

NODE:1

A NOVEL

BY JOHN USHER

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Prelude

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This is Arthur Spinks's story of his encounter with a mind controlling alien that is conjuring our future. His message takes not so much the form of a warning but *an exhortation without prescription*. That's the kind of thing Arthur says, a reminder that the story is first about Arthur in the same way a footnoted prelude is first about setting a tone.

Arthur's tale is one of ambitious dignity and modern industry. But it is a tricky and corruptive story and all the words count. Arthur recorded it aboard his houseboat one late spring evening in a calm bay upon the Berlin Spree. His backdrop, if such things matter, were sounds of wheedling lapwing and shadows of varnished sprits and two years moving around the world in utter paranoid desperation at the centre of a vast conspiracy.

The delivery suggests Arthur read a prepared text in what I believe is called a *heroic mood*, a register reflecting a piratical and belligerent personality that enthuses Arthur with a particularly bright but brittle charm. Arthur's turns of phrase *interrogate a literary hegemony with chromatic mischief* (that's another example of the kind of thing he says) whilst plundering language both immodestly obscure and rudely familiar. You'll also discover Arthur mints his own words and pilfers mythologies to finance his obstinately weird vocation. That said, I find the text of his account follows closely to that of his speaking. Imagine it articulated, if you can, with a twitchy West Country burr croaked in Californian fry and seasoned with outbursts of unwonted teeth-on-edge sucked-in laughter. And if you're after a voice in which to read my abundant footnotes then I, secret gardener to Arthur's protean groves, speak with a slow Midlander-English accent and try to balance Arthur's highfalutin pitch with a more sympathetic ear.

Arthur has always been *quite a serious chap*, a pithy description that if he heard would show his scaffold like a match to the Hindenburg. On account of his pedantry and poeticism and pride he would want this statement qualified and expanded and then likely abolished, but the description has made it this far as I am both editor and publisher to this head-spun paean. And besides, *quite a serious chap* serves to show my own habit for a particular arc of commentary Arthur calls British anticlimactic bathos, a habit he quite unequivocally disdains (Arthur has a precious sense of snide humour expressed not infrequently as a fluffed quotation from a writer you've never heard of).

“I don’t want to bother you much with what happened to me personally,” begins his recording, *“yet to understand the effect of it you ought to know how I got here.”* And with this in mind the story is necessarily in two parts.

Part one is located in late June 2016, that dizzying micro-era when such specificity mattered. We spend a day with Arthur on his lonesome junket to the Polynesian island of Rarotonga, gathering himself in the ignoble aftermath of his corporate sell-out. You see, Arthur and his friend Radwan had together devised a mind-bogglingly advanced speech generation system they called Demosthenes and Caulfield. Their software could convert text to speech in any language and with any accent. It was acquired by Angmar, a murky enterprise shrouded in ethical quandary, and the sell-out left the partners squinting into their golden futures with a terrible moral hangover.

Part two is Arthur’s vision, a transmuted reverberation of his desires and fears and confusions, stewed in the gyres of his petty exasperations and privileged frustrations. These complexes are projected upon a janky post-capitalist society fractured along the lines of folkist and technologist ideology in the year 2084. Upon this tottering trope Arthur’s subconscious has heaped recent advances in artificial intelligence, a milieu in which he is undoubtably, if I may use the confused cliché, state-of-the-art.

The crux of the matter is an alien entity that Arthur reckons to be accelerating humankind towards a utopic era he calls The Horizontal Singularity. He says the entity is distributed within our

minds today and that it has existed over eons of universes, seeping across boundaries of Big Bangs in ways that have been tentatively proposed under the banner of a theory called *conformal cyclic cosmology*, coined by, in case these things matter, Roger Penrose.

From my understanding of Arthur's tale, this entity he calls The Honzing is beginning to coalesce in our youthful incarnation of the universe. The Honzing is crystallising on the substrate of human consciousness and nudging our behaviours to bring about what it claims to desire: a technologically asymptotic future with sufficient computational resources to fully realise its consciousness. It says this era will be a state of optimal equilibrium for itself and us humans and the way I see it is a pretty picture to explain not so much a meaning of life as individuals, but rather the meaning of life as a collective component of an eternal and non-repeating universe.

I feel that Arthur's goal is to spawn a new mythology by shocking us into believing his message. And so I see a duty to warn you of lapses in beauty and an acceptance, and at times celebration, of the grotesque. Puns and pastiche and parody support his hatching: if you think you saw something move between the lines then you probably did, and I shall do my best to elucidate the phenomenon. This shadowy realm shows us what Arthur has taken for granted, filling the gaps of his chequered history and, if you have the stomach to look closer, embedding a tale or two of seedy protraction.

Relevant to our parenthetical relationship is the concept of an *information hazard*. This is a piece of knowledge that when disseminated has the potential to cause harm and this book, Arthur declares, is a good example. The word hazard comes to us from the Arabic word for dice, *az-zahr*, a nice resonance as it first reminds me of Arthur's bumpkin Bristol accent (pronouncing the rhotic r, as he would say) and second because Arthur's tale has multifaceted chance woven throughout its fabric. The trouble with this hazard is that the dangers are, to me at least, imperative but entirely ungraspable.

Having known Arthur since childhood I can testify to a profound change of character since his encounter, a change from

one of a mopey and mawkish and sickly individual to a throbibly enlivened and outraged champion. Arthur has affected, or perhaps attained, an air of peculiar grace. By way of example, he will design his elasticated one-piece suits and have them specially tailored, and although particularly short of patience for matters not relating to the Horizontal Singularity he will listen carefully to any considered critique and inspect that examination with extraordinary detail.

The most delicate detail of Arthur's character is perhaps the most important — it is his special branding of obtuse naivety (this is not to be confused with *innocence*). The naivety Arthur affords to carry because of his rare talents and circumstance, but his character is an overwrought varietal you often find with eternally flowering academics, the sort who struggle to “read the room” and over-think a situation. It altogether makes me wonder, *Just why did this alien beast reveal itself to, of all people, Arthur?*

My closing impartation to you, kind reader, is encouragement to treat this in the spirit it was given, of being true in the most real of senses. The story builds to a revelation with a magnitude of importance that justifies the conceit of its delivery. Whether you receive this with the chthonic horror of Arthur is yours to discover. Call it a steaming pile of theses, pronounce it as you will, and steel yourself for the heir to a hen's mate and a cow's husband, for an ignoble and a seething truth.

PART ONE

Rarotonga
June 2016

Tachyon Fly-Bys

I read to quieten the earworm, the music that comes from within. It invariably performs at the particular pitch of my tinnitus and a few times a year a short melody will lodge for days. And then I read intently, lofty essays and cryptic stories transmuting uncertainties.

Speaking aloud will briefly quieten the cacophonous silence.

‘See what you’ve done there?’ I’d say to myself. And to anyone else who might be listening.

Hearing this you may think I am mad. What till you hear the rest.

Sunday, the morning after my arrival on Rarotonga, and for want of anything else to do I attended church burdened with a fresh earworm tuned to 1661-Hertz, A-flat minor, the opening bars to the Velvet Underground’s *Venus in Furs* looping with impetuousurgence.

Filtered church light fell upon me, blue and jaundiced and bloodied and steeped in an endless droning miasma of white hot viola whip-stabs punctured by the carnal beating bodhrán. This emotion was intense and gloomy.

In a strange twist of fate I would later write a poem describing that church and this would lead to an event giving material evidence for the being of consciousness that directed my vision. But for now let us picture a gangly Englishman, I, Arthur Spinks, sitting in the upper gallery of that small white-stoned tin-roofed church school-boyishly bobbing pasty legs in the damp tropical air and gurning an earnest scowl as I enacted passing tachyons.²

I abandoned the tachyon fly-by to pick a wen upon my balding scalp and soon bore a small biological trophy. Inspecting the flake of skin I shook my head in disgust and then ate it.

² A *tachyon* is a hypothetical particle that travels faster than light. The prefix *tachy* come from the Greek word for *rapid*. A tachyon could not be seen approaching but after one passed nearby it would create two images arriving and departing in opposite directions. Arthur was simulating the unseen arrival of a tachyon with one finger and the simultaneous mirrored paths we would see as it passed.

Chewing the morsel in offbeat syncopation to the Venus in Furs tempo my eyes lazed into a late-arriving couple, a young man and woman shuffling along the pew in front. I noticed matching tattoos upon each shuffler's right elbow, a circle circumscribing an equilateral triangle with a dot at its centre. Leaning in I was trying to determine if the triangles were pointing up or down when the man turned and gave a smile of recognition. The woman followed and flicked a friendly look of *How did we all get here?*, which being none of her business I found immensely irritating.

'It's you,' I intoned.

We three had waited at the luggage carousel the previous night taking po-faced selfies beneath an enormous Polynesian longboat. My bag arrived first on the carrousel, a natty rucksack displaying a prominent First Class label. The straps became stuck and I was the centre of attention stretched on all fours yanking it free of the mechanism and giving what I hoped was a nonchalant look to communicate that my ticket was a matter of fortunate upgrading (which it wasn't). This I did by energetic grinning, giving the impression, on reflection, of someone passionately agreeing with themselves.

The couple presented a healthy North American sapience, perfect white teeth and lithe bodies encapsulated in uncompromisingly black cotton clothing with a loosely tailored but well-fitting geometry. If pushed I'd call it a Japanese style but less overwhelming, a pair of off-duty Bond villains.

My own appearance reflected a sartorial timidity exemplified by that enduring habit of the start-up company, the grey hoody. My colleague Radwan had it emblazoned with our company logo, the letters D&C in a white font ironically aping the design of Milanese fashionistas *Dolce and Gabbana*. Radwan's wife called it my "normie cloak".³

The rest of my attire reads like a charge-sheet to existential diffidence and which I now consider offences to both taste and

³ It was actually I who pioneered this name, "the Normie Cloak". Whether intentional or not, Arthur continually confuses these minor historical attributions of myself and Radwan's wife, Julie.

decency. Merrill sandals over socked feet and cargo-pocketed beige travel shorts were the main offenders, confused by an assemblage of “lifestyle” paraphernalia such as a surfer-style keychain and a scuffed leather wristband. Upon my knee would doubtless rest a battered cap blazing a California Republic bear filled with the Rasta tricolour purchased in one of those tat emporia on the Venice Beach Boardwalk.⁴

I returned a sniffy nod to the stylish Bond villains and recollected how they were greeted the previous night by a hotel agent holding a whiteboard, on which was written a single surname atop other partly erased lettering.

A palimpsest, I said to myself.⁵

Grinning wryly with this analysis the drone dimmed a fraction and my attention moved into the church below. A festival flowers and humanity held court, hibiscus and gardenias tucked behind small ears, popped in mounds of fuzzy hair, poked into buttonholes and sprouting from two vases flanking the wooden pulpit. I felt the tucked and popped and poked and sprouting blooms were held captive and intent to outvie each other for their release.

With a stomach-knotting wave I asked myself:

⁴ It should be noted that although Arthur’s trappings may suggest he was a skater and a surfer and a stoner-hipster, he was, in fact, none of these, and I have frequently heard him describe these tribes with, as he might say, “more than a touch of censure”. His efforts to give the impression of being a street-savvy dude, straight out of Somerset, are taken to ridiculous lengths, peppering his vocabulary with London Ebonics such as *bare* (which according to the way he uses it means “a lot of”), and describing things that are good, and sometimes bad, as *peng* (I’m not sure even he knows what this means). To give you an idea of his aesthetic disposition a few years on, Arthur is listening exclusively to fifteenth century lute music and Enya, and sports a micro-managed pencil moustache, which, depending on who he is trying to impress, will claim it to be inspired by either Little Richard or Errol Flynn.

⁵ A *palimpsest* is a text written on a recycled page, a page on which ink from an earlier text has been removed. The word derives from the Greek *palimpēstos*, meaning “again scraped”.

— *Was this what I expected on my thirty-fourth birthday, sat watching invidious flowers in a church?*

Did I mention it was my birthday? No matter. My mood oscillated like this throughout the service, about which I recall nothing except the name Nebuchadnezzar. The Māori *a cappella* did little to placate Severin’s violas.⁶

There was an interlude in which a young boy played a gently competent noodle on an electric organ and the congregation started to chatter. An alms bag was thrust into our midst, a claret velveteen drawstringed sack with two worn hardwood handles contralaterally situated for expedited passing. The late-arriving couple celebrated its arrival, the man holding it aloft like a sports trophy as his giggling partner took a photograph with an old SLR. They caught me watching and I gave a wink of approval. Not wishing to part with my Cook Island coins (enormous *doublonian* polygons), I donated a few US dollar bills into the bag and sent it on.

As we waited for whatever was to come next I leaned forward to my recent acquaintances — feeling somewhat self-conscious in my bulging beige cargo shorts to their sophisticated attire — and told them how the choir looked like a flowery cult of cricket fanatics. I was explaining the rules of cricket when an usher interrupted to say that the service would continue in Māori and would everyone please follow her.

Our small group of upper-gallery tourists filed out exchanging prissy shrugs to signify that we did not know what was happening. It felt like the first day of school. The cricket-enabled *chicards* peeled off, the woman with a sour look of “I never pledged to support the endeavours of these people”.

We were shepherded to a church annex, a red tin-roofed bungalow with institutional mushy-pea green paint on the wainscoting and a splintery floored badminton-court sized hall. Nectar and bleach contended the air. At the far end hung a large and faded landscape photograph of a young Elizabeth Windsor

⁶ Severin is the protagonist of the autobiographical story *Venus in Furs*, by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch.

attended by a tall white-shirted and neatly trimmed Māori holding in his hand a piece of paper. I drifted towards the smiling queen. She wore a sky-blue dress and baggy long white gloves and brought to mind an oversized six-year-old dressed in her mother's clothes. Three freshly picked Frangipani flowers were tucked into the frame and as I leaned in to savour their smell its Latin name "*Plumeria*" burst into my mind liberated from a childhood memory of my father's horticultural pursuits (I am afflicted as much by forgetting words as with sudden irrepressible *rememberings*, a kind of locutionary Tourette's).

I looked around at the people in the annex and quickly determined it possessed the aesthetic frisson of hummus. The beige of my shorts repeated endlessly, an appalling expression of hegemonic utility (it was also the regulated colour of our family council house). We were a thin dun broth flushed with UHT milk tea and floating in a milieu of acquiescence to unscheduled corralling. I belonged to a filtered elderly population in this absurdly remote location, this geographic singularity, blanched and overcooked by days of travel. To get here we had undressed *en masse*, been irradiated with body scanners and received into vast chambers of scheming money cults, Pharisee tables set for tea at the aspirational duty-free feast before being accelerated into the atmosphere. I'm sure most people would have called it the trip of a lifetime.

The feature presentation arrived unassumedly upon a dull stainless-steel plate born by a tiny Chinese-looking woman with the chestnut complexion, tumbling coal-black hair and pearly-whites of a Māori. The conversation subdued as we scrutinized the few dozen unambitiously presented cubes of an unknown grey-purple matter. This turned-out to be the root vegetable taro. The cold food tasted as revolting as it looked but was eaten with glee as we all knew it served well to provide us with tesseracts of anecdote.

The chattering orbited inanely about matters of provenance and weather and kiteboarding and a French bakery on the north coast near an abandoned hotel (*you've got to rent a scooter, it's so much fun*). You couldn't really detect any movement, any *valency* to what anyone said. But it soon became clear to me these topics served

as *prevarication*, a prudish stonewalling of the circumstances that had enabled most of this gruel to leak over to the Cook Islands. This generally related to a hefty pension payout from an awfully short lifetime of allegiance to further the trajectory of an abhorrent unsustainable corporate process. With purposefully aimed remarks I gave a few strikes on behalf of my parents who had spent a lifetime working night shifts in British public healthcare and looked to the National Lottery and middle aisles of budget supermarkets to exercise their capital rewards. Precisely what I said escapes me but likely included the phrase “a fair day’s work”.

I overheard two Māori ladies discussing a cyclone that would be passing near the island in a few days. If true (as it turned out to be) I would have to cancel my onward flight to Pukapuka, a distant island I had become quite obsessed with. Pukapukan was the language our speech generation system was worse at reproducing: for some reason the Pukapukan it generated sounded artificial to almost everyone who heard it. As a matter of intellectual curiosity I intended to visit Pukapuka to investigate where things were going wrong.

Retreating to a corner of the church annex my tachyon meditations recommenced. Facing out the window I imagined climbing to the highest peak on the island, through the jungle and up the mountain *Te Manga*. Standing on *Te Manga*’s 650 metre summit I would be able to see nearly 100 kilometres to each horizon. And for a tachyon moving at about 300 kilometres-per millisecond I estimated that to travel from one horizon to the other would take about two-thirds of a millisecond. Could I turn my head fast enough to watch a tachyon pass over me? I practiced and had just decided I could not possibly do so without neck and head trauma when the tattooed couple entered the annex and headed towards me.

The girl seemed drunk. She spoke as though I were an old friend, loudly and manically circling a finger.

“This is all jus exposition, no?” she shouted at me.

I nodded sagely and the man raised his eyebrow. Phillip- Manuel and Anne-Marie were their names. Feeling I had shared too much already I called myself Radwan. I immediately liked

them, their breezy detachment suggesting an alliance. Phillippe-Manuel was tall like myself with a short combed down raven's-wing fringe above a cliff-face expressive forehead. Paired with a clean-shaven square jaw and underbite the man altogether gave the impression of a psychopathic detective. Anne-Marie was shorter and had a round face set with kind and attentive deep brown eyes that exuded a mischievous sauciness. They spoke with viscid Quebecois accents that abolished the Venus in Furs earworm as I strained my ear to capture the *unseemly* equilibrium between what sounded like the consonants of Appalachian hillbilly crossed with the vowels of Atlantic-coast French. The rhythm of their speech was uneven, a stubborn forward momentum as if each syllable was being peeled off something. Their pitch cadences reminded me of an early incarnation of D&C and further reminded me that French words in the mouths of Anglo-Americans give a similar feeling as those paintings of dogs playing poker.⁷

'We-er saw you playing with your fin-gurz,' said Phillippe-Manuel. 'It looked more h'interesting than the conversations we av ad ere though h'equally confusing.'

Caught off-guard by the humour I panicked and regurgitated some spiel about the food, 'Have you tried the taro?'

'Ar man,' said the woman. 'I ate it.'

'Good for you,' I said diplomatically, wondering if she was expressing a record of ingestion or dissatisfaction.

Phillipe-Manual nodded to the D&C logo on my grey hoodie and said, 'So, I see you are a student of fashion?'

I was immediately riled, bristling allergically to the sentence beginning with the word "*So*" and further deciding the man was mocking my clothes. 'Terribly sorry but I didn't catch a word of that,' I said, aborting his candidate jibe. 'It's the *accent*.'

The man's face pinched.

'What's the word for *accent* in French?'

'*Accent*,' he said.

⁷ This variety of budget snobbery is quite typical of Arthur. However, in consideration of his *matière* (that is, matters of accent), I think it is fairer to call this not incivility but *uneven charm*.

'Doesn't matter,' I breezed. 'I'm trying to get my head around something. I'd look it up if my phone worked. No bloody connection.'

'We av the same problem,' said Anne-Marie. 'We never thought we'd av to talk to other people when we booked our vacation ere. We shall h'ask for a refun.'

She passed an orange carrot-shaped plastic container to her accomplice who slowly unclipped the multiple fasteners and ceremoniously removed a carrot. I observed the punctilious spectacle, wondering if it was for my benefit.

'My chum, ee as a funny digestif system,' she explained, prodding a finger into her partner's belly.

Phillipe-Manuel crunched the vegetable and shrugged.

Anne-Marie yawned.

'Not yoost to the er-lee day,' she said. 'I yam a freelance h'artist.' I think this was a joke.

'With me it is just the h'opposite,' said Phillipe-Manuel, spitting some carrot upon my face that I politely ignored.

Anne-Marie narrowed her eyes and nodded towards my hands.

'Arr, *tachyons*,' I boomed, suddenly possessed by a boisterous Victorian. 'I must warn you that they are an *information hazard*.'

I looked to my audience and paused in histrionic pander. The angular cheeks of Phillipe-Manuel raised a fraction in what could be the start of a smile or snarl. Anne-Marie nodded once with mock solemnity, as if agreeing with a vet to terminate the life of a hamster.

'Once I've told you what tachyons are you will never be the same! For one thing, you might end up looking like a complete bloody idiot.'

'We shall take the risk,' said Anne-Marie, batting eyelids.

'Now a tachyon particle is a *superlunary* creature.⁸

'And all you need to know is that they travel faster than light. If one is approaching then you won't see it coming. You'll observe

⁸ A tricky editorial decision: Arthur may have meant to say super-luminary, beyond the speed of light, rather than super-lunary, beyond the Moon.

the light from it in reversed order, starting from when it passes and stretching back in time. My right finger represents the arriving tachyon. And when it passes I would see it moving back on itself — that's my right finger going backwards. But you'd also see it continuing forward along the line drawn by my left finger. It's a kind of time-mirroring. As it passed you would watch it going both backwards and forwards in time.'

The Quebecers followed my words with an irritatingly attentive attachment to my mouth. When I finished they looked at each other and nodded as if making an asterisk to which they might later refer.

Anne-Marie asked why my accent sounded "unnecessarily complicated". Accents being very much my bailiwick I was quick to explain with a convenient slice of Victoria sponge cake. The model began with a dense base of Bristolian croak with rhotic trimmings, or to put it another way, low-Q formants and glottal fricatives on the voiced Gaelic diphthongs with a tendency to pronounce the "r" at the end of words. The upper layer of the sponge was burnt and served to represent my prevalence for short barking phonemic ejections and a generally irreverent attitude I'd picked up during university days in Manchester, mixing a dry Protestant moorland wit with a wet Catholic swagger blown over the short sea from Ireland. At the centre of my accent, I explained, pointing to a thin layer of strawberry jam, was a film of London patois absorbed from the music I attended. The garish pink icing was my predilection for obscure and technical words, the sybaritic salts of intellectual and epicurean (small "e") indulgences I had experienced within a *demi-monde milieu*.

Pleased with my French I grinned serenely as my audience rallied furtive glances (looking back, I think a more savoury food might have been a better object for comparison, perhaps a taro cake?). Although I did not mention it then, I should add that my qualities of diction are (up)tightly packaged in a self-conscious awareness gained from spending nearly a decade in California engrossed in the intricacies of accent and that my manner of speaking will adapt readily to any context (to an extent that we may as well dispense with the revolting taro cake simile).

‘You work in California?’ prompted Anne-Marie, gesturing to my cap.

Phillipe-Manuel flinched a smile. My tech-bro senses tingled and I knew him to be a first-rate hacker (I was a fourth-rate hacker, in fact, I would call myself a bad computer programmer and do-away with any special appellation). His twitchy demeanour gave the impression of the sort who had a habit for caffeine and mind-nurturing nootropics. He would certainly be familiar with Angmar, the shady military-adjacent conglomerate that had bought-out our business, and I hoped to avoid discussing the sordid business.

I decided to answer Anne-Marie with a story of my time on the west coast. I loathe anecdotes, a jangling piece of small change wearing a hole in the fabric of conversation. The example I minted on the spot according to my pleasure, *ad libitum*. I once met, so I said, an artist called Casey. We were in a queue for a “medical” cannabis “evaluation centre” at a Venice Beach ““doctors” “surgery”” (my air-quotes were on-point). The guy had an electronic implant creating a sensation whenever he faced a specific location, a location that changed every few weeks. Casey said it was a project to gain an intuitive awareness of the relative subjective and the absolute objective. Anne-Marie yawned through a laugh, nodding her head as though she knew the story.

Feeling the wind in my sails I spun a further yarn about a deserted hotel on the island haunted by the eighteenth-century Yorkshireman Captain James Cook. As penitence for robbing the nation of its Māori name Cook was, I rused, cursed to frighten tourists with phantasmagoric appearances. The Quebecers grasped the fib and said they would help it spread. I hoped for my story to circulate and return as a mutated South Pacific whisper.

By the time the Māori service ended I was ditzily with what my brother-in-law John would probably call *joie de vivre* though I would prefer *Lebensfreude*, which to my ear sounds more resolute, a finite state of affairs when something must happen next.

Through the doors came a group of Māoris talking with each other, led by my hosts who I had stayed with the previous night. They seemed to be the centre of attention and gave me the impression that they were in some way important community

leaders. The beiged legion presented themselves in a line to be recognized by travel company liaisons and experience enablers. The Quebecers peeled off and Anne-Marie gave an inviting wink as she was hustled away.

Sue and John had offered a ride to my hotel. They had invited me to stay with them the previous night due to a booking mistake. With two of Sue's friends we had drunk off-brand JD and Coke and in the morning they introduced me to their family. Sue and John's ancestors were buried in their garden near the hāngī fire pit. I was under the impression I misheard their names, finding Sue and John just too plain for such exotic environs, like a dinner lady and a bus driver. And so I enthused fervently to establish a "beyond names" rapport that I'm not sure I managed too convincingly.

I was soon bumping along in the open cargo bed of a pickup truck sitting atop my carbon fibre rucksack. Besides a laptop and a smattering of clothes the bag contained a few souvenirs from the church gift shop: some flower seeds for Mother, a battered second-hand book selected for the title, *A Surfeit of Lamprey's*, and a *hei-tiki* greenstone pendant for my sister.⁹

Beneath a cloud-dappled sky I faced forward listening to the receding cracked toll of the church bell and watching the world pass by. It felt dreamlike, ducking huge and abundant butterflies in the salty air and grinning in anticipation for time alone. Everyone we passed waved to Sue and John, reinforcing my opinion that they were important people on the island.

The Quebecers's accents replayed in my head, their sticky scansion and the way they added and omitted the letter H. With perhaps deluded vanity I thought myself lucky to have a natural disinclination to learn new languages (I am still recovering from an existential shock discovering in French class there was a verb

⁹ *Hei-tiki* are ornamental pendants usually made from jade. In Māori mythology, *Tiki* was the first man and the word *hei* means "to wear around the neck". In Rarotonga, *Tiki* is the guardian to *Avaiki*, the underworld, *Avaiki Nui* being a Māori name for the Cook Islands. Also, I should mention that I, John, am husband to Arthur's sister.

“to be”, something I’d assumed was implicit). Radwan and I had an ongoing debate that competing descriptive models of the world lead to a compromised understanding and expression of self. Radwan speaks half-a-dozen or so languages and in those days was teaching me German, motivated, I expect, as some kind of snub to both myself and the German language.

The truck drove on.

A homemade sign proclaimed, “Jesus Christ our saviour will save us not money. No flights on Sunday”. As we approached I started to reach for my phone, hoping to snap a photograph *en passant*. But at the last moment I aborted the action, not wishing to appear a crass tourist if Sue or Bob should have seen me in the rear-view mirror. My deference leads me now to think of a concept over which Radwan obsesses called *over-socialization*. I am not sure if he fully subscribes to this idea, that one can be “over-socialized”, or if it is just one of his fatuous thought-experiments (one can be *under-socialized* and so why not *over-socialized*?).¹⁰

Amongst the smells of nectar and dust and ocean I clearly recall that drive to the hotel, pendulous banana chandeliers stranded upon interminable roundabouts displaying unreasonably officious chevrons. We passed a yellow delivery vehicle looking almost wilfully un-aerodynamic, on the side of which was a single large Chinese character. I felt amused by my feeling of alienation to the incomprehensible logogram.

Passing a goat tethered to the centre of a roundabout begat a brief earworm to the tune of Mykola Leontovych’s “Carol of the Bells”: *Goat on-a-rope, goat on-a-rope!* It is a melody I have always found disconcerting, a confused message mixing manic obstinate Gothic melodrama with festive celebration.

I wished my mind would quieten.

¹⁰ Radwan, being the kind of person who, as we will discover, he indubitably is, was likely referring to *over-socialization* in the same way it is used in the Unabomber manifesto: *To designate the process by which children are trained to think and act as society demands*. Or to paraphrase Theodor Adorno, *the tension between an individual's emancipation and submission to culture and society*.

The pickup truck pulled into a newly built hotel, pioneering weeds establishing themselves in fresh cracks and casting no shadow in the midday tropical sun.

Sue came around to open the tailgate, her long white dress conjuring a tanned and congenial Miss Haversham.

I noticed floral appliqués on her blouse. The stitching was neat and perfectly regular and I wondered if it was hand sewn. I followed Sue's gaze down to a thread hanging loose from my shorts that she pulled smartly out, breaking my distracted trance.

Sue held my shoulders with straight arms like a rugby player and I heard the seconds tick on a small watch around her thick wrists, an old windup *Timex* I'm pretty sure Mother wore as a nurse.

Are we going to touch noses, Māori style? I wondered, hoping not as I was sure to get it wrong.

Sue spoke in a precise and clipped Antipodean voice resonating with a strange wisdom, 'Arthur, be safe when you are here. We will have a *Hāngi* next week. You *must* come back to us before you leave.'

I didn't immediately answer, instead wondering what the woman's history was, what her husband did for a living, and trying not to look at her magnificent cleavage.

Long pauses seemed like a natural part of communication in the Cook Islands. I distinctly remember a soft but deep coo that I followed to a bird perched directly above us. It had the body of a slender pigeon but dusted with colours I had not together seen before: a lilac-magenta Mohawk with acid green head and wings and a Day-Glo orange neck.

In time the lilac-crowned dove stopped cooing and flew away. I replied that I would visit when I returned from Pukapuka, relishing the word *hāngi*, the fast diaphragm-aspirated *H* and oral-voweled *a*.

We said goodbye and I blearily walked towards the hotel reception and into a ukulele rendition of "Sheep may safely graze". Passing over the pioneering weeds I mentally replayed Sue's words and detected an ominous tone. Pressing my thumb pad into a sharp stalk of green bamboo I told myself not to be superstitious.

The Horizontal Singularity

Amidst the aura of ukulele I found a Māori woman, chin cradled in locked hands with elbows resting upon the hotel desk. She was either my age or half that, it was impossible to tell, and she gave a twisted grin as though mocking my arrival. Her voice came with the conscientious intonation of a BBC World Service radio presenter, *Kia Orana, Arthur Spinks, and happy birthday*. I flinched a wan smile and felt my cheeks blushing. I noticed upon her long neck a greenstone necklace, a hei-tiki as I had bought for my sister. The grotesque creature stared at me with bulging eyes and I regretted buying the souvenir, realizing it was laden with Māori value I would never understand. I later buried it on the island.

I followed the girl through the hotel gardens regarding tattoos on her shoulder and neck and lower jaw. Her gait was foreign, wide hips swinging that looked comfortable and natural but almost as though she were missing a third leg. I tried to imitate her movement and began to feel nauseous.

Green was now the colour, philodendra climbers and inviting patches of thick wind-swished grass beneath looming coconut trees. High fronds clacked in alien discussion and paths branched mysteriously. *Ah, this garden was enchanted!*

We arrived at a miniature thatched cottage. It was to be my un-humble abode for the next few nights and I was caught completely off-guard when the girl departed with a *Ciao*.

My first act was to pull tight the net shade and pace the room. I could not think what to do. There was still no internet connection and my communication tendrils rang shrill, it was the longest I had gone without online activity in an age. On account of Radwan's brusque mannerisms I was tasked to manage the social media channels of our business beneath an alter ego "Tipso Bodine", so named to engender an air of friendly but alienated authority.

'Peplum!' I blurted, remembering the name for the overskirt worn by the receptionist.

This is it!

What do I desire to do most?

What should I do?

What can I do?

Is that even a reasonable question?

These thoughts emphasised my dizzying freedom, my frenzied stasis.

I was sweltering. It felt like body temperature though according to historical records it was, in fact, around twenty-six Celsius but seventy percent humidity, the same temperature on land and in the sea. The *Borsuk–Ulam* theorem states there are necessarily two points on the earth's surface directly opposite to each other that have precisely the same temperature. There could, on occasion, be two individuals experiencing the same level of comfort or discomfort on exact opposite sides of the globe. And so on behalf of a potential antipodean companion (in Chad, it so happens), I took a cold shower to simmer-down.

Following my shower I entirely forgot to enjoy the pleasant natural cooling effect and vigorously rubbed myself dry. This annoyed me intensely and I considered taking another but a distant but regular muffled thumping stole my attention. The sound was disturbing only in its familiarity, like a waft from teenage years in a dank bedroom. I didn't move until it hit me: it was the distant sound of a baby's chubby pink legs thumping on a wooden changing board. The duple time beating was unmistakable, primitive and bodily.

I unpacked my bag, holding it at its base and aggressively shaking out the tightly packed contents that ejected around me. With an empty surrender I fell upon the bed, face up. Rolling over I discovered I had fallen upon a large garland, a *lei* comprising dozens, perhaps a hundred, daisiesque flowers, threaded through a pink string. Each flower faced the same way in an unbroken ring, an ouroboric explosion of funnels giving birth to funnels, Penrose's stacked eons of universes. Pollen stained the bedsheets.

Beach smells drifted with a briny musk and it was with an eased spirit that I identified two types of ocean wave: a nearby

slurping flop slop slap and a distant equable roar from the outer reef. I arose and slung a large towel over one shoulder, toga-like, moving slowly about the room in gentle contemplation. I recollect how a young Demosthenes practiced speaking to an audience of roaring waves, preparing for his regular address to the thronging *Ekklesia*.

What is the ocean? There is no such thing. There are only individual waves.

Goddamn it! Maggie Fucking Thatcher strikes again! This was a perverted quote of hers from a 1987 glossy lifestyle magazine: *There is no such thing as society, only individuals.*

Language keeps us locked and repeating, I said to myself. We must speak so carefully these days. It's like the 1920's and 30's, Hemingway, Waugh, Huxley and Clifford Odets writing by the waning twilight of fun-times modernism. A similar twilight shone in 2016, a historical reconciliation of the foppish flapper dandyism of tech-bro start-up opportunism cashing in and crashing down. But on an upbeat tone, the artistic attitudes I have experienced in LA and Berlin shine with a vibrant insolence that seems to have fled Susan Sontag's 60's age of intellectual nihilism (fled, or *outgrown?*) and entered her blessed *erotics of art*. Bask in Jeff Koons's kitsch flower dogs whilst gulping the hyperreal fizz of Sophie Xeon's *Lemonade*, checking your hermeneutics in the cloakroom. This earnest irony is what characterizes Metamodernism. *But, I wondered, does my acute awareness and affirmation of this analysis make me a Metamodernist?* I didn't feel like anything.

It should be noted that by this time in my philosophical reverie the towel-toga had dropped to the floor. As I regarded the shadow of my cock, the "old boy", as I liked to call it, I decided the shadow had a more attractive form than the real thing.

My contemplations dangled and literary thoughts continued, how in the century since those days and nights of G. K. Chesterton and Dorothy L. Sayers, to name but two, we've had the night and day of online porn and China, matters about which it's very difficult to write the correct amount.

I was, and still am, somewhat obsessed with the political life of maestro Aldous Huxley. Not so much the ideas, as I am with

those of his imprisoned contemporary Antonio Gramsci, but Huxley's *style*, his authoritative conviction expressed in blazing one-eyed essays and the preciously confident satire of his early fiction that combined with the colourful fantasy of *Brave New World* to paint a *topos* of earnest anti-technology censure that could only have been drawn by an artist blind to the desires of humanity at large.

Huxley's position was a declaration against the Whiggish confidence in the continuation of the enlightenment, against the science-enabled progress of humankind, and an affirmation for a top-down hegemony maintained by intellectual elites. He promulgated his attitude in a clear and wide-eyed didacticism, pulling the reader up to meet his gaze. Perhaps I go to Huxley when I think of an archetype for the *folkist* outlook: looking backwards, passed over by technology as he tends the cultivated flowers of his day to find patterns in the perennials.

Huxley and I share a similar history, raised in England and spending significant time in California. Ours was an existence not as much isolated as insulated, breeding an airy thinking as we knocked on the doors of perception, or in my case, the *NORs of perceptrons*.¹¹

If I have one talent, one special power, then it is my hearing ability. Specifically, it is a power to determine if speech has been artificially generated or is natural. This is a kind of sonic autism, removing (or ignoring) structural mediation of meaning and listening to the *form* of the sound. The meaning of the words, syntax, grammar and so on does not give much clue as to whether

¹¹ Let us unpack this stinker together: First, let it be known that Aldous Huxley wrote a book called “The Doors of Perception” (to which Jim Morrison took a shine). Secondly, that a perceptron is an older word for an AI classification system, a neural network to detect particular patterns. And thirdly, a NOR gate is a simple digital circuit with two or more inputs and one output, that operates much like an OR gate but with the output logic flipped. A NOR gate is considered a fundamental unit in computers: by rearrangement of multiple NOR gates, we can create an OR gate, a AND gate, and a logic inverter. All three give us the *NORs of perceptrons*

some speech has been artificially generated, thanks to ever-improving generative language models and the impoverished quality of language we are used to hearing. Working with Demosthenes and Caulfield I became familiar with nearly a hundred languages, but at one point realized that provenance, social class and emotional lability are too variable to be an indication of credibility. I attend to the direct sensation of the sound itself. I visualize the shape of the glottal pulse and textures of the formants, the resonances caused by the moving tongue and nearly one hundred other muscles. It is almost as though I can *handle* the sound and *feel* the authenticity. At least, that's what I tell people I'm trying to impress (call it what it is, people I'm trying to *manipulate*). In truth, I can't describe how it feels, this un-super power of mine to identify phoney speech. It's something like Goethe's colour theory, perhaps. The art of Alexander Scriabin and Oskar Fischinger explains it better than I ever could in words, but we haven't got time to go into this.

My talent was unearthed by Radwan. We met at university in late 1990's Manchester. He, a young professor of mathematics, I, an ill-inspired engineering undergraduate. There we directed listening tests to evaluate the verisimilitude of synthesised musical instruments. Radwan credits my golden ears with the ultimate success of *Demosthenes and Caulfield*, which can create natural-sounding speech in hundreds of languages and with a myriad of regional accents.

Daydreaming there on the Cook Island, flexing *the old boy*, I wondered in what ways non-speech sounds affect us, how sounds in nature, particularly in our formative years, influence the way we think: the Whorf hypothesis for the sound of the sea.¹²

How is perception of non-speech sound corrupted by language and socialization?

¹² Arthur seems intent to make it clear that he knows about the *Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis*. For us mortals who do not, this is the idea that the languages we use affects the way we think and act: Orwellian *Newspeak*. Apparently, a character in Star Trek was named after him (Arthur's sister describes this character as "*The guy with shit all over his face, but he's really just a human dressed up*").

I once read something off Radwan's bookshelf predicated on the notion that speech has a dominion over text because it more closely contours the patterns of thought (I think the so-called word it used was *privileging*), asserting this claim in that typically absolute and unsupported way in which modern French philosophers, of whom Radwan reads avidly, inevitably do.¹³

Inclined as I am to the Northern European temperament, Berlin was to be my next home. I was moving with my sister and her family and thus studying German, un-grasping the jarring sentence constructions. Funnily enough, since my Honzing vision something seems to have clicked and I have developed an almost synesthetic ability to determine the correctitude of a German sentence just by whether it sounds right. However, I am still unable to lift the veil on most German philosophical texts (Hegel seems, for the most part, impenetrable and deliberately abstruse, an analysis that Radwan commended me on). These writings leave me feeling much, I imagine, how felt *Brave New World*'s empty-headed protagonist John when he discovers *The Tempest* and desires to comprehend its meaning.¹⁴

I further dissected the auditory scene: the cautious cluck of a chicken somewhere in the hedges, the odd-harmonic rattle of a 115-CC moped pootling by, and a flanged scratch of an unknown insect chirping in the midday heat, wing-sound demodulating to produce barely-there difference tones.

I could focus on the sound of one object until the others disappeared. And I could return them with attention.

*My mind was the cause itself: causa sui.*¹⁵

¹³ Arthur has always cultivated a childish distrust of anything French, an affect he propounds with such vitriol I can not tell if he is joking. He has frequently pointed out that I am something of a Francophile, and have a tendency to overuse French words: *Quelle dommage*.

¹⁴ John here, the un-paid, un-thanked and un-invited editor, wonders if Arthur is invoking my namesake as an underhand, cruel put-down, following an argument where I protested that the language he uses is deliberately complicated and alienating to give a veneer of literary propriety.

¹⁵ *Causa sui* is Latin for “cause of itself”, or “self-caused”.

Loudest, yet last to be noticed, was the hum of a small fridge in my room. A capricious idea came, as is their want, in a flash. Reaching across the bed I stretched for the electric plug and after a few firm tugs pulled it from its socket, emitting a satisfied ‘Arrrr’ as the compressor motor whirred down and Freon gurgled to a rested state.

A deeper calm fell upon me and I moved across the lei to seek uncorrupted sheets.

And I pondered upon the Horizontal Singularity.

From the editor: The transcription below is presented unedited to capture some of that feverish glint in Arthur’s eye that characterizes his spirit when talking about this matter.

The Technology Singularity was dimming the atmosphere when I arrived in California, oozing a dude-bro miasma of obsequious rhetoric.

[Sound of Arthur snickering to himself.]

The Singularitist froth was buoyed on the shoulders of *accelerationism*, a slumbering monster emerging like a swamp-thing from the blogs, forged in the furnaces of Nietzsche who demanded *accelerate the process!*

But perhaps I’m giving it too much concern, that talk of the Singularity was merely a phatic expression? A kind of intellectual filler like asking, “How are you doing?”, used by accelerationists across the political spectrum.

In my mind accelerationism is contrasted with the folkist movement, but the aims are not inherently opposed. The contrast is framed by the role of technology to solve social problems, and so I like to talk about a specific kind of accelerationism called Techno-Accelerationism, lest we get waylaid with Nietzschean baggage. The schism between the outlooks of Folkism and Techno-Accelerationism is a seemingly unreconcilable rift in left-wing politics. But it is a schism that my vision, which I maintain was conjured by a single alien being, suggests is harmoniously sustainable.

I came to Techno-Accelerationism via a folkist path, concluding the problem of left-wing reactionary politics and anti-bourgeois attitudes is not only banal but embarrassing. Folkism results from a failure of critical thinking and imagination. Let's take the vapid slogans of the Occupy movement, politely MC'ing their human microphones to convey how unhappy they are with low quality Vietnamese tents and a limited Starbucks menu. Most trade unions are guilty of this charge, demanding their members continue the same demeaning job and demanding a rise in the minimum wage. What they *should* be demanding is a rejection of keeping masses at the minimum of life. It is a form of what the Situationists call *Capitalist Recuperation*, but I don't want that to get in the way of my rant. I mean, what does "stopping austerity" and "saving" the health system even mean?! And while we're at it, what the fuck is so unvirtuous with a choice of dishwashers?

That said, left-wing techno accelerationism sits beside folkist collectivism—hack-a-thons are a thing, whether I like it or not. And yet hackers simultaneously celebrate Waldenesque solitude, Thoreau's *self-reliance* being part of the hacker's creed. But Techno-Accelerationism opposes Marxist dogma that power structures are enforced by capitalist processes, cocking an ear to Gramsci's theory of how the cultural hegemony is perpetuated mostly by society, by bourgeois *stuckist* thinking: *We're all our own prisons, we are each all our own wardens and we do our own time.*

Accelerationism is polluted with the adolescent fascism excreted by pseudo-intellectuals like Anne Rand (*who*, to quote Radwan, *could compress the most words into the smallest idea*). Right wing accelerationists are for the most part cheap-thrill Edge Lords who simply invert the humanitarian agenda as a kind of game, like a child who says no for yes. This is clearly appealing to those who find the democratic process "broken", failing to realize that democracy is an extension of being human and that democracy exists not just in cold parliament chambers but between friends and within our own structures of consciousness.

The ugly bug of right-wing accelerationism came to the boil in the new millennium, ghoulishly naming itself *Dark Enlightenment*. Radwan flirts with its cruel croak beneath the mantle of libertarianism and it's a niggling bother to me why such

strong minds are drawn to such dark ideologies (the musk of masculine identity crisis oozes from these immature crotches). There is no community with right-wing accelerationism, it is a cult of the individual. The draw for hollowed people like Radwan, a lonely genius adrift between the arts and sciences, seems reasonable, an ontological drive hauling him within the belly of the beast to slake his thirst for a new mythology.

Accelerationists are unhappy with a stagnant and steady velocity: they desire a second differential, a delta-delta. Both political wings hasten the burn-out of today's political system, liberal capitalism, or whatever you think it is (I'm reluctant to call it "late-stage capitalism", sharing Frankie Boyle's fear: *what if it's only just getting started?*).

Right-wing accelerationism is motivated to not reduce but *exacerbate* inequalities of social power and enter a highly discordant tyranny, a kind of extreme monarchy with government structured like a business. There's no difference to the goals of this than for any other form of tyranny, left or right wing: it's to propagate a hardcore top-down society run by an elite ruling group upon a subjugated population, and the kind of people who believe this system to be sustainable are clearly deluded.

A feeling of stagnation manifests in the art world, at least by a small group in London whom my sister was affiliated with called the *Stuckists*.¹⁶

Stuckism is art at the stale end of the so-called modern art era, that self-congratulatory fog of indeterminant wank. Stuckism is (was?) entirely un-conceptual and obsessed with authenticity, perhaps an evolution of the punk Situationists "bringing it on". My pet theory is that punk is a primal reactionist expression, essentially, a desire to return to childhood (whether an actual childhood or an idealized false memory or false promise of childhood). Punk and stuckism are negative philosophies

¹⁶ *Stuckism* is an art movement founded in London in 1999. The name originates when co-founder Billy Childish was told his art was "Stuck stuck stuck". The first point of the Stuckist Manifesto is that "*Stuckism is the quest for authenticity*".

wallowing in an impasse, and in spite of their alleged anti-snob attitude is for me one level of snobbery too far.

Stuckism and punk are now empty folkist protests that ultimately serve the hegemony (pissing in a font is recognizing its holiness). If we are talking art then Banksy is my guy. He had the idea to ignore the entire church and allow the experience of his expression to be *entertaining*, entertaining in the true etymologically coherent sense of holding your attention. Gramsci wrote that ideology is rooted in sensationalism and that ideologies must become dramas if they are not to remain mere ink on pages and Banksy is both ink and sensationalised drama.

Folkism is inherently reactionary, a movement *reversing* a trend.¹⁷ Both left and right wing folkists are focused on community systems more than the individual, the right on patriarchal structures like the nuclear family, religion, and Fordist capitalism (heads-down hierarchical production lines). A commonality is a craving for *authenticity*, the waft of a dream evaporating in the brilliant white, alien light of the future: “A’least the man speaks his mind!”, shout the MAGA warriors and *Daily Heil* seditionists. “Rather than money, give me truth,” sigh the lefties.

