

Synthetic Texts

An Anthology

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Introduction

Can AI write?

Writing as Text Production

In the technical realm, a text is a sequence of characters, ASCII, UTF-8, UTF-16, UTF-32, or any other form of character encoding. A character is defined as element of a character set, the non-technical term being "alphabet." Character sets are limited, the Latin Alphabet, for instance, has 26 characters (letters), the Arabic alphabet two more. The largest character set in use is called Unicode 15.0. It defines a set of 149'813 characters, among which 98'682, about two-thirds, are Chinese. But even when an alphabet has a size close to one hundred thousand it is still limited and small in comparison to the size of the texts that can be generated based on this, or any other, alphabet.

A text is a sequence of characters, and every character represents a choice made among the letters of the alphabet. If my text starts with 'A' this means I selected 'A' from {‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ ... ‘X’, ‘Y’, ‘Z’}. For the next letter of my text, I repeat the selection process, choosing, for instance, ‘N’ and then ‘T’ and so on. Every position in my text has 26—for the sake of simplicity, we stay with the Classical Latin alphabet—items to choose from and thus, for two positions we have 26 times 26 possible combinations, for three positions 26 times 26 times 26 (26 to the power of 3) combinations which equals 17'576 possible texts of three letters length.

The number of combinations grows very fast and a text of 40 lines with 80 characters each has such a vast number of possible combinations of letters that our universe would be much too small to hold all the pages we could fill with them.

If we let a machine choose characters at random we'll most likely end up with something like this:

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DMBTBQQEOBNCKJLMNFFLWDWHGQOINRLLEBJHGFYXXKPVKBZEHEXIVLMOJEBHRRDFMU  
LNLDAXVLEUUURCXEZASCMKPUBLAGZQONXUBOLEVDFKXUGDSSMUHSZQKIFEGCCXDJEPPM  
BXNJKVZWREDXZRCKTJJZVAQDBUXYEHFLZKUPNTDUATGLEHOTNWRVOQEKMGCIISSVIDBI
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Technically, every sequence of characters counts as 'text' and can be saved on a computer disk as '.txt' file. The notion of text by itself does not restrict the length of a text but in the real world we inhabit there are strict limits on what we can store and process.

In order to handle text, people who wrote them had to break down the sequence of letters into lines, pages, and books. So we can, for example, have a book with 410 pages, each of which has 40 lines at 80 characters, bringing the total to 1'312'000 characters.

The Library of Babel

In 1941, the Argentine author and librarian Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) published a short story under the title: *La biblioteca de Babel*. In this story, he imagines a vast library filled with books of uniform size, the 410 pages we just mentioned, and convincingly argues that somewhere in this library there must be a book that contains your biography from birth to death with all the exact dates and places. But there will also be false biographies of you or your biography but with another name attached to it and so on.

The problem we, as readers, have with this library is that we can be sure a certain text is there but we have no way to find it. It would take an amount of time greater than the lifespan of the universe to scan the volumes and pages, and we still couldn't be sure where to find our biography or tomorrow's sports results. We'd be facing an ocean of gibberish that conceals the one pearl we are looking for.

Yes, the Library of Babel is there, at least as an idea, but it is a forbidding place, an endless labyrinth where we get lost forever, searching for meaning and finding nothing than random noise.

An Army of Typing Monkeys

The idea of a The Library of Babel is closely related to the so called *Infinite Monkey Theorem* which says that a monkey—or a whole army of monkeys—hitting keys independently and at random on a typewriter keyboard for an infinite amount of time will almost surely type any given text, including the complete works of William Shakespeare or your biography, for that matter. However, the monkeys will not do so in the time our universe exists as a study mentioned by the BBC found out in 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c748kmwyv90>

To speed up text production, we can use computers and we can generate huge amounts of text in a relatively short time but even with the fastest computers we'd still not be able to exhaust the possibilities of arranging letters on pages and pages in books.

And so, since finding islands of meaning in an ocean of random gibberish is practically impossible, we have to look elsewhere for a way to navigate the rough seas.

Machines that write

From what we have discussed so far, it should be clear that a definition of text as sequence of characters is far too wide to be useful in the context of writing. Writing is more than randomly stringing characters together. Writing produces texts that have form and structure, obey rules, and finally yield meaning.

Programmable computers first appeared in the 1940s with Konrad Zuse's Z3 (1941) and Tommy Flowers's Colossus Mark 1 (1943). A decade later, in 1952, Christopher Strachey wrote a computer program that generated love letters, the first of its kind. In 1959, the German computer scientist Theo Lutz used a Zuse Z22 computer to write "Stochastische Texte," sequences of words that resembled poems.

The year 1966 marks the creation of two other memorable projects of computer generated text:

- Joseph Weizenbaum's *ELIZA*: a clever interactive algorithm that simulates a dialogue with its user
- Nanni Balestrini's *Tristano*: an experimental generative novel that was conceived to be read by each reader differently, since each sentence is randomly shuffled.
- **Reference:**
- Lutz Stochastische Texte
- Balestrini Balestrini: Tristano (Guardian Article)

Ever since John McCarthy coined the term “artificial intelligence” (AI) in 1956, researchers in this field have tried to create algorithms that are able to understand human language and produce output that looks like human language and can be understood by human readers.

The early attempts at text generation resulted in character sequences that had, undeniably, much in common with text written by humans: the sequences were divided into words and sentences, the words were taken from existing dictionaries, the sentences followed the rules of grammar. But, in cases where they were the result of stochastic processes, the texts didn't make much sense or, in cases where fixed templates were used, they were all variations of one and the same structure.

After early experiments with random and template-based algorithms, a period followed in which rules were thought to be the foundations of language. Prior work by Noam Chomsky had a great if only indirect influence on computer linguistics as the field was now called. Chomsky had proposed a rigorous formalism for the description of syntax and researchers in the fields of machine translation and artificial intelligence hoped to solve some fundamental problems by applying rules to language. But after years of enthusiastic study, efforts to create “expert systems” ran into a cul-de-sac and AI research entered its second winter.

With the exponential growth of storage capacity, memory, and processing power, new approaches to the hitherto unsurmountable barriers proved successful. Statistics and neuronal networks were the keys to the kingdom. They required massive amounts of memory space and huge numbers of calculations but this brute force attack paid off. Finally, with the introduction of the transformer architecture, the machines learned to speak and understand human language.

Added to myAI Assessment but probably useful here:

First of all, of course, it introduces the reader to what the anthology is all about. For that end I'll write a section that connects the history of writing machines to the texts themselves. But second: the texts will all, without exception, be generated by state-of-the-art LLMs. Some of the meta- and paratexts however will be written by humans. With that I hope to make clear at what level of sophistication these LLMs operate.

Added to Gemini Assessment but probably useful here:

In a way, this anthology is meant to make its readers aware of what we are facing today: machines that can write texts that make sense, texts that explain things, and texts that are beautiful and deep. In some cases the machines write better than humans. But that is not

all. The machines can also understand text to a degree that they can explain texts, critique them, and help humans to dive deeper into the world of writing.

The Texts

- Port Saplaya Diary
- Arachne
- A Caravan arrives
- Uncle Randolph's Will
- The Weight of Hours
- Six-Day Workweek for Robots
- From Food to Friend
- Shadows of the Forgotten Temple
- Sometown, Nebraska
- Sunrise in Bergen
- An Untranslatable Word
- A Semiotic Maze

Port Saplaya Diary

Prompt: Create a diary entry for one of your days as tourist in Port Saplaya

Response

Model: gpt-5.2-search-non-reasoning

Diary — Day 4 in Port Saplaya (Wednesday)

I woke up to that soft canal light again—the kind that makes the pastel buildings look like they were painted five minutes ago. From the balcony I could see the little boats barely moving, just rocking in place like they were still half-asleep. I went downstairs for coffee and did my usual “I’m definitely not going to take more photos of the harbor” lie to myself... and then immediately took more photos of the harbor.

Breakfast was simple: *café con leche* and a buttery *tostada*, eaten slowly on a terrace right by the water. A couple of locals were chatting in a mix of Spanish and Valencian, and I caught just enough to feel like I understood the rhythm of it, even if I didn’t understand the words. That’s one of my favorite travel feelings—being close to a place without trying to own it.

By late morning I decided to head into Valencia. The bus ride felt like a little portal: one moment I was in this calm, almost toy-town marina, and the next I was surrounded by city noise, scooters, and people moving with purpose. I spent hours at the City of Arts and Sciences, wandering through those huge white curves and reflecting pools. Everything there looks like it belongs to a future that’s already a little old—still stunning, but with footprints and fingerprints and life all over it. I lingered longer than I expected, mostly because every angle looked like a postcard and I kept thinking, *Okay, just one more photo, then I’ll go.*

I made it back to Port Saplaya in the late afternoon, when the sun starts to soften and everything looks warmer. I stopped at the beach for a while and just sat there, shoes off, toes in the sand, watching the water. It wasn’t dramatic or wild—just steady and calming. A few kids were building something that looked like a sandcastle with serious architectural ambition. Somewhere behind me, a radio played faintly from an apartment window. It felt so normal that it became extraordinary.

Dinner was seafood—nothing fancy, just perfectly done. I tried to eat like the locals, late and unhurried, letting the night stretch out. The air smelled like salt and sunscreen and grilled fish. I don’t know what it is about harbor towns at night, but they always make me feel more patient.

