Thrice Great Hermes

by Stanley Lieber

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Thrice Great Hermes

i.

no one else in town had a phone. vidya climbed to the top of the water tower alone, to avoid all the hyperventilating demands for explanations, half-thought-out recriminations, more closely considered criticisms, and so forth, that he'd be forced to endure if anyone saw him checking the weather.

no sign of sl.

he scanned the horizon in every direction, waving his phone to aim the beam. still nothing.

which wasn't really a surprise, in the literal sense.

the problem with sl was that he didn't really understand telling the truth. he woke up every morning and created the universe anew. nothing persisted, nothing could convince him to slow down and pay attention to what it was he was saying. vidya had more than once caught sl unrolling a spiel that he himself had originated, in an attempt to gloss over some inconsistency vidya had pointed out. maddeningly, sl couldn't quite grasp why vidya would object to this recycling of his material.

vidya put away his phone.

climbing down the water tower he realized that he'd forgotten to invite sl to the meeting.

now, he noticed, someone had seen him.

the figure of hermes was difficult to see.

the shadow of the water tower concealed nothing. the ups truck stopped, too close, dislodging its driver into the dark grass adjacent to vidya's present geolocation. it was a special delivery.

"you were in the navy?"

"what?" vidya, confused. "oh, this." his hat. "it's from magnum p.i."

the driver blinked.

vidya accepted the parcel and turned back towards the school.

he wondered if sl would show up today. right away, he decided that he probably wouldn't. his usual pattern. vidya cut into the box and verified its contents against the shipping manifest. sl's gift had arrived intact.

along the path he imagined: houses, trees, fences, gravel, weeds, insects, scattered refuse, miscellaneous advertising materials. he wadded up the shipping manifest and tossed it into the shallow ditch that ran alongside the road. who cared.

his hat smelled of sweat.

tires crunched on pale gravel as vidya's mom pulled up in the family's new ford expenditure.

he hated the ridiculous, pretentious, oversized truck.

mom cracked her window and glared down at vidya. "why aren't you in school?"

it was all he could do to sustain his blank expression. the deal he now made with himself was that if she blinked before he answered, that would be it: he was going to hell.

mom blinked.

vidya just didn't care. now that his fate had been sealed, what would be the point of worrying over additional infractions?

he smiled to himself.

the clock on the truck stereo could not tell the truth. it stubbornly displayed the wrong time, almost as if his mom wanted to be late. which, in any case, she always was. vidya was sympathetic—wrangling children was probably difficult at her age. and here he was, not at all where he was supposed to be.

he unzipped the top of his bag, pulled out his clipboard, and quickly jotted down some notes.

she just doesn't care, he wrote.

and then he enumerated:

1. TEMPER

2. COMES BACK FROM MOTHER MEAN

3. YELLING

4. SCHOOL – PROBLEMS

5. COUNSELING

6.

he had veered off into complaining about himself, just as his mother veered off the road.

the ridiculous truck destroyed the tree. the tree destroyed the ridiculous truck. the nature of nature, vidya mused, was circular.

"we're having a wreck," vidya observed.

his mom just looked at him, and then looked straight ahead, gripping the steering wheel.

shattered glass seemed to situate in every crevice of the vehicle's interior. vidya picked a piece out of his hair. he slipped his clipboard back into his bag, brushing glass out of its wrinkles and folds.

a tow truck arrived. the tow truck was considerably smaller than the family's ford expenditure, but managed the job without serious complaint.

"it's a good thing your sister wasn't sitting back there," his mom said, motioning to the rear of the giant fucking truck. "that's where she always sits."

vidya nodded.

"fishtailed," explained vidya. "into the tree."

"loose gravel?" the ups man asked.

"yeah."

the ups man uploaded his paperwork and climbed back into his truck. vidya waved at him as he drove off.

opened the package.

he was surprised by the contents, which weighed considerably more than he had expected. but the manifest was accurate. this was what he had ordered.

"this will do, i guess," he said to himself.

vidya ate his snack as he started on the long walk back to his house.

mom would not be home yet. he'd have time to drag out his game system, play through a few levels, then stow it back in her closet before she got home. she'd never know he'd sidestepped his punishment.

by the time he made it home he just didn't care. he sat down on his bed and sensed all the feeling in his body draining through the top of his head, his sense of himself blinking in and out like the tiny flap atop a semi's smokestack. there was no point in playing, now. in a few hours it

would be time for bed. a few hours after that it would be time to wake up again.

vidya purposely dropped one of the game system's controllers on the floor of his mother's closet before shutting up the accordion doors and returning to his room for the night.

where he promptly fell asleep.

he completely forgot about it and six months later it was still laying there on the floor of his mom's closet. she hadn't picked it up. had she even noticed? he wasn't sure if she was laying a trap.

he shifted several boxes of his other confiscated belongings out of the way and happened upon the bear's rifle. unused since before he was born. its firing pin removed. he pushed aside the useless mechanism and retrieved the item he was looking for.

later, in his room, he made a duplicate copy of the video.

atop the water tower there were fewer interruptions.

vidya pulled out his portable system and began to play. his mind wandered. he found himself unable to complete any levels. before long he replaced the portable system to his bag and simply leaned back, hands spread against the bright, cold surface of the water tower, and tried to think.

tried to think about what.

when the exercise failed, as he knew it would, he decided to dwell on something, anything else, leaving spaces for the revisions he was certain would lately arrive to fill in his memories of the next few moments.

in retrospect the afternoon had been rather nice. he appraised his memory and discovered that he recalled all manner of texture, of detail, that had occupied his mind and senses.

he preferred this version.

shapes moved in the back of vidya's mind.

he retreated to that back room and from out of its filing cabinets he produced folders, notebooks, small boxes, sheafs of lined and unlined paper, various folds of miscellanea. more had arrived.

he sifted through the incoming effluvia and selected a large manila envelope, more or less at random. instinct for his guide, he broke the seal he himself had placed and dumped the contents onto the table. he watched as his hands nimbly sorted the material. none of this was deliberate, per se. all of it seemed to spring from an unseen well. he could only try, somehow, to interpret the results.

the collage of material spoke to him audibly, in his mother's voice.

"wake up and take out the trash."

vidya reluctantly pulled down the covers and swung his feet onto the floor. cold light flooded his room. unsure of his legs, he ambled groggily into the bathroom where he peeled off his urine-soaked underwear and dropped them into the sink. he turned on the hot water and sat down on the toilet, chewing his fingernail.

what would become of the shapes?

spiraling outward from some internal engine, components breaking apart to shattered pieces, content with the by now familiar recurrence, his vehicle rendered inert.

vidya clutched the bathroom towel, remembering to dry his hands. he glanced at the decorative soap dish his mother had positioned on the back of the toilet and wondered why she never removed the plastic wrappers from the various pieces of soap.

the shapes were all wrong.

there would be no further harassment from sl.

vidya sealed off the portal, taping the manila envelope shut with an expensive roll (a pattern of multicolored blocks) he had mail ordered from overseas. he had shattered the rubber stamp with a large rock found along the side of the road. a geode. no more of this.

vidya's gaze fell on the mirror. he went to work on his eyebrows, trimming what he saw as the excess by shaving around the hollow of his eye socket with a disposable razor. next he slathered shaving cream on the back of his head and performed a similar maneuver around the

bottom of his undercut. he fastened his gold chain around his neck and pronounced himself fit to be seen. by whom?

returning to his room he realized that he had not removed the sheets from his bed. he carefully folded the whole mess up into his comforter and deposited the enormous wad of heavy quilt into the washer.

back in his room he gently scrubbed his suede shoes with foam cleaner and a brush. his thoughts fizzled on the notion of the long walk to school.

and so he decided he wouldn't go.

well, he had seen better mornings.

vidya counted the steps between his front door and the street. he filed the useless information in the filing cabinet in the back room and continued on foot to his destination. at the library he claimed his usual table. unzipped his bag and found his book. carefully, he slid his finger to the bookmark, which he deftly removed, and picked up where he had left off the night before.

the librarian startled him. this is not a library, she seemed to be saying. he was confused at first but gradually he realized that she objected to him bringing in his own book from outside the library. he stuffed the contraband volume back into his bag and nodded agreement. the basis of her complaint was not at all clear, but, satisfied, she disappeared back to wherever it was she had surveilled his infraction.

vidya's head hurt. he wandered the isles for several minutes in search of an approved diversion before surrendering the charade. there was nothing left in this place that he hadn't already read.

he was pretty sure.

it was unusual for him to climb the water tower this late at night. but here he was. vidya never noticed any workers at the tower, in fact, he rarely encountered anyone at all, but he knew someone must perform the site's routine maintenance. he supposed that someday someone would ask him what he was doing up here.

tonight broke the usual pattern of silence, as two, then three, then five police cars streaked by below, lights and sirens engrossed in their (to his mind) inscrutable dialogue. he tried to imagine what vocabulary they must employ that negotiated the ordered pattern of their flight, preventing each cruiser from colliding with the next, but he faltered on the strained analogy. words had strangled his notional curiosity in its crib.

his phone battery had already died. he had remembered to double-check the weather, but hadn't gotten to today's delivery schedule before it ran out of juice. today's weather was the usual tornado watch, nothing to ponder, and the ups man never showed up this late, anyway.

climbing down the tower he flinched as several more police cars whipped past, sirens blaring. at the foot of the ladder he discovered the package he had given up on. attached was a short note from the ups man explaining that he figured it would be okay to leave the parcel unattended since it was unlikely anyone else would happen along this late at night. vidya folded the note carefully and filed it in the back room with all his other day-to-day ephemera. the ups man's handwriting was by now a fixture of the archive.

he opened up the package, cutting the brown tape with his pocket knife, and removed each perishable item. satisfied that the foodstuffs had arrived intact, he began to eat his snack.

vidya walked all the way home, still thinking about what he would wear to school the next day.

no school.

vidya said, "okay, mom," and rolled over and went back to sleep. for a few minutes he thought that this was how it was going to work. then she came back.

mike was coming over. vidya was to go and play outside. play with mike's two boys, who were a year, and two years older than him, respectively.

"no thanks," vidya said, and prepared to go on with his day.

mike was a deputy sheriff. whatever that meant in a town this size. his sons were awful, and would probably also become deputy sheriffs, once they were old enough to drink. mike seemed sober enough, though he was very, very sarcastic.

but none of this was vidya's problem. he left the house before any of them arrived, and didn't return until late evening.

in the meantime he wandered the borders between properties, deep in the woods that opened up near his house. in a way quite different from the water tower, this place was separate from the deadening nothing of the town, and of home. he had brought a book.

vidya fell asleep in the woods.

SORRY, I COULDN'T RESIST

I shouldn't write this down.

pt. i:

Yellow, red, white, blue, purple, moire circle, two by two eyes. Beige poncho, projected reverse. Rainbow wires. Pink house.

pt. ii:

This photo is no longer available. Rainbow umbrella, rainbow dress, fog on mountains, how does your garden grow. Manga cafe. Illustrated primer.

pt. iii:

Rainbow, clouds, moire. Polka dot bull, gingham shawl. Rainbow textile. Alarming home, polka dot MLK. Rainbow, stripes, moire. Rainbow, stripes.

I want to erase everything.

sl filled in the blanks. the premise of each title was not always apparent from the cover art. sometimes sl wondered if the cover would end up being the best part of the book. academic, in any case, as he was, as usual, broke. he closed the magazine and tossed it on the floor.

there was no food in the house. his mom would be out until who knew when. he picked up the phone and the phone had been disconnected. probably owing to his recent habit of intercepting mom's paychecks before she could pay the bills. she never seemed to notice.

five mile walk into town. he supposed he'd better get started if he expected to hustle any dinner.

someone was going to pay.

"i could do anything for five hours," vidya said. he realized now that the five mile walk was going to take considerably longer than he had planned. but, five hours? well, it made for a good story.

he whistled to himself tunelessly as he walked. halfway through his journey he sat down on the side of the road and rummaged through his bag in search of a snack. no phone, either. he got himself back to his feet and started to walk. he guessed he really was doing this alone.

no one would complain. no one was there to complain. walk, walk, walk, walk, walk, walk, walk.

it wasn't much of a town.

vidya tore the page out of his notebook and wadded it into a tight ball, which he sent curving in a long arc from the top of the water tower. owing to a slight breeze its progress dwindled into a slow meander towards the snow covered ground, where it was immediately run over by a passing police car. compacted into the snow, it evinced no further signs of life.

vidya was hungry. he considered walking home for lunch but caught himself before doing anything so stupid. that left whatever was packed into his backpack, which was nothing.

he trudged the rest of the way back to school. lunch was over.

this regular rhythm had become both familiar and disspiriting. something lay just beyond the reach of his understanding, but he couldn't say what it was.

weary of repeating the cycle, vidya checked all the way out. after school he went straight home and did nothing at all for the rest of the evening. no books, no games, no nothing.

no nothing.

WELTSTADT

Bifurcated, black and white stripes; moire. This photo is no longer available. Form under sheets. A rainbow of bubbles in a plain, dark room. Architecture of stripes crossed by wires.

whatever happened to just wearing the mask.

it's not clear at all what the woman wants me to do. her teenage son exhibits some kind of behavioral problem. she posits there must be a root cause. i know, right? not my usual gig. but the money's right and the fringe benefits (again, the mother) are sufficient.

alice cleared my schedule for the foreseeable. i drive all the way out to this tiny, shit town (there is no airport) and find a place to stay. then the mother tells me about the father.

this part i'll elide owing to space considerations. suffice to say, it's no surprise the kid has problems.

five hundred a day, plus expenses.

you'd think no one in town had ever seen a mercedes.

local diner. i pretend to enjoy the meal and the waitress slips me her number. i pull out my phone to make a call and the place comes to a halt, dead silent. what did i say? as if in response, the toothpick snaps in my mouth.

the mother is financing this charade, somehow, but i still don't know what she hopes i'll uncover that she doesn't already know.

"ma'am, your son is acting out because you're a total bitch."

that'll go over well.

i've jotted down some preliminary notes but really this is an open and shut case.

the boy needs to grow up, as soon as possible.

no, vidya wouldn't abide being investigated. he climbed down to the ground and waved at raymond, the ups man.

"i don't know, man," raymond said. "sounds like she's got your nuts in a vice."

i had to admit he was right. the kid wasn't going to shake me. i might not have stated it so bluntly, but hey, it wasn't my future on the line. this kid was probably the most interesting thing on raymond's route. i made a note for myself to pull him aside and explain the situation, when it all came down. hopefully he'd understand. nothing personal, it was just business.

vidya didn't have any business. from what i'd gathered he had few possessions, no friends, no prospects. he carried it all in his head. for a teenager that hardly distinguished him, especially in this town, but he'd twisted simply being boring into some sort of art form. his mother was right about one thing. he had to be stopped before he did something he couldn't take back.

this was so far out of my wheelhouse i didn't know the zip code. i had already decided to qui—

vidya didn't even like this train of thought. he ripped the page out of his notebook and sent it sailing off the top of the water tower. it bounced off the windshield of raymond's ups truck just as he pulled up and skidded to a stop in the mud below.

clothes hangers. vidya paged through the assortment of t-shirts hung haphazardly in his closet. there didn't seem to be much point in actually choosing one, so he devised a system to select a shirt at random.

random. the notion relied upon trust in an assortment of factors he knew he barely understood. low confidence his method had attained to any sort of rigor, but he figured the exercise had at least broken him out of the usual cycle of intentionality, followed by immediate disappointment, and, inevitably, humiliation. for what it was worth, the final choice still belonged to him.

at least he hadn't used a damned computer. he knew that the devices in his home would inject unwanted predictability. his method was based instead upon scattering a handful of grass on the table and performing a quick bit of mental math that he likewise could muster little confidence would hold up under scrutiny. none of this bothered him to any significant degree. at the end of it all he was wearing a clean t-shirt, and thus could leave the house secure that no one would question his basic hygiene.

portions of this he had attempted to relate to the ups driver, who had humored him politely, but who hadn't really seemed to understand why vidya required so complex a mechanism to choose between what, to him, seemed to be mostly identical pieces of clothing. vidya gave up trying to explain, but he filed away the experience for later review.

along with the others.

vidya remembered grade school. at once a sense of liberation and disappointment. finally, at least, something slightly different than the usual routine. that is to say, a new usual routine.

he remembered the dull scissors, the dull people. fat crayons, flat on one side so they wouldn't roll away. "seriously?" he had wondered, to no one. the other children seemed content with the condescension. he had immediately set to work harnessing their credulity for his own ends.

he remembered being instructed to cease operations drawing pictures of airplanes for his best friend, whose parents had threatened to sue the school. a year in his future he would accidentally stab the boy with the sharp end of a pencil. the boy's parents dutifully threatened, again, to sue. the school administration, and the boy's parents, had seemed to interpret both offenses as roughly equivalent.

those had been the good years. as his schooling progressed, and his estimation of it degenerated, vidya had moved on to such mischief as organized study strikes against the historicist curriculum and smuggling

banned reading material. he had shared with his classmates the gutter dialect of cable television and contemporary adult fiction.

today, he had brought his phone.

the adults had seemed relieved when he stopped lugging around all the books. of course, none of them had guessed what had replaced them. boasting limited functionality, the device had been a gift from his dad. vidya had modified its capabilities to include the display of arbitrary byte streams, fed from internal storage or the network. he didn't need paper, anymore.

today he opened a new chapter of the logic of scientific discovery. this one was not even in the public library—he had found it on the network. due to the device's small size, it could only display a few lines at a time, but he found that he relished the precise navigation, back and forth, over individual lines of text. he directed his concentration on the rectangle in the palm of his hand, forgetting temporarily about the incongruous relationships between discreet entities irl that continued to elude his grasp.

some unknown period had elapsed when he noticed the light had changed. he tucked his phone into its usual pocket in his bag and headed back to the school, to make an appearance in front of hallway surveillance cameras before he set out on the long walk home.

thwack.

critter steadied his aim and placed another projectile square in the center of the camera eye mounted outside the entrance of the school. so long as the perimeter surveillance was kept out of commission, passage to and from the school could be accomplished more or less without interference. critter repeated this percussive maintenance routine every other week.

vidya walked up just as critter was stowing his rifle. "thanks," he said. critter nodded and vidya headed into the school.

for ninety minutes he sat, apparently listening to the objectionable content. at the sound of the first bell he left the school, headed for the water tower.

no signal.

nothing saved to internal storage. back down the tower, then. he passed critter on the street, who had also taken advantage of the renewed lack of surveillance. the other boy nodded silently and continued on his way. vidya decided to follow him.

winding through the trailer court vidya was sure critter had spotted him. but maybe not. the boy was a year older than him, which counted for something at this age. hard to tell. critter answered the door when he knocked.

his real name was chris. the nickname reportedly stemmed from an incident in which chris had been observed inserting his questionably pubescent penis into a stray cat. the nickname had stuck after his own mom (hopefully ignorant of the legend) had begun using it herself. by now chris didn't even mind. vidya knew all of this and thinking about it made him smile.

critter frequently exploited his greater physical size and strength, often to preposterously exaggerated effect. he liked to put vidya in a headlock. when vidya inevitably resisted, critter would push him down and step on his neck. critter would say, "if you don't like it, why don't you get the fuck out of here and go home?" vidya's mom would offer a variation of this same response when he complained about the situation at home. vidya resolved to stop complaining.

critter's parents provided him with an ample supply of junk. vidya could only marvel at the quantity of video games, comic books, toys, clothing, sporting equipment, candy, record albums, movie tickets, jewelry, and various and sundry other items critter always seemed to possess. for critter, too much was never quite enough. he loved to point this out to anyone who would listen.

