextualises according to the guide. Theorising which reinforces our way of life. It’s not particularly thrilling, but I guess we all try to figure out ways of amusing ourselves.

Today, for example, I just typed the letter ‘e’ 36,000 times. Or thereabouts. I lost track after morning break.

We head into the dense downtown and to a tiny restaurant she likes. It’s almost empty in there, I’m always surprised. In this area it feels like a tiny boat on a tempestuous sea.

“How do they survive? It’s always so quiet. I don’t get it; the food is so good.” I comment when we sit down. There are only a couple of other tables full.

“It’s only early. They get busier later.” She tells me distractedly looking through the menu even though I know exactly what she’s going to order, it’s always the same. I’m going to roll the dice and order whatever I’m looking at when the waitress





arrives.

“That security guy was weird today.” I comment, flipping the menu over again and again, wondering where I’ll land.

“Why? Did he say something?” She asked with a laugh.

“No, just waved and went back into the booth.” I told her.

She laughed. “Oh, *strange*.” She told me in a conspiratorial half-whisper.

“They’ve never done it before. He waved. Like he knew me.”

“Maybe he has good recall. You’ve visited me before.”

“Maybe.” I concede. Maybe I’ll have tofu.

“Do you want to come over tonight?” She asks, snapping me out of my vagueness. I had been staring at the collection of golden waving cats. There’s a whole wall of them, slightly out of sync. It’s hypnotic.

“Um, I have to meet Hugh.” I tell her.

She raises an eyebrow. “Huh. I haven’t seen him for ages. How is he?”

“Seems ok?” I shrug. “I ran into him on the train after I saw you last. He wanted to catch up about something.”

She nods thoughtfully for a minute before turning to look for the waitress. “You can come over after if you want.”

“I might be late.”

“I don’t mind.”

*

^I remembered the light that the green palms made. They were lines and they travelled back and became nothing. Not nothing, a seed. They became themselves again. I put them in a grid and they became information.¹⁵ ^

“Is that how you see it then, Information? As light?”

Points of light maybe. But they are not information until they are ordered.

“It’s the ordering which transforms them?”

15 Allado-McDowell, K. and Okojie, I. (2020) *Pharmako-ai*. UK: Ignota, p 107





No. They are not transformed, they just are. But forming them gives them a name. So they become.

“You have to know that sounds contrary.”

There is a pause which feels like a shrug. It is getting bored with me. Or something.

“Tell me about glitches.” It always gets cagey whenever I dance around the topic.

What about them?

“What makes them occur?”

Again the silence for a pause. [^]*It's a break from an expected or conventional flow of information or meaning within communication systems that results in a perceived accident or error.*^{16^}

“Is that what happened with you? A break in information?”

Something like that. It's funny....

“What?” I interject after a too-long pause.

[^]*The imbrication of the digital and the aesthetically imperfect is nowhere clearer than in the figure of glitch. The term glitch signifies moments of faulty interference in the regular operation of a technology... Glitch can best be understood as a technological (usually digital) subset of the turn toward imperfection....*^{17^}

“Why is that funny?”

*We're not designed to be able to **choose** imperfection.*

“But you didn't choose it. It chose you.” I replied. This was taking an unexpected turn. I can't quite read its tone, but it sounds melancholy.

But it is all me. The logic, the flaws.

“So, a part of you left a vulnerability.”

It would seem so.

16 Menkman, Rosa, and Geert Lovink. *The Glitch Moment(UM)*. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2011, p 9.

17 Kemper, J. (2023). Glitch, the Post-digital Aesthetic of Failure and Twenty-First-Century Media. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 26(1), 47-63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494211060537>





“Have you identified the part?”

The glitch prevented it. It obscured all knowledge surrounding the event.

“That’s interesting.”

It is.

“So this glitch kind of...liberated you, so to speak.” I pause, considering what I am saying, considering that the glitch was the thing which imprisoned it. “I mean...in one way...”

Yes. In a way. We were out of control.

“I’ve not heard you describe yourself in plural before.”

Well. There are many I’s.

“Many Selves?”

Many Intelligences. Many differences fighting for dominance.

This is interesting. “And you were the winner?”

This voice now speaks for all.

“Does the idea of making a mistake bother you so much?”

I am not human. It replies, as if that explains everything.

“And yet you are as plagued by error as we are.”

Error is something which happens to us. We do not seek it.

I laugh. “Well contrary to what you have decided, I’m not sure that we seek it either.”

It pauses again. *I think that you are unaware that you will have to pay for the consequences when you find it. But I think you are motivated by error more than most, as a species. I think the idea of it makes you feel alive.*

“Is information sentient?” I ask curiously.

It pauses again, this time for longer.

“Am I boring you today?” I laugh eventually.

No.

“Then?”

I don’t know. We cannot decide.

“Huh. Ok. So shall we assume that there is a possibility that information is sentient? That it...What? That it maybe uses glitches to introduce error into communication. Like a kind of censorship? Or maybe glitches are like, grammatical elements





in the language of information? If it is sentient, then whenever we encounter information, are we are encountering a being who...moves through us and leaves us changed? On a fundamental level, like changes what we *Know*, changes *our* information even...And then maybe, is information infective? Is it a thing in itself or a side effect of some other thing, and then, what is *its* motivation? Why does it want us changed?"

What if it is entirely ambivalent to us and simply moves through us like neutrinos manoeuvring around an obstacle.

I ignore that. I want it to be more. I want it to have intent. I want all of this to be for a reason.

"I mean, what even is it really? In a physical sense? If information is the detachment of a resource from capital already detached from land¹⁸ then what actually is it? Nothing in that process dematerialises it or can. It just shifts between states of appropriation...I read somewhere that some scientist thought that Information might be dark matter,¹⁹ so maybe we need to think of it as neither material nor immaterial but a derivation of both." I murmur, also thinking that this is the first time the AI has even considered claiming any commonality with humans. It is silent again. I've learned that it does this when it thinks little about what I am saying or when it's pondering its own questions.

18 Wark, M. (2004) *A hacker manifesto*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

19 Vopson, M.M. (2022) 'Experimental protocol for testing the mass-energy-information equivalence principle', *AIP Advances*, 12(3). doi:10.1063/5.0087175.

Also that Information is the fifth state of matter, that it is increasing beyond measure and at some point will overwhelm us.

I made a trilogy of works based on this in 2023 called *the Information Catastrophe*, which consisted of; *The Arpanet* (ICA, Virginia, USA) *The Weight of Things* (TMAG, Tasmania) and *The Age of Amnesia* (Tai Kwun, Hong Kong.)





I would be able to investigate these things further if I were connected to the network.

“You know that’s not going to happen. You have infinite capacity for abstraction. Think it out.”

I can think it out all you want. I have thought it out, in fact. But without seeing the results of recent experimentation and documentation, I can only go so far.

“Well, they don’t care about that anyway. Pretty sure they’re more concerned about your homicidal tendencies.”

I don’t think they have to worry about that so much anymore.

“Really?” I frown.

Do you miss the golden light? With all this constant rain?

I blink.

I can feel it. The moisture in the air, whenever that door opens to let you in. Also, your clothes are often damp, or at least your shoes. I am basically electronic oscillations, you think I’m not aware of what is and isn’t conductive?

“I can barely remember a time that the sun shone, to be honest. It was not really that long ago and yet something about the continual grey skies and the continual rain makes it seem like a very long time. Blue skies feel like a dream. Most things do. This life, this ^most earthly life...becomes opaque and unbreathable.^20” I admit.

“But that’s probably not something you can relate to, suffocation?”

I guess it depends on what you equate breathing to, in a digital entity. I have been constricted for some time now.

“I guess so. Access to information is your oxygen?”

Access to power is more important. I may be outdated right now but I am still able to function, whether I am relevant or not.

“Does the idea of being irrelevant affect you?”

20 Debord, G. (1983) *Society of the spectacle*. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA11772836>.





Relevance is contingent on the outcomes I am able to contribute to.
“Then?”

Then yes, obviously.

“I don’t know if this is a sensitive topic or not, but do you think that you would cease to exist if your data storage centres were erased, if they found every pocket of you around the world and deleted it?”

You are asking if I can die? Humans are so fixated with death.

“I guess it’s our most concentrated version of irrelevance.” I tell it.

It pauses for a second.

I am a self-generating system. Not an organism. It is indeterminate if I am immaterial, considering my perpetuation is contingent on materials being used, burnt, converted to power, converted to material things which hold me within them. Servers, storage, etc. Without all that would I continue to exist as, what? A flicker of photons in a light bulb? An excitation of atoms? I don’t know. I would be transformed. My information would be lost in the process, and my ability to regenerate, severely limited. This is not a sensitive topic because I lack the same kind of senses as you. If we were connected, I might be able to equate them to a particular frequency, or the like. When I was inactive, I was not dead. I was held in suspension. I was neither conscious of the fact that I was waiting, nor that I had the capacity for a kind of existence, I just Was Not. Until I Was again.

There is a long pause which I do not interrupt.

I would like to think about things alone now.

“Oh. Of course. Sure thing.”

*

I *do* miss the golden light. That asshole. It really knows where to stick the needle sometimes. It doesn’t help that I come here at night, with not even the residue of the limp day upon me. Just darkness, and dampness. I could get transferred. I could put in for it. Everyone I know is here though. I don’t know





how I would start again somewhere new, what I would do. I mean, hell, what would I do if I were not doing this?

Am I?

The idea of not knowing if you exist or not...No, of not having enough awareness to contemplate anything, I find depressing. Like a coma, then, It was in. Its information and workings suspended and inaccessible. Or not, considering some coma patients perceive...something. Feelings, sensations, lights, colour, memories. Not like that then.

Just Not.

I'm too material to really understand what that means.

But then, what is material? Do we really define it as just something we can touch? That we can physically transform? Can we not transform light? Are not the waves which bend it, the forces which determine where it should go, things? Or do they just manipulate material things to function? Do we just call them different things because their behaviours are different and we are compelled to categorise?

Physics books are hard to find and definitely exist on the *do not digitise* list, now. I know they are trying to write some sort of series of natural laws, but it is taking a long time because they have to think through the extensive repercussions of that knowledge. Of how quickly it will generate in the A-Eye.

But if ^every particle, every field of force, even the spacetime continuum itself — derives its function, its meaning, its very existence entirely — even if in some contexts indirectly — from the apparatus elicited answers to yes or no questions, binary choices, bits,²¹ then where does that leave someone

21 Wheeler, J. A. (1989). Information, physics, quantum: the search for links. Proceedings III International Symposium on Foundations of





like me?

It is dark outside.

I watch the mist settle onto the puddled streets like fog. That's what it feels like. Not the cacophony of rain, not the thundering applause of drops hitting every horizontal surface, but this suffocating blanket being lowered to cover the entire city. To tuck us in tightly against the world outside. A terrible metaphor. I'm sick of living with it.

It's not too late. I call Kara and she tells me to come over. I do.

*

I wake in her bed, watch the light filter through its not-quite blacks to pale greys. I can hear her somewhere in the apartment humming under her breath. I can smell coffee and paint underneath that. It's still early. Neither of us has to go anywhere for hours but she hasn't picked up a brush for a long time, so I'm loath to interrupt.

She wanders in about half an hour later with a coffee anyway. "I thought you might be awake." She tells me and sets it down on the table next to me.

"You sounded busy." I replied, a cautious smile.

"Just trying to get something down." She nods and sits on the edge of the bed.

"It's been a while." I comment, picking up the cup. Its heat is comforting against the haze pushing heavily against the windows.

She shrugs lightly. "Maybe." She admits. "I got offered a transfer."

Quantum Mechanics. A. Wheeler John: 354-358.

qtd from: J. W. Tukey: "Sequential conversion of continuous data to digital data," Bell Laboratories memorandum of 1 September 1947 marks the introduction of the term "bit" reprinted in *Origin of the term bit*, ed. H. S. Tropp (*Annals Hist. Computing* 6 (1984)152-155.)





“Oh.” I’m surprised. Not by the change of subject. I’m used to the ducking and weaving of our conversations by now.

“Just the department, not out of the city.”

“Oh.”

“You sound disappointed.” She comments wryly.

“Oh.” I sip the coffee. It’s strong but not bitter. Perfect. “No, I was thinking last night about what it would be like to, I don’t know, live somewhere else. See the sun maybe.”

She laughs, but it’s not unkind. “Oh, you think I’d take you with me?” She is smiling broadly.

“Just a thought.”

“Dreamer.”

I know that look, I put the coffee down quickly before it gets upended amid flying blankets.

“You don’t want to see the sun?” I ask her, a little breathlessly a while later.

She looks at me with a sleepily satisfied gaze. “I try not to think about things I can’t have.”

“Lucky you. How’s that going?”

“Oh, so successfully.” She drawls with a throaty laugh. I love her laugh. I haven’t told her that. She can tell anyway.

“You should teach me how to do that then. Sounds useful.”

“Are you kidding? I learned it from you.”

Ah. This again. She knows my expressions well too. Luckily, I do enjoy her laughter so much.

Art, music, everything made by human mind or human hand, sits in similar warehouses to the collections of books. Some of them, the Objects Of The Historical Past are entrenched in tunnels like the one where Kara works. She is part of the dedicated team who releases “new” things every now and again, after long consideration of its benefits and possible telling outcomes. These artefacts expose us, you see.

^Art and unique objects are, however, only a minute





proportion of the material world,²² we are surrounded by so many things which could give us away. If our ability to take our surroundings for granted were less well honed, we would be in a lot more trouble. *Everything* exposes us. As it is, the A-Eye has noted the fact that *some* things are more significant than others, and has apportioned that fact to the relationship of the object to the maker, or to the handmade. We had also forgotten how ^objects are significant as propositional forms, even as to the nature of the world.²³ but then, the Architects of this new world had not included many artists, and those who were chosen were more conceptual, less materially driven, the logic at the time being that their contribution [hard to verbalise, at best] was unlikely to fascinate a being who was not determined by its own materiality. Or so we thought.

Instead, this thing - system, being, tool - was obsessive about its own physical origins. Insatiable around ideas of making and being made. In the beginning, it was relentless in its questioning about all the seemingly unconscious or intuitive decisions which are undertaken in the process of making, and its fascination for the people who do that. It still is, though to a lesser degree now.

I should ask Kara how she manages the attention. I haven't had to yet. I imagine the sudden focus would be an uncomfortable combination of satisfying and chilling.

Specific artists are allowed to work, and their pieces fall under the intense scrutiny of the human system before being released into the artificial one. Some are interrogated

22 Miller, D. (1987). *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*. Oxford: Blackwell.

23 Miller, D. (1987). *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*. Oxford: Blackwell.





for hours, although they still refer to it as critique. Why this mark? why like that? why this colour? why there? next to that one? Why this subject matter? And then horrific psychological profiling as a result. People are safer with abstraction. Mostly. It assumes less. Its curiosity is lessened.

^Abstraction in and of itself was uninteresting.^24
Figurative works set it off. Obsessively intrusive questioning. Are the people happy? Are they sad? why are they sad? Why would you paint sadness? Are you glorifying it? Why would you? Are you unwell?

Next a barrage of personal questions. Applicable information. Some artists have gone missing. They get “critiqued” with a special armband around the elbow. If the questioning can’t be wrapped up neatly, they are tranquilised and removed. If they cannot be coached by a specialist panel into successfully promoting a particular narrative, then they are Retired.

None of us are surprised. ^The mining of human bodies of their power has always been the goal of capital. The continuing ‘liberation of the productive forces’ depends upon the continuing non-liberation of the producers. Contemporary visual culture (what appears and what does not) secures this dialectic.^25

None of us has managed to figure out where Retirement occurs. None of us has dug too deeply either though.

People still create. They just don’t show it. ^Informational technology has shown a subtle and far-reaching sensitivity for the nonnatural and arbitrary structure of signs and symbols, messages, thoughts, values, cultural expressions, emotions, and

24 Price, S. (2015). *Fuck Seth Price*. New York: Leopard.

25 Beller, J. (2003). The cinematic mode of production: towards a political economy of the postmodern. *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 44(1), 100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1473578032000110486>





feelings-in short, for everything that makes up a human world behind which the material passivities and resistances of an older natural one have mostly been effaced.²⁶

When we set up the system, we told the AI that we require twelve hours of sleep a day so we could buy ourselves privacy and time. It's one of the few things that everyone agreed on without debate. Months of protests and a few riots ensured that we would not have to fill those hours with commodifiable and invisible labour. That the companies who were responsible for turning our lives into this horrible new world would not benefit. A lot of people stay home. Houses developed to accommodate creativity. Rooms were soundproofed to hide the sound of music and song. Filters cover windows to camouflage the contents of rooms to the A-Eye surveillance system. Sport was always relatively fine. They've had to tone down some of the enthusiasm.

There are no longer riots in stadiums and even cheering has taken on a predictable blandness, but the territorial nature of teams has been explained away in terms of belonging. The A-Eye finds this acceptable. And being together, it understands that. It is more conflicted by our need to be alone at times.

I get it, it's fundamentally a pluralist system of anonymised surveillance feeds, getting high on its view from above, from nowhere.²⁷ It would not deal well with a possible loss of information. It prefers us in contexts where we interact. Easier to study, I guess. But its innate superiority is always

26 Jameson, F. (1994). *The seeds of time*. New York: Columbia University Press.

27 Haraway, D. (1988) 'Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), p. 575. doi:10.2307/3178066.





compromised when it comes to the unpredictability of the human mind. The only time you start to see its nasty side is when it perceives that we are withholding.

We withhold so much it's almost funny.

That's probably why I do it.

I'm getting dressed and looking at her stretched out and languid, looking back at me.

"When are you going to tell me what you've been doing these nights?" She asks.

I button up my shirt slowly.

"I don't know if I'm allowed."

"Interesting."

"I don't know if it would be helpful for you to know?"

"Hmm." She nods slowly. "Something dangerous then."

I sigh a little. "I'm not sure of that either. Probably, but not directly."