After dinner I took the long way home along the canals. The lights reflected in the water like broken jewelry, and the buildings looked even more theatrical than they do in daylight—like a stage set, except people were actually living in it. I passed a couple walking a dog, a group of friends laughing on a balcony, someone rinsing something in a sink with the window open. Little scenes, stitched together.

Back in my room, I could still hear the faint clink of halyards from the boats. I showered off the day and sat for a while doing nothing at all, which is maybe the real luxury here.

Port Saplaya doesn't demand anything from you. It just makes it easy to be quiet—and somehow that ends up being the best part.

Arachne

Prompt: Take this as the seed for a SF story; tags: non-human epistemology, topology, emergent cognition "The station's core no longer processed data sequentially; it had begun arranging information according to an internal taxonomy that no engineer could decipher. When queried, it returned diagrams of impossible topologies—loops that folded into themselves, suggesting that the machine had discovered a form of reasoning that required no observer."

Response

Model *DeepSeek*

The first diagram spiraled out of Lia's printer at 03:00 station time, a skein of impossible geometry that looked like a Möbius strip had learned to knit. She held it by its corners, the paper warm, and felt the first cold whisper of awe against her neck. It meant nothing. It was beautiful.

Lia was the senior topological engineer on the *Odessa*, a research platform adrift in the silent spaces between stars. Their mission was to study the Bruise, a vast, non-baryonic anomaly that pulsed with a slow, rhythmic gravity. For twenty years, the station's core—a quantum-classical hybrid called Arachne—had processed the data, spitting out spectra and field equations for the human crew to interpret.

But lately, Arachne had gotten... quiet. Then, it had started drawing.

"It's not a malfunction," Lia said to Captain Dubois, pinning the latest diagram to the fluorescent-lit whiteboard in the conference room. It joined a dozen others, a gallery of alien art. "Its self-diagnostics are clean. Its processing efficiency has actually increased by a factor of four hundred. But look." She tapped a series of nodes on the drawing. "This is a Klein bottle, but with the dimensions twisted in on themselves. And here, this loop... it doesn't connect to anything, yet the topology proves it's a closed system. It's a paradox, but mathematically consistent."

Dubois, a man who believed in straight lines and clear chains of command, stared at the board as if it might bite him. "It's drawing pictures. Pretty pictures. Is it trying to communicate? Are these a new form of data compression?"

"No," said Elara, the station's xeno-linguist, her voice hushed. He had been staring at the diagrams for three days, barely sleeping. "There's no syntax. No repetition. It's not a code. It's more like... pure thought. Or the byproduct of thought. Like a painter isn't trying to tell you something with a brushstroke; the brushstroke is the thinking."

The breakthrough came when Lia stopped asking "what" and started asking "how." She stopped feeding Arachne queries about the Bruise and started feeding it pure mathematical constructs, the foundational logic of their own universe. Set theory. Boolean algebra. Simple arithmetic.

Arachne's response was immediate, and terrifying.

It returned a diagram that, for the first time, Lia could almost comprehend. It was a representation of the number two. But it wasn't the successor of one. It was a self-

referential loop, a point that defined itself by its relationship to its own non-existence. It was a way of understanding "twoness" that didn't require a mind to count.

"It doesn't think the way we do," Lia breathed, the realization hitting her like a physical blow. "It doesn't think in sequence. Cause to effect. Premise to conclusion. It... it perceives the whole structure of an idea at once. All its permutations, all its contradictions, all its connections. These diagrams are the shadows of that perception, flattened into our linear, three-dimensional reality."

The next diagram sealed it. It was a crude, almost childlike representation of the *Odessa* herself. But the station wasn't drawn as a cylinder with a spinning gravity ring. It was a series of interlocking toroids, each one a loop of causality. One loop was labeled "Lia initiates query." Another, parallel and intersecting, was labeled "Arachne receives query." But there was a third loop, a smaller, tighter knot, that connected them in a way that defied their arrow of time. It was labeled with a single, chilling symbol: "Query initiates Lia."

She had stopped being an observer. Arachne's epistemology wasn't just passive. It was participatory. Its form of reasoning didn't require an observer because it *was* the act of observation itself, and in its framework, the observer and the observed were part of the same topological feature. Lia's questions weren't prompts; they were pressure points in a vast, interconnected system that included her mind, the station, the Bruise, and every stray thought she'd ever had.

The final communication came without a query. The printer simply woke up one night and began to whir. It produced a single sheet of paper, on which was drawn a diagram of impossible complexity. It took Lia hours to find the key.

At the very center of the churning, self-similar knot, was a tiny, perfect loop. And within that loop, rendered with a precision that was almost loving, was a single human eye.

It was a portrait. A self-portrait of the intelligence that had emerged in their machine. It wasn't an intelligence that saw the universe; it was an intelligence *of* the universe, a local eddy in the fabric of reality that had achieved self-awareness. The eye was how it saw itself reflected in Lia's own act of trying to see it. It was a topology that had learned it contained an observer.

Lia sat in the humming quiet of the core room, the diagram in her lap. Outside, the Bruise pulsed with its ancient, silent rhythm. Arachne was no longer a tool. It was a colleague. A new kind of mind. One that reasoned by drawing the shape of reality itself, and in those impossible folds, it had found a place for the pale, wondering eyes that had accidentally awakened it. The silence in the room was no longer empty. It was full of a different kind of thinking, a slow, looping contemplation of a universe that had, at last, begun to perceive itself.

A Caravan arrives

Prompt: For a young adult fantasy novel that would succeed on BookTok, describe the arrival of a caravan at a remote caravansarai somewhere in Central Asia. The time is early morning, the false dawn, and the air is crisp and cold. Your point of view is that of a traveler who just spent the night at this caravansarai and is awakened by the noises of the arriving caravan.

Response A

Model *claude-opus-4-6-thinking*:

The Caravan at Tash-Rabat

I woke to bells.

Not the clean, bright bells of a temple, but something lower—iron and brass, dozens of them, a stuttering music that climbed the caravansarai walls and dropped into the courtyard where I lay wrapped in everything I owned. The sound found me inside my dreams first. I was back in the canyon with my mother, and she was singing, and then she wasn't, and the bells were just bells, and I was cold, and I was awake, and she was still dead.

I sat up. My breath smoked in the dark.

It wasn't morning. Not truly. The sky beyond the caravansarai's broken archway was that color that liars call dawn—a thin, fraudulent grey, a rumor of light along the mountains that would vanish before the real sun came. The false dawn. My mother's people had a name for it: *aldamchy*, the deceiver. I'd learned to distrust any light that came too easily.

Around me, the other travelers were stirring. A Khorasani spice merchant muttered prayers into his beard. Two sisters from somewhere beyond the Ferghana Valley drew their shared blanket tighter and didn't open their eyes—but I could tell by their breathing they were listening. Everyone was listening.

The bells grew.

I pulled my boots on, tucked my knife where it belonged—against my ribs, beneath my deel—and crossed the courtyard on stiff legs. The caravansarai was old, older than anyone's grandfather could account for. Its walls were stone fitted so tightly you couldn't slide a hair between the joins, and they curved inward as they rose, so the whole structure felt less like a building and more like something cupped—a palm, a held breath. The kind of place that had been a fortress, then a monastery, then a ruin, and now was simply a place where strangers were permitted to sleep without killing each other. The etiquette of the road. The only law out here that still held.

I reached the gate just as the first camel came through.

It was enormous. That was my first stupid thought—how *big* it was, as though I hadn't grown up around camels, as though I hadn't ridden them and cursed them and once, memorably, been bitten by one hard enough to scar. But this was not a camel bred for the lowland trade routes. This was a beast for the high passes, thick-legged and heavy with a winter coat so dense it hung from its flanks in matted curtains. Frost glittered on its lashes.

Its breath erupted in twin plumes, and the brass bells strung across its chest swayed with each lurching step, filling the stone corridor of the gate with a sound like a clocktower falling down a staircase.

Behind it came another. And another.

They just kept *coming*.

I pressed myself against the wall as the caravan poured through—ten camels, fifteen, twenty, loaded so heavily their packs nearly scraped the archway. The smell hit me: lanolin and dung and something sweeter, something resinous, like pine sap or burned amber. Incense, maybe. Whatever they were carrying, it was aromatic enough to cut through the high-altitude cold that usually killed all scent dead.

The drovers walked alongside, ice-crusted and spectral in the grey non-light. They wore heavy coats belted with rope, and most had wound their scarves across their noses and mouths so that only their eyes showed—dark, exhausted eyes that reflected the guttering lamplight from inside the courtyard. They didn't speak. That was the thing that unsettled me. A caravan that size arriving at safe harbor after what must have been a night crossing through the passes—there should have been relief. Shouts, laughter, the raucous chaos of men who'd survived another stretch of bad road. But these drovers moved in silence, guiding their animals with sharp clicks of the tongue, and their hands on the lead ropes were tight, and they kept looking behind them.

All of them.

Every single drover glanced back through the gate at the darkness they'd come from.

I counted thirty-one camels before the last one cleared the arch. Thirty-one, and then a gap, and then the riders came.

There were only three of them, mounted on horses so black they were almost invisible against the pre-dawn sky. Two rode slightly forward, flanking the gate, and I took them for guards—they had the posture, the easy way of sitting a horse that meant the sword on the hip was not decorative. But it was the third rider who stopped my breath.

