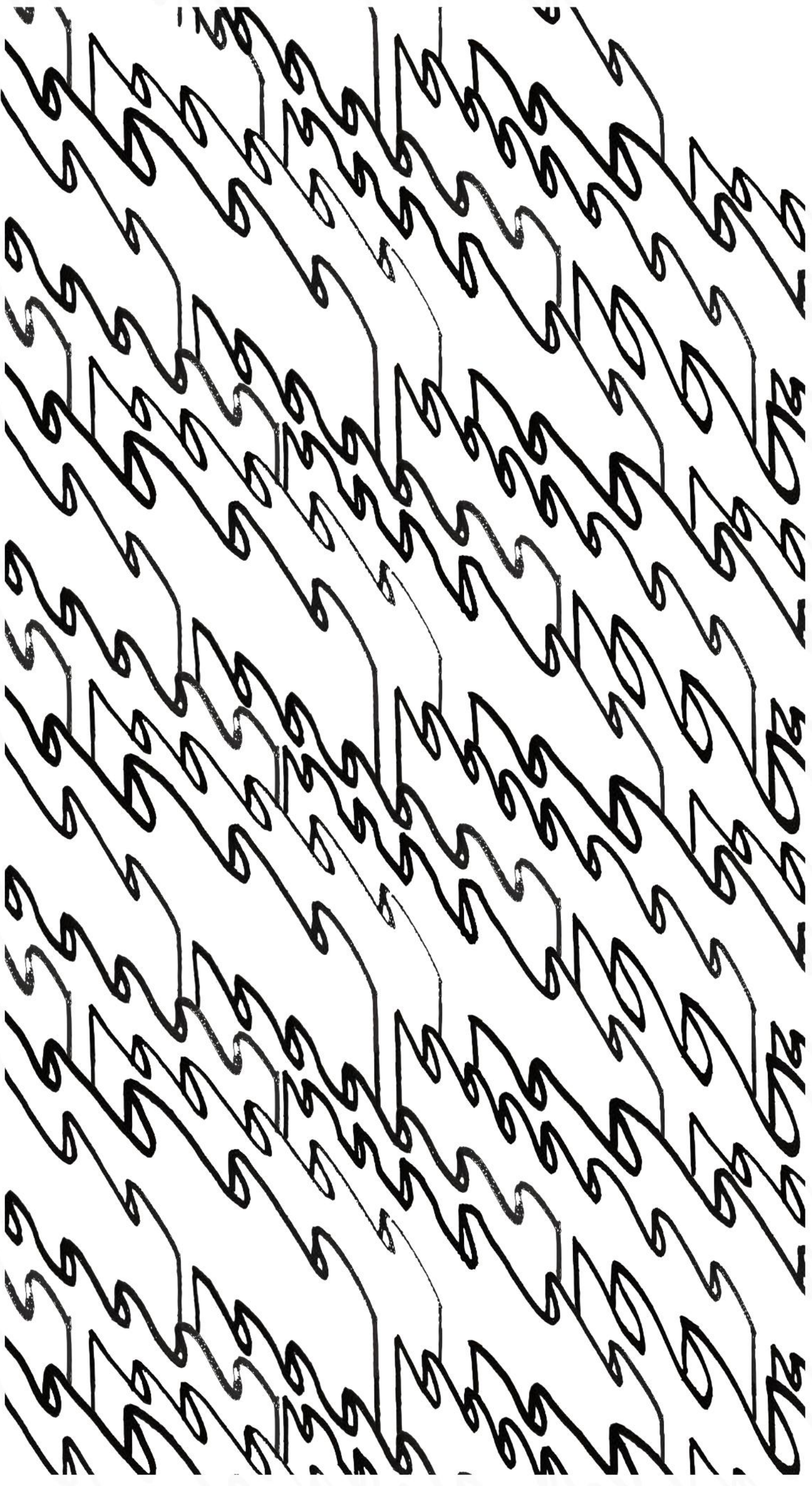


PROPOCEITHALON



AFJUNETHFETIC

The universe is a set of on/off switches, hardwired into the decisions you make. It is not a decision to do one thing, or another different thing; it is the decision to flip one switch from not doing x to doing x , leaving switches $y, z, a, etc, ad\ infin$; off. The universe is built on decision matrix binary code, and our consciousness reinterprets that as Python, for example, interprets the basic mechanics of electrical pulses. For most people, the real *computing* done in their palm is a next to useless preproduct of their hourly Tiktok cultural exchange. The people aren't interested in coding, is all I am saying. That is fine for neither am I.

However, just as there is a calculatable pattern of electrical impulses that connect themselves to a network, that stream data from a warehouse of servers, that present you a UI, that show you a series of images in motion, a sound, and other people's in the moment textual reactions to the same images and sounds—there is also a pattern of decisions that could be made to stream reality from itself, and interpret itself within your own consciousness as any combination of the eight emotions. You can program yourself by flipping switches.