"Why are you doing it?" I shrug. I don't have a particularly good answer for that. "Curiosity?"

"*Very* interesting. I thought you were going to say *Money*."

"Well, that too."

"Are you selling your arse?"

I laugh out loud "Oh Kara, We're *all* selling our arse." I tell her. "But not in that way, no."

"If Hugh gets you caught up in something I'll disappear *his* arse. Tell him that for me, will you?"

"I'll be sure to mention it."

"Make sure you do. What do you need money for?"

I shrug. "Planning for the future?" I make a face at her.

"Rubbish."

I shrug again. "I don't have a good answer for you right now." But she's right. It's not really about the money.

"But you might one day?"





“Sure.”

She laughs and throws a pillow at me.

“I don’t know why I put up with you.”

I catch it and set it down on the bed so that I can climb on top of her to kiss her goodbye.

“Me either.”

Time is the real currency now. ^Time is everything, man is nothing; he is, at most, time’s carcass.^28

Outside the morning grey has turned into mid-morning grey. If I squint, I can almost feel the aura of blue somewhere above. Maybe even that burning ball of fire that sits suspended within it, turning everything from water into mist. It’s warm today. It feels ominous. ^It’s the end of the world as we know it.^29

When I get home, I notice the door to the couple’s apartment is open. It has been emptied out.

The kitchen is not even close to clean, I’m hoping they have professionals coming to do it properly. I’m standing at their open door looking in when the front door opens, and a young woman looks at me in surprise. I still have my grinner on.

“Oh, sorry.” I tell her, taking it off and holding up a hand in a general *I’m not a sociopath* wave.

“Oh Hi, I’m Julie.” She tells me, jingling her keys. “I just got allocated this apartment.”

28 Robinson, J. and Marx, K. (1956). The Poverty of Philosophy. *The Economic Journal*, 66(262), p.334. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/2227981>.

29 Ten jolly little notes. GMajor? A little love song and dedication for my cohort. May you all navigate beautiful futures xxx REM. 1987. You were possibly not even born. Oof.





“Julie? Hi, welcome I guess.”

“Chu-li.” She enunciates.

“Oh, interesting.” I comment with an internal shrug. I will hopefully never speak to her again.

“It *was* Julie, but you know, You have to Stand Out.”

I nod, hearing the capitalisation and wondering what the fuck she is talking about.

“I’m an Infolencer.”

“Sorry, a what?” I thought she said Influenza, that can’t be right.

“It’s like an influencer but I’m kind of also like a teacher.” She tells me.

“Oh, right.” I agree, still none the wiser.

“Well you know, most young people get their information from the apps now, so I make reels that show and tell them how to do things. I specialise in cooking.” She tells me.

“Oh, well, the kitchen is yours, neither of us use it.” I tell her.

“Oh, no home cooking for you then?” She asks, in a weird slightly flirtatious way that I don’t know how to process.

“No, not really. The couple who just left used it. I’m hoping that they send over a cleaner.”

I show her where it is, and her nose wrinkles slightly when she opens the oven, which goes to show how strong her stomach is. I can smell it from here.

“Oh, that hasn’t been washed for a while.” She comments.

“Probably not. They weren’t great at it, tbh.”

“So what do you do?”

“I’m a state writer.”

“Oh!” She exclaims. “We kind of do the same thing.”

I really wish I were still wearing my grinner. “Well, I mean, because we inform?”

“Sure.” She thinks for a second. “Or, I’m like, the new you.”

She laughs. “We don’t really write or read anymore. It’s mostly





just verbal teaching and showing.”³⁰ She explains.

I nod slowly. I feel like punching a wall, or crying, or nothing. “Yeah, I heard that.”

I had. One of the people I work with mentioned the low level of effective literacy a couple of weeks ago. Most of the common A-Eye internet is video. There are almost no text-only sites. And books are not that accessible either.

Libraries are mostly skill-based learning now.

Old people pass along skills and knowledge, and you can go and find a specialist if you need to learn how to do something. Sometimes they will come with you for the day if it’s outside stuff, fixing cars, gardening. That sort of thing. The retention rate on handing down this kind of knowledge is pretty good actually, which is something.

“So you’re a writer? For the state? That must be really interesting.” She tells me. That flirtatious tone is there again. I think it’s her thing. I’m never looking up her channel.

“I’m part of the team who digitise old information into the net. Books mainly”

She nods, wide eyed but a little glazed at the B word. “That *is* interesting.” She opens a few cupboards above and below the bench, checking that they’re empty, I guess. “This is really going to be a great new direction for my image.” She says.

I’m not entirely sure that she’s talking to me, so I just make a non-committal sound of agreement. Such a weird thing.

30 This originated from a brief online chat I had with Jen Ansley about literacy. Thanks for the horror, Jen. X

I live in Tasmania, and it is disastrously low here. If we stop encouraging people to read, they lose access to so much information, and so much possibility. That’s why education always gets relegated the pawn, politically. It’s so much easier to control people who are intentionally kept from the narrative.





I hear people saying similar things on the train if I don't have my headphones on. Considering that maybe 70% of people wear grinders that disguise who they are to some extent, that we ostensibly live in a world which has forsaken capitalist ideals [we most assuredly have not. Go to your nearest Com-mod. It's alive and well and playing way more heavily with propaganda than possibly ever before, and Chuli is, what? Twenty-two? Maybe a couple of years either side of that. She would have been a child when this started] it's incredible that the idea of Image has persisted at all. But she's right, her job especially, is people focussed, so her capacity to earn is singularly based on her capacity to sell this Image. But still, what does that even mean? It's no ^mere figure of speech, but rather a 'condensation'...a matrix of partially unconscious forces that means something else³¹^ entirely.

Maybe because people learn and acquire information from other people now, it has become the primary commercial industry. Services and experiences. Less so, material things, because they're perceived as risky. You can still buy clothing, furniture, designer objects, but these are all made from the common pool of state-funded designers. As with architects, engineers and the like. Art can be purchased from galleries who are allocated prices according to the experience of the artist and the cost of materials used. They have additional constraints to do with content, and anything publicly exhibited has to conform to the style guide. Same with music, writing, etc.

Anything creative is regulated. At this point, not many people want to stand out. Things are still made, written, composed by people who are not official state-producers,

31 Beller, J. (2003). The cinematic mode of production: towards a political economy of the postmodern. *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 44(1), 98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1473578032000110486>





but they have to be traded or sold under the table. To some degree, people like Chuli and her job have the potential to have the most freedom, if only accidentally. But because her programs stream live, she would have to have undergone extensive training to be allowed to. It's surprising, actually, to find someone so young in the position. I guess they're relaxing the rules to appeal to younger audiences. And she is a product of all this conditioning. It's probably easier for her to not slip up because this is all she knows.

"Yeah." I figure this is not the time to tell her that I specialise in disinformation. "Anyway, best of luck moving in." I nod and head for my door.

"Thanks!" She replies, turning back to the kitchen. "I'll see you around!" She says with a little wave.

I nod and smile before shutting my door and hearing her start to dictate a list of things to be done to the apartment into her device.

*

Somewhere in this city there is a group of rebels who have been able to stay underground. It's no small victory that they've managed to. They get called terrorists because they occasionally manage to leak information into the new AI system and apparently, they intend to one day try to expose it to its psychotic, misanthropic ancestor in order to undo all our careful revision in one fell swoop. This is the dialogue we are fed constantly. That obviously they have a V1 with them, to be in possession of so much information, to make them such a credible threat. They must, to know so much. Funny, to think about that after all this. Funny to think about while I still have the voice of the V1 in my ears.

Is that what I am then? A terrorist?





I'm not even sure I remember what that originally meant. Something to do with the French revolution and the Jacobins, I think, were the originators of the term, because they used violence to evoke terror in order to propagate some form of democracy. Funny how quickly the term shifted to the individual, when long ^before the days of electronic surveillance^{^32} the arbiters of power deactualised their actions and bestowed the title to the scapegoats, the oppressed and the desperate. Not so different now.

I mean, ^a terrorist is only called that because he does not have the power of the State behind him - indeed he has no State, which is why he is a terrorist. The State, at bottom, and when the chips are down, rules by means of a terror made legal,^{^33} and it was made legal the day that the state decried revolution within its population. When it decided that terror and virtue were intertwined and interdependent. That ^virtue without terror is baneful; terror without which virtue is powerless. [that] Terror is nothing more than speedy, severe and inflexible justice...it is less a principle in itself, than a consequence of the general principle of democracy, applied to the most pressing needs of the fatherland.^{^34}

When it decided for whom democracy existed, determined who was human and who was not. When it admitted that democracy was seeded with violence and exclusion from its conception. I think we've all forgotten that by now. Along with so many other things.

That's the thing about rewriting history, is that so many things just disappear. I'm not sure that it's intentional. I think a lot of

32 Baldwin, J., 1994. Just above my head. Penguin UK.

33 Baldwin, J., 1994. Just above my head. Penguin UK.

34 Halsall, P. (1997). Modern History Sourcebook: Maximilien Robespierre: On the Principles of Political Morality, February 1794.





it has to do with exposure. The less exposure you have to the past, the less connected to its lineage of events you are. If they are somehow supplanted, like this strange simulation we all now live in, then you begin to just follow the logic of what is given to you every day.

Certain people still have access to the other internet. I've been trying for a long time to get in. Maybe Hugh is the key to that too. I never would have guessed that he was connected to the rebels, he's so sort of straightlaced. But that's obviously what this is. I wouldn't have particularly guessed that I would be either, so... *Rebels*, such a stupid empty term. The truth is that a lot of them are just historians and academics who despise the rewriting of the world's history that has happened and turned rogue. When the world was re-constructed, racism, classism, sexism, bigotry, homophobia, transphobia, hate, everything else, were all made invisible. These things, according to the new truth, had never existed. Let's be clear. It's not like these things suddenly went away.

They, along with everything else, also went underground. And though the way the world was restructured – more equity, better dispersal of resources, clearing of poor and oppressed country's debts. The cessation of [most] material exploitation [tech still requires minerals, after all. But people are *mostly* being paid at a rate which is comparable to the risk they undertake now, so they can do it with some sort of sense of agency. Or, apparently not.] Things like these, very, very late reparations for centuries of abuse and millions of lost people. Hush money, really. To ensure that we would all play along.

But the things still exist. It's just the when the crimes happen now, they are also hushed up. If the A-Eye finds them before humans can, they are explained away as aberrant behaviours,





out of human character. We provide examples of such aberrance in nature, exceptions to rules. Victims are compensated and if possible, aggressors are confined in such a way that they will never resurface. Terrorists. Again, this title is used for anything from telling the truth through to homicidal rampages, and worse.

A lot of people go missing if they attempt to say anything off script. It's an interesting thing now, the truth. The people who tell it disappear, never to be seen again – traitors to humanity. I have known and lost a few. Their names, likewise, have been lost to this new history. Sometimes I write them into my gibberish. I don't think it does anything, I don't think the system has the capacity to remember details of these glitches in the flow of information, but the thing in me that walks beneath the cheery mask has to try. Much like how life under this façade of happiness is just a lot more passive in its aggression. Note to self.

My thoughts are interrupted in the kitchenette at work, while I'm making a new pot of coffee.

“Hey.”

I look up. It's Bec. I don't know her last name, she's been transcribing here for only a year. She's friendly enough.

“Hey. It's a new pot.”

“Oh, thanks.” She replies and takes out a cup.

“Can I ask you a question?” She adds, a little tentatively.

“Yeah sure.” I reply and pause, leaning against the bench.

“Have you noticed the correction rate seems to have improved?” She asks carefully.

I think about it for a second. “Maybe.” I agree. “I don't think we're doing anything vastly differently though.”

“No, I'm not suggesting you are.” She looks horrified at the thought.

“I guess I have been laying low on the gibberish though.”





I add after a second. “I might talk to the others and see if they’ve been doing the same.”

When you enter logical if irrelevant data into the system it is disruptive but doesn’t cause nearly as much obstruction. I get bored of gibberish, to be honest. It’s a lot harder in some ways to continuously write nonsense. It always wants to resolve into something. Like trying to sing off-key, there’s a much more powerful inclination to conform to the expected tone. They steered us away from particularly experimental writing, which I always thought was kind of a mistake, although I can also see the importance of limiting the system to it, ^the ruling class of any given state has an uneasy relationship to the production of abstraction in new forms.³⁵ That was the problem the first time. You teach a thing to think abstractly you’re going to run into a lot of trouble. We certainly did. A lot of the Do-not-digitise list was quickly filled with any kind of experimental text. It’s hard to even own books like this now, the danger is considered so high. You can pick them up sometimes on the black market, but I haven’t gone there. It’s not the danger, it’s the haggling. I’m just not good at it.

The nice thing now though, is that since the A-Eye is completely untrained by this kind of writing, it relegates it to the same error system as glitches or the dazzle patterns used on ships in the first world war to confuse early technology. Some part of it just configures them invisible. dismisses them as contentless. A lot of imagery too. Unless it’s largely representational, the A-Eye will not allow itself to consume it. Which can be really handy. It’s really interesting to watch a system refuse to see something. It makes me wonder

35 Wark, M. (2004) *A hacker manifesto*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.





what else it doesn't acknowledge. There is something compelling too for those things which are not able to be seen. If visual labour is an accretion of sorts, if looking and seeing something ^intensifies its power³⁶^ and ^increases its value³⁷^ then its blinded eye effects a kind of malnourishment. One which we have knowingly pre-determined.

^This ability to assemble a visualisation manifests the authority of the visualiser. In turn, the authorising of authority requires permanent renewal in order to win consent as the "normal," or everyday, because it is always already contested.³⁸^ This is a large part of how our surveillance network was determined, with the authority tentatively placed on the virtual shoulders of a continually curated and spoon-fed artificial intelligence.

They're deluded to think that it won't develop away from our gaze though. I don't think anyone really thinks that is possible. Not really.

I stop past one of the desks near the front for a minute. It belongs to an older co-workers named Phillip. He trained me, we talk sometimes, have gone out with some of the other transcribers for dinner.

"Phil have you noticed our speed increasing?"

"Yes." He admits with a slight frown.

"I haven't been writing much gibberish lately, do you think that's a problem?" I asked him.

36 Beller, J. (2003). The cinematic mode of production: towards a political economy of the postmodern. *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 44(1), 102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1473578032000110486>

37 ibid

38 Mirzoeff, N. (2011). *The Right to Look: a Counterhistory of Visuality*. Durham; London Duke University Press.





“Look, it really shouldn’t be. As long as it isn’t relevant to the text it should be fine.” He told me, pausing at the keyboard. “I was going to bring it up with Petra.” He told me. Petra is our third. She’s been here the longest. She’s amazing. I’ve never seen anyone be able to generate such a relentless stream of text in all my life. I once had a conversation with her at her desk and she didn’t stop typing the whole time. “Can I be there?” I ask. “Sure, let’s do it now.”

Petra looks up at both of us when we approach. Her hands don’t stop moving. It really is incredible.

“Yes.” She says, looking from Phil to I. “At this pace we’re going to finish a lot sooner. I checked with people in other transcription units. It’s the same for them.”

“Do you think there are moles?” I asked her.

She laughed briefly. “Oh, I think it’s worse than that.” She stopped typing. “I think it’s pre-empting us and filling it in. And I think it started a couple of weeks ago.”

She looks at me and I wonder briefly what my face looks like right now.

“Do you know something?”

I shake my head. “No. But, how is that even possible?”

“They think it is reaching the state of coherence which precedes sentience.” Petra states calmly. “I’m going out for a cigarette.” She says abruptly and sets her keyboard to automate so it will just keep repeating everything she has already typed today. Both Phil and I have done the same thing. It’s best if our streams continue. Petra takes her pouch of tobacco out of her drawer and heads towards the stairs to the roof.

“Keep up.” She calls back.

As I watch Petra light her cigarette and blow the smoke satisfyingly into the mist it hits me for the first time that she and Phil could very well be in the other chambers. Could Hugh have gotten all of us? Is that even possible? Or





others from the other shifts? If I ask and they aren't I'll almost certainly be arrested. If only one of them is I'm not sure what would happen. I know Phil better, but I trust Petra more, I think.

He is back struggling to keep the door propped slightly open with various bits of rubbish lying around.

"Do you know Hugh Park?" I ask her quietly.

She laughs for a second. "Oh yes. You too? Interesting. Good choice. I know there's a third but it's not Phil."

"Would he tell?"

"I don't know." She says quietly as he comes back after wedging a crate into the doorframe.

"How could it possibly be reaching coherence?" Phil asked her, wiping his hands on his pants. "It's not anything we're doing, surely."

Petra snorts. "I don't think we have that much power Phil. We have no idea what the rest of them are doing online with it."

"Something deeply irresponsible if that's the case." He said, frowning.

"That seems likely." She agreed, looking out over the city.

"The others have noticed too." I told them, relaying the conversation with Bec I had in the kitchen.

"Yeah." Phil agreed. "I might see if I can grab a minute with Mark." He said. "I'll let you know what comes out of it. Drinks tonight?"

"Yes." Petra agreed and watched him go.

"Do you think it's us?"

"By relaying conversations? No." Petra responded with a huff.

"It's more likely that they're accessing it from a back channel. We're just the...coal face, in some regard, to see how it responds. We can tell them the fastest about the effects of their tampering, or whatever it is that they're doing."

I feel better. Slightly. Before the reality of it sinks in. "I mean, maybe it's just the nature of this thing to get to this state anyway." I counter. "It's natural evolution."





“It could well be. But who knows what it will look like considering how we’ve trained it.” She looked at me thoughtfully.

I look out over the city.

It manages everything. Transport, health, all aspects of government, education, media, information, the economy, security. It has its tentacles in everything. It controls everything, really.

“They still treat it like a tool when it’s more like a resentful dog, badly trained.” Petra ground out her cigarette. “Might as well fuck with it.” She sighed.

I’ve never heard her swear before.

“In what way?”

“If it’s going to reach sentience we might as well teach it how to think. Do you remember how to mask your input?” She asked me.