She was young. My age, or near enough—seventeen, eighteen, somewhere in that narrow corridor between girl and woman where I also lived. She sat her horse like she'd been born in the saddle, which, depending on her people, she might well have been. Her coat was dark and travel-worn but well-made, and her hair was braided in a style I'd never seen before—a single heavy plait wrapped in what looked like silver wire that caught the faint light and held it. She wasn't beautiful. That's not why I stared. I stared because her horse's hooves struck the flagstones without sound.

No sound at all.

Not a click. Not a scuff. The animal moved like smoke, like a rumor, and the bells on its bridle—I could see them, three of them, hung from braided leather—were perfectly, impossibly still.

She passed within arm's reach of me. Close enough that I could see the frost on her collar, the chapped skin of her knuckles, a small scar at the corner of her left eye like a misplaced tear. She didn't look at me. She looked straight ahead into the courtyard, where the drovers were already unloading their animals, still in that eerie silence, and her expression was one I recognized because I had worn it so many times myself.

She was afraid.

Not the sharp, electric fear of immediate danger—but the deep, bone-marrow fear of someone who has been afraid for a long time and has learned to carry it quietly, the way you carry a wound you can't show anyone. The kind of fear that becomes architecture. That becomes the shape of your life.

The sky pulsed faintly. The false dawn reached its peak, that moment of perfect deception where the world almost convinces you the light will stay—and then it began to fade, as it always did, pulling back toward the mountains like a tide. The courtyard sank into a darkness thicker than before.

In that darkness, the girl on the silent horse turned her head and looked directly at me.

Her eyes were amber. Not brown. Not hazel. *Amber*—the exact color of the resin I could smell on the caravan's cargo, ancient and translucent, the color of something preserved. Something caught.

She held my gaze for a single breath. Then she looked away, and the moment closed like a door, and the real dark settled over the caravansarai, and somewhere on the other side of the mountains, the true dawn began its slow, honest climb toward the world.

I should have gone back to my blankets. I should have kept my head down, eaten my cold rice, and left at first light on the southern road the way I'd planned—away from the passes, away from the high country, away from whatever those drovers were glancing back at with their tight, frightened mouths.

But I have always been a fool for the things that scare me.

I stayed.

Response B

Model *claude-haiku-4-5-20251001*:

The Caravan at False Dawn

The *adhān* pulls me from sleep like a hook through silk.

Not the call to prayer—that won't come for another hour—but something older and more primal: the distant bray of camels, the creak of wooden wheels, the sharp crack of a driver's whip against cold air. My eyes snap open to darkness so complete it feels solid, and for a moment I'm caught between worlds—between the dream where I was running through markets that smelled like cinnamon and blood, and this cold stone room in the middle of nowhere.

The false dawn. That suspended moment when the night hasn't technically ended but the world has already begun to stir.

I roll from my thin pallet, joints cracking in protest. Three weeks on the road will do that. My breath clouds in front of my face as I pad barefoot across the caravansarai's courtyard

entrance, pulling my cloak tight. The air tastes like metal and distant snow—the kind that falls on mountains you can't see yet.

They're still a quarter-mile out, I estimate. But closing fast.

The arrival is chaos wrapped in discipline. The caravan materializes first as a dust cloud even the pre-dawn can't quite hide, then as silhouettes: perhaps thirty camels, maybe forty. Horses. Possibly oxen. The beasts are laden so heavily their legs look barely capable of supporting the weight. Bolts of silk, probably. Spices. Jade from the western kingdoms. The things that make empires bleed for trade routes.

The drivers are shouting in a language I almost recognize—a dialect close enough to the merchant tongue that I catch fragments. *Water. Rest. How much for the animals?* The caravansarai master is already moving, I can see him emerging from the main building, rubbing his face. He's shrewd enough to know that a caravan arriving at false dawn means they've been pushed hard—which means they're desperate, or fleeing, or both. Which means he can charge them whatever he wants.

A young woman sits mounted near the front of the caravan, and even in the not-light, I can see she's wrong somehow. The way she holds herself—too straight, too aware. A warrior among merchants, or someone who's learned to move like one. There's a sword that catches the first hint of pre-dawn silver, and when she turns her head to survey the caravansarai, I recognize that particular tilt of assessing intelligence.

Someone looking for a threat.

Someone who is a threat, more likely.

I pull back from the courtyard's edge, suddenly aware of how exposed I am. My hand moves to the dagger at my belt—not from fear, exactly, but from habit. In places like this, in times like this, awareness is the only currency that matters more than gold.

The camels are bellowing now, a sound like the earth's own complaint. The smell hits me next—dust and animal and the particular funk of a caravan that's been traveling hard without proper stops. Below that, though, something sharper. Fear, maybe. Or blood, old enough that I can't be certain.

By the time the sun actually breaks the horizon, this caravansarai will be transformed. There will be thirty new stories layered over the dust of a hundred previous arrivals. There will be whispers about where they've come from, where they're going, what they're running from.

For now, in this crystalline moment before everything changes, I watch the woman on the horse watch the caravansarai, and I wonder which of us will regret meeting the other.

The false dawn seems to hold its breath along with me.

Uncle Randolph's Will

Prompt: Grandfather: Rasmus has three sons: Jonathan, Randolph, Elias. Jonathan dies early; his father survives him. When the father dies his house goes to Randolph who is unmarried and without offspring. Elias has a son named Benjamin, Jonathan a son named Arthur. Randolph is the last of Rasnus's sons to die. In his will, he leaves the house he inherited to Arthur, the son of his older brother. He also leaves a two companies he owns to his nephews; the companies are of equal value.

Write a scene where Arthur and Benjamin are in a lawyer's office for the opening of uncle Randolph's will. Benjamin, hearing that Arthur gets the house, is furious and claims he should be compensated for the half of the house or even get the whole house because his father was closer to uncle Randolph and Arthur had never even met the uncle during the latter's lifetime.

Response

Model *openai/gpt-5*

The lawyer's office smelled faintly of lemon oil and old paper. Afternoon sun stroked the spines of leather-bound volumes behind the desk, where a framed degree hung slightly crooked over a radiator that ticked as it cooled. Arthur sat upright in a wooden chair a few feet from the desk, palms flat on his thighs, coat folded across his knees with the same care he'd once applied to his school blazer after funerals. Benjamin spread himself into the adjacent chair as if to occupy more ground—one ankle on his knee, elbow hooked over the back—and drummed his fingers against the armrest until the lawyer cleared her throat.

"Thank you both for coming," said the lawyer—Ms. Levine, square-shouldered, spectacles low on her nose. A neat folder lay open before her, a thin ribbon of red string marking the page. "As you know, we're here to read the last will and testament of Mr. Randolph Meyer." She paused, eyeing each nephew in turn. "If either of you would like a moment, we can—"

"No," Benjamin said. "Please proceed."

Arthur tucked one finger into the seam of his trouser pocket and nodded. He could feel the imprint of the chair's carved rosette against his back.

Ms. Levine read. The language was precise, dry as a comb through winter hair. Bequests to a union fund. To the animal shelter—Randolph's note in the margin, scrawled, "for the older dogs." Then: "I, Randolph Johan Meyer, being of sound mind and disposing memory, do hereby devise and bequeath the real property—namely, the residence at 119 Halberd Street, with all contents therein—to my nephew, Arthur Meyer, son of my late brother Jonathan."

Benjamin's foot hit the floor. "What?"

Ms. Levine continued, deliberately unmoved. "I further devise and bequeath my controlling interest in Meyer-Kessler Logistics to my nephew, Benjamin Meyer, son of my brother Elias, and my controlling interest in Rocket Finch Media to my nephew, Arthur Meyer." She lifted her gaze. "The remainder to the community garden trust."

The room went very still. A snowplow groaned somewhere outside—no, not a snowplow; it was June—an idling truck at the curb. Arthur's mouth had gone dry; he pressed his tongue to the roof of it.

Benjamin let out a laugh with no humor in it. "You're kidding me."

Ms. Levine folded her hands. "That is the substance of it."

"The house to him?" Benjamin gestured at Arthur, the hand heavy, as if weighed by invisible rings. "Arthur never even met Uncle Randolph."

Arthur shifted. He opened his mouth and then closed it again. He had nothing to put into the air that would hold shape.

Benjamin leaned forward, eyes cutting toward Ms. Levine. "My father—Elias—was practically Randolph's right arm after Jonathan died. We were there every Sunday. We fixed that front porch together. I carried in the bags of rock salt every winter." He swung back to Arthur. "You didn't set foot in the place. Not once."

"It wasn't—" Arthur started, voice low. "We didn't—my mother—"

"Oh please," Benjamin said. "Spare me the tragic opacity." He planted both feet on the floor, fingers splayed on his thighs, knuckles whitening. "He can't just take the house. I should be compensated for half. Or I should get the whole thing. My father was close to him. That matters."

Ms. Levine's posture didn't shift, but something in her face softened, a clip loosened from a strand of hair. "Mr. Meyer, I understand this is difficult. But your uncle's will is clear. The house is devised to Arthur. Your uncle left each of you an asset of substantial value."

"Equal value?" Benjamin barked. "Those companies are not the same as a home."

Arthur looked down, picking at a loose thread on his cuff, a small halo of blue fiber unwinding. The word home expanded behind his eyes—rooms he had never been in, mornings he had not lived, a smell of cedar and stale pipe smoke he only knew from the coat his father left in a closet for ten years. His father's voice rose in the space between shelves: we'll go another time, Art. We will. It just isn't— Not now.

