*I know I’ve seen these shapes before.*

Deng is gone at five — *off to be wined and dined*, she explains, hopping on one foot from the restroom, jamming the other into a flat. Once a month or so, some enterprise catches wind that Deng Jinghan is back in Shanghai and makes discrete and dimly-lit inquiries about whether she might, properly motivated, see fit to build another Bridge. She deflects these and does what she can to parlay them into enormous, unrestricted grants for the Neikotic Safety department. And, hey, we do need a new beamformer.

“Any plans for the evening?” she asks mildly, clipping on an earring.

“I’m — uh, just going to take it easy.”

She looks at me a little sadly as if to say, *don’t get carried away.*

I ride up to the voxelite fab on the sixth floor of Building 3. Great translucent tubes descend from the ceiling. A handful of neikonauts pace between them, waiting for their eggs to finish printing, hoping that today’s loop-lock session might have been the big one. On the wall, between chemical hazard symbols and laser warnings, the largest chiding of all reads simply, *NO PEEKING!* At an open workstation, I tap my card and dump my home directory into the printer. *Clink!* My first job is done in fifteen seconds. *Clunk!* I get a glance or two from around the room. *Clink! Clunk!* My prints pile up in the tray. Someone glances quizzically my way, no doubt wondering what kind of neikotic egg comes in dozens of small pieces. I scoop my prints surreptitiously into a black shopping bag and stride away.

The acrid, vaguely metallic smell of the fab follows me back into the elevator. “*Ai — zhu ni ge hao dan!*” Someone wheeling in a cart of priceless-looking optical arrays catches a whiff, smiles knowingly, and wishes me *good egg!*

I can no longer fit my collection of neikotic debris in a single bin beneath my desk. This summer, while Dr. Deng was away, I moved it to one of the underused metal cabinets along the walls of the Neikotic Safety floor, and locked it for good measure. Nobody’s asked so far. Flinging open the doors, I find three giant plastic tubs, themselves partitioned into dozens of cubbyholes. I heave them onto my desk, and then considering Deng’s warning — *people talk* — move them to an empty conference room and frost the windows.

*I know I’ve seen these shapes before.*

Some pieces of neikotic debris are undeniably, gloriously unique. These are the gems of my collection, tucked into cubbies of honor, in tiny street-powder gram baggies. But I could never ignore the similarities in the grotesque, hyperreal shapes I’ve unlodged from minds over the years. Most of my prints clink around in categories that fill larger, even gallon-sized ziplocks. The problem is the categories; you can read the story of my failures from scribbled-out masking tape labels. The first bag I reach for used to be *#11 [ominous/fibrous/trapezoidal]*, but is now *#56 [warm/wet grooves/oblong]*. The next is *#70 [involuted-pinwheels~careful!]*. With them all laid onto the long table, I consider my latest haul.

These new prints, still warm, glow when held to the light, dark blobs shimmering in amber. But I’d be careless to assume that this means they all belong in the same category — so careless! The goofy, noodly shape from Wang Yi is similar to plenty of pieces from *#21 [tubular/smooth/outward cycles]*. I briefly misplace the chunk from Gu Xiangyu among similar samples in *#3 [classic/crystalline]*. I lay them out in a dozen different ways. I rip into the existing bags, taping off sections of the table for potential new subgroupings, grumbling when I lose track of where a sample came from. It’s frustrating work. It’s disheartening to see old, discarded categories suddenly reappear. I torture myself knowing that next week some new debris will emerge, its whispering whorls demanding that I see the entire collection, hundreds of voxelite shards, in yet another way. Still, I keep turning the kaleidoscope. I take out my earbuds, and listen for the low and intermangled percussion of order within the chaos.

*I know I’ve seen these shapes before.*

Deng’s asked me countless times what it’s all for, printing neikotic debris. I would mumble something about potential patterns I was seeing, ways of taxonomizing it. *Potential patterns,* she’d groan. The proto-science of 19th-century dilettante naturalists, desiccating and naming and classifying, willing truth to the surface with idle musings and musket shot. *Potential patterns* were the stuff of men unwilling to put down the brandy and really, really think. She’d glance towards trash bins of empty bottles and bento boxes, just kind enough to leave the last part unsaid: *you wanna categorize that, too?* I never had the courage to tell her that her own words, scrawled across a Stanford chalkboard the day we met, were sufficient to explain this hobby, this predilection, this madness of mine: *REPETITION IS THE SHADOW OF STRUCTURE.*

*I know I’ve seen these shapes before.*

An hour passes. The table looks like an alien geology museum, covered edge to edge with half my collection. Yet I’m no closer to satisfaction. Logic defies me. For the umpteenth time, I pick up one of my new pieces, something made of conical spikes and elliptical holes, all protruding from each other. Its insides sparkle tauntingly. Vision is little more than a conduit here: I stare into the shard, allowing the gestalt of it to tickle my brain directly. The shapes behind the shapes are layered, nuanced, fractalized.

*I know I’ve seen these shapes before*.