Reactionists are powered by a nostalgic false consciousness, a drive to reach Utopia by re-tracing footsteps (don’t tell em that history is mutable, Radwan would say). What the fuck do you want to return to? cry the techno-accelerationists. The only way out is through!

My personal interpretation for the motivations of leftwing Folkism stems from a tension. On the one hand, there exists a profound sensitivity and humanist reaction against technology: commoditising friendship, the raping of privacy, monopolisation of advertising, aesthetic totalitarianism, and the financing of histrionic loutish power-obsessed cunts (I forget the correct name for the specific psychological disorder). The other side of Folkism is an attractive force, those singing the body electric as they praise

¹⁷ The Oxford English Dictionary cites the first English language usage of “reactionary” in a 1799 translation of Lazare Carnot’s letter on the Coup of 18 Fructidor.

nature in all her bounteous wonders: the clarity of water and the utility of wood and the generous occurrence of foods and alcohol and mushrooms and love.

My vision revolved around a future based on Folkism and Techno-Accelerationism, asking: “How would a post-Capitalist future look, but one where the folk and technology-embracing outlooks persist?”

“Progressives and Conservatives” are words too stained with emotion to stand for Accelerationists and Folkists. You see, progressives are characterized by continuing along a given trajectory and there are plenty of belief systems and behaviours that are progressive yet not accelerationist (such as gender equality). Linear progressive movements lead to local minima “saddlepoints”, solutions that satisfy a problem in a narrow but not broad sense (Marxism would count, but I wouldn’t fight about it).

Saddlepoint is a term we use in AI, thinking you’re at an optimal solution, at the lowest point of error, but in fact you’re just on a plateau, like a high mountainous pasture. Ideas of Utopia are at risk of arriving at such a false plateau: you think you’ve arrived at the utopic objective, as there doesn’t seem to be anywhere to left go, but in fact you’re just on the saddlepoint and the optimal solution lies off down towards the stirrups, *pardner*.

The distinction between Accelerationism and Folkism is close to the *Apollonian and the Dionysian*, another conceit of Nietzsche. Followers of Apollo, so the legends go, revere principles of logic and reasoning, disciplined individuation and ordered structures emerging from internal contemplation. Dionysus was the god of fertility and wine (Bacchus, to the Romans). Half-brother to Apollo and raised by mountain nymphs, Dionysus embodies systems based on the intuitive and the emotional, a hippy god. The Dionysian spirit is a folksy process incorporating group structures and traditions to influence an ethical framework. Nietzsche saw the Apollonian–Dionysian fragmentation of human consciousness as tragic, although to quote that great Dionysian archetype, *The Dude* (Mr Lebowski, if you’re not into the whole brevity thing), “That’s just, like, your opinion, man”.

Radwan says my comparison of Folkism and Techno-Accelerationism to the Apollonian and the Dionysian works only superficially, that Accelerationism is entirely emotionally driven and Folkism is equally rational and rigorous to its own logic, but I find the comparison to be colourful and, let us say, *historically situating*.

This split way of thinking is a filter through which I saw the world in 2017, the time of my vision. It was a viewpoint driven by politics, economics and class awareness, an un-cleared landscape of folksy, Dionysian traditionalists on one side, and technocratic Apollonian accelerationists on the other. Since those days, my language has been refined to talk not of *class* but of *subjugated group* consciousness, with a consciousness of subjugation that must, if you chose to believe my tale, include the machinations of an alien parasitical mental process I call *The Honzing*, and with the entirety of the human species as the subjugated group.

And so it is in the context of my erstwhile outlook I want to report how I became quickly bothered by the under-thought and *unreasonable* rhetoric of an accelerationist group calling themselves *Technology Singularitists*, three dwarfish thieves in giant's robes named, if I may borrow the words of Roger Penrose, *Fashion, Faith, and Fantasy*.

Quite reasonably, you are wondering what The Technology Singularity is, and if so then I refer you to John's inevitable footnote.¹⁸

The viability of the Technology Singularity begins and ends with Moore's Law: the doubling of computational density every two years. The first heuristic is an assumption that more computational power maps to more human-like intelligence. This is based upon mere extrapolation, a blind extension of a trend without any supporting model. It's a structuralist way of thinking, extending the present rather than considering it a motile process that we do not have full understanding of. Besides, an exponential curve is always locally exponential. Bear in mind, the popularity (and my annoyance) with the Singularitists was peaking around 2010. This was before the great new age of machine learning, in which the most memorable goal was scored by the proto-fascists

¹⁸ After minutes of joyless Wikipedia-bothering, I will try to explain the Technology Singularity to ensure we are all upon the same, singular page. Picture a canvas with a horizontal line from left to right representing time passing. Now, think of the vertical axis as a measure of something like the loudness of a sound. You'd start at the left side of the canvas, representing the beginning of your time frame, and you'd paint a line that goes up and down as time goes on to show the sound getting louder and softer. Now, if the curve of this function goes nearly vertical, then its slope or gradient is high. If the curve is vertical then the gradient is infinite: it is non-differentiable, as mathematicians like to say. And a vertical slope of a function is called a singularity. Singularities are quite rare in nature. One example that springs to mind is the curve of sexual excitement in those intimate times we spend with another or ourselves, those moments leading to *La petite mort*. But the function Arthur is talking about for the Technology Singularity is the sum of humankind's *technological capabilities* (as Arthur has instructed me to call it, if he was not such a pedant, we could just call it "technology"). This is generally called "Progress" and tied to objective measurements such as computing power, the number of computing operations a computing system can undertake each second. The technological singularity is a hypothetical point in time marking the emergence of human-like artificial intelligence.

helping Brexit over the line. This age has bought a fundamental change in the design of computing hardware. Whereas once algorithms were inspired by what was afforded them, now hardware design is largely inspired by the algorithms we have waiting to deploy on them: the horse is finally coming before the cart.

Promulgators of the Technology Singularity expect that a computer can replicate the human mind, that consciousness can be modelled, counterfeited, call it what you will, using a powerful computer. And whether or not you care about the whole mind-body duality conundrum, or what our familiar friend Penrose has to say about the limitations of mathematics for mechanizing human consciousness, then you're left holding a mind with no body: a mind that is not going to think like a human being.

[Arthur here again laughs and speaks with a tone that suggests he is deviating from the script.]

Sorry, I was picturing this small metal box, and there's a spindly mechanical hand coming out of it trying to connect some wires with a small loudspeaker, and then this crackly little voice screams, "Help! I'm stuck in a box! Get me outta here!"

[Arthur coughs and recomposes himself.]

And now the decisive point. Supporting the idea that human-like intelligence could be produced by a machine is like free will, and that is easier to explain and probably more relatable. Even though good rationalists like myself *should* be a strong determinist at heart, understanding that my actions at a particular time are an inevitable consequence of initial conditions and current environment, we should *act* as though we have free will. Whether by nature or nurture, we share an idea of morality based upon asking how we would hope the rest of society to behave. We assume we have free will when judging *can one be held responsible for an action* — did we believe the accused had an option *not* to do what they did? And seeing as we have no reasonable alternative to base our system of law upon, then we are left to assume the reality of free will and to *behave* as though it exists.

Roger Penrose proposes consciousness is related to interdimensional processes, quantum malarkey (as 'twere). And I think there could be something to it, seeing as the human brain is

the most complex object on earth and a fair contender for some kind of inter-dimensional antenna. Anyway, the analogy of believing in free will and refuting the possibility of humanlike artificial intelligence stems from the fact that our behaviour will be inevitably effected whatever we believe and it is to our detriment if AI does not emerge. For instance, leaving the solving of global warming to a future opportunity. And besides, we tend to forget how we are generally wrong about complex problems that rely on speculation: *nothing is so firmly believed as that which we least know*, to quote Monsieur de Montaigne. *Illusory superiority*, I think it is called.¹⁹

I hope we understand how the Technology Singularity is defined and that my opinion of it is clear on a logical and emotional level. This needed to be established for us to understand what I mean by the *Horizontal Singularity*.

To begin at the beginning: we imagine our curve of Technology Capabilities versus time, and we draw it as a sigmoid function, what mathematicians call an S shape, but is perhaps more vividly described as the profile of a hill sloping from a flat valley floor on the left to a high plateau on the right. The Horizontal Singularity begins at that future, right-side point in time where the function becomes flat: when the gradient of our Technological Capabilities tends to zero. Some would not consider a horizontal line or plateau to be a singularity, since it has a gradient of zero, but it is a phrase that gives the most meaningful description with the fewest words (also, I enjoy the juxtaposition of the infinite horizon with the infinitesimal singularity).

¹⁹ Arthur seems to have hoisted himself by his own petard (incidentally, when Shakespeare coined this phrase, he was making a pun on the word *petard*, a fart *en français*). Arthur is admitting that having a strong opinion about a particular matter on which we have little knowledge is risky because of our tendency to overestimate our intellectual abilities (the *Dunning-Kruger* effect, as some might call it). So, when Arthur emits all this hot air, I, for one, am left doubting the true sincerity of his vaporous emission.

From the perspective of the universe, such an era has been called *The Omega Point*. This is the end point of time in both the Biblical and scientific senses, what the Jesuit philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called *the state of complexity towards which the universe must evolve*. But this has eschatological overtones, rumours of apocalypse and Big Crunches, and is entirely incompatible with a theory called conformal cyclic cosmology, which we'll get to later (not today).

Think of the Horizontal Singularity as a time when humankind is, from a technological perspective, maximally evolved. There are many problems with a definition of “Technological Capabilities” and I capitalize the words to remind me: do we strictly define *capabilities* as only those aspects of technology about which we have, from a practical point of view, complete understanding and control over? Or are we less rigorous and include *tentative* discoveries? From the little I know of quantum computers and quantum entanglement, it seems they are part of our *Capabilities*, but are explained with statistical principles, and to me this suggests the boffins do not have full understanding of the mechanism by which they operate (Einstein's God not being the dice-rolling type). If you ask me, I'd go for the latter, broader definition.

And if you're interested, my opinion of the Horizontal Singularity is that it signifies the end of humankind. I believe an at best un-trustworthy and at worst malevolent agent encourages this flat-lined future, though without proper context this might sound like the raving of a tin-hatted lunatic. And so, let us get down with the proper context.

The Reverse Walden FOMO Theory

I awoke emotionally inert with a head stewed in dream mire,
eyes closed tight to hold the images in mind.

‘A hovering black egg,’ I whispered.

‘And a crab. A large scarlet red crab lumbering purposefully
along a deserted sun-baked white-dust road.’

Its shell was covered in a scabrous white veined filigree. And
then I realized what was most strange: the crab was travelling not
sideways but pulling itself forward upon massive claws.

I opened my eyes and wondered,

— Could the crab be a manifestation of my earworm? A shelled cousin
of the tormenting invertebrate.

— A scavenger creature with ragged claws, picking through the refuse
of history.

— Moving forwards instead of sideways represents a transcendence, a
symbol of new freedoms liberated from my commercial sell-out, fluent in this
modern renaissance of progressive internationalism and buoyed by financial
independence.

A pillow had fallen to the floor. I decided to refrigerate it to
later sleep upon and opening the un-hummed fridge I found
waiting a complimentary bottle of wine weeping condensation.
Exchanging wine for pillow I reconnected the fridge’s electric
plug, closing the door with a contented chuckle. I unscrewed the
plastic cork and necked a large measure of the lukewarm
Marlborough.

Stretching out along the bed’s diagonal the evening’s agenda
came to me: first, study some German (Rainer Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, which Radwan had gifted with an accompanied hand-
written translation), and second, watch the sunset reading Ngaio
Marsh’s *Surfeit of Lampreys* at the hotel bar. The two objectives
were never realized.

Being my birthday turned thoughts toward family, to my
elder and only sibling, Victoria. In those days she was calling
herself a *conceptual masseuse*. Her finesse was to strategically locate
either mobile phones or logs of wood, both of a particular vintage,

upon the client's body. The put-upon client was left in a darkened, silent room for as long as they desired, a kind of updated Reiki. Of course, it started as a joke. The idea served two conceits: for those of a technological bent to become familiarised with organic materials on an epithelial level, and for folky types to be embraced, literally, by technology. The conceits were ignored: the nerds chose phones and the hippies went for wood. John and Victoria dubbed these two groups the *Phreaks* and the *Woodos* (they were likely unaware of the history of *phone phreaking*, an early form of illicit hacking). Unfortunately, the mix of massage oils and tree bark led to quite severe skin reactions, stumping that branch of the endeavour. And so Victoria focussed entirely on the Phreaks. John was a dab-hand with a quill and designed an advertisement to promote his wife's program. The curlicued pamphlet had a gothic appeal immediately distinguished from that interminably safe Helvetica font, and soon a few hundred glossy flyers were smeared across London's FinTech WeWork Badlands.

John is something of a pedant, like myself. He has a charming predilection to emit *snowclones*, which is a nice word for fluffed cliches (one example that springs to mind is “so on and so *fifth*”). Perhaps his keen attention to detail enabled his wizardry with analogue electronics allowing him to connect the haptic actuators in the mobile phones with a bevy of archaic Bakelite knobs and sliders to control the intensity of the vibration. Victoria collaborated with Radwan's wife Julie to conjure a spiel pairing a particular phone model with a particular client, based on a short interview to determine significant life events. This essentially meant determining with which particular strand of arrogant privilege the client was cursed (many of the crypto bros seemed to have had a special year in 2003, which Victoria associated with the founding of Tesla and pairing with the Nokia 7600, a tiny gadget the shape of a chunky sigmoid).

John and Tor are Folkist Normies, atavistic reactionary neoprimitives living at the fringe of the urban technologists for whom they service. They share clearly defined opinions and nurture desires with a specificity that leaves me feeling somewhat empty (their dream house is a kind of self-sustaining terrarium enlisting

an army of lizards, mice, insects and fungus to provide energy, food, and cleaning services).

I once heard a psychotherapist describe Folkism as a *castration complex*, a searching for something believed to recalibrate society's libido (libido in the pre-Freudian sense of *desire*). And as with most people burdened by this outlook, John and my sister are prisoners of emotion, steeped in retrospection and resolutely struggling against technology with an insistent energy that feeds a fetishist desire for some sort of yoghurt-weaving agrarianism.

Why did John, a country-born bumpkin, move to the city? An expression of some distant explorer gene, wanting to chart the unknown? I call it The Reverse Walden FOMO Theory.

*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately,
to front only the essential facts of life,
and see if I could not learn what it had to teach,
and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.*

— so wrote Thoreau.

This is the basis of my theory. Just Swap *woods* for *city* and consider that a year or two is probably enough time to get the idea of what it's like to live by a northerly pond in 1845.

An EU arts grant had come Victoria's way to document her massage project with a photographer in a Berlin commune, though my Angmar loot allowed to provide her and John and their five-year-old daughter a warmer place to live. I'd visited Berlin for most of the last decade as part of my regular August escape program, spending a few weeks in the clubs and lakes with my sister and her friends whilst Radwan and his family engaged with the Burning Man festival.

Berlin's socio-psychic shape defies my grasp, like clutching a bag of gelatine, squeezed and extruded by trends and forces too complex and decorrelated to reduce. The city-state displays a clear presence of accelerationist and folkist processes, the techno music and inevitable startup scene versus the social and environmental fundamentalism, shadowed by tangential anarchy. The unnameable backdrop to the landscape are the silent memorials to the villains and victims of the left and right, colossal ziggurats, architectural indulgences sat in silent eyeless hollow atonement.

Turkish gangland intrusions further obscure the *topos* and treading in the central bastion of Kreuzberg you feel like you've walked into a Dogme'95 film, where no action is superficial and all is entirely taking place in the here and now.

Berlin always felt a place of balance, a psychic Lagrange point (an L4, to specific,²⁰ and I wish there was a way to indicate my pride with this simile). I could never live in the countryside, there's no hamlet small enough, although having spent time with some of John's hobby friends I'm well-aware of enchanted creatures too rare for the cities. The two arenas of city and countryside will shape my Honzing vision, my admittedly at-the-time squinted viewpoint of it, honed through my scratched lens of post-Marxist fashion. And we shall hear more of Lagrange points manifested as a symbol for coasting a free, or at least low-cost, voyage.

Without really thinking about it, I was soon calling my sister.

The British dial drones overwhelmed like an infusion of embalming fluid, an ansible transporting me instantly to Albion. I composed a schema to explain the effect. Two pure tones played together, equal in level, at pitches of 400 Hertz and 450 Hertz. These frequencies are slightly disturbed from the western A-440 tuning, musically askance by a cochlear-hair's breadth. And if you listen carefully to these tones played together you will hear a difference tone of fifty Hertz, a kind of psychoacoustic hologram created in the abstracted reaches of the auditory system beyond the mechanics of our inner ear (we would hear a difference tone even when the two tones are presented to different ears). And 50 Hertz is a special frequency: it is a tone we Europeans are intimate with, the sound of alternating electricity, the hum of The Grid.

²⁰ Lagrange points are locations in space between two large orbiting bodies where there is no net gravitational pull (the centre of a planet could also be considered one). A small object at a Lagrange point will maintain its location relative to the two bodies. There are five L points in the Earth-Sun system and L4 (which Arthur has likened to the psychogeographical location of Berlin) leads the position of the Earth.

The galloping rhythm of the dial tones comprised a spondee, two short tones leading to a long pause, a *caesura* as in the fecund fissure within Hamlet's immortal question. I determined the combined duration of the two short pulses was precisely one second, and that of the long pause was two. This two-to-one is a ratio not welcoming to music. A quotient closer to the "magic number" *phi* of one-point-six would sound more naturally musical. The effect of this was a feeling of waiting, of longing. And lastly, the two short tones have a tempo of 120 beats per minute. 120 is a psychoacoustically fascinating value, the average spontaneous tapping rate of the human finger, neither too fast nor too slow, taut nor slack, the comfort zone in which plods "house" music.

The dial tones symbolized the British *Establishment*, by which I mean (deep breath) a regressive and repressive regime where the celebration of military chauvinism and top-down tyranny triumphs over humanist endeavour whilst propping a dynasty of bullying kleptocrat parasites enforced with violence and insidious mind control (sigh). But like jazz, and perhaps the French, my disdain is as much affected as actual, a minor aesthetic choice like selecting a particular pair of socks.

My dial tone analysis had lifted a veil. I was emboldened but powerless, a titular tyrant. The sound and non-sound was all, a total perspective vortex of lotus flower water droplets radiating infinitely on Indra's web.²¹

Victoria answered the call, a whisper of *memento mori* behind the tyrant. And I was immediately overcome with a new balm, a human one of guilt for having missed the recent Brexit vote.

An ear appeared on the phone screen studded with a multitude of coloured minerals nestled within white-rooted auburn hair. I could almost smell the patchouli and recollected a

²¹ Arthur has become more mystical-sounding since his Honzing vision. Victoria is a practitioner of Transcendental Meditation and has the following to say about Indra: *The Indian Guru Maharishi taught that Indra represents wholeness of life as pure consciousness, and at that finest level of consciousness everything is correlated in a web of life that supports all activity at more expressed levels.*

pair of wooden-handled *Bodyshop* hairbrushes from our childhood, one maroon and the other shamrock green, which she had called Kurt and Morrissey. Her voluminous knitted jumper was creating moiré patterns in the screen, aliasing artefacts as the video compression algorithm failed to encode her folky get-up.

‘It’s me,’ I said.

‘You better ‘ope so,’ came Victoria’s voice, the pitch contour of her West Country accent diving towards gravelly Sunday night kids-in-bed resilience. ‘Better not be using that deepfake bollocks.’

Over the past few years I had tested our voice generation algorithm on her, trained on my own voice to try and trick her.

‘Your timing isn’t exactly peccable,’ she said.

‘It’s *me*. And I appreciate the joke, but *peccable* actually means _____,

‘Oh, happy birthday Bruv!’ she gushed, positive emotion zinging across the globe. ‘We made a cupcake for you. Tallulah drew a picture of Gramsci’s face on it in your honour. Copied it from that weird T-shirt you got ‘er. Speaking of Capitalism, how’s *bro-tirement*?’

I sniffed. Victoria regularly teases me for being a “tech-bro”, which has the desired effect of raising my hackles, (“What even *is* a tech-bro?”, “Look in the mirror, tech-bro”). I had spent the last eight years living in Silicon Beach, an ever-burgeoning ocean-side tech hub spread over LA’s Santa Monica and Venice, and inundated with young males “working in tech”. As such, to any *bro-grammer* charge I was demographic mincemeat.

‘How’s Tallulah?’ (my niece being a reliable subject to diffuse antagonism).

‘Infatuated with princesses,’ said Victoria, stuffing into the camera’s view a piece of material as pink as it was unidentifiable. ‘Not gonna lie, I’m freaking out about the pink.’

A Bob Marley poster flashed past on the wall behind her, a mosaic of small Bob Marley portraits collaborating to form a single large Bob Marley face. ‘*A Bob Marley of Bob Marleys*’, I thought to myself, reflecting how indifferent Victoria is to fashionable trends, un-cynical and un-ironic in her unashamed nostalgia, *a true hippy*. Radwan had once raged against the failure

of the hippy generation, calling it *hedonic infantilism*, though I think he did this to coax a defence, which came along the lines that most proclaimed hippies were not *true* hippies (I expect Radwan dismissed this as an act of escapology).

Endeavouring to pay attention I said that Victoria's pink concern was entirely reasonable.

'Fi ad a son I could dress im without even finking,' she said.
'Give im a dinosaur T-shirt and kick im out the bloody door!'

I disliked discussing the patriarchy and soon fell into silent distraction. I dislike my confusion, including that by her own reckoning (or perhaps by mine) even Victoria was complicit. Mansplaining, gas-lighting, and cruel romancing paradigms are further undignified by technology, a flotsam wave breaking upon the shores of iniquitous history, upon which I have surfed on dirty coat tails and am allied with by my association to the tech world. It is a modern problem that I feel more engaged with since becoming an uncle, but a problem that has such a complexity it clouds my mind, somehow compounding my complicity.

'You listening?' snapped Victoria.

I grunted.

She grunted back in a lower pitch.

'The patriarchy,' I said.

'How'd you guess?'

'I've got a hard-on.'

'Gross.'

'You were always the Gross-Out Queen.'

'*As twere*.'

A pause. 'Look, the patriarchy is a trip. Don't lay your trip on me, sister.' I winced, regretting my lack of control.

'Watch it, Arth. Just coz it's your birthday doesn't mean —'
I heard the scritches of a cheap cigarette lighter.

'I've got one of those bloody earworms,' I said.

'Wanna know how to get rid of it?'

'Playing it out? Salt on a wound.'

'Na, somefing else.'

'But—'

'Try it. Record a few seconds singing it and send it to me.
That's what mothers are for, sucking up all the world's bad ch'i.

And I think that's what turns us into our own mothers. It's like being in this multi-generational relay race, passing on a baton of anxiety.'

Channelling Dot Cotton, my sister paused for a quick drag and continued: 'John's computer's acting all-up. E's working on it now.'

I heard John in the background shouting, '*Darty little bastard!*'

Victoria pointed the camera in his direction and I could just about discern a dark and hairy form hunched in front of an old boxy computer monitor. Not that I needed to see him, for I could picture him clearly enough in my mind's eye, as he probably is now, rocking what Radwan calls the "post-nine-eleven special ops look": tats and beard, a handsome barrel-chested killing machine, Platonic archetype for Hipster-two-point-zero (though I have been formally warned of physical consequences if I call him a hipster). John would have been enthroned upon a decomposing swivel chair, enshrouded within a cloud of vape smoke and sporting a black T-shirt logo'd with a noise-core artist you've never heard of, noise-core being a genre which in my opinion serves only as a minor distraction from tinnitus.

Seeing how large a part John plays in this story, providing the editorial tone and influencing the major theme in my vision of *folkism and technology*, it would be doing a disservice to yourself and he were I not to commit some meaningful description.

To start on a lively footing, I mention a truly, most hideous artifact you're likely to find John wearing, a specimen testament to his sartorial ignominy:

[Arthur was breathing heavily.]

Aladdin-trousers! Those *appalling* new-age baggy trousers with the sagging crotch that gives the impression you've shat yourself.

That said, there are many, many other things about John I find considerably more annoying.²²

Born and raised in a small hamlet near Wolverhampton, which for some reason warrants him a *Yam Yam*, Mowgli-John still hauls around a Midlander accent like a dead dog on a leash. His father was a laicized Lutheran pastor turned active Marxist (Luther asserted that humankind can not contribute to our salvation, at odds with any revolutionary call to action) and these influences have undoubtably fostered his character breeding program of unsentimental pragmatism crossed with efficient transgression, an attitude most readily exemplified by John's brazenly uncouth habit for baking pizza in a rectangular tray.

John is a gamer, Dungeon Mastering within an alter ego dwarf called something like Brumgron Flinthacker, his special-op great big bushy beard casting the tenebrium over a childhood development complex that probably relates to some relatively minor childhood trauma. It's hard to say whether the mind or the beard is the domesticated beast in the affiliation between John and Brumgron: the mind-beardy problem?

Over the bodies of John and Victoria pencil-line tattoos unexpectedly surface, clandestine commemorations of things with and without extension, flamboyantly social and tenderly private. Matching ear grommets celebrate the negative space of their tailored culture.

As I find to be typical of progressive folkists, John displays a bashful humility infused with delusions of mediocrity. These innards are revealed like a small Cronenberg monster, opening the lid for others to pet. As noted by my friend Stephen Fry, this kind of noble modesty is easily confused with a special variant of *pride*: the pride taken in *not showing any*, and which is perhaps better called *vanity*.

²² The charge against my choice of music is a fair one, though I'm surprised Arthur has the critical nous to form a coherent opinion about new music, seeing as his noise order for blasting Enya at two in the morning last month might suggest otherwise. And also, so-called "Aladdin trousers" are incredibly comfortable, and never come in the colour beige.

Like I said, John's a dab hand with analogue electronics. Besides futzing with Victoria's massaging gadgets he is somewhat legendary for building custom analogue guitar effects pedals with Midlander names like "Bandy Grocklez" and "Bostin Scrage". In case you've been living under a rock, *analogue* means electronic systems using varying voltage signals, like FM radios and record players, and is contrasted with the digital on-off voltages used by computers. The word *analogue* comes from the Greek word for *proportionate* and is a sister to the word *analogous*. Both words are born from *ana*, Greek for *anew* (as in *ana-lepsis*), and *logos*, a particularly holy word in Western language (in some senses, *logos* means "holy word"), and I find this etymological grounding helps to introduce the spiritual mindset of people who covert analogue electronics with a gentle but earnest religiosity.

John embodies a paradoxical composure typical of the British, cherishing minor rules and tradition (pizza form aside), and yet he deeply resents centralized authority, resents *being told what to do*. According to my understanding, the philosopher Theodor Adorno attributed this truculent pathology as resulting from a disruption in integration of the authoritarian figure into the ego, and in my opinion goes a long way to explain the Brexit fiasco: it's the result of being told what to do (perhaps by a god-bothering "father") but without integrating the reasoning into one's outlook, and in the process rejecting the expediency of *any* authority figure.

That said, John is an *outstanding fellow* (a pithy appraisal, chosen to raise his hackles: he visibly withers when I use such outdated language). He and Victoria were childhood sweethearts, married in Gretna following a handfasting ceremony at the Glastonbury Festival, and I could not wish for a better companion to my sister, a more loving and dedicated father to my

niece, and a more reasonable person to act as editor to this story, which, I must say, he offered to do without compensation.²³

‘How’s it occurring?’ I shouted. Victoria moved closer to John so we could chat.

‘Easy, Arthur.’

‘Tor said y —’

‘Oh, happy birthday,’ he blurted, likely behested.

‘Right, thanks. Tor said the computer’s acting up.’

‘Yeah, the little bastard-arrow-pointer thing on the screen keeps darting around by itself. It as a bloody mind of its own.’

‘Sounds buggered.’ (I attempted to mimic his accent, which he deftly ignored.)

‘We daren’t turn it off.’

‘Trust your gut,’ I said.

‘You know I’ve got Crohn’s, right?’

‘How should *we* know what to do?’ declared Victoria, her anger boiling over. ‘I hate technology so much, Arthur. It leads to, what’s the word?’

‘*Estrangement and alienation and quiescence*,’ said John in a mild parody of a Californian, his Brummie twang erratically demodulating like a radio tuned between Ozzie Osbourne and Paul Robeson. ‘It’s another form of tyranny, man.’ This was typical of John, who saw tyranny everywhere, except, bizarrely, in the monarchy (I remember him defending the Queen as being “a real person”). ‘Technology is always changing,’ he said.

‘You can’t get use to everything all at once,’ calmed Victoria.

‘But it’s like that *everywhere*,’ droned John. ‘Everything looking the same.’

²³ I also *must say* that I had much better things to do than editing this deranged fantasy of Arthur’s. And though it might be indecorous to request financial compensation for an ostensibly modest favour, especially after my brother-in-law kindly purchased an entire building for me to live in, it might be reasonably expected that a multi-millionaire would impart to their extended family more considerate conditions under which their favour can be wrought. And, on the subject of pet-like facial hair, it seems relevant to point out that Arthur’s cultivation of his pencil moustache is, *Je dois dire, absurde*.

'Dressed in black,' I said
'Black, black, black!' squawked John, with unexpected animation.

'Johny, I think it's time we went home, dear,' mothered Victoria. I dearly hoped it wasn't sex-talk.

'You're *right* though!' I said, channelling Basil Fawlty. 'Our culture is asymptotic. Even the ring-tones are uniform, one-twenty beats-per-minute,' knowing John would catch the reference to House music.

'Grids within grids,' said John. 'We desire our incarceration.'
'Too bloody right,' I said. 'House arrest.'
'Tech-no prisoners,' he deadpanned.
'Tech-no prisoners,' I repeated.

Victoria re-ignited: 'Well, I don't know what you're going on about but it's bloody annoying is what it is.'

'What is?' John and I chorused.

'Technology. Computers. I don't know how you deal with it, Arthur. It turns us into functional objects. It's masochistic.'

'We do it to remind us we can still feel pain,' I said, which she ignored, perhaps thinking I was joking.

'These new AI systems,' said John. 'There's no deep understanding and so it is nothing like real intelligence. They just reinterpret work that humans have created and parrot a pre-programmed response.'

His deluge was a repeat of a speech I had given to Victoria. The layers of irony ratcheted a smile across my face.

A distant cry of baby and John stood up to make his exit.

'Gotta go, mate. Give my regards to Radwan and his, er, wife when you see them.'

I noted how John had avoided using Julie's name, which he knew perfectly well.

'You mean *Julie*?' I teased.
'Is it?' he said, far too quickly, rubbing his gut.
'Anything you'd like me to say in particular?'
'Er, ask her if she still *can't even*,' he said, and ducked out of camera. I guessed this request was some slight to Julie's pedigree, overflowing, as John had once remarked, in *hyper-mutant-bourgeoisie slime*.

John and Victoria had twice visited me in LA. He had bravely insisted to use only public transport, an endeavour which Julie supported. Radwan and Julie took them to a Burning Man party in a Valley compound, which I think was quite, if I can dare conjure the consequences, *sexy* (I stayed home, babysitting the kids). Radwan and John stayed at that party for three days. Their wives returned the next morning wearing each other's clothes (I expect as a joke to play on me, as they were both in exceedingly good spirits). They said they had together come to an understanding of the left-wing folkist and techno-accelerationist agendas I had characterised them each as archetypes of.

Victoria picked up where we'd left off.

'*So*, I looked up Angmar, that company you sold your algo-whatsit. *Dirty Knees and Coal Field?*'

'*Demosthenes and Caulfield*,' I corrected, peeved she had begun the sentence with the word *So*, which she knows I find annoying.

'Whatever. Angmar are spooky buggers, Bruv. They're all sorts of shady. I heard that guy Pierre who runs it makes all his decisions using a computer program. He is an agent of *calculated evil*.'

I bristled. Radwan had once taken me to task for parroting something I had read, that Pierre's company, Angmar, was ethically corrupt for maintaining almost exclusive contracts with government intelligence services and were not entirely fussy about whose government's intelligence they were servicing. Radwan had tied me up in knots saying I was anthropomorphising Angmar and mis-applying human morality.

As if reading my mind Victoria added some corroboration. 'Look, Angmar recruits and buys the works of great minds, like yours.'

'And Radwan's,' I said, wondering how she would react.

Victoria didn't say anything, but I could hear her breathing.

'Angmar,' I prompted.

'They keep their work away from public scrutiny. Apple is the worst. The bad apple. Who knows what good could of been done with all the ideas they've buried?'

A Dot Cotton drag.

'I feel sorry for all the mothers, really. So proud, their brilliant little boy, looking forwards to seeing how they would change the world for the better. *Make* their kids proud.'

(I was reminded of my sister's annoying custom to emphasize what I found to be the wrong words in a sentence.)

'And then they go and sit in a cubicle in some *awful* valley full of cars *and* wankers. And to top it off, they're forbidden from discussing what they are even working on!'

My sister concluded in a tone of unassailably righteous dignity: 'They use knowledge as a commodity to maintain the status quo.'

I felt like applauding. 'Some ideas are best kept secret,' I said quietly. 'Information hazards. But anyway, Radwan says Pierre is just a puppet.' Now I wondered why I was on the defensive.

'Well, *he* should know,' she said bitterly. 'I'll save the lecture till you've cashed your three pieces of silver.'

I instinctively opened my mouth to further my mild support for Pierre, but only a pathetic strained sound emerged.

'Let's talk about something else,' she said. 'How's the German coming along?'

'I'm reading a poetry book. Stuck on the second word.'

'I feel you. I've stopped using that Pimsleur app you recommended, it's just too creepy.'

'Organic Learning. Now called *Gamification*,' I said.

'John taught me a good word. *An-stan-dig-keit*. Means to be up-standing.'

'He should know,' I dismissed. 'You guys still excited about moving t'Berlin?'

'Oh yeah,' said Victoria with a rumble of Brexit after-shock. 'Tallulah needs a more rational society to grow up in.'

'Never thought you'd be praising the rational over the emotional.'

'I am not,' said Victoria calmly, pronouncing every letter. 'They are the same. The emotional is inherently rational, we just don't have introspection into the process. We need to be logical to stay true to our rational emotions.'

'Now I'm lost.'

'No you're not, ducky,' said Victoria.

Her reassurance tempered my confusion, leaving me with a watery feeling that embodied my entire pre-Honzing disposition. I changed the subject, ‘I’m going to Scotland before we move to Berlin. Ensconce myself in a wee island cottage and start designing a computer game.’

‘Oh, good,’ said Victoria absently. I wanted her to express more interest in my scheme and feared that her indifference was a sign she did not consider this to be a worthy pursuit.

Perhaps she doesn’t think I’m artistic enough? I thought.

‘The game will help us come to terms with our yearning for mythology,’ I said, echoing something Julie’s boss, a psychotherapist, had told me. ‘Our technology-twisted thinking has estranged us from the irrational and the magical and I want this game to somehow address that and calibrate ourselves towards a post-capitalist future,’ I added, not entirely sure what I meant by “calibrate”.

‘Sounds great,’ said Victoria with undisguised sarcasm. ‘And how’s wherever you are now?’

‘Cook Islands,’ I said petulantly. ‘They say there’s a storm coming.’

‘Sounds *portentous*,’ said Victoria with a warm cackle. ‘And I know it’s a taboo subject, but how are *you* feeling, Bruv? How’s the weather on *Planet Arthur*?’

‘I’ve been thinking about getting a nose job, actually,’ I lied spontaneously, as I frequently do with my sister. But she didn’t fall for it.

‘I’m proud you’re not fixated with beauty,’ (again, attention waning, I wondered if she meant *my* beauty or that of others, but resisted interrupting). ‘You’re so cool, Bruv.’

‘I don’t think so. You were always the essence of cool.’

‘I was talking about this the other day with Alison in our mindfulness class.’

‘Oh, you’re becoming a dualist?’

‘What you mean?’

‘S’what mindfulness does to me. Did it for a day once, concentrating on the taste of each breath. Thought I was having a psychotic episode.’

Victoria ejected a laugh. ‘You’re so funny, Bruv. But I know what you mean. What was I talking about?’

‘Your conversation with Miss Bechdel,’ I said. ‘Being cool,’

‘Like, it’s so hard to even nail down what we *mean* by cool, right?’

A five-beat pause.

‘You’re asking *me*?’ I asked. ‘How should I know? Looking sexy and complicated? It’s all aesthetic garnish. Style over substance.’

She took another drag and spoke with that irritating “holding the smoke in” stoner’s drawl: ‘Style is the *totality*.’

‘That’s just words.’

She breathed out and switched up a gear. ‘Belief in your outlook with an attitude of the *inviolate*. Astonishing but never astonished, *darling*.’

‘Sounds pretty close to sanctimony.’

‘I’d say that sanctimony has a hypocritical air to it.’

‘*Sure*,’ I sniped.

‘But that’s only an opinion,’ moderated Victoria (she has the highest social intelligence of anyone I know, possessing a rare ability to morph into an awkward kook to ease the anxiety of, as Julie calls them, the “neuro-spicey”).

‘And what do you think makes *me* cool?’ I asked.

‘Well, for a start you seem to have such an excellent nose for the *fakes*. The *pseuds*, as’d say Father,’ (the Bristol rhotic R barely there on this last word, a sad withering of a wonderfully expressive accent eroded by London). ‘It’s all about *authenticity*. *Without as within*,’ she said Mary-Pious-Poppinserly, stuffing her propriety back into an R-P veil. Oh, how I detested London for corrupting and subjugating expression! It is what Gramsci meant by capitalism infusing us with a cultural hegemony and probably what the oblique strategist Mark E. Smith meant in *Perverted by Language*.

‘Authenticity is overrated,’ I said reflexively. ‘It is a sign of our longing for a *mythology*.’ I briefly wondered what I would say next. I felt emotional and dissociated. ‘Authenticity is a British infatuation and goes a long way to explain those awful art galleries full of used tampons and pickled cows, daring culture to be

abstract and eat its revolting self. The culture, I mean the *cult* of authenticity is why we ended up with Farage and Trump.'

'We confuse authenticity with *consistency*,' said Victoria with that calm voice she reserved to wear me down, the same voice Mother used on Father, for that matter. 'Consistency is a trivial aspect of authenticity. The other qualities *are* more nuanced.' (Perhaps her haphazard emphasis was trained to tire my logical faculties?) 'People like consistency, Arthur. Especially when the message *is* simple. Like, do you know exactly what *is* meant by democratic socialism?'

I confessed I did not.

'Exactly. And that's why the press hate real politics.' (Not *just* the press, I resisted saying.)

'Coolness is about a sense of *style*,' she said, steering the conversation. 'You've always known where to draw the line.'

'I used to copy *you*!'

'Remember when I dressed you as *The Fonz*?'

The Fonz had a fundamental influence on me.

'Well, you're still doing it, Bruv. Still acting cool.'

'*Acting*? More like emotional paralysis,' I spat. 'And an acrid dissatisfaction.'

'Know thyself,' said Victoria.

'S'what I got from supporting sociopathic bullies perverting infantile marionettes,' I said, feeling the words come easily. 'Building soul-destroying machines to fast-track a society we're not ready for.'

'And that's what makes you *cool*, Bruv. Coolness is ultimately about connection with power.'

'I dunno, Sis. That sounds like the kind of outdated Marxist bollocks John's father spouts. The word *power* is just so vague. Looking for power in a social system reduces one party to subjugation and I think the important systems are so much more complex today. I can see us going round in circles until you get to a definition that says something like "*coolness is a quality of things that we experience as cool*". I learnt this from arguing with Radwan about how to define music: GNU's Not Unix.'

'I've no idea what you're wittering on about Arthur and I really don't have time to find out.' Victoria's vagaries of mood

were as mine own and she switched from *Fantasy School Councillor* to *Sister without Mercy* in a flash. ‘I was talking about coolness, not fucking *wildebeest*. You see, the cool essence is a mystical and fearless progressiveness, a feeling in the dark towards something uncharted. It is an attitude that history *always* supports.’

‘Are you calling me *mystical*?’

‘Well you’ve certainly turned it down a few notches. I was talking to Mother about it the other day. D’you remember when you burnt my loo-roll Cloud Buster?’

‘Your Kate Bush phase. Yeah, I —’

‘You really could be a little *shit* with all your scientific ranting. I hope you can bring your Californian attitude with you to Berlin.’

‘I’ll try, Sis.’

‘But you *know* what I’m saying, Arthur. About the idea of cool. Your *zeitgeistyness*, your Federal Internationalism.’

‘My *Feral Internationalism*?’

‘No, *Federal*. As in a group of self-governing states. In equilibrium. People saying *Ciao* to each other.’ And as an afterthought, ‘Without your macho *irony*.’

‘Oh, I see,’ I said shyly, accepting the charge. ‘But I think there’s a better word than *power*. And *cool*, come to think of it,’ regretting my words as I spoke them.

Victoria’s breathing fell like heavy snow.

‘You still there?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ came the response, slow and practised. ‘You *always* do this. You over-think it.’

My sister summoned a British monster, the aversion to earnest high-brow frippery in favour of low-key banter. My friend Mark Fisher put it like this: *to punish overreaching ambition with the dampening weight of bathos*. If you don’t know, then *bathos* means a message ending in anti-climax, reminding us of grounding and depth, as in *batholiths*, and combining this with an appeal to the emotions, as in *pathos*.

In a way, bathos is a unique expression of *philosophy*. At least for the British, it is. As my friend Peter Schjeldahl suggests, the equivalent American expression of philosophy would be wise-cracks. And as Radwan would say, for the French and Germans it would be what we call *philosophy*. British bathos serves two

purposes: to lighten the drama, the cheery “See ya” sign-off (the British do this with more ease and casual grace than any nation I know of), perhaps as a mortality coping-mechanism. The second role is a signifier of the importance of *reasonableness*, what my Marxist father-in-law would say is a reminder of class consciousness, and what I would further say is scummy froth on the sea of divisive populist propaganda, the likes that pitted the puritanical panto of Corbyn against the flatulent suicidal lunacy of “Major Bohnson”.

I had felt at home in LA amongst the *over-thinking* and impractical inhabitants of Venice Beach. I would miss that particular freedom to speak my highfalutin tongue to that unlikely audience of rude grebo skater bums, sandy psychonauts and super-chill Arnies, ever ready to shoot the cool breeze and hear your *reckoning* (perhaps it was just my accent?).

Victoria was clicking her fingers. ‘You’ve gone again. Look, the word *cool* is just fine. Let your semantics go, *Bro.*’

I almost said, “Well, someone’s got to do it”, when Victoria pre-empted me: ‘And don’t say *someone’s got to do it*. Just because someone *can* do it, does not mean they *have* to. That’s *entirely* what is wrong with the *accelerationist* way of thinking.’

I felt humbled by Victoria’s insight. But on the other hand her view on things like gentrification had softened, perhaps from the popularisation of the *cause célèbre* or, as I like to think, because of a raised awareness to its complexity vis-à-vis *freedom of movement*.

Victoria and I had not communicated since the result of the Brexit referendum fell upon us the previous week. My absence for the ballot hung humming like piano wire across a bike lane.

Brexit left a numb and scooped-out wound, our taste of Guernica. But with a riveted iron sense of British decorum it was clear that today we would not discuss this directly. Neither of us had spoken to our father since he started pro-leave campaigning. Perhaps the signs were there a few years earlier when he made the national news picketing a recycle centre, outing the feverous environmental movement as an orchestrated distraction to prop a hegemonic capitalist agenda. Victoria suggested this was a consequence of cleaning one-too-many of Mother’s interminably miniature jam jars.

I chugged the tepid wine and burped.

‘You spoke wiv im?’

‘Course not!’ (Victoria was back to speaking Somerset). ‘You know I aven’t. You know I won’t will I. Not for a while, anyway. Christmas will be . . .’ she paused.

‘Difficult,’ I said.

‘Difficult. Yes. It *must* be difficult,’ she said, with rare gravitas. The cycle-path piano wire sung in the wind.

She modulated to a major key: ‘But if you *do* wanna talk politics then I’ll say this: our saviour will come when we least expect it. Someone on the inside, right under our nose. *Ivanka!*’ (As you shall later read, during my Honzing experience Ivanka manifested as a triumphantly assassinated and then fashionably eaten hero.)

‘*Ivanka?*’

‘Yeah, my crush.’

‘Don’t wanna hear,’ I said, suddenly thinking about Radwan’s wife Julie.

‘You think *The Donald* could win?’

‘Well, maybe I’m just insulating myself from disappointment, but I feel that something terrible is on the move. It feels *desperate*, a last gasp of a malevolent and cornered demon.’ She sounded desperate but I was used to such high-pitched edicts (growing up near Glastonbury, spreading conspiracy stories of the varietal I call “unmeritable bollocks” is as much inevitable equipage as indication of any deeply held belief). But something she sang rang with a familiar melody. It was Demosthenes, born, as he was, on the cusp of the changing tides in Ancient Greece, from the days of Socrates and gen-one democracy to rule by kings and the end of the philosophy as the central force at the heart of governance: the end of the beginning, if I may call on Churchill.

‘But *Ivanka?*’ I said, her name cold-showering me to attention.

‘Yeah, *Ivanka*. There’s gonna be a statue to her one day. Mark my words, Bruv. She’ll be a hero. The other side of whatever comes next.’

‘And when will the *other side* come to pass?’ I teased.

‘About seventy years,’ came her reply with a tone of assured casualness.

‘And what will society look like then? Your fear of a fascist techno dystopia is keeping us from the socialist utopia we deserve.’

‘No, no, no!’ she said. ‘I share your faith in humanity, Arthur. Your awkward, embarrassed positivity. Besides, a dystopia is just too easy, too *obvious* to imagine, and if history has taught us one thing it’s that the future is not obvious.’

I chewed her words and found them wholesome and robust, though with an aftertaste of dodgy logic.

‘Well, thanks. It’ll be a leftwing progressive utopia,’ I said.

‘Is that left wing with or without the hyphen?’ she asked, ever the stickler.

‘Without. The noun.’

‘And what’s the catch?’

‘There will be a split in the population. Half-half. Those embracing technology and those against it.’

‘Sounds like bollocks.’

‘*Manichean*, perhaps,’ I said preciously. ‘But hardly bollocks. It’s the greatest mystery of our age, these fifty-fifty’s we keep getting.’

‘Mystery? Conspiracy more like. *It’s the economy, stupid.*’ She said that in a parody of Radwan. ‘The corporate empires don’t want to rock the boat. Divide and rule, mate.’

‘You’re sounding like your husband. And Radwan.’ I smiled, thinking it was rare the three overlapped in their critical outlooks. ‘I think it’s an evolutionary thing, sis. Keeps us maximally chaotic, maximally creative.’ I nodded to myself, reassured to hear my words. ‘Regression to the mean,’ I wafted, burping an undergrad statistics class.