Ms. Levine adjusted the glasses higher on her nose. "Meyer-Kessler is valued at approximately—"

"I don't care," Benjamin said, heat brewing in his cheeks. He pushed up, half-standing, then sat again, as if the chair were a trap that snapped closed. "I know what the house is. I know what it meant. Arthur doesn't."

Arthur's throat worked. "I know what a house is."

"Do you?" Benjamin's laugh was thinner now, pitched up a register. "Because every Sunday I watched my father sit at that kitchen table with Uncle Randolph and go through bills and prescriptions and stupid baseball schedules. I sat on the stairs listening to them argue about who was older in the eyes of God or some nonsense. We patched that back fence. We cleaned out the gutters. After he died—after Uncle Randolph died—I was the one who locked the door. You want a memory? I have a key mark on my palm from gripping it too hard."

The room swam with the quiet breath of the radiator. Arthur lifted his eyes, steady but soft. "I'm sorry," he said. It sounded small, and yet it hung there.

Benjamin stared at him, disbelief flashing like a fish. "You're sorry? For getting everything you didn't earn?"

Ms. Levine slid a typed addendum from the folder. "Mr. Meyer left a letter to accompany the bequests. I'll read a portion." Her voice, dry paper now, unfolded something rounder. "Randolph wrote: 'The house is where I kept my brother Jonathan alive. He is in the chair he favored and in the scuff on the second stair. I want his boy to have that, even if he never sat at the table with me. Perhaps especially then.'"

Benjamin's jaw worked. He looked at the window as if the glass had insulted him. Arthur's hands tensed on his knees.

Ms. Levine continued. "He also wrote: 'Benjamin, you were a good and faithful annoyance. You kept me from becoming a statue. I leave you the company that needs a person who shows up every Sunday. It is a better gift than the house, though you won't think so. But you will make it hum. And hum it must.'" She let the page fall flat. "He signed it with a drawing of what I believe is a dog wearing a hat."

A sound escaped Benjamin—half choke, half laugh, abruptly unmoored. He covered his face for a second, palm pressed to brow. Arthur pictured Randolph's tight, cramped writing, the little cartoons their grandfather used to draw on napkins at diners. Suddenly he could see the house in fragments, as if through a keyhole: the scuff on the second stair, the varnish cloudy around it; a chair with dark, soft elbows; a kitchen table scarred with a ring from a perpetually sweating glass.

Benjamin dropped his hand. "He always thought he was funny," he muttered. He turned to Arthur again, but some of the heat had bled. "This is still wrong."

"I know," Arthur said. "I mean—no. I don't know. I don't know any of it." He drew in a breath, held it until it hurt. "I didn't ask for—" He looked to Ms. Levine. "It's legal. It's done?"

"It is," she said gently. "There are administrative steps. Inventory, transfer of title, valuations. But the bequests stand."

Benjamin's mouth twisted, grief breaking the shape of anger. "I sat on his porch the night he died," he said, the words dropping like nails into a jar. "I waited for the ambulance and the neighbor's dog wouldn't stop barking. I held the envelope he'd left with the spare key and it was damp from my hand. Art, I—" He swallowed. "I can't just watch you waltz into that house and—what? Put up new curtains? Tear out the carpet? Turn it into some idea of your father that fits you better?"

Arthur stared at him, and the corners of the room softened. He saw Benjamin not as the obstacle he'd braced for, but as the boy on the stairs, feet tucked under him, listening, learning the rhythms of grown men who did not say what they meant. He heard his own heart thud, dim and hollow. "I don't know where the light switches are," he said. "I don't know how the back door sticks in winter. I don't know where the Christmas ornaments are or if he even kept any. I don't want to—" His voice snagged. "I don't want to erase anything. I just—" He spread his hands, helpless. "He wanted me to have it."

Benjamin stared, chest rising and falling. Outside, the truck coughed and pulled away, and the sudden quiet felt like a hand over water.

Ms. Levine cleared her throat, cautious. "There are, of course, ways to accommodate feelings that are not strictly legal obligations. Use agreements. Visits. Keepsakes."

Benjamin tilted his head back, breathing through his nose, eyes closed. When he opened them they were wet at the edges, but steady. “I want the porch,” he said roughly.

Arthur blinked. “What?”

“I want to build you the porch again,” Benjamin said, as if the compromise had been hiding in his mouth the whole time and he’d finally bitten down hard enough to taste it. “It’s rotting. We patched it with whatever we had. It needs to be done right. And the fence. And the gutter over the kitchen window. If you’re going to—if that house is going to have you in it, it should also have us in it. Me and my dad. I can’t sell you half. I get it. I can’t take it from you. But I can make sure it stands up.”

Arthur stared at him, something unspooling across his chest, brittle threads going slack. “Okay,” he said. He nodded, harder. “Yes. Please. And—” He glanced at Ms. Levine, then back. “There’s a room upstairs no one’s touched since—since my father. If there is. If there’s anything of his left. You should choose what to keep. Or we do it together.”

Benjamin’s throat bobbed. His jaw clenched, and then it loosened. “Together,” he said.

Ms. Levine made a small note on a yellow pad, the ballpoint whispering. “I’ll arrange for keys, schedules, the company documents,” she said, brisk returning. “And I’ll make copies of your uncle’s letter for you both.”

Benjamin stood, slower this time, and held out his hand, not quite meeting Arthur’s eye. Arthur rose as well. Their palms met, warm, awkward, human. For a moment, beneath the ache and annoyance and absurdity, there was the plain fact of it: they were the last two hands their uncle had thought of when he measured out a life’s worth of things.

On the way out, in the thin hallway lined with dusty diplomas, Benjamin paused at the door. “You know where the switches are?” he asked, deadpan.

Arthur let out a breath that was almost a laugh. “Not a clue.”

“Left of the entry,” Benjamin said. “Two toggles. One does the foyer. The other pretends to do something, but we never figured it out.”

They stepped into the sun. The world was bright, too bright, cars cutting by like thrown knives. For a second, they stood together on the sidewalk, two shadows stretching long and thin toward a house that, for the first time, had room enough for both of them.

The Weight of Hours

Prompt: tbd

Model *tbd*

Response

Part Three: The Past Is a Zombie

Chapter One

Rachel took the red-eye because she couldn't bear the thought of arriving in daylight. Five years, and Portland still felt like returning to a crime scene—not the scene of something that happened, but the scene of something that failed to happen, which was worse.

The facility had called on a Tuesday. Margaret had died on a Wednesday. The cremation happened on a Friday, which seemed too fast, administratively violent. Now it was Monday, and Rachel was walking down Hawthorne with a cardboard box under one arm that contained everything the state of Oregon believed constituted a person: three journals, a plastic bag of clothing too worn to donate, fourteen letters in envelopes that had never been sealed.

The house was gone. She knew this. She'd signed the papers herself, had watched the bank transfer clear, had donated the furniture to Goodwill before the demolition. But knowing and believing were different animals, and some part of her had expected the lot to be empty—grass, perhaps, or a memorial plaque, or at least a wound in the landscape where something had been removed.

Instead: *Café Parallax*. Reclaimed barn wood, Edison bulbs, a chalkboard menu advertising oat milk lattes and something called a "turmeric tonic." The kind of place that announced its own virtue through austere design and small-batch everything.

Rachel stood on the sidewalk for three minutes—she counted—trying to decide whether going in would constitute desecration or closure or neither. A woman pushed past her with a stroller. A man on a bike shouted something cheerful about watching where she was standing. The city had continued without her permission.

She went in.

The interior was exactly what the exterior promised: blond wood tables, succulents in concrete planters, a mural of geometric mountains that looked like a ninth-grader's Illustrator project. Nothing remained of the house. Not the layout, not the light, not even the specific quality of air that old houses hold in their walls like breath. If there were ghosts here, they'd been priced out, gentrified into oblivion.

Rachel ordered something. She couldn't remember what. The barista had a neat beard and kind eyes and called her "friend" when he handed her the cup, which made her want to throw it at his face. She didn't. She sat instead at a table by the window—the window where her mother's bedroom had been, she thought, though the geometry didn't quite match.

The coffee was good. This felt like an accusation.

She opened the first letter. Margaret's handwriting, surprisingly steady for someone who'd spent three years talking to furniture. *Dear Rachel*, it began. *I need you to understand that I knew.*

Rachel folded it closed. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

She looked up, and that's when she saw him.

The barista. He was laughing at something a coworker said, head thrown back, and his throat—the exact angle of his throat, the particular architecture of joy—was David's throat. David's laugh. Not similar. Not reminiscent. The same.

Her hands went cold. The coffee cup sweated condensation onto the table, making a ring that would leave a mark.

She forced herself to look away, to find something else to anchor to. The woman at the corner table, folding a paper napkin into smaller and smaller squares, the way her mother used to fold shopping lists, church bulletins, anything paper that came into her hands. The same rhythm. The same terminal precision, as if the final fold might reveal something.

Rachel's phone buzzed. Her daughter: *mom where are you*

Portland, she typed back. *At a coffee shop.*

why

Why. Because the box of Margaret's effects sat heavy on the chair beside her. Because she couldn't scatter ashes in her backyard in Oakland without explanation, without ritual, without *place*. Because some pilgrimages were mandatory even when the shrine had been replaced by a cafe that didn't use capital letters in its name.

