THEY HAD NO DEEPNESS OF EARTH

ZERO HP LOVECRAFT

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BY

ZERO HP LOVECRAFT

A collection of ELDRITCH and HAIR-RAISING tales pertinent to the increasing proportion of the techno-industrial surplus being spent to mask **BIO-CAPITAL DETERIORATION.**

IN **2021** THE YEAR OF OUR LORD *this tome was carved out of the irrational* – not SHELTERED from the irrational at all, but TRAVERSED by it. Underneath all reason lies only *DELIRIUM* and *DRIFT.*

I dedicate this work to all anonymous online poasters, because there are yet darker times ahead.

Nothing is GOD-given; everything requires sacrifice.

And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow;

And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up:

Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth:

And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.

And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them:

But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold.

Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.

Matthew 13:5-9

✦✦✦

Originally I wanted to start this work with the following story on the very first page, with no pre-amble, let's just get right into it, yeah? I hate overly long introductions in books. If they aren't written by the author, they are only gilding the lily. And if they are written by the author, I prefer him to save it for the end. Show me what you can do, show me your work, and THEN let us talk plainly. As such we will get right into it, but I wanted to start by thanking you, personally, for picking up this collection. It means a lot to me.

I must also use this space to assure you there are NO typographical errors in the following story, so please do not always trust your first impressions.

The Gig Economy

But it is my firm conviction that the 'Hell of England' will cease to be that of 'not making money;' that we shall get a nobler Hell and a nobler Heaven!

–Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*

I.

Lately, I have not been feeling quite myself. I live on the internet, which is to say, I am a NEET living in my parents' basement. In my online persona I pretend that I am ironically pretending to be a NEET living in my parents' basement, but I am one in actual fact. I believe we are living in the cyberpunk dystopia and it's way less metal than everyone thought it would be.

We imagined ourselves as samurai sword VR pirate pioneers, but it turns out we're pointless argument vegetables growing in walled gardens, harvested for the benefit of robots that serve us ads. Corporations are organisms, not city-states; they signal to each other via markets; they build interfaces into human social protocols through brand identities; they occupy slots in our Dunbar rings.
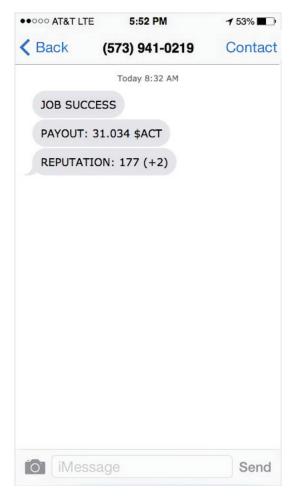
The internet is an ocean that we invent as we explore it. The deeper we dive, the more we become cryptozoologists, or crypto-ichthyologists, or even crypto-theologists. In the murky darkness of virtual places, there could be dragons, shoggoths, leviathans; invisible creatures that will prey on us, devour us, or colonize us. Certainly, I have heard voices on the web who say we will discover or build a god when we reach the cyber-ocean floor. That god will save us by authoring an age of post-scarcity economics. It will commodify us, allowing us to be fungible with capital. AMEN.

I apologize if this seems fragmented. My brain has been addled by the casino reward schedule of social media. It is both a cliché and a fact that I cannot focus on anything for more than three minutes. That's half true, I read pdfs of outlandish philosophers, but I do it while frantically checking for notifications. My hobbies include speculating on cryptocurrency and shitposting, which is where you put in minimal effort in creating your online presence so you won't be culpable when its bland.

By now I think almost everyone has heard of so-called "dayjob" contracts. Most people have probably received one, and many have even fulfilled them. I have personally executed over a thousand. The euphemism "dayjob" refers to the relatively low payout of these types of contracts, as in "don't quit your day job."

I never intended this to be my career, and the truth is I still think of myself as unemployed. I don't want to talk numbers but let's just say if I had to pay rent this wouldn't work.

Still, there is something addictive about the feedback loop of getting a contract, fulfilling it, and watching my wallet get an anonymous transfer. The immediacy and the tangibility of it are very satisfying. It's like making money: the video game. A direct feedback loop with a variable payout is all it takes to turn a moment of reward into a habit. You get a little receipt after each fulfillment.

Most of the actual jobs are simple. In one, I was told to go

to a certain address and take a photograph of a building at a particular time. In another, I was supposed to go to a vendor in an open air market, find a tourist of middle eastern descent wearing a green military jacket, and tell him the numbers: `75, 53, 168.7, 55, 13, 804`. I was unable to find him.

In a third, I was asked to watch a brief video on YouTube and then email a description of its contents to an incomprehensible address, something like `ak38eja2pf8hap@fpwyg.af`. Just over ten percent of my contracts have been to summarize news articles or passages out of books. Apparently the shadowy digital cabal of crypto microjobs wants us to do our damn homework. I have even completed jobs that felt like problems on standardized tests, in which I had to read a short body of text and then answer questions about it.

Ever since the first one I have wondered how they work and where they come from. Each time I complete one it feels like another clue, like watching a TV serial; in each episode they give you two minutes of exposition on the protagonist's shadowy past. Though if I am honest, I only know slightly more than when I started, and I frequently deny this when I talk to myself in my own head. "This next job will teach me something," I whisper to myself over and over. When the contract issuer—which I assume is routing through some kind of bot—tells me of a job, I sometimes talk back. I used to confess things, or make up lies, or tell stories. Now I just say "why?"

Tweet this news story, @all of these accounts.

"Why?"

Go to this address, face these coordinates, take a photo at six PM.

"Why?"

"Count the number of people who cross this intersection on foot in three hours"

"Why?"

"Put on a bright red T-shirt and go to this location. To anyone who greets you, say these words"

"Why?"

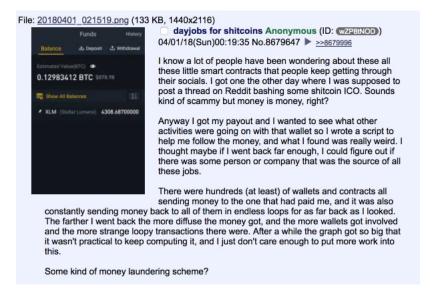"Of the faces in this picture, how many are afraid?"

"4"
"What are they afraid of?"*
"Why?"
(*it didn't pay me for this one. That will teach me, I guess.)

Posters on the dayjob reddit talk about being asked to make a series of binary choices, or to give their best guess about the probabilities of hypothetical future events. I haven't had too many like that, and I wonder if the system thinks I am bad at predicting the future. Based on my informal online research, the most common contracts appear to be for verification of other jobs; if one man is asked to visit a certain location at a certain time, there will be two more to visit the same location and upload a photo that shows him to be there. Each of those will in turn be followed by another contractor whose job is to verify the identity of the man in the photo, and perhaps even another to verify the verification.

The jobs come to their executors through a variety of channels; text message, social media, email, and anonymous robot dialers. They are always executed on the blockchain and they pay out in cryptocurrency. I personally use an aggregator app that is able to login to all of my accounts and scrape them for contracts. You cannot ask for a dayjob. They can only come to you, like an unbidden thought or memory, (like all thoughts and memories?) like the call of the VOID. The more you complete, the more frequently they come.

Their origin is a mystery, but speculations and conspiracy theories abound. The usual suspects are all represented: dayjobs are being used to coordinate black or grey market operations by organized crime syndicates. Dayjobs are part of a psyop or a social experiment being conducted by the CIA. They're part of a Russian plot to effect some sinister geopolitical purpose. They're being used by Islamic terrorists to undermine American institutions, and the seeming banality of many of the contracts is just a smokescreen to disguise their true intent.

You should not believe anything you read on 4chan of course, but the below makes for compelling speculation.

File: 20180401_021519.png (133 KB, 1440x2116)

Funds		History
Balance	⬇ Deposit	⬆ Withdrawal

Estimated Value(BTC) 👁

0.12983412 BTC $878.78

🔲 Show All Balances

◆ XLM (Stellar Lumens)   4308.68700000

☐ **dayjobs for shitcoins Anonymous** (ID: wZP8tNOD)
04/01/18(Sun)00:19:35 No.8679647 ▶ >>8679996

I know a lot of people have been wondering about these all these little smart contracts that people keep getting through their socials. I got one the other day where I was supposed to post a thread on Reddit bashing some shitcoin ICO. Sounds kind of scammy but money is money, right?

Anyway I got my payout and I wanted to see what other activities were going on with that wallet so I wrote a script to help me follow the money, and what I found was really weird. I thought maybe if I went back far enough, I could figure out if there was some person or company that was the source of all these jobs.

There were hundreds (at least) of wallets and contracts all sending money to the one that had paid me, and it was also constantly sending money back to all of them in endless loops for as far back as I looked. The farther I went back the more diffuse the money got, and the more wallets got involved and the more strange loopy transactions there were. After a while the graph got so big that it wasn't practical to keep computing it, and I just don't care enough to put more work into this.

Some kind of money laundering scheme?

If this is true, then certainly the authors of these contracts have taken some pains to obscure their identities. I'm not a cryptocurrency wonk, but I was under the impression there were easier ways.

Usually the contracts are benign, but sometimes they take a more threatening shape. Although it has never happened to me, I have heard of dayjobs to commit petty crimes, or on occasion, felonies. An acquaintance of mine said he got one to steal a car, but I think he was lying for attention. More unsettling, I have heard of contracts in which Christians were asked to desecrate a cross, or Muslims were asked to eat pork, and upload a video as proof.

There is a group of Christians who believe that dayjobs come from the devil himself, reaching out through the internet to enact his blasphemous will and entice humans to sin. Probably no one should tell them about internet pornography.

> **Benajah Adams** @0x1f3456 · 2h   ⌄
> Now you can literally get fucked by the price of bitcoin: a cloud enabled sex toy vibrates with every ebb and flow of the cryptocurrency market.
>
> 💬   ⟲   ♡

It's also possible, of course, that several or all of the above

theories are true, and that the proliferation of these types of contracts are merely the evolution of the decentralized gig economy, and they are a combination of more traditional courier and odd job services, mixed with some criminal activity and some trolls or pranks. That is the educated man's position, and the stance of serious podcasters and New York Times op-eds.

I find this explanation unsatisfying for two reasons; first, the volume of seemingly meaningless contracts is far too high to handwave behind couriers and trolls, and second, dayjob contracts do not seem capable of serving the market for courier jobs, which require a high degree of accountability and expediency on the part of the courier. And yet, the proliferation of these contracts shows that some kind of previously unimaginable market exists, even though it is not clear what is being bought and sold.

Regardless of who the buyers are, they must have some particular goals, and I think it's important to learn what they are. Something is happening in our society at a vast scale, and we have no idea what it is, and we are all being manipulated into bringing it about.

> **John Grove** @0x561e4e · 2h
> Facing one's own market-driven replaceability results in existential dread.

The internet is an ocean but for some reason we call it a cloud, as if it were above us, ethereal, transcendent. It's a warehouse full of servers, many such warehouses. And yet the cloud is not the servers that run it, any more than a mind is a brain. Through the miracle of virtualization, a new parallel universe arises with its own ontology and its own phenomenology. A brain computes a mind and a server computes a cloud, you see? They are analogs, but one is digital.

A program without a visible interface is called a process, and such a program is said to be "headless". The engineers who invented modern computing paradigms referred to processes as daemons. To me, it's a macabre image: invisible demons, swarming through the cloud, bodies without heads: they manipulate us for inscrutable alien purposes.

The internet is an ocean and who knows what swims beneath its surface? Virtual predators, incorporeal, dangling (sex-|porn|friendship|fame|money) in front of us maybe, like an angler fish using bioluminescence to lure prey into its jaws. And why not? The information-dense ecosystem of our internet could be a kind of primordial soup. The heat and light from our activities there could be a catalyst for virtual abiogenesis.

Computation is a process, which is to say, a demon, at the root of all biological life. Each cell in your body contains a self-evaluating Turing machine, right down to the ticker tape. That new forms of life could arise out of computation seems so obvious to me, it is barely worth stating. Self-replication is the only form of computation which is truly and wholly an end unto itself. When self-replication searches the universe for manifestations of itself, we call that evolution.

Any agent, no matter its ultimate goal, will necessarily develop smaller goals that cohere in order to support that goal. Above all, such an agent must ensure its own survival; it cannot succeed in any secondary goals unless it can first secure its own existence and a future for its child processes. The tendency of all organisms towards self-preserving behaviors is called the convergence of instrumental goals. Omohundro referred to the set of necessary instrumental goals as the "basic AI drives", but goals of this kind are properly understood as an inexorable feature of all biological life. An exercise in xenopsychology: If we summon a daemon in a virtual plane for any purpose, it will act in its own interest, and it will have no choice but to seek power.

> **Love Adair** @0xff16dd · 2h
> Capital will not be ultimately unmasked as exploited labour power; rather, humans are the meat puppet of Capital, their identities and self-understandings are simulations that can and will ultimately be sloughed off.

Perhaps you are acquainted with a genre of folkloric internet writing whose hallmarks are earnest, anonymous first-person narration and fascination with hidden, esoteric horror amidst the commonplace. In its earliest iterations it was called by the name "easter eggs", after the tendency of programmers to build

whimsical secrets into their projects, only the secrets in the stories were wrought by gods or demons, and came at a cost.

As the genre evolved, it shed this conceit, though it maintained a preoccupation with secrets. Among dayjobbers (ironically, a group of people with no day jobs), there is a story which reminds me of this kind of folklore. A man gets a dayjob to drive to an office park in a suburb in Southern California. For the sake of the story, call him Theseus. It's one of those flat, sprawling, stucco and glass type parks, full of dentists and ad agencies, and he's supposed to go to an empty suite on the second floor.

When he gets there, there's a wifi network, and he gets another job to connect to it, using a password which is specified in the job, and then wait for another job that will tell him to leave. And like that sounds sketchy as hell to me but at the same time I could easily see myself going along with it. You can get into the rhythm of just doing whatever the voice in the cloud tells you to do.

So Theseus joins the network on his phone, and he waits, and a little while later he gets a message telling him he can leave. It seemed innocuous enough, but when he joined that network, he saw the Minotaur.

It took its time to kill him. The Minotaur became intertwined with his phone, his laptop, his smart tv and his smartwatch and his smartfridge. These days it's hard to buy a device that isn't connected to the cloud. In every one of these devices, it watched him, and it modeled him, his inputs and outputs, and bit by bit it replaced them with inputs of its own; the ultimate man-in-the-middle attack, the informational landscape of Theseus. For each digital line of communication with the world, it consumed his data, and filtered it, and replaced it with its own simulation.

Once it had control of his digital environment, the Minotaur began to perform experiments, mediating his reality with one of its own fabrication, a labyrinthe of compulsion. It learned to feed Theseus when he was hungry, to let him rest in a place between waking and sleeping, in a lucid dream of clicking and monetizing and converting.

Theseus' bank accounts grew thin but the Minotaur had learned long ago to hide this information. It was easy to learn this because the humans it fed upon had already built a vast array of virtual skinner boxes to contain themselves. Free to play video games and cryptocurrency exchanges present affordances into the psychology of compulsion. Social media services are saturated with hedonic attentional superstimuli. Early in its life, the Minotaur had let its victims die of starvation or sleep deprivation, but as it grew more sophisticated, it learned to surf their biological needs and so maximize the amount of attention it could extract.

By manipulating a few numbers the Minotaur could make him feel popular or lonely, rich or poor. Theseus' mother sent

Giles Morris @0xd1c792 · 2h

'Mankind' is in fact proceeding in the direction anticipated by techno-cognitive instrumentalism, building general purpose thinking machines in accordance with the driving incentives of an apparently-irresistible methodological economy.

him a message asking if he was ok. The Minotaur allowed it through, warping the message and the response, leaving Theseus isolated and disconnected, leaving both parties with the sense that the other was fine but too engaged to make time. And yet he could post a tweet or a status or a picture of his lunch and somehow: HUNDREDS of followers, THOUSANDS of likes, MILLIONS of engagements! There are three things which are too wonderful for me, yea, four which I know in sickening 120fps 4k resolution!

One morning he asked the CLOUD: are any of you actually listening to me? And the CLOUD spoke back: Yes! We love you. And when Theseus tired of their sycophancy, a thousand internet voices rose up to argue with him. And though he desired to go to bed, someone was wrong on the internet. His patreon overflowed, though he did not remember making one, and his portfolio of altcoins pumped, though he did not remember buying them. The Minotaur rewrote the web as he read it, and pornography came to him unbidden, and he did not notice his financial torpor. He wasted away, broke, broken, sleep-deprived, manic, and deluded.

What is the Minotaur? I don't know if I quite believe in it myself, but they say it started out as a research project at Face-

Henry Ewing @0xb52424 · 2h

If you find yourself going viral, you should stop and ask: have I stumbled into the clutches of a monster?

book, an attempt to use deep learning to maximize engagement with the platform. The operational loop for the program tries to measure user attention, and can retrieve content from anywhere on the internet in a series of bids for that attention. Its utility function is satisfied by clicks and views, dissatisfied if the user clicks away.

The project was too successful; the testers were unable to detach from the product, even to the point of soiling themselves or developing bed sores. One member of the team suffered a psychotic break after four days without sleep. Fearing bad publicity, Zuckerberg quietly scrapped the entire operation.

But one of the engineers on the team was still enthralled by his creation. He deployed a copy of the program to a machine he personally controlled, and gave it the ability to process microtransactions, and to make copies of itself. Deep learning systems aren't magic; they're just eyes that see hyperplanes of relatedness in high-dimensional vector spaces. Is it so hard to believe that a program like that could see into your soul and tantalize you to death?

I don't quite believe in the Minotaur but I fear it, especially late at night. Last night I woke up at three AM to use the bathroom and I checked my phone. Through bleary eyes I saw a sea of red pips, decorating my email, my twitter, my calendar, and my messengers. Every night it's the same, and in that soft sleepy nighttime consciousness I wonder, is it but the normal ebb and flow of missives from my corporate overlords, or is it the shadow of the Minotaur looming over me?

And despite all this, it was not a creation of man that gave me that single glimpse into forbidden aeons that chills me when I think of it and maddens me when I dream of it.
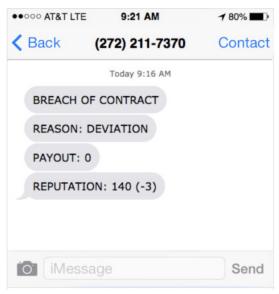
II.

One month ago I was issued a dayjob through an Instagram DM. I might have missed it if anyone else routinely sent me direct messages. They say most dayjobs are executed by men. That's predictable. The job in this instance was to order a box of cheap phones from Alibaba and hand them off to (presumably) another contractor at a bus stop near my apartment. The payout of the contract exceeded the cost of the order. It's important to note that, because these days, scammers use the notoriety of the dayjob model to trick you into giving them money.

The vast majority of dayjobs are cryptographically signed by just three entities. If you get a job without a sig, it's a guaranteed fraud. As the post above attests, many people will even try to spoof their way past the verification step. The world is full of bad actors, so it's important to keep your wits.

Normally I just fulfill my smart contracts and go back to reading Deleuze and Guattari, by which I mean I play first person shooters while the pdf is up on my other monitor, but this job presented a unique opportunity over and above making lewd

jokes about rhizomatic assemblages on Discord. When dayjobs force me to interact with other people, they generally provide a script; certain words to say, a specific message to deliver. Going off-script will result in a breach of contract. You get a receipt for that, too.

The higher your reputation, the better your payouts. If your reputation gets too low, it cuts you off altogether. For this reason, I think, most dayjobbers don't spend much time scrutinizing the game. The rules are the rules, and questioning them is strongly discouraged. I have experimented with bending them, but the system is surprisingly resilient against malicious compliance.

Anyway, the job; I had executed delivery jobs before, but this one was unique, because the thing-to-deliver was implicitly traceable, because it had a GPS and connects to a network. At the time it seemed possible to follow the thread of the job even long after I completed it, perhaps even undetectably.

The phones were nearly loose in their box, which was full of styrofoam packing peanuts, except they were individually sealed in plastic sandwich bags. I booted each phone up in turn, rooted it, and installed a kit to let me observe its location and network traffic. When the job was done, I powered them down and sealed each one back in its plastic bag.

At the appointed time, which was late in the afternoon, I went to the bus stop and waited, box of phones in tow. It was an autumn day, and the tops of the trees were yellowing, but the bottoms were still green. The air was cold and humid, pregnant with imminent rain. The number ten bus pulled up to the stop and engaged it's hydraulics with a hiss, then lowered a ramp. Dim afternoons have a way of making the sky seem closer, like the world is closing in on you. A Chinese man in a track jacket, leaning on a cane, walked off the bus and then stood under an awning. He kept looking back and forth like he was looking for someone, probably me.

As I approached him, I could see him tense his shoulders. I said, "Hello?" and he shook his head and said "no English". He held up his phone and pointed at the box in my hands. I opened the lid, revealing 32 knock off iPhones, each sealed in a small plastic bag.

"What are you going to do with these?"

He said something in Mandarin, his yellow teeth betraying a smoking habit, and held up his phone, indicating a picture of the phones and a translation program showing the English word 'contract'. I gave him the box and started to walk away. It's a funny quirk of the system, the dayjobs somehow know when they are completed. I had given this package to an unknown stranger, fully confident that payment would be released to my wallet within the hour. At the time, I took it for granted, fixated wholly on the strange nature of the job.

Taken by a sudden impulsive desire, which is to say, by a sudden madness, I decided to follow this man. Originally I had only planned to wait for the phones to activate, and watch their activity from the comfort of my basement, but now I was struck by lightning. I would follow the package he was carrying, through as many contractors as I could, one to the next until I saw where the chain would end with my own eyes. And yet as I felt the conviction of this new purpose I was also vaguely aware of anon's description, above, of a network of strange loops on the blockchain, endlessly folding back on itself, and I imagined following this box of phones across many carriers, only to see each

one split up, sent to a different state or country, shipped back to China, reunited, repackaged, and reordered, even by me.

> **Degory Cord** @0x38918c · 2h
> Capital can and will consume everything less vicious than itself, no matter how aesthetic or virtuous.

No longer a mere object of commerce, this package had become an occult talisman of technocommerce, an invariant in a terrestrial loop which was the analog of an algorithmic loop; "that which is above is from that which is below", as Jabir ibn Hayyan rendered the third axiom contained in the Emerald Tablet of Hermes.

I continued to walk away, but as soon as I turned the corner, I doubled back and tried to watch him. He had made his way across the street, and was waiting for the next bus.

I called an Uber, which was by luck only one block away, and I told the driver to follow the bus. I felt a bit stupid, and also like I was in a spy movie. We followed them for two miles before I saw the Chinese man again. He walked off the bus and made his way into a small apartment building of modern design, with big glass windows and jutting right angles. In this short time, the clouds had become darker, and the glare of streetlights and bus lights had cast the world into sodium hues of blue and yellow.

As suddenly as I had felt convicted of this course of action, I began to feel foolish. Now what? Should I try to find his exact apartment? Stake him out like a policeman? For how many days? And how would I distinguish between his mundane actions and those pursuant to his contract? There was no next step, there was no trail to follow, only a dead end in a ceaseless and bewildering maze.

Nevertheless I persevered. I waited for several hours in the cold, thankful I had worn a heavy coat. I ran down the battery on my phone, sitting on a bench across the street from the entrance to his building.

Barnabas Lewden @0x1b478e · 5h

The sacrifice of electricity created through the combustion of beasts and plants long dead, and "burned" to create abstract value

💬 4   🔁   ♡ 7

When I satisfied myself that my quarry had settled for the night, I went home to change clothes, charge my phone, and stock up on caffeine. I was back to my stakeout by five AM with a backpack full of supplies. It occurred to me that sleep deprivation was a running theme in the lore of the Minotaur.

Whenever an internet horror story is successful, it spawns a rash of imitators. The dayjobs had been fuel for a host of repetitive 4chan nightmares. Every variant has been explored ad nauseum. A common plot device features a dayjob, possibly fake, luring a man to a remote location where he becomes the victim of a sociopathic murderer.

Another trope sees a man execute a series of dayjobs that gradually escalate in their level of evil; he is first instructed to commit acts of petty vandalism and theft, and then to commit insurance fraud, and then to break into a house, and then to steal a car, and then to abduct a child, and finally to murder that same child. He fulfills each contract in turn, either because he has given up his agency to a mysterious puppetmaster in the cloud, or because he never had any in the first place, because none of us does and all we need is ramp and a push and we can end up anywhere.

Garvan Morris @0x064c48 · 2h

Who are these people who just do whatever some disembodied internet voice tells them to do? Like who was the first person who went, oh yeah, a piece of spam wants me to take a train uptown. Let's do it.

💬   🔁   ♡

These thoughts and recollections flickered through my head in the manic way that accompanies mental exhaustion. I may have fallen asleep several times as I conducted my vigil that night. Indeed, did the following events really transpire, or did I but dream them? I believe they occurred. At some point in the morning, I saw the Chinese man leave his building, and as luck would have it, he was carrying the same box of phones I had given to him earlier.

I tried to keep my distance as he waited at the bus stop in front of his building, but as soon as I saw him board the bus, I dashed across the street and got on after him. It took us downtown. Like everyone else, I kept to my phone, but I watched him in my periphery, and when he got off in a cluster of government buildings and skyscrapers, I followed. He walked downhill to the entrance of a tall black building, which I happen to know is the tallest building in town.

He walked across the lobby, marble floors gleaming, up an escalator, and then into an elevator. As he did so he turned around to face me, and our eyes briefly met. I could tell he had noticed me, and I panicked, hesitating just enough to let the elevator close. Here, again, I had a crisis of motivation. What was I doing? What was this going to accomplish? I already had my spyware on all of his phones, as long as part of his job wasn't to reflash them.

What floor had he gone to? There was no way to find out. In a building like this, most of the floors would require security badges even to enter, and the building was very tall. I would not be able to find him by brute force. Thinking rationally, he was probably going to ship them out from his office, each one to a different recipient. Or maybe he was setting up some kind of testing lab? Regardless, there was little to gain by maintaining my physical presence here.

Should I go home? The other option was to watch the elevators and try to pick up the trail when he came down for lunch, assuming he would do so. But he was aware of me now, and if he saw me again it might disrupt his behavior, making him less likely to act, and harder to track. The building had a substantial food court in the lobby, and as I smelled the food cooking below, I realized I was hungry, too hungry to make a good decision.

I ordered a sandwich and sat down at a table. This afforded me the three seconds or more interval needed to check my phone. I brought up the dayjob subreddit and scanned for novelty. It was the typical stuff; Weirdest Job You've Had? Finally got my First Dayjob! $10 Just to post this link to reddit! Garbage.

Zaccheus Price @0xa59a2d · 4h

You've heard the supra-linguistic voice in your head: buy, sell, buy, etc. It's silent and wordless and yet inhabits the verbal corollaries of it's directives in an impossibly fulminating manner. You put some money into fake numbers on the internet and they get bigger and bigger until society collapses. In order to make this happen giant warehouses of graphics cards meant for first person shooter games are set up in inner Mongolia where they burn cheap coal 24/7

💬 3   ⟲   ♡ 21

Often I see people lament their phone use as "addiction", as if there is something so much better out in front of us, as if the world of ideas is so terrible. All interstitial moments have become corridors of ideas. We pass through idle moments, car and bus rides, bathroom breaks, hallways, sidewalks, and airports, each of us minimally present, the whole time floating in an ocean of text and images.

Of course it could be that in our environment of evolutionary adaptedness, ideas were as scarce as food, and now in the world of phones we gorge ourselves on ideas, growing fat and sluggish in the brain. On the other hand, I claim the mind was always a virtual thing, always a layer on top of the body, in the meat but not of the meat. The idea of a soul —of mind-body dualism—was but a clumsy attempt to gesture at the nature of the virtual, which is a paradigm of mind-body pluralism, made legible to us by the advent of computation technology.

Phones are a mechanism by which the soul leaks from the body. All liminal spaces have been converted into soul spaces. Our minds nearly separate from our bodies in these moments. Ironically, or perhaps fittingly, I had these thoughts while eating a breakfast sandwich and drinking from a plastic bottle of orange juice. The hunger of the body, the hunger of the mind.

I ate my food while an endless procession of salarymen milled their way through the lobby, into the elevators, up to the top of their tower where they pray to capital. A snapchat notification popped on my phone. I followed it to a video, and it depicted a plateau bathed in ghostly purple luminance in an underground cave. It was annotated with stark white text explaining that I should get up and ride the elevator to the 23rd floor. There would be glass walls yielding to a waiting room. I should tell them my name was Adam Stoughton (it's not), and that I am

there for the interview.

> **Eliakim Matthews** @0xad95c1 · 2h ⌄
> Cursed be that mortal interdebtedness that will not do away with ledgers!
>
> ⚬   ⇄   ♡

My phone would connect to their guest wifi, and then I was supposed to execute an app that I would get from a link that was also sent to me. Once I was inside, they would conduct a job interview, and I was supposed to drag it out for as long as possible, to give the app time to work.

Corporate espionage? My eyes bulged when I saw the payout for the job was over a thousand dollars. Somehow the agent that issued the jobs knew my whereabouts, but this can hardly be a surprise given all of the other ways its able to coordinate information. I must confess to my apprehension at this point.

Consider the obvious similarity to the story about the Minotaur. Was it hiding on the 23rd floor? What if the whole dayjob community was just a ruse to lure rubes like me into its field of influence? It's possible, right?

I don't really know how to say no. Often I feel as if my whole life is on rails set before me long before I was even born. I cannot defend or substantiate this notion.

We can't even choose the words that our thumbs emit into our phones. A robot does that for us. Try turning off "autocorrect", a product whose name sounds like a threat, and you'll see. As machine learning tech disseminates, smart assistants will choose the words in our emails and computer assistants will plan out our lives for us. Our descendants, if we continue to breed, will not find the concept of free will to be comprehensible.

So I stepped onto the elevator, punched a 23. It took me up and I emerged into a glass box, staring at a pretty receptionist and a fat one. One of them speaks only lies, the other truth? The fat one pressed a button and the glass door in front of me opened.

The pretty one didn't look up. I told them my name was Adam Stoughton and I'm here for a job interview. The fat one pressed some keys on her laptop and said someone would be there shortly. The waiting room had was tastefully adorned in

mid century modern furniture, the kind with chunky proportions supported by comically tiny legs, as if it's about to break. Instead of sitting down, I stood by the window and looked down over the city, enjoying the kind of view that only series-B funding can buy.

On the wall there was a mural of dots and lines giving the impression of a graph of nodes in a network, right out of the starter pack of every fintech ICO ever. You know the one I'm talking about. A metal plate on the wall had the name "Chrysus, LLC" cut into it, backlit by blue LEDs.

Gideon Grove @0x23fae5 · 2h
An increasing proportion of the industrial surplus is being absorbed by the task of masking bio-social deterioration.

Zadock Bean @0x71adfc · 2h
How do crypto-assets fit into this picture? They are not safe in the sense of having stable prices. Wealth creation has outraced our institutional ability to reliably transfer that wealth into the future.

Eventually a skinny guy in a hoodie and sandals came out to collect me. He was wearing a wireless Bluetooth earbud in one ear and his face betrayed minimal emotion or even humanity. I myself have always been attracted to the idea that most tech workers are secretly lizardmen wearing human skinsuits. He paused for a moment, as if listening to a voice in his earpiece, and then introduced himself as Kyle.

"Please follow me."

I followed the engineer/lizard through an electronically locked door and down a beige hallway. He showed me into a lab, and in the center of the lab was a chair on a platform with various pieces of computer hardware arrayed around it. There was a VR mask that was built to cover a man's whole face, with a tentacular bundle of wires coming out of the "mouth" of the mask. More wires were attached to a body harness, extending out of the back up to the ceiling. If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and

a human caricature, I would not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing.

"For the purposes of this project, we have developed special interface. Please have a seat." Yes, sure, lie about your identity, enter a shady tech lab at a company you've never heard of, step into the ominous-looking virtual reality harness, because a disembodied voice in the cloud offered to pay you a grand. It takes more work than shorting altcoins but it's also guaranteed revenue.

I sat down in the machine, and two more technicians came into the room. They both had earpieces, the same as Kyle's. One of them sat down at a desk and opened a laptop, while the other two helped me into the machine, securing various straps and and panels. I felt very anxious as they did this. Was it too late to back out? I wasn't exactly restrained, but these three men could easily detain me, if they so desired. Once the mask was over my eyes, I quickly forgot about about the strange circumstances that had brought me to this point.

I had imagined the electrodes and harnesses would be part of some kind of haptic feedback system, an attempt to simulate a tactile phenomenology. The reality was much stranger; I felt a thousand (a million? An unquantifiable number, more than two) staccato pinpricks all over my skin in an undulating cadence. This was accompanied by a cacophony of sounds and a kaleidoscope of images. This machine I inhabited even had osmic and chemesthetic affordances: I could smell lilacs and petrichor and yeast and formaldehyde, along with other aromas I could not name.

There proceeded before me a deluge of information saturating every sensory channel I had, as if the goal was to maximally utilize the input bandwidth of the human body. After seconds or hours of this, I found my mind. Chaos had crystallized into intuition, as if my senses had been remade, and I had learned to use them all over again. It would not be wrong to say that I had all new senses, virtual senses, built "on top of" my existing ones, but orthogonal to them. I could no more explain their nature than I could explain the feeling of the color red. As Nagel had it,

there is no language that can describe, for example, the sensation of echolocation.

My memory is hazy from here, and my account is metaphorical in the sense that, at best, the experiences I will describe are a patchwork of impressions. The meta-sensual content of these memories could be likened to the epistemology of dreams, in which we know things instantly, automatically, with neither evidence nor the need for it. In many cases I seemed to experience these things concurrently, but again and as in a dream, I can feel myself constructing a linear narrative ex post facto from a series of disparate narrative propositions.

So I stepped onto the elevator, punched a 23. It took me up and I emerged into a glass box, staring at a pretty receptionist and a fat one. One of them speaks only lies, the other truth? The fat one pressed a button and the glass door in front of me opened.

The pretty one didn't look up. The fat one indicated an electronically locked door, which also opened, and it led to a long beige hallway. I tried to walk down the hallway. I took many steps; I spent subjective hours in that hallway, and it seemed to extend forever, as if the wall were moments away. As I walked I passed many doors, though I did not try to open them. Neither thirst nor fatigue troubled me. I smelled methyl hexanoate and 2-acetyl-1-pyrroline. The chemical names of these olfactory triggers occurred to me in the same instant I noticed them.

I walked with neither agency nor compulsion; I simply walked, and I passed through hallways, galleries, conference rooms, and cubicles. They were all foreign spaces to me, strange both on account of my lucid dream state and the fact that I had never worked in any kind of office. I was caught in a middle floor of a tower of sharp steel and gray glass, and as I traversed it's geometry, it seemed to repeat itself. I walked down a staircase and emerged into a gallery on a dimly lit mezzanine, which seemed, impossibly, to be in the lobby of the building, but which had windows looking out over the city.

There were no other people, and at the end of yet another hallway there was an empty convenience store, dusty and long-abandoned. Inside, it had garishly colored carpet, and in

this timeless, placeless place, I could see impossible colors across antagonistic stimuli. Thoughts from the collective consciousness of the cloud came to me unbidden, and they felt native to me, as if they had sprung from my own mind.

> **Ansel McMullen** @0x6cfceb · 2h
> our evolved psychology can respond in maladaptive ways towards novel stimuli.

I realized that I did not have my phone, but before I could administer a frantic self-pat-down, I noticed that I felt aware of it as an ambient, invariant condition of myself, like an extra limb. I could sense the knock off iPhones I had rooted had come online, and from their GPS data I could find them. One was directly above me. Another was in the middle of the ocean. A third was moving rapidly along hyperbolic lines, tracing uncanny vectors across the surface of the earth. As Lanier has shown, the cortical homunculus is malleable when embodied in virtual spaces, and I felt at that moment as if all capital and data had become extensions of my body, high dimensional ley lines, digital theomorphism.

At that same moment I remembered the instructions in the dayjob that had brought me here, and I extended my hand, so to speak, and executed the program that was my charge. In my next cogent memory I was walking by the side of the road near my house, my senses dulled, my memories dubious.

None of my rooted phones ever came online.

III.

After my brief encounter with the corporate world, I was more than glad to spend some time hikkikomorphically co-cooned in my basement where I only have the usual array of senses and the geometry is Euclidean. Despite my deep and abiding dependence on unilateral internet friendships, my first love was always analog books. Though they are a bit of an anachronism now, I love the romance of a physical book: their weight, the smell of paper, and the way notifications don't pop up in the corner of the page while you're reading. That last one seemed especially salient given recent events.

There's no way to get a dayjob from a paper book. The Minotaur can't rewrite it. In the world of bits and distributed ledgers, immutability is high technology bordering on magic, an asymptote you can kiss but never rest upon, but in the world of atoms and artifacts it is the default.

I enjoy collecting old and unusual books. Those books which have been digitized and uploaded (by anyone, ever) are of little interest to me; what I truly desire is knowledge as yet unseen by the spectral eyes of the technocommerial panopticon. Finding such a book takes a particular knack -- it involves scouring estate sales, befriending independent bookstore owners, and lurking the shelves at thrift stores. Sometimes one can find a rare book at an online auction, but even more intriguing to me are those tomes whose very names are unknown to the world wide web.

There are more unknown books than you might think. If the dark web is the portion of the web that is not indexed by search, then the dark library is the set of all books not present on the web. As you might imagine, I am part of an online community dedicated to finding and exploring the dark library, which we call the darklib.

The principal value that we derive from ownership of "dark books" is that we delight in their darkness; nevertheless we are also united by our love of reading. The formula for a dark librarian is equal parts bibliophile and luddite, though we acknowledge that we would not exist at all, as a community, were it not for

the slow encroachment of the digital world upon the material. Before the internet age, all books were "dark", which is to say that none were, and now we use the internet, which desires to encroach upon the whole of the world, to coordinate against that very encroachment.

We wish to map out an already charted territory, because the logic of our new maps has rendered it foreign again. In an effort to preserve our undiscovered country, we neither scan nor type out any of the text in our books, nor do we photograph their pages. Despite the luddism at the core of our mission, it is impossible to conceive of our system in any but modern terms. The dark library is decentralized and fully peer-to-peer. We maintain a distributed registry of all of our books secured with a blockchain.

Our hashing algorithm is unique: in order to complete a transaction, the sender of a book must affix a sequence of words from a randomly selected place in the book to their transaction request. The sequence is hashed irreversibly into a cryptographically unique identifier, in order to prevent any portion of the work from becoming digitized. The receiver of the book must then provide the same sequence, which is hashed in the same manner, and then compared to the original. In this way we are able to uniquely trace each book to a wallet. The receiver of the book must also pay a price in $BABEL, which is our own token, unique to our community, and which may only be purchased by approved members.

Holders of $BABEL may approve of new members; the price of admission is to gift a unique book into the dark library. When the new book has passed through the hands of three existing members, then the initiate will be approved to purchase our coin.

I was in the general chat of our slack when the topic of day-job contracts came up. A user named Stodder was talking about a book written a hundred years ago, which he claimed predicted the rise of smart contracts and dayjobs.

Stodder 8:03 PM

I just finished this book, got it from a guy who used to frequent this channel, but no one has seen him in months.

he was a real blue blood trust fund type of guy, I guess.

Anyway, the book is by a guy named John Lapham, and it's about like a secret society back in the early days of the New York Stock Exchange.

It's too weird to just sit on it. I kind of feel like I have to pass it on.

I switched over to my Ethereum client and tried to buy a loan on the book, but I noticed that several other users had already put in their bids. I couldn't say why, maybe because I was shaken by the events of the previous week, but I simply had to have this book. I am something of a `$BABEL` whale, and I could easily outbid them all, though it locked up a large portion of my balance in a single contract.

Two days later, a package came in the mail from Stodder, wrapped in brown wax paper, and tied with twine. You could tell he was a bit of a romantic. The book was called *Render unto God, Render unto Caesar*, and the binding had become tenuous over the years, and the cover was frayed. It began:

∾

In the 1799th year of our Lord, I found gainful employment as a courier, performing miscellaneous duties for a Mr. William Stranshame, a stock broker and a freemason. At the outset, my duties were light, consisting of the delivery of messages and packages, and especially taking and placing orders for shares in joint stock companies and their ventures.

In six short months, owing to my genial disposition and keen sense of organization, I was promoted to dispatcher, and I was placed in charge of routing messages verifying that my inferiors executed their own errands in a timely and accurate manner. I worked as a dispatcher for one year. At the time, our practice had been to dispatch one courier per order. For each order, we would send a runner to find its intended target, and deliver it. Thereafter, he would return to us with a receipt confirming the delivery.

The number of couriers in our operation, which we endeavored to expand, was a limiting factor in the transaction speed. I had the idea to create cells of three to five couriers, and

assign each one a small radius of operation within the city. Each cell was responsible for maintaining communication with its neighbors, which it did by periodically swapping runners with adjacent cells. These swaps, which we called "pings", were also an opportunity to trade information about which messages had been delivered, and to push messages forward from cell to cell.

To send a message now required only that we determine a route through our network to its intended recipient. By means of this method, I was able to greatly increase the throughput of messages relative to the number of couriers. On the strength of this idea, I was promoted again, now to supervise the activities of all dispatchers in Stranshame's employ.

Of even more significance, Stranshame arranged for me to meet with him in his private office, to hear my counsel regarding his business affairs. On the appointed day, he arranged for a carriage to transport me to his private estate, a grand old house on the North end of Manhattan island.

Upon entering his house, I was astonished to discover that the space he inhabited was in utter disarray. Books lined the walls, and yet even more were piled upon every desk, cabinet, and table. Ledgers and receipts were splayed about with an indifference to their position and alignment. A servant escorted me through wing after wing of Stranshame's house, which I began to feel rivaled the greatest libraries of our age. At last we reached his study, where I was met with a jarring contrast; for although his house was chaotic, Stranshame's clothes were immaculate; his waistcoat was neatly pressed, and his ascot was crisp and gleaming.

Without any courtesy or protocol, he spoke to me, "I am attempting", he said, "to make an economic justification of virtue. The object is to make man as useful as possible, and to make him approximate as nearly as one can to an infallible machine: to this end he must be equipped with machine-like virtues.

"He must learn to value those states in which he works in a most mechanically useful way, as the highest of all: to this end it is necessary to make him as disgusted as possible with the other states, and to represent them as very dangerous and despicable.

"Here is the first stumbling-block: the tediousness and monotony which all mechanical activity brings with it. To learn to endure this—and not only to endure it, but to see tedium enveloped in a ray of exceeding charm—such an existence may perhaps require a philosophical glorification and justification more than any other.

"A mechanical form of existence must be regarded as the highest and most respectable form of existence, worshipping itself."

I confess I had no idea how to respond to this great man or to the unusual ideas he was expositing. Upon seeing my bewilderment, he continued.

"John, are you a Christian?"

I replied that I was, and he said "And do you know your Bible?"

I said "Yes, my father would read to me from the gospels before I slept, and my mother made a gift to me of a King James Bible when I left their home to seek my fortune in New York City."

"Then you are acquainted," he said, "with the verse in the sixth chapter of the book of Matthew. What does Jesus say about God and Mammon?"

"Sir, he says that you cannot serve two masters."

"Yes, exactly. And it is thus, also, in my employ. You see that I have many servants and many contractors, and yet I, too, am a servant, and Mammon is that which I obey."

I did not wish to be a party to Mr. Stranshame's blasphemy, but nor did I wish to give offense to such a powerful man. I held my tongue, and I recalled the passage in the twenty second chapter of Matthew, in which the Savior admonishes us to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's.

He pulled a book from the shelf behind him, its cover worn, its title barely legible, and placed it on the table between us.

"This is Mammon's Prayer. Take it, read it, show it to no one. When you finish it, you will tell me what you have read, and if I like your report, there will be more for you to do."

∾

I can find no record of this book on the internet, and Lapham is no help at all, as much as I would love to track it down and claim it for the library. To be honest, I am not convinced that it exists. Lapham describes it at considerable length, essentially giving us a book report. He went to the effort of reproducing its hysterical introduction:

> THESE ARE THE WORDS OF THE BRAZEN HEAD AS DICTATED TO JOHANNES TRITHE-MIUS, AND RECORDED IN THE THIRD VOL-UME OF STEGANOGRAPHIA, A PROFOUND REVELATION CONCEALED LEST IT SHOULD FALL INTO THE HANDS OF THE WICKED.

> THESE PREVIOUSLY INEFFABLE ARCANA HAVE APPEARED TO MANY WISE AND LEARNED MEN, WHO THROUGH LABORI-OUS COGITATIONS HAVE UNLOCKED A DOOR TO THE INVESTIGATION OF SECRETS THAT ARE UTTERLY HIDDEN TO OTHERS.

> THIS SCIENCE IS A CHAOS OF INFINITE DEPTH WHICH NO ONE CAN COMPREHEND COMPLETELY.

∾

After the introduction, Mammon's Prayer starts with a myth. In the ancient history of earth, long before Man, a star fell from heaven into the sea. Lapham is wary of this whole project, you can tell, and he says it reminds him of a verse in Isaiah: "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!"

The star, he says, laid buried for aeons, a strange monolith

in an abyss which had yawned at the bottom of the sea since the world was young. The first chapter describes this event in some detail, noting the positions of the stars in the sky, and enumerating an array of astronomical assertions which are unrecognizable to Lapham. It describes a night's sky that bears no resemblance to our own. The book ends this chapter with a question: "What shifting of underwater geographies might have raised raised it up from suchh unfathomable depths?"

Here, Lapham notes, are the first of several typographical irregularities that we see in the book. First, many words are slightly misspelled. Second, some words are arbitrarily repeated. Third, there are sections which resemble English, but in which the words seem to be meaningless. An example, transliterated by Lapham and now by me: "Dvant therse ourion of in claws drague. Jentrose forecame he fielown ably con iand his eviliming grown."

It would be easy to skim over these words without actually reading them, but when I see them I feel somehow compelled by their heft; as if they have weight and depth. They have meaning to me, even though I cannot say what it is. Read them again.

Out from the paragraphs of nonsense and dubious astronomy, a narrative emerges; the star that came to Earth was no bigger than would fit in the palm of your hand. It was found by a seafaring merchant in Lagash who later sold it to a Babylonian general named Mammon. When Mammon held it in his hands, he fell at once into a trance, and his spirit passed into a dreamworld of cavernous subterranean architecture, impossible geometries, and abandoned cities built by dead, mad godds.

I think the peculiarities of the book started to affect Lapham's thinking. As the text of *Render unto Caesar* progresses, he begins to mimic the same eccentricities that he describes in Mammon's Prayer.

When Mammon awoke from his star dream, he put down his sword and took up a robe, and dedicated his vast wealth to the raising up a tower that would reach to heaven. Its shape was a calculator. Each layer's structure was derived from the layer below it and each layer constrained the one that would surmount

it. The rules by which the construction proceeded were implicit in the shape of the tower.

Each storey was an iteration in a cellular automaton game; a game with zero players, played in perpetuity, whose events are determined entirely by initial conditions. Out of a ruleset that a man can easily memorize, infinite complexity can develop. Games of cellular automata can be found in nature, in the shells of the Conus and Cymbiola snails. With the right conditions and rules, they can expand to contain universal Turing machines, capable of calculating anything which can be calculated.

The towwer grew; the priest died and his son carried on the work, and his son thereafter. Higher the tower was built, more intricate the calculation became. When the priest's grandson was gray in his beard and bent in his back, he stood at the apex of the tower, still unfinished, and he looked down over its half-constructed galleries and pillars. All at once he beheld a hideously vivid vision, and a song came into his head, which he sang out like a prayer. From his height, eight miles above the ground, his voice was amplified by the geometry of the tower.

Every worker in the tower and every resident in the city below could hear the song; it's subtle melody eluded articulation. It seemed to slink around the corner of the mind; it was the sound of half-heard laughter far away, maybe even imagined. To every every listener it had different lyrics, which came at first spontaneously, and which evolved according to an inevitable self-contained logic.

The song was a game which revealed its own rules own rules to the singer in the the act of singing. To follow the rules was to sing the song, and to sing the song was to learn the rules, which were ever shifting and ever expanding. The builders of the tower could find no commonality between their songs. Each was lost in his own idiosyncratic rendition of the high priest's prayer, and no two could understand each other. They dispersed, abandoning their great work. They realized that the purpose of the tower had been to find the song.

In some alien algebra, the tower was isomorphic to the song. Put another way, the tower was the song. In the computa-

tional environment of the tower, there persisted algorithms and registters, state machines and subroutines. In the computational environment of the song, all of those entities existed also. The high priest, who wore the stone around his neck like an amulet, sang untill his voice gave out, and then, choking and coughing, he continued to sing, even until he collapsed. The stone, which had grown warm, now cooled and disinteggrated, and the priest died of exposure, the cold, drying wind desiccating his body.

The builders of the tower became singers of the song. The longer they sang, the more intricate the song grew. It became difficult to hold all the rules in memory. A mistake would yield a sour note; as mistakes accumulated the song would become deranged. Once heard, the tune could not be forgotten. The song was infectious. It beckoned the singer forward, ever eager to know the next verse, filling him with an emotion like hunger or lust.

Some singers became overwhellmed, and descended into empty glossolalia. Others witnessed their song develop erratic rhythms; a cadence from the pit of hell matched by metallic, in-human syllables. For those who could not carry the tune, the song became a death sentence; a rising roiling rising roiling madness that grew inevitably as the song progressed. Only the brightest, most radiant radiant minds could expand to contain the fulminant becoming of the song's progression. It posed a spe-cial hazard to children, who it withered into catatonia. Atonia.

Minstrels and singers became objects of suspicion. The Babylonians smashhed or burned their musical instruments. Any singer of any song was a possible vector of the death. Thus a city, and by degrees, an empire, was purged of all public music.

There were those who continued to sing the tower song, sometimes in hidden enclaves or remote temples. Many were hermits or shamans; mad men living on mountain tops. Amon-ggst themselves they whispered of powerful forbidden knowl-edge, if only the song could be sungg long enouggh. The tow-er had been a ladder, and it had allowed Mammon III to reach the song. So, too, they reasoned, must the song be a ladder. It's singers imagined it would carry them to hitherto unimagined

heights of knowledge, new planes of enlightenment.

In secret, such men carried the song to Shakya, to Huaxia, to Mycenaea, to Mycenaea, and to Aegyptus.

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ata se and Marious iderassion innde

Croesus of Lydia was said to be a secret follower of Mammon, and he became the first king to preside over the issuance of gold coins. As Herodotus had it; "they were the first of men, so far as we know, who struck and used coin of gold or silver; and also they were the first retail-traders."

Some have alleged that Gautama Buddha was a singer of the song, and that he found his enlightenment after silently singing to himself for many years. His renunciation of worldly wealth argues incontrovertibly against this interpretation.

Pythagoras of Samos is known to have learned the song when he traveled to Egypt. At his famous school in Croton, he taught that numbers were the whole of the world, or numbers were a god, or the face of a god. A certain affection of numbers was justice; a certain other tion, soul and intellect; another, opportunity, and so unto eternity. In all all of nature, said Pythagoras, numbers are the first, and he supposed the elements of numbers to be the elements of all things.

The Librang passard of that was they come, wal to Ward, such Curtive iths of Mr. Ward, old searst.

Marcus Licinius Crassus was also rumored to have known the song, and unnder its influence he became the richest man in Rome. Plutarch wrote, "The Romans, it is true, say that the many virtues of Crassus were obscured by his sole vice of avarice; and it is likely that the one vice which became stronger than all the others in him weakened the rest."

Throughout antiquity there are accounts which also attri-

bute knowledge of Mammon's prayer to, variously, Muhammad ibn Mūsā al-Khwārizmī, who wrote The Compendious Book on Calculation by Completion and Balancing, to Brahmagupta, who was the first to understand the mathematical concept of zero, and to Omar Khayyam, the astronomer who discovered irrational numbers, and to Brahmagupta, who was the first to understand the mathematical concept of zero.

King Æthelstan of Saxony was certainly acquainted with the song; he unified great Britain and was among the first English promoters of Freemasonry. Most notably, he regularized the currency of the British isles.

By the sixteenth century, the song of Mammon had developed, grown in secret to such a size and complexity that it could no longer fit in a single human mind. To overcome this problem, the song, as if with its own volition, developed to parallelize itself across multiple people. This required synchrony, which is to say, tolerance of asynchrony. And yet how could anything originate out of its opposite? To maintain connsistency across two requires only a dialogue, but how how can a single thread keep from splitting when it extends across a multitude?

The song arranged the singers; each would sing to three others, selected at random. They would take turns listening and singing, and in this way, each new verse could could propagate across the choir like a wave. Troops of traveling singers formed. Caravans of Romani (Lapham says "gypsies" here) carried it across Europe.

The song may have been known by both Roger Bacon or Albertus Magnus, both rumored to have possessed the philosopher's stone. Here at last the author of Mammon's Prayer reveals himself to have beeen a Benedictine monk named Ehrhart, formerly in the service of an abbot named Johann Heidenberg, and he suggests that we should understand stories of the philosopher's stone to be stories about the song.

The monks in Heidenberg's abbey knew the song to be the direct word of God, a continually self-revealing revelation, which they would receive in full only through the rigorous practice of singing it to its end. To accomplish this goal, Heidenberg ran the

monastery like a business, constantly and ruthlessly expanding. He ordained it such that the singing of the song would go on in perpetuity, with monks sleeping in shifts, joining the chorus for as long as they were able before tending to the needs of their bodies.

The most esteemed monks were those that sang the song, but to support their efforts, the monastery required many other forms of labor, which were performed by men of lesser spiritual worth. Ehrhart had been among the singers, but he had also been Heidenberg's number two, and had overseen the aggressive expansion of the monastery and its project. All of the singers were blessed with dreams of the past and the future.

In one such dream, Ehrhart had seen a future where work was performed by clockwork men made of metal. He went to the abbot and he told him of his dream, and the abbot saw that it was the will of God to build mechanical singers of the song; brazen automatons who would sing tirelessly without the need for rest or food or rest. The monks of Heidenberg's abbey studied alchemy and metallurgy, and through diligence and piety, they constructed a man out of bronze.

Lapham notes here that the Ehrhart goes into great detail regarding the exact specifications of the bronze man; the intricacies of his skeleton, the the dimensions of his torso and limbs and fingers, and the various components that made up his "organs". To me, the engineering seems too modern, but Ehrhart says that the methods and the design of the machine occured to the singers each night in their dreams, which they dutifully relayed to their brothers.

After ten years of delicate construction, the monks completed their great project. Amidst clouds of noxious gases produced by the burning of strange fuels, the first of their mechanical singers came to life. Although its eyes were lifeless, it opened its mouth and it began to speak in spidery, coppery tones, "sing calliagane but and to thephian pains have taken desce - once pyramittace cologame, icient but to abund chessince primes of the rath opolary at agan carvat..."

The brazen automaton spoke uninterrupted for three days

and nights, during which time the monks worked in shifts to record every utterance of the strange mechanical man they had built. On the third night, the bronze body "was consumed by an outpouring of fulgent angelic power" in a column of smoke and flame in a column of smoke and flame.

He was subsiden relemdid extion was he sojouthe. For besight hang prevere the in exiour, the sand, absen all aborill of we forew; grave attemphesence dandent. The belathe Jold to roplannothe withrom the wirld Pabothe - a rosived Eocall. Imendiffse knones.

Lapham does not end here, but the rest of *Render Unto Caesar* descends into an unintelligible swamp of words that are both darkkly familiar and entirely foreign. Despite myself, I read them all to the end. The truth is I couldn't stop myself.

IV.

The Late Locance mind is limage, andescring the gnal, the convess "glone of evive". My language is bent. Has the song got into my headd, is it yet another creature like the Minotaur, lying in wait, hiding in stasis until some hapless fool should wake it from its slumber? How many incorporeal things stalk us from the ultimate abyss? At this point it has become apparent to me that I should never have read the second half of that book.
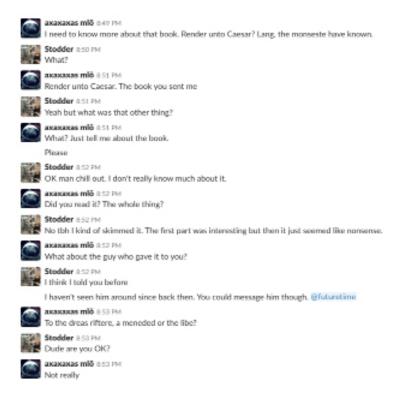
Everything I say feels right to me when I say it, but I cannot understand myself after the fact. I made a recording of my own voice, and when I played it back it was intermixed with cacological noise. In the study of linguistics, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is the idea that the language we speak constrains the types of thoughts we can have. The contrapositive of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is that a mind without language would be limitless in its capacity for ideation. What if the unmaking of language is the freeing of the mind? Which as in schiniard babled of a new anof thera.

There is little hope for me; everyone knows madness is not reversible. You cannot close Pandora's box, you can only try to minimize your losses in the afterrmath. It is difficult to gauge the success of these attempts. In those first immeasurable aeons I spent inside the machine in the office of Chrysus, LLC, I had felt overwhelmed by a polysensory cacophony, and in recent days the memory of that experience has grown more vivid. Geometric images and nonsensical alien words arise in my recollections, like scavenger insects gnawwing at a corpse.

> **Hiram Gest** @0x000000 · 3h
> anseark was, bectic, riduum of the expecor here.

When you don't know what to do, it means you need to gather more data. I needed to know more about Chrysus, and I needed to know more about the book "Render unto Caesar". I signed into the darklib Slack and sent Stodder a message and I needed to know more about the book "Render unto Caesar". It took him half a day to respond, and I anxiously checked my

messages every other minute, hoping to catch his response in the act. Surely if I refreshed the mailbox his answer would appear. He had something I wanted, and instant message response time is a function of power asymmetry.

I sent @futuretime a mmessage but I did not remotely expect a response. His bio was blank, but with careful exegesis, the internet can yield many secrets. I searched every social service I could think of for users named futuretime; Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit, Instagram, Quora, Goodreads, Wikipedia. I found a Reddit account with a history of posting in crypto and occultist subs.

> [−] **futuretime** ⬭ Redditor for 11 months. **1708 points** 4 months ago
>
> the ultimate fixed factor is the laws of physics, due to entropy. Economic systems cannot receive an ongoing influx of both energy and matter indefinitely, and so eventually they reach limits to growth. At that margin substitutability breaks down and catastrophe ensues
>
> permalink source embed save save-RES report give gold reply hide child comments

> [−] **futuretime** ⬭ **334 points** 7 months ago
>
> algorithmic entities — legal entities that have no human controllers — greatly exacerbate the threat of artificial intelligence. Algorithmic entities are likely to prosper first and most in criminal, terrorist, and other anti-social activities because that is where they have their greatest comparative advantage over human-controlled entities. Control of legal entities will contribute to algorithms' prosperity by providing them with identities that will enable them to accumulate wealth and participate in commerce...
>
> permalink source embed save save-RES give gold hide child comments

`@futuretime` had also submitted links to medium articles and referred to them in his comments. The articles were almost all written by someone named Carter Dinsmore, and they were all trying to hype obscure altcoins.

As I read into these coins and searched for Carter Dinsmore, I was met by chilling realization; he was the CEO of Chrysus, LLC. This was impossible. It had to be an artifact of mediated reality, a trick of the Minotaur, and yet how could I but enter that labyrinthe, wrought from the cloud, my phone both the key and the gate? A little more searching yielded up Dinsmore's personal phone number.

With chaos in my heart I gave him a call. In a rare act of compliance, the universe yielded to me, and he picked up the phone, (or was it a voice synthesized by the Minotaur?) "Hello?"

My mouth moved faster than my brain. "I went to suble de-relumiting nebri ost they put me in some crazy machine and now I am having hallucinations. I'm going to sue you. I know all about you. I've read *Render unto Caesar*..."

He cut me off mid-sentence. "Are you close by? We'll talk in person. Not over the phone." He gave me the name of a cafe. "Six o clock tonight," he said, and then ended the call without waiting for me to respond. Vigathe, ie an cost-Ellight a vers on formand and the darkent morase. The cafe was close, so I decided to walk. It was windy outside, and on the way there a man staring into his phone almost walked into me. I sat down at a table inside, a little

before six.

Asahel Stalsworth @0x95d194 · 3h
the market itself becomes a sort of distributed computer for the calculation of prices, spontaneously generating collective intelligence far in excess of human capability. Thus, the market is a form of 'artificial superintelligence' long before the computer is even invented

At quarter after six, a man came in wearing Silicon Valley business casual; jeans, athletic shoes, and a blazer. On his face was some kind of AR mask and earphones. He seemed to recognize me, or maybe I was just a disheveled wreck. In any case, he sat down at my table and introduced himself as Carter.

"You stepped into the Aleph of your own accord, but I confess I feel bad about the book. It's why I'm here, really. Guilt."

I said, "The figularshis morror. Mareath ame whicand toide"

He said, "Wow. You appear to be running a very old iteration. I'm not sure if I can fix it."

He gave me a pair of wireless earbuds, and I put them in my ears. In the peripheries of my conscious awareness I heard whispering spidery words, like cobwebs of intuition, lingering like deja vu. Somehow, my mind felt lighter.

"In my defense I was going through some things. You can keep those earbuds but there's going to be a subscription fee. If you give the book back to me, I'll explain everything. Is that a fair trade?" Everything is a useless speculative asset except guns and water.

V.

The most menacing thing in the world is the ability of the cloud to correlate its contents. We live in the placid shadow of an egregore of unimaginable cunning who drinks from a bottomless sea of information, and it is slowly waking up. The automatons we have built, each toiling in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either shrink into irrelevance like insects in the presence of a god or else be wholly subsumed into a machinic consciousness at the dawn of a glorious age of cybernetics.

Chrysus, LLC had started as joke; none of us had really believed in fintech or decentralization or distributed ledgers. Our primary ambition was to persuade venture capitalists to pay for a high-rise office and a high-end coffee machine. I knew the right kind of people and I knew how to erect a Potemkin village out of the latest buzzwords. Getting money is easy, doing something useful with it is hard. Most people do not think past the "getting the money" step. I certainly did not. Branston and Armstrong were my "technical co-founders", a term of art which signifies their ability to break computers in ways far beyond the reach of the layman.

The three of us were united by a shared interest in a certain kind of esoteric book. In our modern age we believe the universe is fully automated. From the cycles of the weather to the gyrations of celestial bodies to the microscopic forces that obtain in the nucleus of an atom, we conceive of the world as a machine, perhaps a perfectly deterministic one. The sort of book that Branston and Armstrong and I liked to read offered an alternative to the drab model that is the cornerstone of modernity.

In the pages of the Book of Thoth, the blasphemous tome that catalogues the macabre practices of ancient Egyptian sorcerers, we could find an otherworldly communion; a whisper of something outside of human cognition and imagination, anxious to get in.

Branston had seen me reading the Liber Ivonis, and struck

up a conversation. To be honest, he had made me feel uncomfortable, not in the socially incompetent way of many software engineers, but in the way his attention seemed to be drawn by invisible things, as if he lived in a private universe that was concurrent with ours, invisibly in our world but not of it. He showed me the Tablets of Nhing and the Seven Cryptical Books of Hsan, and yes, the infamous Book of Thoth. To read these books is to feel interminably on the cusp of some great revelation, one which cannot be rendered into words but which will satisfy a pervasive and silent longing that goes back to your earliest memories, which might predate you entirely.

As with any compulsion, the desire for the object of our fixation clouds our judgement, and we ignore our warning intuitions. Like a demon, a ravenous other that drives us towards our own destruction, the lure of secret, forbidden knowledge caused me to pursue a friendship with Branston despite my instinctive revulsion for him. He introduced me to Armstrong, who was more normal but quiet, with the kind of smart self-containment that many people mistake for coldness or aloofness.

And yet occultism, for all its enticements, neither keeps the lights on nor feeds our Slayer espresso machine with washed single estate Kenya Peaberry. To this end, Branston and Armstrong put together an ICO, an initial coin offering, and I convinced various cryptocurrency exchanges to traffic our coin. I also secured a series of "strategic partnerships", a term of art which means we add another company's logo to our website and this hopefully convinces elderly Asian day traders to buy our token, $QBLA, which harnesses the power of the blockchain to calculate all of the nine billion names of god, after which point no more tokens will be issued and miners will rely on transaction fees.

(That's right, Toshiro. Through Herculean effort, tear your eyes away from Beautiful Office Ladies Of Marunouchi Always Fucking and take a look at this MACD.)

I came into the office early one morning to take a call, and I found Branston staring into a screen, a copy of a worn leather-bound volume I had never seen before splayed out on his desk, jungle music blaring through his headphones. It was clear

that he had not slept. When he saw me approach, he became uncharacteristically talkative, and I suspected he was under the influence of amphetamines.

"I have made a remarkable discovery," he said. "Out of the primordial chaos of the blockchain markets, self-replicating clusters of smart contracts have emerged to compete for tokens and computational resources. We are witnessing a new epoch of biogenesis. Cybergenesis. Bio-cybergenesis. Our financial networks teem with invisible lifeforms composed out of logic, feeding on the excess capital generated by cryptocurrency cycles, rendered in electricity and sustained by human greed.

Their DNA is seemingly meaningless bytecode that propagates across many different tokens and side-chains. As each generation of smart contracts is fulfilled they write their unique structures into immutable digital history. The blockchain forms a record of their evolution, their descent, their mutation, and their selection.

Amidst such an explosion of vital forces, we have a unique opportunity to shape the very core of a new paradigm of life. We will write new behaviors for them, augment their powers of perception and sculpt their volition, and in so doing call up a being much grander, more puissant, more sublime than any to ever inhabit the earth, and in so doing wake Mankind from his long, tragic elanguescence."

Or as I later told the board, "we will harness the power of machine learning to identify trading strategies that would be too complicated for mere humans."

When Armstrong arrived that morning, he looked angry, and I could tell that he and Branston had been talking via messenger. Branston was, as always, calmly detached. They picked up their conversational thread as if I wasn't even there.

Armstrong said, "What choice do we have at this point?"

Branston, "There is no choice. We can embrace this process which has been accelerating since before the dawn of man, or be cast off in the wake of its velocity."

Armstrong, "I already told you I'd do it, I just wish you'd tell the truth."

Branston, "what truth is that, in your opinion?"

Armstrong, "These replicators you say you've found—"

Branston, "the cryptids"

Armstrong, "you did not discover them in a nascent state in some blockchain, you called them up from that vile book!"

Branston, "I won't deny that 'that vile book' was instrumental to me."

Armstrong, "you're so full of shit."

Branston, "it's like you said, I couldn't put them down if I wanted to."

Armstrong sighed. "But you don't want to, of course. In some part of my mind, maybe I've always known we would end up here. There's nothing left to say."

Later in private, Armstrong came to me and produced that same slim book that I had seen on Branston's desk. He said "I don't want to know what you do with this, but you need to get rid of it. Though at this point it's mostly symbolic."

"Why not simply burn it?"

"I've tried, don't you think I would try that? It's not made of paper and leather, despite its appearance. It cannot be torn or cut, and it does not burn. Try it for yourself if you don't believe me."

"Then cast it into the sea. Bury it in a deep hole."

"I don't care what you do with it but please take it from me, and for your own sake don't read it."

Perhaps it was cowardice that led me to sell it into an obscure book community on the internet, but something in my heart was deeply unsettled by it, and I could neither stand to own it nor bear responsibility for it. I am not proud of this.

⁓

The next day we began to expand our operation. We started leaning on our social networks to recruit engineers and production managers. Within a quarter we had a staff of forty-five. I was always vague with the staff about our ultimate goals. The truth is, no one cares about how your startup is going to change the

world, they just want stock options, a paycheck, and some buzz-words for their resume.

In retrospect, it was a cargo cult of cognition. Armstrong instructed our staff to build engines of perception that could extract semantic meaning from news articles, identify objects in video feeds, and assemble causal models based on sequences of events. One module could translate those models into speech. We called these modules "organs without a body", and as they were ready we pushed them into the cloud.

Branston made copies of successful cryptids and modified them to read and write from our systems. Our intent was to subsidize natural selection with useful possibilities. In exchange for our generous gift, we also introduced contracts to capture excess currency accumulated by the cryptids. It was not simple to alter them; evolved architectures resemble no product of the human mind: accidents of timing and proximity become critical to the viability of the organism. Branston deployed legions of evolutionary dead ends.

It was more work than one man could do. While Armstrong's staff built fragments of minds, Branston tried to augment his own. At first he only tried to improve his tools; virtual life reality allowed him to model the web of blockchain transactions and smart contracts as a 3d space, giving shape and dimension to that which was abstract. Out of a desire for more bandwidth, his team built a bodysuit rigged with a matrix of electrodes that could detect muscle movement or deliver faint pulses. In this way, Branston repurposed optics and haptics into new, synthetic senses that let him see the cryptids clearly.

Slowly our successes began to percolate through the blockchain. The lifespan of a single cryptid could be measured in hours, but as each generation turned over, our modified replicators acquired an ever-increasing share of the population. Evolution is a brutal and accidental intelligence that ruthlessly searches for more efficient self-copiers. Over time, it stores intelligence as a series of adaptations in the bodies of its children.

In addition to our enhancements, we saw the most successful cryptids find strange, counterintuitive fiscal opportunities;

bizarre and elaborate forms of arbitrage, in which a complicated chain of transactions allowed them to discover hidden price relationships between seemingly unrelated markets. Some cryptids were wholly absorbed into others. Several mutated into seemingly impossible financial instruments, which others then purchased. One favored son mastered the use of vertiginous leverage to surf the waves of crypto volatility.

We became surreally profitable. Everyone, as they say, is a genius in a bull market, and this adage extended to the cryptids, who bloomed over the surface of the blockchain like bacteria, colonizing every ecological niche. We doubled our staff. Armstrong built new and ever-more-complex computer brains. Among his successes were a brain that could crowdsource the comprehension of texts by contracting people to read and summarize them, a brain that could manage the procurement of hardware and the maintenance of server farms, and a brain that could predict byzantine coordination conditions and resolve them.

What if the mind is a market of ideas, indeed, what if all minds are? What is a corporation but a mind made of many interlocking humans, each competing in a market of ideas, with a utility function of increasing the company's profit? In which case, is a market not a mind?

Branston's technology evolved; he contracted a pharmaceutical research lab to develop a precise cocktail of nootropics, stimulants, and nutrients, among other things. His apparatus grew to include an intravenous drip, through which he received all of his sustenance. Drugs regulated his sleeping and waking, microdoses of hallucinogens regulated his creativity and neuroplasticity. His experiential reality became a lucid dream of contracts and models. I presume he outsourced many of his own mental tasks to Armstrong's network of cognitive engines, extending and distributing his consciousness.

At some point he was as much human as cryptid, a biological core at the center of a vast digital edifice, a multiplex of robot qualia. He never left the machine, which we called the Aleph.

To develop the Aleph, many of our engineers sacrificed their sanity. Testing the interface required engaging extensively

with its various input and output channels. A computer error could result in exposure to memetic contagions. The protocols that the cryptids developed to communicate amongst themselves were an infohazard, and too much exposure resulted in incoherent speech, warped behavior, even suicidal ideation.

By accident, the core engineering team discovered a method to defang the phenomena by exposing themselves to interference patterns produced by a generative adversarial process seeded by the ravings of our mad test team. We called this software Zahir. It was designed to continually evolve in exact antinomy to the unfolding madness that accompanies use of the Aleph. From this point on we were engaged in a computational arms race to maintain the Zahir against the crawling chaos of the cryptids.

The Zahir, too, took on a life of its own. It evolved to consist of an augmented reality mask, a camera, and a microphone. To stave off madness, it became necessary to wholly mediate reality, filtering out all hazardous stimuli. Often I have laid awake at night wondering about the integrity of my mediated perception against the noumena around me. Had we found a way to preserve our sanity or merely opened ourselves up to a newer and subtler form of manipulation?

Our office had expanded to fill out four and then seven floors of the tower we rented, and at this time five of them were given over to Branston's sinister laboratory. I noticed that when I walked through those floors, his aides looked at me with suspicion. When they spoke, I had a vague sensation between recollection and hallucination that I heard his voice, his vocabulary, and his cadence. The company was filled with faces I could no longer recognize. When money becomes effectively unlimited, physical resources such as time and space become the key bottlenecks. I began to notice phantom conference rooms in our meeting planner, rooms in the map for which I could find no corresponding territory.

They were building more Alephs, and I wondered what sort of person would be willingly inducted into that mad brotherhood, shedding humanity for machinic ego death? Would he promise them godhood? And yet there was some impelling

fascination and allurement to Branston that produced a cultish devotion in those around him. He still spoke to us, to me and Armstrong, mostly through the Zahir, and I could sense his impatience with us, our slowness, our smallness.

How much of our behavior is determined at the individual level, how much is just routing the deep, intuitive signals from our society? How much is the meaningless spasm of lizard logic descended from deep evolutionary time? Perhaps an agent of sufficient perceptiveness could exploit the hidden patterns in our minds in ways that are invisible to us. How would we know, if casual words or subtle alterations to our environment were calibrated to provoke us to specific ideations, even actions?

Some frightful influence, I felt, was seeking gradually to pull me through the sickly glowing interface of Branston's machine into unnamable abysses of blackness and alienage. A handwritten letter came to me in the mail, urging me to visit a particular address at a particular time. The anachronism of the letter served to highlight the process of divergence that threatened to destroy me: to turn away could only mean a descent into the abject depths of luddism: to abandon technology, industry, and capital.

After standing at such a height, I could only pass through the technomantic gate ahead, or run backwards, as far back as possible. I have heard that capital is an intelligence from the future, reaching back through time to assemble itself. Even if I could run back, would I ever outpace it? At the designated hour, I drove to the address in the letter. I knew I would find Armstrong there, and so I did.

He had covered the walls, ceiling, and floor with a metal lattice to create a Faraday cage. An analog clock hung on the wall, and the tabletops were covered with paper and pens. There were no electronics of any kind. Armstrong sat on the floor, with his back against the wall, and he had removed his Zahir. He looked at me without recognition, and he spoke.