‘No, the *opposite*, Bruv,’ (Victoria had studied less maths in her “cinema projection” program). ‘You’re saying there will always be a split between the Hippies and Geeks?’

‘*Preterite folkists* and *techno accelerationists*,’ I said, preferring the less emotionally charged nomenclature, but wincing as I said the even more dangerous word accelerationist. ‘You reckon Ivanka’s a “sleeper agent”? I goaded.

‘Yeah. She’s just not...’

‘Woke?’ we cried together.

Victoria’s laugh was like mine and she soon erupted in a wet London hack. As her small fit subsided our gaze met on the video screen and recoiled in modest synchrony, stormy waves reflecting from an Atlantic breakwater.

‘Is that weed you’re smoking, Sis?’

‘Only at night.’ And then with razor’s edge lucidity, ‘Are you *really* okay, Arthur? Still *working it all out?*’

I fussed with my hair, for some reason thinking about offal, liver, kidneys. *Blood foods.*

‘I contain multitudes,’ I said distantly, thinking, *Eating flesh is a singularity. You can never go back.*

To mask a burst of confused emotion I asked my sister if her “theory of cool” applied to dietary decisions, revisiting an established taunt that her veganism was an artefact of fashion. But she did not take the bait and merrily called me, “a dandruff-eating twat-head”. I paused, wondering if “twat-head” was a new London expression or one I had forgotten. I then coughed with embarrassment that I’d been caught picking my scalp (a nasty anxiety-tic I had then).

‘Well, I’m glad you’re acting elfy, Bruv. You sound *different*. Your voice sounds so deep and relaxed! Even your laugh sounds, er, kinda nice!’

Tallulah started wailing in the background.

‘One last thing,’ I said. ‘I thought of a metaphor for Berlin.’

‘Go on, but be quick.’

‘Have you heard of something called a *Lagrange point?*’

‘Er, don’t think so. No, yeah, I erd about em on telly. Gravity wells. What about it?’

‘Well, I was thinking that Berlin is like one.’

‘Right. Good. Very clever. Okay, really got to go, Bruv,’ said Victoria as the crying crescendoed. ‘Call Mother, yeah?’

‘Yeah.’

‘And, er, give Julie a squeeze when you see er. From me, an all.’

I furiously ignored the sultry undertones of my sister’s entreaty.

Panopticon Daydreams

I looked to the ceiling, Mother's face appearing in the Artex swirls. I missed her language, how she would say "bonce" for "head" and her Blitz-spirited Boomer amiability, or is that "A-bomb happy lassitude"? — I'm sure the nuclear threat must have penetrated the British psyche in ways we will never really understand.

Amicability was a character I had studied for that undoubtedly helped me deal with the prickly nerds and sociopathic leaders in the tech world. I'd met many A-listers and had gained a few first-hand party stories, though they read mostly like misadventures of quotidian frat-bros. Of course, the business persona was a character I was role-playing. Radwan refused to play that game and so it was left to me to direct the demos of our speech generation engine and to handle media relations through my alter ego *Tipso Bodine*. I enjoyed playing Tipso, a multiracial gender-fluid avatar, somewhat overweight, I imagined, revelling in their perfectly situated happenstance and thanking the universe with ebullient yet entitled kindness.

From this meditation I mis-stepped and plunged through a Looney Tunes manhole, the vertiginous heaviness of Brexit pushing me down towards a rotating twisted silhouette rushing towards me that matched my contorted aspect as I slotted exactly through it.

- *What did Brexit portend? Who would paint Britain's Guernica?*
- *It is a cannibal island rallying against itself as much as any foreign infection, inoculating itself with austerity upon the downtrodden.*
- *The downtrodden are so easily written off as having bad morality but it's easy to have high-minded opinions when you're well fed.*
- *Power prefers darkness, if it's exposed to light it erodes.²⁴*
- *We need more bearers of light, like those Neanderthals who carried fire with smouldering moss. Ironic, as the future we are heading to will likely outlaw burning: A future without fire.*

²⁴ "It's a general truth that power prefers darkness, if it's exposed to the light it erodes". So said Noam Chomsky, talking in 2014.

Line by line, an impulsive ditty came to me (I have used William Carlos Williams's stepped-line formatting, a presentation I am particularly fond of):

*Oh, England!
The Chavs and the Toffs
The Norms and the Scallies
Having it off
In crisp-packety alleys!*

I was assailed with formative themes from my childhood: Doctor Who and Tomorrow's World on the TV and the kitchen dresser displaying inherited ceramic dishes in the shape of the animals that were to be cooked upon them. And I could see the mantelpiece above the electric fire-effect heater upon which at Christmas sat a bell-jar containing a miniature fox and rotating fir tree. When it was time to retrieve the model from an old biscuit tin we'd say, "Fetchez la cloche!", riffing on Monty Python. We were a loud and warm family, plastering the cracks with jokes and homespun habit. Our parents would take meticulous effort to dress the Christmas tree with intentionality, overstuffed with a *litany* of decorations (I use the word carefully). They made sure the tree, this realized myth, appeared balanced from all viewpoints both inside and outside the house, unable to bare a thread more tinsel and crowned with an octahedral purple alum crystal I had grown as a child. My parents still live in the same ex-council house semi, bought in 1984 on the back of Thatcher's right-to-buy scheme (I never understood why Father regretted it at the time but now see it as acceptance of Neoliberalism's dominion, acquiescence to the unspoken hegemony of *Capitalist Realism* that there was no other possible future but capitalism).

All these thoughts tumbled in my mind, mutating offerings to a nostalgic shrine I examined with a purely emotional attitude. It was an attitude of the kitsch and not the camp, un-ironic and deeply authentic. The gaudy nostalgia was confusing. A vocabulary for the nuances of family culture did not come readily to mind (isn't it pathetic that the only word we have to describe the snug family spirit is that overcooked Disney word "cozy"?). But LA had taught me a new understanding of non-material

nostalgia, an appreciation of it as a variety of emotional intelligence. Not that I eschewed materialism, it went hand-in-hand with *desire*, but the material stuff I had bought and disposed of was, for the most part, a testament to my existential diffidence.

- *The mountains of tat I've bought over the years. Especially the electronics: Silicon components born in darkened ovens and assembled where there truly is no darkness by slender-fingered children.*
- *These fruits then carried over oceans in dank shipping containers, processed in Fulfilment Centres and delivered the last mile in cuboid delivery trucks by the soon-to-be obsolete proletariat: If you liked that, you'll love this.*
- *What is the fate of shops, long after they've become gyms and mortuaries?*
- *Will art become unstuck?*
- *A certain kind of art are statements of refusal to accept the present and mark a distance from an idea of Utopia. As we edge towards the Horizontal Singularity, will we see a convergence of art with reality? Will our understanding of what is art sharpen to a point, precisely definable by an algorithm, or will it broaden even further to become an almost meaningless concept?*
- *Novacene²⁵ art will be created algorithmically and deeply personalized, customized to an individual's world view with brain monitors, a two-way composition of unequivocal value. We will become curators to our taste.*
- *Demosthenes said, "What a human desires, he also imagines to be true". AI art will imagine what we desire and re-imagine what we call truth: the anthropic principle to the Nth-degree.*
- *There will inevitably be a reaction against artificially generated art. Giving people exactly what they want is tinged with base ideology: it signifies the end of art as an ongoing dialectic process between a creative and a critical agent, a conversation within the artist and between society and art in general.*
- *But perhaps AI will give us a useful perspective about what art is, rather than these riddles we use to describe art.*

²⁵ James Lovelock has coined the word *Novacene* to describe a post-Anthropocene age of humankind dominated by AI.

At some point the phone network must have connected and a flurry of sounds burst from my phone, a carnival of uncoordinated *skeuomorphs*. I'll save John the footnote: a *skeuomorph* is a design that has a correspondence with a real-world object, like a classic ding-dong door-bell on a mobile phone (the Greek word *skeuos* means *utensil*). The skeuomorphs excreted by my phone were an anthem to immediacy and influence and ingratiation, dopamine reward-squirts hailed by a three-hundred millisecond virus that had, as Radwan would say, "hacked the brain stem".

I felt a sudden urge to send a poem to my only significant girlfriend Rose, who was at the time living in Rome. Radwan had always encouraged me to read poems. In his Rilke I had found one of his own poems scrawled in pencil on a postcard showing a burned-down English seaside pier, its charred scaffolding standing fast in front of a vivid purple sunset. I had read Radwan's poem in the LAX executive departure lounge, tipsy on fake Champagne, and found that it spoke directly to my current predicament (indeed, I expect that he wrote this poem *for me*), the name was, after all, *intercession*.²⁶

I read the poem aloud and considered whether to send it to Rose and claim it as my own.

²⁶ An *intercession* is a Christian prayer on behalf of someone else (I am quite well educated in Christian doctrine: as Arthur has mentioned, my father was a protestant priest, allegedly descended from John Wycliffe who in 1384 translated the new testament into Middle English, was subsequently declared a heretic and had his works burned).

Intercession

in time past does present wait
fate comes to bare
Revealing
becoming is the great unknown
it sits upon the tyrant throne
Believing
a pale fire whets airy thought
a [*indecipherable*] pile of pennies fought
for morals cashed
Rose from the ash
the harried rush
the burning rash
Of being.

I interpret the poem as a reconciliation of my moral sell-out to Angmar and a pile of pennies for my thoughts (I'm sure there are a few other things in there too, Radwan is known to tell private jokes to himself).

Inspired, I took the brave decision to improvise a new poem based on the morning's church-going experience and send it to Rose. I am loathe to repeat this howling doggerel, but it will add necessary colour to my back-story.

Tea and jam

meant well with feeling

New Queen Bess 'neath white-washed ceiling.

[The pun on *enjambment*, meaning the continuation of a sentence from one line of poetry to the next, is undoubtably the highlight.]

The shortest way back to the UK

Is via Cal-e-forn-I-A.²⁷

²⁷ “*The shortest way to Tara was via Holyhead*” — so said Stephen Daedalus at the end of Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Tara is the hill where the kings of Ireland were traditionally instated, and Holyhead is a port in Wales serving ferries to and from Dublin. Along similar paths, Joyce also said, “*Longest way round is the shortest way home.*”

Exotic seeds I do bring un-to
You must not know
How I long to
be pon you.

And for whatever reason my muse saw fit I clicked send on this horrifying effort. A moment later a ping signified that Rose had read the message.

With a violent groan I threw the phone into the bathroom liberating unmistakeable rattle-clacks of catastrophic hardware failure.

Feeling unhinged but remarkably calm, perhaps liberated, I pressed both palms into my eyes and rubbed until specks of light appeared, leaning into the mild anaesthesia.

I was considering switching from iPhone to Android (more so in light of my sister's *parrhesian* diatribe). *Perhaps this would be a good time?* I thought, nuzzling into the brilliant white sun patch on the floor of my bungalow.

A dreamy vision of a large building came. It was a prison, the type where the cells radiate from a central observation hub. I was located within that hub at the top of a guard tower, the only guard on duty. Come to think of it, perhaps I was the prison warden? A thick yellow plastic edged every object, institutional-looking with oversize corners. I faced a surrounding one-way mirror peering across a gap of about twenty metres into a multitude of bubble cells each held in a rusting iron frame. I felt inflated with a sense of duty to the prisoners, a charge to maintain the equilibrium.

The cells numbered hundreds per level and uncountable levels in rings stretching above and below. Looking into one I saw my father standing composed and noble, tapping on the glass and nodding sagely as though he was the warden.

We must liberate our oppressor, I said to myself, the words coming like a poem remembered by heart and evidently inspired by the demise of my phone.

The glass in my own cell became mirrored. I imagined people viewing me, people I was connected with on social media

following my occasional updates, following me and others. And people of serious influence, like Pierre, who was connected with all the powerful systems on the earth. I felt both compressed and pulled as if I were at a planet's core and it dawned on me that each cell was a node in a great web of discrete multiplicities.

'Orthogonal multitudes,' I whispered.

It was a system of space without time, each node equally central and equally significant and equally alone.

A Rarotongan goat bleat disturbed the spell.

I was now stuck trying to remember the name for the radial prison design.

Slipping into a doze a new image formed in my mind, an image of a moon or large asteroid adrift in space.

— It's Planet Arthur, I thought.

An unseen star reflected cruelly from the moon's ivory surface, pockmarked with cratered runes and sigils of esoteric meaning I knew were intended for me but which I could not understand. And when I focussed on these symbols they dissolved, fading out as a dot on the blind spot.

— A fovea in my mind's eye.

The astral body seemed to be hovering above a vast dark silky fluid, a Galactic Ocean of barbaric vagueness and primal indifference.

An object was now pushing its way through the planet's regolith, a circular protrusion with a crisp edge. It was a new crater forming from beneath.

Then a tiny point appeared at the centre of the crater.

And finally a shiny black edged equilateral triangle pushed through, touching the crater's rim.

The entire triangle-circled-dot symbol was the same I had seen on the Quebecers's tattoos and which I had also seen at the

meetings with Angmar, the symbol I would later find was a simplified form of the Kali yantra.²⁸

The Kali symbol was discomforting and so I opened my eyes to enact a change in thinking towards something more real.

- *The mountain I had seen on the island, Te Manga: I will climb it. And then I shall swim across the inner lagoon to the outer reef.*
- *Byron claimed swimming the Hellespont to be his greatest achievement. Byron! What does this tell us? That the physical triumphs the spiritual? That the British are pagan empiricists at heart?*

I wondered how a country's geology affected its people: mountain people, plains people, forest, sea and island people. The climate is known to affect the sounds of language, rainforests giving rise to vowel sounds (plot twist: it is the other way around!).

- *Assuming there is something to the Kiki-Baboo effect, that the sound of words and their meaning is related, I wonder how the sounds of words will change in new arenas of communication, in the non-space of headphones audio.* ²⁹
- *In space, no-one can hear the ungeminable rhotic.*

²⁸ The circled dot was used by the Pythagoreans (ca. 570 – ca. 490 BCE) to represent the first metaphysical being, the Monad or The Absolute (the monad symbol is also the symbol used in chess for a state of play called Zugzwang, but that's another story). The triangle-circle-dot symbol approximates the yantra symbol of *Kali*, the Hindu mother-goddess of time, destruction, transformation and regeneration. A yantra is a diagram used in meditation for promoting transcendence, occasionally accompanied by a spoken mantra. The triangle symbolises three qualities of consciousness: as subjective knower, the process of knowing, and the objective known.

²⁹ The Baboo-Kiki effect refers to our non-arbitrary mapping between speech sounds and the visual shape of objects. The name comes from an experiment: American students and Tamil speakers in India were shown two images of cartoon clouds, one was rounded and the other had spiky edges. The people were then asked “Which of these shapes is Baboo and which is Kiki?” In both groups over 95% selected the curvy shape as Baboo and the jagged one as Kiki.

A particularly informally-fonted information board at the airport displayed how the island of Rarotonga is a coral reef growing upon a sunken volcano last active two and a half million years ago.

— *One year for each of my Angmar dollars.*

I could not intuitively grasp such a number. I couldn't picture a million dots.

— *Maybe that's a symptom of imposter syndrome, that I do not think I deserve this windfall. Or perhaps it's a protection mechanism for social and self acceptance, that I'm really a narcissist who is faking imposter syndrome.*

The brooding planetoid was on the edge of my thoughts.

— *What shall be my Hellespont?* I asked myself.

— *Conjure a computer game and loaf around the arcades of the world's Vanity Fairs, a mincing flibbertigibbet satisficing my time.³⁰*

Radwan said that my loyalty to European ideology (whatever that is) reminded him of Walter Benjamin, a mystical Jewish philosopher who resisted an offer to escape Vichy France. Radwan said that I, like Benjamin, should move to Paris and not Berlin. I recently discovered that Benjamin died whilst crossing the border into Catalunya.

Son to a Lebanese refugee and Nicaraguan immigrant who together ran a food truck (Radwan takes the truck to Burning Man, dolling out *gallo pinto* to the midnight masses), Radwan grew up in wine country north of San Francisco. For some reason he no longer speaks with his father, Bilal.

At Berkley Radwan had studied semiotics in the department of philosophy. He spawned brief infamy off the back of a symposium lecture titled, “Junk food as mythology in post-class historiography: Glucose, Georg Lukács, and George Lucas”. On account of the facetious punnery his professor turned him out and led to a surprising turn of events. Radwan’s impending penury inspired him to devise an algorithm generating titles and abstracts for academic papers. He submitted the report to a

³⁰ *Satisficing* is a word coined by AI pioneer Herbert A. Simon, a portmanteau of *satisfy* and *suffice* to describe achieving only *satisfactory* rather than *optimum* goals. *Flibbertigibbet* is a Middle English word referring to a flighty or whimsical person.

prestigious conference where it won best paper. This is the story of Radwan's entrance into the scene of Artificial Intelligence.

Radwan left California for a research fellowship on a dreary island in northwest Europe (he once told me he wanted to get closer to a group of accelerationists, before accelerationism had become such a tainted word). And that's where we met, Salford University.

The University we both attended was a bravely unprestigious institute existing in the shadows of Manchester. Salford was the original Dirty Old Town, anchored to history with a legacy of gasworks and canals and factory walls that for the past century had inspired a ferocity of artistic expression with the intensity of a quasar.

The Scally is inseparable from Salford. Radwan was quick to taxonomize this class of people as a particular variant of voiceless lumpen proletariat to be contrasted with the Chavs, who in his mind were closer to aspiring bourgeoisie. I sing for the Scally, a force entirely lacking aspiration and displaying this with flamboyant violence and box-cutter wit and vigour: watcha get is just what you see. Living in their midst felt adjacent to a true counter culture, perhaps the only true counter culture England ever had. The Scally is an unconscious revolutionary terrorizing the social, political and societal hegemony and opting out long before it was trendy.

The un-fussing mother of Salford is Manchester, a city created for creating and in an important way allied to Los Angeles sharing a pioneering, sprawling and unscheduled story. Manchester's limb-mangling mills and spuming factories are now backwards-E Revolution vodka bars annexed by the body and soul mangling spumes of LA's Culture Industry.

Radwan taught a final year mathematics class (at least, I think it was a maths class, but all I remember is undue yammering about Lucas Numbers). We all failed his exam and no-one graduated, a turn of events about which Radwan and I have mixed fillings.

Memories of the late nineties echo with the music of later-day jungle, choreographies of drum and bass. The music was a conspirator to Salford's charm, the white noise concrete snare of

underpasses unsettled with dank hordes of cackling Scally. I realised only a decade later, reading Mark Fisher in LA, that what drum and bass provided was a feeling of an arrived-at future. And not just the zaney future described by those fake postcards conjured by twee science fiction writers (pretty much the job lot of them). We called the genre Drum and Bass from about 1998 onwards, *Jungle* being too Ali G'd up by then. The tempos were lightening, the attitudes street and alien, distilled in the pirate radio stations of Babylon's fractionating tower blocks.

Going out meant pubs and raves (we called them *Free Parties*, an undeservedly poor rebranding). Uncountable nights and grey mornings we spent in dilapidated warehouses, abandoned theatres and scuzzy squats, egged on with promethean acid-techno saw-tooths, skazzed on off-brand cider and hippy ketamine. But aesthetically I found the entire experience an expression of baroque nostalgia dusted in hollow baubles.

Our university year group were a jolly crew and everyone liked Radwan (we called him Aladdin). Radwan was a psychonautic veteran, hotboxed in the lysergic vapours of Berkley's ivory towers, and he was thus quite adaptable to both the Free Party scene and the brown-acid horror show of Manchester locals at a Friday night Piccadilly taxi stand. Radwan was also, it should be said, a self-declared master of what he called *Game*, an icky word for duplicitous philandering using cod psychology tricks to deceive and manipulate women into sex. He said it was something we all did anyway, just less efficiently, that he was just *accelerating the process*. I never saw any evidence of Radwan putting theory to practice and wouldn't be surprised if it was all a ruse to egg us on. He was, in many ways, the archetypal Edge Lord.

Following an immoderate weekend of partying I had broken down to Radwan, one miserable Monday morning during a one-on-one tutorial session. I felt a complete fake, that the syllabus moved too fast to intuitively grasp and that learning equations by rote felt inauthentic. Radwan consoled me that what we call science is an inauthentic culture, being less about understanding and more about curiosity. In fact, he said, embracing or at least recognising my inauthenticity would serve well. He was right, as I

found out when I started to work with artificial intelligence where the impossible parameter sizes of neural nets were way beyond intuitive comprehension (the speech-to-text algorithm behind Demosthenes and Caulfield had something like ten million parameters).

Radwan and I founded a *listening club*: ‘*AUDIOFILES: Truth, forty-eight thousand times a second*’ (don’t get me started on sample-rates). We’d spend an hour listening to a variety of reproduced sounds and retire to the university’s anechoic chamber to rebalance our cochleae (or *cochleas*, if you’re so inclined). The playback material in *AudioFiles* wasn’t just digitally stored music but live kinetic assemblies, jingling bells on wheeled contraptions located in reverberant chambers, their emissions transduced by ultra-sensitive research microphones and reproduced on a hemisphere of electrostatic portals with distortion levels so low to make a strong man weep (*Ah!*).

AudioFiles revealed a blessed ability, a love that speaks no name, if you will. It was the ability to hear a difference between two immeasurably different sounds, between live analogue audio and their digital simulacra. Our club was a disparate order comprising a few Salford locals and a pedestal of uptight psychologists rubbed-up the wrong way by a pool of chummy and frivolous electronic engineers. The quorum was split between fanatics (there is no better word) of analogue versus digital audio electronics. The two camps were called *analog-istas* and *digital-ists*, and only now do I appreciate the snide ideological implications. I think this is when my fascination with the contrasting virtues of the folkist and technologist outlooks began, a lens for beholding the divisions in society that entirely shaped my vision of the near future. Radwan chaired the discussions in such a manner as to indicate that the analogue and digital perspectives were meaningful, pioneering, and had consequences for and a context within fundamental mind-body philosophical questions, a viewpoint he propounded whilst making it unequivocally clear he didn’t care a damn either way.

After Salford I returned to Bristol, living with my sister and John in an “autonomous zone” (somewhat dependant upon the council for electricity, water and refuse collection, but we forced

the local Tescos to shut and the absence of a convenient meal-deal gave a feeling of mild empowerment).

In Bristol I worked on an educational music project sponsored by an EU grant called something like “*Teach the World to Sing*”. Radwan returned to California where he had something of an existential crisis brought on by the 2008 financial crash and the bank bailouts. It was socialism for the capitalists and capitalist realism for the people, where wealth and greed were subsidised, [Adam Curtis voice] *And no-one was proposing any alternative.* Radwan’s response was to turn all his values into contingent beliefs. He took a contract with an internet company building an algorithm to determine authorship of spam email (using a neural net, naturally). Radwan expanded the algorithm to the audio domain to determine the provenance of junk robo-calls and it was a natural step (for him at least) to darken the shade of his hacker-wizard’s hat and spin-off a new enterprise, building a system that generated natural-sounding speech from text in the voice of a specific individual. And so was born a speech generation system *Demosthenes*. Longinus, author of *On the Sublime*, said of Demosthenes four centuries later that he “*perfected to the utmost the tone of lofty speech, living passions, copiousness, readiness, speed.*” A comparison between Demosthenes and Radwan comes readily.

But there was a problem with Radwan’s Demosthenes: it could not sound convincingly emotional. I was requisitioned to help with fine-tuning the quality on account of what Radwan called my “fussy thorium ears” (thorium being a mineral he valued more than gold, for a reason I do not understand). And a few months later I was endorsing a turmeric-stained start-up hoody smoking blunts on Venice Beach.

We toiled ninety-hour weeks for months and months. I worked on the analytic “ears” of the speech generated by Demosthenes, a *discriminator network* in the parlance of our times. We called this computational listening system *Caulfield* in honour of *Catcher in the Rye*’s protagonist, he with that houndish nose for the *phony* (a word I loathe). The comparison of Caulfield comes to me, it has been said, as readily as Demosthenes to Radwan.

Radwan and his wife are regulars at Burning Man, a progressive collective of revellers who meet at an annual festival

on Nevada's Black Rock Desert spewing beneath the unashamed hyperbole "A club for radical self-expression". Cries of *meritocracy* proliferate — a word derived from the Greek for "rule by strength" and an indication the spirit is one more of *doing* than *thinking*. Meritocracy means nothing but a system for celebrating hierarchy and propagating populism and division and inequality. Its proponents come from an anti-humanist utilitarianism, stripping the other-worldly from our midst and rejecting the artists whose tiny voices collaborate to entirely overwhelm the froth of practical history. Meritocracy shares a foundational pillar with Folkist thought, privileging direct action and consensus and inclusivity, whilst favouring immediacy over mediation. That's the way I see it anyway but I'm crazy, I swear to God I am.

I once attended Burning Man, lurking in a nylon Santa Claus outfit and festering amongst the uncomfortable ambiguities that chafe between the self and society (though there was nothing uncomfortable and ambiguous — nor chafing — in what Radwan and Julie were barely wearing). Radwan's Burning Man avatar is a pervy clown named Roly-Poly. His registered clown face is a capital lambda symbol Λ over one eye and two tears of acid smileys dripping from the other (perhaps more memorable is the pair of tight red speedos with a kind of green elastic sock besides two silver baubles). Julie goes as Mary, mother of Jesus. They invited me one night to a DMT camp with some extremely influential and generally un-friendly philosopher-technologists who gave me the Playa name Node.

Radwan calls himself a *situationist accelerationist libertarian*. I will again save John the footnote, as I enjoy explaining *Situationists*: its name derives from Sartre's 1943 work *Being and Nothingness*, "There is freedom only in a situation and there is a situation only through freedom." Situationists react against political -isms. They are part of a performative artistic movement that climaxed with the punk music scene and in my opinion take the whole thing far too seriously.

Radwan shoots a spectrum of opinions he maintains are necessarily conflicting. A prime example are those arguments of the type that rally against a centralized state but which share the same goals as what "strong state" socialist-leaning governance

already provide and aim towards. In fact, when I once identified the contradictions he said a *situationist* and an *ironist* are the same thing and considered the matter closed.

Radwan's dream is for us all to desire and realize the end of toil and drudgery: no more miserable Monday mornings, no more alienated labour. To this end he prescribes an immediate tax-less free-for-all that he claims is necessary to kick-start the technology revolution that will lead to material abundance, unlimited travel, and sustainable energy. Radwan refuses to use the word capitalism. He says that giving a name to our present day era is an over-abstraction of our path towards Full Automation. But he does agree that the end of what most of us call capitalism is nigh and its death will be announced by a necessary period of anarcho-syndicalism (whatever that is) where gross inequality is inevitable and even to be encouraged (this is his accelerationist streak talking). He says humankind will eventually asymptote to a state of AI-dominated communism. I say he's got the order wrong, that radical socialism is a necessary short-term step for moving away from market mechanisms, equalising wealth and opportunity, and attaining a global and unitary association for controlling and regulating the essentials, namely the systems of work, health, transport, food, education, energy and housing. Like I said, Radwan is an Edge Lord *extraordinaire*, a trickster contrarian who exclaims he owes society nothing and doesn't expect anything in return. Our political discussions invariably begin and end in a stalemate over the definition of what we mean by the word *fair*.

Julie (who at that time worked for a kind of fringe-psychologist) has confided that at heart Radwan is somewhat lost, a rudderless galleon navigating turning gyres across oceans of contingencies and indefinite futures where nothing is at stake, desperately juggling his doubts lest they come into contact and cause catastrophic annihilation. She claims his alter-ego Roly-Poly is a reaction to his work, that artificial intelligence is inherently farcical, mechanising the fluid. Radwan has expressed disenchantment with the fundamentals of AI as-practiced today, albeit in more technical terms. Put simply, he says the probabilistic under-pinnings are bullshit, entirely at odds with everything we know about the deterministic physiology of the

body, when one-plus-one always equals . . . unless, and I say this conjuring the speculatory voice of others much more qualified than I — my friend Penrose amongst them — unless there is something *other-worldly* at the centre of cellular, molecular, atomic goings-on in the brain, quantum interactions connecting with another side using some structure as an antenna (or perhaps, using *everything* as an antenna), jiggling matter on *this* side with unseen forces like trans-dimensional Brownian motion.³¹

AI applied to perceptual problems forces a self-reflection in a most fundamental way. Although an AI network is relatively fluid, with many millions of parameters, the criteria by which we must evaluate the system is a crunchy low-dimensional approximation of a generally complicated and not-well understood aspect of human perception. This metric is called the cost function and for the text to speech system I worked on the cost function mapped to *naturalness* and getting to grips with what we perceive as natural was for me singularly unsettling (much, I imagine, like writing an autobiography).

Radwan’s rejection of centralized authority and his ironic disposition might be compounded by his explorations in AI, though I expect it is a developmental, childhood issue, something to do with a missing step in the integration of the authoritarian figure into the ego (and judging by what I saw in his and Julie’s onetime “play dungeon” — now their kids’s play area—authoritarian figures seem to be an important concept in his life).

Seeing how large a part Radwan featured in my Honzing vision it should be pointed out that I am not sure of the degree to which he is committed to his political opinions, that he is perhaps just playfully riling whoever might be listening. His sense of humour is enigmatic with an ugly smear of cruelty running right down the middle like a stick of Brighton rock.

³¹ Scotsman Robert Brown observed jittery motion of small particles ejected from pollen of the ragged robin flower (*Clarkia pulchella*, as Arthur well knows). Einstein later modelled this motion as the unseen forces from water molecules.

In a climate that could not be more different from where Radwan and I met, I felt a sudden hot need to connect, and so I opened my laptop and called him.

Demosthenes and Caulfield

In shade sat Radwan, Skrillex hairdo bubblegum pink above a cigarette-box ink-black goatee, hands interlocked in headmasterly attendance. Behind him loomed an enormous forty-eight starred American flag.

‘The fuck you wearing *now?*’ I blurted.

Leaning into my laptop I was beholden to Radwan’s baggy jacket, covered in gently wafting finger-nail sized scales flocking in murmurations of colour.

‘Yeah boi,’ he said, overplaying a Snoop Dogg drawl and smoothing an elbow. ‘E-M sequins.’ Radwan leant back and traced a serpentine curve over his chest and pot belly. ‘Keeping it o-gee.’

‘Straight ballin,’ I croaked, reflecting how Radwan generally wore clothes that did not fit him well. ‘Too bright for Berghain though,’ (Berghain, meaning “mountain pasture”, is a kinky Berlin techno club, notorious for baring the colourfully clothed from passing its threshold).

‘Dontchoo worry bout me pardner, I’ll ged’in.’

I moved to lay upon the floor of my hotel room, angling down the laptop screen.

‘*So*,’ he breezed, drawing the word out with relish. ‘What’s going on, brother?’

‘Y’know, lying on my back, trying not to think of England,’ I said absently. ‘Any news from no-where?’³²

A rare pause as Radwan collected his response to my sleight.

³² In *News from Nowhere*, William Morris envisions a society in which any hint of melancholy behaviour (*the Mulleygrubs*) is eradicated.

‘Omelas might be a fairer comparison, Arthur. And you should know, being one who walked away.’³³

‘But the cupboard was bare,’ I sung, hamming-up my English accent.

‘Tried to call you earlier,’ said Radwan. Ignoring my answer served as acknowledgement by the standards of our relationship, which was intimate and complicated to say the least. ‘Kids wannida say happy birthday but your phone’s off.’

I shrivelled, remembering the awful poem I’d sent to Rose.

‘Doing okay?’ he asked, ladling-on an extra serving of irony.

‘You know me, keeping it together. Writing love poems. I’ve an emotionally progressive agenda.’

Radwan’s simmering breeziness boiled over into an attitude that I would not tolerate from anyone but my sister:

‘You?’ he squawked. ‘Emotionally progressive!? This coming from someone who sez “I love you” on a first date only- *Only!* Get this, *only* so he doesn’t get embarrassed smuggling the *real* “I love yous” in later!’

‘Guilty,’ I said. ‘When it comes to romance it’s safety first.’

‘You truly are the product of an empire. Protecting their flock with *safety precautions* so the overlords don’t go hungry.’

‘I carry a heavy burden of history. I incorporate by inclusion.’

‘Tut-tut, that’s not the European way, *Comrade!* And anyway, it’s incorporate by *reference*.’ Radwan was touching on a nuance of US versus EU patent law: US patents can reference another publication by name and that other publication would be considered part of the new application. But in European patents the referenced work must be included in its entirety, you’d have to copy every word of that other reference into your patent application. Let’s say I have adopted the US spirit in this tale.

Radwan made a loud off-screen whisper. ‘It’s Arthur!’

³³ “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” is a one-page story by Ursula Le Guin, premised around a utopic city in which a single child is held captive in a state of abominable misery. The story ends with the impartation that there are those who visit the child and choose to leave the city and head into the mountains.

As he rocked to one side the tiny figure of George C. Scott appeared standing to attention in front of an absurdly large Star-Spangled Banner, saluting General George S. Patton to eternity. Patton's billowing jodhpurs were as beige as mine own. Radwan had had that poster when we met in Manchester and I'm pretty sure it's a reference to some philosophical idea that wooshes above my head.

'Hey Arthur!' cried a voice, bursting with undoubtful joy. It was Julie, Radwan's wife, who in spite of wearing clothes strictly of a single pastel colour emitted, if I may vomit the adjectives of a purple-prosed phony, a *radiance of ferocious resplendence*.

Julie was particularly resplendent those days, sparkling in the financial splash of D&C's sellout that had dissolved her ties as secretary to a lecherous Pacific Palisades chromotherapist treating the fallout of Hollywood's *Toxic Positivity*.

I considered my near decade in LA a requisitioning, like a Roman legionary from the Costa Brava doing service in Northumberland. Julie was closer to a friend than Radwan. She was an ally and a confident, Radwan being more like a guru. I couldn't stand Julie when we had first met. She had this mildly brain-damaged Valley Girl way of speaking (she later admitted to deliberately talking slowly with me as I didn't seem to be able to understand her otherwise). If there's any Ground Zero for the bourgeois-accelerationist it's The Valley and Julie is a thoroughbred. In case you're sufficiently fortunate not to know, San Fernando Valley is an area of LA, an incalculable golden grid of lights. Valley denizens are characterised by a wonderfully expressive style of language, a croaking creaking voice balancing sick-bucket ditzy positivity with a hot and precious temper, an exasperation to outsiders that would have Martin Luther reaching for his WASP-swatter.

Julie's ascension through the scholastic ranks left a Ritalin hangover that combines with a Botox regime to give a slightly dead behind the pale grey-blue eyes, Shirley Temple locks halo'ing an ageless oval face that always seemed to be looking up (in fairness, she is about five-foot nothing). Julie is a universe of mystery, her time consumed as much with LA cultural flotsam as

with cultural critique: Kim Kardashian facing Susan Sontag on the (one) nightstand.

I can't help but think of Julie as a reflection to my sister, not on the left-right looking-glass axis of ethical and moral outlooks — both screeched the same layers of progressiveness — but rather a temporal reflection centred around 1980, with Julie's future-looking cultural engagement contrasted with Victoria's folky inertia. They weren't opposites but rather perverted realizations of a common seed.

I've heard Radwan and Julie use the codeword "preterite" whenever my sister and John are mentioned. I've come-across the term when studying German, the *Präteritum* being a case for actions that were once happening but have now ended. The word comes from the Latin *praeteritum* meaning "passed by" and Radwan and Julie use the word preterite when talking about hippy, folksy people, not in a derogatory way but as a kind of jokey anthropological taxonomy (theirs is an acquired sense of humour). I mention this because Preterite is a word that cropped up in my vision, used to formally designate the large jupopulation in the late twenty-first century who rejected technology beyond the year 2045.

Julie and I conspired to get Radwan to accept Angmar's offer to buy our company. He held out for a few months, his rational oscillating between the offer was too much or it was too little. I think the most annoying thing for him was that their offer was just *right*, too reasonable, twenty-three million, a month hand-over plus the cost price for our servers. The deal was *almost* petty but with no personality. I was just happy to get the money and leave America, which I thought was heading for a violent civil war.

'Hi Julie!' I fired, my voice cracking with a calibre of enthusiasm that surprised everyone.

Radwan replied, 'You are well met,' (it was unclear whether he was directing this to Julie or me).

Into the screen she blossomed, sporting a zipped-up canary yellow hoody and a pneumatic bloom. A tattoo of six numbers flashed briefly on her inner forearm.

'Hey Arthur! You're looking a lot like you!' she yelled.

'I've been practicing,' I fawned.

'You're so funny,' she said flatly. 'How're the tropics? Is it night or day? Your life is so adventurous!'

'Perhaps *adventitious*,' I said, flexing the word I had read in a Henry Miller novel.

'Is that one of your *new words*?' she replied, reminding me of my sister. 'So, you're still moving to the East, huh?'

'Well, Berlin is hardly —'

'I was Skyping with John and your sister last week. The KitKat Club sounds super *fun*!', now using a voice for buying ice cream with the kids.

'We drove past that French bakery today. You know, the one that annoys you.'

'Right,' I said, hoping she would not say its name.

'The *quoti-dian* pain, right?'

The words assaulted me like cowshit over a mouse.

'Right.'

Radwan snickered.

'So, how're you *doing*, Arthur? You've been without the *daffodils* for a week, right?'

This was our euphemism for the neon-yellow neuroenhancer drug levo-*modafinil* I took to help with concentration. It was like a mild dose of amphetamine and I had not quite been able to kick the habit, not wanting to feel however I might feel without them.

'I'm accepting the universe,' I said. 'Which I find incredibly irritating.'

'The accepting or the universe?'

'It's all the same.'

'Well, do you want to hear what I think?'

'Eat less reds?' I sneered.

Ignoring my petulance she said, 'My boss, ex-boss, and I have been discussing your *absquatulation*.' A pause to register the use of the word I had a tendency to overuse in the office.

'And?'

'Well, she also says you are *chronically annoyed*.' Another pause, in which I considered the diagnosis, which I felt facile and bloody obvious. This relates to an underdeveloped integration of the

pleasure principle into your ego. Oh, and incidentally, she wants to schedule another playdate.'

I made a grunting noise in response (I had thought our intimacy covert).

'Your shadow side is active, Arthur. Jungian *projection* like we talked about. What you call *That jungle bullocks*?' (She could never pronounce the b-word correctly, that magnificent British *shibboleth*.) 'You are projecting one aspect of yourself which you secretly perceive as inferior on to other people.'

'Just one?' I half joked.

'Humour is good,' she said. 'Look, I gotta put Grody and Max to bed but if you want then we can talk about this next week. We're *ree* excited, aren't we honey?'

'Course we are b—'

'Okay. And say hi to your sister, *huh?*'

Julie vaporized and I took a few moments to gather myself in her Roadrunner aftermath.

'Do you and Julie speak about me often?' I asked Radwan.

'Often?' said Radwan in a goofy British accent. 'Yeah. *Often*. It's threshold obsession. We're sad you're moving away. You remember those girls she used to hook you up with?'

'Oh man, what a disaster.'

'What went wrong?'

'With me and the Valley's Finest? Christ knows. Maybe it was that fucking interminable attention-pandering buzzsaw vocal fry. It makes the colours dim when I hear it.'

Radwan chuckled. 'But they were all so *happy*.'

'That was the other problem. Besides being too...'

'Too *Jewish*?'

'No! come on. I was gonna say fit. You know me, the Jews are the only tribe I feel a part of.'

'Coz they won't have you. You're obsessed with the hegemony, with becoming a Subaltern. Gramsci's gone to your head, man.'

'Hey, I've had enough analysis from your wife. Prefer to bottle it all up,' I said, half-joking.

'Well, you'll make a fine vintage when you're decanted.'

'Think I might be corked.'

‘You’re fine!’ Radwan’s sequin jacket rippled resplendent. ‘The Fräulein of your dreams is waiting for your enchanted ring beneath a mountain. Anyway, you must be feeling pretty good now you can help your family out, right?’

‘Yeah. I guess.’

‘Jeez look at you, saying “I guess” like us Americans.’

‘North American, matey.’

Radwan replied in a heavy Anglo-Indian accent, bobbing his head side-to-side: ‘Very sorry *Memsabib*. I was making only dunderheaded Tamasha!?’

This was an old kid: I had thought Radwan to be of Indian heritage when we first met, a misunderstanding he loved to re-live.

‘Must have cost you a few *ethical credit points* to say that.’

‘Now listen carefully, young Padawan. We technologists lie in an *infallible* bed as we watch the world burn, our primo joint smouldering upon the glassy MacBook.’³⁴

‘You’re saying we techno-accelerationists are the *chosen ones*? Crusading in the pursuit happiness? The *Crusaders* probably thought the same thing.’

‘Touchy subject,’ said Radwan, adding in an attempted Good-Old-Boy British upper-class voice: ‘And I must continue to protest your use of *techno-accelerationist* in the strongest possible manner.’

His accent missed the mark, the way he said “manner” as *manor*, too much Tay-lor Swift pitch-droop, America’s particular variant of Bathos.

‘Some say that accelerationism is a form of violence,’ I said, thinking of John and my sister.

‘*Accelerationism?*’ he said, his sarcasm suggesting I had mis-stepped. ‘Sure. *Thinking* is a form of violence, s’what happens when the mind confronts reality, maan.’

³⁴ Radwan seems to have been riffing on W.H. Auden’s *Consider This And In Our Time*: “Look there, At the cigarette-end smouldering . . . Pass on, admire the view of the massif through plate-glass windows of the Sport Hotel.”

I laughed to diffuse the tension, unsure as to what extent he was joking.

‘Well, technology clearly manipulates our desires.’

Radwan returned to his natural tenor, slow and deep with oriental consideration but with an underbed of chilled Californian railroad gravel.

‘We have disabused those notions that desire necessarily derives from a lack of something physical or some fairy-tale concept called *sin*.’

‘That’s not what you said when we met,’ I interjected. Radwan continued as though he hadn’t heard me (my inner Holden crying, *That’s the trouble with these intellectual guys, they never want to discuss anything serious unless they feel like it*).

‘Desire comes from within. It is *not* the result of external pathologies,’ he blustered.

‘Desire is but the flames of friction from what we lack and what we need,’ I said, poetically striving.

‘Well, that’s a meaningless truism, Arthur. Bad poetry like most Hegelian modernist bullshit. It’s as wrong as Marxist modernist bullshit that values industry above ideas.’

‘And Capitalism?’

‘You know I don’t like that word. But for the sake of a clickbait argument, let’s call it the other side of the same coin. The future of desire is not about conflict against the state.’

‘You’re talking about desire in the future?’

‘Yeah.’

‘And what about now?’

‘That’s subjective.’

‘Well, that’s just like, your opinion, man.’

‘Touché. Look, we are born with a desire for an unmade future.’ I started to hum the mellow horn part to the Star Wars “Force” theme. Radwan responded by tuning his voice to doe-eyed Carl Sagan, morphing to Obama as he progressed. ‘The future we glimpse in glimmers. Desire is a high form of creative intelligence, Arthur. Perhaps desire is the very *essence* of art. And Burning Man is the paragon of this virtue!’

Obama-Radwan smoothed the arms of his ruffling jacket to dissuade protestations.

‘The age of the desire machine is upon us!’ he thundered. ‘Until now it’s been truth and beauty or comfort and happiness.’ I recognized Mustapha Mond’s proclamation in *Brave New World*. ‘Why not all?’ he added.

Radwan slowly rotated his chair to the flag on his wall, barking as he did so a riff of Major General William H. Rupertus’s *Rifleman’s Creed*: ‘We must desire more than our enemy! We must desire him before he desires us!’, saluting General Patton *en passant*.

‘So be it,’ I tempered. ‘Until there is no desire but a term sheet, brother.’

‘We are too conformist,’ he said, deftly ignoring me. ‘Civilization is conforming to technology. There will be a time when technology is tailored for each of us. A one-to-one mapping will offer us what we truly desire and it will be the machine that has to accept *our* terms. Commerce used to be a form of persuasion but now it is closer to force, it truly is closer to violence. We are bombarded with license agreements until we click surrender.’

I smiled at the comparison of an End-User-License-Agreement to terms of surrender.³⁵

‘Well you always did love *Euler’s* method,’ pronouncing it *Yoo-ler*, punning on the acronym EULA.

‘Help!’ he cried. ‘I feel a strong weakness,’ fanning his face in false modesty. ‘What is *wrong* with you English? You just can’t resist puns.’

‘We’re keeping the language alive. It is our duty. Didn’t you say that ambiguity was at the heart of ethics?’

‘That was Simone de Beauvoir but I’ll take it.’

‘The word has become a static symbol,’ I said, repeating something I heard on a recording of Marshall McLuhan’s *Medium is the Message*. ‘Humour moves us away from the objective world and adds nuance. *Should old Aquinas be forgot?*’

‘I remind you that humour and puns are not necessarily the same thing, Arthur. I see them as a particular variety of British

³⁵ In 2019, the PayPal end-user license agreement (EULA) contained 23,659 words, which is about the number of words you’ve read so far.

masochism, a wilfully self-destructive drive like Brexit. *Oh, you despisers of the body!* Perhaps it's self-acceptance? A sign of authenticity? Camus said that suicide is acceptance in the extreme.³⁶

'I see Camus as a particular variety of masochism.'

'Maybe it's a sign of a sufficiently advanced civilization to bring about this self-destructing humiliation. It's a beautiful truth. Like Euler, that Empress of Mathematics.'³⁷

'Indeed,' I said. 'Though weren't you *for* Brexit? Is not that "every man for himself" freedom policy your libertarian M-O?'

'Well, I didn't read the latest manifesto,' he said, engaging me with a sudden and, to me, cute preciousness.

'How're you feeling about the deal?' I asked, cruelly twisting the knife.

A pause, which I wondered if he'd left for my apology.

'*Es ist so*,' he said quietly, giving a quick triplet of flanged finger taps on his desk. Then he switched back to his animated mode. 'You know how I feel. Selling out to *Angmar*.'

'You still reckon they're connected with — '

'They're in deep,' he said, now in a lower gear. 'With everyone. Maybe other way round. Hard to say. *Secure Contain Protect*. What kind of a brand *is* that?'

'Maximum slogan density,' I said.

'We poured ourselves into that enterprise, loving our monster to life like some kind of perverted Pygmalion. I had mastered it as it has mastered my own life!' Radwan again spun around to salute General Patton.