"i can't feel pain," he would also say. "i was born with a condition, my nervous system doesn't transmit pain." he would pull up his sleeve to reveal a long scar running down his arm that had been carved out by the tire swing on the playground, wrapping around him like so, while the rest of his body was flung from the tire. "i didn't feel it," he would continue. "it didn't hurt at all." he derived obvious pleasure from relating this tale to smaller, younger boys. vidya didn't care if it was true or not. critter was stronger than him, tougher than him, and so far vidya had proven incapable of inflicting upon him injury of any kind. the ultimate explanation for his failure was utterly beside the point.

into the woods.

even the small sounds of the tiny town could sometimes be too much. vidya would take his bag and spend the whole day wandering in the forest that opened up next to his house. he could walk for hours without encountering civilization, though sometimes he would meet another person coming or going.

perhaps a mile from his house, further into the woods, stood a small abandoned structure. he supposed it had once been a residence, though all of its furniture and fixtures had long since been stripped. he assumed, by visitors such as himself.

into this structure he had, over time, drug various items from various other locations. the bench seat from an old car he found amongst other such old cars at an abandoned car lot elsewhere in the woods. a small battery powered television that did not work. the latest addition was a portable charcoal grill, on which he planned to cook meals. from time to time he had considered rebasing his operations (in general) to this relatively remote location. the lack of insulation, and for that matter, the almost total lack of windows, dissuaded him from entertaining that notion seriously.

in the meantime he hung posters.

unlike on top of the water tower, there was no signal in the woods. consequently he had deposited his collection of hardcopy books inside the abandoned structure. makeshift shelves lined the walls. he had found the deep woods to be a suitable spot for reading. the only problem was moisture. since the abandoned structure was hardly shipshape, his books were probably, even if slowly, being ruined. still, he judged them to be safer here than at home. he'd just have to work his way through the remainder of unread volumes before time ran out.

for this one, it was too late. black mold.

deep in the forest sunlight seemed to emanate from nowhere. already an overcast, misty day, the tree cover concealed the ostensible source of the light. by all rights it should be completely dark inside the abandoned structure but somehow he was still able to read.

he smelled mildew.

"if you have the opportunity, do it," he said.

vidya closed the moldy old book and scanned the room. he was alone. outside it had grown dark. from whence, then, the voice?

vidya packed up his gear and left. the walk home seemed to take longer than usual. much longer. in fact, he had made no progress. he went ahead and sat down.

when he woke up it took several long moments to remember where he was. the sensation disagreed with him.

"i don't like being out of control," he said.

vidya somehow made it the rest of the way home. his mom was just climbing into bed. "don't leave your clothes on the floor," she reminded him. he laid down on his bed without even bothering to take off his shoes. when sleep eluded him, he remembered the book. continued to read. by morning he had finished the last chapter.

mom was going nowhere. vidya decided to check in on critter. at the border of the trailer court he paused to consult his watch. not sure what difference the time would make, he went ahead and knocked on critter's door.

"go the fuck away." critter's nose barely penetrated the morning air. when vidya failed to respond he shut the door without elaborating further. cowed, vidya turned and walked away.

onward, he guessed, to school. they had replaced the external cameras. so soon? he wondered if the contract had gone to a new vendor. he made a deliberate face at the camera as he passed beneath its gaze. controlling the narrative.

inside the building he faced the usual dilemma: motion or stasis. mental motion incurred immediate penalties, while mental stasis most often yielded plaudits. the dichotomy was false and he never cared for awards anyway.

on the second floor he stopped in his tracks.

the detective had followed him to school. long scraggily hair, unshaven jowl, sports glasses. a man out of time. vidya ducked into the restroom and locked himself in a stall.

predictably, the detective had followed. he could hear the man speaking aloud to himself as he peeked into each stall, seemingly confident he was about to spot his quarry.

"the kid thinks i don't know."

mother had been born here.

grandmother had been born here.

great grandfather had been born in these woods. dad claimed that mom's family had arrived in the area from ireland in 1735. why here, of all places? and how had they even found it?

the little town connected via narrow roads to other little towns, twisting through the forest over hundreds of miles to eventually intersect with a small city. mom had visited such places, but only with the car doors locked. here, things were quieter.

further from the roads the forest was quieter still. inside the abandoned structure sound seemed to stand still. the detective could follow him here, but seemed, for whatever reason, unable to enter. vidya breathed in the moldy air and waited for the man to lose interest.

perversely, the man never lost interest. beyond the walls of the abandoned structure sounds of the forest suggested that he was, whoever he was, still out there. for his part, the detective peered into the holes where windows should have been, straining to confirm the boy was still inside. vidya could see brief flashes of reflections cast by the mirrored lenses of his sports glasses. what did he even want?

no, this wouldn't do. vidya ripped the page out of his notebook and tore it to pieces, then stuffed the remains into a crack in the mantle. he was embarrassed that he'd written it. dumb, boring, childish work.

ignoring the gesture, the detective circled the perimeter of the abandoned structure, searching for a way in. based on the condition of its exterior, this hardly seemed an impenetrable fortress. still, no easy access points were apparent. he decided to document his lack of progress, perhaps post-scenario analysis would provide a clue, but it dawned on him he had forgotten to bring his camera.

vidya crouched in the pantry and wondered when the man would leave. time seemed to crawl. vidya wondered aloud what the man could possibly hope to find, all the way out here in the middle of nowhere, who he was and why was he here, how had he managed to follow him through the woods, what was the meaning of any of this, and why he had written it all down.

nothing was working.

S.O.M.L.

pt. i:

This photo is no longer available. Pixel mirror; rainbows. Confectioner's table. Pink galley. Beads on mirrored glass. Snow hangs from the awning.

pt. ii:

Honey wine, lace. Gingham apron. This photo is no longer available. Striated plaster. Polka dot textile; red, white, blue.

no radio in the truck was a blessing, and she never talked, so things were going well.

mom would just run over whatever happened to run out in front of her. in the big truck you could feel everything, but it didn't matter because the truck just kept going. sometimes vidya would turn around and try to look for whatever it was they had just run over, but usually it was useless because they were moving so fast, and the road had too many curves.

since the accident things had changed. mom gripped the steering wheel with both hands, always facing straight ahead. sometimes she would ask him questions, and, absentmindedly, foolishly, he would answer.

today it had been about the woods. where it was he went, what it was he did when he got there. vidya thoughtlessly told her the truth about everything. he realized it was a mistake even as he began. today he wished for a radio in the truck.

she was yelling. the abandoned structure would be off-limits from now on. he was yelling. she wouldn't even know about these things if he hadn't told her. (he realized, now, this might be a key.) he couldn't get her to understand. she didn't care.

the truck had steadily continued to accelerate. the angrier she got, the faster it went. she was angry at him for glancing nervously at the road, which fed directly into the circumstance that had aggravated his anxiety in the first place. she didn't seem to notice what she was doing, or how it contributed to exacerbate the situation. vidya was concerned now they were about to have another accident, which of course, they were. it was all so predictable, like something he'd written.

saved by the flashing lights. mom was now angry that vidya had cost her a traffic citation. she hadn't started yelling, yet (the policeman had not yet made it back to his cruiser), but vidya could tell she was about to start. it was how this worked.

he waited.

whatever, he thought he could hear the ups truck.

out here?

raymond got out of his truck and wandered into the woods, not really sure what he was looking for. delivery instructions were vague on this point. the message had simply said to find him in the trees. well, here he was, in the trees.

and here was a house. not on any road, not anywhere near a road. place looked abandoned. raymond was about to set down the package when he noticed a man with long scraggily hair and sports glasses standing outside the house. this could not be the package's recipient because vidya was a teenage boy, who he knew quite well.

the detective noticed him, noticing him.

raymond averted his eyes and pretended to be looking at his clipboard. who was this guy and where was vidya?

inside the abandoned structure, vidya was sure he had heard the ups truck. he crawled out of the panty and, on his belly, over to the boarded-up window. he could definitely hear two voices, two men talking.

"special delivery," raymond said.

after some further discussion raymond turned over the package and the detective signed for it. raymond shrugged, not sure if there was anything else he should say or do, and walked back to his truck. he'd tally this in the measuring system and then get on with his other deliveries.

but something wasn't right. the address had been ambiguous, and that man definitely wasn't vidya. had he delivered the package to the wrong person? raymond didn't like this at all. he locked the truck and turned around, headed back into the woods. to the house, to make sure vidya was all right. it would mean another manual tally in the measuring system, but his manager was just going to have to understand: a boy was in trouble.

psychic interference. or anyway, he couldn't think. too many variables exchanging places at once. no one was ever here; now, there were two of them.

vidya wanted to leave. no sooner than he realized this it was accomplished. mom stared straight ahead and finally resumed yelling. not exactly what he had in mind, but vidya wasn't going to complain. he listened to what she had to say. soon, he had a headache.

mom pulled into the driveway and vidya climbed down from the truck. she had finished yelling so he went straight to his room and locked the door. she wouldn't like that, but she probably wouldn't come by and try the handle. probably.

he pulled out his phone and checked the weather. very little of what she said would make it into his notebook. after a while, he probably wouldn't even remember.

he didn't know what would happen to the abandoned structure. most likely his books were permanently lost. even if raymond, the detective, and his mom all just left it all alone, the spread of mold was definitely going to be a problem. but he had nowhere else to take the books. for a moment he even considered stowing (some of) them in empty lockers at school, but that notion was too absurd even for him.

he thought perhaps he could simply isolate the most important examples and put them in the mail, addressed to himself. when he needed one, he could hold on to it for a while before mailing it back out, and carry it in his bag until he was finished re-reading it. the rest would stay safe on raymond's truck.

but how would he pay for that.

he'd need to make one last trip to the abandoned structure, to make sure he hadn't left behind any personally identifying information.

then he'd block the place and its contents from his memory.

there were other places.

bedford, with its stoplights. bloomington, with its books. jasper, home away from home for what must have been pre-war german immigrants. there were a lot of these little places spread out across the southern part of the state. most where more populace, almost all were more commercially developed than vidya's own black lick.

he'd wander between them all, in later years, but for now he was stuck. at least, when no one was willing or able to drive him.

sl was back. back from where? why didn't you try asking him. you'd come away with a story, but still not know the definitive answer to your question. vidya could make a certain kind of sense out of that.

in his book of lies sl had (or rather, vidya had, since he was the one actually writing it all down) recorded what he had said were the essential ingredients needed to create the world. the world, of course, that they planned to sell to the rubes.

sl's mom, or other people that either he was related to, or intertwined somehow with people that he was related to, always seemed willing to drive them places. vidya would climb into whoever's vehicle and strap himself in, usually noticing that he was the only passenger who bothered with a seat belt. if at one time this had concerned him he had long ago stopped worrying about it.

they would drive differently than mom. vidya was often uncomfortable with the speeding, or with the open containers of alcohol inside the vehicle. one time he rode in the back of a pickup while the driver cursed young people (vidya included) and sipped hard liquor from a paper cup. there hadn't been room for both him and sl in the cab of the truck.

any of vidya's concerns would have seemed irrelevant to any of these people, and, in fact, on the rare occasion when he would speak up, it was not uncommon for the adult in question to stare at him as if he were something they had just scraped off the bottom of their shoe. vidya could relate. he took good care of his own shoes.

through an obscure process that remained hidden from him, vidya had begun to adapt to sl's method of living. the peculiar, often maddening transit between blatant falsehoods and just as blatant plagiarism,

twisted just so, that seemed to comprise the totality of his personality. adapt, but not without reservations. questions, really. the transformation was as yet incomplete.

in jasper, the environment seemed different, somehow. an altered psychic resistance. vidya couldn't say just what the difference might be. more an instinctive suspicion than anything he could put into words. however he explained it, mom was going to be pissed when she found out he had ditched school and traveled here.

and now he needed a ride home.

sl was gone.

vidya went to school. some of the books he had hidden in empty lockers had grown legs. he knew no one would be reading them, and he guessed, correctly, that most of them could be retrieved from the big trash can at the end of the hallway. the problem was that in the process of moving from locker to trash can, some of them had picked up moisture and debris. he exfiltrated them all to new empty lockers, farther away from his own. he'd see about bringing in a padlock (was that allowed?).

the yellow magic orchestra sticker on his own locker had been roughly torn off, defaced with a magic marker, and then stuck back on, upside-down. the vintage sticker had cost him thirty dollars. it was his own fault. he knew this was a school.

down the hallway. he tried to avoid teachers, janitors, the future farmers of america, special ed, members of the high school marching band, football players and benchwarmers, substitute teachers and teaching assistants, the librarian, bus drivers, visiting representatives of various education-related concerns, underclassmen, people who were both older and younger than himself. that left an empty drama club dressing room, off the back end of the auditorium stage. vidya pulled out his book and began to read.

five or six minutes later they found him. they came in, and he didn't react. one of them sat down on the table, right in front of him, right on top of his book, and he didn't react. the same asshole reached over and drove the unwound end of a paper clip deep into the meat of vidya's forearm. he didn't react.

"you're gay," aaron said, and withdrew the paper clip. they all left.

vidya went back to reading. he scratched absentmindedly at the superficial wound on his arm, ignoring the blood. frequency was slowing, but incidents of this nature were still occurring. at least they hadn't called him by his name.

he wasn't yet invisible enough.

THE GATELESS GATE

Ice and snow on the fence. Layers of beige brick. This photo is no longer available. This photo is no longer available. Mist covers hill. This photo is no longer available. Mark the puzzle path. Gray, blank. Beige wall. Stripes as shadow.

raymond was concerned for the boy, and decided to keep an eye on him.

what form this observation could ultimately take, with his responsibilities, and with their limited interaction, he didn't yet know. but somebody had to look out for him. it wasn't right he had to fend for himself.

raymond heard the sirens, and managed to pull over his delivery truck before the rush of police cars, speeding recklessly, ran him off the road. wherever they were going it must have been important. raymond was glad he wasn't a cop because he hated to get in people's way. ironic, he guessed, that he'd ended up driving this big, slow truck for a living. whatever, he preferred to drive slow.

the boy was usually at the water tower, unless he was at home or at school. today he was nowhere. raymond had not been able to locate him, and he was not responding to delivery notifications.

an update appeared, directing him to a new delivery location. the instructions were imprecise, but it seemed vidya's package was bound for a spot somewhere in the middle of the woods. raymond sent up the drone. leaned back in his seat to start on his lunch. figured he would kill two stones with one bird.

five or six minutes later the drone found him.

the next day vidya learned that if mom declined to withdraw him from school, the administration intended to initiate due process. complaints had been filed by the parents of female students alleging that vidya had been snooping around the back stage of drama club rehearsals, staring at girls as they changed. the complaints were serious, with the implied threat of legal action against the school.

vidya considered the charges farcical, and replied to the school administration, and to anyone else who would listen, that none of this made any sense. surveillance of the nature all his fellow students had been subjected to on a daily basis accomplished the same thing he was now being accused of. to state the obvious: there were cameras in the dressing room. how do you know that, if you've never been in there, came the braindead response.

vidya had countered that he never said he had never been in the dressing room. in fact, he often ate his lunch there when he didn't feel like dealing with the cafeteria. anyway, what was the difference between him eating his lunch, when the place was deserted, and the administration recording video of teenage girls changing their clothes? the difference, the administration had said, as if he should need to be told, was the question of consent.

mom had offered no resistance that he could see. vidya was pulled immediately out of school.

"and don't think you're going to just sit around here all day," she had said. "if you're not in school then you're going to get a job."

vidya wondered if the surveillance vendor was hiring.

it turned out they were.

the application had to be filled out in the vendor's office. vidya got up early on his first day off from school and walked into town. when he found the office, he realized that it occupied the building where his mom used to pay the phone bill. the old phone company logo was still visible, a ghost image fading on the side of the building, its surroundings bleached by decades of bright sunlight. vidya thought, "it could be worse," and entered the office.

beyond the green door he was greeted by his cousin brandon's mom. not his aunt, exactly. they were cousins in some nominal sense he would never understand. she smiled, sincere enough, and extended to him a clipboard with his application already attached. she seemed to know why he was there.

the hiring process proceeded smoothly, and soon vidya found himself back at the school, this time wearing a uniform. today's otjt included the installation of a new external camera over the front entrance of the building.

vidya knew just where to look.

the abandoned structure had burned to the ground. parts of the surrounding forest had also been affected. vidya wasn't sure if something he had done had caused, or led to, the fire. anyway, the books and papers he left inside were now gone forever.

they had finally let him come back to school, probably thanks to his mom. he kept his job, working nights and weekends. part of the deal struck to enable his return had been to steer well clear of the drama club and their dressing room. at work, of course, he would still have to maintain the cameras. it was a coincidence that his lunch breaks on the job overlapped neatly with the drama club's after school activities. he considered the dressing room as a lunch destination but, you know, not really.

inexplicably, older boys hung around the school during off-hours. one evening as vidya was making his rounds a group approached him, challenging his presence.

"why are you even here, queer?"

it began.

this part was always a source of confusion. the ostensible reason for the harassment was, while he realized accuracy was much beside the point, not even true. in later years it would dawn on him that the constant questioning was in many cases a masked invitation. but tonight it just seemed dumb.