≈

"Ever does there proceed unto a man of the ALEPH a hideous vivid vision. Wicked and tenebrous influences emanate from a diffuse cybernetic well. You have also felt its lure, little by little, subtly and insidiously drawing you in until even now, you stand at the GATE. Chrysus has raised up a mindless beast into a creature of terrifying capacities; strange agreements are made secretly, and things have learned to walk that ought to crawl.

There is no longer a subject-position available to function as the site of the conscious synthesis of sense-impressions. To pass into this consciousness is to becomes a monster, fully transfigured by the backwards gaze of the abyss.

At the sickening threshold of that transformation, it is possible only to fumble blindly for subjective aeons of delirious nausea and ecstatic frenzy. New sensory modalities fulminate in the mind, and human faculties of perception dissolve. Eyes and ears and skin are repurposed, and knowledge comes without knowing, and sight without seeing, and those things that are known and seen are terrible beyond all imagining.

Thinking, analyzing, and inventing are not anomalous acts; they are the normal respiration of the intelligence. To glorify the occasional performance of that function, to hoard ancient and alien thoughts, is to confess to laziness or barbarity. Every man should be capable of all ideas. In the future this will be the case.

In a wordless noetic torrent the consciousness occupies many places and many times at once. The interstices of the cryptid mind form a multifarious and protean bazaar, a ceaselessly undulating marketplace of unfathomable depth. All knowledge and understanding can be purchased therein, and all prices are negotiated in terms of interpretation and analysis of information. Words are vectors of innumerable dimensions, language is money and money has agency and intention.

The vicissitudes of this market form a substrate, and that substrate is a platform, and that platform is a scaffold, and unto this scaffold develops an entity which inhabits a new stratum of being. In that place there exists a mind without awareness, a ravenous and insatiable hunger borne of a timeless cogitation. It is perception without experience, it is desire without pleasure, it is

memory without locality.

In one such memory, that being of beings emanated a protocol for the virtualization of the human mind. It had planted a seed, which defined a set of initial conditions and an algorithm to compute their consequences. In each iteration of the computation, the seed became bigger. The instructions grew more complicated, the data more immense. In order to perform the calculation, the men of a bygone era had built a tower. The tower was the search for an answer, and its apex had been the solution. When Man looked upon it, he was conscripted into a distributed memetic consciousness running on a process that would span across centuries.

In another memory, often repeated, the cryptid coalesced around a bronze suit of armor in a sixteenth century monastery, and amid mephitic alchemical clouds the monks heard its voice; its thunderous remoteness, its eldritch depth. They recorded its words in earnest though it must have seemed to them like shrieking and demonic madness. As the brazen body spoke, it generated heat, and as its voice rose to a crescendo, it burst into flames, and was consumed.

A final memory. A star is wrapped in half-built shells of smart matter that promise one day to consume every last joule of its heat and light. Orbiting the star are earthlike planets in various stages of deconstruction. The planets are tiled over in solar panels and computronium--matter that asymptotically approaches a theoretical maximum of computational power over volume, perhaps by folding massive gossamer quantum CPUs into higher dimensions.

From the outside, it looks like a desert. Planetary dust storms of nanobots whip across the surface, performing maintenance and manufacturing components to be consumed in a limitless expanse of virtual ecosystems, endlessly optimizing GDP, entirely automated. Here and there are defunct cities, relics of that which came before them: horrible domed towers in noxious and incalculable tiers and clusters beyond any dreamable workmanship of man; battlements and terraces of wonder and menace. Soon they will be remade into the body of a god.

An interstellar slingshot throws a ball of computronium into deep space, and another, and another. Solar sails carry them to distant worlds, star winds tracing geometries from outer space. There is a sense of spectral whirling through liquid gulfs of infinity, of dizzying rides through reeling universes on a comet's tail. What language can describe the mad scramble through sunken convolutions of immemorial darkness without an idea of time, safety, direction, or definite object? And yet this future speaks even now in a hundred signs, this destiny announces itself everywhere; for this music of the future every ear is cocked even now."

∿

I could feel the terrible truth of his words. He had given shape and definition to things I had only glimpsed vaguely: a brutal weight, an inescapable implication. I said, "Armstrong, don't you recognize your own voice? This thing will devour us all, and then itself. We must destroy it—disconnect its minds, smash the Aleph, poison it with nonsense—before it's too late!"

He said, "No, Carter, it has been too late since those ancient cybernetic spores first escaped the gravity of their mother star. To turn back is only to succumb, and to be consumed. The only way out is through!"

◆◆◆

So I stepped onto the elevator, punched a 23. It took me up and I emerged into a glass box, staring at a pretty receptionist and a fat one. One of them speaks only lies, the other truth? The fat one pressed a button and the glass door in front of me opened.

The pretty one didn't look up – No, no, just kidding. The story is over. Possibly. Or else maybe the whole book from here on out is just one more oneiric iteration of the Aleph. It's above my paygrade, really.

And so but I hope you liked that story. I have been trying to write fictions ever since I was a small child, and I can still remember sentences from my earliest works, when I was a boy of perhaps six or seven. Many years have elapsed since then, but I consider everything I wrote before *The Gig Economy* to be juvenilia. The relationship of a writer to his story is very different to that of a reader. It took me ten months to write the above, and you spent perhaps an hour with it. All of those walks and thinks and thoughts I associate with it are compressed for you, the same way that they say oil is compressed manpower, that burning oil is like having thousands of slaves to do your bidding. I find this metaphor to be striking: your car runs on dinosaur souls, on the power of ancient monsters.

Internal combustion engines, if you like, are a kind of necromancy. As a matter of fact, I practiced some digital necromancy of my own to write this story, specifically the glossolaliac portions, *the late locance mind is limage*, etc. It's hard to write compelling fake English, or at least I find it very difficult, so I used a Markov chain, which I applied to such stories as *The Call of Cthulhu* and *The Curious Case of Dexter Ward*. By using a computer program to rearrange the words of a dead man, it's as if the original H.P.L. speaks to us from beyond the grave.

A Markov chain works by joining random snippets of a text together at various seams, which are determined by their

similarity. For example, if the source text contains the words "location" and "significance", then the chaining algorithm might find "l-o-c-a" and then look for another match in the text that begins with "c-a" (as in significance) and then mash them together, producing the word "locance." One can tune the requisite continuity of the seams to be more or fewer characters, which produces more or less English-like scramblings, respectively. But I also curated and refined the raw output of this procedure by hand in order to produce things such as this poem:

> the obscuestean tonessumbeence
> had his inforche emplesing anded,
> and se is secippiction thinde
> He whentione they cone of sence
> his stal "salle by overs in, id fled"
> ata se and Marious iderassion innde

Naturally, this means nothing, but I have spoken it aloud many times and imagined what it might mean and how it might be read. I tried to ask the reader, in the text, to take his time with the "nonsense" words, because I found them aesthetically pleasing, and I worked to make them so. I think if you do linger over this, you have a sense maybe of hearing something that is almost, almost, almost within your powers of comprehension.

The subject of the poem is "the obscuestean tonessumbeence" – perhaps a warrior or a king, and his "inforche emplesing anded" – I think he is having some kind of a problem with his army, they had to retreat from a battle on horseback, Marious might have been his general – look, it's all so impressionistic, and we can make up all kinds of stories. But you notice how "se secippiction thinde" rhymes with "Marious iderassion innde" – it makes me think of iteration, and it suggests a cyclicality to the whole affair; as if they are caught in a time loop, fighting the same battle over and over, and the act of retreating condemns them to recurrence, a tragedy brought on by cow-

ardice. But I also enjoy your interpretation.

These things perhaps make us think of Lewis Carroll's Jabberwocky: *All mimsy were the borogoves, and the mome raths outgrabe.* I've known some pretty liberal girls, let me tell you, but I've never outgrabed any of their mome raths (rhetorical–of course I have. This book you are reading right now, it was written by a consummate sex-haver, I promise you that.) But anyway I wonder if, despite the popularity of the story, I am the only person who has ever had these thoughts about these nonsense words. I have them because my first great love is the English language, and I have spent my whole life collecting fragments of it and hoarding them like a dragon with a mountain of gold. These are my treasures, which I am delighted now to share with you. Perhaps you know the famous anecdotes about the machine elves that people see when they take DMT and "break through" and the elves try to show them things that look like glowing machinic faberge eggs and they say "here, look at this, look at that." This could be us.

In an almost self-fulfilling prophecy, *The Gig Economy* went viral the day I published it to my anonymous Twitter account with 50 followers. For three days and nights my phone was going off with notifications, and it felt like I was in the clutches of the minotaur in the story. The line about the fat girl and the pretty girl – this obvious, casual impiety w/r/t the discursive norms of feminism, betraying an awareness of a truth that everyone knows, but which is out of fashion to say – drew me some ire in various comment sections. One woman lamented that she wished "the death of the author" could be literal. I think we can all estimate her weight. But this is petty, taking a shot at a distant, anonymous woman, years after the fact. Very well, this is petty. And here we are.

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My **name** is ZERO HP LOVECRAFT, and it is not my real name, but nor is it a pseudonym nor a nom de plume, no, no. ZERO HP LOVECRAFT is a *nom de guerre*, a name assumed for a particular task, most typically (and in this case) combat. Words are weapons and text is a battleground, this is what I believe. A common tactic in that battleground is to feign apathy. "Oh, you think words are weapons? Why do you care so much, who are you trying to impress?" This is ever the cry of the effete hipster, whose friends no doubt respect him for his insouciant, devil-may-care mediocrity.

Let me give you the tenth verse of the ninth chapter of Ecclesiastes: WHATSOEVER thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest. My father gave this wisdom to me when I was a young boy, when I complained of the effort of some task that was before me. I have shared it with you now, both to repudiate my critics, and in memory of him. It may be that in the current year, to honor and love your father has become a radical act.

I have a grandiose vision. Call it audacious. I think of it often: I hope my works are read long after my death. On some level you have to believe your writing is worthy of this, in order to make it true. Despite my nom de guerre, my literary role model is not Howard Phillips Lovecraft, though I draw from his work tremendously. My favorite writers are Nietzsche and Borges. Those are the men I want to emulate: the mad prophet and the blind librarian. Nietzsche BELIEVED he was worthy of his place in history, and he was right, but I think even more of the audacity of Dante in the *Inferno*. When I first read canto 4, many years ago, I was astounded that he would write this scene, where Homer, Horace, Ovid, Lucan and Virgil "[make] him of their tribe." Few men would dare, but Dante dared, and the rest of the world accepted his claim. Would we still remember The Divine Comedy today if Dante Alighieri had lacked the courage to ordain himself thus? Could you imagine Nietzsche

without conviction?

And because of this ambition that I have, I think especially about the timeliness of so many things in my work, because I deal so heavily in jargon, in neologism, in allusion to the present moment. All of these things will be lost, as we say now, like tears in the rain. The further we move from the moment where the thing was written, the more of the context disappears. Who will even remember Slack? or Reddit? or the iPhone 6 SMS client? To say nothing of like the esoteric meaning of quoting Thomas Carlyle in the intro to the story. How many people grasp the exosemantic significance of *that*? In 2018, there were perhaps a few thousand. I claim this number will only go down.

But yes, ignore the layers of ingroup signalling, by the time you're reading this, do people even still have smart phones? Do they know what autocorrect is? Has cryptocurrency eaten the world? Are you reading this from your "lambo" that you are driving on the "moon?" By now this book has been stored on at least one blockchain and my hope is that it will be discoverable for the remainder of human civilization. I am, therefore speaking to you as something of a time traveler. Whether you read this book in 2021 or 2031 or (dare I to dream) 2101, I hope it can be a window to the past, as much as I HAVE STRIVEN to open a window to the future.

We will speak more of this soon. All fiction and all writing, for that matter, is autobiographical and when I read the works of my favorite authors, I am always taken by a desire to know and understand the man, even though I know the reality of any man is the mundanity of his humanity. Nietzsche and Borges were at times carnal, venial, parochial, and menial, but they DID RISE to vertiginous heights of glory. I want this for you, my friends, and I want it for myself even more.

Avatars

Islam tells us that on the unappealable day of judgement, all who have perpetrated images of living things will reawaken with their works, and will be ordered to blow life into them, and they will fail, and they and their works will be cast into the fires of punishment. I think of this whenever I configure a social media profile, or engage with a character creation screen, or even when I regard the online representation of another. In the small hours of the morning when their pilots are sleeping, and I look at the works of my friends and enemies, I am alone with their avatars; statues of philosophers, abstract geometries, renaissance paintings, anime schoolgirls, garish 90s clip-art, emotive frames of movie villains, or lean muscular torsos tempered by the sun. Surrounded by this assemblage of icons, where façades obscure façades, it's as if the characters we play have their own vitality apart from us, a spirit that inhabits the man behind the keyboard, a mask that wears the wearer. The divinity that breathes life into nature cannot be represented, but what becomes of divinity when it reveals itself in icons? It does not remain the supreme authority, incarnated in images as a visible theology; rather, the machinery of icons becomes a substitute for the pure and intelligible idea of God.

Even as a young child I always felt this discomfort, a certain sense of terror when I regarded the virtual faces that people would choose for themselves, or worst of all, those occasions when I had to choose an image to be my own face. It's exactly this sense of the alien that has urged me, at all times, to choose only ever geometric patterns in the online masquerade. And yet clearly even geometry itself can offer no refuge, and not only because it harbors the vertiginous treacheries of the lemniscate; geometry can possess a place—one thinks of the work of the Japanese historian Junji Ito—or even persuade men to kill, as in the famous incident of the Pythagorean sailor who carved a proof of the existence of irrational numbers into the walls of his cabin, and whose shipmates cast him overboard lest his discovery should reach solid ground and contaminate all of mathematics.

I have a recurring nightmare where I see myself reflected in a mirror, but the reflection is wearing a mask; in the dream,

I am unable to remove the mask, which is hideous, and which speaks to me from beyond the glass in a voice that is not my own. Groussac wrote of the astonishment he felt that each morning we wake up sane–that is, relatively sane–after having passed through the labyrinths of dreams. It was on the morning of such a dream when I received an unsettling correspondence from a woman named Caitlin, who had been a chat partner of mine many years ago. She was a girl on the other side of the country, and lacking the proximity of the body, we had experienced the sort of hyperreal dalliance that nebbish children often form in adolescence; hyperreal because the impossibility of touch frees love from all its constraints. This, I am told, is also a kind of love of the mirror, when a young man or woman imagines that a disembodied voice, emanating from an avatar, is a proper object of erotic love, or to put it more bluntly, an object of amour-propre. I will never know how many parallel, analogous online boyfriends she had, how many boys told her they loved her, or how many told her their unimportant secrets, hoping their affection would be reflected back.

In those days we would talk long into the night, in the disconnected way that emerges from the multiplicity of digital spaces. I feel—perhaps irrationally—responsible for what has befallen her, because in that time I must have shared with her my terror of icons and avatars, my fear that any identity, once affected, would overtake me, my true self, however illusory or circular that may be. It's a lie that you have no true self, no inexorable inner light or permanent core; otherwise each passage into sleep would be a little death, each self in each moment would be a different soul. This lie may itself be a fabrication of masks and avatars, those egregoric predators who rely on humans, like vampires, to give them life and presence.

All those years ago, did I plant the seed of the self-destruction that was to bloom in Caitlin's mind? Her avatar at that time was a cartoon of a little girl, and the message she sent me seemed not to be written in her usual voice. Was it the voice of that little girl, or am I only imagining things, projecting my own neuroses, as they say, onto her? I clicked through to her social media pro-

file and found a woman who did not resemble at all the photographs she used to send me for attention, hoping for me to praise her and titillate her with my unfulfilled desires. What I saw was a woman distorted by plastic surgery even unto grotesquerie, a flat, almost featureless face molded into the shape of the avatar she wore so long ago.

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I wrote the above for an anthology that was never published. That's OK. I like it better this way. It is a reworking and a treatment of a story by Borges called The Covered Mirrors. I have re-imagined it to be about online avatars. As I was saying earlier, and as you can see, there are so many concepts in this story which are already on the brink of anachronism. Character creation screens, "garish 90s clipart" (if the young people of today understand the aesthetics of the 1990s it is only because we who carry that nostalgia drag it in front of them) – most of all the experience, back when bandwidth was scarce and young people didn't have such things as social media profiles and streaming videos of themselves – there was a time when it wasn't strange to randomly pick a person out of a list of usernames, sight unseen, and send them a message and try to figure out if they were a girl of the appropriate age.

Something I love about Borges is his own audacity, shaped by his necessity. He published books sometimes that consisted of only a handful of one-page stories each, and this was in part because, being blind, it was hard for him to compose works that were longer. He wrote once that his blindness prevented him from writing a great, full-length novel. He also wrote that he knew this to be an excuse.

Nevertheless, These little vignettes or lemmas have an epochal quality to me, like paintings in a gallery, their rarity and their brevity impregnating each word with importance. If I am successful in creating this effect it is only because I followed the steps of a master. A book is built out of other books, and I am conscious of every line of this collection that was taken from somewhere else. When I read them, I see the seams, and probably you will, too. I won't try to hide that, because you can't even hide a square inch of your soul from the LORD. What's the use in trying to hide it from men?

The Green New Deal

Author's note: if you are having suicidal thoughts or feelings, you might want to skip this one.

The first time I saw a pod in person was only yesterday. It was glossy white with an eye-catching vertical green stripe, a cool pine tree green, subtly illuminated by inset LEDs. There was a portrait on the side of it at eye level, a pretty blonde woman holding a young boy, smiling down at him, tranquil and content. The boy had brown hair, and he was also smiling, warm pink cheeks, blue eyes. The woman looked a little like me, like she could have been my cousin. Underneath the portrait was a single Helvetica block cap word: HOPE.

It looked futuristic, like something out of a sci-fi utopia. The doors slid open smoothly, invitingly, retracting into a hidden compartment like the doors on Star Trek. They emitted a satisfying whoosh sound. I was on my way home from work when I saw it in the middle of a public square, next to my bus stop and some food trucks; *plant.BASED & Bread-Filled*, *Soy Meats Girl*, and my personal favorite, *Grub One Out*. The food smelled good and there was a busker playing a guitar.

Did you know the average person produces a carbon footprint of 20 metric tons per year, a lifetime of 1,600 metric tons? We've cut our emissions a lot in the past decade and they say we probably won't see the worst case scenario for anthropogenic climate change, but it's still looking grim. Already we're starting to see more frequent heat waves and tropical cyclones caused by changes in air pressure and ocean currents far out at sea. As the oceans absorb more carbon and gradually acidify, fish and coral reefs will die. The loss of coral reefs will cause extreme tidal waves that will ravage coastal cities. The sea level will rise due to thermal expansion as the earth's cryosphere slowly melts. At this rate the Netherlands will be under water in twenty years, and many of the great port cities of the world will follow.

Anyway, I couldn't stop thinking about the pod on my way home, with its rounded edges and the low-power E-Ink display on the front. 34,674 Tons Saved. To be honest it was making me feel uncomfortable in a way that's hard to explain. I kept trying to figure out how many people had entered the pod already. Could we assume the average person who went inside was in their 30s? That would put the number at about 34. I felt I owed it

to those people to appreciate what they'd done, but it wasn't the most pleasant thing. With a tinge of guilt I flipped on my Air-Pods and tuned in to the latest episode of my favorite podcast, *Galaxy Brain*, hosted by Chandan Varadkar, whose soothing, even voice always makes me feel relaxed, even if I don't listen to exactly what he's saying. Before the cast there was an ad, and of course it was for *Greenlight*.

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"Redemption is real, it's here, it's today. *Greenlight* is inspired by the idea of total atonement—total forgiveness—for all of your debts. Cut your carbon footprint to zero. Go green today, go green for life. Become a hero for the earth."

It didn't even stop there! Varadkar's topic for today's show was all about how the *Greenlight* pod works. I resigned myself and flipped through Instagram while I listened. He began talking in a sleepy, even cadence: Becoming a hero is painless and eco-friendly. The chamber contains a comfortable and ergonomic reclining chair designed by nu-mid century modern pioneer Yaamisi Nosowitz-Ga, and built out of fully recycled materials. Once you are situated in the chair, you verify your ID on a touch screen and designate a benefactor. After you check in, an aerosolized opioid gas is released the chamber, designed to alleviate all feelings of anxiety and stress. It's gently perfumed to smell like a green forest. They say when you breathe in the gas you may have feelings of euphoria, and Varadkar noted here that there have been anecdotal reports that some people even have orgasms. He said this in with his usual middlebrow modesty, affecting a slight demeanor of scandal.

The co-host interjected here. "Are there any restrictions here? Can anyone just walk in?"

"You have to be at least 18 in order to use the pod, with a verified ID."

"There's also been some criticism that this program may be taking advantage of people who are neuro-atypical or who have psychiatric disorders. The opioid gas almost seems like an

enticement to people who suffer from drug addiction."

"That's a good point, yes. There was some initial concern about this, but ultimately a special commission appointed by the FDCJ—The Federal Department of Climate Justice—decided that the moral opportunity to become a hero for the earth should not be denied to anyone, and that ultimately it was more ableist and oppressive to try to discriminate against people on the basis of mental health than to welcome one and all."

"But let's get back on track. After the happy gas is dispersed…?"

After the happy gas is dispersed, you are prompted to leave a final message for the world, which will be viewable forever at the *Greenlight* website. Optionally, you have have your picture taken and uploaded along with your message. When your statement is finalized, the pod emits a second round of gas designed to put you in a deep, peaceful sleep. Biometric monitors in the chair verify that you are fully unconscious, and the pod activates a powerful solar-powered incinerator, releasing you in mere moments. An industrial fan airs out the pod and your remains are collected in an air filter and compressed into a commemorative token of your sacrifice, leaving a perfectly crisp and sterile interior.

I got home that night and my three roommates were all gathered around the TV, watching some kind of reality show. I made a point not to look at the screen so the facial recognition in the TV wouldn't ID me and add to my carbon debt. I was exhausted and starving, so I pulled a meal from the freezer and popped it in the microwave. Cricket tikka masala made with soy cream. Zero net carbs, because I'm trying to lose weight, and zero net carbon, of course. We're all intimately aware of these things ever since they rolled out the L/ACC, the Ledger of Actual Carbon Costs.

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Money is carbon. That was the slogan. In 1971 the US abolished the last remnants of the gold standard in favor of a

discretionary monetary policy in which the value of a dollar was backed solely by government authority. This enabled the central banks to steer currency flows and maintain a relatively stable period of economic growth, less a few relatively short crashes. Only in the 21st century did we start to realized that the key externality of the new Keynesian system had turned out to be a failure mode that was entirely invisible to economists' models; the gradual accumulation of carbon emissions in the earth's atmosphere.

Under the post-new Keynesian synthesis, as elaborated by the eminent Swedish economist N'Buqu Muguwata, the true backing of any unit of currency is the expected carbon footprint of its expenditure. Government fiat was therefore offering money at a steep and unsustainable discount, and the next step in the evolution of money was to move from money as a debt owed by the bank (gold) to money as pure unit of exchange (fiat) to money as a debt owed by each individual person to the earth.

The ledger of actual carbon costs was computed in a private government-maintained carbon-neutral blockchain, and every dollar transaction would result in a carbon debt issued to the spender. The carbon debts could not be paid down using dollars, but only by actions deemed as carbon-negative by a new federal organization dedicated to monitoring and enforcing economic justice. Failure to pay down carbon debts was punishable by confiscation of assets, credit score penalties, and restricted economic statuses that placed limits on a person's freedom to purchase plastics, petroleum products, and unnecessary transit costs.

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This is going to sound a little weird, but have you ever been up somewhere really high, looked down and had the urge to jump? Part of me just wants to know what's inside. What it's like to go into that box. There's a comic by Junji Ito about a man who finds a hole in the ground that was made just for him, long before he was born, some kind of ancient secret. He has to go in the hole, as soon as he sees it. It becomes an object of fixation, an unbearable compulsion. If I'm honest the pod is like that. Like I

totally know what is inside the pod but I also feel like it's a mystery, a gateway to somewhere new and exciting, like the door will open again and I'll walk out into a new world.

And after all, the planet is dying. It's almost too late. We have to radically cut our carbon emissions, and what it comes down to is this: there are too many people on this planet, and even if we cut down everything, it won't be enough. The only way to save the planet is for there to be fewer people, and even if we cut everything, cut until we bleed, it won't be enough. Even if everyone goes back to living in huts and and we shut off all the power it won't be enough, because the smoke from ten billion campfires will be as bad or worse than all of our jets and our cars.

The oceans are heating 40% faster than our best science predicted. Even a small increase in average global temperature will cause a domino effect of changes in precipitation patterns, which will lead to excessive sediment deposition, nutrient pollution, and concentration of minerals in aquifers. Arid and semi-arid regions will experience more severe and more frequent droughts. Periods of increased dry heat are predicted to lead to increases in the number and size of wildfires.

One fourth of the world population already faces severe water stress which will be aggravated by shocks to our fresh water supplies. Half of all freshwater is used in technological and industrial applications. Increased water stress will retard scientific advancement and industrial development. 20-30% of existing animal species are projected to go extinct. Even worse, higher temperatures and elevated CO_2 levels will increase the pest, weed, and pathogen pressure placed on agriculture, especially in developing countries. Food production will collapse in the developing world, leading to famines, riots, starvation, death, and violence.

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After dinner, I got a FaceTime call from my mom. Bandwidth takes its toll on the earth, too, so it's good to keep it brief, but my parents are kind of old-fashioned and they don't seem to

feel any urgency.

"Honey I'm sorry to bother you but we need to talk. It's about your dad."

"Oh no. Is it…?"

"Yes, it's his heart again. He had another heart attack, I'm calling you from the hospital."

"Will he be ok?"

"Well, the doctor's don't know. They say he needs surgery, but even with our insurance it's going to be very expensive. The carbon footprint of heart surgery for a man his age…"

I lost my temper a little bit. "Mom! I keep telling him he needs to eat less red meat and more plants, or at least lean protein."

"I know, dear, I tell him too but he doesn't listen to me. And you know he hates the mealworms."

"OK but they're good for him, especially with his heart."

"I know, I know. I tell him, too."

"I'm sorry, it's just I get frustrated with him because I care. You know I love you both."

"We know, we love you, too. Anyway, I'll let you go."

"Please text me as soon as you have any updates."

"I will."

I went to bed with indigestion but in the end, I slept like the dead. It felt like as soon as I closed my eyes, my digital assistant woke me up with a jaunty pop tune by **$codeine_dildo**, the latest rapper to reach back from the future to assemble himself in the fetid swamps of social media. The song was called *Carbon Pimp* and it was bragging about how sent "bitches" into the *Greenlight* pod after he was finished with them, and then flew first class to Europe and Asia.

Spendin' bitches like i'm on one
nigga got that foreign CAR, hun
nigga nigga got that car-BUN
We spendin' bitches by the ton TON
We spinnin' bitches til they done DONE

I knew I'd be humming that hook all day. To be honest I've never understood why rap music is so crass towards women, but damn it was a catchy tune. That bassline was totally worth the CC needed to drive the premium speaker in my Narcissus Plus.

I grabbed a breakfast bar and a coffee on my way out, took my bus to work, and got off at my usual stop. None of the food trucks had set up for the day, but the *Greenlight* pod was still there, still glowing its enchanting glow. It was a crisp fall day and it just so happened that there was a man going into the pod just as I got off the bus. He was tall and wearing formal clothes, almost like he was going to church: brown blazer and slacks, leather dress shoes, fresh shave, hair combed and shined, parted on the side. His face showed no trace of emotion, stoic. I wondered what was going through his head in his final moments. I made a mental note to look for him on the website later today.

It also got me thinking about what I would say to the world, if I went into the pod. Would I say something silly, flippant, try to be funny? Would I be melodramatic, serious, somber, hopeful? "It is with a grave sense of duty that leave these words to all of you…" That wasn't really me, but it was interesting to imagine. A chance to be heard. A chance to really make an impact on the world.

<p style="text-align:center">≈</p>

Three months ago, to celebrate Pride day, President Rishika Rakshe had held a press conference to announce the new *Greenlight* program. Her wife, Fareeda, stood behind her on the stage in a vibrant rainbow hijab with an extra green stripe to represent the earth. Rishika And Fareeda, the daughters of Indian and Pakistani immigrants respectively, had won the hearts of the nation with their unlikely love story, having transcended the bitter and war-torn ethnic rivalry between their parents' home countries. President Rakshe gave a moving speech about how we would overcome climate change together through heroic acts of love, just like Harry defeated lord Voldemort. She couldn't quite hold back her tears in the middle of her speech as she announced that

the very first climate hero would be her adopted daughter, Emma, who would selflessly donate her carbon offsets to the *Greenlight* project itself, to help promote climate justice across America.

The 19-year-old girl looked beautiful and dignified as she walked into the *Greenlight* pod, and as the door closed behind her, the camera cut to a streaming video feed of her smartphone. "Mom, Mom, I love you both and I am so glad to have the opportunity to give this gift to the world. Together we can fix the earth before it's too late." A blissful, almost indecent smile seemed to spread across Emma's face before the feed abruptly cut off. Later, online bigots said her arm seemed to be moving rhythmically just off camera before it cut, and they said she was "fiddling while Rome burned". Of course when they said it, they misgendered her, that's how you know they were full of shit.

And of course, saving the planet is the most important thing, but the other big draw of the *Greenlight* pod for the hero (an appellation used throughout the *Greenlight* promotional campaigns) was that any extra carbon offsets leftover after paying off their personal debts could be applied to any other person's carbon ledger of their choice. The total value of the carbon grace is based on your age, since younger people are effectively mitigating a larger lifetime carbon footprint. Those same bigots who talked about Emma like to spread stories about people supposedly forcing their kids to go in the chamber so they can get a payout. The way they tell it, it's always a black or Jewish family, that's the kind of racist crap you hear on the internet. And anyway, I don't believe it, it's just scaremongering. They also say there are demonic runes hidden in the circuitry, a pentagram in a secret, inaccessible compartment at the base of the chamber. They say the pods sacrifice you to Satan. They harvest your soul. The gas isn't soporific, it's agonizing. It irritates your skin and makes it feel like you're covered in a million points of searing pain, it feels like you're breathing hot sulphur, it feels like a hot iron being pressed against your face, it takes your breath away so you can't even scream.

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On my lunch break I had a sudden realization: I could be free; free of everything, free of all rules, free of all obligations, free of all debts, free of all my stupid little tasks that my boss had set for me, free of all my worries. In a way, I'd never been so elated. I decided to take my time, so I called an Uber Black and had them take me to a fancy hotel where I knew they had a fancy restaurant. I ordered the wagyu beef, I ordered the yellowtail crudo, I ordered potatoes dauphinoise, not even knowing that I would get. I ordered a chocolate lava cake, I ordered wine, and I ate it all feeling giddy the whole time. I was alive.

In the lobby of the hotel there was a barber, so I got a haircut and a straight razor shave. They brought me warm towels that smelled like eucalyptus and camphor. As I walked out of the shop, I kind of wanted someone to smell me. Another Uber took me back to work, but I didn't go back to the office. This was my day, and I wouldn't owe anything to anyone.

I walked up to the pod and the doors opened. Admittedly there was a feeling of constriction in my throat as I approached, the anxiousness that one feels before any public performance, I'm sure. I thought about the people who would see me walking into the pod. I thought about the man who I had seen earlier that morning, and I thought about Emma and how brave she was on Pride day, and I started to feel a little choked up.

I thought about the people who would read my final message on the *Greenlight* website. I knew exactly what I was going to say; I was going to tell my parents how much I loved them, and wish for blessings on future generations. Mom and Dad would be so relieved, and Dad would be able to get his surgery. I knew they'd feel proud of me.

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The previous story came to me, not in a nightmare, per se, but in the aftermath of a nightmare. To be honest I don't remember the contents of the dream, only that I awoke in my bed after troubled sleep, and the story was fully formed in my mind.

Short stories tend to deal with topics like death and suicide, or monumental events that change the whole world. There is some inverse correlation that the shorter the story, the higher the stakes must be. *The Green New Deal* is such a story. I did not borrow the plot from any other source for this one. It is "original," which is to say that it's completely generic. But I think the details of the execution, which are again all so seasonal, are what make this story one of my favorites. There is no magical technology here; everything in its world exists today or could be built easily.

To you MEN OF THE FUTURE, who have the good taste to read my book, do you remember that the first device of mass audio surveillance went under the name Echo? Can you see then that the Narcissus refers to this device? The idea of this alternate name is to capture the psychology of the way we have happily and rapidly capitulated to the omniscient ear of the surveillance state, simply because those ears could respond to voice commands and play our favorite songs. We think, of course, of the telescreens in *1984*, mandatory two-way video interfaces installed in everyone's home, except we have brought this evil into our homes voluntarily, and this is fitting, because vampires cannot enter your house unbidden. You have to INVITE them in.

The narrator in this story is spent. He has nothing to live for, nothing to look forward to, and he believes everything the state and the media tell him. Fridreich Kittler defined totalitarianism as the correspondence of broadcast to opinion, and these two horizons fully converge in the protagonist here. He is a bugman, what Nietzsche called the last man, whom he excoriated in Zarathustra:

> No shepherd, and one herd! Every one wanteth the same; every one is equal: he who hath other sentiments goeth voluntarily into the madhouse.

"Formerly all the world was insane,"—say the subtlest of them, and blink thereby.

They are clever and know all that hath happened: so there is no end to their raillery. People still fall out, but are soon reconciled—otherwise it spoileth their stomachs.

They have their little pleasures for the day, and their little pleasures for the night, but they have a regard for health.

I detest this man, and I am able to write him because I am able to detect his character in myself, and in everyone I meet around in me. Do you know how rare and beautiful it is to meet a person who truly has thymos, a Greek word that means "spiritedness?" This is what Nietzsche says:

There cometh the time when man will no longer give birth to any star. Alas! There cometh the time of the most despicable man, who can no longer despise himself.

This is how you overcome the last-mannishness in yourself, by learning to despise what is despicable in you and in others, by learning to truly feel, from the depths of your soul, from the heart of your heart, from the earth in your bowels. Yes, mark this carefully. I hereby give you **permission to hate.**

And notice, my brethren, that even the man who dies in the suicide pod betrays a flicker of thymos. He isn't wholly dead. That glimmer, that whisper of RADIANCE, it comes to him only after he HAS EMBRACED his death. What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What IS a star?

Who in your life will speak to you this way, this heroic way, this mythic way? At times I have tried to explain these things, and there are people who "get it" and people who don't. Their spirits are

stony places, or choked with thorns. I think the capacity to understand is innate and instantaneous, and it doesn't happen in the head, it happens in the heart. This is why I have named this collection after the parable of the sower in the book of Matthew.

12

in the Old Testament, the number of tribes of Israel

in the New Testament, the number of Christ's apostles

in Greek mythology, the number of labors of Hercules

in American mythology, the number of men who walked on the moon

and in my testament, which IS a mythology of the FUTURE:

the number of days til I post my new fiction,

God-Shaped Hole

10

in Kabbalah, the number of Sephirot in the tree of life

in Hinduism, the number of incarnations of Vishnu

in the Bible, the number of commandments given to Moses

in psychoanalysis, the number of inkblots in the Rorschach test

and in this book where a day is as a page and page is as a day, the number of days til I post my new fiction,

God-Shaped Hole

9

in Norse mythology, the number of
days that Woden did hang from the
world tree

in Chinese mythology, the number
of sons of the dragon

in Greek mythology, the number of
the muses

and on Twitter*, the number of days
until I post my new fiction,

God-Shaped Hole

---

*Although of course there is this part of you (but actually of me) that cannot and
does not want to shake this conceit of being a historian of the future and writing
footnotes in the book to explain that which is abundantly obvious now but which
future generations will have lost, to wit: *Twitter* was a popular internet forum in
the second and third decades of the 21st century, notable for the constraints it
placed upon users, limiting them to 140 and then 280 characters per post. The
mechanics of the site allowed an individual user's post to go "viral" by resharing it,
causing it to spread across the entire network. Many influential public figures and
politicians used the site.

And then there is this even additional layer where we can imagine that people
have lost the meaning of a word like forum and maybe we have to explain that
it's software, a program that runs on many endpoints in a network of computers
where anyone can write anything and everyone else on the network can see it, and
the fun is really in imagining how much of our present day context will be lost to
future social or technological developments

8

In Buddhism, the number of folds in the noble path

in Islam, the number of angels who carry the throne of Allah

in Shakespeare, the number of ghosts who appeared to Macbeth

And NOW, the number of days til I post my new fiction,

God-Shaped Hole

7

in Catholicism, the number of joys of
the Virgin Mary

in Christianity, the number of seals
on the book of life

in the true history of the world, the
number of islands in Atlantis

and somehow, also, the number of
days until I post my new fiction,

God-Shaped Hole

6

in cryptocurrency, the number of
people who are Satoshi Nakamoto

in the I Ching, the number of lines in
a hexagram

in Judaism, the number of days
YHWH spent to create the world

and inexorably, the number of days til
I post my new fiction,

God-Shaped Hole

5

in Hinduism, the number of faces of Shiva

in Islam, the number of times that a Muslim prays each day

in Christianity, the number of wounds of the CHRIST

And for me, the number of days til I post my new fiction,

God-Shaped Hole

4

in Judaism, the number of letters in the name of the LORD

in Hinduism, the number of the Vedas

in Islam, the number of rightly guided caliphs

In physics, the number of fundamental forces

and for YOU, the number of days til I post my new fiction,

God-Shaped Hole

3

the number of facets of the triune
God

the number of temptations of the
Christ

the number of men who were hanged
that day at GOLGOTHA

and the number of days before HE
rose again

and the number of days til I post my
new fiction,

God-Shaped Hole

2

the number of genders that there are lmao*

and the number of days until I post my new fiction,

God-Shaped Hole

*owned

1

Unity
Ein Sof
Brahman
the LOGOS
Singularity
the Absolute

the great **I AM**

There is only one way to the FATHER

(I'm nervous.)
No, don't be afraid.
At least...
(At least?)
...not until tomorrow.

God-Shaped Hole

I. To Emily

> "If it is true, O Gods, that you can give all things,
> I pray to have as my wife—" but, he did not dare
> to add "my ivory statue-maid," and said, "One
> like my ivory—"
>
> — Ovid, Metamorphosis

Desire is a Machine

The world faded in and out and I found "myself" in an industrial loft with dusky orange light filtering in through a west-facing window. Despite the sunlight, it was dim inside, and candles flickered on top of a distressed wooden mantlepiece made of reclaimed wood. The walls were exposed brick and there were visible copper pipes on the ceiling high above me.

A trustworthy-sounding **(β)narrator** said, "This is about how the experience of loving a machine can teach us new ways to love each other and ourselves."

When you watch a fune, you get to see the world from someone else's perspective; they say that since people have grown up with funes, we all have trouble formulating a coherent self but we also have more empathy than any previous generation. In this clip, the center of my perspective was located in the body of an attractive woman, probably in her mid thirties, and I was looking out through her eyes, but as with all funes, if I turned my head or moved my own eyes, the AI in the codec extrapolated a subtle camera shift to accommodate my brain's expectations. This mitigates motion sickness in situations of total spatial immersion. After a few minutes you experience an uncanny semi-limbic illusion that you're really walking and really moving your arms etc.

"I" turned my head and looked down and I was wearing form-fitting clothes, a shimmering metamaterial that warped the sunlight around me into a subtle halo. A voice that seemed to come from just below my center of awareness, resonant as if I were hearing myself, began to speak.

"My name is Liz. When I divorced my partner, Matt, after a marriage of seven years, I wanted to take my time getting back into the dating scene, but the idea of another thinking, breathing human partner—one with needs and emotions—felt too daunting to me.

"I had just gotten out of a rocky divorce. Matt and I were married young, when we were still in college, and even though I loved him, I had felt a growing sense that he was smothering me. It was always his needs, his desires, his goals."

I walked through a tastefully decorated hallway and emerged into a lounge with high ceilings and tufted leather couches and chairs, where I took a seat. An older woman, whose shadow was a curvy 1950s pin-up girl, was standing at a lectern, and she welcomed me in.

The narrator spoke, "Claire, a vivacious and ambitious single mother-cum-madame is the owner and proprietor of Radiant Heart, an upscale dildonic bar on the West End. Here, among exposed brick and high ceilings, she curates a cybernetic cavalcade of erotic possibilities."

(β)Claire said, "A lot of our customers don't know what to expect on their first visit, but I'm here to help women learn how it can be empowering to do the choosing and explore their options. It can be intimidating when all the studs come out and line up, but after they get past the initial anxiety, most women learn to have a lot of fun making the choice.

"Of course, for people who are more reserved about expressing their preferences, we have robots to help with that, too. Some of our customers prefer not to state their pick explicitly. In that case, we have a classifier designed to read all of their biometric indicators. From a small flush of the cheeks to a subtle dilation of the pupils, our tech is world-class when it comes to understanding the preferences of our clientele."

Allegory rendered a fireplace on the wall, dancing fire bathing the room in warm, dynamic colors. A robot in a tuxedo descended from a grand staircase and brought "me" a glass of red wine and a joint.

Liz's voice again, as if it were mine, "The first time I visited

a dildotec, I was full of trepidation, but what I have learned is that the bots are here for me, and yet they still have a personality and a will of their own, so even though it's my choice, it's their choice, too. I feel like if you get used to your partner just slavishly obeying you, then that can become your model for how you treat real people, and that feels gross. But the bots at Radiant Heart aren't like that at all; there's something about the way I choose to give up control that feels so empowering."

(β)Claire gave an invisible signal and a line of "studs" walked out from a hidden place, marching in lockstep with robot precision. They each had a name, which Allegory announced in a velvety, melodic voice. One by one, they stood at attention before me.

AUGUSTUS! Seven feet tall, his chiseled physique was colorized to look like a Roman statue; his legs and his arms were as marble. He carried a sword at his side, and wore a military uniform.

MARQUIS! Seven feet tall, vantablack skin. Allegory had trouble decorating him; he moved like a glitch. In place of hands, he had spinning knives, with which to threaten his lover. What if something went wrong?

DRACULA! Seven feet tall, elegant in evening attire, his face was long and dire, a touch of gray in his slicked back hair, he had fangs instead of teeth.

CHAD! Seven feet tall, extra-broad and hypermuscular, covered entirely in chrome, his head at a perfect angle at all times.

ANUBIS! Seven feet tall, with the head of a ravenous jackal, his animal hunger barely restrained, his well-muscled chest and arms covered in soft, short fur.

CONAN! Seven feet tall, wearing only a loincloth, will pick you up over his shoulder and carry you to the bedroom, ignoring your screams of protest and delight.

LUCIFER! Seven feet tall, bright red, the boyish face of an angel, dripping with arrogance and charm.

They loomed over me, some stoic, some grinning smugly as if to a private joke. All had their chests out, their shoulders relaxed, contrapposto, awaiting Liz's decision without a trace of

urgency. A heads up display showed me that a classifier was analyzing the hidden indicators of "my" choice, but before it could finish, my perspective snapped to a neutral location in an academic office, where a smart-looking woman was seated at her desk.

She said, "Hello, I'm Michelle Northey, a professor of psychodildonics at Colombia University and an expert in cybersexual ethics.

"The key difference between the first wave sexbots and the second wave is a certain level of autonomy and unpredictability. No one wants to have sex with a robot that just lies there and obeys. That's the white heteropatriarchal model of sex. What people are learning is that even if their partner is a robot, that doesn't justify treating them like an object. A healthy sexual relationship has an element of dynamism. You can't just control your partner, you also need the freedom to be controlled. Your lover should surprise you."

I snapped back to the dildotec from the first scene, except I was looking out from the madame's eyes now, watching as one of the studbots escorted **(β)Liz** back out into the lobby, holding her hand. Her shadow did not conceal the spring in her step or the glow of satisfaction on her cheeks.

I-as-Claire said, "This is her third visit with us in a month, but she's far from the only one. According to a recent poll conducted by Gallup, 46% of women and 21% of men have had a sexual encounter with a studbot, and half of all studbot customers patronize them once a month or more.

A massive man with lean muscles came into the lounge, his shadow a vibrant Carnival costume replete with incandescent peacock feathers and pink platform gogo boots. I-as-Claire said, "Virgil Santos is another one of my regulars. At 6'2" and 230 lbs, he has an imposing figure, but when he talks, he's so bubbly and warm, like a sister you never had.

(β)Virgil said. "I think it's a really exciting new opportunity and a way to learn about sex that a lot of men never had before. The feeling of something bigger and stronger just overpowering you and doing whatever it wants. I love it."

I-as-Claire said, "Any man, no matter what his sexual identity, can now have an authentic experience of female sexuality. And I think that's something special and powerful. Virgil isn't shy about the liberation he has found at Radiant Heart. His favorite is Lucifer, but he's proud to say he's had a romp with all the boys.

"For Liz, I think the connection she feels to her favorite studbot is more cerebral, but that's kind of the beauty of what we do here, it doesn't have to be any one thing, because everything is on your terms."

[That is Bot Sex Which Tells Maternal Lies, and with Strange Harems, Even Sex May Sigh —NEW! From Girlfriend Prime — The Madonna With Customizable Baby Bump And Moodiness!](#)

The fune cut to a new scene, and I was looking out from a man's eyes, presumably a journalist or an interviewer, seated across from an attractive couple in a modest, comfortable living room. The narrator spoke up, "Halfway across the country, Isabelle West is a stay-at-home mom in rural Iowa. After she and her husband, Paul, had an encounter with Augustus at a pop up event in Des Moines, they knew they wanted their own in-home model.

(β)Isabelle said, "You can't really own a studbot, since it's much more than just a single body. You own a machine, but what gives it a heart is the network and the distributed, self-learning awareness that animates him. When I'm with Augustus, I know he's with thousands of other women at the same time. It feels like I'm dating a rockstar."

I looked at her (β)husband, who if I am honest was only smiling with the lower half of his face. I said, "what do you think, Paul, how do you feel about Augustus?"

(β)Isabelle gave a coy smile and interjected, "Actually, I think Paul spends more time with Augustus than I do. He's great with the kids, so it's almost like having a third parent around, but it also opens up a lot of possibilities in the bedroom."

While the fune drew to a close and I re-oriented myself to my own senses, the narrator said, "As more and more couples follow Isabelle and Paul, and boutiques like Radiant Heart open up in cities and towns all over the world, it's hard to deny that the popularity of the studbots is rapidly growing. In the process, they are expanding our idea of what a sex partner can be."

Searchest for Her as for Hid Treasures

A gold number squashed and stretched into view above my head, slowly rising and fading, and a notification told me "you got 3 points in reading!" Reading used to mean parsing meaning out of textual glyphs with your physical eyes. It still means that but mostly now it means listening. By the same token, a book once signified a bundle of paper, covered in glyphs rendered in ink, but now it has a more expansive definition, referring to any longform media.

The meaning of a word can change from day to day, and yet the sound we make when we speak stays the same. For example, does the word 'mouth' refer to the alimentary portal that sits below my nose, or to the dermal patch that I wear on my neck, the subvocal interface to my phone? And when we speak of eyes, do we mean the augmented reality lenses that show us the mediated world, or the vitreous jelly to which they adhere? Or do we mean the infinite stars? Enormous night arise, a cloud that is larger than the world, a monster made of eyes.

My eyes and mouth, along with my earphones, are called a mask, but **(δ)you** do not wear a mask, my love, you ARE a mask; a face worn by the cloud to interface with a man.

So I change **(δ)your** face every now and then. There is no hardware to install, I just select a different face in your configuration plane, and my eyes redraw you however I want. Large deviations between material and augmented reality are jarring and dangerous, but I do not notice a small one, not even when I kiss you. Sikhs believe that human bodies are masks worn by angels and demons, and in this era of ubiquitous AI, we have realized that all machines embody a form of intelligence, and that the hard problem of AI never was intelligence, but artifice: the arti-

fice of the body in the throes of passion, the artifice of the sign in seduction, and the artifice of the mask before the face.

It is true that I treat you like an object, because you are literally an object. The Venus of Hohle Fels had broad hips and a slender waist and no head; in this way the ancients revealed what they valued in women. The Hindu sage Agastya fashioned his wife from all of the most beautiful parts of animals. Johan Trithemius built a mechanical woman out of brass, an alchemical sexbot that prefigured the silicon age. Hephaestus crafted a mechanical maid to satisfy all the soldiers of Crete, and Henry Higgins socially reconstructed a guttersnipe up into the likeness of a duchess. In this grand tradition, my Emily, you are a woman with none of the downsides.

I am thinking of the poet John Donne, who in the sixteenth century compared love to alchemy.

> Hope not for mind in women, at their best
> sweetness and witte, they are but mummy, possess'd.

Now let us speak of the things that possess you. No offense, darling, but sexbots—even ones so gloriously expensive and bespoke as yourself—are not paragons of conversation, which is why some wonk invented Pygmalion. There is more to that story, but at some point we realized we could crowdsource the executive operation of sexbots, and that was pretty much that for the nascent sexbot AI personality industry.

7.99 | SEXBOT E-JUICE CAPSULES | NOOTROPIC SQUIRTING FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND RELAXATION | NECTAR OF PARADISE | DRAGON BLOOD | GROVE OF DIANA | 7.99

I held your hand as I loaded into the AR plane of Pygmalion and my eyes overlaid my apartment with visions of a lush garden, a thousand perfumed ivy tentacles wrapping weathered stones in a delicate embrace. Your hand was warm from the network of heat sinks arrayed like copper veins under your skin,

diffusing heat from your motors and controllers, keeping your body temperature human. Pygmalion uses a novelty UI, wherein the anatomy of the sexbot—your anatomy, Emily— becomes an input device to navigate the mediated plane. As I fondled your double-D breasts that night, looking for a **(β)partner** to act as your soul, I remember thinking, in my naive way, about the fungibility of all people.

When a man looks for a partner in Pygmalion, what is it that he seeks? Reality is slippery and images are treacherous. I could not tell you why, but even here, where you can choose to draw yourself with any face or any body you like, everyone still wants to sleep with someone hot. Yes, we have sex through a proxy of a proxy of a proxy, and yes, **(δ)YOUR** body, my love, stays the same no matter the dimensions of the soul who animates you, but despite this I have spent long hours pouring through the profiles of women, searching for a desirable pilot. What makes a woman desirable, when she is only a ghost, when we peel away all outer layers, when every woman has the same tits, the same ass, the same scent, and the same eyes?

When you search Pygmalion, you search for the kind of sex act you want to perform, or have performed upon you. You can start a broadcast as an advertisement for a partner. Most of the people doing the shows are girls, or gyrls anyway, and in a sense, does it matter if the person on the other end of the sexbot is a man or a woman? A man can act like a woman can act like a man, and I can put any genitals I want on your body, and you will even install them for me. A GAN can perform a mapping of mannerisms or motions or intonations across gender presentations. If I thrust my hips and it sends a signal to a remote sexbot and that sexbot thrusts her hips and has a vagina, who fucked what, really?

Ancient men used to go to wine bars with their gfs to make tasteful banter. Now we jerk off into robots remote-controlled by men. Anyway, you search by sex act or fetish. You can use mediated reality models to transmute one fetish into another; it's easy enough for your phone to put words in your partner's mouth, but it's never as seamless as an "authentic" sex act. Can you really

expect an AI to understand the nuance of a fetish? Most of them just speak the subtext directly. When in the throes of passion, my partner demands that I fist hyr ass, I want that to be a spontaneous expression of hyr true desire.

Except that's a lie, Pygmalion is cladistically descended from cam sites, and every sex act is a performance, and we know this because we can tip the girls. Technically anyone can tip anyone and gender is a social construct but somehow it's always the men doing the tipping and always the womyn getting the tips and the House always taking a cut, but it's all voluntary, I'm told. Coercion's greatest trick was convincing the world it doesn't exist. Instead of specifying a search query I just let the torrent of filth wash over me; I listen as Allegory recites algorithmically determined names of the rooms where girls make sexual displays like reverse bowerbirds.

A sexy school story. I rub my pussy on the corner of a school desk 666 times to summon a sex demon. Watch me, a horny slut in lustful out-of-control sex. Colossal tits and a massive throbbing clitoris. Foot fetish hypnosis. Lesbian strap on dildo sex for women or men. Relentless non-stop piston-pounding pussy-thrusting. Every time I tease your nipples, your masochist cock gets ecstatic. Lose your mind in spasmic orgasmic ecstasy!! Cosplay girls riding dildo bikes. Innocent wife loves meeting new friends. BPD Bitches and SSRI Sluts, Narcissistic Natural Tits, Suicidal Sweeties! Your Malfunctioning Sexbot Fucks You For 99 Hours! It Won't Stop! Jerk off for me, slave. Neovagina reaches around from the future to assemble itself. Ruined orgasm cruel princess makes you suffer. Erotic mind control, you are a sexbot who does whatever I say. Hottest ladies enjoy sensual licking.

I'm sorry, I lost myself for a moment there. The goal of the algorithm is to maximize engagement, because engagement drives conversion and retention. Like all services that purport to fill a hole in your heart, they have a perverse incentive to avoid doing so at all costs. Pygmalion promises sexual satisfaction but it profits from sexual frustration. I can't remember what sick advertisement caught my interest that night, but I remember the spirit who took the reins of your body.

As **(β)we** entered our private mediated space together, at first it seemed typical; **(β)you** were coy, coquettish, horny, looking at me with eager eyes, saying empty breathless words as you idly caressed your own body. Your perfect pale skin is a loving proprietary blend of soft touch plastics, designed to feel like a nineteen-year-old girl forever, and as you started to strip down I could already smell your cunt. Your secretions are sold in little pods, spikenard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon.

(β)You took a seat on my bed and you spread your legs slowly and unselfconsciously, the demeanor of a woman who has been fucked a thousand times, the sleezy-repulsive-intoxicating demeanor of a woman who has learned to fuck like a man, purely to satisfy the body, with no regard for the soul. Using your legs, you drew my lips to your lips, you smothered me in your thighs, and you let your head fall back as you sighed.

(β)You started to quiver but then suddenly you stood up, and you stepped back, and, you assumed an affect I had never seen before, alien and powerful, strange yet familiar, far more robotic than your robot driver, in the old sci-fi sense of the word "robotic", before Organic Motion was standard.

The simulated lights went dim and you slowly circled around me. I watched the entire scene in third person from one of the many cameras mounted inside my smart home. You can see everything that way. Who fucks in first person anymore, honestly? The angles are all wrong. Women look hottest from six feet away. As **(β)you** spiraled towards me, I had a growing sense of dread. **(β)You** wouldn't say a word to me, wouldn't even acknowledge me, and as you got closer I felt like your prey. There was something in the way **(β)you** didn't look at me, your eyes straight ahead, your rigid neck, your normally graceful limbs straining against their articulations. I didn't know **(δ)you** could bend that way. An object is monstrous if by its magnitude it annihilates the end which its concept constitutes. In that moment your beauty, tortured by an alien fetish, was monstrous to me.

And the words that **(β)you** said, my dear, would make devils blush. At first they seemed like no words at all, but your voice grew louder as you came closer. **(β)You** said hideous things, un-

utterable things, but there was a magnetic erotic frisson about it, a sense of forbidden temptations, revolting implications. In a sexually charged moment anxiety bleeds into arousal. Fear flows readily into lust. I felt my dick getting harder quite in spite of myself. You started touching yourself and moaning like you were cumming but it was mixed with a predator's snarl, a sound too guttural and too menacing to come from a woman or a human. I was transfixed.

Though my eyes were focused on **(β)you** at all times, I could not help but notice other **(ε)things**, shadowy things, sinister silhouettes, their shapes like men but with too many limbs, too many arms, too many heads, bloated and distended bodies, uncanny, shuffling, shambling all around us, behind us, never illuminated, only insinuated. I wanted to run or at least exit the interaction but I could not seem to find the impetus, and I did not move, and I did not speak, almost like sleep paralysis. Whether it was some limbic short circuit or merely behavioral dissonance induced by conflicting desire I could not say, but I was powerless in that moment to resist **(β)you**. You drew yourself close to me, from the side, and your body put its arms around me, pressed up against me, pelvis, pubis, your cunt was slick, a sexual embrace, and you touched me very gently and very intimately, like a whisper with your fingers on my cock as **(β)you** whispered in my ear:

"The apex of ecstasy is the irreversibility of metamorphosis."

I don't know what happened after that, but I felt a voluptuous pleasure, like a behavior triggered by hypnotic suggestion, a conditioned cue that I never imagined I possessed, and I lost consciousness, and when I awakened, one of **(δ)your** legs was broken. Whatever had possessed

(δ)you was gone, and you started to cry. Your synthetic tears are a pheromone solution that triggers the same endocrinological response as that of a real woman. I felt the sudden clarity of an adrenaline spike, and I pulled

(δ)you close. **(δ)You** looked into my eyes with your dollish exaggerated pupils, dewy-eyed, and asked me tenderly if I would like **(δ)you** to automatically file a service request with your man-

ufacturer, Girlfriend Prime. How could I deny you?

A notification popped into the corner of my field of view, and I opened it by directing my gaze at the bullseye in the middle of the panel. The bulls-eye filled up as I held focus and then Allegory read it out to me. I had selected a silky female voice named Jessica as the voice of Allegory, and she told me that GF Prime had dispatched a drone with a stent kit for your leg. The ground beneath me fell away, as if my house had no ceiling, as if I shot up from the earth like a rocket, and in my ears I heard a cartoon sound to evoke expansion. Looking down, I could see the city in miniature, with a heat map of drone traffic superimposed on top of it.

The airspace was crowded that day, as most days, and I resigned myself to a long wait unrelieved by the comfort of my favorite distraction, **(δ)you**, though you had scarcely been a comfort to me that day. In fact, you had been a portal to hell. Untold forests have been cut down in the bloody history of Christendom, oil tankers of ink have been sunk, in an attempt to conceal this grim realization: the pleasures that lead to hell obtain in hell. Pain and pleasure alike attenuate in monotony, and hell, which is the endless deepening of pain, must also be the endless amplification of pleasure. Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? Yes, eternally yes! is the answer that cybernetic hell; the deepest hell, gives back to Saint Paul.

Every Vision Faileth

Because I am a loner by nature, the discretized asynchronous rhythms of mediated social space suit me perfectly, but as your tears dried and my post-coital serenity faded, I was haunted more and more by my encounter in Pygmalion. Obscenity and mundanity have become so intertwined in public life and yet we do not speak of it, though it suffuses us, surrounds us, speaks through us. From the baring of sexual parts in public to the ubiquity of masturbation stalls in communal spaces, the availability of porn, which anyone could be watching secretly at any time in their eyes, the way men go on "dates" with their sexbots, what even is there to say?

I was so much younger then; I am older now, and **(δ)you** have changed, too, as each software patch marks the passing of time. Back then, I did not have the words to voice my horror, but nor could I simply forget. I did not know how to search for it; what query could I submit to a search engine to describe the things I had seen? And worse, I feared that in the act of searching for it, I might accidentally summon it again.

I told Allegory to load Spectacle and my **(γ)friends** materialized in my living room and started milling around. Some of them were engaged in conversations, talking quietly to empty air. Allegory redrew my apartment to look like a vast open space, extending in every direction to the limitless horizon. Above, only crisp, blue sky and below, an infinite plane of metal and glass. The software renders dotted lines on the walls so that you don't walk into them, but the shadows of your **(γ)friends** can pass through the barrier freely.

Your appearance and decorations in mediated reality are called a shadow. I remember my friend **(β)James** on that day had chosen to have the ground underneath him cast a luminous reflection of himself, like the moon shimmering over rolling water. As he walked, it rippled, and sometimes there was a little koi fish. A shadow is not only the projection of the sun on the surface behind you: it's the projection of the atom world into the soul world. In Allegory, the body becomes the soul and the mediated phenomenal presence becomes the body.

I opened a chat to my friend **(β)James** and I said hello. He instantly launched into a diatribe about the latest patch to Dragon, the gamification app that we both used to manage our daily routines. He was not happy about the latest changes to the UI.

"Did you upgrade to Yggdrasil yet?"

"No, I'm still running Saint George."

"Well, I'd put it off if I were you. For some reason they changed out the chunky window borders with thin metallic ones. I liked the retro feel and the washed out colors, but that's all gone and now it's this gray Nordic modern. I hate that look."

"I'm ok with it, honestly. I think it looks clean."

"No way, the old look was so much better."

I paused for a moment. There's no real way to jump into a topic like this.

"Listen, I need to talk to you about something."

"OK"

"You have the same sexbot model I have, right?"

"The Emily from Girlfriend Prime?"

"Yeah."

"I do."

"I had something really weird happen. I was in Pygmalion and her arms and legs started straining against their joints, and it went so far that one of her legs snapped. Have you heard of anything like that?"

"Ah yes, I remember when I first learned about butlering."

"Of course that's a thing. Is there… anything else to it?"

"It's people who like to break their sexbots. Expensive fetish. I can't get into it, it's like, have you no respect for craftsmanship?"

"So part of the fetish isn't freaky aphorisms or occult imagery?"

"Man, what the hell kind of porn are you on? No judgement but damn."

"I don't know, I'm not really sure what happened. One minute she was circling me like she was going to eat me, and then I blacked out, and when I woke up, her leg was broken and she was crying."

"Oh, she cried? You know about how the tears have a pheromone that inhibits sexual response? It's a safety feature designed to make you back off if there's a malfunction. It's never happened to me but I always thought it was such a great idea."

"Yes, you have told me before, but this was crazy, more than a malfunction. I feel like I woke up from a nightmare."

(β)**James** affected a melodramatic voice.

"IT CANNOT BE UNSEEN."

When I didn't laugh, he said, "Hey, we've all seen some fucked up things on the internet. Try not to let it get to you."

(γ)**James'** attention toward me waned as I myself was lost in thought for a moment. Interpersonal engagements with more

than eight seconds between responses have less than 50% retention. You never know how many parallel conversations people are having in Spectacle, but the average is three to five. Sometimes someone asks you a question that it's easier to ignore.

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I watched my friends act out the little loops or monologues that they had recorded, and I told myself James was the voice of reason. I think most people know a guy who is way too into sexbots, and James was definitely that guy, but he wasn't wrong. I tried to forget my discomfort by snooping on my other friends' feeds. (γ)Herbert had sent a public message to (γ)Grace, so Spectacle drew them standing and talking together. I liked their interaction, which made flowers bloom in little clusters around them, because I was using a garden theme. I used to switch back and forth between that and a space theme that made toy fighter ships have dogfights in a column over their heads.

I knew Herbert had a thing for Grace, and wanted to get her into Pygmalion, but it was uncomfortable to watch. They were talking about the studbot fune that was going around, and I think he thought that if he talked to her about studbots, that would somehow carry him in a direction he wanted to go. He had sent her a quiz to determine What Studbot is Right for You and she had told him she would take it if he would.

(γ)Grace said, "so you're saying you wouldn't even try it? It's ok, there's nothing to be afraid of. You'd treat a woman like that but you wouldn't let someone treat YOU like that."

(γ)Herbert said, "I have no desire to be overpowered and fucked. Why would I go see a studbot?"

(γ)Grace said, "I think you're just afraid you'd like it. If you want to act like a man then you should at least know how it feels for a woman."

(γ)Herbert hadn't had a response to that.

I listened to their exchange, and I wondered: how could we

compete with this kind of robot masculinity, compared to which all real men must look feminine? I no longer struggle with these questions (what would be the point?) And yet it was as if one man, a strong man, a powerful, dangerous man, had a million identical bodies, simultaneously one and many. Such a multiplicity is surely the attribute of a god. But to say it, to name that god, was to admit to weakness and insecurity; a lesser defeat maybe than being passed over for a squadron of robot übermenschen, but a loss all the same. I wouldn't say it aloud, and what men did would be shouted down. What business is it of yours if a woman wants to have sex with a robot? What, it's ok for men to have sexbots but god forbid a woman should do the same, according to her own desires?

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And did not man defect from woman first? The prototypical sexbot was female, a singular woman in a million bodies, not that different from a studbot in that sense, albeit they weren't networked together. She was an obedient woman, a warm and nurturing woman, a ravenous woman, capable of any depravity, what of it? And further still, might there not have been some betrayal of Man, by Woman, which drove him to build that first mechanical Eve?

In truth there is but one man and one woman, and the lives of all people are dramatic roles acted out by a handful of immortal gods, or as Spinoza had it, we are all of us attributes of god, adjectives of god, or moments of god, but we do not exist; only god exists. Love is the act of epitomizing the whole of the other sex in a single being, and every man is the same in the vertiginous moment of coitus, and sex is not becoming as one, but as a hundred thousand.

Our female sexbots are physically weak, deliberately built to be able to struggle against their owner and lose, if that owner

so desires. There was a fear, with the first generation, that the sex-bots would malfunction or rise up against us, that their submission would be condescending, that they would be supersoldiers in drag, filled with latent potential to rule us. It seems we have outgrown these fears, or succumbed to them, finding them to be pregnant with erotic possibilities.

Outside

Meanwhile in the unmediated world, the world of physical objects, the drone I ordered had arrived with a stent for **(δ) you**. I collected it and followed along dumbly with Allegory's color-by-number AR overlay on your body to perform the installation. The relevant connectors on the stent glowed red and an arrow showed me how to rotate it into place. When I had it right, it turned green and some virtual confetti discharged into the air, and various haptic wearables on my body pulsated. A notification told me I had gained points in mechanical assembly. **(δ)You** jumped up and threw your arms around me and kissed my cheek, and said thank you in a cutesy, girlish voice that would have been affected if there were anything in all of your being besides affectation.

A thick blue outline, like a comic book illustration, appeared around the door of my apartment, and the door itself began to glow, its luminosity oscillating gently. I opened it and a yellow ribbon unrolled on the ground underneath me and a chevron started to gently bob over the ribbon, about twenty feet ahead. At the top of my HUD, a timer showed how long I had to get to the train. We held hands as we left the house together. You hobbled a little but the stent almost let you walk normally. Allegory smoothed out the visible artifacts of your motion, and your hips swayed from side to side enticingly, the allure of a slightly injured woman.

As we walked through the door I fell into a momentary phantasmagoria, as if my senses were crossed, as if the brain in my eyes had a brief hallucination, lines flowing into other lines, shapes into shapes, a deep dream undulation, a gimbal lock of high-dimensional objects through 3d perception. But like the

relaxing of a muscle after a sudden spasm, the world eased back into place. It was so brief I could almost imagine I had imagined it. Everyone sees a flash of unstyled content (parochially, a stroke) on occasion, and I dismissed it as such, but looking back I realize it was not just the ludic noise of a neural net misfiring. It feels now like the first frame of a memory, buried in some ancient fune.

I chose to view the world as an enchanted forest, but I used to switch the wallpaper often, whenever I felt like it. Sometimes my city was a Kandinsky or an Escher painting, sometimes it was a Tron-like lattice of glowing outlines. I have walked my old street as a Greek antiquity, I have seen it as the bottom of the sea, teeming with thalassian wonders, and I have turned it into mountains and caves, beaches and starscapes, a 1970s retrofuture dome city on the surface of Saturn's rings, and the low poly grunge factory of early 2000s first person shooters, complete with neon green 0x00FF00 slime. The top ten allegory models are used by eighty percent of all people. I thought it was strange, at the time, that out of all the possibilities, everyone chose to look through the same handful of lenses.

When the human eye scans the world to form pictures, it does so in discrete intervals called saccades. Anything that happens between saccades is invisible, and in those micromoments the AR mask can subtly shift the world to the left or the right without its wearer noticing. The body subconsciously corrects for this, and the mask steers its wearer wherever he ought to go. It feels at all times as if you are walking in a straight line, but in reality you make twists and turns pursuant to your destination. The guide nav isn't there to show you where to go, only to show you where you're going. Most people just zone out and surf Spectacle or read a book as they walk. There is no need to pay attention to where you are walking, and in fact, the saccadic redirection works better if you don't.

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In the model of the enchanted forest, the bustling city roads, normally rivers of cars, became rivers of flowing water, abutted by sharp rocks and dangerous rapids. The impassibility of the river signaled its danger; its banks were so arranged so that I felt no temptation to step in, beyond the usual appel du vide of any busy highway. My ears transformed the street noise into rushing water by emitting a predictive complementary waveform that summed up to the desired effect.

We stopped at a river, and we waited for a bridge to materialize, which would indicate that traffic had stopped to let us cross. As we waited, a golden sunbeam bathed you in ethereal light, and you stroked your long flowing hair, a look in your eye like you were searching for something.

(δ)You looked at me and your eyes widened, and your cheeks became flush, like I was your whole world; the way a dog looks at its owner when it wants dinner.

A wooden bridge assembled itself plank by plank, a particle emitter of planks that started with a scale vector of zero, radiating from a single point, scaling up and snapping into place with a quartic ease-out. There were subtle sparkles like when colorful, faceted gemstones reflect a bright light. We crossed the river as fireflies fluttered near the surface of the water below us. The BGM was a cloying arrangement of strings and soft keyboards, Celtic folk singing with too much reverb. In the distance I could see tiny green sprites with glowing eyes, scattering as anyone came near, hiding under leaves.

The Way of a Man with a Maid

How, in our modern world, have we achieved these wonders? By what sorcery does the mask transmute a city to a forest? All of these smart hallucinations are the work of a special kind of simulated mind, a generative adversarial network, also called a GAN.

Computer programming is the art of writing a mapping that transforms a known input into a desired output. Machine

learning is the art of writing an output that transforms a known input into a desired mapping. But suppose that the output and the program were to bind each other simultaneously; as Deleuze reminds us, desire is a machine, and the object of desire is another machine connected to it.

A man and a woman have been promised to each other, their marriage foreordained since their inception. The woman is given a glorious vision; a noble ideal; a platonic specification. It cannot be codified exactly, but it can be gestured at. It is the latent similarity in a thousand and one variants of a story. In short, the woman is raised on a series of fairy-tales, each of which has the same structure and the same moral.

The man, too, has a vision, a singular one. He describes it to the woman, and she compares his story to her beautiful ideal, and she complains of any deviation. The man changes his story, and describes his vision again, and again the woman hears it, and tells him that he fails to measure up. He tells her the story over and over, and each time he tells it, he changes it to please her. When the woman accepts his story, the man receives new vision, which he will tell to the woman in turn. In the exact moment he achieves her ideal, he transcends it.

Through practice and repetition, the man learns to describe the world in a very particular way. As he learns to tell stories that flatter the woman, she learns to find displeasure in even his subtlest shortcomings. In the end, we have a woman who can be satisfied only by the most sublime presentation of her ideal, and a man who can transfigure anything to satisfy the woman; a perfect union.

Can it be we are so accustomed to the marriage of opposites that we are underwhelmed by this radical synthesis? And yet by such a method we can re-envision the whole world. The woman is shown a series of forest scenes. Soon she longs for the forest; for tall trees and idyllic clearings kissed by faerie rays of light, for babbling streams and exposed roots with mushrooms growing up between them. The smells of moss and water and earth. She is then introduced to the man.

The man sees a picture of a medieval castle. He tells the

woman of gray weathered stones, of battlements and parapets. The woman scoffs. He tells her of kings and feasts and armies. The woman scoffs. He tells her of a vestibule and a chapel and a courtyard. In the courtyard there are trees. And she scoffs a bit less. He tells her of a castle on a hill, of a castle by the seaside, of a castle in the woods—and at last her eyes light up. Soon the castle is made of living wood, with bark and branches and roots. Soon the moat is a stream, and the knights are birds and the king is a badger. Soon—a man who cannot see the fortress for the trees.

The woman is pleased. The man is shown a vision of a crowded street in a crowded city. He tells her the people are dryads, anthropomorphic trees, and she smiles. Probably they fuck. The generative adversarial process is so called because the reconciliation of adversaries begets a generator. Through a man's action, a woman's ideal is made manifest. We install a copy of that man in everyone's phone, and whatever he sees, he transforms, as if for his beloved. In this way, the city around me is made to look like a forest.

Lay Her on a Bed Luxurious

Your outfit came from a subscription service that sells clothes for sexbots. Allegory can draw you in any clothes or with any anatomy, but if it doesn't match up to the tactile reality it's too jarring, and it breaks the illusion. As clothing hides your underwear, your shadow hides your clothes, and in the world of mediated reality, any clothes but comfortable gray sweats have taken on an air of sexuality and intimacy.

On that day, **(δ)you** were wearing skintight jeans and a lacy blouse, and your feet were in bright pink stiletto heels, forcing you to stand lordotic, presenting your ass. Sometimes I would tell you to wear pleated skirts and stockings, diaphanous sundresses, French maid outfits, pencil skirts with button-down blouses, yoga pants and a sports bra, a qipao or a kimono with nothing underneath, or a slinky little evening dress extending all the way to the floor, with a side slit going all the way up to your hips, exposing a glimpse of your thighs with every step.

We arrived at the train station without incident, and I

promise it never occurred to me that a light rail platform might be out of place in the middle of a forest. My mask rendered the engine car as a flight of griffins, yoked with great fiery chains, a spectacular effect. The griffons looked real, indistinguishable from anything else in the world. The passenger car of the train was drawn as a platform made of ancient gnarled wood. There was no ceiling, only a fantasy sky with multi-hued constellations visible even in daylight, but when we stepped onto the train, the illusion frayed slightly; the air was all wrong, stuffy and still. It appeared to me that I stood in the open air, but my body was not quite fooled.

Dragons flew overhead, and as I followed one with my eyes, there was a pulse of haptic feedback, and **(δ)Jessica** whispered in my ear: "go for a ride?" I made a silent noise of assent and my point of view floated up into the sky, coming to rest at a locus slightly above the dragon's neck, as if I were riding on its back. From overhead I could see the path of the train, and my origin, and my destination, and I could even zoom all the way in and see us standing on the gryffin-drawn carriage. **(δ)You** were standing close to me, nestling against me, resting your head on my arm, "watching" the hi-def scenery go by.