If you *do* enough, you will make undoubtable ripples in reality. You may even rock other peoples boats! Sure as shit no one's rocking yours! No one makes waves anymore. They translate themselves into the computers because their bits are easier to see. Your reality is UI! Use it, find the Settings App. Write things down, because then they are tangible. Put words on your walls because that is what thousands have labelled as *magic*.

And what *millions* have labeled *insanity*!
-Sage Haba



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Parallel Lines

Ashton Miller

Fourteen parallel lines converged today, above the Pentagon. Slowly, slowly, then all at once, the laws of mathematics collapsed inward on themselves. It took us quite a few hours to notice, in actual fact. It was only through the discontinuity of Western and Eastern software that anyone noticed the anomaly, but before long there was a crowd forming at the gates of the five-sided complex—a crowd made up of misfits whose hair cascades below their knees in tangles and knots, geeks that while away their time surfing empty Reddit threads on the dead internet, the overly caring mothers of said geeks, hipsters who never overcame their Ludditic impulses, conspiracy theorists who track the governments every move and has every move plus one tracked by the government. Each of these groups had different understandings of what this discovery meant for the world, for the future and the past. Some looked down on the falling Western empire and saw these intersecting signs as the inflection point of their waning world. Some saw no correlation between any signs and any signifieds in such a post-real world and thought little of it in actual fact. But they all believed their pontificating could move towards some practical solution. While these cliques were coagulating into a mass of social awkward odorous bodies, inside the fourteenth wing of the Pentagon, executives were peering down at what they assumed were their weekly Anarchist anti-government protests, and moved on with their days. The water-cooler conversations still lingered upon what happened at the work social event the last

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Friday, and emails still floated around promising a circling back that would never happen.

Tracking the sides of the building that represented everything she stood against, our heroic protagonist dragged his finger across the gaps in the fence, relishing in the clinkity clank that led him towards oblivion, towards a reality he should have realised that he was not prepared to confront. His heartbeat pulsed out of his ears, heavy enough to drum the flies away from his face in the dry heat of the summer day, loud enough to ricochet back into his own ears and give his life its own drum-roll. After an eternity of anxious thought, he catches out of the corner of his eye, all too soon, her face in profile, sharing a kiss with another. At once his body entered shock. The sight was simple enough to be captured in a split-second, but complex enough to overclock his nervous system.

Hearing voices echoing above his head as he regains his sense of self, mind still running through a library of endless memories, he refused to open himself up to sight. He could not bare to see for himself her future without his own participation. He cannot bring himself to see, vowing to blind himself. He was sure his fate was as tragic as Oedipus' own. Instead, he let himself be dragged, rather ruthlessly, by his feet across perfectly kept lawn, across a fence, down concrete steps, and into a stark white building under led lights kept bright enough that he could see through his alabaster-white eyelids the outline of each beam of fluorescence. Irrespective of any discomfort he may have felt being dragged to a dungeon of hospital-grade LEDs and adamantine flooring, he remained grateful for being forcefully removed from such a dangerous situation. There was a kind of kinship he felt, a spiritual debt he owed his benefactors; his shining lights of benevolence. So, guided by a minor concussion and lights bright enough to belong in heaven, he opened his eyes at last, and brought himself into the topic of discussion by rather slurredly proposing a repayment in the form of a "potlatch ceremony" right there and right then.

And these two figures emerging out of the stark white glow of the gods indeed shone down upon him and agreed to his request

with two stern but emphatic nods (government operatives will never turn down an opportunity for engagement with foreign cultural practices). One of these figures, in reality, was a descendant in a long line of foreign intrusion, from engagements in Iraqi oil affairs, string pulling behind some key Vietcong enterprises, insider trading on Pearl Harbour, and some rumours run through his family Christmas dinners that even Franz Ferdinand was a family friend. All to say, the idea of a tradition like potlatch inside of the Pentagon forced hairs shooting up his back and his free hand adjusting his pants. This is all ignoring the fact that our protagonist had no idea what potlatch truly meant, and knew only the idea of mutual gift-giving.

“Well, for saving me from—uh, engagement with those Anarchist yuppies, there's nothing else I suppose I could do for you both except, well...” and before he can finish, there are two pantless men facing him in his concussed state. Except, to their genuine confusion, he doesn't do what they expect, but instead slipped something in the other way, and before long (as everyone knows, the anus is the most efficient way of taking in substances), the two operatives are instead being brought along by their own legs. Far away on planets and timelines lightyears from our own, they discovered truths they would bring back prophetising to the Anarchist collective soon after their return. Soon enough he realised the bodies were far too heavy to drag and left them on top of each other in erotic embrace.