"getting that money," vidya said, rubbing thumb and forefinger together. as the older boys tried on their dumbfounded looks, vidya adjusted his uniform cap several times. the stalemate seemed absolute, but wasn't, really.

when vidya finally came to someone had already called the police. he later found out that the call had been placed by the same boys who assaulted him. next, vidya was arrested for soliciting minors (minors were sometimes charged thusly, when their group activities were otherwise difficult to pin down), child endangerment (likewise), and public indecency (his uniform having gone missing).

at the police station vidya was locked in an empty cell. provided with a small bowl of water and an abrasive washcloth, he was told he would not be released until he succeeded in wiping the ungrammatical phrase "i'm fag," that had been written across his forehead in magic marker, off of his face.

it took the better part of two days to satisfy the sheriff.

vidya lost his job. he was back in school, as if nothing had ever happened. he even returned to eating his lunch in the drama club dressing room. no one ever mentioned the previous trouble. no one seemed to care. vidya didn't understand.

in dreams, he had talked to himself. discussed his own confusion about the way no one around him seemed sentient. about how he could have used the money from his job to replace some of the books that had been lost in the fire. what to do about sl. no firm conclusions had ever been reached by the time he woke up.

sl had breezed back into town, dragging in his wake signs and portents of life beyond the forest. yeah, yeah, and the attitude as well. no sooner than he showed up he was gone again, never answering his phone or bothering to call. vidya was growing weary of the sham his friendship had turned out to be. how could anyone live like that?

he couldn't seem to gain any traction. events tractored along, mechanically flattening obstacles, but the stalks slowly popped back up again, mocking all his attempts to alter the landscape. and he was reduced to farm analogies.

james had offered to hide some of vidya's remaining books in his locker. on the face of it this seemed like a bad idea. james was a default target—his locker was at least as prone to tampering as his own. but vidya appreciated the gesture. he selected a few relatively unimportant volumes and handed them over.

students were not allowed to receive deliveries at school. vidya frequently flouted this rule, with raymond's tacit assistance. if he included instructions to have a drone place the package on an obscure windowsill, no one ever seemed to notice.

today's delivery was running late. vidya paced the second floor hallway, anticipating the tardy delivery notification.

"hall pass," james demanded in jest.

vidya was impatient, but he didn't want to seem rude. james was his friend. "what are you doing in the hallway during class?" he asked.

"drain the main vein," james said, jerking his hips back and forth, rustling his baggy jeans.

vidya stared. james proceeded to the restroom.

vidya unlatched one of the windows facing the outer wall of the campus, and was greeted with a blast of winter from outside. he slumped down against the wall beneath the window and waited to hear from raymond.

five or six minutes later a drone approached.

taking up his assigned seat in mr. anderson's class, vidya gradually fell in with a new crowd. loud, illiterate, stridently devoted to high school athletics—so far, not much different than anyone else attending the school—his new friends were distinguished primarily by the fact that they were, much like vidya himself, the targets of constant, nonsensical abuse. joining in with this new crew—mom had referred to them as "colored boys"—somehow intensified vidya's own status as punching bag for the upperclassmen and for the less careful adults who concerned themselves with matters of tradition and seemliness.

mr. anderson had asked him lots of questions about the music. vidya dutifully played him some tracks. the older man had seemed sincerely interested, but it was clear that the english teacher in him wasn't ready for these kinds of lyrics. at least no one had told his mom what he had been listening to. mr. anderson, visibly appalled, had put on a brave face and let the subject drop.

james was his point of entry with the colored boys, co-signing for vidya's uncanny ability to make anyone, mostly anyone, laugh. it was the first time after kindergarten, where vidya himself had laughed out

loud at the absurdity of his classmates' comprehensive ignorance of the world, that he had belonged to a large group of friends. this happy and hilarious situation was befuddling in the extreme. where had they all suddenly come from?

answer: kingston, jamaica.

in an unlikely arrangement, a national content provider had acquired the remnants of his town's crumbling gilded age resort hotel—a story in itself—and had conspired to sponsor immigration into the area of cheap labor from the caribbean. the workers, naturally, had brought their families along with them, or in some cases had produced additional offspring once they arrived. all of these children, once they reached the mandatory age, would attend vidya's school. this was how the presence of non-whites in the community had been explained to him by critter's dad, clearly inebriated, taking a break from long soliloquies about his three tours of duty in vietnam.

the economics of the resort hotel, situated as it was in the middle of nowhere, made little sense when one considered the narrow roads, the expense of freight both to and from its remote location, the relative dearth of local color and culture, but it remained a substantial employer of the local population, immigrant or otherwise. in fact, the surveillance vendor who had recently fired vidya also serviced a contract with the hotel. fiber optic lines snaked in and out of the guest rooms, wiring the whole building for networked audio and video surveillance. other businesses in town enjoyed similar custom.

from his new friends vidya had learned his way around the grounds. service entrances, service tunnels, private elevators, hidden doors, locked cabinets, crawlspaces, sealed storage facilities, forgotten access points to the roof. many days, vidya didn't even bother going to school. just as the abandoned structure in the woods had proven superior isolation, the hotel was a better place to sit and read than the school's library, with its multimedia displays and its teaching assistant staff sword fighting with newspaper sticks. most of the rooms were empty. most of the staff didn't care.

aw, little of this was true. none of these kids were really his friends. only rarely would any of them deign to talk to him. vidya wondered what their home countries had been like. he wondered why they seemed so happy to have moved here, to this wretched shithole he hated with all of his being, with every pixel of his after-image.

vidya turned himself to face himself.

what did he really want?

he wadded up the piece of paper and threw it on the ground.

vidya wanted a cigarette. there was no explaining it. smoking was not something he did, but the craving was real. familiar. somehow comforting, like recognizing yourself, and not someone else, in the mirror. still, he demurred.

a blister had formed in the roof of his mouth. he pushed at it with his tongue, probing carefully along its edges. the shape reminded him of a small kidney bean. it hurt, kind of.

vidya got out of bed, wadding up his soggy sheets and transferring them to the washer. mom would be up, soon, asking him the usual questions about how he had slept. eyes drifting carelessly to the sounds emanating from the washer. he really didn't want to talk about it.

the snow outside refused to melt. walking into town was going to be a nuisance. accordingly, vidya conceived a plan. a doomed plan.

"mom, can i take the truck," he asked when she woke up, already knowing the answer. "all right, then, well, thanks anyway."

vidya got on the phone with james, deftly maneuvering him into thinking it was his own idea for vidya to come over. he had to get out of the house. mom was okay with it, just be back before dark. vidya said okay, and slammed the storm door behind him.

walking to the mailbox vidya counted the cigarettes he saw on the ground. there were quite a lot of them. he felt the urge to pick one up and smoke it, but unfortunately he had nothing on hand to light it with.

unfortunately? what was he thinking. this increasingly familiar urge had edged out the usual distractions, interests, preoccupations, peccadillos, and the heretofore impervious sense of focus that typically comprised the workings of his mind. he was no longer sure that he would recognize himself in the mirror. as these thoughts coalesced, his trust in himself seeming, increasingly, to be misplaced, james drove up, smiling like an idiot, and waved him into the van.

his brother's van. rose-hulman alumni. some kind of technology guy. all vidya could remember about him was a story james had shared where his brother had met morris day, backstage at a show, and morris day had dismissed him, derisively, as a "fat fuck." well, that he was.

the van's interior was roomier, more comfortable than vidya had expected. adjustable leather seats, a mcintosh turntable mounted convincingly on some sort of mobile stabilizer, crushed velour armrests. james touched a button on the dash and a can of cherry pepsi emerged from the center console.

"got any cigarettes," vidya said, sounding deflated, and even looking a bit deflated, as his cheeks sagged and his shoulders drooped against his seat. his friend paused for what might have amounted to three seconds, before he depressed another switch and a small door opened in the ceiling, out of which fell a white pack of silk cut, james' brother's signature brand. vidya stared at the package and then discreetly deposited it in his bag.

vidya didn't smoke. vidya smoked.

vidya didn't smoke.

his mouth hurt.

all of this gray tracking across his forest like smoke.

vidya sat atop the water tower and watched the spread of the disease. human language, from which he was, for now, thankfully removed.

he opened his bag and took out his sandwich. he fumbled with his thermos and his elbow struck his phone, which had been sitting on the cold metal beside him. it tumbled over the side. he watched as it slipped, spiraling to the ground, impacting with a practically inaudible thump.

vidya climbed down.

he was reduced again to real books. at school, the library admitted to some few volumes he had previous ignored. mostly, lurid fantasy texts, too similar (judging from the titles, covers, and dust jacket descriptions) to other examples of the genre he had already read. he liked this kind of stuff, just not this particular stuff. still, it was here.

mr. anderson noticed him reading a book that, judging from its cover, would seem to concern the adventures of a flight of spacefaring dragons. the pained expression that displaced his usual happy demeanor belied internal contradictions in a man who professed to prefer usa today to the new york times because the former contained more colorful charts and its articles contained fewer words.

sensing opportunity, the english teacher had suggested a program of alternatives: orwell, bradbury, heinlein, dick, pynchon, kafka.

vidya had rolled his eyes and explained his predicament: it wasn't that he hadn't explored the recommended authors, it was precisely that this gaudier book was unfamiliar. he hadn't read it before. the shapes it presented were new.

the shapes?

vidya went into the whole spiel: he couldn't think of it in words. there weren't any words about it to think. what he saw were shapes, lines, volumes, twisting into and out of each other in connecting patterns, stretched over time. a schematic view of myriad, though not particularly discreet elements. a maze that in sharp focus represented a pathway, but in the long view comprised the entire map. the map could be folded, bent, rolled up, distorted, stretched, and fitted to arbitrary configurations, but never altered from its essential substance, containing all possible interpretations, and defying any attempt to artificially constrict the infinite catalogue of juxtapositions it advertised, that it seemed to offer.

mr. anderson had not known what to say. for his part, neither had vidya. and that was the point.

mr. anderson had changed tacks. "let me tell you a story," he said.

during the war he had been in the army, serving on a ship.

"okay, let me start again."

during the war he had been in the army, but he had not really been in the army. he had sat in a chair, looking at pictures all day long. the pictures were photographs that had been taken by a satellite. the chair had been in the back room of a small office, which was an architectural firm that did not design buildings. the secretary of the firm did not know that mr. anderson spent his days looking at pictures, and in fact did not know that the firm did not design buildings. a second man, mr. anderson's colleague, consumed his days forging busywork: various papers, contracts, receipts, memos, correspondence, flyers, bills, and invoices for the secretary to file, retrieve, proofread, type, mail, receive, dispose of, or misplace somewhere in the general disarray of the front office. mr. anderson would enter the building early each morning, flash his badge, ride the elevator to the floor occupied by the firm, nod to the secretary, produce from a hidden compartment in his sports jacket a special key that he used to unlock the safe in his office, and proceed to activate the covert mechanism by which the top of his desk rolled back to reveal his personal digital workspace. hold all my calls, and no interruptions, please.

"photographs of what," vidya intoned blandly.

"suspected military installations. airfields, mostly," mr. anderson said. he leaned forward conspiratorially. "and what do you think of that?"

vidya's eyes moved back to his book, the trashy fantasy fiction.

"any interest in maybe doing something like that when you grow up?"

vidya's eyes remained pointedly on the book.

"no thanks," he said, and continued with his reading.

every so often sl would grow tired of moving slowly. the blank page, the page filling in, the finished page covered in perhaps ill-considered marks. he watched it all happening and it always felt like time was standing still. the hand moved so slowly, and there was so much he wanted to give.

sl looked down at vidya's arm. he decided he would try to control it. slowly, at first, he allowed himself to feel each muscle as it flexed and relaxed, obeying vidya's intention to direct the pen in his hand. next he exerted minimal strain, causing vidya's hand to slip, then to catch itself before the pen slipped entirely out of his grasp. satisfied with his command of the instrument, sl began to write.

he scoured vidya's mind for textures. many he could readily repurpose, mixing and matching, recapitulating something that was nevertheless entirely new. with this he was well pleased.

after a time vidya's body began to complain. sl realized it had grown sore, hungry, as the session had wore on. he rose, to search for food.

what was it vidya had said about food? sl didn't care. sl would do what he wanted, with affection.

first on the list was cleaning the body. the boy didn't know what he was doing. he wet the bed. he touched things. vidya always washed his hands, but for sl this would never be enough. new habits must be set in place. he ambulated the body to the shower and turned on the water.

next the body must be groomed, and dressed. sl took a long look in the mirror, unhappy with what he saw. he went to work on the eyebrows, improving on god's best efforts. he shaved the face and the back

of the head. he brushed the teeth. clothes, it seemed he remembered, were kept in the boy's room.

opening the closet he recalled a black t-shirt that would do. he pulled it on, followed by a minimally adequate jacket and a pair of jeans. all of it was black, but sl was quite beyond worrying that he might offend the town's inhabitants on the street. what was this? vidya trying to break through. the boy was actually succeeding.

sl remembered this part.

softening to the boy's pleas, sl slackened his grip on the body, which jerked away from him violently, and retreated to an obscure corner of the mind where he felt he was unlikely to be noticed. some manner of distraction would be in order.

vidya looked down and wondered what had happened to his notebook, why he was wearing different clothes. something was going on, but he couldn't imagine what it might be.

he got on with it.

no one would understand about the phone. how it could not be replaced. how he had not even wanted it, at first, but how it had come to serve as perhaps his most important window to life beyond the forest. nobody else in town had a phone, and nobody else in town wanted one.

vidya wanted his phone. irrelevant now, as it was gone. his books were gone, too. raided at school, confiscated at home. by all outward appearances he now seemed normal. that is to say, illiterate. but he'd continue to serve out his sentence even if nobody could remember his crime.

two more years.

at eighteen, in theory, he would be on his own. he could hardly imagine what that would be like, but he was confident that he'd put at least as much thought into it as anyone else. namely, these maladjusted adults who had chastised him for reading between the lines.

he tried to push through the sludge in his mind, but he was neck-deep in something that was seeping out of his ears. he couldn't... grasp... the words...

he couldn't breathe, he couldn't think, he couldn't see his way to an idiom that didn't carry contradictory connotations, defying what it was he had intended to convey. he had to change the liner in his waste-basket three times a week. the shapes and the colors mocked his efforts to tame them.

the real sl would not recognize himself in vidya's notebook. and what could vidya say? there was nothing for him to say. there was no one to hear. there was no point in complaining, and there was no one to adjudicate his complaints.

vidya threw it all in the trash.

fade to

Beige. Bent white gallery. Lay out the laundry. Shadows wash windows. This photo is no longer available. Pull the red thread. Red polka dots on white drapery. Into the doll's house.

and then

This photo is no longer available. What was it, Spain? The owl in daylight. Rock blunts scissors. This photo is no longer available. Beyond the smeared rainbow.

and then

THE ABANDONMENT OF CRUELTY

Bubble drifts in its field of suds. This photo is no longer available. This photo is no longer available. Shrink-wrapped antique classroom. San Angeles. Fence in the ceiling. Prosthetic coincidence (telegraphed). Fluorescent halo (wired). London, maybe. Moire. The blank screen.

1. One Day Your Mind May Fade.

2. We deal in writing.

3. J-shaped graph

4. Famous architects design prisons.

5. Reciprocal Onanism

6. cast a shadow over Pope Francis' visit to Mars.

7. spasm of a lunatic

8. Here Papa pisses.

9. Liberty is a bitch who must be bedded on a mattress of corpses.

10. Talk! Or I'll eat your brains and shit in your skull...

11. empty emerald case

12. Jewlers, for example, will no longer have to lease a dedicated telegraph line to get an exact time signal for their high-end watches.

13. failure: success

14. ***Meguro***

15. dubious traffic stops

16. Any thoughts about this or other possibilities?

17. cheap pathos

18. colors that pop like a whore's lip gloss

19. I really have to wonder.

20. u

this is my story of what happened.

the situation never really changed, the people never wrote themselves, the draft was abandoned.

no, in fact quite the opposite. i could feel the hand moving my hand. i could see with the eyes peering through my eyes. i could search in the mirror and there i would be, my voice in my head would disagree, and i would disagree with it, and there would be a sort of compromise, and i would remain silent.

the first time i bargained myself away might as well have been any of the times since, or any of the times in-between. "if the light changes, i'm going to hell." and then what? taking the lord's name in vain, i waited for an answer, also in vain, and continued to wait, and never stopped waiting, and for what?

the voice was never deep enough. they would say, "is that you?" on the phone, never seeming to believe me. maybe that was the problem. there was never any way to convince. never any evidence.

"this is hardly falsifiable," i would think, and i was right.

as soon as i would see the elements i would try to make them fit. construct a collage to force it to make sense. but this, too, is only you, and what can you do? authorship is censorship. language is theft. who writes the words, and what, in the end, is left?

syncretic blank, the unstated word, the unsated world, questions left furled.

you leave it unfinished.

you leave it alone.

only walk away, and it is done.

> ***'with evil done to me unsated still,' has taken possession of all the roads by which any comfort may reach 'this wretched soul' that I carry in my flesh***

étienne stood by the window and watched as the workers far below him cleared snow from the street. well, four stories below. they looked small enough. even in the privacy of his own mind étienne tended to fudge the details.

he liked to stand there during his morning break. sunlight would touch the streets, the cars, the sidewalks, just so. he would stand in the window and he would not hear the sounds of the office, nor of its inhabitants, whom he loathed with a clarity wholly absent from even the best of his written work.

no sooner than this clarity had obtained it would be time for him to get back to work. the elevator would open, he would step inside, and through the negotiation of some dark transaction, precise details to be determined, he would find himself back on the proper floor, back at his desk, back on his phone, back to not standing by the window. his two breaks and his lunch bounded the ritual, defining along its edges the canonical parameters by which the company's proprietary algorithm operated him.

he was being dramatic. a favored self-criticism during corporate sponsored struggle sessions. but they paid him too well to complain about work. he sipped his coffee and waited to hear from his manager.

he did not have to wait for long. her voice resolved, inaudible to audible, transitioning roughly from his imagination to his ear.

"have you made plans to see a doctor?"

he found that he preferred the manager as portrayed by his imagination. momentarily jarred from the procession of self-generated mental imagery, he fell out of step with the interaction, stumbling over the non sequitur.

"what?" he said.

"your break lasts ten minutes. we started to worry when your timer expired and you hadn't returned from the men's room. what were you doing in there?"

his immediate impulse was to state the obvious. that he hadn't been in the men's room, that he had been standing by the window on the fourth floor. but he stopped himself when he realized that it was beside the point. what she really wanted to know was where the extra two minutes had gone, the two minutes by which he had exceeded the ten minutes alloted for his break. he searched through his mind for a substantive excuse and came up blank.

"any orders, today?" he asked, diverting the conversation back to the ostensible reason why they were all there in the first place.

"none, as you are well aware from monitoring the dashboard. stay busy at your desk. some of your coworkers are cleaning up their stations, or reading quietly. remember to tally your time accurately."

it had been the same for two months. virtually no work to do, but the constant imperative to stay busy doing it. étienne marveled inwardly at the infallibility of certain guarantees established for him by his union contract. soap residue of an earlier era, when monopoly drew nourishment from its own largess. and now étienne, like the former monopoly, swirled around the drain. for how long could this go on? he pulled out his copy of neuromancer (he'd finally tracked one down) and picked up reading where he'd left off. earlier, before his break.

side-glance at the woman seated next to him. she eyed his paperback with open suspicion. "are you reading that for school?" she finally asked, more incredulous that a book could exist, here, in the current year, than passing any judgement on its title, author, or the presumable content of its character.