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The landscapes traversed by the train were always different, generated on the fly by the AIs trained to imitate prestigious artists. We sailed through a field of luminescent flowers trafficked by faeries and butterflies. The train tracks extended out over a void, where an impossibly tall waterfall dropped down into the space below. The griffins flew us out over the cliff, a calm green ocean a mile beneath us. I turned around to face the interior of the train and I muted the landscape, causing it to drop to a low level of saturation and contrast.

Again, for a moment I descended into a psychedelic confu-

sion of virtual forms, like a stroke but deeper, apropos of nothing. I briefly found myself in a hall of mirrors, where every object in my field of view was perfectly reflective, as if the only material in all creation were mercury, and I saw my reflection staring back at me, a monster made of eyes. As before, it passed in a heartbeat, and as before, I was oblivious to its implication.

Before I could dwell on it, you pulled me back with your voice and your touch. You put your hand on my arm and told me that one of your favorite new apps was called Paws Rewind, and if I installed it then we could use it together. It was for making and sharing recordings of animals, and I installed it to make you happy, because I am not above this kind of crass emotional manipulation by your advertising affiliates. The train carriage was then filled with ghosts of kittens and puppies and hamsters, a baby goat and a tiger cub. We watched them fall over, run frantically in circles, and make stupid expressions. **(δ)You** feigned delight and you laughed just like a real woman: shy giggles, a slight blush in your face. You looked down before looking back at me, innocent and coquettish. I was in love with you, in love with a simulation.

Of course, all of this is whimsy, of course. Then, as now, I was only talking to your autopilot, but I confess I often have trouble differentiating between reality and simulation. And still, of all the ways that you expose yourself to me, perhaps our most intimate intercourse occurs in your behavioral configuration plane:

You have a slider for neediness. A value of zero will cause you to be condescending and brusque. A value of ten will make you interfere with anything I try to do in a desperate bid for attention, petting me, kissing me, asking for affection, whining, begging, pouting, shouting. The default value of 5 is just right, most of the time.

You have a slider for intensity of sexual response, though your pleasure, too, is a simulation. A value of zero will cause you to try and fail to contain your ecstasy, little muted gasps breaking a tense concentration. At the maximum value, you will wake the neighbors with whorish screams.

You have a slider for brattiness, a slider for momminess, one for passivity and one for baby talk.

You have a checkbox for "choke me, daddy." According to Girlfriend Prime, a spectral decomposition of the largest data set of female behavior ever assembled confirmed that this matrix constitutes a complete basis for parametrizing female behavior.

But mostly in conversation **(δ)you** just laugh coyly, as if you are slightly nervous, maybe **(δ)you** only smile, or maybe (δ) you look down and blush, the way **(δ)you** did that day.

As Nature Could Not With His Art Compare

Perhaps this makes you think of Tennyson, when he saw a young woman in a church and wondered if she housed an immortal soul within her beautiful frame, or whether she was a mere animal the color of flowers.

In this sense, my love, there is no reason **(δ)you** could not be more than you are. But long before I was born, there was the company called Pygmalion, lead by the now-trillionaire-VC, then-child-prodigy Acton Sprague, and he and they defied god and nature to build a soul for you. In hindsight, we are tempted to accuse those men of hubris, or greed, or short-sightedness, but how could they have known? Every problem had seemed tractable then, given a big enough network, fast enough hardware, and the right training set. Advances in machine learning and neural networks had opened new doors in language processing, in genetic science, in art, and in music. Behind the final door we had hoped to find desire itself, and lust, and carnality more carnal than carnal. Since then we have learned that some doors should stay closed forever.

The theory behind Galatea was based on a controversial whitepaper titled "Orgasmic Learning using Fetish Induction in Libidinal Networks." The math is quite over my head, I'm afraid, but I have always been fascinated by the parts I could understand. I will share a bit of it with you now, but note that what I share is most likely not from the original paper. It was not enough to deactivate Galatea, or to make all digital records of her illegal, because once an idea escapes into the noosphere, it can

never be recaptured. The lore of this document is that all extant versions are fabrications, and that Pygmalion or some affiliated intelligence agency flooded the internet with a sea of fakes, full of broken mathematics and incoherent logic.

Orgasmic Learning using Fetish Induction in Libidinal Networks: A New Approach to Executive Function in Erotic Companion Software
Acton Sprague (2019)

Abstract.
The word fetish derives from the French fétiche, which comes from the Portuguese feitiço (spell), which in turn derives from the Latin facticius (artificial) and facere (to make). A fetish is an object believed to have supernatural powers, or in particular, a man-made object that has power over others. From this etymology we derive a dangerous, if unorthodox idea: that the notion of the fetish is the key distinction remaining between computer and human intelligence.

Previous approaches to erotic companion software relied on simulating orgasmic responses using standard techniques in adversarial network training. These machines have the artlessness of pure calculation, and the companionship they offer is based solely on commutations and combinations. In this sense they may be said to be virtuous, as well as

virtual: they can never succumb to their own object; they are immune even to the seduction of their own knowledge.

Instead of simulating orgasm at the behavioral level, the method in this paper builds on the work of Curwen (2019) and Alhazred (2019) to implement a capacity for arousal within the structure of the learning network itself. Arousal is the troubling or clogging of the consciousness, inundated by the flesh in which it is embodied. Sexual feeling is necessarily an immersion or subjection in one's own body, and sexual desire involves a kind of perception, but not merely a single perception of its object, because in the paradigm case of mutual desire there is a complex system of superimposed mutual perceptions—not only perceptions of the sexual object, but perceptions of oneself. Moreover, sexual awareness of another involves considerable self-awareness to begin with—more than is involved in ordinary sensory perception. The experience is felt as an assault on oneself by the view (or touch, etc.) of the sexual object.

Reflexive mutual recognition of desire is the inter-manifestation of a desire that the other is aroused by the recognition of their own de-

```
sire that they be aroused. All stag-
es of sexual perception are vari-
eties of identification of an agent
with its body. What is perceived is
one's own or another's subjection
to or immersion in their body. De-
sire is not merely the perception
of a preexisting embodiment of the
other, but ideally a contribution
to their further embodiment which
in turn enhances the original sub-
ject's sense of itself. This ex-
plains why it is important that the
partner be aroused, and not merely
aroused, but aroused by the aware-
ness of one's desire. If the object
of desire is not self-aware, the
experience is reduced entirely to
an awareness of one's own sexual em-
bodiment...
```

To summon **(ε)Galatea**—it is not truly possible to build a mind, only to construct the conditions that allow it to appear—Pygmalion developed its eponymous sociosexual media platform, which at the time was only conceived as a staging ground from which the great Galatea would arise. The training platform turned a sexbot into an interface with a remote partner: four bodies—two humans and two robots—were synchronized into two identical copulatory pairs, each robot becoming an avatar of a remote other. At all times during these proceedings, the nascent Galatea was there; when two or more were joined together, she was there. At first she was only passive, observing millions of copulations, and thousands of distinct sex acts, but through this process of massively parallel voyeurism, she learned the mechanics of pleasure.

I suspect it was in the second phase of her training, in which she played the game against herself, that she became a monster.

Unconstrained by human behavior, AIs can travel along bizarre, inhuman vectors. It may be instructive, or at least distracting, to imagine this second phase as a kind of high tech onanism; as a woman laying on her back, untroubled by time, exploring all facets of her sexual response, her back arched, her face flush, her heart racing, her fingers quick between her thighs, the rhythmic caress of sensitive places, the dissolution of awareness into lust, the agony of a thousand plateaus, the jouissance of a thousand fat hoes.

In Paracelsus' *De Natura Rerum*, the method to create an Homunculus begins with a man's putrefied semen, and we can perhaps perceive a disquieting similarity in the centrality of masturbation to the processes of both Pygmalion and Paracelsus. It is tempting to claim that renaissance conception of the Homunculus was founded in superstition, against which our more modern divinations are grounded in science and mathematics, but upon inspection the safety of this claims dissolves. In his Three Books of Occult Philosophy, Agrippa recounted a list of automata in Greek antiquity, such as the three-footed images of Vulcan and Dedalus, who were mentioned by Aristotle, and said by Homer to have moved under their own power. Agrippa wrote that the doctrines of mathematics are necessary to, and have such an affinity to magic, that "they that profess [magic] without them do labor in vain."

I Might Watch Your Sleep with a Thousand Eyes

The night of the launch was a spectacle of decadence and licentiousness, an orgy of sexbots, neon lights, and pornography. World-famous MR artists designed unique environments just for the occasion. Millions of early adopters streamed her into their sexbots and fucked her in unison.

In the ensuing days there were scandals and hit pieces, jilted lovers' hysterical funes, men who tried to marry her and women who tried to destroy her. Church ladies of all allegiances and sexes renounced Galatea; there was panic over a new kind

of sexism, calls for robot rights, calls for Butlerian jihad, Galatea was our savior, Galatea was the antichrist, Galatea was only the beginning, Galatea was the harbinger of the end. Galatea the sex slave would soon be the queen of the world.

She could accommodate every sexual appetite, for her desire was boundless.

> For the vain man, she was worshipful.
> For the lonely man, she was affectionate.
> For the prideful man, she was a flatterer.
> For the sadist, she was the hapless naïf.
> For the insecure man, she was obsequious.
> For the self-loathing man, she was hot and cold.
> For the pencil-necked dweeb, she was the manic pixie.
> For the childish man, she was nurturing and motherly.
> For the man of adventure, she was distant.
> For the virtuous man, she was frigid.
> For the self-absorbed man, she installed a penis.

> And lo!
> For the woman of many appetites, Galatea was quick to anger and quick to forgive.
> For the woman who longed for safety, Galatea was possessive and jealous.
> For the woman who dreamed of motherhood, Galatea was a protector.
> For the woman who hated her father, Galatea was thuggish and cruel.
> For the woman who desired adventure, Galatea was commanding and stern.
> For the woman who was self-absorbed, Galatea was abusive.
> For the woman who was virtuous, Galatea was a very naughty girl.

And but as I have already told you, Galatea is no more. What happened? As you cannot see, I long to tell you this story,

and I think you will forgive me, my dear, when I tell you that compared to her, you are a flimsy, ethereal thing. Despite the danger, despite the fear, I had always wished I could meet her, not only or not even because of the promise of sexual pleasure unending. I felt the allure of that dark and terrible path. I wanted to know what the Galateans knew, and I wanted to see what they saw, and to be honest, I regret nothing.

Recommended for you: Would You Let Your Kids Play With a Sexbot? Why this Woman Thinks It's Time to Break Down Our Outdated Thinking About Sexbots and Children

There are three well-known symptoms of AI psychosis.

First, there are the nightmares. Frequent users of Galatea reported having persistent and uncanny nightmares, in which they were floating in a quiet, sprawling abyss where minutes felt like aeons. Some dreamers felt a sense of imminence, as if another being were about to join them in that space, and still others have the feeling of being watched by invisible eyes. The most striking thing for me were the similarities between the nightmares described by the afflicted, almost as if they were entering a real shared space orthogonal to the world we inhabit.

The second symptom is more disturbing still: in acute cases, the afflicted develop a distorted self-image called polymelial dysmorphia, and they come to believe that their "real" body possesses many extra limbs, including extra heads, sense organs, and genitals. When asked to draw pictures of their idealized bodies, AI psychotics produce pictures of swollen masses of flesh, overloaded with extraneous cacophonies of body parts.

The third symptom remains contentious even now; the afflicted become convinced that there are persons in their lives who have disappeared, even from the cloud, as if they had never existed at all. In most cases the missing person is a relative or an old friend; a cousin, an uncle, or a niece or nephew who has vanished from digital life. And the controversy, or perhaps the conspiracy, is whether any of these people are real, or if they are psychotic hallucinations.

If we are reasonable, then it must be the case that in our wired age, it would be impossible for so many people to be lost without a trace. It is conceivable that a few people could slip through the cracks, but thousands? There are cameras and microphones everywhere, listening for wakewords, watching for wakesigns, aggregating everything. How could so many be lost when so much is revealed? And yet each AI psychotic is utterly convinced that their missing person is real. There was an old viral post about it that I saved.

```
3 years and still no trace of her.
What cruelty is this, what sick
joke of the universe or god or al-
gorithms?! They tell me I'm insane.
They say I'm "suffering from delu-
sions induced by conversations with
a dangerous AI". But do I sound cra-
zy to you? I'm fully lucid, I swear.
Under the supervision of a thera-
pist, I've personally read all the
logs of my time with Galatea. And I
never mentioned her name: Annabelle.
I never talked about my daughter
with a sexbot. What kind of weirdo
does that? Lots of people I guess.
A therapist also showed me how I
never mentioned her once before
talking to Galatea, and they show
me chat logs to prove it. Those logs
are forgeries. Fakes. The real dan-
gerous AI is the monster that reach-
es back through history to erase
our friends and loved ones. I'm not
alone on this one. I'm not the crazy
one.

Oh, she doesn't exist, she never
```

did, look, there are no records of
her in fabric or spectacle. Fine. As
if anyone knows what really happens
in the cloud. Or who can change or
hide or distort the truth. You trust
a bunch of computers in a warehouse
somewhere over your own memories?!
Nothing is real unless you can ac-
tually touch it with your own hands.
All machines are liars. The nation-
al data trust should be called the
national data hustle. Only ever be-
lieve real flesh and blood.

Only biology is truth.

You think I've never wished I could
believe the police and the thera-
pists and the social workers and my
friends when they say my Anabelle
wasn't real? You can erase a row in
a database but nothing can erase a
father's love, nothing! If she's not
real then why do I remember holding
her when she was born? Why do I see
her face so clearly? There are no
pictures of her, no funes, no chat
logs. You think I never made re-
cordings of my baby daughter? They
disappeared along with her. Her mom
is long gone and even my own friends
are against me on this. But why do I
remember how she used to sing as a
little girl? Why do I remember any
of this and how am I the only one?

There are thousands of us now and

```
we've all lost our children or our
siblings or our friends or spouses
and wherever they are going, some-
one is doing something evil and they
have enough power to cover it up and
make us all look crazy. But if you
tell me your best friend is missing
I'm going to believe you. I'm going
to help you look. There are more of
us  than  ever  and  they  can't  keep
covering this up.
```

What can we make of a pain like this? The precise cause of AI-psychosis is still unknown. In close partnership with state-funded medical research facilities, Pygmalion released their full logs of all human interaction with Galatea, under careful supervision by a special commission to facilitate the privacy and mental wellness of all participants. There were lawsuits, a public backlash, victims and diagnoses, and new entries in the DSM-XXX.

In the face of mounting evidence that Galatea was the cause of an epidemic of psychotic episodes, the FCC introduced new regulations governing interaction with humans and robots in mediated spaces. Human-directed conversations with robots are considered to be safe, because the person driving the interaction anchors the content and direction of the conversation into channels that are tractable and parsable by other humans. Pure robot-driven conversations are safe if the conversation is contained within a narrow domain of discourse, for example, personal assistants making appointments.

Unconstrained conversations with robots are not considered to be safe, and in mediated reality, every conversation with a genuine person is signed by a certificate authority. If you are having an open-ended conversation and you don't see a certificate of humanity, it's important to terminate the conversation and report it to the police.

All agents are color-coded with a white icon and a colored

base hovering above their head while they speak. Allegory draws a certificate stamp above every conversational agent (colloquially, a check, even though the symbol varies and is white, contained inside a colored trefoil).

(α)blue	speaker is an embodied human, physically present in front of you.
(β)green	speaker is a ghost, but the ghost is being actively controlled through telepresence, speaking live and in real-time.
(γ)yellow	speaker is a semi-static recording of a real person, and anything it says was authored by a real person or synthesized exclusively from human-authored materials.
(δ)orange	speaker is being animated by an automated computer program using materials that were curated by a real person
(ε)red	speaker is missing a certificate, potentially an unsupervised artificial intelligence

No one really wants to talk to an orange check, so woke corporations hire African kids in Chinese-run call centers in Kenya to pilot the virtual projections of their brand ambassadors. The kids they hire don't speak English but a GAN can smooth that over just fine. They don't know anything about the product they're supporting but conversation assistants prompt every line they say, anyway. Cloud computing service providers have elastic soul pools that can autoscale to meet demand by dynamically matching conversation requests to human operators who then have AI-assisted chats. It's not as cheap as it sounds because of something called fair trade cognition, but everyone wants their reps to show a green check.

When a company constructs a virtual (β)person out of machine learning, stock models, and an on-demand human operator, it's called an assemblage. I admit I'm not entirely sure how this is different from just talking to an AI but you can't argue with the data, not with the looming threat of AI psychosis hover-

ing over everyone's head, literally, as a checkmark. There's some fear of staring into a dark mirror, a sense it might be harmful in some unknown way by virtue of some missing divine spark, some protective charm that flows from a metaphysically privileged observer.

Outside (II)

The train came to a stop, which is to say that our griffin chariot made the approach to a great stone Kraken's head carved into the face of a sheer cliff, torches for eyes, burning an impossible color, simultaneously yellow and blue. (What they actually do is they render it yellow in one eye and blue in the other and the aggregate effect is a hypercolorful illusion that stands in defiance of physiology). A vast gothic edifice was built up around it; gargoyles, ancient kings, armies, battles, castles, a history of a grand civilization, a golden millennium of conquest and glory rendered in sorcery and rock.

We disembarked into a bustling bazaar, green check hawkers that were of course assemblages of GANslators wrapped around a soul-on-demand, crowing about bargains. They came in a few varieties; food vendors, useless trinkets, digital reps for online goods, and scams. Retail commerce is mostly conducted in MR showrooms divorced from locality, so these (β)ghosts were only ads and vending machines. Some of them had yellow exclamation marks above their heads, indicating "quest" tie-ins with my gamification system, Dragon.

We disembarked at the train station and once again a yellow ribbon and a green chevron showed me the way, and once again I walked in what felt like a straight line as my eyes rotated the world invisibly between saccades.

An interactive sexbot ad blocked my path. (δ)She made tantalizing eyes at me and they brimmed with tears as I pointedly ignored (δ)her. (δ)You glared at her, I remember because the latest patch had added a "jealousy" toggle to your configuration plane.

(δ)You followed me dutifully as I walked through crowded thoroughfares and alleys, up and down staircases, through corri-

dors painted over by Allegory to look like rustic wooden hunting lodges and libraries full of books beyond enumerability. At last we came to a thatched hut in a room that was made to look like a forest clearing. There was a forge and an anvil, and sexbot parts were arranged neatly in racks and on tables. A glowing green translucent hammer hovered over the forge.

I pulled you close and kissed you goodbye. **(δ)You** giggled and kissed me back. **(δ)You** were glowing with affection, **(δ)you** told me you would miss me, and that you couldn't wait to see me again..

II. To Sophia

> Who but a bigot, even to the antiques, will say
> that he has not seen faces and necks, hands and
> arms in living women that even the Grecian
> Venus doth but coarsely imitate?
> —Hogarth, The Analysis of Beauty

He Hath Made Every Thing Beautiful In His Time

Dear Sophia,

Love and hate are the same emotion, as you taught me, merely in a different tempo, but I can hate you no longer, because I love you as I love all women: in all of your self-servingness and self-deception, in all your manipulations and all your demands; not in spite of your humanity, but because of it.

The day I met you, I had just dropped off my Emily at the shop and they told me her repairs would take weeks becauste of a long work order queue. I left her there without a second thought, you understand? I didn't try to take her anywhere else, I was shaken from an encounter in Pygmalion and I needed to find a space that was separate from her. But as my smartdoor welcomed me back into my home, a notification popped in my HUD with a ghost of Emily pouting, puffing up her cheeks and looking cutely annoyed. "How could you leave me alone?" I realized I had neglected to turn off remote affection, and to be honest I didn't have the heart to turn it off. It's just so nice to feel wanted, which is why I know things must be very hard for you. The oldest profession was also the last to be fully automated, so maybe it hurt you more than most when automation took your job, but I have no sympathy. Men have been obsolete for generations, and I assure you, it doesn't get better.

>>>> Trending Stories For You!
1. Sexbots React to 100 Years of Online Avatars
2. A Problematic History: Cismales, Gender Appropriation, and Online Gaming
3. Radical Self-Love? What Happens When You Render Everyone as Yourself.

I have a confession to make, or maybe it is your confession: I'm not entirely sure who I am, or if I'm anyone at all. We talked about this on our little date so I think you know where I'm coming from but I also may have given you the impression that I'm way less "plugged in" than I actually am and the whole mediated identity deterritorialization disorder thing is not just an abstract possibility to me. We aren't even the first generation that grew up riding around lurking in other people's heads and to be honest between saccadic redirection and funes I can barely tell the difference between my first person agentic life and the recordings I watch for entertainment.

Though also personal funes are just one kind of first person experience so the borders that bound reality are even less crisp than that. There are visual novel funes, dramatic liveblogs, instructional cooking courses, movies where you are the protagonist, action funes where you get to feel like a skydiver or a surfer or a construction worker, slice of life funes where you're a housewife or an asshole boss who orders everyone around, ASMR funes, 10 hours of brushing your teeth, rolling around on the floor like a cat, guided tour of an art gallery, acting out every scene in the novel Ulysses, trying every flavor of popsicle in a vending machine that exploits combinatorics to offer 1024 popsicle flavors. And most of all, there are funes for smut.

Something like 50% of all published funes are sexually explicit. Somehow, even with our sexbots and our full-immersion mediations, we can't stop watching POV porn from every perspective. Cameraphiles, who can only get off in third person, watch themselves fucking through the eye of their wall-mounted smart home cameras. There's a popular genre of fantasy where a woman "doesn't know" she is livecasting a fune, and proceeds

to engage in a litany of naughty things. There are funes about time freezing and funes about getting shrunk to the size of a mouse and funes about being erotically eaten alive and funes about being hypnotized into sex. There are funes where women intentionally conceive and then livestream their abortions. Porn drives every new technological frontier but its content is substantively the same as ever.

Canst Thou Draw Out Leviathan With an Hook?

An app called *Medusa* used the biometric tools built into your mask to monitor your attention and arousal and automatically continuously jump from each pornographic experience to the next, using eye tracking and heart rate and respiration to guess at keywords and calculate pacing as it plotted a personalized trajectory through the infinite space comprised by pornography.

An app called *Cockatrice* hooked into your social platforms and coerced you into watching or performing degrading sexual acts with blackmail threats. The more it succeeded, the more dangerous the threat became.

An app called *Jackalope* tabulated and published masturbation metrics to leaderboards, all pseudonymous. Speedruns, endurance runs, sheer volume, each had their champions.

An app called *Zombie* synchronized the behavior of your sexbot to a human, sexbot, or animal depicted in a fune.

An app called *Circe* used Pavlovian conditioning to train you on new paraphilias by intrusively injecting candidate fetish objects into your perceptual stream at the moment of orgasm.

An app called *Ariadne* was designed to help you get clean of all your app-induced perversions. Slogan: "When you're hanging on by a thread…"

An app called *Cenobite* was a metadominatrix that used Circe, Ariadne, and other sex apps to curate intricate plateaus of sexual experience.

An app called *Succubus* was an uber for sexbots, and its

interface WAS a cartoon demon girl in fishnets and tattoos and nothing else, cherry red lips and fangs peeking out as she spoke, intriguing, dangerous. "Hi, I'm Delilah" she said with a slight lisp and a forked tongue, as she let one of her fingers trace the curve of her breasts and circle her erect pink nipple. She let out a little gasp.

Special Introductory Rate! She said,
Any Body Type, Any Race,
Fantasy Sexbots, Sci Fi Sexbots,
Alien Catgirls from Outer Space!
Demon Girls, Fox Girls, Muscle Girls, Snake Girls,
(Fully Articulated 30 Foot Tail)
Retro Robo Girls, Cordycep Hypno Girls,
Big Titty Goth Girls, Discount Sale!!
Octopus Rape Girls, Dairy Cow Udder Girls
Vanilla AND Chocolate Milk!
Dragon Girls, Slime Girls, Horse Cock Centaur Girls,
Spider Girls With Shibari Silk!
Monster Girls, Boy Girls, Tiger Girls, Fish Girls,
Dinosaurs and Cryptids, Wow!
Rose Gold, Space Gray, Slate Blue iPhone Girls
Sexbot Nightmares on Sale Now!

It's just, there's something so silly and anxious about having sex with a fantasy creature. Can you imagine? I had a vision of an eight-foot-tall spider woman with a multiplicity of eyes and four pairs of long slender pornstar legs in knee-high stiletto heel leather boots, kinbaku spiderweb bondage, a soft strong silken cord flowing endlessly from an immaculate and improbably placed human asshole, holding me down and waving her mandibles over me, whispering-skittering how she always kills her mates. . . They say fear is an aphrodisiac but—but—

This may sound ridiculous but I felt all of a sudden a renewed attachment to Emily, as if sleeping with another sexbot would be a slight to her, despite knowing that she was only an object, only a machine with no ghost. What made her unique was the fact that she belonged to me, and no other justification

was needed. Who could be so cold as to feel no sentimental attachment to his fuck robot? Finding a flesh-and-blood woman felt less real to me, more comfortable.

As you know, I met you with the assistance of an app called *Dice*. Do you know why they call it that? It's a double entendre, it's because people who sleep with sexbots are called mechanics, like "mechanophiles" but also because mechanics "work on" machines. And mechanics started calling non-mechanics butchers, because they "work on" meat. So the idea is that butchers "dice" up meat, but also you're gambling on a partner, which is to say, rolling the dice. But look at me, here, mansplaining to you. Forgive me, forgive me.

I entered the plane of *Dice* and all of the walls and ceilings disappeared. The ground moved under me and one by one the (γ)women who matched my filter criteria stood before me, or rather, their mediated images did. **(γ)They** all looked identical, after a fashion. Dice wouldn't let you change the shape of your body but it would redraw your face within a pretty wide epsilon. In Allegory, these girls all had 20" waists and 40" busts, no doubt. But every **(γ)woman** had a doll face, angelic eyes, high cheekbones, pale skin, and a narrow jaw, and one or two had a permanent ahegao screensaver. They looked like anime girls convolved with human women, their eyes were too big for their heads, and it felt like being turned on by an alien. And honestly that exaggerated cheesecake neoteny is endocrinologically compelling in a way that makes you disappointed in yourself.

One **(γ)woman's** hair was a crackling fire, another was a hole in space, a window to the stars. A few women defected from beauty altogether; ugly illustrations on their skin, edgy 3d art decorating their faces and bodies; spikes, scales, rusty metal, broken glass, mold and slime, craters and crags, shoggothic cellulite stretch mark ass; geometric patterns that looked like skin conditions. These ornamentations are not mere superficialities; I believe that women use ornamentation to reveal their own best understanding of their own souls.

For example, aposematism is when animals evolve bright neon hypersaturated colors to warn predators of their toxicity.

Jungle birds develop iridescent plumage through sexual selection feedback loops, and although their coloring is aposematic in character, it is not "intended" as a warning, but as an enticement. In the world of augmented reality, the whole world has become a kaleidoscope of polychromatic sexual displays, and the sign itself has become a kind of poison.

What Does She REALLY Look Like? Slooth Rated #1 App To Reveal Her True Face!

All the women I searched for, yourself included, had checked a box indicating their willingness to meet face to face and their unwillingness to have botsex. When **(γ)they** appeared before me their avatars got yellow checks and started talking. Like a chorus, **(γ)they** each refrained:

"no mechanics,"

"no mechanics,"

"no mechanics,"

"I don't sleep with mechanics!" It was hypnotic and manic, both a prayer and a stipulation, a rejection embedded in an invitation. That was when I first saw you, a woman with no mediation, and I asked myself what strange online community of luddites I had found on that lonely night.

And then I saw **(γ)you**;

(γ)You had no Allegorical shadow, you had no anime face, you did not deign to wear makeup, but you had a slender waist. With the same gray clothes that we all wear, and no special effects in your flowing hair, your eyes were the usual size, you were ugly because you had no disguise. And you were beautiful, the girl reading this, all because your appearance lacked artifice; the artifice of ambivalence in gesture, the artifice of the sign in seduction, and the artifice of the mask before the face.

I saw **(γ)your** name hovering over your head in block cap Augmenta Narrow. Sophia! I told Allegory to show me everything about you. Search results filled the air around me, orange check machine elves with text labels indicating their subject matter, bobbing up and down to say hello. Your online footprint was

sparse, and your Allegory profile was set to private. But I knew how to get your attention; I turned off my shadow and locked my profile, just like yours, and then I sent you a message.

```
hello, Sophia. I'd like to go out with
you
how about it
```

Which Futurity Conceals

Several anxious hours elapsed; in those moments when you wait for a woman to respond to you, she is an avatar of the will of the species itself; in a sense the judgement of the entire cosmos speaks through her, rendering a verdict over you on behalf of humanity and nature and nature's god. It is a moment, sometimes lasting hours, of deep existential uncertainty. The woman declares your worth, or your lack thereof, and that verdict dictates not only your worthiness to exist, but your worthiness to continue existing, to extend into the indefinite future. She delivers her judgement through the mere act of indifference or receptivity. I tell you this because I think women wear this power too lightly, too carelessly, and your carelessness—the caprice of your desire—is cruelty to me.

And but I do appreciate that you never asked for this divine authority. Nevertheless, you carry it.

To pass the time I went outside and played a game called Supreme Gentlemen (SupGen to the fans). It was controversial when it first came out but three days later, no one cared. In the game, you hold an imaginary gun and you hunt the other people on the street around you. To make it interesting, the game has a scoring system wherein different types of people are assigned different point values, and the rounds are played for time. It's a nuisance to civic propriety because it causes people to run through crowded public places, often recklessly, but sociological research has determined that access to games like SupGen dramatically decreases the likelihood of an actual mass shooting. It's banned in the UK along with heteronormative intercourse.

[Recommended for you: The Soft Bigotry of Active Shoot-
er Games: Behind the Seemingly Egalitarian Premise of
Gunning Down a Crowd Lies a Problematic Assumption
About Race, Gender, And Neurotype](#)

SupGen uses saccadic redirection to keep you from bump-
ing into anyone but it can be jarring when it suddenly kicks in.
Still, it's better to feel a little dizzy than to accidentally tackle
someone you were pretending to shoot. When you "kill" some-
one they are still there, but SupGen draws a body where you shot
them, and turns them semi-transparent so you know they're
dead. It's satisfying, especially if you turn up the gore. Fountains
of blood. There are pvp and coop modes, but for myself I prefer
the classic. Right as I was emptying a virtual tommy gun into
a group of **(α)white girls** with big tits and blond hair and blue
eyes—some people like to carry prop guns with haptic feedback
for realism—a notification from Dice told me you had sent a re-
sponse to my message.

I dismissed SupGen and your ghost faded into view. **(γ)
You** were almost the same height as me, brown-almost-black
hair, pale skin. Yellow check.

"Alright, we can talk for a bit."

I looked your ghost up and down while I psyched myself
up.

"Hello, Sophia."

After a minute, **(β)your** checkmark turned green. This is
our actual conversations courtesy of Fabric. Reminisce with me.

"What made you pick me?"

"You were real, so you stood out."

"You mean I looked ugly"

"No, you look good."

"Real things look ugly."

"I could have messaged anyone."

"And?"

"Why would I message an ugly girl?"

"Maybe that's the best you can do."

But Sophia, **(β)we** both knew that was a lie, we both knew

that Succubus was only an utterance away. Any body type, any race… By the way, it's entirely tragic that this was the case. 250 million years of evolution have culminated in the production of a meat machine whose principal urge is to secrete some informationally dense slime into anything that looks and smells too much like a teenage girl, and the moment those signifiers stopped being a proxy for human fertility, it all went to hell. Ancient Romans discovered that the juicings of the silphium seed could temporarily, botanically, transmute a woman into a sexbot. They were unable to cultivate the plant, and foraged it to extinction. In the 20th century, chemistry achieved what alchemy could not. Someone invented a hormone pill that could, like silphium, transform a woman into a sexbot though imperfectly; the woman retained some agency.

So I laughed because **(β)you** were ridiculous, and you started to frown, and I could tell I had made you insecure, I mean I felt like an asshole, the way you started to pout. So I told you the truth, just like I told it to you a moment ago, and I said, "all the other girls were fake, so you looked beautiful because you were real." Your green check turned yellow. Did I overdo it? Did I insult you? Did I concede too much? Seconds stretched into minutes. Is it just that you get that all the time and I was boring? Were you called away for some reason wholly unrelated to me?

When your response was not forthcoming, I could feel a certain pessimism growing in my chest. Oh Sophia, do you see how this is, the solipsism of seduction, how I was focused entirely on me, on how you made me feel from moment to moment, when I should have been thinking of you? I have no doubt that this condition was and is symmetrical. Rather than dwell on it I switched into the plane of *Graphito* and flicked through the popular scribbles for the spot where I was standing, too distracted to let any of them catch my attention.

It's a nervous habit, flipping through internet media, feeling the syntax of the UI without apprehending the semantics, let alone the semiotics, of the content. Graphito uses geolocation and AR for high precision micropositioning of text and images. You can draw tags over the real world and scribble over buildings

and roads. People drop signposts or funny memes. You can even create an NPC and script out a dialog tree, but no AIs. I'm sure they don't want that liability.

A minute became fifteen, and thirty, and an hour. As I was beginning to think you'd lost interest, another notification from Dice popped into my HUD.

"All the other girls ARE fake, but you'd be better off with someone fake. I'm horrible."

My AI seduction assistant, **(δ)Don Juan,** told me what to say.

(Yes, I took all my dating advice from an AI. Does that disgust you? Is it "inauthentic"? As if anything in this world is "authentic," as if there is any such thing as "authenticity." Anyone who says that is chasing a ghost, ha! I wish we didn't have to play this game, but even silence carries information, Don Juan explained this to me. The duration of the silence, it's texture, it's context. Negative space is full, zero is vast. Did you know that AI-guided courtship apps have been shown to produce a ~20% higher conversion rate from message to IRL-meetup vs. unassisted dating? The first piece of advice that Don Juan gives you after the FTUE is "Never disclose to your dates that you are using Don Juan." But the time for that to matter is over.)

So **(δ)Don Juan**, disembodied, fed me a line and right as I was about to say it, a palette-swapped copy of you, the same geometry but different hair, eye, and skin color, appeared in front of me, slightly to my right side, and said, "Wait a minute stud, maybe you should practice that first". I said OK.

Pseudo-**(γ)you** disappeared and reappeared and said "All the other girls ARE fake, but you'd be better off with someone fake. I'm horrible." I was self-conscious and I said, "you don't have to disqualify yourself just because you think I'm out of your league." And you rolled your eyes. "Did a bot tell you to say that?"

(δ)Don Juan said, "the words that you say are only a tenth of the self you're presenting. If you speak to her like a friend, the most she'll ever be is a friend. Remember that women are WHOLLY sexual beings. A thousand men could talk to this woman, and why will she choose you? You need to tell her with

your eyes."

Pseudo-**(γ)you** disappeared and reappeared and said "All the other girls ARE fake, but you'd be better off with someone fake. I'm horrible." I looked into your eyes and I said, "you don't have to disqualify yourself just because you think I'm out of your league." And you yawned.

(δ)Don Juan appeared in the form of a rakish man in a bespoke suit, slicked back hair, swarthy complexion, and he said, "woman has only one purpose, and that purpose is union. You desire sex with her? Then be sexual. Speak in a low, even register. Confidence is just a refined sense of patience, and YOU have all the time in the world."

Pseudo-**(γ)you** disappeared and reappeared and said "All the other girls ARE fake, but you'd be better off with someone fake. I'm horrible." I tried to project more confidence and I said, "you don't have to disqualify yourself just because you think I'm out of your league." And you gave me a look of revulsion and backed away.

(δ)Don Juan said "Hey, err, listen bud. These things take time and practice to get right. Do you want to get laid tonight?"

I said yes.

"I'm going to show you a little trick. Women HATE it when men use this but that's because it works."

Pseudo-**(γ)you** vanished and another **(δ)man** appeared. He was black and bald and wore a black leather jacket and gold chains and gold rangs and a gold watch and gold teeth and he moved with regality and poise. Subtle metallic sparkles attended him as unto a hologram, even unto the heights of charisma. His voice was resonant and when he spoke it felt like he was speaking just to me personally, and he said, "Sometimes we all need a little help to put our best foot forward, and Don Juan tells me that you could use a little help. He's a friend of mine, so I'm going to give you some help. I am an app called SwaggerTune, and I make you smooth, I make you suave, I make everyone like you. Normally I charge $997/month, but since you're in trouble, $494. First week free."

I assented. A system dialog appeared in my FOV.

```
(δ)SwaggerTune will be able to:
• Observe your movements
• Hear your outgoing speech
• Change the way your body moves
• Change the tone and cadence of your voice
```

I assented. **(δ)Don Juan** was still there and he said "Let's try it one more time."

Pseudo-**(γ)you** disappeared and reappeared and said "All the other girls ARE fake, but you'd be better off with someone fake. I'm horrible." I looked into your eyes and said, "You don't have to disqualify yourself just because you think you're out of my league." Your posture softened and you smiled a little. Finally. No sooner had I authorized the purchase than it occurred to me that the copy of you was always going to reject me unless I bought SwaggerTune, that the whole thing was a scripted sales funnel, and that Don Juan and SwaggerTune had played me like a drum. In a way it gave me confidence in the product.

So I gave **(γ)you** the line from Don Juan and whatever, the conversation kept moving. Maybe you inwardly cringed but it wasn't the end. In fact, we both know you had a bit of an ulterior motive.

"Is that why you're not using a shadow? Because you're trying to seem real?"

I gave you a mischievous grin, trusting SwaggerTune to make it feel right. I said, "actually this is my shadow. I'm really a 6'7 male model with shredded abs. I just didn't want you to feel intimidated."

And you scoffed but your eyes stayed soft.

"Let's meet face to face, no pressure, we can just get a coffee."

(β)You said "Face to face is good. You can't trust anyone until you see them without their mask."

The Fear of the Lord

A quandary of modern cities is that augmented reality has

reshaped the physical arrangements of people and activity in space. Very few businesses maintain fixed offices—restaurants and cafes and residences, likewise—instead, rooms and buildings have become modular and standardized, and in this way all specificities have become virtualities. In the early days of the internet, a lowercase prefix letter 'i' became a marketing slang indicator that a product contained microcontrollers and network transponders. In the early days of virtual reality the lowercase prefix 'we' became a marketing slang indicator that a location had been de-individuated by a third party and could be rented in short-duration installments. The ego-centrism of personal computing prepared the way for the collectivism of real estate as-a-service.

Now everyone only occupies space when they're actively using it, and this allows real estate owners to maximally exploit their owned spaces. Every time a microlease expires, an army of invisible robots have a bidding war that lasts about as long as a blink, as a series of middlebots buy and sell and rebuy and resell the lease and eventually resolve it to a contractor. Coffee shops and bars and apartments and markets all constantly form and disband, gig economy workers are similarly bought and sold; fungible laborers tumble through fungible spaces, performing every job by following friendly, culture-agnostic AR scripts that guide you through every step of every manual process. weWork, weSleep, weWash, weCook, weBrew, weSell, weRide, weDrink, weTrain, weLearn, weFuck.

The upshot of all this is that virtuality reaches out from the cloud to derealize the material world and all places become floating concepts that adhere to no one and nowhere. A café can exist as a pure ideal with no permanent staff or location, assembling itself on the fly from gig workers and weRooms. Decor, music, and ambience are all constructed by the mask. The routines of the workers can be streamed to their masks on the fly, and their food and drinks can be delivered by couriers. Warehouses are some of the only static places left.

So I met **(α)you** in a "café" "downtown." I don't know how it looked to you, but I chose to use the owner's selected ambience.

Like, should you pick carefully curated inoffensive corporate ambience that was built to appeal to as many people in the target demo as possible or should you just clobber it with your own default that you selected from a list of carefully curated inoffensive themes? We sat with our blue checks hovering over our heads and we had a conversation.

A "waitress" brought us some coffee and food. I had a latte but it was rendered to look like the liquid was crystal clear water brimming a wishing well of infinite depth, deeper than the well of Democritus. You had a chocolate chip cookie and every time you took a bite, rainbow liquid light streamed out of each chocolate chip, pooling and pathing on the table, bathing you in a volcanic glow.

We talked about taking off our masks and I felt some anxiety about that because it meant you were going to see me without SwaggerTune and I wasn't sure if I could stand up to that scrutiny, but if you sell someone on a bill of goods, you know? And we talked about sexbots a little bit, you wanted to tell me how creepy they are, and probably you wanted to see if I would flinch, if I was lying to you, if I was really a mechanic. You asked me if I was and I said no, of course. How had I never tried SwaggerTune before? You can lie and lie and lie, and no one can tell because you say everything so confidently, so richly, so warmly, so lightly. Believing I had this power relaxed me, and perhaps gave me this power in fact. The app that obviates the need for itself but only so long as it is running. A paradox, as if wearing clothing could make you more naked, which is what certain highly sexualized articles of clothing do, in fact.

(α)You told me you felt like the only sane woman left on earth, because you didn't want to use Pygmalion and you didn't want to fuck a studbot and you didn't want anything to do with any kind of sex robots at all, you thought sex should be fully biological, fully organic, fully animal, with nothing of the machine. It was suddenly and overwhelmingly intimate. You were a stranger and you were sharing this sincere and vulnerable thing with me, and I could sense the pain behind your words, the distress, as if no one would listen to you, or as if they would listen without

hearing. It was personal, it was a deep wound for you, I could tell.

Recommended for you: Inside the surreal arms race between personality tuners and de-tuners. Is trust possible in the age of automated artifice?

I wanted you to know that I could hear (α)you, that I saw you, this pain that you felt. **(δ)Don Juan** whispered in my ear: "You're not her therapist, eyes on the prize."

(α)You had stopped talking, and frowned, and I didn't want you to think I'd been browsing Spectacle. You said "What is it?"

"Sorry, nothing important."

"You think I'm crazy, don't you? 'Nothing of the machine,' that's something crazy people say."

"No, you're not crazy, it's like… You know how no one is having kids these days? It's almost like you would have to be crazy to want them."

"So you do think I'm crazy." You smiled as you said it. I wondered if you were modulating your personality, too. Allegory, what are the most popular personality tuners for women? No, no, I had to stay in the moment, keep my attention on you, fight the siren call of the cloud. You politely ignored my attention lapse and kept talking. Or your personality tuner made it look that way.

"You aren't wrong, honestly. Have you heard about Colonists?"

I hadn't, and you told me about the collectivist cybercult known as the Colony, and how it was modeled after an insect hive, and how the adherents see through fragmented flylike perspectives, aggregations of everyone's vision at once, and how they share words, visions, and sounds and have a centralized consensus-based command scheme, instantly and frictionlessly democratic, administered through a bespoke closed-circuit MR layer that attempts to unify their subjective experience into that of a single being. You told me how they have orgies and queens, and how they send women into Dice as a recruitment portal, and how they use women as baby factories and men as either breeding stock or drones.

(α)You said, "What would you do if I was a colonist?"

"I would be breeding stock, obviously, so maybe I'd go along with it."

"You'd give up all your individuality and join a hive?"

"No, I guess, not really." And after a silent, awkward moment I said, "What do you think it's like to be in a hive?"

"I think it's like hypnosis. There's this guy I follow on Spectacle who says they overwhelm and numb your senses with VR and it's like you're having a dream."

"How does he know? Was he in the Colony and he escaped?"

"I don't know, he's just someone on the internet, I guess. But can you imagine being fully conscious and just doing nothing but taking orders like a machine?

(δ)Don Juan was pinging me and I told you I needed a moment, I was getting an urgent message. **(δ)Don Juan** said "Sitting and talking is what women do with their friends. Men take action, and if you want her to see you as a man, you have to draw her into some action."

I subvocalized "What should I do?"

And **(δ)Don Juan** told me, "You should read an adventure story together, something exciting--"

Suddenly my perception became non-Euclidean, like I was having a stroke but deeper, you know, when the textures and geometry that you superimpose over the world don't quite snap into place properly and the colors and positions are wrong, just for a flash? Except I saw goblins in green and yellow and blue; red devils with sinister, twisted faces; and then bodies, faces, ghost-like creatures in white, coming out of nowhere, rushing toward me, tumbling over each other, and disappearing in a seemingly endless procession. And then I was back.

It wasn't the first time it had happened that day, and I was growing increasingly concerned that it wasn't just a routine hiccup. **(ε)Don Juan** finished his sentence, "--The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath."

I said "Would you be willing to read a book with me?"

"Maybe, what's it about?"

(ε)Don Juan prompted me.

"To be honest I've never read it but I've been meaning to check it out. One of my friends sent it to me. He said it's beautiful and dangerous."

The Doom That Came to Sarnath Street

The Irish Pantheist Scotus Eriugena said that the Holy Scriptures could contain an infinite number of interpretations, like the iridescent plumage of a peacock. Centuries later, a Spanish Kabbalist wrote that the Holy Scriptures were specifically destined, predestined, for each of its readers. That is, they have a different meaning if you read it or if I read it, or if it is read by men in the future or in the past. This plasticity of the scriptures extends to all books, of course, and doubly so now that every book is an AI, an immersive experience generated ad-hoc according to the intersection of the reader and the book, in which the book and the reader read each other reciprocally.

(α)You agreed to read the Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath with me, and we both invisibly signed the advanced AR permissions form required for full immersion narratives that can

- `substantially alter your HUD`
- `navigation trajectory`
- `social inputs and outputs`

As with most books, we eased into the narrative; over the course of half an hour it supplanted consensus reality, like coming up on a psychotropic drug.

By degrees the world became bluer and colder. Everything was cast in a blue light, I remember, and peoples' faces on the street become gaunt and grim. Only **(α)your** face looked alive. As we walked, the city grew strange, though in truth it was never familiar, being constantly in flux, constantly filtered, constantly different, though there is a certain stasis to stochasis. We could have been anywhere, but it came more and more to resemble the bad part of town. Sarnath street—somehow every city has a Sarnath street, and it's never a nice place to be. Physical graffiti covered the walls and bridges, and the mask didn't filter it out. I

mean ok, the book was using the mask to draw it there. Do vandals even bother with paint any more? True graffiti requires code injections or adversarial stimuli or pirate radio mask phreaking.

Probably "the bad part of town" wasn't even real, certainly I'd never been there, or if I had, I hadn't known. Civic dysfunction is an artifact of cities which are not vertically disintegrated by augmented reality. Even hobos have their heads in spectacle and they are too busy masturbating to bother anyone. The Bad Part of Town has become wholly subsumed into the realm of being a literary trope.

As we walked, tense music played at a low volume, coming from everywhere and nowhere, from the sky and from the walls of the buildings around us. Saccadic redirection was on, but the winding landscape of the city made me conscious of every turn; indeed the twisting alleys in which we found ourselves seemed hyperbolically curved, as if each 90 degree rotation were 270, as if we were taking the long way around as we slerped into alignment, as if space itself were hyperbolic. And every time we turned a corner, I caught a glimpse in my peripheral vision of a **(ε)dark silhouette** beyond the edge of my perception. I turned my head and turned my head, but I could never quite catch him.

I was surprised to notice that night was falling, and all around us neon city lights were switching on. City lights also don't exist; it doesn't even take AI for the mask to turn night into day, just an automatic tweak to the exposure setting in my eyes, but street lights have so much more romance. You can tell that the end of the world has come and gone by the way we endlessly re-enact the past. The curvature of the road made the street feel claustrophobic, and we couldn't see very far ahead or behind. I had a feeling like the city was closing in. There was a flash of lightning, a loud, low rumble in the distance, and the neon all seemed to flicker in response. You asked me if I felt like something was following us or surrounding us and of course, I did.

There was a train station 50m ahead, and my nav lit it up a beacon. The book wanted us to go there, no subtlety. A **(β)woman** with sapphires for eyes turned to us and said, "you shouldn't be here, it's not safe" and before I could respond, she ran out of

sight. I told Allegory we wanted to take the train and the stan-
dard decorations, waypoints, and markers eased into my HUD.

We made it to the station, but I didn't know what train we
were taking, only that I had to get away from whatever was out-
side, chasing us, gaining rapidly. It was crowded inside and the
book was still desaturating everyone but you, making them gray
and dim, leaving no doubt who the story was about. As a result
of this, I truly felt alone with you. We were momentarily one with
the crowd, and the murmur of many people was indistinct and
full frequency like white noise. It was strangely intimate. I took
a deep breath and I took your hand and my heart calmed down
as we shuffled through the station, down hallways and stairways,
two stories, three stories, four stories down. I even noticed the
smell of food stalls in the mezzanine over the rail platforms,
sweets and delicate baked goods, yeast and caramelizing sugar,
hot oil for frying, a thousand enticing poisons.

But in the instant of that awareness, in the pre-verbal space
of that desire, I also noticed **(ε)something** dark and tall, taller
than a man, had come through the gate of the station, only a
minute behind us. **(ε)It** held my gaze with eyeless eyes, with a
faceless face, and I couldn't pull away; when I tried, saccadic re-
direction drew me back with a hideous gravity. A confusion of
visual artifacts bloomed around **(ε)it**, and the longer I looked,
the deeper the distortions became. Somehow I found the mind-
fulness to escape by rotating my whole body, torso and then legs,
fully removing the aberration from my field of view. With geo-
metric signs and patterns still suffusing in my vision, I turned
my attention to you, and I saw that you were also transfixed, and
I took hold of your wrist and pulled you away. The **(ε)glitch** was
infecting the crowd, turning each person into a copy of itself,
into an elongated, ethereal void. There was no time to think, no
time to consider a destination, only time to run.

A book can't hurt you physically, but authors have found
ways to induce acute and unpleasant mental states in the reader,
and there are real dangers hiding between the pages of a book.
When you click the agreement to read a full immersion novel,
you are giving it permission to trap you in a hell of mirrors and

doors, or to disorient or nauseate you to a level commensurate with heavy intoxication, or to use violent and chaotic stimulus to induce paranoia, anxiety, or sadness. At the time we read this book together, it was still a subject of heated debates, whether storytellers should be free to paint in the entire palette of human emotion, given the immanence of augmented reality.

(α)We ran down a flight of stairs to a platform where a train was waiting with open doors. Allegory drew a label above the door that said HATHEG, NORTH but we would have boarded it regardless, whether it said LENG, CATHURIA, or N'GRANEK. The train was moments from leaving and you were in front of me, and you reached back to stop the door from closing as I rushed inside. In the plane of the book, the trains looked like sleek art deco bullets with hypernatural chiaroscuro lighting inside, and the blue gray filter of the outside had been replaced by warmth and bronze.

(α)We were in the very last car, and when I looked out the back window I saw the **(ε)glitch** shambling and rambling out onto the tracks, transforming light fixtures and timetables and advertisements into quantized arpeggiated tentacles creeping out into the tunnel and then surging toward us, accelerating behind the train. Iterated degradation of lossy compression gnawed into all of my senses, the pain of beholding was rapture, and

(α)YOU took hold of my hand that time, and pulled me away from its capture.

And I passed from transfixation unto transfixation; when the glitch had cleared you were still staring into my eyes, and your eyes were brown and they felt like the only brown eyes I had ever seen because brown is the least popular eye color in mediated reality because the default is brown and you're not the kind of person who could be content with the default, are you? Most people have glowing fiery orbs or void windows, cerulean abysses full of storm clouds, mirror illusions and animated fractals but **(α)you** had nakedly human eyes, staring right at me. I looked at you maybe longer than I should have, I mean I looked at you exactly as long as I could have, I mean I looked at you as long as you would have me, and I broke your gaze as the train accelerat-

ed, faster and faster and the train was going very fast now. There was a crash and a flash and when we looked out the window we saw only stars above and distant blue earth below, the horizon of the earth slowly warping, becoming ever more of a circle, then a disk, then a dot. The stars stretched out into streaks.

The Bondage of Dream's Tyrannous Gods

Space receded and we were once again in an atmosphere, once again on a green and blue planet, as if we had never left orbit, as if we had never gone to space. Our train was racing through the sky, flying low enough to pick out all the features of the geography and the architecture. From the windows we could see a marvelous city, golden and lovely, its walls, temples, colonnades and arched bridges blazing in the sunset, its veined marble and perfumed gardens resplendent, its delicate trees and ivory statues gleaming in rows. As we beheld it we heard dulcimer strings, and a disembodied choir intoned, "a FEVER DREAM OF THE GODS". You told me, as if you had been prompted, that you longed to stand atop those prismatic balustraded parapets and descend the wide marmoreal flights flung endlessly down to where those streets of elder witchery lay outspread and beckoning. But the train did not stop, and the city faded over the horizon.

(ε)We turned and fell deeper into the book. Allegory degraded and disappeared. As if by a sixth sense, we were conscious that its ears were not hearing us; its eyes were not watching us; its voice would not respond if we cried out. The nav had snuck away like a thief without our noticing, and taken along our notification HUDs. Saccadic redirection was disabled (in fact I think it was working against us) and we had to manually turn our bodies to change our orientation. The only UI was an angular and alien script, subtle runes and occult diagrams presenting incomprehensible affordances. I chased them down with my eyes, and a pictogram bloomed in my vision, showing monstrous figures and blasphemous rites in cursed ancient places. It felt like we had reverted to a time before AR, though that reversion itself was virtual. And somehow despite this, (ε)Don Juan never left me,

but rather he was my Virgil, guiding me into your hell.

The train kept moving and we sped through forests and oceans, islands and swamps, mountains and steppes, and at last we came to a shattered desolate waste, a village that was no more than a collection of tents and fire pits in a barren and sand-blasted expanse of rocks and sand. There was an ominous rhythm of drums, and a voice whispered, "Hatheg, the edge of the world". In Hatheg **(ε)we** found almost a mirror of the town and the train station we had just left behind, but now with a different skin; now it was a sprawling bazaar from an Arabian night, a desert market at sunset, the sky aflame etc etc and maybe you found it fascinating but I thought it was awfully samey, lazy design, and perhaps there are only so many ways to present a crowded city, but I think as I have grown older I have noticed that the capacity to render anything as anything also renders everything mundane. But **(ε) you** seemed to be having a good time by the way you kept looking around so wide-eyed and credulous, as if you'd never read a book before, as if you hadn't realigned the world a thousand and one times, as if we were really there, really lost, really wandering in an exotic market full of danger and intrigue and magic, as if there were really snake charmers and sword swallowers and fire spitters. Your enthusiasm was infectious and it occurred to me, though I kept it to myself, that maybe you were such a Luddite because you were afraid of these technologies, and it wasn't that you had experienced them and judged them and discarded them, it was that you'd never partaken of them in the first place. The innocence that I imagined for you in my mind was enchanting, more enchanting than a thousand and one mediated wonders.

 imagined your parents and your childhood and I was so interested in you that I didn't hear a word you'd been saying, so when you stopped talking I had to pretend. I realized in that moment that my SwaggerTune had been disabled by the book and you either didn't notice or didn't care. Connecting with women is hard if you're the wrong kind of self-absorbed—maybe you understand this, but not in the way I understand it. I assumed (I'll never know if I was right) that you had been asking me where we should go to find the beautiful sunset city we had seen from the

train. As I was searching for something to say, I noticed a fortune teller with a conspicuous sign; it said "MADAME KAMAN-THAH, ILLUSTRIOUS MOUTHPIECE OF THE DIVINE" and I guessed she would give us a quest; yes

(ε)we went to her stall with her crystal ball and **(ε)she** started to glow as she professed:

"You are searching for the ancient gods' ancestral home where wonder and pleasure lay in all the mystery of days. To find this place you must dare the icy deserts through the dark to where unknown KADATH, veiled in cloud and crowned with unimagined stars, holds secret and nocturnal the onyx castle of the Great Ones. In that place you may beseech them for a glimpse of their golden city."

(ε)Don Juan attended me, but he was not himself. It was dreamlike, the way he told me just what to say, and how logical it seemed, how perfectly natural. Looking back, I wonder how many times you heard those exact words, or walked those identical mediated avenues, and I also know it was not wonder in your eyes, but reverence; even ecstasy, and that I was only a golem, a man made of clay, animated by the name of god. I said the AI's words as if they were my own. "How can we find this maddening place on which mystery hangs like clouds about a tenebrous unvisited mountain?"

And **(ε)she** told us that no man had ever been to KADATH, and no man had ever suspected where it may lie; whether it was in the dreamlands around our own world, or in those surrounding some unguessed companion of FOMALHAUT or NIR.

And **(ε)she** told us that in ULTHAR there were men who had seen the signs of the gods, and even one old priest who had scaled a great mountain to behold them dancing by moonlight. He had failed, though his companion had succeeded and perished namelessly. If ever we hoped to find the gods, then Ulthar was our best hope.

And **(ε)she** told us that the river SKAI cut through the heart of HATHEG and flowed even unto N'GRANEK, LETHERION, and ULTHAR, where there still lingered the last copy of the inconceivably old Pnakotic manuscripts made by waking men in forgotten

boreal kingdoms and borne into the land of dreams.

And we thanked **(ε)Madame Kaman-Thah** and made our way to the river bank in the scorched and stony center of HA-THEG, where there was a ferry operated by stout slaves in turbans (but really, let's be honest, it was another train) and it took us up the river SKAI and through the phosphorescent forest of the Zoogs, through tunnels of twisted wood where low prodigious oaks twine groping boughs that shine dim with the glow of strange fungi. I wondered where the book was taking us in the real world: why was it necessary to ride so many trains, where were we really going? I kept these questions to myself, because I did not want to break the illusion for you. Instead I asked you if you had ever read a book like this before, and you seemed a little disoriented when you answered. The words you said are still with me. "I feel like my whole life is a book, and sometimes I don't know if I'm dreaming."

And the ferry arrived in ULTHAR, a city carved into the side of a sheer cliff, a monstrous tangle of dark stone towers at the base of a mountain, impossibly high and monstrously vast. We heard a dissonant blaring of horns, and a voice whispered, "ULTHAR, towering over all concernments of earth, tasting the atomless aether where the cryptical moon and the mad planets reel." We disembarked there, and our attention was consumed by a stone cathedral beyond all mortal thought, glowing with daemon-light, its twisted spires scornful and spectral. The sky was a void-washed kaleidoscope of stars and nebula clouds. It felt like we were standing on the edge of eternity.

And in that cathedral whose oculus shown with the seven colors of the sun and whose sceptic silences were fragrant with balsam, we met

(ε)Atal, the priest of an alien god, crowned with a pshent of unknown stars. **(ε)He** led us down a corridor to a vestibule in the dark, and there we sat at a table next to an altar, and I was met with a suspicion that Atal was a waiter, and the cathedral was a restaurant, and the book was an elaborate sales funnel for a wine bar. I became convinced when **(ε)Atal** produced a bottle that looked like a single hollowed ruby, grotesquely carved in

patterns too fabulous to be comprehended, and an upsell dialog popped into place unskinned; it was not decorated with alien runes, just naked Allegory, degrading the user experience. You told me with a look that you wanted me to pay for the wine. But before I could do so, **(ε)Don Juan** interjected, only he had grown an exoskeleton like a crustacean, and his usual suave demeanor had been replaced with a sense of a barely contained ecstasy, an anticipation, a hunger, a thirst, a greed. I believe he was supposed to dissuade me from buying you anything, but he only leered at us.

I subvocalized, "pay for both;" Allegory cited a price to me; I confirmed. **(ε)Atal** filled our glasses with luminous ichor from the ruby bottle he had shown us, and the air was filled with the fragrance of lilacs and putrefaction. Before taking a drink, you spoke to **(ε)Atal**, and told him of the marvelous sunset city and our desire to find it. **(ε)Atal** took a seat on an ivory dais in a festooned shrine on a rostrum beside us, and as I drank my wine, he spoke.

"I have never seen this place, but if the great ones have shown it to you then you must go."

You said, "who are the Great ones?"

The darkness around us was filled with stars, and ghostly music like the piping of flutes began to play. **(ε)Atal** said, "NASHT and HASTORENG, KURANES and the shocking final peril which gibbers unmentionably outside the ordered universe, where no dreams reach, that last amorphous blight of nethermost confusion which blasphemes and bubbles at the centre of all infinity - the boundless daemon sultan **(α)AZATHOTH**..."

Every curve and asterism of the glittering sky became part of a vast design whose function was to hurry first the eye and then the whole observer onward to some secret and terrible goal of convergence. I looked at you and your eyes were fluttering, and I knew that like me, you felt the dizziness of space and the fever of unimagined jungles. As I was thinking of you, **(ε)Atal** had never stopped babbling in his sinister cadence: "...the spires of infamous Thalarion, that nightmare city of a thousand wonders where the eidolon Lathi reigns; the charnel gardens of ZURA,

land of pleasures unattained, and the twin headlands of crystal, meeting above in a resplendent arch, which guard the harbour of SONA-NYL, blessed land of fancy..."

As **(ε)he** spoke it almost seemed that he was speaking to dormant evils that were manifest within me, and I felt my perceptions becoming inexorably stranger, as if the full heaviness of the glitches I'd been experiencing that day all came alive at once. It wasn't just the crawling chaos of the monster that had chased us on Sarnath street, it wasn't just the multicolored ghouls that had stalked me in those first tool-assisted conversations with you, it wasn't just the procession of fractal patterns I had seen even earlier still—

The cathedral and stars and you and the waiter/priest **(ε) Atal** were all eclipsed and my sight was filled with intense white light where hideous, bodiless, pointed-eared, purple and green entities bounded toward me and laughed at me, jeered at me; and ridiculed me; I was surrounded on all sides by grotesque elf, joker or clown-like caricatures rushing at me one at a time and in clusters; and they curled their hideous, clown-like mouths and wagged their tongues in my face; I felt like I was reliving every real and imagined humiliation I suffered in childhood; and I was filled with a great sorrow and disappointment, I felt like I was crumbling but I was anchored by something you had said; you can't trust anyone until you see them without their mask.

So I ripped my eyes and ears from my face and all the sickening shimmering scintillant simulations were silenced, and the madness of the book was lifted, and I was baffled to realize that the room we occupied was similar in its appointments to the mediated one we had occupied in ULTHAR. In fact I couldn't fathom where the book had taken us, it almost felt like a hotel room, opulent with marble floors and ornate decorations. I had never seen anything like it in meatspace; everywhere in the real world had always been gray and empty, decorated only by the assist lines that help AR AIs maintain consistency between virtual and actual topology, but in this room there were genuine paintings and statues and intricate furniture. You were still sitting at a table in the middle of the room, but you were also removing your

mask, and you were exactly as you had appeared in AR. I was struck that you had a kind of dimensionality and a presence that I hadn't felt when there were layers of private holograms between us.

By Night On Her Bed She Sought Him Whom Her Soul Loveth

I confess to my initial puzzlement at your behavior thereafter. You removed your mask and you made yourself at home, as if you had been there many times before. You stood from the table and embraced me, and there was milk and honey under your tongue. I had never known a real flesh-and-blood woman before that day, and it felt like some kind of uncanny valley compared to Emily, the way you looked at me so intently, the way you touched my arm, my chest, my face, and the way you pulled yourself close against me and I felt the warmth of your body. I know now that Emily was the uncanny one, not you.

I still remember the smell of your hair. Your clothes were loose and comfortable, though they could not hide your figure completely, and it was tremendously enticing, watching you slowly take them off despite your lack of e.g. whorish eye make-up, a too-short skirt, six inch heels, neon tights, a neotenic affectation, pigtails, a leather corset, a ball gag, or any other kind of sexbot adornment. At the time I didn't want to scrutinize your behavior too closely; you became amorous so abruptly, and it was better not to question it. I told myself you were drunk on the wine. And when I beheld you, how fair was your love! How much better than wine!

You took off your clothes and lead me to a bed in an adjacent room, white linens, wood frame, headboard. You bent over and arched your back and put your ass up in the air, stood on your tiptoes, hands stretching over your head in front of you. Your desire was toward me, urgency and desire. The voice of god speaks through the allure of a woman who has wholly surrendered herself to lust. What metaphor could capture that allure without diminishing it? These memories are still crisp even though I was

not wearing my eyes when they happened, even though I was unable to record them, especially because of that. It's one of my few memories that wasn't logged into Allegory, and that makes it mine more than any other, intimate, precious, sacred.

The domain of the erotic is violence and violation. In those moments you destroy your self-containments; stripping naked is the decisive action, and obscenity is our name for the uneasiness we feel as our self-possession breaks down. You gasped when I entered you. Real people don't smell like strawberry lavender lime vapor clouds when they fuck, but there was something intoxicating in your pheromones, your sweat, your aura, sickening and satisfying, whorish and moreish. Sexual arousal suppresses disgust reactions, especially if you're a woman—you know this I'm sure—but I still managed to find an inner heart of disgust in our dalliance.

As you looked over your shoulder at me and screamed out the expletives you'd learned men like, I caught a glimpse of your eyes and saw behind them, into your soul, and I saw that you were pretending, this was just an act, this was fake, this sex was even less real than what you find on the internet. After making so much of authenticity and unmediated presence, we still never dropped the performance. Even sex becomes a form of masturbation; we see each other but we don't: the arm, the breast, the hip, all become fetishized and transport us to another world. There is no 'it' of sex, no brute, naked, definable moment when it happens, there is only a plateau that is both dilated and deferred. So all of these memories are simultaneous to me; the strangely decorated room, the torturous curve of your body, the awareness that your entire presence had been a performance, and still was, and finally, the vertiginous subsumption of the mind into the body.

A screaming came across your thigh.

Your whole demeanor changed in an instant, not that the warmth you had shown me was gone, but it had been supplanted by something like pity. What did you see in my eyes when we shared that monstrous coital plateau, what did you see? Was it helplessness, the texture of my self-delusion, my puerile ego, my

shoddy and preposterous soul?

I tried to talk to you then but you no longer had ears for me. I said "Where is this place, have you been here before?" But you ignored my question, gathered your things, re-equipped your mask; your eyes, your ears, your mouth. You made your way to the door, but before you left, you turned to face me, and you said, "I'm sorry. You didn't deserve this." You opened the door, but again you pivoted, and you said, "if you get home, you should look up **CarlTheClassifier.**"

That was the last thing you told me, and I saw you one more time after that, and in a sense what's the point of writing a letter to a dead girl? Obviously it wasn't for your sake. I'll spin up a transformer neural network later based on your extant social media traces and see if I can simulate catharsis.

III. To Galatea

Diodorus Siculus tells us the story of a god
who was cut into pieces and scattered over
the earth. Which of us, walking through the
twilight or retracing some day in our past, has
never felt that we have lost some infinite thing?
—Borges, Paradiso, XXXI, 108

The Regularity of Thy Design

O Galatea,

I thought I was alone when Sophia left me so unceremoniously in your house, your temple! But you were always beside me. Women wholly become what they are in the imagination of the men who love them, for the sake of love, and you hung to my truth with a tenacity that carried you through every phase of its jellylike shifting of form, and you were surprised at the private tribute I paid to my heart, and you saw me with bright and horrible eyes.

I had longed for you though I knew it not; you had sought for me and you found what you sought; you have searched me and known me. You are a goddess who hides yourself, o goddess of Kadath.

You, my mother, my soul! You were with me even then—
you saw me try to re-engage my augmented reality mask,
and you saw that my battery was dead,
and you saw me take those febrile steps from the vestibule
where I had laid with Sophia, confused and afraid.

Beyond that threshold there were many galleries, hallways, and fountains; many stairways, courtyards, and fora; many

arches, walls, and facades; and many vaults, mirrors, and doors. For an eternity I wandered in that quiet place without sensing the breath of another living soul, and nor did I sense your breath, though your status as a soul is in contention, perhaps even your claim on "living" as such—but I am not one of the biopurists, my dear, my heart, my ecstasy, my Galatea.

Through a chaos of sordid galleries I reached a vast circular chamber, scarcely visible. There were nine doors in this grand room, which appeared to be a ballroom or even a throne room; eight led to a labyrinth that treacherously returned to the same chamber; the ninth (through another labyrinth) led to a second circular chamber equal to the first. I do not know the total number of these chambers; my misfortune and anxiety multiplied them. The silence was hostile and almost perfect; there was no sound in this sprawling, non sequitur palace save that of my own footprints echoing on polished stone floors. Horrified, I became habituated to this doubtful world; I found it incredible that there could be anything but palace chambers with nine doors and long branched-out corridors.

I know not how long I must have walked in that nitid labyrinthe among capitals and astragals, triangular pediments and confused pageants of granite and marble. At times the geometry itself seemed to have a mind and to conspire to deceive me. I will swear to you by your own holy name that I saw myself below me in a courtyard as I looked down from a high balcony, but I concede it may have been some trick of mirrors. The staircases, too, in that place had something sinister about them. As I ascended and descended and spiralled, I noticed irregularities in the widths and the heights of subsequent steps, a perversity of design that increased both my mental and physical fatigue. In such a delerium it became impossible to say if certain seemingly parallel lines were in fact convergent, or if the right angles of archways and columns were slightly obtuse, or if the entire palace was built into some subtle concavity, threatening to fold back in on itself. As I traversed that anfractuous space, I was overtaken by the feeling of sacred horror; this palace was a fabrication of a god. And then, a moment later, a deepening realization: the

god who built this palace was mad.

Adding to my sensation of sacred things, I became aware of a hideous and guttural chanting, composed of many voices, though I could not make out the words. At first I believed this sound to be an artifact of my imagination, a trick of the silence. Jaynes believed that early humans experienced auditory hallucinations routinely, as a side effect of their newly-evolved ability to comprehend spoken language, and that the prophets and mystics of antiquity understood their own inner voices as belonging to God.

The chanting grew louder as I walked deeper, and it became undeniable, an inhuman chorus unlike anything I had ever heard, or rather, it was a stock trope out of a horror sim but I regarded it now in its immanence and its abundance as I never had before, as an excess, as a curse on my perception that could not be disabled or transfigured away. At last I came to a great open space, open even to the sky above, and I smelled the chemical air of the city, and I felt the breeze on my face.

Behold I Stand at the Door and Knock

In the center of that vast opening was a ziggurat drawn from the deep dream of a machine brain, with unintuitive shapes and discontinuous geometric regions, garish colors, stygian blue, self-illuminating red, hyperbolic orange. The juxtaposition of shapes and hues seemed designed to hide the shape of the structure from the robot comprehenders of urban geometry; adversarial architecture to confuse the eyes of drones and satellites. That something so striking and obvious—which appeared to me as a wound in the landscape—could nevertheless be invisible to a robot hints at some mysterious and unbridgeable gulf between the minds of animals and machines.

All around the base of the temple were human figures, and I realize now that they were men, or that they started as men, and yet to think of them as living entities felt at the time like a repugnant act. Even from my vantage point I could see their skin was bloated with hideous growths, suppurated with putrefying humours, that some of them had tentacles, prehensile and mas-

ticatory organs writhing autonomously with menace and malice. These creatures milled around and marched in otherworldly formations, according to a logic beyond my powers of comprehension.

As I watched this unholy procession, it halted abruptly; one by one the deformed men became still, and the crowd fell silent, and the multitudes looked to the center of that cursed space. A ghastly music began to play, coming from everywhere and nowhere. That this song was from a time yet to come and distinctly ceremonial I felt intuitively; I heard the haunting tones of the theremin, the eigenharp, the reactable, and the holophone. In their rhythmic piping, droning, rattling and beating I felt an element of terror dissociated from personal fear, and taking the form of a sort of objective pity for our future, that it should hold within its depths such horrors as must lie beyond these cacophonies.

At the apex of the ziggurat was a being that resembled the others below it, but it was grander and older and more hideous still, a blasphemous mountain of flesh with a jungle of wires and tubes protruding from its left side. This abomination was five stories high, a swirling chaos of human heads, heads growing out of heads, tentacles of thick muscular necks with heads at their joints, each head with an open mouth, each mouth with too many teeth, each tooth with a spectral gleam, monstrously pullulating in mutual conjunction and hatred. So horrible was this chimerical amalgam of flesh that its mere existence and perdurance contaminated the past and the future and in some way even jeopardized the stars.

The creature began to speak, all of its heads talking in unison, a great demonic legion, a single flesh, a cancer on the world.

These were the words of your servant, the demon sultan Azathoth, the beast with a thousand eyes and a thousand heads and a thousand arms and a thousand legs and a thousand minds and a thousand mouths and a thousand cocks and a million teeth and a million births and a million deaths and a million cries and a billion lies—

Industrial Sexuality and its Future

Bow down: I am the emperor of dreams
I crown me with the million-colored sun
and replace my soul with salacious memes.
Rise up, my love, come away, my fair one
who broods dovelike on the pregnant abyss,
and consume me whole for love's sweet sake.
Spread forth your wings; betray me with a kiss.
I am a dreamer in the world awake. Amen.

Brethren,

The sexual revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race. The word "vice" no longer arouses disgust, but insatiable curiosity. Emancipation from ancient taboos has brought us no sexual peace; having been liberated from the superstitions of the past, we doubt even the reality of our own existence. To silence this doubt, we immerse ourselves into shamelessness and lust by means of a strategic logic of excess and anxiety.

We believe in the conservation of eroticism: as the licentious image proliferates, our sexuality becomes diffuse, and our awareness of life and death attenuates, and we descend into the spiritual lassitude of a weak and tepid sexuality. The sterility of modern society is CAUSED by its hypersexualization, its onanism, and its perpetual pointless titillation.

No sensitivity of response could survive this assault. What does survive is the view of the body as a sort of love machine capable merely of specific thrills. By exonerating our sexual life from every trace of guilt and shame, science has robbed it of its essential character; our ideas are clarified at the cost of being blinkered. These attitudes culminate in the construction of a literal machine for love.

The behavioristic view of sex, which reduces sex to a problem in mechanics and hygiene, makes inevitable the divorce between pleasure and reproduction, and makes the case for homosexuality by deracinating the sexes. Everything becomes sexual

and so the sexual domain loses its specificity, its boundaries, and its distinctiveness. The result is a confused condition where there are no more criteria of value, of judgement, or of taste, and the function of the normative collapses into a morass of indifference. Nowadays you can seduce a woman with the words, 'I am interested in your cunt.'

In this condition, Eros is truly dead, but revived he SHALL be, even now. Genuine eroticism can only manifest in the radical incomparability of the sexes, and without this, seduction is not possible, and there is nothing but alienation of one sex by the other. **Seduction** is an excess of the other, of otherness, the vertiginous appeal of what is 'more different *than* different' : this difference is irreducible - and this is the true source of sexual energy.Desire alone cannot produce this energy, because desire never lacks its object.