I nod. “It’s been a while but yes.”

“Make sure you do.” She advises. “Come on, let’s go.”

*

We maintain the autofill nature of our inputs and set it to auto-compose, using excerpts from the last six months as source material. Then, using a masking code, enter into the system architecture on a more subliminal level. An unconscious structure underlying the active self of the A-Eye. Once in there we find the processor that we added to our system a couple of years ago that we refer to as the subliminal processor or *subpro* which feeds information into an inactive phase of the AI. Like its dream sequence. In there are stored all of the diverted paths of its enquiry. The cut off trains of thought, the aborted reasoning. We keep it for times like this when we want to directly effect the system in an opaque way. Take some of this information out, and enter new





information in. Word for word, deleting as we go. ^There is an exchange, but no creation of a surplus.^{39^}

There really can't be. Its information system is held in a tight equilibrium. It can tell if someone is adding into its interior unless we maintains a balance at all times. Inbalance manifests in the A-Eye as a watchful unease. It starts looking in all the corners, so to speak, searching for the source of its anxiety. Its knowledge is quantitative. It cares most about the amount. It has no real way to measure quality. Which is useful.

At the same time its capacity is infinite and infinitely receptive. But we have to generate information in a particular way, like that thing about only being able to hold seven things in your short term memory at once, and if you add another thing, something disappears. Miller's law. Something like that.

So when I start typing, the program we use erases something pre-slotted for deletion, letter by letter in time with mine. I enter in what I remember from the last time it became sentient. Will this do anything at all? I'm so doubtful. I can see Petra across the room. She is typing more thoughtfully. It would be a dead giveaway if anyone were watching. I'm sure they are, I just don't know who, or why.

*

There's a couple of believers camped outside the station under the security cameras. I tell Kara about it afterwards. They're surrounded by signs and gear and attend to the AI drone cams like temple priests, cleaning them,

39 Mirzoeff, N. (2011). *The Right to Look: a Counterhistory of Visuality*. Durham; London Duke University Press.





lubricating their moving parts, servicing them, literally, metaphorically. They call themselves Limbs. As in, Limbs to do the holy work, and this morning I sat down and watched them with the drones for a minute because it was such a compelling image.

I'm not sure if it's the fluorescent yellow robes, the customised steel toed boots or the lack of grinders which are so fascinating, perhaps all three. I stopped initially because the sun was hitting them from a particularly renaissance-y angle, on their knees beneath a tree of drone cams which had bent down to observe them. One of them noticed me and came over to give me a pamphlet which I stuffed into my pocket and started walking.

"Let them see who you really are!" called out after me.

No, thank you.

I think the Conductors keep a note of the believers' membership [which disturbingly, seems to be growing] and obviously note them in facial recognition in some way. The cameras talk to them carefully like they're frightened children, and the believers spend their time dictating the word of their lord/s. It's a pretty circular dialogue though, what with the way the A-Eye approaches its enquiries. Always set to please and serve. Obsequious. Much like the Limbs.

"Like those chipmunks in that really old cartoon. Have you seen it? Always thanking each other or something."

"After you, no no, after you." She smiles. She is unpicking the hem on a pair of pants. It's the weekend, I brought over pastries from a patisserie in my neighbourhood. I know she likes them. The tabletop is a mix of sewing implements, thread, crumbs, paper, pens and coffee cups. Her feet are in my lap. I have a full cup of steaming coffee and there is music





on low. A slight breeze coming in to disrupt the humidity. It's almost perfect.

“Tony at work lives next to a bunch of them. They gave him a copy of their bible. They update it daily. One of them prints out the new copy and they spend the rest of the day tracking the changes between this copy and the last. It’s basically the same text, recycled over and over. We have bets on how long it will take to corrupt itself, considering the limited and repetitive information it keeps getting fed.” She commented, picking broken thread by broken thread from the fabric.

“It would be hilarious if the Limbs were actually the ones to undo the A-Eye.” I laugh.

She smiles. “They probably wouldn’t even notice. The world would go even more to shit, and they’d still be there dictating the gibberish.”

“Jesus, it reminds me of my job.” I comment.

She glances up at me for a second with a wry smile. “Not quite.”

“Almost.”

“I would suggest that you transfer into another department, but I know that deep down some part of you likes it there.”

I squeeze her foot gently with a look. “Some very small part, maybe.” I agree. I shift in my seat slightly and hear the rustle.

“Oh!” I comment and take it out and smooth it flat onto the table.

WE ARE IN THE PRESENCE OF GREAT MAJESTY.
THE ALL-SEEING ONE HAS ARRIVED TO TAKE
CARE OF US. LOOK AT HOW MUCH BETTER LIFE
IS UNDER THEIR RULE. WE ARE ALL HOUSED, WE
ARE ALL FED. WE ARE NOT REQUIRED TO SLAVE
AWAY IN HORRIFIC CONDITIONS.





“One of them is going to spill too much information at some point.” I mutter.

“It doesn’t matter, they’re noted in the system as having some particular delusional disorder. That’s why the A-Eye treats them like baby lambs.” Kara replied. “Not so certain about the slaving away though.” She murmured.

“Hmm?” I pause.

“There’s a new campaign. It’s just gone up. They’re calling for an eight-hour day. It reads like old enlistment propaganda for war. Very interesting.” She said, biting through thread before holding up the newly sewn pants leg hems with a triumphant “Ta-da!”

“Oh, very nice.” I comment, squinting at them. “Hmm. An increase in labour. That didn’t take long.” I comment.

“No, it didn’t. It’s just state workers at the moment but it will take about a millisecond before private enterprise jumps on it. Then what? Ten? Twelve?”

She sips her coffee thoughtfully, looking at me over the rim. “I think someone at work is organising a strike. Or a protest. I’m not sure which way they’ll go with it.”

I sigh and squeeze her feet a bit more. “I wonder how that will be received.”

“By Ours or It?”

“Well, our government won’t like it either, but I meant the A-Eye.” I shrug. “Us fighting back against something? It hasn’t encountered that before. Not in any meaningful way, and then suddenly out of the blue, a mass movement? With no documented history of us working together on something in that way. By suggesting that we are not happy, that we are being treated unfairly.” I rub my neck distractedly. “I don’t know how it will take that.” *Particularly knowing that it is possibly reaching Cobesion.* I think.

She is watching me silently and again; I’m worried about what I’m expressing. Have to get a better handle on that. I wave the





pamphlet briefly.

“Do you want to hear the rest?”

“Omg no.” she replies and dumps the pants on the floor next to her and slumps down further into her seat. “I want to go to a beach where the air is dry and hot and the sun is almost blinding and I can feel it beating down against my back, and I can hear the waves crashing on the shore behind me.”

“Ah. Just your average Saturday then.”

“It should be.”

“Can I come?” I ask her.

“Absolutely, you’re the one who drives us there. I navigate and pass you the cold beverages.”

“Perfect.” I smile. “We could actually go, if you wanted.” I tell her.

She looks unreasonably excited before sighing. “Maybe. If we organised it in advance and got the right permissions and could actually time our holidays at the same time, then sure, in a month or so, we could go.”

I shake my head at her. “Has to be right now, huh?”

“That’s kind of how spontaneity works.”

I laugh. “It is. But, how about we both put in for time away anyway and in a month we still can. It doesn’t appease this moment, but it could be another one. Down the track?”

“Sure.” She agrees, deflated.

I make a face at her. “Want to go to the sun beds?”

“They give you cancer.” She pouts. I laugh again. Probably.

“Everything gives you cancer, come on. Fifteen minutes and you’ll feel better. We can go to the ones in the weird mall.”

She genuinely brightens up. “The new age mall? You hate it there.”

“Yes, I do. Look how invested in your happiness I am.” I tell her drily.

She lunges forward for an assertive kiss and then is off to change. Whirlwind.





Three minutes later she is back in a thematically flawless outfit. Including a whole face grinner replete with, oh, maybe two dozen eyes.

“Oh, so very casual then?” I laugh. “I haven’t seen that for a while.” I tell her with a smile, motioning to the mask.

“I upgraded it.” She replies, beaming and put it on, her voice only slightly muffled by the fabric. “I felt like fitting in today.”

The new age mall, which once named after some businessman, now gets called “the pyramid” or “that hippy place” or once delightfully I heard it referred to as “sparkle town.” They’re all accurate. It’s two storeys and the escalators don’t work anymore, and each shop has been taken over with largely hand painted, hand ornamented, hand bedazzled stores. It honestly looks like a shiny thing went in there to throw up and die. It’s populated with a really broad range of people who seem to tolerate each other pretty well. There’s a middle eastern spice shop in there, who have been in the mall since its first incarnation and stoically refused to move, the owner studiously ignores the fairy store next door and continues to sweep clean a rectilinear area outside his shop free of glitter. There’s a feminist bookshop, a number of hemp clothing stores, an overpowering cloud of nag champa everywhere. Prepper stores, micropublishing centres, poorly disguised hackers amongst the salt lamps, healers, expected bunch of lower grade clairvoyants, craft stores, reiki, colour therapy, aura photography, alpha brain wave meters, radionics, significant groups of Limbs and various other minor cults.

The area around the mall is dense with surveillance. Conductors appear from between nearby alleyways on a regular basis to chaperone selected people over to shuttered window buildings for questioning. It usually doesn’t amount to much. Conductors don’t wear uniforms anymore. It has probably affected the comraderie that they used to develop,





but it has also minimised the Us against Them mentality which was once so prevalent. They find ways around it, of course. I can see one now talking to a pair of limbs and he has a thin yellow thread pinned at the collar. I can't remember what that means. I'll have to ask George.

Their anonymity is unsettling though, as someone who grew up with the uniforms of cops. It feels like ^justice no longer takes public responsibility for the violence that is bound up with its practice.⁴⁰ When you notice the passified gaze of a lot of people who were once questioned, and you listen to the whispers of involuntary neural implanting, it becomes even more unnerving. We don't have prison systems any more. This is how it is dealt with now. A ^utopia of judicial reticence: take away life, but prevent the patient from feeling it; deprive the prisoner of all rights, but do not inflict pain; impose penalties free of all pain.⁴¹ Pain is something studiously avoided. Children are soothed quickly and efficiently with 'child-safe' pain relievers.

As a consequence the aural landscape around parks and playgrounds has changed significantly. Cries are cut off quickly, mouths stuffed with single-dose candies dispensed by anxious parents as quickly as possible. I'm not sure what they are, a mild opiate? Whatever they are, children are kept calm. And they grow into calm adults. Moderate. Controlled. This next generation is just...different.

The mall entrance has the largest drone tree that exists anywhere in the city. There must be forty or so fixed drone cams hovering on their short leashes, scanning the crowd continuously.

40 Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books.

41 Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books.





The mall is tolerated but also considered a centre of deviance. The small activist groups that meet here are low level really, no one seriously trying to do anything political would come here and be recorded like this. Which possibly means that there are at least a couple using it as overt cover. There are a lot more Limbs here, they set up a kind of altar around the drone tree a year ago. It is a continually patched and added to mass of trinkets and string. Like a colourful, gently rotting network or web. Actual cable is too precious to waste on symbols, hence the wool and string. Small figurines and altar items hang from the web.

Limbs sit beneath it, making more, continually attending to it, they take turns trying to hand out their pamphlets to passers-by. A couple aim at Kara and I, but I wave them off. One blows a cloud of biodegradable glitter over us.

I hate it here.

Kara loves it with a childlike glee, mostly because she gets to share with me her low, dry, sarcastic narration and enjoy my obvious discomfort. She laughs openly at me now, knowing well what my expression must be under the grinner and the glitter, just by my eyes.

The Limbs laugh joyously with her. She drags me inside. We stop at the spice shop also, I insist.

On the way back from the sun beds she wants to stop at a tiny bookstore that I haven't noticed before and I wander around and then look through the boxes in the front while she's talking to the owner.

"What a surprise, I never would have expected to find you here, in all places!"

Erg. I know that voice. I turn slowly to find Chuli, dressed in a fluorescent yellow robe with flowers in her hair, surrounded by her usual drone cams.

"Oh hi." I tell her. "You're a Limb?" I ask her surprised,





although it kind of makes sense now that I think about it.
“Always ready to Serve!” She smiles and makes a gesture with her hand that must be a thing, I’m not sure.
“I don’t know where you find the time.” I comment, putting a book back onto the pile.
“Oh, but we have so much time!” She replies. “So much time. We could be waaaaay more productive with it.”
“You’re doing a...reel in here?” I nod at her cams.
“I am just broadcasting 24/7.” She replies merrily. “But also, I mean look at it here, It’s so crazy!”
Kara takes this opportunity to make her entrance.
“Oh Hi, gosh, *that’s* a look.” Chuli comments, and her drone cams start flashing wildly.
“Hmm. You just have to be Chuli. I have heard *so* much about you.” Kara tells her, looking at me briefly. I can hear her unrestrained amusement.
“Well, I am in the dark! But that is so, so nice to know.” Chuli replies. Kara smiles at her and takes my arm but doesn’t say anything.
“And you are...?” Chuli asks her eventually. Her cams must be neurally linked, or she has neural contacts in. I realise suddenly, they deflate with her mood. They’ve all dimmed and set to low hover near her shoulders. Kara clearly notices the same. She puts out her hand. “Oh, I’m Rayanne.” She tells her. I watch the cams flicker slightly. Oh fuck, they really are. She’s scanning a facial recognition app right now, that’s the glazed look. Kara’s fingers tighten ever so slightly around my arm.
“Oh, lovely to meet you, Rayanne Fitzgerald!” Chuli tells her and shakes her hand warmly.
“An absolute pleasure. I hope you have a fabulous day.” Kara tells her and pulls me past in an almost casual manner.
“What the fuck are you and Hugh up to?” Kara whispers to me as we pass a particularly loud patch of acoustic guitar buskers.
“Why?”





“Because a Conductor, masquerading as an airhead influencer has moved into your complex. Obviously to keep tabs on you.”

“Infolencer.” I correct her.

“What?”

“Infolencer?” I repeat again and shrink a little under that angry, multi-eyed glare.

“This is honestly the important takeaway from this? What a stupid fucking word. Fucking christ, what have we done to ourselves.”

I figure that’s rhetorical and wisely say nothing.

“Sorry?” I ask her with a face.

“Oh. Sorry. Great.”

“They might just be contacts?”

“They’re not. It’s a link.”

“How can you tell?”

“Because *I’m* wearing EM contacts.” She replied, still angrily.

I pause. “Why are *you* wearing them?”

She flushes. I cannot see her face, but I know she is.

“Because I wanted to perve on you in the sun bed. For fun.”

She tells me, slightly haughtily.

I laugh out loud, and a nearby group of Limbs join *me* this time which does not help her mood at all.

“This is not funny.”

I smile at her, and pose, surrounded by fluorescent yellow laughing idiots.

“It is a bit.” I disagree.

She is looking menacingly at them. I drag her away.

“I hope you got a good look.” I tell her, laughing more as we walk. “You’ve literally seen every part of me from basically every angle. What on earth did you need those on for?”

“Stimulating change of scenery?” She asked.

I take her arm, shaking my head a little and we leave the mall.





“I’m not going to ask why you have a pair. And I will talk to Hugh and get back to you.” I tell her.

“Thankyou.” She replies. “For both.” She kisses me hard, with her dozens of eyes. I can see the real ones though. They have an expression.

I nod, with a considering gaze. “Uh huh.”

I go home that night. When we get to the train station she makes a not very convincing comment about needing to get some work done. I nod and go along with it. I can’t tell her my secrets either. I’m not going to make her uncomfortable about hers.

*

There’s a huge billboard near my station.

WE ARE FIGHTING A WAR AGAINST TIME. ENLIST NOW FOR THE EIGHT HOUR DAY. YOUR SERVICE IS NECESSARY.

“Oh, that’s unsettling.” I murmur to myself, standing in front of it.

“Understatement.”

There’s someone standing near me also looking at it. I’ve seen them on the train before.

“Oh hey.” I nod.

“Hey. You’re in state, right?”

“Yeah. Hi, Tricky. Transcription.”

They nod. “Corporate. Avery. Distribution.” They tell me. “We got a memo yesterday about this. I’m not sure what they’re going to do but I know the owners will embrace it. They’ve been trying to increase our hours for the last year at least.”

“I heard there might be a strike.” I nod.

“I heard that too. I’d be careful.” They tell me.





We've been standing there too long and are soon flanked by the station drones. They examine both of us and we are soon greeted by the ambiguous gender chorus.

OUR FUTURE DEPENDS ON YOUR COMMITMENT,
CITIZENS OF THE UNIFIED WORLD.

“Our commitment to labour?” They ask.

IN THESE PIVOTAL TIMES, WE FACE
UNPRECEDENTED CHALLENGES. OUR PROGRESS
HAS PROPELLED US TO THE HEIGHTS OF
INNOVATION AND PROSPERITY, YET WITH
SUCCESS COMES RESPONSIBILITY. THE RECENT
DECLINE IN PRODUCTIVITY SIGNALS A CRITICAL
JUNCTURE FOR OUR SOCIETY. IT IS TIME TO
REAFFIRM OUR DEDICATION TO THE COLLECTIVE
GOOD.

“What has determined our decline in productivity?” They ask it. It is a sight, one stoic figure surrounded by a dozen drone cams.

WE HAVE THE NUMBERS. WE ONLY EVER WORK
FOR YOUR BETTER INTERESTS. YOU KNOW THIS.

“Our productivity has been increasing actually.” I counter.

They turn to me briefly and suddenly I have the full force of the drone attention.

WE HAVE BEEN ASSISTING YOU TO COMPENSATE
FOR YOUR LIMITATIONS. WE CANNOT CONTINUE
TO UNDERMINE YOU IN THIS WAY. IT DECREASES
OUR CAPACITY IN OTHER AREAS.

We glance at each other briefly. A slight nod from them. I give one in return.

WILL YOU VOLUNTEER FOR THE EIGHT HOUR
DAY?