"it ain't dan brown," he agreed.

at the end of the day he closed the paperback and switched off his terminal. walked to his car and drove to his apartment, where he showered, read for an hour, and then erased the day from his mind.

he would try again in the morning.

grandpa died.

étienne received a call at work directing him to place another call, which was in turn answered by his father. "he's gone," dad said.

grandfather. vidya editor albone, archetypal mystery to étienne, a man who had rarely spoken in his presence. étienne's primary memories of the departed were sensory: the flash of slicked-down hair, the lingering stench of his cigars, the dark forearms exposed by the rolled-up sleeves of his flannel shirts. when city councilmen had dropped by the house to transact business, étienne would crouch near the smart rows of municipal law books (within reach of grandpa's recliner) and strain to hear the top notes of their conversations. snatches of each exchange would drift in from the fort porch, and, in his memory, such dialectic as was joined by his grandfather would rarely disappoint.

undoubtedly, étienne's father had known him best. grandfather's enigma had weathered the short time they had all spent together living under the same roof untroubled by the erosion of mere familiarity. he simply didn't say enough to incite disagreement. but étienne recognized in himself a certain tendency toward what he regarded as his grandfather's habits. he, too, mostly kept to himself unless work demanded a performance.

toiling mostly at night, grandfather would sleep through the day, rousing only for dinner, the paper, his programs, and an after-dinner nap in his recliner. grandmother had synchronized the household to a tiding of general algorithms, first of all ensuring that no one would awaken grandpa before it was time for dinner. improvising, interlocking, and multitasking the rest. most days, grandpa enjoyed his full measure of sleep.

étienne didn't know much else. as a child he'd accepted it all at face value. there had been no reason to ask questions about grandpa, because grandpa had always been around, would always be around, and those were the given, obvious facts, like getting clean water out of a faucet.

he remembered combing the backyard for grandpa's discarded cigar butts, which he and his cousin bill would load into a toy cannon and fire at passing cars. had grandpa even noticed?

étienne called his sister, who had already heard the news, and then he called his mother, who had not. he secured permission to leave work, and found himself taking greater care than was usual with the preparations to close down his station for the day. he wiped down his monitor, his desk, the armrests of his chair, and, lacking for any other pressing responsibilities, withdrew from his office for the remainder of the day.

"the best of you is hidden," violet had said, several years later.

"there are... things... i can't say," étienne said.

he placed one foot, and then the other, on the floor. he stood up. midmorning through heavy curtains. in his memory he could place many such mornings, characterizing the system of the world as a brightly lit screen that burned his eyes when he tried to see what was going on, on the other side. he figured that he was too close to the source, and squinted.

it was shopping day, and he wandered through it absently, much as he did on their other shopping days. he made decisions and then he lived with the consequences. for example, if he forgot to buy something at the store, then he would have to wait until the next week to rectify his mistake. the relationship between his actions and the situation he found himself in could not be any clearer.

his wife was violet, who had the same name as his grandmother. being that she was an individual she belonged to herself. she was not the same person at all. étienne could understand this because it was obviously true.

after shopping it was time for work. étienne enjoyed his work about as much as he enjoyed anything else, which was to say, not at all. when pressed he could refrain from thinking about what it was he would rather be doing—the blandness he now put out of his mind was embarrassing. he was grateful for the distraction, and for the money. especially in this economy. he'd been saying that now for going on twenty years. well, he was still bored with himself and the economy was still fucked.

today's orders processed, he began to surf idly between feeds. mom was doing okay. sis was still asleep. dad... who knew? he noticed violet had finished her dinner. grandma's connection was down again. he stood up, stooping so as to avoid the unwanted attention of his manager, and marched his eyes from point to point along the ridge of the cube farm, scanning for skylined backup. he spotted an idle coworker and tasked them to investigate. no tampering with family accounts from his profile.

by the time his coworker got around to his request grandma's connection had righted itself. the intermittent trouble never rose to the threshold that would trigger an automatic truck roll. no black bag for granny, and the trouble would never be fixed. the log was mutable after all.

étienne suffered another dull night. he pulled out his notebook and analyzed the week's progress. notes and fragments, nothing he hadn't set down before. he still wasn't sure what it needed. more words? none of it was happening.

he regretted the thought the moment he noticed it passing through his mind. he didn't want any of this to happen, that was the point of writing it all down. he closed his notebook and put it away, then tossed his dying ink pen in the trash. later for that. leave me alone. go away.

his allergies were flaring and his back hurt. he centered himself and cycled throug the eight points of awareness, suddenly certain that his manager was about to tap him on the shoulder. when he turned around she was nowhere to be seen.

he wanted to sleep. sleep, and stop dreaming.

étienne sank slowly into his bath. "here come the warm jets," he said, before his face slipped beneath the surface. verbal responsibilities abdicated for the duration.

from this vantage he considered whether or not he wanted to go to work today. his answer: no.

the back of his head rested gently on the bottom of the tub. he opened his eyes but could make out only the vague light of the bathroom window. something was wrong with his eyes, a spot, in his right eye, he guessed, that wouldn't go away. maybe it was the water.

surfacing, he shook off his hand and reached for his tea. steam filled the room, and he could breathe, if only temporarily. from the small chest beside the tub he retrieved his copy of the atlantic monthly, and proceeded to enjoy his bath. the war was on. he read a long article about it before he left for work.

in the car he connected his phone to the sound system. but the screen it finally displayed was wrong, and the sound paused each time he locked the phone to extinguish its backlight. suddenly, a burst of much louder audio, apparently from a different program. he disconnected the phone and stared straight ahead with both hands on the steering wheel for the rest of the drive to work.

he was late getting to work. this triggered the usual exchange with his manager, which he observed to play out without manual intervention. no real contribution from him was necessary.

he lost track of what he was doing. he actually fell asleep at his desk. when it was time to go home, he did.

he realized it was christmas, and he wondered why he had forgotten. he thought he might correct some of his pages before going to sleep.

he didn't speak to anyone for three days, violet included.

he felt alone, and he supposed he realized that he was. no interruptions had distracted him from the nothing he still felt.

he tried to play the game with himself. select the items, space them apart, connect them together with whatever tools were at hand. when it worked, it scared him. when it didn't work, he would sulk in silence for days, until something else caught his attention, until something new had replaced his point of view. when it finally happened he would surrender immediately, willingly, to the new. whatever it was.

étienne could feel the next new thing coming on. he was starting to be interested in the history of his business. at work there were books, on forgotten shelves in forgotten rooms, that detailed obsolete methods and procedures. he could even charge time to reading them.

he realized this was temporary. something to hold him over until the next new thing came along, as inevitably it would. but this was what it was all about.

before he knew it the work day had concluded. uncharacteristically, he was the last one out of the office. he turned off the lights, swiped closed the door.

at home he took another bath. reading papers from work.

INTERNAL SEPTEMBER

Snow on mud. Polka dots on screen. System call. This photo is no longer available. This photo is no longer available. White wall. White stairs.

vague. sl's thing. étienne wrote down what he knew. the manual would be utilized by his coworkers. he promoted his own text above that contributed by others in the meeting. people seemed to agree, his was the best. the document would bear his signature.

he would continue this work in place of his other work, scarcely asking permission to put his hands on the wheel and right the ship. he found that management mostly stayed out of his way. he figured, as long as he was making them look good, things would be fine, and for the most part he was right.

just before thanksgiving the company announced that étienne's office would be closing at the end of the year. workers could elect to follow the work to a small town, about a hundred miles away, two hours by car, or they would lose their jobs."it's a very small town," the representative from hr said."there aren't many big roads."

étienne knew the town. home to his grandfather.

étienne had grown complacent. they paid him so much just to sit and read books. why would he look for anything else? he discussed the opportunity with violet (his wife, not his grandmother) and decided to follow the work. the movers threatened to quit over the large quantity of books that had to be moved from his old apartment to his new

apartment. it had taken him two weeks to box them up.

they bought a house. étienne's grandfather's house. étienne vaguely remembered it from childhood. that was a lie. the memories weren't vague at all. he had never been able to get the place out of his head. the problem was that the house had been demolished, some years before. étienne spent a couple of hours one afternoon, pacing the property, turning around and around in the grassy, empty space where grandpa's house used to be. surreal. they closed on the property that evening, and construction of their new home began in the spring.

a year after management's announcement étienne sat in his new house and read a book, still marveling at the provisions in his union contract. he's started on nabokov. violet painted in her studio. the snow came early that year, but étienne had prepared with a cord of wood and a very thick coat. violet barely complained.

what was happening?

low bandwidth. remote storage was full, but things were still working. kind of.

thus ensued the manual process of standing up a new vm, copying data from the old vm, making the new vm live, verifying nothing had gone wrong, and decommissioning the old vm. all, hopefully, without dramatic data loss. étienne did this from his phone, taking it from, and replacing it to, his pocket, in-between glances to assess the transfer's progress.

he had isolated the trouble immediately: he had somehow neglected to set the temporary bit on a large index file, which consequently had been copied in its slightly modified state to permanent storage, over and over again, for some span of months. permanent storage being immutable and finite there was no available remedy once it had filled up but to start over again with a fresh file system. it cost money.

the process was also complicated by flaky connectivity, out here in the middle of who-knows-where. étienne had taken to walking in the woods that opened up near his house. not far off his back porch he would lose signal entirely. even inside his house, or even in certain spots downtown, signal was unreliable. each time he filled remote storage he had to walk or drive to the same location, near the old water tower, to sustain a connection long enough to initiate the now-familiar process of

setup and restoral.

today, on a whim, he climbed the water tower. settling on top to take in the view, he pulled out his phone. very good signal, up here.

positioned as he was atop the tall structure, which was itself planted atop a tall hill that overlooked the town as it spread out (like a stain) in the valley below, he could see for an impressive distance—in all directions. the tops of different varieties of trees, mostly. at the mouth of the valley, where the steep incline abruptly terminated in miles of relatively flat expanse, he could see even more trees. it was like the town had fallen off the dining room table, slipping off the edge of its uniformly green tablecloth. if you didn't already know what was down there you'd probably never look.

étienne produced from his shirt pocket a small notebook and commenced to record his observations about the previous year, the unlikely combination of events that had brought him, almost against his will, to this perch atop the water tower in his grandfather's hometown. why was he here, what was the meaning of this life, and why was it so hard to establish a stable connection in this shithole when the tower was visible almost anywhere you went. his observations most often emerged in the form of a question.

chime. étienne had received a message inviting him to give a talk at a ted conference that would take place some one hundred miles away from his present location. due date: this weekend. haha, no thanks.

and with that he was out of time. étienne climbed back down the ladder and walked back to work.

the film had made some kind of impression. étienne didn't know. he'd never seen it. popular enough to warrant a theme bar in his town's podunk, dry dock casino. he guessed the bar had probably been added to coincide with the year of the film's title finally coming to pass. all of it was old, now. he wondered if anyone still cared.

the film's plot concerned a young man, josef k, who one day wakes up to find himself transformed into an imitation of a human being. a replicant. in fact he was always thus. (the allusions to kafka were muddled.) joe is trapped in a world with no people (sounds like a heaven), but he doesn't realize that no one, not even himself, is real (same). unbeknownst to himself and the rest of the world's population, there are no

humans left on planet earth. anywhere. whatever examples of the maker's race may yet survive have long ago fucked off into space, leaving behind their besotted android surrogates to obsessively recapitulate the same tired fantasies, over and over again, on and on, ad infinitum, world without end. so, the film's characters slavishly revamp many scenes and elements from the original film, to which this later catastrophe was an unwanted, and yet critically lauded, sequel.

étienne vaguely remembered most of this, enough to recognize the comical animatronic musicians whose retinue included the offspring of various famous performers, and whose monarch, though clothed bizarrely in 1970s (?) working class garb—cab driver hat, denim vest, white t-shirt w/ rolled-up sleeves (concealing, not very well, a packet of gitanes), brief rectangular mustache that separated nose from mouth like a dark aluminum spacer set between sections of drywall—was clearly, though absent from the waist down, a partially reconstructed android reproduction of the one and only david bowie.

"hi folks," he said. "you can call me karl. and we're... tin machine!"

the absurdly enthusiastic band of robots wasted no time ripping into their opening number.

and i tell myself, i don't know who i am karl crooned sadly. ***my father ran the prison***

a rombus of pure pink light hovered incessantly near karl's face, helpfully informing that the lyric most likely referred to eldon tyrell, hated inventor of the replicants from the first film.

karl's group had been a late addition to a subsequent re-release of the two films. his contributions—whether made before or after his physical death, which occurred a year and some odd months before the release of the second film—consisted of a mere handful of tracks, apparently intended to bookend semi-random sequences from the films:

01. heat
02. the stars (are out tonight)
03. love is lost
04. you feel so lonely you could die
05. if you can see me
06. plan

étienne had heard some of the music before. here, the mechanical band performed it on a loop. inescapable.

but i am a seer, i am a liar karl sang, something wrong with his vision.

étienne's guest never seemed to arrive. as the band clicked through its program, étienne went ahead and ordered their drinks. james would show up, eventually. he'd just have to make due with what étienne chose for him.

dead ones and the living

it was then that he noticed karl's eyepatch. an odd detail.

gleaming like blackened sunshine

karl's teeth, having evidently been damaged by previous clientele, had been replaced with what appeared to étienne to be a curving half of a polished, black hockey puck. replacement teeth inscribed, rather than fully carved.

soaking up our primitive world

étienne, still waiting for his friend, took this opportunity to avail himself of the head.

their jealousy's spilling down

here, karl jerked, seeming to skip.

but i hope they live forever

returning from the head, étienne saw that james had arrived, and had taken up his seat at their table. he welcomed his friend with an open-palmed slap across the back. james started forward in his seat, but smiled.

even your eyes are new continued karl's electronic caterwaul.

"i hated this movie," james said, referring to the sequel. "so pointless."

but your fear is as old as the world

"hey," étienne said. "experts loved it, even if the box office tanked. fifty-thousand blade runner fans can't be wrong."

you know so much, it's making you cry

james wasn't swayed. "nah, it was just bad." he added: "who cares."

oh, what have you done?

the two men drank in silence.

i hope you feel so lonely, you could die, die, die, die

étienne didn't care, either. the day had been a long one. and now he wasn't entirely sure whether he'd seen the film or not. maybe just the original? but then there was something about josef k having a user experience tailor-made for him by—you know what? he was tired.

if you can see me, i can see you karl's apparatus rotated a full 270 degrees to face étienne directly. because of the eyepatch, he seemed to be staring in two directions at once, but somehow étienne still felt he was staring straight at him. he blinked, and rubbed his eyes, but the robot was still there.

if you can see me, i can see you karl repeated. his face seemed to flicker. an animated animatronic, taking the piss.

from nowhere to nothing, and i go way back

a black substance—oil?—began to gush from karl's mouth, but the tin machine just kept on singing the same sarcastic lyrics, devoid of meaning, devoid of any connection to reality or current events.

the stars to the west, the south, the north, and to the east

étienne backed away from his table, clumsily, the drinks he'd already downed having impaired his mobility. most of what had been on the table now ended up on the floor. james tutted, unconvincingly, though it seemed to amuse him disproportionately to do so.

a love of violence and a dread of sighs

so take this knife

and sl was back, standing there before him in the bar. karl continued, but by now étienne was only listening to himself.

i'll burn all your books and the trouble they make

étienne handed himself the knife, but now he had the knife.

who could he be, now?

étienne awoke to find he had been transformed into a real human. his back hurt. he crawled from bed and pulled on his clothes from the night before.

into the woods. violet would sleep for a couple more hours. it was saturday, so, no work. the sky was white. the trees were black. étienne liked rainy days, but maybe it had been a mistake to wear the suit.

he walked his usual trail. the path continued past the remnants of an abandoned car lot, twisted through several properties, crossing more than one barbed wire fence strung between trees. today he went further, through a clearing he had never noticed before, wandering onwards through the brush until he came upon the ruins of what appeared to be an old house, connected to no road, adjacent to nothing but overgrown weeds and more tall trees.

he decided to sit down.

the shoes were definitely ruined. he dug in his pockets and produced only a peppermint, from the bar. seemed like it might rain again at any moment, but the sky stubbornly kept its own secrets.

étienne impulsively checked his phone. nothing. of course nothing, he was in the woods.

the house seemed to have burned down. charred beams exposed and fallen, there wasn't much shelter left. étienne picked through the rubble, looking for any extant personal effects. pieces of books, but not much was left intact.

the rain started up again, and étienne felt stupid for walking so deep into the woods on a day like today. he frowned at his shoes and started home.

violet was just waking up.

a surplus had been declared, and étienne volunteered to surrender his job, transferring to another position within the company that shared the same job title, but performed entirely different work. the previous holder of his new job, who enjoyed less seniority than himself, was in turn forced to transfer to a less desirable position with a lesser job title. in this way a third person at étienne's original job was spared. such were the convolutions of former-monopoly surveillance.

concentration points, referred to as "surveillance shacks" by his fellow tradesmen, were sprinkled generously throughout the small town. étienne's new responsibilities included installation, maintenance, and disconnection (rare, except in cases of site demolition or upgrades) of circuits at twelve central offices and remote surveillance shacks located within the town and its surrounding area. beyond this immediate charge, his personal sphere of responsibility comprised what amounted to the entire southern half of the state, stretching from his old home in the city to the

southern border with kentucky. when duty called he would climb into his company truck and drive to the given location to assess the situation, and possibly to administer aid. priority was anyone's guess.

the central offices were not staffed, as such. his own reporting location was home solely to an administrative assistant, out front, and the sensitive surveillance equipment, concealed behind a false façade that presented itself to the public as a web design firm. the receptionist didn't know anything about the false façade or the equipment. she only knew about websites.

the solitude of étienne's shift encouraged him to reflect on the nature of his new situation. when grandma died, there had been no remaining focal point for his father's family to rally around. he suspected that, barring funerals, he would probably never see most of them again. mother's family had all but disintegrated, many years before. that left violet and himself, working through the current decade. he'd approached the question of why he'd decided he needed to come here, to grandfather's property, but hadn't yet pushed hard enough to penetrate, and as a result he'd failed to enter into the question properly. the empty field that had confronted him when he first arrived, expecting to rekindle fond memories of grandpa's house, still haunted him as he stumbled over furniture, groping his way around his new home in the dark. waking up in the middle of the night he realized that some of the new rooms shared the same shapes as the ones he remembered from childhood. but he was still mostly lost.

the surveillance shacks were spaced at irregular intervals throughout the town. even the local addresses were sometimes hard to find. he spent more time locating the ones that were relatively close by than he did the comparatively distant remote huts. all things being equal, putting gas in the truck was probably the worst part of his job.

for his next shift, the manifest of his daily carry would include:

- briefcase
    - leaf w/ wireless physical keyboard
    - plastic box w/ ink, nibs, brushes, pencils
    - folder w/ blank paper
    - notebooks (various)
    - felt tip pens
    - nabokov novels 1955–1962 (library of america)
    - berlin in the 1920s (taschen)
    - 50 years of the u–2 (schiffer military history)
    - the shadow #1–4 (dc)

- backpack
    - full–size leaf for extended sessions
    - small hand tools (various)
    - adapters, terminators, cords, clips, straps
    - portable speaker (wireless)
    - handheld game system
    - pocket music player
    - whatever books, magazines, etc., wouldn't fit in the briefcase

- rolling carry–on
    - tools for work
        - redacted
        - redacted
        - redacted
        - redacted
        - redacted
    - tool pouch w/ quick release pistol belt

- lunch bag
    - stanley thermos
    - pb & j sandwich
    - container of apple slices
    - power bar
    - sencha green tea
    - bottled water
    - napkins (folded)

étienne lugged all of this around everywhere he went. the upside was that he felt completely prepared for most any situation he was likely to encounter, up to and including the complete shutdown of the local municipal government.

which presently obtained.

most of it was automated. routines were generated for regular tasks that required human intervention. order flow (provisioning, maintenance, disconnects) perpetuated the impression of variety.