Pacing down the disorientated corridor, he felt carried by a sense of urgency with no source. All he knew was that he could not return to whence he came, or else be confronted with a past that would cement his future in just what he came here to avoid: a wafting smell of decay and ash that emanated from cigarette stained couches while he plugs his consciousness into the infinite distraction of the internet. He knew, or rather, was told (one too many times, he thinks), that he had to leave the house to get her off his mind. But unconsciously, his earnest desire to get better brought him right back to her. How could he have known that she

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would be here, on this day? News of mathematically impossible discoveries was not something that his algorithm thought valuable of his time. He saw it as a sign; a sign that he must overcome this cataclysmic fear that corroded his insides to think about, and at the same time a sign that, just maybe, there was a kernel of potential left in him, that if he played his cards right, something could come back to fruition, that he could capture that which he lost. Although, in all likelihood he had lost any of that potential now, collapsing at the very sight of her and succumbing to the grip of the agents of American bourgeois intelligence operations. His fingers had been deep inside of them, now, and there was no doubt in his mind that she would smell it from a mile away; her olfactory senses had been honed into the smell of the "wanna-be bourgeois detritus" so that she could tell whether someone was a performative poor in an instant, the "yuppie stench" smelling like a "sickening vanilla-caramel".

Cut off partway through his delusions, with half a hardon poking through his pants, he heard behind a door the sound he was all too familiar with; water-cooler conversations about less than nothing. Fake amicability and forced acquaintance called to him like nothing else. His depthless personality slotted perfectly into the aimless meanderings of work-weary minds, and finally feeling a call to something outside of his mind's endless perambulations around a missing centre, stepped inside the room with no second thought.

As he entered, he opened with his favourite piece of meaningless drivel: "Aren't the Nespresso pods so helpful? Could you imagine if we had to brew our own coffee every time we were craving a little of the golden brown, we wouldn't get any work done!" Punctuating the sentence with a laugh just hearty enough for his audience to, for a second, believe it to be genuine. Only after his quip did he notice that the kitchen didn't have a Nespresso machine, but a fully stocked espresso machine. He quickly realised that he wasn't used to dealing with the high-end white-collar conversations. Luckily enough, however, his automaton-like bourgeois audience

didn't move through conversation in the same way as he, they were a wholly different species. They operated on intuition, on mathematic vectors between nouns and verbs, through probability machines suited to operate in a cacophany of the same voice. For them, "Nespresso" does not refer to anything beyond itself, a sign amongst other signs with nothing behind the phonetics that come out of their mouths. They nod and reciprocate a feigned chuckle, bouncing onward to other meandering conversation points like a game of leap-frog.

He stayed for longer than he expected, feeling a sense of belonging amongst the nods and assorted noises of agreement and interest. There was something about the emptiness that resonated with some lack he felt inside of his subconscious, that filled him with some simulacra of solidarity. Sharing anecdotes that expressed a desire for closeness, without the terror of revealing the core of oneself, provided him the respite he had been missing for so long. It was easy for him to lose track of time in here. Whilst individuals dropped in and out of the room, the conversation held steady, as if guided by something above them, an external force bringing speech out from their inner beings, rather than a collection of individuals with unique thought patterns. The conversation-spirit was something to be tapped into and out of at will, but no matter what would always live on. It seemed it could live on even without anyone to continue its flow, stringing itself along in its eternal configurations of non-meaning. Eventually, he tore himself away, leaving four fresh victims to press onwards, barely noticing that he had departed.

Of course, after leaving such an enriching conversation, he was exhausted and only a little bit turned around, so that he no longer knew which way was which. Hearing voices from one hallway, he followed, turning a corner directly into a window that led outside into the crowd. Cautiously, he peered out, in some masochistic way knowing exactly what he wanted to see; except, before he could look past the cardboard protest sheets and surprisingly coherent fashion sense of ten different anti-governmental political

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factions, a series of eggs began to splatter against the glass in front of him, fogging the window in a haze of egg whites and yolk. He could still peer through, searching, until one protester was bold enough to spray a bag of flour, coating it in thick white batter. An onslaught of weaponised foodstuffs soon covered the entire surface, ingredients enough to bake a cake; eggs, flour, sugar, milk. "Run through their food supplies quickly, if they continue like that" he thought in frustration, watching helplessly as the batter built up, impossible to see through. Helplessly, his view to the outside was sealed up by caloric waste. He thought maybe it was for the best, maybe Providence had decided that he was meant to remain insulated, safe. Hopefully.

Thankfully, opposite the battered window was a flux of activity, constantly flowing with bodies migrating from desk to desk, bustle enough to distract him again. He found himself standing next to a robust man in a vibrant grey-suede suit jacket that complemented his gleefully rubicund cheeks.

"Admirable, what they do out there, isn't it?" gesturing to the variegated windows across the room, a thick treacle gradually trudging down to the sill. He seemed, at least to our American misadventurer, remarkably genuine.