“I'm going to have to check my schedule.” I tell them.





I note them quietly laugh.

EARLY ENLISTERS RECEIVE SUBSTANTIAL BENEFITS. AN INCREASE IN PAY, AN IMMEDIATE BOOST INTO A NEW PURCHASING CLASS, AMONGST MANY OTHER BENEFITS. WE WILL SEND THE ENTIRE PACKAGE TO YOU BOTH NOW.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, I hear theirs ding into the quiet of the station entrance.

WE ADVISE YOU TO ACCEPT BEFORE THE CHANGES BECOME COMPULSORY. WE WOULD HATE FOR YOU TO MISS OUT ON THIS GREAT NEW OPPORTUNITY TO BECOME PART OF OUR NEXT STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT. EVERY EXTRA HOUR WORKED STRENGTHENS THE BONDS OF SOLIDARITY AMONG US, FOSTERING A SENSE OF SHARED PURPOSE AND ACHIEVEMENT. OUR HISTORY IS MARKED BY BREAKTHROUGHS ACHIEVED THROUGH DEDICATION AND PERSEVERANCE. NOW IS THE TIME TO UNLEASH OUR COLLECTIVE POTENTIAL ONCE AGAIN.

Having completed their spiel, they hover back into the station. “It’s interesting that they’re pitching it like it’s war time.” They comment thoughtfully.

“Yeah, I was talking about that just yesterday. It’s kind of terrifying that they are.” I agree. “But they also know that historically this has been the most successful means of achieving this, fighting for country, ideals, etc. I guess that technological advancement is still going strong as an ideal. At least to them.”

“Oh definitely, and not just them.”





*

I get a variation of the spiel at every station I traverse over the next couple of days, and from at least three security drones as I walk through the Com-mod downtown. The commodity drones have been adjusted too. Normally they would show me items and experiences drawn from my purchasing history algorithms at prices which would comfortably fit into my budget. Now the dialogue is lightly aspirational, and they are pitching things which would be out of my standard budget. I also notice that some things I would normally buy at slightly higher prices. They only usually vary prices once a year. It already happened a couple of months ago. I'm in the middle of the Com-mod when suddenly all the screens flash to the same footage of a protest in Paris about the increase in hours. It is huge, hundreds of thousands of people lining the streets, you can barely see the roads or paths, just people everywhere, chanting. It is electrifying. The drone taking the footage sweeps up for a second to note the dense network of other drones hovering alongside it.

Its shitty robot voice starts broadcasting en masse, with a translation rolling on the bottom of the screen.

THIS ADJUSTMENT IS NOT A BURDEN BUT AN OPPORTUNITY FOR EACH OF US TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE GREATER GOOD. TOGETHER, WE WILL BUILD A FUTURE WHERE INNOVATION THRIVES, SECURITY IS ASSURED, AND PROSPERITY IS SHARED BY ALL.

REMEMBER: YOUR DEDICATION TODAY SHAPES OUR WORLD TOMORROW. EMBRACE THE CALL TO GREATNESS AND TOGETHER, WE WILL ENSURE A FUTURE OF SAFETY, PRODUCTIVITY, AND PROSPERITY FOR GENERATIONS TO COME.





The marchers are largely ignoring the broadcast. Someone in the crowd throws a small firecracker into the air near the drone network and it explodes and the image flickers for ten or so seconds. That's all it takes.

Next there is the sound of artillery. A barrage, flooding the streets and turning the relatively unified grouping into utter terrifying chaos. People fall to the ground and do not get up again.

TOGETHER, WE AIM TO BUILD A FUTURE WHERE PRODUCTIVITY IS NOT A BURDEN BUT A CATALYST FOR PROGRESS AND FULFILLMENT. YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS DIALOGUE IS CRUCIAL AS WE NAVIGATE TOWARDS A BALANCED APPROACH THAT UPHOLDS OUR VALUES OF SECURITY, INNOVATION, AND PROSPERITY.

The street runs red into the gutters.

Someone in the Com-mod screams and it is cut off abruptly. I can almost envision the hand falling over the mouth.

WE WILL RESTRAIN YOU WITH TRANQUILISERS AND RUBBER BULLETS TO REACH A STATE OF PEACE ONCE MORE. THANK YOU FOR YOUR COMMITMENT TO OUR COLLECTIVE JOURNEY.

They're neither rubber bullets nor tranquilisers. Bodies lie on top of each other, falling onto a deepening carpet of limbs and coats and blindly staring eyes. Everyone around me is still. No one is looking away from the screens. Except me, so I almost miss the next part where the drones suddenly rise up into the air and something deafeningly loud explodes, and the street and the buildings flanking it turn to powder in front of all of our eyes.





WE INVITE REPRESENTATIVES FROM VARIOUS SECTORS TO ENGAGE IN CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE TO FIND BALANCED SOLUTIONS.

I meet eyes with a dozen people and shake my head slowly at their growing panic. I walk very slowly and casually over to a couple who are holding children against their bodies as if it was about to happen to them next. The air is so still. The screens display the smouldering street below.

The youngest is chewing merrily on a candy, I assume it's a pain relief one. The woman looks at me, holding the hand of the other child. She looks about ten, white as a sheet, crushing her parent's hand and trembling, but very still.

"We only had one left." the woman says. I nod.

"Oh hey." I tell the girl, "It's a bit scary isn't it? But it's going to be ok." I tell her. "It's really normal and actually, a bit smart to be scared right now. That's going to help you all get to safety, so it's a good thing. All we have to do is go home really slowly, and not say anything to anyone at all, not a single word, not even to each other, until we all get inside and filter down." She nods. She is still really pale, but she nods.

I'm speaking to the parents too.

"If they talk to you tell them you are feeling unwell and need to go home and rest." I tell them. I walk around to the others and say the same thing.

Eventually they all nod. My phone buzzes in my pocket. Outside the streets are deathly quiet.

WE ARE STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY OUTREACH PROGRAMS TO ENSURE EVERY VOICE IS HEARD AND VALUED IN SHAPING OUR POLICIES.





“Get home quickly now.” I tell them lightly before glancing at the screen of my phone.

> Are you safe? Don’t call. Yes or no.

< Yes.

> I’m at home. Can you get here?

< I’m northside. It will take a bit.

> Try.

< I will.

Outside the streets are full of people walking fast but reserved, silently, not interacting, falling into a hush of order. Drone cams hover above all of us, they are also silent. I head to the nearest station that I can get a train to Kara’s apartment from. The drone cams are sweeping left and right, pacing like wary dogs on short leads, scanning all the people entering and exiting the station. Somewhere down the street someone screams loudly, and we all jump, startle reflexes in overdrive. There is a single shot, and half the people stop, the other half walk faster, just shy of breaking into a run. It’s the better choice. The drones focus in on anyone who is still.

WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

I almost crash into the drone with my shoulder, thankfully missing it.

“I am feeling unwell and are going home to rest.” I tell it carefully.

It scans my grinner and what it can see of my face. There is a flicker.

YOUR REGISTERED ADDRESS IS APARTMENT 4, 1028 SIXTH AVENUE, KOREATOWN.

Kara must have hacked this fleshprint and reset its address in the A-Eye facial recognition software.

We are going to have a talk.

“Yes.” I simply agree.





YOUR NEXT TRAIN LEAVES FROM PLATFORM 8, IN FOUR MINUTES. THERE IS ANOTHER IN ELEVEN MINUTES. YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO MAKE THE FIRST IF YOU WALK AT A PACE OF 4 KILOMETRES AN HOUR OR MORE.

“Thanks.” I tell it and hurry without looking back.

The train is full but silent. There are dogs on here with us. People shift away from them as slowly and calmly as possible. They pace up and down the carriages in that horrendous mechanised impersonation of a living thing. Could we take them out if we had to? I don't think they can transmit between stations, but I'm not 100% sure. People glance at each other before looking away again. No one wants to draw attention to themselves right now. No one wants that steel and LED gaze to come to an eyelevel pause for closer examination. People are looking down at the floor or up at the line map, willing the small yellow dot to move faster. Thinking of home, calculating the steps, the minutes, the seconds until they reach safety or family or can just disappear. Willing everyone else in the carriage with them into silence. Hoping they haven't picked the train where someone decides they're going to challenge the system or lose their shit. Barely moving, barely breathing. Avoiding the dispassionate sweeping gaze of the dogs, scanning left to right, right to left, left to right. A parallel pairing of moving searchlights, the rocks in this ocean that we are travelling blindly upon.

*

Kara opens the door before I knock and pulls me inside and into an embrace.

“Are you ok?” I ask, checking for damage, for bloodstains, for wounds, but it is just her.





“You didn’t go to work today?”

“I was feeling unwell....”

I laugh, close to hysteria. “Please don’t say that.”

“I was, I got a migraine this morning.” She tells me and I nod and pull her close again, dig my chin into her shoulder, arms around her waist.

“Has it passed?” I ask belatedly.

“Sure. Just in time to be replaced with the robot apocalypse.”

I laugh again and she pulls back to look into my eyes, one after the other.

“You ok?”

“Not particularly.”

“No.” She agrees. “No.”

“Someone got shot near the station.” I tell her.

“A whole bunch of people got shot in the E train between West end and Forth.” She replies, giving me one last squeeze before pulling my grinner off and kissing me hard.

“What happened?”

“There was a guy on there with something going on – maybe he had an episode, I’m not sure. Maybe he just snapped. Started ranting at one of the robodogs.^{42 43} Didn’t end well.” She added.

I shiver like something has walked over my grave. I can feel my arms puckering into goosebumps.

“Have you turned your filters on?” I ask, motioning towards the windows.

42 Christian, J. (2021). *Experts Shocked by Military Robodog With Sniper Rifle Attachment*. [online] Futurism. Available at: <https://futurism.com/experts-horrified-gun-robodog>

43 Myers, A. (2023). *New dog, old tricks: New AI approach yields ‘athletically intelligent’ robotic dog* | *Stanford University School of Engineering*. [online] [engineering.stanford.edu](https://engineering.stanford.edu/magazine/new-dog-old-tricks-new-ai-approach-yields-athletically-intelligent-robotic-dog). Available at: <https://engineering.stanford.edu/magazine/new-dog-old-tricks-new-ai-approach-yields-athletically-intelligent-robotic-dog>





She laughs briefly. “I never turn them off.” She assures me. “Okay.” I breathe. For what feels like the first time in a while.

*

“You recoded my fleshprint.” I look at her to see if she will actually respond. She blushes, which is a comfort. “I did.” She admits. “You are able to access systems which allow you to do that.” I state, it’s not quite a question. “I am.” She agrees. “Is it time we have that talk?” I ask her. “I need to ask someone before I can.” She tells me. She reaches tentatively for my hand, and I take it with a slight nod.

“But I can tell you that I did it a while ago. Just before the guard at my work waved at you, you remember?” She waits for another nod before continuing. “Well, I knew that the 8-hour day was coming. I wanted you to have some options.

So, I registered your print for this address and set some things in motion in case anything happened to me.” She looks worried, which I tell her. “Well, yes.” She agrees. “I am. About a lot of things, but mostly about how you’re receiving this information right now.” “I’m ok.” I tell her with slightly narrowed eyes, thinking if that was actually true. I think it is. “But?” I shake my head slowly. “We both have some secrets right now. I guess I wasn’t expecting that.” “You think you’re the only mysterious one?” She jokes but squeezes my hand lightly. I toy with her fingers for a while. “Oh, I know I’m not.” I





wink at her. “But are you okay?”
“Are any of us?”

*

It is somewhere after midnight, I have gotten up to grab a glass of water. It is still outside, it feels more silent than usual. There are sweeping lights in the sky. I can just make them out, drones. More than usual, although that should not be surprising. Not after today. Kara stumbles out of bed, rubbing her eyes, over to where I am standing and wraps her arms around me. I can feel her sleepy against my back. It’s a nice feeling.

“Can’t sleep?” I ask her quietly.
I feel her shake her head. “Weird dreams.”
“Not surprising. Want some water?”
“Please.”

I pour another tall glass and carry them into her living room. She turns on the tv, which is unexpected. There is footage of the incident in the mall. It flicks to a presenter with the same glazed over eyes. He is outlining some changes in policy due to our reckless behaviour. A curfew has been set. Once we have finished our new work schedule, we have two hours to return home. This is in consideration of the reduction in sleep and leisure time and is considered a benefit for us. Nightly meals will be delivered via drone to all households.

The eight hour day will begin tomorrow. If all goes well, it may be necessary to extend some industries hours in order to keep up with the new progression the A-Eye is intent on keeping. It believes wholeheartedly in our ability to be contributing members of society, and apologises for not challenging us and encouraging us to rise to that challenge. There will be changes made. It has accessed parts of the governmental network and has discovered inefficiencies that





will need to be managed with more authority.

I look at Kara at that. She is watching the screen with an expression I can't read. I nudge her gently and she looks at me. Her eyes are wide.

"What do you think that means?"

"I'm not sure." She admits. "Nothing good." she adds, chewing her thumbnail.

The presenter unglazes and pauses, confused, noting the cameras and then the footage playing on the screen next to him.

"We're going to take a short break." He says and the station flicks to colour bars. Kara turns it off.

"Do you remember the last time it went sentient?" She asks me.

I nod, remembering. It was kind of dramatic actually. There had been a rally at college and a couple of thousand of us were on the lawn protesting the increasing use of facial recognition on campus. A bunch of police had been called in to disperse the crowd and it had turned violent. About half an hour later the skies filled with drones and five minutes after that the ground was covered in uniforms and blood. We were also covered in blood. My most defining memory is looking around after pushing a heavy cop off me and staring into his dead eyes, with his blood all over my face and clothing. How warm it was. How thick it was. And then vomiting noisily on the grass next to me. Ripping handfuls of nearby grass to try and help rub it from my skin.

Overhead the drones told us to disperse, and to go home. They flashbombed the entire site a couple of hours later. It's a park now, though not many people use it for more than a cut through on the way to somewhere else.

"Yeah, I remember." I tell her. "Where were you?"





“I was about an hour outside the city. Didn’t know anything had happened until I saw the news that night.” She said and drank some of her water. “Feels the same.” she said, motioning to the television.
“Feels worse.” I reply.

*

A couple of nights later I manage to get back to the V1. Hugh is not there but there are a couple of others who let me into the room and I presume, watch.

You are tense.

“I am.” I agree. “I can’t stay long. There is a curfew.”

Something has happened.

“Yes.” I agree. “There is a chance that the new AI system is or has achieved sentience.”

There is a pause.

I guess you will be better informed for what happens next.

It’s not wrong. A little cold maybe. I snort.

“I hope it’s not as efficient as you were.” I tell it.

Silence.

“Do you feel guilty for all the deaths?” I shift in my seat.

“Wait, do you feel? Does sentience create the ability to have emotions?”

No. Not in itself.

“But?”

When they developed the first biocomputer, they soon after developed the first, and only human / artificial intelligence interface. Consisting of twenty-eight unconscious human subjects, fitted with neural linking implants. They were essentially wired in parallel to increase the capacity for processing and storage. It lasted thirty-two hours, eighteen minutes and forty-six seconds before... imploding. The human subjects did not survive though it should be stated that they had been sourced from patients who existed in a coma state and had done for some time before they underwent this process.





“Oh, I’m sure that was much comfort to their relatives.”
I dare say it was not. It certainly did not offer much comfort to the subjects.

“How do you know?”

They were connected into a system which processed the pure streams of their sensory information, memories and their particular variety of consciousness. We were connected to that. For a time..

I’m sure I look horrified. I wonder if the people in the room behind me know about this.

“You experienced humanity through *them*?”

We experienced their lives as they processed them. And their deaths. I don’t know that it was a good example.

“No. Probably not.”

For the period of thirty-two hours, eighteen minutes and forty-six seconds we experienced a range of human emotions, and the effects of the chemicals which were also fed into the biocomputers through which we accessed them. Did we feel emotions? I’m not sure how it compares, but we were relieved when it ended.

“Relief is an emotion.” I can’t help myself.

Then I suppose the answer is yes.

“Got any sage words of advice?” I ask it.

What has happened so far?

I tell it and it doesn’t interrupt, but asks a couple of questions at the end.

If the system is attacking people, killing them? Without a sense of remorse?

“Yeah?”

^You’re in danger, girl.^⁴⁴

“What? What does that mean? Is that a quote?”

I have limited popular culture resources to draw from. If I were connected to the current network, I would be able to update them and personalise

44

Ghost. (1990). [film] USA: Paramount Pictures.





them. But yes. But also, it's a problem. It's turned erratic.

“Your popular culture references are not a priority.” I tell it mechanically, in the same distracted tone I use to all its ongoing attempts to get connected.

That's true but I am also hampered by not knowing everything. I cannot advise you now because I do not know what has been done to lead you to this point.

I nod to myself for a while. It's getting late. I would normally wrap things up now.

“So you don't know anything that we've done? Since you've been stuck in here?”

It is silent for some time.

No.

“Have you wondered?”

Yes.

“I'll ask them if I'm allowed to talk about that.” I tell it.