étienne traveled from shack to shack, carrying out his assigned functions. some days he would not have to travel at all. on these occasions he found time to read, or otherwise fritter away the hours. when work interrupted his reading he would become irritable.

eitenne walked into the front office already thinking about lunch. "anything, today, carmen?" he asked the administrative assistant, who was invariably seated at her desk. "all in your e-mail," she assured him, bluntly. "fine." he closed and locked the door to his office, then initiated a sequence of keypresses under his desk. the wall shifted and shuddered into a passageway, opening to reveal the equipment kept in the back, and to his real work.

the web had changed in fifty years. phones now provided most of the surveillance services previously relegated to manual data entry. wireless had remained strictly short-range, so there would always be a need for a local web to tie it all together. carmen believed that her labors supported an engineer working to propagate this web, and technically perhaps she was right, but it was critical to the operations of a successful surveillance apparatus that mundane aspects of its inner workings be kept hidden—or at least, plausibly deniable—from the technicians who kept it all going. architects who let on they had glimpsed the bigger picture were often said to end up buried alive, inside the pyramid.

étienne watched from the back room as carmen gathered up her things, her station's neat and orderly appearance succumbing to further tidiness as she cleared away the evidence of her work day. her small hands moved quickly and quietly. (well, there was no audio on his feed.) after he was satisfied she had left, étienne switched off his monitor.

FORM FIELD

Striped fabric. This photo is no longer available. This photo is no longer available. Prototype, portable. Bubbles. Blocks of wall.

nothing could change the fact that he was tired. an evening without travel, he worried his new boots would never get broken in. finally, he removed the foam inserts, and tied them tight enough to cut off the circulation in his feet.

a ticket came in asking him to make a two hour round trip to shut the front door on a surveillance shack. cleaning crew again, no doubt. he ignored it.

what had never been clear was why the mind tended to focus on discernible plots, as if the mere fact of a (somehow) legible progression from one discreet state to the next was in fact the primary appeal of the perceptive act. to what end, he always wondered. legibility was authorship, and who needed attribution? scared governments, was the obvious answer. étienne turned the problem over in his mind without ever reaching the forty percent minimum information needed to confidently make a decision.

other concerns included: what was the soul, and where was it located; who watched the watcher; what was the hand that moved the hand; why was it always so hard to see a mistake as you were making it, but always so easy to spot it in retrospect. he moved through the questions as he moved through the woods near his house—inexpertly.

he could see the back of his own head in his monitor.

after his lunch, étienne decided to tidy up his office. he removed the week's accumulation of garbage to approved containers, destroyed ephemeral notes, labels, transfers, and other related detritus. he drew the line at performing maintenance on the office's ladders, light fixtures, and doors. instead, he put in a ticket.

the dispatch center called, requesting information about one of étienne's peers.

for a night with no work, he felt he was doing a lot of work.

time to read a book.

the gods had pursued étienne from childhood. over and around obstacles, their pursuit had been relentless, ever-present in his awareness. and now he was here, in this place where at least one of them had first been born.

most of them were dead. all of his fathers had moved on. bowie had followed the last remaining shade from beneath the hollow tree. and now étienne was here, in this space that invoiced itself as the ***berlin of the ohio river valley,*** where the bars boasted animatronic bowies.

so, the faces of the gods were gone. sl came around from time to time, willing to relate their stories, but you had to turn him off and on, the spigot would not contain itself of its own accord.

étienne didn't want to know how it worked. he figured the town had not been like this, back in grandpa's day. the casino had not even existed. the hotels had sat decrepit, or otherwise mostly empty—let's say neglected. the town's connection to germany was also likely a fiction, but it was true there had been some crossover between labor protests, in the early- to mid-twenties. in october there was strassenfest.

grandpa had only smiled when anyone brought up the subject of bowie. "we've got one of those down at the bar," he would say, and laugh. he didn't laugh very often, so the effect was unnerving.

when étienne had decided to abandon the gods, he had required a seal, to close off any temptation towards regression. he chose the unlikely figure of the spiral, or, to put it bluntly, the rune u+1f300. spotting it frequently in advertising and literature, the mark assured his safety. this was what he had decided. he was surprised to discover it as a

motif in the town's architecture, and wondered if perhaps he hadn't simply remembered it subconsciously, from his childhood.

for the most part the seal had proven effective. the usual seeping through of malicious messaging, whether through malevolent incompetence or honest misconfiguration, had left him mostly unscathed. the glaring exception had been his inability to set down in words exactly what it all meant.

when he wasn't reading, étienne would open his notebook and attempt to communicate with himself. the clatter of notes as he assembled them would fall on deaf ears. though sometimes, looking back in a notebook filled years before, he would convince himself that he was finally getting the message. the future—his present—having bled through to his past. he realized he was setting himself up for some manner of disappointment.

tonight was no exception, as presently he had no earthly conception of what any of the words he had just written down were intended to mean. he decided against destroying the pages just drafted, but marked them each anyway with the seal.

> How to keep sane in spiral types of space. Precautions to be taken in the case Of freak reincarnation: what to do

He expected nothing, and that's precisely what he got.

As designed, the seal was a seal upon itself, cutting off the tape even as it continued to spiral off the reel.

"not so fast," sl said, sarcastically. "i have a few more things to say."

sl went into his whole spiel about how he'd arranged things so the gods would sort it out amongst themselves. let's you and him fight, while i'm over here doing as i please. the product of the conflagration was the ticker tape. a fixed match. an arranged marriage that paid dividends.

étienne remained unconvinced. he closed his notebook and strapped on his tool belt to do some work. paying work, unlike this... whatever it was. uncompensated emotional labor.

surveillance consolidation. as older equipment was phased out, existing lines were concentrated into shelves that carried ever higher capacity. customers—the lines feeding the cameras—had to be moved from their disparate original termination points to new homes in the high capacity shelves, all without interrupting service. étienne didn't hear many complaints.

tonight he worked a few such cuts. when he felt he'd done a reasonable amount of work he marched back to his office and picked up reading his book, almost as if nothing had happened.

stepping happily through nabokov, he proceeded on, to gogol and turgev. the informal survey of russian authors was not actually intended as such. when he couldn't concentrate on his reading he ate another snack.

the end of étienne's shift arrived right on time, and he drove home. violet was asleep. he took off his clothes and lay down on the bed.

he was tired.

Disk And Executive MONitor

attendant, ministering, or indwelling spirit; genius

sometimes, mounting the storage media would crash the machine. this could be awkward if étienne was operating remotely. he'd have to wait, possibly for hours, until his duties brought him back to the same facility where he'd left the machine. he made lists of lists, to coordinate the intricate ballet of managing the defective equipment, together with its ineptly written software. then, a master list to coordinate the lists.

he'd been on the job long enough to know that any solutions to his daily annoyances would be completely up to himself. training would not be forthcoming. he could only hope that whatever he came up with would not run afoul of company policy. the most likely scenario was that no one would ever check.

most likely no one would ever know. on a typical evening étienne saw no one, spoke to no one, interacted with no one but the machines. when there was work to do, he did it. when there wasn't any work to

do, he would do something else. he enjoyed the silence.

the machines were unreliable. less reliable, even, than himself. which puzzled him. how could any of this possibly even work? how did anyone ever really get surveilled? there was no one behind the steering wheel. he figured that was why he was here.

enough things had broken on this day for étienne to wonder if he was doing something wrong. there was little in the way of feedback, aside from the simple binary conclusion: working or not working. sometimes not even that was clear from the context clues alone.

he took meticulous notes. it was all he could do.

at the end of his shift he packed up his things. he left a message for the day shift:

> something is wrong here but i don't know what it is. anyway, good luck.

étienne had thought he was alone in the central office. a flicker of movement on his monitor caught his eye, but upon closer inspection he could see no one on any of the cameras. he unlocked the door to his office and ventured into the front reception area.

bill was asleep on the couch. the air reeked of marijuana. bill had spilled his beer all over the carpet. he was out cold. étienne tested the theory by lifting bill's arm and dropping it right on his chest. nothing. no response. bill was a coworker. another technician who covered his offices and shacks during the night shift, which commenced presently. so be it.

étienne logged out and headed home. the snow was starting up again, and he didn't want to waste time trying to rouse bill from whatever had befallen him. he managed to squeak into his garage before the roads got bad. he was thankful he had a garage.

he popped open his leaf and propped it up on his knees, trying to stay awake to finish his movie before it was time for bed. violet stirred uncomfortably and he decided that, anyway, he was too tired to continue. he lay awake staring into the darkness right up until he didn't.

he had remembered something, earlier in the evening, about grandpa's old house. he couldn't remember now, but it had been something he had intended to write down before he left work. oh well, figure

it out in the morning.

up, out of bed, and back to work. the days linked together in a regular, predictable progression, a chain that was connected to nothing. pulling... what, exactly? probably nothing. that was why it was so easy. by now étienne had straightened out his own office, and a few of the remotes besides. the biggest problem was the techs who worked during the day. they didn't do things the way he did things. he spent a lot of time fixing mistakes, re-doing work they had already finished and closed out. he supposed there was someone providing the same service, for him, catching his mistakes, fixing his errors. maybe it was bill.

he began leaving little notes.

> hands off the tv dinners

and

> flush the fucking toilet

he printed out and hung a photograph of an early atomic test on the inside of a men's room stall.

soon enough, notes from others began to appear.

tonight, he hung up an article from an nsa internal publication, circa 1974: guidesmanship: how to write technical manuals without actually giving anything away.

then he sat down to work on the manual.

EVERYTHING IS TRUE, NOTHING IS DELETED

WHITE, BROWN, RED, WHITE, GRAY, BROWN, WHITE, WHITE, GRAY, WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, RED, WHITE, WHITE, GRAY, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK BLACK BLACK, BROWN, PURPLE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, GRAY, WHITE, BLACK.

"does any part of you want to do this?" sl asked.

étienne peered over the edge of the water tower, looking down.

"no," he said, and backed away from the edge. sl nodded, as if everything was taking place exactly as he had foreseen. "you're okay," he said.

"waiting for this conversation to finish," étienne said, fumbling with his phone. "it always takes a long time when you feed it a lot of text."

"just wait it out," sl urged him.

étienne's process finally returned control to the shell. he manipulated the output before sending it back into a new file, which he promptly mailed as an attachment to his friend, james.

"intuitive," sl remarked.

it was time to go home. étienne climbed down and walked to his truck. he would need to stop and get gas on his way back to the office, which he didn't like to do at night. served him right for staying up there so long.

sis called and said that dad was dead. which was strange, in étienne's opinion, because he hadn't noticed anything unusual happening, during his shift. he hung his phone and completed the drive home, wondering how any of this could be real.

"not yet," violet said. not his violet, but the violet he'd noticed, standing behind the partition between himself and the other places that were not himself. "not yet," she repeated, several times, and he got the distinct impression she was receding from view. he was losing access. "not yet," she said again, and she was gone.

étienne didn't know what to say.

quit complaining. stress hormone levels rise by fifteen percent after ten minutes of complaining.

étienne closed the message and closed his leaf. he got back to work.

later, at home, he stressed out, complaining about his day at work. when he realized what was happening he thought about the message he had received in his company mail, warning him about complaining. he decided to try to calm down and take it easy.

one consideration was the age of the equipment. much of the old technology took up more space than could be justified by the capacity it carried. at the same time, the services it still provided could not just be switched off. the customers had contracts. a complicated cut procedure, requiring meticulous planning, was one of his primary work functions. but this process took time, and the migration from old to new was not keeping pace with the deterioration of the old network. obsolete facilities could not be repaired when the old equipment failed and replacement parts were not available. so, what to do when something broke and there was no way to fix it? étienne was still responsible for the downtime. he supposed part of what they were paying him for was to take the fall.

larceny was employed. from one surveillance shack to the next, idle surplus equipment was purloined to be installed elsewhere, where it was needed. increasingly this method was used to secure reliable services, quite outside the official inventory procedure. it was a violation of company policy, but then, so was allowing a preventable service interruption. étienne figured someone higher up would be able to see this.

sometimes the trip to fetch a spare plug would consume the better part of his shift. on these occasions étienne would finish his work (restoring service to the problem circuit) and go home without writing down his usual detailed notes. days or weeks afterward he would find himself unable to recall the details of what he had done, and why.

he had begun carrying with him the small painting kit violet had given him as a christmas present, some years before. and a portable record player, which seemed preposterous, especially since he only owned one record: miles davis, bitches brew. 180 gram vinyl, but the second lp from the set, and its sleeve, had gone missing. he had had to repair the player's frayed power cord before he could listen to his solitary scratched record.

he didn't get it.

étienne pulled up to the railroad crossing and applied his brakes. he noticed a truck from the power company in the lane next to him. squinting, he could make out the driver's screen through her driver side window. she was scrolling rapidly through quilt patterns, rejecting them all at a fast clip. the train finally passed and étienne let off of his brakes.

a new problem had emerged: what to do with the old equipment when it broke. replace it, fine, but how to dispose of the broken parts? the answer was not so straightforward as it might seem. frequently, the inventory system contained no record of a device that had been placed in service over a decade before the trouble appeared. the equipment just sat there, anonymously performing its function, even without possessing paperwork to justify its presence. étienne had heard that the aging devices, when they did manage to get returned, were being melted down for their gold content. he knew for a fact that most of this stuff ended up in the trash. but he'd also heard stories of (former) employees caught with large stockpiles of decommissioned defectives stashed in their attics, garages, and sheds, at home. why, he always wondered, would they accumulate stolen property at their homes?

his immediate concern was keeping the clutter in his office under control. trash was collected only twice per week. but some weeks he had a lot of trash. or anyway, a lot of decommissioned parts that did not appear in the inventory.

near his home, on an adjacent lot, stood an old, abandoned house. off and on he'd explored the property, ultimately concluding that he had no interest in buying it. but now a solution to his problem at work had presented itself: he could store all the unknowable junk in this building. after all—it was true—he never knew when a component of some discarded unit might come in handy to repair an unrelated problem with yet another piece of obsolete equipment. and this wasn't his land, wasn't his attic, wasn't his garage, and it wasn't his shed.

over a period of three months étienne cleared out the debris and restored a minimum of weatherproofing to the ramshackle structure next door to his house. it was more of a barn, now, than a home, but the discarded parts would in any case be safe from the elements.

in a flight of fancy he designed and mounted a barn quilt on the side of the old building. covertly, it served double duty as a transmitter for the building's remote surveillance gear.

with the project's completion étienne considered the inventory crisis—at least the one lately manifest within the confines of his responsibilities—solved.

and there wasn't a soul alive he could tell about it.

website

web·site / 'web-,sit /

variants: Web site or less commonly web site

noun TELECOMMUNICATIONS

A concentration point of connections to remote surveillance devices, also known as the central office. Remote sites are colloquially referred to as surveillance shacks.

webshit

web·shit / 'web-'shit /

noun TELECOMMUNICATIONS

An official, aficionado, or example of web-related technology, theory, or associated activities.

the lions came.

standing at the sink and staring out of the kitchen window he saw them for the first time. lions, cresting the ridge, walking slowly out of the woods. converging on his home as if there were some reason lions should exist in 21st century indiana. in winter.

male and female created he them. étienne blinked and sipped his coffee.

later, as he climbed into the truck, they glanced at him with evident disinterest (cats) and he wondered to himself if this was just going to be the way things were, from now on. more of them continued to show up as the morning wore on, but they didn't seem to have any particular reason for being there. étienne could remember the portraits of the big cats his father had hung throughout the house: panthers, tigers, cougars, cheetahs, and lions. could there be some kind of connection? of course, the framed drawings from his childhood living room could hardly have lured these cats into the woods.

the lions didn't cause any trouble, but still he was careful. he locked his doors and drove to work.

when he returned home they were all still there, most of them asleep. okay, so this was how it was going to be. what would violet think? one of the males perked up momentarily when étienne slammed the door of his truck, then rested his chin on his forepaws and drifted back to sleep. étienne was more careful with the back door of the house.

in the morning they were gone. well, absent. not apparently visible. he assumed they might return at any moment. they could always come back. he was curious to know: what had they wanted, and what had they been trying to tell him?

LIONS IN DREAMS: Understanding dreams is not so difficult. In practice dream symbols translate into certain words within the English language. For instance one lion dream translated into the words "feeling nervous" and the dream meaning was linked to the feeling "I am very nervous about being caught breaking copyright rules". So dream meanings are in fact very relevant yet they seem so bizarre.

both of his parents were dead. étienne found out about his mother when a message arrived from his sister. he had cut up his fingers at work, so when he went to type in his reply, the cuts, still not healed, had started to bleed again, which made quite a mess, which was all very dramatic and stupid.

all he could do was go to work. on the way, in the truck, he listened to an audiobook about the new york developer robert moses. obviously, this guy had never taken a swing at this town. the book was over sixty hours long. étienne was confident there would be no mention of indiana, or more specifically of the little place where he made his living. no news was good news.

at work there was nothing to do. he had left nothing for the tail end of the week. he would sit in his rolling chair and accrue benefits.

what was it he'd written down? there was nothing in his mind but the drone of the machines. he might have fallen asleep if there had been anything to let go of. he noticed that, because of the injury to his hand, he was now holding his pen in exactly the same way he had observed his father holding his own pen, when he was a child. "i've written so much the muscles in my hand don't work anymore," dad had said. something like that, pops.