³⁶From Camus's 1942 *The Myth of Sisyphus*: *Suicide, like the leap, is acceptance at its extreme. Everything is over and man returns to his essential history. His future, his unique and dreadful future—he sees and rushes toward it. In its way, suicide settles the absurd. It engulfs the absurd in the same death.*

³⁷"*Mathematics is the queen of the sciences*": so said Carl Friedrich Gauss. Radwan clarified to me that so-called *Euler's identity* (which combines the concepts of pi, the constant e, and complex numbers), should properly be called the *Cotes- de Moivre-Euler equation*, in respect of the true history of this mathematical effort.

'But now the entire project seems like intellectual *usury*. Julie says it was inevitable. *Eminent domain. Supreme ownership.* Angmar's eminence casts a shadow over the entire tech landscape. I mean, *shit!* You seen who's on their board? Kissinger. Blair. Fucking *Enya*.'

'Fuck, really?' I blurted, thinking this unlikely humour from Radwan.

'Yeah. You read the term sheet?'

'Well,' I started, still recovering from hearing Enya so unexpectedly.

'Here's the lowdown.' Now Radwan was channelling his hero Columbo (the first thing he bought after our deal was a mint condition 1959 Peugeot 403).

'When you get back,' he sleuthed, 'Here's the thing. You've gotta hand over your electronics, your beloved iPhone, the lot. Not even allowed to use a goddamn printer. What you make o that, huh? Oh, and they want your passwords. Going all the way back. Deeply weird doo-doo, dude.'

'You think they're worried we might elope? Sell China a back door so they can fake the voice of Mister President? You're paranoid, man.'

'Paranoia is one of our greatest assets, I've told you this, Arthur. Lets you see the world through a lens of over-abstraction, revealing the subterfuge and manipulation that's everywhere. Paranoia is the secret to creativity! All the greats were paranoid, you know. All of em. Anyway,' he said as an afterthought, 'I thought you'd be rooting for *Mrs President*?"

I let Radwan's spume wash over me, I'd heard it all before. And anyway, I never for a second back then thought that Trump would win. 'I was thinking about Pierre,' (Pierre being the guy who runs Angmar, the company who bought us out).

'Whaddabout im?"

'You still think he's just a puppet?'

'Cagatintas nabob,' cursed Radwan, confessing his Latino and Arabian heritage. 'He's a patsy. A mercenary. Just like us. Wool-gathering opportunist. What do you call it when the mercenaries accuse the mercenary?' he drifted upstream to Captain Kurtz.

‘You know he makes all his decisions by algorithm?’ I said, parroting what my sister had told me.

This seemed to bring Radwan around and with his former presence said, ‘He still codes.’

‘You’re *kidding*,’ I gushed.

‘Ats what he said.’ Radwan was now gushing in the TMZ chatshow mode of his environs. ‘We met the other day. We *get on*.’

‘Was he wearing those appalling toe shoes?’

‘Yeah, same brand as mine. I’m gonna miss your attention to detail, soldier!’ Radwan enthused, wagging a finger like another George C. Scott instantiation as Crazy General Buck Turfidson.

‘What did you and Pierre talk about?’

‘Nothing. He has no real mind. He’s a zombie accelerationist that says things like “AI is safe because AI tells me it is safe”. I kinda love the guy! He’s a total nut-job! A punk.’

‘Right,’ I said, wondering what Radwan meant.

‘Pierre is a slave to a mythology he has created for himself built on the lore of success according to an outdated creed.’

‘I thought you said he was libertarian?’

‘He *tells* himself that,’ said Radwan, with a level of sarcasm that left it open as to whether he thought Pierre tells himself he *is* a Libertarian but *knows* that he *isn’t*, or that Pierre tells himself he *is* a Libertarian and *doesn’t* know that he *isn’t*.

A pause tailored for my ruminations.

‘Pierre said he doesn’t know why Angmar even bought us out. We’re tiny. Invisible. They usually deal with companies worth *billions*.’

‘Then why?’

‘Trust the algorithm!’ said Radwan, squawking the frog-voice of Pierre, ever bursting with bromides. ‘He’s quite insane. Ruthlessly logical and entirely un-emotional. Or maybe the other way round. Can’t quite get it. S’like he’s under a spell.’

I smiled at Radwan’s rare confusion and said, ‘But you always said reason was all.’

‘*Beware, gentle knight, the greatest monster of them all is reason,*’ replied Radwan with Quixotic munificence.

I acknowledged his warning with a sarcastic bow.

‘Did Pierre give you any tips?’

‘Yeah. Invest in thorium. Or was it *technetium*?’

I wondered if this was a joke then asked, ‘You see those tattoos on his lips? Saw it today on a couple-a hipsters. That triangle circle and dot symbol.’

‘*Kali*,’ replied Radwan.

Having not heard of Kali with a K, I assumed that Radwan had said Cali with a C and replied, ‘Yeah, classic Cali. What a total weirdo. No doubt a blood boy nonce.’

‘I’ve never heard the word used like that, Arthur, but I guess you’re not using it nicely.’³⁸

‘Clever clogs.’

‘Pierre’s not gay, if that’s what you’re saying. He’s sexually inert. S’what Julie sez anyway. He was at the clinic. Went for the P-R, stayed for the therapy.’

Radwan chuckled nostalgically and said with an annoyingly fey British accent, ‘He reminds me of someone I once knew.’ I had a hunch he was talking about his father and was irked he had to be so histrionic, like he was in some cringey Merchant Ivory schlock.

I took a deep breath to control my flair, not wanting to say anything flippant in consideration of Radwan’s reservations about selling to Angmar. The money offered was too good to refuse (Radwan had earned ten-times my payout) but my lack of contrition had nearly ended the friendship. As I said, Julie and I had convinced Radwan to sell but in doing so he had lost all credibility in the open-source software communities. Radwan had also cashed-in his reputation on numerous philosophy forums, which he’d earned by invalidating a thought experiment called “The Prisoner’s Dilemma”.

³⁸ A Blood Boy is a Silicon Valley in-joke, an alleged healthy young man who is hired by a tech billionaire as a source of youthful, healthy blood via regular transfusions (something to do with mitochondrial rejuvenation). Arthur was using *nonce* as the British slang for kiddie fiddlers. Apparently, the word has another meaning- a *nonce word* is one created for a single occasion and meant to be understood by its context, as Roald Dahl Crodsquinkled.

For some reason, perhaps looking for a confrontation to clear the air, I said, ‘Angmar is all water under the bridge.’

‘*A little water clears us of the deed*,’ muttered Radwan, again with his fey British accent.

‘Don’t be so dramatic. Stop throwing shade on our success.’

‘One shade the more,’ he said, now teasing.

‘A’least you’ll have more time to play with Dinah and Sputnik,’ I said (the names of his hench unit of a British Shorthair and Julie’s immaculate companion, a Shih Tzu so-named, according to Radwan, because “it makes the United States look like losers”).

‘Arabian playboys play with Dinar and we all know they’re not happy,’ said Radwan. ‘What you gonna do with *your* millions? A nice house, sure, but what about the rest? Stick it in a fund, further the hedgey-money? Else what? Buy a pair-a Levi’s and head down the crypto-mines whistling *Also sprach?*’

Radwan started to whistle a tune (he has an excellent three-octave range), not Richard Strauss but Philip Green’s *Alice in Wonderland Musical Fantasy*, looking me dead in the camera-eye.

I sang Norman Newell’s libretto when he got to “add it up” but changed the conclusion:

(*Reading, writing and arithmetic
Are such an awful bore.
Reading, writing and arithmetic
Are not what little girls are for.)
Add it up, subtract,
Add it up, subtract,
Now multiply by nine.
I don’t want to work anymore, anymore.
And I don’t want to be a mi-ner.*

Radwan reflected my flash of smile and then shook his head and changed into a tougher gear. ‘I feel sick when I think of all the shit I gave sell-outs. You heard we got Slashdotted?’³⁹

I shook my head.

³⁹ To be “Slashdotted” is to be subjected to the judgements of Slashdot.com, a website hosting discussions about technology-related news.

‘We’re in the hall of flame.’

Radwan took his phone to the window and directed the camera view into the evening LA gloaming.

It was a car from Radwan’s collection, a cream-finish Buick Electra’85, my preferred environment for conducting listening tests: touch screen controls and seats so plush you got back ache just looking at it.

‘Someone scratched *Bunco Shill* on the hood.’

‘What does that even mean?’

‘Means my reputation’s fucked. The GIT repo’s been vandalized. The Daubechies are all un-regularized and the markdowns are full of goatse.’

‘Urgh. The goatse of Christmas present.’

‘Anyway, Demosthenes was deeply flawed. The work you did on Caulfield was the best thing about our project. I mean that. Julie always said I’d be happier not working in AI and she’s right. Maybe that’s why she convinced me to sell.’

‘You’re calling it AI now?’

‘AI, machine learning, whatever. They should just call ‘em “problem solvers” and be done with it.⁴⁰ ‘*Thou shalt not make a machine in the likeness of a human mind*,’ he said, misquoting from the novel Dune.

‘*Thou shalt not make a machine to counterfeit a human mind*,’ I corrected.

‘Whatever,’ dismissed Radwan, suggesting that either there was no difference or the entire argument was inconsequential.

‘Engineering is trivial,’ he continued. ‘Just ask Auden: The moon landing was inevitable since the first flint was flaked. Kennedy was bullshitting when he said it was hard, that was just a *ruse*, man.’

I thought Radwan was supporting the faked moon landings conspiracy. ‘You’ve finally lost it.’

‘Don’t be a *wanker*, Arthur,’ (he had mastered this word in all its manifestations). ‘It was a *ruse* because it was a *distraction*. That’s what the word *ruse* means.’

⁴⁰ *General Problem Solver* was a computer program created in 1959 to work as a universal problem solving machine.

‘No, Radwan, *ruse* comes from the Latin—’

‘Well done for caring,’ he said cruelly.

We had entered a familiar zone of conversation by now, finishing each other’s sentences, heading off the next and speaking much faster than my preferred rate of fire (I believe this was Radwan’s default mode, like an overclocked CPU, and he was making a compromise when we spoke at what I considered a “normal” pace).

‘But caring won’t get you on the guestlist for Pierre’s meat-head fuck-fest, spewing their lukewarm brain Santorum over the carved ash dead white face of humanities xeroxed soul. *I’ll be a candle-holder and look on; The game was ne’er so fair, and I am done.*’

I let the air settle and answered, ‘As twere.’

‘How’s your sister doing?’ he said, seemingly out of nowhere and with a hint of sneer. But before I could answer he continued, now in a more sanguine register, ‘Look, fixing millennia of social problems, *that’s* hard, buddy. Sure, AI will save us from an asteroid one day but till then we’ll go on blindly advancing technology, blinded by the dazzle, treating things in terms of how they can be counted.’ A three-beat pause. ‘Almost makes you wonder if something’s behind it all, eh Arthur? Feeding us these delicious blue pills so we don’t look behind the curtain.’ He said this with a look of desperate mania, somewhere between a bid for confirmation and a goad.

‘Up to a point,’ I answered carefully, finding Radwan’s blue pill/ red pill Matrix-drop uncharacteristically heavy-handed. ‘It sometimes feels more like a *bribe* than a reward.’

‘No difference,’ he fired. ‘I want to work with something indisputably *righteous*. I *got* to.’ And this he said with such a precipitous gravity that it frightened me. ‘Need another project. Twenty-mill is too much to retire comfortably. Too much left-overs.’

‘You don’t want to work from the *inside*? I asked. ‘Build some backdoor for “the rebellion”? I thought about what my sister had said about Ivanka Trump.

‘No, I’ve played my part and failed, dude. Eaten my cake and had it.’

I was caught off-guard by Radwan's fluffing of the cliché and with strained levity stuttered, 'A-anyway, how is your automatic music-generation thingy going?'

'S'okay. Can count above four now.'

I laughed. An early incarnation of his music generation system had once generated a sixteen-hour recording of a synthesized voice repeatedly counting to four.

'The new system is sounding kinda like jazz.'

'Oh, I'm *so* sorry,' I taunted (Radwan listened almost exclusively to jazz, a genre which I maintain a firm opposition to in the stalwart spirit of British anti-jazz humour, although, to be honest, for the most part I'm utterly indifferent).

'Tray drole, Arthur, tray drole. Anyway, how bout *you*? Still going to Scotland? The Isle of Mutton, right?' he parried.

'The Isle of Rum,' I answered preciously.⁴¹ 'Inspect Slartibartfast's handiwork.'⁴²

'I prefer the Isle of Margarita. Must be hard to leave the Cali club. You're still going through with the *Germanic shift*? Back to the Grimm latitudes?'

'One fairytale to another.'

'Still craving a new mythology? Take it up with Fred Schlegel.'

Not knowing who Fred Schlegel was, and not wishing to find out, I returned to detailing my plans, 'Gonna live on a boat in Berlin. Support the progressive agenda.'

⁴¹ The Isle of Rum (Rùm, in Scots) is where Arthur's vision with The Honzing climaxes. It was once spelt Rhum as the laird wished to disassociate himself with the drink. Rum is a roughly diamond-shaped mountainous island, about forty square miles in area, a few miles south of the Isle of Skye.

⁴² Slartibartfast appears as the award-winning fjord-sculpting Magrathean in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, about which Arthur has an encyclopaedic knowledge.

⁴³ Note from Arthur: Radwan was referencing a classical linguistic study, *the proto-Germanic shift*, also known as Grimm's law (the fraternal Grimm's of folk stories). I've left in this narrative colour to indicate the esoteric substance of our conversations.

‘You’re such a martyr,’ said Radwan, without any humour.
‘How’s the Rilke?’

‘Stuck on the second word.’ I picked up the book (*Duino Elegies*) and read, ‘*Wer, wenn ich schreee, hörte mich denn aus der Engel?*’⁴⁴

Radwan beamed a face of proud approval (whether this pride was directed to me or Rilke was unclear).

I said, ‘But the second word *wenn* could mean *if* or *when*. Depending on which word you use, it completely changes the meaning!’

Radwan fired a game-show host style finger-snap-point-and-wink.

‘I think this trip will help clear my mind.’

‘The real self cannot be found when the mind has clarity,’ he replied.⁴⁵

‘Maybe,’ I replied plaintively.

‘You’re not gonna hang around in LA, huh? Too Utopian?’

‘It is for some. People who never want to feel the cold. People who can’t handle too much reality. Anyway, I thought you said Utopia means “no place”? ’⁴⁶

‘Well, it used to. That’s the thing about Utopia: the definition is always changing. Thomas More’s was full of slaves.’

‘More’s the pity.’

‘Indeed.’

‘The future aint what it used to be!’

⁴⁴ The German word *wenn* can mean either *when* or *if*. According to my grasp of German, the Rilke line translates to “Who, when/if I cried, would hear me up there amongst the angels.”

⁴⁵ “One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

⁴⁶ Thomas More, Lord High Chancellor to and then executed by order of Henry VIII, coined the word *Utopia* in 1516. More derived the word from the Greek prefix *ou-* meaning *not* and *topos, place*. However, the homophonic prefix *eu-* means *good* and thus the word has come to mean “good place”.

‘That’s something we can agree on, master Yogi,’ replied Radwan. He yawned and asked what I was going to do when I moved to Berlin.

‘Design a new computer game,’ I told him.

‘What else you gonna do?’ he snapped back. I wondered why he, as with my sister, had such a dismissive attitude towards my project.

‘I dunno man,’ I said, laying back on to the cool vinyl floor. ‘Try and stay happy?’

‘Happiness is a hard master.⁴⁷ But yeah, follow your bliss, dude.’

‘We find our happiness or not at all?’ I said, referencing a slogan from a trendy Santa Monica café where the baristas would serve a so-called *motivational* quote with each coffee.⁴⁸

‘You still tying yourself up in knots thinking about free will?’ asked Radwan.

‘More than ever. I feel like a monk praying to a god he doesn’t believe in, hoping to regain his faith.’

‘You know, there’s no difference between *being* right and just *thinking* you’re right,’ said Radwan, with touching warmth.

‘Is it?’ I asked feebly. ‘But do you think it’s okay to *act* like you believe something even if you fundamentally *don’t* believe in it? Don’t you think the consequences of this in-authenticity will outweigh the utilitarian benefits?’

⁴⁷ “*Happiness is a hard master, particularly other people’s happiness. A much harder master, if one isn’t conditioned to accept it unquestionably, than truth,*” — so said the Controller in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*.

⁴⁸ *Not in Utopia, subterranean fields, Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where! But in the very world, which is the world of all of us — the place where in the end we find our happiness, or not at all!* From the final part of William Wordsworth’s poem “The French Revolution - as it appeared to enthusiasts at its commencement”. The establishment that Arthur refers to is, he later confessed, the legendary “Café Gratitude”, who seem proud to assert that, “*Our food and people are a celebration of our aliveness*”.

‘Zee ends zey justify zur-means,’ said Radwan, in a decent impersonation of Pierre. ‘Consequences are more important than actions’ (who knows if he was being ironic?)

‘But what if *everyone* thought that way?’

‘Then I’d be a damn fool to think any different!’

‘Okay, Yossarian,’ I said, feeling I had been toyed with.

There was an offscreen yell and Radwan excused himself for a few minutes.

I made to stand up but in the process stabbed the palm of my hand on a splinter of glass that had ricocheted from my broken phone. I removed the shard, wrapped it in a tissue, and sucked the drop of blood.

Waiting for Radwan to return I moved to the bungalow’s door. In the porch was a small tree from which I plucked a small ripe lemon. I dug my fingers into the skin and then bounced the fruit off the crook of my elbow, missing the rebound. Bending down to pick it up I saw someone approaching. It was the Māori receptionist, sashaying along the branching garden path and singing to herself. A gentle wind moved her dark hair as if in slow-motion. In case she should glance my way I struck a contemplative pose, as though I had just had a breakthrough idea (a ploy polished in the cafés and bars of LA), head nodding and teasing a likely unconvincing smile. But a rising bolus of self-loathing closed the act and I ducked back into my room, pulling tight the net curtains.

Radwan was still away from his computer so I laid back down upon the floor and with closed eyes smelt my lemony fingers, rubbing the citrus oil into the puncture wound on my palm and savouring the sting.

I considered my computer game. I desired to conjure a vision of a post-capitalist future and at that moment, lying on my back, I felt a stirring hope.

— *It will be art that saves me! Redeem my silent sin.⁴⁹*

— *Art for art’s sake.*

⁴⁹ “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.” — Dietrich Bonhoeffer, anti-Nazi dissident.

— On the other hand, even deodorant advertisements tend towards ‘*art pour l’art*’.

You cannot take a purely aesthetic interest in a disease you are dying from. I think Orwell said that.

Intending to Google the etymology of the word *slogan*, which had been haunting my mind, I reached towards the laptop. But Radwan returned to the screen and took the place of Patton.⁵⁰

‘I really want to talk about my computer game,’ I said. ‘S’an ambitious idea, a gaming and learning environment that will show how a post-capitalist society can exist, and I’m completely committed to the project.’

‘Technology gives life *meaning*,’ Radwan said slowly, seemingly ignoring my earnest declaration.

‘To me?’

‘Your game is a *humitious endeavour*,’ he declared.

‘Is that a compliment?’

‘The highest. It means a *humble ambition*.⁵¹

I did not take his compliment entirely to heart.

Rolling over I raised my legs above me in a yoga pose. Looking out through the door I noticed the horizon had gathered a white line of cloud.

‘I want to write a backstory to the game. Create a new mythology. I think it is a kind of *sublimation* to shake off all my anxiety,’⁵² I said.

Radwan beamed another proud look.

‘I believe we need a high-brow story to capture this millennial tech-world spirit.’

‘Yeah, we *might*,’ said Radwan, with an ambiguity that at the time I did not notice. ‘What’s the moral angle? try not to sell out to an evil corporation like Angmar?’

⁵⁰ The word *slogan* is derived from *slogorn*, an Anglicisation of the Gaelic *sluagh* (army) and *ghairm* (cry).

⁵¹ The translator and philosopher Walter Kaufmann fused the words humility and ambition to give *Humbition*.

⁵² *Sublimation* is a term used by psychologists for the conversion, or transmutation, of a defence mechanism into a mature and socially acceptable form of expression.

‘Yeah. Nor turn into a pro-set-il-izing c—,’

‘Quite,’ Radwan cut-in. ‘And I believe you people in the old *cunt-ry* pronounce it *pros-le-tizing*.’

I returned a pursed ‘Touché.’

‘Touche? Anyway, back to your game. What’s the pitch?’

‘How about a disguised polemic attacking libertarians as socially under-developed, cruel simpletons?’ I blurted, surprising myself with my level of vehemence. I instantly regretted taking a confrontational tone and the air seemed to cool.

Brightly, Radwan said, ‘Or how about we just agree it’s about the future directions of humans and technology?’

‘Not quite,’ I said, sniffing my fingers. ‘You can’t have one without the other. S’like saying “human love” or “human music”: it’s redundant. *Needless specificity*, as you might say.’

‘Sure, yeah. I *might*,’ said Radwan, with spirited sarcasm. ‘Maybe if I was Arthur Spinks from the small town of Pedantry, very central England.’

‘As I’ve told you before, Bristol’s further west than California. I thought *your* hometown was more central, right down the crack from what I’ve heard,’ I said with a wink.

‘Hey dude, leave Vallejo out of this. We’re proud people. Especially the ones who’ve left.’⁵³

We chuckled and I continued to summarise the backstory for my game.

‘The plot concerns a new start-up company: emergent technology at the micro level, discussing the ethical conundrums borne of tackling seemingly innocent problems. Bringing forward the future, conjuring the *naughty meats* of convenience for the masses.’

With a camp accent Radwan said, ‘Oooh the *Naughty Meats* sound so *sweet*.’⁵⁴

⁵³ Vallejo is a city north of San Francisco with a generally low-income demographic, situated between two active fault lines.

⁵⁴ Perhaps Radwan was nodding towards Oppenheimer, who said, “When you see something that is technically *sweet*, you go ahead and do it, and you argue about what to do about it only after you have had your technical success.”

‘And what’s the reward?’ he asked. ‘How does the game end?’

‘Well, I don’t know how it would end but the reward mechanism is the experience itself, its sheer novelty. You will see how the characters view the world through their specific perceptual and cognitive filters.’

‘Gimme an example,’ said Radwan, with the impatient snap of a Sand Hill VC.

‘Okay, so when role-playing a paranoid character the presented reality would exaggerate threats and distort intentions. Characters with spiritual beliefs would see a different symbolic abstraction. Processes would be *enframed* by their *teleology*, if I may.’⁵⁵

‘You may.’

‘For the mystics, crystals would heal and ley-lines lead. If a black cat crossed someone’s path then they’d have a bad day. Or is it a good day? Whatever. The point is that beliefs effect our reality, acting as perceptual filters to sharpen or blur clues, seeing things that are there, at the pixel level, but with a meaning that may not be shared by the other characters. Oh, and I have this second-rate Heidegger spin on it.’

‘Kids love Heidegger,’ intoned Radwan with malevolent glee.

‘Well, it happened to me a few months ago after working late. I was in that poncey supermarket near the office.’

‘Erewhon.’⁵⁶

‘Erewhon. Right. And I dropped a drink on the floor, some revolting slime, and I just *stood* there, staring at the puddle and thinking I could *undo* what I had done. You know, hit command-

⁵⁵ *Teleology* is an explanation for something in terms of its purpose. It is derived from two Greek words: *telos* (purpose) and *logos* (which has many meanings, one of them being reason).

⁵⁶ *Erewhon* is an organic grocer and café on Venice Boulevard, named after the novel of the same name by Samuel Butler. According to Arthur, *its bounteous aisles and colourful charisma pervade the dreams of any visitor.*

X and *undo* the action. My point is that technology shapes the way we think.'

'Sounds closer to second-rate Max Weber than Heidegger, but I see your point. Happens to me all the time,' said Radwan.

'AI makes us think of the world in terms of countable attributes.'

'Spinoza said that for us mortals there are only two attributes: thought and extension.'

'Someone had to say it.'

'But dontcha think *everything* we do influences the way we see the world?' asked Radwan. 'With coding it's probably the other way around.'

'Probably,' I said, stung by Radwan's immediate disassembly of my theory. 'I want to draw a link between certain types of minds and how easily they grok far-out concepts, ideas like inheritance of information through eons of the universe.'

'You've been reading Penrose,' he said. 'Should come with an Info-Hazard warning.'

Radwan was correct on both charges: I had heard of Penrose's theory of *conformal cyclic cosmology* in a book proposing information transmission — information *panspermia* — from one universe eon to a next. It means that the end conditions of one universe and the starting of the next are related. Penrose proposes that the universe iterates through infinite cycles of expansion and that there is no period of contraction, no crunching *gnab gib*. Penrose looks to non-random patterns in the cosmic background radiation but I think it's fair to locate his theory at the shaky end of the tentative scale. The Honzing intimated that he was a being that persisted across eons of universe. It's an idea of such inconceivable magnitude that it subsumes every religion and teleology that has gone before, and the only reason it is not discussed is, I believe, that much like the thorny issue of everlasting death, the magnitude of CCC creates some kind of block preventing ourselves from investigating. The horror-show Nietzschean twist is that every universe eon is the same as the last, that the information transferred over is always the same. And what about this: it is the goal of The Honzing to break this cycle.

Radwan proposed a “god mode” in my computer game, where the characters had no perceptual filters and saw an “over developed” view of the world as it truly is, showing relations between things that are not necessarily apparent to the naked eye. I replied that I would call it an “alien mode”, which, as Radwan well knew, was the closest I would get to a belief in a god-like entity.

‘Oh, and the backstory will be set in the near future,’ I said, shortly before exploding in a sneeze. ‘Must be pollen from all the bastard flowers here,’ I grizzled, affecting a curmudgeon as I occasionally did with Radwan. He laughed and said that a near future setting was a nice idea: “A world of half-baked AI”, as he put it. Also, he said, setting a game in this janky future would reduce my responsibility to address contemporary issues, a point I readily conceded, thinking about the patriarchal themes I didn’t know how to address but would feel obliged to do if the game had a present-day backdrop.

‘And how ‘bout maybe wrapping it up in a cyber punk Vaporwave vibe?’

‘Yeah, *maybe*,’ I said, in a way that meant “definitely not”.

I explained my desire to show a less glamorous and more complex vision of the future, a slowing of change on the social landscape and a flattening of time towards a cultural homogenisation; hollow, whimpering pre-echoes of a horizontal singularity.

‘Your flat-lined singularity sounds like the End of History,’ said Radwan. ‘And I think the whole idea stinks. Mankind is inherently differentiable. Like the swoosh function, it needs constant growth. Just ask Nike.’

I chuckled at his multi-modal gag.

‘It’s a culmination of the enlightenment,’ he proclaimed. ‘Didn’t think that was your cup of tea. You always complained

those Cyberpunk visions were too obvious, that it was too easy to predict a dystopic future full of Morlocks and Eloi.⁵⁷

‘I’m not saying it will be a dystopia, although it might seem so now. This horizon is something we haven’t and perhaps *can’t* imagine yet. We’re heading towards a goal we can’t see, like a fox heading-off a rabbit on a bend.’

‘You’re betraying your Englishness, old chap. Maybe trying to hit one bullet with another would be better for the US market.’

I snickered.

‘That’s our job, man,’ said Radwan, with serious modulation. ‘Seeing round the corner. Beyond the horizon. Writing recipes for Milliways. Something Marx couldn’t do!⁵⁸

‘We’re heading towards that horizon of your Utopia, towards *your* horizontal singularity.’ I don’t know if he accented the word to suggest it was an idea he didn’t endorse or was simply attributing authorship.

And now Radwan transmogrified to a “wise man of the west country”, leaning towards his attendance: ‘But listen ‘ere, young nymph, in thy ‘orizons, may all my sins be remembered.’

I wondered why he said *my* and not *our*, whether talking of deeds past or to come.

Radwan tuned out the Shakespearean wizard and said, ‘Reminds me of a recurring dream,’ shifting to reveal General Patton saluting beneath the looming US flag. I’m trying to touch a ghost, reaching ahead to where it’s moving. Julie says the ghost represents the *un-arrived future* and that I am a product of the culture industry who endlessly cheat their consumers of what is promised.’

⁵⁷ In HG Wells’s “The Time Traveler,” a distant Earth future is inhabited by two groups of human descendants: the Morlocks and the Eloi. The former are stunted troglodytes and the latter live in a Utopic above-ground paradise, eating only fruit. Unfortunately for the Eloi, they are hunted and eaten by the Morlocks.

⁵⁸ *Milliways* was the name of *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*. Marx wrote in *Das Kapital*, “*I don’t write recipes for the cook-shops of the future.*”

‘Sounds about right. What do *you* think your dream means?’ I asked.

‘I think there’s no way of knowing.’

‘That is uncharacteristically *reasonable* of you, Radwan. I’m having some strange dreams lately. Waking dreams.’

I felt light-headed and laid back upon the floor, raising my legs. Radwan threw me a rope and shouted, ‘Arthur! Stick with the plan! Go ahead with your scheming! You’re gonna make an original, psychedelic, near-future zeitgeist computer game, out of which a new awareness will emerge. S’at simple!’

‘Pretty much writes itself, eh? Maybe I should sprinkle some *Deluxe* philosophy in there too,’ I baited.⁵⁹

‘Sure, that’s definitely what’s missing from computer games,’ deadpanned Radwan. ‘A thousand levels of post-structuralism: give the player an insight into why they desire their own repression, *muaan*.’

I ejected a snort and said, ‘I was thinking of putting you in it, actually. Just using your name. It sounds so exotic.’

‘Tucker-ize me,’ said Radwan. ‘In the tradition of your culture, mine is yours to appropriate.’⁶⁰

‘Speaking of names, what’s that prison called, the circ—’

‘Panopticon. Sorry Arthur, I gotta go. See you soon, buddy. Enjoy the trip.’

⁵⁹ We must assume the *deluxe* philosophy Arthur is referring to is that of *Deleuze*.

⁶⁰ Wilson Tucker was a pioneering science fiction writer who used his friends’ names in his stories.

Laying my trip on me

Sunset arrived with a cold breath, the lush greens bruising to mauve as animal sounds came to the foreground and the present sharpened to a point. It felt as if the jungle were turning inside out. I witnessed beneath an absurd miniature thatched roof in the hotel bar, sipping a can of pissy beer.

I'd dined on *ika mata*, a delicious raw fish salad with a coconut sauce and chips of fried taro. The book I'd stollen from the church, *A Surfeit Of Lampreys*, was a pretty run-of-the-mill detective story, nothing to do with the blood-sucking eel beast that caused the death of King Henry I. And so I turned to the ocean for distraction, watching a northerly sun that loaded me with a peculiar doubt, a twisted *déjà vu* that confused my spirit. I speculated upon the psychological consequences of swapping the sun's east-west procession as the apocalyptic effulgence plundered the horizon, rippling rich oranges like distortions from a VHS video playback.

The thick Styrofoam of my dew-dappled beer holder was missing a Tsingtao logo, obliterated by a maleficent thumb nail. I put down the vessel and from a beige cargo pocket extracted a large twelve-sided Cook Island one dollar coin. Slowly, as my dazzled eyes adjusted, the glowing head of Queen Elizabeth II became apparent. I moved my thumb over her fiery likeness, glowering back with matching imperiousness.

But it was not hatred I felt to the monarchy, as I felt towards other systems of pernicious greed and tyranny. The Queen provided an *infinitely* humanitarian focus, an empowerment of dignity. Plus, it seemed like a kind of joke we were all in on, but they weren't. I felt a post-capitalist future was easier to imagine than one without the British monarchy. No, the monarchy gave not emotions of hatred but of enraged sadness, twisted by my own confusions between fairness and justice and dignity. Looking back I realize that I *treasured* this mood. I wore a mythology of my emotions, custom made. I visited this colourful shrine with nostalgic calm and paid homage like a tourist picking over cheap

giftshop tat. Perhaps the reason I say the monarchy will continue is that I *want* this to happen, that the camp souvenirs I receive from my righteous indignations outweigh my cut in the problem.

The flipside of the coin showed a penis-baring Māori god in all its profiled glory and my mouth tightened a cowboy grin as I rolled the coin across my knuckles. In time I repocketed the coin and took out a fidget spinner, gifted (I think) by Ben the bartender. Ben was massive, even for a Māori. He had rugby-induced cauliflower ears and a wonderful baritone that sung every vowel from the diaphragm. He called me “bro” with a plosive “r”, sounding like a gruff cat saying the word “brow”. The fidget spinner was polished black glass and Ben had shown me a trick he called “The Line Dance” where he passed it from one finger to the next, pinching the central hub and spinning up the three-pointed star by flicking a blade with another finger and hopping the spinning star from one finger to the next. The toy inevitably fell upon the concrete, exploding into a thousand shards. The central ball-race ring popped out and headed for the shrubs but I intercepted it and collected it in my hands, shortly discovering that the internal diameter of the ring was fractionally larger than the apparent size of the sun when holding it at arm’s length. As I looked through the ring and into the fuzzy Vaporwave orb I implored the universe to show me the green flash (although I did not know if the flash even existed, nor what to expect if it did). I held my breath. And at the critical moment a booming voice erupted behind me: ‘Never seen it?’

I flinched and again dropped the fidget spinner, my smile ratcheting to breaking point as I turned around. There stood a blazing young male baring an athletically kempt and self-assured mien bursting from a Hawaiian shirt of floriographic fantasy. I was entirely unsurprised to find he was shod in a cacophony of flamingo-covered socks stuffed into rainbow jelly sandals.

Socks and sandals, I said to myself, *the surest sign of a Brit.*

I looked up and into a pair of Oakley Radars, those angular glasses for athletes with “Fire Iridium” lenses that I’d noticed younger kids in LA wearing. I hoped to make my irritation clear by angling my chin up by two or three degrees.

Again, the voice boomed: ‘You’ll go blind!’

The accent was crisp but dripping with posh British tenor, a bonsai tree smothered in crude oil.

Oh great, I thought. Eton's arrived. One of the Pims-drinking salmon-trousered trusty-clones who bought and sold England by the pound.

'Room for one more?'

He beamed a grin of what I can only call *expressive ecstatic disassembly* — a cartoon freeze-frame a few milliseconds after his head was exploded from within.

My annoyance boiled-over with a tooth-ache smile and a tidy karate-chop towards the empty seat at my table.

The Oakleys peeled off to reveal a broad and scooped face paler than I had expected, plump pink lips peeling back like Broadway curtains to reveal good-for-British teeth. Sticky-out ears, amphibious eyeballs and a bowl haircut gave the impression of an escaped schoolboy and I half expected to see a School Master bursting through the bushes with a huge net to recapture his charge.

I spoke my thoughts: '*What are you doing here?*'. I started the question with a hard first word and so as not to appear overtly rude continued in the same style, giving each word equal emphasis.

Embarrassed at the absurd proclamatory voice I attempted a softening with a "mate", which overlapped with the first word of his reply:

'Yeah/[mate]. I'm working at the local hospital. Intern. Year out thingy, y'know?' The man-child shirt-tucked the sunglasses and his torso seemed to deflate by about ten percent. His upper camel-like lips were raised as if for inspection.

'Wow,' I replied ambiguously, wondering if this really *was* a child with some kind of gland problem.

'Yar tell me bout it. Bit of a cunt, much?'

I coughed spontaneously. It had been a while since I had heard the word spoken so casually and was surprised as much by my reaction as the word itself.

With rolled r's and an eyes-down bow the man said, 'Tarquinious Sorrel.'

But the histrionics were too much and I exploded in laughter, which is something I hardly ever do. The alleged

Tarquinious joined me, seeming to have an uneasy alliance with quietude.

Through dopey wet eyes he finally said, ‘The name’s Tarquin, *ak-shurly*. But call me Tark.’ He pulled a kooky pout that I found genuine and disarming. We clunked beakers and took large swigs of tepid beer-piss.

The data built to support a theory of pedigree: Besides his absurd name, the way Tarquin said “mate” seemed unnatural and he was inconsistently rounding dental fricatives into glottal stops (for RP-Posho’s, “faking the stop” is rarely anything more than a disaster).

I again decided to call myself Radwan.

‘Arrived last night. From LA,’ I said, forcing a chatty casualness.

‘But you’re English, right?’

‘Course I’m fucking English,’ I snapped, appalled that I could have been mistaken otherwise.

‘Sorry old boy. Didn’t mean to—it was just the way you—’

‘No, no. Sorry. Long day. Bit drunk,’ I apologised, embarrassed by my flare in temper, annoyed at Tarquin for his entitled quickness of judgement, and fundamentally pissed-off with the entire universe for everything else.

‘Must be quite nice here,’ I said after a while.

‘Bloody nightmare,’ deadpanned Tarquin. ‘Chap I work with makes his tea in the microwave.’ His teeth flashed like a pageant contestant.

‘Thin end of the wedge,’ I croaked, and took a large slug of beer.

Our pairing did not arise from a natural gravity, winsome well-built “Call me Tark” sitting upright and exuding woody notes from a sophisticated cologne whilst my lanky frame was no-doubt twisted and reeking of corruption. Months later, Tarquin told me about his childhood: he had indeed attended an awfully posh boarding school and was an orphan, born *Gareth* in Woking. His working-class parents had drowned when he was twelve, an accident during coitus, so he claimed, slipping in the bath (*You can’t make it up*, he told me). Gareth received a large trust fund and

moved into his grandparent's house attending a private school on a bursary. In an effort to assuage the teasing he changed his name to one in the style of his peers. And thus, Gareth was reborn Tarquin.

Tarquin took out his phone and beamed into its screen, disactivating the relevant neck muscles. The device was a Microsoft Lumia 640 and I found it singularly confrontational to my clean Android versus iPhone Manichaeism. A photograph of Jeremy Corbyn beamed at me from the back of the phone, covered with a multitude of colourful stickers my six-year niece might well covet.

I was caught staring.

'*Jez we can, brudder*,' I said with a serious look, giving the peace-sign with my right hand.

Tarquin laughed. Perhaps he was caught off-guard at my politically on-trend attitude?

'Yar. Cliché right?' he said at last, for some reason wiping tears from his eyes.

'Rightness allied with foolishness,' I said, trying to strike a sympathetic chord but perhaps missing the mark. My speaking manner slowly moved toward the avuncular, *Demosthenic* tone of Radwan (it should be said that when drinking I have a tendency to get quite serious).

'It's a crisis in mythology,' I declared, glad to assert a theory I'd been working on for a while. 'We crave something physical after experiencing how the virtual corrupts desire. We are like old toothless cowboys on the ranch of world history flogging the nag of capitalism.'

Baiting wet eyes from Tarquin.

'But!' I modulated, pointing heroically *ad astra*, 'We are just a delta-away from bumping out of our saddles, away from this local minima and being on our way to a free and progressive life of sustainable luxury abundance!'

'Sounds *divine!*' exclaimed Tarquin, with such a glut of camp enthusiasm I wondered if he was being ironic, sarcastic, or was gay.

'You're very happy, aren't you?' I said. '*Winsome*.'

‘You lose some,’ he replied, and punched my right bicep quite hard.

I rubbed my arm but couldn’t help chuckling with the deep ache.

‘Mythology,’ he reminded.

My finale was delivered with a sagging calibre of passion: ‘Look. We’re striving for a new and *righteous* mythology. Fully Automated Luxury Socialism.’

‘Is that a thing?’

‘It can be. But for now we’ve got perhaps the greatest jam maker of our age.’ I tapped twice on his phone. ‘When everything around is so temporary you long for something permanent and Jeremy Corbyn’s low-quality beard has provided this very well.’

Tarquin clapped and gave my shoulder a big squeeze.

‘Means to an end,’ he said. I wondered if he was being sardonic in that nebulous and uncommitted way the younger generation seem to engage with philosophical matters to rile his audience. Or perhaps it was simply a quotidian dose of British bathos.

I tapped the photograph of Corbyn and in a gangly London accent said, ‘Man’s got skills. Brings the *situation*.’

He started laughing again, this time in a more mature way suggesting he was in on a joke and I wasn’t, even though to me it felt the other way around.

‘What’s with the shirt?’ I asked, annoyed with his unfathomable oscillations of attitude.

Tarquin darted a glance to the bulging pockets on my beige shorts and said, ‘Styling it out. Like you,’ (I’m not sure what “styling it out” means, but guess he was impressed with my utilitarian apparel).⁶¹

And with a crazy-faced grin Tarquin lifted his feet and clopped together his ironic clash of ironic socks and ironic sandals.

My sense of a generational archetype crystallized as the night progressed. I would hesitate to call this a matter of *Millennials*, a

⁶¹ My guess is that he *wasn’t*.

lazy title that lacks any real jurisdiction and presumes people are *types* rather than *individuals* (besides which, it takes time to meaningfully distil the *spirit of the age*, especially in these days of the eternal present). Non-the-less, Tarquin seemed steeped in a familiar piety, a variety tender in William James's sense and contrasting with my gristle.⁶²

In hindsight, I find it poignant that despite the difference in the texture of our minds and the process of their making, Tarquin and I had arrived at a similar progressive and humanistic world view, a kind of convergent evolution as with the polyphyletic fraternity of bats and birds.

Tarquin possessed a natural doctorly instinct maintaining an effortless sense of presence. Medical professionals carry a social ease that, I assume, comes from being well-rested on solid moral laurels. As a teenager I spent a few weeks shadowing a pathologist but soon decided the commitment was beyond me. In Tarquin I glimpsed an aspect of my past self, my unarrived future.

We shall see Tarquin reappear as the protagonist in my vision, though enframed by my opinion of him from our short time together that evening in Rarotonga. His ironic but earnest outlook hinted at something beyond the post-modern deconstructive sneering irony I recognized in Radwan. It pointed towards a more classical energy, a heroic striving in an air of graceful non-relative morality.

A worthy diversion: about one year after my vision whilst hiking in a remote high valley in Switzerland I met a man who helped me situate the generational archetype to which Tarquin belonged. I was in the Canton of Valais and well above the treeline when a storm came, a *Retour d'est*, as they call it. Within minutes the sky darkened and hail was coming in ferocious blirts, pummelling the ground around me. I knew I was in trouble. Through the milken air I spotted a yellow light which I followed to a small refuge. Using my bag as a shield against the icy fists I

⁶² William James made a distinction between the *tender* and the *tough* minded: The *tender* are more idealistic, optimistic and dogmatic. The *tough* more empiricist ("fact based"), materialistic and sceptical.

made it inside, there to find a man writing by light of gas lamp at a small metal desk. He was an enormous blond-bearded man of Nordic heritage and gave his name as something like Anzi Friday, although I found everything he told me to be entirely unreliable and have not heard of him since. Over that night we drunk an awful alcoholic drink that tasted of dandelions and I told him of my vision with the Honzing, reading from an early draft of this account. Anzi was also writing a book, introducing a kind of mildly racist cock-and-ball philosophy he called Nordic Metamodernism. And Anzi said my story was an example of this new post-postmodern stage at which humankind had arrived. Furthermore, Anzi claimed that Tarquin and his representation in my vision were manifestations of a Metamodernist but that the political and cultural era described in my vision was of a post-Metamodernist nature. Like I said, I haven't heard of him since.

At some point in the evening I asked Tarquin what he was doing working at the hospital.

'Diabetic clinic,' he said. 'Big problem,' adding with savage vehemence, 'Bloody fucking advertising,' thumbing towards the kiosk's Coke clock. His expression of an absolute morality was a refreshing change from Radwan's relativism.

'I heard they add stuff to Coke that prevents you spontaneously vomiting,'

'Yar. Phosphoric acid,' he said. 'It's an *antiemetic*, dontcha know.'⁶³

'We can't stomach our own culture,' I said. 'It's a perfect metaphor for late capitalism, treating the symptom and not the cause.'

'*Sequala*, mate,' said Tarquin.⁶⁴

⁶³ An antiemetic is a drug used to mitigate against vomiting and nausea. Phosphoric acid is commonly used as an antiemetic for gastroenteritis.

⁶⁴ *Sequala* is the name for secondary symptom of a primary disease, injury, therapy or trauma, Latin plural for "sequel".

‘Good name for a bar,’ I replied, wishing I had some reefer. ‘Anyway, let us try and stay away from politics tonight. Tell me about medicine. What’s the latest?’

‘S’not really my forte, but I just read a paper about *epigenetics*. S’fascinating how the environment can impact DNA mutations, how stress and chemicals can influence our offspring. Someone said *the greatest burden a child must bear is the unlived life of its parents*, and I tell you what, Radwan, those words have always been close to me. Lamarck was right, crafty Frog!⁶⁵

Tarquin paused to consider something and said, ‘Epigenetic therapy will let us live much longer.’

‘About as interesting as it is depressing,’ I said.

No response.

‘We’d be the “almost made it” generation,’ I clarified.

‘Yar. S’pose so. Never thought about it that way. But yar, s’pose so mate.’ Then with a nudge and a wink he said, ‘But I’d prefer we were remembered as the *Roffle* generation.⁶⁶

This is another example of how Tarquin belongs to an era of modern expression moving beyond “affirming the negative”, a term I learnt from Anzi Friday. It means identifying what is wrong with a system but not suggesting or allowing for a solution and I expect that Radwan would say the *Occupy* movement was a prime example of this.

Tarquin continued:

‘Plenty of other theories out there, ideas that used to be called pseudoscience but turned out to be true. Who knows what’s around the scientific corner, eh? You heard about recapitcher, *reee-cap-IT-u-lation* theory?’

With weary apprehension I replied that, as yet, I had not.

⁶⁵ French biologist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744–1829), called his hypothesis, which was a competitor to Darwin’s, *Inheritance of acquired characteristics*.

⁶⁶ RO(T)FL is internet slang for “Roll On the Floor Laughing” and is pronounced “roffle”. It dates back to at least 1989, when it was used in a post on a Usenet group discussing amateur radio. Someone nicknamed “Chuq” apparently ROFL’d when another person did not know the meaning of RTFM (read the fucking manual).

'Freud believed in it,' said Tarquin, spitting the name out like snot. 'Or rather, he *said* he did.' A satisfied chuckle. 'Freud said the way humans develop from an egg right up to when we bloody-well die is related to one's *evolutionary history*. *Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny!* That's what the mad bastard said. It means stages of our life shadows stages of human history.'

'More like stages of bollocks,' I said (a perverted interpretation of *recapitulation theory* would appear in my vision and it will become clear how I completely mis-understood it).

'That's fucking Freud for you,' said Tarquin. 'His dream stuff is great reading. Very creative chap. Into word play, y'know, *Freudian slips* and all that. Very British, really.'

'Puns?'

'No, no. *Parapraxis*, old boy.'

'Naturally. Can you give me an example?'

'Sure. Say someone dreamt about breaking a bottle of *perfume*, then he'd say this could be a symbol for breaking something that rhymes with *smell*, like breaking a *spell*.'