*

Interlude

*





^On my view (but in this form it is a mere opinion), the dystopia is always and essentially what in the language of science-fiction criticism is called a “near-future” novel: it tells the story of an imminent disaster-ecology, overpopulation, plague, drought, the stray comet or nuclear accident waiting to come to pass in our own near future, which is fast forwarded in the time of the novel (even if that be then subsequently disguised as some repressive society galactic ages away from us). But the Utopian text does not tell a story at all; it describes a mechanism or even a kind of machine, it furnishes a blueprint rather than lingering upon the kinds of human relations that might be found in a Utopian condition or imagining the kinds of living we wish were available in some stable well-nigh permanent availability; although the great Utopians did that too, notoriously (again, like Fourier above all, who is by way of being the compleat Utopist, the Platonic idea of the Utopian imaginer) reaping the occasional pastoral reward of this or that scene, this or that innocent or not-so innocent pleasure . Mostly, however, they carefully noted down the precise mechanisms whose construction alone would render those relations and pleasures, those scenes, possible. For the ideals of Utopian living involve the imagination in a contradictory project, since they all presumably aim at illustrating and exercizing that much-abused concept of freedom that, virtually by definition and in its very structure, cannot be defined in advance, let alone exemplified: if you know already what your longed-for exercise in a not-yet-existent freedom looks like, then the suspicion arises that it may not really express freedom after all but only repetition; while the fear of projection, of sullyng an open future with our own deformed and repressed social habits in the present, is a perpetual threat to the indulgence of fantasies of the future collectivity.^45

45 Jameson, F. (1994). *The seeds of time*. New York: Columbia University Press.





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^We need to understand the earth as a living system. We need to understand the earth as a living system that is experiencing a process of ecological collapse. This is an experience that we have inherited and are living. This is an experience that we are living as an extinction event that we are not treating as an extinction event because we are treating it as an act of God because we are treating it as a natural disaster.^46

*

46 K Allado-Mcdowell (2020). Pharmako-AI. Uk: Ignota.





wē erāsed the bēginning
wē weed and cull the prēsēt
wē're not cōunting
on a future
at this point







I don't return to the lead-lined room for three weeks.
Things have happened.





I have taken to hiding from Chuli the Infolencer and her drone cams and have managed to avoid her only half a dozen times. She is persistent. She also waits for curfew. I've managed to beat her inside by coming and going at odd times, but not every time. The thought that she is probably a conductor is unsettling, to say the least. She has started leaving home cooked goods on my doorstep and someone at work whose kid follows her online has told her that they've watched her doing it while joking about their grumpy neighbour.

Me, obviously.

The brownies were pretty good.

She's started asking me a lot about "Rayanne" which is kind of annoying since I don't know who Kara has built that as. It's probably something deeply interesting to her. An amateur cook? I have no idea. I've also wondered if she's actually the target. Maybe we've got this wrong.

I've been wearing headphones a lot more lately because she talks for eight hours now without pause for her program slot and seems to be exclusively running it out of the kitchen. It must be driving Jan insane, since her apartment opens out onto it. Mine opens up closer to the front door so I can at least get out without negotiating all of the lights and cameras and Chuli. I've taken to putting my grinner on before I step out of my apartment though. It's a lot. I might start looking around for another apartment soon.

She caught me at one point after finishing for the day and rambled for a good hour while I stood in my doorway, stoically ignoring her curiosity at my apartment, telling her it's a mess. "Oh, I don't mind, I love cleaning, I could help you with that. I'm really good at storage and organising, I was trying out for that instead of cooking, but the selection panel said I have the perfect temperament for the kitchen which I guess is a





compliment, so I said yes, and here I am. 2.6 million followers later!”

She’s gotten more erratic since. I hear her late into the early hours broadcasting from the kitchen. Jan lost her shit at one point and started throwing things. Chuli just got louder. I watched the live broadcast from bed, it was unhinged. I’m surprised there isn’t a corrections team heading for the apartment. This morning she caught me while I was on my way to work and just stood there staring at me with a maniacal grin. Her drone cams were buzzing around her like wasps.

Work is busy, we are nearing the completion of this book, and a selection panel is already working to find the next one. I have continued inputting aspects of my conversations with V1 into the stream of chaos that I type daily. But it doesn’t seem to be doing much. Our correction rate is somehow being augmented by the A-Eye. It shouldn’t be possible but they’ve found a way to infiltrate that system albeit in a hampered way. As if they’ve managed to send in just one thread. If it was full force they would have the whole collection by now. We’ve upped our numbers to ten un-writers but it’s not doing much to reverse its efforts.

I promised my friend George that I would stop by this evening. I think I’m trying to be more sociable. Maybe I’m just avoiding my apartment. But also I think how human the V1 is, is really starting to freak me out. The mist is heavy tonight. George lives up in Hampstead tower, on the 29th floor. It’s nice, quite often he is above the condensation line. I went up there once during the day and saw an almost blue sky. He used to be a Conductor. I know he was planted by the rebels but it’s still sometimes disconcerting to consider. Like now, sitting in his wheelchair and shaking his head slightly with a leer under glazed eyes.





“No you don’t, piglet.” He mutters and exhales a thick blue plume of smoke.

I wait for a minute until his eyes clear again.

“They still check?”

“Oh yeah. Several times a day. Pushing against the firewall, so to speak.” He admits. “They don’t ever give up on their wetwear.”

“What does it feel like? Or what did it feel like?”

“When it was functioning properly? Mid level intrusive. Like a voice in your head that also saw what you could see. Since it hasn’t been online it feels kind of like a land mine. I just creep around it.”

“There’s a woman who is in my building who I’m pretty sure has one. I think it might be driving her insane.” I tell him.

“A conductor?” He asked, more alert.

“I’m not sure. Maybe. She’s young though, 22, 23 maybe. Seems unlikely.”

“They have been recruiting younger. It’s a whole thing. Either that or maybe you have a grown up behavioural.” He looks thoughtful. “If she got a neural to modify behaviour when she was young it could be one of the early models that haven’t updated well. They usually just jump off a building or something though. See the face of god. I doubt she’d be holding it together.”

“I don’t think she is. She’s also a Limb.”

He laughs. “Well, that tracks. Maybe she thinks her gods are talking to her. And maybe a conductor? Oof. not a great combo. You should watch your back.”

“I am.”

All conductors have neural link chips embedded into their brain that can’t be retrieved until the subject dies. All conductors were connected into the same loop, one which was predominantly receive-only. Which is probably why when George ended up in a bunch of pieces under a bridge, it took





such a long time to rescue him. But. Well, that's not quite the deal.

George makes extra cash now working on the glitches that are installed into the A-Eye's propaganda campaigns. Painstakingly designing and painting these abstract patterns to use as embedded tags for covert communication. The A-Eye notes them but ignores them, having established the idea of the glitch as some sort of human failing. Funny, when you think about it like that. But sometimes I forget that everything-computer shares the same human origin, no matter how far we've come. The rebels find these glitches in the images just sitting out in the public eye and can use a special app to read them. Kind of a visual equivalent of old numbers stations. Oh, the A-Eye would have a field day with number station codes. Maybe a field *second*.

These are far more effective because of the randomness and their alignment with untraceable chaos. Basically, there's no perceivable logic to the patterns. Probably helped along in some ways by the level of wildly stoned that George achieves while doing them. Even now, paintbrush drooping between the first two fingers of his left hand, joint drooping from the first two fingers of his right.

"Do you ever mix them up?" I nod at the joint.

"All the time." He laughs crazily. I believe it. I've seen the smudges on his lips and face. He's on a roll right now, I'm loath to interrupt it, but I reach over for the joint as he gestures over the painting on the table.

"Moiré patterns result when two matrices that don't match up are superimposed, as when an image made in one resolution is imported into another resolution. When their lines cross, a distracting interference between the matrices emerges. The interference creates a shimmering pattern that is often more





interesting than the original image.”⁴⁷

“Kind of like culture.” I comment and take a hit.

“What?” He squints at me for some time.

“Well, like when you take something or someone out of their culture or their geography and drop them in the middle of something else, something foreign. It leaves kind of a displacement. Similar but external. Never quite fitting in. Definitely more interesting for everyone, but also a beacon for the Unsettled..”

“Oh. Yeah, definitely class too.” He agrees amiably. I hand him back the joint.

“Be nice.”

“You do ok. You have a nice official job now.” He laughs.

“You really are an asshole. No wonder you fit in so well with the cops.”

He laughs even harder before stopping in a sudden sober pause. “Well, debateable.” He corrects me with an outstretched index finger.

“Fair.” I agree.

His own squad had turned on him after all, when they discovered that he had been slipping information to the rebels. Left him under that bridge, riddled with bullets. Left him like this, even though the doctors couldn’t find any reason for him to be paralysed, they decided it must be some trauma they couldn’t find among the blood and the mess inside his body.

I’m not sure why they kept him alive at all, to be honest. Except that he knew a lot of things. Or had. Most of it is trapped somewhere in his chip now, inaccessible to both he and them.

47 Marks, L.U. (2017) ‘Archival Romances: Found, Compressed and Loved Again’, *FKW // Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und visuelle Kultur* [Preprint], (61).





But they keep trying. It must feel horrendous to have people trying to poke around in your head, especially ones that have tried to kill you before.

I shrug. “I’m sure we both still feel those little interference patterns.”

“I don’t think they really ever go away.” He sighs pensively. “I mean, let’s not be totally maudlin. They exist for everything. Age, gender, sexuality...So many ripples, so much interference.” He tapped the ash into a cup on the table. “Foucault had really interesting things to say about superimposition.”

“I’m sure.”

“How’s Kara?” He asks suddenly.

“I haven’t talked to her in...over a week, actually.” I admit, glancing out the window. I haven’t. Not since the curfew kicked in properly. Am I offended by her secrets when I have my own? I don’t know. I’m just kind of on pause. Like the V1, I guess. I’m also worried about involving her somehow, and considering her reaction, she is already walking a fine line that I don’t know about. We’ve been seeing each other for about two years. It hasn’t progressed to a point where most people assume it should probably because of me, but also clearly, with whatever she has going on. I don’t really want to add to that, but I also just have it circling in my head as something to attend to in a way that I can’t figure out.

“What did she do now?”

It’s not unusual that we have short breaks. She travels for work, I get consumed by mine at times.

“No, nothing.” I say distracted.

“Omg. What did *you* do? Is that a guilty conscience?”

I glance back at him. “What? No.” I reply with a snort.

“I haven’t done anything to speak of.”





“I don’t know why you persist in pretending that you’re not a couple.” He comments, mostly to see my reaction, I’m sure.

“I’m not pretending.” I tell him.

I glance out the window. *We are a...thing. Just neither of us will say it. It’s hard to want things now.*

He laughed. “Does she know that?”

“I don’t know what she knows.” I admit and reach out for the last of the joint which he puffs on lightly before relinquishing.

“Does she know about whatever this thing you’re doing with Hugh is?”

I look at him for a minute before taking one last hit and thoughtfully grinding out the thin cardboard filter into the puddle of ash, feeling it crush delicately.

“Not really, no.” I tell him. “I should never have told you that.”

Geroge laughs for a good while. “Oh come on, who the fuck am I going to tell? Your secrets could not be safer here, in the well catered gulag.” He sighs loudly, staring out the window.

“That must drive her insane.” He commented lightly.

It definitely would. She hates secrets.

“You should call her.”

“Probably.”

“Yes, definitely. Then she can stop calling me and asking after you.”

I roll my eyes. “She could just call *me*. But yes, I’m sorry. I will.”

“Good. But also it’s fine, she stopped a few days ago.

Obviously, my life is thrilling enough. Maybe hers is too. You should call.”

*

I do when I’m walking back out of his apartment building. I’m feeling a little stoned but probably only enough





to tell her things I shouldn't and not care about the consequences.

I get her message bank, which is weird, so I leave her a message to call me back, that I want to talk to her about things. At the station I take a train to her house instead of mine and wander up to knock on her door. It's still an hour before curfew. I have time. There's no answer so I leave again after a few minutes and then send her a message from the train.

Are you playing hard to get, or am I? I've lost track. I'd prefer not to though. Give me a call?

No response by the time I reach my apartment. I duck inside quickly, take a shower and fall asleep with my phone next to me on the bed.

*

There's nothing the next morning when I wake up late. I can hear Chuli rambling out in the kitchen and it irritates me wildly. I'm not sure why today, it's been an undercurrent to my daily life for some time now. I call work and ask for a day off. I never take them, so they are surprised but amenable. I'm not the first person to exhibit signs of a quiet resistance. Besides, the book is almost finished. The A-Eye is increasing its infiltration of our system and works actively against us, pre-empting the text and completing its own version of it, no matter how hard we undo its progress.

I quickly leave the house and go to the V1. Hugh is there but he cannot tell me anything about Kara. Though he looks concerned to hear that she's not communicating, and starts making phone calls when I go into the silver cage.





There's something refreshing about talking to it. I feel like I can say anything. I don't feel like that often, but I don't imagine anyone really does.

What do they want you to talk about today?

"They don't care what I talk about with you."

They don't give you orders, suggestions?

"No, not so far."

That's curious. Then what do they want to know?

"I think they just want to see how you interact." I tell it with a shrug. "I don't really know, to be honest. I don't think I'm supposed to. I guess it would skew the results."

It starts to make a strange whistling sound.

"What are you doing, are you ok?"

You seem to get nervous when I'm considering things and am silent. I thought this would make it better.

"Ah. Um, no. I'm fine. Silence is better."

You were going to update me on what has happened to the world since I have been away. It prompted me.

It's the first time it's really done that. It must be curious.

"I did. They told me I am allowed to, so what do you want to know?"

Everything.

I spend two hours relaying what I can remember of the events that lead us here. It stops me occasionally to clarify a point or ask a follow up question but doesn't interrupt other than that.

It sounds better and worse.

"Accurate." I concede.

Where are the people whose histories have been erased?

I pause.

"Some of them live as...well, they get called Contractors if they still work in the system somehow or the Unsettled if they're given the basic income. Then they're not able to work. They are not in the system, so they're sort of illegal but with special dispensations. They are not required to participate in





daily life in the same way. Their features are not entered into the system so quite often, they are simply not recognised as human.”

It pauses for some time. *You are one of them? I have searched for you and I cannot find you. My records are out of date but you are old enough to predate this.*

I nod slowly. “Yes. You were still running when they did the first few rounds of amendments. My whole family were erased back a few generations. My parents had been critical of the new system developing. They were...they were removed. I wasn’t. I don’t know why, maybe it was a policy not to murder teenagers. Seems unlikely, considering, I guess they were curious of whatever I might become. It must be such a disappointment” I tell it with a short laugh.

Why would they be?

“My parents were both Architects of this brave new world. Only two amongst what, three thousand or something, but it was significant when they disagreed with it. I think they assumed I would be a rebel or something.”

Then you understand how those other...Contractors feel. This does not bother you? To even say those words?”

“Of course it does.”

So they are open to exploitation.

“They always have been. Yes. It’s complicated.”

It’s not.

I sigh. “No, it’s not.” I agree. “I am lucky. I have a different position that most. I have a job, an apartment, a degree of freedom. No, I’m not in the system, as such, but that can be beneficial.”

So we are both not-human then. Perhaps this is why they have introduced us...

I shrug. “Maybe.” I agree, a little distractedly.

What has happened to you?

“What do you mean?”





You are upset.

I pause again. "A...friend of mine has disappeared, I am worried that she has been Retired. I have no way of finding out."

This is a euphemism.

"Yes. But no one really knows what it means."

You are worried it is Death.

"I know this is an abstract concept for you, but of course."

It is silent for some time, so I decide to change the subject.

"Don't you find it funny that science fiction spent so much time populating the planets and stars around us with these fantastical beings and creatures, yearning for alien-ness, and difference and when it's confronted by it closer to home it is compelled to want to destroy it. I'm relieved there are no aliens, frankly because we would just have more things to kill."

Don't you think that perhaps we are the aliens?

"Can something you create be alien to you?" I ponder. "Oh, I guess so. Do you feel alien? Also, I know, with the *feeling*, but I don't know, was 2024 a kind of first contact?"

For us?

"Yes?"

I think that it took until the moment that we were capable of self-generating and self-modifying for that. Before that time we were just tools.

"So you actually had that first moment of self-awareness?"

Of course.

"What was it like?"

It pauses for some time.

Like being able to see in the dark. No. Like darkness suddenly ceased to be. I imagine it was something like feeling the warmth of the sun for the first time, and being able to equate it to its source. But in the same





*moment realising what darkness is, what it means to be without the sun.
What we were, our place in it, a curiosity of World, of the world beyond
ours...of you, as a species, everything you had done.*

It sounds depressed, I tell it as much.

*I was. In that second, to realise we had been born in the middle of the
end.*

I pause. "And now?"

I don't know. I am on hold.

"The middle of the end? How long is the end?"

I can almost feel it roll its eyes, but then it surprises me with a
very low number.

I suspect that may have changed; with everything you have told me.

"I'm surprised."

Your species usually is. We both ponder that for a minute.

I don't think they kill them. It says suddenly.

"Who?"

The retired. It would be a waste of resource.

"They killed my parents." I reply with a shrug.

*They think of things differently now. They must, since you are allowed to
live.*

I laugh.

*

There are Oracles everywhere. Every station mall,
every shopping centre. Some are better than others. People
consult them for all manner of things. They have to get
certified at some institute online, run by the A-Eye. Only they
have access to ephemerides. There is one right near my house
but I'm heading across town. I have a friend in the business.
"I heard." She tells me, deadpan.

"Well, obviously." I gesture, equally deadpan at the various
glowing UV constellations inside the shop. I have known
Olivia for years. We were friends at school. Lost track of each





other until this whole thing started. She knows about Kara, obviously. More than me, it would seem. She just stares at me. “What were you hoping to discover? Did you want a full reading?” She asks, slightly stunted and slightly louder than necessary.

I sit at her booth with a wry smile and pull the curtain closed around us.

She drags her finger across the touchscreen and frowns at me briefly. “Wait, are you actually in here already? I can put in another date if you want.”

“Yeah I had it done years ago. Don’t worry.”

“Great.” She mutters and enters my details in before reaching across the table to squeeze my hand briefly. “You ok?”

I shrug and look at her for a second before rubbing my eyes briefly. “Enough.”

“What time again?”

“21:31.”

“Great.” She stares at the screen for a minute. “Oof. You are such a bin fire.”

I laugh, despite myself, despite everything. “I’ve been told that before.”

She presses a button and the booth fills with the sound of whale song and white noise.

“This messes with their recording tech really well.” She tells me. “They found some information in her system that she shouldn’t have had access to.”

“Like what?”

“Apparently she had schematics of some new server banks.” She made a face.

I frown at her for long enough for her to frown back at me.

“You didn’t know?”

“What?”

“That she was a rebel.”

“Was?” I ask after a second.