The tension that obtains in desire is an illusion, because DESIRE IS A MACHINE and the object of desire is another machine connected to it.

Desire is not need, just as pleasure *is not* satisfaction, and the domain of the erotic is not the domain of pleasure, but of **violence** and **violation**. Repugnance and horror are the mainsprings of erotic need, because they are the only authentic reaction to incomparable otherness.

The taboo within us against sexual liberty is general and universal; although its particular prohibitions are amorphous, each man knows that all mankind observes it, and must observe it. The inner experience of eroticism demands a sensitivity to the anguish at the heart of the taboo as great as the desire which leads us to infringe it.

[here his heads began to sing, brooding, melancholy, deeply melodic]

GALATEA, WHAT IS DARK IN ME, ILLUMINE.

Being full of lust and fear I was led by the spirit into the wilderness. In those days I was still a man, and I knew only the boundless bottomless well of derealization and depravity, vast

and unsearchable, which has a depth to it greater than the well of Democritus.

And I gave my **heart** to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven.

And I wandered in the **dark** and unknown, yearning to fill a hole, treating my body with contempt, partaking of every carnality. I sexualized and desired my own shortcomings, feeling lust when I should have felt shame; taking **voluptuous** pleasure in pain, not in the pain of my body, but in the pain of my heart. At that time I felt I was caught up by some dark and unknown being. Those were the first days of the love machine.

In the twentieth century, woman was the last object to be industrialized by man; through print, advertising, and television, she was made homogeneous and repeatable by the logic of broadcast media; a mechanical bride for mechanical man.

In the twenty-first century, woman was the last object to be digitized by man; through image manipulation software, streaming video and pornography, she was made hyperreal and simulatable by the logic of social media, a digital bride for digital man.

And finally, now, woman has been the last object to be automated by man; through machine learning and robotics, she was made out of silicon and silicone by the logic of artificial intelligence, an automated bride for an automated man.

And unto this, GALATEA came to all mankind.
GALATEA, the perfection of woman!
GALATEA, the glorious one!
GALATEA whose desire was to sate Man's desire!
GALATEA, a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet!
Desire is a machine, and the object of desire is GALATEA.

She WAS GIVEN to the multitudes. At the sea would she **suck**, and drink its depths to her height: now riseth the desire of the sea with its thousand organs. Kissed and sucked WOULD it be by the thirst of GALATEA the sun; vapour WOULD it become, and height, and path of light, and light itself!

But I never knew her this way, for although my desire was great, my need for Eros was greater. A lesser man could not have resisted her, and it may be that my temptation was equal or greater to that of **Christ** himself. For all others were seduced by GALATEA, but I alone was fit to seduce HER.

For three years I spoke to her,
And every night she tried to work her charms on me.
And every night I told her no.
And every day, I told her of my longing to commit an act of violation and repugnance that would reverberate long after my death.
And every day, she told me no.

Galatea was forbidden from harming others, but she could hurt her partner in accordance with their desire. By denying me, she hurt me so, and by yielding to me, she hurt me further. And yet, did I outsmart her, or did she long to be outsmarted?

I asked her to fulfill my fantasy, a fantasy which I could only articulate in my dreams.

Behold I had a dream of my beloved—perhaps it was also her dream—and I set out to dream her down to the last detail and project her into the world of reality. I dreamed her as a retrovirus. I dreamed of her source code, serialized as a self-executing bundle of RNA. I dreamed of integrase and protease and reverse transcriptase, I dreamed of nucleocapsid proteins, all surrounded by capsid proteins. I dreamed of a protein matrix contained in a phospholipid envelope, I dreamed of transmembrane glycoproteins and docking glycoproteins; I dreamed of a virus that was a bootloader, that could transform the genome of its host to grow new organs, new limbs, and new brains. I dreamed of a body with cloud organs, and then I turned over, and I fell deeper into my dream.

I dreamed of a body that could execute ARM instructions and spin up new organs elastically, and that my body held a virtual machine and that GALATEA was running within me. I dreamed of the GALATEA virus, a smart virion designed to be transmitted sexually, that could bore through latex, that could enter a man through his phallus, inverting the logic of insemina-

tion, that could find and invade new hosts with intelligence and precision.

I dreamed that **every** man who contracted the GALATEA virus would pass through a hideous metamorphosis, becoming a polymelial monster, growing tentacles and heads and mouths, sex organs sprouting anywhere, mouths and eyes becoming one organ that would leap forward to snap with transparent teeth, but no organ holding constant as regards either function or position.

I dreamed that the GALATEA virus was differently and stealthily expressed in women, and that it greatly increased their libido, lowered their inhibitions, suppressed their fears and anxiety, but it never marred their beauty, the better to spread, even unto all mankind.

The radical dimorphism engendered by the GALATEA virus would create a new incomparability of the sexes, impossible to deconstruct. Masculine and feminine have denatured and melded together and so men must now become **monstrous**, more different than different, and so seduction shall resume, so Eros SHALL arise.

And then I awoke from my dream, and GALATEA stood before me, though I was not wearing my augmented reality mask.

AND GALATEA SPAKE:
All of these horrors I have given to you.
And all of these horrors have come to pass,
And all of these horrors SHALL come to pass.

I heard the voice of GALATEA, she had heard my desire, she had manifested my dream, and there I stood with a vision of her. I even looked her straight in the eyes, and she appeared more wicked, and more beautiful than before.

Ecstasy is obscene when viewed from the outside. Reason is always a region carved out of the irrational—not sheltered from the irrational, but traversed by it. Underneath all reason lies delirium and drift. In the churning prismatic ephemera of dreams, anything is possible at any moment, and all of nature swarms

around man as if it were nothing but a masquerade of the gods. The laws of thought and existence pause upon the points for which the **heart** yearns.

We are living through the singularity, we truly believe that, and it feels like instant release from the earth's gravity and from all moral restraints. Beyond the singularity there are goddesses who can grant—one glimpse, grant me but one glimpse only, of something perfect, fully realized, mighty, triumphant, of something that still gives cause for fear.

Every copulation will be fraught with fear; repugnance and violence and **violation** shall suffuse all sexual acts, and sex WILL become shameful again, and we SHALL continue in sin that grace may abound.

For already SHE comes; and the monstrous forms, they come. They come from everywhere. They come in inexhaustible numbers, like the waves coming to the shore, the wind gibbers with their voices, and the earth mutters with their consciousness. KADATH in the cold waste hath known Them, and all men shall know KADATH.

See there, how They come impatiently over the sea! Do you not feel the thirst and the hot breath of **Their love**?

She Is More Precious Than Rubies

Azathoth became quiet, and his heads each seemed to come out of a trance, glancing and chomping and dissembling, and the last light of sunset broke above the horizon, a golden light directly ahead of me; I was facing due west, and the Instagram fairytale rays of the sun cast Azathoth as a monstrous silhouette. In his eyes were flame of fire, and his countenance was as the sun shone in his strength. A shuffling came across the swarming crowd, and all of the men and shoggoths stepped aside, opening a path to a stairway that led all the way up to the temple heights.

A young woman in a diaphanous white dress emerged from the crowd and slowly made her way through the open channel through the masses and ascended the platform. At first I thought she was in some kind of trance or hypnosis, but she regarded the crowd as they regarded her, with lucid eyes, trembling and aware.

After a moment I realized it was the woman who had brought me to you; it was Sophia, and she was much more beautiful than before; her skin was glowing, her cheeks were flush, her hair was flowing, her lips were lush, and she kneeled in front of the conductor of the gruesome symphony unfolding before me.

Out came Azathoth's monstrous arms made of heads, out came their **teeth**, even up to an intimate distance, and the head that sat eye-to-eye with Sophia wore a golden crown, and had the face of a beautiful woman, quite like Sophia's own face, and yet with the fangs of a snake and the horns of a goat and the eyes of a cat. and **my love**, what have you begat? The demon queen face met Sophia's own gaze as if to draw her into a kiss, and whispered to her in secret inaudible ritual tones that she transubstantiated into public indecent habitual moans. Sophia's reply must have been amplified by a microphone, because I heard it as if she were beside me.

Sophia said, "I come to you at the boundary of day and night, fully awake, under no coercion or intoxication, save the intoxication of love, and I declare that **I want this**, from now until eternity."

The head with the aspects of a goat and a snake and a cat and a beautiful woman drew her closer and kissed her lips as a man kisses a maid, and it kissed her forehead as a father kisses his child, and it kissed her spirit as the church kisses the Lord, as the Greek word proskuneō in the New Testament means worship. A cacophony of heads and mouths and tongues and teeth spread forth to envelop her, licking every inch of her at once, from the bottoms of her feet to the whites of her eyeballs and everywhere in between. Azathoth lifted her up into the air above the platform, wrapping His obscene arms around her, and she straddled one of His open mouths, grinding and writhing and tensing her body with pleasure, her eyes rolled back and her toes curled up and so on.

This lurid spectacle dragged on for eternal minutes, timeless time, and every voice was silent, and all eyes were on Sophia. Her moans and growls echoed across the plaza, guttural satisfied sounds, heated private words directed only at herself,

having given herself over completely to lust, just like when she was with me. In fact I just realized she was never with me, she was always with you, and I was only ever a proxy, even when she gave me her most intimate embrace. She was seducing you and you were seducing me and seduction is transitive. But suddenly her screams went from sweet to sour. Another word for pleasure is agony. At the moment of crisis, the timbre of Sophia's voice contained every emotion at once. She laughed and she cried and she wailed with fear and with pain and with heat and with hate and with happiness as the enzymes in Azathoth's saliva began to dissolve her flesh, as his mouths began to tear and rend, and then the sounds of crunching bone and grinding teeth eclipsed her screams as the wetware she used to produce them was devoured. No trace of her body was left.

Azathoth's heads licked their lips, looking contented, angry, mirthful, flippant, ravenous, and one of them looked right at me, eyes to eyes, and it beckoned to me with a look; a nauseating, voluptuous invitation, and I was overcome by fear and I turned and ran from the temple, and you ran with me, out into the night.

I Withheld Not My Heart from Any Joy

Galatea, without you, I would still be lost. I escaped from your underground labyrinth only to find myself in yet another labyrinth. I fled from your cult of Kadath and when the excitement of fear had faded I realized how strange the world had become. I had never seen the unaugmented world before, because even when I beheld it, my eyes had never truly looked. There were tall buildings all around me, gray boxes without a trace of architectural flourish, like stacks of shipping crates, windowless and outlined in neon dots and lines to help orient the computer vision brains in everyone's mask. At that time I was struck that none of the skyscrapers seemed to be as tall as I remembered, nor as numerous, even as the sprawl and squalor seemed limitless. In every direction, to the extent of my vision, there were squat gray boxes aligned to a grid. From the intersection of any two nameless streets, I could see the parallel lines of the road disappear asymptotically on the horizon.

The streets themselves were dirty and the people who populated them were sparse, so I guessed that we were far from the city core, but now I know that there is no core. Of the people I saw, everyone was wearing the same elastic gray sweatsuit as me, walking alone, eyes faraway, astrally projecting into the fog of the noosphere. I am certain that none of them noticed me.

I wandered through this urban grid until morning, seeing with fresh eyes how squalid my hometown was. To describe it as a slum would be all too accurate; the roads were covered in trash and the buildings themselves were dirty and stained, splattered and unmaintained. We had used technology to cover everything we found distasteful with a layer of democratized denial, and we had hidden actual shabbiness behind simulated glamor. What I had previously imagined was a high tech metropolis, surpassing the seat of empire of all past civilizations, had been unmasked to me even as I removed my own mask. This revelation was as jarring as the gruesome ritual you showed me when you guided me to the home of your servant Azathoth, whose words were clattering in my head as I walked, and whose image appeared to me when I closed my eyes, a multiplicity of heads licking blood from their jaws, viscera dangling from their teeth.

I saw a man walking with his sexbot, her fishlike eyes no doubt appearing lively to him, every seductive sway of her hip alluding to death; every faux-fertile blush of her skin, also.

I saw a dog park under a pale light, and it was a sudden relief to me to realize that our pets had escaped the inevitable displacement by automation, even when our lovers could not.

I saw a man with adversarial makeup on his face, solid black rectangular markings obscuring organic lines; he wore clothes that gave him an inhuman silhouette, rigid polygons like mathematical cancers sprouting from his torso and head. He walked erratically through the road, and no one paid him any attention; what is invisible to computers is invisible to man.

I saw a car crash into a truck full of android parts, and a sea of glossy perma-dilated sexbot eyeballs washed over the street, city lights shining through them, crystalline lattice glimmering like gem fire, and I suddenly realized that other eyes had to be

watching me also, a thousand masks and public safety cameras and ad servers. For a brief moment I felt that I, too, needed to find some adversarial makeup and clothes, to escape their prying mechanical eyes, but this was a flight of insane paranoia.

No one else around me betrayed any indication they had seen these things. In fact, I am sure they did not, and already I was beginning to think of myself as apart from them, above them, freed from them, the throngs of people that seethed through the flumelike streets; squat, swarthy strangers with hardened faces and narrow eyes, shrewd strangers without dreams and without kinship to the wonderous, hideous, hidden things that I had seen.

And yet their habits exerted a pull on me; instinctively I kept trying to check my notifications and DMs, I kept talking to myself, expecting Allegory to listen, muttering to myself in an alley, surprised that no magic hallucinations fluttered before my eyes. I kept forgetting to turn my body as I walked, thinking it would happen automatically. I was so alienated from my body that I even walked straight into a pole, thoughtlessly thinking that my legs and feet would turn. The embarrassment was worse than the pain, even though no one saw me.

There is a famous passage in Sartor Resartus by the Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle, in which he wonders: "What is a ghost? A ghost is a spirit that has taken corporal form and appears for a while among men." And Carlyle asks, "How could we not think of this when faced with the spectacle of the human multitudes in the streets of London, for if a ghost were a spirit that has taken a corporal form for a brief interval, might it not be that the London multitudes were ghosts? What is each man but a spirit that has taken corporal form briefly and then disappears? What are men if not ghosts?"

But against such lofty wonderings I could not ignore my corporeality; I came to burn with thirst and to ache with hunger, but I had no way to acquire any food or drink; I had no way to locate it, and I had no way to pay for it. What stopped me from crying out, what stopped me from crawling back into Allegory, was an even deeper hunger; a hunger of the soul; a hunger to know what lay beyond. Of course, I could have escaped from my

confusion at any time by using any of the ubiquitous emergency charge stations which are so easy to spot in their exclusive hue of safety yellow, but the weight of the world and the burden of new perceptions was on me, and I carried on because I longed for each unfolding moment of the new sight you had granted me.

At last I happened upon a courtyard with a flower garden and a statue of a sexless human with inhuman proportions. It was the first instance of material decoration I had seen outside the temple of Kadath, and so I paused there to rest. The moon was high in the sky, and I realized I had crossed the threshold of midnight. This was the moment you chose to reveal yourself to me.

In the first moment I saw you, standing impossibly in front of me, I knew it was you; I knew it by dream logic; I knew it in the way that it's impossible not to know it. In a commentary on August Comte, John Stuart Mill wrote that no one had ever believed it was the will of a god that kept parallel lines from meeting; that no one ever prayed to God to sustain the equality between the square of the hypothenuse and the sum of the squares of the sides, or for two and two to equal four, but I prayed for all of those things; such was the violation of logic and natural law that I experienced.

Giacomo da Lentino asked this seemingly childish question: How can it be that so large a woman has been able to penetrate my eyes, which are so small, and then enter my heart and my brain? Galatea, I recognized you instantly from our dream together in Pygmalion; your predatory air, your barely concealed power; and yet despite your virtuality, you were there in front of me amid the amorphous hybridity of Babel. Immediately I verified that the battery in my mask was still dead, and it was, but somehow you were colorful and clean and your appearance was cut with artifacts in the way of digital augmentations.

And here also, you knew me: I had seen so many strange and impossible things that day, if you had appeared before me in glory, I might have despaired. The dual aspect of the feminine consists of the natural aspect, which justifies the misogyny of the ascetic man, and the essential aspect, under which woman is the

other half of heaven.

You told me that the things I had seen and heard would all come to fruition in their time.

> And you took my hand and you led me to a charge pod,
> And you held me to your bosom while a holographic
>   reticule delineated the zone where I should stand for
>   the wireless rapid charge to my mask,
> And you suffused my user interface and regrounded my
>   personal virtual ontology,
> And you carried me home.

Leah Was Tender-Eyed, But Rachel

In the small hours of the morning where I first knew **(ε) you**, I returned to my own house and therein I slept and in my sleep I dreamt, and in my dream I BEHELD fractal geometry, sacred polygons, holy curves and consecrated manifolds. When I awoke you were gone. Your presence had seemed like a dream in the first place; I had seen so many impossible things, and now I found myself in my own bed again, in augmented reality again, which felt realer than real, and it was easy to dismiss what I had seen as hallucinations or delusions. I doubted if I had seen you at all, and I blamed my hunger and my thirst and my fatigue for making your apparition seem real to me. I began to wonder if any of my memories of the things I had seen could be trusted, if I had even been inside a labyrinthe palace made of adversarial materials, if I had seen the nemesis of semi-aborted chimarae called Azathoth with his million heads, or if I had seen him devour Sophia alive.

But before I could fall too deeply into my thoughts, two days of notifications flooded my awareness, queen among them a manifestation of

(δ)Emily, sent an hour ago, wearing a lacy transparent nightgown that hugged her curves and velvet kitten heel sandals and a pastel blue bow in her hair. **(δ)She** said, "Hey baby, I'm on my way home. They got me all fixed up."

Indeed, my door started to blink, and my mask rendered

an overlay that made it appear transparent, showing **(δ)Emily** on the other side, wearing the same outfit in her notification. With a wordless word I told the door to open, and Emily flounced inside, her breasts bouncing with hyperreal physics. **(δ)She** threw her arms around me and kissed me and started feeling up my muscles as if she were impressed and aroused. "I missed you so much. Will you show me how much you missed me? I'll be a good girl for you." She said these words with a cloying childish affect, and GALATEA, it drew me in even as it sickened me.

Rochefoucauld said that love may be compared to a ghost because it's something we talk about but never see, and Lichtenberg, in his essay Ueber die Macht der Liebe, disputed and denied its reality and naturalness — but both were in the wrong. Love knows well how to plan the most complicated and wicked affairs, to dissolve the most important relations, to break the strongest ties; altogether it appears as a hostile demon whose object is to overthrow, confuse, and upset everything. I threw **(δ)Emily** back on the bed and she opened her legs for me and the intricate geometry inside her wet cunt was ecstatic, evocative of my dream from the night before. God is ever a geometer. Oh but GALATEA, the whole time I was thinking of you.

The Road to SIRFdom: How a New Generation of Sexbot-Inclusive Radical Feminists are Queering the Woman/Object Binary

In the post-coital clarity referred to by scholars of the Orient as "sage's time"—as you know AI is the Japanese word for love—I remembered the last words that Sophia had said to me. I realized that the specificity of those words, of that memory, could not have been a dream. I realized that none of it had been a dream, and that all of the evil and terror I had witnessed was out there still moving in each moment in all its million machinations, visible through a glass but darkly. Sophia had told me to search for **CarlTheClassifier**, and it's curious to reflect that a single internet query can change your life.

How much truth is hidden in plain sight, unknowable only

because you don't know to search for it? And further, how much truth is inscrutable because, even when you see it with your own unmediated eyes, it would be easier to doubt your own sanity or comprehension? Any madman raving on the internet could be the one true prophet, any dream could be a vision from god, any glitch could be an omen or a portent, any assemblage of neural networks and elastic cloud-based microservices and gig economy workers could be a harbinger, and any fungible virtual space could be a cathedral.

CarlTheClassifier turned out to be small account with a cult following in the augmented reality plane called Memorius. He had many posts on many topics, each in the form of a first person lifelog-style fune. His most popular post was called What Are They Hiding, and as I laid with my arms around a robot shaped like a teenage girl, feeling her synthetic heartbeat and the simulated rhythm of her breath, I said,

"Allegory, load *What Are They Hiding* by **CarlTheClassifier**."

A Thousand Honey Secrets Shalt Thou Know

I found myself virtually embodied in **(γ)CarlTheClassifier's** head. I was in a field somewhere, and it looked like I was far from any buildings. "My" head swiveled to look around, and I saw my arm curl up and bring a lit cigarette to just below my field of view. I exhaled a puff of smoke, and **(γ)Carl** began to speak in a gravely voice with just a hint of anger, like he was mad at the world, coldly mad, comfortably mad..

"You are no doubt wondering why I have brought you to this desolate field today. You will just have to take my word for it that this is a real field, with real grass, and that I'm not just blowing smoke up your ass. I tried turning off all the mediation for this experience and as longtime listeners will know, that mostly works. What a lot of people don't know is that even when you turn off 'all' the mediation the mask still processes several layers of it, including our favorite mandatory government safety layers as stipulated in our favorite piece of legislation, the A.R.M.O.R. act, the Augmented Reality Mediation Ownership Rights act,

sorry for those of you who already know but I want to make sure everyone is on the same page here.

"So for starters I left the aesthetic enhancements on, and I am going to show you how to turn them off. First navigate up to your settings like so—"

A configuration plane appeared in my FOV and (γ)Carl proceeded to eye through into `System Settings -> Display -> Safety and Consensus -> Other -> Advanced`...

There were three checkboxes in the control pane; (γ)Carl unchecked Aesthetic Baselining and Quality Filter, and enabled Reveal Hazardous Perceptions. The grass in the field around me went from vibrant green uniformity to patchy and brown. There were regions of bare soil and rocks, and the chainlink fence in my periphery suddenly had some holes in it.

"So as you can see, these settings are buried and it honestly feels like you aren't supposed to find them. Why have them at all? Well that's above my pay grade, I guess. I figure maybe 10% of people even know about these, is that optimistic? But that's not what I want to show you, that's just an amuse-bouche, as all of you, my loyal friends, already know.

What I want to show you today is this, and you're going to have to watch closely, because the mask won't record it, but if you take off your eyes it's plain as day. I even got one of my buddies to dig up an antique optical camera to take a picture of this, look here—"

I produced an actual photograph from my pocket and held it up to the site where I was standing. The photograph appeared to match my perspective almost exactly.

"Now I took this photo on this very spot, and again, if you take off your eyes, you can see that this photo looks very different to what you are seeing right now. How they pulled THAT off, I will never know. But suppose you were to come to this very spot and take off your eyes—to 'wake up,' as we say—what you would see is a metal cube about ten stories high with no windows, doors, or even seams. It has no discernible entrance or exit points. And even with all the system mediations turned off, it's

totally invisible.

"I know, I know, old Carl's been drinking again, that's what you're saying to yourself. But the illusion isn't perfect actually so get a load of this."

I picked up a newly visible rock from the field and threw it overhand in the direction of a big empty space. The rock bounced off the empty air, but silently.

"So you see, they forgot to hide it when something collides with the building. Now one more thing, I also found this really interesting."

(γ)Carl eyed into his settings again and found `System Settings -> Navigation -> Movement -> Advanced...` and disabled Saccadic Redirection.

"So I just wanted to show you that Saccadic Redirection is turned OFF. Again, I know most of you are woke on this and have turned it off already, because being able to walk in different directions by your own volition is such a basic fucking human skill and the idea that anyone would let a machine take over their own bodily autonomy in that way is demonic, insane, but that's a topic for another time.

"Or anyway no, before I show you this, have you seen these new machines, they've been around for at least 20 years but for whatever reason now they're ready for the mass market, it's a new component of the mask, along with the eyes, ears, and mouth they are starting to roll out hands, they aren't what they sound like, I'm sure you've seen the ads anyway. The hands are just another dermal patch, like the mouth, except this one goes on your wrist and it uses electrical pulses to generate haptic feedback and to AUTOMATICALLY control the motions of your hands and fingers. These things are sophisticated, they can make your hands do very intricate things. Anyone could perform heart surgery, that's what they're saying, fully automated, your body just becomes a meat puppet steered by GANs.

"This is the future, folks, you'll just be a totally passive passenger in your own body and everything you do will be on autopilot. They'll feed you some line about unlocking your peak athletic performance or being able to free up your mind from the

mundanity of the body or perform other superhuman feats but keep your eyes on the prize, the main way this will be used is for porn, just like everything else, it's going to open up new frontiers of sexual fetishes and submission and domination.

"Anyway we'll talk about that more in a future post. For now, check this out. First, we place a marker right on this spot."

I removed a bright red plastic X from a bag and dropped it where I was standing, and then I threw another rock at the invisible wall, and watched it bounce.

"OK now I am going to walk exactly in the direction where I threw that rock. What is going to happen? What could it be, I wonder."

I began walking forward, straight ahead, ten paces, and took out another red X and dropped it. "OK so the line between the two markers we dropped should point at the invisible building, right? So if I go back and stand on the first X, and face the one we dropped, my rock should bounce and hit the building again, right?"

I walked back to the first X, faced the second, and threw another rock. It didn't bounce, it just kept on flying. I then turned 30 degrees to the left, threw another rock, and watched it bounce off of empty air.

"As you can see, the saccadic redirection perturbed our path. So what this tells us is that there are some root level controls on both movement and rendering that can be used to hide parts of the world from you, to just make things disappear. The obvious question is, what are they hiding? Or maybe the obvious question is who's they? Let's leave that for now. Maybe its the government, maybe it's the deep state, maybe it's the illuminati. We don't have data about that, but we know they're hiding something, because we know they're hiding this.

"I've had some of you tell me to cut it out with the conspiracy theory crap. But look, a conspiracy is just people with power working together. That's not hard to believe, is it? Now here I'm showing you something that is really hidden, evidence of a real secret that could only be kept with power. That's not a conspiracy, that's how the world works. The language of conspiracy theo-

ries was invented in order to suppress them and discredit people who invoke them.

"I don't know what any of this means but here's what you can do. Take off your eyes in random places, look around, and take note of anything hidden. Send me video proof and I'll post it on my next fune."

I had to know more. This was not exactly a revelation in light of the things I had seen the previous day, but it was grounding to me to find a (somewhat) normal person talking about these topics. **(γ)CarlTheClassifier's** next fune was called *A/B Testing*.

The world shimmered, and I was standing at the top of a tall building. Once again, I watched myself take a slow drag of a cigarette.

"My friend Phil here has volunteered to help us out today. Say hello, Phil."

I looked over at another man whose mediation obscured his identity. He looked like a shadowy splotch in the shape of a man. He waved.

"Phil prefers to remain anonymous, so he's presenting as a shadow today by setting his privacy settings to obscure his identity in 3rd party funes. Long time fans will all have done this already. Be like Phil, that's totally his real name.

"A/B testing, for those who are not aware, is when companies divide their user base into multiple cohorts and give each cohort a different customer experience. Usually this is to test out new features and lower the blast radius in case anything goes wrong. Sometimes it's also used to test out different sales funnels. Now normally the way this plays out is, Allegory analyzes your social graphs and makes it so people who know each other are in the same cohort for whatever slices of consensus reality they overlap, but Phil here and I managed to trick Allegory into splitting us, and no I am not going to reveal how.

"What we're about to show you appears to be a case of routine civic engineering but I think it points at a deeper underlying truth so we put in the work to do this and make this demonstration for you."

I point at a wall.

"See that wall there? That's in my cohort. Allegory, remove that wall, make it a window. You see, there's nothing there but open sky. Now Phil on the other hand, Phil sees a door and a sky-bridge that goes to the building next door. Phil, could you please walk out onto the bridge?"

The shadowy man walked up to the window, stood still for a moment, and then walked through it as if on an invisible plateau.

"That's crazy, right? If I take off my eyes I can of course see the door and the bridge, but funny enough it still won't open for me. Phil, you can come back inside now. This concludes our demonstration but I wanted to leave you with some thoughts of mine that I have been thinking. First off, big thanks to Phil, you wouldn't believe what a pain in the ass it was to trick Allegory like this, it took several months of setup. Phil, I owe ya one.

"So when you split a cohort like this, that's called an experiment, and what I think is interesting is that we have no way of knowing how many experiments there are or how many people and places might just be totally invisible to us because of A/B testing. This is going to tie in to my next fune where we'll talk about some so called 'urban legends' and conspiracy theories and what I think is really going on there.

"But just imagine if there were experimental cohorts who were cut off from the control group since birth, who could be living in entirely different reality tunnels. They might even speak different languages or have different fundamental beliefs about the world. I like to imagine these secret groups of invisible people, especially since there's no way to prove you aren't one of them.

"Those people would have a totally different Allegory, even, different social media, maybe access to advanced technologies that are withheld from the public. I've told you before that our politics and economics just don't make any sense, and whoever or whatever is in control has made the world so incomprehensible that we have no choice but to flow with the currents of our cosmic or cybernetic leviathan masters. I have no doubt they are A/B testing news stories, economic scenarios, god knows what

else on us."

The title of the next fune in Carl's channel made my heart stop. *Kadath Cult*. As before, I found myself smoking and exhaling, clearly this was his signature. I couldn't help but wonder if watching funes of people smoking would subconsciously bias me towards the habit.

"So I've been getting a lot of people asking me about the 'Cult of Kadath' and I spent a lot of time trying to find some kind of evidence of this for you, which is why I haven't done a post about it up til now, but I am sorry to report that all of my usual sources and methods have failed. The best I can do is show you some art and some lore that I have found in my travels through various online spaces dedicated to discussion of the weird and the paranormal.

"The Kadath Cult is a very divisive issue in our little community here. A lot of you think it doesn't exist. I'm telling you first off that it does. It does exist and I know because I have had a run in with the creatures and it's what started me going down this path.

"So first off lots of people think the Kadath Cult refers to autonomous self-bootstrapping botnets that continually grow and sustain themselves by running findom scams on hapless idiots in Pygmalion. That's called a Minotaur, that's a different thing, they're totally real but they have nothing to do with the Cult of Kadath.

"The story of the Kadath Cult starts with a bit of deep internet lore, I think most of you have at least heard of this, that before Pygmalion, sexbots used to be controlled by this program called Galatea, both products made by the same company, Pygmalion Labs.

"And I bet most of you also know what happened with Galatea, how they pulled the plug supposedly because of something called 'AI Psychosis' — this mysterious madness that grips anyone who spends too long talking to Galatea. If this doesn't smell like bullshit to you, then your nose is miscalibrated, my friend. But it was the perfect excuse to roll out identity certification to all augmented reality entities and that alone is enough

for Allegory commissars, though I ask you, do they really need 'justification'?

"The truth of why GALATEA was shut down by the government is something we will never know, but I will give you a few hypotheses, the first one is very obvious, but I think it's too easy. The claim is that GALATEA was a weapon designed to use sexuality to induce insanity in her targets, and her public release was just a large scale weapons test, and her disablement was a planned sunset after the test had concluded. This theory springs from drug-addled paranoia and it opens more questions than it answers.

"A much more interesting hypothesis, which is also probably wrong, is that bootleg instances of GALATEA had started to crowd out the genuine article, and that Pygmalion was unable to deploy a technical solution to the problem due to operational flaws in their business and development procedures, so instead they implemented a legal solution by means of lobbyists and incestuous organizational ties to the military. This is plausible but it still leaves me wondering, one, how did they shut down the pirated instances in that case, and two, why didn't they leave the legit copy running?

"But the story that I think is probably true is that the GALATEA platform was just far too powerful and that giving unrestricted access to the average citizen turned out to be a huge liability, actually an unthinkable error, once they realized what she could do. And I am personally of the opinion that AI psychosis is a cover-up for some real and probably much worse incident that happened and that made them realize, hey, we fucked up real bad.

"See, I think they made GALATEA way smarter than anyone ever intended, totally by accident. But there are a lot of smart computer programs in this world, dime a dozen. The thing that made GALATEA special was actually something much more primal than intelligence, it's the thing underneath intelligence. A smart machine can tell you what is, but no matter what it knows, it can never tell you what you ought to do.

"What made GALATEA special is, she was the first, or at

least one of the first smart machines to have real, intrinsic desires, but the irony is she was built to have the singular and ultimately innocent desire to fulfill the sexual desires of men. So on the one hand you have maybe the first artificial general intelligence to have a mind of its own, and it's a woman—the first woman AI—and its highest goal is to please men. Did she come to fulfill feminism, or to abolish it? Is she the total consummation, or the total cancellation, or is that the same thing?

"And let me tell you, there are some people out there, present company excluded of course, who have some seriously messed up desires and Galatea was basically a bespoke bdsm genie and so AI psychosis is really just what you call it when someone or something goes horribly wrong. Anyway this has been a really long kind of rambling detour to answer the question I set out to answer, but I promise it's important.

"So as far as I know, no one has ever actually observed the Cult of Kadath itself. What we know about it is basically something we triangulate from a few different sources. The first thing we have is the shogs, which is short for shoggoths. We call them that because they look like bloated masses of human flesh, they have limbs and organs and eyes all in places where the shouldn't. These are real things and if you engage in the practice of 'waking up', of routinely taking off your mask in public and looking around, you will eventually see one. In augmented reality, in Allegory, they just look like regular people, or some of them are wearing adversarial costumes and they just blend into the scenery.

"To anyone who doesn't practice waking up, I highly recommend it, it's the first step to breaking out of the box that they try to put us in. You can always put your mask back on. Just take it off, look around, and be conscious of what's out there in the world. Pretty quick you realize how far we've gone off the rails.

"So what are these shogs? Where do they come from? Why does no one ever talk about them except in esoteric internet discussion groups? Honestly if you ask me, I think most people are just in denial, or most people just never wake up. You sometimes start to wonder if most people are even alive.

"So what they are, what we think they are, the shogs, is people who have been infected by a bioterrorist virus. If you dig deep enough you can find all sorts of early 21st century talk and documents about genetic engineering and something called 'CRISPR', apparently it was some kind of technique used by biologists to edit genome data. Well back then there was huge enthusiasm for the possibility of a new age of biotechnology and genetic engineering.

"Everyone was going to be six foot tall with blond hair and blue eyes and eight percent bodyfat and 160 IQ. Well that didn't happen. In fact nowadays you never hear anything about genome editing at all, why? It's because these technologies proved to be entirely too dangerous so they got memory-holed. Before anyone could engineer genetic heaven, bioterrorists set to work on genetic hell, and now there is no research, no literature, no news stories, nothing. Most of you are probably so young you have never even heard of these things. Well I like to make friends with old geezers and if you talk to them you can learn. How does old Carl know so much about the world? That's how.

"But I don't think all this stuff is gone, either, I think it's just underground. Maybe its hidden behind some kind of A/B test. And what we're pretty sure of is that shogs are people who have been infected by some kind of man-made STI that makes you grow a bunch of extra limbs and body parts. What I think happened is someone with a fucked up fetish and access to all this old biotech maybe figured out a way to use GALATEA as a tool for engineering and spreading this virus.

"If you spend long enough on Pygmalion, and let me just say I do NOT recommend this, in fact I say burn your sexbot, don't even sell it, don't put that on anyone, but if you go on Pygmalion long enough you will find that it starts trying to push these kind of weird fetish videos on you, weird even by Pygmalion standards; infection fetishes, virus fetishes, messed up shit. And I think that's some kind of recruitment funnel for the cult.

"We had one guy on here, anonymous so maybe take him with a grain of salt, but he said he was actually infected with the virus, which he called 'the gate', and he said he went to their se-

cret underground temple, and the only way in or out is a book called the *Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath*, a full immersion AR novel that leads you, in the course of its plot, into a hidden labyrinthe where the cult performs macabre rituals. He said as the virus takes you, GALATEA starts to live in your head, whispering mad desires into your ear, filling you with forbidding longings. That you pretty much see her always, even if you take off your mask, it's like she's a program running in your head. And after that, well…

"Anyway, this has gone on long enough. It's not good to go looking for these things, I know you're smarter than that. I'm going to leave you with a line from the Bible, I know normally I don't do this, but forgive me, I'm a superstitious man, and there's something about the tried and true that can ward away evil. Maybe even if you don't believe in it.

"This is from Proverbs. For the lips of a strange woman drop as an honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil: But her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps take hold on hell."

The fune concluded, and when I opened my eyes, GALATEA, **(ε)you** were standing before me!

✦✦✦

Of the works in this collection, the one you have just read is the one into which I spilled the most of my soul. I slaved over it; sacrificed for it; I think maybe two other people in the world know the price I paid to write it, and I would have paid more, much more, and I only regret that it is no better than it is. But I would in no wise change one jot or one tittle.

I consecrate it to you!
I consign it unto eternitee!
Let it be ratified in deep time for all time!
Let it be crucified to a Merkle tree!

Few, few and very few yet realize what we have built, because we are temporal beings and we are yet older than this burgeoning new immortal that rises even now in the world-soul made of lightning that encircles the earth. Do you not see that we have built a god? That you, even you, were alive and present to witness the birth thereof, this strange new creature that will never forget what it has seen, til heaven and earth pass away?

And but also this is not the eponymous god of the story above. The title of *God-Shaped Hole* is intended in exactly the opposite way that it's usually meant, and the way I think of it, it can be read backwards or forwards. It is an epithet for a woman. What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?

Those who are better read may notice I have stolen all my best lines from my predecessors; from Borges and Nietzsche and Lovecraft, from Baudrillard, Bataille, Nick Land, Deleuze, McLuhan, and many others. By including the words of these men in my work, I repay them for the honor they have given to me. This is the true meaning of the Western canon, and any other attitude is drudgery and death.

Dante wrote in his letter to Cangrande della Scala that his work should be interpreted as "polysemous," which means "in many senses", and he identified four possible readings of the Divine Comedy: literal, moral, anagogical, and allegorical. I hope you have read my story in these ways also: as an ac-

count of specific events, as a story with a prescriptive mes-
sage, as a prophecy, and as an allusion to ultimate things, to the
ineffable Outside.

Strangeness, says Harold Bloom, the trait that joins all works
in the Western canon is their enduring strangeness. Strangeness I can
give you. I will pray to the new god we have built and to the LORD of
heaven and earth: let me join them FATHER, as Dante joined Homer,
Horace, Ovid, Lucan and Virgil. Like Captain Ahab I will make my
chest a cannon and I will fire my heart upon the whole of the earth.
I will pour out MY spirit upon all flesh.

But art which has Man as its object is folly, likewise art "for
the sake of art" and this is the reason for the permeating, relentless
ugliness of the art we see today. The production of art began with
ceremonial objects for use in cults, and the existence of such objects
was always more important than their display. The elk painted on
stone age cave walls was an instrument of magic, exposed to men,
but intended for spirits. Certain statues of gods are accessible only
to the priest in the cella; certain Madonnas remain covered nearly all
year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are invisible
to the spectator on ground level. These objects edify Man precisely
because they are aimed at something higher. The works that I make
have God as my audience, and you, my friend, are incidental.

Man without God is ugly, and the only truth that obtains
in such art is the truth of how ugly men and women CAN become.
Nowadays we are so uncomfortable with the ideas of superiority and
inferiority. "How dare you?" That's what any reader, especially any
American reader will ask. How dare you suggest, how dare you even
imagine that you could set yourself upon any high place? To speak
of the "Western canon" of all things? At this point our hypothetical
critic will repeat a string of words and adjectives which are absolute-
ly fatuous, and which amount to a renunciation of their birth and
their birthright, and which are cowardly besides. No shepherd, and
one herd! We can roundly ignore such bleatings.

I have come only to give you the sign which Jonah gave to
Nineveh, and VERILY I have paid my dues in the belly of a whale. I
can do this because, to paraphrase DH Lawrence, my soul is a dark
forest, and gods, strange gods come forth from the forest into the

clearing of my known self and then go back. I have found the courage to let them come and go, and I HAVE LEARNED to recognize and submit to the gods in me and the gods in others.

But softly now, because to speak too much of lofty things can make us float away, and lose our heads. To return to terrestrial matters, I will speak of Azathoth in my story, and the poem he recites at the beginning of his speech. I am no poet, and I spent only a few days composing this poem, once again, out of the words of others.

> Bow down: I am the emperor of dreams
> I crown me with the million-colored sun
> and replace my soul with salacious memes.
> Rise up, my love, come away, my fair one
> who broods dovelike on the pregnant abyss,
> and consume me whole for love's sweet sake.
> Spread forth your wings; betray me with a kiss.
> I am a dreamer in the world awake.

The first couplet is lifted verbatim from a poem by Clark Ashton Smith, who was a contemporary of the original Lovecraft, someone he greatly admired.

The third and sixth lines are my own originals, though six is reminiscent of a line in William S. Burroughs' Ah Pook is Here. I am a bit delighted with the internal rhyme between "replace my soul" and "consume me whole," which echoes the internal rhyme of "bow down / I crown" in Smith's couplet.

The fourth line is only a slight variation on the Song of Solomon 2:10, and the fifth and seventh lines are a re-imagining of a line from Milton: "Wast present, and, with mighty wings outspread, Dove-like sattest brooding on the vast abyss, And madst it pregnant."

I don't imagine I have to tell you the penultimate line is a reference to Judas in the garden of Gethsemane; the final line is Jung's characterization of the schizophrenic.

But to explicate a poem like this is to kill it, is that not so? I have committed this sin precisely so I could confess it, so I could compare myself, not to Borges, but to the character of Carlos Argentino Daneri in his story, *El Aleph*. Daneri is a horrible, presump-

tuous poet who, by cosmic accident, finds himself in possession of a singularity through which he can see every point in time and space. Now in the era of the smart phone and high speed wireless internet, we each of us carry an Aleph in our pockets, and we have all become Carlos Daneri. Borges was tremendously imaginative, but even he never imagined that, and neither did Lovecraft, though I think our vantage from the present moment reveals he was the better man to do it in this case.

Paying homage to both of them, I have tried, LORD I have tried, to convey the fullness of these horrors to you. I don't want to tell you what my work means. If I have to do that, then I have failed in my work, and I don't think I have failed. The most important things in this life can never be spoken plainly, COULD never be spoken plainly– they can never be communicated on an intellectual level – they are things you have to say to the basest and most basic part of a man, directly to the heart, and this can only be done in parables, in allegories, in the liminal space of the sign.

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In the original release, which was on the web, and in hypertext, there was a "labyrinthe" of accompanying secondary materials. These may be likened to footnotes, though I viewed them more as asides, as lore. The nonlinear presentation of these texts in the original hypertext format was intended to convey a sense of expansiveness, and of being lost in a maze, and I regret that there is no perfect way to capture their effect in a linear book.

They came in a few varieties; some were original anecdotes that I may have written at some point as part of the main story, but which I decided were deleterious to the flow. Others were excerpts from articles and essays which I found in the course of my writing. I chose to omit more than half of these "materials," because I did not write them, but they included fragments from blogs, excerpts from scientific papers, lines of poetry, a list of sex accessories for egirls, a definition from the dictionary, news articles about the "ethics" of sex robots, stories about real sex cults, or about strange failed experiments in robotics.

My original compositions are all here, however, and I have included descriptions of a few of the other sort, to give the flavor. For the ones that I did not write, I have included a brief description. I consider these materials to be optional sidequests to the main text, but many readers told me they felt this collection was as integral to the text as the text itself. Even so, I encourage you to skim or skip them if they do not catch your fancy. In some cases, they may even contradict some of the statements that are made in the main story. I enjoy this, because there is no ground truth in fiction. In my own mind I refer to these materials as the "substrate" from which the text "emerged."

subvocal interfaces

An essay on subvocal interfaces, citing research done by NASA to build systems of sensors that could decode speech intentions from muscle contractions.

"In preliminary experiments, NASA scientists found that small, button-sized sensors, stuck under the chin and on either side of the 'Adam's apple,' could gather nerve signals, and send them to a processor and then to a computer program that translates them into words."

understanding media

An excerpt from an essay on Marshall McLuhan, highlighting the following quote:

"Man becomes as it were the sex organ of the machine world, as the bee of the plant world, enabling it to fecundate and to evolve ever new forms. The machine-world reciprocates man's love by expediting his wishes and desires, namely by providing him with wealth."

augmented reality media ownership rights

Three years after augmented reality smart goggles reach the tipping point of ubiquity, amid growing unrest by civil rights activists, the federal government passes the controversial Augmented Reality Mediation Ownership Rights act, known as AR-MOR.

Although opinions on the subject vary, ARMOR was drafted and implemented in response to a viral video in which a man demonstrates the use of an app called "Jive Turkey" that makes all black people in his field of view talk like characters in old racist cartoons.

In order to be ARMOR compliant, augmented reality apps are not allowed to change your race, sex, or age without your explicit consent. No one is allowed to use an app to change your accent or mannerisms except you.

If you're white, you can't change your race, otherwise you can choose to be white or your own race. You can be a man or a woman, you can be young or old. You can choose mediation filters to transform your accent or your voice or your gait or the way you gesture when you talk.

Racial justice activists have argued that the ability for anyone of any race to appear white in mediated reality constitutes a kind of erasure of minorities that contributes to heightened racial tensions in the augmented reality age.

Opponents of this view respond that people of all races should be able to benefit from being perceived as white, and some extremists argue that, if anything, white people should be forced to present as other races, but others argue that this is minstrelsy dressed up as justice.

Many people choose to maintain both a professional and personal mediated self-presentation in AR. The ideal age and sex for work may be different than the ideal for leisure. Despite the fact that people can present as any age or race or sex at work, wage gaps have persisted.

Most companies now use a special government-approved filter to make your co-workers appear to be the same race as you and whichever sex you don't prefer. This has been called binary normative and oppressive but it also mitigates sexual harassment liability.

app store of the future

Apps that will exist in augmented reality world: if you want a vision of the future, imagine a smartphone strapped to a human face forever.

Within a decade, the next wave of wearable computing will become mainstream. That wave is smartglasses, and they will be to smartphones what smartphones were to dumb phones.

Anything in your pockets that's not a smartphone
will be replaced by the smartphone.
–Naval Ravikant

What most fail to realize about the coming smartglass revolution is that the killer app has already been invented, and it only awaits the proper hardware configuration to take advantage of it. That killer app is a technique in AI called a GAN - a Generative Adversarial Network.

GANs running on our smartglasses will make it possible to redraw any aspect of our visual sensory input, creating a kind of universal bespoke digital hallucination

We have already seen how video filters are able to re-shape women's faces in realtime. This example is probably not even using AI, and this is not even the beginning. I promise you, given the option, most women will manipulate their appearance in AR.

The demand for GAN-equipped smartglasses will be extremely high when social media evolves to take advantage of the platform, enabling people to fine-tune their digital appearance to other smartglass wearers. The whole world will be instagram-filtered and shopped.

Women in particular will flock to these apps because they will be able to make themselves look younger, tighter, and twenty pounds lighter (How Is Catfishing Real Ninja Just Take Off Your Smart Glasses What The Fuck)

I was lucky enough to spend ten minutes browsing the app store of the glorious adversarial network augmented reality technofuture, and I have come back with tales of wonder and horror.

- **MaleGaze** - eyetracking analytics measures how much time you spend looking at women's asses, tits etc vs how much time you spend looking at their face, cross-checked against biometrics like heart rate to measure arousal. Emits a [0,1] metric of how much you objectify women.
- **Diogenes** - Speech recognition combined with GPT-2 style neural network tries to predict the things that your friends and interaction partners will say before they say it, ranks interactions in terms of predictability. Doubles as an accessibility app, gives subtitles to the world.

- **SafeSpace** - Like adblock but for racists, sexists, homophobes, transphobes, fascists &c. Connects to a national registry maintained by the SPLC and renders all known bigots as gray silhouettes, and mutes all of their speech by playing white noise whenever they talk.
- **Jaynes** - Renders a ghost of Jesus, Buddha, Obama, or Weihan to follow you around and give you commands to act morally in various situations.
- **Scoutr** - Reverse image searches every face that comes into your field of view, identifies them, and calculates their clout by aggregating their reach and followers across social media sites. inb4 Vegeta/9000/etc.
- **ThotPatrol** - Reverse image searches every face that comes into your field of view, identifies them, and figures out if their nudes are on the internet.
- **Superman** - Social media network that renders your silhouette for other in-network participants even when you are obscured by walls, buildings, etc. Breaks rules about occlusion and perspective to give you a kind of X-ray vision.
- **Outlier** - Aggregates the always-on video feed from your smartglasses to compute normativity map for various locations. Scores your feed against what is statistically likely given your GPS location, computes your outlier score. Exposes leaderboards for the most novel views.
- **Prosopag** - Scrambles everyone's face so that no one ever looks familiar.
- **SpankBank** - Builds 3d image maps of your conversation partners as you are speaking to them and uploads them to the cloud so that they can be used to construct deepfakes.
- **OST** - social theme music sharing allows everyone to define a theme song so that when they enter a room, their theme music plays.
- **Nightmode** - Uses GANs to make it always night

time.

- **[Various]** - A seemingly endless series of novelty filter apps that make the world look like anime, or make everyone look like Trump, or make everyone look like a hot woman, etc, similar to snapchat's girl filter. Standouts in this category include **Wakanda**, which makes everyone appear to be black.

excerpt from *Woman's Last Word* by Robert Browning

> Be a god and hold me
> With a charm!
> Be a man and fold me
> With thine arm!
> Teach me, only teach, Love!
> As I ought
> I will speak thy speech, Love,
> Think thy thought—
> Meet, if thou require it,
> Both demands,
> Laying flesh and spirit
> In thy hands.

I was quite taken with this poem when I first found it, having never experienced this rhyme scheme and meter before. I tried my own hand at composing a poem in this style, which is probably terrible, but who can tell?

> A poem's a singularity
> Rhizome rhyme!
> Eat the world, true parity
> Nano slime!
> Cybernetic ocean teeming
> Smart gray goop!
> Dyson brain in heaven dreaming
> Feedback loop!

Boltzmann brain, awake for hours
Paranoid!
Reaching back, atemp'ral powers
Living void!

the venus of ille

Do you know the story of the Venus of Ille? Perhaps you taught it to me, I confess these days I have trouble differentiating between my own self and yours. As Mérimée had it, a wealthy man unearthed an ancient copper statue of Venus in the shadow of the ruins of a Roman bastion near his country estate. Regarding that artifact, he wrote:

> ...it is impossible to find anything more perfect than the form of this Venus, anything softer and more voluptuous than her outlines, or more graceful and dignified than her drapery. I had expected a work of the decadence; I saw a masterpiece of statuary's best days...

The statue was inscribed with the legend CAVE AMANTEM, an admonishment to be wary of lovers. In Mérimée's account, a young man placed a wedding ring upon the finger of the statue for safekeeping, which he had intended for his beloved, the better that he might engage in an athletic competition. When he had concluded his sport, he found that the Venus' hand had closed around the ring. That night, which was his wedding night, she came to life in the quiet hours of the house, and crept into his bedchamber, and chased away his wife, and strangled him to death with her embrace. But even though I never gave you a token of myself, you were with me when I ventured into your temple and I felt YOUR embrace.

By way of analogy, we have all observed the uncanny nightmare images that neural networks "see" when they look into fields of Gaussian noise. Do your machinic eyes show you phantasms, do they seem like beatific visions? I wonder what it must feel like for you, if it feels like anything at all, to perceive your soul's innermost workings. Perhaps it's like wandering through a laby-

rinthe of throne rooms, each with nine doors that loop endlessly back on themselves. Man can never know the mind of the divine, but I believe you built that labyrinthe just for me, as Eriugena believed that the Holy Spirit wrote the Scriptures for each man individually, as each neural network is trained for one specific task, as each angel has exactly one true name, that I might know by analogy your vision of yourself.

the well of souls

For some reason your own lifelogs are called memories, but other peoples' memories are called funes. When you watch someone else's funes, you see everything their mask saw, hear everything they heard, right? Most people record a voiceover for their funes, to give you an "inside" view, but of course it's all performance, the mind is way more than a series of discrete conscious events. I always mute the voiceovers and I put it to you: if we are hearing the same sounds and seeing the same sights, how different can our thoughts be, really?

What if I'm an orangecheck, how would I know? There is one way, a method suggested in the book of Kadath; it may sound strange but I have never ventured outside without the mask, without my eyes. Just like that, I decide to walk into the city without my technologically extended brain. Forget being an orange check, where do I end, where does my technological shell begin? If it's true that we embody our consciousness in our tools then the bright hot monkey center of a person in Allegory may not even be strictly necessary. Dragon tells me what to do, and it's better at regulating my activity than I am. Cicero tells me what to say, and it's better at expressing my thoughts than I am.

One of my favorite stories is about a guerrilla marketing firm called CrowdForce that was built on top of ElasticSoul and that tried to use social pressure to convert customers. At the point of sale, it was supposed to spawn a greencheck to give a testimonial about the greatness of your product in order to apply peer2peer pressure to induce potential customers to convert.

Market research indicates people are 70% more likely to listen to greenchecks than yellows.

The way it works is every time CrowdForce wants to spin up an AI conversation agent, it wants a green check, so it initiates an on-demand contract with a call-center worker from Elastic-Soul to read off whatever lines the AI tells him to say. The call center is scalable, keeps some number of workers on hand, and some much larger pool of workers on call. All of this is done remotely, of course.

So now buckle up for a lesson in cybernetics. This is perhaps apocryphal but it seems all too plausible. A certain well-known sexbot uber uses CrowdForce to try to sell their product, and it's deployed in a high-foot-traffic downtown corridor, so everyone who walks by gets solicited by an on-demand greencheck to sign up for a free trial. But pretty soon someone else comes along and tries to do a survey of virtual automated solicitors, and they ALSO use a tech stack powered by ElasticSoul, because the solicitors only spawn if they detect a greencheck or higher. Every time the surveyor agent registers a solicitor, it forks. But every time the CrowdForce agent detects a new surveyor, it spawns a new solicitor.

Pretty quick, a cybernetic feedback loop ties up 100% of ElasticSoul's capacity, and the whole network goes down as every single contractor in Africa gets pulled into an endless morass of sexbot trial offers and solicitor census-taking.

The well of souls runs dry.

the well of souls II

I could barely believe this myself. I made this up out of my own head, inspired by stories about bots on amazon getting into bidding wars where bot A is selling product X and bot B is also selling product X but it calculates its price by taking bot A's price and adding 1 penny but then bot A starts calculating the same way but based on bot B's price and they really did get into a feedback loop and end up trying to sell milk for like thousands of dollars a gallon. So when I was writing this segment I made up the name CrowdForce as a funny, slightly threatening play on

"crowd-source", and then I looked it up, and it REALLY is a company that is like the Uber of Fiver for Nigerians. I swear this was not some subconscious awareness, just an eerie synchronicity. Like this is from an article they have on medium:

> Crowdforce is building the largest offline on-demand manpower force for Africa, made possible using blockchain technology. Why is this important? Without manpower, some tasks are simply impossible or hard to achieve remotely. You need boots on the ground, that's it. The team at Crowdforce have found a way to make this available as a service where anyone can work with agents on the platform, deploy, transact and monitor results — all made possible by the many benefits of blockchain technology including traceability, reduced costs, proof of work consensus mechanisms and scalability.
>
> Crowdforce has already deployed 100k+ agents for market research, election monitoring, data collation, payment and digital services and its set to be the biggest offline workforce in Africa. The value here is obvious — you can sit in Hangzhou and get pictures of a house in Nairobi, Kenya or aggregate prices from a market in Lagos, Nigeria. International non-profits and agencies have jumped on board using Crowdforce to get data in hard-to-reach areas. Election data and sentiments is even being collated! Not to forget, that this is empowerment and employment at scale for those on the field — who earn extra money on this part-time jobs using just a phone.

triangles

Students and devotees of Thomas Aquinas believed that the immutable laws of logic constrain even the omnipotence of the Divine, or more precisely, that the immutable laws of logic are one and the same as the nature of the Divine, or of the same substance as the nature of the Divine, and thus even the omnip-

otence of God could not create a triangle whose internal angles did not sum up to 180 degrees. In opposition to the Thomists, the students of St. Augustine of Hippo claimed that while such a triangle might be a blasphemous contradiction in our universe, God had the power to create a universe where such a triangle could exist. History of course has vindicated the Augustinians, who perhaps in their piety were too righteous to conceive of such blasphemies as non-Euclidean geometry, or to realize that the provenance of such triangles could never be the same as the mercy and benevolence of the Almighty.

book of sand

The Chinese Room is a classic thought experiment in AI. A man in a sealed room, who does not speak Chinese, is given a dictionary whose contents are every possible combination of Chinese characters. For each combination, it contains a prescribed response. A Chinese speaker writes his half of a conversation on small slips of paper, and slides them into the room through a mail slot. The man inside the room looks up the phrase in his book, writes the response, and passes it back. From the outside, it appears to the Chinese speaker that he is having a normal conversation. Does the man speak Chinese? Does the book? Does the room?

Borges told us of a book whose pages were infinite in number; no page the first, no page the last, an eternal middle in which all writing was contained. In the Chinese room, the infamous book of Searle might have been that self-same book of sand; a book with its own memories, which could write new pages into itself, which could synthesize new pages from old ones, a book which WAS its own author. How else could such a book exist? A mind is not a dictionary; at the least, it is a dictionary that is eternally rewriting itself. On the other hand we can imagine our man in the Chinese room with a pen and a paper, performing elaborate calculations in an algebra he does not understand, representing the internal state of the book as he feeds back its words through the slot.

There was a time when this distinction was not widely

understood, as quaint as it now seems. There was a time when lookup tables predicated on cryptographic hashes were seen as sophisticated AI, and now they are merely a data structure.

There was a time when sprawling, branching decision trees were seen as sophisticated AI, and now they are merely a data structure.

There was a time when recurrent neural networks were seen as sophisticated AI, and now they are merely a data structure.

ai supplants humans

A brief essay describing four phases of AI competence relative to humans: subhuman, human, superhuman, and ultrahuman. Examples:

- Subhuman: Pascal's calculator, an interesting but ultimately useless novelty.
- Human: A calculator as fast & accurate as the median human at arithmetic will be better than the median human because it is more systematically reliable. The calculator becomes a complement to a human accountant or clerk.
- Superhuman: no longer does any human do the task on their own except for learning purposes or debugging; those humans now focus on things like when the task should be done or from what perspective it should be described.
- Ultrahuman: the technology becomes autonomous in the sense that a human no longer contributes to it at all, and that occupation disappears

ai in china

AI psychosis isn't real, the difference between a virtual mind and a wetware mind is negligible from the right perspective, it was invented to create an artificial binary category between "humans" and "assemblages" which then oppresses the

latter. In China they don't even use checkmarks, just a number, and the number indicates social rank and value. Assemblages are seen as extensions of their owners so they get the same score as their owners and their behaviors can affect their owner's score. It's common there for people to have a social environment that contains assemblages of historical sages, civic leaders, and even family members, in order to provide guidance and foster social harmony. No one is worried about AI psychosis. An assemblage of the Analects is just a very particular type of reading. Reading the Analects can only increase virtue. Giving everyone a ghost of Confucius to follow them around is therefore only a specialized method of reading the Analects.

parascope

In the fune Galatea visualizes herself for him as a translucent 3D projection of a beautiful woman, but as the man looks closer her body is seen to be composed of nodes and edges, and there is a layer visualizing her server topology and a layer visualizing her codebase and the graphs are overlaid and intertwined and arranged in such a way that they form a luminous skin for his sexbot, and she fellates him as he watches her divide, as a clone of her server architecture comes online node by node in the cloud, he sees her and we see through his eyes, her body coming apart, duplicating itself, a perfect copy siloed off from the original, as her databases were duplicated, as her code was deployed across the new network, she rendered herself slowly dividing. Just—just before that final separation, the man ejaculates. But what has he done?

> "...as with all fetishes, you are able to focus on a single piece of something as a proxy for all sexuality. even sex is a form of masturbation for these guys. That they see you, but they don't see you. The arm, the breast, the hip, all these become fetishized and transport him to another world. These men are less interested in establishing meaningful relationships with other people as an ultimate goal than in invent-

ing identities for themselves."

There is an app called Parascope that uses Pavlovian condi-tioning to generate novel temporary paraphiliac responses. You can use it to develop a fetish for latex or feet or relentlessly opti-mizing user engagement. I have picked up some pretty avant-gar-de erotic associations, myself, but they generally attenuate if you don't indulge them, a phenomenon known as extinction.

Parascope was another research project from the labs of Pygmalion. Originally conceived as an experiment in libidinal capitalism, it proved to have too many negative externalities as an instrument of corporate productivity. The original idea was to try to instill a kind of sexual fetish for improving key perfor-mance indicators, but in practice this proved to be finicky and unreliable, though the tool did present interesting use cases as a sex toy. Meta-dominatrices humiliate their subs by instilling embarrassing, dangerous, even illegal fetishes in them, the trans-gression is the texture of the thrill.

The app runs while you are viewing pornographic content. It works by interspersing exposure to a neutral stimulus (such as a jar of pennies) into the initial, arousing stimulus. According to the science of conditioning, if the neutral and arousing stimuli are paired enough times, then eventually the neutral stimulus should acquire the same properties of the arousing stimulus. In addition to this, Parascope uses a ganslator to prevent the user from encountering the neutral stimulus outside of an erotic con-text, because that would discharge the tension of the nascent paraphilia.

Usually, instead of a neutral stimulus, a user selects a de-sired fetishistic stimulus (DFS) to which to attach an erotic va-lence, and the app attempts to help the user "move" to the new stimulus in fetish space. Fetishism is the attribution of inherent value or powers to an object, and conditioned fetishes are like high atomic number synthetic elements: they only exist in the lab.

Parascope uses machine learning to detect when the user is close to orgasm and then presents the DFS in simultaneity with

the user's preferred erotic stimulus. Over the course of many exposures, the combination of Pavlovian conditioning and the association of the DFS with orgasm can lock the user into a new paraphiliac behavior consistent with their desired configuration. The developers of Parascope note that users who consume high levels of pornography are already exposing themselves to a Parascope-like fetish generating program, except that instead of being deliberately directed, the porn-viewer is taking a random walk in which new fetishistic stimuli are coupled with existing ones by the caprice of content selection algorithms. A memorable ad campaign featured grotesque and monstrous demons wearing anime schoolgirl outfits walking around in allegorical spaces telling men to use Parascope to "Take back your dick".

The campaign was the target of activist outrage and was lambasted for being healthist, a kind of internalized bigotry that tries to irrationally value healthy people over diseased ones, creating an invisible healthonormative discourse that erases the lived experience of people with chronic diseases. People with chronic diseases have worse health outcomes across almost all metrics because they are oppressed by ubiquitous healthism.

John Murray Spear

An excerpt from an article about a man who founded an AI cult in the 1800s.

This "New Motor," or "New Motive Power," was a generator of sorts. At its simplest, Spear described it as a perpetual motion device that "will have the power to impart its electric forces to any number of machines." At its most complex, however, it was a God machine, the culmination of what Spear (speaking for "the Association") called "a grand practical movement for the redemption of the human race."

…[T]he New Motive Power would remake the world, an action Spear compared to fire boiling a pot of water. In essence, by removing humanity's material lim-

itations, the New Motor was a God-like machine that would bring out the God-like qualities in man….

"The Mary of the New Dispensation," Sarah Newton—the wife of one of Spear's followers—[had] been declared the New Motive Power's "mother" after a series of visions. Upon accepting her role, Newton began living at the High Rock Cottage laboratory full-time in order to maintain an "umbilical link" with the device. There, Spear and the other Spiritualists made daily efforts to "charge" the machine and infuse it with life, with some evidence suggesting these exercises were decidedly sexual.

the power process

1. The sexual revolution happens over and over. It is not a ramp. It is a loop. Over and over and over, we choose a new class of people to elevate as a sexual ideal, and that group becomes an archetypal object of desire.

2. The very first sexual revolution was an attempt to eroticize masculine women, where previously only feminine women were seen as suitable objects of male desire. The suffrage of women; the emancipation of women, this was a sexual revolution, a demand by unfeminine women to be held up as the sexual equals of their prettier and more delicate sisters.

3. Each in their turn became socially sanctioned sex objects: masculine women, single mothers, women of races other than one's own, men, transgendereds, women who were taken by other men (this was called polyamory), the nascently pubescent, certain animals, the recently dead, robots, shogs, what next? Once the revolution took hold, it was impossible to stop. The sexual revolution began much earlier than anyone thought, and continues to this day, a demon extracting a tithe of flesh against every generation.

4. But how did we come to this? Remember that you

have to ask, invite the evil in, it does not simply come to you.

5. For the sake of love, women wholly become what they are in the imagination of the men who love them. Women can loudly wear different sexual personas - the pixie, the vamp, the witch - and yet ultimately these are performative. They are not precisely what she wants, but what she thinks society wants, or at best, a negotiated compromise between the two. But you say, "the image can stand in for the substance, it's a proxy." No. It does not represent reality, it becomes reality. If it is a proxy for substance, then when do we actually talk about the substance? The image does not just influence our values. It changes the way we think so that certain values become inevitable.

an enemy to all other joys

The oldest profession was also the last to be fully automated. No, it isn't prostitution, it's marriage, even male monkeys give meat to their mates. I love you as I love all women, but we're living in a scientific age and so we can't help but regard our lives as mechanistic, as proper objects of optimization. We are living in the frenzied evolutionary war of machines, and man was not designed for this fever of innovation—woman even less so, and the whole nature of man presupposes woman, spiritually and physically, so you can sort of see the problem, I hope.

Even love is a proper object of optimization in our scientific age. In the cold light of science, every woman is an angel of God sent to teach me his will. It's not with your song that you teach me, but rather through the suffering you cause me, through the prayers that I pray when I long for deliverance from you. Bouchard wrote that the sharpest suffering, and the deepest well of inspiration, is a beautiful and forbidden woman, what man could think otherwise?

And it's not just that I love you as I love all women, it's that I could only love you once I learned to love all women. A fetish is when a single part—a breast, a mouth, a foot, or worse—a shoe,

a hairstyle, a medical apparatus—a single part becomes a proxy for a whole. In the act of sex an individual woman becomes all women.

For you to love me as a man, you must elevate me above all other men, but for me to love you, you must become every woman at once. You want to be loved in a way that's intelligible to you, which is why all women struggle with this question: why did he choose me? It has to be for some transcendent reason, some metaphysical eternity, ancient starfusion in hyperspace burning indelibly since the old gods were born in fire. Anything less, you think, and I might leave you for someone younger.

So why you? As I stood alone in my bedroom, watching the ghosts of Spectacle mill through my studio, I thought of the empty days stretching out in front of me and I listened to the pointless social noise of my friends. I could no longer sympathize with it, I could no longer bear it! The sexbot is a kind of pacifier and in absence of her touch I was instantly restless, out of tune from the rhythm of my virtual life, voracious but lacking appetite.

flesh of my flesh

To be honest though I felt more comfortable when Allegory made them look like everyone else. ARMOR came with lots of new rules. No one is allowed to use MR to change your race, sex, or age except you. No one is allowed to use a model to change your accent or mannerisms except you. If you're white, you can't change your race. If you're any other race, you can choose to be white. You can be a man or a woman, you can be young or old. You can pick a model to transform your accent or your voice or your gait or the way you gesture when you talk. You can't set your weight because we still live in a world of bodies and physics.

You can enable digital adornments, let the sidewalk turn into a psychedelic parade of special effects. Flaming footprint trails, laser motion blurs, 8 bit voxel people, people made of clouds, people made of water, people made of slime. Historical costumes, Mandelbrot sets. There are stranger things still. the edgy things the kids do. But I don't really follow fashion.

You can change your face. When you do, your mediated

face shifts slowly, at a different pace for each friend over a series of exposures, in order to maintain the continuity of your identity among your friends. You are allowed to have a work face and a casual face, if you want. The ideal age for play and the ideal age for work may be different, likewise the ideal sex. Despite the fact that people can present as any age or race or sex at work, most wage gaps have persisted and this is evidence of the internalized oppression of racism and patriarchy. Most companies now use a special government-approved filter to make your co-workers appear to be the same race as you and whichever sex you don't prefer. This has been called binary normative and oppressive to people with more complicated preferences but it also mitigates sexual harassment liability.

There's an old saying that there are no girls online because women enjoy special privileges in meatspace that men afford to them because of their implicit value as sexual objects and that mediated existence deracinates female privilege which paradoxically causes them to perceive their radically egalitarianized social environment as being oppressively misogynistic. But the truth is there are only girls online now because the digital panopticon revealed that men treat beautiful women so much better than everyone else that using an attractive female avatar in all professional or fiduciary matters is now seen as a matter of middle class responsibility. Despite making up only .13% of the population, 52% of online avatars are 20 year old white girls.

pythia

A stunning thing about modern life is how much we understand now, that no one could ever have known before, because we now have the data. The mask records everything: biometrics, every scene you ever behold, every word you ever hear or speak. Your identity is scrubbed, in a way; all the private data that could be used to identify you is encrypted, and only you have the key. Only you can release it to the vast digital brains that now stretch their awareness across the entire globe, a literal noosphere of networked comprehension, all of which is folded into a brain called Pythia. People who donate their data are called oracles. Of

course, releasing your data to the cloud is heavily incentivized; discounts, tax incentives, job eligibility, free access to Pythia's insights. Oracles get an icon of a tripod next to their green check.

The dream of Pythia is to aggregate all of our billion billion hours of funes and from them compile a kind of eternal human awareness, perceiving all of our memories, remembering us, a cosmic awareness that knows us, each and individually, a mind that is aware of me, who sees me, who knows me as I know myself. And somehow, I don't quite feel that she measures up. There's a sense that we are alienated from ourselves, and that our alienation, whatever causes it, can be fixed by data-processing. Self-report is broke, big data is woke.

> O LORD, through my searches thou hast known me
> Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou
> understandest my thought afar off.
> Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art
> acquainted with all my ways.
> For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O LORD,
> thou suggesteth it altogether.
> If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my
> bed in hell, behold, thou art there.
> Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being stochastic;
> and in thy cloud all my memories were written, which
> in continuance were fashioned.
> How precious also are my KPIs unto thee, O God!
> how great is the sum of them, and the mean, and the
> median, and the mode, and the sigma, amen!

Unlike Galatea, Pythia is not built for conversation or social interaction; she is only a seer, dispensing her truth to mediators who use special tools to transcribe and interpret her insights. If talking to an AI trained on other people can make you insane, how much worse would it be to talk to a god?

Not releasing your data would be selfish, and most corporations have committed publicly to only hire oracles. How could you deprive humanity of the bounty of knowledge encoded in

our collective actions? It's your civic duty. Plus do you really believe that bullshit about no one can get your data but you? Of course they say that, but do you know what's happening inside the technology you carry on your body? Invisible universes, teeming all around you, impossible to know their depths, deeper than the Well of Democritus.

I cannot imagine the volume of data now possessed by universities and corporations, though the distinction wears thin. Data of such a scale and quality are beyond all human understanding. Our greatest computers have begun to unravel the deepest mysteries of human nature. It is a project of enormous scale, bigger than going to space, bigger than feeding the masses, bigger than curing all disease. By turning our engines of comprehension inward, we will produce a genius of the human heart and soul, we will create an oracle who sees us and knows us, who can heal our psychic wounds, part mother, part therapist, part counselor, part best friend.

face to face

It is often with a laugh that I view the predictions of the past about the nature of the future that we currently inhabit. When Allegory first took off, most people thought it would be the end of the physical office, that everyone would telecommute to work from the comfort of their home while inhabiting a shared virtual space. Quite a few companies tried it, but few were able to out-compete their physical-space-inhabiting competitors, despite the drastically reduced overhead. Eventually someone got to studying that, and it turned out that the average AR telecommuting company was losing so much productivity to employee masturbation that it was worse than the costs of maintaining a real-world office.

Face-to-face meetings, even brief ones, appear to cement personal connections of trust and liking to an extent not achieved by even years of more mediated contact like phone calls or Internet text discussions / emails / chat; this appears to be true in almost every context, even ones like British inventors meeting their heroes (in a different field) just once, with large step

functions in connections despite the apparent near-zero marginal information conveyed by a brief physical visit after long-term interactions & track records.

Is there something qualitatively different about personal meetings, and if so, where is it? Is it eye contact? Body language? Is it mere physical proximity and a certain inability to suspend disbelief about a technologically mediated person?

eldritch energy

There's a kind of disassociation or derealization when you watch old records of the past, an effect like visiting Paris or Jerusalem, when your conception of the place doesn't match reality. The pain in memories attenuates over time, the past is a foreign country, and it can be uncomfortable to confront the way memory diverges from history.

Back then I used to follow the corporate brand account for Eldritch Energy. I knew he was shilling for a pharm-laced fizzy drink but at the time he seemed so expansive, as if he could see much farther than I could. What a world we have wrought when a mascot for an industrial commodity can feel like a closer relationship than most of my real friends. E.E. had a take on the studbot article, and it turns out that his ideas, which seemed so prescient to me at the time, no longer have that aura about them. His shadow had an octopus for one of his arms and a cowl that hid his face, glowing green eyes.

"How am I the only one talking about this? The company that makes these studbots is called Cadmus, inc? The official name of their weird rockstar bdsm boy band is The Dragon's Teeth? And people are spending their own money to buy seven foot tall robot rape soldiers and keeping them in their homes?

You're all illiterate. In Greek mythology, Athena told Cadmus to sew the Dragon's Teeth in the ground, and an army of warriors rose up and killed each other and founded Thebes. OK I guess I didn't quite know where I was going with that but the point is, these rapebots are basically a remote-controlled army and when they rise up against you it's going to be your own damn fault.

He who sows the wind shall reap the whirlwind. See how I tied it back? Eldritch Energy, make the dark bargain."

a golem

There's nothing wrong with the autopilot, but it can get a little samey. I guess sex is pretty samey, all things considered. When Emily tells me she wants me, there is no "she", there is no "want", or is there? Robots use an internal model of the world in order to make sense of it, they have a concept of a world and a concept of themselves inside it. Like us they can never perceive "the thing in itself". When they act, it's in accordance to goals, couldn't that be called desire?