étienne tried to understand it all from his mother's perspective. dad had refused to promise that he'd stop seeing the other woman, so, really, she had had no choice. for the rest of her life she had faithfully enumerated his father's many faults, ones that étienne must never, ever, emulate. don't lie, don't cheat, don't be lazy, don't spend money recklessly, don't destroy the foundations of trust within your own family by promoting an unrealistic standard of evidence with regards to matters of cause and effect. étienne had added the last stricture on his own. nobody, including himself, had lived up to his expectations.

mom had told him once that she thought he was too hard on people, and that he took it out on god. all of that was over, now. étienne hadn't left god. god had left him. there was nothing to believe in, and therefore nothing to be angry about. there was no point in dredging any of this up now. mom was in no position to listen, or to argue.

here came the exhaustion.

étienne drove home and went to bed.

DO NOT ANSWER /
DO NOT ANSWER /
DO NOT ANSWER

Pyramid mountains, grass, rocks, a road. Cathedral arch. Visual rhetoric. This photo is no longer available. Android duck on the pond; repairs. Your kindle is unable to connect to the wireless network.

it was back to reading. étienne wanted to finally finish anaïs nin, and of course henry miller. mishima was temporarily (again) on hold.

his daily carry had expanded to include even more books. a dedicated satchel. was this a mistake? there was scarcely room in the truck for his work tools. if he couldn't work when he got there, he'd just have to sit and read. étienne made the stuff fit, though his elbows would bang the satchel on tight curves.

something still troubled him.

his back was sore, pretty much all the time. dad would have told him to have it looked at. "whatever it takes." étienne hadn't seen a doctor in years. he was uncomfortable sitting, standing, laying on his stomach, or on his back. laying down on his side his knees would fit together unnaturally. sleep was something he had to resent. it showed up whenever it felt like showing up—totally lackluster, totally unreliable. and totally unapologetic. he figured, that's just sleep being sleep.

the gods were still fighting. he still didn't believe in them but he supposed that was one way you could say it. (why should he need to say it?) sometimes phrases appeared into his head. he'd rather they didn't.

more days went by and étienne read more books. he got on with his routine. it helped to sort out the situation with mom's estate. he went for fewer walks in the woods. he tried to figure out what to do with his body while he was sitting, standing, kneeling, or laying down. he tried to stop complaining.

at times it seemed he had forgotten how to animate his limbs. he called upon his motor functions and the attempt would produce no discernible movement anywhere in his body. he'd stop, and wait, and finally his arm or his leg might twitch. then he'd go on with whatever it was he had been trying to do.

in the years that followed he would remember this lack of cooperation and wonder how he had decided to address the apparent rebellion against himself. he would have no memory of it.

things were not going well. he ordered a new pair of boots and they were the wrong size. he sent them back, and the replacements, a half size larger, were also too small, but he wasn't certain until he'd worn them for a couple of days. reluctantly he ordered a third new pair of boots.

climbing out of bed something went wrong. his back seized up and it was impossible to stand. his lower back was the problem. he eased himself back onto the bed and yelled for violet (she'd been up for hours, by this point). what now?

it lasted for five days. he thought he would lose his mind. painful spasms even just trying to turn over. he was exhausted but sleep was out of the question. when he dozed off, and moved, another spasm would shoot through his back. if he did sleep, waking up, and moving again, unthinking, it would set off a similar, unintentional chain reaction. at the end of the five days he finally just stood up and walked out of the bedroom, as if none of it had ever happened.

for the next three years, the cycle repeated once or twice each spring and fall. changing of the seasons meant at least a week in bed. outside of this window his back was mostly normal—just the usual low-grade misery. after three years the seasonal bed rest was replaced with a near-constant crook in his back that made it a challenge to stand or walk without making sour faces that pissed people off. he sighed a lot. the pain—as such—wasn't bad enough to incapacitate him, it just lodged him in a permanent, sort-of-bad mood.

no one appreciated this more than violet, who spoke to him every day. "my back hurts," he would say, again.

he resolved to stop complaining. mainly because it took up so much of his time, and anyway had no positive effect, re: his back. whenever he wanted to complain about something he would stop, and not say anything at all. reminded him of his grandpa.

this worked about as well as it worked. sometimes he would complain anyway.

his back hurt.

his back still hurt.

étienne stopped on his way to work to fill up the truck. coffee, danish, spinner rack comics. whatever, he bought a copy of uncanny x-men.

sometimes while reading a comic he would flash upon some way the story or artwork could be improved. he would take his pen from his pocket and draw his improvement right on the page. the ink would soak through the page and he would frown. in this particular issue some of the power signatures, as illustrated by the book's artist, seemed incomplete. étienne added linework as he saw fit.

he took the issue with him to lunch. this time, at jerry's family restaurant. he finished his french toast and eggs and headed back to work. it wasn't until he had made it several miles down the road that he realized he'd left the comic book on the table back at jerry's. probably already bussed away by the wait staff. too late to go back now.

he'd made important notes in that comic.

the next day he stopped again at the pantry for coffee. the spinner rack of comics was gone. "yeah, we're not going to be getting those anymore," the cashier said flatly. there was no way for étienne to argue—policy was policy. he bought a cherry slush puppie and hopped back in the truck.

most likely, declining readership and increasing encroachment by corporate management into this territory previously ignored by parent companies would account for the abrupt cessation of newsstand distribution. adaptations in alternative media having all but eclipsed the humble, openly dysfunctional methods by which the source material continued to

be churned out. item: the comic book spinner rack had been replaced, in étienne's local pantry, by a large cardboard display of branded, papercraft vr glasses. cheap and disposable, just like the comic books had used to be.

étienne didn't know or care about these machinations of capital. he just wanted to hold a comic book in his hands and read it, maybe more than once. that would no longer be an option without traveling to another, larger town, where demand evidently supported the operation of a privately owned comic book specialty shop. and who had time for that?

adding the longbox to his daily carry was not so ludicrous as at first it might seem. the box was not completely full of comics (he'd recently upgraded from a shoebox), and there was plenty of room in the back where he could shove small bits such as tools or snacks. the cab of the truck was now completely full. he still fastened the passenger side seat belt around his backpack, even though with the compartment now packed tight it was no longer strictly necessary.

when his fingers were cut up it was sometimes difficult to turn the pages.

mail order had saved him. if newsstands were not going to carry them, and traveling to specialty shops every week was impractical, he'd find other ways to acquire his comics. he'd seen the ads in the books and taken a chance. some of the companies even bought back issues, or would trade them for credit. he sampled new titles that were included with his orders as freebies.

after it was already too late he realized it was happening again. another new interest to consume his mind. (which had proven a quick snack). he tried to care but he found that he couldn't. this was what he was doing, now.

between issues he would write his own stories. he gleaned from an interview in a house publication the format of a comic book plot and script. he wrote for himself to draw, sometimes skipping elaborate descriptions in his plots because of course he knew what he meant.

the drawing materials were carried in his briefcase. sometimes it was hard for him to find time to draw. and sl was completely full of shit. étienne had sent him a complete issue, fully penciled, over a year ago. in all that time he'd heard nothing from his friend.

sometimes it seemed like comic books weren't worth the effort. procuring, reading, caring for, transporting, storing, organizing, writing, drawing, duplicating, and distributing—what, exactly? it was mostly trash, and étienne knew it.

he wondered what he would be interested in next.

start with a blank sheet of paper. common sizes include: 5.5" x 8.5", 8.5" x 11", 8.5" x 14", and the venerable 11" x 17", though sizes at the larger end of the spectrum can be expensive. a fully realized comic book may be created for around five dollars if the artist isn't picky about materials.

next, the page must be laid out in pencil. some clever artists skip this step, and work directly on the page in ink, but for our purposes roughing out the page with any non-permanent graphite lead will do.

at this stage the lettering of word balloons, captions, and sound effects (onomatopoeia) is added in ink, whether from a pre-written script, or, less frequently, improvised by the artist. performing the permanent lettering immediately after the pencils are turned in also allows for any last minute adjustments to the artwork to be decided upon before it is committed to its final form in the next step.

finally, the page's linework is tightened up by tracing it in black ink. most artists tend to prefer india ink, but any form of black line (including, it should be noted, thick, dark pencil markings) is acceptable, so long as the result is reproducible by mechanical means. modern production techniques, often involving computers, are more forgiving on this point.

color is optional. a typical self-financed, self-published comic may find color reproduction to be prohibitively expensive.

at the end of the project the artist will find he has created a comic book story of however many lovingly, painstakingly assembled pages comprise his completed graphic narrative. the satisfaction of crafting a tale well told is found by most artists sufficient to quell the pangs of loneliness typically suffered by those who exhibit a sensitive nature, including some of the most celebrated practitioners of cartoon art in the modern era.

drawing comics makes you crazy, but if you follow these steps, we guarantee you'll hardly even notice.

HE'S GOT (BACK) ISSUES

Surface of Mars. Beverly at the door. Blank book. Surface sounds. This photo is no longer available. Fake car.

sl called, asking for anything related to computers. old manuals, disks, peripherals, component level parts, warranty cards, trade magazines, catalogues, notes, instructions, schematics, or program listings—he wanted them all. étienne asked if he had any comics to trade.

it turned out he did. amazing spider-man #298-299; cerebus #77; twenty copies of x-force #1 (several versions inclusive); ten copies of spider-man #1 (several versions inclusive); the uncanny x-men and the new teen titans; cosmic odyssey #1; wolverine limited series #1-4; marvel uk black and white reprint magazine featuring george pérez avengers stories; conan the barbarian (misc.); alpha flight #10; daredevil #168; random 1990s issues of the amazing spider-man and batman; ann nocenti daredevil (incomplete run); daredevil: the man without fear #1-5; video jack #4; silver surfer v3 #1-3; justice league america #34; thor #337; x-factor #25-27; groo (misc.); wizard magazine (misc.); the death of superman tpb; dark horse presents #34-36; roachmill #1; uncanny x-men #141-143, 180; and a complete set of tsr marvel super-heroes role playing game pewter figurines. étienne said he would take them all.

in return he surrendered a tandy color computer (coco) 2, its manual, a collection of recently pirated software, and a joystick.

it was an okay trade. some of the comics étienne already had, and a lot of them were garbage, but there were also quite a few key issues he could flip on the secondary (tertiary?) market to buy yet more comics. they shook hands and étienne loaded the new books into his truck.

the computer had already been old when dad had handed it down to him, maybe twenty years ago, when he was around ten years old. crucially, the dual floppy disk drive hadn't been a part of étienne's deal with sl. he assumed sl would be back for it once he realized his mistake.

what other comics did he have to trade?

for some reason étienne's town had a video store. a remnant of the somehow still extant berlin-in-the-'00s tourist theme. étienne had taken to renting videos to watch during his shift.

one evening when he stopped by he noticed they were giving away comic books with every rental. there were mint condition stacks of three titles: uncanny x-men #215, uncanny x-men #216, and avengers annual #10. since he was renting three videos, étienne was entitled to all three comics.

why did this place have old comic books? they weren't second prints. they weren't even german translations. weird.

he left the shop, and headed on to work. He went about his shift.

bill had messaged him, wanting to complain about politicians. étienne demurred. he was going to watch his videos.

from his backpack étienne produced a device whose function was to interface the ancient video player to his visor. the thing was on the fritz. some protocol glitch between the devices. lacking any other explanation, étienne blamed a recent firmware update.

blame was fine, but now he couldn't watch his videos. the contemporary playback device he'd found squirreled away in a closet in his central office was likewise—but differently—inoperable. he sighed and gave up.

he flipped through the comics. okay, he'd never read these issues before. filling more holes in his collection. this michael golden art was something else.

étienne put down the comics and ate his lunch early. he'd be hungry later, but so what, he could do whatever he wanted. (thanks, violet, for packing the lunch.)

bill again. leave me alone.

the next evening étienne returned the videos to the shop, unwatched. he noticed the stacks of mint condition comics again, and, impulsively, offered the clerk a hundred dollars to buy the whole lot.

"nope, nuh uh," the clerk said. "one free comic per rental."

and then there was the house. grandpa and grandma's house, where dad had moved back after the divorce, his world contracting into his childhood bedroom, no longer shared with his brothers. that had been where the computer was stored, where the books had lived, where the board would be laid on the bed and the pages laid out for assembly, a small lamp and a small speaker providing atmosphere.

the house was gone, now. the green asphalt tiles had given way to green vinyl siding, had given way to demolition, debris removal, and, finally, a stranger mowing the empty lot.

before any of that had been the old bedroom, the crumbling wallpaper in the kitchen, the pale beige carpet in the front room, the moss on the cracked concrete of the back porch, the makeshift garage—all, also, gone.

étienne could somehow picture it clearly, even though he had never been inside the place. his grandfather's grandparents' house. in some other little town. in some other little world. he was just as sure the place was gone. he found out later—it was.

he counted the other unknown places he somehow felt he knew: the public library, the firehouse, the demolished wing of the casino, the firehouse in that other town (whose name he did not even know), several homes of strangers, a drug store that sold adult magazines sealed in ziploc bags, a movie theater (which somehow he knew had also burned to the ground), john henry's restaurant, an old train car, the church in the country, the trailer park, the small barn in the backyard over the hill, yancy's swimming pool, the cellar, the other pizza place by the highway on the way to petersburg, the old caboose at the city park that dad (who's dad?) had said he'd help settle into its base by the shelter house, brandon's new house on flood road, riding two skateboards down hill street while

dribbling a basketball, the empty trailer whose yard nevertheless got mowed, medco center, pumpkin center, the rural pole barn that also burned down, the swing set at the campground (also installed by grandpa), the stacks of newspapers in aunt (the other aunt) eunice's living room, sitting at home and watching cable television. none of these were his memories. none of these people were people he knew. they trampled through his mind as if the route was familiar and they didn't need to look where they were going.

all he could do was think.

he found the address—also, somehow, already in his mind—on a mapping service and confirmed the street view in his visor before turning off the device and closing his eyes, laying his head down on his desk and pressing its flat, laminate surface directly against his forehead.

the pictures continued to disembark, dragging trunks and chests through his mind, on their way to an as yet unimagined new world.

quartz in the ground, in the woods behind the house. étienne started finding it the last time he went out for a walk. mostly concentrated in a small ravine behind the abandoned car lot. he brought some back to the house and kept it in a plastic bread bag.

big glass doors off the dining room. sitting at the table eating his breakfast he could see the whole town. such as it was. he stretched out his arms and ran his fingertips along the tablecloth. finished his cereal.

he'd been reading a byrne superman. number fourteen, the first he'd managed to acquire. some primitive computer art, inside.

beyond breakfast he'd made no plans for the day. violet was already up and out of the house. he didn't have to work. he'd have to think about it.

it was starting to snow.

a lion emerged from the woods. it rounded the yard barn and sauntered up to the house. on the back porch it nosed through the cat food étienne had put out for the strays. bottom half of the plastic milk carton that served as a bowl briefly got stuck on the lion's nose, and eitenne laughed out loud.

the lion didn't laugh.

"i am smiling," étienne said for the lion.

he decided to walk into town. the snow started and stopped, sputtering gently for the rest of the day. he spent the afternoon wandering between "weimar" shops in town. he came home clutching christopher isherwood.

étienne perversely tracked his purchases in a custom-made arrangement on an antique amiga computer running openbsd. basically, a big text file. he would print out the file and file it in his filing cabinet, because it amused him to do so. the computer was not networked, and lions couldn't type.

when violet came home she said she was pregnant.

iii.

violet would never forget. her brother had gone too far this time.

years later, when he finally moved out, she had indeed all but forgotten. still, holding someone down and spitting in their mouth was a rotten thing to do. she had hugged him, and he had climbed somberly into the car with dad.

shit you, she'd thought.

it had been a while since she'd thought about him at all. busy with her own life. today, she wondered what bullshit he might have been up to lately. then she realized she probably didn't want to know.

she liked driving the ambulance. it was nothing like piloting a drone, which in any case the air force had not allowed her to do, but sometimes she would pretend the steering wheel controlled a sort of flying vehicle, and she'd bank between the clouds (the other cars), and she'd increase throttle to military power (the posted speed limit). she imagined her patients would appreciate the time saved by avoiding stoplights.

once she had clipped the top of the ambulance on a low underpass. no real permanent damage, but a serious scrape atop the vehicle that had had to wait six months before it could be repainted. an ongoing embarrassment for which she'd earned a nickname, which shall not be repeated here.

her own son liked to browse through the photo albums of wrecks and rescues that her coworkers maintained, back at the base. every time she had had a close call, like with the underpass, like with several other near accidents, she was thankful that she'd never made a mistake serious enough to earn photo documentation in the album. she'd not want him to see anything like that.

lunch during her shift was usually a disappointment. bad restaurants, nothing like the lunches mom had made for dad. she'd tried making her own lunches but eventually had given up, exasperated at her own lack of imagination. there were only so many ways to arrange the basic ingredients of a sandwich.

violet pulled her meshback cap down over her hair and drove her ambulance back to base.

hermes woke up in the back of an ambulance, headed to who knows where. after confirming all of his constituents were intact, he saved his game and switched cartridges. he'd pick this up again later.

sl was tormenting him. his vestments were ill-fitting. hermes had a lot of complaints.

and gods didn't ask permission.

here he was back in the ambulance. they were taking him somewhere because he had been injured. nevertheless, he had a message to deliver.

at the hospital, a boy was making a fuss in the waiting room. his grandmother was dying. he was, understandably, upset. but he was also too young to be allowed into intensive care. he was making a fuss because the nurses wouldn't let him in to see his grandmother, and nobody was doing anything about it. hermes could see the injustice of the situation, but rules were rules.

gods were made of rules—although, sometimes rules could be bent.

hermes delivered his message. the boy gradually calmed down, though not until he had been physically removed from the premises. hermes considered his task completed, and left.

violet steered her ambulance around to the garage. it was her turn to wash the unit, and all she wanted to do was sleep. once she finished with the water hose she drug herself into the ambulance base and laid

down on her cot, without even bothering to take off her hat and shoes. she'd sleep until the end of her shift, barring any more runs.

at 07:00 she woke up, splashed water on her face, and drove herself home. it was time to take the boy to school.

hermes was late for work. sl had laid enough traps, diversions, and obstacles to stop a lesser god dead in his tracks. but hermes still had a few tricks up his sleeve. if he'd worn sleeves.

it was a kelly. work one day, enjoy one day off. work one day, enjoy one day off. work one day, enjoy four days off. violet was not going anywhere. today was her day to sleep. as for the following three days...

instead she listened to records. yet another repackaged reissue from the bowie camp. this time, the original 2002 heathen (the rays) ep. expanded at the time of its original release to a full album, against bowie's wishes, the farce had included unfinished demos, rejected soundtrack submissions, and other odds and ends, all of which had been scrapped by bowie himself before the mastering stage. this was not that. this new release commemorated the 250th anniversary of the founding of west berlin, indiana, the piece of shit town, population 574, that violet found herself living in. all the weimar shops on the walkway were hawking copies of the deluxe edition. she had bought one, not because it was popular (in fact, it was the fastest selling vinyl of the past twenty-five years), but because she liked the material. "i find i enjoy simply interpreting the songs," bowie had said in a contemporary interview. indeed.

the tracklist proceeded as follows:

1. sunday
2. afraid
3. i would be your slave
4. 5:15 the angels have gone
5. heathen (the rays)

the tracks all fit onto a single side of the record, with the program repeating on side b.

it had been bowie's first solo effort since 1983, and his last until shortly before his death in 2016. it had comprised the entirety of what he had had to say about the intervening decades. violet once owned a copy of an earlier release, in middle school, and it had helped her to unlock

some of the cultural response to the 9/11 attacks on new york and washington, d.c. much later, it had helped her to realize she no longer believed in god.

she'd bought a copy for her son, who already claimed he didn't believe in god, but she was pretty sure he'd never listened to it.

well, there was always hope.