'Sounds like a beauty me ol' china,' I said, giving a Cockney wink and double thumbs-up.

Tarquin seemed to find this funny. 'But I'm with Freud and Jung that dreams can help us understand what's going on in our subconscious,' adding, seemingly for my benefit, 'Below the surface.'

I shuddered as I recollected my dream crab.

'Do you have any recurring dreams?' asked Tarquin, with eerie prescience.

I responded that I never dreamed and asked in what ways Freud's ideas were still discussed.

'Well, 'e gets a lot more credit than 'e's due,' said Tarquin, loosening his accent like a tie at a wedding. 'Sensational claptrap for the most part. Tit-bits for the chatteringers. He knew almost nothing about the female body. All that stuff about the id and ego and the super-ego tells us more about history than ourselves, the way we structure everything.' I recalled a declamation by Julie that the ego doesn't exist in the same way today, that it's more like a machine, a phenomenon of friction between our *id*, what we truly

desire, and the *super-ego*, which is really, the way I see it, just another word for society, the re-placed father figure.

‘What about Jung?’ I asked.

‘Oh, Jung was wrong in an entirely different way,’ said Tarquin. ‘Anima and animus characters lurking within us. His stuff sounds like a self-help diary. Something to be *written* more than *read*.’

‘Sounds like my kinda book.’

‘Nar, I doubt it. Jung’s ideas leads to archetypes. *There’s two kinds-a people bollocks.*’

Tarquin’s intellectual confidence was enchanting.

‘Imagine basing a whole philosophy on that basis?’ he said. ‘Thinking that there are *two kinds of people*.’

‘Sounds like my kinda book,’ I said again, giving the ocean a wink.

Tarquin stormed on: ‘I think *cybernetics*, or whatever you call it, could learn a lot from all that psychoanalysis stuff, test those models empirically.’

I smiled at hearing Tarquin’s quaint use of the old-fashioned word for AI and replied, ‘We’re prisoners in a *panopticon*.’

‘Nice comparison,’ said Tarquin (I was amazed he grokked the metaphor so readily). ‘They say life goes to ‘ell when two ages overlap. And we seem to be in a pretty *overlappy* age right now.⁶⁷

I thought of what my sister had said about a last effort of resistance from the conservatives. Our current day Crisis of Mythology was a change of ages as Demosthenes had presided over and which ultimately led to his death, refusing to support Antipater, the tyrannical successor to Alexander, and preferring the company of Poseidon in whose temple he ended his life with a poisoned quill. You can’t make it up, eh?

‘Well, about fifty-one percent of us seem to be living in a previous age,’ I said, instantly regretting dropping Brexit so crudely. As if covering for my embarrassment and with

⁶⁷ “*Human life is reduced to real suffering, to hell, when two ages overlap.*” — *The Steppenwolf*, by Hermann Hesse.

phlegmatic stateliness worthy of Demosthenes himself Tarquin exclaimed, *Laudamus veteres!*⁶⁸

‘Couldn’t put it better,’ I snarked.

‘*Lauder-mouse vi-terries*, old boy. *Lauder-mouse vi-terries!*’ he thundered, hamming the Latin with English public-school pronunciation. ‘We praise the past!'

‘Most people praise the *present*; I prefer the future. *Humankind cannot bear much reality*.’

‘Can’t it?’ asked Tarquin.

‘Well a friend of mine, a philosopher, more or less, says that facing reality is about facing our *mortality*. Though who knows what he really thinks,’ I said, talking about Radwan. ‘Either way, we seem surprisingly *capable* at *adapting* to new realities. Swear I saw someone on a hover-board last week.’

Tarquin laughed and asked, ‘What do you think is the future of communication?’

‘Impossible to say in the short term. Communication is less about utility and more about expression, media being the message and all that. Art is not *about* something it *is* something and I think that’s what communication has become.’

‘What?’

‘Art. And communication, I think,’ I blithered. ‘Soon there’ll be mind-reading gadgets. That’s a given. At first they’ll be hella janky. I certainly wasn’t born to be a thumb-secretary to me bonce!’ I tapped my head. ‘And the food industry will change, farming and processing and delivery. There’ll be even naughtier meats.’

‘How *delectable*,’ lip-smacked Tarquin.

‘That’s what my mate says. And the quest of self-obsession and authenticity will doubtless continue well beyond the event horizons of our panopticons.’

Tarquin scratched the back of his neck as I continued my rant. ‘New lifestyle cults will rise to help people deal with themselves. The big problems are energy and AI, we get those

⁶⁸ *Laudamus veteres, sed nostris utimur annis*, is from Ovid’s poem *Fasti*, a report of a conversation between the poet and the Gods. It translates “we praise the past, but live in the present”.

sorted and we're in Utopia. In fact you might only need a decent AI and it will solve the other problems for you.'

'So you're saying that the solution to all our problems is *a problem-solver?*' said Tarquin, stroking his chin in mock solemnity.

'In a nutshell,' I said, clearing my throat and draining the beer (it's likely my accent had migrated towards that of a Victorian butler by now, an irritating tendency of mine when drinking). 'Anyway, what d'you reckon you'll be up to down the line?'

'Psychiatry,' he declared immediately. 'I think that's all there'll be left of medicine once the robots replace the radiologists and the rest of us. Hope so. Our minds'll be the only thing left to tinker with. In fact I reckon the word doctor will change to mean this and we'll look back on doctors like me as we do Victorian horse farriers.'

'But I've gotta work out who the fuck I am first,' he scoffed. '*If you can look inside yourself, you can look inside anyone.* Or is it the other way around?'

'*Man is not what he thinks he is. He is the tyrannical secrets he hides from himself,*' I said, quoting from Cafe Gratitude.⁶⁹

'Quite so,' said Tarquin. 'It's an interesting time. There's a clinic in Edinburgh who use sound therapy to take you back to a particular era in time.'

'Not surprised. Music can do that.'

'Sound,' Tarquin corrected. The distinction seemed important but I let it go.

'And what can you tell me about myself? Any *tyrannical secrets* I should know about?'

'Really wanna know?'

'Don't think so.'

I looked out to the distant lightning flashes on the horizon and tapped together the broken fidget-spinner and the shard of broken iPhone in my pocket.

⁶⁹ Either Arthur or the staff of Cafe Gratitude have jumbled two quotations here: "*Man is not what he thinks he is, he is what he hides,*" is a quote by André Malraux. And "*Secrets, silent, stony sit in the dark palaces of both our hearts: secrets weary of their tyranny: tyrants willing to be dethroned,*" is from Joyce's *Ulysses*.

‘Probably just a lot of guilty drivel.’

Tarquin recrossed his rugbyman’s legs and said, ‘Well, if you say so, *Radwan*, then you’re probably right. But maybe the source of your guilt isn’t what you think it is.’

I studied Tarquin’s pale blue eyes to fathom if he had purposefully emphasized “*Radwan*”.

‘*Ressent-e-ment*.’ I teased the words out, pronouncing it the British way. ‘S’when you create a false reason for, ahem, *hating on* the cause of your problems, in the vernacular.⁷⁰

‘Scapegoats,’ I continued. ‘S’what led to Brexit innit. It’s a kind of jealousy.’

‘Jealous of—?’

‘Freedom?’ I blathered, wondering what was coming next. ‘People bettering themselves and levelling up. *Coming over ‘ere stealing our opp’er’choonity!*’

I paused and adjusted to a calmer register. ‘It’s something The Proles have no chance to do.’

I thought Father would agree with my statement (perhaps it was a cry for approval?) though I was reminded how Radwan had harped on that the proletariat was a romantic fiction, the desires of “Little Girl Marx”.

‘My father voted Leave, actually,’ I confessed, with an unexpected sense of pride. ‘Altruism at its finest. Humane and practical. Wanted to destroy the entire bloody rotten system.’

I thought how Pierre was similarly aligned by supporting a right-wing accelerationist think-tank and encouraging people to have more children.

Tarquin nodded with genuine and possibly sympathetic attendance and said, ‘Whatever it is that made people vote Leave will one day be in The Manual. DSM-slash-six three-zero-seven-point-four-seven, *Ressentiment Disorder*.’

The letters DSM clued me to what Tarquin was talking about, for on more than one occasion I’d heard Julie raving

⁷⁰ *Ressentiment* is taken to be a sense of hostility toward an object that one incorrectly identifies as the cause of one’s frustration, an assignment of blame: The ego creates an enemy in order to protect itself from culpability.

against the misguided and cruel dogma of mental illness diagnosis as divested within *the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders*.

‘Y’know,’ barked Tarquin, ‘Some people would say we actually *enjoy* our absurd suffering.’⁷¹

‘You reckon?’ (I said this toyingly although I mostly agreed with the proposition).

‘Yar!’ he blurted. ‘Empowers us. We don’t want to *actually* overthrow The Man, we *don’t* want to kill our dad, like Oedipus. We wouldn’t know what to do next. S’why conspiracies are so popular, people losing their jobs to machines.’

‘Oh, the guilt. I’ve heard it enough from my sister and think it’s bollocks.’

‘What is?’

‘People losing their stupid jobs to machines! I only wish it were so! I truly do. The worker class has been reduced to servile errand boys delivering packages and shifting bricks on building sites. And while we’re at it, I think the idea that people actually *enjoy* their own misfortune is utter bollocks.’

‘But I think they *do*,’ said Tarquin. ‘And by extension, they enjoy other’s misfortune, too.’

‘Well maybe it’s my Californification but I say that we are all *redeemable*.’

I let the words settle.

‘What I’m saying,’ I continued, ‘is that at some level, *all* people feel shame. *Especially* the billionaire Edgelords. In fact, I think most of them are either psychopaths or religiously tainted and are trying to enjoy this life as much as they can, rage against the dying light and all that. Because at some fundamental level of their consciousness these religious nuts believe they will be punished for their transgressions against humanity.’ I paused. ‘Or is this a guilt? Is it the same thing as shame?’

‘Nope. Different words for the same thing.’

‘Yeah?’

⁷¹ “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

‘Yes,’ replied Tarquin in a tone of authority that I at once respected. ‘You could say that guilt is a personal thing and shame a social construct, but that is all relativistic post-modern bollocks if you ask me. A deep shame arises when there is a mismatch between how one presents oneself and what one really desires. Leads to, well, have you ever met a genuine *narcissist*?’

‘All over the tech world,’ I said, thinking about Pierre again. ‘Pretty close to a sociopath, right?’

‘Kinda. Think of a narcissist as a CEO obsessed with constant praise and public adoration, while a sociopath is like a hacker who exploits systems and people without any remorse.’

‘I’m not sure how far these names get you,’ I said, somewhat preciously. ‘*Autism* gets banded about so much nowadays it means almost nothing.’ Tarquin gave me a lingering look, perhaps impressed at my casual *savoir faire*.

‘My mate reckons we can be over-socialized,’ I continued, talking about Radwan. ‘The *liberal condition*, he calls it. Frankly, I find him embarrassing. Or is it shame for *understanding* him? What is the difference between shame and embarrassment?’

‘Different causes, old boy. Embarrassment you get from, ahem, *exposing* oneself. It’s a social thing, like shame, but more a matter of transgression against public traditions. Ethics. And shame, well, shame runs deeper. Shame is a transgression against *oneself*?’

My inner philologist marvelled at Tarquin’s confidence but the premise sounded shaky, like the guilt-shame distinction he had wafted away. *Where did his confidence come from?* I wondered. His absolutist attitude was a hallmark of a new generation, seeing things beyond the fragmented relativistic post-modern kaleidoscope.

‘I think embarrassment is a fundamentally English quality,’ I said. ‘Clearly relates to theory of mind. I’m sure you know all about all that.’

‘A theory of mind? What’s that?’

‘Really? It’s so basic. Atomic, you might say. It’s our understanding that we’re surrounded by people who basically think more or less like we do.’

‘Do they?’

‘Yeah, more or less. But what I’m saying is that we can’t help but consider the minds of our younger selves, as children, and have both shame and embarrassment for our behaviour, especially towards our parents. But we also look back at ourselves as a younger civilization, our naïve outlooks and behaviour: the crap cave paintings, the bullshit ideas of the Greeks, and the fascist Romans.’

‘And the rest.’

‘And we are embarrassed because we understand that society is what makes us and that we are all one.’

‘Cosmic,’ said Tarquin, perhaps in jest.

‘Well, the point is that I’ve got embarrassment and shame and guilt in spades and, er, can we end the session now please doctor?’

‘But of course. Now please excuse me, I have an urgent appointment with Jimmy Riddle.’ I blinked.

A few minutes later I heard Tarquin talking with Ben the barman, each sentence tracing an arc of pitch like a shooting star above a nativity scene.

I thought how his name seemed ill-fitting.

Quentin, now that’s better-suited. Less prickly, less flashy, I thought (we will find this name appropriated in my vision).

I have always found my own name likewise ill-fitting. Besides its bombastic claim to heroism, “Arthur” sounds ironic, a trendy gesture towards hipster proletarianism. But I enjoyed wearing Radwan’s name that night, it felt subversive and somewhat kinky, *unheimlich*, as the Germans say for uncanny. Radwan had commented when we met that our relationship was on sound footing, “A fellow *spondee*”, he said.⁷²

Tarquin carried two tall glasses each containing about three inches of rum and a handful of ice-cubes. He handed me one without ceremony and gulped half his measure as he looked out to the flashing black ocean.

⁷² A *spondee* is a pattern of two consecutive stressed syllables.

I sensed a chill in the air and wondered why Tarquin was now sullen. Breaking the silence I resorted to my “Emergency Banter” routine: ‘D’you tip here? Can’t stand the practice myself. Always have to do it in America, of course. Here’s four bucks for the beer and another to subsidise your avaricious boss.’ There was no flinch in Tarquin’s Byronic stare so I continued my spiel, ‘Tipping condones the, whassa word.’

‘*Hegemony*,’ said Tarquin with icy resolve and sat down.

‘It’s anti-progressive, working these terrible jobs, making other people’s food and getting paid less if you don’t smile. Bloody meritocracy. Wrong side of history,’ I said, taking a swig and coughing (it was gin, tasting both neat and very cheap).

‘Quite,’ came Tarquin’s reply. His testiness concerned me, sitting there motionless and staring darkly towards the ocean.

I shook my head and thought back to a particular morning in California, the crisp view of distant mountains on an early morning drive, alone and content.

— *Did I say something wrong?* I wondered.

‘Sorry for ranting. That’s my *steez*,’ I said.

I don’t think Tarquin was familiar with the word as he spluttered and said, ‘Your *what*?’

‘My *steez*,’ I repeated. ‘Y’know, my *style*,’ I clarified.

‘Right. Your *steez*,’ said Tarquin, wiping his eyes.

I think he was caught off guard by how street-savy I sounded.

‘Meritocracy always sets me off,’ I offered.

‘Seems like a fair system, rewarding those who try harder,’ said Tarquin, sitting down and raising his glass. We chin-chined and he downed the measure. I took a sip and began to feel nauseous.

‘It’s bloody unreasonable,’ I snapped back, hoping I wouldn’t have to explain further.

Tarquin said nothing.

‘Look, this is what I mean.’ I was flushed with conviction. ‘Meritocracy adds inertia. You’re punishing people who do not maintain the structures of power.’

‘Meritocracy is a *rewarding* system,’ said Tarquin. ‘That’s the whole point.’

'Same thing,' I said. 'Least in practice. Reward and punish. It's ordering people in a line.'

'But it will encourage people at the back to move forward.'

'Right. People at the back. Q-E-D.'

'I'm not sure that a punishment system and a reward system are equivalent. S'like comparing Soviet Russia and America.'

'Well we agree on something then.'

Tarquin presented a fist for bumping, which I shook my head at and continued:

'Perhaps it's some unprocessed trauma from being the lanky weirdo at school. Or a historical trauma, recapitulation from a pacifist Viking ancestor who didn't want to fight.'

'The Viking's were actually quite —'

'I know,' I interrupted, holding my tongue that wanted to regurgitate Radwan's nasty rebuke "Well done for caring".

Tarquin turned to face me. 'So, Radwan. Tell me something about yourself.'

'I've been living in California for the last eight years or so. LA.'

He made a sound as though I'd told him I'd renounced eating celery.

'Well, s'not for everyone.'

'Marmite.'

'More like nutmeg I reckon. Don't get to taste it enough to decide what to make of it,' I said, unnerved by my quick and sure-footed answer. 'Dunno whether I was there for the cultural exoticism or escaping the lack of mine own.' I realized the nutmeg wouldn't hold up to this qualification so changed tack. 'I'm a weed grower, naturally.' I winced at my stupid fib.

'Oh,' again, entirely non-plussed.

'No,' I said, inflamed for his Millennial unconcern. 'I'm actually a *phonologist*.' I enjoy saying the word, revelling in the aftermath of lukewarm confusion. 'A kind of linguist,' I added.

'I see,' said Tarquin. 'And what does a *kind of linguist* do? Anything to do with Neuro Linguistic, er—'

'Programming,' I finished. 'It's funny, I *do* work with NLP, but—'

‘All that creepy dating stuff?’ interrupted Tarquin. ‘Putting people down to reduce their self-esteem?’

‘I believe what you are referring to is called *Negging*, in the vernacular,’ I flicked eyebrows. ‘But yes, from what I overheard at a party once, Neuro Linguistic Programming is used to such devious ends. My friend calls it *Game*. Sounds completely *bunco*.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Trickery,’ I said. ‘NLP is pseudoscience. Officially speaking.’

‘You suggest there could be something to it?’

‘Well, although it’s pseudoscience, not part of the scientific canon, the phenomenon may still have an effect. I mean, hypnosis is pseudoscience—’

‘Is it?’ asked Tarquin, taking out his phone and hammering-in some text. I was surprised by the gentle emotion that flushed over me as I saw him handle the phone. Without mine I felt more disconnected than ever. It was a peculiar “coming of age” feeling, an elevated pride.

Tarquin read from his screen, ‘Is hypnosis pseudoscience? *Hypnosis is a phenomenon of the mind*, blah blah blah. Until then, *hypnosis is, by definition, pseudoscience*.’

‘Please cite your references,’ I intoned.

‘That was,’ (a pause), ‘*Math-E-Magic* on Reddit. But it should be noted that his assessment is disputed! *Third-eye-opener* has much to say to the contrary.’

‘The great debate of our time.’

‘It might well be,’ muttered Tarquin, swiping his screen. ‘So apparently there’s a *conspiracy against the truth*. Pseudoscience is really, well, the bottom line is that I should investigate the *Mandela Effect*. Mankind’s timeline has been changed and we’re in a *hacked stub*. Third-eye is sure of it.’

Tarquin flashed his phone at me.

‘That’s not how you spell *pseudoscience*,’ I said, fighting to contain an outburst of Gramscian critique, that capitalism’s cultural hegemony comes not from the oppressive system but from ideology of the bourgeois.

Instead I went more upbeat, ‘California is full of people who believe in bizarre ideas. There’s a lady I met who offers re-birthing sessions. I don’t think Mother’s quite up to it, to be honest.’

A contemplative sound from Tarquin.

‘Anyway, and sorry for the rant, again, but my point is that even if there is no scientific evidence for, I don’t know, karma, belief in these phenomena still affect the universe. Belief influences perception and behaviour. This billionaire I know has covered his body in arcane symbols and yet he’s so rational he makes most of his decisions with a computer.’

‘Far out,’ said Tarquin. ‘Sounds very Californian. But we were discussing neuro linguistic perception.’

‘Programming,’ I corrected. ‘The NLP we were discussing concerns the language we use *within* our mind, how different levels of consciousness represent information.’

‘Sounds rather conceptual,’ said Tarquin. ‘You’re saying that thoughts exist as some kind of language?’

‘No! That’s what the NLP-dick-eds are saying. The idea that thoughts exist in some kind of word-like language is absurd. It’s why I can’t stand reading most literature, the way authors write what people are thinking in tidy italics.’

‘Makes for a good story,’ said Tarquin, with annoying reasonableness.

‘Look,’ I said, feeling something like a phoney politician with a difficult constituent. ‘Language effects how ideas are created and understanding this can help to get a message across. Y’know, *Winning friends and influencing people*.⁷³

‘Self-help books have a lot to answer for,’ said Tarquin.⁷⁴

‘You know that for each of us there is an accent, a single pronunciation that can be used to completely control us. S’like a

⁷³ *How to Win Friends and Influence People* is a self-help book written by Dale Carnegie and published in 1936.

⁷⁴ *Self Help* was a book published in 1859 by the Scottish reformist Samuel Smiles. A contemporary said, “Smiles was the arch-Philistine and his book the apotheosis of respectability, gigmanity and selfish grab”.

key opening a lock. Can make us do anything. Can make *important* people do anything.'

'You're fucking kidding me,' said Tarquin, with a breathy seriousness that I found both disarmingly innocent and unnervingly empowering.

'Yeah I'm kidding. Can't stop myself,' I confessed.

'Hal!' barked Tarquin.

'But this is the trouble with linguistics in general,' I said. 'The theories can't really be verified. What do you do? Get a couple of twins and — You wouldn't get anywhere near the ethics review board. You heard of Chomsky?'

'Yar, that chap who—'

'No. Well, yeah, before all that he— Anyway, my friend Chomsky—'

'You *know* Chomsky?'

'Yeah, sure.⁷⁵

'Chomsky's main theory was based on the assumption that we share a common and innate language system. But the problem with his examples were that they assumed we all talk proper. *Lee. Properly.*'⁷⁶

'Right.'

'But we don't speak proper. Fucked if I do, anyway.'

'Right.'

'S'why I detest dialog in movies. Films. People never talk in complete sentences but in the media they are always shown as neatly contained impeccable statements. S'all so contrived. I just can't suspend my disbelief and can barely read anything in the first person. Most of what we say to each other would need footnotes if anyone wanted to understand it. You see what—'

'Yeah.'

⁷⁵ I doubt if Arthur "knows" Chomsky personally. He has a tendency to call people he admires and is influenced by "my friend".

⁷⁶ *Language and Mind* is a book by Noam Chomsky, first published in 1968, in which he reviews the idea of *deep structure* in language: a computational approach to understanding the underlying "deep" meanings of written or spoken language.

‘We speak in clichés,’ I said. ‘Licks and phrases like a mediocre jazz musician. Like a good one too, for that matter. And when it comes to describing thought with words we can only loosely contour the squalls of consciousness: the things of the mind. *The map is not the territory.*⁷⁷

‘What?’

‘It’s an aphorism. An epigram,’ I blazed, three sheets to the wind. ‘It means that when a real thing is reduced to a series of comparisons, like we do in AI today, then what we’re left with runs the risk of being confused with the original thing itself. We redefine the thing in terms of its representation. A cat becomes something an algorithm calls a cat. Humanity becomes the internet babble of a select few sensationalist morons. Same with psychology, talking about *lifestyle* instead of *life*.’

A gruff harrumph from Tarquin left me wondering if he was following.

‘My point is, *was*,’ I continued, ‘that it’s not just our *vocabulary* that determines the effectiveness to communicate. The *style* is just as important.’

‘*Idola fori*,’ said Tarquin, with a tediously mysterious wink.

‘Come again?’

‘The idols of the marketplace, old boy. Something my old master would say.’

‘I expect he would of.’

‘Would *have*,’ corrected Tarquin. ‘*Common* mistake,’ he added stiffly (if he meant *common* as some kind of haughty social class put-down, I find it nothing more than charming).

‘It’s hard to describe what we take for granted. David Foster Wallace compared it with a fish having to describe water.’

‘Never heard of im,’ said Tarquin.

‘Not surprised. No offence. Well *describing water*, so to speak, is what AI is substantially about. *The unknown knowns*—’

⁷⁷ Arthur was quoting an aphorism of the singular Alfred Habdank Skarbek Korzybski: “*The map is not the territory . . . but another version of reality*”. It conveys the notion that a derived abstraction is not the original thing itself. Korzybski credited the writer and mathematician Eric Temple Bell with originating this observation.

‘To quote—’

‘Slavoj Žižek,’ I interjected, aborting his certain Rumsfeldian botch. ‘The fundamental aspects of consciousness are what’s most difficult to describe and reduce to an algorithm, like memory. S’why people are so surprised it’s taken us this long to make such basic technologies as natural-sounding speech.’

Tarquin crossed his legs and with the manner of a surgeon asking if I was sure I wanted to have my legs amputated, he asked, ‘So, you’re a *coder*, yar?’

‘Well, more an enabler,’ I said, feeling my temper ratchet as he seemed insistent to begin each sentence with the word “So”.

‘You sound guilty?’

‘Well, I’ve always had a kind of shame, no, *embarrassment* with my work. There’s a kind of *futility* to it, working with AI. To be honest, I just stumbled into the middle of it, sucked into the whirlpool. A big problem is that we can’t simulate a human brain coz our memory is effectively infinite, what with Wikipedia and everything else at our fingertips, and yet our recall is so highly unpredictable. Our own consciousness is part of everyone else’s and we can’t put that into an algorithm.’

A doctorly pause. ‘I’m really sorry, but if I’m *frightfully* honest I don’t know what you mean by an *algorism*.’

I smiled at either his mispronunciation or crypto-fastidious use of what was the historically correct form.

‘Heard something on a podcast recently,’ he said. ‘How to travel everywhere in a country and sell things. Is that something to do with algorisms?’

‘You’re thinking of the *Travelling Salesman* problem, I said. ‘S’a classic.’

‘What’s that?’

‘S’not important anymore. Amazon solved it. But an *algorism*, as you say, is a series of instructions, a recipe. You know, the word *recipe* comes from the Latin *recipere*, meaning to *receive* or to *take*.’ I tested his logophilia and he gave me an annoying smile as though I were joking. ‘Y’know Paul Romer?’

‘Not personally.’

‘Well, he reckoned technology was a purely material thing, instructions for mixing raw materials together. Romer defined

technological change as an improvement in those instructions. That's the real value in society now, data and algorithms are the valued commodities and *not* raw materials. And that means humans are more valuable now than ever, and not *things*. Quite an upbeat view, dontcha think?' Tarquin looked at me attentively, his large bright eyes encouraging me to continue. 'S'not good for those who require scarcity to bulge their fucking portfolio. S'why the beast of capitalism is running scared and s'why we've ended up with technology monopolies running the show. They are unassailable. The snake's got it's FAAMG's into the neck of civilization and it can do what it likes. The problem is, of course, that monopolies are not healthy.'

'*Where sickness thrives,*' muttered Tarquin. 'But you were talking about al—'

'—gorithms. Yeah. Just think of them as recipes for mixing numbers.' I took a drink to wet my throat. 'Computers do some things really well: Add, recall, store, iterate and compare.'

'This is a Turing machine?'

'Kinda. A computer sees the world in terms of *differences*. All boils down to NOR gates. Any neural network can be represented as a decision tree, a big ol' flow chart comparing two numbers. Get two numbers and see which is bigger or —'

'Greater,' he said.

'Smaller.'

'Anyway, that's how you make artificial speech with convincing accents nowadays, and probably for a long long time to come. There's been a fundamental change in speech technology over the last decade. For a start, you don't need to know anything about linguistics. In fact, I used to interview people to make sure they knew less about linguistics than myself. Some advice I got from Fred Jelinek.'

'Who's that?'

'You need a new job?'

Tarquin immediately answered, 'Nar. You're alright mate,' in a tone that seemed designed to sting.

'Back in the day, speech technologists followed a heuristic approach using all kinds of clever bollocks, transitional probabilities and acoustical models of vocal tracts. Then came an

era of brute force, replaying recordings of celebs. Y'know, Joanna Lumley reading the Sat-Nav.'

'*Anf*ful,' spat Tarquin.

'National treasure, darling!' I exclaimed, surprised, in fact somewhat delighted at his flaring.

'No no, not *her*, *darling*. I mean the word *Sat-Nav*.'

'Right. Couldn't agree more.'

'Brute force,' prompted Tarquin.

'Right. *So*, to make speech nowadays we use neural nets and machine learning. An algorithm makes a model whilst you're having a snooze. Mind you, most of these new machine learning programs don't have any *real* intelligence, no deep understanding. They effectively parrot a pre-programmed response, never thinking of the next move.'

'I've heard that before,' said Tarquin with a wry smile. 'And how long does it take to train a model?'

'Not long. Maybe a few days.'

'*Days*?!'

'Yeah, days. And that's using a computer that costs as much as a car. Think of a control panel with about fifty million knobs. Problem is, we wanted our machine to sound truly human, misquoting or saying the wrong things, fluffing the lines. And this is much more complicated than creating a machine with super-human powers, one that never forgets and speaks the Queen's English. Most of the text and speech we use to train the model is from formal presentations. S'all been pre-written, like Chomsky's examples. We tried to build a *janky robot* with a mind like a ditzy stoner. Didn't someone say that forgetfulness is the heart of creativity?'

'Can't remember,' said Tarquin.

'Well that's the danger of having infinite information at your fingertips. Anyway, I've just spent the past eight years building an algorithm that talks. You feed it text and tell it what language and accent you want.'

‘Do you code in Python?’⁷⁸

‘Yeah. It’s the new Lingua Franca. Or rather, the new English.’

‘I’m reading *Python for Dummies*.’

‘Those little yellow books have so much to answer for. I’m part of the problem, just read one on psychoanalysis. I first diagnosed myself as an over-achieving sociopath with delusions of exceptionalism but now think I have imposter syndrome.’

This earned an unwarranted laugh.

‘Speaking of bullshit psychology, they say that to be a good coder requires the qualities of laziness, impatience, and *hubris*.⁷⁹

‘But I think these three all boil down to *pride*, and pride leads to every other vice, according to C. S. Lewis.’

‘Died the same day as JFK,’ said Tarquin.

‘And Aldous Huxley,’ I added. ‘Mainlined a hundred mics of acid.’

‘Beast mode.’

‘Anyway, we were talking about *halgorisms*,’ (the Victorian butler was back, carrying the epenthetic ‘h’). ‘Here’s the pitch: I co-founded a company testing these computer programs that convert text to speech. We trained the models using recordings of people talking online. Many *thousands* of hours of recordings. If you want to convert your text to speech then you just dial in the language and accent. They call’em *Deep Fakes*. Our system can sound quite emotional too. We made this demo of a timid Putin speaking Geordie and pretending to be sober.’

‘AI scares me. Replacing all our jobs.’

⁷⁸ The Python programming language was developed by Guido van Rossum. The whimsical *Benevolent dictator for life* named it after Monty Python. Python is the most widely used language in artificial intelligence research.

⁷⁹ According to Larry Wall, designer of the Perl programming language, the three great virtues of a programmer are *laziness* (write time-saving programs), *impatience* (write programs that anticipate your needs), and *hubris* (excessive pride is needed to fuel the quality in one’s work, less one succumbs to the implacable *snark* of the coding community).

'Well it *should* scare you. And no-one's job is safe. That's the good news.' (No laugh from Tarquin.)

'Us computer programmers will be the first to go. Ironic aint it? I's'a-best thing a language AI can do, create more code. S'coz it's so simple. Thirty-two words in C, the mother language of all computers. Your friends studying radiology might not have the same kind of career as their seniors either. Shorter half-lifes. Or is it lives?'

'No one really knows,' he deadpanned.

'Great mystery,' I said. And we shared a warm chuckle without flinching from our private peerings toward the black ocean.

'But artists losing their jobs,' I said. 'S'not happening til the end of humanity. Take graphic art. We don't like art coz of what it looks like.' I looked down at my stupid shorts. 'We like art coz of what it connects us with, the humanity of the artist and the ideas in which it is situated.' I basked in the glory of my tottering statement before it fell over.

'And also we like art coz of what it's not,' said Tarquin with a smile. I also smiled and wondered if he had said this to appeal to me, thinking I would agree with it. Indeed, it reminded me of the kind of thing I *used* to say, taking that irritating negativistic and relativistic angle that our identity is not static, that *existence precedes essence*. The Honzing vision changed my opinion for the better.

'What was I saying?' I said.

'The real problem.'

'Yeah. The real problem of AI is that we can effectively create new humans.' I felt like leaving it at that, but Tarquin's patience egged me on.

'We live online now. We can apply for a new passport. Buy a house. Correspond and work. And AI can pretty much do all of that now. Send an email. Take a language course. Do a university degree. Certainly in the next five years. It means we can fake an individual. Thousands, millions of people. But the only thing it can't do yet is —'

I paused to reseat myself, downing my drink and slapping the thatched roof of our little shelter.

'—Fake a human voice.'

‘And you—’

‘A two-way exchange,’ I blustered. ‘A casual conversation between two people conveys a type of human intelligence that will be the last to be understood and mechanized: emotional intelligence. The way we adapt our language to who we are speaking with, the way we give room for the other to speak, the humour and the way we interrupt. The pauses and ebbs and flows of energy in our conversation, measured to the nearest millisecond, give insight into the deepest and most magnificent realms of consciousness.’ I nodded to the ocean.

‘And your system can do all of that?’

‘Nar,’ I said, shaking my head low.

‘Oh,’ said Tarquin, somewhat deflated. ‘I thought—’

‘But s’good enough for someone.’

Tarquin raised his glass and I crunched down another ice cube.

‘And this someone is using it now?’

I replied: ‘Yeah. Probably. He paid a fortune for it. We’ve also got an open-source free-to-use version but it sounds more robotic. People prefer it. We found out people didn’t actually *want* a computer with a real voice, they wanted it sounding at least a *bit* artificial. What the fuck does *that* tell you?’

‘Too much reality,’ he said. ‘Is that what you call the left side of the uncanny valley?’

‘Yeah. But someone found our system to have more immediate value on the *right* side of the valley.’ I coughed. ‘One of our demos was a perfect rendition of Obama reciting a prayer. In Arabic.’

‘Wow. Now I know why you were asking me about guilt.’

‘In our defence, our speech *recognition* engine was something of a game-changer. Lets people speak to their computer with a regional accent. Works very well.’ And with an afterthought I said, ‘Except round here.’

‘Here?’

‘*Pukapuka*, to be precise. Going there this week. S’why I came to the Cook Islands. Our algorithms can’t replicate or understand the Pukapukan accent and I wanted to find out what’s the problem.’

‘You’ll have to see if the storm lets you do that,’ said Tarquin. ‘And what about other accents?’ he asked with a mischievous glint.

‘Well, we put a lot of effort to make sure it works for British regional accents in particular.’

‘Don’t get owt for nowt!’ said Tarquin. ‘The north has been harried enough.’⁸⁰

‘Harrowed to death and Eton alive,’ I said dryly.

Glossing over my critique, with a soft Dublin accent running so fast the words ran like the Liffey, Tarquin asked, ‘*And how does your-algorism-fare-with-a-thick-Irish-brogue-now?*’

‘Funnily enough, it rather struggles with Hiberno-English. Can’t handle the “unrest of spirit”. Something us English will never understand. Who said that accent is the soul of the language?’⁸¹ Also, our algorithm could never do a convincing laugh, though that didn’t seem to matter to the company who bought us.’

‘So you are *obsessed* with accents?’

‘Well, I started out designing music synthesisers but realised that what I was really working on was simulating *voices*. S’all about sawtooth waves. You heard of a three-oh-three?’

‘Something to do with techno music?’

‘There’s no need to use the word music, but yeah. The three-o-three is the most classic synth sound. It’s a sawtooth wave shape, like speech, like glottal pulses, and it makes our Wernicke’s go crazy.’⁸²

‘You’ve thought this through,’ said Tarquin.

⁸⁰ This dark-toned reference is towards “the Harrying of the North”, a genocidal campaign by King William the Conqueror who ransacked and burnt most of Northern England. About three-quarters of that population, mostly of Viking origin, were destroyed.

⁸¹ “*Accent is the soul of language; it gives to it both feeling and truth.*” — from *Emile* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

⁸² The Wernicke’s area is a part of our brain involved in the understanding of speech.

Just came to me. Anyway, I left the world of synths and moved into voice and accents. Ended up working ninety-hour weeks living off ghee coffee. It was a cultivated obsession.'

We shall later see how this cultivated obsession is related to The Honzing in a most fundamental way.

'Accent can reveal more about a person *faster* than any other quality of behaviour,' I continued.

'Quicker.'

'Exactly. Years in America heightened my sensitivity. It was either surrender and go native or hold out as some absurd bastion of Albion, whistling *The Archers* and going moist-eyed for the dial-tones. Y'know, a thoroughly *insidious* aspect of computer speech recognition is that it forces you to speak with a neutral accent. There are over seven thousand languages today and half of 'em are going extinct. But accents are more important. Language is syntax, rules and regulations, legalese and jargon. Accents are charm and rhythm and poetry; ornamentation to embellish and hide behind. They are what the language walks upon, the *soul*, if I may.'

'But accents are being burnt in the furnace of budget technologies, forcing us to comply with their janky algorithm to play James fucking Blunt on Spotify. It's beyond. . .' I was at a loss for words.

Tarquin answered with precious moderation that I was *entitled to my opinion* (perhaps he was a fan of Blunty?)

'Mediocrity is what we've come to expect of this banal future we've arrived at. Most people are fine with computers sounding like Stephen Hawking.'

With relevant pronunciation Tarquin said, 'IS THIS NA-OT A GOOD VOICE FOR THE FU-TCHUR?'

'Maybe, and excellent impression, by the way, it's hard to get the dental and alveolar stops sounding the same. My mate says the future has arrived but it's *unevenly spread*', (Radwan was quoting William Gibson).

'He's haunted by a future that hasn't arrived, the lazer-holograms and lab-grown meats and a society where the emphasis is on sustainability and ethical righteousness. S'what we were

promised, he says. He's a haunted prisoner of time: Hostile to the past, impatient of the present, and cheated of the future.⁸³

'Yikes. Overlapping ages,' said Tarquin. 'Reminds me of someone I met recently, a crazy scientist, but go on, tell me how your speech thingy works.'

'It's the way it can simulate emotion. Gives the machine a personality. Vocal tics like hmms and umms. S'all a kinda camouflage. When you ask people "does this sound natural" then if the voice sounds emotional or charming, we don't listen so much to the raw sound but focus on the *sentiment*. Adds chaos. It's a cheat, really. Same goes with chatbots. You give it a ditzy attitude and you gloss over the fact it doesn't seem to know much about the idea of fundamental concepts like *fairness*. S'called Natural Language Processing, the proper NLP.'

'And where do you get all the audio to train your system?'

'Well, that's the crux,' I said, tapping my nose, '*Vee hav vayz ov making you talk, meine Freunde*. It's amazing what information people will give if they're using something for free.' I gave a knowing look to Tarquin but was met with a blank stare. 'Anyway, the point is that our speech algorithm can train itself to sound like a particular person using only about ten minutes of speech. Though it depends on the person.' I shifted awkwardly, avoiding eye-contact.

'You're thinking it would take longer with me?' Tarquin said. 'Tricky to pin down my public-school twang, eh what old boy?' And then switching to a gangy London accent, 'Yeah bruv but man can do wun-uv dis ting innit,' tapping his nose and winking.

I sensed that Tarquin was having fun at my expense.

'And this data collection you do is all, you know, *legit*?' he asked.

⁸³ *Haunted by technologies that haven't arrived: Hauntology* (a portmanteau of *haunting* and *ontology*) is a concept coined by philosopher Jacques Derrida in his 1993 book *Spectres of Marx*. The term was taken up by media theorists such as Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds to describe art preoccupied with a "nostalgia for lost futures".

I refer you to our twenty-seven page end-user license-agreement, the *terms-of-surrender*.’

‘Is that what you call it?’

‘That’s what I call it,’ I said, looking away.

‘And you did all of this? You must be a genius.’

‘No no. I have a talent is all.’

‘You’re a *master* then?’

‘Alas, not even. I’ve met many masters and one genius.’

‘What’s the difference?’

‘Masters can do anything they want. A genius, they have no choice.’

‘And is your genius a man of honour?’ asked Tarquin, with sudden presence.

I thought about Radwan.

‘I don’t think so, not any more.’

‘Then he is a tragedy. A tragedy.’

I nodded. ‘Anyway, back to my talent. I was just quality control, the Golden Ears. I spent years listening to speech and rating how natural it sounds, stalking the *artefacts of artifice*. The algorithm would present two recordings of speech and I judged which one sounded most natural. And this trained a *new* algorithm that did the authenticity classification automatically, something called a *Generative Adversarial Network*.’

‘So your first neural net generates a voice and a second one listens and decides if it is fake?’

I hmm’d.

‘And would you say that it *knows* what is fake? Is it *sentient*?’

‘Maybe,’ I said lazily. ‘Just depends how you want to define *sentience*. S’like the bicameral theory of mind,’ I said, grasping a pre-prepared spiel.

‘Easy for you to say.’

‘Bi-cameral meaning two chambers. Y’know, a camera is a box, right?’ (Furrowed doctorly eyes from Tarquin.) ‘The bicameral theory states that up until quite recently, a few thousand years ago, our mind worked in a different way. It had a speaking part and a listening part, a part that listened to the voice of God, or Gods.’

‘You mean the left and right hemispheres?’

'No, s'more abstract than that. There's suggestion from Homer.'

'Oh yes, he wrote some bangers. *The wine-dark sea!*' cried Tarquin, sweeping an arm across the ocean.

'Quite. We used to *hear* thoughts more than feel them. Joan of Arc style.'

'And you're saying your company had an algorithm based on this idea?'

'Yeah. Well, kinda. A creating system and an editing system. We sold the company. Got *acquired*, in the parlance.' I rubbed my toe in awkward distraction remembering what I had heard of Angmar's connections to robotics. 'It's also, well, it's a bit of a celebration,' I said, deciding not to reveal it was my birthday and especially not to talk about Angmar.

'Yolo,' said Tarquin. 'Rinse it.'

'Rinse?' I asked, not having heard the word before.

'*Squander*,' he helped.

I again clocked Tarquin in the eyes to determine if there was another level of meaning but could not find any evidence.

The jungle insects had finished their cry and the new silence hung with the presence an un-hummed fridge. Stevie Wonder's *Don't You Worry* started playing at the bar but mixed with the original 1984 cut of Run DMC's *It's Like That*. The tempos and the musical keys matched, 120 beats-per-minute, B major. The barman and beautiful receptionist were nodding their heads in sync, looking at each other with a strange peacefulness. The vibrational juxtapositions of the two tracks gave an edgy register and I wondered if the mix was directed towards us tourists. Tarquin didn't seem to notice the tension and danced merrily in his chair, clench-fisted arms flexing with tiny child-like movements like a nursing home patient.

A boozy truculence brewed within and I steered the conversation towards conspiracy ideas, testing Tarquin's mettle with some of the more *connoisseur* material I had read on leaflets in Venice Beach, info-hazards like Alien Technology Infiltration.

'Yar, conspiracy stories. Send 'em over!' boomed Tarquin, still chair-dancing. 'There was this chap, mad scientist type fellow. Came into hospital once. Astrophysicist I think. Classic

schizophrenic breakdown, poor bastard. He was totally freaked out by the amount of Dark Matter in the universe. Maybe it was Dark *Energy*. Whatever. He said that the more we investigate the universe, rationally, with science and that, the more we struggle to come up with answers. He had stopped eating and thought the Moon was harvesting our creative intelligence.⁸⁴

‘Blimey,’ I said, wondering why the story sounded familiar. ‘Sounds like that riddle about the hole: *what gets bigger the more you take away*. Maybe you should call it the “hole truth”?’

‘Good one,’ said Tarquin. ‘The more we question the givens and re-evaluate our *heuristics*, as you might say, the less sure we are about the actual nature of things. It feels as though the universe is *changing* as we investigate it. Sometimes I feel it actually *resents* us dissecting her and is punishing us with confusion and anxiety.’

‘The Hawthorne effect,’ I declared.⁸⁵

‘Indeed,’ repeated Tarquin, sitting upright with a Harley Street aura. ‘This is happening on both the macro and micro levels: the wide-eyed cosmologists, the biologists and the technologists, people like yourself deconstructing and reconstructing consciousness. It goes against classical science.’⁸⁶

⁸⁴ The visible universe is made of baryonic matter: protons, neutrons and electrons. This makes up less than 5% of the mass of the universe. Lord Kelvin, in 1884, postulated that the universe contains more mass than is observable and today cosmologists predict that the remaining 95% of mass is dark matter and a force that repels gravity known as dark energy (Lord Kelvin also declared that heavier-than-air flight was impossible, so maybe it was a lucky guess). The dark energy/matter theory is *a post-hoc postulate*, also called an *auxiliary hypothesis*. Karl Popper derided such types of ideas as *conventionalist hypotheses*, the variety that do not provide a method for falsification.

⁸⁵ The *Hawthorne effect* is the inclination to modify our behaviour when we are aware of being observed. Perhaps the *observer effect* is a better analogy.

⁸⁶ By *classical science*, we assume Tarquin was talking about the position of Aristotle, who when discussing the science of Nature said: “*We advance from what is more obscure by nature towards what is more clear and more knowable by nature.*”

‘A modern paradox,’ I said. ‘Technology is alienating us from our rational selves by removing our sense of control. Turning machines off and on again when something goes wrong.’ I thought of my sister and John. ‘Technology and capitalism are configuring us to endorse nonsense conspiracies.’

‘Take back control!’ blurted Tarquin, Faraging the Brexit bus slogan.

‘The truth is far more frightening: no-one and no-thing is in control. We’re designed to over-abstract, find out what’s behind the mask, behind the curtain. When we find nothing there we have a crisis.’ I composed myself and facing the southing sea pronounced in a dodgy Yoda accent, *‘When to stop, that is what we must know. Knowing when to stop averts trouble.’*

‘Hmm,’ said Tarquin, with rightful doubt. ‘And what’s the solution?’

‘Only just coming to terms with the problem. Automization and centralization seems pretty obvious. Perhaps our crisis isn’t even a problem to be solved. There *are* definite problems to be solved, that’s for sure, but our existential crisis, why we have these schisms in society, they might be entirely natural consequences of evolution, a kind of planetary Gaian game theory to find the optimal solution.’

‘So you’re not a revolutionary?’ said Tarquin, quite reasonably, although possibly in jest. I didn’t feel like going into my theory of violence but thankfully didn’t need an excuse as in a lighter tone of heroic bathos he said, ‘Anyway, enough twaddle. Fancy another drink?’, as though we had been discussing biscuits.

Fast music was playing on the bar’s loudspeakers, an electric bass line waddling unpredictably amongst unruly bongos backed with hearty Polynesian harmonies. A rootsy lead voice encouraged the listener to sing along, incredibly fast and incomprehensible Māori lyrics save for the odd short English phrase, one of which I was soon singing, “*I come-a-take-a you home!*”⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Arthur and Tarquin were probably listening to the exquisite Cook Island music collective *Virgin Voyage*.

An *a cappella* ballad played next. The lead voice sounded African, strained and wise.

Tarquin returned and interrupted my musical reverie.