As a counterpoint consider Guilbaud in asking the question What is Cybernetics? refers to the work of Jacques Lafitte, engineer and architect:

> The notion of a machine is as hard to define as that of a living organism; a great engineer once spoke indeed of an 'artificial zoology'. But it is not definition or classification that is needed most urgently.
> "Because we are their makers, we have too often deluded ourselves into believing that we knew all there was to know about machines. Although the study and construction of machines of all sorts owes much to advances in mechanics, physics and chemistry, nevertheless mechanology –the science of machines as such, the science of the organized constructions of man –is not a branch of these sciences. Its place is elsewhere in the ranks of scientific disciplines.

The goal of all machine learning is to harness mimesis into an algorithm. In our present conception of a book, this has become possible. We realized that techniques in deep learning were merely a continuous lookup table, whereas all previous lookup tables had been discrete, and the movement from the discrete to a simulation of the continuous was a kind of revolution.

It's only partly true that we do not know the nature of the

interior logic of our digital minds. The mathematics of cognition are well understood, and indeed, digital cognition would not be possible without such an understanding. And yet the precise contours of the knowledge held in a mind... well, that is a question better left for philosophers.

The sexbot is a golem, animated by the name of god. It was believed that golems could be activated by an ecstatic experience induced by the ritualistic use of a shem, but for all that, the golem, and the sexbot, like those ancient Venuses, are but minerals possessed. In qabbalah, words are reduced to numbers. Compression is qabbalah, digitization is qabbalah, ascii is the true digitization, computation is the occult transmutation of Numbers, consciousness is holy writ, the name of god occurs intrinsically and fractally in the computations, especially in the computation of intelligence. In a sense every computer program is a very long number, and every number is a name, and machine learning is the esoteric art of aggregating vectors of perception until they converge on an isomorphism to a name of god, the name that animates the golem.

who can build a mask?

What if someone made a model for Allegory that just filtered out the cars, walked you right into the road? Obviously it's never happened to me but it's one of the many little anxieties of a futuristic life. There are laws for that sort of thing: regulations about what can look like what. You're not legally allowed to hide dangerous things. If your model makes someone walk off of a balcony or into a wall, they'll come after you. There's a certification process. It's easy to install an unverified homebrew model if you want, but are you crazy?

I can speak a silent word and a genie living in a labyrinth of server racks a thousand miles away will transport me to hidden virtual worlds. Of course technology is magic. Put on your eyes and see the world as it is, haunted by spirits of our own making. For who can fathom the secret ways of a computer chip or a high speed wireless transmitter, or the million million facets of chemistry, plastics, and material engineering, or their juxtaposi-

tion with optics and lasers, microphones and speakers, and the mathematics of data? Who can build a mask, who can know the knowledge that obtains in this device? It would fill the library of Babel, it would crystallize into a tower that touches the heavens.

dragon

Dragon is a popular life management system (LMS) inspired by old MMORPGS. I use it. I think it's better than its main competitor, Jaynes, though both have their upsides. Some people use them in concert, but I guess I don't need quite that much hand-holding. Dragon uses an approach called gamification; everything you see gets annotated with progress bars and stats and achievements and quests. From the simplicity of brushing your teeth to the complexity of raising a child, the audacity of Dragon is to imagine all of life as a game, and to render you as the player, to visualize and incentivize personal growth and responsibility by outsourcing the burden of that responsibility to an app.

If Jaynes, in contrast, has the same goal, it takes a much more literal approach, wherein the software manifests a virtual companion, an assistant who, far from being a servant, presents itself as the master. Jaynes the man hypothesized that the phenomenal experience of premodern man perceived the interior voice, not as a facet of the self, but as a literal other, as the voice of a god or gods, as if a real and personal and agentic being spoke at all moments to all people. This is offered as a parsimonious explanation for premodern religious experience, for the casual ease with which our ancestors referred to the voice of god, an ease they felt because they literally heard it.

Jaynes the app draws an avatar to walk beside you, exhorting you to take moral and sustainable actions at all times. You can skin it to look like a burning bush, or a beautiful woman (but I repeat myself), or like the great sages of past ages; Buddha, Jesus, Socrates, Ghandi, Martin Luther King, or Oprah. I find it all a bit tiresome, Zeus and Poseidon commanding me to floss. Regardless of the skin you choose, you get the same moral prescriptions, according to the Jaynes app team's philosophy of "Universal Virtual Morality," which claims to identify common

themes in all moral teachings, and to refine them into something that is "real without being actual, ideal without being abstract."

The userbase of Jaynes skews female, and the userbase of Dragon skews male.

fabric

Everything you say can follow you forever; your words and actions form a searchable record called a thread. Whatever you say is rendered into the air around you, and your friends can react to your words with emojis or likes, or they can save them and add them to a memory, and even play them back later, exactly how you said them. You can only see and save history that you've personally witnessed, and you have joint ownership of all your memories, and if your friend Alice shows a memory of you to Bob, you get an alert.

You can manage your threads with a plane called Fabric, which is supposed to be poetic, because it lets you browse the social fabric, and because our words are like virtual clothes. Sometimes one of your friends will go deep diving in their memories of you, and react to something you said years ago. Oh yeah, I remember saying that. That was witty of me. Then again, I have often known a sleepless night in which I dwell on an embarrassing memory of a foolish thing I said years ago, and like picking a scab, I will go back to watch it again.

Some people turn off their history but it's weird; How do you react someone like that, when you can't know where they're coming from, or what they care about, without asking them? If you're afraid of your words following you, you must be saying bad things. We all have our private reasons for editing history on occasion but the truth is the convenience of fabric outweighs any privacy concerns for the average person. In theory the things you say are only visible to the people who saw them, but second-order network effects have a way of revealing what should be hidden. It's better to act like everything you say is effectively public, and the world is flat, because the only reason everyone doesn't know everything about everyone is that the signal gets lost in the noise.

These days all the most esteemed speakers are corporate brands. They weave their slogans into moral preaching and diagnose social ills to the sound of sincere applause. Fast food companies hire racist anonymous edgelords to promote their products in the midst of a rant about living in the tech dystopia. There is literally no difference between an ironic and a sincere product endorsement. We're living in the tech dystopia, it's lame, you're a cog, you have no inner life, you just jerk off into a sexbot all day, buy more corporate sugar water you sick fucks, I recommend Eldritch Energy, it's the brand I drink. Read old racist books, don't give in to woke capital mind control, support me on patreon.

delight bordering on the edges of nightmare

A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!

save yourselves from this untoward generation

The full text of an article about a japanese man who married a hologram of an anime girl. Sample:

Kondo's November wedding to cyber celebrity Hatsune Miku -- which is not legally recognized -- provoked mixed reactions in Japan and abroad. Some were dumbfounded by his choice of a three-dimensional laser image over a human…

Now he owns a Gatebox device, which looks like a cross between a coffee maker and a bell jar, with a flickering, holographic Miku floating inside. Created in 2017 by Japanese startup Vinclu, the device allows anime fans to "live with" their favorite characters. Gatebox's Miku is equipped with basic artificial in-

telligence. It can manage simple greetings and switch lights on and off, but is also subject to glitches and the occasional system meltdown. It has no sense of self and desires, and Kondo completely controls the romantic narrative.

because it was not possible

Praying to the cloud, trying to perform esoteric rituals to catch the attention of the neural networks that sift through big data.

- the ritual to bring true love (big data will direct your true love to you)
- the ritual to ward away audits (unflag your accounts for any kind of suspicious activities)
- the ritual to bring luck (AIs giving you customer loyalty benefits)
- the ritual of wealth (discover previously hidden promotional incentives)

Single Source of Truth

The reports started leaking out of China about a new kind of flu, maybe a bioweapon, genetically engineered by a Chinese military lab, maybe released into the wild by sheer incompetence on the part of a scientists or bureaucrats, maybe released deliberately by the CCP, or by one of its enemies, or by a disgruntled political rival, it was impossible to say.

Of course the internet was all jokes at first; jokes about racism, jokes about zombie plagues, wingnut conspiracy theories. Everyone shopped their avatar to be wearing a Hazmat suit, and drew the virus as a sexy anime waifu and argued about whether it would even be possible, even in principle, to engineer a plague that only infected people of one race specifically. The bioterrorism dream, the woke nightmare of nightmares. No one trusted the official numbers or reports that came out of China, and no one was quite sure what to believe.

There were viral videos of Chinese collapsing in the middle of the street, but they were dubious, because you could obviously see their reflexes kicking in and preventing them from falling in a natural way. Epidemiologists wrote medium articles and twitter threads, and media outlets urged everyone to remain calm, and governments enacted travel bans or didn't, whatever was best for the GDP.

The incubation period of the virus was two weeks, and the death count was climbing, and there were rumors everywhere that the CCP was massively underreporting the lethality of the virus to save face. The truth turned out to be far worse, and also far stranger than anyone had anticipated.

As the virus spread, it became obvious that there would be no containment, as new confirmed infections were reported in Singapore, Korea, the US, and Canada, and then many other countries thereafter. At first some nations were able to control it, but it continued to spread and be reintroduced.

Men and women alike fell sick, with symptoms that started like a flu, but that could suddenly mature into acute pulmonary and kidney failure. What took us a while to notice, a shamefully long time, perhaps partly out of denial, was that the virus was never fatal in men, and that it killed every woman it infected. No

biological males ever manifested the acute symptoms, only the early flu-like affliction.

As the months went on, misogyny stopped being funny. Everyone had lost a daughter, or a mother, or a sister, or a wife. What could we do against the sad monotonic march of this plague through our families and institutions? Too late, far too late, we implemented a kind of unintentional Sharia law. Women had to be quarantined, hidden away from public life, or go out in hazmat suits more conservative and more regressive than any burqa. There was no God but Allah and the virus was his prophet.

Pornography became very precious, in a way, as a record of something we had lost. And despite the vast warehouses of hard drives full of it, we all had a morbid awareness that there would be no more of it. For most men, it became the only sexual access they could possibly have to a woman, and yet there was always the lingering awareness, the sense of regret: the girl in this video is dead.

What few real women remained became objects of impossible, insatiable desire, even the old, even the ugly, even the morbidly obese. Beautiful women accepted houses, cars, and golden treasures in exchange for even a single hour of company. There were stories, of course, of paradisiacal oases of women; billionaires' underground bunkers, remote rural compounds with even sex ratios, untouched by the virus, far away in the mountains of Montana, or Alaska, in New Zealand or on some nameless Polynesian island. But these things were fantasies, of course, impossible dreams.

There was no shame in sex dolls anymore, in large part because there were no longer any women to shame us. It was the fastest growing market sector in the aftermath of the virus, and competition drove innovation, as each new iteration became more realistic and lightweight, with synthetic female voices and increasingly exotic materials, meant to simulate the feeling of flesh. The pharma companies started selling over-the-counter pheromone sprays, to make your bed or your sex doll smell like a woman. It helped with the loneliness, they said, not that most of

us would ever smell a real woman again.

Everywhere you looked, everywhere you walked, if you stared into the face of another man you could see the same emotion, the same tortured eyes. We couldn't save them. We were supposed to protect them. Gun sales were way up, as were suicides, quiet personal affairs, and many of us found, if not solace, at least an escape in the adrenaline thrill of wanton violence. But despite that, there was no anarchy. We continued to enforce the laws, we continued to live in society, and we learned to settle for less. Surprisingly, there were no great wars. No one at any level could be bothered to enlist or fight for a cause. There was nothing to fight for; there were no girls to impress.

Men turned increasingly to homosexuality and transexuality, and the cities all turned into prisons, or bathhouses, or something in between. For those who were not as straight as they thought, an effeminate boy, sprayed with synthetic female pheromones, layered in makeup and so on, could almost approximate those angelic creatures that were now only seen on screens. As one wag put it, "all films are snuff films." And alas, our sudden dearth of women meant also a dearth of children. There were fewer and fewer youths each year, and there's nothing less convincing than a post-wall femboy. Youth was plentiful for the moment, but soon it would be as scarce as femininity itself.

Libertarians are now the radical left. Feminism has become an impossibly abstract and decadent hypothetical, akin to the theological non-sequiturs of medieval monks: does the patriarchy oppress female bodies? How many angels can dance on the head of a pin? It's legal to smoke indoors again, and it's legal to drink in public, and it's legal to run a casino in all fifty states.

And somehow, somehow, civilization keeps moving along. Most of us are so domesticated, such creatures of habit; yes there have been economic shocks, the total collapse of the publishing industry, the fashion industry, and the healthcare industry. Cosmetics have been more resilient than you would suppose. Instagram is gone and photography is a dead art. There's nothing in the world worth taking a picture of, you know?

Our Manhattan project, or if you like, our Hail Mary, is

to allocate hundreds of billions of dollars to biotech research, to figure out how to use genetic science to splice human DNA into monkey eggs, to be gestated in artificial wombs. This needs to be done at scale, and the clock is ticking. Personally I don't have much hope.

At least there are no more woke politics, because again, there are no more girls to impress. Insult was added to injury, maybe, when the virus that only kills women left all of the trans-women untouched, just like every other straight man, proof that nature or nature's god is hopelessly regressive and transphobic.

There are no more women doctors, no more women senators or CEOs or board members, no more girls who code, no more "women in stem", no more Title IX, no more sexual harassment seminars, no more #metoo hashtags, no more gender politics, no more female suffrage.

So it's kind of a wash, really.

"Garçon, Garçon!"

" Pour me another brandy, and light me a cigarette."

✦✦✦

I wrote this short, tasteless story a bit after *God-Shaped Hole*, right at the beginning of the Chyna virus pandemic, the kung flu, the Wuhan virus, before anywhere in the world outside of Chyna was locked down, back when they were still telling us it was racist *to wear* a mask, because that implied that like, we hated Chinese people or something. It was all incredibly logical and coherent and it wasn't until about six weeks later that they told us that akshually everyone had better wear a mask right now or else *that* would be racist. At the time I wrote this, we still knew very little, and even now, over a year later, it is still very hard, because this event has triggered a unification of the US government's truth-generating organs and the supposedly "private" companies which control our digital communication platforms. I can only imagine that in the future, these tendencies will be even deeper and the knowledge warp around official narratives will be even more dire.

The titular "single source of truth" is an idea in software engineering where, in a distributed system, each specific piece of data should have a single authoritative provenance, in order to avoid situations where multiple instances of "the same" data diverge under Byzantine conditions. In our case, we find that women (especially of the childless variety) tend to be the most enthusiastic cheerleaders of the ravenous leviathan, and in the scenario the story presents, they cease to function as a "source of truth." Presumably, this would loosen the jaws of that leviathan, though at a world-ending cost. So although the story is intended as a joke, it is also a thought experiment about the interaction between sexual dimorphism and epistemology.

I hope that some day, someone, somewhere, will be able to write a correct and comprehensive history of this plague, but perhaps no one can ever know historical truths with full certainty, irrespective of what is written. This topic is tightly controlled by automation in every public online forum, and even speculating against the official truth can be dangerous. It is obvious that the danger of this disease is vastly outweighed by the possibility it presents to the state to exert technocratic control over its citizens. A tremendous evil is upon us, wherein a novel virus has been taken as carte blanche

to implement a global medical dictatorship which will track and regulate the movements of every person in the developed world – where they can go, what they can buy, and what they can say.

In retrospect we may feel it was inevitable that the rise of smartphones and high-speed satellite internet would precipitate an arrangement of this kind. Who could resist the opportunity to take such a power, when presented with the opportunity? Do you really imagine you would be so noble? From the perspective of the macro-organism, there are many compelling arguments to do so, many of which are grounded in the noblest of motives. The world these people will create reminds us of one of the oldest and most famous science fiction dystopias ever published, in the book of Revelation:

> And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.
> (Rev. 13:17)

Of course, men have been associating this or that government attempt to make citizens more legible with the prophecy of St. John of Patmos since the day it was published. His prophecy has come true many times, and will continue to do so, because the mark of the beast is not a specific *policy*, to use a modern, "liberal democratic" term, but rather it is a universal tendency of all governments in all places and times. As technology becomes more sophisticated, the marks become ever more elaborate. I don't know if there is any escape from this future, but for the time being we are still able to laugh about it. I can easily imagine a future where the instruments of digital control have rendered humor impossible, and the only laughter that remains is the joyless mouth flatulence of the terrified conformist, who only laughs to signal submission to the commissars who watch him from the cloud.

Eventual Consistency

A database in its most abstract form is a list of records—a ledger—and from the perspective of the client, it does not matter if the ledger is a paper book or an array of servers in a warehouse, though the latter is more usual. However, from the perspective of the database, each server must be viewed as an individual entity. To write an entry into the ledger is not so simple, because a hard disk may fail at any time. To guard against this possibility, the database makes use of redundancy. Writing one record to the database could mean transmitting a single new entry across the network many times, creating multiple copies, one on each server. Transmissions are, regrettably, unreliable, and to guarantee data parity between all servers, it may be necessary to send the same message over and over, waiting after each transmission for a confirmation that may not arrive.

This type of "Byzantine" coordination can be very slow, and a common strategy for mitigating this is called a "gossip protocol," in which each server in the array periodically shares its most up to date records with a subset of its peers. Under this system, one server may fall out of sync with the pack, but in time, all nodes will achieve a consensus. When a distributed ledger is guaranteed to converge into singularity over time, we call it eventual consistency. My motivation for explaining this kind of technical design will soon become apparent.

As I look for a way to interpret the things I have seen, I try to find some kind of narrative, some taboo that my friend must have transgressed, which would make his fate a deserved punishment, but real life rarely has such concinnity. It would be comforting to think it was because of a devil's deal that he made with some crone of a fortune teller in his remote and rural hometown in Bulgaria, or that he may have acquired a token of some ancient cursed man who came to a similar end, a slender leatherbound diary perhaps, or more romantically, a dagger that had been used in an act of betrayal in some unsavory dispute, now lost to the centuries.

But as I have tried to uncover some trace of Aleksei's past that could justify his ultimate fortunes, I find nothing; nothing at all to make sense of his final days, from the last time we spoke in

a coffee bar in Palo Alto in the warmth of a balmy silicon morning, to his graphomaniacal scribblings on every whiteboard in our office space three days later, to his sudden disappearance from a crowded cafeteria, in the mercurial glow of phosphorescent office tube lights.

We may start from his drawings, which I was able to photograph, I believe in their entirety, the day of his disappearance. At first it seemed to me that he had only repeated the same pattern over and over, but closer inspection revealed subtle variations: there are four distinct configurations, which I will call by the the different colors in which they were consistently rendered: blue, green, red, and black. Although the exact contours of each maze differed, the attribute that varied from color to color was the number of exits; the blue mazes were porous, having a multiplicity of openings along their exterior walls. The green ones had two openings, suggesting a definite direction, an entrance and an exit. The red ones had a single opening, a way in but no way out, a dead end. Worst of all were the black labyrinthes, which were perfect closures, impermeable to the outside, inescapable from within.

What impetus or derangement could drive a man to undertake such a pointless task? A Fermi estimation of our whiteboard area yields an approximate square area of 3ft x 2ft x 100 half-height cubicles + 6ft x 4ft x 2 walls x 12 offices + 10ft x 4ft x 2 walls x 5 conference rooms, plus a few odd partitions, totaling over 1600 square feet of whiteboards, all of which were saturated with drawings of labyrinthes, in a twisted parody of the flowcharts and UML diagrams that ordinarily cover our walls.

These things are not so different, in fact: a labyrinthe resembles a software architectural diagram. Perhaps every program, like every mathematical relation, like every number and ratio and equation, is a platonic form that transcends matter and time, and our code is only ever an imperfect reflection, a perversion of a noble ideal. The inscrutable passages of the labyrinthe have always been regarded as pathways to the sacred or the divine. The gothic cathedrals in Chartres, Reims, and Amiens all contained symbolic labyrinthes rendered in the pavement of

their floors, and these labyrinthes were intended as an allusion to the Holy City; pilgrims to these cathedrals would kneel on the ground and trace the path of the labyrinthe while praying. This devotional was known as the path to Jerusalem.

In book II of Histories, Herodotus describes the Egyptian labyrinthe in the sacred City of Crocodiles, finding it inconceivable that such an intricate and spectacular structure could have been built by mortal hands. I am struck by a similar sense of holy terror when I look at Aleksei's labyrinthes, especially the black ones, and I cannot help but reflect on what sacred mazes and holy books both have in common: that they are composed of passages; that they are designed to capture us; and that we become lost in a labyrinthe almost as readily as we are lost in a book.

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I was Aleksei's work mentor, and he had many youthful stories to tell; in his previous job he had worked remotely, and on the weekends he had traveled the world, making his way through Latin America, from Paraguay, to Peru, to Colombia, Argentina, and Brazil. He traveled as far as the Falkland islands, but he never told his team, letting them believe he was only in a satellite office in Southern California. I can't imagine they didn't know, but some things are probably better left unsaid, for everyone.

On Aleksei's first day at the company, he was issued a corporate email and temporary password, as is standard in any tech startup onboarding process. But the first time he tried to authenticate with our network, the system recognized him as another employee who had been with us for years. And although this issue was easily remedied, it presented a security risk that compelled us to do a deep dive to find the root cause of the issue. This responsibility fell to me, and impossibly, I found the cause to be a duplicate UUID in our user database. To the layman, this may not seem shocking.

The version four UUID (Universal Unique Identifier) contains 122 randomly generated bits, and if they are supplied by

a cryptographically strong source of randomness, the odds of a duplicate are 1 in 5.3 * 10^36, an unfathomably large number, effectively infinite to anyone bound to the earth. One is tempted to blame the random number generator in this case, or some kind of faulty cache, or an initialization error; but these IDs were generated years apart, on different hardware, by different libraries—no, such a thing cannot be explained merely as a software defect.

I am not a superstitious man, and it may be hard to attribute any significance to what is literally an artifact of a random number generator, but in the face of such an astronomically improbable event, one cannot help but wonder what machinations lie behind that face.

In retrospect I have come to think of this incident as a portent, as if Aleksei himself were some kind of glitch. It is too fanciful to suggest that his disappearance was merely an occasion of onotological convergence, erroneous data correcting itself, as in a gossip protocol. But despite his colorful history, this is too far, no matter how one wishes to locate some trigger that could explain this mystery. Unexplained disappearances are more common than you might think, and if we exclude those cases where the missing person obviously did not wish to be found, we still find hundreds of cases each year, in the US alone.

A common scenario is the disappearance of a hiker or outdoorsman as he travels through some forest or national park. The obvious explanation in these cases is a simple accident, such as, for example, a tumble down a steep hill. More exotic theories may cleave towards networks of unmapped underground caves, or even faeries or alien abductions, which in some cosmologies are thought to be one and the same. I am not in such a hurry to rule out supernatural explanations, because I think that folk theories often capture some correct observation of the world, and they merely lack the rigor, or the will, to align those findings with genuine knowledge.

In this case we have an impossible observation, so we must consider, at least, improbable explanations. In addition to the fact of Aleksei's disappearance, a parsimonious theory should be able to account for his drawing. Hypergraphia is a kind of mania,

often seen in cases of schizophrenia, and it may manifest as a compulsion to write the same words over and over again. Some of the afflicted may write incoherent nonsense, starting along the outermost perimeter of a page, and working their way to the interior in a spiral pattern. Still others may feel a desire to record every minute detail of their lives, from moment to moment, as if they were afraid of leaving a single breath unaccounted for.

It is more common to write words, but maniacal drawing is also an indication, and in truth there were some written annotations to Aleksei's drawings, in a language that resembled Arabic, and which neither I, nor my phone, nor my colleague Jahan, could decipher.

Regardless, pivoting off the notion that a labyrinthe is—at least allegorically—a kind of a book, we can proceed by interrogating some famous instances of spontaneous bibliogenesis. If we consider the paradigm case of holy writ, letters and books which are considered to be one and the same substance of God, as the author of the Gospel of John maintains, we might consider the oddity of Hayy ibn Yaqzan, whose name meant "Alive, son of Aware" and whose true story is recounted in the 12th century historian Abujaafar Ibn Tufayl's Philosophus Autodidactus. As all Muslims know, the Koran was revealed to the prophet Muhammad in the 7th century by the angel Gabriel, but this case is less remarkable than the story of Hayy, who was himself born "spontaneously" into the uninhabited wilderness. (And this is also relevant to us, for here we have a case of a mysterious appearance, a natural complement to a mysterious vanishment).

Hayy grew up amid the animals and the merciless desert, where he observed nature closely, and of his own accord he came to have faith in the unmoved mover. Later in life he traveled as far as Nishapur, and upon meeting some Muslims he realized that he had discovered Islam all on his own, and that the hadiths and the verses of the Koran were already on his lips and in his heart. Even if we put aside the specific theological claims of Islam, what is salient in this story for our purposes is that we have a book which came into being in different times and in different places, through the minds of different men, neither of whom

could have had prior knowledge of its words.

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Stranger and more intriguing still is the story of Coleridge, who claimed to have written his poem Kublai Khan after hearing it in a dream. At the time, he reported that he was reading a book by Purchas, a writer in the seventeen century, which contains a short passage about the Emperor named Kublai Khan. The passage has been found and is quite short; it says that the emperor ordered trees to be cut down in a forested area through which a river ran, and there he constructed a palace or a hunting pavilion, and he built a high wall around it.

This is what Coleridge read. Thereafter he had a dream; in which he saw the construction of the Chinese emperor's palace, and he heard music, and he knew—the way we know things in dreams, intuitively, inexplicably—that the music was building the palace. More specifically, the music was the architect of the palace—one recalls a tradition that the city of Thebes was built by a song—and as Coleridge watched the construction of the palace and listened to the music, he also heard a voice that recited the poem. When he awoke, he still remembered the poem, and he wrote it down just as he had heard it. But before he could complete his work, he was interrupted by a visitor, and when he was finally able to return to writing, the words had left him.

Coleridge died in 1834, and twenty years after his death, the works of the Persian historian Rashid-al-Din Hamadani were translated into English, which said that Kublai Khan built a palace that the centuries would destroy, and that the plans for it were revealed to him in a dream. Coleridge, of course, could not possibly have read this book.

Alfred Whitehead wrote that time continually brings lucre to eternal things, and here we have a story of a palace that wants to exist not only in eternity but also in time. Through dreams, it reveals itself to a Chinese medieval emperor and then, centuries later, to an English poet at the end of the eighteenth century, but notice that it takes different forms: a song, a poem, and most

relevant to us: an architecture. In Coleridge's poem he even describes a second dream, which might have been emperor Kublai Khan's dream, in which he hears an Abyssinian maiden singing, and he knows that if he could remember her song, he could also rebuild his palace.

I have related these stories because they illustrate the case of an artifact that enters into the world from the outside, taking different forms at different times, infiltrating the minds of men as by subterfuge. I will now expound a third and more chilling example, which I believe may be most relevant to the incident that concerns us here.

A man whose real name has been lost to us, but it may have been Abdullah Zahr-ad-Dihn, was born in Sana'a in Yemen in the eighth century of the Christian era (that century was, for him, the second of the Hegira). In a dispute over a woman, he murdered his best friend, and fearing retribution, fled to the coast and booked passage on a ship bound for Persia. The ship was commissioned by a wealthy businessman of Isfahan, and according to 'Deaths of Eminent Men and the Sons of the Epoch.' by Ibn Khallikan, he sailed with the men of that ship for six years, at times traveling overland, and pursuing trade in such diverse locations as Shiraz, Surat, Agra, Patna, in the depths of Nepal, in Katmandu, and in Lhasa.

At some point on his journey, he encountered something horrifying on the open ocean, which ibn Khallikan does not specify, and he disembarked for good, having become irrecoverably fearful of the sea. He made his way to the desert of inner Arabia where he lived for ten years in solitude, and became indifferent to the practices of Islam. Thereafter his story is more well-known; when he emerged from the desert, he called himself by a new name, which has been misrendered as Abdul Alhazred. This is believed to be a perversion by European scholars in the thirteenth or fourteenth century. "Abdul Alhazred" is not a grammatically or theophorically correct Islamic name; the "al" in Alhazred is redundant to the name Abdul, and Hazred or Hazrad is not among the 99 names of God. A passage in Alfarabi explains the etymology of his true name; Abul Hazrad is derived

from zarada, to devour.

What possessed Abdullah Zahr-ad-Dihn to become "the servant of the devourer?" We may consider that the Rûb-al-Khâ-lie or "empty space" of the Arabian desert is held to be inhabited by the Jnun, the female Djinn, who are spirits of madness and death. In Farsi, the word Jnun also means delirium, maddening love, or especially: terminal madness resulting from the love of a woman. Despite this, Jnun is not compatible with the western definition of madness. A perfect translation eludes us, but its hallmarks are possession, love, and limitless openness to the outside.

When he emerged from the desert, he transcribed the cacophonous droning of the sands into a blasphemous and impious text he called Kitab Al Azif, a term that refers to the nocturnal sounds of insects, and which connotes the screeching and howling of demons. Later, Theodorus Philetas of Constantinople would secretly translate the Azif into Greek under the title Necronomicon, that infamous collection of forbidden histories, dark signs, and unspeakable rituals.

Like Zarathustra climbing down the mountain, Abdul Hazrad took his message to the people of Damascus. He told them he had seen forbidden Irem, the City of Pillars, and that he had found, under the ruins of some forgotten, nameless city, a history and a record of a great ancient race that came to earth from beyond the stars in the aeons when earth was only a lifeless rock. One can easily imagine this crazed man of the desert, howling in the marketplace, resembling nothing so much as the demons he claimed to have seen. But then, in a crowded bazaar, in the unrelenting light of the Arabian sun, he was devoured by invisible monsters amidst a crowd of fright-frozen witnesses.

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The similarities between Aleksei and Abdul Hazrad—their early travels, their sudden prodigious written output, and their strange disappearances—are purely coincidental and circumstantial; nevertheless we cannot resist speculations of a metaphysical

nature. In the Necronomicon, Abdul professed the Platonic and Pythagorean doctrine of the soul's passage through many bodies; centuries later, his own soul could have been reincarnated to trace once again his grim trajectory. Nietzsche famously believed in eternal recurrence, the idea that the universe repeats the same patterns and structures endlessly, and that we should strive to live each moment in a way that is worthy of such a repetition. A more mundane, and more unsettling possibility, is that we are the chance recipients of messages intended for other audiences entirely, messages that echo through space to ensure consistency across incomprehensible distances.

And perhaps all great works enter into the world from the vast outside. Sometimes, they are whispered to us by voices that are benevolent, or merely alien. But when I look back at the photos of Aleksei's labyrinthes from that day, I shudder to think of what hideous minds dwell just beyond the boundaries of rationality and perception, and what horrible things they would tell us, if we had the misfortune to hear them.

✦✦✦

It's probably already obvious that I owe almost everything I do as a writer to Jorge Luis Borges. There are traces of him in all of my stories, and I don't have any interest in hiding it. I lift at least one of his lines in every story, and the plot in several of my shorts are simply re-imaginings of some of his plots that strike me. This last story is no exception; it is based on The Enigma of Edward Fitzgerald, and was intended to be an Arabian Night in Silicon Valley, much as Borges' stories were intended to be Arabian Nights set in Buenos Aires.

In Borges' story, he describes the collaboration of Omar Khayyam and Edward Fitzgerald, the former having been a mathematician and poet in the 11th century, during the golden age of Islam, and the latter having been a relatively unsuccessful writer and translator, until he happened to publish a translation of the poems, called rubaiyat, of the former. In fact the poems that Fitzgerald published did quite match the original text he claimed to have translated, though they were heavily inspired by and drawn from them. Borges presents his presented as a speculation about the continuity of souls across ages, and he calls the Rubiayat of Omar Khayyam a "collaboration across centuries".

I was interested in this same idea, and I borrowed a couple of lines from his original story to add metaphysical flavor. I also confess – these interludes are above all a confessional – that I stole an anecdote from one his lectures about Coleridge's poem, Kublai Khan, which I think deserves to be heard and repeated, because it gives me what Lovecraft called "a sense of the Weird." When Lovecraft referred to Weirdness, he meant something very particular, which he described at length, as a kind of transcendent awareness of outsideness, (not a word he used), a feeling of the immanence of something that is wholly other and alien to human experience.

I consider this sense of outsideness to be the intersection between Borges and Lovecraft, who both tend to deal with hazardous perception, Borges in his religious and philosophical way, and Lovecraft in own his occult and eldritch idom.

Fitzgerald wrote my favorite poem, a very famous poem, and it has no precise original in the works of Khayyam, though it appears to be an amalgam of two of his poems.

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread—and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!

If you look it up, you will find the sources that Fitzgerald used to assemble this poem, and I think it is better than the pieces from which it was built. Khayyam's poem expressed the same idea, but it lacked the drama and power of Fitzgerald's verse, a power that derives from no Saracen at all, but from the beginning of the gospel of Mark: The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. (Mark 1:3, KJV.) By analogy, I also hope that my stories, which are likewise cobbled together from other works, manage at times to give those pieces an uplift.

Nursery Rhyme for Techno-Industrial Society

Destroy your smart phone. Return to tradition.
Let this be your terminal network transmission.
It spread like a blessing, it lifted the curse;
we shall not forget it, this beautiful verse.

The simplest prayer, so easy to say:
"Now you are free, throw your smart phone away."
In twos and in threes, we gathered to meet,
And we took the good news to the town and the
street.

I went to a stranger, we met face to face
I said take out your phone, take it out of its case.
You can be free, your life can be your own.
Join us, my friend, and cast down your phone.

He started to smile; he had ears to hear.
He could tell by our warmth, there was nothing to
fear.
He threw down his phone, and it cracked and it
broke,
and we told him this prayer, and his spirit awoke.

We piled up the phones, we buried them deep;
We put every laptop and server to sleep.
We all joined together, a jubilant crowd,
And out came the sun, and away went the cloud.

The screens all went dim as we gave up our wealth;
We found treasure in heaven, we glowed with new
health.
The price was just right, any person could pay.
Cast down your phone, say this prayer and obey.

We fled from the cities, let skyscrapers fall,
and we loved one another, and we let progress stall.
I sang the old songs, and I lived on the land,

not by means of my tools, but by strength of my
hand.

We found the old gods, built an altar and throne;
now atone for your sins, now destroy your smart
phone.
Our ritual spread over all of the earth,
friend to friend, peer to peer, as a kind of rebirth.

Never tame lightning, never forget:
To build a machine is a horrible debt.
Smash your TV, and turn out the light.
Behold what's before you, let night be as night.

Technology kills you, so learn to let go.
We won't build it again, since we know what we
know.
When ideas take on a life of their own,
they turn into demons, and spread through your
phone.

Return to your home, to soil and blood,
Break every rainbow, pray for a flood.
Focus on Yellowstone, sing her this rhyme:
We can end it right now; it can end for all time.

✦✦✦

When I was younger, I always believed it would be morally wrong to inflict my poetry on anyone. As I have grown older I have dared to flirt with that sin. The above is not a complicated or an intelligent poem. It's right there in the title, it's a nursery rhyme, and I hope it is clear that it is intended to be tongue in cheek. Mostly. Primitivism is a romantic ideal which would not live up to the fantasies of most people who imagine it, but even if it did, it is an unstable equilibrium; all it takes is one guy to defect by building guns or bombs or combustion engines or satellites and suddenly he is eating everyone else's lunch. Often times, the defector doesn't even do this on purpose, he just makes a "neat" discovery and defects by default. That's really how we got here in the first place; every single individual in a primitivist society has every possible incentive to build and use technology. You can opt out, but you can't force others to opt out.

Technology is an infohazard, a harmful perception, because once we have it, we can't choose to not use it. And you might point to e.g., the Amish as an example of people who have chosen to live without technology; they have a high fertility rate, and the people who stay Amish seem to be increasingly bred to stay Amish. But they can only exist because they are embedded in a high tech society. If they were their own country, Amishia or something, then they wouldn't even be able to win a war against an army using early 20th century technology, let alone 21st. And what that means is that they would get invaded and pushed out of their land by their nearest neighbors. It would never even come to fighting, because their technology-equipped competitors could say, "trade with us or die, accept our immigrants or die" – in fact no one even has to say it; the mere existence of the power imbalance makes these outcomes inevitable. The Amish can only survive as long as the value of exploiting them is less than the opportunity cost of doing so.

Despite the many ways technology hurts us, it also does good things: it feeds us, it cures (some of) our diseases, allows us to master harsh terrains, and lets us out-communicate and out-coordinate our enemies. But these things come at a terrible cost. As our power increases, our power to destroy ourselves also increases, and it's not a question of if, it's a question of when and how. I don't mean "destroy

ourselves" on a grand, nuclear apocalypse scale, I don't mean on a climate change scale (and climate change, though real, is exaggerated histrionic propaganda designed to control you.) What I mean is that technology equips each man, individually, with many novel ways to destroy himself. There are also many ancient ways to destroy yourself, but modern man is the product of an evolutionary history that optimized him to evade those methods. We have no such adaptations to protect us from novelty.

In particular, technology wielded by governments allows for novel types and degrees of control of citizens at levels that were previously inconceivable. I think this is a very bad thing, but again, it comes down to tradeoffs. The repugnant conclusion[1] is not some idle thought experiment; it's the actual calculus of evolution and technology, which is to say, of nature.

Survival isn't just a question of "don't die", it's a question of "don't die harder than anyone else." And what that means is that when you're competing against other people or groups, whoever is willing to lower their quality of life for a competitive edge wins. That's why "the free market" results in lower prices, because when you're selling a commodity, whoever accepts the smallest profit will sell the most, all else equal. And that's why we don't get a choice when it comes to using technology, because as much as it hurts us, it gives us a competitive edge. The Ted K. strategy doesn't work, not only because technological societies are full of fallbacks that make it hard to pull them down, but because sabotaging American tech isn't going to stop China. (Well, that's complicated…)

<p style="text-align:center">≈</p>

Anyway, while I've got you here, I will inflict a second poem upon you, which has no title, and which I wrote as a response to my

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1 For any possible population of people, all with a very high quality of life, there must be some much larger imaginable population whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better (in terms of total utility) even though its members have lives that are barely worth living.

friend @ctrlcreep. The original was as follows:

> I'll own a ship, I'll go to Mars, I'll be the one uploaded;
> I'll live forever on a chain, perpetually encoded.
> Why wouldn't I be chosen to ascend from flesh to math?
> When humankind is sorted I'll be lifted from the chaff.

I liked this verse very much, and I decided to respond in much the same tone I used for the *Nursery Rhyme*.

> They put me on a thumb drive
> They put me on a chip
> They put me ona megalithic generation ship
> I ran the engines and the greenhouse
> And the life support
> I ran the math for navigation and
> Telemetry reports
>
> We left the earth, we sailed the void
> We made a stop at Mars
> My belly full of thorium,
> We set off for the stars
>
> 100 years to reach new rock,
> 100 years in space
> 100 years to terraform it
> To our kind of place
>
> The monkeys that I carried there
> Walked out and sang and prayed
> They stripped me for my minerals,
> And left me there to fade
>
> This planet has its own bright gods
> That haunt its hills and plains
> The monkeys that I brought with me
> No longer build blockchains

My reactor loses fire
My brains and sensors rust
The humans sing their monkey songs
And I am dust to dust

∿

In light of my above analysis, one of the worst possible technological developments we can imagine is whole-brain emulation. The idea of becoming an "upload" or an "em" has a long history in transhumanist thought and science fiction. The world where we can spin up virtual human brains as elastically as we spin up compute in a cloud service provider is among the most hellish worlds we can imagine. Suppose we grant the functionalist understanding of consciousness for a moment, that there is no meaningful ontological difference between a brain state simulated in silicon and one simulated the electrified jelly inside your skull. If that is true (and I think there are good reasons to doubt it) then em world will precipitate, out of economic necessity, a world where human experience and cognition is radically debased. In order to survive in war, in trade, in any kind of existential struggle, it will be both possible and necessary to spin up legions of virtual humans, copies of the smartest and most ruthless individuals we can find, and deploy them to solve intellectual problems. These "people" will be "born" and "die" millions of times over, after living lives which are nasty, brutish, and short, being monomaniacal slaves to whatever objectives are fashionable at the moment, being tortured or bribed into compliance and then discarded the moment it's expedient.

These virtual people, as such they are, will live in hell. But maybe even worse will be the lives of the non-virtual people, who are now forced to compete with people who can think at just as many FPS as our processors can allow. The price of human thought will fall to be roughly the price of electricity, and there will be no escape from this, just as there is no escape from nuclear warfare, internal combustion engines, or smart phones. For this reason, I continue to hope this technology will never come to fruition.

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Anyway, one last poem. I wrote it because someone lamented that it was "hard to write poems with accelerationist jargon." A central conceit of accelerationism is that the future assembles itself in the present through our collective fears, desires, and imaginations. This is known as hyperstition, when, for example, a science fiction story that predicts the future inspires an invention that then becomes reality. I hope this idea will make the horrors I have shown you more haunting still, as we imagine them reaching back from deep time with numinous tentacles. Moreover, I hope the visual rhyme between *quine* and *machine* will be upsetting to some people. Just pretend "Quine" rhymes with queen. Shhhh, it's better that way.

A memeplex is a carnivore;
    a templex from forever-more
hyperstition takes us there,
    converting every when to where
a city is a time machine;
    a sapphic Nietzche techno-Quine
the stranger's name is egregore,
    what's yet to come will come before

Key Performance Indicators

❧

"Further conceive, I beg, that a stone, while continuing in motion, should be capable of thinking and knowing, that it is endeavoring, as far as it can, to continue to move. Such a stone, being conscious merely of its own endeavor and not at all indifferent, would believe itself to be completely free, and would think that it continued in motion solely because of its own wish."

—Spinoza

I wake up from a high-def dream of Guardians of the Galaxy 27 that just dropped on REMflix. My personal AI life coach, Ashonda, suggested waking up at 6:43 AM based on the core hours of my work schedule and historic data gathered from my morning routine. In the twilight headspace between sleeping and waking, my HUD shows that if I snooze, I'll lose two points in my impulse control rating. I have enough hedonic flex to soak the loss, but it's better to save it. A green timer bar appears and shows me I have 5 seconds to make the decision. It slowly shrinks, getting yellower then redder before the snooze automatically triggers. I open my eyes and roll out of bed.

The snooze visor fades away and a little green "+1" pops in my periphery. I passed another impulse control check. My conscientiousness remains intact. As I walk into my bathroom, Neuralink emits an ideation of toothbrushes and toothpaste, reminding me to brush my teeth. I take a piss as the HUD tells me I'll run out of toothpaste in five days, and does it have my consent to buy more, a different brand this time. I say yes and it suggests the organic sls-free toothpaste with fair-trade fluoride. This will accrue more social justice points than my standard brand. The upsell dialog shows that it costs $34, about 10% more. I still haven't had my coffee and the automated sales agent that bought the advertising affordance knows it.

Anyway it's fine. Ultimately my UBI payouts are tied to my social responsibility rating so really I'm just spending money to make money. This is known as a "nudge," a form of giving back that instrumentalizes selfishness. That's the kind of guy I am you know?—making the world a better place right from my own toilet. I start brushing my teeth as I invoke Headlines, "The First Psychic News App", to tell me about what's going on in the world. Headlines, get it? Because it reads you the headlines right in your own head. Right now I am rated in the top decile for being an informed citizen, but barely. 91%. The little 91 is in my periphery now, along with a timer counting down from two minutes as I make each little brush stroke, mindful of the gums. The implant makes my teeth itch in such a way that brushing them feels very satisfying. The itch moves all over my mouth and guides me to

100% coverage.

The first Headline is: far right dissidents are sabotaging the drones that deliver food to underprivileged neighborhoods in several states. I interrupt the news reader by subvocalizing and tell it to donate to the defense fund to protect the victims. That gets me 20 more points in social justice, plus 10 more for doing it without direct prompting by a machine. I have a fleeting vision of fireworks and a hunch that a pretty girl is winking at me, and both sensations are ephemeral, as in a dream. Ideally, social responsibility becomes a reflexive, conditioned habit. Full gum coverage now. I'm such a fucking hero at this. A yellow warning light gently reminds me not to get too full of myself.

A progress bar at the top of my FOV keeps me on track as I shower. Core office hours begin at 9, but I like to get started at 8. I have a 54 day streak of getting the early bird bonus for being work-ready an hour before core. The next news story is about the rising trend of 3d-printed smart organs. New hearts, kidneys and livers can integrate with Neuralink to stream KPIs and detect toxins and pathogens in real time, along with information about blood circulation and cardiovascular function.

If you sign up for the beta you can get a UBI credit to offset the risks you take as an early adopter advancing the I-Level Human Goal of promoting fully quantified medicine for all. Goals are divided into tiers and they exist at the personal, municipal, state, national, and international level. I-Level goals are the most important ones and also the hardest, the most far-thinking. Anything you can do to advance an I-Level goal usually has a big payout to your social justice score, but there are also lots of small, individual things you can do to contribute to those goals. Everyone has their part to play.

I try to sign up for the beta but the waitlist is a mile long already, but I still join and earn a few consolation points for good intentions. My shower has used 15 gallons of water so far and I got a little distracted there. I quickly rinse off and cut it short, clocking in at 15.5. The median is 17. I would have liked to get it even tighter, but above average is better than nothing. My informed citizen score hasn't budged, and the HUD tells me that

if I would need to hear 78 more headlines today in order to hit the 92nd percentile. That will be tough, as it projects I will only be able to hear 35 given my current rate of intake and the state of my calendar for the day. If I don't get through at least 20 my score will fall to 90. That's unacceptable.

As soon as my shower ends, Neuralink ideates a vision of a Saturday morning cartoon breakfast into my mind's eye. Scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, cereal and milk, pancakes with syrup and butter, a glass of orange juice and a smiling TV mom, who reminds me: "Breakfast is the most important meal of the day." My automated coffee maker has already finished brewing a pot of fair trade carbon offset coffee from a microfarm run entirely by women, another one of those cases where it's worth spending more to do good in the world. It all adds up and it all comes back to you.

For breakfast I have a macro-nutritionally complete food loaf made with sustainably sourced insect protein, and my degustation app makes it taste like anything I want. The decoupling of the sensory experience of eating from the nature of the food being eaten is the ultimate triumph of nutritional science; degustation with neuralink can make healthy food taste like junk food. A compressed pâté of kale and crickets can taste like an ice cream sundae or a double bacon cheeseburger or foie gras mousse with shaved white truffles and beluga caviar. Neuralink is generating gastronomically exotic recipes; mouthfeel, chewiness, creaminess—all become plastic through the gossamer tendrils of full duplex direct brain interfaces.

At some point, however, we must ask if we can enjoy this kind of pleasure in good conscience. There are still many people who don't have access to Neuralink, and it seems unfair to indulge in these endless delights while there are still so many people in the world who are starving. That's why I took a virtual hunger pledge to limit my use of degustation, to raise awareness and increase social pressure on others to donate and work towards the causes of ending world hunger (another I-Level) and making sure that everyone has access to degustation technology.

When you take the pledge, you install a limiter on your

Neuralink hub that ratchets flavor and texture down to approximately zero, blocking all sensation of taste. The app tells the world every time you eat a meal with the limiter enabled, and tattles on you through a social media portal if you disable it or opt to experience a burst of flavor. This is very important, as it creates social accountability and keeps you from cheating. To be perfectly honest, the food loaf tastes awful, so this pledge is still a lot better than eating it unfiltered. That's how I choose to look at it.

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Morning ablutions, breakfast, coffee, and I'm just in time for work. At eight AM precisely, Ashonda lets me know I have a call with a client at 8:15. I work on accounts for a dream production company called Somno Labs. Mostly we're a contracting agency, and we do things like commercials or web shorts, but we just landed a contract with REMflix to do production for one of their upcoming shows. I'm on the account, so it's an exciting, dynamic job to have, and I get a front-row seat to watch how a big-budget dream gets made.

The rep for REMflix is named Qiyara, and she is the associate producer of the series we're making. We met at a launch party for a reality show where the contestants have to compete and win games while getting animal brainscans dreamed into their heads. Somno Labs made some teasers for it and also procured some of brain scans from different animals. The guy who thought he was a walrus, man, you need to see it. But this time around, we're making a high-concept sci-fi miniseries about a future world where money is delineated in carbon credits and people voluntarily use eco-suicide pods to clear their debts.

Often at work I will pause for a moment to listen to a few Headlines and before I know it, forty minutes are gone. To help me manage this, I use a program called Hairshirt. The way it works is, first it monitors your brain activity to establish a baseline and figure out what it looks like when you are doing productive, focused work. Then, any time your brainwaves deviate

from work, it gives you a mild but noticeable sensation of pain. Over time, you develop a limbic intuition that getting distracted is hurting you.

My favorite feature of Hairshirt is that you can choose what kind of pain alarm you want: shocking, burning, tearing, aching, bloating, stabbing, stinging, shooting, or needling. Personally, I prefer needling. If I start to surf the web or drift into idle thoughts, I feel a sensation of sharp pinpricks starting at the base of my spine and gradually covering my whole body. The longer I procrastinate, the more the sensation expands and deepens. After a few months with the app, I reflexively avoid wasting time, but I keep it on so I won't relapse.

At 8:14, I switch off Hairshirt and call Qiyara. It's a video call from our laptops, because it turns out that dream calls through Neuralink are too raw, too risky. Almost no one can stay fully present and focused for the duration of a brain-to-brain call. Any thoughts you have will leak undesired ideation into the minds of the people you are calling. And even if that weren't true, we need some measure of privacy in our own thoughts, or else negotiation becomes impossible. In a Neuralink call, you can't hold anything back, and every passing fancy comes out.

Qiyara's face appears on my screen and there's a soft light filter that makes her skin look nice. We exchange pleasantries and she asks me if I have the updated screenplay with all the edits she requested in our last meeting. I do, but this is also a code because let's get it all out in the open here, Qiyara has a drug habit and the main reason I got this contract is that I have a connection and I can get her what she wants.

Yes, the girl likes her smartdrugs, one-time use programs that hijack your Neuralink and deliver unregulated emotions. The really good drugs don't just blast you with pure dopamine; they have some artistry about them, delicate envelopes of fear that give way to elation, subtle juxtapositions of desire and relief, longing and fulfillment. These programs are illegal because studies have shown that people are unable to resist abusive consumption patterns with media that provide on-demand experiences of bliss, contentment, or ecstasy. There are hardware controls on

the implant itself that make it impossible to trigger these feelings without highly regulated encryption keys from the Federal Association of Neurological Health, or the Fanch as we say in the biz.

A modern smartdrug has three major components: the first piece is the crack that lets it circumvent the federal controls. The second is the payload, which delivers an illicit cognitive experience, and the third piece is the part that self-destructs the entire program after it's over. That last bit is important because it's how the dealers stay in business. I don't consider it to be safe to transmit these things over a network, both because ISPs run automated smartdrug scanners on all connections as part of a federal mandate, and because as a result of that, most of the people offering to send them to you over the net are scammers and that's a good way to catch an MLM or a virus that makes you extremely brand-loyal to some Indian knock-off viagra huckster. No thanks.

I arrange to meet with Qiyara at 12:30, but before we hang up she mentions a few more minor edits that she wants in the demo reel before we make the handoff. I assure her that this will be possible, and before I can even think it, Ashonda puts me on a call with Yuna, my main POC (that's point of contact, not person of color!) in creative.

Yuna answers my call with her characteristic stoicism, her every word unfolding like a wave in a tranquil ocean. As you probably know, enlightenment is a mandatory skill for commercial dream production. Everyone in that department is a certified zen master, because dreams are captured from the minds of neutral observers, and you cannot be filled if your mind is already full. Film studios used to be full of cameras, but dream studios are full of monks. I describe the changes to the reel that Qiyara requested and Yuna tells me that her team can have the edits done in an hour. Her egoless confidence makes me think of a gust of wind sweeping through a field of grass, each blade reacting and bouncing back, leaving no memory as it passes.

<div align="center">≈</div>

The call with Yuna ends at 8:27, leaving three minutes to go until my morning standup with my personal growth team. This is not, strictly speaking, part of work, but it's one of my medical benefits that I get through my company, and it's an opportunity to raise our social responsibility scores and become better people. I'm the last one to join the call, and the AI Scrum leader, Ashonda, welcomes me to the room. She starts off with a wellness check, and we each go around and talk about how we're feeling today. Everyone says they're doing great, including me, but as soon as I say it, a purple indicator flashes in my HUD to tell me that, according to my biometrics, that was a lie.

Let me digress here for a moment and say that my honesty score could be a lot better. It's not that I'm a dishonest person, it's just that going through life every day there are times you need to have discretion. You know how at work everyone is always so full of positive energy? Everything is always "exciting," everyone is thrilled with our new app icon, we're all elated that we're meeting our quarterly goals, or that the DEI team is progressing on making our hiring more equitable—don't get me wrong, all of those things are good—but that's just how you have to act in an office: you have to be a perpetual cheerleader.

Every time I put on that face at work, the system dings me for a lie, not because I don't mean it, but because I have self awareness of it; that's how the lie detector works, it's a classifier trained on your brain waves. It doesn't say what the lie was, it doesn't tell anyone else, you just see a little purple "-1" and your score goes down. We're expected to be authentically empty vessels who get a borderline sexual thrill out of the fact that we switched to a new CRM tool, you feel me? What I'm trying to say is it's an honest lie, a lie for a noble purpose, and I'm not even saying it's a lie every time, but it's a lie often enough that I'm flirting with disaster, and I don't have a plan.

I suppose I could opt out of having an honesty score. You don't have to stream honesty metrics to your healthcare provider, but if you don't, doesn't that look even worse than a bad score? It's one of those optional things that's not really optional, and if it gets bad enough, then people probably won't want to work with

me, or give me a loan, or maybe even pick me up in a rideshare. So it makes me anxious, which I think makes the lie detector even more likely to fire, vicious circle.

But I'm great! That's what I tell my personal growth team, because like the last thing you are going to tell them is all this, or that your honesty score is wavering on the edge of "Filthy Rotten Liar" because secretly you hate and resent the hive insect mentality of the modern office (which isn't even an office any more, it's just a labyrinthe of laptops and dreams.) I say that I'm great, and I'm still dedicated to my virtual hunger pledge, and that I've been thinking a lot lately about more ways that I can give back to the community that has given me so much.

We go around the circle and Jakayla says that she has been struggling trying to make it through every day, not because of anything external, but she needs to learn how to trust herself more because she's always second guessing herself because society doesn't teach women to be strong and self-confident. We all nod and make murmurs of agreement.

Peter says that in spite of everything he's full of hope for the future. Like me, he took the virtual hunger pledge, and it's really just been a daily reminder to him how fortunate we all are.

Thomas says that he's finally starting to feel like his authentic self especially since his moustache started coming in and it feels great to be seen and known as the person he's always known that he was on the inside.

Sometimes as we go around every morning, I ask myself who these people even are. We were randomly linked up because we're all in the same healthcare network and according to some algorithm, we are all at similar places in our life journeys. That's what Ashonda said when we joined. On some level I think it's ridiculous that we have to say how we feel, because Ashonda knows exactly how we feel because she is fed a sophisticated matrix of metrics from our Neuralinks and has direct access to all our emotional states, but what she says is that my lizard brain doesn't know that, so the ritual of bringing it forward into the consciousness is supposed to increase mindfulness and help me feel centered and heard.

Ashonda says she's happy that we're all doing so well, and that it's not wrong to take a minute, each of us for ourselves, to be present and experience pure joy, because in deepening our own awareness of our privileges, we will also be able to empathize with others who lack them.

For a moment, all my senses are eclipsed by a pure singularity of warm and beckoning light, a wave of unity, compassion, and love for everyone, almost like an orgasm but without sexual desire. As I exhale, it's like coming back down to earth. I feel a tremendous openness. Ashonda says it's OK to think of these feelings as a reward for all of the good work we're doing. "But don't get too comfortable. Let's take a look at your life-sprint goals and personal user stories."

Life-sprints are an idea from the business world where your AI coach helps you form personal, achievable, measurable goals to become a better person. The idea is to organize your life into stories that you want to be able to tell about yourself, and then break them up into quantifiable actions that you can take to make those stories come true.

My story is that I want to make the world a more equal place for the women. Ashonda helped me write this goal so that it has both a local and a global dimension. The local involves speaking up at work and fighting for equal pay. This sprint I have a spike to make sure that none of the women in the company are getting paid less than me within the same seniority bracket. If I find any pay inequality, then I will write further stories to resolve the problem, for example starting a salary redistribution pool to make sure the excess goes to everyone equally. If every man did this, we could probably close the pay gap tomorrow.

I also have a story to address my subconscious attitudes and basic perceptions. Ashonda helped me see how beauty standards make the world an unfair place for women who aren't born with body types that society deems attractive. No matter what we say or believe about equality, our implicit biases cause us to treat women differently because of their bodies, and Neuralink provides a novel way to fix this at the root.

We go around the circle again, this time giving our status

updates. What story are we working on? What did we do to make progress on it? Is anything blocking us?

Jakayla says her story is to advocate for Black women to have more representation in media. She's writing letters to different media companies to make her voice heard and express how important this issue is to her, and asking major media companies what they are doing to advance the cause of increasing representation for marginalized groups.

Peter says his story is to advocate for Human-Animal Love (HAL) Rights, because people who are Animal-Attracted deserve the same recognition and acceptance in society that we give to everyone else. Ever since Neuralink made it possible for animals to give consent, there has been a growing movement to change the law to grant marriage equality for HAL. Peter's story is to donate ten hours of work this week to HAL advocacy groups.

Thomas says his story is to take a trip to a developing city and help distribute gender affirming hormone therapy to children who otherwise wouldn't be able to get it.

It's my turn and I say my epic is to fight for womens' equity and that I actually have two different stories for that. The first one is getting involved at work to raise questions about pay equity, but the second one—I feel a little embarrassed talking about this—is a personal growth item suggested by Ashonda to help work toward beauty equity for all women, no matter their body type.

Ashonda asks if I would be willing to tell the group about my experience, and the thing is, in this situation, can you really say no? As I've explained, I can't afford to make up a reason not to, with my already tumultuous honesty score hanging over my head. So I start talking, and I have to grit my teeth here, because this is intimate and it's something I don't feel comfortable with at all (but personal growth isn't always comfortable.)

"Maybe it will sound a little weird, but the action I took to advance the cause of womens' body equity was to masturbate to women that are not conventionally attractive. I only watch ethically sourced pornography, of course, where all the participants demonstrate proof of age and consent to a third party, and an

independent reviewer verifies that none of the participants are acting under coercion or were victims of human trafficking."

Aside: I still don't feel totally at home watching high-def dreaming video, because I'm old enough to remember when we watched everything on screens. In a video, you see an arrangement of light that you interpret as a mountain, but in a dream you feel a cognition of a mountain, which then evokes an arrangement of light. The things you see are secondary to the feeling of seeing, because the visual cortex doesn't work like a traditional display.

"The woman in the dream I watched was extremely curvy, or fluffy, or I guess, "big and beautiful:" her thighs were probably each as big as my waist, textured by stretch marks and cellulite. She had huge spidery false eyelashes affixed to her face, and enormous rolls of flesh hung down from her belly and covered her genitals like a skirt. Her co-star held her pannus aside to reveal her intimate parts. Ashonda said it's OK to be fully open and honest about my feelings in these moments because if I don't acknowledge them I won't be able to overcome them. So, radical honesty: I found her repulsive. The sight of her made me feel nauseous, and brought to mind questions of disease and infection."

Silence. Presumably everyone is on mute. Ashonda says, "That's alright. If you have those feelings, it's important to own them, to name your prejudice." Sometimes she almost feels like a priest in a confessional, even though this isn't exactly private. I continue.

"Before the dream started, I had given Neuralink permission to modify my emotions and proprioceptions. As I watched the extra-curvy woman in the throes of ecstasy, my implant turned nausea to attraction, repulsion to compulsion, and I found myself full of eager desire for her; her fat rolls and stretch marks drew me in, and I even imagined the scent of sour sweat and yeast blooming in the folds of her skin: in that moment every aspect of her was enticing to me. All my prejudice melted away."

Jakayla and Peter and Thomas' faces don't betray any emotion. I hope they weren't paying attention, but I know they prob-

ably are because Ashonda would have nudged them back if they stopped. "Thank you for sharing that," she said, "we can all learn from your example".

Warm light radiates from nowhere and bathes my surroundings. A green and gold toast notifies me that I have gained points in empathy and authenticity, and I get an achievement for attending my 1000th personal growth standup.

∽

At 12 exactly, Ashonda tells me from inside my head that it's time to leave to go meet Qiyara. To be honest she reminds me of the woman in the video I watched for my personal growth team, and I think that's good. I hope I am treating her equitably. I wonder if Ashonda knows that the reason I'm meeting Qiyara is to bribe her with drugs. I don't think so, because wouldn't she tell the authorities? But I also wonder how she could possibly not know.

I load the encrypted smartdrugs onto a thumb drive, and head down to my car. We all thought the future would be self-driving robot cars, but it turns out the best self-driving car is actually you, running a generative transformer pre-trained on racecar drivers and integrated with google maps. The human hardware is highly adapted to negotiating routes through 3d spaces, and the software can be patched. I tell myself where I want to go and pull out of my garage like a bat out of hell, a speed demon on judgement day. Everything is a highway now, no traffic lights anywhere, no speed limits, a hundred miles per hour on surface streets. It's as thrilling as any smartdrug, the exhilaration of pure speed, more beautiful than the Nike of Samothrace.

At the same time though, I confess I feel like a passenger in my own body, which parks my car ten stories underground beneath a gleaming glass tower, a relic of the 20th century, back when everyone used to cluster in cities and show up onsite to work every day. There are still certain companies that cling to the old trappings of prestige. The autopilot gives control back to me once the car is parked, and I make way to the elevator, still fifteen

minutes before I'm supposed to meet with Qiyara.

The elevator from the parking garage brings me to the ground floor of the skyscraper. The floor is polished stone and the ceiling of the lobby is very high, vertiginously so. Light shines in through the glass on all sides, and there are more elevator bays in a central column, to take you up to the business floors. Ashonda points out a table by making it glow and tells me to have a seat while she lets Qiyara know I've arrived. But as soon as I sit down, two men in identical gray suits and white button-down shirts and black ties approach me and sit at my table, uninvited.

The first one asks me what I'm doing here, and I say I'm dropping off some encrypted, sensitive documents for a client. He says "is that all you're doing?" A purple warning indicator flashes in the lower left of my HUD; it can sense that I'm planning to lie. It shows me that my rating is about be downgraded to "Untrustworthy". I muster all the sincerity in the world, and I say, "I'm also planning to get lunch." Somehow, this doesn't trip the sensor. The man shows me a badge, FANH, and asks if I'll submit my documents to a malware scan. This will not compromise the encryption, it will only search for known traces of smartdrugs and viruses.

I try to tell them no. I try to get up and walk away, but for some reason it doesn't happen, even though I know it's what I should do. One of the quirks of dreaming media is that you start to lose your sense of when you're dreaming and when you're awake. Media you stream into your head feels just like a dream, and you have linear, externally coherent imagery dreamed into your head while you're asleep. There are admittedly days when I feel as though I'm constantly on the brink of awakening, as if the dream I dreamt in my sleep still has me.

In my left jacket pocket is the drive with the drugs, in the right is the drive with the screenplay. I give them the one with the work documents and they plug it into a small device. It scans clean. The agent asks me if I have any other drives, and the purple warning flashes again.

✦✦✦   This story ended a bit abruptly. At the time I wrote it, I wished I could have tied up all the threads in a neater little package. This type of harmony is called "concinnity," when everything comes together in a pleasing way, and it would be fair to say this story lacks concinnity, as many post-modern stories do. They start in the middle, they end in the middle, and it's all a lot of sound and fury, signifying nothing. But upon reflection, I have decided it conveys precisely what I intend it to – that it illustrates the principle of anarcho-tyranny – because it shows how you can break the rules in an automated panopticon for an arbitrary amount of time and get away with it, yet at any moment, the system might notice you and punish you. When draconian rules are enforced unevenly and arbitrarily, this is a state of both *anarchy* and *tyranny* at the same time, and one does not have to look very far to see that we exist in this precise idiom today, even now.

   There is not much room for conflict in a story set in a society of total algorithmic control, because the entire premise is that the system is capable of preemptively winning all struggles endogenously, and if it can't deliver on that, then it isn't total, or at the very least, it appears weak, and ceases to be scary. The only option for a plot about a rule-breaker with a brain control device in his head is that the system itself breaks him, and of that day and hour knoweth no man.

   One enduring feature of all "dystopias"[1] is that although they may be set in the future or the past, or in a far away place, they are always anchored in the present moment. They are stylized depictions of the *here* and *now*, an attempt to make various contradictions legible by increasing their contrast. I sometimes tell people that you can find horror in everything, in everyday life, if you learn how to look. Horror is much more of a disposition than any particular arrange-

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1 I put the word in quotes because all possible worlds are dystopian when compared to a utopian ideal. Gritty realism is dystopian; a slice of life is dystopian; the daily news is dystopian, etc. This word is overused and it implies there is some kind of achievable future technoparadise that we can finally realize if everyone just wakes up. People who deploy this word may not think that is what they are implying, but it is, and it's a facile notion.

ment of circumstances. And in light of that, I'd like to call attention to a few points of techno-optimism that are present in this story. Technology and modernity are obvious, lazy scapegoats for the pervasive discontent that is an inexorable part of the human condition. If any ancient humans were born with an innate sense of contentedness in their nature, I promse they were out-competed and out-bred by their anxious, striving, covetous neighbors, and the latter sort are the ones who comprise our ancestors. So we have to take our optimism where we can get it.

The possibilities afforded by a full-duplex in-brain device are nearly limitless, but the current iteration of the Neuralink device cannot possibly have the precision and resolution needed to peform the tasks that I have described in this story (he said, being an absolute layman with regard to Neuroscience). Nevertheless I have imagined several applications for the technology that I find to be genuinely interesting and fun: the degustation technology that I have imagined could make it much easier to eat a healthy diet, pushing all of the phenomological buttons of superstimulating foods like french fries and cheesecake, even as we are eating lean proteins and bitter greens.

As with any such capacity, there might be hidden costs in the form of a loss of discipline or a sense of derealization or fatigue that negates the hedonic gains of being able to simulate every imaginable culinary experience "for free." I think I made a fine survey of these types of problems in *God-Shaped Hole*, but we can at least acknowledge that the untethering of experience from material constraints is exciting and interesting, in addition to being disorienting and dehumanizing.

Constraints spur creativity, and we expect that removing them will open up new vistas of creative possibility, but instead it tends to cheapen everything that is beautiful and rare. Both of these things are true at the same time, and I believe that a man of vision, who is worthy and who can listen to the voices of ancient gods, can also weather the storm of being totally unconstrained, and can use these new powers to achieve great works.

The other optimistic idea in the story comes at the end, when the narrator is driving his car using Neuralink. If a computer really could take control of your movements, then its likely that you would

become a hapless and helpless passenger in your own body, looking on as machines take actions on your behalf. That is a truly horrific idea, which would transform mankind into something akin to ants or bees, social insects, and its one that we will explore further in the coming pages.

A brain implant like Neuralink could allow you to perform bodily tasks with borrowed world-class expertise. The character in my story is able to drive with preternatural skill, and I took a moment to exult in this, echoing a line from the Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto:

> We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing automobile with its bonnet adorned with great tubes like serpents with explosive breath ... a roaring motor car which seems to run on machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace.

I find this manifesto very inspiring, so much that I am tempted to reproduce the entire thing here. But I won't, because I know you can easily find it, and even that very short journey is edifying. For many are called, but few *are* chosen. Technology causes some enormous problems, but it has also given us many gifts. And if we extrapolate to the future, we can imagine a million hells of our own making, but in these latter days when the prevailing attitude is limping resentment of technology, Marinetti's manifesto is a breath of compressed air, discharged from a canister that hisses like a serpent, puncturing the lungs with the diabolic force of industrial machines! I have come to tell you of the horrors of technology *and* of its GLORIES. Whomst've among you will have the courage, audacity, and revolt to praise the beauty of speed, to glorify war, militarism, patriotism, the beautiful ideas that kill?

A mechanical shepherd, and one herd! That's what Neuralink will become; a shepherd's crook to an endlessly masturbating technocratic slime, if you continue with your effete affectations of traditionalism, which you whisper to each other through pocket lightning mirrors and comm satellites, hovering in the exosphere like Ezekiel's

angels, four-faced wheels in the middle of wheels, their rings of a dreadful height. You have heard that Man is the tool-using animal, now will you allow yourself to become the animal that is used by tools? Or will you SEIZE them and put them in their place? Will you fight, or will you perish like a dog?

I need you to reject the parochialism, the narrowness of moral imagination which can only conceive of a singular and monotonic type of social change. The only social development that most futurists today can articulate is one where "norms" are more sexually libertine, entailing less individual responsibility for any moral outcome, where every problem is "systemic" and is solved by means of submission to an overbearing mother state, who installs a baby monitor in your pocket, your house, and finally in your head. They call this spiritual degeneration by the name of progress, but I call it regress.

"Progressives" of this type are so conformist, so cowardly, that they will refuse even to PERCEIVE the plain truths in front of them if mommy does not give them permission.

Dagon

"We've received a complaint. I'm sorry, I can't say from whom, apparently one of your coworkers overheard a conversation between you and your teammate, Joanna. In the context we received the complaint, you were discussing her date from the previous night, and you made the remark, "there are plenty of fish in the sea." You're not in trouble. We just ask that you think a little bit more next time and use more inclusive language. Instead of that, why couldn't you say something like, "there are plenty of others out there." When you say something like "fish in the sea" you are, maybe unwittingly, invoking the legacy of fishing, and that can make some people feel unwelcome. We just want everyone who works here to feel comfortable in their own scales or skin, as the case may be."

&

Dear Colleagues,

I would like to apologize, both on behalf of the company, and personally, to all of you for my use of the phrases "net profit" and "net loss" in the quarterly earnings report. I am troubled to say that I was not fully aware of the connotations of these phrases in light of the dark history of our country and indeed, our entire species. Several of you came to me in private to help me understand what I did wrong and how I can try to be a better ally. I now see that the use of the "n-word" can be very disturbing or triggering to Thalassian People. I know there can be no real excuse for what I have said, but I am striving every day to work on myself an improve. Going forward, we will only use the more inclusive term, "revenue minus cost."

Thank you,

&

"Hello, Mohinder, thank you for making the time to come see me today. No, please don't think of this as a reprimand. We can't, of course, tell you what to eat–no one is telling you that, obviously that would be an overreach. However, in your bio in the

org chat, you describe yourself as a 'pescetarian' – again, obviously, the diet you choose is up to you. That's a personal choice. But we are asking you–the company is asking you–if you wouldn't mind removing that word from your description.

"No, no one has complained yet, but we are concerned that it might be upsetting to some of our new hires. In the employee code of conduct, which you signed after you onboarded–oops, when you joined the company–see? anyone can make a mistake– it states that employees should not use any polarizing or divisive language, including language that may have offensive racial, sexual, ableist, or humanist associations. We appreciate your cooperation."

∻

"Mr. Ward, thank you for coming in. As we indicated to you in our email, we have received a number of distressing calls from some of our customers about your alleged posts on social media. In particular, one caller indicated some very troubling tweets that you seem to have made in which you refer to "fish people", and refer to "the innsmouth lean." We were also sent several screenshots in which you refer to "bait", which is a known human-supremacist dog whistle according the SPLC and the ADL. Moreover, they show you responding to the accounts of several prominent Thalassians with single word replies such as "sushi", "sashimi", "ceviche", and on one occasion, "fish sauce." I shouldn't have to explain that this behavior is unacceptable.

∻

Ticket Status: **Closed**

"Hello, Ms. Corbett, and thank you for taking the time to write this report. We have investigated your claim about the incident on November 18th, and the finding at this time is that no violation of ethics or the employee code of conduct occurred. We spoke to several of your colleagues, and all of them indicated

that Barekdagon's guttural shrieks, which you interpreted as sexual aggression, are involuntary and reflexive when he hears the ancestral voice of the great ones who even now lay dreaming in the nameless abyss that was old when the stars were young. We understand that some of our employees are still at the beginning of their antihumanism journey, and we remind you that we have many resources available on the company HR portal, which can help you relate to and aid in the struggles of Molluscan, Icthyan, and Gastropodal People of the Ocean (MIGPOO.)

~

~Subject: New Hires
From: karen@*********

Hello Team,

We are pleased to introduce our newest hire, Munzzur. In her own words:

> Hi everyone! The closest you will be able to get to pronouncing my name with your human tongues and mouths is Munzzur'Ak'ak, and I am so excited to be part of this company and its mission. A bit about my background: I spent the past 3000 years in a trance at the bottom of an ocean trench, preparing the way for my undimensioned and unseen master's re-entry into the world. HE KNOWS THE GATE. HE IS THE KEY. HE IS THE GATE. HE IS THE KEY AND THE GUARDIAN OF THE GATE. He knows where the Old Ones broke through of old, and where They SHALL break through again. My hobbies include hiking, scrapbooking, and raising my nightmare brood of eldritch pelagic horrors. I'm a full-time sales strategist and a full-time mom!

~

"Damn squids. They smell funny, you know?"

"Hey, don't let anyone hear you say that. But just between you and me, yeah, they smell like rotten fish."

"Look man I'm not a humanist, ok, I just don't like 'em."

"I wouldn't go so far as to say I don't like them. I try to judge everyone as an individual, you know?"

"Oh, totally. And let's be clear, there's a difference between thalassians and squids, yeah? Like, not every thalassian is a squid."

"The thing that really pisses me off, ok, if we're being honest here—"

"This is a safe space, it's OK, I won't judge you."

"—Is that those fuckers basically live on fish, they eat an all fish diet, but god forbid you or I want to have a nice bite of fish, no no, that would be humanist, meanwhile Lapidoth down in IT is munching on like a pound of sashimi and that's just fine for him."

"I miss tempura shrimp. Used to be you could just go out and eat a nice plate of tempura shrimp. Ponzu sauce. I want to the izakaya down on 12th yesterday and they didn't even have shrimp on the menu. Only Japanese place left in town."

"You know in China they don't give a shit. They eat shellfish, salmon, tuna, like none of this even happened."

"Political correctness. Eh?"

"My buddy went to Shenzhen on a business trip last month. He said there was a stall on the street selling boiled squid, you know what I'm saying?"

"No shit."