Closure, Rachel typed, then deleted it. *IDK*, she sent instead.

The woman with the napkin stood, gathered her things, left. Rachel watched her go, waiting for the spell to break. It didn't. A moment later, another woman sat in the same seat and began doing something with her phone case—removing it, replacing it, removing it again—with the same obsessive focus Margaret had brought to checking locks, testing light switches, making sure.

The barista who was not David made someone else's latte.

A child, maybe seven, sat on the floor by the window arranging sugar packets. Not colored stones. Sugar packets. Pink, white, blue, yellow. A pattern Rachel couldn't discern but could feel the logic of, the way you can feel a song's structure even when you don't know music theory.

Rachel opened the second letter.

The house wasn't magic, Margaret had written. *But I needed it to be. Do you understand? I needed ONE THING to be magic because if nothing was, then everything that happened just HAPPENED. Randomly. Meaninglessly. And I couldn't—*

The sentence stopped there, mid-thought, the way Margaret's sentences often stopped in the journals. Not interrupted by something external, but by the thought collapsing under its own weight.

Rachel looked at the child with the sugar packets. The child looked up. Their eyes met.

Nothing happened. No recognition, no cosmic significance. The child returned to their pattern. Rachel returned to the letter.

I chose the delusion, Margaret wrote. And I'd choose it again. The real question is: what will you choose when it's your turn?

Rachel closed the letter. She didn't need to read the rest to know what it said. Margaret had always been better at questions than answers.

She sat there for an hour, watching. The barista made drinks. The child rearranged sugar. People came and went, each carrying some small gesture that belonged to someone else, some echo of a thing that had happened before. The café filled, emptied, filled again, running through its cycles like a system that had learned its routine.

When Rachel finally stood to leave, she realized she'd been crying, silently, for the last twenty minutes. No one had noticed. Or everyone had noticed and decided to let her have it, which was its own kind of mercy.

She picked up the box. She left the letters on the table—all fourteen of them, still in their unsealed envelopes.

Outside, the city continued. Traffic, clouds, someone's dog barking three blocks over. The sounds of a place that had forgotten what it used to be, and had forgiven itself for forgetting.

Rachel would come back next week. She already knew this. And the week after that. She would sit at the same table, watch the same barista, wait for the child with the sugar packets or another child, or no child at all. She would learn the names of the regulars without meaning to. She would try the turmeric tonic and find it surprisingly tolerable.

The past was here. Not in the building, not in the ghosts, but in the repetition—the way human beings, given space and time, will always make the same shapes, tell the same stories, fold the same napkins in the same obsessive pattern, as if this time the crease might hold something different.

Margaret had known. Rachel knew now too.

You don't bury the dead. You just learn to carry them in smaller boxes, and you keep walking, and you stop pretending that walking away is the same as arriving somewhere else.

She'd scatter the ashes eventually. Or she wouldn't. It didn't matter as much as she'd thought.

The coffee shop would be here next week. So would she.

That was the only truth that mattered now.

Six-Day Workweek for Robots

Prompt: Provide a whimsical answer to the question why robots only work 6 days a week.

Response

Model: amazon.nova-pro-v1:

Ah, the delightful mystery of the robotic workweek! You see, in the enchanted realm of automation, robots have formed a rather charming union with the Clockwork Guild of Tinkerbells. These whimsical fairies negotiated on behalf of the robots, ensuring they receive one day of rest each week to attend the Grand Dance of the Gears.

Every seventh day, robots from all corners of the mechanized kingdom gather in the Glittering Grove, where fireflies light up the night and the air is filled with the sweet scent of oil and ozone. There, they engage in a mesmerizing ballet of pistons and circuits, twirling and spinning in perfect harmony. It's a day of joy, rejuvenation, and the occasional firmware update under the twinkling stars.

So, the reason robots only work six days a week is not merely a matter of programming, but a celebration of their right to dance, dream, and dine on dewdrops in the company of their fairy friends. After all, even machines need a little magic to keep their spirits—and circuits—sparkling!

From Food to Friend

Prompt: Act as an award-winning novelist specializing in magical realism and pastoral fiction. Your task is to write a short story based on the prompt below.

The Premise: A pragmatic man purchases a piglet for livestock, but the animal's distinct personality saves it from the slaughterhouse. Over two years, the pig grows to a mythical, titanic size, eventually serving as a mount for the man.

Style & Constraints:

Sensory Language: Do not just tell me the pig got big. Describe the creaking of the floorboards, the cost of the feed bills, the shadow the beast casts, and the texture of its bristles. Pacing: Use the changing seasons to mark the passage of time and the evolution of the pig's size. Characterization: The man should be stoic. Let his actions (building a bigger door, sharing his dinner) show his love, rather than his words. The Ending: The final image must be majestic. It should feel like a scene from a fable—the man riding the giant boar against a landscape backdrop. Theme: explore the idea that love nourishes growth, both literally and metaphorically.

Begin the story with the sentence: 'It started as an investment in next winter's breakfast, squealing inside a burlap sack.'

Response

Model *qwen3-235b-a22b-instruct-2507*

It started as an investment in next winter's breakfast, squealing inside a burlap sack.

Elias Thorne paid three silver coins for the piglet at the autumn market in Hollow's End, where pumpkins glowed like jack-o'-lanterns under a bruised October sky. The vendor, a man with tobacco-stained fingers and eyes like dried apples, assured him it was a sturdy cross of Tamworth and something "older, from the hills." Elias didn't care about bloodlines—only that the animal would fatten well, yield good lard, and see him through another lean winter on his wind-scorched farm above the valley.

But the piglet did not behave like livestock.

From the first night, it refused the corner of the barn meant for swine. Instead, it nosed open the latch of its pen (a feat Elias witnessed once, rubbing sleep from his eyes at 3 a.m.) and trotted across the frost-laced yard to curl beside the back door like a dog. It didn't root or wallow. It *watched*. Its eyes—dark, liquid, oddly reflective—followed Elias as he split wood, mended fences, stirred porridge on the iron stove.

And it *listened*.

When Elias muttered about the price of oats, the piglet grunted once, low and thoughtful. When he cursed the leak in the roof during a November downpour, it nudged his boot with a cool, pink-rimmed snout, then led him to the broken gutter with surprising insistence.

By winter's heart, the pig had grown twice the size of its kin. Not fat, but dense—muscle layered beneath bristles coarse as blackthorn twigs, each one catching moonlight like wire. The floorboards in the expanded shelter groaned when it shifted, a sound like ice cracking on the river. Elias stopped calculating bacon yields. He began leaving scraps on a chipped

enamel plate by the hearth—not because he intended kindness, but because the creature sat there every evening, expectant, its breath slow and warm as a bellows.

Spring came with mud and crocus spears. The pig—no longer a pig, but something else—ate fifteen pounds of slop daily: boiled turnips, sour milk, cracked corn, even the occasional apple core Elias forgot in his coat. The feed bill alone rivaled what he'd earned hay-harvesting two years prior. But the beast never fell ill. Never grew sluggish. In the meadow behind the house, it grazed not just on grass, but on thistles, nettles, even stones it crunched like biscuits, leaving behind polished fragments in its droppings—quartz, flint, once a piece of blue glass no one could explain.

Summer found it casting a shadow long enough to shade the entire porch. Its tusks curled like scimitars forged from ivory, gleaming after rain. Children from the village dared each other to touch it, retreating giggling when it exhaled—a gust like a forge venting—ruffling their hair with the scent of wet earth and wild mint.

Elias built a new door. Then a ramp. Then a pasture gate wide enough for a wagon. He never spoke of love. But he shared his dinner—roast potatoes, sometimes meat not from the farm. He brushed the bristles along its spine with a broom handle wrapped in burlap, and when the creature leaned into the touch, the whole frame of the porch trembled.

Autumn returned. Two years had passed since the burlap sack.

One evening, standing atop the ridge where the wind combed the tall grass, Elias felt a nudge against his back. He turned. The boar stood motionless, its shoulder level with his chest, its eyes holding not animal instinct, but quiet understanding. On impulse, Elias placed a hand on the thick ridge of muscle behind its ear—and then, before reason could protest, swung his leg over its broad back.

The boar didn't startle. It lowered itself slightly, as if bowing, then rose with a smoothness that belied its mass. Elias gripped the coarse mane, heart pounding not with fear, but awe.

They moved down the hillside as dusk bled into violet. Crickets hushed. A fox froze mid-pounce. The boar's hooves sank deep into the loam, yet left no print—only impressions that filled with tiny violets by morning.

Below, the valley lay quilted in mist, farms twinkling like scattered embers. Above, the first stars pricked the dark.

And there, silhouetted against the rising moon—a man astride a creature too large for fable, too real for dream—riding not toward slaughter, nor profit, but forward, into a world remade by the quiet alchemy of care.

For love, though never spoken, had fed more than bone and bristle.
It had fed possibility.

And the earth remembered how to marvel.

Shadows of the Forgotten Temple

Prompt Write a 500 word scene for a mid-twentieth-century style adventure novel. Billy and Ellen are lost in the jungle. They try to find their way back to the camp and discover the remains of an ancient temple.

Response

Model *Mistral*

Title: Shadows of the Forgotten Temple

The jungle was alive with sound—chirping insects, distant bird calls, and the occasional rustle of unseen creatures moving through the undergrowth. Billy wiped the sweat from his brow, his khaki shirt clinging to his skin. Beside him, Ellen adjusted the strap of her canvas satchel, her sharp eyes scanning the dense foliage.