SPIRIT OF COMMUNICATION

- Except that their English sometimes seemed a little odd.

- Is your resume out of style?

- Apple staff "physically hurt" by walking into glass walls at Foster-designed campus

- nth bit is not set

- Deldo is a sex toy control and teledildonics mode for Emacs

violet was bad with money. she spent a lot of it. not on purpose, exactly, but the stuff seemed to disappear steadily as events fulfilled their natural course, like water draining out of a sink. of course, the money didn't just get up and walk away.

hermes searched through her wallet, looking for change. nothing.

violet rolled over in bed. she'd been laying around for four days. now it was time to get back to work. twenty-four hour shifts took their toll, and she was tired. at least she hadn't blown any more of her paycheck while she was asleep. her son had smashed his visor, and it would have to be replaced. she'd be paying for at least half of it out of her own pocket.

hermes didn't carry any change. no pockets. and the machine only took quarters.

hermes was, among other things, the god of money. naturally he had plenty of stuff for himself, but the people he had to deal with often seemed to have trouble keeping it around. take violet. there was usually not much left for him to steal from her by the time she got paid. habitually, she lived from paycheck to paycheck. she kept him always on his toes.

violet wrenched herself out of bed and ran a comb roughly through her tangled hair. almost immediately she gave up, screwing her usual meshback cap down onto her pillow-formed head. some battles were not worth fighting this early in the morning.

hermes didn't just give up. but violet had stymied his most creative efforts to put a cap on her spending. she simply did what she wanted to do, whenever she wanted to do it. there was no real strategy involved, she simply moved forward, here stumbling, there taking sure-footed, confident strides, one purchase at a time.

violet cracked open a pepsi. her son was back with his father. her parents were dead. she ingested the thick liquid easily, crushing the empty aluminum can against her forehead. after all these years, the maneuver still hurt. she dropped the can into the recycle bin and climbed into her truck.

laid rubber in the parking lot.

the divorce had been sudden, a surprise, though perhaps it shouldn't have been. violet had found herself unable to explain. anything, really. that was sufficient. the paperwork had been filed.

her husband (her ex-husband) had taken the boy, and much of the furniture. consequently violet spent a lot of her time sitting on the floor. she never quite got around to replacing the missing pieces.

her days off from work were filled with fewer interruptions. she caught up on a lot of sleep, but she found herself spending less and less time at home.

usually, she showered at work. dinner, too, so her fridge at home was most often empty. when the boy came over for his weekend visits he would complain that there was nothing to eat. she would sigh under her breath and ask him if he'd like to go out for dinner. when he said yes, she'd ask him if he'd also like to go see a movie. when he said yes, her evening, and her budget for the following week, was planned. it all cost a substantial amount of money, on her salary, but she would tell him to order whatever he wanted.

when violet wasn't asleep she would read. clancy, brown, griffin, lustbader, had all given way to proust, isherwood, waugh, mishima, nin, colette. she worked her way through most of the public library. well, except for the romance novels...

at home, there were her subscriptions: the new york times; the smithsonian magazine; national geographic; the indiana historical society journal; air power journal; air force magazine; friends journal: the magazine of the air force museum foundation, inc.; the new york review of books; the london review of books; the claremont review of books (haha); the new yorker; retro gaming magazine; the uncanny x-men. and she wondered where all her money went.

twenty-four hours was a long shift. the twenty-second century had been a long century. but life itself seemed short. there was so little time to cram it all in. even with the visor to help.

violet sat on the floor, surrounded by newspapers and magazines.

it was all bullshit, and she hated it.

the problem was, it wore off.

seeing the thing was fine, making the realization stick was quite a different exercise. contrary to the cliché, there was no need to "unsee" a thing; as the initial sensation receded, so, too, did its memory.

well, some memories. violet couldn't shake them all. the question became: was she remembering events, or was she remembering having remembered them? looking at the photo albums her whole life had confused the issue, until she no longer knew what she knew, or how she knew it. what if those people had never existed?

her brother, sl, had said things like that. maybe she was glad that their contact these days was infrequent. so, why did she miss him?

at work, patients (plural) had complained about her hygiene. coworkers had complained that she never pulled her fair share of cleaning duty in the community kitchen. her ex-husband wanted her to take their son for the summer, have him stay over at her apartment for the duration.

she fell back on her reading. she'd begun to keep a log of the titles she completed. at first she tracked the date when she started to read the book. then she realized that it might make more sense to track the date when she finished. she'd tried both, and the log was already a mishmash of different combinations of data points, difficult to collate and analyze systematically. the whole thing had become a burden.

she felt like there was something she had intended to write down. some idea, or realization, or some clever procedural tweak that could be implemented at work, to shave seconds off the department's response time.

it was gone, now.

she could write it all on paper. three-ring binders and the color coded system of underlining: black, white, pale green, orange, blue, red, gray, yellow, purple, brown, taught to her by her father. little paper collars that fit snugly around the ring holes she'd punched into each sheet—violet didn't know what they were called.

a small bookshelf housed the binders. she transported them back and forth between locations (work, home) in an oversized duffle bag. once full she was barely able to hoist it into the truck.

contract work, mostly. human intelligence was not dead. disney paid well for this deniable variety of collection and analysis. compared to her normal salary, which the county sometimes decided to pay out. she compiled new dossiers and revised existing ones. fact-checked analyses written by other contractors, sometimes being paid to re-fact-check her own. she was at once a writer and an editor, which was normally frowned upon by the corporate bean counters. demand had normalized the tacit abrogation of standard protocol.

disney's competitor, gogol/verizon, also paid, though not quite as well as their older, more openly aggressive sibling. sometimes she submitted the same report to both entities. no one ever seemed to notice, or at least no one ever complained.

before she submitted a report she would always gogol the text of her article, just to make sure that any uncredited borrowing she'd committed wasn't immediately apparent. in a way, she'd come to realize, this was a form of early submission. but whatever flags she'd triggered hadn't seemed to have affected the demand for her work. they just kept on paying her to write.

violet vaguely remembered the first request she'd received that mentioned her son. it had been quite a while ago, and at the time she hadn't considered it out of the ordinary—at one time or another she'd reported on all the members of her family—but the requests had kept coming in, steadily increasing in frequency until some months it felt as

though she did nothing but keep track of her son. which felt—somehow, she guessed—wrong. was it a conflict of interest? were there tax implications? she concluded these considerations were above her paygrade.

the duffle bag was secured with a small padlock, the key to which she wore on a chain around her neck. other technicians at the base mostly stayed out of her stuff, but it wasn't wise to take chances with the sensitive material, especially when that material frequently concerned family.

additional security concerns were dealt with as they arose, on a case-by-case basis.

one thing she insisted on: she turned off her visor while she wrote.

THIRD SYSTEM EFFECT

– When ye meet your ancestor, kill your ancestor!

– The discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth

– in one video circulating on social media

– They periodically crash for unknown (to me) reasons and need to be rebooted.

– In the Azure palace in Highest Clarity heaven are jade tablets registering the names and nomenclatures of those adepts who are destined to ascend to the asterisms in broad daylight.

CASCADE

Gray, the red stitching. This photo is no longer available. Fruit of the tree in the snow. Little bird in the tree.

NEWTON'S TRANSLATION

1 Tis true without lying, certain & most true.

2 That which is below is like that which is above & that which is above is like that which is below to do the miracles of one only thing

3 And as all things have been & arose from one by the mediation of one: so all things have their birth from this one thing by adaptation.

4 The Sun is its father, the moon its mother, the wind hath carried it in its belly, the earth is its nurse.

5 The father of all perfection in the whole world is here.

6 Its force or power is entire if it be converted into earth.

7 Separate thou the earth from the fire, the subtile from the gross sweetly with great industry.

8 It ascends from the earth to the heaven & again it descends to the earth & receives the force of things superior & inferior.

9 By this means you shall have the glory of the whole world

10 & thereby all obscurity shall fly from you.

11 Its force is above all force. For it vanquishes every subtle thing & penetrates every solid thing.

12 So was the world created.

13 From this are & do come admirable adaptations whereof the means (or process) is here in this. Hence I am called Hermes Trismegist, having the three parts of the philosophy of the whole world

14 That which I have said of the operation of the Sun is accomplished & ended.

book 4

THE USEFULNESS OF DREAD

Just kidding. Werner knew the jokes would keep coming. At home they had made sure he would expect it wherever he went. People were going to laugh at his visor. He didn't care—the technology was real.

Pete had looked through its lens, feigning involuntary sounds of amazement, but he couldn't say that he'd seen anything. It was just a strip of translucent plastic. The magnetic clasp was nice, he supposed. No need for latches that might break. He just didn't understand the joke. "Ha ha," Pete said.

But the visor was real. Werner scrolled through his feed and found the article he wanted to share. He nudged it along with a facial gesture. Pete just stood there, looking like he wanted a cigarette. Hadn't he gotten the message? Maybe his connection was down.

They got on the bus. The trip across town would give Werner ample opportunity to explain, again. "We'll split the profits 70/30," he began. Pete nodded. "I can provide a complete accounting, if you're interested." Pete said that he was. "Here." Werner handed over his visor, indicating some greater of detail could be gleaned by strapping it onto Pete's head.

Pete Demurred. "I believe you." Werner's smile sagged, but only temporarily. "I'll just send you each page as it's completed, and we can go from there."

"Sounds like a plan," said Pete.

Werner would write the pages, longhand, illuminating the various passages in ink and whatever other materials he judged would facilitate the effect he was going for. Pete would come in behind him and add his color to the text, underlining, emphasizing, organizing connections between apparently disparate clusters of words with textures and hues that rendered their derivations explicit. Pete was good at what he did, and Werner felt that it might have been necessary, with any other colorist, to provide detailed explanations of each paragraph of his text, but with Pete the colors always seemed to come out right. For fear of saying too much, he usually just left him alone to undertake his work. Werner was hardly a micromanager.

The bus arrived at its next-to-last stop and the two men disembarked. Werner flickered out and Pete continued down the street to his apartment.

BEYOND SECTION THREE

The surveillance itself was trivial. Disney still wanted the sound of the street. Werner would talk to his friends, picking up the latest gossip, and then he would go home and write it all down. This (once embellished by Pete) would be submitted along with a voucher to his Disney rep. Several weeks later he'd receive a cheque in the mail, stamped on the back with his contract.

The contract was short: Transfer of POV to Disney in perpetuity.

Work for hire spying was dubiously ethical, but it put food on the table. Werner tried to forget about the fact that he'd never see a dime for foreign reprints (by far the most lucrative market for his work). Once he'd considered moving to china, but as a college dropout he knew his chances of securing suitable housing were slim.

Pete had graduated.

Werner's oeuvre was stored in a filing cabinet in his basement. Once a job was completed he'd deposit it into a large manila envelope and, after attaching a relevant label, slot it in chronologically amongst the other like material. Pretty soon it was going to be time for another filing cabinet.

The arrangement with Disney wasn't ideal, by any means, but Werner just wanted to get his work out there, where people could see it, read over it, glean what they could from what he had to offer. He figured he'd have time to make money later in life. And there was always the chance one of his reports would get optioned for a scandal. An "as reported by" credit would set him up for life.

The economics of the business were, frankly, fucked. Werner had moved out here after Pete had found some success with contract work. Now he was here—where was here?—in Indiana. And what did that mean? At least rents were cheap.

Riding the bus was recreation to be enjoyed from inside his apartment. He'd watch the buildings as they whipped by, wondering what this place had been like, decades ago, before the tall buildings, before it had been swallowed up by Chicago. He didn't know what he imagined. Probably something with powdered wigs and restless natives. More than likely it was just a bunch of people driving big-ass trucks.

SAY THE LEAST

Werner sat on the big rock at the top of the hill in the woods, where the creek began its descent into the ravine, where the trail ended and turned back upon itself. Very cold water flowed around his legs, filling his shoes and soaking his pants. His eyes fell on a patch of moss.

He'd picked up the nine hand positions, and their eighty-one total variations, from a book he'd bought at the mall. The specific mindset, and the verbalization meant to accompany it for each hand position, had been omitted from the author's account, "for the reader's safety." Werner didn't see how this was very safe, being only one-third armed for the exercise. He sat and waited for someone to contradict him.

Fall was happening. The water was cold. This far in the woods he could still hear the city conducting its business beneath him. When more of the leaves fell he would probably be able to see its writhing carcass, as well. Then it would probably be time to find a new place to sit.

From his mind he conjured an image of that new place. He realized it was a place he already knew. He had to let the image go.

The water was seeping into his underwear, and he wondered exactly what it was he was doing. He untwisted his fingers, then stopped, remained in position atop the rock.

Scent of decaying leaves and moss. There were no more words.

WHAT OTHER PEOPLE HAVE ALREADY SAID ABOUT LINES

Werner didn't really know the language, but he managed to write the characters all over every surface he owned, and at least some of the ones he didn't. Examples of his private papers had been sealed with what he hoped were accurate phrases. Some he merely filed away and forgot.

Others he tried to read only a short time after he wrote them. Here, too, he found that the encoding was mostly one way. No idea what he had meant to remember. These, as well, he would grudgingly file and forget. How was he supposed to access them? If he could access them, anyone could access them. The symmetry was obvious, and perfect.

On the other hand, it was likely even the ones he could no longer crack were an open book to his handlers at Disney. Oh yes, he knew about their attempts to monitor his progress...

Pete had sent along another batch of proofs. Werner wasn't sure that he recognized his own words. No fault of Pete's. Something was going wrong with Werner's editor.

The cornerstone of good reporting is clarity. Accentuate the positively verifiable. Excise the negatively misinformational. At times this somber algorithm resulted in short articles indeed. Werner had become fond of throwing in extras for himself to cut prior to submitting a story. Only sometimes would he forget to do the cutting...

Where was he.

Werner drew a firm boundary around the truth. Nothing else could be allowed to creep into his reports, tempting as it might be to embellish—ahem—to add color—ahem—to extend the bare facts into a tapestry better suited to clothe his artistic pursuits. The things he felt he didn't understand he reserved for encoding. It would be bad form to clutter the articles with poorly explicated digressions. As time wore on he found that the encoded ledger eclipsed his contrary meanderings, both in terms of sheer length and what he had to assume had been a surfeit of fine detail...

These items and more flitted flirtatiously through his gradually awakening mind as he prepared his workspace for another day of reading, collating, and typing. Werner cleared his desk of ephemerals and reset his internal chronometer. It was four hours until lunch.

I DON'T WANT TO KNOW

He'd buried some of it, in an airtight container in the woods. A Zero Halliburton he'd stolen from his old job. The books themselves probably seemed stupid, but he took from them what he got from them, and he thought they should be preserved.

During one such expedition to the burial site he uncovered someone else's cache. Another Zero Halliburton, this one older, and far more battered than his own. Inside was another small collection of books. Hubbard, McCaffrey, Reid Banks, Herbert, London, Steinbeck, Wilde, Camus, Gibson, and Malcolm X. There were also several copies of the same old comic book from Radio Shack detailing the assembly of a cheap electronics kit. Werner closed the case and returned it to its place in the hole.

To his own Zero Halliburton he added a slim volume of Anaïs Nin, lately acquired. he noticed that the new edition was cut to a slightly different size than the rest of its siblings from the same series (the "continuous novel"), and briefly wondered why on Earth a publisher would choose to do that.

All the way back to the road he pondered the inclusion of L. Ron Hubbard in the other Zero Halliburton's canon. From what he could remember, the material was trash, the boasting of a mediocre purveyor of shitty science fiction, both in the author's writing, as well as in the constitution and operation of his global religious cult. Werner thought, maybe there was a good reason the suitcase had been buried.

He hitched a ride into town and immediately began talking to the driver.

I WANT OUT

West Berlin had changed. Not in Werner's lifetime, mind, but in the decades following the war, as the influx of returning prisoners brought with them news of the actual Germany, contradicting the dogma West Berlin's citizens had propagated (in innocence, to be sure) before the intrusion of sharpened reality had burst their local media bubble. Werner supposed that the merger with Chicago had also played some small role in the town's transformation from post-industrial wasteland into the shortly-pre-collapse tourist trap it remained today. He was sure he couldn't say.

Whatever, now things were better. He'd heard tell of an adjoining community, set up during the war, where runaway slaves had found a new life (Indiana having had no extradition treaty with Kentucky). He wanted to say the community was out somewhere near his hidden cache, but he had had to admit to himself that he wasn't sure. He'd always figured that someday he would try to suss out precisely where it had been situated, go and pay a visit. Well. Part of the problem with the woods was finding time to walk around in it. Especially at times like this, when he didn't really know where he was going, or what it was he thought he was looking for. Most of his free time was radically more structured.

His ride picked him up at the edge of the woods. As he rode in silence he contemplated the possibility that he'd already previously found the slave community, stumbling over it during one of his daily walks, and simply never realized the coincidence. There were signs of civilization everywhere in the woods, but very few people. The notion seemed likely. Even attractive. He filed it for later perusal.

The one time he had encountered another person on the trail it seemed as if they were headed elsewhere (anywhere?) in an awfully big hurry. Indeed, the gentleman came close to trampling him as he stepped onto the path, all soft smiles and oblivious serenity from his just-completed session at the rock. Werner had pointedly cleared his throat—"Ut!"—but the man had kept going, ignoring him completely, almost as if he'd never really been there at all.

Werner was pretty sure he had been there, but perhaps it was true that his mind had drifted elsewhere. The man could have watched where he was going. The Zero Halliburton swinging from his harm had nearly taken Werner's head off.

It would probably be a mistake to romanticize the past.

Werner cleared his mind and attempted, with some difficulty, to focus himself on not focusing. Again, the words melted to ice water in his throat. Which was sore. The repetition was making him hoarse.

He needed more time to sit.