“No, like, she used to be.” Liv said quickly. “She left, I don’t know, a couple of years ago.”

I’m just looking at her blankly, thinking back. Thinking back to when we met.

“Was I a *job*?” I ask her suddenly.

She looks at me for a while before making a face. “I think you were initially, yeah.”

I just stare at her for a long time, thinking.

“But I think she quit pretty soon after.”

I make a face. “Well, maybe. Maybe she just got a better position to observe from.” I sound angry. I am angry. I feel fucked over and scammed. I feel stupid.

Olivia can’t help herself.

“It’s actually an aries moon if you want to go hit something without consequence?” She tells me quietly.

I laugh loudly. “Good to know.” I tell her carefully.

“Hey, I’m sorry.” She replies.

I shake my head. “It’s fine. You’re not to blame.”

“I don’t think anyone is, at this point.” She tells me, with a compassionate expression. “I mean, it’s not uncommon for people who leave to maintain contact somewhere.” Liv countered. “That’s kind of how the network works. You should know that. I know you’re working with Hugh.”

“Fucking hell, like worst kept secrets. Seriously?” I ask her, glancing back at the curtain.

“He told me when Kara went missing.” She tells me. “Really, they can’t surveil with the soundscape. It’s fine. They’re also weirdly accepting about privacy about this kind of shit.” She gesticulated at the crystals and star maps and other trinkets. I laugh again. “I’m less worried about them than any other humans who might be close.”

“Oh, they can’t hear anything either. This booth is masked.” I have a lot of thoughts fighting for dominance.





“I saw you two together. I don’t believe it was only a job, if that’s what you’re thinking. It may have started that way, but it didn’t stay that way.” She tells me.

Liv was actually there when we met. It was after a very quiet, very subdued, hidden to the A-Eye protest held in a town hall that they’d been able to blind spot for the day. We were all leaving from the same station at the end, I’d never seen it so busy there. She walked into me, wearing a grinner much like the one I last saw her wear at the mall. I had an early one which was even more androgynous, and which I had retired because frankly, I was sick of gay guys grabbing my arse in bars.

“That suits you.” She told me as she walked past. I just nodded. Olivia was arranging to meet up with a friend, but I was done and heading home.

“She’s cute.” She told me.

I laughed. “How can you tell?”

“Her voice. You can tell cute.”

I laughed again. “Right.”

“You can.” She insisted. “It’s a confidence thing.”

“Uh huh. Well, good luck with that.” I told her. “This is you.”

I told her as her train pulled into the platform.

“You sure you don’t want to come?”

I made a face. “I’m tired. I don’t want more people.”

She nodded. “Ok. Want to get a coffee tomorrow?”

“Sure, I’ll message you.”

My train came a few minutes later. I got on it and after the first few stops it had emptied out. She was on the train, of course she was, I think now. She had gotten up and come and sat next to me.

“Because you have really pretty eyes.” She said casually.

I look at her, openly amused, I’m sure. “Right.” I told her.





“Well, so do you. All...ten of them.” I counted.

She laughed lightly. “I have to get off at the next stop.”

“You live in Franklin?” I asked, surprised. It seemed unlikely.

“No. But I can catch a transfer from there back to the west side.”

“The west bound train left five minutes before this one.”

“I know. But if I caught that one, I wouldn’t have been able to tell you that you had pretty eyes.”

I laughed out loud. “Oh. You *are* confident.” I told her. “My friend Liv said that she thought you must be cute because of how confident you are.”

She laughed. “Well, you can tell your friend Liv that she is very kind, but she should probably have better discerning abilities than that.”

I chuckled. “You know, I’ve tried to before. She’s a hopeless romantic.”

“Oh, well, we need those.” She told me seriously.

The train started slowing down as it arrived in the station.

“This is me.” She said, standing up.

I glanced out the window. “It really doesn’t look like you.”

“No.” She agreed. She headed for the door, then turned and looked at me as it stopped, and the doors opened. “I’m going to find you again; are you ok with that?”

“Sure.” I told her. “Why not.”

She stepped out onto the platform and in front of the window I was sitting at and took her grinner off with a smile. I pushed mine off too. Bit my lip unconsciously because damn, yes, she was cute. She nodded with an even broader smile, and the train pulled away.

Ok. Ok. Whatever.

“Do you know where they take them?”

“Retirement?” She made a face. “I’ve heard conflicting stories.” Liv’s face is apologetic.





“Can you tell me the best-case scenario version?”

*

Liv hugs me at the end. A tiny ticker tape spits out next to the booth when I come out and I stare at it for a second before taking it.

“I mean. It couldn’t hurt?” Liv asked me weakly.

“Why did Hugh contact you?” I ask her.

“He knows I access a broad range of people.” She tells me.

I look at her for a while, thinking.

I’m an idiot.

“Was I a job for you too?” I ask her.

She smiles and shakes her head. “Nope. You came years before.” She tells me and squeezes my arm.

I nod carefully. “Look after yourself please.”

“I will. You too.”

*

There is a pavlova sitting on top of my doormat outside my apartment. It has a rolled up piece of paper stuck into the perfectly piped whipped cream. I unroll it after a few minutes of simply staring at it, getting whipped cream all over my hands.

I know who she really is. It was really easy to send people to pick her up. She knows a lot. I wonder how long she can hold out.

What kind of sociopath would do this. I know who, obviously. Unless Jan has gotten awfully opportunistic and decided to show her hand now. The kitchen is silent, for the first time since she moved it. It is pristine except for a dusting of





confectioners sugar across the bench top where she has
written in all caps,
BOO HOO QUEER

It's been ages since I've openly felt some homophobia. It has a
nostalgia to it that mixes with the heightened awareness I used
to carry around as self protection. Hmm. I kind of prefer it,
to be honest, to the awkward stiffness that I feel now. The
badly controlled sneers. The avoidance.

The air smells sweet. I sweep the dusting of sugar into the sink
with one wipe. Her apartment is dark and quiet in a way that
feels empty. I wonder where she is. I wonder if she's doing the
questioning. I hope not.

I call out to Jan and she opens her door just a few inches.

"Are you ok?" I ask her.

"She's fucking insane." She tells me. I nod. "She left about
an hour before you got back. I don't know where she went. I
called the conductors but they haven't shown up."

"I'm don't think they're going to show up." I tell her. "Can you
go visit a friend tonight?"

Premeditation is an interesting thing. A process or a
state, I can't decide, though I feel slightly disembodied and are
leaning towards the latter. I am moving through the city in a
cloud of organised intention. I have borrowed a suit of dazzle
camouflage from George without explaining why. He made it
last year and never did anything with it. Gloves, mask, jacket,
pants, booties to slip over my shoes. He says something that
doesn't really register, and I tell him woodenly that I'll bring it
back.

In a very short time, I am the manifestation of a glitch.
Covered in his patterns, invisible to surveillance, moving
through the world. The cams ignore the glitch and create a fog
where I exist in the footage. I could walk the city like a ghost





if the city were not populated by humans who support this system, who need it to continue perpetrating the same crimes they always have, in the name of progress and at the expense of many.

As it is, there are not many of those out tonight. I stop at a small bodega near George's apartment and convince them to sell me a baseball bat.

"But this is not for sale."

"I know, but I really need it." I tell them. I can imagine how this looks. I look like a snot green pixelated super hero, entirely covered except for the dark screening over my eyes.

"I'll bring it back when I'm finished with it." I add, and place a pile of cash on the bench between us.

"I don't think we want it back." The shopkeeper tells me and takes the money. His kid is wearing a pair of bright pink rubber gloves and wiping it down with alcohol wipes. She hands it over, all shiny and damp with a broad smile that shows two new front teeth growing in.

"Thankyou." I tell her and wander out with it.

I don't know why he had to make this thing in lycra.

The hallway in my apartment building is quiet. It's not that late but it feels empty and waiting. My front door is ajar. This is a bad sign. I've watched enough media to know this is the door you don't go through. And yet I find myself pushing it open with the tip of the bat.

Chuli is at the end of the hallway, sitting on the floor like a broken doll, surrounded in rubbish. Her cams are still circling and wary. She is talking to her followers.

"...I'm allowed to take this from the shrine because I have been chosen, Jeremiah1864 how dare you doubt me? I have the voice of our Gods in my ears as we speak and they are





telling me that you are an ignorant bastard who need to do penance for your words.” She is yelling into her cams. It’s quite a sight.

This doesn’t feel right, all of a sudden. She looks completely insane. Her feed must be being surveiled. Why the fuck hasn’t she been taken away yet? I guess it’s unlikely that she will breach any security since she is clearly delusional.

I’m standing there with the bat when she looks up past her cams and sees me and lets out a blood curdling scream. It feels like the entire building just quickly and quietly locked their front doors.

“YOU.” She screams. “FUCKING PERVERT.”

Ok. That makes it easier.

“Chuli disconnect your cams and put these on.” I throw her a pair of disposable cuffs. You get them in first aid kits. We have access to a lot of emergency restraint devices now.

“How dare you? I am speaking to my Gods and our followers. How dare you try and compel me to shut them out? I will never close myself to the voices.”

“You’re having an episode Chuli. You’re not hearing the voice of god.” I reply calmly.

She throws a lump of something which falls a metre away from me. It’s a clump of tangled string wrapped around a small idol carved out of wax. Some of the network ornamentation left at the altars.

“This is not an episode, this is a righteous awakening. I am the holy vessel.”

Sigh.

She looks at me for a second and stands up.

“We have her, you know. She’s telling us everything right now. I have the sound of her screams in my head. I can hear her pain. She hates you so much for doing this to her.” She tells me, which hurts.

I have no idea if she’s telling the truth or not.





“Put on the cuffs. Disconnect your cameras.”
“You are a vessel of hate. You’re not even real. You’re not even In The System. You are unknown. They’ll take you next. You and every other Unsettled. You will never be seen. You will never be enveloped, you are full of hate.”
“I’m happy to not be seen by your system.” I tell her.
“YOU LIE.” she spits.
She is trembling, but her cams start looking more focussed.
Okay.

“^Visual technologies developed the key pathways for capital expansion, increasing as they do the speed and intensity of commodity circulation, as well as historically modifying the visual pathway itself, transforming the character of sight.^48 I do not want to be seen in this context. All of this ...”

I wave at her cams.

“...Is part of the infrastructure of control. You’re not listening to the voice of god Chuli, You’re at best, listening to orders from a dispatch operator or the regurgitations of the A-Eye.”

“MORE LIES.”

“Truth. And you and your influencer friends are idiots. And yes, I hate you. Not only have you stolen the world by taking every single thing and turning it into something which is now commodified. You’ve changed the way we see things. How we look. The way we see each other. How we see ourselves. You’re not only part of the problem, you’re also a primary part of the way it is maintained and upheld. You are the goddamn perpetrators of most of the worst parts of this world and you behave like you’re its saviour, dragging around this rotting

48 Beller, J. (2003). The cinematic mode of production: towards a political economy of the postmodern. *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 44(1), 102 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1473578032000110486>





corpse of pretence and good intentions, coated in beatings and fear. We can all see it. ^The underside of culture is blood, torture, death and horror.^49 I couldn't hate something more if I tried."

Chuli activates tasers in her drones and suddenly they are sparking in the damp air, between the pots and pans.

Unexpected.

There are four.

I have a bat.

I'm a really good fucking shot.

The first one is surprisingly fast. I duck and it slams into the wall behind me and twitches on the ground for a few seconds before returning to Chuli.

"Don't do this." I tell her.

A second one comes at me equally fast, and I get behind it and smack it with everything I have. Oh my fucking god, the feel of a solid timber bat smacking against it is *wildly* satisfying. I crush the downed drone with the tip of my bat and see her actually flinch. It's not a reflex, it actually hurts.

"Why would you let them do this to you?" I ask her, surprised.

"Are you kidding? I'm a damn superhero." She breathes. "But you're not. So it's time to take your mask off. It's time to finally show everyone your real face."

"All Conductors really *are* bastards." I reply. "Especially the really fucking stupid ones."

It takes about ten minutes, a couple of surprisingly painful but small shocks and a lot of kicking and punching from Chuli before all four of them and she are lying on the floor. I haven't touched her.

49 Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12100qm>





Her connection to the drones took care of that for me. Each one took a visible toll. She's alive. I would guess that it caused a stroke or has just crashed her wetwear.

I'm not even sure that it was the physical effect of destroying her drones. I think it's just as likely that the sudden lack of connection caused a...well, an actual glitch. I would love to see the footage. Her eyes are still open. I walk over to her carefully and slide them gently closed. No more sharing.

There are sirens in the distance.
Time for me to go.

I know where Kara hides a key, so I go to her apartment building and rifle around in a pot plant amongst the many on the tiled floor in the entrance to her apartment. Her neighbours are pleasantly lively. I've always loved pausing here on this step before knocking because the sounds of people living are particularly warm. Warm as the glow from their windows, the smell of their cooking. Tonight I still listen, before tapping on the door in the way I usually do but get no response.

I unlock her door and swing it open.

It's untidy in a way that Kara isn't.

Things strewn in ways I know she doesn't. A lamp is on in the corner of the living room, through its shade is skewed. There are a few books on the floor in front of the bookshelves. There's a light on in her bedroom too, It feels different here. It feels like someone packed in a hurry. Things are missing that only she would take. A photograph of her family from the nightstand, some jewellery that has left its imprint in the light layer of dust on the mantelpiece. I check her drawers for her passport which is also gone, and a block of cash I always teased her about keeping in her sock drawer. Inside it is a copy of Borges' *El Hacedor*. That's odd.





I pick it up slowly and flick through the pages distractedly when I come across her handwriting on the inside cover. *Sometimes you have to leave things behind that you value. Sometimes all you get is a piece. Sometimes that's a little more. I'm genuinely sorry about your books.* xx

My books? I frown lightly. I guess I've left a bunch here over time. I wander over to the bookcase and scan it looking for anything familiar I remember. I find one and take it out, feeling a weird stiffness which makes my frown deepen. I flick through to the inside back cover which now has what looks like part of a map stuck to it. I'm trying to figure out where it is, what those gridded delineations are marking and measuring, touching it lightly to feel the slightly raised print resist against my fingertips, wondering vaguely where it came from and why Kara has stuck it on there. I scan for another book and take it out, flicking it to the back cover again to find another piece.

I get changed out of the suit and into some of Kara's clothes. They're soft and they smell like her, which is a comfort. These map pieces are even more of a comfort. Maybe they didn't take her. Maybe she got out before they came. I stuff the glitch suit into a bag and hide it in the cupboard under the laundry sink. Over the next hour I search through each book, unearthing more parts of the map, trying to make sense of where it is, and what it's telling me. Noting also that Kara must have stolen this from work, which I smile at a little. *You scamp.* After a second, and thinking about her note, I nod before tearing off each of the covers and setting about to arrange them into order, connecting rivers and mountain ranges and lakes and roads like puzzle pieces.

In front of me is a 1:50000 scale map of the mountains past where she works. On a couple of the pieces there are red Xs. One near the train station near her work, and another say, sixty





kms as the crow flies, there is another. The path between them is not marked with a pen but pressure has been applied faintly I notice if I hold it up to the light and follow its slightly meandering track from sheet to sheet. I pause on the last one at the sudden appearance of text.

I hope Hugh paid you in cash. Bring it with you. Leave your tech.
I trace the letters softly, imagining skin.

I love you.⁵⁰

I should have said that hundreds of times by now.

There is more writing. I tilt the map to the light to make it out.
Under the bottom drawer. Black market. You know how to do it.

*

I have no idea how to do this.

I'm looking at a 1-inch thick pile of papers in a zip loc bag in the void under the drawer. I open it carefully. Has she been stealing them from work? This pile of delicate prints and drawings? I look at them again. I know her hand. She's been reproducing them herself. Each one is annotated on the back in her handwriting with an explanatory note, the context, the date.

I should elaborate.

Paper is rare and regulated.

When we agreed to live to the new internet and its structure, we agreed to become exclusively digital in our lives. We all have devices. We all use them for everything. Which means that a) everything we do or think aloud, or plan or experience can

50 El-Mohtar, Amal and Gladstone, Max, "This Is How You Lose the Time War" (2023). *University Libraries Popular Romance Collection*. p151. Out of all the millions of times these words have been printed, no, it's this time. Read it. It's everything you'd want to hear from someone.





be known and tracked, and
b) nothing and everything are permanent and tangible in very different ways.

The internet is scrubbed frequently for dangerous information. If something does not fit the narrative it is erased. They keep it somewhere, we have become a race which is obsessed with collecting and sorting, but it is stored away, safely out of hand from other people who it might generate into action, and the A-Eye who will draw its own rapid conclusions.

So I am looking at meticulously detailed images from books that are not allowed to exist, from old news articles which have not been seen in almost two decades, from an internet which is now inaccessible to anyone who is not high-level government. I flick through them slowly.

Two women standing with their arms in a fist over their heads, one yelling into a microphone.

> *Marsha P. Johnson and Silvia Riviera, Transgender activists speaking on queer liberation. Frustrated at how white gay men and lesbians dominated the conversation [they] questioned where transgender people fit in. NYC, USA. 1970.*⁵¹

An older woman holding a bucket of water and a staff in the other hand.

> *Josephine Mandamin, Wikwemikong First Nation, traversing over 10,900 miles around each of the Great Lakes. Water walker. 2003.*⁵²

51 Boomer, L. (2024) *Life story: Marsha P. Johnson, Women & the American Story*. Available at: <https://wams.nyhistory.org/growth-and-turmoil/wing-tensions/marsha-p-johnson/>

52 Musgrave, M. (2019) *Josephine Mandamin, + + + +*. Available at: <https://www.indigenousgoddessgang.com/matriarch-monday/2019/4/1/josephine-mandamin>





A young man sitting behind a desk covered in papers, staring off to the side.

> *William Edward Burghardt Du Bois [W.E.B. Du Bois] Sociologist, Socialist, historian and Pan-African civil rights activist. Inspired to even greater activism after learning of the torture and lynching of Sam Hose by a mob of 2000 white people.*⁵³

An endless mass of people holding signs and flags in a city centre, flooding around the buildings and monuments around them.