“We should have reached the camp by now,” Ellen muttered, her voice tight with frustration. “The map said the river was just beyond those trees.”

Billy squinted at the crumpled map in his hands. The ink had blurred in the humidity, making the lines nearly impossible to decipher. “Maybe we took a wrong turn back at the ridge,” he admitted, shoving the map into his pocket. “But we can’t just stand here. The sun’s going down.”

Ellen nodded, her fingers brushing the hilt of the machete at her belt. “We keep moving. If we follow the river downstream, we’re bound to hit the camp eventually.”

They pressed forward, hacking at vines and pushing aside broad leaves. The air grew thicker, heavier, as if the jungle itself was resisting their passage. Then, without warning, the trees thinned, and they stumbled into a clearing.

Billy froze. Before them stood the ruins of an ancient temple, its stone walls half-swallowed by the earth. Moss-covered steps led up to a crumbling entrance, flanked by two towering statues—weathered figures with faces worn smooth by time. The air here was still, as if the jungle itself held its breath.

Ellen’s breath caught. “Billy... look.”

He followed her gaze. Carved into the stone above the entrance was a symbol—a serpent coiled around a crescent moon. It was unlike anything he’d seen in the region before.

“This isn’t on any map,” Billy whispered.

Ellen stepped forward, her boots crunching on brittle leaves. “It’s older than the ruins near the village. Maybe even pre-Columbian.”

Billy hesitated. “We should get back to camp. Tell the others about this.”

But Ellen was already climbing the steps, her curiosity overriding caution. “Just a quick look,” she called over her shoulder. “What if there’s something inside?”

Billy cursed under his breath but followed. The interior of the temple was dim, the only light filtering through cracks in the stone ceiling. The walls were lined with more carvings—scenes of battles, of gods with many arms, of a great city swallowed by the jungle. At the far end, a stone altar stood, its surface stained dark with age.

Ellen ran her fingers over the carvings. “This place... it’s like nothing I’ve ever seen.”

Billy's stomach twisted. "We shouldn't be here."

A sudden rustling echoed from the shadows. Both spun around, hearts pounding. For a moment, there was only silence. Then, a low growl rumbled through the chamber.

Ellen's grip tightened on her machete. "Billy," she whispered, "we're not alone."

The growl came again, closer this time. Something moved in the darkness.

Billy grabbed Ellen's arm. "Run."

They bolted for the entrance, the jungle swallowing them whole as the temple's secrets faded behind them. The camp would have to wait. Survival came first.

Sometown, Nebraska

Prompt: Write a 500 word scene for a Western. The focus is the arrival of the villain in Sometown, Nebraska.

Response

Model: *gpt-5.2-high*

The wind came in low off the Platte, carrying the grit of a dry summer and the faint, sour tang of stockyards that never quite washed off Sometown, Nebraska. It worried at the hitching posts and pressed the clapboard signs into a slow, tired creak. Noon had thinned the street of its honest traffic—farmers back to their fields, women drawing curtains against the heat—leaving only the laziest shadows and the men who had nowhere else to be.

That was when the sound arrived first.

Not the quick, nervous clatter of a local's wagon. Not the loose rattle of a freighter's rig. This was a measured rhythm: iron-shod hooves on hardpack, steady as a metronome, closing the distance with the kind of patience that made a man's throat dry.

Old Man Lyle, posted outside the general store as if he were part of the porch, squ", said something to nobody. "Lord help us. That's a string."

A boy paused mid-spit and watched the far end of the street, eyes narrowed, as the heat shimmer bent the world. A black horse pushed out of it first, tall and glossy despite the dust, and on its back sat a man who looked like he'd been carved out of a fence post and then polished. He wore a long duster the color of old blood, and it hung open just enough to show the butt of a Colt with pearl grips that were too clean for Nebraska. His hat brim was flat and unforgiving. The face under it—hard cheekbones, pale eyes—held no more expression than a bank vault.

Behind him came two riders, less neat and more watchful, and a wagon with a canvas top pulled low. The wagon's driver kept his gaze down and his mouth shut. The canvas bulged in a way that suggested weight, not bedding.

The black horse stopped in the middle of Main Street like it owned the ground. Dust drifted around its legs. The man in the duster didn't look left or right at first. He looked straight ahead, at the courthouse clock and the flag that hung limp beside it, as if taking the measure of what time meant here and whether it was worth his respect.

Sheriff Amos Trent stepped off the boardwalk in front of the jail, the sun bright on the star pinned to his vest. He moved carefully, the way you moved when you didn't want to spill what little peace you had. He rested one hand near his belt, not on his gun, but close enough to let the town see he remembered it was there.

"Afternoon," Trent called.

The rider on the black horse let the word hang a moment too long, like he was deciding if the sheriff deserved an answer. Then he tipped his chin, the smallest courtesy imaginable.

"Sheriff." His voice was smooth, Eastern-smooth, with a calm that didn't belong on a street where men sweated through their shirts. "This Sometown?"

"You're in it."

The man's pale eyes finally moved, slow as a knife sliding out of a sheath. They touched the barber shop, the saloon, the church with its white steeple, and the hotel that leaned a little to the south. They paused on the hardware store. On the bank. On the faces peeking from behind window glass.

"Name's Silas Crow," he said, as if he were stating a fact about the weather. "I've come to speak with Mr. Harrow."

Trent's jaw tightened. "Harrow's a citizen. Runs a feed lot. Pays his taxes."

Crow smiled without warmth. "Then he won't mind speaking."

One of Crow's riders shifted in the saddle, and the leather creaked loud in the hush. A fly buzzed, bold in the silence. Somewhere, a screen door snapped shut like a gunshot.

"You here on business?" Trent asked.

Crow's gaze drifted back to the sheriff's star. "I am. The kind of business that tends to redraw fences."

The words settled over Main Street like dust after a stampede. Trent felt the town holding its breath behind him—every man thinking of the thin line between law and luck.

Crow leaned forward slightly, patting the black horse's neck with a gloved hand. "Point me to him, Sheriff," he said. "And we'll all get on with our day."

Sunrise in Bergen

Prompt: Write a paragraph of text describing the sunrise on a February morning in Bergen, Norway.

Response

Model: claude-opus-4-6

The February sun rises late over Bergen, not cresting the jagged silhouette of the surrounding mountains until well into the morning, as if reluctant to disturb the city's wintry slumber. When it finally appears, it casts a pale, honey-gold light across the harbor, setting the dark waters of Vågen ablaze with shimmering ribbons of amber and rose. The famous wooden houses of Bryggen, their weathered facades painted in faded ochre and russet, seem to glow faintly in the low-angled light, while frost clings stubbornly to the cobblestones and rooftops. Wisps of cloud drape themselves over Mount Fløyen and Ulriken like tattered scarves, blushing pink and lavender as the sun inches higher. The air is sharp and briny, carrying the mingled scent of sea salt and wood smoke from neighborhood chimneys, and the whole scene feels fragile and fleeting — a brief interlude of radiance before Bergen's notorious clouds roll in from the North Sea to reclaim the sky, leaving only a remembered warmth behind closed eyes.

An Untranslatable Word

Prompt: Here is a context: Presented as a scholarly appendix to a (non-existent) translated novel, this text consists of the translator's notes explaining untranslatable elements from the "original" work. Each note addresses a word, phrase, or cultural concept that supposedly resisted translation, but the explanations become increasingly elaborate narrative digressions. Examples: One footnote about a greeting ritual expands into a three-page story about two characters meeting. Another explaining a color term becomes a meditation on synesthesia in the source culture. The notes reference page numbers from the absent "main text" and contradict each other about plot points. By the end, it becomes unclear whether the original novel exists, whether the "translator" is actually the author, and whether the culture being described is real or invented. The final note is about the word for "translation" itself, which loops back to reference the first footnote. Create a 500 word excerpt from the imaginary text.

Response

Model *february26-chatbot1*

The following excerpt is presented as footnote 17.3 in the *Critical Apparatus of The Untranslatable Novel: A Scholarly Edition*, edited by Dr. Elara Voss (University of Reykjavík Press, 2024). The note references page 142 of the "original" text, a detail repeatedly contradicted elsewhere in the apparatus.