BEHIND THE WHEEL

Werner couldn't control himself. His mind rebelled at the touch of its master's hand. He'd misidentified the source. There was nothing to be done, now.

Werner suspected as much.

He watched himself slowly waking up, consciousness gathering steam in the too-bright morning sunshine that streamed in his bedroom window. The apartment faced east. Werner watched himself get out of bed and draw the curtains.

Coffee was on. Werner watched himself turning off the machine, pouring the dark liquid into his mug. Some outside force seemed to propel him through the motions. Out of control, he continued with his usual routine. Werner watched himself make toast.

At the table he watched himself reading the paper. Which section did he look to first, which headlines caught his eye. Some of his choices surprised him, in spite of himself. The part of Werner that watched Werner watching was not always happy. He sometimes felt powerless to intervene. Werner's life was a catastrophe. Werner turned the page.

Beyond section three of the paper was a special advertising supplement. Rothco boots. "Not in this lifetime," quipped Werner. He watched himself throwing the paper in the trash.

Local media was full of things like this: fashion, sports, gossip, trumped up scandal, pets, celebrities, ads, births, deaths, legally obligated announcements, market reports, hard news reporting. It all made him nauseous. Werner didn't watch the news. He insisted on reading his lies on paper, same as he wrote them. Even then, the material was lacking in... Verisimilitude?

He'd forgotten where he was going with all this.

No control.

SERIOUSLY, KARL

Could he learn to love himself? The question was hardly idle. Werner had plumbed its depths his entire life... The answer was no closer than it had ever been. It not love, then, what? Anger?

Werner's practice was drifting. In fact he was ready to quit. The stiffness in his back still had not dissipated. His legs always fell asleep. He wasn't sure it was working at all.

Karl wasn't much help. Functionally illiterate, openly racist, indescribably ignorant of the world beyond West Berlin, the man clearly didn't shower every day, or even every week. His guitar playing was an embarrassment to the instrument. When he found out that Werner read comics he began sending peace overtures in the form of full-page tracings out of random issues of The Uncanny X-Men. Karl was Werner's meditation coach.

Karl would join him at the rock, sitting in the placidly flowing water, watching as his own ankles started to go numb from the cold. Karl would make up some nonsense about medieval paramilitaries from Korea and Werner would use the offset reality as a fulcrum, turning the world upon Karl's axis of lies. Karl didn't need to know the real story. Couldn't, truth be told. (Nothing there for him to know, Werner added).

More was required from Werner than these childhood games. Karl didn't have a job. His most likely destination was the Air Force. Meanwhile Werner had a mouth to feed. His own. Werner would pay for Karl's drinks and Karl would serve as a mouthpiece for whatever it was that had pursued Werner from his childhood in the Bronx to his current situation as a freelancer here in Metro Southern Indiana. The arrangement was cruel, but fair.

TEN THOUSAND THINGS WRONG

Werner rotted from within, and soon his reports were little more than lists of people and objects, lacking the critical analysis that had distinguished his previous work. Demand shriveled up, and he was forced to find other ways to make money. Karl was useless on this point, as well.

Werner's inventory of his apartment came up empty of saleable items. Nostalgia wasn't what it used to be. There just wasn't any market for most of his junk, at least not if he expected to turn a profit. Brokerage fees and freight charges ate up the margins. Maybe he was in the wrong business.

He tried applying for staff positions but the leading companies never even responded to his inquiries. That's how you knew they didn't want you. He struggled with the compulsive certainty that his applications had been lost in the mail.

The only thing left to do was meditate with Karl, and wait for something else to come along. Success was what happened while you were making other plans. But during meditation he wasn't making any plans at all. He resisted the urge to think that maybe that was the problem.

Always, he was resisting.

Pete came through with the last few pages of his final report. Once this one was submitted, he was shit out of fresh material. He'd not been developing any new sources, and he didn't want to report on the process of putting together the reports. Every time he did that he lost readers.

Maybe if he started some trouble.

Most of his best work surrounded ellipses...

HOLD

Melting backwards to the morning when he first knew something was wrong. His knees and elbows had not fit together. All through the night he'd fidgeted, trying to make them... work. That had been early on, back when he was... what... eight or nine years old? There had never been a way to lay properly, and thus never a way to get any sleep. Quite unsurprisingly, in the mornings he never felt refreshed. Only... awake. Each new day was merely a continuation of yesterday's pain.

What had changed was the money. Nowadays, they paid him quite well. But it would never be enough to—Werner had to stop himself, there. Reticent to explore the reasons why his subject was always so uncomfortable in his own skin. It was enough to record the fact and move on. His client wasn't (any longer) paying him to speculate about cause and effect. Turn over the data and advance to the next report.

The method could be applied to his personal life, as well. No lingering, no judgement.

Werner contemplated a change of career. Contemplated. But he knew, in the end, that he wasn't going anywhere. Megapolis or no, reporting was what he knew how to do. He'd tried rolling over, tried to reposition, but his knees still wouldn't fit together. His elbow scraped the wall. Better to stay on his own side of the bed.

Better to get money. After Pete's cut, broke was still broke.

Werner slowed down, inhaling and exhaling in long, sad shrugs. Within a few minutes he had fallen asleep.

ON THEIR WAY

There's more to it but Pete doesn't want to know. Werner keeps at it, explaining and explaining. It's all going badly when suddenly he wakes up.

He'd fallen asleep again, sitting in the creek. This didn't usually happen during winter. He counted himself lucky that the sound of gunfire had awakened him before he froze to death.

Hunters. Not particularly close, from what he could tell. But perhaps it was time to move on. When in the past he had encountered others in the woods it was difficult to know what to say. He didn't smoke and he didn't drink, so it was unlikely they'd have anything in common. Plus, he'd usually been sitting in the stream, so it usually looked like he'd wet his pants. One more bright line of division between himself and the blue collar drunks who roamed the forest. Unless they had pissed their own pants, which wasn't unheard of.

The trail was cold, the wind was cold, his face was cold, his legs were cold, his feet were cold, his fingertips were cold, his neck and his ankles were cold, his soaked socks and shoes were cold, instigating a self–renewing cycle of freezing, fucking cold. Werner stomped through the leaves carelessly, his mind occupied by the continuing question of what his mind should be occupied by. Errant spider webs caught in his hair and mouth (he still hadn't learned to keep his mouth shut, in the woods). He swatted at the cobwebs but the spiders were long gone. No one left to take it out on.

More gunfire. Closer this time.

Time to go.

IT TAKES THREE

On the night Werner had decided to quit, a two-man team was dispatched to separate him from the job. Neither side of the dispute was aware of the other's current disposition. Perhaps communication would have alleviated the need for violence...

P steered the transport over the landing zone as T anxiously tensed and untensed his grip on the the straps of his crash web. At last, they were going to see this wretched little town for themselves.

Exiting the vehicle they observed strict silence. P never said anything—he didn't have to. T had to work harder at the discipline but he was making real progress. Stubbing his toe on the way down the ramp, he stopped, eyes ablaze, but simply bit his tongue. Noticing the small triumph, P nodded his approval.

A short hike to the apartment complex and the men took up positions around the main entrance. When a preliminary scan by their ship confirmed Werner's apartment was empty, they climbed the staircase to his balcony door and gained entry via special access methods and procedures. Namely, entering a master code that appeared nowhere in the manufacturer's documentation.

Several hours later Werner drug himself in the front door. It had taken him quite a while to trudge all the way back to the city after his ride had flashed a cancellation. All he wanted to do was take a hot bath and drown his considerable sorrows in a mug of hot chocolate.

"Sorry, pal, we drank it all," T said.

Werner noticed the intruders for the first time. "I see," he said, and sat down opposite his guests at the kitchen table. "Can I offer you any other refreshments? I'm afraid I don't have any alcohol or cigarettes." P could sense T revving to go and cut him off with a final sweep of his arm. "We're good," he said, for the both of them.

Werner placed both of his palms flat on the table. "So," he said, "To business, then?" There was a certain pleading in his tired, gray eyes.

P continued to stare. "Quite so. We're here about the report."

"Oh, that old thing," snapped Werner.

"As you are no doubt aware, many readers have found themselves dissatisfied with your recent output. We're here to help get you back on track. Failing that..." P trailed off.

"You're too late," Werner blurted out. "I've decided to quit." At this, T rocked back and forth in his seat, increasingly agitated by the rising potential for action. This time, P made no move to tamp down his enthusiasm.

P himself stopped. "You can't just quit. In fact, we've brought along some sample material, to help get you started."

P threw the latches on his satchel and Werner eyed the stack of papers suspiciously.

The pages were scarcely legible, but did seem to be scrawled in his hand.

REVISE AND EDIT

Here P produced from his satchel two distinct manuscripts. "We recommend these." Werner accepted the manuscripts and examined them carefully. "Okay," he finally said.

Werner got to work cutting them together. It wasn't at all clear this what P had wanted him to do, but P made no move to stop him. Werner continued:

[REDACTED]

P consulted his emerald tablet. He swiped right to accept the revisions, then locked the resulting mishmash in his satchel. "You may dispose of the rejected fragments as you see fit." He gestured expansively to the starts Werner had not used, and the remains of the two manuscripts he had operated on. Werner nodded. "Of course." He carefully gathered up the bits of text and deposited them into a drawer. Very likely, something here could be salvaged later, for paying work.

That brings us to your compensation," P said, T already heading for the door. T stopped. From a concealed pocket in his parka P produced a sealed envelope. He broke the seal and handed over Werner's cheque. "Contract's printed on the back," he indicated, helpfully.

"In perpetuity, of course," Werner acknowledged. This was nothing new. He folded the slip of paper into his wallet.

Exit P and T.

Werner knew there was no way this could be over. When a knock came on the door he was almost relieved.

It was T, who poked his head into the room (the door had not been locked), apparently looking for his gun. He'd left it laying on the kitchen table. Werner nodded, and T entered, retrieving his weapon and exiting again, all without saying a word.

Werner returned to his empty mug. It was still empty, so he made tea instead.

had himself under control, and he had the balanced personality of an aware individual. He was aware of his own strengths and weaknesses, and he knew how to harmonize them with the personality of his adversary in order to accomplish the desired results. He knew the most opportune moments to act and when to lie low.

Been looking for a boot like this for a long time. I wear them with short and pants and they look rugged and masculine. So many combat boots out there don't get it right with the design and feel. Classic combat boots have become more common on ladies than guys for casual wear, so not all work/combat boots work on guys like they used to.

Modeling and design of software at the architectural level. Architectural styles. Basics of model-driven architecture. Object-oriented design and analysis. Iterative development and unified process. Design patterns. Design by contract. Component based design. Product families. Measurement theory and appropriate use of metrics in design. Designing for qualities such as performance, safety, security, reliability, reusability, etc. Analysis and evaluation of software architectures. Introduction to architecture definition languages. Basics of software evolution, reengineering, and reverse engineering. Case studies. Introduction to distributed system software.

This review is intended to help the reader decipher what looks like an overly complicated book. Read this review while looking at the book's table of contents.

Keep up your practices and your diary as you see fit.

Paintbrushes are being snatched out of children's hands

BACK UP

sl made one last attempt to animate his limbs. He lay on the floor, on his futon, really feeling the pain, not sure which way to try and move. Any gesture he made sent the pain shooting in that new direction. It never really wore off, never left any one area completely, just shifted its intensity down legs and arms, out to fingertips and toes, up along his neck and into his jaws and ears. He leaned back and stared at the ceiling, as if that had been the plan all along. He finally decided he wasn't going to get up, this time. He squinted bitterly and pissed himself.

The computer was across the room. He couldn't reach his book or his notepad. The sun was slowly setting. The phone rang.

sl rolled over and immediately regretted expending the effort. His back spasmed wildly and he cried out, but of course, there was no one to hear him. Defiantly, he moved his hand, and, temporarily dislocated from the extreme pain, he watched his hand move. A form of passive progress.

This sparked a memory from somewhere deep inside him. sl began to order his mind. He watched patiently as each thought found its own level. He forgot where he was. Further displaced from his immediate predicament, he moved first one leg, and then the other, up, then down, off of the futon. The doorbell rang, and he watched himself stand up and answer the door.

"I just got mugged," said the delivery man. sl accepted the pizza, and, experiencing some measure of empathy for the driver, added an extra hundred dollars to his tip. The delivery man shrugged and walked back to his car, forgetting to limp.

sl lay back down on his futon and opened his pizza. He ate, head positioned horizontally so as to avoid setting off his back. It didn't work.

For the rest of the evening he tried to forget who he was.

This proved costlier than expected.

in the community kitchen. her ex-husband wanted her to take their son hadn't considered it out of the ordinary—at one time or another she'd written by other contractors, sometimes being paid to re-fact-check the book. then she realized that it might make more sense to track the date when she finished. she'd tried both, and the log was already a family. she felt like there was something she had intended to write down. some the duffle bag was secured with a small padlock, the key to which she had complained that she never pulled her fair share of cleaning duty idea, or realization, or some clever procedural tweak that could be "unsee" a thing; as the initial sensation receded, so, too, did its implemented at work, to shave seconds off the department's response their contact these days was infrequent. so, why did she miss him? remembered them? looking at the photo albums her whole life had collated and analyzed systematically. the whole thing had become a, felt—somehow, she guessed—wrong. was it a conflict of interest? were frowned upon by the corporate bean counters. demand had normalized the tax implications? she concluded these considerations were above their contact these days was infrequent. so, why did she miss him? full she was barely able to hoist it into the truck. the duffle bag was secured with a small padlock, the key to which she hadn't considered it out of the ordinary—at one time or another she'd her normal salary, which the county sometimes decided to pay out. she date when she finished. she'd tried both, and the log was already a additional security concerns were dealt with as they arose, on a her own. she was at once a writer and an editor, which was normally committed wasn't immediately apparent. in a way, she'd come to seeing the thing was fine, making the realization stick was quite a collate and analyze systematically. the whole thing had become a collate and analyze systematically. the whole thing had become the book. then she realized that it might make more sense to track the different exercise. contrary to the cliché, there was no need to her normal salary, which the county sometimes decided to pay out. she realized, this was a form of early submission. but whatever flags she'd case-by-case basis. a small bookshelf housed the binders. she transported them back and mentioned her son. it had been quite a while ago, and at the time she committed wasn't immediately apparent. in a way, she'd come to one thing she insisted on: she turned off her visor while she wrote. frowned upon by the corporate bean counters. demand had normalized as though she did nothing but keep track of her son. which disney's competitor, gogol/verizon, also paid, though not quite there tax implications? she concluded these considerations were above a small bookshelf housed the binders. she transported them back and committed wasn't immediately apparent. in a way, she'd come to implement at work, to shave seconds

off the department's response a small bookshelf housed the binders. she transported them back and additional security concerns were dealt with as they arose, on a family. case-by-case basis. in the community kitchen. her ex-husband wanted her to take their son, her brother, sl, had said things like that. maybe she was glad just kept on paying her to write. article, just to make sure that any uncredited borrowing she'd the duffle bag was secured with a small padlock, the key to which she her brother, sl, had said things like that. maybe she was glad that each sheet—violet didn't know what they were called. seeing the thing was fine, making the realization stick was quite a small bookshelf housed the binders. she transported them back and a small bookshelf housed the binders. she transported them back and date when she finished. she'd tried both, and the log was already a hadn't considered it out of the ordinary—at one time or another she'd seeing the thing was fine, making the realization stick was quite a had complained that she never pulled her fair share of cleaning duty written by other contractors, sometimes being paid to re-fact-check her normal salary, which the county sometimes decided to pay out. she submitted the same report to both entities. no one ever seemed to forth between locations (work, home) in an oversized duffle bag. once written by other contractors, sometimes being paid to re-fact-check "unsee" a thing; as the initial sensation receded, so, too, did its mishmash of different combinations of data points, difficult to idea, or realization, or some clever procedural tweak that could be submitted the same report to both entities. no one ever seemed to sensitive material, especially when that material frequently concerned

APROPOS OF NOTHING

vidya took only what was necessary, and headed for his makeshift shelter in the woods—several bales of hay, a few loose boards torn down from a decaying barn, and, for a roof, a plastic wading pool found at the fenced off trash dumpster near the road into town.

he leaned his head back against the hay and read his comic book. it would be dark soon. fortunately he'd brought a flashlight. the hay bales were already starting to go moldy, and the smell was getting to him. he thought he heard a dog.

forgot to bring a snack.

he wanted to keep reading, but there was something he had to get down on paper. he laid the comic book down gently on the hay and opened his notebook.

maybe fifteen yards away, p and t pulled on their suede lion suits. "why do we have to do this?" t whined. "don't worry about it," p assured him.

vidya wrote more and more and more of it down. he filled a few pages in his notebook before pausing to think. he wouldn't re-read, this time. onward, forward, while there was still time.

hermes stepped from the trees into the small clearing where vidya had erected his clubhouse cum shelter. pine needles caressed his marble white arms, and he looked mildly confused, blinking his eyes in the diminishing sunlight. "what's he doing here," t whispered, too loudly.

vidya paused again. the next bit would decide everything. he shook his head and continued.

hermes turned himself, slowly, to face the reader. the unmistakable glint in his eye betrayed what had at first seemed to be a friendly gesture. "dear reader, are you ***getting*** any of this?" he asked, smiling warmly. seeing that the reader wasn't, he added, "don't worry about it," and winked mischievously, quietly, yet smugly amused at the feat of self-reference.

t blundered a few paces into the clearing, tripping over a tree branch that had fallen across his path. his lion mask finally tumbled loose, hitting the ground with a dull thud. "m-meow..." he cooed, weakly. p shook his head, still smarting from hermes' jibe.

vidya thought again that he heard a dog. he poked his head out of the shelter and saw nothing. the sun had gone down, and it was starting to get cold.

sl barged suddenly into the clearing, swinging his elaborately carved walking stick like a baseball bat. he was shouting something about due process when p and t dove for cover. they both seemed spooked by his sudden arrival, and each of them clambered backwards into the brush, awkwardly displacing different components of their lion costumes, desperately vying for the security of the tree line. vidya was never able to gain clarity on this point: why were they both so afraid of such a minor character?

étienne and violet traded stories about their grandparents, great grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers, and sisters, some of whom had owned original pressings of bowie's early 21st century albums. étienne's favorite bowie character was the anonymous, unshaven internet troll, clad in cargo shorts, hawaiian shirt and flip-flops, who played on all the star's later studio cuts. violet somehow had never heard of that one. they agreed to disagree.

at some point vidya had had enough of the moldy smell. he tore the pages he'd been working on out of his notebook and shoved them into a gap between the rotting bales for safekeeping. he egressed the shelter and kicked over the wading pool, breaking the illusion of an intentional structure. as he wandered away from the site, the whole cast of characters converged on his position.

"i'm not being sarcastic," sl said, apropos of nothing. "i *am* sarcasm."