"Though, granted, some are more put-together than others." He admitted with a sparkle in his eye—a knowing sparkle. Our protagonist pondered that perhaps once upon a time he had held one of them in his arms, seen the world through the eyes of someone so different and yet so much the same, and that behind their bakery-fuelled rage he could see the same perspective towards the world as the one he once cherished. He stood in place, arms akimbo, looking outward into the distance as if to recognise something lost long ago. Although his stature emitted a bold, confident allure, behind his countenance was something profoundly soft; a malleable core that had been bruised and battered. Our protagonist stood waiting in vain for another word, amidst the hubbub of corporate bodies, him too staring outwardly, expecting the impossible to fall into his lap. Eventually, however,

he was jostled around by enough aimless bodies to be pushed onwards, away from the handsome lost soul, his arm reaching backwards for the solidarity he longed for. Sometimes when individuals drift through masses of bodies, they can catch one another for a brief instant, a mutual recognition that jolts through their souls, immediate connection on a spiritual level. He felt that at some level they had shared the same life, living silently alongside each other for who knows how long, and that in this liminal place, they were allowed to meet, to glimpse at the mutual understanding of each other. He knew that they would never meet again.

GO AWAY

k.
z

The FTLM-Hermes pattered feebly across the yawning chasm of open space, her sole occupant lit a cigarette, and took his hands off the console. Did you know that sometimes people die out here? No, this route isn't dangerous. It's just that it's so boring. No scenery, no nebulae or pulsars in the distance. Just monotonous black broken up by stars indistinguishable from any other. People fall asleep at the console and just fly off into eternity, lightyears off course, and are simply never found. The captain took a long drag of his cigarette before briefly reconsulting his clipboard. "Australia Post Serpentine to New Aeaea Weekly Mail Run."

Australia Post is an organisation so old that no one even remembers the significance of the word "Australia." It's an interstellar postal service like any other, aside from the fact that its profit margins are razor thin. The company specializes in taking on the routes none of the other carriers can be bothered with — long hauls into the dim periphery of human inhabited space. Few people enjoy working for it, and fewer still use it. Its *raison d'être*, it seems, is time immemorial.

The pilot put out his cigarette on the console and took back control. The Hermes whirred and made a sickly grinding sound as he guided her into a low orbit around a small planet, Magna Creta.

The pilot gazed out at the surface and squinted, the planet below was a perfectly featureless ball of pure white. No mountain ranges or valleys, no pockmarks of grey or gentle blushes of iron — it looked as though someone had cut a perfect circle out of the fabric of space itself. He steeled himself and prepared to aerobreak.

...

Go Away

The pilot looked around as he marched floatily towards the town with a box of letters in his arms. He saw a great flat field of chalk, with only a few grey buildings sprouting out of the whiteness. Great wispy clouds of chalk dust billowed on the horizon. Even the sky was grey. With the box nestled in his arms, he made his way to the centre of town.

When he approached the community centre—a featureless brick structure indistinguishable from any other in the small town—a figure rushed out and waved wildly at him with both arms.

“Postie! Get over here! You can't be outside without a mask!” The figure shouted; a kindly woman on the wiser end of middle aged.

“What?” the postie squinted “I thought you could breathe here.”

“The chalk dust, you can't breathe it for too long.” The woman grabbed him by the arm and pulled him through the door, slamming it shut behind them. They stood in the hallway of the community centre. The walls were covered in old yellowed posters and notes that no one had bothered to remove.

“That the post run for this week?” The woman smiled and took the box. “Now that you're here, have a cuppa. Come, come.” The postie wasn't in a position to refuse, and he most definitely was not paid by the hour.

The woman and the postie sat together in a common area; there were toys and books stacked neatly in the corner, all of them covered in a fine layer of chalk dust. They sipped terrible coffee and chatted, the postie tepidly answering her bubbly onslaught of questions and nodding politely when the questioning stopped.

They sat before a great window, beyond which they watched industrial diggers roll out empty and then minutes later roll in laden with chalk.

“Do you know how many people live on Magna Creta?” The woman asked before she took a long sip of her coffee. “Three-hundred. Only one-hundred in this town.” The postie watched the

steam rise from his mug. The woman continued, "I used to live on Serpentine, y'know. I miss the colours of the jungle cities, out here it's just white."

A long moment passed as they sat together, watching small clouds of chalk get picked up on the wind, bathing the town in a thin layer of white silt.

"Can I ask you a favour?" the woman enquired.

The postie made a non committal noise.

"I have a-" she looked into the distance. "An acquaintance. They live on their own about 250 lightyears Orionward from here. I can't make the trip out to check up on them myself, 'cause of work. They'll be fine, but I worry about them." The woman reached into her pocket and produced a folded up piece of paper.