Or felt them, at least. But whichever piece I could choose as this new shard’s neighbor would imply a redrawing of boundaries, a sloshing of consequences. I close my eyes and its spikes dance behind them, because of course they do; the thing they teach you about debris, once you’ve developed neikotic channels, is that even in soberspace you’d be a fool to look directly at it.

If I had a death wish, I’d bring all these models into loop-lock. I’d see all the angles and sides that three dimensions can’t capture, I’d run a thousand tensor comparisons a second — and in the last moment before my mind is crushed irretrievably under the weight of all this junk, I’d have the insight that eludes me in this cold light, in this frigid basement room. But I’m not so stupid as that.

Not quite.

I find the tryptamine pen in my backpack. Twist the knob on the bottom: micrograms per pascal-second. Tryptamines are for loop-lock, sure, and if you freetrip too hard your neikotic channels will be all gooey the next day. It’s why neikonauts are always fucked on phens, and why mushrooms are a tourist drug. But my problem has never been achieving loop-lock. I find the bottom of the heavy mesh swivel chair, calm myself, and inhale.

*The DMT hits my bloodstream almost immediately, and with no tiles and no scanner it’s like constellations of triangles it’s like rivers of eyes it’s like jack-in-the-box-of-snakes-and-ladders it’s like layers of jade and snacks in the ballroom and sliding through saturated concentric and waving and fractal and alive and frames of mmmmmmmmmmmmme overlapping and unfolding primary-colored origami on the downbeat of a rhythm from just down the nautilus...and then I remember, somehow, what I brought myself here to do —*

*grasping at remove, raising mmmmmmmmmmmmmmy lead-dead contraption of a hand to inspect*

*this piece of debris and this one and this one and this one*

*spikes glisten facets heave with the suggestion of others*

*popcorn-kernels with zigzags of sight’s fullness of color’s precursor*

*and Iiiiiiiii remember it, Iiiiiiiii see it*

*sight entwingles with memory*

*those few low-poly frames sent back up from the diving-bell*

*Iiiiiiiiiiiiiiii’ve*

*seen these shapes before*

*they all fit together somehow*

*sight and memory morning and night shadow then and shadow now*

*topologies collude exteriors align gears mesh*

*Iiiiiiiiiii — know — these — go — together*

I hold on to this, I hold so tight and don’t let go, as the curve peaks and the drug fades and my vision comes to rest. I hold and hold, and the holding is what persists back to sobriety, a grasping that clicks so neatly into the clockwork, until I’m sober and merely sweating, gasping for air that I already had. Five black-and-gold pieces lie before me. Just a moment ago I was convinced that they fit together, apparently at angles so acute that they’ve slunk back into the fabric of spacetime. I’m left holding a sixth shard of voxelite, suddenly baffled by what I meant to do with it.

*I know I’ve seen these shapes before.*

But of course I have. I’ve been seeing them all day; I saw them in Mbetethi’s mind. I drop the sixth piece, grimacing at the dents it leaves in my hand, at the murky golden spikiness that persists when I close my eyes. *I know these go together.* I remember that in my throat; I might have shouted it. But the truth of it is flattened, the chorus of it gone silent. Isn’t that what I had already known before?

Outside, a light clicks on. Someone padding around the Neikotic Safety floor. I defrost the conference room door and find Deng peering at me from the other side.

“Dinner good?” I ask, as she steps inside. In the moment, it’s all the Mandarin I can put together.

“Oh...” she sighs, seeing the mess I’ve made of the conference room table, and likely smelling what I’ve been smoking on. In her slight frame, in her old-fashioned jacket, something seems to gently collapse. She surveys the room for some way to set it all straight with a word, but it eludes her. “This *again?”*

All the blood that’s supposed to be in my brain is in my ears. I feel exposed, drained — and, in the fresh burst of air conditioning that she let into the conference room, very cold. History suffocates me; I feel like someone playing Mona Xu in a re-enactment of one of her legendary blowouts with Dr. Deng. I know she feels it too. Silently, I start to scoop the debris into its bags, losing some finer-grained distinctions in the shuffle. Deng says nothing, only picks up a piece and raises an eyebrow. *Where does this go?* She turns out to be a fast learner, correctly bagging the next one with a wry smile. We work in silence this way for a few minutes until the table is nearly clear.

“I know there’s something here.” Eventually, I squeeze this past the lump in my throat. “Nobody else is looking at things this way, and maybe that’s for good reason. But I know there are patterns.”

Deng snaps a box shut. She assesses her own words, speaking softly, slowly. “I was here, once, you know. Not exactly, but I remember the feeling of wanting it all just to fit together somehow. I wanted a periodic table. It’s dangerous, nebulous work you’re wading into. But maybe every generation has to taste for themselves.” In the moment I’m struck by the stillness I see in her eyes; no insistence, no reaction. “What makes it debris is that we have a hard time letting it go. *Of course* there are patterns, Mona. The hard part is admitting that they don’t matter.”