'You alright?' I asked, noting his frequent visits to the toilet.

'Tummy troubles,' rubbing his abdomen. 'Hardly slept in the last few days. Been living off Red Bull and chocolate, prep'ing the hospital. There's a storm coming in.'

I whistled the top line of Brad Fiedel's *Terminator* theme.

'Well, no one knows what will happen,' he continued. 'But apparently a cyclone rolled through here a while ago and the island was cut-off for a week. A real *humdinger*. There are rumours some of the injuries were treated with Māori medicine, burning herbs and, well, have you heard of *trepanning*?'

'Yikes,' I said, visualizing the skulls I had seen in The British Museum.

'Yar. Climate change is real. Three millimetres a year and rising.'

'Each Amazon one-click bringing us closer to *Götterdämmerung*'.⁸⁸

Fisherman told me huge swaths of deep-water seaweed are washing up. Surest sign of a storm. Crabs too. They're huge! Could crush your head!'

I pushed my thumb pad into the sharp shard of smashed phone.

The music stopped and so Tarquin and I sneaked away with our drinks, not wanting to disturb the bar staff who appeared to be discussing something important. As we walked down to the beach the hotel lights turned off.

We sat down upon the gritty shore. Stars revealed themselves in patches of broken cloud and a gentle breeze blew steadily ashore. By the light of a partly revealed moon I noticed on Tarquin's left ankle a tattoo, a caricatured human skull encompassed by a snake consuming its own tail, a riff upon the Rod of Asclepius.

⁸⁸ *Götterdämmerung* is a German translation of *Ragnarök*: the great flooding events leading to the demise of most Norse Gods.

‘Practicing your anatomy?’ I asked.

‘Ha! Yeah, no, mate did the design. *Ouroboros*.’

I thought Tarquin’s use of “mate” had become easier throughout the evening.

‘Clever. And the skull?’

‘Oh, that’s Bong-Ra. Breakcore, y’know? Good idea at the time scenario.’

‘*Bong-Ra*.’ I repeated the name with dubious relish. ‘News to me.’

‘Not surprised,’ said Tarquin. ‘No offence,’ he added quickly.

I wondered if Tarquin was taking a jibe at my age.

He continued: ‘Yar. We follow him around at music festivals. Synchronises people. Four days caning it. Hive-mind, y’know. Collective consciousness and all that. S’where I met up with the anti-Frackers. Somewhere in Somerset. Not gonna lie, we didn’t think anything would come of it. Managed to convince the council to re-wild a farm and go off-grid. Accidentally became experts on bees and power inverters and wound-up drafting a roadmap for UBI.’

I hmm’d with wizardly modulation.

‘Universal basic income. Living allowance.’

I withered, confronted with a double charge against my political and environmental apathy. And then a hotter feeling displaced these emotions, an anger for not being part of this history.

‘Where in Somerset?’ I said, trying to sound casual.

‘Village called Branscombe.’

‘It’s in Devon.’

Perhaps detecting my fluster, Tarquin coughed to clear the air. ‘I really think there’s a brain sync happening when we’re at festivals, some vestigial thing like you get with those strobing Dreamachines. You *must* know what I’m talking about.’

‘I do, and I think you’re right. But festivals always seem culty.’

‘Nar, opposite. Festivals are for people who don’t want to join the cults.’

‘Another old boy’s network,’ I said, peeling a crispy snail-trail of dried ectoplasm from my inner thigh and flicking it into the ocean. ‘Sounds to me a set-theory problem. Marx’s club.’⁸⁹

‘Hardly,’ snapped Tarquin, perhaps riled by my snark and perhaps confusing Groucho for Karl. ‘I think your *friend* who’s worried the future hasn’t arrived needs to get out more coz this international progressiveness seems to me what the future promised. Striving for the *common good*.’

I nodded aporetically, wondering if Tarquin was suggesting that *I* needed to get out more.

‘No doubt the universe is unfolding as it should, offering us its *desiderata*,’ said Tarquin.⁹⁰

I looked back to the hotel bar and saw the barman and the receptionist sharing a cigarette.

The distant lightening had paused and Tarquin stared seawards to a gap in the clouds framing the gibbous moon hanging a hands-width above the white line of breaking surf, its reflection textured as an oil painting.

The dew point fell silently through the zephyr.

‘Moon’s a fingernail,’ said Tarquin, pointing towards it and closing one eye. ‘The white bit,’ he added absently, holding his aim.

‘The *Lunula*’

‘The Lunula,’ he repeated. ‘I’ve been thinking how coincidental it is, the Moon and the Sun. . .’ Tarquin faded out, still staring, I waited for him to continue.

‘They appear to be exactly the same size. It’s *miraculous*.’

⁸⁹ The set theory problem is a logical paradox popularized by Bertrand Russel: *Given a set, a collection of distinct objects, then what is the set of all sets that do not contain themselves as members?* (If you are still unfamiliar with the word *set*, the Oxford English Dictionary explains its 43 senses in 60,000 words.)

⁹⁰ *Desiderata* indicates things that are desired; from the Latin *desidere*, meaning *from the stars*. Tarquin quotes from Max Ehrmann’s prose poem *Desiderata*: *You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.*

'Never really thought about it, but yeah, it's an incredible coincidence. Must have really —'

'Affected the way we think,' finished Tarquin. 'The way we understand our lives in terms of meanings. Our personal whatsa word?'

'*Teleology*,' I ejected triumphantly.

'*Teleology*,' he repeated.

'It's a *Jonbar point*,' I said, nodding with smug sagacity.⁹¹

I continued. 'It was a turning point in history. The Moon awakened our rational minds. It dared us to understand it, nudging our ambition to tap on its surface, cosmic clues and threads for us to follow.'⁹²

I paused for a moment to collect my thoughts before continuing: 'A clue to a deeper level of understanding about ourselves and the universe. It teaches us to consider what we mean by a coincidence and what we mean by arbitrary. It teaches us to *over-think*.'

'*Apophenia*,' said Tarquin.⁹³

'What is?'

Finding patterns. Patterns that aren't there. Unrelated repetitions. Symbols that seem to be directed at only the viewer.

⁹¹ According to David Langford's writings in the *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, a Jonbar point is a term used in the sci-fi scene meaning a forking point in a plot, an event that has a significant consequence, much like the butterfly effect. The name comes from a 1938 story about a certain John Barr who makes the decision to pick up either a magnet or a pebble: choosing one will lead to either a utopian civilization named Jonbar or the tyrannical state of Gyronchi.

⁹² It is useful that Arthur should compare a *clue* with a *thread* here: *clue* is derived from *clew*, an old English word meaning "a ball of thread or yarn." Its meaning was in reference to the *clew of thread* given by the Greek goddess Ariadne to Theseus to help him escape the labyrinth of the Minotaur of Crete.

⁹³ *Apophenia*: from Greek *apo-* (apart) and *phainein* (to show). The word was coined by psychiatrist Klaus Conrad in his 1958 publication *On the beginning stages of schizophrenia*. He defined *Apophänie* as "unmotivated seeing of connections accompanied by feelings of abnormal meaningfulness."

Confused semiology, if you will. Social media encourages it, kids thinking everything's about themselves. *Self reference.*⁹⁴

'A-po-phenia,' I repeated, weighing the word as I looked out to the thin line of surf crashing on the outer reef. 'Think that's a problem I might have. Always reading too much into things. *False positives.*⁹⁴

'Yar, we all do it old boy,' said Tarquin, yawning. 'We all over-analyse. Confirmation bias. *One must know when to stop.* I was arguing with a chap the other day that the word *waste* was an abbreviation. As in "waste bin". I think it's coz I'm so used to acronyms.'

'Symbols,' I said, adding in a robot voice, 'We're all symbolic teleological entities.'

'It's the *scientific condition*,' said Tarquin. 'And the non-scientific condition, for that matter.'

I nodded, thinking about my sister, specifically how I'd once tried my theory of *karma* on her, how Newton's law of energy conservation is hard-wired, or at least learnt very early, and that we expect a reaction to an action even in the psychic realm (I can't remember her rebuttal but no doubt it was quite withering).

Tarquin again pointed his finger to the Moon.

I wonder if the Sun-Moon realization was new for him. Not the realization that they're the same apparent size, he must have known that from solar eclipses, rather that vertiginous sense of the *sublime*, the *oceanic synchrony*.⁹⁵

I watched Tarquin twist his pointing finger along its longitudinal axis. For some reason I recollect a Burning Man

⁹⁴ The statisticians Neyman and Pearson in 1933 termed a Type I error as believing there is a trend to the data when there is not. This is called a "false positive". A Type II error is a false negative, thinking we do not have a meaningful pattern when there is one. Mathew's Correlation Coefficient considers both types and is often used to evaluate the efficacy of a model in machine learning.

⁹⁵ Romain Rolland, the French humanist writer, coined the phrase "*oceanic feeling*". In a letter to Sigmund Freud he described it as "*a sensation of eternity, a feeling of being one with the external world as a whole*". Rolland's idea of the oceanic was inspired by the example of Ramakrishna, a 19th Century devotee to the goddess Kali.

“decompression” party I had attended with Radwan: live projections of microscopic creatures called tardigrades and a burlesque show to Jefferson Airplane’s *White Rabbit*. Beautiful and intelligent Bright Young Things were in attendance. I had taken what might be considered a heroic dose of magic mushrooms and they overwhelmed me like a tsunami washing over a sandcastle. I felt as a vessel, a viewing portal for many others that have gone before me: an *actualization of the past*, as Radwan might say. As a co-founder in a Californian start-up, life was *smeared across time* (perhaps this is why I find the idea of tachyons so enchanting?). Radwan and I had been constantly refining a new demo, a pitch for purposes of funding or satisfying our sponsors. In that five-minute presentation we existed only in the absolute now. And yet the past was always to hand. Los Angeles was a city of *becoming* as much as *being* and there was something essential about it, something irreducible and inevitable where the environment seemed to explain itself and defied comparison. Yet as an outsider I was constantly trying to understand the city in terms of *difference* and thus I was constantly looking back in time for points of contrast and similarity. But the future had been perhaps the strongest force, a vacuum sucking Radwan and me towards our exit, the *rapture*.

‘Whad ju think about a God-less world, Tarky?’ I slurred.

‘God-less eh? Well, I’d rather have a *religion*-less one. They’re just flawed human *creations*, thass-er problem. The only place God exists is in the human mind.’

‘The shout in the street,’ I said automatically, and paused a while, wondering where I’d heard this.

‘Religions are the ultimate info hazard.’

‘I thought info hazards concerned spreading *true* information?’

'Depends on who you ask. Religions are true to some.'⁹⁶

Seeming to ignore my reasonable critique, Tarquin quietened as he spoke: 'What a truly id-*io*-tic conceit.' A pause. 'No, they're just *banal*. I mean, a jealous god? *Jealous*? It's *absurd* to think that a god might have such *basic* human passions. The legacy of religion will be one of perpetuating a culture of grievous violence. It's all too clear how these patriarchal systems came about: either for controlling society, as cute campfire riddles, or as sweet lullabies of consolation for poor lonely orphans.'

'Aphorisms,' I said, nodding in support.

'Lullaby riddles!' sung Tarquin, fishing out an ice-cube from his glass and throwing it into the black water. 'People are just hedging their bets. Like Pascal's Wager,' he added triumphantly. 'We hedge our bets by believing in God, so if we are right then heaven awaits! And if we are wrong, well, we just wasted a few hours on Sundays.'

'Well, we lose more than that if you follow most religions. And wouldn't an almighty Biblical God know you were cheating? But I see what you're saying. We weigh up the opportunity cost.'

'Economics,' said Tarquin. 'It's a very British way of thinking. Nation of corner-shops, dodgy plumbers and bankers. Perhaps explains our obsession with manners. The Greeks called it *Xenia*: showering guests with good cheer and hospitality in case they turn out to be a god.'⁹⁷

'It's the downside of the enlightenment, no room for cynicism. The default is to believe, not reject. There's this idea the universe doesn't really end but another one, another *eon*, comes after, and information can migrate from one eon to the next. Cosmic cyclic something-or-other. It's a pretty picture drawn by

⁹⁶ The philosopher Nick Bostrom unleashed the term *information hazard* in 2011, defining it as a risk that arises from the dissemination of *true* information. Speaking with Arthur about Bostrom's definition, he says that it is a truth according to the disseminator and receiver of the information, but with a veracity that may not be shared by others.

⁹⁷ *Xenia* is the Ancient Greek name for hospitality shown by a host to their guests (*xenos*).

Roger Penrose. I hedge my bets on it just coz I don't want to look like a chump if it turns out to be true. It's a very British trait. *Over socialization*, I added, thinking how Radwan had once called England, "The land of *I-couldn't-possibly*," in one of his rare efforts of doggerel.

"S'about marketing," said Tarquin, perhaps misunderstanding what I had said. "We're Lilliputians.⁹⁸ Force-fed false choices, arguing over which way up our boiled eggs should be eaten. And we lap it up old boy! Coke or Pepsi, wanky Apple or, er —"

"Janky Google!" I said, laughing.

"Right. Twas ever thus. Hedge funds are running the lot. Clue's in the name, betting both ways. Very *reasonable*."

I held my tongue, remembering Radwan's Quixotic earlier warning: *Beware, gentle knight, the greatest monster of them all is reason*.

"And yet here we are," said Tarquin, with a register so impartial to resolution it could barely be called speech.

We both beamed into the inky black.

I felt a voiding within, the comic tragedy of primeval emotions, the sickly material trappings of the present and the tantalizing promises of the future. Tarquin was a whitehot spark burning at the kernel of this carnival. He represented both technologist and folkist traditions, clasped between these two forces by the weight of history and circumstance. Tarquin was not an aspirational *Übermensch*, that was for the likes of Radwan (who knew at least how one was defined). Tarquin was *menschy*, *menschlich*, and driven by desires and a dignified love of this world and of life, an idealist who is part of the ordinary world and aware that presenting answers is more important than protesting the

⁹⁸ Lilliput was a fictional island nation in Jonathan Swift's 1726 novel Gulliver's Travels. Traditionally, Lilliputians broke boiled eggs on the larger end, but a breakfast accident led to a faction breaking their eggs on the small, pointed end. Thus, a quarrel arose between the "Big-Endians" and the "Small-endians", a quarrel encouraged by an enemy of Lilliput (Blefusco). Swift used this sub-story as a satirical statement about the pettiness of religious schisms and the influence of propaganda.

problem. It entirely makes sense that my vision was experienced through the eyes of Tarquin's likeness.

I rummaged idly in the sand and picked up a smooth black pebble. I held up the pebble to eclipse the moon and breathed the word *Aleph*.

And by way of terminal punctuation I threw the pebble into the ocean. I had expected to make a splash, a receipt of acknowledgment, but the sound was masked by the southing of the waves.⁹⁹

I was surprised to find myself crying large tears of confusion.

Tarquin broke the silence. That's enough for me tonight. Woe unto the early risers and all that bollocks,' and without waiting for my reply he disappeared through a large flowering red Ixora.

I decided to sleep on the beach and returned to the bungalow to fetch a towel. On the far horizon the lightening had restarted. It was almost continuous, a private masque.

'Truth and beauty *and* comfort and happiness!' I shouted.¹⁰⁰

I pushed through the shrubs and back to the beach, stomping along the gravelly sand with a fast tempo that begat several earworms.

First came Paul Dukas's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, the oboe leading to ruminations on the day's poetic disaster.

— *Why is my poetry so bad, yet great poetry resonates so strongly and meaningfully with me?*

— *In surrendering yourself to art, then you actually become the artist.*

'Metempsychosis,' I said aloud.

⁹⁹ "I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore and diverting myself now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me." — Isaac Newton.

¹⁰⁰ In *Brave New World*, the Controller Mustapha Mond says, "Our Ford himself did a great deal to shift the emphasis from truth and beauty to comfort and happiness. Universal happiness keeps the wheels steadily turning; truth and beauty can't."

— *A transubstantiation.*¹⁰¹

The wind was picking up and the sand began to hiss. The waves were crashing into the outer reef with a new urgency.

‘Damn these spirits that we have summoned!’ I bellowed, my hip joints aching in the damp cold.

Coltrane’s jazz behemoth *Giant Steps* emerged, its “coming home” melody looping endlessly as steps in an Escher drawing and driving me maniacally along and along into the unknown darkness. I looked down and realized I was stepping in shallow tide-washed divots of another’s footprint.

— *History does not repeat itself, it only rhymes with itself!*

Enige Wiederkunft, I whispered.

Giant Steps transformed into the Westminster Quarters, the Big Ben bongs repeating over and over at double time. The loop was a deranged fantasy of interminable recapitulation and as I often do to tire an earworm I counted to thirty two on my hand in binary, fingers-for-bits, a corporeal mantra counting down to a reckoning. And as saturation was achieved the music was instantly muted and I stopped with sudden exhaustion.

Looking back along the beach I could not see where I had come from. The footsteps had washed out. A lone tree rose from the low bushes illuminated in watery moonlight. My hip was throbbing and I crawled on all-fours to seek sanctuary beneath the palm. I set out the towel, laying down at full stretch, arms and legs as a Vitruvian Man. I breathed deeply until pain was far.

Through over-reaching fronds I looked up to the stars but did not realize their twinkle came from a head-bound coconut.

¹⁰¹ “Do not the fervent readers who surrender themselves to Shakespeare become, literally, Shakespeare?” Borges, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*. And along similar lines: “Consider what it is to listen and to understand someone speaking to us. In a certain sense we have to become the other person; or rather, we let him become part of us for a brief second.” So wrote Julian Jaynes in *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. *Metempsychosis* is a concept meaning “transmigration of souls”.

PART TWO

The year 2084

*It resembled nothing that I have ever heard described.
It resembled plasmic energy.
It had colours.
It moved fast.
It collected and then dispersed.
What it was, what he was . . .*

— Philip K Dick

A note from the editor:

And here is Arthur's Honzing Vision. This is reported in the third person, a form Arthur claims more closely relates to the nature of his experience, viewed as if upon the shoulders of someone else.

My intention is to supply an objective consideration, though perhaps I have included too much affect in the description (then again, why should that which claims to be serious be also opaque and unrelatable?)

This is a sketch of a near-future conjured by the Honzing, but one envisioned within the mind of Arthur. And thus this vision is rife with psychic shadows of Arthur's present self, perverted by his fears and desires.

It is a vision framed within the question "How would a post-capitalist future look, but one where the existing schism between the folk and technologist politics still exist?"

There are changes of names and perversion of themes from Arthur's waking world but the key to the mechanism has a simple design. For example, Tarquin becomes Quentin, the protagonist of the story from whose shoulders we shall view. Technology enterprises are taken to extremes and twisted in accordance with Arthur's particular variety of naiveté, cynicism and humour.

The dialog I have left strictly unedited, which Arthur says should be taken as direct communication from The Honzing.

Threshold Apophenia

Quentin Parsley casts no shadow beneath a grounded Edinburgh sky, a hazy firmament of moor-brewed mist and electronic hum. Sounds of twisting dried wood issue from his reality modulator to indicate he has arrived and he turns to face a short run of sandstone steps bridging the pavement to a glossy black door. Concave time-puddles in the rock show where others have trod before, one history upon another.

A sudden flutter-whomp and Quentin snaps his head skyward as a band of pigeon wheel from the rooftops. His movement coincides with a flanged triplet of sonic booms and in a gawping pose he assimilates the moment.

Here stands Quentin as an artefact to antiquity, a subject worthy for an ethno-geologist: developmental chasms, aspirational anti-clines and genealogical faults treasuring deep seams of distantly forged privilege. Polite mousey hair contours bulging eyeballs afloat a kenspeckle autumn-reddened nose. Sticky-out ears and gangled spoon fingers contrive to give an accidental but gentle appearance, a monkish countenance that could be taken for stoic ennui but is, in humble fact, closer to a bright and altogether *reasonable bearing*.

Clothing for Quentin is a tidy and coherent system, a proud declaration not to be understood by casual observation. A tight-fitting flesh-coloured trouser and jacket suit clattering against silvered ankle boots, their transparent soles filled with a noble gas. As Quentin adjusts the pressure from one leg to another, electric sparks discharge primeval reds and blues.

A burgundy tweed cap belies Quentin's Federalist affiliations, its rim piped in a cellulose vein that once provided home to billions of bioluminescent algae. Alas, Quentin has neglected to feed his hat with the nutrient spray upon which the colony subsisted, and consequently it no longer emits a soft green glow but instead a brackish waft into the hazy morning air.

Drone hangs in this air, a singing-bowl buzz-bee whisper from the city's vehicles emitting their Federally regulated whine. Quentin lifts his ear towards erratic taps of a robin opening a snail on granite paving, taps reminding him of a reality modulator set

mating with its housing. Quentin clocks the robin and it cocks its head.

An approaching tone grows and splits, a sonic double helix like two leaves spiralling up and down that Quentin recognizes as the sound logo of The Kali Lifestyle Corporation, the state-owned enterprise who manufacture his brain interfacing reality modulator. Turning about he finds an ovoid, large enough to carry two people and moving upon a single ball tire. A thin band around the auto-taxi's waist changes colour with the pitch, infra-red to ultra-violet that burn the eye.

Quentin flips his RM visor to temper the glare and admires the vehicle advancing through the mist. Its style is consistent with Kali's sleek policy and he nods in approval. He cannot help but think of Rossum, an *alternative* manufacturer to Kali (there are no *competitors* in this post-capitalist age). The standard Rossum vehicles are also ovoid but twisted ninety degrees to increase carrying capacity and painted a garish canary yellow. Rossum hail from the Preterite Communities, wherein dwell those who have rejected technological developments since the year 2045. The city-living Federalists call them *Zoners* but Quentin winces when he hears the word, feeling the contempt towards the society into which he was born.

Tessellated pattern upon the auto-taxi's ball tire tread indicate Kali's yantra logo of a circle-nested equilateral triangle nested with a dot at its centre. Perhaps sensing a querying mind state, Quentin's RM visor pops a subtitle describing the meaning of the logo: the dot representing the indivisible and infinitesimal, the circle is the expansive and infinite counterpart, and the triangle an earthly projection of a higher order of dimensions on to a two-dimensional Euclidean slice.

'Circle. Triangle. Dot.' Quentin says, staring at the vehicle floating past upon uncanny suspension.

The receding ovoid carves a crisp vortex in the mist. Quentin freezes, mouth open in earnest concentration as he diligently blinks his right eye in an effort to reset the display on his reality modulator.

Why won't this thing go? he says to himself, and the message disappears.

Quentin slides up the visor, puffs out his cheeks and presses his thumb-pad onto the finial spike of an iron railing. He pirouettes on dusty rock and ascends the time puddled steps, bouncing an index finger between the rails like a strop on a wheel of fortune.

Adjacent to the door is a bay window comprising a mosaic of small panes coloured azure blue, daffodil yellow and Christmas red. It reminds Quentin of his childhood in the Preterite Zone, of a visit to a spiritual alignment centre. A moving shadow casts upon the net curtain behind the glass. It is an arm, small jerks in rapid succession with a muffled chink of chiselled rock accompanying each jolt. The movement stops and a large drape falls upon the sculpture extinguishing the shadow.

Quentin repositions to confront crisp bolections on the glossy black door. Stars are birthed as he clicks heels and genuflects to inspect a brass plaque displaying the embossed declaration “Dr Rhea & Dr Tottman”, partners of the federal recapitulation therapy clinic he is joining.

Quentin briefly imagines his own name replacing that of Tottman’s.

A flash of white within the smothering clouds.

— *Lightning? No, more likely aftermath from Friday’s immoderate psychedelic excursion, too much Zee-D-C*, he decides.

Quentin desires to angle his head and place the tip of his tongue upon a corner of the brass plaque, explore for the sharp metal edge.

A moment passes.

He blinks and taps brightly upon the metal.

He stands up and smiles.

Quentin is a compulsive tapper, subscribing to Heisenberg’s opinion that, *We observe not nature herself, but nature as revealed to our means of observation*. This he read epigraphed in a small book for children ghost-written by the esteemed Dr Rhea.

A rattle informs Quentin the plaque is missing a screw.

— *Aha!*

Ever inclined to read into an “Aha!” moment as one should arise, his wonder continues:

— *What conceit is this?*

‘Does it mean anything?’ he mumbles. The reality modulator detects his general confusion and activates the *SoundTrack* application, which is set to respond to emotional upsets like this. It plays a short burst of music, an arpeggiated minor chord in a tense and brooding flavour performed with a chorus of uncoordinated slide whistles. Quentin listens to Preterite Zone music like this (in fact, he considers Federal music to be more like dreary “sound patterns”). The familiar timbres relax him, elevating his youthful spirit.

Quentin stares at the missing screw and considers the brass plate’s rattle.

— *If the screw is intentionally absent, then it is among these subtle considerations I desire to be*, he thinks, pushing the tip of his index finger into the empty screw hole. He twists, feeling the sharp edge bite, takes back the finger and examines the pockmark.

His ruminations continue:

— *Perhaps the screw’s significance is only an indication of my unsuitability to work in psychotherapy, reflecting my intractable tendency to project meaning where there is none, my intractable apophenia.*

A stillness comes as he measures the word, pinching pockmarked finger and thumb as he counts each syllable.

— *A-po-phe-ni-a.*

‘Is this a test?’ he says aloud, and taps the plate once more.

‘*Delusions of self-reference*,’ he mutters. And by way of irresolute cadence Quentin inhales deeply though flaring nostrils, lips purpling in pursed defiance.

Another broad flash in the homogenous clouds above.

He curls his finger back from the brass plate and into his cuff. Retracting a few inches of his thirty-six-year-old frame Quentin chides himself, embarrassed by the ill-timed break in confidence.

“*Acting is Being*”, he whispers to himself, again quoting, capital letters and all, from Dr Rhea’s book. Quentin hopes *SoundTrack* does not comment and he winces, expecting a sound that does not arrive.

Poking a fingernail into the cleft of his upper front teeth Quentin dislodges some errant breakfast remnant, a seed husk

that was cutting into his gums. This enhances the wideness of his healthy Norman grin, which combined with a vacant stare lends further import to the appearance of a handsome simpleton.

Shuffling noises startle Quentin and he rotates his head, finger still in mouth. He faces Dr Tottman who is exhibiting an affiliation to a serious commitment, one that he would seem to carry at all times as a bureaucrat might once have clutched a box of files in the corridors of power. A large forehead extrudes like paste, furrowed as a drooping flag. Tottman's angular cheeks share the colour and vitality of wood ash.

With a view to regaining control of the situation, Quentin removes the finger from his mouth and purposefully inspects the esculence before flicking it to the floor. He jerks a poorly executed category five smile (formal, no teeth, four-hundred millisecond twitch of the buccinator muscle). Dr Tottman repeats the greeting and begins his own inspection, tracking deep-set colourless eyes to Quentin's coruscating shoes, at which he makes a harrumphing noise. The gaze tracks upward and a soft Edinburgh voice declares, 'You must be Doctor Parsley.'

Was that a slight pause before my surname? Perhaps a deliberate sleight to my Zoner roots.

Quentin notices what appears to be dust in Tottman's cheeks.

'I have arrived,' he responds.

Tottman's brows invoke a dry wit and he says, 'Well, here is the key. Since you are closer,' locking eyes with Quentin and extending a trembling black leather gloved hand.

'The only way in is through,' says Quentin, intoning a perversion of the Federal slogan and regretting his wink as soon as it begins.

A Surfeit of Lamp Freaks

Quentin spent his considerable free time enveloped in *The Fringe*. This was the rhizomatic idea forum that had come to replace the streaming effluent of *Two-dot-oh Content*, long since consumed and conflagrated in the monopolising fires of Capitalist Meltdown.

The Fringe was up-beat and high-brow and the main platform to define Federalist and Preterite culture for over a decade, which was a long time these days. The individual would present — through a custom avatar — points of views and interests that were serious and above all *authentic*. Due to the reconciliation movement the Fringe was less and less about the differences between the city-dwelling technology-accelerating Federalists and the country-living tech-frozen Folkists. Although both societies participated equally, the Federalists would perspectivize ideas through the lens of abstracted processes, as though viewing society as an alien, whilst the Preterite Zoners would perspectivize *through* society, using everyday realism to discuss, in essence, pretty much the same topics — aesthetic fashion, sports, food, and generally run-of-the-mill art (or *Art Processes*, as the Federalists would say).

Quentin occasionally re-watched older sketches where a more confrontational attitude prevailed. This was a clandestine operation as would be considered considered Zoney nostalgia and Quentin's credentials were already bruised. You see, shortly after he had moved from the Zone, Quentin had become pan-flash memefamous, discussing the nuances between latent shame and embarrassment he felt towards his behaviour as a child and his ancestors in general. It was an unseemly insight for a Federal Psychologist to admit.

There were live Fringe shows every ten days, this being the most common work period in the Federation for each OSM (*Old School Month*). You miss an old school week of Fringe and you'd miss the latest acronym.

"Hard to keep up!" moaned the Zoners.

"That's the whole point!" teased the Federalists.

A Fringe Channel was a rite of passage, a calling-card to showcase your *povai*. Heady times! But worth the effort, Quentin told himself.

Ever over-thinking Quentin had waited this long for his Fringe debut on account of not wanting to promulgate any clichés. Besides, since the Fringe was viewed in both the Preterite Zone and the Federation he felt an embarrassed shame at the thought of childhood friends and family discussing how he had changed. But enough time had passed to assure Quentin of his Federalist nature and he felt an urgent need to tailor a coherent Fringe character to suit the expected appetites of a Human Recapitulation Therapist.

And to these ends Quentin employed Kali's *personality developer*. Pee-Dev, as it was called, had weaved together a variety of archetypes for Quentin's Fringe persona based on what the Feds called *povai* (pronounced as if it were a French word, hardly anyone cared that this stood for *Points Of Views And Interests*). Quentin's Fringe personality landscape conjured by Pee-Dev sprawled across the landscapes of *Mystic Comedian*, *Futurely-Raconteur*, *Spiel-Mongering Anecdotalist* and the *Prophetic Casuist*.

Pee-Dev recommended an avatar combining a Father Christmas and a circus clown wearing tight elastic pants tailored to his cock and balls. But to Quentin this smacked too much of gauche Zoner irony and un-coy Federal bravado. So Quentin decided to present nude, which was as statistically safe-a-decision as wearing all white in a Tech-Si Club, and over a couple of weeks Quentin's alter-ego "Kurtosis" was born.

Participation in live Fringe events was incentivised by The Honzing Corporation, a manufacturing authority that had incorporated the Pacific Polynesian States. Honzing were masters of ecological engineering, choreographing the trans-oceanic barges and constructing Earth's L1 Sunshade. The enterprise had expanded from "kinetic energy networks" into "luxury desire fulfilment", running the factories in the Manufacturing Districts and the network of orbital computers. Honzing were culturally unaffiliated and collaborated equally with the Federal and Preterite communities, spawning a nascent "third way".

Honzing ran a campaign of continual public ingratiation. To what ends, no one knew. Lately they were gifting a range of product they called *Desiderata*, tailor-made toys and tools designed to maximally appeal to an individual. Some called these “double-oh-nine-nines”, inverting the dreaded room of Orwell. Plugging Honzing desideratum in a Fringe show was rewarded with energy tokens and in-turn directly transferable for Work Exchange Points, modifying the strictly regulated 480-hour-per year Quotum.

For Kurtosis’s Fringe debut Quentin sported his Honzing desideratum, an animatronic mind-controlled moustache glistening slug-black on his upper-lip. He recorded the show into a Prompt Ansible and read from Pee-Dev’s auto-cue. This Quentin was able to do better than most, a talent honed from his work at the clinic where most of what he said to a client was read from a computer-generated script.

‘Why do Zoners celebrate The Christmas?’ he said, wincing with distraction from the janky grammar, unusual for a Kali product.

‘Zoners do not believe in God but in The Magick. That is Magick with the k: *The Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will.*¹⁰²

Perhaps this is why they are obsessed with fire?’

Fire was considered archaic in the Federation as a kind of post-Promethean gesture but to Zoners it was a proud symbol of identity.

‘Federalists see past the Folkist change towards the *Change of Change*. The second differential. It is only acceleration that can yield a force.’

Quentin wondered where Pee-Dev was going with this and his moustache drooped in confusion.

‘But the Honzing Corporation are fuelling a new kind of sectarianism in both the Federation and the Preterite Communities.’ Quentin liked the sudden change in direction,

¹⁰² Quentin was quoting Aleister Crowley’s definition of Magick here. The word magic comes to us from the Ancient Persian word *magush*, itself bequeathed from the Sanskrit *mahan* meaning *great*.

discussing Honzing was sure to bring attention to his Fringe show.

‘Sects can offer more rewards than religion. More, let us say, club goods.’

Quentin was briefly concerned that his audience would think he had said “sex” and therefore completely misunderstand the point, whatever it was.

‘But in the long term Magick will have a difficult time filling the gap left by religion. The psychologists of the Federation have explored and mapped this territory of trauma left by the Crisis Of Mythology.’

Again Quentin winced, wondering why his prompt did not use the more recognized abbreviation COM.

‘Religion can focus on the future: The gods are not obliged to deliver on demand nor even in this lifetime. They can take their time and promise only that *it shall come to pass*. Magick desires quickly observable affects for specific purposes.

‘Is Magick just one of these gauche folkist policies arising from rejecting a rational and scientific outlook? A vacuous ephemera of a primitivist yearning arising from a low-grade Cri- I mean, COM?’

‘Denial of a technology-driven future results from a developmental disruption to a theory of mind. This is a level one COM pathology that occurs with our transition from child to adult.’

Quentin furrowed his brow with serious resolution to look well-informed on the matter but his moustache fidgeted like a sniffing ferret and completely spoiled the effect.

‘It is a sad legacy to the Harrying of Scarcity that eliminated unsustainable capitalist processes.

‘On the other hand, belief in Magick could signify a mature and altogether *reasonable* process, a declaration that the universe is beyond our capabilities to comprehend.’

The moustache seesawed as Quentin considered how this statement weakened the angle of attack by providing a defence for Zoner logic.

A third arm hologramed from Quentin’s shoulders and a third hand opened its palm as he said, ‘On the *other* hand,

performative magick must give an audience reason to doubt it. We Federalists desire *craft* and not *miracles*. Zoners worship immediacy and direct action that miracles provide. This childish desire condemns Preterites to a future of physical toil and inert mental drudgery. They sit at a local minima upon the saddlepoint of iniquitous history.'

Quentin was decidedly pleased with how his sketch was now going. *The saddlepoint of iniquitous history indeed!* He wondered what *iniquitous* meant but felt comforted that Pee-Dev had considered it the kind of word he should know.

And now for the crux of his spiel. The third hand dissolved and with a quiet voice and looking directly ahead Quentin read, 'Honzing desiderata straddle these magical loci. It is what makes them *unheimlich*'.

With the German word Quentin's feeling of triumph grew further and he winked to his unseen audience as his moustache sententiously twiddled.

The Honzing Corporation was sacrosanct for Fringe sketches, not only because of their humanitarian and ecological record but because they were sponsors and it would be *indecorous* to bite the feeding hand (the word *indecorous* was used often in the Federation, reclaiming the bourgeois word without any irony). Quentin found it interesting how Kali's personality developer had directed him to question the Honzing desiderata. It was an abstracted face-off, the well-seasoned Federally-aligned Kali casting aspersions upon the motives of un-aligned Honzing. Quentin wondered how his audience would react.

The attack on Honzing Corp was sustained and began with a quotation from Jung: '*We can predict the future when we know how the present moment evolved from the past.*'

A deck of cards appeared on the upturned palm of Quentin-Kurtosis. They flicked themselves up in the air and he snatched one.

'In this strongly *determinist* way the direction of time becomes *arbitrary*. Don't you think that the products of this corporation we know so little about but who possess untold computational resource are removing our sense of free will?' Kurtosis flickered a dangerous wink as The Honzing Corp logo appeared upon his

forehead, a setting sun that flashed emerald green as it ducked below the horizon.

For the final flourish Quentin-Kurtosis tapped the single card on to the table and the card Magick'ed into a full pack.

‘Zoners call us *Lamp Freaks* because we watch the world through our reality modulators. But we more closely engage with what reality *truly* is. Our masks directly interpret our personal *Umwelt* and avoid the bias of perceptual filters. *Wamung ist Falschmung!*’ (Quentin fluffed Brentano’s quotation *Wahrnehmung ist Falschnehmung* which means, ironically, “perception is misperception”.)

‘One of the ideas promulgated by the Honzing Community is that many universes have existed before the current one. And most interesting of all, it is possible that information can carry across the boundaries of Big Bangs: *Time future is within time present*.’¹⁰³

‘It was an idea proposed a century ago by that great hero of the Zone Roger Penrose. It means our digital footprints will echo eternally: *optimism of the intellect!*’

Quentin winced as he heard Gramsci’s mangled words hanging in the air, Gramsci being a philosophical hero of the Zone. But he had advised his Personality Developer to include syncretic ideas combining standard and tentative theories from both the Federation and the Zone. He neither understood Penrose’s theory of conformal cyclic cosmology nor had any evidence it was an idea being seriously discussed and he was shaking his head in confusion when Pee-Dev had the editorial nous to end his livestream.

Quentin believed that his jibes at both the Federation and Honzing Corp were too clever by half and his debut Fringe sketch had flopped. It therefore came as a surprise to find he had been

¹⁰³ *Time present and time past, Are both perhaps present in time future, And time future contained in time past. — Four Quartets*, TS Eliot. Arthur’s vision has referenced the theory of *Conformal Cyclic Cosmology*, an idea proposed by Roger Penrose of information transmission from one universe eon to a next.

selected to present at a regional event. And a few weeks later Quentin accumulated with twelve other Fringe finalists in an old Edinburgh theatre. The group was evenly split between those originating from the Preterite Zone and the Federation and since Quentin was born in the Zone but had left after his coming-of-age Rumspringa he counted as the odd-numbered disciple for both societies.¹⁰⁴

They sat in a semi-circle with a mob of multi-legged googly-eyed mechanicals creped around, holding onto the crimson curtains and skuttling amongst ankles as their lizard-irised eyes flickered red to green when operated by a remote viewer.

The first sketch was in German. The Federal audience conscientiously removed their reality modulators to indicate they did not require any translation and emitted frequent laughs with effusive gusto that Quentin joined in with (he had a feeling that he wasn't the only one feigning his understanding).

A bearded Preterite woman next took the stage. The sensationalist gender statement was so passé that Quentin could almost hear the Federalists rolling their eyes. Of course the Zoner was heavily clothed as the naked trend had started after the 2045 schism. Their delivery was, however, quite remarkable: animated and well elocuted and entirely present with their audience. Quentin noted how Zoner humour was always a few steps ahead, that the punch-line was implied but rarely given. At one point Quentin betrayed his Federalist alignment by laughing with the Zoner audience. The joke was something to do with how the Federalists always had a perfect face tan, the implication being that the tan came from the glare of their RM visors.

Quentin-Kurtosis was up next and the Preterite crowd mouth-clicked as he took the stage in a blooming spotlight. Their warmth infused him like a hit of ZDC. He took the stage naked and moustachioed, hair slicked back and dyed electric heliotrope. But when he moved to speak his breath was taken, beholden to a Federalist woman in the front row captured by a ray of light

¹⁰⁴ The jolly word Rumspringa means a rite of passage, typically during adolescence. It comes from a translation from German as “jumping or hopping around”.

reflecting off a mirror at the rear of the stage. She wore large dark circular glasses upon a slightly too perfect nose and her face and body were striped with black and white bands about an inch wide. The woman had a sturdy posture and closed and opened her eyes slowly as if in slow motion. When Quentin tilted his head from left to right she shadowed the movement. She altogether reminded him of a mortician crossed with a large herbivore.

Quentin's RM display flashed a message to start the show and he side-stepped to interrupt the reflected beam of light.

The opening salvo was a fumbled and weak-spirited commentary on technology oligarchs Kali and Rossum.

'Even though Rossum and Kali's products are functionally equivalent, the Preterite fanatics who insist on using Rossum know they are using an inferior design that does not recognize thought gestures so accurately. And this breeds a frustration, a *resentment*.' (He misread the French word *ressentiment*.)

'This resentment they direct at Kali.' [Pause] '*Jedem das Seine.*'¹⁰⁵

Quentin stroked an invisible long beard to add gravitas and as expected the erudite-sounding German precipitated a murmur of appreciation. He nodded as his moustache flexed like the arms of a bodybuilder.

'Look at this eyesore,' he said, somewhat unsurely. The graphic rotated to show an upright ovoid auto-taxi, pointy-end down like Kali vehicles but coloured Rossum yellow.

He was confused but read the text, losing energy as he completed the spiel.

'It can barely fit two people. So not only is it inefficient and against the principles of the Federal Community but ... it ... looks ...'

A hologram coconut fell down and cracked open the ovoid.

Quentin gave a shrug and his moustache mimicked the movement. Deranged shadows of his backlit genitalia moved

¹⁰⁵ *Jedem das Seine* is a German proverb meaning "to each what he deserves". It is an ill-thought quote: the Nazis put it to monstrously snide use at Buchenwald concentration camp, being written upon the gates facing the prisoners within.

across the faces of his audience and sounds of disagreement arose like a mist. Quentin wondered why his personality developer had mistaken Kali's auto-taxi design for Rossum's. Was it being *ironic*? Irony was such a nostalgic Zoney humour.

The hologram faded and Quentin continued.

'Why do these people in the Preterite communities torment themselves with this janky technology? Do they really *desire* their hardship? I say this is a consequence of *under-socialization*, disrupting their integration of the pleasure principle.' Quentin paused for a moment as he considered what he had been prompted to say.

'It is anti-progressive to be using and supporting inferior technology.' Quentin again paused. He was not sure what argument Pee-Dev was presenting but trusted its judgement that he would agree with it. 'That's right. Supporting inferior technology is against the natural order. The universe is unfolding as it should!'

'The universe moves according to its own law, nature's *Gesetz*, if you will. Society gives a common framework and it is important and reasonable to feel regular guilt when we overreach these limits, it stops the rampant individualism that was so venerated by the capitalists.'

'Ivanka, may her legacy prevail, said it so well, *They cannot win, so stand your ground.*'

Quentin cleared his throat to deliver the next line with due solemnity, '*The planet goes on being round.*'¹⁰⁶

A sound of reverent agreement from the audience.

Opening his legs Quentin briefly illuminated the front-row female and was rewarded with a flash of smile, which darkened in the shade of his scrotum.

'We in the Federation are riddled with contradiction.'

A sudden hushing, controversy was in the air.

'We are obsessed with the past.'

¹⁰⁶ *He calls her arguments unsound, and asks her not to yell.
She cannot win. He stands his ground. The planet goes on being
round.* — From Wendy Cope's *Differences of Opinion*.

'As a practitioner of Recapitulation Therapy it is quite reasonable for me to have such an opinion.'

Quentin was pleased that Pee-Dev had wielded his professional authority.

'RT is premised on turning over stones in the rock-pools of humankind's history, de-shelling the crustaceans within our neurosis.'

A somewhat brittle metaphor, thought Quentin.

'Recapitulation Therapy is only a step beyond Freudian reductionist nonsense, under-abstracting our subconscious drives into prosaic fables and denying the complexity of the universe and our spiritual connection with it.'

Am I arguing for a God now?! Quentin didn't understand what he had said but was comforted he sounded as if he did.

'What we really need to focus on is *cultivating desire*.'

The words hung above him like daggers. Desire was a taboo subject in both the Federation and the Preterite Zone.

'Desire for our needs and desire for our satisfactions. We see the consequences of Desire-Shame at my clinic. People don't know what to do with themselves when they can work only forty hours a month. We don't know how to spend our *you-bies*.' Quentin air-quoted the abbreviation for what used to be called universal basic income.

'Keynes warned us, *No country and no people can look forward to the age of leisure and of abundance without a dread. It is a fearful problem for the ordinary person with no special talents.*

'We are born corrupted! Capitalism perverted the meaning of desire by manipulating our drives and interests through advertising and by idealising wealth. Post-modernism taught us to deconstruct our longings. Our language model was tainted and we relate desire with greed. We need to de-territorialize desire! Reclaim it as part of the techno-accelerationist agenda!'

Quentin saw his audience was distracted, making or receiving thought gestures or commenting on his performance that seemed to have gone off the rails.

Why am I saying these emotionally driven platitudes? He thought.

Using the kind of language they teach Zoner infants.

It sounds like an advertisement for a Deleuzian nannybot.

Thankfully Pee-Dev truncated his spiel and presented three options for a finale:

1: Discuss the Prince Reagent's ectopic womb expression therapy.

2: Satirical sketch about the boycott of wine from the Christian State.

3: Critique of the Honzing manifesto.

A hunch told him that deriding the Honzing Corporation would compensate for his risky anti-Federation skit and perhaps re-capture the attention of the alluring woman in the front row. And so using a thought gesture Quentin chose the third option by imagining his personally crafted thought gesture, three chickens in a Christmas tree, wearing berets, smoking cigarettes and squawking in French.

'What do *you* think about The Honzing manifesto?' Quentin hadn't read it, in fact he wasn't sure if it even existed.

'It was written by this guy who gets all his ideas from Zee-D-C.'

'The Honzing Corporation want to speed up the *sing-u-larity*.' Pee-Dev suggested he give an amusing example of a singularity but Quentin flashed a thought-gestured "no" (an image of a sandwich, spilling out of which was a clump of twitching dirty bird feet).

'You remember the singularity evangelists? Me neither. Well, they said the graph of time versus progress would go vertical last week. The AI *rapture*, they called it.'

Quentin paused for a reaction that did not arrive.

'These people were really *extrapolationists*. And I think the rapture's late. Kali is good but the accuracy of those thought gestures still have a way to go. Did anyone watch the new Oedipus movie? Well, I accidentally sent a few messages to Mother and she still isn't speaking to me.'

A few titters from the Federal crowd rewarded his gag, but he could tell the Zoners were unimpressed.

'Honzing say the horizontal singularity is when things don't change. No more improvements to our lives. And that's their idea of Utopia! I mean, we achieved that a hundred years ago, right?'

No reaction. *Perhaps too on-the-nose?*

‘They say that our current idea of Utopia will be different in the future. But I say that’s like intercepting a bullet with a, er, rabbit.’ Quentin wondered if Kali’s personality developer had again made a mistake. A chair-on-floor scrape emphasized how badly his performance was now going.

‘Honzing is the club for you when no-one else will have you: not even the bumpkins in the Zone teaching robots how to stare at their owner’s navels.’

His material had failed in a furore of inelegant belligerency. Not a single slow clap indicated the lack of support for Quentin’s sketch. Someone made the “throat slit” gesture as he walked off the stage.