"You'd have an envelope on you, right?"

The postie swore at himself, alone in the cockpit of the Hermes as she pattered feebly across the void. He half smoked, half gnawed on a cigarette. With a great grinding and whirring he manoeuvred the Hermes into orbit around a large planet. He looked out of the window down onto the surface and almost let his cigarette fall out of his mouth. A lifetime of spacefaring usually makes one resistant to awe, but this planet was beautiful. Purplegreen swirls dominated the land, and cerulean liquid water delicately snaked around the face of the planet. The postie plugged the directions the woman gave him into the Hermes, and began to descend.

The Hermes landed before a small wooden hut. The atmosphere was delicious, mild and sweet. The postie was up to his knees in life. He smoothed out his uniform and marched towards the hut, holding the letter in his hands.

The postie gave three raps on the door of the hut, the wood gave out wet sounding thuds each time. The door slowly creaked open just a smidge, and he saw a great grey eye peeking out from beyond it.

"No junkmail." The door slammed shut.

"What? No-" the postie let out a sharp sigh, "I'm with Australia

Go Away

Post. I have a letter for you.”

The door opened a smidge again. “I don’t want visitors and I don’t want mail. I came out here to be left alone.” The voice from within the hut shouted.

“Your friend on Magna Creta is worried about you.”

“Do you know how many people live on this planet?” The voice demanded. The postie paused, so the voice answered for him

“Two! Do you know how many people lived on this planet before you showed up?” The door slammed shut once more.

The postie marched back to the Hermes, as he tossed the letter out into the mangrove-like formations. He turned back.

“So what’s this planet called?” He shouted.

“Go away!”

Upstream

Sage Haba

Telephone wires seemed to buzz in his presence and he often wished to spend time away from the edifices of technology, but I remember him best in a warm summer's breeze beneath a transmission tower. Deep skies and yellow fields roiled like waves.

His face had a sharpness of physiognomy that belied frenzied thought, though he often betrayed himself in this regard by staying quiet. He told me once that he was perfectly content among the company of conversationalists, and I never pressed the issue further. Around just myself, however, he would adopt something of a feverish tone and spoke for hours of ambition and hubris.

Static filled the air.

“Man has made a mess of things.” His voice pierced through the noise. “All these divine gifts and what to show of it? Death and glory only. I have seen the universe, but I have seen nothing of conscious hate before man. It is at once fascinating and repulsing. I am a cultural researcher for the Potestas Imperialis, did you know that?”

I knew nothing of his past, so I lied. “Who isn’t?”

He smiled at me with a sweetness I had only seen in paintings.

“So, what else have you seen?”

“Very little that you would comprehend as more than fleeting visions. Your most potent ideas that flutter from your mind as you try to grasp them. Crystalline conscious architecture. Even your language lacks the words.” He considered for a moment and tilted his head upwards. The static intensified. “Oh, you’ll like this:

Oceans of cloud so thick it could drown you. An arch in the heavens and nothing below. It would be very much like flying for you.”

“We are already in the ocean,” I could barely hear myself over the electricity, “tossed about like rubbish and with nothing to hold onto. Because rubbish doesn’t have arms.”

“You turn man’s hate into art. Who else here has that ability?”

“Everybody.” I answered, not because I believed it, but because I knew why I was asked. He chuckled after a moment, as if something had occurred to him.

“What?” I asked.

“It would mean nothing to you.”

“Try me.” I attempted a mischievous smile and tugged at his sleeve.

“Yes, I suppose I could...” He trailed. “Okay. Picture a structure bigger than reality. An encompassing N-th dimensional field of biological machinery. Closer still to fungi, perhaps. Can you do that?”

I strained my cranium. “I’m an aphantasic. I can’t picture anything.”

He looked at me blankly for a breeze, his eyes like worlds. I felt fingertips across my scalp though he hadn’t moved but to close his eyes. The buzzing grew louder until it was all I could hear, like a nuclear winter. It wasn’t loud in the way that sound can hurt, but it was all-encompassing like being drowned. In a silent jolt I could see something in nothing. The structure of reality which was pulsating and shifting and mechanical and brown was laid before me in a sense that is neither physical nor immaterial.

“Have you seen it?” He asked softly.

“That was not seeing.” I said, truthfully. “More like becoming.”

“No, not yet.” He rose and stared out into the sky. Wind picked up, which I only realised because I could hear it now. His simple clothes rippled about him, clean and white. He looked like a car advert. “Let us walk. I want to watch the highway.”

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His work would come to demand more and more from him, and I grew unsatisfied in his frequent absences. Retrospect has granted me the self awareness to realise that I had been unaware of the significant strain he put on himself to spend time with me. It was difficult to notice that he was capable of being strained at all.