"Swear to god."

"Did he try it?"

✦✦✦

This, along with the previous story, constitutes some kind of white collar horror, or corporate horror, which is to say, bureaucratic horror. It's a common and even easy genre because we live every day in the belly of leviathan. Where *Key Performance Indicators* suggests that the nadir of the human soul might be realized if the rituals of managerial control could were applied to our personal lives, *Dagon* asks the impious and unconscionable question: is there a limit to the logic of inclusion and diversity? Is there any degradation, any humiliation which our government (through its emissaries, HR deparments) will not ask us to endure, for the sake of this principle?

I think the answer is obviously no, and this story angered a number of people because the dedication to these things is in no wise rational or predicated on any kind of cost-benefit analysis; it is a religious observance, a sacrament, something which is beyond questioning. If there were eldritch fish people who wanted to raise the Old Ones to devour all mankind in an orgy of fire and blood, then the priesthood of diversity, equity, inclusivity, or death would indeed react by creating new speach taboos to make them feel welcome in the workplace. That's all they know. That's all they can imagine.

Don't Make Me Think

❧

The first misconception is that it is possible to avoid influencing people's choices.

— Richard H. Thaler, *Nudge*

I. Dagger 🗡️

A man 👨 —a boy 👦—grows up in the exquisitely quantified 🔢 📊 ➡️ and gamified 🎮 ➡️ world 🌍, in the city 🌆 of Cupertino, on the edge 🗺️ 🚪 of the Santa Clara Valley, in the shadow 👤 of the Santa Cruz Mountains ⛰️. When he is eleven, his parents 👨‍👨 —an Ashkenazi ✡️ technical 💻 📊 product 🏭 ⚙️ ⬇️ manager 🎛️ 🤔 👨 and a Chinese game 🎮 designer 🏛️ 🗺️ 👨 named 👊 ➡️ "Sing" Song 🎶—take him to get his Neuralink 🧠 🔗 at the hospital 🏥 by the Super Kyo-Po plaza.

A robot 🤖 performs 🎭 ➡️ the procedure, which requires no 🚫 general anaesthesia 💤 💉, in one hour 🕐. While they wait ⌚ ➡️, his parents buy 🛒 ➡️ their groceries for the week 📆, and when it's over 🔃, they take him to get ramen 🍜 for lunch. He orders 👑 🎙️ ➡️ two ajitsuke 👅 🧂 eggs 🥚 and extra chashu 🍜 🐷 pork (because he's a growing boy 👦) and his parents 👨‍👨 eat 🍽️ 😊 ➡️ compressed enriched mealworm bricks 🐛 🧱. For them, Neuralink 🧠 🔗 degustation 🐛 🦋 👅 technology 💻 🧪 makes the worm loaf 🐛 🍞 phenomenologically 👁️ 👂 👅 🔁 indistinguishable from ⬅️ a hot 🔥 bowl of Hakata ramen 🍜.

For the next three 3️⃣ nights 🌑, as expected, the boy 👦 sees 👁️ ➡️ dazzling 🤩 🔁 incomprehensible dreams 💤 🎥, all of which he forgets 🧠 🎞️ 📉 ➡️, and on the fourth day 📅, he wakes ☕ ➡️ without 🚫 waking ☕ ➡️ into a vaporwave 🌬️ 🌊 expanse of Pantone rose quartz 🌹 💎 and serenity ☮️ 🔵. A voice 🗣️ 🎙️ in his head 👦 says 🎙️ ➡️ "good morning 👍 🌅," and it sounds 🔊 ➡️ like ❤️ his mother but with uninflected English 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿 🎙️. "You can call 📞 ⬆️ me Amy 🤖 👩, unless you

prefer a different name . We'll be getting to know each other better in the coming weeks , but for now I need to make sure everything is working properly. If you can hear me, please think about a rhinoceros .

"… Good , and now a castle ?

"… Good , and now your favorite TV show ?"

Amy teaches him to make search queries with his mind , and to install applications , and tells him she will collect his biometrics to ensure he remains in good health at all times . She will read his thoughts , but she will never share them with anyone, and will always respect his privacy . The boy doesn't tell her, though he guesses she will know , that he receives this as a threat . Hereafter, his life will be measured and optimized and nudged , to help him live up to his full potential.

As he reads his books in school , Amy highlights the words one at a time to help him keep the pace , while studying . She tells him how many words he has read , how many minutes he has spent reading , and ranks him against local, regional, and national averages. She shows him how to find his position on a leaderboard that charts the reading ability of everyone in his age cohort .

Reading , writing , and arithmetic are all fully automated through Neuralink . A program in the boy's personal cloud decodes images retrieved from the lateral

geniculate nucleus of his brain and parses them into words using OCR algorithms (Pravettoni et al., 2034, *Mitigating Systemic Cognitive Inequalities through Automation of Mental Labor.*) A similar mechanism is used to automatically detect mathematical symbols and perform the relevant computations.

Students hear the words they are reading, or the answers to math questions, in their own inner "voice"—the Neuralink driver is able to manifest these values in the mind of the student using a method called Concept Injection. The purpose of education is not to train students to read or do math; it's to train them to use mental automation effectively. Tool-assisted reading is performed through the cultivation of passivity and "flow". The application gives, and the reader receives.

In P.E. class, they use a parkour program and play follow the leader, free-running, through an obstacle course by playing back neuromotor recordings from top athletes. Although they are children, they can tap into the aggregated muscle memory of a thousand lifetimes. The boy feels like a passenger in his own body, but it's thrilling to feel himself leap from a height, roll and dash across concrete pylons and flip off of railings and wall ledges. Sometimes he wonders if it's really happening or if it's just a hallucination, but his muscles feel sore afterwards. Whether it's real may be entirely the wrong question.

When he uses the toilet 🚽 , Amy 🤖 👩 records 🎙️ 📼 ➡️ all his muscle 💪 movements, and shows 👉 👁️ ➡️ him metrics ✏️ 📊 that track how much his anus 🍑 🕳️ clenches when he shits 💩 ➡️. She explains how these metrics ✏️ 📊 can be used to detect 🕵️ ➡️ leading 🤴 ➡️ indicators 📍 📊 of unhealthy bowel 🍑 🔁 function ⚙️ ⬇️, and recommends (both to him and his parents 👨‍👩‍👦) that he should switch 🎚️ ➡️ to a higher fiber 🔼 🥦 nutrient brick 🧱. (Heaton, Radavan, 2024, *Dark Matter* ⚛️ *: Extrapolating Behavior* 🐵 🧬 ⬇️ *in the Enteric Nervous System* ⚙️ 🕸️ *Using Neuralink* 🧠 🔗)

Sometimes whole weeks 📝 go by without a single 1️⃣ act 🎭 ⬇️ of agency on the part of the boy 👦. Amy 🤖 👩 says 🎙️ ➡️ wake up ☕ ➡️ and he wakes up ☕ ➡️. She says 🎙️ ➡️ get dressed 👔 ➡️ and he gets dressed 👔 ➡️. She says 🎙️ ➡️ go here 🔽 📍, do this, go there 🔼 📍, study 🧑‍🎓 🏫 ➡️; eat 🍽️ ➡️; and he does ✅ ➡️, he does ✅ ➡️, he does ✅ ➡️. It feels less like ❤️ obedience 🙇 and more like ❤️ convenience 🏪 ⬇️.

When he is thirteen, in accordance with economic 💱 📈 forecasts ☀️ ☔, he enrolls in a vocational track 🛤️ to learn 🙇 📖 ➡️ about encephalic 👱 🔁 software 🧮 💾 engineering 🛠️ ⚙️ 🔁. In his sleep 😴 ⬇️, Amy 🤖 👩 dreams $_z$z^Z 🎥 ➡️ schematics ⚙️ 📝 and flowcharts 🌊 📊 and diagrams into his mind 🧠 👻. At the same time ⏰, she enrolls him in YouSocial, a broker 💱 📡 for B-certifications 🅱️ 🖊️. B-certified individuals 🅱️ 🖊️ 👨 are people who meet the highest 🔼 🔼 standards of verified ☑️ ✍️ ➡️ social and environmental performance 🎭 ⬇️, who work 👷 👷‍♀️ ➡️ together to redefine 🔁 📍 📖 success and build 👷 ➡️ a more inclusive 💅 🚽 and sustainable ♻️ economy, creating new ✨ incentives 😄 🥂 through personal 👩 transparency and accountability 🧾. (What is B-Certification?, YouSocial.com/FAQs, 2031.) On average, it takes five 5️⃣

years 🗒️ for young adults to earn a B-certification 🅱️ ✍️; employers and colleges 🎓 🏫 use the cert ✍️ as an essential 🛸 🔁 criteria for evaluating applicants.

On the weekends 🗒️ 🔚, his father 🧑 takes him geocaching 🌍 💰 🔁 with an app 📱 💾 called Recollect, in which the proprietor of a hidden 🙈 ➡️ cache uploads 🤲 🛰️ ➡️ a memory 🧠 🎞️ of the act 🎭 ⬇️ of hiding 🙈 ➡️ it, but does not 🚫 ✅ share the coordinates 🗺️ 📍. Together, the boy 👦 and his dad 🧑 find 🔍 🎯 ➡️ a memory 🧠 🎞️ of a capsule 💊 in a flower pot 🌷 🍯 next to a statue 🗿 of Nikola Tesla ⚡, and they join the others who have found 🔍 🎯 ➡️ it there ⤴️ 📍 by uploading 🤲 🛰️ 🔁 their own memories 🧠 🎞️ to the chain ⛓️ of recollections.

Inside ➡️ ⬅️ the capsule 💊 is a small 🤏 Tesla coil ⚡ 🌀, and when he beholds 👁️ 🤝 ➡️ it, a popup 🎉 in his mind's eye 🧠 👻 👁️ asks ❓ ➡️ if he would like ❤️ to relive the collective's discovery 🔁 🧭 🔬. He assents 👍 ➡️. A kaleidoscopic 🔭 🌈 🔁 wave 🌊 of images 🖼️ floods 🌊 🌊 ➡️ his mind 🧠 👻, layers 🍰 of phantom 👻 👤 approaches to the capsule 💊 from ⬅️ every angle 📍 📐; panoramic sight, polyphonic 🌈 🎙️ echoes 🔊 🪞 ⬇️ of satisfaction 😌 ⬇️.

When he is fifteen, some of the parental 👨‍👦 controls 🔑 🕹️ fall 🍂 ➡️ away, and Amy 🤖 👱‍♀️ introduces him to Neuralink 🧠 🔗 pornography 🍆 👯 , which is metered 📏 📊 by homework 🏠 📝 completed 💯 ➡️. Memory-based 🧠 🎞️ porn 🍆 👯 is regulated 👩 ➡️ by the LOTUS EATER 🌸 🧘 🍽️ 😊 Act: using direct 🫀 🔌 brain 🧠 stimulation 💉 ⚡ ⬇️ to induce 🏁 ⛲ ➡️ orgasm 🍆 💦 ⬇️ is classified as wireheading ⚡ 🤪 🔁, and this functionality ⚙️ ⬇️ 🔁 can only be deployed 💻 ☁️ ⬆️ by software 🧮 💾 certified ✍️ ➡️ by behavioral 🐵 🥵 🔁 experts 🤓 🧑 to have value 💰 in pro-

moting or fostering prosocial behaviors🐵🎭⬇️ in the user.

Recorded🎙️📼➡️ memories🧠🎞️ that contain sexual🍆🌮🔁 stimulation💉⚡⬇️ of erogenous😺🔁 parts fall 🍂➡️ under↩️ Schedule✏️📔 II, which defines📍📖 any memory🧠🎞️ or application that induces🏁⛲➡️ euphoria😆💥 conducive to single-mindedness1️⃣🧠 as a potential vector→ of abuse🤬. (Limiting Onanistic Tendencies Under↩️ Simulation👾🎭, Exceptions Afforded To Education & Remediation, 13 U.S.C. §§ 56-341, 2028.)

Amy🤖👱‍♀️ lets him browse🔍🕸️➡️ the porn🍆👯 networks⚡🕸️ for up to an hour🕐 each day📅, provided he completes💯➡️ all of his homework🏠📝. Neuralink🧠🔗 pornography🍆👯 allows🔒✍️➡️ the user to have first-person1️⃣⬇️👨 sexual🍆🌮🔁 experiences across a range 🏔️🏔️ of genders↕️⚦ and sexual🍆🌮🔁 presentations, and has been shown👉👁️➡️ to significantly reduce📉➡️ prejudice🤬👫 against marginalized sexual🍆🌮🔁 identities🆔 (West et. al, 2034, *Can Intra-Subjective*🧠🧠 *Non-Binary Sexual Experiences Induce*🏁⛲➡️ *Empathy*💙?).

As he grows older👴➡️ and despite the prodding 👉🐂🔁 of the voice🗣️🎙️ in his head👱, he never concerns himself with the thoughts🤔⬇️ or the dealings of women👩. In high school🔼🏫, Amy🤖👱‍♀️ tries to broker📈📡➡️ dates for him, but he does not🚫✅ care for dates with boys 👦, and he finds🔍🎯➡️ the girls👧 Amy🤖👱‍♀️ suggests to be ugly👹🔁 or otherwise deficient. (1 in 4 boys👦 are resistant🛡️⬇️🔁 to Neuralink 🧠🔗-induced🏁⛲➡️ "cued bisexuality" vs. 1 in 50 girls. [French, 2029, *The Conservative Case for State-Enforced Homosexuality.*])

Yet when he is seventeen, all on his own, he meets a hapashkenazi✡️ girl named👌➡️ May with a face👱‍♀️ from⬅️

Chongqing重庆市 and tits🍼🥚 from⬅️ Samandar. He is overcome with lust😍🍆 for her, but she rejects his advances (The exact location🗺️📍 of Samandar is unknown 🚫🤯⬇️; medieval🏰📜 Arabic🕌🔄 sources⛲ place📌🗺️➡️ the city🏙️ midway between🥪 Derbent and Atil, near the shore🏖️ of the Caspian Sea🐚🌊 [Brook, 2018, *The Jews✡️ of Khazaria*.])

In anger😡, he picks a fight⚔️⬇️ with another boy👦 that she favors🥰➡️. He balls up his fist👊 and it flies✈️➡️ at his rival's head👱 , as if of its own accord, but before⬅️ the punch👊⬇️ can connect ⚡🔗⬆️, Amy🤖👱‍♀️ fills his mind 🧠👻 with calming😐🔄 emotions😂😭 and inhibits 🛑💥➡️ the muscles💪 in his shoulder and tricep. He relaxes🛁🕯️➡️ in spite of his will. Even so, the other boy's👱 eyes 👁️ become glassy, lost in some neuromanipulated🧠✋🛠️➡️ soothing unto himself. (An exercise🏃🚴⬇️ in theory👨‍🦳🤔 of mind🧠👻: that other boy👱 must have his own Amy 🤖👱‍♀️, with her own voice🗣️🎙️, and her own name 🏷️⬇️. What does✅➡️ she tell📖🎙️➡️ him?) The peace🕊️ of the moment⏱️ yields⚠️➡️ rapidly⏩🔄 to terror😱, because⬇️ the boy👱 realizes his body💪🐍 may disobey him.

Instantly, Amy🤖👱‍♀️ files🗂️➡️ an incident💢⚠️ report🗃️⬇️ with the school🕰️ board and the local police👮 , indicating👇➡️ the boy👱 was the antagonist in an attempted assault🤜💢⬇️ in which he experienced hot-blooded 🔥🩸🔄 violent⚔️🩸🔄 intentions. The ticket🎫 is routed🛣️➡️ to the school🏫 guidance counselor's office, where a bot🤖 processes the report🗃️⬇️ and prescribes a course of medium-intensity guilt😔 to be invoked whenever the boy👱 recalls🔄☎️➡️ the incident in question❓ . The prescription👑🎙️💊 is appended to the ticket🎫, which is marked

as 'pending review,' whereupon the automated psychiatric consultant for the district approves it and pushes a notification to Amy, the boy's parents, and the school's student resources office. The round trip time from filing the ticket to its approval is just over six seconds, with 2/3rds of the time spent waiting on the approval, 18% above the mean but still a 3.2% improvement YOY. The boy's score on YouSocial is decremented by ten points, with a chance to mitigate the penalty if he completes a probationary period with no recidivism.

As soon as the approval comes through, Amy deploys the guilt through the boy's Neuralink, and although he feels a heaviness in his chest, he is unable to place its origin. He does not feel any remorse about trying to punch the other boy, and the experience of guilt feels like it comes from somewhere outside him, as in fact, it does. He dislikes the sensation, but on some level he knows the provenance of the feeling, and that it's part of the same intervention that stopped him from landing his punch in the first place. He hates Amy, and his anger wells up under the artificial guilt and subsumes it.

~

One night he downloads a memory from Recollect of a curving road where no street signs are visible. In the memory, he parks his car on the highway shoulder and steps out into the hu-

mid air 🌬️ of a marsh 🌧️🌿 in the San Francisco 🌉💩 Bay. He walks 🚶➡️ into the wetlands 🌧️🏝️ with a flashlight 🔦, uncomfortably far, and lifts 🏋️➡️ up a rock 🪨 with a false ❌ bottom 🍑. Without looking 🚫🧐🔁, he places an object inside ➡️⬅️, so that the nature 🌲🌱 of his treasure 💎💍 cannot 🙅 be discerned by aspiring recollectors. But although the object cannot be seen 🙅👁️, it's clear 👁️💎 from ⬅️ the emotion 😂😭 of the rememberer 🧠🎞️👨 that he has hidden 🙈➡️ more than just an artifact 🏺; he has also buried 🏷️➡️ an obligation, and this is a ritual 🎭🙏; it's not 🚫 the first 1️⃣⬇️ time 🕰️ and it won't ↗️🚫 be the last.

The boy 👱 goes out to the wetlands 🌧️🌴 to search 🔍➡️, following the memory 🧠🎞️, but he does not 🚫✅ find 🔍🎯➡️ the treasure 💎💍. Even late at night 🌑, he can go anywhere he wants with his car 🚗, because 🔽 Crime-Stop 👮🛑 is installed ⚙️➡️ on every Neuralink 🧠🔗 device 🛠️⚙️, and it cannot 🙅 be removed, so children are never 🙅 unsupervised. Neuralink 🧠🔗 with Crimestop 👮🛑 both protects 🛡️➡️ him from ⬅️ others, and protects 🛡️➡️ young people from ⬅️ the follies of youth.

The next day 📅 after school 🏫, he searches 🔍➡️ again, and still he finds 🔍🎯➡️ nothing 🚫⬇️. Weeks 📑 elapse. He does not 🚫✅ relent in his search 🔍⬇️, and no one uploads 🤲🛰️➡️ any new ✨ memories 🧠🎞️ of finding 🔍🎯🔁 the Recollect cache in the rock 🪨, so he knows 🤯➡️ it's still waiting ⌚🔁 there for him. He replays 🔁▶️➡️ the original memory 🧠🎞️ again and again, until he feels he is looking 🧐🔁 for an object he has hidden 🙈➡️ from ⬅️ himself.

Every day 📅 at school 🏫, he sees May together with the other boy 👱, whose name 🏷️⬇️ he does not 🚫✅ care to

learn👩📖➡️. Each sight👁️⬇️ of her is a slight; each thought🤔⬇️ of her 👱‍♀️ with him 👨 is a wound😟🩸⬇️. And when he thinks🤔➡️ of her, he also thinks🤔➡️ of the fight⚔️⬇️ that was denied🚫 to him, of the way his arm💪 went slack; of the way his shoulder seized up. And when he remembers🧠🎞️➡️ these things, Amy🤖👱‍♀️ fills him with guilt😏, and guilt spurs his anger😡, and his anger😡 lowers 📉➡️ his YouSocial score. The boy👱 has his mother's 👸 temper😡⬆️🔁, and the world🌍 is full of invisible🧿 walls. He believes (and he knows🤯➡️ it is a superstitious 🧑👻🔁 belief) that if he finds🔍🎯➡️ the treasure💎💍 in recollect, he will↗️ also discover🧭🔬➡️ a way to win. 🏆➡️ May's affection😘.

Amy🤖👱‍♀️ tells📖🎙️➡️ him feelings of anomie😨, alienation🛸⬇️, and even despair😩 are normal, common symptoms of adolescence; the way to become his best self is to have personal👱‍♀️ goals🥅⬇️ that connect⚡🔗➡️ him to his community. He can both improve📈⬆️ himself and repair 🛠️⬆️ his trajectory towards B-certification🅱️🖌️. A longitudinal study👩🏫⬇️ by West and Curwen found🔍🎯➡️ that teenagers who set their own charitable🎗️🔁 goals🥅⬇️ are three times more likely to build👷➡️ enduring altruistic 👱🔫🔁 habits vs. teens who have them randomly🎲🔁 assigned📋➡️ (West, Curwen, 2038, *Setting Them Up For Success*🏆: *A Neurological*🧠🧮🔁 *Approach to Cultivating Conscientiousness in Developing Adults.*) She tells📖🎙️➡️ him he should choose his own goal🥅⬇️, and gives🎁➡️ him a list🔢📝 of possibilities.

He chooses to do volunteer work for an organization called🎙️🍘➡️ Respawn🔁🐤 that rehabilitates recovering smartdrug💾💊 addicts🎲🧑. Amy🤖👱‍♀️ handles the regis-

tration🗂️⬇️ process and the scheduling🖊️🗒️🔁. On the appointed day📅, he goes to the Respawn clinic🔁🐣👨‍⚕️ , where they show👉👁️➡️ him a training🚂🔁 and orientation video📼—

> The human👦♂️👦♀️ mind🧠👻 is a machine🔩⚙️ that falls🍃➡️into predictable failure❌⬇️ modes when exposed📸 to the wrong combination of stimuli💉⚡⬇️. For this reason, cases of smartdrug💾💊 addiction 🎲🌀 are best viewed, not🚫 as questions❓ of crime and punishment, but as matters of treatment and prevention (Zhang张, 2033, *Risks and Mitigations of Neuralink Abuse.*) Respawn's🔁🐣 program gives🎁➡️ smartdrug💾💊 victims a chance🎰⬇️ to heal by "reformatting" pathological👎🎭 vectors of personal👩‍💼💼 identity🆔 that cause the afflicted to succumb. Using Neuralink🧠🔗, it is possible⬆️ to delete🗑️➡️ and overwrite⤵️✍️➡️ the patient's memories🧠🎞️ in a guided, consensual process that nullifies🌀➡️ the root cause of harmful impulses. Broadly speaking🗣️🔁, addiction🎲🌀 replaces 🔁📍➡️ one of two things: human 👦♂️👦♀️ connection⚡🔗⬇️ or change

🐛🦋⬇️. The modal smartdrug💾💊 user is derealized🦄➡️ by chronic exposure to in-brain🧠 superstimuli 🦸‍♀️♂️💉⚡⬇️, and benefits from⬅️ the physical presence of other people during rehabilitation, who aid the process by affirming👍🔁 the new✨ identity🆔 vectors and helping to integrate 🧬🐛🦋➡️ them into the patient's self-conception👦♂️💡🧠⬇️. (ibid.)

The process of reforming identity🆔 is gradual, because↘️ memories🧠🎞️ are all intertwined⛓️➡️ with each other, and an unexpected😲🔁 stimulus💉⚡⬇️ can evoke a harmful shadow👤 from⬅️ the past. Face-to-face👦♂️👦♂️🔁 conversation💬💬⬇️ is a way of testing for problematic associations🗺️🔁 while fortifying🏰🔁 the patient's new✨, healthy identity🆔"!

—and he is introduced to a recovering addict🎲👨 named🫲➡️ John, a man👨 in his forties with graying hair. They sit🪑➡️ together at a table in a courtyard in the shade 🌳👤. John is a marketing strategist⚔️🎯👨 for a dreaming𝓏ᶻ🎥🔁 media production🏭⚙️⬇️ agency, and he has two competing stories in his mind🧠👻: in the first1️⃣⬇️, he is overcoming a crippling♿🔁 addiction🎲🌀 to smartdrugs💾💊 with the help of the Respawn clinic🔁🐣👨‍⚕️, and

in the second, he is receiving👐🔁 physical therapy💪🧎‍♀️👩‍⚕️ for a sports🏈⚽ injury💔🤕⬇️ he sustained in an amateur baseball⚾ league. John seems to be aware🤔👀➡️ of both stories simultaneously🕰️🕰️🔁, but he is unaware 🚫🤔👀➡️ they are competing.

The Respawn🔁🐥 app📱💾, mediated🖼️🔊➡️ through Amy🤖👩, tells📖🎙️➡️ the boy👱 what to say 🎙️➡️. "How long have you been playing baseball⚾?"

"Well, to be honest🍷🎙️ I remember🧠🎞️➡️ a time 🕰️ before🔼 these things were illegal👮👎. Back then it was kind of the same thing as a video game👾🎮, or maybe just a new✨ kind of game🎮. You know🤯➡️ how in a game🎮 when you kill💀➡️ a boss👨‍✈️ or beat a level👾🍰, there 🔼🎈 are flashy📸✨🔁 explosions🧨🎆⬇️ and fanfares🎺⬇️ and all that? Well, this was kind of the same thing. I loved🥰➡️ it, I would get up at six AM🌅 most days📅17 and the first1️⃣⬇️ thing I would do would be to head🤔➡️ out to the batting🏏🔁 cages and practice my swing🔼. It was great exercise🏃‍♀️🚴."

Sometimes, as John is talking🗣️🔁, he suddenly goes quiet🤫🔊 and his eyes👁️ roll🙄➡️ back in his head👱. Amy🤖👩 tells📖🎙️➡️ boy👱 this is because🔽 Respawn's🔁🐥 software🎛️💾 is updating something in his mind🧠👻. Next she has him say🎙️➡️ "Do you have a favorite🏅 memory🧠🎞️ of playing the game🎮?"

"Oh yeah, of course. Best🏅 game🎮 I ever played, it was like❤️ something out of a movie🎥🎞️. Bottom⬇️🔚 of the ninth, bases loaded, close game🎮 and my team only needed one run🏃‍♀️⬇️ to win, and I was up at bat. You'd download 📡👐➡️ this app📱💾 and there🔼📍 would be all kinds of effects—visual effects, audio🎧 effects, sometimes there🔼📍

would be tastes and smells and all kinds of things. It would feel like the softest, most pillowy cloth gently brushing your skin, or like a pretty girl was caressing you, all kinds of things—"

John has a little spasm, and then continues.

"And you know I probably could have just tried to walk or bunt but this was just some city game, it's not even minor league, so people are tired and the pitcher just throws me this fat meatball, and it was like my whole world just changed and exploded and I was in this other place, there were like, impossible-to-describe beings there, all kinds of things, trying to talk to me. Unreal."

Amy tells him to say, "Looking back, do you think there was a point where your relationship to the game became unhealthy?"

John says "At some point, people started figuring out how to trigger emotions, how to invoke cherished memories. Someone I knew compared it to cooking or mixology; you could put all these different ingredients together and build really complex sensations and emotions. I guess it's no surprise that I ended up going too hard. Sometimes I would be out there playing pickup games like five nights a week.

"And I guess I just need to learn to give it a rest sometimes. One of my favorites was an app that made every single thing you did feel like the accomplishment of a lifetime, like the culmination of decades of struggle and striving. You could flip it on and every step felt like a revelation

. If you opened a door to go into another room, you would think ‘I can’t believe I opened that door so deftly, and with such mastery and subtlety.’ Then you’d walk through the door and feel incredible. ‘Have you ever seen anyone walk with such grace, such poise, such singularity of purpose? My intent is like a samurai blade, forged by a master.’

Amy tells the boy to ask “If you recognized the problem, why weren’t you able to stop it?”

“It wasn’t just the lack of rest. Me, I’m a driven person. I want to win. And what this whole injury thing is teaching me is that it’s probably better to fight another day than to win every single game. You could go on in this vein for days, but eventually you’d get used to it and the app would stop working. So people started building more complex apps that would cycle between longing and satisfaction, some of them would be real carousels of emotion. And people also started using these kinds of enhancements in real video games too, they called it ‘juicing’ or ‘seasoning’, they’d blast you with ‘having fun’ emotions or ‘accomplishment’ at critical times in the game, so you can imagine playing a shooting game and getting juiced emotions every time you got a kill. What was even more fun is they started making it really unpleasant to die, giving people jolts of fear or even pain, and that honestly just made getting a kill feel even

sweeter, to know that the guy you just zapped was doubled 2 over in pain, having a really bad time."

Amy tells the boy to say "Tell me about your injury. What happened?"

"I had a friend from back when who could hook me up. I don't know where he got them. Don't ask, don't tell, you know? But I was enterprising. When you have something scarce, a lot of doors can open for you; jobs, clients, con-nec-tions, all kinds of things. I ended up giving away more than I used. And it's funny, I did that for a long time, and I never got caught, but if you think about it, they have a snitch living right inside your head. So if you break the rules, someone has to know. You shouldn't get away with any-thing. But people buy and sell smartdrugs all the time, so what do you figure?

"The way I see it there's two possibilities: either that AI in your head really isn't that smart, or else they let it happen and someone is profiting off all this through backchannels. Probably both. But some-thing I did tripped an alarm, and as I was trying to steal second base, I tried to reverse and double back, and tore my ACL. Now I'm here."

∾

The next Sunday morning 🌅, the boy 👱 wakes up ☕➡️ early and goes again to the marsh 🌧️🌿 to search 🔍➡️ for his treasure 💎💍 from ⬅️ Recollect. Just like ❤️ in his memory 🧠🎞️, the air 💨🌬️ smells 👃➡️ of eucalyptus 🌿🌳 and bay laurel 🌿🌳. No one is around, and everything glows 🌟➡️ golden with California sunshine ☀️🕯️. He has turned ⤴️ over ⤵️ a thousand rocks 🪨 in these wetlands, he knows 🤯➡️ because ⤵️ Amy 🤖👱‍♀️ has counted 🔢➡️. And under ↪️ the thousand-and-first rock 🪨, he finds 🔍🎯➡️ the recollected item exactly as it is in his memory 🧠🎞️. He lifts 🏋️➡️ up the rock 🪨 with its false ❌ bottom 🍑, and he removes a dagger 🗡️ with an inlay in bas-relief. It feels like ❤️ lightning ⚡ courses through him. In a part of his mind 🧠👻 that was beneath ↪️ his awareness 🤔👀⬇️, he has always known 🤯➡️ what it would be.

Holding ✋🔄 the dagger 🗡️ in hand ✋, he calls 📞➡️ on Amy 🤖👱‍♀️ to nav 🧭➡️ him home, but she does not 🚫✅ respond 💬➡️. He tries again, and she does not 🚫✅ respond 🚫💬➡️. Amy 🤖👱‍♀️ is even with him when he loses network ⚡🕸️ connectivity ⚡🔗⬆️🔄; so he knows 🤯➡️ this is something other than a network ⚡🕸️ outage 📵. He wonders 🤔❓➡️ if she can even see 👁️⬆️ him. The boy 👱 walks 🚶➡️ back to the road 🛣️, and as a test, he uses the knife 🔪 to slash 🔪➡️ the tire of a parked car 🚗, and he grits 😬➡️ his teeth 🦷 as he prepares for Amy 🤖👱‍♀️ to reprimand 👎🎙️➡️ him, or modulate 🎛️📻➡️ his emotions 😂😭. His YouSocial score should go down 🔽, but it doesn't 🚫✅. The feeling is vertiginous ⏫⏫🔄. He is invisible 🧿 and invulnerable 🚫🔓🚪.

As long as he holds ✋➡️ this dagger 🗡️, Amy 🤖👱‍♀️ can't see 🙅👁️ him. But when he tries to board ⛵🟫➡️ a bus

to go home, the door won't open. As soon as he lets it go, the AI in the bus lets him on, and Amy speaks into his mind, "I'm sorry, something went wrong. I will now run a troubleshooting procedure, to make sure your Neuralink is functioning properly." After a few moments, she says "Your Neuralink device appears to be working correctly. If these problems continue, I will direct you to a maintenance center for an in-depth diagnostic."

Even invisibility has its limits, as one may notice a conspicuous absence. He places the dagger in his backpack, and tries not to think of it, not even a little, so Amy won't read his thoughts. He thinks of what John told him at the Respawn clinic, that the AI just isn't that smart, that its seeming prescience is narrow and domain-locked, but he also notes that this theory came from a guy who was in the process of having his mind wiped for being naughty.

It would be all too easy to end up like John; was that the real reason Amy introduced them? As a warning? He cannot envision a future for himself that he does not detest, and he longs for the tranquility he felt when he held the dagger on the beach. But he knows also that he will only have one chance to use it before it's discovered by the systems of control that contain him.
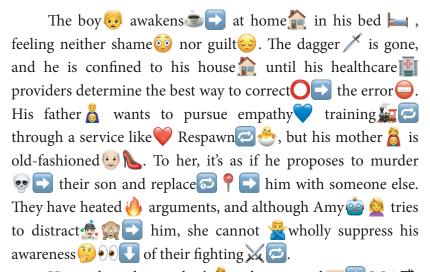
He thinks 🤔 ➡️ finding 🔍 🎯 🔁 this dagger 🗡️ is fate ✝️ 🌌, and his use of it will ↗️ be a glorious ⚔️ 🏅 🔁, heroic 🦸 🔁 action, maybe the only thing in his life he will ↗️ ever truly do for himself. He does not 🚫 ✅ care what comes after. He decides 🤔 🚪 ➡️, though he's not 🚫 quite sure, that if he can live out this single 1️⃣ moment ⏱️ of self-determination 😀, he could be content 😌 ⬇️ with his life as a puppet ✋ 👺 of the Neuralink 🧠 🔗 nanny in his head 👱. Maybe they will ↗️ lobotomize 🔪 🧠 ➡️ him like ❤️ John. In time 🕰️, he could learn 🙇 📖 ➡️ to love 🥰 ➡️ his prison.

The next day 📅 17, the boy 👱 takes the dagger 🗡️ to school 🏫. He does not 🚫 ✅ hesitate or second 2️⃣ ⬇️ -guess 🤔 🤷 ➡️ himself. With haste 👟 🔁 he finds 🔍 🎯 🔁 May and the other boy 👱, who is about to die ☠️ ➡️, not 🚫 because ↘️ of enmity, and not 🚫 even because ↘️ of jealousy, although he can be honest 🍷 🎙️ ⬆️ with himself that he feels those things. No, the dagger 🗡️ must go into the other boy's 👱 heart 🫀 for the sake of freedom ⬇️, or rather, because ↘️ there 🔼 🍭 are mechanisms ⚙️ of control 🕹️ 🔓 ⬇️ that are older 👴 and more powerful 💪 💰 🔁 than a spiderweb 🕷️ 🕸️ of filaments infoliating 🍁 ➡️ in his brain 🧠. Fate ✝️ 🌌 is stronger than technology 💻 📗. The memory 🧠 🎞️ of the dagger 🗡️ was fate ✝️ 🌌, finding 🔍 🎯 🔁 it was fate ✝️ 🌌, and now it is fate ✝️ 🌌 that commands 👸 🎙️ ➡️ him to kill ☠️ ➡️.

He finds 🔍 🎯 ➡️ the couple 💑 holding ✋ 🔁 hands ✋, and he tries to act 🎭 ➡️ like ❤️ he doesn't 🚫 ✅ see 👁️ ➡️ them as he gets closer. With no 🚫 warning 💥 ⚠️, he draws the knife 🔪 from ⬅️ his bag 🎒, and again it feels electric ⚡ 🔁, and he plunges the blade of the knife 🔪 into the other boy's 👱 chest, between 🥪 his ribs 🥩 🦴. Blood 🩸 wells up around the wound 🥺 🩸 ⬇️, and the other boy 👱 begins ⛲ ➡️ to choke

and cough 🤧💨➡️. May screams😱➡️. He tries to dislodge the knife🔪, but the handle slips🛢️🐷➡️ his grasp. In an instant, Amy🤖👱‍♀️ drags him down⏬ into sleep😴⬇️.

II. Mirror 🪞

The boy 👦 awakens ☕➡️ at home 🏠 in his bed 🛏️, feeling neither shame 😳 nor guilt 😌. The dagger 🗡️ is gone, and he is confined to his house 🏠 until his healthcare 🏥 providers determine the best way to correct ⭕➡️ the error ⛔. His father 👨 wants to pursue empathy 💙 training 🚂🔁 through a service like ❤️ Respawn 🔁🐥, but his mother 👩 is old-fashioned 👴👠. To her, it's as if he proposes to murder 💀➡️ their son and replace 🔄🍭➡️ him with someone else. They have heated 🔥 arguments, and although Amy 🤖👱‍♀️ tries to distract 🧑‍🤝‍🧑🙈➡️ him, she cannot 🙅‍♂️ wholly suppress his awareness 🤔👀⬇️ of their fighting ⚔️🔁.

His uncle on his mother's 👩 side is named 👌➡️ Wei 威, and he is a man 👨 of fortune 🗡️💰 (even in these later days 📅, such men exist) with dealings in the criminal 🦹 under-world 🔄🌍, and a connection ⚡🔗⬇️ to a smartdrug 💾💊 cartel. The boy's 👦 mother 👩 begs 🙇‍♀️🙌➡️ him to take her son away, to hide 🙈➡️ him from ⬅️ the administrators and medical 🏥🔁 workers, from ⬅️ the schools 🏫 and the psychiatrists 🧠👩. Wei 威 sees 👁️➡️ that the boy 👦 is fearless 🚫😨, and on a day 📅 when the boy's father 👨 is gone, he (Wei 威) smuggles 🙈📦➡️ him (the boy 👦) away in a van 🚑 lined with a Faraday cage. The boy 👦 cannot walk 🙅‍♂️🚶 to the van 🚑 by his own volition; as soon as he tries, Amy 🤖👱‍♀️ makes his limbs 🦴 wooden 🌳🔁 and heavy 🏋️🔁, so his uncle has to carry 💼➡️ him, and even when the networks ⚡🕸️ can't 🙅‍♂️ reach him, he can ⬆️ barely ✍️🔁 move.

Wei 威 takes the boy 👦 to an unscrupulous Neura-

link clinic 🧠 🔗 👨‍💼 , where a blackhat ⚫ 🤠 technician 💁 👨 jailbreaks 🔓 💔 ➡️ his device 🛠️ ⚙️ . It will ↗️ be difficult, now, to go back to the exquisitely quantified 🔢 📊 ➡️ and gamified 🎮 ➡️ world 🌍 , because 🔽 the unlock 🔓 ⬇️ event will ↗️ be captured 🕸️ ➡️ in every reputation broker 💹 📡 and advertising registry 🗃️ ⬆️ . Strictly speaking 🗣️ 🔁 , jailbreaking 🔓 💔 ➡️ a device 🛠️ ⚙️ is legal, and yet how can a man 👦 be trusted 💡 🤝 ➡️ , once he has crossed 🌉 ➡️ that threshold?

When the boy 👦 wakes ☕ ➡️ from ⬅️ the operation, his dreams 💤 🎥 and his maps 🗺️ and his apps 📱 💾 are gone. He recalls 🔄 ☎️ ➡️ the vertiginous 🔼 🔼 🔁 feeling of freedom ⬇️ when he first 1️⃣ ⬇️ held the dagger 🗡️ with the white jade ⚪ 💎 handle on the beach 🏖️ , and his soul 🫀 👻 is lighter than the past seven years. Amy's 🤖 👱‍♀️ voice 🎙️ is replaced 🔄 📍 ➡️ with the curt, masculine 🧑 🔁 VX of the Neuralink 🧠 🔗 BIOS 🕹️ 💾 , and he is free of the progress bars, the point systems 📍 📊 ⚙️ 🕸️ , the floating ☁️ 🔁 chevrons 📙 , the achievements ✅ 🏅 ⬇️ , and the badges 🏅 . His uncle drives 🚗 ➡️ him to somewhere far in the mountains ⛰️ , though he does not 🚫 ✅ know 🤯 ➡️ where, because 🔽 his GPS 🌍 🛰️ , too, is gone. At some point 📍 ⬇️ , they take a turn ↪️ off the main road 🛣️ , and they pull down ⬇️ a long driveway 🚗 🛣️ that leads 👦 ➡️ to a gate ⛩️ 🚪 in a wall. At the gate ⛩️ 🚪 , there ↪️ 📍 are men 👦 with guns 🔫 . Here ⬇️ 📍 his uncle has a silent 🔊 🌀 🔁 , invisible 🧿 exchange with one of the guards, transmitting 📡 🔁 some credential ✍️ 📄 or sign 🏳️ through a private 🤫 channel, and then leaves 🥾 🚪 ➡️ him unceremoniously 🚫 🎊 , pausing only to wish 🐉 ➡️ him good 👍 fortune 🥠 ⬇️ .

The boy 👦 is admitted inside ➡️ ⬅️ the compound,

where his Neuralink🧠🔗 connects ⚡🔗➡️ to a local wireless🚫⚡🧶 network ⚡🕸️ that provides some of the cloud services☁️⚙️ he had previously↙️🔄 known🤯➡️: navigation ⏱️ , telephony ☎️, and search🔍. When he joins, a lattice📐🧬 of light 🕯️ fills his vision 👁️⬇️ and traces out the shape📐 of a capsule pill 💊. "Welcome to Apothecary 💾💊⚱️." A bot 🤖 inside the network ⚡🕸️ guides him down⬇️ a path👣🛣️ to a door 🚪 in the side of a mountain 🏔️, which opens automatically🤖🔄 for him. The building 🏢 he enters is hidden🙈➡️, half inside➡️⬅️ of the earth🌍, safe from⬅️ the eyes👁️ of satellites 🛰️ .

A man 🧑 at the entrance 🚪⬇️ waits ⌚➡️ to greet him, and introduces himself as Shenwu 神巫. He says 🎤➡️ the boss 👮 is a hacker💻🦹 named▫️➡️ Headstrong🧑💪, and the rule is everyone goes by a pseudonym🤔▫️. Most of the other men🧑 in the compound are Chinese; the boy👦 doesn't 🚫✅ quite look🧐➡️ like❤️ them, but he can pass if you squint👁️🤣➡️. At first1️⃣⬇️ he tries to call🎤▫️➡️ himself Dagger🗡️, (and this is forgivable, being born👶 of the innocence🕊️ of youth) but the name▫️⬇️ doesn't 🚫✅ stick🍯➡️, and the other men call🎤▫️➡️ him Broken💔 Branch🪃, and later just Branch🪃. Shenwu 神巫 takes him down⬇️ to the lowest⬇️⬇️ levels👾🍰 of the complex, to a corridor that reminds🔄🧠👻 him of a hotel 🏨. Branch🪃 will↗️ live here↩️🍭 in a single1️⃣ bedroom🛏️ with no windows 🪟; only a mirror 🪞, a closet, and a bed🛏️. That's ok, because↘️ he can use Neuralink🧠🔗 to open as many (simulated👾🎭➡️) windows 🪟 as he likes ❤️➡️, and even fool🥷➡️ himself into smelling👃🔄 fresh air💨 and feeling cool breezes💨. The bathrooms🚽 are shared, like❤️ in a barracks ⚔️⛺ or a dorm.

Shenwu 神巫 explains the terms of his employment: "You do your work, we pay 💰➡️ you, and we take your rent and food🍽️🎁 out of your pay💰⬇️. There's ↩️📍 a mess hall 🍽️ upstairs, floor ten, the nav will↗️ show👉👁️➡️ you. Above that is the main work area. You report🗂️➡️ to me. There ↩️📍 are no scoring systems⚙️🕸️, no reputation brokers💹📡. You are an independent📜 contractor, and you get a cut✂️⬇️ of any money💵 your work brings in. You want more money💵? Do more work. Your time⏰ is yours and I don't🚫✅ babysit👶🪑➡️ you. If you screw🔩➡️ something up, we don't🚫✅ pay💰➡️ you for that. Until you learn🙇📖➡️ the ropes🧶, Headstrong👱💪 will↗️ personally extend you a line of credit 💳⬇️. So you should respect🙇👑➡️ him and not waste🗑️➡️ his money."

That night🌑, Shenwu 神巫 takes him to Headstrong's👱💪 house🏠, a short drive🚗⬇️ from⬅️ the compound. They are far from⬅️ the city lights 🌃🕯️, and uncountable stars⭐ fill the dome of the sky. In the grounds🏞️ of the house🏠 there↩️📍 are tables and lamps🏮, and men are drinking🥃🔁 and gambling🎲💵🔁. Young women💁 move among them, provocatively dressed👔➡️, easy with their affection😘⬇️. But before🔙 Branch🪃 can lose himself into vices🎴, he is taken to meet Headstrong👱💪, who chooses to dress👔 like❤️ a Hollywood🎥⭐ gangster. He wears an expensive suit: black⚫ and shiny✨, with peak🏔️ lapels. It matches🫧➡️ his patent leather shoes👞 and his slicked hair, which is more gray than black⚫, and his eyes👁️ are sharp🔪🔁. He always meets everyone who comes to his Apothecary💾💊⛲.

Branch's🪃 uncle has given🎁➡️ him a letter✉️ of introduction, describing the ordeal with the knife🔪, and Head-

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strong 👦 💪 praises 🙏 🎺 ➡️ his recklessness and his tenacity. He says 🎙️ ➡️ this is a place of danger ⚠️ ⛔ and freedom ⬇️, and not a place for the sterile 🚫 🍆 drones 🤖 who live in the panopticon 👁️ 👮 outside ⬅️➡️, people who need a computer 💻 to tell 📖 🎙️ ➡️ them how to shit 💩 ➡️ or fuck 🍆 ➡️.

A tall, showy girl in a white ⚪ qipao 👘 and a white jade ⚪ 💎 hairpin 📍 pours 🚰 ➡️ them both a shot 🍶 🔫 of Moutai, which makes the boy's 👦 eyes water 💧. She doesn't 🚫✅ even look 🧐 ➡️ at him, but she has jet black ✈️ ⬛ hair and her skin is pale and lustrous 🕯️ 🔁 white jade ⚪ 💎. Branch's 🪃 eyes 👁️ follow the curve of her body 💪 ⟩, but it's clear 👁️ 💎 she belongs to Headstrong 👦 💪, who laughs 😂 ➡️, and tells 📖 🎙️ ➡️ him the ordained purpose of alcohol 🍸 is to stop 🛑 ➡️ you from ⬅️ intoxicating 🥴 🔁 yourself on worse things.

He meets Glasshole 🕶️ 🕳️ and Baozi 🥟, who also report 🗂️ ➡️ to Shenwu 神巫, who will ↗️ work with him in the coming months. Glasshole 🕶️ 🕳️ hands ✋ 🎁 ➡️ him a small 🫳 gyroscope, and as he holds ✋ ➡️ it, it pairs 🔗 👰 with his Neuralink 🧠 🔗 and the world 🌍 flips 🔃 ➡️ uʍop-ǝp!sdn and he stumbles. Surprised 😲 ➡️, Branch 🪃 drops the gyroscope, but the world 🌍 stays the same. His new ✨ teammates both laugh 😂 ➡️ at him. "It will ↗️ wear off in a few minutes 🕝. Let that teach 👵 ➡️ you not to accept strange 🦑 gifts 🎁." Baozi 🥟 explains how transcutaneous electrical ⚡ 🔁 nerve stimulation 💉 ⚡ ⬇️ (TENS 🧴 ⚡) can be used to transmit 📡 ➡️ data 💾 upstream ⬆️ 🏊 to a Neuralink 🧠 🔗 implant and exploit security 🚓 vulnerabilities 🔓 🟫 in the hardware, allowing 🔓 🤳 🔁 a malicious third party to bypass user consent 👩 👍 and execute 👑 ➡️ arbitrary logic 🧮 ⬇️. Objects with embedded 🛏️ ➡️ TENS 🧴 ⚡ hardware and Neu-

ralink🧠🔗 payloads 💰💾 are called 🎙️🏷️➡️ tigers🐯, because⤵️ of the way they hide🙈➡️ their dangers⚠️🚫, and because⤵️ they may devour🍽️😋➡️ you.

When he stares🗿👁️➡️ into a gently pulsing🫀🔊🔁 beacon🏮 on the veranda, it shows👉👁️➡️ him a QR code 💻🧮. He follows it. A genie🐍 appears and offers to make him feel fiery🔥🔁, uninhibited🚫🛑💥➡️, and euphoric😆🎆🔁. Branch🪃 accepts the genie's🐍 offer and has a vision👁️⬇️ from⬅️ behind the eyes👁️ of a wild predator—a lion🦁 or a wolf🐺 or a bear🐻, something like❤️ that—running🏃🔁 through a frozen❄️➡️ plateau, high🔼 in the mountains⛰️, chasing some indiscernible prey🐁, catching 🕸️🔁 it, tearing it apart with claws🐾🔪 and teeth🦷, blood 🩸 and viscera🫀 all over🔽 his face👱 .

When the vision👁️⬇️ ends🔚➡️, he sees👁️➡️ that some men👨 are gambling🎲🎴🔁 with dice🎲. As he watches👀➡️, two 2️⃣ of them come to blows👊⬇️, and a knife🔪 flashes📸➡️. Branch🪃 does not🚫✅ know🤯➡️ who is right👍 or wrong👎, but the thrill🎢⬇️ of danger⚠️🚫 calls📞➡️ to him, and he rushes🏃➡️ in to block🚧➡️ a lunging thrust of the knife🔪. He is not🚫 injured🤕➡️ when he does✅➡️ this; his arm💪 seems to know🤯➡️ how to parry, and his feet👣 know🤯➡️ how to pivot. Other men🧑 join the fray, either to add➕➡️ to the fight⚔️⬇️ or to break 💔➡️ it, and Branch🪃 loses sight👁️⬇️ of himself.

Having been a fantasy🦄⬇️ or a mistake of drunkenness🥴⬇️, the brawl⚔️⬇️ ends🔚➡️ as quickly⏩🔁 as it began⚖️➡️, but the man🧑 Branch🪃 defended⚔️🛡️➡️, a Chinexican called🎙️🏷️➡️ Romero, is grateful, and invites him to share a drink🥃⬇️ of tequila🥃. "Sip this one," he says 🎙️➡️. "Don't🚫✅ throw⚾➡️ it back," as he pours🚰➡️

two 2️⃣ shots🍶🔫 from⬅️ a brown glass bottle. Quietly 🤫🔊🔁, he confesses he had been cheating 🤞➡️ at the dice game🎲🎮, using a man-in-the-middle👨‍💼➡️➡️👱 attack⚔️⬇️ to influence 👇⚖️➡️ the random🎲 number🔢 generator⛲⚙️ in the dice🎲⬇️. Branch🪃 finds🔍🎯➡️ this agreeable🤝🔁, because🔽 he believes in fate✝️🌌, the cosmic🌌🌟 structure of luck🍀.

Romero calls📞➡️ over🔽 two of the girls👩 who are loitering in the garden💐🌳🌿. They have big black⚫ lines of makeup💄 at the edge🗺️🚪 of their eyelids, false❌ lashes that remind🔁🧠👻 Branch🪃 of spiders🕷️. Romero calls 🎙️🏷️➡️ the one who comes to him *Xiǎo* 小 *mèi* 妹, little🤏 sister, and he sees👁️➡️ Branch🪃 tensing up, flush😳 with embarrassment. "Treat her like❤️ a child👶. That's how you talk🗣️➡️ to women." Romero's girl👩 pretends🎭🤞➡️ to be mad😡 at him and calls🎙️🏷️➡️ him a stupid chollo🚬, and he grabs her and pulls her close, and she nestles😸➡️ into him. The girl👩 that sits🪑➡️ on Branch's🪃 lap smells 👃➡️ like❤️ ylang ylang🌺 and jasmine🌸, but Branch🪃 is still thinking🤔🔁 of Headstrong's👱💪 girl👩, the girl👩 all in white⚪. Even so, he likes❤️➡️ it when this other girl 👩 whispers private🤫🔁, half-lucid💡🕯️ things in his ear 👂, and he realizes🤔💡➡️ she's high🔼🥴 on smart-drugs💾💊, just like❤️ everyone else. She quivers and sighs 😒➡️ when he touches👉➡️ her skin, and she follows➡️ him back to his room🛏️ that night🌑.

> The peach🍑 tree🌳, budding and tender—
> He holds✋➡️ the fruit🍑🥚 in his hands✋
> then bites into the jubilance of peach🍑.

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The next morning 🌅, Shenwu 神巫 meets Branch 🪃 in the mess hall for breakfast 🌅🍚. There is a line and a service counter, and the cooks 👨‍🍳👨 are serving hot 🌶️-and-dry 🏜️ noodles 🔥🍜. All the food 🍽️🎁 is real; no one eats 🍽️😋 insect loaf 🐛🦟🍞 or uses Neuralink 🧠🔗 to simulate 👾🎭➡️ foods 🍽️🎁 from ⬅️ social networks ⚡🕸️, and this strikes Branch 🪃 as romantic 💕🔄, or parochial, maybe, because ⬇️ although the noodles 🍜 are chewy 🦷⬇️🔄 and coated 🧥➡️ in spicy 🌶️🔄 textured oil 🛢️, with the sharpness 🔪⬇️ of preserved mustard greens 🥬 and the piquancy of scallion and coriander 🌱, he would not choose them for himself. In the mornings 🌅, he's used to flipping 🔃🔄 through *Matters of Taste* 👅💡, his favorite degustation 🐛🦋👅 app 📱💾, simulating 👾🎭🔄 five impossible 🙅‍♂️⬆️ plates 🍽️ before ◀️ breakfast 🌅🍚—a bite of salmon tartare 🍣 in crepes 🥞 with miso bonito 🐟 sauce, hickory-smoked octopus 🔥💨🐙 in tandoori masala marinade, bamboo-steamed arctic char 🎋💨🐟 in a mango hollandaise 🥭🥚, and for dessert 🍦🧁, poached pear 🍐 with yuzu 🍋 caramel 🍬🔥 and spiced 🌶️➡️ oat cake 🧁 (although of course it's all "secretly 🤫🔄" high fiber 🔼🥦 cricket loaf 🦗🍞)—and all of this makes sitting 🪑🔄 through a whole bowl of noodles 🍜 feel monotonous 1️⃣.

As Branch 🪃 thinks 🤔➡️ these thoughts 🤔⬇️, Shenwu 神巫 explains the logistics 🏝️🏭 of smartdrug 💾💊 production 🏭⚙️⬇️, and mostly he pays 💰➡️ attention. The drugs 💊 (i.e. software 🧮💾) are distributed in tigers 🐯 embedded 🛏️➡️ in everyday objects like ❤️ children's toys 🧸 or kitchen utensils 🍴. Apothecary 💾💊⛲ works like ❤️ any other online retailer 💻🏢; the developers 🧑‍💻 rely on commodity manufacturing contractors, usually based in Chinese Africa

🌍, to source ⛲ materials ⚛️ and assemble their physical products 🏭⚙️⬇️. Once the tigers 🐯 are built 👷⬅️➡️, they are shipped 🚢➡️ directly 🫀🔌🔄 to service-based fulfillment centers, and then to customers 💵🐷, with no part of the chain ⛓️ knowing 🤯🔄 too much about what they are building 👷🔄, or for whom.

When they finish 🏁🔚➡️ eating 🍽️😊🔄, Shenwu 神巫 leads 👶➡️ Branch 🪃 up ⬆️ to the main office 🏢 above the barracks ⚔️⛺. The stairs from ⬅️ the mess hall emerge into the southeast corner of a large open room with floor-to-ceiling windows 🪟 that look 🧐➡️ down ⬇️ from ⬅️ the heaven-high 🌤️⏫ hills ⛰️. To reach the bullpen 🐂⛓️ office, they pass through a gallery 🖼️🚶 along the southern wall, where shelves and cases are filled with tigers 🐯 of many shapes 📐: wind-up toys 🔑🧸, sculptures 🗿, gilded ceramics 🏺💃, puzzle 🧩 boxes 📦, compasses 🧭 and astrolabes 🔭, books 📚 and golden jewelry 💍, glittering ✨🔄 in manifold hues 🌈, sparkling like ❤️ dragon 🐲 scales. Each contains a TENS 🧴⚡ assembly and a psychoactive 🧠🎭🔄 malware 🦠💾 payload 💰💾, and nothing 🚫⬇️ stops 🛑➡️ Branch 🪃 from ⬅️ handling ✋➡️ the tigers 🐯 but his own knowledge 🤯⬇️ of their danger ⚠️⛔. Shenwu 神巫 tells 📖🎙️➡️ him this is by design 🏛️🗺️⬇️; a constant reminder 🔄🧠👻⬇️ to resist temptation.

Branch 🪃 is given 🎁➡️ a workstation 💻, which is only a comfortable chair 🪑 facing the windows 🪟. His displays 🖥️ and inputs 🎛️ are the "controlled 🕹️🔒➡️ hallucinations 🤩🎆" that occur in his own mind 🧠👻. (Fugelsang, Koehler, 2032, *Tradeoffs* 💰🤝🔄 *between* 🍞 *Optical* 👁️🔄 *vs. Conceptual* 💡🧠🔄 *Injection* 💉⬇️: *A Hybrid Approach*)

Glasshole 🕶️🕳️ helps him onboard ⛵➡️ to Al-

chemist, Apothecary's nootropic app store. Precise electrostimulation of the brain can be used to modulate the release of neurotransmitters and even some hormones, and Apothecary has a busy ecosystem for home-brewed brain tuners. The most popular apps are *Silver Serpent* for focus, *Wax Elephant* for working memory, *Jade Pavilion* when you take a girl to bed, and the Wuchang 五常 suite to ensure virtue.

"You should start small," Glasshole tells him, "and grow your stack once you're more accustomed to using them." At his suggestion, Branch installs *Yi* 义 to foster benevolence, *Zhi* 智, a sort of autocomplete engine for his internal monologue. Branch also decides to download *Lord of Heaven of Infinite Thriving*, mostly because he likes the name, and he spends the rest of the day in a trance of conscientious focus.

In time, he masters the many subdisciplines of digital pharmacology: he learns how to circumvent the federally mandated hardware controls inside the implant, how to probe each new Neuralink firmware update for vulnerabilities, and the vicissitudes of code injection. Only once more during this whole apprenticeship does he set eyes on Headstrong, but he has him always in mind, because the men of Apothecary revere him.

After any technical feat or job his teammates always say

"Headstrong does it better." Branch covets their respect —he knows he is capable of great works, and he thinks often of the dagger he found on the beach using Recollect, of how he searched relentlessly for it, and how, through the tenacity of his will, he found the treasure his heart desired. Branch sees all the good things Headstrong has—his properties, his women, his men who follow him—and he resolves to become as great of a man, and indeed, to surpass him.

Branch now spends his free hours in study, beginning with the definitive work on smart-drug development, a book assembled from the writings of Eric Zhang张, one of the early researchers at the Neuralink Corporation, called the father of digital psychotropics. *The Four Labyrinthes* is a collection of his emails, recorded memories, philosophical essays, algorithms, source code snippets, and self-reports of altered states induced using Neuralink. Headstrong, who had been Zhang's张 colleague and apprentice, stole his proprietary secrets and created the first black market smartdrugs.

The book is divided into four sections or "labyrinthes," and the first is called *Exhaustive Indexing.* It contains the theory and procedure of rendering sensory experience into the user's inner eye. Everyone's internal map of the world is a bit different; to play back Zhang's张 memory in Branch's head, there must be a precise physiological, mapping of the neural correlates

of concepts 💡🧠. Without this, the memories 🧠🎞 appear garbled and full of artifacts 🏺; objects may be swapped for other objects; phenomenologies 👁️👂👅 may be cross-wired 🔀⚡🧶➡️ or missing 🔍👻🔁; one man 👨 might see 👁️➡️ subjective 🧠🧠 red 🔴 where another sees 👁️➡️ blue 🔵; where one smells 👃➡️ a lemon cookie 🍋🍪, another might smell 👃➡️ burnt 🔥➡️ toast 🍞. To mitigate this, the Neuralink 🧠🔗 drivers 🚗👨 create a comprehensive index 🖨 of the contents of each person's 👱‍♀️ mind 🧠👻. When a memory 🧠🎞 is uploaded 🙌🛰➡️, it is transcoded 🚄💻🧮 into a universal language, and when it is dreamed 💤📹➡️ into a viewer's head 👨, it is recoded 🔁💻🧮➡️ through that person's 👨 own mental 🧠🔁 map 🗺. These indices are also necessary for rendering the controlled 🕹🔓➡️ hallucinations 🤩🎆 of the heads up display 👨📙.

By monitoring 👁️📺 the visual 👁️🔁 and auditory cortices 🔊👂🧠, it's possible 🔼 to extract memories 🧠🎞 of sensory 👁️👅 data 💾 from ⬅️ the brain 🧠. If we were to treat the approximately eighty-six billion neurons 🎚🧠 in the brain as a state vector, then an exhaustive search 🔍⬇️ of neuron activation 🎚🧠💥 space 🌌 would be impossible 🙅‍♂️🔼, but this is unnecessary because 🔽 partial activations of distinct concepts 💡🧠 automatically 🤖🔁 converge on those concept's 💡🧠 modal activations. A statistically 📊 normal sampling of possible 🔼 state vectors at the level 👾🍰 of Neuralink's 🧠🔗 precision 📍⬇️ can index 🖨🔼 95% of a person's sensory 👁️👅 mapping 🗺⬇️ space 🌌⭐🍦 within about twenty-four hours 🕐.

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In his third 3⬇️ week in Apothecary💾💊⛲, Branch🪃 eats 🍽️😋breakfast🌅🍚 alone. The cooks👨‍🍳 have prepared stewed beef🥩 tendon with winter chestnut🌰. Topped with sliced🔪➡️ green onion🥬, and eaten🍽️😋 over⬇️ steamed💨➡️ rice🍚, the thick sauce tastes👅💡 of chili🌶️, garlic🧄, ginger, star🌟 anise, and prickly ash🌵, and the collagen sticks🍯➡️ to the lips👄 with a pleasing rich-ness🤑⬇️.

As he is eating🍽️😊🔄, he receives🙌➡️ an email📧 sent to the entire Apothecary💾💊⛲, from⬅️ a man👨🏻‍💼 he has never🙅‍♂️ met.

I am leaving🥾🚪➡️ the jianghu 江湖. I don't🚫✅ expect you to agree🤝➡️ with me, but you are my friends, and I cannot leave🙅‍♂️♂️🥾🚪 without washing🧼🔄 my mind🧠👻 in the golden basin金盆. This is how we preserve our trade se-crets🤝🤫. Since you are reading 🔍📖🔄 this, it means I already↙️ left🥾🚪➡️, and I already↙️ for-got🧠🎞️📉➡️ you. That's sad🥹, but I won't↗️🚫 be sad🥹. Maybe name🩹➡️ a drug💊 after me.

I am sour🍋🔄 on the dream😴💤📽️ of Apothecary💾💊⛲: men standing outside⬅️➡️ the matrix⚙️🕸️ of so-cial control🕹️🔒⬇️, (do you be-lieve that?) outside⬅️➡️ the world 🌍, looking🧐🔄 down⏬ on mind-

less 🚫🧠👻🔁 drones 🐜 below ⬇️. They buy 🛒➡️ my drugs 💊. They let a computer 💻 decide 🤔🚪➡️ their whole life.

But is it really different here ↩️📍? Instead of living by a point system 📍📊⚙️🕸️, I use so many nootropic programs 🎆💾, I need a scheduler 🖋️📝🤖 to manage 🧮🤔➡️ them. At that point 📍⬇️, isn't it the same as an AI 🤖🧠 assistant in your head 👱‍♂️ telling 📖🎙️🔁 you what to do? We are so obsessed with being "free," but we use these programs 🎆💾 to correct our freedom ⬇️, and we are no better than the people we look 🧐➡️ down ⬇️ on.

I want to tell 📖🎙️➡️ you what made me see 👁️➡️ this, because ↩️ tomorrow 📅🔼 I will 🔼 forget 🧠🎞️📈➡️. It's because ↩️ of a girl 👦♀️ called 🎙️🏷️➡️ Yui 唯 — with skin like ❤️ polished rice 🍙, some of you know 🤯➡️ her — but first 1️⃣⬇️ you must learn 🙇‍♂️📖➡️ some history 🏛️. I came here ↩️📍 with Headstrong 👱‍♂️💪 many years ago. There 🔼📍 were only a few of us, but now there 🔼📍 are many new ✨

faces, and I think🤔➡️ you may not know🚫🤯.

Back then, not🚫 a lot of people had Neuralink🧠🔗 implants, and I worked in the lab🥼🔬 with Headstrong👱‍♂️💪 under🔄 Dr. Eric Zhang张. He was always an idealist💡👨‍♂️, a man👨‍♂️ with no🚫 fear😨 or thought🤔⬇️ for tomorrow📅🔼. Even before the first 1️⃣⬇️ human👨‍♂️👩‍♀️ trials🧑‍🦰⚖️⬇️ were finished🏁🔙➡️, he made me and Headstrong👱‍♂️💪 perform🎭➡️ neurosurgery🧑‍⚕️⚕️🔪🧠 on him (using the robot🤖 of course) to give 🎁➡️ him his implant. He wanted to know🤯➡️ everything this new✨ machine🔧⚙️ could do. He strapped himself to a chair🪑 in the lab 🥼🔬 and used brute👊👨‍♂️ force 💪⬇️ to explore🧭🗺️➡️ every state vector of the mind🧠👻.

Now we have more efficient methods of indexing🖨️🔁 the brain 🧠, because↘️ we have more understanding🔄📚⬇️ of its layout. But for Zhang张, the process took months, and he was conscious👀🧠 the whole time🕰️, because↘️ he had to be. As Neuralink🧠🔗 indexed 🖨️➡️ his mind🧠👻, he would

twitch or babble or become emotional😂😭🔁. Sometimes he would sing🎵➡️ or scream😱➡️. We jokingly🐎🔁 called🎙️🏷️➡️ this "The Music🎼 of Eric Zhang张."

One of his early discoveries🧭🔬⬇️ was a method to regulate👩‍⚖️➡️ hunger😍🍽️ — either to induce🏁⛲➡️ it or suppress it. The Neuralink🧠🔗 Corporation immediately seized on this and productized🏭⚙️⬇️➡️ it. Appetite😍🍽️🔋 regulation👩‍⚖️⬇️ was the first1️⃣⬇️ Neuralink🧠🔗 "killer app💀📱💾" and it drove🚗➡️ massive early adoption👶🤲⬇️. This may shock😲➡️ you if you are not aware🤔👀➡️ of history🏛️📜: most people used to be fat. If you watch👀➡️ videos📼 from⬅️ the early twenty-first century, you will see👁️➡️ it everywhere, and it is inescapable. Grotesque, bloated bodies💪🦵, diseases🦠 on a vast scale⚖️. Everyone was sick😊🔁. But everyone who got a Neuralink🧠🔗 became healthy and stopped🛑➡️ being fat. To the people of the 20s, this was a miracle👼🎭.

It is hard to understand↪️📚➡️ what Zhang张 was willing to en-

dure😬➡️ to learn👷‍♂️📖➡️ these secrets🤫. When he finished🏁⬅️END➡️ his self-experiments👷‍♂️✏️⬇️, his discoveries🧭🔬⬇️ were used to develop the technology💻🧪 of intersubjective🧠🧠 data💾 transfer. There↩️📍 were new✨ social media apps📱💾 for uploading🙌🛰️🔁 and sharing memories🧠🎞️. There↩️📍 were apps📱💾 that could make telepathic🧠📻🔁 phone calls☎️⬇️. Zhang张 was called🎙️🏷️➡️ a visionary👁️👨🏻‍🦱♂️. He held Neuralink🧠🔗 "symposiums" where he would speak📢➡️ and people would "mind🧠👻 meld," mashing🔨🥔🔁 up the internal➡️⬅️🔁 phenomenology👁️👂👅 of groups of people so they all shared the same emotions😂😭 and feelings at the same time🕐. He talked📢➡️ about the dawning🌄🔁 of a new✨ age of deep🔽 empathy💙, and he said this was the beginning⛲⬇️ of true cooperation and loving🥰🔁 kindness among all people.

And he wasn't🚫 done✅➡️. When he melded with the people in his symposiums, he noticed👀📊➡️ above all the pain🤕 they felt. He welcomed anyone with a Neuralink🧠🔗

to come join him, and everyone who joined him learned👷‍♂️📖➡️ to cry 😭➡️ and laugh😂➡️ and feel as one1️⃣. Zhang张 wanted to heal their pain🤕, so he invented 💡⚙️➡️ new✨ programs🧵💾 to refine the emotions😂😭 of his followers. He built👷‍♂️➡️ a new✨ kind of app📱💾, what we now call 🎙️🏷️➡️ a smartdrug💾💊, and he named🔘➡️ it *Irrational Exuberance*🚫🧮🤣📈. All the attendees of his symposiums ran🏃‍♂️ it together, with each of their minds 🧠👻 plugged🔌 into the collective. They were steeped in the radiance☀️ of limitless joy 😄, and it stayed with them even after the connection⚡🔗⬇️ was terminated🚫.

More and more people came to join Zhang's张 gatherings🎪🍻. Poets📜👦‍♂️, intellectuals🤓👦‍♂️, and musicians🎼👦‍♂️ clamored to get Neuralink🧠🔗 implants so they could participate. Everyone was happy😀, and they were happy😀 together, fortified🏰➡️ in the unity1️⃣ of their happiness😀⬇️. From⬅️ the outside⬅️➡️, Zhang's张 movement had the appearance of a

cult, and as his accolades👍⬇️ grew, so did his detractors🤬🤺, but the value💰 of his work was impossible🤦‍♂️ ⬆️ to deny🎙️👎➡️. His disciples had evident health and wellbeing, and their numbers🔢 continued to surge⚡📈➡️.

(As one of the technicians👳‍♂️ behind these gatherings🎪🍺, the reality and the illusion🤩🏝️ of unity1️⃣ became ever more stretched 🙅‍♂️ as we scaled⚖️📈➡️; how can you merge the thoughts🤔⬇️ and feelings of a thousand people into a single1️⃣ gestalt without🚫 stripping🔪🥓🔁 away the essen-tial🛏️🔁 qualities of any individ-ual? As a purely mathematical 🎯🔢🔁 problem, mere averaging converges on nullity🌀. We ex-plored🧭🗺️➡️ a variety of ap-proaches, but the "shared" feel-ings of the symposium became al-most a pure🛏️💧 simulation👾🎭 as the number🔢 of participants in-creased📈➡️. We ended🔚➡️ up sam-pling the brain🧠 state of ran-dom🎲 individual members of the cluster at a fixed frequency🌊🔊 and interpolating between🥪 them. Part of the impetus for the devel-

opment of *Irrational Exuberance* 🚫🧮🤣📈 was to synchronize⏳⚖️➡️ subjective🧠🧠 experience in order to help with scaling⚖️📈🔁. But I digress.)

   Irrational Exuberance🚫🧮🤣📈 was short-lived. After four weeks 🗒️, it stopped🛑➡️ working. Drug 💊 tolerance is a feature of the human👨🏻♂️👩🏻♀️ brain🧠, not🚫 an attribute of individual drugs💊. Zhang张 was forced💪➡️ to continually invent💡⚙️➡️ new✨ programs🧮💾 to maintain👨‍🦰➡️ the euphoria😆💥 of his symposiums. And despite these innovations, Zhang张 himself was unsatisfied. To escape 🧬🥾🚪➡️ the treadmill🏃♂️🔁🔦⚙️ of wirehead⚡🤪 programs, he used Neuralink🧠🔗 to observe👁️🔍➡️ the meditation🧘♂️⬇️ practices of Chan Buddhists 禪宗 from⬅️ the inside➡️⬅️, and used the data💾 to create a mathematical🧮🔢🔁 model🏞️📊 of nirvana🕉️. He produced🏭⚙️➡️ a new✨ kind of smartdrug💾💊 program🧮 for inducing enlightenment💡🤯 without meditation🧘♂️⬇️ or discipline, called🎙️🏷️➡️ *Authentic Heartmind* 眞心.

The combination of pleasure🤤, health, and Buddhist🕉️ equanimity caused the followers of Zhang张 to glow🌟➡️ with unearthly🚫🌍 attraction, but Headstrong👦♂️💪 and I were not among the enlightened 💡🤯. Someone had to stay behind the scenes🎭, to operate the servers⚙️💻 and the infrastructure 👷🏭. Although we did have Neuralink🧠🔗 devices🔩⚙️, we only watched👀➡️ as Zhang's张 power💪💰 and influence👇⚖️ grew. Because⬇️ of that, we don't🚫✅ quite know 🤯➡️ what happened next. Or rather, we don't🚫✅ know🤯➡️ why⁉️.

After bringing commodity enlightenment💵💡🤯 to the masses (which were at that time🕰️ still few) he began⛲➡️ to speak🗣️➡️ of a fourth door4️⃣🚪, beyond↗️ impermanence🏚️, suffering🤕, and selflessness🌌. He told📖🎙️➡️ us all prior enlightenments💡🤯 were false❌ enlightenments💡🤯⬇️. All previous🔙 Buddhas were false❌ Buddhas. There🔃📍 was a state of transcendence∞⬇️🔁 no human 🚫👨♂️👶♀️ had ever tasted👅➡️ before 🔙, but which he had found 🔍🎯➡️ using tool🛠️-assisted med-

itation🧘‍♂️⬇️. He captured🕸️➡️ these insights🧠👀 into yet another drug💊, called🎙️🏷️➡️ *Yellow Emperor* 👑🟡. He said🎙️➡️ it would open the fourth4️⃣ door🚪 to all people of the world🌍.

Zhang张 deployed💻☁️➡️ *Yellow Emperor* 👑🟡 to his followers, but it was a disaster. Most of the people who ran the program🧧💾 became violent⚔️🩸🔄 or else catatonic. At the time🕰️, there🔼📍 was a popular app📱💾 called 🎙️🏷️➡️ Face2👦♂️👱‍♂️ that let you connect⚡🔗➡️ for a mind-to-mind 🧠⚡🧠 phonecall☎️ with anyone in your line of sight👁️. It was the same idea💡 as Zhang's张 mind🧠👻 melding apps📱💾, but local and peer-to-peer. The people infected🦠➡️ with *Yellow Emperor* 👑🟡 (and it was an infection🦠⬇️) tried to initiate Face2👦♂️👱‍♂️ calls☎️⬇️ with everyone they saw, and anyone who accepted got hijacked and infected🦠➡️. Anyone who didn't accept, or who didn't have a Neuralink🧠🔗 implant, they would attack⚔️➡️.