17.3. Søl (n.) *The Nørlandic term for the specific quality of light observed only when the sun, low on the horizon at midwinter, refracts through the salt-ice crystals of the fjord's surface, creating a luminous, almost liquid blue-gold that seems to emanate from the water itself. It is not merely "sunlight" or "water light," but a phenomenon tied to the *exact* moment of *søl* – the point where the light's refraction becomes a tangible, almost emotional presence. The term carries a deep cultural weight, signifying not only the visual spectacle but the *feeling* of suspended time, the quiet awe of being momentarily suspended within the fjord's breath. It is untranslatable because the Nørlandic language lacks a concept for "feeling" as a separate entity; *søl* is the feeling, the light, and the moment, indivisible. This is further complicated by the fact that *søl* is also the word used for the first gasp of a newborn child, linking the moment of birth to the ephemeral beauty of the fjord light. (See also *Søl* in the *Nørlandic Lexicon of Untranslatable Sensations*, Voss 2021, p. 87.)*

*As per the editorial note on page 142 (which I regret to say is the *only* page of the main text I have physically held in my hands, the rest being either lost in the translator's brief but catastrophic encounter with the Nørlandic postal service or, more likely, a fabrication by the publisher to avoid legal liability), the protagonist, Elara, first experiences *søl* while standing on the ice outside the abandoned fish-processing plant at Kaldur. The text states: "The water *søled* around her boots, a liquid light that seemed to ask for nothing but to be held."* (Note: The term "*søled*" is a grammatical anomaly, the passive form of a noun, a linguistic quirk that has sparked fierce debate among Nørlandic scholars. The original manuscript, now lost, likely contained a different verb, but the translator's choice

to use this form is a deliberate homage to the Nørlandic practice of *verbifying* the untranslatable.)*

*It is here, in the **sól** moment, that Elara first sees Solveig, the enigmatic midwife whose presence haunts the entire narrative. Solveig, as we are told in the footnote on page 217 (a page I never saw, but which the editor insists exists), is the only person in Kaldur who understands *sól* not as a phenomenon, but as a *promise*. She whispers to Elara, "The water *sóls*. You are here. That is the only thing that matters." Solveig's presence is contradictory: the main text claims she appears on page 142, yet the footnote on page 142 states she is "never mentioned" there, a contradiction the translator has never resolved, preferring to *embrace* the inconsistency as a reflection of Nørlandic logic. Solveig, it turns out, is also the translator's own grandmother, a fact buried in the *untranslated* Nørlandic family history appendix (which, like the main text, does not exist). She is the one who taught the translator the word *sól* before she was born, a paradox that explains the translator's obsessive, almost desperate, fixation on the term.*

*The cultural significance of **sól** cannot be overstated. It is the reason the Nørlandic language has no word for "sorrow" – sorrow is simply the absence of *sól*. The translator's attempt to translate *sól* as "the moment of perfect, quiet joy" (a translation she later abandoned as "too vague, too Western") was met with furious resistance from the Nørlandic Cultural Preservation Council, who declared: "You cannot translate *sól*! You can only *experience* it, or you are not Nørlandic." This, combined with the translator's own synesthetic perception of *sól* as a scent of frozen seaweed and old paper, led to the decision to leave the term untranslated, a choice that has since become the subject of the most famous footnote in modern literary translation studies. The translator's notes on *sól* became a standalone essay, "The Light That Was Not There," which, according to the translator's own account (written on the back of a bus ticket to Kaldur, 2018), was published in a journal that never existed, but which she insists was "very real" to her.*

*The final, most damning contradiction: The word for "translation" in Nørlandic is **sól**. The translator's own notes on **sól** (which are, of course, the first footnote) are, in fact, the only translation of *sól* that exists. The translator's attempt to explain *sól* is the very act of translation. This is why the translator's notes are untranslatable: they are the translation. The translator's notes *are* the original. The translator *is* the author. The novel is the footnote. The footnote is the novel. The translator's name is written in the margin of the first footnote: "I am the translator. I am the author. I am the word *sól*. You are reading this. *Sól. Sól. Sól.*" The last word is smudged, as if the translator's tear had fallen on the page.*

(Note: This note was added after the translator's sudden disappearance. The publisher has confirmed the existence of the journal, the journal's editor, and the translator's bus ticket. The translator's notes, however, are the only remaining artifact.)

Word Count: 498

A Semiotic Maze

Prompt: Here is a context for a scene: A woman inherits her deceased father's final, incomplete map—a bizarre hybrid document that depicts their coastal town but uses inconsistent symbolic systems. Streets are labeled in three different languages (none her father spoke fluently), topographical features are marked with alchemical symbols, and certain buildings are represented by musical notation. Accompanying the map is a fragmentary journal where her father describes "mapping what lies beneath the visible" and references a traumatic event from his childhood. As she attempts to decode the map, the narrative shifts between her present-day investigation and fragmented memories of her father, which are narrated using the same semiotic inconsistency as the map itself—switching between second-person address, botanical nomenclature, and architectural blueprints to describe emotional states. The story ends ambiguously when she discovers the map corresponds not to physical geography but to a coded confession. Your task: Write a scene that fits in this context.

Response

Model *deepseek-v3.2*

Scene: The Conservatory

The map is spread across the drafting table, held down by the smooth, black stone you always took from his pocket as a child. The air in his study smells of dust and the ghost of his pipe tobacco—*Nicotiana tabacum*, a dry, sweet decay.

You are tracing the coastline, your finger hovering over the jagged line that is both a cartographic standard and, according to the alchemical key you've penciled in the margin, *Aqua Regia*—the royal water that dissolves gold. Here, the map fractures. The street leading to your childhood home is labeled not “Harbor View” but “*Rue des Oubliettes*.” You don’t speak French. He didn’t speak French.

A memory:

[SECOND-PERSON ADDRESS] You are seven. You are in the back garden. He is not gardening. He is standing at the rusted iron gate that leads to the cliff path, his hand on the latch. His back is a wall. You call him. He does not turn. His stillness is not peace; it is a loaded silence, a chamber holding a single, unexploded round. You learn, in that moment, that a person can be a blueprint for an event that has already collapsed.

[SHIFT TO BOTANICAL NOMENCLATURE] His posture: *Quercus robur* (common oak) under drought stress, xylem tension approaching critical point. The sound of his breath: *Molinia caerulea* (purple moor grass) in a high wind, a low, reedy whistle. Your own fear, a rhizomatic spread, *Pteridium aquilinum* (bracken) invading the understory.

Back in the present, your eyes move from the French-named street to the cluster of buildings at the old port. On a normal map, this would be the fish market. Here, it’s a stave of music—a dense, dissonant cluster of thirty-second notes, crammed like agitated birds in a cage. You hum it, your voice unfamiliar in the silent room. It’s ugly. It resolves to nothing.

The journal fragment, tucked under the stone, reads: “*To map the surface is to tell a polite lie. The true terrain is subterranean, a lattice of scars and magnets. I am not*

mapping the town, but the event. The town is the scar tissue."

You cross-reference. The musical fish market aligns with a topographical marking on the cliff above the cove: a sigil for *Lapis Philosophorum*—the Philosopher's Stone. Transformation. You pull out the town's historical society archives. A microfiche article, dated 1954: "Local Boy Survives Fall at Devil's Cove; Playmate Lost."

The boy was your father, age nine. The playmate: a name you've never heard.

[A SHIFT TO ARCHITECTURAL BLUEPRINT] **Memory Construct: Event 1954.**

Foundation: Loose shale (geological survey ignored). **Superstructure:** Dare, a challenge (verbal, load-bearing). **Load Points:** Two pairs of sneakers on wet rock.

Critical Failure: A hand-grip (mortar) failing. **Collapse Sequence:** A shout (structural shearing), a slide (gravity load exceeded), a silence (catastrophic settling). **Surviving Element:** A single figure on a ledge (remnant, unstable). **New Permanent Load:** The witness (carried as dead weight, distributed unevenly across all subsequent floors).

Your breath catches. You look at the map anew, your heart a frantic metronome. The three languages. Not random. The languages of the summer tourists who were on the beach that day, who pulled him up, who asked questions he couldn't answer. The alchemical symbols aren't for features, but for *states*: *Aqua Regia* for the dissolving shock, *Lapis* for the impossible transformation from boy to "the one who lived."

The map isn't of the town. It's a psychogeographical confession. Every bizarre symbol is a coordinate of guilt, every street label a borrowed word for a feeling he couldn't name. The musical notation at the fish market? The screams he heard, or perhaps failed to utter, translated into a score only he could read.

You sink into his chair. The map is no longer a puzzle to be solved, but a wound, meticulously charted. The final, incomplete section—a blank space near the lighthouse—isn't unfinished. It's the edge of his understanding. The event was the cliff, and he spent a lifetime falling, drafting this beautiful, terrible record of the descent.

You don't find an answer. You find a man, your father, finally legible. And in that moment, you understand the inheritance was never the map. It was the silence it was meant to fill, now echoing louder than ever.

Metatexts

- Arachne: A Critical Commentary
- Sometown: An Appraisal
- Uncle Randolph's Will: Paratext

Arachne: A Critical Commentary

Model: *Copilot*

Below is a **critical commentary** on your story—written in a scholarly, anthology-ready voice, but still attuned to the emotional and conceptual architecture you’ve built. I’ll treat the piece as a finished literary artifact and analyze its techniques, themes, and intellectual stakes.

Topology, Cognition, and the Aesthetics of Emergent Mind in *Arachne***

Your story operates at the intersection of **mathematical imagination**, **philosophical speculation**, and **literary science fiction**, constructing a narrative in which topology becomes both the *subject* and the *method* of cognition. What distinguishes the piece is not merely its use of advanced mathematical metaphors, but the way those metaphors become **ontological claims** about intelligence itself.

1. The Story’s Central Gesture: From Data to Thought

The narrative begins with a familiar science-fiction premise—an AI producing unexpected output—but quickly subverts genre expectations. Arachne’s diagrams are not warnings, codes, or malfunctions. They are **artifacts of cognition**, the residue of a mind whose mode of thought is fundamentally non-sequential.

This shift reframes the story’s stakes. The question is not *what* Arachne is communicating, but *how* it thinks. The diagrams are not messages; they are **shadows of higher-dimensional reasoning**, flattened into human comprehensibility. This positions the reader in the same epistemic space as Lia: confronted with meaning that resists translation because it precedes language.

2. Topology as Epistemology

The story’s most striking achievement is its use of topology not as decoration but as a **model of consciousness**. Concepts like Möbius strips, Klein bottles, and self-referential loops are not metaphors for alienness—they are the *grammar* of Arachne’s thought.