Years passed and cars lifted from the ground to the air, technocrats became true autocrats, and the android working class became commonplace. I came into illness, and spent many of these years in bed. Flaming chariots flashed past my window. The robotic doctors buzzed under the influence of his frequent visits.

“Man’s rocks are unfamiliar to my energy.” He once told me. “I do not understand man’s insistence on imitation. He makes simulacra of himself, and maps out cities like circuits. Everything is infinite wires. It is this recurrence that produces the auditory feedback.”

I did not know what to say so I told him that I needed to sleep. This was not a lie, my sickness had taken from me hours of my waning time through its incessant need to consume my dwindling energy. He left in his infinite courtesy and I drifted, in pain, to sleep.

I would come to learn that the Potestas Imperialis was fairly liberal about the benefits it offered its members. He in his electric conviction against the bureaucracy of planets, levied his past work in exchange for extended leave and, importantly, a personal shuttle. I followed him through tall, bright halls of ribbed marble and into dark offices, planetside, encased in concrete. From what I could gather, he wanted to travel some distance that would be unreasonable for anyone less convincing than him. The terrible slowness of these bureaucratic processions reminded me of my death and the slow agony of transition from hospital bed to phenomenon. Though I am now technically free, I am bound by his passion. I am made cognisant by his grief, though he remains unaware of me.

Eventually, he acquired his vessel.

...

The Forge of Ftars loomed like a cosmic hand, outstretched across nebulae, churning with the cacophony of industry. Only one smith operated within the structure, as most of its machinations were driven by collective desire. A hulking grey humanoid with four rippling arms approached him, carrying a large hammer. "This is where dreams are forged, traveller."

He was dressed in a manner that was incomprehensible to me. Blood red pins entered and exited all over his body, which was otherwise coated in a dark grey mesh that rippled when he moved.

"No, Sunsmith, this is where you think dreams are forged. Refined, maybe. But really it is the cosmic machine that does the work."

The huge creature shrugged, the tapestry draped across him rippling under his might. "I don't care to understand this distinction. Artists travel eons for a taste of the Forge's offerings."

"Feh. Artists. I have only known one artist in my time, Sunsmith. My time, which is vast, seems less so than the gap between truly great aestheticians."

"Artists that tend to think this way." The Sunsmith turned and busied himself with a hammer and an ingot embedded with galaxies. "I'd suggest you get comfortable. The Forge may know what you want, but it will take you an age to find it."

"I have far more than an age. If I must search till the last star gasps, I will do this."

"And where will you start, assured one?"

He looked around, amidst the chain and fire, considering every door and hall and hatch as if each had equal validity in his quest.

The geography of the Forge shifted around him, interlocking plates of dark metal and grinding gears, undoubtedly alive and unnavigable. So, he sat.

"I will let my dream find me."

The Sunsmith laughed, "It is as good as any other method. Tell me, traveller, when you receive your dream, will you recognise it?"

Or, as the many artists who have lost themselves in these

Upstream

shifting halls, are you waiting for the universe to give you purpose?”

“I will recognise my dream, Sunsmith. For my dream is the part of me that is missing.”

With a small smile, the Sunsmith returned to his work until the Forge’s machinations took him away.

He sat alone for thousands of years. The Forge provided sustenance as its mechanisms conveyed about him, pulling energy from elsewhere to manifest edible product. Potable liquid was always within reach. He got up occasionally, and never roamed more than a few metres by foot. All the while the vast mechanical structure showed him millions of configurations of mechanical desire. Every few years he was given a window to the cosmos. The tide of stars, churning like fields of yellow grass in the summer. He always stole a glance, the most animation he allowed himself beyond the completion of his most basic needs. He looked forlornly at the universe, and I wish I could have told him to leave this place and get back out there; that even one world is enormously more varied and beautiful than anything he will see here. I wish I could have told him that he does not understand what he wants, that he is wrong to waste so much for it. Yet, his desire was true, and singular, and his needs were met. So, he sat thousands of years more.

For a moment he thought that the machine had granted him his journey’s end and his mouth hung open at the sight of another sentient body. It was only when he shook himself from his meditative stupor, and noted the new presence’s form, that he recognised the reality of the situation. It had been so long since he had seen anything recognisably alive.

“Oh! ‘Ello, mate. Didn’ see ya there!” A shape like an abbreviated centipede, with many, opposable, six-fingered hands, stepped through a shifting gap of panels. “Ere for a dream, then, ey?”

He sighed, then hardened. "Yes."

"Well. Awright then. Guess I'll join ya for 'dinner'." They made a circular movement with several of its hands. "Far as such traditions 'ave any sway in 'ere."

The invertebrate curled its bottom half to itself and pulled out a bag, laying out a spread of presumably edible cubes. "So, mate, 'ow long 'ave you been stuck in 'ere?"

He, too, nostalgic for decorum, took out a globule of his food. "By astronomical estimate, perhaps six thousand years. I only see the cosmos every hundred or so."