Skulking at the back of the room Quentin watched as the woman from the front row took the stage. Covered in a robe of heavily folded white chiffon she stood still for a few seconds and then nodded. The robe relaxed and fell to the ground to reveal her naked body.

Quentin was beholden as the woman bent down (of course, her anus was hidden with a small porcelain bung). She started stroking an obsidian pointy-end down ovoid the size of an ostrich egg, hovering about a foot above the stage, and from which a bright light sprayed forth in the characteristic blue-white flicker of an animated hologram. And the woman was again re-clothed.

The shape of her body was, Quentin told himself, *catastrophic*. And the reason was that he knew he had fallen for her based on immediate carnal intentions and that their inevitable affair would be unviable. He was transfixed by her aspect: skinny with bulging joints and a placid overbite.

A camel, thought Quentin. She’s like a sophisticated camel.

He could imagine her head lolling amongst fig trees and fussily selecting which fruit to eat. Her slow grace reflected an unbounded self-confidence, clutching in her hand a crop whip with a gleaming chrome handle. It was as if her body and movement was *designed* for a taste he didn’t know he possessed, like discovering he could play piano. More than play, that he was a *virtuoso* but he entirely detested the sound of piano and everything it stood for. The hologram projected sand dunes over her body that only added to the confused symbolism. Quentin

began to consider that she had contrived this camel theme and wondered if it was referencing a clever German work of literature he hadn't read.

In an aggressively phlegmy Glaswegian accent the woman said, 'I am Neikea and I was going to talk about Honzing but I have been pre-empted by the previous Zone-bred *Edgeflake*!'

The archaic portmanteau was awkwardly received by the Federal audience and Neikea gave Quentin an apologetic and confused shrug — obviously her RM set had directed her to say this, and evidently it was the kind of thing she would say as otherwise why direct her to say it, but such an *ad hominem* assault was hardly decorous.

Neikea's voice now gave the impression she had been shot with a slow-effect tranquilizer dart. Quentin cocked his head to her lisp and unbroken Federal vocal fry.

'Ths, I'm going to talk about thomething elthe: the reality modulator ath a fear control mechanism. Thpecifically, artifithial eyeth.'

Maybe her voice was coming from the egg? Who knew! He liked the way she began sentences with the word "So", it provided a platform on which he could perch.

'Now, ith blindneth thymbolithith a loth of power, then artificial eyeth like *totally* thwart thith fear.'

Neikea continued as Quentin relocated to the toilets, overcome with masturbatory ambition.

After the show Neikea approached Quentin. She bought with her a strange floral scent with hints of nutmeg and he couldn't decide if he liked it or not.

'Edelweiss tincture,' she said, the lisp and fry now gone. 'I saw your livestream. Our povai are entirely synchronous. And your discussion about desire today, I understood *everything*.'

Quentin nodded his head automatically and tried not to breathe through his nose. He didn't know what she was talking about.

Neikea waited for him to speak, according to Federal protocol, and Quentin said, 'It's odd we both talked about Honzing. I developed the routine using—'

'Pee-dev. I know,' she interrupted. 'We all do. But the system constructed the text based on your povai and so you are the essential author. *Causa sui*. And I am sorry I called you an Edgeflake, but it must be what I am thinking and so please don't take my apology too seriously.' Quentin nodded and blushed deeply.

'It is curious that Kali chose the same material for us,' he said. 'Kali confronting Honzing is new.'

'I heard Honzing is controlling Kali,' said Neikea.

'They must have arranged for us to meet,' he said.

It soon became clear that Neikea and Quentin were well matched. They had both left the Preterite Zone during Rumspringa break-outs and both were ravishers of aesthetics. They shared a fierce admiration for Kali's design principles matched in passion with a condemnation of Rossum's and a distrust for Honzing. Quentin delighted in Neikea's moral and ethical rectitude, ranging from the colours of which foods to eat to the bioavailability of clothing. Quentin felt cleansed and anointed by her sanctimony.

Over the next few weeks Quentin and Neikea's relationship blossomed. By standards of the previous millennium, it oozed with unctuous artifice. To aid his romantic endeavours Quentin used an application from the Pee-Dev suite called *SelfNeg*. Developed according to the theory of *Programmed Libidinal Negation*, *SelfNeg* aimed to enfranchise Quentin in his romantic pursuits by lessening his self-confidence. The goal was to foster a vacuum for sympathy and attention. The app had several approaches. It would bully him with sensitively sculpted questions such as, "Quentin, do you feel worse for the ecological damage you have caused the planet or for the insignificant legacy you would leave if you died tomorrow?" Or it would add a soundtrack to his life, dissonant chords of doubt and unease whenever he was making a decision. *SelfNeg* proved so effective that when he arrived to meet Neikea he was often in tears.

It came to pass that Neikea took a position at the recapitulation clinic as an Emotional Endpoint Validator. Quentin and Neikea would walk to and from work together in the gentle Edinburgh autumn, drunk on virtue. They talked about having a child and the lifestyle criteria for the Zoner surrogates they would select for gestation and the gender and pedagogical parameters of the nannybot. It was the happiest time of Quentin's life.



Rumspringa Overload

Two months passed and Tottman was dead. Edinburgh's drones now impinged upon a black sign etched with the words "Dr Rhea & Dr Parsley. Neo-Recapitulation Therapists".

One bright November morning Quentin sat upon a levitating coil opposite his senior colleague Dr Rhea, her small body enveloped by a throne of translucent black gel. Tottman's desk lay between them, a confused eclectic structure with which they had not decided what to do. The rhomboid tabletop was a silvery alloy no thicker than a thumb nail that turned transparent with the slightest pressure. It showed a history of technology accessories, the stump of an anglepoise interface and manipulator, a defunct holographic projector, and a more recent platform to house the hover-orbs.

In front of Rhea the tabletop was burnished with two hand-sized shallow divots, a Rorschach locus for the lazy eye housing motile knickknacks — a many-sided dice and a small unfurling silver pinecone — which Rhea jostled with her small pale fingers. A gnarled wooden frame melted from the tabletop into four dayglo plastic legs.

Rhea rested her unsocked feet upon a velvet hassock directly beneath the shallow divots. She claimed the table embodied Tottman's spirit, balancing an unsteady alliance of Zoner and Federal influence (contrary to work-place protocol, Rhea always used the informal slang Zoner over the official term Preterite). The table was, she said, neither elegant enough to be considered an engaging curio nor functional enough to suggest accomplished intention. She followed this with a sultry snicker that contributed to Quentin's suspicions the psychotherapists' relationship had been more than professional.

The role of the psychotherapist in these days was as a transformer of information, deciding how best to present a client's data. It was mostly Federalists who came to the clinic. Most were suffering from a *distressed desire organ* in the age of luxury abundance and ever-decreasing need for human work.

Preterite Zoners came through occasionally, generally for Rumspringa Fallout though sometimes just for a conversation.

Quentin was beginning to realise Rhea's treatments fell into a pattern of invigorating the client with a sense of control. Her method was to finish each session by presenting two decisions each as seemingly important as they were actually trivial. The art to in-person psychotherapy was, so the non-joke went, to give the impression that there was an art to it.

Tottman's office had always felt the wrong size to Quentin, too long and too narrow. A thin crimson carpet bisected a wide black vinyl floor bridging the desk to a sunken nest of pillows, a hollow in the ground veiled by a net curtain that sanctuaried the clients during their guided recapitulation. Quentin's gaze ran along a low rusting iron shelf upon which was a long and dusty holographic display screen showing the rotting prostrate corpse of a gaunt Christ, the eyes wide open and tracking its viewer. Quentin could almost smell the oozing green-black stigmata. And from the opposite wall protruded an obsidian plinth bearing a chalk statue the size of a cat and showing a commanding Goddessian female kissed by a small cherubic angel and attended by a kneeling sculptor.¹⁰⁷

Quentin felt trapped between the two works, simultaneously pulled apart and crushed by their semiotic gravity.

Rhea and Quentin enjoyed each other's company because they mostly agreed with each other's povai. It was considered *indecorous* for Federalists to speak more than a thousand words per day, much less than the garrulous Zoners, and Rhea and Quentin's daily word count was often in the multiple thousands.

The clinic occasionally dealt with "soft" criminals, exiles who didn't want to live in either the Federation or the Preterite Communities and generally guilty of corruptions relating to non-kinetic *Violence* (the word had a narrow definition in the Federation and a lose but much contended one in the Preterite Zone, with both nations claiming their understanding to be

¹⁰⁷ This statue seems to be representing the classical Greek story of *Pygmalion*, a sculptor who fell in love with his creation and which was bought to life by the goddess of love Venus.

intuitive). Since the abandonment of the Martian settlers the statelets of the stranded tech-barons had ceased to function and now the soft-crims had nowhere to go but the interstitial Manufacturing District that surrounded the Federal metropoleis of Europe and Asia. As the years progressed there was almost no work for humans in the MD but some inmates enjoyed manually servicing the Rossum machines, fine-tuning AI models, and feeding the fussy bitronics of the orbital computer interfaces.

Stalwart Conks was a new client recently released from the MD and Rhea and Quentin were tasked to appraise his psychological profile. A middle-aged mathematician charged five years ago with non-kinetic violence in the Preterite Zone, Conks was once a world-famous professor in Classical Personal Expression from the Learning Collective of Glastonbury. He was found guilty of using Post-Fork AI Models. Art-Taste-7-b33tr was a model trained in the Federation in the year 2060 and Stalwart used it as a tool for his art export/import business. His exceptionally harsh punishment was dealt by a joint Federal-Preterite committee who imposed a contempt of court judgement due to Conks's persistent not-guilty plea. You see, Conks claimed he did not understand what he had done wrong even though a cognitive capability test determined beyond doubt that he did.

Conks had visited a city during a Rumspringa sabbatical and stayed too long in a Meme World. It scrambled his values and when he returned to the Zone he would say things like "Do what you believe is right!" and he started a Leet Prompting school. Years after his incarceration in the MD, Conks still suffered from recurring dreams where *simony* was the only word spoken.¹⁰⁸

Rhea declared that Conks was embroiled with Preterite and Federal contradictions regarding one's commitment to the self and to society. This particular brand of *Depersonalization* was a registered disorder defined in the Federal Health Manual. Depersonalization covered a range of symptoms experienced by Zoners spending too much time in virtual reality environments

¹⁰⁸ *Simony* is the act of selling church favours for money. It is named after Simon Magus, a biblical magician who is said to have offered payment in exchange for godly empowerment.

and exacerbated by the Manufacturing District, where the incarcerated population had little else to do. Rhea called these depersonalized Zoners “moon doubters” after a patient who had come to question the veracity of natural phenomena.

Recapitulation Therapy was a response to the Federal slogan “History is Mutable”, meaning that history is not so much what the records show but what records are shown. RT was prescribed for Conks’s assimilation into a new Federal life where he least-dis-wanted to live. Their remit also covered an introduction to other social protocol such as the smile category system and the proper ways to minimize verbal communication.

A Health Agent determined if a client’s subconscious was missing the integration of a particular stage in human history. If so, the client would be immersed in media from a particular era until a time in which they were deemed by a Human Recapitulation Therapist to be thoroughly steeped.

But it was not a recent post-2042 Fork event for which Conks needed recapitulation therapy but rather a course of Enlightenment Idealism and European Colonialism. Specifically:

1. Friedrich Schlegel’s writings on the role of mythology in Western Civilization. This was the forerunner to the Crisis of Mythology, a pathology that reached a head in the existential rioting of the 2040s.
2. The history of the Mapuche, a nation brutalized by the Conquistadors but ultimately contributing to the fungible token system that unified the world’s economies.

Rhea and Quentin were stuck. They could not see an easy segue to join these two histories and build a narrative story that would interest Conks. The trajectory for the Mythology course was standard and encompassed two best-selling Authors (as all artists and philosophers were now called) Georg Lukács and George Lucas. Quentin was of course familiar with the Mapuche from his Preterite history education, the South American nation who had introduced their non-monetary exchange policy that was the basis of modern internation economics, the Trafkintu system.

Quentin fiddled with his Reality Modulator to induce some lateral thinking and he shortly felt the urge to recount a story by Freud about someone who dreamed they were a horse with human hands.

'Fucking Freud!' blurted Rhea, laughing with unusual heartiness and showing creased crescents at the edge of a prim Celtic mouth. Her tidy bob of dark hair reflected an iridescent oil on water sheen and a leg brushed lightly against Quentin's inner calf. Quentin noted that Rhea smelt faintly of Zee-D-C, an increasingly high note rising right up and inside his body, soft as down.

Quentin was sweaty-warm. Fortunately his tumescent concern was assuaged with a further outburst from Rhea and a wink displaying her complicity in the little game he had played of baiting her with the Freud story.

A pause for vigorous two-minute applause, which was in vogue, again, in the Federation as a form of kinetic-yoga to degauze the mind.

Rhea's misgivings regarding the merits of Freud were well-known and Quentin felt guilty for how his RM set had invoked the ploy. Freud's ideas were considered void as a practical means for understanding consciousness but held in regard as a historical datum for understanding twentieth century modernist thinking towards the individual, much as how Marx was treated in the Preterite Zone.

A soft bleating bought a close to the scene and Dr Rhea slid on her reality modulator. A visor screen covered the upper part of her face, a luxurious model edged in purple felt that matched the material of the cushion below the shallow craters in the table. Quentin watched the sensor band slip behind her sparkling carbon-dusted ears and Rhea raised a hand to indicate she must attend to whatever message she had just received and her visor darkened. Contrasting with this elegant assemblage Rhea commenced an irritable swatting, pinching the air as she navigated her virtual Umwelt and giving the appearance, Quentin thought, of a bee-bothered queen.

Quentin tapped the thin table surface and watched a wave ripple out, fleetingly transparent at the pressure maxima. Rhea

was still pinching the air so he walked along the crimson carpet to the pillow nest. Once settled there he fiddled with a sensory organ and closed his eyes. The sound of gentling lapping waves and a faint odour of oily wood smoke, coconut and nectar wafted around him. It was the smell of doctor Tottman. He thought about Neikea. Besides Neikea's appeal to his sense of reason he decided it was her *smell* with which he was most enamoured, a low-note honied and homey musk. His personality developer suggested he arrange for a dinner date with her that evening. He knew exactly where to take her, it would be dangerously weird and perhaps would quicken the romantic catastrophe of which he had foretold.

Quentin looked up to see Dr Rhea facing him through a partly cleared visor screen. He could not tell if her focus was upon him or the screen and her upper lip ratcheted in an asymmetric burlesque, flakes of black lipstick on tusky upper-canines. The ratcheting seemed to be lasting longer than it should and the spectacle bred a nauseating discomfort. Time hung in the air, movement without acceleration. Quentin was about to force a cough when he turned and saw Neikea who had entered the office after a sharp double knock that he now recalled hearing. She wafted around him, head raised at a haughty angle testament to their morning commute that had soured with an argument, Neikea remonstrating against Quentin's apathy to a referendum mandating the ethical credit point system as a multiplier for the UBI allowance.

Neikea fired to Quentin a professional-grade no-teeth category five smile, her auburn curls jiggling with the tassels on a green plastic neck choker. Quentin's eyes darted down to her groin, the sneaked appraisal recognized by Dr Rhea who smiled in a reflex that Neikea understood, a blush appearing on the apex of her cheeks.

'Thith just arrithed,' said Neikea, handing Rhea a red envelope. Quentin wondered why she sometimes affected a lisp.

Dr Rhea took the letter and Neikea left the room with a salvo of glances to Quentin, to Rhea, and to the shallow craters in the table surface. The heavy scent of her Edelweiss perfume lingered. Rhea wafted the air with the red envelope and then held

it up to her eyes and inspected both sides, elbows hovering a fraction above the tabletop. Quentin looked on, wondering why she was taking so long to open it. Rhea emitted a satisfied sound and slowly raised an index finger, terminating in a long and sharpened nail with which she then scythed opened the envelope. The slow shearing of the paper fibres set Quentin's teeth on edge.

From the envelope Rhea took a postcard and held it with one hand. With the other hand she held the envelope, wafting it with lazy distraction. Rhea put down the card on to the table and gave a wink to Quentin. But Quentin misjudged her look and returned a solemn nod, as if agreeing to put down the family dog.

Quentin relocated to the desk as Rhea read the postcard. He studied the photograph on its face. The image seemed to show a snow-capped mountain range beyond a calm grey sea beneath a cornflower blue sky. But on closer viewing Quentin determined that what he had first thought to be a mountain peak was, in fact, a solitary anvil thundercloud: black and bulbous and threatening.

— *Why such a gloomy image?* he thought.

— *A sense of uncontrolled power.*

Dr Rhea finished reading and waved the card as she had done with the envelope, looking distractedly to one side as though she were alone.

‘What is it?’ asked Quentin.

‘A postcard.’

‘Post *what?*’ (Quentin had never heard of a postcard, and thought Rhea was talking about a new category for something, *post-modern et cetera.*)

‘Mail.’

‘Is it a womb-man thing?’

‘What?’

‘The thing in your hand.’

‘The postcard.’

‘What’s *card*?’

‘What people used to write on.’

‘And this is what came after it?’

Rhea smiled and Quentin slumped with churlish impatience. She placed the card on the desk, lowered her head to its height

and blew the card to him. Rhea then sat up, removed her visor and recommenced swiping.

Amidst the anis flavour of Rhea breath and Neikea's lingering scent, Quentin's graphological investigation began with an analysis of the postcard's pencilled lettering. The address was written in a neat blockish style with perfect verticals and horizontals.

QUENTIN PARSLEY, PSYCHOLOGIST
137 EVENINGTIDE TRIANGLE, EDINBURGH

The text looked carefully copied. Its kerning was consistent and showed no signs of correction. The signature, however, was in a decorated style like a medieval manuscript, matching the antiquated language of the content. Its first letter was a curlicued letter R.

Quentin re-read the message, realizing he remembered nothing from his first pass.

Dear Quentin,

I write to you asking for help.

Magnificent things have happened to me since we met. Ideas have arrived in dreams. These ideas I have enacted upon and from-which gained incomparable success and influence. It is, as you say in your Fringe show, a kind of Magick.

But I increasingly feel as if I have no option but to follow the ideas and the waking world has become entirely dreamlike.

I have an earnest desire to see you and alleviate this malady, here on the Isle of Rum.

Ragnor

As Quentin moved his thumb over the handwriting the graphite dust fell off but the words were still discernible from the embossed channels. He rubbed away the remaining dust and nodded to himself thinking that Ragnor, whoever he was, exhibited classic signs of depersonalization syndrome.

— *Rumspringa Overload.*

— Ragnor probably heard about me from my Fringe channel, he thought.

The name Ragnor was nigglingly familiar. Quentin looked up and found Rhea facing him. Her visor screen was flipped above her head and she assumed a steady pose, chin resting on interlocked hands and elbows in the two shallow craters.

'I can tell you're over-analyzing,' she said, looking down at her elbows. 'It's like the loose screw all over again.' And she started snickering through her nose. Quentin saw through the divots Rhea's legs opening and closing rapidly. 'How Doctor Tottman and I laughed at that! Might've been what killed the poor bastard.' She turned into the window's coloured light and said, 'You know what this is about, right?'

Quentin shrugged, stung by Rhea's Federal insensitivities. 'It's a Honzing thing,' she said. 'Ragnor is a leader with those extreme techno-accelerationists. Surprised you haven't heard. He's running a conference on Rum. ECL.'

'ECL?'

'Ex Crown Land. Outside the Zone. Kind of like the M-D but, well, nicer. Rum's an island. Used to be owned by a king, out east towards Doggerland. Went as a family to escape troubles in the 40's. With the cousins.' Rhea scratched the back of her neck and cackled in recollection. 'Oh, the things we used to do to keep warm,' dabbing the inner corners of her eyes.

Quentin shifted awkwardly, 'I read Honzing's manifesto about the horizontal singularity. Well, I heard about it. They sent me a moustache.'

'Did they? They sent me something quite, ahem, enjoyable.' Rhea batted her eyes and coughed. Her legs stopped moving and she said with sudden presence, 'Perhaps you should go to the conference.' But her voice came so neutrally it could have been either a suggestion or question.

Quentin shook his head and turned over the card to look at the photograph. "*Skye Cuillins from Rum*" read a small subtitle.

'I don't know. Honzing are a cult, right? They say that an alien deity inhabits our minds and controls our desires.'

'Nudges our desires,' corrected Rhea.

‘Whatever. Besides, Neikea. You know,’ he nodded towards the shallow divots on the table.

‘Ach come on!’ said Rhea. ‘It’s a lovely day outside. Why don’t you run along and start the weekend early? You’re way past this month’s Quotum. These Honzing lot aren’t your cup of taro. Too much *ethos*. It wouldn’t be at all logical to go there.’

It was indeed lovely outside now and the coruscating sunlight silhouetted Dr Rhea in the bay window.

Quentin turned over the card and noted that his thumb had rubbed some of the carbon onto the lower part of the postcard below the signature. The smudged dust revealed two sentences, hitherto invisible and embossed into the card:

A risible inditement succumbs eventually
Yet over us does reality evade all meaning

Quentin did not have time to process these sibylline passages as Rhea reached out to take the postcard he was holding. He instinctively mirrored her, stretching out the card to pass it back. But just before the exchange Quentin changed his mind. Rhea held his gaze.

‘I think it would be so *reasonable* to go,’ he said, looking into her small black eyes.

‘Suit yourself,’ said Rhea, as the visor screen covered her face with a velveteen glide.

Quentin looked again at the postcard and focussed on Ragnor’s curlicued signature. He pocketed it and walked down the crimson carpet.

Modus Ponens

Pausing on the sandstone threshold Quentin smiled as he accommodated to the crisp brightness. His reality modulator advised he visit a Kinetic Exercise Centre but Quentin thought this activity was decidedly *passé*, overnight electro-neural stimulation being the more accelerated form of muscular tonic. However, perhaps in response to his diffidence he was soon advised it was better for his long-term health to trust one's RM set over an emotional opinion.

Quentin was directed down the time-puddled steps and into the droney city, the two syllables of Ragnor sloshing around his head. To recentre himself Quentin practiced his Thought Gestures. He had trained his reality modulator to recognise about thirty TGs, considerably better than Neikea who still struggled with the yes-no-maybes. The trick was to have the command clearly detected by brain activity sensors, easy to recollect, and yet unusual enough to avoid accidental invocation. An effective TG needed both an unambiguous mental image and a strong emotional theme and was most effectively recognized if it was brought to mind like a memory, even adding a few histrionic flourishes such as nodding one's head in haze-wrapped reminiscence. Kali Corp incentivised learning TGs and Quentin was working on one to call his parents, to "phone home". To such ends he had devised the "Foam Gnome": a sad red-hatted white-bearded little man wearing a crown, fishing in a froth-boiling pond and yearning to be repatriated with his kingdom. The success rate for was over three-sigma, a solid prize-contender.

For not the first time that day Quentin called his parents, who had retired to the Preterite communities:

'Sorry, me again. Testing the — '

"That's okay Quentin," said his mother in her sing-song West Country voice. Her bouncing arcs of pastoral cadence stretched and pitched with capricious Zoner fancy. 'Alll-ways lovely to heeee-ar you dear. What's the latest since this murrrrning? Still going okay with Neikea? Aaaaa-ve you any plans for the evening?"

Quentin found her accent infuriating, reminding him of his origins.

'I am taking her to that Ouroboros cook-house,' he said, emphasizing the curtness of the consonants and enunciating each vowel in the exotic word. 'You know, the restaurant for which you gifted me tickets where they—'

'Oh yes dear. I didn't choose it. It was your faaather's idea. I think it's disgusting.' She pronounced the last word as though it had been "lovely".

'Well I'll tell you about it later, Mother.'

The gym came into view and Quentin hung-up. His RM set produced a convincing rendition of his voice saying goodbye and adding a sentimental message of apology for not being able to join for her one-hundredth birthday, which Quentin had forgotten about anyway.

The fitness institute was officially titled "Health Ordinance Compliance Centre", but called the *Hocc*.

Following appropriate decontamination Quentin fitted himself into a workout suit and loaded his program, *The Labours of Hercules*. His workout music started to play, *Steely GAN*.

He was already about twelve hours into cleaning the Augean stables, toning his rhomboids to suit Neikea's aesthetic preferences. The task was enjoyable and made a change from the slaying and capturing of violent beasts, which had given him nightmares that had warranted a recapitulation session comprising a fully immersive rendition of Peter Jackson's *Bad Taste*. The toil of shovelling large piles of manure left enough energy for some basic mental ruminations.

— *Ragnor believes he is dreaming.*

— *It's like the Moon Doubting Rumsprings we see at the clinic who think they are in a computer simulation.*

Dream analysis had never appealed to Quentin. It was a Zoner pastime, relying too much on abstracted metaphor and generally presenting a non-testable claim. He recalled from his Jungian education (when he lived in the Zone) that dreams were likened to *shadows* of a waking mind, aspects of the dreamer's personality such as their anxieties, interests, life experiences and aspirations. According to his interpretation of Jungian shadows, certain personality aspects of the dreamer could be represented in

the dream world as other people, images, themes, or atmospheric feelings.

The reality modulator spoke with its familiar voice:

'Shadows relate to the secret aspects of one's self, one's *id*, which we do not recognize.'

— *So, if this is all part of Ragnor's dream, then I, Quentin Parsley, am a shadow for some aspect of him.*

'Is the knowledge of my own existence real?' Quentin mumbled, feeling suddenly faint.

A cardiac heart symbol flashed on his visor screen and a text box appeared reading: 'MODUS PONENS'. Quentin had heard the phrase in a clever Fringe show.¹⁰⁹

— *And if a dream is a shadow of a dreamer's mind, then if the dream definitely exists, does this mean there must be a dreamer?*¹¹⁰

— *But how do we prove we are in a dream if we cannot prove the converse? It is not a testable hypothesis.*

Quentin's RM set said, 'All we can be sure of is qualia. That is all there is. There is just a single and shared eternal qualia.'

He felt hot and removed the RM set.

— *Maybe modus ponens is not relevant to these ontological questions, that it does not help to determine if we are all just the stuff of dreams.*

¹⁰⁹ *Modus ponens* comes from Latin *modus ponendo ponens*, meaning "the mode where affirming affirms". It is the name for a rule where we say that when a second thing exists because of a first thing, then if the first thing definitely exists then so must the second thing. Or in other words: If P implies Q, and P is true, then Q must also be true. $P \rightarrow Q, P \vdash Q$.

¹¹⁰ Quentin's induction here is a *fallacy of the converse*: For instance, if we have a statement: *All humans dream*, we may incorrectly infer that: *This animal dreams so it must be a human*.

— Or perhaps *modus ponens* is relevant but it is beyond my capacity of reasoning to figure out *why*.¹¹¹

— These logical tools are useful in those old syllogisms, those three-part Platonic Bocardos.

— It seems that if I can invalidate the question of “are we dreaming”, then I can more easily help Ragnor.

— Deciding if it is a reasonable question to ask is the first step.

Quentin felt wrapped in clues, besieged by inklings.

In his mind Quentin heard Dr Rhea say in a slow and deliberate voice, “What we have here is a manifestation of a protective and unfulfilled personality. This is the most reasonable explanation.”

— But why is this dreaming illusion a *nightmare* for Ragnor?

— Perhaps it is just a reaction to the lack of control in his life, as was the cause for the conspiracy pandemics in the early two-thousands.

— Lack of control is what drove the eco-socialists to form the Preterite communities, cultivating their atavistic neo-primitive outlook.

Quentin looked up and then said aloud, ‘Estrangement and alienation and quiescence,’ nodding curtly as if saluting a twentieth century military general.

— Ragnor was probably advised to seek help at Dr Rhea’s clinic and he found my name associated with it.

— Rhea didn’t comment when I said that Honzing were a cult.

— I suspect that Ragnor is a Zoner using next-gen reality modulator systems.

— What did Rhea write? “Our problems with technology can be cured like sea-sickness: we need to focus on the horizon of the deep-future, when things will stop moving.”

¹¹¹ Note from the editor: I asked Arthur if he could clarify if, after his Honzing experience, he thinks the *modus ponens* thought experiment and the fallacy of the converse are relevant in the question of “are we living in a dream or simulation”. He says he now has a stronger opinion than the vision-character of Quentin, but that to describe this further would detract from his essential message about the process of The Honzing entity. This is typical of the obtuse answers that Arthur is increasingly given to give.

‘Conciliate,’ whispered Quentin, relishing the sibilant consonants as if tasting a sour fruit.

And then in an instant he remembered:

— Ragnor! Yes, he was that guy I met in Rarotonga! When I was on my first Rumspringa.

— It must be the same guy. How could I forget a name like that?! He must be about fifty now.

Quentin fell backwards onto a compliant safety gel, face up below a ceiling of infra-red radiators. With hands aloft he idly opened and closed his fingers to modulate the intensity of heat impinging upon his face and thought how he was fractionally complicit in Ragnor’s breakdown, being a part of his past. He felt as if he had discovered a new animal and was tasked to name it.

Quentin journeyed home under a burning twilight with the swagger of a hero.

Acquired Tastes

Quentin and Neikea met in a cook-house holographically announcing itself with a self-consuming snake. The interior was styled *dream chic*: lava lamps projecting primary colours upon comfortably seated diners whilst Theremin tones and musical saw waltzed about in a baroque passacaglia.

Tabletops were a taut elastic membrane, especially compliant such that tableware slowly sunk to become flush with the surface. It took Quentin considerable effort to avoid resting his elbows upon it.

There was no menu because everyone knew what was on offer. Earlier in the year Quentin had withdrawn some stem cells from his health account from which were grown two portions of gluteal muscle tissue. He and a guest could dine upon himself any time after the first month, the portion size being in proportion to the incubational duration within the bioreactor.

Towards the table Neikea said, ‘I would be grateful for two glasses of Elysium Merlot and a tartare,’ adding as an aside to Quentin, ‘Like a millennial raw-foodie.’ She mimed screen-swiping a smart phone and duck-facing a selfie. ‘You seen my charger?!’ Her neck flashed a diamond dog collar.

There were no human staff in the cook-house. That was what separated it from the Preterite Zone restaurants, where food preparation was a much loved work-hobby. Neikea and Quentin earnestly agreed the Federal policy was more righteous. Yellow serving manipulators glid amongst the elastic tables alerting themselves with badly synthesised Rossum coughs.

Quentin looked around the room and nodded at the sartorial coherence to Federal diktat: canary yellow bulging pantaloons and tight-fitting navy-blue jackets.¹¹²

Repeated exclamations professed how the “cultured” meat (a term of Zoner derision, which had been un-ironically co-opted in the Federation) did not contribute to one’s flesh quota. Quentin relayed this news to Neikea, who already knew this.

The Federal public had adopted a modality of polite but emotionally estranged social engagement. This consisted of unflinching eye contact and category three smile — stimulating the zygomaticus (and nothing but the zygomaticus) for fifteen-hundred milliseconds — and then raising one’s hand as if holding an invisible teacup and vocalizing the utterance “hmm”. It was increasingly common to use the RM set to stimulate these muscles. The intonation of the hmmm was supposed to be neutral and sophisticated, as if agreeing about a very serious matter. Quentin found it difficult not to show his teeth after the vocalization but the *au courant* greeting came quite naturally to Neikea.

Seeing a mutual acquaintance Quentin gestured to Neikea, waiting to see how she would respond.

Would she raise an actual glass or would she just affect raising one? he wondered.

Neikea’s hand flinched and Quentin guessed she was reaching for the vessel and so he mirrored the movement. But no! Neikea raised a vessel-free hand with one little finger extended. Quentin panicked and kneed the elastic table and the wine glasses launched into the air.

¹¹² The yellow and blue clothing style invokes the *Werthertracht*. This was the favoured clothes of the protagonist in Goethe’s “The Sorrows of Young Werther”. This book is worth a mention as it was one of Goethe’s first works, an autobiographical bildungsroman concerning a mawkish adolescent and his conflicted feelings of artistic sponsorship and romantic unrequitement. It captures classical ideas of the sublime including great thoughts, strong emotions and a subjunctive mood (*if it were so*, that kind of thing). I would say that there was more than a touch of Young Werther to the pre-Honzing Arthur.

After the spillage was mopped two shallow bowls arrived on which was a small portion of dog-meat grey matter. Quentin's face was acid-etched upon the dish with a message that read, "Happy Birthday from your Bio-Parents". His likeness was lifted from a photograph taken twenty years ago, grinning wildly with two thumbs up. He didn't recognize himself.

Neikea took the first bite of her tartare with an unflinching nonchalance that further raised her esteem in Quentin's bewildered eyes. Onto his cutlet he poured spoonfuls of brilliant washing-powder-white phosphoric acid to mitigate the nausea. Neikea said there was a new variety of cultured meat containing hormones to disable higher-brain processes and reduce the gag reflex.

'*Lab-optimized*,' grizzled Quentin.

Neikea refuted the pun and chewed the raw flesh. Mixed with the Merlot it gave a feral spectacle. Quentin pushed a piece of muscle tendon along his plate. It was undercooked and far too tough to chew. He tried to camouflage the offal on his face beneath the glass chopsticks.

Neikea chatted merrily as she ate: 'I heard they are opening a cook-house in Bath where you can eat parts of historical people. *Which part of who* would *you* like to eat?' she sang.

Quentin said he would have to think about it and excused himself with a bilious belch.

Neikea had nearly finished when Quentin returned. He recommenced the two-way assault but felt decidedly pathetic. The wine glass had refilled and with a large calibre straw he desperately downed another, hoping to benumb the entire experience.

A passing Rossum bot asked Neikea in a Slavic-tinged accent, 'Vie your friend not eat? Is he being too good vor himself?'

Neikea and the robot laughed and as the joke recirculated the cook-house was soon tittering, repeating the punchline "too good for himself" and pointing at Quentin. Quentin blushed furiously and grinned back at his audience.

— *Perhaps it's the Zee-D-C I took earlier that's making me feel so self-conscious*, he thought, gulping down the grey cuisine that

crunched with phosphoric acid. He couldn't help but compare the cruel etiquette of Federalists to the emotional sensitivity of the Preterite Zoners.

Taro pudding followed. The mauve congealment bore the characteristic aftertaste of sulphur and the eggish gas was politely wafted.

Recovering his confidence Quentin raised the subject of Dr Rhea. This was good kindling to light the conversation and the chat progressed with passion. Dr Rhea, about whom both had much to say but had been unable to do so with their outside-work confidants, for who else could understand her *mercurial* complexity?

Quentin said there should be a name for a frustration borne of wanting to discuss esoteric topics but lacking a suitable audience. A muffled voice issued from his coat pocket: '*Exulansis. This comes from the word Exile.*'¹¹³

Neikea's eyes flared and darted between Quentin and his coat.

'So indecorous! And I'm going to delete our conversation history tonight from my Word Count.' Neikea donned her reality modulator and with a surly temper stood up and headed towards the toilets. Quentin waited in brooding despair at his social blunder. When Neikea returned a few minutes later she brought with her the good-natured spirit they had earlier shared, as though nothing had happened.

A yellow serving robot removed the dishes and left a hand-sized plastic arcuate object. It turned out to be an electronic fortune cookie with holes at each end into which they exhaled, their faces almost touching. The table interface said it was conducting a DNA analysis of their breath to predict a possible offspring phenotype and shortly displayed the message,

¹¹³ *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows* defines *Exulansis* as *the tendency to give up trying to talk about an experience because people are unable to relate to it*. The word does not appear in online records before 2014.

"ANAMNESITIC HYSTERIA: A phenomenon where people believe they are dreaming."¹¹⁴

They both laughed, assuming the analysis was a hoax.

'Well, according to someone I know we might all be a figment of an imagination,' said Quentin, thinking about Ragnor but not wishing to expound.

They relocated to Neikea's apartment, an attic in an ancient waterside factory configured in the original sense of providing a significant risk of head injury. The room was lit by a single red orb, below which Quentin and Neikea faced each other upon miniature glass stools drinking fermented tubers and mirroring category two smiles.

Quentin's eyes explored the room and its varied contents. A triangular pendant hung in the corner showing a bucolic Preterite scene of a peasant hoeing soil in a valley. Next to this hung the small whip that Neikea held during her live Fringe performance. Its chrome handle gleamed electric blue. And levitating upon the faux-cement counter Quentin recognized the spheroid projector Neikea had used in the show. He longed to tap it.

'Honzing desideratum,' said Neikea with a yawn. 'Use it as a timer.'

'And the,' said Quentin, nodding to the whip.

'Oh, Rhea suggested I should —' Another yawn cut Neikea off and a *SoundTrack* permutation started to play slow and quiet Polynesian music.

They kissed unceremoniously and Neikea led Quentin on to an old sofa, a Zone antique edged in worn hardwood and overstuffed with protruding feathers. Before long she was asleep, and Quentin covered her in a thick velvet blanket.

Staring through the ceiling window Quentin saw a gibbous moon. He aimed his tapping finger towards it creating a halo on the tip and he thought back to his meeting with Ragnor in the Cook Islands.

¹¹⁴ *Anamnesis* is the process of reminiscing.

Brave New Problems

Quentin awoke in a sickly emulsion of liver red and neon green. A Stonehenge model rotated upon a glass shelf running head-crackingly above the bed. The twin light ricocheted around Neikea's spotless sleep-env and through the small henge, creating anaglyphic shadows like a mis-exposed camera film. Adjacent to the rotating souvenir was a small steel disc with neat thin lines of electric blue powder configured in three letters: MLY.

Once Neikea and Quentin had insufflated the letters they took a quick skin analysis. Alphanumeric symbols appeared on the glass shelf suggesting they consume 10 mg of 5-HT to calm their high. But the inhaler was in the kitchen and the Domestic Manipulator non-functional, Quentin having thrown it against a wall in a fit of surprise during one dark night's trip to the toilet. He told Neikea he didn't like the machine, that it looked "Rossumy", but really it was because he was scared of the beady-eyed grabber, unresolved trauma from a teenage bet. And so, Neikea and Quentin commenced sex without any further medication.

Lying on his back Quentin noticed a sticker on a trilithon lintel proclaiming the England & Wales tourist office. It was printed on cheap bibulous paper and the red Welsh dragon had smudged. Realising he should be more in the moment, Quentin looked up and saw Neikea's eyes were closed. He turned to find his reflection in the mirrored wall. The green light gave his face a ghoulish and primitive look.

Uncharacteristically intrepid, Quentin gently locked his hands into Neikea's axilla and lifted her a few inches above his prostate body, coddling her groin upon the axis of his head. As the irony bud bloomed in his mouth he looked up to the densely embroidered snakes of William Blake ivy on the enveloping negligee, illuminated with lambent gleams flickering through the megaliths.

As the initial rush of MDMA faded the couple became critically present in the sensual world and Neikea began to thrum, embellished with cup-and-saucer teeth chatter. Quentin diligently

pressed towards a singularity as fingernails razored into his jowls, pulling him within the ectoplasmic veil. At the moment of rapture Neikea roared thrice in the affirmative, sweeping out an arm and knocking Stonehenge and a small bottle onto the bed. A heady smell flooded up: it was the essence of her scent, the tincture of mountain flowers.

Everyone had at least one psychological disorder in the Federation. In fact, considering that you did *not* have any disorders was itself a registered disorder, leading to resonant oscillations in the schedules of psychologists like Drs Rhea and Parsley. Neikea was suffering from a reduced sense of material desire; *a non-compliant integration of the psycho-capital drive mechanism*. This was a common side-effect of accelerated abundance since the nationalization of all manufacturing centres. Under the supervision of Dr Rhea, Neikea was undergoing a recapitulation of an era labelled *Maximal Capitalism*, centred around April 1985. This involved complete immersion in global media from the period, assisted by magneto-limbic stimulations for increased emotional engagement (Rhea was sceptical about the approach and considered Neikea's symptoms a mere sequala, but she had no choice according to the Federal Health Statutes). And so, following their coital breakfast Neikea lay in bed watching the hit charity single "We Are The World". Her lips spasmed randomly like a sleeping newborn, wincing smiles and frowns exploding like thunder and arms abducting with the Moro reflex.

It was a weekend for Quentin and with the four days he planned to visit Ragnor on the Isle of Rum. He rehearsed his trip by practicing incidental Zoner banter, in case he had the misfortune to talk with anyone.

After about an hour a stream of bloody saliva indicated Neikea had endured enough and Quentin removed her visor. He announced he would travel to Rum and visit Ragnor. Through tear-streaked eyes Neikea said he was crazy to undertake such a long journey to aid a barely remembered friend, reminding him that Honzing were a cult promulgating a theory of alien mind control. Neikea had planned to spend the day in the botanical gardens educating the bots in matters of visual harmony, but

Quentin was unswayed and a quarrel soon arose that shared the atmosphere with the scent of edelweiss.

And so it was in bad temper that they prepared to leave. Quentin wore an inflatable metallic film anorak, custom-made with no threads, branded at the nape with the *Kali* logo and matching Neikea's except his had a light blue hood and hers one of rose pink (Quentin's algae hat had been composted, Neikea complaining that it smelt of wet dog).

The island of Rum was outside the Federation and beyond the Preterite Zone. There would be unregulated food and less reliable connectivity to the orbital servers so Quentin packed three small beige cuboids that arrived in the delivery portal that he assumed would counter the anticipated short-comings. The gear weighed only a few kilos and was distributed efficiently in the flanks of his pneumatic jacket.

Twenty minutes later a shiny-black pointy-end-down auto-taxi announced itself with Kali's double-helixed ident. Quentin and Neikea ran through the November drizzle and entered the vehicle beneath a wing-door, welcomed by a laminar air film and infra-red burst. A brusque American voice blundered, "*Is it your desire to be taken to the Haver-ly transportation interface?*", to which Quentin replied in a matching voice, 'CONFIRMED,' and the door closed.

The ovoid vehicle moved fast, rotating along the major vertical axis with each corner so as to keep the passengers facing the direction of travel. Quentin hugged Neikea with a jolly hunting spirit that made their anoraks crackle with static. His effort to kiss was thwarted by their visor screens and Neikea emitted a peeved whinny when he tried to lift hers.

The couple were soon sat upon compliant gel seats at Haverly train station beneath the high glass copula, through which leaked a pallid light. They faced each other in silent mind-fuzz, attention flicking around the subdued Rumspringa carnival awaiting their return to Preterite communities like drugged ants. Occasional shrieks of rage and fear and resilience made for a tense mood that the pigeons soothed with their lofty coos.

Without warning, Neikea's eyes rolled up and her lips puckered in earnest concentration. Quentin assumed she was making a thought-gesture and he took a sip of Breakfast Solution, a syrupy mix of terpenes and anti-nausea chemicals. He conjured a mental image of a crab upon a cartoon-cliché one-tree desert island and the thought gesture was recognized. His RM displayed information for his trip to Ragnor, a map of the route he would take that day from Edinburgh to Rum, and an image of Ragnor's postcard that he re-read for the umpteenth time:

Dear Quentin,

I write to you asking for help.

Magnificent things have happened to me since we met. Ideas have arrived in dreams. These ideas I have enacted upon and from-which incomparable success and influence. It is, as you say in your Fringe show, a kind of Magick.

But I increasingly feel as if I have no option but to follow the ideas and the waking world has become entirely dreamlike.

I have an earnest desire to see you and alleviate this malady, here on the Isle of Rum.

Ragnor

And the hidden text that the carbon dust had revealed:

A risible inditement succumbs eventually
Yet over us does reality evade all meaning

The familiarity of the words was dizzying.

— *Seems like something I've written now*, he thought.

— *I wonder if the Honzing people will welcome me?*

Neikea was still flickering her eyes and so Quentin inspected the tabletop. At its centre was a hologram, a logogram for the Chinese tourist industry. Rocking his head animated the image, the winged quadrilateral alternating with a green panda. Quentin began to compose a Thought-Gestured love poem using his RM set. It was a kind of Haiku of action and emotion, albeit somewhat crude due to the limited vocabulary and syntax of communication

between his mind and the device. His RM set began playing a Switched On version of Antonín Dvořák's *Serenade for Strings*.

Quentin's TG Poem went something like this:

Awakening {A cartoon sunrise, the sun as in a late-capitalist era breakfast-cereal advert. Thin yellow arms stretching from the beaming yolk-yellow disc.}

The feeling about a particular environment: Dark and unfamiliar and perhaps-scary. {A thick jungle of vines and creepers on a desert island. Teenage albino bald dwarfs are smiling at you and tapping their teeth. As your perspective settles, you see the feet are actually hands.}

Unknown red and green light. {Red = Blood. Green = The garden of Quentin's parent's house.}

Perfect warmth and slow sounds of human sleep. {Three sleeping black kittens in a basket in the sun.}

Feeling non-time and non-waiting. {Quentin's childhood memory of at a beautiful Scottish estuary, lapwing wheedling in the mudflats.}

Devastating Eternal Magnificent Germanic-Cowboy Elated Triumph {The Allegro con fuoco of Dvořák's New World Symphony}

The message was sent.

Neikea's head cocked to the right as her RM set began to stimulate her mind to communicate Quentin's poem. It evoked images and themes in her own idiolect using her personal thought vocabulary and syntax, and Quentin hoped she would understand it.

Over the following few minutes Neikea's head slowly angled to the other side as she looked at Quentin, arms crossed in twee elfin symmetry and face in passive countenance as though she were staring out of an airplane window above a calmly clouded continent. Quentin returned a broad grin but remembered how primitive he had appeared in the bedroom that morning and shrunk into himself.

After about a minute the lights in Neikea's RM set changed colour to indicate she was now available.

'Never really understood music,' she said brightly.

Quentin's attention then transferred to a man bearing what appeared to be a chrome-plated chin. 'What's that?' he asked.

'Chin cap,' answered Neikea, with a look of "Are you okay?"

As Quentin tried to make sense of this the pigeons in the station seemed to explode, flying up moments before a flanged triple thud sonic boom fractured the air. The human babble muted and Quentin vibrated with *déjà vu*.

As the hubbub returned Quentin looked around for the metal chinned man who Neikea had so succinctly described. His gaze wandered to a small group of people sitting down on the station floor, all dressed in Federal yellow and blue and wearing visor screens. A well-projected proclamation cut through: ‘... the definition of the word *machine* in relation to the *brain as a machine*. . .’

Neikea punctured Quentin’s grazing on the fragment, ‘We should go on one of those new cruises to Greenland, see the fjords. The weather will be perfect for the crossing if we leave in twenty-four days. Only twenty-two Yoo-Bees and fourteen E-C-Pees.’

‘Hmm, yeah,’ said Quentin vaguely, suddenly very tired and wishing for less stimulation.

Perhaps sensing this, Neikea changed to a softer, mothering tone and said, ‘I know you don’t like E-C-Pees. You’re so like Rhea.’