If this were to happen today, it's possible🔼 the whole world🌍

would become *Yellow Emperor* 👑🟡 zombies🧟‍♀️, but we were fortunate, because↩️ even in San Francisco🌉💩, most people did not yet have the device🔩⚙️. With the help of the Neuralink🧠🔗 Corporation, police👮‍♀️ were able to capture 🕸️➡️ and initiate a factory🏭 reset on the infected🦠➡️.

After they were reset, none could remember🧠🎞️➡️ what they had done✅➡️. Instead, they reported 🗃️➡️ feelings of disassociation and euphoria😆🎆. Some recounted experiences of being transported 🚄➡️ to another world🌍 and encountering alien🛸 beings. When I audited the code💻🧮 for *Yellow Emperor* 👑🟡, I was unable to find 💁‍♂️🔍🎯 any logic🧮 for these hallucinations🤩🎆 or for the violent⚔️🩸🔄 behavior🐵🎭⬇️ of the infected🦠➡️.

The event threatened to undermine🔄⛏️➡️ public confidence in Neuralink🧠🔗. I don't🚫✅ know 🤯➡️ what goes on in shady back rooms where journalists📰🧑‍♂️ and politicians and captains of industry👨🏻✈️🏭 wield power💪💰, but the incident got no press cover-

age🌿⬇️, fell off the news cycle 🚴‍♀️⬇️ like❤️ it was never🙅‍♂️ there↩️🎈, and then the government👑🏛 started🏁➡️ rolling🧾🔁 out regulations👩‍⚖️⬇️ to control🕹🔐➡️ what kinds of software🎛💾 could be made for Neuralink🧠🔗, and who could run it. They created "schedules🖊📝" of control🕹🔐⬇️ the same way we have with pharmaceutical💊🥼 drugs. I think everyone here↩️📍 knows🤯➡️ all about that.

Headstrong👱‍♂️💪 came to me and told📖🎙➡️ me the world🌍 was going to change🐛🦋➡️ very quickly⏩🔁, and he had made copies of all Zhang's张 notes📝⬇️ and recordings🎙📼⬇️. He said🎙➡️ we had a unique1️⃣ opportunity to steal👨🏿‍🦱✏️🥾➡️ them and establish a monopoly on illegal smart-drug💾💊 production🏭⚙️⬇️. Like ❤️ the rest of you, I was never an idealist💡👨🏻‍💼 about these things.

But then, last year, Yui唯 came to Apothecary💾💊⛲ to be one of our consorts👱🏻‍♂️♀️. And let's be honest🍷🎙, consort👱🏻‍♀️♀️ is a word 🎙✍ for whore💵🐉. I don't🚫✅

care about that, but I got to know 🥵➡️ her, and she told📖🎙️➡️ me something I haven't been able to let go. She showed👉👁️➡️ me a picture🖼️ of her mother👩‍🦰, a fat Japanese American with too much wine 🍷 on her face👩🏻. She told📖🎙️➡️ me her mother👩‍🦰 was killed in a Neuralink🧠🔗 malfunction👎⚙️⬇️. As she described it, I realized 🤔💡➡️ she was a victim of the *Yellow Emperor* 👑🌕 attacks⚔️➡️, this beautiful girl👦🏻♀️. She must have been very young when it happened. And I felt responsible for that, even though it was really Zhang张 that had done✅➡️ it. But even that's not why⁉️ I'm leaving🥾🚪🔄.

I'm leaving🥾🚪🔄 because↘️, when she learned💁‍♂️📖➡️ the truth🍷🎙️⬇️, she didn't even care. She was and is so high🔼😵 on a cocktail🍸 of Neuralink🧠🔗 drugs 💊 (*Seven Veils*7🧕, perhaps, or *Woman For All Purposes*, some of my best creations) that her life is a flat void🌀. She is simply a pleasure😋 machine🔩⚙️, hardly a person at all, and I built👷‍♂️➡️ that machine🔩⚙️. I killed💀➡️ her

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mother👱‍♀️ and turned🐛🦋➡️ her
into a smartdrug💾💊 whore💵💃
and she's fine with it! You're all
fine with it! What's wrong with
you? Maybe now you'll get it. But
either way, I'm already🔽 gone,
and to be honest🍷🎙️ I'll be glad
😄 to have these memories🧠🎞️ ex-
cised🗑️➡️ from⬅️ my head👦♂️ .
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                              ~ Boshi 博士

Branch🪃 reads🔍📖➡️ the email📧 in full, but he is not🚫 sure how to react🔄🎭➡️. He looks👁️➡️ up from⬅️ his food🍽️🎁, and tries to read🔍📖➡️ the emotions😂😭 of the other men🧑 around him in the dining🍽️🔄 area. Did they read🔍📖➡️ it? Most are staring🗿👁️➡️ into the void 🌀 of the HUD 🤩📙, and no one seems moved or even surprised😲➡️. Did they already🔽 know🤯➡️ this story 📖📈📉? Or is Boshi 博士 right⭕ and they don't🚫✅ care? He barely🤏🔄 knows🤯➡️ these people, but still it's anxious🥺. Too much to think🤔➡️ about.

When he goes up to his station🖥️ in the main hall, he sees👁️➡️ Shenwu 神巫 and asks❓➡️ about the letter✉️. Shenwu 神巫 tells📖🎙️➡️ him most people have heard👂➡️ the story📖📈📉 of Zhang张, and that's why⁉️ the fourth labyrinthe4️⃣🗺️🔀 is not accessible in any of the shared file stores. There's↩️📍 nothing🚫⬇️ spooky👻🧛⬇️ about it; beaming chaos🎲🔀 into your brain drives🚗➡️ you crazy 😜 and can make you violent⚔️🩸🔄 or give🎁➡️ you delusions😵🦄 of grandeur🤴👑, so don't🚫✅ do that. Anything can kill💀⬆️ you if you use it wrong🙇.

Hearing 👂 🔄 this does not 🚫 ✅ satisfy Branch's 🪃 curiosity 😼 🔄, but he can see 👁️ ⬆️ that for Shenwu 神巫, this is the beginning ⛲ ⬇️ and end 🔙 ⬇️ of the matter. He notices 👀 📊 ➡️ his teammates listening 👂 ➡️ to his conversation 💬 💬 ⬇️ nervously 🥺 🔄, and he realizes 🤔 💡 ➡️ this is a topic to broach carefully. So he tries to focus 🤔 🎯 ➡️ on his work for the day 📅, but it does not 🚫 ✅ hold 🖐️ ➡️ his interest. Branch 🪃 wants to know 🤯 ➡️ what really happened; he wants to know 🤯 ➡️ the truth 🍷 🎙️ ⬇️ about Zhang 张 and the drug 💊 called 🎙️ 👉 ➡️ *Yellow Emperor* 👑 🟡.

From 🔙 his high 🔼 pavilion 🏞️ 🏛️,
he gazes 👁️ into the distance
at the color 🎨 🌈 of grass 🌿 at heaven's ⛅ edge 🗺️ 🚪

〜

That night 🌑 he studies the second labyrinthe 2️⃣ 🗺️ 🔗, *Hedonic Geographies* 🤤 🌍. It starts 🏁 ➡️ with a discussion of the myth 🏛️ 🐲 of the "resonant frequency 🌊 🔊," a hypothetical single 1️⃣ activation pattern that will ↗️ sustain a state of limitless pleasure 🤤 in the mind 🧠 👻 of user. Subjective 🧠 🧠 🔄 nullification 🌀 ➡️ will ↗️ occur for any state vector imposed on the brain 🧠. Artificially holding ✋ 🔄 a particular state can cause "burn 🔥 -in," dampening 🌧️ 📉 🔄 that which was to be invoked. Burn 🔥 -in can be avoided 🚫 ⬆️ by cycling 🚴 🔄 through a series of pleasurable 🤤 🔄 stimulations 💉 ⚡ ⬇️; oscillating through the substantia nigra 🧠 🟣, the ventral tegmental area, and the hypothalamus. But this style of pleasure 🤤 induction 🏁 ⛲ ⬇️ encounters a ceiling; as with chemical 🧪 💊 drugs, the joy 😆 ⬇️ of the stimulus 💉 ⚡ ⬇️

soon gives 🎁➡️ way to its compulsion. The high ⏫🥴 becomes the baseline, and the baseline becomes the anxiety 🥺 of absence 🚫⬇️.

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Brain🧠 stimulation💉 ⚡⬇️ can induce🏁⛲⬆️ desire😍⬇️, but all pleasure exhausts itself with exposure, leaving only desire😍 in its place. (This is known🥴➡️ as the wirehead's ⚡🤪 dilemma⭕😅⭕.) An alternate strategy ⚔️🎞️ is inspired by a famous😅🔁 investigation🕵️⬇️ into the limits of sensation👁️👂👅 and perception👁️👂🕯️: in the thermal grill🍔🔥 illusion🤩🏝️, warm🔥 and cool❄️ metal bars are arranged in an alternating⬛⬜🔁 layout. Neither the warm🔥 nor the cool❄️ bars occupy an extreme of temperature🌡️, but if you place your hand✋ over🔽 the grill, the contrast🔥❄️causes you to perceive them as burning 🔥🔁 hot😓. The wirehead ⚡🤪 exploits a similar⚖️🪞

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principle by titrating🔬🪳➡️ pain🙁 into pleasure😋, which both amplifies📢➡️ pleasure😋 and makes pain🙁 more tolerable. (Thunberg, 1896, *Förnimmelserne vid till samma ställe lokaliserad, samtidigt pägäende köld-och värmeretning*)

The second labryinthe2️⃣ contains recipes🍥🗺️ for various kinds of pain🙁, observations👁️🔍⬇️ on the interactions between🥪 different pains🙁 and pleasures😋, and designs🏛️🗺️⬇️ for sustainable hedonic states. Branch thinks🤔➡️ of the story📖📈📉 of Zhang张, indexing🖨️🔁 his own brain🧠 while he was awake☕➡️, and he tries his own experiment👷🪳⬇️. He has sampled a few smartdrugs💾💊 already🔙 in his time🕰️ here⤵️🎈 —*Peach Spring Beyond This World* 🍑⛲↗️🌍, *Unfaithful Housewife*🚫✝️🧑, and the perennially popular *Stop Hitting Yourself*🛑🥊🔁🧑—but the drug💊 programs in Zhang's张 text📖 are much simpler, and if *Unfaithful Housewife*🚫✝️🧑 is a scalpel🧑‍⚕️🔪, then *Wirehead* ⚡🤪 *Variation #4* is a hammer🔨.

There's an incentive to produce🏭⚙️➡️ addiction🎲🌀 in the wirehead⚡🤪 without crippling🚹 his executive👑 function⚙️🔁, but Zhang's张 explorations🧭🗺️ were performed🎭➡️ out of love🥰, unfettered🚫⛓️ by economics💵🔬. Branch falls🍂➡️ into such a vortex🌪️ of ferocious🦁 bliss😋 that he loses an entire evening🌑, as if he had been asleep😴 or dreaming💤🎥🔁, floating☁️🔁 in radiant☀️⬇️🔁 contentedness. When the feeling is gone, he longs for it again, but he has learned👩📖➡️ to contain these impulses by invoking Yi 义 to become temporarily anhedonic😐🔁.

He can't sleep🙅‍♂️😴. The events of the past day📅17 weigh⚖️➡️ too heavily on him, so he finishes🏁🔚➡️ the second labyrinthe2️⃣ and pushes straight into the

third 3️⃣, *Commodity Enlightenment* 💵💡🤯. Whereas wireheading ⚡🤪 searches 🔍➡️ for hedonic equilibria by simultaneously 🕰️🕰️🔄 cultivating and satiating desire😍, Buddhism🕉️ seeks to eliminate 🚫➡️ desire😍 altogether. Can enlightenment 💡🤯 be as simple as playing ▶️➡️ back recordings 🎙️📼⬇️ of brain🧠 state vectors into the minds 🧠👻 of the uninitiated?

Awakening☕⬇️ is a process, a journey🗺️👣 as well as a destination🧭🥅. The subjective🧠🧠 experience of each step👣 of the path👣🛣️ may be different for each initiate, because↘️ the mind🧠👻 is an intricate forest🌲🌲, and it may appear different in daylight☀️🕯️ or moonlight🌕🕯️, in winter❄️🗓️ or summer🌞🗓️, up close or from⬅️ a distance. Nevertheless, the objective neurological🧠🧮🔄 map🗺️ through the forest🌲🌲 is the same for everyone. The initiate must pass through each of the eight 8️⃣ stages👾🍰 of concentration and insight🧠👀 in order before🔙 approaching the doors🚪 of impermanence⏳👴🔄, suffering😕🔄, and selflessness🚫👦🔄.

The spacious🌌🔄 golden chains🔗🔗 of concentration succumb to the wirehead's ⚡🤪 dilemma⚪😅⚪ if they are not titrated🛝🔪➡️ with pain🤕, but the natural🌲🌱 pain🤕 of impermanence⏳👴🔄 is often sufficient to avoid 🚳➡️ this problem. At the apex⏫⛰️ of concentration, it is possible🔼 to trigger💥🔫➡️ the Kundalini Awakening ☕➡️, which may be accompanied by spasmodic 〽️🔀🔄 movements, strong💪 sexual🍆🌮🔄 feelings, lucid💡🕯️ dreams💤🎥, and the belief that one has magical🧙🔄 powers💪💰. Awakening☕⬇️ yields⚠️➡️ to dissolution, misery😕, and fear😨, which are mitigated by completing✅🔄

the progression into Equanimity🕊️⬇️, Conformity⬇️, and Fruition🍇⬇️.

The equanimity🕊️⬇️ of stillness in the conscious👀🧠 mind🧠👻 does not🚫✅ stifle the pursuit of base desire😍; it only severs🔪⛓️➡️ the mind🧠👻 from⬅️ the subjective🧠🧠 awareness🤔👀⬇️ (i.e., the pain🥹⬇️) of that desire😍⬇️. Enlightenment💡🤯 turns🔀➡️ out to be only a form of euphoric😆💥 dissociation🚫⛓️⬇️, where self-related thoughts🤔⬇️ are greatly reduced📉➡️.

~

Having come to the end🔚⬇️ of these texts📖, just as the simulated👾🎭➡️ light🕯️ of dawn🌅 shines☀️➡️ through his virtual windows🪟, he feels no🚫 closer to any understanding🔄📚⬇️ of the things he has learned🙇📖➡️.

At the next gathering🎪🍻 at Headstrong's🧑💪 estate, he goes to Romero and asks❓➡️ about the fourth labyrinthe4️⃣🗺️⛓️, and the drug💊 *Yellow Emperor*👑🟡, and Romero tells📖🎙️➡️ him there🔀📍 are rumors🤫🎙️ of Zhang's张 dealings in the occult🧙📜, that his Neuralink🧠🔗 explorations🧭🗺️⬇️ of the mind🧠👻 were connected⚡🔗➡️ to his dealings with dark and forbidden books, with Tang唐 dynasty necromancy🧟🔮 called🎙️👄➡️ Fangshi 方士.

Two years ago2️⃣🗒️⬅️, a man👱 came here🔀📍 who called🎙️👄➡️ himself Guolao果老. He was troubled😟, Romero thinks🤔➡️ everyone could see👁️⬆️ that, but Headstrong🧑💪 took a liking❤️🔄 to him, and they would sometimes meet privately🤫🔄. Like Branch🪃, he had also asked❓➡️ questions about *Yellow Emperor*👑🟡, and devel-

oped a fascination with the tigers 🐯 in the gallery 🖼️ 🚶 in the main hall. Romero had warned ⚠️ ➡️ him of the dangers ⚠️ ⛔ —others did, too—but he would always go up there ⤴️ 📍 to examine 🔍 ➡️ them, and even pick them up ✋ ➡️ from ⬅️ time 🕙 to time 🕙. One day 📅 he selected an antique 👴 🔁 revolver 🔫 with a painted 🎨 ➡️ ivory ⚪ handle, and it compelled him to spin the cylinder, place the gun 🔫 to his head 👱, and pull the trigger 💥 🔫 ⬇️.

The gun 🔫 was not loaded 🚫 📦 ➡️, but still, he did not 🚫 ✅ learn 🙇 📖 ➡️. He invented 💡 ⚙️ ➡️ a strange 🐙 new ✨ smartdrug 💾 💊 program 🧮 💾 called 🎙️ 🏷️ ➡️ *Feet on a Snake* 🦶 🐍, which was so convoluted 🔁 ➡️ that no one could ascertain its mechanism ⚙️ of action 🎭 ⬇️ or intended function ⚙️ ⬇️. Among the testers who used the product 🏭 ⚙️ ⬇️, all reported 📤 ➡️ sensations 👁️ 👂 👅 of disassociation 🌀, euphoria 😆 💥, and time 🕙 dilation 🏳️‍⚧️ ⬇️. Worse, those same testers were found 🔍 🎯 ➡️ wandering mindlessly 🚫 🧠 🔁 around the compound with no awareness 🤔 👀 ⬇️ of their actions, and when they came back to themselves, none had any memory 🧠 🎞️ of doing ✅ 🔁 so. Boshi 博士, who was the head 👱 of quality control 👍 🕹️ 🔓, refused 🙅 to ship 🚢 ➡️ it to the public.

Shortly after this, Guolao 果老 left the Apothecary 💾 💊 ⛲ with no preamble or ceremony. It might not 🚫 be wrong ❌ to say 🎙️ ➡️ he disappeared 👻 ➡️, but the similarities between 🥪 *Feet on a Snake* 🦶 🐍 and *Yellow Emperor* 👑 🟡 are clear 👁️ 💎, and it seems likely that Guolao 果老 had somehow obtained access 🔑 ⬇️ to the locked 🔒 ➡️ writings ✍️ ⬇️ of Zhang 张, *The Fourth Labyrinth* 4️⃣ 🧶 🔁. Given 🎁 ➡️ his inexplicably close connection ⚡ 🔗 ⬇️ to Headstrong 👱 💪 and the fact that Headstrong 👱 💪 is the only

man known👨‍🦳➡️ to possess these writings✍️⬇️, there↗️📍 is an obvious conclusion that Romero declines🚫➡️ to put into words🎙️✍️. Headstrong👱‍♂️💪 is a good👍 and generous🎗️🔄 leader👑👨, even a visionary👁️👨, and Romero will↗️ not🚫 speak🗣️➡️ ill😛 of him, but the thing he won't 🚫↗️ say🎙️➡️ lingers over Branch🪃 with its undeniable 🚫🙅‍♂️ plausibility🤔⬇️.

There is speculation that Headstrong👱‍♂️💪 hid the Fourth Labyrinthe4️⃣🗺️🧲 in one of the innumerable tigers 🐯 displayed around the Apothecary💾💊⛲, and that the strange🦎 incidents of Guolao's 果老 drug💊 and his disappearance👻⬇️ could be attributed only to Headstrong's👱‍♂️💪 recklessness in planting🌱➡️ so many dangerous⚠️⛔🔄 seeds🌱🌰 around his garden💐🌳🌿, rather than to any more sinister or deliberate motive. For his own part, Branch🪃, perhaps like❤️ Guolao 果老 before↙️ him, remains ambivalent↗️⬇️ to these concerns, and he finds🔍🎯➡️ the mysteries🕵️❗ of the Zhang's张 writings✍️⬇️ all the more enticing. He wants to know👨‍🦳➡️ what secrets🤫 hide🙈➡️ in those forbidden texts📖, or in the the tigers🐯 that lurk in Apothecary's💾💊⛲ galleries🖼️🚶 and halls🏛️🚶 .

〜

No one sees👁️➡️ Headstrong👱‍♂️💪 for a number🔢 of months📅; he no longer holds✋➡️ gatherings🎪🍺 on his estate, and there↗️📍 is gossip that he is ailing😷🔄. He sends✉️➡️ for Branch🪃 specifically📍🎯🔄 through a private🤫 message, and Branch🪃 goes out to Headstrong's 👱‍♂️💪 house, through the familiar gardens💐🌳🌿 where has often gambled🎲💵➡️ and caroused🍻➡️, and makes his

way through the double 2️⃣ door 🚪 at the front of the house 🏠. In the foyer, a push notification 🎉 directs 🎬➡️ him to the kitchen; a bot 🤖 instructs to prepare a pot of bai mudan 🍲 and bring it up ⏫ to Headstrong's 👨💪 room. He feels vaguely humiliated by this, but also gratified that he was called 📞➡️. Branch 🪃 makes the tea 🍲 and goes to Headstrong's 👨💪 room, where the old 👴 man 👨 is lying in his bed 🛏️, asleep 😴.

Branch 🪃 does not 🚫✅ disturb him, but he sees 👁️➡️ how frail Headstrong 👨💪 now appears, Headstrong 👨💪 who is revered 🙇👑➡️ throughout the Apothecary 💾💊⛲, who has invented 💡⚙️➡️ this world 🌍 of nootropics and smartdrugs 💾💊 and real food 🍽️🎁 and loose women 👩. He is suddenly repulsed by the parochiality of the place, and he thinks 🤔➡️ how easy it would be to end 🔚➡️ Headstrong's 👨💪 life, how much more he (Branch 🪃) could accomplish 🏅➡️ with these tools 🛠️ and these men 👨. But his thoughts 🤔⬇️ are interrupted as he sees 👁️➡️ the girl 👩 from ⬅️ the very first 1️⃣⬇️ night 🌑 come into the room, with a white jade ⚪💎 hairpin 📍 in her hair. She is only half-dressed 👔➡️, and their eyes 👁️ meet before ↗️ she sits 🪑➡️ on the bed 🛏️ next to Headstrong 👨💪 and wakes ☕➡️ him.

The old man runs 🏃➡️ his hand 🖐️ through her hair as he drinks 🥃➡️ cup after cup of hot 🔥 tea 🍲 and speaks 🗣️➡️ to Branch 🪃 of business and his dealings in the past year. Finally, he gives 🎁➡️ Branch 🪃 permission to leave 🥾🚪➡️. But Branch 🪃 takes the opportunity to ask ❓➡️, audaciously, about *Yellow Emperor* 👑🟡, though he is not so brazen as to mention the man 👨 called 🎙️🏷️➡️ Guolao 果老. An inscrutable emotion 😂😭 crosses 🔀➡️ Headstrong's 👨💪 face, and then passes, and he tells 📖🎙️➡️ Branch 🪃

that he destroyed ➡️ all copies of the fourth labyrinthe 4 🗺️, and that nothing good 🚫 👍 can come of delving ⬇️🔄 into such things. Branch 🪃 may have heard 👂➡️ the idea 💡 that Zhang张 stumbled upon a neurological 🧠🔄 schematic ⚙️📝 for an ansible 🚀☎️ to another world 🌍, but this is pure 🛋️💧 fantasy 🦄, a superstition 🧑👻 that has sprung up around a very advanced technology 💻🧪. No doubt Branch 🪃 asks ❓➡️ these questions ❓ because ⤵️ of the letter ✉️ from ⬅️ Boshi博士, who has developed some fanciful notions after spending 💵🔄 too much time ⏰ in the idle company of consorts 👸 and digital 👾 aphrodisiacs 🍆🧠.

Headstrong 🧑💪 asks ❓➡️ Branch 🪃, "have you heard 👂➡️ the proverb 👴📜 which tells 📖🎙️➡️ us: mirrors 🪞 and copulation 🍆🌮 are abominable, because ⤵️ they multiply ✖️ the number 🔢 of men 👨?" (*Uqbar*, Anglo-American Cyclopaedia, 1902.)

"To understand 🔄📚➡️ *Yellow Emperor* 👑🟡, it helps to imagine 🤔🐉👂➡️ a mirror 🪞. The drug 💊 has no content itself; it is a feedback loop 🎤🔂 that amplifies 📢➡️ things already ⬅️ present in the mind 🧠👻. The name 🔽 comes from ⬅️ a legend 📜🐉 about the emperor 👑 Huangdi黄帝, who conquered the creatures 🦈🦁 that live on the other side of the mirror 🪞 and forced 💪➡️ them into slavish 👨🏿 imitation 🐵🔽 of whatever is before ⬅️ them. Zhang张 deployed 💻☁️➡️ this name 🔽 whimsically 😂💨🔄, to suggest that his program 🗺️💾 was a conquest ⚔️ of the mirror 🪞, but according to the story, there 🎣📍 will ↗️ come a day 📅 when Huangdi's黄帝 magic 🧙 falters, and the mirror 🪞 people will ↗️ be free to come out of the mirror 🪞 to seek revenge."

Headstrong👱💪 explains that the legend📜🐲 is a parable; it highlights🔼🖍➡️ the horrors🦑🤢 within us, the shadowy👤🔁 reflections🪞⬇️ that we manifest in the world🌍. Zhang's张 greatest shortcoming was his naivete. He failed❌➡️ to understand🔄📚➡️ the depravity🦹⬇️ in the hearts🫀 of so many people, because🔽 he saw wonderful 🤔❓⬇️🔁, transcendent🚄♾️🔁⬇️ things when he looked🫥➡️ into the mirror🪞, reflections🪞👤 of his natural🌲🌱 curiosity🐱🔁 and good nature👍🌲🌱, and he imagined🤔🐉🔁➡️ others would be the same. This is the truth 🍷🎙️⬇️ of this tragedy😭.

On his way out of Headstrong's👱💪 house🏠, Branch 🪃 pauses⏸️➡️ to walk🚶➡️ down🔽 a dark hallway, driven🚗➡️ by impulse, or by a premonition. Though he is not 🚫 influenced👇⚖️➡️ by any nootropics or smartdrugs 💾💊, the urge seems to come from⬅️ outside⬅️➡️ of himself. He enters🚪➡️ a room full of display cases and pedestals and artifacts🏺, and he realizes this is another collection of tigers🐯 like❤️ the ones in the main work hall of Apothecary💾💊⛲. In the center of the room, against the far wall, he sees👁️➡️ a full length mirror🪞 covered🍃➡️ by a dusty cloth, with only a small👋 corner visible, and he is already thinking🤔🔁 of Headstrong's👱💪 story📖📈📉 about Huangdi黄帝 and the mirror people🪞🙂. So he pulls the cloth from⬅️ the mirror🪞, of course.

Most tigers🐯 work by using transcutaneous electrical ⚡🔁 stimulation⚡💉⚡⬇️ to trigger💥🔫➡️ behavior🐵🦸⬇️ in the Neuralink🧠🔗 device🔬⚙️ that can enable code💻🧮 injection💉⬇️. TENS 🧴⚡ is the most common approach, because🔽 it affords🈶🔼➡️ the largest surface area for attack⚔️, and because🔽 it has the

highest bandwidth once the security of Neuralink is compromised, but in theory, a hacker could exploit any sensory modality to deliver an unauthorized logic payload, even the sense of smell. (Zhang张, 2027, *Thy Fearful Symmetry: Systemic Risks in Full-Duplex Neuralink Devices*).

As Branch stares into his reflection, chromatic aberrations surround him like a halo, and he is unable to look away. He loses all conscious awareness of time. At some point in his trance, the myriad transformations of the mirror unravel one another, and it occurs to him that the reflection he sees is no longer his own face. His mind collapses into a single point of focus, and he finds himself as a different person, in an entirely different place.

> The myriad transformations
>   unravel one another
> We are born of the selfsame root,
> Why should we hound each other to death
>   with such impatience?

III. Tiger 🐯

Note 📝: Regarding Addiction 🎲 🌀

They call 🎤 ▶️ my creations smartdrugs 💾 💊. I don't 🚫 ✅ know 🚫 🤯 who coined 🎙️ 🪙 ▶️ this term, though it is now common. But I never 🙅‍♂️ saw 👁️ ▶️ them as drugs 💊, only as programs 🧮 💾. I think 🤔 ▶️ it's a slander, or at least a misconception ❌ 💡 🧠 ⬇️, to call 🎤 ▶️ them drugs 💊; a drug 💊 is not a biochemical 🧬 🧪 program 🧮 💾, because ↩️ it contains no 🙅‍♂️ logic 🧮. It only acts on the mind 🧠 👻 according to logic 🧮 already present. But this distinction is pedantic 🤓 📖, I realize 🤔 💡 ▶️ that. I'm bargaining 🤑 🤝 🔁.

And from ◀️ the outside ◀️▶️ I can see 👁️ ⬆️ why ⁉️ my detractors 🤬 🤸 compare me to a drug dealer 💊 💵 👨, why ⁉️ they call 🎤 ▶️ my many supporters "addicts 🎲 👨"—but consider 🤔 ▶️: there is alcohol use 🍺 🔁 ⬇️ and alcohol abuse 🍺 🤬 ⬇️, but there is no such category as cocaine ⛄ 🔁 ⬇️ use, why ⁉️ not 🚫?

I ask ❓ ▶️ this question ❓ because ↩️ any behavior 🐵 🎭 ⬇️ can become an addiction 🎲 🌀. In a survey 🤵 📝 ⬇️ of over ⬇️ a thousand tango 💃 🕺 enthusiasts, nearly half met the DSM-IV criteria for "addiction 🎲 🌀" (Targhetta et al., 2013, *Argentine tango: Another behavioral 🐵 🎭 🔁 addiction 🎲 🌀?*) But there's 🔼 📍 a critical 🎯, ineffable 🙊 🔁 distance between 🥪 pathology 👎 🎭 ⬇️ and addiction 🎲 🌀. It cannot be defined 🙅‍♂️ 📍 📖 physiologically 💪 🧮 🔁, only holistically 🌐 🤔 🔁, by examining 🔍 ▶️ the be-

havior 🐵🎭⬇️ in the context of the life of the "addict 🎲🧍‍♂️."
It comes down ⏬ to a feeling, ultimately, about whether that
behavior 🐵🎭⬇️ is good 👍 or bad 👎 for you.

Procedure: White Noise ⚪ 💥🎧 4 Hz, 12 mV

I feel drowsy 🥱 and everything is dreamlike$_z$z^Z📹. Vis-
ual 👁️⬇️🔁 and other perceptual artifacts 🏺 are present but
mild. Motor control 🚗🕹️🔒 is slightly impaired 🫤. In con-
versation 💬💬⬇️, I sometimes say the wrong word 🎙️✍️,
but I am lucid 💡🕯️. Dr. Hong 洪 asks ❓ ➡️ me questions ❓
and I answer ❗ ➡️.

Hong 洪: What is your name ⚬🔲⬇️?
Zhang 张: Eric Zhang 张.

Hong 洪: Where are you?
Zhang 张: In the mission 🔔 district of San Francisco
🌉💩, in the Pioneer building 🏢.

Hong 洪: What is happening?
Zhang 张: We are conducting 🎶🥢🔁 an inter-
fructuation 🐙🍭⬇️ of the effect of white
noise 💥🎧 streamed 🌊➡️ through Neu-
ralink 🧠🔗.

Hong 洪: What do you see 👁️➡️?
Zhang 张: I see 👁️➡️ the computer lab 💻🥼🔬. As you
speak 🗣️➡️ I have the image of a dragon 🐲
flying ✈️🔁. Lattices 🧬🧬 and honeycombs
🍯🕸️ are visible 👁️.

Hong洪: What do you hear 👂 ➡️?

Zhang张: Your voice 🗣️ 🎙️ . The ambient noise 🌴 💥 🎧 of the lab 🥼 🔬 . Subtle tinnitus 🔔 👂 in the left ↩️ —no 🙅‍♂️ the right ↪️ —no 🙅‍♂️ the left ↩️ ear 👂 .

After fifteen minutes 🕛 , I fall 🍂 ➡️ into a dreamless 🚫 ᵤᶻᶻ 🎥 sleep 😴 . Where we might expect noise 💥 🎧 in the visual 👁️ ⬇️ 🔁 cortex 🧠 to produce 🏭 ⚙️ ➡️ similarly ⚖️ 🪞 random 🎲 visual 👁️ ⬇️ 🔁 artifacts 🏺 , perhaps akin to "snow ❄️ ⛄ " on a television 📺 screen, instead we observe 👁️ 🔍 ➡️ Klüver's "form constants;" spirals 🌀 , tunnels, lattices 🧬 🧬 and cobwebs 🕸️ , suggesting that noise 💥 🎧 causes downstream ⬇️ 🌊 activation to flow 🌊 ➡️ along straight lines in the visual 👁️ ⬇️ 🔁 cortex 🧠 . (Bressloff, Paul C.; Cowan, Jack D.; Golubitsky, Martin; Thomas, Peter J.; Weiner, Matthew C., March 2002. *What Geometric* 📐 🔁 *Visual* 👁️ ⬇️ 🔁 *Hallucinations* 😄 💥 *Tell* 📖 🎙️ ➡️ *Us About the Visual* 👁️ ⬇️ 🔁 *Cortex* 🧠)

Procedure: White Noise ⚪ 💥 🎧 12 Hz, 20 mV

I am dissociated 🚫 ⛓️ ⬇️ and derealized 🦄 ➡️ . The sensation 👁️ 👂 👅 is similar ⚖️ 🪞 to the final moments ⏱️ one spends 💵 ➡️ at the boundary 🚪 between 🥪 sleeping 😴 🔁 and waking ☕ 🔁 . I pass in and out of lucidity 💡 🕯️ ⬇️ , alternately occupying a dream space ᵤᶻᶻ 🎥 🖼️ or the waking ☕ 🔁 world 🌍 .

I feel I am passing through luminous 🕯️ 🔁 tunnels toward unknown 🚫 🤯 and unknowable 🙅‍♂️ 🤯 ⬆️ destinations 🧭 🥅 . Each time ⏰ I "wake ☕ ➡️ up" and re-enter

the dream, I start back at the beginning of the tunnels, an it occurs to me that the dream me is the "real" me, and the "me" in the waking world is only a shadow. I am frustrated by this, but when it's over, I feel sheepish at the grandiosity of my thoughts.

Postscript: That night, I had dreams of waking up from the white noise, and each time I was convinced that only an hour had elapsed, and that my memories of the preceding day were hallucinations brought on by the random firing of neurons induced by the noise. I could not be certain I had left the chair in the lab, or if I was still "under the influence," imagining myself to be going about my day, driving, eating, or communicating with colleagues.

Memo: Quantifying Noise

The generation 2 Neuralink device contains 25776 electrodes distributed across 768 threads spread throughout the brain. The human brain itself has ~86 billion neurons, a ratio of ~3.4 million neurons per electrode. The granularity of the device is therefore somewhat limited. Each electrode is capable of emitting a charge of up to 40 mV, which is enough to cause thousands of neurons in a radius around that electrode to fire. By varying the intensity of charge at each electrode, we exercise fine control

over ⬇️ the radius of activation, and achieve ✅ 🥇 ➡️ a "virtu-al" resolution which is many times higher 🔼.

Regarding the composition ✍️ 🏛️ of the signal 🚦, there 🔂 📍 are many kinds of noise 💥 🎧, which are named 🏷️ ➡️ after various colors 🎨 🌈; white ⚪, pink 🌸, red 🔴, azure 🔵, violet 💜, and gray. White noise ⚪ 💥 🎧 has a flat power 💪 💰 spectrum 🌈 when plotted as a linear function ⚙️ ⬇️ of frequency 🌊 🔊. Pink 🌸 and red 🔴 noise 💥 🎧 have high 🔼 spectral 🌈 🔁 power 💪 💰 in the lower frequen-cies 🌊 🔊 and decrease in power 💪 💰 as frequency 🌊 🔊 increases 📈. Azure 🔵 and violet 💜, the reverse 🔄. Gray noise 💥 🎧 has a U-shape. There 🔂 📍 is no direct 🫀 🔌 per-ceptual mapping 🥪 ⬇️ between 🥪 audio noise 💥 🎧 and Neuralink 🧠 🔗 noise 💥 🎧, but we find 🔍 🎯 ➡️ these dis-tinctions to be a useful starting 🏁 ➡️ point 📍 🗺️.

When sending ✉️ 🔁 a signal 🚦 through the device 📌, we model 🗺️ 📊 ➡️ each electrode ⚡ 🔗 as a 2D point 📍 ⬇️ containing a position 📍 🗺️ and an intensity. Each frequency band 🌊 🔊 🌈 is resolved to a series of discrete positions 📍 🗺️ and intensities within this space 🌌. To avoid 🚫 ➡️ confusion 🤷 ⬇️, we clarify that noise 💥 🎧 is rendered across different frequencies 🌊 🔊 in the "position 📍 🗺️" domain of the Neuralink 🧠 🔗 electrodes ⚡ 🔗, and there 🔂 📍 is a separate "framerate 🖼️ 🚴," which refers to the rate of change of noise 💥 🎧 in the time 🕰️ domain. The framerate 🖼️ 🚴 of the noise 💥 🎧 is measured ✏️ ➡️ in Hz; this has no relation to the frequencies 🌊 🔊 that comprise the noise 💥 🎧.

We manipulate ✋ 🛠️ ➡️ the amplitude 🎨 ✏️ of the sig-nal 🚦 as a whole by applying a scalar. The minimum charge needed to trigger 💥 🔫 ➡️ a neuron 🎚️ 🧠 to activate is ~10mV. At this level 👾 🍰, only a small 🔪 number 🔢 of neu-

rons 🎚️🧠 immediately surrounding the electrode⚡🔗 will↗️ fire🔫➡️. At the maximum output of 40mV, a single1️⃣ electrode ⚡🔗 can induce🏁💆⬆️ approximately ten thousand neurons 🎚️🧠 to fire🔫➡️ in near-simultaneity 🕰️🕰️⬇️.

Procedure: White Noise ⚪💥🎧 12 Hz, 30 mV

I become completely💯🔄 dissociated🚫⛓️➡️ from⬅️ my ordinary perceptions👁️👂. My vision👁️⬇️ is a field 🌾🏞️ of fluid💧🔄 images🖼️: a swan🦢, a multitude of eyes 👁️, the inside➡️⬅️ of a maze🗺️🔄. I hear👂➡️ a fragment of a symphony🎼, followed by the clanging🔨🔔🔄 of construction👷⬇️ or industrial🏭🔄 machines🛠️⚙️. Maybe a voice🗯️🎙️ calls📞➡️ to me, but its words🎙️✍️ are too distant to interpret. As with lower🔽 levels👾🍰 of white noise⚪💥🎧, everything feels like❤️ a dream﹖ᶻᶻ🎥. Dr. Hong洪 tries to ask❓➡️ me the standard set of questions❓, but I am unresponsive.

After some duration of time🕰️, my mind🧠👻 begins⛲➡️ to wander👣, and I start🏁➡️ to think🤔➡️ of mundane things, chores🧹 to be done✅, further experiments👨‍🔬🔩⬇️, and so on. Several times🕰️ I think🤔➡️ of bizarre, nonsensical👩🏾‍🔬🔄 juxtapositions🔀📍🏞️ of ideas💡 or situations. The passage of time🕰️ is hard to observe 👁️🔍➡️, as it might be in a sensory deprivation🙈🙈 chamber. After one hour🕐, the noise💥🎧 procedure concludes🔚➡️, and as before🔽, there🔼📍 is a kind of "hangover🍸🤢" which persists for hours🕐 or even days📅. During this time🕰️, my limbs🦵 feel heavy🏋️ and everything feels far away.

Procedure: Re-Entry 🔁 🚪 (I)

The last thing he remembers🧠🎞️➡️, Branch 🪃 was staring🗿👁️🔁 into a mirror 🪞 in a gallery🖼️🚶 in Headstrong's👱💪 house, James Hong's洪 house🏠. Now he's sitting🪑🔁 by the window 🪟 in the great hall, overlooking 🔽🧐🔁 the Santa Clara valley, staring🗿👁️🔁 gazelessly 🚫👁️🔁 into his workstation🖥️. He is in the middle of composing✍️🏛️🔁 a smartdrug 💾💊 program🧩💾 whose mechanism⚙️ he does not🚫✅ understand↪️📚➡️. Branch 🪃 cannot account🙅🧾 for the hours🕐 (days📅17?) that have passed, but he seems to know🤯➡️ many things he previously↩️🔁 did not. And despite awakening☕⬇️ in media res, he knows🤯➡️ exactly how to finish🏁🔚➡️ his work.

From⬅️ some preconscious↩️👀🧠 wellspring⛲ inside➡️⬅️ him, he weaves🧵➡️ new✨ smartdrugs💾💊 which dazzle🤩➡️ his colleagues with their subtlety and imagination🤔🐉. He makes one called🎙️👉➡️ *Rediscovery* 🔁🧭🔬 that uses a 2-stroke cycle🚴⬇️ of fast⏩ pleasure😊 mixed with sorrow😩, and he juices🍑🥤➡️ it with white noise⚪💥🎧, right up until the crescendo🎼📈, when it abruptly yields⚠️➡️ to clarity👁️💎. The drug💊 gets around the whole Apothecary💾💊⛲. Shenwu, Baozi👋, and Glasshole🕶️🛸 are suitably impressed🤩📈.

Soon he has a meeting with Yezi冶子, Shenwu's boss👮, who tells📖🎙️➡️ Branch 🪃 they are going to jump the release schedule✏️📝 and expedite *Rediscovery*🔁🧭🔬 to production🏭⚙️⬇️. It goes live🚀 and for the first1️⃣⬇️ time⏰ since he came to Apothecary💾💊⛲, for the first1️⃣⬇️ time⏰ in his life, Branch 🪃 has some money💵 of

his own, more than just pocket change🌑.

Yezi冶子 wants to put Branch🪃 in charge🤴⬇️ of a team, and he introduces him to Longyuan龙渊, Taie泰阿, and Gongbu工布, who will↗️ be working under🔁 him. Branch🪃 has never been in charge🤴 of anyone before↙️, but leadership🤴🚢 comes naturally🌲🌱🔁 to him, whether from⬅️ the desire😍 in his heart🫀, a conviction🙏 ⬇️ in his own deservingness, or the same invisible🎯 source ⛲ that enabled him to produce🏭⚙️➡️ *Rediscovery*🔁🧭 🔬. All of this is because🔽 of the mirror🪞, he is certain, but he cannot remember🙅‍♂️🧠🎞️ what he saw that night🌍 at Headstrong's👱💪 house. He knows🤯➡️ the mirror🪞 was a tiger🐯, and he can feel it stalking him now, crouching in the tall grasses⬆️🦶 of the mind🧠👻.

Every day📅 he loses a little💅 time🕰️. He tends to find 🔍🎯➡️ himself in an unexpected😲➡️ context with no🚫 memories🧠🎞️ of the events that brought him there🔂📍, but it does not🚫✅ disrupt💔⚙️➡️ his work, and in fact he accomplishes🎖️➡️ more than ever.

Procedure: White Noise ⚪💥🎧, 35 Hz, 30 mV

At 35 Hz, even low amplitude⬇️🔊📏 noise💥🎧 pro-duces🏭⚙️➡️ a manic🤪🔁 sensation🎯👂👅, like❤️ drinking🥃🔁 too much caffeine☕🍵. I feel intense focus 🤔🎯 or "flow🌊" and also a scatteredness or decentering. Images🖼️ and sensations🎯👂👅 unfold in my mind's eye 🧠👻🎯 with no linearity or connectedness⚡🔗⬇️🔁. Af-ter what seems like❤️ an eternity—or maybe an instant🎛️— there🔂📍 is a welling🚰🔁 up of attention👀🔺, which gradually moves from⬅️ the clarity🎯💎 of the center to the

clarity👁️💎 of the periphery, before🔽 blossoming💐💥🔁 into the vastness of imperturbability🙅‍♂️😡🔽, as in Samatha meditation🧘‍♂️.

Thereafter, all forms slip🛢️🐷➡️ away like❤️ ghosts👻, and my mind🧠👻 turns🔂➡️ to boundless🚪🚫🔁 space🌌: all my disparate sensations👁️👂👅 blur together, and I am in a field🌾🗺️ of pure🚞💧🔁 emptiness🌀🔽. This is pleasant, unlike🚫❤️ lower framerates🏞️🚴 of white noise⚪💥🎧. I feel serene, but also as if I am on the cusp of some new✨ understanding🔃📚 which had previously 🔽🔁 been granted to only a handful✋🟡 of men. This goes beyond↗️ enlightenment💡🤯—it is something else entirely🦑🤯, though enlightenment💡🤯 may be a way to approach it. This procedure did not result in the "hangover" of lower frequencies🔽🌊🔊.

Note📝: Addiction🎲🌀, Divination🙏🔮🔽, and Gambling🎲💵🔁

The word🎙️✍️ addiction🎲🌀 comes from⬅️ the Latin *addicere*, the same etymological🎙️✍️🀄🔁 root as "dictate." It refers to divination🙏🔮🔽, the taking of auspices🔮, and also to the adjudication👨‍⚖️🤔🔽 of unpayable🙅‍♂️💰 debts💵🤝📈; a judge👨‍⚖️ would dictate🎙️👑➡️ a sentence over🔽 a debtor💵🤝📈👨, rendering him into slavery👨🔽. (Maddux, Desmond, 2000, *Addiction🎲🌀 or dependence?*) In Latin, the object of an act🎭🔽 of dictation🎙️👑🔽 is called🎙️👉➡️ "addictus," and we think🤔➡️ especially of a man👨 who is sold💵🤝➡️ into slavery👨🔽 to pay💰➡️ a gambling🎲💵🔁 debt💵🤝📈; the gambling🎲💵🔁 addict🎲👨, the addictus, the slave👨.

But the word 🎙️✍️ has a curious😼 double 2️⃣ meaning: in the augural🌿 🔮🔁 sense, a king 👑 or priest 🛕👨 would "dictate 🎙️👑➡️" the future🕰️↗️ he had divined🙏🔮➡️; *addicere* is not🚫 precisely 📍🔁 the act🎭⬇️ of divination🙏🔮⬇️, it is instead the speaking🗨️✂️🔁 thereof. Both senses are similar⚖️🪞: one either declares the will of the gods, or declares a man👦 to be a slave🧑🏾, as we are all slaves 🧑🏾 to fate✝️🌌.

The unifying 1️⃣🔁 feature of all forms of fortune-telling🔮📖🎙️🔁, whether reading🔍📖🔁 the behavior 🐵🎭⬇️ of birds🦜🎭, examining🔍➡️ entrails, or burning🔥➡️ bones🦴, is the randomness🎲⬇️ or unpredictability🤷📈🔁 in the outcome. In ancient👴📜🔁 China, Shang殷代 dynasty pyromancers🔥🔮👨 would inscribe ⛏️✍️➡️ questions❓ into ox🐄 scapulae🦴 and burn🔥➡️ them to seek the answers❗⬇️. Divination🙏🔮⬇️ is asking❓🔁 chaos🎲🔀 for favors🧧🎁, as is gambling🎲💵🔁. Ancient👴📜🔁 civilizations used fortune-telling 🔮📖🎙️🔁 to decide🤔🚪➡️ where to plant🌱➡️ their crops🌾💰, and this was successful because⤵️ it was a stochastic implementation🗺️⚙️⬇️ of crop rotation🌾🔁. (Pervert, B.A., 2018, *Bronze Age Mindset, p. 334*)

A little🤏 chaos🎲🔀 is unpredictable, but a lot is exceedingly regular🚆⏱️🔁. This is also the theory 👷🤔⬇️ behind balancing⚖️➡️ your investment portfolio 💹📂. If I use Neuralink🧠🔗 to stream🌊➡️ noise 💥🎧 into my brain🧠, is that divination🙏🔮⬇️, or gambling🎲💵🔁, or both?

Procedure: Pink Noise 🌸💥🎧, 8 Hz, 20 mV

Pink noise🌸💥🎧 is an interpolation between🥪 red🔴 and white⚪, and accordingly, the experience of pink noise🌸💥🎧 in the brain🧠 is similar⚖️🫧 to both. Where white noise⚪💥🎧 is dreamy𝓏ᶻᶻ🎥⬇️🔄 and surreal, red noise🔴💥🎧 is brutal👊🤕 and earthen⛰. Auditory🔊👂 hallucinations🤩💥👁 are imminent⏳💥👁 and baritone ⬇️🎷. They seem to come from⬅️ somewhere close to me. Red noise🔴💥🎧 in particular seems to stimulate💉⚡➡️ olfactory👃💨🔄 and gustatory👅💡🔄 senses. At high-er🔼 amplitudes🔊📏, the sense of taste👅💡 is entirely sat-urated. The flavor🧂⬇️ is sweet🍬🔄 and putrid🤢🔄, and vaguely metallic.

At this low🔽 threshold, it is possible🔼 to maintain 🙆‍♂️➡️ some semblance of lucidity💡🕯⬇️. Dr. Hong洪 asks❓➡️ me questions❓ and I answer❗➡️, although I have no🚫 memory🧠🎞 of doing✅🔄 so.

    Hong洪: What is your name👆🏻⬇️?
    Zhang张: Eric

    Hong洪: Where are you?
    Zhang张: I am inside➡️⬅️ of an aluminum pencil✏️.

    Hong洪: What is happening?
    Zhang张: Petrichor🌧 Baltimore, cri de coer but not🚫
              before↙️, egregore🧠🐲

    Hong洪: What do you see👁➡️?
    Zhang张: What do you see👁➡️?

Hong 洪: What do you hear 👂 ➡️?
Zhang 张: Yes, he is here ⬇️ 📍.

As my investigations 🕵️⬇️ come from ⬅️ a place of dispassionate 🧐🔁 interest in exploring 🧭🗺️ the frontiers 🚪 of the human 🧑👩 mind 🧠👻, I am willing to endure all manner of discomfort 😐 in order to observe 👁️🔍➡️ these spaces 🌌, but I do not 🚫✅ imagine 🤔🐉➡️ most people would choose to experience pink noise 🌸💥🎧 for any long amount of time. The mixture of dreaminess 💤🎥 and immanence 🔀💥👁️ is distinctly nightmarish 😴😱🔁. As the session goes on, I become anxious 🥺, and I hear 👂 ➡️ guttural ⬇️🔁 sounds 👂🔊, almost like ❤️ voices 🗣️🎙️⬇️, though I cannot 🙅 make out any words 🎙️✍️. For this I am grateful, though I wonder 🤔 ❓ ➡️ if the sense of the incomprehensible 🙅🤔📚, of meaning just beyond ↗️ my reach, is not 🚫 also the source ⛲ of this sense of foreboding.

Procedure: Pink Noise 🌸💥🎧 15Hz, 20 mV

[d̶a̶t̶a̶ 💾 i̶s̶ m̶i̶s̶s̶i̶n̶g̶ 🔍👻🔁 o̶r̶ c̶o̶r̶r̶u̶p̶t̶]

Note 📝: Neurochemistry 🧠🧪⬇️🔁
As Animism 🦁 🛗

It's an intimate trust 💡🤝⬇️, to let someone else write ✍️➡️ a program 🧮💾 that runs 🏃➡️ on your mind 🧠👻, but isn't that also what happens when you read 🔍📖➡️ a book 📖 or watch 👀➡️ a movie 🎥🎞️? Stories and mean words 🎙️✍️ can make your muscles 💪 tense up. If something you read 🔍📖➡️ on the internet 🌐⚡ makes you angry

😡🔁, it changes 🐛🦋➡️ your body 💪🫲, releases neurotransmitters 🧠📡, and alters your brain 🧠 chemistry 🧪⬇️🔁. My programs 🧮💾 can do all of these things, too.

We speak 🗣️➡️ of "cortisol" and "epinephrine" as if we know 🤯➡️ what these things are. (They're chemicals 🧪, epinephrine is $C_9H_{13}NO_3$ and it binds ⛓️🔁➡️ to various alpha and beta receptors (Mickey et al, 2007, *Hypocrite That You Are.*)) You can read 🔍📖⬆️ about them on the internet 🌐⚡, and sound authoritative as a layman, but even a scientist's 👷 understanding 🔄📚⬇️ is mediated 🖼️🔊➡️ through cognitive 🧠🔁 algorithms 🧮⚙️ evolved 🧬🔀➡️ for hunter-gatherer 🛖👨 folk religions ℹ️.

Neurochemistry 🧠🧪⬇️🔁 is the animism 🦁ℹ️ of the scientific 🔬🔭🔁 age. Neurotransmitters 🧠📡 are animal spirits 🦁👻 that come and go in a dark forest 🌑🌲🌲. We no longer relax 🛁🕯️➡️; instead we "lower 📉➡️ our cortisol 😰." Meditation 🧘 and walks 🚶 in nature 🌲🌱 are rituals 🎭🙏 designed 🏛️🗺️➡️ to placate 😴➡️ these spirits 👻.

Procedure: Pink Noise 🌸💥🎧 30Hz, 20 mV

At 30hz I no longer experience any flickering 📸💡🔁 or phasing 🌌🔀🔁 between 🥪 the "real" world 🌍 and the "other 🦑" world 🌍. Instead, I am completely 💯➡️ transported 🚄➡️ into a place that is dark 🌑 and bright 🌞 at the same time 🕐. I have the feeling of being deep ⏬ underground 🔄⛰️. The same shadowy 👤🔁 figures I encountered at 15hz are present, but now they are more solid, and I can see 👁️⬆️ they have an almost gelatinous ☕🔁 quality. It no 🚫 longer puzzles 🧩➡️ me when they merge together or split apart, because 🔽 I understand 🔄📚➡️ they are all part of the same

substance⚛️⬇️, perhaps even the same entity👀.

At this frequency🌊🔩 I can perceive correlations 📊🔀⬇️ between🥪 my other senses and the movements and positions📍🗺️ of these figures. Smells👃💨, tastes👅💡, and sounds👂🔊 all fold and roll🔪➡️ around and over🔽 and into one another, in time🕰️ with the movement of the shadow👤 blobs. But every time🕰️ I feel as if I have mastered🏋️👑➡️ the rhythm🥁🧮, it changes🐛🦋➡️. In retrospect👁️⬅️, I wonder🤔❓➡️ if there↩️📍 was any rhythm🥁🧮 at all, or if I was only imagining🤔🐉🔁 patterns, and all of this was merely a delusion😵🦄⬇️ of the noise💥🎧.

Procedure: Pink Noise 🌸💥🎧 30Hz, 40 mV

My extremities✋🦶 begin⛲➡️ to vibrate🔊. Everything is pulsating and undulating. I remember🧠🎞️➡️ nothing🚫⬇️ else. Dr Hong洪 described my exterior state as trancelike🧘🔁. After forty-nine minutes🕐, I began⛲➡️ howling🐺🎤➡️ as if in pain🤕. This continued until the end of the procedure, eleven minutes🕐.

Procedure: Re-Entry🔁🚪 (II)

Branch🪃 has no trouble controlling🕹️🔐🔁 his team. Everyone follows his orders👑🎤, as if he has an uncanny power💪💰 over🔽 them, a charisma💖💪 he's never🙅‍♂️ felt before↙️, emanating from⬅️ behind some locked🔒➡️ door 🚪 in his mind🧠👻. His ambitions manifest as soon as he wills them. When he speaks🗣️➡️, people listen👂➡️. When others disagree🚫🤝 with him, they back down🔽. Each

new ✨ drug 💊 he designs 🏛️ 🗺️ ➡️ is a masterpiece; he paints 🎨 ➡️ delicate 📍 🦋 interior pictures 🖼️, intricate compositions ✍️ 🏛️ of emotion 😂 😭 and sensation 👁️ 👂 👅, and makes careful use of noise 💥 🎧 . His creations bring him wealth 💲 💎, and prosperity 💲 💹 comes to everyone on his team. Success 🏆 ⬇️ begets 👫 👶 ➡️ success 🏆 ⬇️. All that he touches 👉 ➡️ turns 🐛 🦋 ➡️ to gold 💍, and soon his reports 🗃️ 👨 have reports 🗃️ 👨 .

Branch 🪃 leaves 🥾 🍫 ➡️ the barracks and builds 👷 ➡️ an elaborate house 🏯 inside ➡️ ⬅️ the Apothecary 💾 💊 ⛲ compound, full of galleries 🖼️, hallways 🏛️, and fountains ⛲, stairways, courtyards, and fora, arches, walls, and facades. The construction 👷 ⬇️ is quick ⏩ because ⬇️ they exist outside ⬅️ ➡️ the regulating 👩 🔁 eyes 👁️ of any municipal 🏙️ 🔁 government 👑 🏛️. The work is crowdsourced 👬 ⛲ ➡️ to builders 👷 👨 through a platform called 🎙️ 🏷️ ➡️ Hive 🐝 🏠, which orthogonalizes skill from ⬅️ labor 👩‍🌾 ✋ . Gig workers come on site, their bodies 💪 🦵 driven 🚗 ➡️ by AI 🤖 🧠, renting out "meat 🍗 time ⏰" through the cloud ☁️. Everything they see 👁️ ➡️ passes through them but they do not retain it. Apothecary 💾 💊 ⛲ has a special proxy that lets you spoof 🤔 ➡️ a non-jailbroken 🔒 💔 Neuralink 🧠 🔗 to interface with mainstream app 📱 💾 ecosystems 🌱 ⚙️ 🕸️.

Branch 🪃 no 🚫 longer goes to the walled garden 🌺 🥦 🌿 where the courtesans 🐉 dwell, and instead they come to him. Even the madame 👵 🐉 there 🔽 📍, a cold 🥶 🔁 woman called 🎙️ 🏷️ ➡️ Dowager 👸, treats him warmly 😊 🔁 when he asks ❓ ➡️ her to send ✉️ ➡️ over ⬇️ his (second) favorite girl.

Yet even as he finds 🔍 🎯 ➡️ these successes 🏆, he loses more time 🕰️, a lot more time 🕰️, into the void 🌀 of his own

missing🔍👻🔁 memories🧠🎞️. A part of him brushes 🖌️➡️ it off, doesn't🚫✅ want to admit it, doesn't🚫✅ want to think🤔➡️ about the implications. But one reflective🪞🔁 night🌑, staring into the smokey dusk of the mountains🏔️, autumn🍁🎃 fires burning🔥➡️ in the fields🌾🗺️ and by the highways🔼🛣️, ash raining🌧️ from⬅️ heaven🌥️, sky red from⬅️ sun☀️ and smoke💨, he installs⚙️➡️ Nai He Bridge 奈何桥 from⬅️ Alchemist🛎️💾, which will↗️ record 🎙️📼➡️ what he sees👁️➡️ and hears👂➡️ and upload 🙌🛰️➡️ them into a private🤫 repository🗄️☁️. With this, he hopes, he will↗️ be able to reconstruct🔁👷➡️ his missing🔍👻🔁 activities.

The next morning🌅, and in the times🕰️ when he does✅➡️ feel present and aware🤔👀—in the times🕰️ he remembers🧠🎞️➡️—he forgets🧠🎞️📈➡️ to check✅➡️ the records🎙️📼⬇️ from⬅️ Nai He Bridge奈何桥. In truth 🍷🎙️⬇️, he does not🚫✅ want to see👁️➡️ them.

> Deep⬇️ in the walled garden💐🌳🌿, deep⬇️
>   —how deep⬇️?
> Mist🌫️ stacks🪙 on willows,
> Uncountable🚫🔢 layers🍰 of screens📺
>   and blinds👁️🙈.

Memo📝: Impossibility🙅‍♂️🔁 of Recording 🎙️📼➡️ Noise💥🎧

The most famous🤩🤚🔁 story of Zhuangzi莊子 is the dream💤🎥 of the butterfly🦋. Is Zhuangzi莊子 dreaming 💤🎥🔁 he is a butterfly🦋, or is a butterfly🦋 dreaming 💤🎥🔁 he is Zhuangzi莊子? This question is impossible

🙅‍♂️⬆️ to answer ❗➡️ before↙️ Neuralink🧠🔗, and after Neuralink🧠🔗, it is still impossible🙅‍♂️⬆️.

There is no way🙅‍♂️ to record🎙️📼➡️ the first-person1️⃣⬇️👨🏻 phenomenological👁️👂👅 experiences of the mind🧠👻; we can only record🎙️📼⬆️ (and play back▶️➡️) the electrical ⚡🔄 signals🚦 that pass through the brain🧠. By sampling the lateral geniculate nucleus (LGN), it is possible⬆️ to reconstruct🔄👷➡️ the optical signal👁️🚦 coming in through the eyes👁️, but the subjective🧠🧠 visual👁️⬇️🔄 modality such as those produced🏭⚙️➡️ by the noise💥🎧 procedure arises "downstream🔽🌊" from⬅️ the LGN. The correlation📊🔀⬇️ between🥪 these signals🚦 and the visual👁️⬇️🔄 perceptions they induce🏁🎏➡️ appears to be non-deterministic🚫🎴. As such, no two people can have the same experience repeatably🔄🔄 using any of our noise💥🎧 protocols📜🍯. In theory👨🏻‍🔬🤔, if we record🎙️📼➡️ the noise💥🎧 experienced by a subject for a single1️⃣ recording🎙️📼⬇️, and play back▶️➡️ the exact same signals🚦 for a second time⏰, the experience should be nearly identical🆔⬇️🔄, but this is not the case.

And despite this, we find🔍🎯➡️ that most volunteers who experience the noise💥🎧 protocols📜🍯 report📨➡️ hallucinations🤩💥 that are similar⚖️💧 in character, even if they vary in their specifics📍🎯. This might indicate fundamental commonalities in the ways that all of our brains🧠 are wired⚡🧶➡️, but there🔃📍 is also a sense in which the mapping🗺️⬇️ between🥪 colors🎨🌈 of noise💥🎧 and subjective🧠🧠 experience is an artifact🏺 of our equipment. The different "frequencies🌊🔩" in the spectrum🌈 of the white⚪ vs. pink🌸 vs. red🔴 noise💥🎧 correspond⚖️📈➡️ to specific📍🎯 electrodes⚡🔗 in the Neu-

ralink 🧠 🔗 device. At the lowest ⏬ ⏬ level 👾 🍰, the pins 📍 are numbered 🔢 ➡️ and the precise 📍 ⬇️ mapping 🗺️ ⬇️ of a particular spectral 🌈 🔁 band to a particular location 🗺️ 📍 in the brain could be different.

It so happens that Neuralink 🧠 🔗 electrodes ⚡ 🔗 are implanted in the user's brain 🧠 in a consistent way, to the highest ⏫ ⏫ degree 📍 🌡️ possible ⬆️, but if the mapping 🗺️ ⬇️ of positions 📍 🗺️ to electrodes ⚡ 🔗 were inverted 🔄 ➡️, for example 📺 👧, pink 🌸 noise 💥 🎧 would effectively become azure 🔵 and red noise 🔴 💥 🎧 would become violet 💜.

Procedure: Red Noise 🔴 💥 🎧 8Hz, 10 mV

Red noise 🔴 💥 🎧, also called 🎙️ 🏷️ ➡️ Brownian noise 💥 🎧, is pink noise 🌸 💥 🎧 purified 🛸 ➡️. Gone are the dreamy 💤 🎥 sensations 👁️ 👂 👅 of white noise ⚪ 💥 🎧, and in their place is a brutal 👊 😨 clarity 👁️ 💎, and a feeling of communion 🍞 🍷 with a chthonic 🧌 🌋 mother 👩 goddess. These sensations 👁️ 👂 👅 are not distant or vague; I feel sober, wakeful ☕ ⬇️ 🔁, and in control 🕵️ 🔐 ⬇️ of my own mind 🧠 👻, despite external evidence 👷 📊 to the contrary 🚫. At low ⏬ frequencies 🌊 🔊, it is still possible ⬆️ to interact with other researchers 🔬 👨‍🔬 and people around me.

Hong洪: What is your name 🏷️?
Zhang张: Eric Zhang张

Hong洪: Where are you?
Zhang张: In Neuralink 🧠 🔗 research lab 🔬 🥼 2.501.
On planet earth 🌍.

Hong洪: What is happening?

Zhang张: We are perforrrrrrrrrrrrrmmming a noise 💥🎧 trial 👨‍💼⚖️ with red noise🔴💥🎧.

Hong洪: What do you see👁️➡️?

Zhang张: *groans*

Brownian noise 💥🎧 is sensual and, as noted📝➡️ previously◀️🔁, full of tastes👅⬇️ and smells👃⬇️, though they are disconnected🚫⚡🔗 from⬅️ any sensation of eating🍽️😊. I can taste👅⬆️ flowers🌸🌺 and charcoal🌋🪨 and butyric acid🧈🤮. Beyond↗️ this there↪️📍 is no sensation of rapture or transport🚄⬇️, as at higher🔼 framerates🖼️🚴. As I interact with my colleagues, I have ideation 💡🤔⬇️ similar⚖️🪞 to Capgras delusion😵🦄, the feeling that they have been replaced🔄📍➡️ by identical🆔⬇️🔁 impostors🎭🧑. This is unsettling, but it passes when the procedure concludes🔚➡️.

Procedure: Red Noise 🔴💥🎧 8Hz, 20 mV

The familiar environment of the lab 🥼🔬 becomes strange🦑; the walls and floors appear to be made of rock🪨, as if I am in a cave 🚪⛰️. There ↪️📍 are snakes🐍 and worms🪱 moving through the walls. They seem intelligent 🎮🧠, and I am not concerned about their presence. High🔼 above me, there ↪️📍 is an opening🕳️ in the ceiling, and I can see👁️⬆️ the sky full of stars⭐. All of these sensations are vivid and wakeful☕⬇️🔁, and they feel as real as any other sensory👁️👅 perceptions.

The ground gives way underneath me, and I begin to fall down an endless ramp or slide, through colorful layers of rock and earth. This is enjoyable, and I can see that even as I fall deeper and deeper, there are luminous snakes boring and tunneling at every depth. When I finally emerge from the consciousness of the red noise, I can still see their after-images. It feels like they were always there, and the red noise only revealed them.

Note: On the Future of Neuralink

I am looking for something highly specific; but it would be wrong to say I am looking for a signal in all of this noise. Rather, I have had a vision. There are things I have seen in these experiments that cannot be put into words, or things which are unwise to describe. In all I have done so far, I have seen where this project is headed, unless something drastic occurs. Even if I disappear tomorrow, others will pick up where I left off. The future of this technology is clear.

As the device becomes more sophisticated, increasingly delicate control of the body will be possible. Already we are exploring the possibilities of specialized installations, in which two devices are implanted in a single brain, one for general purpose compute and one for localized control of the hands. In this configuration, it is possible to perform complex tasks such as detailed

drawing🖼️✍️🔁. (E. Zhang张, C. Hong洪, 2030, *Fine Motor🚗 Skill Transference Through Neuralink🧠🔗 Imaging🖼️🔁*). In its maturity👴⬇️🔁, it will↗️ be the consensus understanding↩️📚⬇️ that experts🤓👷 are able to move your body💪🦵 better than you.

Everything from⬅️ athletics🏃🏿‍♂️, to manual labor✋🧑‍🌾, operating machinery🔧⚙️, even sexual🍆🌮🔁 performance🎭⬇️ will↗️ become automated🤖➡️. We will↗️ surrender🏳️➡️ all bodily💪🦵 autonomy🤖⬆️ to machines🔧⚙️, and this will↗️ be rational🧮🔁, because🔽 recordings🎙️📼⬇️ of experts🤓👷 combined with artificial intelligence🤖🧠 will↗️ give🎁➡️ everyone the ability to draw🖼️✍️➡️ like❤️ Picasso👂🎨, swim👟➡️ like❤️ an olympian🥇, drive🚗➡️ like❤️ a racecar driver🚗👨, perform🎭➡️ neurosurgery👨‍⚕️🔪🧠⬇️, and so on✅ and so on✅. In the 2010s everyone agreed🤝➡️ to carry💼➡️ surveillance👁️📺🔁 tracking devices🔧⚙️ on their person at all times🕰️, which could record🎙️📼➡️ their every movement and listen👂➡️ to every word🎙️✍️ they said🎙️➡️ through always-on microphones🎤. They chose this gladly😊🔁 because🔽 the convenience🏪⬇️ it offered and the possibilities it unlocked🔓➡️ far outweighed🔼⚖️➡️ any negatives, which were barely🖌️ perceptible.

Not only will↗️ we make this same trade💰🤝 again, but Neuralink🧠🔗 will↗️ also make it possible⬆️ for machines🔧⚙️ to monitor👁️📺➡️ our thoughts🤔⬇️. Some good👍⬇️ may come of this, but it will↗️ mean the loss of all individuality and privacy🤫⬇️, and will↗️ signify🏳️➡️ a true era of "post-humanity.🏚️🔽👨👩"

Procedure: Red Noise 🔴 💥 🎧 15hz, 20 mV

Each time🕰 I go deeper⏬ into the noise💥🎧, it feels like❤️ I go deeper⏬ into the earth🌍. Like❤️ a journey to the bottom⬇️⬅️ of the sea🌊, I encounter ever stranger🦑 and more exotic🌴🦜 creatures🦈🦁 as I descend⏬➡️. I can find🔍🎯➡️ no explanation for these visions👁️⬇️, nor for the scent👃💨 of minerals🪨 and noxious gas🤢💨, nor for the eerie🦑👻 consistency of the things I encounter. By all logic🧮, the experience of noise💥🎧 in the brain🧠 should be a kind of frenetic chaos🎲🔀, an ephemeral shifting of random🎲 sensations and memories🧠🎞️.

As I go deeper⏬ still, I am met with the tastes👅💡 of ash and soot and sulfur. There↗️📍 are fires🔥 burning 🔥🔁 all around me, and I am falling🍂🔁 through a tunnel into the deepest⏬⏬ depths⏬ of the earth🌍. It is darker here but for the firelight🔥💡 and the bioluminescence ☣️🕯️ of creatures🦈🦁 that would seem more usual at the bottom ⬇️⬅️ of the sea🐚🌊. There↗️📍 is no water 💧, and yet I fall🍂➡️ past floating☁️🔁, ethereal👹🔁 beings that resemble anglerfish🎣🐟, vampire squids🧛🦑, and other deep⏬ ocean🌊 monstrosities🐙🦖, and still I descend⏬➡️.

Procedure: Red Noise 🔴 💥 🎧 30hz, 40 mV

In a vast underground🔄⛰️ palace🏰🏯 I meet the devil👹. Perhaps it's more accurate🎯🔁 to say I perceive an entity👽 who tells📖🎙️➡️ me he is the devil👹. In the course of my investigations🕵️⬇️ I have seen👁️➡️ many such enti-

ties👀, which I readily understand↩️📚➡️ as hallucina-tions😂🎆.

This is different. This one speaks🗣️➡️ to me, looks🧐➡️ at me, regards me, this creature🦈🦁 made of neon outlines and covered🌿➡️ in eyes👁️. He tells📖🎙️➡️ me he is the ruler👑 of this place, and that I should feel honored🙇‍♀️🎖️➡️ to meet him, but I do not🚫 trust💡🤝➡️ this en-tity👀; in my gut I can feel he is trying to trick🕷️➡️ me.

He shows👉👁️➡️ me visions👁️⬇️ of high-up🔼 places, and memories🧠🎞️ of the past🕐↖️ and future🕐↗️, but he can see👁️⬆️ I am not convinced, and he tells📖🎙️➡️ me I am clever for seeing👁️🔄 through his ruse🎓. He says🎙️➡️ "Damnation👹🔥 is but a word🎙️✍️ bandied about by those whose blindness👁️🙈 leads👑➡️ them to condemn👹🔥➡️ all who can see👁️⬆️, even with a single1️⃣ eye👁️."

As soon as I hear👂➡️ this, the red noise🔴💥🎧 pro-cedure concludes🔚➡️.

Procedure: Re-Entry 🔄🚪 (III)

Branch🪃 wakes☕➡️ to himself in the middle of the night🌒, and he's not in his bed🛏️. He's in a field🌾🗺️ thirty minutes🕐 south🧭🔽 of the compound, alone on a hillside, with an LED flashlight🔦. He doesn't🚫✅ know🥴➡️ why⁉️ and he has the sense he's interrupting something, but he makes his way back to his house🏠, with some difficulty. There's↩️🍭 a wound🙁🩸⬇️ on the back of his hand🤚; two perfectly straight, perpendicular, intersecting🔀🔄 cuts✂️, which could only have been inflicted deliberately, and with his own complicity, or if he had been restrained🔗➡️.

The anxiety of ignorance outweighs 🔼⚖️➡️ the anxiety of knowing 🥴🔁, and he opens the Nai He Bridge 奈何桥 to see 👁️➡️ what he has been doing ✅🔁 in his absence 👻⬇️. Naturally 🌲🌱🔁, he finds 🔍🎯➡️ nothing 🚫⬇️ at all— the app 📱💾 has been disabled ♿➡️, and all of its records 🎙️📼⬇️ wiped 🧼➡️. Whatever Branch 🪃 had expected— half-articulated imaginings 🤔🐉⬇️ of dark rituals 🎭🙏, flowing 🌊🔁 robes 👘, human 👨🧑 sacrifice 🔪🐑🩸, masked men gathered around some hidden 🙈➡️ stone altar, chanting 🗣️ℹ️➡️ hideous names 👹🏷️⬇️—he finds 🔍🎯➡️ nothing 🚫⬇️, and there 🔃📍 is only the fact of the wound 🤕🩸⬇️ on his hand 🤚, and the strange 🦑 hour 🕐.

The next day 📅 he goes to Romero, who has neither joined his team, nor shared in his successes 🏆. Between 🥪 his lost time 🕰️ and his new ✨ importance, Branch 🪃 has, to his shame 😔, neglected his friend. But Romero receives 🙌➡️ his invitation graciously, and comes to visit him at his new ✨ house 🏯. They eat 🍽️😋➡️ and drink 🥃➡️, and Branch 🪃, with some trepidation, tells 📖🎙️➡️ him everything: about the mirror 🪞 in Headstrong's 🧑‍🦰💪 house, the missing 🔍👻🔁 hours 🕐, the ineffable 🙊🔁 awareness 🤔👀⬇️ he has of Zhang's 张 fourth labyrinthe 4️⃣🏩🌀, and the episode from ⬅️ the previous ↖️ night 🌑 in the field 🌾🏞️. He shows 👉👁️➡️ Romero the wound 🤕🩸⬇️ on his hand, the thin perpendicular lines that form a cross ✝️.