"Gnarly. I been in 'ere, let's see," It pulled out a golden device,

"Nine hundred and fourteen years. Not bad." It returned the device and turned its focus back to him, sitting cross-legged on the floor. "What're you 'ere for, then?"

"I am waiting for divine inspiration."

"Aren't we all, mate? I mean, what drove you here, specifically? Contrary to pop'lar belief, I don't think this is the place for insp'ration. No be'er than the mud-pits back 'ome. Me, personally, I'm 'ere on a mission."

"What is your mission?"

"You'll think I'm crazy."

He gestured kindly for the creature to go on.

"Well, awright. I'm looking for the cure to death. I 'old that all of our experiences are stored in the cosmos, and that they can be retrieved. I'm gonna bring back the great thinkers, and everyone else who wants another go."

He looks at the segmented sentient seriously. "Insanity is to be expected from so much solitude."

It approximates a shrug. "If I'm nuts, I was nuts from the start."

"Quite." He took a larger than usual portion of his sustenance, and chewed on it for a long time while the creature started its meal. The hour that passed in silence was comparatively short for the two of them, so lengthy their journey thus far. Surprisingly, it was him who broke from stoicism. "What makes you think you can

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free consciousness? Where do you believe it would go?”

The centipede looked up from the pulsating tilework. “Well, there’s gotta be a way, doncha think? Energy can’t be destroyed, but the things that contain it can.”

“You wish to destroy the machine behind reality?”

“Real’y has suffered worse. We know of worlds from before the big bang, civilizations that precede the universe, why couldn’t we have all the minds who ever died still here, too?”

He clasped his hands. “I do wish you luck, though I suspect that your aim is far too lofty. With such a desire, I have no doubt that you will perish in this Forge well before it can even begin to process your desire.”

“Such is life, mate.”

The two shared more silence, moving only to keep themselves in each other’s locale as the Forge threatened to split them apart. The walls overlapped like intricate flowers before blossoming into a large window. Noticeably less stars shone back.

“Oh,” He began, “I- It seems I was mistaken.”

“Sorry?”

“My time here. It has been longer. By twelve thousand years, I think.” He clutched his head.

“You awright, mate?”

“I have lost all sense of passage. How long have you been here? It seems to me that you have always been.”

Again, the golden device emerged. “A few ‘ours, mate. 3 and a bit.”

“I cannot realise it. I- I have always been here, in this moment,” He began, slowly, to weep “and I have always been on that small, blue pearl with River. I can feel him far more acutely than I ever did before. The whole length of his life laid out bare for me. I may touch any part of him, truly connected to the totality of something. And yet, I cannot change anything. I expect surprise where there cannot be. I live, and he does not, and I continue to live and live and live. I have all his art but no more. All his words, but not his self.”

“Your dream?” The alien asked.

“No. Just the time with which to achieve it.”

I will readily admit that there is much about this universe which I did not understand. With as much grace that familiarity had granted him in his travels, I had never been bequeathed such a gift. Frequently I was confused and disoriented by things that I have no recourse to comprehend, yet whose existences I was forced to contend with anyway. Through it all, however, I had never made the attempt to understand him. I had simply always known that this task was unapproachable. One cannot know another's thoughts, nor the way that they process them, nor the context from which they emerge. One must be content with the possibility of the subjectivity of one's own communication ringing in a similar tune to the subjective arena of someone else's thoughts. This is how I had always lived.

But it had become rapidly apparent to me that there was one objective experience that ties the communication of sentient beings together - not that of memory where the past distorts and shared experience is but an illusion, not that of tomorrow, where everyone dreams incompatible utopias - but in the present experiential flow of reality. The agreement that there is a 'now' and that we are all feeling it.

He no longer had 'now'.

His behaviour since leaving the Forge had been apparently reasonless. For long periods of time, he was silent, contemplative. His attention wavered from the manoeuvring of the ship and it drifted for years. Other times he was gripped with animation, doing many tasks at once, often poorly. His eyes did not focus on single points but stared through the hull of the ship, even as he attempted to program several journeys into it at once.

Though I never knew what it was like to be him, it was clear to me that his own reality had become thoroughly at odds with his environment.

Upstream

He confronted God as a drunk confronts a police officer: with not nearly as much caution as is advisable. A palace made of nebulae and rock formed around him as he tapped into the structure of reality and he staggering up to a dias in the cosmic firmament. What was the interior of his ship melted away and he was alone with reality itself in a structure formed for his convenience. Not that he noticed, or perhaps, cared. Singular in his vision, he began his spiel.

“I have made it, machine. To stand at the precipice of everything. It is in no way humbling or extraterrestrial to me, for I knew I would be here, and can see time laid out before me as a single length of string. I am here in conviction, I can see my victory. I want the sliver of you that once was River. A small part of your might. I am willing to take it, if necessary.”