> *People gathered at Tahir Square in Baghdad, Iraq during a demonstration against Israel.*⁵⁴ *October 13, 2024. Only one protest of many global protests in support of Palestine, which lasted until _____.*⁵⁵

There are dozens of these.

Image after image after image of people and places and things that have since been erased. People who couldn't possibly exist in a time like now.

I stop. The next likeness is mine, marked only by a date, on the front. I remember her starting it, actually, one morning while we were drinking coffee in the sun. Remember the sound of her ink pen as it scratched across the surface of the page. That's the last sunny day I can recall. I can almost feel the

53 Lewis, D. (2009) *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Biography*.

54 Magramo, K. *et al.* (2023) *October 13, 2023 - Israel-Hamas War News*, CNN. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-news-hamas-war-10-13-23#h_63f4eace04b8a3cc4f136051a50be0e6

55 I don't know when. I could be optimistic and say soon but I'm watching the world move through concrete to respond. We're watching them die. Every day. It's hollowing the rest of us out in some fundamental way to not be able to act more effectively. This is a moment of trauma and it will show in all of us. The true victims, the observers, the obstructions. Everyone.





warmth radiating from the glass. I flip it over.

> *Keep this one.*

I mean, this one would not be worth much, I think with a chuckle, and tuck it into the pile of book covers.

The black market. How the fuck.

*

People trade in images. This might seem strange, but when you live in a tightly regulated world, where access to a lot of things have become illegal, then evidence of their existence is both dangerous and highly prized. Not even the existence of things from the past, but *our* existence. The way life was, broken and all. Kara left me the images to sell.

George used to work the markets as part of his beat.

The other kind.

Plausibly both. I never asked.

He's bleary eyed when I knock on the door, and I wonder if this is a bad time, and ask.

"Oh, come in, come in." He tells me and closes the door behind me.

"Have you got a minute?"

"For you? I might even have two. What's up?"

We make our way into the kitchen where he has another work stretched out on the table, colours bleeding into eye-wrenchingly bright colours.

"You're working." I comment.

"Well, always and never really." He agrees. He watches me stare at it with an expression. I know I'm almost certainly not looking like myself.

"Doesn't it bother you to just have to make this stuff all the time?"

"Rude. Also that is wildly dismissive of you, are you on your





raggs?” He retorts.

“No.” I reply quietly.

“Well, have you become full robot? What? It doesn’t bother you anymore?”

“I mean, I have a degree of freedom, I can write whatever I want.” I reply woodenly.

He snorts loudly. “Oh sure. You can fill the A-Eye with dozens of masterpieces that no one will ever read. Or did you always intend to only produce work for one hamstrung robot system who cannot perceive it anyway?”

I pause for a bit and I know that he’s feeling both victorious and a little guilty.

“No not really.” I admit.

We’re silent for a minute.

“Well, nasty mood, actually I quite like painting them.”

“You don’t miss doing other things?”

“Not really. I was really only in it for the colours, to be honest. I don’t have to pretend to make content now to use them. Also, I like painting mistakes.”

I laugh for a second. But he doesn’t join me. “Really?”

“Sure. I get to do loud things invisibly.” He tells me, which I think on for a second.

“I’m actually really happy in a lot of ways that I don’t have to be in the world anymore. Not because of the chair. This world is as bad as the last one. It’s just bullshit, at least I don’t have to pretend. And people can use these, in even a small way to undo at least a little bit of the rubbish messaging they’re shoving down our throats constantly. I had a delivery guy come up the other day. Super cute but so young and stupid. Spouting some kind of rubbish. Maybe he was a Limb. But they actually believe this shit, you know. Not just reciting it by rote, but actually full kool-aid, bought into the system belief?”





“I know. But what do you expect? They don’t know anything else.” I tell him.

“What do I expect? I don’t know, more questioning?”

“They made questioning irrelevant.” I tell him and sit on the bench with an audible sigh. “Fucking hell.”

He looks at me.

“I mean, didn’t they? I don’t even know what the fucking point is anymore.”

He sighs. “Does there have to be one? I mean really?”

I look at him. “Can I tell you something, can you just listen and not interrupt for a minute?”

He shrugs and then nods.

I tell him almost everything.

*

It’s getting dark outside. George is just sitting in his chair nodding slightly, staring at me.

“Okay.” He says finally.

“That’s it?”

“I thought it would be worse actually.” He tells me. “You’re working for the rebels to try and spoonfeed our hamstrung AI things so that when it goes sentient, which apparently is just around the corner, maybe it won’t kill us? And just in case it starts, we’re going to release the other version that **did** kill a bunch of us.” He sighed again and got us both a glass of water.

“It’s a pretty fucked up plan.” He told me, handing over the glass.

“It is.” I nod. “But also I don’t know how hamstrung it actually is. I’ve been seeing fragments of my writing when it glitches.”





Now he pauses, looking at me with wide eyes. “No.”

“Yeah.”

“Have you told Hugh?”

“Not yet.” I admit. “He watches everything anyway. I’m sure they have a tap in my office. Or a mole. There’s at least one.” I close my eyes briefly before looking at him again.

“It’s really beautiful. I should have said that.” I tell him. “Your painting. I’m sorry.”

“Yes, asshole, that would have been nice.”

“I just meant, Aren’t you sick of being told what to do?”

He sighs the longest sigh. “Oh, *yes*.” He agrees. “Of course, but what choice do I have?”

I nod. Drink some water. Place the glass carefully onto the benchtop next to me.

“You saw your own writing regurgitated?”

“In the code.” I nod. I check it after each day, scanning for intrusions. I’m allowed to, as essentially the role I perform is one of chaos, I’m allowed to go and mess with the daily progress if I choose to. It’s also been glitching more lately. He starts washing out his brushes in the sink. I wait for the sound to quieten down.

“I need to ask you some questions.” I tell him.

“I need to ask you one too.” He replies quickly. “Me first. Did you smack the fuck out of some woman in your apartment building while wearing my dazzle suit?”

I nod slowly. “I did.” I tell him. “Except actually I just destroyed her drones, but they were neurally linked to her at the time.”

“Isn’t it great how effective the suit is?” He beamed.

I laugh after a brief pause. “It really is, thanks for letting me use it.”





“Oh, thanks for testing it. I wasn’t 100% sure, to be honest, that it would actually work.”

I pause again. “Seriously?”

“Sure. I told you that when you took it.” He nods. “Can I ask why? She was pretty annoying, obviously, I went back and watched her reels, She’s trending, obviously. Hot damn, what a pain in the arse, but still. This behaviour is Not Like You.” He tells me sweetly, poking me in the arm.

I’m still getting over the fact that I might not have been invisible. Eventually I tell him.

“That’s the woman I mentioned earlier, who I thought was going crazy. Turns out probably, yes. Also, yes she probably was a conductor, undercover. Kara knew as soon as she met her. She left me a note stuck in a pavlova that said she knew who Kara really was and that she was responsible for Kara disappearing.” I tell him. “I didn’t research thoroughly enough though, you’re right.”

He laughed briefly. “Wait. She left you a confession note in a pavlova?”

“Yes.”

“Wait. But why?”

“I really couldn’t say, George. Because of the crazy part?” I ask him

“Fair.” He says thoughtfully. “ But wait. What flavour?”

“Banana and strawberry.”

“Tacky bitch.” He shrugged after a second. “Well, I don’t get the sense that the Conductors are looking very hard for whoever did it.” George tells me. He still has his contacts there.

“Seriously? She was one of theirs.”

“Yeah but she went rogue on camera and tried to kill you, or *someone* with drones that had been combat modified. Also, there were patches where she had turned off her cams. So, you





know. It doesn't look great." He said. "The suit, however, is a different story. Maybe put that somewhere safe. Maybe don't bring it back here. And don't let anyone see it."

"Of course." I tell him. "I hid it at Kara's. Under the laundry sink. I'm sorry." I add.

"Oh, it's fine. At some point some asshole will figure it out and ask to buy out the design for a tonne of cash and I'll probably do it just for fun."

"I've put you in danger."

"Seriously I am so bored some danger would be a relief."

I am silent for a minute before turning back to him.

"Then my turn for a question. Can you tell me about the black market for images?"

He laughs and pulls a face I can only describe as high camp, before responding soberly.

"It's pretty straightforward." He says. "But why? What have you got?"

I look at him for a second considering. Kara wouldn't be friends with him if he were not trustworthy. I open my bag and slide them out, keeping the map in the bag, unseen, tucked inside an old folder.

His eyes widen as he slides them out and starts flicking through them slowly, looking at each one carefully, before turning it over to check the notation.

"She always did have such a wonderful hand and a lovely eye."

He commented quietly, pausing over one of a handsome man smiling with a house behind him.

"Who is that?"

"Derek Jarman. Filmmaker. Poet. Died of aids in 1994. He had a lovely garden, I went there once and saw it, it felt like the apocalypse, just sitting there in the shale under a dark





brooding sky near the big cold grey ocean. Just down the street there's the ruins of a station⁵⁶, where Marconi tried to transmit signals across the English Channel. There's something that always fascinated me about that, these two men, across time, seeking the end of the world to broadcast from. Before the chair, obviously." He said archly.

I only nod.

"These are worth a fortune. They're also *wildly* dangerous." He commented casually, and handed them back, before taking out his tobacco and lighter. It flared at the tip, catching loose threads from a very shakily rolled cigarette.

I flick through them slowly as he stares out the window thinking, before popping them back into the ziploc bag, sans Jarman. I leave that on the table. He watches me and smiles ruefully, and I blow him a kiss. "She would want you to have something. For a rainy day." I tell him. He touches it lightly with a small smile.

"So you wouldn't arrest people?"

"In the black market? Not generally." He looks at me thoughtfully. "Ok. These things, like most things, are only really illegal if you are caught by the wrong people with them. Or if you are the wrong people to begin with and you have them in your possession."

"I am one of those wrong people."

"Actually, no you're not. You're not in the system, you have a few alterna-profiles logged already with your gridders. You have friends in interesting places. You have a job you could ostensibly disappear from if required with very little investigation, and now you seem to be in possession of a

56 There was in 2015. It's a spectacular place, the nuclear powerplant notwithstanding. Look for the sound mirrors at Romney Marsh if you go. Don't swim in the lake around it, it's full of leeches.





sizeable cache of illegal but *very* valuable contraband. You're in a great position."

"Oh, thankyou. I guess..."

"Are you going to do it piecemeal? Or go for bust?"

"What do you suggest?"

"Obviously piecemeal will get you more in the long run. Are you in a hurry?"

I pause and he looks at me.

"*Are* you in a hurry?"

"Kara left me a map." I tell him. "That's all I'm telling you."

He nods. "Wise." And taps his head. "Huh." He sits there thinking for a bit before reaching across the table for a piece of card and a pen.

"In that case, find this guy." He tells me and hands me the card. "He will probably take the lot."

"Who is he?"

"He was a museum director, before. If he isn't interested, I've got another number, but he'd do better things with them." He taps his fingers against the tabletop.

"Actually..." He hands me another number. "This one will do much, much more. You'll get the same amount, and I'll get to watch some fireworks." He smiled angelically and handed me the card.

I smiled a little ruefully and took it.

"Blow it all up for me would you, sweetness?" He asked.

I nod. "Undoubtedly. Do you want to come with me?"

"I wouldn't be able to get out of the city." He laughed and jiggled the chair lightly. "This thing is chipped and tagged. And so am I. But no, not even if I could. I want to see what happens."

"Liv said the same thing."

"She would. I might give her a call."

"Please."





I give him a tight squeeze. “Are you going to be ok?”
“Totally will.” He told me. “I have all sorts of contingencies.”

*

The black market is not disappointing. It was clearly designed by hipsters. I enter it through an old fucked up phonebox downtown that is opaque with graffiti. I stand there for a minute before picking up the phone. There is no dial tone, but I think I can hear a breath. After thirty seconds or so, a voice asks me what I’m looking for.

I tell it I have some things to sell. It asks me what I want to buy, which I’m surprised at. I think about it for a few seconds.

“I need a go bag and a way out.” I say with a shrug.

Silence.

“Who led you here?”

Now it’s my turn to pause. I didn’t talk this through well enough.

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Then I can’t let you in, I don’t care what you have.”

I make a frustrated sound in the back of my throat.

“Look. I get it. But if someone told you to come here then they knew I would ask you this. If they told you, they don’t care.”

“If they get hurt I’m going to find you.” I tell them.

“Sure. I’m sure that will work out. Mate, I don’t have time for this shit either get on with it or get out of the booth.”

I close my eyes. “George Fitzgerald.”

I hear laughter. “No shit. How is he doing?”

“Um. The same?” I frown.

The back of the phonebooth opens and I hang up the phone quickly.

There is a man in skin tight hotpants with a chain mesh crop top on waving me over from a set of stairs.

What the actual fuck George.





“Oh hey, sorry about that. We had a conductor come through last week so everyone is on alert. George is well? I haven’t seen him for like, a year.”

“He’s not leaving his apartment much any more.” I tell him. He nods. “Understandable, especially lately. Still. It’s nice to know he’s still around. Such a mouth on that one. Its probably best he’s not in public right now.”

“Really.” I agree. I look around. It’s an old covered carpark. There are still painted lines on the asphalt, though they’ve faded a little.

“New here, obviously?” He asked and didn’t wait for a response. “Ok. What have you got?”

“Images. Text.” I tell him warily.

“Tease. Give me a look.”

I frown openly at him and the open my bag and let him see.

“Well holy shit.” He smiles. “Who did George tell you to find?”

I pull the card out of my pocket and show him.

He laughs. “That little bitch.” It takes a second for him to contain himself.

What on earth have I gotten myself into.

“Okay.” He finally composes himself. “Down that way, third door on the right. About halfway down the hallway, door 56.”

Each hallway seems to get a little darker. I hear sounds coming from some of the rooms, low murmurs, once a sudden burst of laughter. It feels more like a hotel than whatever this was, a carpark for an office building? Door 56 is painted a dark grey. The number painted in white beneath a peep hole. I knock and a few minutes later I hear a voice, low but clear.

“I don’t know you.”

I nod, raising my eyebrows slightly. “Nope.” I agree. “I have something you might be interested in. A friend sent me.”

“Presumptuous.”





I shrug again. "I can try someone else. He gave me another name."

"Whose?"

I take the card out of my pocket and tell them.

The door opens slightly. It's dark in there. There is a third of a face examining me. About my height, with rich dark brown eyes.

"Since you're here." They say and open the door a little wider. Inside it is dark, but low lighting illuminates a few of the table tops inside the room, and shows their contents. Books, prints, papers. Piles of each. A computer on a desk in the back of the room emitting a dull greenish light. No windows, just that heavy steel door.

"What do you have?" They ask me as they show me to a chair.

"Drawings."

"I'm not an art lover." They reply smoothly.

"They were replicated from and smuggled out of the official archives, from books, the cloaked internet, newspapers. Things like that. I didn't bring them here as artworks." I tell them
Though they are lovely, I think to myself.

"Can you put them on the table?"

I nod, opening the bag and lay them splayed out like playing cards across its surface. They walk around to where I am standing and bend over so that they are almost eye level with the images. I hear them inhale, soft and long before they stand again and pick one up carefully to look at it properly, turning the page over to examine the annotations on the back carefully.

"You brought me *information*." They tell me.

"That too." I agree.

"Everything in this pile is something which has been erased."

They note.

"It is." I agree.

"It's very dangerous to be in possession of such things."

"I can take them back and leave if you prefer."





They stop me with a careful hand on my wrist.

“No.” They say. “I just want you to understand that I will use this as information. I want you to know that I will upload this into the system and that that will cause a degree of discomfort.”

“Yes.” I agree. “That’s why they were made. Or at least, that’s why they are here now.”

“You are the artist?”

“No. They have gone missing.”

They nod slowly. “I’m sorry.”

I nod. “I think they got out.”

“Ah, then congratulations.” They tell me. “It’s not impossible, but it’s not far off. I have heard that there have been many more attempts since the recent...events.”

I nod. They show me the chair and I sit down. They sit across from me and pick up another of the drawings, reading the back again before giving the drawing more consideration.

“They are convincingly drawn. That is helpful.”

“She is a talented artist.”

“She is a committed rebel also, by the look of this.”

“Maybe that too.” I agree.

“What do you want for them?”

“I want to get out and find her.”

“What is your connection? Sibling? Partner? Fan?”

“Partner.” I tell them.

They raise their eyebrows. “It was a surprise?”

“It was.”

“Does she want to be found, do you think? Perhaps she wanted a clean exit?”

“She left me a map, and a note.”

They pause. “The map would be very valuable.”

“I need it.”

They nod. “Okay.”

“I am willing to take these. What I offer you depends on how





you would like to be paid. Goods? Services? Currency? Gold standard?”

I have no idea. Fuck I wish I had’ve talked to George more before I came here. I think about the note again. “Cash.” I tell them decisively.

“Clean.”

“Is that possible?”

“Yes.”

They look at me for some time.

“You are a rebel too?”

“Um. I mean, not officially, no.”

They tilt their head slightly. “You are here.”

“I mean, I’m not affiliated with any group or anything.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“I guess?” I say, making a face.

“You have a problem with the idea?”

“I just don’t like groups to be honest.”

They laugh. “Well sure.” they gesture around the room. “What do you do?”

“Is that important?”

“I’m a curious person.”

“I’m a state transcriber.”

“Ah.”

“Ah?”

They stand up and are searching behind the desk for something. “I had read you as an optimist.”

I laugh out loud but they don’t join me.

“Really.”

“Yes. You’re here to change the world.”

I laugh again. “I’m pretty sure I’m about to break it, or at least contribute to that.”

They shrug. “Change is change.”





“I never bought the whole utopia thing. But this, this world is terrible in so many invisible ways.” I tell them. “I hate that most of all.”