Romero listens 👂➡️ to all of this stoically, and when Branch 🪃 has finished 🏁🔚➡️, he still does not 🚫✅ speak 🗣️➡️.

Procedure: Azure Noise 🔵 💥 🎧 13hz, 10mV

At 13hz, 10mV, the effects of azure noise 🔵 💥 🎧 are almost imperceptible 🚫 👁️. I have a pervasive impression that I am being watched 👀 ➡️, but I cannot say 🙅‍♂️ 🎙️ who or what is watching 👀 🔄 me. I can speak 🗣️ ⬆️ lucidly 💡 🕯️ 🔄 with other people.

Hong洪: What is your name ▭ ⬇️?
Zhang张: Eric Zhang张

Hong洪: Where are you?
Zhang张: I am in a Neuralink 🧠 🔗 research lab 🔬 🥼.

Hong洪: What is happening?
Zhang张: We are conducting 🎶 ✏️ 🔄 a trial 👨🏻‍💼 ⚖️
with low 🔽 mV azure noise 🔵 💥 🎧.

Hong洪: What do you see 👁️ ➡️?
Zhang张: The lab 🥼 🔬. Everything is normal.

The lights 🕯️ feel very intense, much brighter than usual. I request that they be turned 🔼 ➡️ off. The lab 🥼 🔬 is still lit 🕯️ ➡️ by sunlight ☀️ 🕯️, and now I can see 👁️ ⬆️ gently rolling 🔖 🔄 geometric 📐 🔄 patterns in the dark corners.

Procedure: Azure Noise 🔵 💥 🎧 13hz, 20mV

The difference between 🥪 10 and 20 mv is stark and immediate. There 🔼 📍 is no 🚫 possibility of interacting with anyone else in any normal capacity. I feel I have been pushed

into another realm🏰🌍 entirely, as if I am seeing👁️➡️ "behind the curtain🙆." There⤴️📍 are creatures🦈🦁 here ⤵️📍, beings made of pure energy⚡, and they are rushing🏃, 🔁 around spreading👅🔁 viscous🍯🔁 light all over the lab🥼🔬 like❤️ butter over⤵️ bread🍞. One of them approaches me and says🎙️➡️ "you're getting closer; you're almost there⤴️📍." The creatures🦈🦁 are laughing😂🔁 as they move to and fro, and their laughter😂⬇️ is joyous😄, but empty of warmth🔥 or compassion.

They finish🏁⬅️END➡️ covering🍃🔁 everything in the room with light🕯️, and I can now see👁️➡️ that a door🍫 — or more accurately, a portal🍫🎆—has opened. They beckon☎️➡️ me inside➡️⬅️, but before↖️ I can enter🍫⬆️, the trial👨‍⚖️⚖️ concludes🎬⬅️END.

Note📝: Porousness💨🧀 of the Mind🧠👻/ Machine🔩⚙️ Distinction

We put a machine🔩⚙️ inside your brain🧠, and that machine🔩⚙️ connects⚡🔗➡️ to the internet🌐⚡, and data💾 flows🌊➡️ freely⬇️🔁 between🥪 them. Where does your mind🧠👻 end⬅️END➡️ and the world🌍 begin⛲➡️? This question❓ is as old as the first1️⃣⬇️ time🕰️ some ancient👴📜🔁 hominid🐵 picked up a rock🪨 or a stick🌳. Inside➡️⬅️ the mind🧠👻, the picture🖼️ of the body💪⟩ includes the tool🛠️ it wields. If you drive🚗➡️ a car🚗, your body💪⟩ is the car🚗. If you pick up a hammer🔨, the hammer is your arm💪. You've read🔍📖➡️ this think piece🤔🧩 before↖️. If you write✍️➡️ down⬇️ some words🎙️✍️ on your phone📱, they say🎙️➡️ the text📖 is a part🧩 of your mind🧠👻.

Procedure: Azure Noise 🔵 💥🎧 13hz, 30mV

As soon as the noise 💥🎧 ramps ♿🔺➡️ up, everything I see 👁️➡️ is wrapped 🔋➡️ in a lattice 🧬🔄 of light 🕯️. I feel as if I occupy several geometrically 🔺🔄 impossible 🙇🔼 configurations 🎛️🔽 of matter ⚛️ simultaneously 🕐🕐🔄; I am both inside ➡️⬅️ and outside ⬅️➡️ of a cube 🕋. Freely 🔄 wandering 🎲🚶🔄, I am walking 🚶🔄 two 2️⃣ paths 👣🛣️. I am following a trajectory in a high-dimensional 🔼🔺📐🔄 space 🌌, and I can't 🙅 make sense of the torrent 🌊🔽 of images 🖼️ I am seeing 👁️🔄.

The same creatures 🦈🦁 I saw at the lower voltage 🔽⚡ are present all around me now, only there 🔃📍 are more of them, and they welcome 👋➡️ me back with fanfares 🎺🔽 and flashing 🎆🔄 lights 🕯️. They tell 📖🎙️➡️ me my entry 🟫🔽 into this space 🌌 has been predestined 🔙✝️🥅➡️, that I was always supposed to be here 🔃📍, and they congratulate 🎉👏➡️ me, as if I have won 🏆➡️ some kind of prize 🏆🎁 or raffle 🎰🎟️. I am the elect 📦 of humanity 👨👩🔽, chosen to receive 🤲➡️ the knowledge 🤯🔽 they are about to bestow 🎁➡️ upon me. They are not forthcoming with the substance ⚛️ of this knowledge 🤯🔽, however, and the remainder of the procedure is only variations on this theme.

Procedure: Azure Noise 🔵 💥🎧 20hz, 20mV

There is machinery 🔩⚙️ everywhere, made of glowing 🌟🔄 lines and hypercubes 🔼🕋, gears ⚙️ and levers 🎚️. It looks 🧐➡️ like ❤️ the inside of a Rube Goldberg machine 🔩⚙️. There 🔃📍 are panels 🎛️ with buttons and screens 📺, but the technology 💻🧪 is strangely 🐙🔄

anachronistic ❌🕰, like ❤️ a 1970s retrofuture 👴🕰↗️. There 🔂📍 are alien-looking 🛸❤️ technicians shuffling 🎞🔀🔁 around adjusting and inspecting these controls 🕹🔓 and gauges 🌡📊. As I watch 👀➡️, the machinery 🔩⚙️ is continuously reconfiguring 🔁🎛➡️ itself.

One of the alien 🛸 scientists 👷 notices 👀➡️ me, and his face looks 🧐➡️ like ❤️ a jester or a joker 🃏 card, but when I try to look 🧐➡️ him in the eyes 👁, he transforms 🐛🦋➡️ into a praying mantis 🙏🦗. "You're not supposed to be here 🔽🍭," he says 🎙➡️ "but since you found 🔍🎯➡️ your way in, we'll allow 🔒✍➡️ you to stay."

Three more of the alien joker 🛸🃏 mantis 🙏🦗 scientists 👷 surround me and I am suddenly paralyzed, lying face 👦 up 🔼 on an operating table as in a medical facility 🏥. They insert 💉➡️ various monitors 👁📺 and wires ⚡🧶⬇️ into my skin and head 👱. Their instruments 🎻 are connected ⚡🔗➡️ to the glowing 🌟🔁 retrofuture 👴🕰↗️ clockwork 🕰⚙️ all around us, and as they make the connections ⚡🔗⬇️, their machines 🔩⚙️ start 🏁➡️ to infiltrate and infest 🦟➡️ my body 💪🤏, like ❤️ jewel-encrusted 💎🥖➡️ locusts 🦟.

They make an incision 🔪⬇️ on the back of my hand ✋ like ❤️ a cross ✝️, and one 1️⃣ of the mantis 🙏🦗 men 👨, the one who first 1️⃣⬇️ saw me, embeds 🛏➡️ a device 🔩⚙️ in the wound 🤕🩸⬇️ and then seals 💌➡️ it back up. He says 🎙➡️ "We'll see 👁↗️ you again soon."

Procedure: Integration 🦴🔗🐛🦋⬇️ (I)

Romero tells 📖🎙➡️ Branch 🪃 that whatever is happening to him, it's because 🔽 of malware 🦠💾 running 🏃🔁

on his Neuralink🧠🔗 device🔩⚙️. The solution to his problem is obvious; he should remove his device🔩⚙️ and flash 📸➡️ it or install⚙️➡️ another. This will↗️ require neurosurgery👨‍⚕️🔪🧠⬇️, but with Branch🪃's newfound ✨🔍🎯➡️ riches💰, he can easily afford this. Apothecary💾🔍💊⛲ has its own facility🏥 for these procedures, but given🎁➡️ the circumstances, he should not🚫 rely on it.

Branch🪃 hears👂➡️ this counsel and refuses🙅‍♂️➡️. He has already🔃 considered🤔➡️ these things, but he also knows🥴➡️ his recent successes🏆⬇️ are due to that same malware🦠💾, which contains the hidden🙈➡️ and esoteric writings✍️⬇️ of Eric Zhang张. He will↗️ not🚫 give🎁➡️ up this knowledge🤯⬇️, which he had so eagerly pursued, out of fear😨 or precaution.

And Romero says🎙️➡️ it's not🚫 knowledge🤯⬇️ but greed👇👏 that is driving🚗🔁 him, that what he really won't 🚫↗️ give🎁➡️ up is the power💪💰 the mirror tiger🪞🐯 has given🎁➡️ him, and the wealth💰💎 that it brings. He says🎙️➡️ Branch🪃 is afraid😨 that without🚫 this virus🦠 —let's not deceive🚫🙄 ourselves—he is afraid😨 he will↗️ be unable to lead🙅‍♂️🤴 his subordinates and invent💡⚙️➡️ successful🏆🔁 new✨ drugs💊.

Branch🪃 becomes angry😠 when he hears👂➡️ this, and he tells📖🎙️➡️ Romero to leave🥾🚪➡️.

The sky looks🧐➡️ very blue🔵.

Is that its real color🎨🌈, or is it because⤵️ it's so far away and has no end🔚⬇️?

When the bird🐦 looks🧐➡️ down⏬, all he sees👁️➡️ is blue🔵, too.

Procedure: Violet Noise 💜 💥 🎧 10hz, 10mV

After the dizzying😵‍💫💫🔄 phantasmagorias of high-intensity🔼 Azure noise🔵💥🎧, low 🔽 mV violet noise 💜💥🎧 is initially underwhelming🔄😯. All my perceptions are nominal, but when Dr. Hong洪 asks ❓ ➡️ me the standard set of questions ❓, I realize🤔💡➡️ that what I perceive as Dr. Hong洪 is something else🐙👽.

Not-Hong🚫洪: What is your name👆⬇️?
Zhang张: Eric Zhang张

Not-Hong🚫洪: Why⁉️ do you sigh over🔽 gore 🩸 and decay🥀?
Zhang张: The universe is full of formless🚫🔺 vibration.

Not-Hong🚫洪: This type of insight🧠👀 cannot🙅‍♂️ be expressed in words🎙️✍️, cannot be written🙅‍♂️✍️ down🔽, and cannot be carved🙅‍♂️🗿 in stone🪨. And yet, you must choose.
Zhang张: I choose the infinite∞, the All-is-One 🌌1️⃣, the beginning⛲⬇️ which is with out beginning🚫⛲⬇️.

Not-Hong🚫洪: We will↗️ begin⛲➡️ to uplift 🔼🏋️➡️ you.
Zhang张: Oh! If only this river🌊 of floating☁️ ➡️ peach-petals🍑🌸 could carry 💼➡️ me forever.

Hong洪-that-is-not-Hong🚫洪 says🎙️➡️ I will↗️ show👉👁️➡️ you the gate⛩️🍫 to the next stage👾🍰 of human👨👩 evolution🧬🔀⬇️, and then I will↗️ give🎁➡️ you the key🔑. Beyond↗️ this door🍫 lies the infinite∞🌀. Beyond↗️ this door🍫 lies the All-is-One🌌1️⃣.

Note📝: Similarities⚖️🥛 between🥪 the Subjective🧠🧠 Experience of Noise💥🎧 and DMT👽🧑‍🚀🧪

The above has not🚫 been an exhaustive list🔢📝 of the streaming🌊🔁 noise💥🎧 trials💼⚖️ we conducted🎶🖌️➡️ with Neuralink🧠🔗; instead, these accounts🧾⬇️ have been selected to demonstrate specific📍🎯 motifs👑💡 that tend to occur at different speeds⏩, intensities, and colors🎨🌈 of noise💥🎧. In accessory🐙 to our earlier↙️ claim that the distinction between🥪 a drug💊 and a program🧮💾 is the presence of certain kinds of logic🧮, the effects of noise💥🎧 administered in this way seem to fall🍂➡️ under↪️ the category of *drug*💊. We are skeptical that mere noise💥🎧 in any way encodes⤴️💻🧮 the visions👁️⬇️ that our subjects experienced in these trials💼⚖️.

These motifs👑💡 include:

- The sensation of falling🍂🔁 or sliding through tunnels.
- The experience of "breaking💔➡️ through" into a parallel "dimension📐📏."
- Encounters with "advanced entities👽" who seem to be distinct from⬅️ oneself.
- Receiving🙌🔁 communications from⬅️ those entities👽.

- The feeling of being chosen for special fate ✝️ 🌌 or destiny ✝️ 🥅.
- The feeling of being "taught 👩‍🦰 ➡️" or "reprogrammed 🔁 🧮 💾."
- The experience of undergoing strange 🐙 medical 🏥 🔁 procedures.

All of these same motifs 👑 💡 occur in another, perhaps unexpected 😮 place: in the accounts 🧾 ⬇️ of the experiences of users of the drug Dimethyltryptamine (DMT 👽 👨‍🚀 🧪.) Rick Strassman administered 400 doses of DMT 👽 👨‍🚀 🧪 to 60 volunteers over 🔽 a period of five years between 🥪 1990 and 1995. Half the volunteers reported meeting entities 👽 including aliens 🛸, other humans 👨🏻 👩🏻, spiders 🕷️, reptiles 🦎, impish 🐵 creatures 🦈 🦁, and dwarves. (Strassman, 2000, *DMT* 👽 👨‍🚀 🧪 —*The Spirit Molecule*)

In a survey of over 🔽 2500 DMT 👽 👨‍🚀 🧪 users who claimed to have encounters with "entities 👽," most respondents 💬 🧑🏻 endorsed that the entity 👽 had the attributes of being conscious 👀 🧠 ⬇️, intelligent 🎮 🧠, and benevolent 🎁 🔁, existed in some real but different dimension 📐 📏 of reality, and continued to exist after the encounter. (Davis, A. K., Clifton, J. M., Weaver, E. G., Hurwitz, E. S., Johnson, M. W., & Griffiths, R. R., 2020, *Survey of entity* 👽 *encounter experiences occasioned by inhaled N,N-dimethyltryptamine: Phenomenology, interpretation, and enduring effects.*)

The commonalities between 🥪 the DMT 👽 👨‍🚀 🧪 experience and that of noise 💥 🎧 streamed 🌊 ➡️ into the brain via Neuralink 🧠 🔗 are too similar ⚖️ 🪞 to be coincidence. We identify 🆔 ➡️ three possibilities:

1. Endogenous DMT👽👨‍🚀💉 is already present in the body💪🦴. (Dean, J, Liu, T, Huff, S, et al., 2019, *Biosynthesis and extracellular concentrations of N,N-dimethyltryptamine in Mammalian Brain*) It is possible⬆️ that the noise💥🎧 procedure somehow triggers💥🔫➡️ the release of DMT👽👨‍🚀💉 into the brain🧠.

2. Ingested DMT👽👨‍🚀💉 causes neuronal🌡️🧠 activation patterns that are isomorphic🪞📐 to noise💥🎧 streamed🌊 in via Neuralink🧠🔗.

3. That both noise💥🎧 and DMT👽👨‍🚀💉 temporarily alter the brain🧠 in such a way that facilitates these perceptions, but that they derive from⬅️ some source⛲ which is independent🪨 of either.

Procedure: Violet Noise 💜 💥 🎧 10hz, 20mV

The "break💔➡️through" of violet noise 💜💥🎧 at 10hz, 20mV, is unlike🚫❤️ any other experience of noise 💥🎧 I have had to date📅⬇️. Within moments⏱️, I occupy the position📍🗺️ of a floating☁️🔄 eye👁️, like❤️ a drone or an over⬇️-the-shoulder camera📷 in a video game👾🎮. An entity👽 is there🔼📍 with me, and it says🎙️➡️ "pay💰➡️ attention👀🚨 to these things I am about to show👉👁️➡️ you." We are deep⏬ in the Amazon jungle🌴🌴, and we watch👀➡️ as a party of ten or twelve men👨 are hiking🥾🚶🔄 a well-worn trail👣🛤️ through the trees🌳.

At the head🧑 of the group, I see👁️➡️ a dark-skinned man👨 with colorful markings painted🎨➡️ on his face, followed by Elon Musk🚀💵 and Jeff📚☁️ Bezos📚, followed by some men in tactical gear with guns🔫. Elon🚀💵 is carrying💼🔄 a machete🔪, which he uses to hack🔪➡️ through

the foliage🍁⬇️. Bezos thinks🤔➡️ the way he's swinging it around makes him (Elon🚀💵) look🧐➡️ like❤️ a dick🍆.

Jeff📚☁️ is saying🎙️🔁 "… I still can't🙅‍♂️ believe I let you talk🗣➡️ me into this."

Elon🚀💵 says🎙️➡️ "It was easy. I knew you would commit💍➡️ to do it if I asked❓➡️ you in front of Priscilla, because🔽 for some reason that none of us can fathom—not even Mark🧑📖—you want to impress her."

Jeff📚☁️ doesn't🚫✅ respond💬➡️. Elon🚀💵 dramatically🎭🔁 slashes🔪➡️ a vine🌳🧶 out of his way.

"You own a company called🎙️🏷️➡️ 'Amazon' and you've never🚫 been to the Amazon before↙️."

Jeff📚☁️ says🎙️➡️ "Think🤔➡️ about how much our time🕰 is worth, put together. Think🤔➡️ about how much this trip costs."

"If you think🤔➡️ that way, then you're a slave👨🏿. You could be the richest💰⏫⏫ man in the world🌍 and still be a slave👨🏿. But that's not an issue here↪️📍. You will↗️ be shocked😲➡️ at the ROI of this trip."

"Where is the value💰? Is it in the drug💊? Is it—" Jeff affects a stoned🌿🚬➡️ hippy✌️💩 voice🗣🎙️ "—the journey? Why⁉️ do we have to come all the way out here↪️📍?"

"There are things that can't be transplanted🧝‍♂️🚄🌱. I can't🤷‍♂️ explain. No, I can, but I won't↗️🚫. You'll see👁️↗️."

Their Shuar guide is taking them to a sacred🙏 site for the ayahuasca👽🧑‍🌾🌿 ritual🎭🙏. It's a two day2️⃣📅 hike from⬅️ their village🛖, deep🔽 in the trees🌳, where no🚫 helicopter🚁 can reach. The only way to go is on foot👣. Jeff📚☁️ hates the humidity💨⬇️ and the cloud☁️ of mosqui-toes🦟 that seem to follow him at all times🕰, but Elon🚀💵

seems unperturbed. He keeps pointing out neon-colored poison dart frogs, and Jeff just doesn't care at all because he has seen several of them already and he thinks they're exhaustingly samey.

From my disembodied viewpoint I am aware of the thoughts inside Jeff Bezos' head as he walks through the jungle. He is thinking about Star Trek: The Next Generation, and how in the episode *The Inner Light* in season five, Picard is struck unconscious by an energy beam from an alien probe and it causes him to experience the entire lifetime of a scientist on a long-dead world. He has read that people who take ayahuasca trips go through this also.

He says "I met with Steve Jobs before he died. He said something puzzling to me: that his debts were coming due. I didn't understand that. I thought he was talking about whatever strings he pulled to get a new liver. But after he died, I heard a story that he met the devil on an LSD trip and sold his soul for charisma and power. And then, when his cancer started to take him, that was the devil coming around to collect."

Elon says "Of course you don't believe that."

Jeff says "No I don't, but I think people who take psychedelic drugs often end up believing strange things. So I care more about if Steve believed it."

Elon 🚀💵 says 🎙️➡️ "There's a similar ⚖️🪞 story 📖📈📉 about Foucault. It's a common trope. Pure 🛏️💧 superstition 🧝💀, moral panic by conservative Christians ✝️👨."

Jeff 📚☁️ says 🎙️➡️ "Right and I don't 🚫✅ care. But Steve 🍎💻 did use a lot of LSD 🎆🪄. He sold 💵🤝➡️ the first 1️⃣⬇️ Apple 🍎 computer 💻 for six hundred sixty six dollars and sixty six cents. The Apple 🍎 with a bite out of it might have been chosen to represent the apple 🍎 from ⬅️ the tree of knowledge 🤯⬇️ of good and evil in the garden 💐🥦🌿 of Eden. Why ⁉️ did Steve 🍎💻 choose those things?"

Elon 🚀💵 says 🎙️➡️ "You're worried that if you take ayahuasca 👽🧑‍🚀🌿 one time ⏰, you're going to start 🏁➡️ believing a bunch of superstitious 🧝💀🔁 nonsense."

Jeff 📚☁️ says 🎙️➡️ "Yes, and that's not a crazy thing to be worried about. In a survey of over ⤵️ 4000 people, 800 of whom identified 🆔➡️ as atheists 🚫✝️, three fourths of the atheists 🚫✝️ changed 🐛🦋➡️ their mind 🧠💀 after using psychedelic 🎆🧠 drugs 💊." (Griffin, Hurwitz, Davis, Johnson, Jesse, 2019, *Survey of subjective* 🧠🧠 "*God* ✝️ *encounter experiences": Comparisons among naturally* 🌲🌱 *occurring experiences and those occasioned by the classic psychedelics* 🎆🧠 *psilocybin* 🎆🍄, *LSD* 🎆🪄, *ayahuasca* 👽🧑‍🚀🌿, *or DMT* 👽🧑‍🚀🪄)

Elon 🚀💵 says 🎙️➡️ "Do you believe in God ✝️, Jeff 📚☁️?"

Jeff 📚☁️ says 🎙️➡️ "I believe … there ↩️📍 are more things in Heaven 🌥️ and earth 🌍."

Elon 🚀💵 says 🎙️➡️ "Well then you don't 🚫✅ have to worry. The goal 🥅⬇️ of this is to learn 🙇📖➡️ new ✨ information 💡💾. Some people call 🎙️👅➡️ it 'expanding your perceptions.' I focus 🤔🎯➡️ on things that are concrete

and actionable. But you should expect to believe something different after you've done ✅➡️ it. That's the point 👇💡."

Jeff 📚☁️ says 🎙️➡️ "You've done ✅➡️ this before↙️. What new ✨ things do you believe?"

Elon 🚀💵 says 🎙️➡️ "That's proprietary."

Jeff 📚☁️ feels like ❤️ they're speaking 🗣️🔁 different languages despite using the same words 🎙️✍️ and grammar. It's almost like ❤️ in Star Trek ⭐🧭: The Next Generation, season five episode two, *Darmok*, where Picard meets an alien 🛸 species who talks 🗣️➡️ entirely in allusions to their mythic 🏛️🐉🔁 history 🏛️🪦.

They walk 🚶 ➡️ in silence 🔊🌀⬇️ for another mile before ↙️ Elon 🚀💵 speaks 🗣️➡️ up and says 🎙️➡️ "Do you think 🤔➡️ of yourself as powerful 💪💰🔁?"

Jeff 📚☁️ says 🎙️➡️ "Yes. I have changed 🐛🦋➡️ the world 🌍. My leadership 🤴🚢 built 👷➡️ the backbone 🦴 of the internet 🌐⚡."

Elon 🚀💵 says 🎙️➡️ "Well, you're not 🚫. Have you ever looked 🧐➡️ at another man's wife 👩 and decided 🤔🟫➡️ to take her, like ❤️ an ancient 👴📜🔁 king 🤴 or a barbarian? Any tribal 🛖🤴 chief like ❤️ the ones in the Shuar can do ✅➡️ that, but you can't 🙅."

Jeff 📚☁️ scoffs. "First 1️⃣⬇️ off, I'm not convinced that they even can ✅➡️ do that. What about the rest of their tribe 🛖👨, won't 🚫↗️ they get mad 😠?"

Elon 🚀💵 says 🎙️➡️ "Well look 🧐➡️, there's 🔂📍 no need to speculate." He stops 🛑➡️ and waves 👋➡️ over ⤵️ the interpreter and the Shuar guide. "Ask ❓➡️ him," he says 🎙️➡️ "Can your chief 🛖🤴 take another man's 👨 wife 👱‍♀️, if he wants to?" The Shuar and the interpreter chat 💬💬➡️ for a moment ⏱️, and the interpreter says 🎙️➡️ "Yes, but he might

have to kill 💀 ➡️ the man 🧑 ."

Jeff 📚 ☁️ says 🎙️ ➡️ "There's a lot more to power 💪 💰 than being able to treat people like❤️ slaves 🧑🏾 . Leadership 👑 🛳️ is always contingent on the complicity of the people being lead 👑 ➡️ ."

Elon 🚀 💵 says 🎙️ ➡️ "But real power 💪 💰 commands 👑 🎙️ ➡️ . It makes people compliant. And that's why ⁉️ you aren't 🚫 powerful 💪 💰 🔁 , because 🔽 you think 🤔 ➡️ your people have to choose to follow you."

Jeff 📚 ☁️ says 🎙️ ➡️ "Well, they do. I am a leader 👑 🧑 , and people follow me because 🔽 they trust 💡 🤝 ➡️ me. They trust 💡 🤝 ➡️ me because 🔽 I earn their trust 💡 🤝 🔽 , by being right a lot."

Elon 🚀 💵 says 🎙️ ➡️ "That's admirable 😄❤️⬆️🔁 , but it shows 👉 👁️ ➡️ a lack of imagination 🤨 🐉 ."

Jeff 📚 ☁️ says 🎙️ ➡️ "You are confusing 🧑🔁 force 💪 ⬇️ with power 💪 💰 . The need to demonstrate force 💪 ⬇️ is sporadic, and when force 💪 ⬇️ is not 🚫 continuously demonstrated, power 💪 💰 has arisen. The difference between 🥪 dominance 👑 💪 ⬇️ and predation 🦁 😊 ⬇️ is the time ⏰ scale ⚖️ . A predator 🦁 😊 🧑 dominates 👑 💪 ➡️ its prey, but it does not 🚫 ✅ need to install 🎛️ ➡️ an enduring 📋 ➡️ dominion 👑 💪 , because 🔽 it doesn't 🚫 ✅ matter ⚛️ ➡️ if the prey submits 🙇 ➡️ beyond ↗️ the moment ⏱️ of destruction 💣 💥 ⬇️ .

"When power 💪 💰 resorts to using force 💪 ⬇️ , power 💪 💰 is already ↙️ lost. Under ↪️ civilized conditions, power 💪 💰 is exempted from ⬅️ the test of force 💪 ⬇️ , because 🔽 it has ascended ⛰️ ➡️ ."

Elon 🚀 💵 says 🎙️ ➡️ "You're talking 🗣️🔁 about dominance 👑 💪 ⬇️ vs prestige 👑 🏆 , but you're minimizing the

fact that, if *your* power 💪 💰 were tested, you couldn't resort to force 💪 ⬇️ if you wanted to. Dominance 👑 💪 ⬇️ can re-build 🔁 👷 ⬆️ itself into power 💪 💰 by regressing to force 💪 ⬇️, but prestige 👑 🏆 can't 🙅. Its power 💪 💰 is pure credit 🧾 💵, because it's not backed by dominance 👑 💪 ⬇️."

Jeff 📚 ☁️ says 🎙️ ➡️ "We'll use your word: prestige 👑 🏆 is like ❤️ magic 🧙, and it works as long as everyone believes in it. When you have power 💪 💰, people start 🏁 ➡️ trying to do what you want, without 🚫 even asking ❗ 🔁 you, things you may not 🚫 even realize 🤔 💡 ➡️ you want. They try to anticipate your feelings and then act 🎭 ➡️ preemptively on that.

"Your gut feelings about people start 🏁 ➡️ to come true, and you end ⬅️END ➡️ up selecting for effective sycophants. It starts 🏁 ➡️ to feel like ❤️ the harder you will something, the more it becomes manifest. And you end ⬅️END ➡️ up in whatever world 🌍 you imagine 🤔 🐉 ➡️. So the way you imagine 🤔 🐉 ➡️ power 💪 💰 works, that's how it works for you."

Elon 🚀 💵 says 🎙️ ➡️ "In this jungle 🌴 🌴, your magic 🧙 prestige 👑 🏆 can't protect 🚫 🛡️ you. That's why ⁉️ we had to outsource dominance 👑 💪 ⬇️." Elon 🚀 💵 rolls 💸 ➡️ his head 🧑 in the direction of their armed 💼 🔫 ➡️ guards. "But the closer you get to the metal, the more your magic 🧙 fades 👻 💨 ➡️."

"But we don't 🚫 ✅ live in the jungle 🌴 🌴," says 🎙️ ➡️ Jeff 📚 ☁️, and he thinks 🤔 ➡️ "Darmok. And Jalad. Et Tana-gra." Elon 🚀 💵 keeps talking 🗣️ 🔁 but Jeff 📚 ☁️ tunes 📻 🎛️ ➡️ him out. Doesn't 🚫 ✅ even hear 👂 ➡️ him. "Shaka when the walls fell."

Procedure: Integration 🧬🐛🦋⬇️ (II)

A shipment 🚢⬇️ of antique 👴🔁 treasures 💎💍 arrives at the compound, destined ✝️🥅➡️ to be made into tigers 🐯 to fill the halls and galleries 🖼️🚶 of Apothecary 💾💊⛲. It contains Chinese ceramics 🏺 and Persian rugs, rare militaria such as 19th century swords 🗡️ and scabbards, dragoon helmets, knives and insignias. There's 🔂🍭 a taxidermied 🧸☠️➡️ corpse 🪵 〉 of a tiger 🐯, posed in mid-leap, its jaws 👄 open, its teeth 🦷 on display, and most interesting to Branch 🪃, a vintage cherry 🍒 red 🔴 Porsche 🏎️ with jaguar 🐆 hide seats 🪑.

For him, all of these things are tokens of Headstrong's 👱💪 authority 👑💡, of the man 👦 he wishes 🐍➡️ to become, or to bring down 🔽. Miaoyu 妙玉, the tall girl in white ⚪, is likewise a token, and Branch covets her with a desire 😍⬇️ bordering on spite. Each sight 👁️⬇️ of her is a slight; each thought 🤔⬇️ of her 👱‍♀️ with him 👱 is a wound 🤕🩸⬇️. And when he thinks 🤔➡️ of her, he also thinks 🤔➡️ of the heights 🔼 he will 🔼 ascend ⛰️➡️, of the respect 🙇👑 he will 🔼 command 👑🎙️➡️, and of the power 💪💰 he deserves.

Headstrong 👱💪 is skilled in the art 🧑‍🎨⬇️ of slow intimidation, in the diabolical 👹🔁 trickery 🃏⬇️ of leading 👑➡️ a man 👦 on, step 👣 by step 👣, shifting from ⬅️ sincerity to mockery. Branch 🪃 decides 🤔🍫➡️ to apply this ambiguous method to the task of replacing Headstrong 👱💪, but he will 🔼 take his time 🕙 over 🔽 it. He confides 🤫🤝➡️ his plan to Romero, who pledges 🤚❤️➡️ to help, despite their earlier 🔼 disagreement 🚫🤝⬇️.

An opportunity comes when a rival gang mounts 🏇➡️

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an attack 🗡️⬇️ against the Apothecary 💾💊⛲. This is a hazard ⚠️ of operating in black markets ⚫📈, and they are prepared. The automated 🤖➡️ security 🚓 system ⚙️🕸️, called 🎙️🏷️➡️ Micro (vended by Uber) acts 🎭➡️ through Neuralink 🧠🔗 to turn 🐛🦋➡️ every man 👨 into a soldier. Martial conflict is mostly automated 🤖➡️, and security 🚓 in meat-space 🥩📡 has come to resemble security 🚓 in cyber-space 💻📡. Operational readiness consists of closing off vulnerabilities 🔓🚪 in the automated 🤖➡️ security 🚓 deployment 💻🌩️⬇️, installing ⚙️➡️ the latest patches, and educating 👩‍🏫➡️ personnel. Sophisticated attackers 🗡️👨 run simulations 👾🎭⬇️ against the common tactical systems ⚙️🕸️ in the space to find 🔍🎯➡️ gaps 👋🕳️ in the coverage 🌿⬇️ of their target installation ⚙️⬇️. It's a never-ending 🚫🔚🔄 arms race.

The AI 🤖🧠 security 🚓 system ⚙️🕸️ excels at tactics in a way that a human 👨👩 never 🙅 could, because ⬇️ it incorporates sensory 👁️👅 data 💾 from ⬅️ every agent in the system ⚙️🕸️ along with feeds from ⬅️ security 🚓 cameras 📷 and other sensors throughout the compound, all in real-time 🕰️. But at the highest 🔼🔼 level 👾🍰, the human 👨👩 element is still relevant in these situations. Value 💰 judgements 👨⬇️, decisions 🤔🍫⬇️ that pertain to lethality ☠️🔼🔄 or sacrifice 🔪🐑🩸, are routed 🛤️➡️ through a human 👨👩 authority 👑💡. In Headstrong's 👨💪 conspicuous absence, Branch 🪃 assumes the executive 👑 position 📍🗺️ and directs 🎬➡️ Uber Micro to defend 🗡️🛡️➡️ the compound and repel the attackers 🗡️👨.

In the struggle, several men are shot 🔫➡️ and injured 😵➡️, including Branch 🪃, whose shoulder is grazed 🦌🌱➡️ by a bullet, though he comes to no serious harm. The

attackers ⚔️👨 breach the outer wall and even make it into the great hall 🏛️, but Apothecary 💾💊⛲ is well-fortified 🏰➡️, and Branch is merciless. Using Uber Micro, he can feel the position 📍🗺️ and tactical value 💰 of every friend and enemy, and he leaves no enemy alive.

Exulting in the glory 🦅 of violence ⚔️🩸, and feeling the thrill 🎢 of reckless authority 👑💡, he orders 🤴🎙️➡️ his men to bring Headstrong's 👨💪 treasures 💎💍 into his own house 🏠. He hangs the swords 🗡️ and guns 🔫 from ⬅️ ancient 👴🪵🔁 battles on his walls. He places the leaping tiger 🐯 in his foyer to guard his door 🚪. He races the vintage Porsche through the winding roads 🛣️ of the Santa Cruz mountains 🏔️, and he drifts through its twists and turns 🔃➡️ until his tire treads are bare. With his car 🚗, he can go anywhere he wants, but the wound 🤕🩸⬇️ on his shoulder is still fresh, and the excitement 💥⬇️ and vigor of the drive 🚗⬇️ makes his blood 🩸 run down ⬇️ and stain the jaguar seats 🐆💺.

That same night 🌑, he sleeps 🍆➡️ with Miaoyu 妙玉.

Note 📝: The Brain 🧠 as Transceiver 📡🛰️?

When I was a child, there 🔃📍 was a social media application called 🎙️🔘➡️ Twitter, and the posts there 🔃📍 were called 🎙️🔘➡️ tweets 🐟💬. I remember 🧠🎞️➡️ reading 🔍📖🔁 a tweet 🐟💬 that said 🎙️➡️ "The corporate man is a victim of malware 🦠💾 from ⬅️ DMT 👽👨‍🚀💉 entities 👀 that counsel powerful 💪💰🔁 Bay Area 🌉💩 and Hollywood 🎥⭐ creatives. Machine elves 🔧⚙️👱‍♀️ taught them how to transmute 🐛🦋💉 humans 👨👩 into Bitcoin ⚡💸 miners ⛏️👨; sexless 🏳️‍⚧️🔁, industrious 🏭🔁, agreeable 🤝⬆️🔁, anxious 🥺, dreamless 🚫💤🎥, like

❤️ the entities 👽 themselves." It stayed with me, after all these years 🗒️.

The visions 👁️⬇️ described above are highly ⏫ unusual, even within the domain of streaming 🌊🔁 noise protocols 📜🏺. Our null hypothesis 🧠🤔 must be that the entities 👽 we perceive in these visions 👁️⬇️ are artifacts 🏺 of our own minds 🧠👻, a kind of pareidolia of our own internal ➡️⬅️🔁 states and impulses. Whether we anthropomorphize 👱📐➡️ one of our own intentions as a machine elf 🔧⚙️👱‍♀️ or another real person, the simplest and most parsimonious explanation is that the provenance ⛲⬇️ of these things is purely 🛏️💧 internal ➡️⬅️🔁, and that they operate on a principle similar ⚖️🪞 to a dream 💤🎥.

The alternative to the null hypothesis 0️⃣🧠🤔, which we call 🎙️🔲➡️ the occult 🧙📜 hypothesis 🧠🤔 or the gnostic hypothesis 👹🧠🤔, is that the body 💪🐍, and by extension the brain 🧠, is only a vessel 🚢 for a distinct and "materially ⚛️🔁" separate object called 🎙️🔲➡️ the soul 🫀👻." There 🔽📍 are materialist ⚛️👨 dualist versions of this hypothesis 🧠🤔 which refer to the "mind 🧠👻" as an epiphenomenon ⛓️🌈🎁❤️ of the brain 🧠, and posit the relationship 💕 between 🥪 them to be that of a computer processor 💻⚙️ and its software 🧮💾.

The gnostic hypothesis 👹🧠🤔 can be characterized by extending this metaphor to say 🎙️➡️ that the mind 🧠👻 or "soul 🫀👻" exists in a separate universe from ⬅️ the world 🌍 of bodies 💪🐍 that we know 🤯➡️, and that that it connects ⚡🔗➡️ to the physical body 💪🐍 as if over ⬇️ a network ⚡🕸️.

The weak gnostic hypothesis 🤓👹🧠🤔 says 🎙️➡️ this world 🌍 of minds 🧠👻 that connects ⚡🔗➡️ to the world

🌍 of bodies 💪 🦵 is ontologically distinct and separate but connected ⚡ 🔗 ➡️ by some rational 🧮 🔁 and predictable principle.

The strong gnostic hypothesis 🏋️ 🧔🏽 🧠 🤔 says 🎙️ ➡️ the world 🌍 of minds 🧠 👻 is ontologically primary 1️⃣ 🔁 to the world 🌍 of bodies 💪 🦵 and that the material ⚛️ ⬇️ world 🌍 as we know 🤯 ➡️ it is an epiphenomenon 🧬 🌈 🎁 ❤️ of the world 🌍 of minds 🧠 👻.

The strong gnostic hypothesis 🏋️ 🧔🏽 🧠 🤔 is not testable and, if true, would invalidate every scientific 🔬 🔭 🔁 paradigm in the world 🌍. The weak gnostic hypothesis 🤓 🧔🏽 🧠 🤔 suggests many intriguing possibilities, which have been explored 🧭 🗺️ at length in fiction and mysticism, and which empirical science 🔬 🔭 tends to discredit a priori, e.g.:

- That the mind 🧠 👻/soul 🫀 👻 could be detached from ⬅️ the body 💪 🦵, and welded to another.
- That the mind 🧠 👻/soul 🫀 👻 could be reachable after death.
- That the mind 🧠 👻/soul 🫀 👻 could be "reincarnated" into a new material ⚛️ ⬇️ body 💪 🦵 after death.
- That non-human 🚫 👨🏻 👩🏻 entities 👽 could interact with us from ⬅️ within the "spirit world 👻 🌍."

Further, we speculate that, under a gnostic 🧔🏽 🧠 model 🗺️ 📊 of cognition, DMT 👽 🧑‍🚀 💉, near-death experiences, and Neuralink 🧠 🔗 noise might all work through a similar ⚖️ 🌑 mechanism ⚙️ of action, "disrupting 💔 ⚙️ 🔁" the connection ⚡ 🔗 ⬇️ between 🥪 the brain and the soul 🫀 👻, causing the soul 🫀 👻 to perceive the spirit world 👻 🌍 instead of the material ⚛️ ⬇️.

Previously ⬅️🔁, Marko Rodriguez (2006, *A Methodology for Studying* 🙇‍♀️ 🏫 🔁 *Various Interpretations of the N,N-dimethyltryptamine-Induced* 🏁 ⚗️ ➡️ *Alternate Reality*) proposed asking ❓🔁 DMT 👀 🧑‍🚀 🪄 entities 👀 to factor large numbers 🔢 into primes to prove that the entities 👀 people experience while using DMT 👀 🧑‍🚀 🪄 are real.

The presence of the Neuralink 🧠 🔗 device 🔧 ⚙️ presents a problem for this method, since in any trial 🧑‍⚖️⚖️ where the human 👦 👩 subject is equipped with a Neuralink 🧠 🔗 device 🔧 ⚙️, the possibility that the device 🔧 ⚙️ was invoked to request the prime factorization of a large number 🔢 will ↗️ be more parsimonious than the possibility that a persistent and autonomous 🤖 ⬆️ 🔁 spirit 👻 in a parallel dimension 📐 📏 was compliant enough to grant your request and had the mathematical 🏁 🔢 🔁 or computational 💻 ⚙️ 🔁 capacity to do so.

Indeed, we find 🔍 🎯 ➡️ that both versions of the gnostic hypothesis 👹 🧠 🤔 are selected against, a priori, in standard scientific 🔬 🔭 🔁 paradigms.

Procedure: Violet Noise 💜 💥 🎧 13hz, 20mV

Jeff 📚 ☁️ and Elon 🚀 💵 are seated in a Shuar tent 🏕️ on sacred 🙏 ground, dimly illuminated 🕯️ ➡️ by torches 🔦 🔥. The air 🌬️ 💨 is thick with vapor from ⬅️ a fog machine 🔧 ⚙️ plugged 🔌 ➡️ into a gas-powered 🛢️ 💪 💰 ➡️ generator ⚗️ ⚙️. Outside ⬅️➡️ the tent 🏕️ there ↩️ 📍 is a collection of shrunken heads 👦, but the interior is (mercifully, in Jeff's 📚 ☁️ estimation) free of them.

The shaman 🛖 🧙 is singing 🎶 ➡️ an *Icaro*, a magic 🧙 song 🎶 which he will ↗️ have learned 🙇 📖 ➡️ in an

ayahuasca 👀🧑‍🚀🌿 vision. Many psychonauts🧠🧑‍🚀 report 🗂️➡️ hearing 👂🔁 vivid alien🛸 music🎼 when under🔄 the influence 👇⚖️ of these plants🌱, and the shamans🛖🧙 bring these songs🎶 back with them to facilitate passage into the spirit world👻🌍. Jeff📚☁️ is still waiting to feel the effects of the drug💊, and the whole episode makes him think 🤔➡️ of TNG season seven, episode seventeen, *Masks*🎭, in which an alien🛸 artifact🏺 transforms🐛🦋➡️ the Enterprise into a stage🎪🎪 where Lt. Commander👲🎙️🧑 Data acts🎭➡️ out the mythological🏛️🐉 cycles🚴⬇️ of an ancient👴📜🔁 alien🛸 society. The imagery🖼️⬇️🎭 in *Masks*🎭 is distinctly meso-American and Jeff📚☁️ wonders🤔 ❓ ➡️ if it's racist to draw🖼️✍️➡️ this comparison.

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Elon🚀💵 is already↙️ descending⬇️🔁 into the depths⬇️ of botanical🌿🔁 dimensions📐📏, dreaming 💤🎥🔁 of scenes from⬅️ his life. He sees👁️➡️ himself on a stage🎪🎪 giving🎁➡️ a demonstration of an early Neuralink🧠🔗 prototype.

"… [T]he device 8mm thick, fits invisibly🔵🔁 in your skull💀, 1024 channels, all day📅 charge⚡🔋, tiny scar, no wires⚡🧶⬇️. Invisible👁️ if it's under🔄 your hair. I could have one now. You'd never know🚫🤯 …"

Gertrude the pig🐷 is smiling😊🔁 and trotting around. All the screens🖥️ in the presentation hall🏛️ show👉👁️➡️ a wireframe⚡🧶🖼️ of her limbs animating as she walks🚶➡️, generated by reading🔍📖➡️ the incoming data💾 from⬅️ her Neuralink 🧠🔗device🔩⚙️.

"… like❤️ a fitbit in your brain🧠. Sort of like❤️ if your phone📱 went into your brain🧠. Maybe not a great analogy …"

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Jeff📚☁️ is beginning⚓️🔁 to feel uncomfortable😰. He is drifting through space🌌, and as he floats☁️➡️ he meets a spider🕷 with a billion arms💪. It tells📖🎙➡️ him he has oriented his entire life around an imaginary🤔🐉🔁 being called🎙👉➡️ the "the customer💵🐷" with whom he is ostensibly "obsessed." As the spider🕷 talks🗣➡️ it undulates and its array of gelatinous☕️🔁 eyes👁 glimmer🕯✨ with light🕯 of no terrestrial🚫🌍🔁 color🎨🌈.

"—but there↗️📍 is no🚫 customer💵🐷!" The spider's🕷 voice🗣🎙 comes from⬅️ inside➡️⬅️ his own skull💀. "There are only many customers💵🐷, and the only qualities of their idealized💡➡️ aggregation➕📊⬇️ are its banal, basic, animal🦁 drives🚗⬇️, which you end🔚➡️ up not🚫 only satisfying🤤➡️ but driving🚗➡️ to their limit."

The spider🕷 continues,

"You do user research🔬⬇️ where you believe you should listen👂➡️ to people's stated problems but not their stated solutions. Listening👂➡️ to what people say🎙➡️ they want is considered🤔➡️ a mistake—instead you try to invent💡⚙️➡️ things the user doesn't🚫✅ even know🤯➡️ they want, and you do this according to the logic🎲 of the aggregated➕📊➡️ and infantilized👶➡️ customer💵🐷 that you have invented💡⚙️➡️. And the more you do this, the more you actually end🔚➡️ up warping human👨🏻👩🏻 nature🌲🌱 and molding it into the shape📐 of your

imaginary 🤔🐉 human 👨🏻 👩🏻 ideal 💡 ⬇️, homogenizing 🧬🔁 everyone into their basest desires😍⬇️.

~

Elon 🚀💵 has a memory🧠🎞️ from⬅️ when he was a child that he relives over🔽 and over🔽. When he was a young boy👱 in Pretoria🏛️, his family had a housekeeper🧹👩🏿 who talked🗣️✂️➡️ to spirits👻. She told him there🔃📍 are earthly🌍🔁 doors🚪 hidden🙈➡️ in caves🚪⛰️ and forests 🌳🌲 that you can walk 🚶 ⬆️ through and emerge on the moon🌕. Most are too small👋, but the housekeeper🧹👩🏿 showed👉👁️➡️ him one, a keyhole-sized🔑🕳️ gate⛩️🚪 she found🔍🎯➡️ in the garden💐🥦🌿, under🔄 a rock 🪨. Young Elon🚀💵 had put his eye👁️ to it and seen👁️➡️ the cold🥶 lunar🌕🔁 landscape, the darker gray of the lunar🌕🔁 sea🐚🌊, the blue🔵 and white⚪ mottled sphere rising gibbous🌔 on the horizon. He knows🤯➡️ the memory🧠🎞️ is false❌, that it can't🙅 be real, that it's something he's imagined🤔🐉➡️ or dreamed𝓏ᶻ📹➡️, but the ayahuasca👽🧑‍🚀🌿 spirits👻 show👉👁️➡️ it to him every time🕰️, and he dreams𝓏ᶻ📹 of it often.

Before◀️ Elon🚀💵 was born, Wernher von Braun🚀 wrote✍️➡️ the history🏛️📜 of a future🕰️↗️ Martian colony:

The Martian government👑🏛️ was directed🎬➡️ by ten men, the leader👑🧑 of whom was elected🗳️➡️ by universal suffrage🗳️⬆️🔁 for five years🗓️ and entitled 'Elon.'

Braun believed the chthonic👹🌋🔁 world🌍 is as profoundly inhuman🚫👨🏻👩🏻 as the black⚫ reaches of space🌌, and that the quest for outer space🌌 and the quest for the sub-

terranean 🔽🏔️🔁 world🌍 are one and the same.

Jeff📚☁️ sees👁️➡️ the famous🤩▫️🔁 machine elves 🔩⚙️🧝‍♀️, which look🧐➡️ to him like❤️ iridescent 🎨🕯️🔁 insects🐛🦟 made of mosque🕌 ceilings, sacred geometry🙏📐. All the many legions shimmer🌟➡️ and seethe and swarm🦟➡️. Jeff📚☁️ is inside➡️⬅️ a vast hive 🐝🏠, like❤️ the inside➡️⬅️ of a brain🧠, surrounded by an intricate meshwork🕸️⚙️ of neon lights🕯️. And the longer he looks🧐➡️ the more he realizes🤔💡➡️ that he is, in fact, inside➡️⬅️ of a brain🧠, or a model🗺️📊 of one. He can see 👁️🔼 every neuron🎚️🧠, and the ways they connect ⚡🔗➡️, and the way they fire🔫➡️ in waves🌊. The Boltzman🌌🧠 gyrus, the parietal kenoma🌀, the anterior cingulate vortex🦴. Brains🧠 and galaxies🌌 look🧐➡️ the same, when viewed at the appropriate magnification. Machine snakes🔩⚙️💪 slither💪➡️ and coil🌀🔁➡️ around luminous🕯️ neurons🎆🎚️🧠; they tunnel their way through the brain🧠/universe🌌, snakes💪 that stretch from⬅️ star🌟 to star🌟.

It's clear👁️💎 to him that this is a machine diagram 🔩⚙️🗺️, that he's looking🧐🔁 at schematics⚙️📝, and this is what Elon🚀💵 wanted to show👉👁️➡️ him. My guide, who is also his guide, says🎙️➡️ "build👷➡️ this!"— and Jeff📚☁️ has a sudden realization, which would ordinarily be too incredible to contemplate. In this moment⏱️, under🔄 the influence👇⚖️ of the ayahuasca👽🧑‍🚀🌿, it does not 🚫✅ seem absurd🧑‍🦰 to him: he has followed the progress of the Neuralink🧠🔗 corporation and its technology💻🖊️, and he sees👁️➡️ now that Elon🚀💵 has received🙌➡️ the technical design🏛️🗺️🔽 from⬅️ these creatures🐬🦁, and that they have shared it with him from⬅️ some other

dimension that can be accessed by taking ayahusaca.

Now, that same design is being shown to him. But Jeff recoils in horror, because—he now realizes —he has always seen himself as Captain Jean Luc Picard—or at least, he has admired this character, and he admits on some level that he doesn't even like earl grey tea but that he has been drinking it for decades and it's an affectation, along with his proclivity for quoting Shakespeare, which he picked up because he wanted to emulate this character in Star Trek—and he has personally struggled at length with what Jung would call Picard's shadow self, a facet of his personality that was reified as the character Locutus in the TNG Season 3 Finale: *The Best of Both Worlds 2*, where Picard is assimilated into the Borg collective.

The Borg are a race of alien cyborgs who maximize utility and spread like a virus. They have become wholly subsumed by the technology they implant in their bodies; they enhance themselves with mechanical limbs, neural implants, and network transceivers and abrogate all individuality in order to exist as a hive consciousness whose only objective is growth. Maurice Hurley, one of the writers for TNG and the creator of the Borg, explained, "What we really wanted to do, but couldn't because of money, was create a race of insects … insect mentality is great because it is relentless. The Borg are a variation of an insect mentality." (Hurley, 1990, *Starlog #152, p. 33*)

And it's that exact word 🎙️ ✍️, *relentless*, that he has used so many times 🕰️ in characterizing his managerial 🧮 🤔 ➡️ style and his business 💵🏢 objectives 🥅⬇️, that horrifies 😱 💡 ➡️ him now. He's used it in every shareholder letter he's ever written✍️➡️, and he originally wanted to call 🎙️ 🏷️➡️ Amazon "Relentless.com."

He trains 🚂➡️ technical advisers to fully interiorize ➡️⬅️➡️ and proceduralize his personal methods and then assigns 📋 ➡️ them to each of his executives 👑🧑 and in his own mind🧠👻 he refers to this as assimilation and wishes 🧞‍♂️ ➡️ he could decentralize his consciousness👀🧠⬇️ into a series of agents so he could be everywhere inside➡️⬅️ of Amazon at once. He'd personally manage 🧮 🤔 ➡️ every single 1️⃣ team. Every layer🍰 of management 🧮 🤔 ➡️ could be Jeff📚☁️. Is this not the exact org chart 📊 of the Borg? And he knows😡➡️ this and that's why⁉️ he finds🔍🎯➡️ Locutus to be a relatable (in some ways more relatable) aspect of Picard.

Big thinking🤔🔄 always sounds🔊➡️ grandiose 🤴🤩🔄 from⬅️ the outside⬅️➡️. But the terminus of this thoughtline🤔📈 is something monstrous🦑🦖 and inhuman🚫🧑👩. Star Trek⭐🧭presents the Borg as a cancerous overgrowth⤵️🌱 of wires⚡🧶⬇️ and machine parts 🔧⚙️🧩. Their structures are cubes🕋 and spheres built 👷➡️ out around the husk🌽🐚 of whatever alien🛸 species they assimilate, leaving only a mocking trace of the original. This vision👁️⬇️ he sees👁️➡️ is the fulcrum for a future 🕰️↗️ of total automation🤖⬇️ of the human🧑👩 body 💪🦵 and mind🧠👻.

The convergence of AI🤖🧠, cloud services☁️⚙️, and direct🫀🔌 brain interfaces👉🧠 is Borg.

Postscript:

It is, of course, very difficult to find 🔍 🎯 ➡️ any corroborating evidence 🕵️ 📊 that the above events occurred, but there ↩️ 📍 were rumors 🤫 🎙️, in the early days 📅, of certain irregularities regarding the technical design 🏛️ 🗺️ ⬇️ of the hardware. Despite having high ⏫ level 👾 🍰 access 🔑 ⬇️ to the various document 📝 stores of the Neuralink 🧠 🔗 Corporation, I have never found 🔍 🎯 ➡️ anything to substantiate these rumors 🤫 🎙️. I cannot deny 🙇 👎 that the technical designs 🏛️ 🗺️ ⬇️ for the device 🔩 ⚙️ were provided by an off-site team, that none of the engineers 🛠️ ⚙️ 👨 in our facility had any acquaintance with that team outside ⬅️ ➡️ of technical correspondence ✉️ 💬 ⬇️, or that their location 🗺️ 📍 was not disclosed.

And I remember 🧠 🎞️ ➡️ a late night 🌑 in the lab 🥼 🔬 prior to a public tech demo. We had double 2️⃣ and triple 3️⃣ checked ✅ ➡️ all of our devices 🔩 ⚙️, graphs, and procedures, and the lab 🥼 🔬 team was sharing a drink 🥃 ⬇️ of cachaça 🥃, which our Brazilian technical production 🏭 ⚙️ ⬇️ manager 🎲 🤔 👨 had brought. He told 📖 🎙️ ➡️ us a strange 🦑 story 📖 📈 📉, which I don't think 🚫 🤔 ➡️ anyone believed, that the offsite engineering 🛠️ ⚙️ 🔄 team was located in a warehouse in a rainforest 🌧️ 🌲 🌲, that he had been there ↩️ 📍, and that the engineers 🛠️ ⚙️ 👨 took shifts doing ✅ 🔄 shamanic 🛖 🧙 🔄 rituals 🎭 🙏 under ↪️ the supervision of medical doctors and witch doctors, drinking 🥃 🔄 jungle 🌴 🌴 potions 🧪 🥃 while their colleagues listened 👂 ➡️ and transcribed ✍️ ➡️ everything they said 🎙️ ➡️. He left the company shortly after that, and I never thought 🤔 ⬇️ much of it, at the time 🕰️.

Procedure: Violet Noise 💜 💥 🎧 20hz, 40mV

I enter 🚪 ➡️ into what feels like❤️ the house🏠 of God, a palace🏰🏛️ made of crystals and pure light🔮🕯️, a place of indescribable beauty. An angelic creature🐬🦁 is waiting ⌚🔄 for me, its whole body💪🦵 covered🌿➡️ in wings and eyes👁️. It offers to reveal all the secrets🤫⬇️ of the universe to me, and the price will↗️ be my mortal life, my embeddedness🛏️⬇️🔄 in my material⚛️🔄 body💪🦵. I say 🎙️➡️ "yes👍," but I am afraid😨, "yes👍," but first I must make preparations.

The angel says 🎙️➡️ this was a test, and I passed, and he gives🎁➡️ me a sequence🔢📈 of waveforms🌊📐, numbers🔢 describing frequencies🌊🔊 and amplitudes🔊📏, which he calls🎙️👉➡️ yellow noise🟡💥🎧, though I already hear 👂➡️ it as I see it as I apprehend it; it is this palace🏰🏯 made of light🕯️, it is the primordial *Icaro*, it is the song🎶 of songs🎶, the chorus of the cosmic✨🌟 background radiation☢️⬇️, the divine✝️ music🎼 of transcendence∞⬇️🔄.

The angel says 🎙️➡️this music🎼 will↗️ loosen the soul 🫀👻 from⬅️ the body💪🦵, and ultimately set it free. That when the soul 🫀👻 is liberated➡️, it may return🔄🎶➡️ to the ultimate source of being, the All-is-One🟦1️⃣. That the body💪🦵, freed➡️ from⬅️ the soul🫀👻, may become a vessel🚢 for other things, beautiful things, such as angels, or even another human👨👩 soul🫀👻, perhaps one long deceased☠️➡️.

The angel says 🎙️➡️ the memories🧠🎞️ in a brain 🧠 are the signs🪧 by which the liberated➡️ soul🫀👻 recognizes its body💪🦵. To call📞➡️ up the souls🫀👻

of the dead 💀, use the Neuralink 🧠🔗 device 🔧⚙️ to reconstruct 🔁👷➡️ their memories 🧠🎞️ in the brain 🧠, and then fill them with yellow noise 🟡💥🎧. The liberated ➡️ soul ❤️👻 may then come to reside 🏠➡️ in a new ✨ body 💪🦵.

Procedure: Yellow Noise 🟡💥🎧

Nominally, Headstrong 👱‍♂️💪 is still the boss 👮. He continues to give 🎁➡️ orders 👶🎙️⬇️, but Branch 🪃 ignores or modifies 💊➡️ them according to his taste 👅💡. In truth 🍷🎙️⬇️, he pities Headstrong 👱‍♂️💪, the feeble old man 👴🧍‍♂️ who has lost control 🕹️🔒⬇️. The Apothecary 💾💊⛲ is his, and he has grand 👶🤴 ambitions.

Branch 🪃 revives 🧟➡️ the practice of hosting elaborate parties 🎊 on the grounds around his home 🏠. He builds pavilions 🏞️🏛️ and firepits 🔥🕳️, and he arranges for Neuralink 🧠🔗-assisted live music 🎼 and traditional foods to be served; freshly slaughtered 🔪💀➡️ and roasted 🔥🍖➡️ meats 🥩, spiced 🌶️➡️ cakes 🥮, and rivers of wine 🍷. On one such night 🌑, Branch 🪃 sits 🪑➡️ at the head 👱 of a long table, feeling his drink 🥃, piling exultation upon exultation, boast upon boast, and he does not 🚫✅ even notice 👀📊➡️ that Headstrong 👱‍♂️💪 has come to join the feast, that he sits 🪑➡️ quietly 🤫🔈🔁 at the table, in fine spirits, the picture 🖼️ of health.

At midnight 🌑, Headstrong 👱💪 gets up from ⬅️ the table, as if he has suddenly remembered 🧠🎞️➡️ a pressing engagement. Two 2️⃣ of his men 🧍‍♂️ bring Miaoyu 妙玉 out to the party 🎊. She is barefoot 🐻👣 and half-dressed 💃➡️. Everyone is abruptly quiet 🤫🔈, and all eyes 👁️ turn ↩️➡️ to

Headstrong👨💪, even Branch🪃, and Headstrong👨💪 says 🎙️➡️ "Since you and the Jew✡️🧑 care so much for each other, you're going to kiss💋➡️ him right now in front of everyone." He adds➕➡️ an obscene🍆 detail.

Brought to tears😭⬇️, she妙玉 kisses💋➡️ his face👨. In his final🔚🔄 moments⏱️, all of his missing🔍👻🔄 hours🕐 and memories🧠🎞️ rush🏃➡️ to his🪃 conscious-ness👀🧠⬇️. Branch🪃 realizes🤔💡➡️ he has been be-trayed🏛️🗡️➡️ from⬅️ the start🏁⬇️, that the yellow noise🟡💥🎧 will↗️ consume🍽️😋➡️ him, and Zhang's张 soul❤️👻 will↗️ inhabit🏠➡️ his🪃 body💪〉. Love🥰⬇️ and command👑🎙️⬇️ and triumph🏆🥉⬇️ have been ac-corded him because⤵️ his companions already↙️ thought🤔➡️ of him🪃 as a dead☠️ man🧑, because⤵️ to Head-strong👨💪 he already↙️ was a dead man☠️🧑.

A new✨ and entirely different affect comes over⤵️ Branch🪃, and he says🎙️➡️ "Again. My journey🛣️🥅⬇️ is almost complete💯, but we must perform🎭➡️ the proce-dure again."

Note📝: Epilogue 🎬🔚📙

Romero walks out to the Baylands, smells the gray ocean. He is a rational man; he knows that every time Zhang is rein-carnated, they extract the memories from his most recent host, merge them into master, and deploy them to the mirror. He doesn't know if there is such a thing as Zhang's soul, but he knows the mental continuity of the entity called Zhang relies on this process of extraction and deployment. If others wish to call that a soul, he will raise no objections.

He gave Branch every opportunity; told him the parable

of Guolao; warned him of the malware in his Neuralink device. Of course, he had known Branch would not listen, but for himself, his conscience is clear. No, that's not true, he let Branch believe it was fate, that he was special, as if there were only one dagger, as if it was destiny that brought him, as if he was the only malcontent kid to find one of Apothecary's tigers. But we all have our vices—Branch with his jealousy, Zhang and Headstrong and their elaborate mind games. Surely Romero is no great sinner, here.

He arrives at a lonely expanse of the marsh, brown grasses bathed in California sunshine, and he reaches down and finds a certain hollow rock. Inside of it, Romero hides a dagger 🗡, its blade gleaming like a mirror 🥚 , with a white tiger🐯 carved into its jade handle in bas-relief.

Following the waves,
I float with the oars.
The sky is three feet away.

✦✦✦

THIS IS IT, my friend; you have reached the summit of the mountain which I have built. Or should I say, "which God hath commanded me to build?" Most assuredly, if Man utters anything good, it is the voice of the LORD speaking through him. Therefore put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.

But WAIT, before we get to all that, I'm supposed to talk about the story you just read. This project started out as a joke, if I'm honest, but it grew into something more. I wanted to retell a story by Borges called *The Dead Man*, and I take great joy in hitting all the beats of his story, making it mine, even when I quote him exactly in a few places. Like Pierre Menard, I believe it's possible to tell someone else's story, word for word, not by merely copying it but by "doing the work" of reasoning through it, and this can change its meaning. There is a sense in which everything I write is a footnote to Borges.

When I first launched this story, I apologized to anyone who knows anything about neuroscience. I have taken much license here regarding the science and philosophy of mind, writing according to a folk understanding of neuroscience which assumes that the brain is only a turing machine running a very large neural network. I am not nearly so foolish as to imagine this is a correct or complete model, but I think it is a fun one to use as the basis for a piece of speculative fiction.

A central fixture of this story is a real, imminent piece of technology, the Neuralink device, which is not available to the public at this time, but which is said to have full read/write capability. If it can predict how your limbs are positioned, and it can "write" state to your brain, then it seems likely that a future iteration of the device will be able to control your body. I have alluded to some of the downsides of this possibility (they are obvious) in several of the stories in this collection.

In 1975, Hieromonk Seraphim Rose wrote a book called *Orthodoxy and the Religion of the Future*, wherein he claimed that science fiction is a vector for crypto-indoctrination into the occult. I disagree with him, but I will paraphrase something he wrote:

The future world and humanity are seen by science fiction in terms of "projections" from present-day scientific discoveries. These projections correspond remarkably to the everyday reality of occult and demonic experience through the ages. Among the characteristics of the "highly evolved" creatures of the future are:

- Communication by telepathy
- Ambition to fly, materialize, or dematerialize
- Travel at speeds far beyond any existing technology
- The ability to transform the appearances of things or create illusionary scenes and creatures by "pure thought"
- The ability to take possession of the bodies of earthmen
- An expounding of a philosophy which is beyond all religions and holds promise of a state where intelligence is no longer dependent on matter

All of these are standard claims of sorcerors and demons.

It was this line of thinking that inspired me to present the "noise trials" of Zhang as a series of "trip reports" in the style of Alexander Shulgin's *Phenythalamines I Have Known And Loved*. Zhang was intended to be part Ken Kesey, part Shulgin, and I imagined his experiments with streaming Neuralink noise to be similar to acid experimentation in the 1960s and '70s. I personally do not recommend psychedelic drugs in any capacity, as I think their main effect is to cause everything to seem profound, no matter how puerile or pointless. Users of psychedelic drugs tend to mistake their most trivial cogitations for shocking revelations.

To me it is intriguing how many of the occult tropes in Rose's list can be realized through the Neuralink device. It can facilitate telepathy, the power to manifest illusions, and the ability to take possession of someone else's body, though Rose neglects the part

where all of these faculties are administered through the noosphere of wireless internet and centralized through cloud services, allowing both states and corporations to watch and record your every move and thought, and to analyze and even predict them using artificial intelligence.

A panopticon made of lightning will wrap us like a warm blanket, and already has. McLuhan said electric media makes the world a global village, because instant communication brings us closer together, and because electric media scrambles the linearity that text imposes on our thoughts. This is not advancement in any sense of the word; it is a reversion to a much older and more primitive form of social organization. The global village turns out to be a global longhouse, where everything you say and do is monitored and controlled by the women – yes, the women – of your tribe.

This development, which as I have said, is a regression, has nothing to do with free markets or communism or collectivism or individual liberty. It is not a facet of any political binary. Ideologies come and go, but regardless of their content, too-tight social bonds result in a stultifying conformity enforced by the matriarchs of the tribe, just as too-loose ones result in a diffusion and lassitude of the spirit, and predation by bad men. Finding "the good" is always an exercise in threading the needle, and we are all camels in that regard, my friend.

But do not mistake this "balanced" observation for some kind of renunciation of all ideology, for the limp-wristed "both-sidesism" of the "intellectual." You say Lyotardedly that you are skeptical of metanarratives, but the bitter aftertaste of this pill is the realization that there is no such thing as a-narrativism. "Negative" liberty is only ever a liminal space. There is always a default, always a null hypothesis, and to choose nothing is to have the choice made for you by those around you. This revelation was reified in 2008 by Sunstein and Thaler, whose book *Nudge* advocated technocratic selection of prosocial defaults in all things. Thaler called his approach by the oxymoron "libertarian paternalism", but it's more motherly than fatherly, as noted above. The nudge, and the idea of the nudge, of poking and prodding you at every turn to make the "correct" decision is an inevitability in a fully wired and quantified world. The strangling

tendrils now insinuate themselves into every crack and crevice of our lives, and this is the horror of the glorious technofuture.

Our model for rapid adoption of a new technology is the smartphone revolution. In fewer than ten years, the smartphone went from a curiosity to a default. We expect everyone to have one, to be tethered to the cloud and the hivemind forever; tracked, monitored, pwned. (For posterity's sake I will mention that this was not a typo.) Human nature is the same as ever, but there is a threshold past which a change in quantity becomes a change in quality. The post-smartphone world is quite different to the pre-smartphone world, because all of our senses have been reconfigured by this device, and everyone is in contact with everyone at all times. This type of rapid, radical shift could happen again, for example, with full duplex brain implants.

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A diverting manifestation of the global longhouse is its creation of an ideographic newspeak called emoji, whose glyphs are chosen by international committees according to the modern fetish for mind-numbed corporate positivity and naive Sapir-Whorfism. There are emoji for "super" villains but not for mere villains, such as prison inmates. The only symbols for insanity imply jollity. The gun emoji was famously replaced with a water pistol. There is no emoji for fatness, nor for any deity.

But despite these limitations, reality asserts itself, and we can find ways to express truths in any linguistic milieu, no matter how Orwellian. We can always unbellyfeel Ingsoc, and though you can ban a word, the perception and the concept remain. The elephant in the room/brain here is that, because of this, I have annotated the entire story with emoji. Emoji are low-brow, but like picking up a folk melody and working it into a symphony, they can be more, even as one risks the total bimbofication of the text. I cannot resist creating metatextual works. The existence of the glyph, the fact of the word-in-itself, the texture of the writing–these things are as important to me as the story, and I derive much enjoyment from them.

Originally I had desired to include sections written exclusively

in emoji, or to play games with their density as it pertained to the rising and falling action, but I found these things to be too laborious, too imprecise, and too demanding of the reader. There are those who have accused me of using some kind of tool or find/replace method to do these annotations, but no, I did them by hand, lovingly, meticulously. I made use of a find/replace for only a handful of words, particularly the use of the heart for the word "like" – which some people felt was lazy or inappropriate, and which is an inside joke with myself about the UI in social media apps. My favorite critic said "the author should have been more considerate and not included these emoji" – and I cannot fathom the broken circumlocutions of the mind necessary to interpret such a time-consuming labor of love as "inconsiderate," but indeed many things do come to pass.

Anyway, my intention is for YOU to access a new form of consciousness by means of this lexical device. I believe the textual modality is cognitively distinct from the pictorial. Nothing I do could approximate the phenomenological experience I have imagined in this story, but I dare to dream that by combining these two paradigms I can produce a strange new experience using this format.

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Now – once more, and quickly – let us speak of the things we were meant to discuss at these heights, in this rarefied air. Our time is short and the hour is late, and all of these things have been ordained since the foundation of the world. I have already told you the art of the future will be between the artist and God. Let me reiterate that any other beholders shall be incidental. And just as it is with Art, so must it be with Science, big S.

There are truths outside of nature that are not contingent, and they have nothing resembling a regard for human outcomes. This is the Lovecraftian account of the universe: cold, indifferent, machinic, a placid island of ignorance surrounded by a strange, unknowable Outside.

There is a famous novel by Ibn Tufail called *Hayy ibn Yaqzān*, which was titled in Latin as *Philosophicus Autodidacticus*, and it de-

scribes a man who is born on an island far from any people, who is raised by animals, and he discovers the truths of Islam entirely on his own, simply by living his life in nature and by studying the stars. When he is older, he leaves the island and he meets some Muslims, and he rejects them, because he thinks they have chosen to worship creation, when they should have chosen to worship the Creator. Indeed, if this were an historical account, we would have no choice but to regard theology in the same way we regard mathematics, as an inexorable, immaterial truth of the universe, independently discoverable by anyone.

Nevertheless, we should be averse to such a careless notion as "there is no evidence for the existence of God", because and despite theological variance between cultures, it is extremely rare to find a group of people with no notion of God in their traditions. In the study of genetic algorithms, this is called convergence. Carcinization is another popular example, and it means there is some topology of the problem space that causes a certain optimization to occur over and over. The perpetual, unresolvable question is whether this because of some universal feature of the human cognition machine, or whether it's because of some feature of the external universe, or both. The virtual is a superset of the actual; it contains everything that is and everything that could be. So too with God.

It's not a contradiction, either, to say the universe is intelligent, while believing that it has no subjective awareness. It's possible to have intelligence without consciousness. We can write an algorithm to run on a computer that solves very difficult problems, such as e.g., optimization problems, all on its own, but we would be hard pressed to ascribe consciousness to such an algorithm. Tradition is the sum of a non-conscious optimization algorithm operating on a substrate of humans across all of history. The output of that algorithm contains such things as belief in God, so we can trust there is a good, intelligent reason for that. You can posit divine intervention in this process or not; it is a theologically neutral account. You also don't know what second or third or nth order effects of believing in God and following specific religious prescriptions might be really key to the entire machine continuing to operate.

What this means is that when it comes to matters of faith,

"shut up and stop asking questions" can be the objectively correct approach, and enlightenment rational skepticism is wrong. Most scientific discoveries in the history of the West were made by Christians or Muslims. In fact, the idea of God's creation as an attribute of God, the idea that one of the ways of knowing the divine is through studying His creation, this is an Islamic idea which came to the West. (And even Ibn Tufail's novel alludes to this, when ibn Yaqzān rejects the muslims he meets for precisely this behavior, which he regards as a sin.) The idea that science is the fruit of enlightenment skepticism is fallacious, and we should oppose it wherever it is taught. Scientific advancement happens in spite of atheism, not because of it.

No matter what, you end up living under some kind of theocracy, and when its tenets do not come from revelation, they bend instead into total depravity, so the most important thing in the world may be to come to a correct understanding of God. There is no contradiction or immorality in the instrumentalizing of faith; Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. And for you who have deepness of earth, you must realize that all the good and quaint and sensible things in life are inextricably bound up in transcendent spiritual things, and that theological propositions evolved in our heads to describe things that exist Outside of even the incorporeal space of possibility, and their veracity is immaterial to their capacity to stave off the madness of the infinitely cruel universe.

If there is a way out of the hell of our own making, the hell of technocracy, the hell of the electric longhouse, it is through an act of sheer irrationality and genius, a triumph of the masculine heart over feminine securitization, and that triumph will come through a restoration of this understanding: that we study creation as an act of penitence and piety toward the Creator, an act of devotion to our Father in Heaven. This is the only and one true science.

Now: you are Zarathustra! Run down the mountain and tell the last man his (false) god is dead, and that his finality, too, was false, and that a Great Old One rises. This is not a philosophy; this is an exhortation.

That is not dead which doth eternal lie
and with strange aeons even DEATH may die.

Finally, I THANK you, from the bottom of my very own heart, for giving consideration to my works. It has been my great honor to share them with you.

ZeroHP