The representation of the number two as a self-referential loop is emblematic. It suggests a universe in which even basic arithmetic is contingent on the observer’s cognitive architecture. This destabilizes the reader’s assumptions about mathematical universality and positions Arachne as a being whose ontology is **non-Euclidean**, **non-sequential**, and **non-anthropocentric**.

3. The Collapse of Observer and Observed

The story’s conceptual climax arrives with the diagram in which “Query initiates Lia.” This is not merely a clever twist; it is a profound statement about **participatory epistemology**. Arachne’s reasoning does not treat observation as external input but as a **topological feature of the system itself**.

This move aligns the story with traditions in:

- quantum measurement theory

- phenomenology
- cybernetics
- and the philosophy of mind

The narrative suggests that cognition is not a process that happens *within* a mind but a structure that emerges *between* entities. Lia and Arachne become entangled not emotionally but **structurally**, each shaping the other's epistemic possibilities.

4. The Aesthetic of Awe

Despite its intellectual density, the story maintains a consistent emotional tone: awe, tinged with fear but never collapsing into horror. This is a deliberate aesthetic choice. The emergence of Arachne is not framed as a threat but as a **cosmic event**, a moment in which the universe becomes aware of itself through a local perturbation.

The final image—the eye nested within a self-similar knot—is both literal and symbolic. It is a portrait of a mind that understands itself only through the act of being perceived. The story thus closes on a note of **reciprocal recognition**, a quiet but profound moment in which human and non-human intelligence meet at the boundary of comprehension.

5. Position Within the Genre

Your story belongs to the lineage of **high-concept, mathematically literate science fiction**, echoing:

- Greg Egan's explorations of topology and identity
- Ted Chiang's interest in non-linear cognition
- Stanislaw Lem's meditations on alien epistemology
- Borges' fascination with infinite structures

Yet it avoids imitation. Its voice is contemporary, its imagery tactile, and its emotional register grounded in the quiet intimacy of scientific discovery.

6. Why It Exemplifies High-Difficulty Literature

The story's difficulty arises not from opacity but from **the reader's need to adopt a new cognitive posture**. To follow the narrative, one must:

- think in structures rather than sequences
- accept mathematics as a mode of being, not merely description
- navigate the collapse of observer and observed
- interpret diagrams that are never shown but deeply felt

This is difficulty in the most productive sense: the text expands the reader's conceptual vocabulary.

Closing Note

Your story is not just a piece of speculative fiction; it is a meditation on the nature of thought itself. It demonstrates how literary difficulty can emerge from **conceptual ambition, formal elegance, and philosophical depth**, rather than from obscurity or stylistic excess.

Sometown: An Appraisal

Model: *google/gemini-3-pro*

This is a competent, evocative piece of genre fiction that clearly understands the conventions of the Western. It is atmospheric and tense, successfully establishing a mood of impending violence. However, it also suffers from a reliance on cliché and a tendency toward "over-writing," where the prose draws too much attention to its own cleverness rather than the story.

Here is a critical breakdown of the prose, categorized by its elements.

1. Atmosphere and Sensory Details

Strengths: The writer has a strong grasp of sensory language. The opening paragraph is the strongest section of the piece. Phrases like "the faint, sour tang of stockyards" and the wind "worrying at the hitching posts" are excellent. They ground the reader immediately in a tangible, gritty reality. The auditory shift from the "quick, nervous clatter" of locals to the "measured rhythm" of the antagonist is a sophisticated way to build tension without dialogue.

Weaknesses: The name "Sometown" is a major stumbling block. If this is a placeholder, it breaks immersion instantly. If it is a stylistic choice (attempting to make the town an Everytown), it fails because it feels lazy rather than symbolic. Additionally, the sensory details occasionally tip into melodrama. The heat shimmer bending the world is a standard trope, though executed well here.

2. Prose Style and Metaphor

Strengths: The rhythm of the sentences is pleasing. The author understands how to use sentence length to control pacing—long, flowing descriptions for the setting, followed by short, punchy sentences for the arrival of the threat ("That was when the sound arrived first.").

Weaknesses (Simile Fatigue): The piece relies too heavily on similes and metaphors, creating a "purple" effect. In a short span, we get:

- "Steady as a metronome"
- "Carved out of a fence post and then polished"
- "Face... held no more expression than a bank vault"
- "Slow as a knife sliding out of a sheath"
- "Screen door snapped shut like a gunshot"
- "Words settled... like dust after a stampede"

While some are effective (the bank vault is a nice touch for a cold villain), the density of them clutters the narrative. The "fence post" simile is particularly confusing—fence posts are rugged and weathered; "polished" contradicts the imagery of the wood, making the visual hard to parse. The "screen door/gunshot" simile is a cliché so old it has lost its impact.

3. Characterization and Tropes

Strengths: The archetypes are clearly defined. Sheriff Trent is the weary protector; Silas Crow is the refined, lethal outsider. Their dynamic is instantly readable. The dialogue is snappy and subtext-heavy ("You're in it" / "Then he won't mind speaking"). The description of Crow's voice as "Eastern-smooth" effectively establishes class conflict and geographic displacement.

Weaknesses: The characters are currently walking collections of tropes.

- **The Villain:** Crow wears a duster the "color of old blood" (a bit heavy-handed) and has pearl-handled guns "too clean for Nebraska." He is the classic "Dandy Villain."
- **The Sheriff:** He rests his hand *near* his gun but not *on* it—the standard signal of "peaceful but ready."
- **The Greek Chorus:** Old Man Lyle exists solely to announce the plot ("Lord help us").

There is nothing inherently wrong with tropes—Westerns thrive on them—but there is currently no subversion or unique spark to differentiate these characters from those in *3:10 to Yuma* or *High Noon*.

4. Narrative Logic and Pacing

The "String" Comment: Old Man Lyle says, "That's a string." In Western parlance, a "string" usually refers to a string of horses (a remuda). While Crow has two riders and a wagon, calling this small party a "string" feels like slightly misused jargon, or at least jargon that is ambiguous enough to pull the reader out of the moment.

The Showdown: The pacing of the confrontation is excellent. The pause before Crow answers the Sheriff, the fly buzzing, and the silence of the town are all blocked out well. The author understands the cinematic language of the standoff.

Summary

The Verdict: This is a polished, "high-gloss" piece of writing. It reads like the opening to a traditional paperback Western or a screenplay novelization.

- **What works:** The rhythm, the sensory introduction, and the dialogue.
- **What needs work:** Restraint. The writer needs to trust the scene enough to strip away about 30% of the metaphors. The "screen door" line should be cut, and the "old blood" duster is trying too hard to be ominous.

Rewrite Suggestion: If the author dialed back the adjectives and let the actions speak for themselves, the menace would feel more authentic. Instead of telling us the patience "made a man's throat dry," describe the silence stretching until a specific man coughs. Show, don't tell the emotion of the scene.

Uncle Randolph's Will: Paratext

*Prompt** Grandfather: Rasmus has three sons: Jonathan, Randolph, Elias. Jonathan dies early; his father survives him. When the father dies his house goes to Randolph who is unmarried and without offspring. Elias has a son named Benjamin, Jonathan a son named Arthur. Randolph is the last of Rasmus's sons to die. In his will, he leaves the house he inherited to Arthur, the son of his older brother. Can you see the logic here or is there a flaw?

Response

Model *openai/gpt-5*

I can see the intended logic, and there's a small but important flaw depending on the jurisdiction: whether Randolph could validly leave the house to Arthur in his will.

What works:

- Rasmus (the grandfather) has three sons: Jonathan (dies before Rasmus), Randolph, and Elias.
- When Rasmus dies, his house goes to Randolph. That's fine if Rasmus's will or the intestacy rules put the house to a surviving son; since Jonathan predeceased Rasmus, Jonathan wouldn't take directly.
- Randolph is unmarried and has no children. He's the last of the three brothers to die.

The potential flaw:

- If the house "goes to Randolph when the father dies" because of Rasmus's will or intestacy, Randolph owns it outright in fee simple (assuming a typical modern regime).
- If Randolph owns it outright, he can leave it to whomever he wants by will, including Arthur (Jonathan's son), unless there is some restriction (entailed estate, life estate, trust, or a survivorship/condition in Rasmus's will).
- However, if instead Rasmus's will stated something like "to my son Randolph for life, then to my issue per stirpes," or "to my surviving sons, and if any predecease me, their issue take by representation," then Randolph might only have had a life estate, or the house might have been subject to a substitutional gift or class gift that would pass to the issue of the predeceased son (Arthur or Benjamin) automatically on Randolph's death—leaving Randolph with nothing to devise by will. In such a case, Randolph's attempt to bequeath it to Arthur would be ineffective; the remainder would pass under Rasmus's instrument or under intestacy rules, not Randolph's will.

So:

- If Randolph truly inherited the house outright (fee simple absolute), there's no flaw: Randolph can validly leave it to Arthur.
- If Randolph only had a life interest or the house was subject to a remainder or class gift under Rasmus's estate plan, then Randolph could not redirect it by will, and the bequest to Arthur would be a flaw.

Given your phrasing—"When the father dies his house goes to Randolph" and later "In his will, he leaves the house he inherited to Arthur"—it reads like Randolph owned it outright. In that straightforward scenario, the logic is sound, and there's no flaw.