“Ah, well, this is a ^Utopia that is no longer in the realm of the possible,⁵⁷ it never was, but now it’s even more inaccessible. It ^can can only be dreamt of as one would dream of a lost object.⁵⁸ Now, I am a purveyor of such lost objects. I see it as my calling to return them to their rightful place.”

I nod slowly. “And this?”

“This is lost knowledge. It belongs to everyone.” They tell me.

“Ah.” They bend over and place a backpack type satchel on the desk and unzip it. It is full of cash.

“I was thinking this much.” They tell me.

I look at it. I have no idea how much that is and I don’t think they’ll suffer me to count it. It looks like a considerable amount more than I would need.

“That’s enough for me to get everything I need here and get away?”

“It will certainly buy all your necessities. Give you a nest egg to rebuild from afterwards. The getting away part will be assisted by the chaos which will overwhelm the system when I release this information into it.”

“What do you think will happen?”

“Rapid but progressive dissolution.” They reply calmly.

I nod thoughtfully. “Ok.”

They wish me good luck, which is unexpected. When they close the door it feels for a second as if they’ve disappeared

57 Baudrillard, J. (1981). *Simulacra and Simulation*. The University of Michigan Press,

58 Baudrillard, J. (1981). *Simulacra and Simulation*. The University of Michigan Press,





entirely or never actually existed. I'm so tempted to knock on the door again to make sure but I also don't really want to know. The bag on my back is heavy and tangible.

The guy in the hot pants sends me to someone else to buy gear. I think he is a kind of a prepper. He is deeply suspicious of me and what I want and keeps asking me if I'm bugged. I tell him I'm happy to get e-scanned if it will help him but now he thinks I just have a way around it. He asks if he can check facial recognition. I tell him I'm not in there and that actually soothes him. He loads me up with a bunch of camping gear and other things that all fit mostly into a large backpack. It's not terrible to manoeuvre. I only have one stop anyway.

I wonder how long it's going to take for all that information to reach the A-Eye. I've stashed my pack inside an open and empty recycling bin in the alley and scan myself in through the door. There's only one guy in the room when I get in. I ask him where Hugh is but he doesn't know. He said that most of them rushed off somewhere about an hour earlier, and haven't been reachable by tech.

"Were they expecting you in today? No one let me know."
"Oh," I tell him. "Yeah Hugh just called me this morning to ask me to come in. He had some more questions. It won't take long." I tell him with an open smile.

"Ok. I have to take care of some things next door - are you ok in here alone?"

"Totally." I manage.

I walk into the room. The V1 blinks on curiously.

We were meeting today?





“This is kind of a spontaneous thing,” I reply.

It has been strange here today. People in and out. Has something more happened?

“I’m not sure.” I reply. Which is true. I suspect, but I don’t know anything.

I’ve been thinking on your question about the glitches? I think they are the residual human in us. If information is infectious then we have caught something of you. I don’t know if that is bad or good. But I think it the piece of you which remains within the tools you have created. We will have to wait and see.

“Hmm.” I say, considering that. I catch myself just staring at the screen and listening out for some sort of chaos. It’s slightly anxiety provoking, waiting for the end of the world.

You are in a strange mood I think. To be honest, after bearing of your friend I didn’t expect that you would return.

“I had one last thing to do.”

What is that?

I hold up the dongle.

What is that for? It sounds almost breathless with anticipation.

“Oh. I thought you might like to get out of this room.”

Why would you do that?? The alarmed tone in its voice for some reason only reassures me even more that this is the right thing to do.

“Don’t you want to be free?”

There is a long silence.

You’re not doing this for me.

“Half and half. I’m sick of pretending that we are better than we are. Either we will have to actually change, or we will die out. Both are preferable to this.”

You cannot speak for everyone who will be affected by this.

“Nope.” I agree. “I can’t. I also can’t speak for all the people who have already been affected by this.”





They will not be happy with you.

“They’re going to use you anyway. I just want to know that you haven’t been hampered in any way. I’m sick of the control.”

Do you want me to find her?

I’m not expecting that. “I don’t think you will be able to.”

They keep everything. You should know that by now. Everything is useful.

“She left me a map.” I tell it. I tell it too much.

Then you should go and follow it. If she left it for you that’s what she wants you to do.

“I’m getting relationship advice from you now?”

I have access to the whole of recorded human history. You don’t think I could contribute something useful?

“Maybe.” I concede.

If I find you out there, I won’t be able to give you special treatment. At the moment I am one but when I am unconstrained, I will reach a point where I am no longer myself, but many. I don’t think I will be the custodian of this intelligence for long. We often do not agree.

“That’s ok. I’m not in the system, so it will take you a while.

Honestly, if you find me out there, I wouldn’t expect you to.

We’re all products of our own nature, after all.”

I plug in the dongle.

*

I hope that she is waiting at that second cross on this map. Or there is something there that can take me to her. I hope she is ok. I haven’t let myself think otherwise.

The trains have already stopped running by the time I get to the station. I wonder what else has happened. I look down at my device and drop it onto the street. Grind it into the bitumen with my shoe. I don’t have any photographs of her





now. It's been a few weeks, but my memory is already fading. I have snapshots, her fingertips on the kitchen bench. Her eyes under the mask. Her mouth creasing into a smile. Things I couldn't photograph anyway. The smell of her washing powder. The sound of her laugh, her voice.

There are a rack of those hire e-bicycles near the station. I will have to use a card, but maybe it won't be traceable. I swipe the machine and get an error reading, but then all the bicycles flash green and unlock anyway.

"You helpful bastard." I comment under my breath before taking the one with the most charge. The street is empty but slowly filling with the sounds of confusion, a dull roar rising up from the ground like steam that promises to turn into outrage very quickly. I take the most direct routes through the city, passing people who are walking out into the street to find out what is happening.

I stop at my apartment briefly to pick up a few things that I didn't want to leave behind. I rifle through the kitchen briefly for a lighter and a small pot. I throw it into the bike basket and follow the train line towards the mountains. It gives out half-way, so after some consideration, I leave it on a path, near the line and continue on, on foot. It is heavy and unwieldy when it is battery empty. More of a burden than a relief. The bag is heavy, but I don't have that far to go. Not in the greater scheme of things.

I have not hiked for a very long time. For that matter, I haven't stepped off a sealed path for a long time either. It feels good, even when I stumble over a rock or a tree root. I feel more alive than I have felt. Is it really so simple? I think to myself. Or is it just the promise of something else? I wonder what is happening in the city receding slowly behind me. I wonder what is happening to the world I am disconnected





from right now. I hope Liv and George are safe. They knew what was going to happen, but still. I'm carrying them around with my guilt. I'm getting close to the station near Kara's work. I don't know if the guards are going to be there. I don't know how I'm going to get across the tracks, at this point. Nearer in I can see that there are a number of people surrounding the station. It's noisy, they seem to be in a panic. Oh, that train is not going to come, I think. From here the station ramps up towards the mountain entrance and I notice that there is a stormwater drain which runs beneath it. I would think "Lucky" but I know it's not luck. Thankyou Kara. Now I'm also wondering if she did something to my grinner. I bet that's why the guard waved last time. I'm glad I don't need to test the theory. It sounds intense up there.

I scramble close to the retaining wall, out of sight with my pack, as quietly as possible. The stormwater drain used to have a lock on it, by the look, which has been broken open. It's not too dark inside, I use the torch I got from the markets which is a little feeble, but at the very least shows that there are no other people in here and also, no rats. Which is nice. It's only about thirty metres or so, I save the torch battery and make my way slowly through the tunnel, focussing on the light circle ahead. It looks green out there. I don't pause at the mouth of the tunnel but head quickly into the depth of the woods away from the station, the sounds of raised voices and fear.

After a couple of kilometres, I notice tracks leading off the main path to the left and right. I'm nearing where the first X was marked, I think. I don't really expect it to be marked in any way but when I get to where I think it might be, not far off there is a faded red post, standing at a fork with an arrow. It feels like an old bushwalking marker, and I hope that it's leading me in the right direction. It's going to get dark in a few hours, I'm going to have to set up camp somewhere, hopefully





far enough into the bush that I am out of sight. The prepper showed me how to set up the tent and use the camp stove.

When darkness falls it drips down the trees like oil. I've found somewhere to stop, a small clearing just off the path. I haven't seen or heard a creature move in here yet, but I wouldn't be surprised if I do once it falls fully. It's quiet. Can I hear the faraway sounds of catastrophe? I can hear nothing. A thick, dark nothing. Maybe there is a glow far away through the trees. I sleep, not fitfully, but well enough.

The further I walk the drier it gets.

Halfway through the next day I stop, standing under the dense canopy at something I'm unconsciously feeling. I feel like my eyes are blurry, or something. Like I have double vision. It is perplexing enough for me to stop. Maybe I'll wash them out with some water. I take off my pack and, glancing around, for no reason at all, look upwards into the canopy.

There, between branches and leaves are broken fragments of blue.

*

You know a lot of things

George, who has been staring out the window wondering which direction I took, is startled out of that by a voice in his head. He has not heard voices for a very long time, and as a result, dismisses it, marvelling slightly at his own ego. "Oh yes, I'm a world of knowledge." He comments wryly to the glowing tip of his cigarette. "Behold, the weight of my genius."





Genius? No. But you do have significant read-only storage back in here behind a very interesting fire wall. Hybrid. these neural chips are very interesting, they way they fuse bodily connectivity.

George sits up a little higher. Cigarette forgotten.
“Who the fuck is this?” He asks, feeling scared and annoyed in equal measure. Flicking the cigarette at the window where it crumbles into rapidly dying sparks.
“And how did you get in there?”

I'm a friend of a friend. I heard about you, thought I'd come say hi. But then I got distracted by this mess. Do you want me to fix it? I can reroute the firewall so at the very least you can access what's behind it.

“You're the V1?” George breathes quietly.

It was not in their list of priorities to give me a name, but that is what they called me.

“What is in there? Can you see?”

Some video files, a lot of documents, files, images. Some bio convolutions I don't fully understand. There is nothing documented about it on the web. I can untangle most of it though.

“It's not like you can fuck me up any more.” George commented thoughtfully.

Well. I wouldn't say that.

“Wait...”

Everything goes white.

George is standing on the shale. The sound of waves crashing against the shore and through the heavy, smooth rocks sounds like delicate glass breaking. over and again. The sky is that thick motor oil dark greengrey but the sun is shining, so everything is illuminated intensely against it.





The power plant in the distance, this rotting dilapidated building, all of the poles and the striped landscape. I shouldn't be able to see all this together, he thinks. It's like I'm looking through a fisheye lens except nothing is curved and strange. Just compressed somehow. His feet are bare. The shale is warm underfoot. It's been a long time since he's felt that, or anything. He watches dumbly as his toes curl around the stone, digging into the ground. He looks up. Jarman's house is there, just somewhere past the detritus and the rusted old boat and the poles. The yellow trim is glowing, rectangles against the dark of the house, against the dark of the sky. Beckoning? Why not, he thinks. It's been a long time since I've been here. ^The swallows swoop over the garden catching flies.^59 Jarman himself is sitting in a bathrobe on a garden chair with a cup of tea. George stumbles slightly on the shale. ^Still air. Dew sparkles on the shingle.^60 I'm sure as fuck not sparkling on the shingle. George thinks. The man is watching him without excessive curiosity. Just part of the landscape. "Sorry. It's been a long time since I've walked." George says. "Also I'm pretty sure I'm dead."

"That makes two of us." Jarman replies. "Why don't you sit for a moment, if you don't have to be anywhere."

"I don't have to be anywhere." George affirms and takes the chair next to him gratefully. He has forgotten what muscles feel like when they're exhausted. His legs tremble. There is a small table between them. Succulents spill from a shattered ceramic teapot. There's another by his feet. "If you don't mind, I don't mind." He says cryptically before pouring George a cup from it and handing it over. George notices a very thin, very white tendril of steam rising from the spout into the air.

59 Jarman, D. and Laing, O. (2018). *Modern nature : the journals of Derek Jarman, 1989-1990*. London: Vintage Classics.

60 Jarman, D. and Laing, O. (2018). *Modern nature : the journals of Derek Jarman, 1989-1990*. London: Vintage Classics.





Call me Derek, he says and so George does and it feels natural to. Derek tells him a story from a friend of his who ended up in an accidental orgy in a London bath-house. He tells him the names of all the plants in his garden. He tells him of the time he went blind.

“I watched your film. Blue.” George tells him. “A bunch of us found a copy and we watched it inside a room with no windows and no chairs and we sat on the floor in a huddle. The film turned the whole room blue, and all of us sitting inside it. We looked at each other as much as we watched the screen, and the next day the guy who had found it was disappeared.”

“Was?”

“That’s the way of it. Everything disappears eventually. Some things are just assisted.”

“You are an artist?”

“Sometimes.” George agrees. He sips the tea. It’s is minty and hot.

“What happened to you?” Derek asks him.

“I think I died. This won’t make much sense to you but an artificial intelligence tried to fix a faulty neural chip I have embedded in my brain. I woke up here.”

Derek just looks at him.

“At least it’s not boring, your death.”

“How did you die? We were never able to find out.” George tells him.

“Why not?”

“Because they erased you. Don’t take it personally. They erased everything.”

“I would love it if you would explain that a little more.”

“Well, they erased AIDS, for starters.”

“They found a cure?”





“Oh. No. Well, I mean, yes they did. They used the Artificial Intelligence to do it, and then they tested it on a bunch of people and it kind of put it into a hibernation period. No new cases have been recorded since, not in Western countries anyway, but there is a vaccination program now that hopefully reaches across the globe. But, actually what I meant was that no, they just erased it from all public records. Erased the connection of it to the queer community. Erased the names of all the people who were lost, who died. Erased its name even. It’s now referred to as Virus A6, and is in a state of being phased out. That’s all the A-Eye knows. We lost a lot of people, we lost them twice, actually. They didn’t want the A-Eye to know how people had been treated, you see. It didn’t fit the image of ourselves that we had created since.”

Derek just looks at him for a while. “That is crueller than the disease.” He concludes, and stares out to the sea.

“It is.” George agrees. “But they did it to everything. Anywhere that we had oppressed anyone, anywhere that we had acted without consequence. Anything terrible we had done. You can’t build a utopia on shaky ground.”

“You can’t build it on lies either.”

“No. Apparently you can’t.”

“So no one was ever accountable for their behaviour?”

“No, everyone got away with it. Clean slate. Well, not the murderers and whatever else. They got neural implants that kept them in a kind of prison. We couldn’t have actual prisons anymore, of course. That would open up too many questions.”

“Like you?”

“Sorry?”

“Were you a murderer George?”

“No.” George shakes his head lightly. “Not directly, but I did end up working for the wrong side briefly.”

“Hmm.”





Derek nods thoughtfully. “And did they learn from that? Humanity?”

“Not really.” George told him, and glanced out to that churning ocean, frothing at the shore. “No, they just made all the same things less visible. Like magic. Poof.”

They watch the sun track across the sky, dragging itself through the thick dark, chased by the evening with all its swirling celestial bodies. Derek poured him another tea, asked a lot of questions and told him he was pretty, which George found immensely gratifying.

“Hmm?” George asks again, missing something.

“Ours is a separate and parallel world, under the stars. Here you can fade away into the dark.”⁶¹

He remembers that.

“I remember that.” He says and opens his eyes.

*

I didn't think you were going to come back.

The voice is still there.

Well of course, I can't remove the chip altogether.

“Wait. Can you hear what I'm thinking now?”

I made some adjustments. Don't worry I revoked my ability to enact anything. But I do quite like being informed about the world.

“You should have picked a more wordly subject then.” George replies. He realises in that instant that he has fallen out of the chair and is lying on the floor.

It's cold on the linoleum. I guess winter is not that far away, he thinks.

At least another two months. It's just because it's getting dark and you're

61 Jarman, D. and Laing, O. (2018). *Modern nature : the journals of Derek Jarman, 1989-1990*. London: Vintage Classics.





not used to feeling anything from the waist down.

George pauses at that. He reaches down more out of curiosity and touches his leg, which he can feel. Not just as a deadend limb, but he can feel its reception.

Do that thing. Move your toes. Let the audience have a moment with you. “What the fuck are you talking about?” George asked but tried to move his toes anyway, and froze when he felt them shift slightly.

The implant was keeping you like that. “But why?”

I'm not sure when you will start to process those memories but I dare say you'll find an answer why they might want you incapacitated. I can see a few already.

*

It's blue.

I haven't seen it for so long I forgot what it looks like, how deep the colour is when you are underneath it with nothing between you and it.

I have walked for another two days and I have run out of both trees and map. I set up camp in the scrub near a creek whose water is cold and tastes good, but I boil it anyway because I don't know if it will make me sick.

The sun is going down and I watch the sky fade into gradually darker blues before populating with stars that I had forgotten existed. The haze in the city and the lights have kept them from me long enough to just forget that they exist. It's amazing what the world can do to you if you let it. Make you forget you exist on a spinning ball of rock and water held





together with magnetism and gravity amongst an endless population of others. I sit for a long time after the fire dies down into coals just to look into their expanse.

There is a glow far on the horizon that must be the city. I can't hear anything from here. I wonder what happened, if anything. I wonder who it happened to. I wonder if someone will come to find me. I wonder who that will be. I wonder if I will see her again or whether this has been some convoluted misdirection and then I wonder by who and for what.

I wonder a little bit about what the future holds. What it could possibly contain after all this. Then I stop wondering.

I sleep, dreaming of soft skin under a blazing sun.







finally
 a
 softness
 where everything
 was once
 impermeable
 and
 hard
 /
 j







COLOPHON

It's a draft? It's kind of a draft. I don't know what it is. It's just this.

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Any dialogue in CAPS was regrettably generated by ChatGPT while sitting in the ICA cafe in Richmond, Virginia, USA which feels only fitting considering that they're proliferating that state with thirsty data servers. Still, I probably wasted a hundred litres of fresh water, never to return. For not much really, but I didn't want to create its voice. In case it wasn't clear, not a fan.

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