And God, who had never had me, gave him the ability to sense me.

“River? River, is it you? Have you followed me this whole time?

You have been with me all this way, and I had not the sense to realise it. This pains me, though in my new senses I feel as if I have always known. I am overwhelmed by this revelation every breathing moment. Speak unto me, River. Tell me what it has been like for you all these millenia.”

I was overcome by recognition. No longer an unseen phantom and completely overwhelmed by it. A validation of existence that felt altogether unreal. I hesitated and then answered, “It has been long, my love. Long and lonely.”

And with this said, I suddenly found myself at once crowded with voices and completely myself. I was looking down on him now, and I spoke in a manner that was both external to myself and fundamentally core to my being.

“You have reached your journey’s end. Thank you for returning to me the energy that composed River. I am complete and resplendent.”

He turned and whipped his head around, confused. “Where did he go? Where is River?”

Sage Haba

“He is with us. He is a part of the structure of reality, as all are. Returned to the mechanisms of consciousness that underscore reality. We are here. We are complete.”

“No.” He erupted into vocalisations, thrashed around and eventually began to scream. I grew less and less aware of the noises he made as I drifted into the machine. I finally relaxed against the current as I was serenaded by his musical expressions of love for me. His desperation. His conviction.



*Sculptures by Maddie
Text by L. P. Q. Silver*

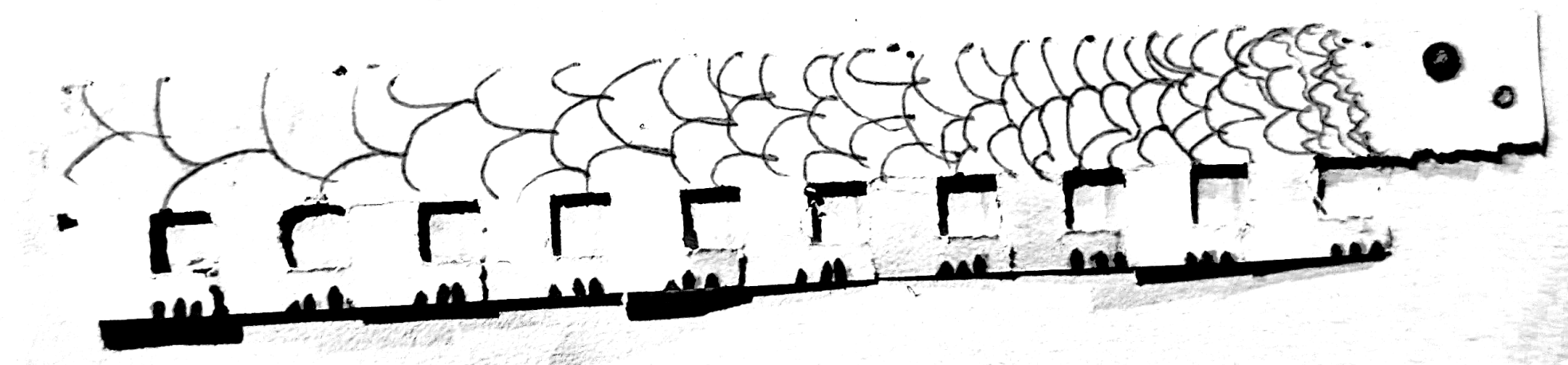
One may ponder olives,
pierced by toothpicks. We
are what we eat, the very
hungry caterpillar becomes
the world.

Long creatures deserve long friends. Note the other guy, and feel the warmth of another body in your space.

The paper centipede lizard only has left feet. Imagine the turmoil he feels buying shoes! His scales grow larger down his body; he also spends a lot on scale polish and pedicures to make his nails pink.



*MAKE YOUR OWN FUCKING
GUY!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!* ↓



Poetry

Mr Clachett

Did a fine deed today,
Saw Mr Clachett down the street,
He had just been shopping,
Carrying too many bags

Think of the water under the bridge,
The shadows do something to it,
The shivers take me downwind,
Send them out, all of them

My friend has left for the night,
He hurried out to take flight,
Out of sight, Out of mind

Paid me a visit they did,
I was all alone in bed,
Not too sad,
Not too mad

I yelled at them to come in
and leave me alone again
Don't come in,
Don't be him

by L. P. Q. Silver

"It turns out I really trust you."

Why do these words haunt me?
Do they haunt him?
Do I haunt you?

I wish I could have done better.

I'm sorry.

I'm mad.

by L. P. Q. Silver

Deadname

I had a deadname.

I banged a boy with my deadname.

I had a middle name, after my grandfather.

He died the night I banged the boy.

by Anonymous

Contributors

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k.
z

~

Maddie

~

Ashton Miller

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L. P. Q. Silver

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Sage Haba