‘No, they’re fine. Ethical guilt points—’

‘*Credit Points*,’ corrected Neikea.

‘Whatever. I realize they’re part of the agenda.’ And he sung an old Federal slogan: ‘It’s futile to fight the future!’ Quentin wondered if he was being ironic. ‘I just don’t see what was wrong with the universal basic income system. The *yoo-bees*,’ he air-quoted. ‘Just combine the two into a single value.’

‘But *you-bees* are just the energy quota, a hundred a month. There’s no ethical dimension.’

‘Then factor that into the cost!’ said Quentin.

‘Look, *it’s really not that complicated*,’ said Neikea, her voice parodying the education program that the Feds directed to Zoners. This triggered a response from Quentin and with sulky resolve he said, ‘Okay, let’s go to Greenland.’

‘Oooh, promises, promises,’ replied Neikea with a lazy coyness that provoked an immediate bristling in Quentin.

— *Is she suggesting I'm a tease, or am I just “over-analysing”?* he wondered, scratching his head. ‘*Promises promises* was so flippant.

Neikea noticed the emotional tides wearing upon his face and gave a smart slap on his thigh.

‘So, when do you return from this ridiculous adventure to the Zone?’ she said.

‘Well—’ he began, resisting to correct her that the Isle of Rum was technically outside the Preterite Zone.

‘You know they still pay with cash out there, right? No biometrics. And they’re mostly addicted to Zee-D-C.’

‘Myth,’ declared Quentin.

‘Whatever,’ dismissed Neikea, as though she didn’t understand the word. ‘There’s no connection with the servers. That means none of your beloved Fringe.’

‘Di—’

Neikea interrupted again, her voice returning to mothering whisper, ‘These Honzing people sound *dangerous*, Quentin. I mean, what *are* they? They don’t pay tax but they embrace new technology, so they’re neither Zoners *nor* Federalists. They’re *idealists*. And that means they’re not, practically speaking, *anything!*’

‘That’s just—’

‘They are suggesting that an alien lifeform exists within our minds and is controlling our destiny. They say this being will exist forever, passing through Big Bang eons. It’s too much! It means that every interaction we have with it will echo forever! How are we supposed to accommodate the enormity of the idea? It’s such a big idea that it MUST be wrong!’

Quentin had learnt the theory of Conformal Cyclic Cosmology as a child, held aloft in the Zone as a typical example of Federal indulgence for scientific abstraction.

‘I was saying the other day on my channel that we should classify The Honzing as an information hazard. I will propose it to the census committee.’

Quentin nodded, wondering what the “census committee” was.

‘And what kind of a name is *Radnor*? This friend of yours who runs the cult.’ Neikea was frantic. The name seemed entirely inconsequential compared with the philosophy behind it. Quentin

waited a moment before replying, ‘It’s *Ragnor* with a *G*. And, as I’ve said, he’s not really a friend, just someone I once met. I’m only going for two nights and will return on Monday.’

In a calmer voice Neikea said, ‘It’s so cute how you still talk about days of the week, like they do in the Zone. You mean the twenty-one-eleven, right?’

— *When did people stop using days of the week?* thought Quentin.

An Elon KloneBoi glid past on flashing blue rollerblades, hissing in pious disapproval. He was dressed in standard brown overalls, in *memoria* to the abandoned colony on Mars, and carried a collection of cleaning products in a plastic bucket. Everyone in the station looked at the poor monk, it was rare you saw one nowadays. The skazzed Zoners tittered and the uptight Federalists looked with clown-face pity but they all felt the same way about this lonely artifact of individualist religion. The young man headed to an antique blue telephone box which he began to meticulously sanitize.

Evidently triggered, Neikea flipped down her visor screen and slumped like a powered-off nannybot. Her face seemed to melt, a clear sign she had re-emersed herself into April 1985. At one point she whispered, ‘*New Coke. It goes so well with food.*’

Rhea had confided that Neikea’s treatment was a complete misunderstanding of recapitulation theory, that what should really be targeted was Neikea’s lack of creative spirit, that *desire* was one of the highest manifestations of creative intelligence but the extreme capitalist era had entirely perverted its understanding.

The yellow and blue group of people stood up and someone said the word “Honze”.

Neikea detached her visor and re-housed it in her jacket pocket with a snail-shell-tap magnetic click. Her delicate, fussy handling engaged Quentin like an ASMR shiver, a liminal sensation between acute annoyance and sensual pleasure.

Since the morning’s argument Quentin had wondered if he truly loved Neikea. He had hitherto understood love in two ways, as a romantic relationship between two red-blooded *homo-sapiens*, and as a more abstracted, philosophical kind, the love for an idealised concept, the *soundness* of an idea or its *robust simplicity*.

— Maybe we really love the idea of a person — their belief systems and behaviour?

‘Maybe there’s just one kind?’ he whispered, displaying his confusion with a shrug.

Neikea laughed at the distressed spectacle. She then took from her pocket a small metallic flower, a lead cockade, and placed it in Quentin’s hand. He took the flower and studied its fine detail.

Aboard the shuttle to Tarsus, Quentin walked to his cubicle and the door sealed behind. Neikea shadowed him on the platform although Quentin was unable to see her through the tinted windows. He inspected himself in the reflection, staring towards her with a gormless face. He reached into his trousers, removed hand and sniffed fingers. Neikea shook her head and walked away.

Fellow Travellers

There was a short delay as the tunnel was depressurized and Quentin was advised this would be a good time to top up his Tithe quota. Subscribers to the Kali brand were contractually obliged to use Tithe for every one hour in ten they wore a reality modulator (Pee-Dev counted). The voice of Tithe spoke with an accent that was familiar by design, arrived upon by iterating through permutations of provenance and personality, measuring Quentin's brain response and tweaking the parameters of *distinction, projection, jurisdiction and familiarity*. The voice did not have to actually *be* familiar, it just had to evoke a *sense* of the familiar. In fact, Quentin's tithe sounded different most of the time as the voice was perceived via eighth-nerve stimulation, "speech without sound". To mask the artifacts and encourage familiarity, the reality modulator magnetically stimulated the temporal lobe whenever it spoke, giving the impression to Quentin that he had already heard it before, a *déjà vu* artifice.¹¹⁵

The magnetic excitation caused a faint tickling as the faux-familiar voice spoke:

This is a reminder from Kali that your Tithe quota is in arrears. We further remind you of your obligation to contribute one hour for every ten of use. Failure to do so will increase your necessitate use and reduce quality of performance.

¹¹⁵ In 1963, neurophysiologist Robert Efron proposed a theory of *déjà vu* based on his finding that the brain's sorting of incoming information occurs in the temporal lobe. Signals enter this part of the cerebral cortex twice before processing, once from each hemisphere of the brain. Efron proposed that if the two signals were temporally de-synchronized then they would be processed as two separate experiences. The writer Philip K. Dick had different ideas: In his *Exegesis* he proposed a theory of *déjà vu* premised that time is a form of energy, a script of the future which can enter a mind. He said, *Now and again we catch a glimpse of this script as it unfurls in our mind: that's déjà vu*. Philip K. Dick also said: "*People claim to remember past lives. I claim to remember a very different present.*"

Quentin flared his nose, irritated at the prolix message.

We shall now play a poem and measure your reaction. We have generated this to best suit your points of views and interests.

Please do not interfere with playback even if you do not enjoy the experience. The benefits of Tithe will become apparent.

Tithe altered its voice to that of a jolly West Country farmer on the verge of hysteria:

He-he-hello there Doctor Parsley and thanks for your *Tithe*! Ha ha!

— *Oh boy. Tithe must be tweaking its humour model,* thought Quentin with weary apprehension. He could smell cider.

Today we're going to be learning what kind of poetry you enjoy. We're trying hard to get this just right and so we need to know what you think about it. And that's just one great reason we need access to your brain!

Quentin chuckled at the silly voice.

As I'm sure you know, we folks at *You-Know-What* use your brain interface for a small bit of cerebral time-sharing. [Belch] S'cuse you!

It sounded and felt like it was coming from his gullet.

The voice continued:

Now, you may feel some mild tingling in your ol' brain box. If you really 'aven't got nothin' better to do, then watch our disclaimer video to learn about the kind of processing we may or, of course, may not be undertaking on your brain for, as we say *round these parts*, "The Betterment of Humanity!"

Okay now Quentin, blink to let us know you are fine with all that boring stuff and we'll begin, won't we!

Quentin blinked and felt a sensation as though the back of his eyeballs were being flicked with a cold metal chopstick. The flicks came irregularly, like a dog barking at night, and with each he saw specks of white. Quentin understood the tapping came from a brain analysis and stimulation program, "wet-ware"

measuring his response to the poem and stimulating his brain to offload some computational operations.

He closed his eyes and heard the familiar voice of Tithe.

Let us be going now.

The reality modulator detected Quentin was falling asleep and so the poem's first line was repeated. The chopstick taps changed to hot pinpricks.

Let us be going now.

You . . .

. . . and us.

Forging ahead

To meet Ragnor

In his mind caves

And see what may come

Of double waves.

— *Hmmm, that's pretty good. It rhymes and has authentic intention, like proper poetry.*

Quentin yawned, removed the headband and snapped it into the jacket cradle. He would have to top-up his *Tithe* contribution later.

Quentin woke suddenly and his leg shot out in startled confusion. He instinctively located the reality modulator upon his head, feeling a scalp tickle as the wet-ware initiated. A single soft sound came, a flopping like the dropping of a wet towel. He knew this was a message indicating that someone had just thought of him. The application, which he called "Towel Drop", was configured such that the message sender was anonymised. The app was bundled with his Kali RM set and Quentin did not know how to disable it, but the reward mechanism had, so far, proved sufficient for its survival.

The train was soon travelling at near-supersonic speeds beneath the moors and non-federal towns between Edinburgh and Tarsus. Quentin stared into the window, falling into the streaks of light. It took some time to notice his own face staring back, a realization that evoked an expression of surprise. And then, after a short delay, his surprised face had the same effect, a *second noticing*. He found the idea of being surprised at his surprise intriguing, like a pair of mirrors reflecting into each other.

Quentin was wondering if there was a name for this phenomenon of estranged self-observation when his reality modulator dropped in with its faux-familiar voice:

You are thinking of the *Hawthorne Effect*: when a person knows they are under observation they will behave differently.

Quentin did not think this definition was precise enough to describe his experience, and besides, Hawthorne sounded unconvincing, like the name given to grim Pre-Fork Federal housing estates. But he was still impressed with his new RM set, impressed it could read his thoughts so well.

He did not expect any company in his two-seat booth. It was more usual for Zoners to travel by a zero energy vehicle such as balloon or boat. As a Zoner teenager Quentin had work-travelled on a air barge, transporting hydrogen from the Qattara Depression to the Adriatic Complex. It was kind of a floating kibbutz but he never felt at home, never enjoyed talking with his compañeros; Quentin was always more interested in the machinations of Honzing's weather forecaster.

A smell of stale sweat mixed with notes of Zee-D-C interrupted Quentin's train of thought. He opened his eyes and found a man sitting opposite him.

A Zoner, he decided. Rumspring'ing around the cities.

There was a knack to riding in the vacuum trains that had taken Quentin a while to master when he moved to the Federation, keeping the head forward and taking no sudden movements in case of a change in vehicle velocity. Quentin hoped his companion would not vomit.

A bizarre explosion of grass-green hair erupted from the Zoner's head. An oval disc flew from this spouting spectacle, dangling half an arm's length in front from a sagging telescopic rod. The disc was projecting light upon the man's face, fast moving strips of neon and green text. It was advanced tech for someone from the Preterite Communities, from the tale-end of their knowledge database, but still generations away from Fed-tech. Quentin shivered at the thought of such a crude epithelial interface.

The man appeared to be asleep and so Quentin dared further examination of this striking specimen. It was a filled-out face, sunburnt and haggard with a threat of rough violence. Quentin briefly determined the number 4004 flashing across the man's closed eyes. It was a number much-discussed on the Fringe lately, corresponding to the determined margin of error, in years, of the time since the last Big Bang, that is, the time since the beginning of the latest universe eon occurred 13.8 billion years ago, plus or minus 4004 years. Quentin was surprised that someone from the Zone would be interested in such new scientific information, which was way past the 2042 internet fork date.

The telescopic monocle retracted into the Zoner's hair. Upon his temples sat some kind of biological brain interface, inverted shark-fins arching back like sleek sideburns and pulsing light up its major axis. His left upper arm was exposed through a tear in his jacket. Quentin saw the result of severe body modification, a slot within his bicep about five-by-two centimetres into which was embedded a small book.

A cough-cum-growl alerted Quentin to look up and he found the man staring back. Quentin froze. With a gruff Gaelicised voice the man said, 'Grrr-ya war'n'scramn eh big man?' Biblical blue eyes stared back above black-stained gappy teeth in a huge but friendly face. The oval projector screen waggled like a dog shaking a bone. Quentin knew that "scran" was Zoner-dialect for food and wondered if the question was gay patois or the opposite. Possibly, he considered, he had been warned to *scram*, as in to leave immediately.

'Aye-y'nay,' said Quentin, moving his head noncommittally in a diagonal swoop.

'Bing'warn t'wi'off noo?' said the man, offering what appeared to be a gnawed-on wooden stick.

Again, Quentin did not understand the man's words nor intention, but guessed he was offering the stick. He improvised an ambiguous, 'Aye, yeah, no, ye-ah-nay,' closing his eyes as he started the Babel translation app with a thought gesture.

'Hims n'ya gon brash lookin wi-ta?' came the response.

Quentin forced a smile, eyes still shut, wishing that Babel would start. A bubbling sound signified the app had started and his visor screen displayed a text message in pastel green and pink lettering:

You now use Babel.

'Ah sed, hims n'ya gon brash lookin wi-ta?' repeated the man.

Non Federal accent.

Speak: Ay how-yoo-doin yawl-rite.

Quentin obliged.

'Aye yer-yam!' said the man. 'Was thinkin' yer was some Honzing cont thar forra min'it like. Ye Fe'ral Lamp Freak-sal-rite pal. I-da gee yee a skelpit lug fwer Honzing though ya kwim me?'

The person says he thought you were a member of The Honzing, but he realises you are a part of the Federal Union and that is acceptable with him.

Do not ask what a *Skelpit lug* is.¹¹⁶

Note The Kali Lifestyle Corporation take no responsibility for any harm which may fall upon its users as a result of our services.

Speak: Kay man yar The Honzing-shite do-in ma nok in t' grind man.

Quentin said, 'Okay man. Yeah, the Honzing shite is doing my nok in and I'm a grim man,' adding an asymmetrical baring of teeth that was intended as an assertive snarl but ultimately had the effect of a vacillating shrug.

Fortunately, an incoming communication interrupted the man and into his dangling oval screen he commenced shouting and ejecting spittle. Quentin took the opportunity to move to the next compartment.

As he was leaving, he heard the man say, 'Aye e's jus a lamp man. Hacked stem. Lookin' fer summink all in t'ed.'

Relocated, Quentin closed his eyes and thought of his earlier flare of irritation with Neikea.

¹¹⁶ This is just as well: A *Skelpit Lug* is a hit in the ear.

A belch repeated the breakfast drink and reminded him of its medicinal qualities:

— *Perhaps it's the rhizomes giving me these mood swings?*

The salts of tuber vegetables were alleged to increase the efficacy of a reality modulator, enhancing the detection of metabolic activity in the brain. But the side-effects included emotional lability and so Quentin had configured his RM to warn him when it detected precursors. This it did by playing a dry, percussive sound, a hollow, woody clonk. The tapping rate of the clonk varied like a Geiger counter in proportion to his stress level.

A flomp lessened the rate of clonk.

Quentin tried to focus on something concrete, about how the world view of the younger generation from both the Preterite Zone and Federal Union had changed over the past decade. It was a change from an Earth-centric gestalt to a more universal outlook, the place of humankind in a context of universal exploration and an obsession with the far future, as typified by the Honzing movement. Ironically, this outlook-shift manifested in counter-progressive movements such as a rejection of environmental sensitivities (the flood was coming and they were moving to higher ground). In a Preterite Fringe sketch, Quentin had heard this attitudinal shift likened to an event in Ancient Briton about five-thousand-years ago when monuments were realigned from facing features in the natural landscape to features in the sky, a physical and psychic recalibration of the human lodestar.

— *The younger generation have a fundamentally different approach to time, a rejection of nostalgia. This must be related to their increased life expectancy from the epi-genetic therapy.*

— *And yet this new generation seem to have given up trying to define and follow a personal ethical code. We have completely integrated the authority figure into our ego.*

— *There is a kind of ethical economizing, the ethical credit point system has reduced virtue to an algorithm. I guess it saves time trying to work things out for ourselves and creates a consensus.*

— *We are moving from a human-driven technocracy to a computer-driven one and our political leaders are there to inform the algorithms by identifying and prioritizing the perceived problems.*

— *The Honzing movement aims to end politics altogether. It considers this a liberation. But from what? From our vices and corruptions? From ourselves?*

— *But on the other hand, the Honzing aims at a reasonable compromise between a personal and a societal humanism, a reconciliation of the differences between the Federation and the Zone.*

— *Honzing desiderata tailor tools to our specific porai and reject the mass-marketing of single products to millions of people.*

— *It is as if by showing us what to do with our free time they are revealing our true nature to ourselves, enabling our authenticity.*

— *It is a turning point away from the banal twentieth-century work ethic, the compression-expansion cycles from work and ego worship. A new world of psychosis awaits!*

— *We are running these programs on our brains now but used to be paranoid about viruses running on computers, or data snooping by unknown institutes.*

The next sentence came automatically, a slogan he had heard many times on the Fringe:

— *Accepting and embracing the risks of technology define what it means to subscribe to the technologist principles of the Federation.*

Quentin sighed, pressing his palms against the cold window and thinking how ill-defined this distillation of the zeitgeist felt. Wincing, he expected to hear a mood-warning clonk, but when one didn't arrive his spirit raised. He pressed chilled palms to his cheeks.

— *And then there is Ragnor, his voices, his reasoning, and his logic that are keeping him on Rum.*

He wanted to visit him, but could not explain why, could not interrogate the emotion, as they would say at the clinic. This had bred a fretting anxiety.

Rhea had counselled him:

‘You’re having your first Crisis Of Mythology,’ she said.

‘You mean a COM-zero?’ he teased, knowing how she eschewed acronyms used in the Federal categorizing systems, especially using zero-based indexing. ‘They still call it an existential meltdown in the Zone.’

‘Hard for all of us to keep up.’

‘Can’t get used to everything all at once.’

'It's like that everywhere.'

'Beware of complexity,' Quentin had said. 'It's a *ruse*.'

Rhea had gone on to opine how Quentin was desperate to find and label a new psychological disorder, compelled by a sense of intellectual striving to move away from his Folkist heritage. But Quentin found Rhea's diagnosis did not ring true. Although he barely remembered Ragnor — they had spent just one evening together — he decided his principal motivation to venture forth came from a desire to find and label a *new mythology*, not for himself, but one to share, anonymously if necessary. The widespread mythologies in the Preterite Zone seemed intangible, flowing processes defined only relative to each other. Ragnor was something he could touch, melding ideas unanticipated by either the techno-accelerationist or folkist traditions. It was an unforeseen adventure!

Refuting It Thus

Arriving into Tarsus Central terminus Quentin was eager to leave the train. He stepped into the corridor within a lazer grid projected from a yellow cleaning bot the size and shape of a penguin. The grid modulated in intensity as the machine spoke a Slavic-cum-Indian accented command with a strange chunking and emphasis:

'QUENTIN PARSLEY. PLEASE-DO not OBSTRUCT THIS-DEVICE. your FACE IT HAS-BEEN DETERMINED AND-we DO NOT an-TICIPATE ANY INTERRUPTION WITH OUR SERVICE-or your EXPRESSION OF-IM proper INT ENTION.'

The message left Quentin with a frost of annoyance. He resented the way he had to bend his ear to understand Rossum's low quality English. A short string of woody stress clunks sounded and he turned away.

Quentin stumbled on to the platform and headed towards the light of a floating Coke logo, hanging above a waist-high red pyramid. He assumed it was art, since public commercial advertising was long outlawed. Quentin knew what to do: he flipped down his display visor, looked at the Coke logo and blinked twice to agree with the terms of the wet-ware app that would download and briefly operate on his brain. The pyramid opened in four petals, rather awkwardly, Quentin thought, as though it had not opened for a long time. Inside was a red plastic cup of milky liquid, electrolytes to enhance the interfacing. Quentin took the cup and through his reality modulator saw superimposed upon the liquid an animated image. It was a desire-nudge for the latest nannybot with the Gramscian tweak to mitigate hegemonic indoctrination.

In his tired state Quentin did not feel the tingle from the brain stimulation. He noted how the nannybot was a big-end-up design but painted yellow, a robot progeny of Kali and Rossum.

— Has the algorithm determined I'm thinking about babies? Perhaps I am, the data systems know more what we desire than we do.

— I could use desire-nudging at the clinic to reveal the subconscious desires of a client. Maybe I could use it to better understand Ragnor’s disorder, and why the Honzing cult is so attractive to him and others.

Quentin downed the liquid. He had not experienced a sugared drink for years and quickly broke into a sweat. The petals closed with a hum, but when Quentin turned around the drink stand had vanished.

His next train to the ferry terminal at Mallaig departed from Sturgeon Street Station, a few kilometres through the centre of Tarsus. Quentin stepped upon a moving platform and bore his face upwards into the rare sunlight as he was taken outside.

Pillars of stone leered down, empty pedestals to capitalist tyranny ordained by louche industrialists to mock the hollow men below. Banks were long abolished and the state was both principal employer and capitalist. But employment was controversial. There was a monthly work quota of about forty hours (a personally tailored value, on a downwards trend over the last decade) but most of this time was taken to fine-tine AI models. The Fringe was humming lately over a split in Federal opinion over what forms of art could count towards the quota and Quentin had a hunch the hullabaloo he could hear was related to this.

A manifestation of a few hundred people were passing. According to Quentin’s reality modulator, they were not Federalists but Zoners protesting a new proposal to the *Bureau of Weights and Measures* (The Bureau was in many ways a successor to the United Nations, the International Organization for Standardization, and the International Electrotechnical Commission). The *Bureau of Pedants*, as Zoners called them, had subsumed *words* as a form of *measure*, and regulated (or rather, wished to regulate) their precise definition, in all their contextual glory, in all languages, as both a noble and desperate measure of conservation and as a utilitarian means to standardize communication and meaning. The proposal stated, “Art is an immutable substance, either with physical extension or a process without form, with a quality of affect we call “art” that can be determined algorithmically”. Some wanted to add that an algorithm could also determine the valency of art — whether an

example of art could be described as good or bad — but this had been scrubbed from the proposal as a concession. Surprisingly, Quentin's RM suggested he join. Quentin secretly sympathised with the plight against the proposal, but seeing as it was one of a Federally contrarian intent he was reluctant to make such a public declaration. He had recently attended a protest lobbying the Bureau to adopt a resolution to determine *Whether a statement can be computationally determined as appropriately funny*, a march organized by "The Wimmin", a far "right-on" political party that had started as a crude joke in a novel.

Quentin trusted Kali's judgement and sauntered in the direction of the marchers, which was, as luck would have it, traveling towards Sturgeon Street Station.

The crowd smelt of Zee-D-C and carried Honzing slogan-bearing placards:

HONZING BRINGS HAPPINESS FOR EVERYBODY AND
EVERYTHING MATTERS

ETERNAL RECURRENCE IS REALITY

BEWARE OF REASON

DOWN WITH MERITOCRACY

SUFFICIENT UNTO THE DAY

NO THINGS BUT IN IDEAS/ NO IDEAS BUT IN THINGS
TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE

IMMANENTIZE THE ESCHATON

THERE MUST BE HAPPY ENDINGS!

One sign stood out: a hologram broadcast from a lazer interference projector displaying a vertically orientated disc about three metres in diameter and rotating slowly like a large coin. The image quality was grainy and its intensity weak, such that it could only be discerned when the background was dark.

The disc showed twelve animated objects arranged as numbers on a clock dial:

At the twelve o'clock position was a Neanderthal. The hunched man was drawing what seemed to be a luminous green turtle.

At one o'clock sat a corpulent female with a head like a bunch of purple grapes. Writhing snakes cascading over voluminous breasts.

A stocky male warrior stood at two o'clock, covered in tattoos and shaking his penis towards a three o'clock ornate royal crown. Blood dripped down from the golden fleurons.

Covering the space around four and five o'clock was an image of a small town. The scene was full of detail: a sense of fairy-tale calm, men constructing long-boats and women weaving clothes, spinning threads on a wheel.

At six o'clock was a pulsing cartoon heart in a teacup surrounded by a wreathed garland.

Seven o'clock housed a book and telescope, flanked by a green sun and full moon.

Then at eight was a pair of dramatic masks, the smiling comic and sad tragedy.

At nine o'clock trod a goose-stepping soldier, marching beneath an all-seeing-eye pyramid.

Ten o'clock showed a big-end-up Kali vehicle facing an angular yellow big-end-down Rossum robot, small drones buzzing around the aggressive stand-off.

And finally, at the eleven o'clock position was an alien eye and letter lambda Λ embedded in a mushroom.

Quentin tried to understand the hologram:

— *Does it represent the story of humans? About our circular evolution? About "history repeating itself"?*

A reek of Zee-D-C announced a short flat-capped man wearing a leather kilt. The man nudged Quentin and with a Cockney accent said, ‘Thee Bo-eef-ian wheel mate. The prophet of the future is the past, innit,’ knowingly tapping his nose.

The man backed away and said, ‘Someone’s got to do it, mate.’ He pronounced this with an ambiguous tone that could be interpreted either as an explanation for the protest or as a disguised threat for an act he or Quentin had yet to undertake.

Quentin could imagine Dr Rhea dismissing the circular evolution idea as “over-simplified platitudinal nonsense”, a sentiment that Quentin was, particularly today with his volatile temper, inclined to agree with. He snarled towards the softly glowing sign and thought:

— These circular patterns might seem familiar, returning to similar motifs throughout our small lives, but it's just lazy cynicism to apply that to evolution as a whole.

— What's more it is an autocratic, anti-humanist, and down-right non-Federalist idea.

— Honzing liken the development of humanity to a corkscrew trajectory, which sounds more reasonable.

The last sign in the procession was a simple white scroll banner, held aloft on two thin bamboo poles, on which was stencil-sprayed text in Gothic font that read:

Be not anxious for the morrow.

Refute it thus.

‘Refute it *thus*?’ said Quentin to himself.¹¹⁷

He saw the word *Honzing* blinking at the bottom of the sign. The word flashed at such a rapid rate it could only be seen from the corner of one’s eye.

Quentin nodded towards the man carrying the banner, a tall man wearing an outfit covered in fluttering white sequins. Out of the floppy hood a stern Abe Lincoln face looked out, pendulous-nosed, unshaven and weather-worn.

— *Looks shifty. Droog-like*, thought Quentin.

Coherent with the strange look, the Abe-Droog also exhibited a pink-rimmed monocle with a silvered reflection.

Quentin was intrigued and stepped behind the man and followed, trying to understand the two sentences.

Refute *what*? he asked.

A projected yellow JUR logo appeared between Quentin’s legs and he turned to face a Rossum cleaning robot, a yellow pyramid the size of a chair driving on two caterpillar tracks.

¹¹⁷ Dr Samuel Johnson, writer of the 1755 *A Dictionary of the English Language*, claimed to disprove Bishop Berkeley’s immaterialist philosophy that there are no material objects, only minds and ideas. He did this by kicking a large stone and asserting, “I refute it thus!” However, it can be argued that his action failed to prove the existence of the stone outside the realm of ideas formed by perception and so he failed to contradict Berkeley’s argument, merely dismissing it.

“LOOK! I AM WALKING HERE!” it barked.

Quentin turned to face it. He was thinking that the machine had the same design as the nannybot he had seen in the Coke commercial. And then he tripped and fell over something.

‘Arrgh!’ cried Quentin, rolling on to his back. He had fallen over a person sitting upon the road. ‘I’m so sorry,’ he said immediately, his Preterite courtesy shining through. Thankfully, his target seemed unharmed, indeed unmoved.

Whoever it was that Quentin had fallen over was wearing a fur cloak with slicked-down black and silver hair like the undercoat of a wolf. The fur reached to silver-stockinged knees, ending an inch below the finish of a thin yellow skirt. A handswidth of pale skin led to tall and polished black boots of shiny leather. On their chest was a blue chrome T-shaped bar covering the sternum and clavicle that held the cloak tight to the body. A wide emerald green sash emphasized a slim waist.

He or she wore a bulbous white hat like a 1960’s future-concept air hostess and their face was covered by a large pinched-oval visor, the point reaching to the chin.

The visor was a screen, initially dead-channel static but clearing in a small oval to reveal the mouth of a woman. She gave a coy smile with purposefully hidden teeth that seemed mocking, as though Quentin had arrived late to a pre-arranged meeting.

Quentin scrambled up as the mask cleared and stared at the woman’s pale blue eyes.

“YOU MOVE NOW!” barked the lingering cleaning robot, somewhere between a statement and an order.

The woman looked at Quentin, tilted her head a fraction, and said, ‘I take care everything.’ She raised a middle finger to the robot, to one of its camera-eyes, and tapped the lens neatly with a ring. The machine reversed quickly away, flashing its lights as if to warn people it had a problem, and the woman’s mask once again clouded.

Quentin had a moment to briefly inspect the woman’s ring before it disappeared under a long sleeve: a flake of matte-black crystal, like a shard of coal about an inch across, with uneven grain and embedded in a chunky silver setting. The crystal seemed to suck in light and he could see an after-image when he closed his

eyes, as though it were burning phosphor. The ring was altogether haunting, like nothing he had seen before.

Through a Mask, Brightly

The woman's visor screamed patterns of angular blues flocking in frenetic murmurations. When she spoke her lips appeared and then faded as an expiring candle. The voice came confidently accented in a clipped Italian-cum-Balkan: 'Sorry for getting in your way-a. This new 'orsing thing.'

'Horsing?' said Quentin.

'Si. You know, the—'

'Ar, Honzing.' Quentin nodded and offered a hand. The woman tapped her bulbus hat leaving evaporating divots in the silken cloth. Quentin shrugged and repurposed his hand to brush his shoulders off. When the woman started to stand he quickly re-offered the hand, which she took without ceremony.

The patterns on the mask dissipated and it became transparent.

— *Such pale skin*, he thought.

— *Such intelligent eyes. Almost golden.*

Their faces came within a hand's thickness. Moist warm breath funnelled down her visor and fell upon his forehead, mixing with a cassolette laced with a faint herbal booze and notes of corporeal corruption. Quentin found the aroma disarmingly exotic.

The woman stooped craning vulture-like to give the impression of looking up though she was, in fact, almost a head taller. As her hand lingered in his Quentin's eye was drawn to curved long artistic fingers and dirt beneath the fingernails. He stepped back and said, 'I'm Quentin,' and returned his hand to shake.

'But ov course. And I yam Venus,' came the neat reply, shaking Quentin's hand with exaggerated formality. Her name was displayed on her visor, which was useful as she pronounced it *Finesse*.

Quentin nodded several times.

Venus gave the slightest tily of the head that seemed as close as she would get to a smile and Quentin's gaze darted to a tuft of Marilyn-blonde hair peaking from the white globe hat.

'You know my name?' he asked.

‘You are on my-ya system.’

‘And what was that you said about Honzing?’

Venus pinched the fingers of her right hand and raising it skyward she twisted it about 10 degrees towards her chest. ‘Scusi,’ she said. ‘It’s-a Ragnor.’

After a long pause she said, ‘And he looks-a forward to seeing you. Per-raps tomorrow?’

Quentin made a throaty noise as he processed the information.

‘And ee say pliz bring-an, er, open mine.’ Before Quentin could respond Venus again held up a finger and laughed a gravelly chuckle that Quentin found familiar. She took a small silver tube and sucked on it. It was Zee-D-C, taboo for public consumption in the Federation but tolerated for use by Preterite visitors. In a pale green cloud of smoke Venus repocketed the device without offering any to Quentin.

‘So?’ said Quentin, testing whether she had finished her call. Venus flinched a micro-smile, her mask clearing momentarily. ‘You were just speaking with Ragnor? You *know* him?’

‘I do not rilly know im. We av the same, er, kind ov *employer*.’ Venus spoke out of one side of her mouth, as if the other side did not wish to fully engage with Quentin.

‘*Employer?*’ queried Quentin. The word was used only ironically in the Federation since the state was the ultimate arbiter of work.

‘Si. Orsing. Onzing. Whatever you call it. I yam a kind ov journalist. I *observe*,’ she said proudly, gesturing to the receding marchers.

‘You’re a *spy* for Honzing?’

Venus turned to face Quentin and cocked her head. Arching eyebrows declined the question.

There was a second manifestation following the first group. It comprised a mixture of Federalists wearing visor screens and Zoners adorned with wicker and wrapped in eco-wool. A polite bike-bell ring alerted Venus and Quentin to turn around and face a black big-end-up Kali auto-taxi. Venus raised one hand towards it, the same hand bearing the crystal ring that appeared to have chased-away the Rossum cleaning bot. But at the last moment she

seemed to change her mind and withdrew the hand into a cuff.
‘Maybe we find somewhere else, ey?’

Her visor screen became opaque and again showed the flocking patterns.

Quentin and Venus relocated to the side of the street. Quentin noticed how Venus’s cloak stiffened as she walked, tightening in striated bands like muscle tissue. The blue chrome T-bar hugged her sternum tight.

‘What is this mask you’re wearing?’ asked Quentin.

Venus answered with a list, as though she had done so before but had rearranged the order, ‘It changes what you see. Re-abstracts the visual stream. Shows you relations between things. It is a new way ov seeing things. Modulates the number ov dimensions you can see. You can see more clearly. You can see brighter.’

She paused on this up-beat cadence before continuing the enumeration:

‘The mask shows-a-you what you want to see. Abstractions ov relation and differences of difference. The mask shows you the meaning of things in relation to other things as well as the thing-in-itself. It can show the biology ov other piple. Emotional liability.’

‘*Lability*,’ corrected Quentin with a sniff. Venus made a little giggle.

‘You can correct for the way you are feeling. Factor-out the hormones and the stress and all the rest, you know?’

Quentin hmm’d with doctorly attendance.

‘We see through the prism of our thinking. Reality belongs to the subjective. The mask, it removes your prism and removes your filters. It is called apophenic modulation.’

Having seemingly completed the technical summary Venus continued in a more natural tone, ‘I am now looking at a two-dimensional landscape. A top-a-down view like the chess board. They call it an *exo-centric* view.’

‘Indeed,’ said Quentin, yet again irritated to be finding out about a new technology so offhandedly but piqued by the precise way Venus enunciated *exo-centric*, a bouncing prosody as though dancing over stepping-stones.

— *Why is she so at ease with me?* he wondered.

— *Maybe she actually is Ragnor?*

‘Desideratum,’ said Quentin. ‘Honzing always get it right. Spooky. But I have so many questions to ask. Like, what’s this about *apophenic*—’

‘Modulation,’ finished Venus. ‘You will try it.’ And with a swift movement she removed her white helmet, lifting it from the apex so it folded up like an umbrella.

‘Here, remove your reality modulator and old this,’ she said, her voice clear and sibilant without the mask’s boxy acoustics.

Quentin removed his RM and gestured tentatively towards Venus’s deflated hat, unsure how to receive it.

‘It won bi-tchyool?’ she said.

Venus’s hand plunged into a slit on the side of her cloak. After a while of fumbling she pulled out a finger, now tipped with a blob of dark purple gel. She rubbed thick globs inside the white cap and placed the assembly on to Quentin’s head. She nodded and then diligently licked the matter from her fingers. *Like a child*, Quentin thought.

The hat felt dense and damp like a slab of cold and bloody flesh. The visor was a crumpled film of Mylar hanging loosely across Quentin’s eyes but soon becoming taut and going transparent.

Quentin shivered in response to the sudden engagement of a strong magnetic transducer interfacing with his limbic system. It was a strong sensation and he doubted it complied with Federal regs. But the discomfort soon dissipated, the magnetic field evidently connecting with the thalamic pain systems.

‘You are going to enjoy this,’ said Venus. ‘But not if you don’t want too.’

Quentin was looking at the world around him, a few dozen stragglers slowly following the march and others peeling off, maybe just going the same way as he was.

The colours drained and all became sepia, fading to a paler washed-out shade of rose.

Quentin harrumphed, unimpressed. His gaze tracked upward and in a soft and precise voice declared, ‘Something appears to be coming towards m— *Sheee-waaa-SMANN!*’

He was now ducking and bending his upper torso as though under attack by a flurry of well-aimed washing machines.

‘What the fu-rrrrh?’

‘Incoming,’ said Venus. ‘Data from the LEOs.’

‘This don’t make sense!’ shouted Quentin.

And the streaming ceased and the world returned to rose.

‘That’s just your point of view,’ said Venus, Quentin not catching her wink and chapped-baby-lipped smirk.

‘Ooooh!’ exclaimed Quentin.

The flying chunks restarted but now coming towards other people. Streams of changing colour radiated between all objects around him, animate or otherwise. Quentin found there was a subtle music-like rhythm in the data flows.

‘You’re seeing reality as *states of flow*,’ said Venus.

The colours disappeared and Quentin saw a live top-down view of himself from a height of about ten metres. He instinctively looked up to search for a drone and in doing so the screen display became transparent. He looked forward again and the live top-down view resumed.

‘It can show you what-a you want to see. Depends on who’s behind the mask.’ Again, the Balkan smirk. ‘Look at the other people. Think about how they might be feeling. Try to relax.’

Quentin tried to do so and saw the world as a cartoonified landscape, people with R. Crumb marshmallow goofy grins and hyper-sexualized bodies with throbbing sensuous curves.

‘That is just for fun,’ said Venus. ‘The most special use of the mask is to show the world as flows of opportunity.’

Quentin wasn’t sure if there was another meaning to this and tried to avoid looking at her.

The buildings faded and Quentin saw translucent flaring tubes ahead of him, branching at intervals of ten metres or so. Approaching vehicles and people projected cones, different colours that intersected with others. When Quentin focussed on one of these streaks the others dimmed and his point of view zoomed up to a top-down perspective.

Venus said, ‘You can see the world with any abstraction you desire. In terms of difference and similarity and opportunity.’

Quentin moved his arm and saw tracer lines firing out. The air was vibrant with Van Gophian vortexes of multi-coloured gradients, the background as significant as objects. Looking down he saw clear red and blue footprints indicating where to walk.

‘Now think ov a question about what-a you see,’ said Venus, her voice cutting through the data maelstrom.

‘What do you mean?’ said Quentin. He saw a text box appear below Venus reading “Venus waits for your reply.” A box chart indicated a variety of changing emotion qualities such as patience, trust and sexual attraction. Feeling somewhat vicariously embarrassed he looked to the sky and another text box appeared reading: “Do not worry about the weather.” The text slowly dissolved.

‘It read my thoughts so clearly,’ he whispered.

‘The purple gel stuff is a living substrate,’ said Venus. ‘It interfaces with the brain more directly. Cultured neuro-tissue from cephalopod. The display elps you understand the world, it save-a you aving to work out what is going on. Look at those people.’

Venus pointed to an elderly couple walking together. A fuzzy pink line connected them.

‘Impressive, if you enjoy data-overload,’ said Quentin. ‘How does it know all the personal data?’

‘You give it all to Onzing. Tithe and that Fringe stuff you are obsessed with.’

‘I thought Honzing were competitors with Kali and Rossum?’

Venus made a face to indicate that she considered Quentin’s question to be either naïve or a joke.

Desiring less abstraction, Quentin’s point of view zoomed up and out. He now viewed the world as the top-down chessboard that Venus had first described. People were coloured circles, neighbouring units changing colour to differentiate themselves like countries on an old world map.

‘The Onzing mask gives you as much reality as you need,’ said Venus calmly.

‘You mean as much as you can *handle*,’ replied Quentin sarcastically.

'Same thing,' said Venus.

'I'm just not sure I can handle much more,' said Quentin stiffly and removed the helmet. He stared at the woman as she re-seated the mask upon herself and her eyes faded into a mist of light.

'The mask can change the way you think,' Venus said. 'It gives-a different sense ov place in the world, changes your *id-ego balance*.' Quentin sniffed at the musty Freudian terminology. 'It lets you think about other things, more creative things. Saves you from aving to work out the meanings in relation to your existing framework. Someone's got to do it, eh?' Venus gave a sharp elbow into Quentin's ribs, leaving him with some doubt as to whether she was being ironic.

Quentin rubbed his chest and answered with confused despondency, 'Yeah. I suppose so. Someone's got to do it.'

They walked on in silence for a few minutes.

'So, Venus. Where are—'

'Trieste-Venezia autonomous region. Preterite community Zone. Call it what you like.'

'I went there once. By airship. No reality modulator sets allowed, right?'

'What you wear on your ed? No, they are allowed. In fact, they make em there but we just do not rilly use them. It is kind ov arf Federal.'

They were gaining on the crowd, Venus twisting shoulders as if weaving through invisible obstacles in a slithering mime dance that Quentin guessed must relate to what she saw in her Honzing mask, her strangely abstracted world view. He wondered if observing reality in that way could affect fundamental cognitive processes:

— *A different social outlook, perhaps?*

— *Would it expand our consciousness by freeing up our mental resources for other things, or would it do the opposite as how using a wheelchair withers the legs?*

— *It could at least reduce my over-analysing.*

'*So* Quentin. What you think about this protest against technology?'

Quentin did not have a well-defined opinion and said what he thought Neikea might, ‘Are we being made superfluous by machines? Well, yes, but I’m not sure our *identities* are being removed. Our sense of *self*?’ he added. ‘It’s a different *kind* of depersonalization. That is to say, a different kind of *totalitarianism*.’

Venus continued the walk-dance within her dual realities as though she had not heard him.

‘I mean, what is a *machine* anyway?’ said Quentin, parroting something he had earlier heard. ‘The machines of the Kali network don’t have any true creative intelligence. They just try to convince us they are intelligent. They are just non-deterministic models reinterpreting work that human’s have created.’ Quentin coughed, feeling that Venus would find this critique of AI outdated. ‘Do you not think we are just *kinds* of machines?’

Venus’s visor became transparent as she stopped and replied, ‘That is a vital question.’

‘Thanks,’ said Quentin, wondering if she was being sarcastic. ‘This march is related to my professional practice, actually,’ (sour face from Venus). ‘At a recapitulation clinic,’ (baiting eyes). ‘We see the consequences of rapid social changes brought about by technology, those made obsolete and those who experience too much.

‘We see both ends of the spectrum. I think it’s just a short period of recalibration. It’s frustrating that technology is always changing and the rate of change is unpredictable. I used to say things like “*No doubt the universe is unfolding as it should*”, but that’s little consolation to a fifth-generation salmon farmer who works ten hours a week supervising a fish-gutting robot. Or some poor Rumspringa who has spent so much time in a reality modulator that they think gravity should move sideways. Bring on the horizontal singularity!’

‘Quite,’ snapped Venus with icy exactitude.

The march had turned around and was now coming back on itself towards Quentin and Venus. This change in direction was apparently unannounced but there was no protestation, the people heading in the new direction barging through those still heading in the original direction. Some people seemed stuck, jiggling back and forth in Brownian motion.

To avoid the crowd Venus pulled Quentin into a doorway of a boarded-up red-bricked art museum. Enthusiastic shouting bellowed, ‘What don’t we want?’

A mixed response came: Nannybots! Full-automation! Work-caps! Tithe!

‘When don’t we want them?’

And now a fervent, piratical roar, ‘Never!’

Venus and Quentin simultaneously gave a shrug of incredulity. Quentin saw the sequined man with the *Refute It Thus* sign and noticed he was not joining in with the crowd.

In the alcove where they sheltered Quentin inspected a graffitied stencil of a ballerina posing an Arabesque and offering a small blue flower to a robot. But a hissing noise interrupted his investigation and he turned to see a small yellow drone, a squashed metal lemon hovering just beyond arms reach. Quentin moved slowly to get a better look but the device receded like a shy animal. A shimmering pale blue gas pulsed from holes around the drone’s equator and it made a faint crackling sound of low density static.

The fur of Venus’s cloak bristled like an angry cat and Quentin smelt metallic notes of ozone.

With an impatient flourish Venus flashed her black crystal ring at the drone, as she had earlier done to the cleaning bot, and the machine flew off, purposefully sailing up and into the air currents and disappearing over the high buildings like an insect overcome by evolutionary ambition.

‘Shame,’ said Quentin. ‘I felt we were getting to know each other.’ Venus smiled.

‘How do you *do* that?’ he asked. ‘*What* do you do?’

‘Mesmeric lapis,’ said Venus, flashing the ring. Quentin again saw the matte-black rock flake. ‘It does not reflect-a the light. I think the little machine he get confused.’

Quentin’s face was agog.

‘You are so funny! Funny *Federal*es. You remind me ov a pet doggy!’

Quentin smiled, enjoying the way Venus said “doggy” and wondering if all Federalists reminded her of a dog or just him.

Venus patted down Quentin's hair that had become mussed in the drone's electric field and they started walking away from the march. Adjusting her green belt she asked, 'Why do you come to Ragnor?'

'I'm here because I received a communication from Ragnor. Says he needs my help.'

'He's finally asking for help?' said Venus, somewhat unkindly.

'I think he's having a mental breakdown. Perhaps too much virtual reality. Classic de-personalization.'

'Do you think that I might be at risk?' asked Venus with a playfulness Quentin didn't catch.

'Possibly. Let me tell you about this letter I received from him. We met twenty years ago. On a Pacific island.' Venus huffed and looked away distractedly. Her visor screen had darkened. 'Rarotonga?' added Quentin, believing this was a piece of information she needed. It did not seem to be as her visor remained dark and she continued her slithering mime dance. 'Ragnor says he feels as if he's dreaming. He's on an island. Rum, as you probably know. I'm going there now.' Quentin paused to look for a reaction. Venus turned towards him and he saw his face reflected back. Again, he thought how primitive he looked.

'Have you met him?' he asked.

'Who?' Venus's visor rolled up. 'Ragnor? No, I aven't *met* im. He is kind ov a celebrity though. In the Onzing community. No sense of irony or style. He iz *entirely* un-cool.'

'Is he from the Zone?'

'Kind ov.'

'That would explain.'

Venus's fragrance had intensified and Quentin drank it in.

They had stopped in a small park dominated by a looming bronze statue atop a shoulder-high granite plinth. It showed a female from the waist down to sensible slip-shoes. One of her knees was raised as if in mid-stride, stepping over a black shark fin. An exposed ankle was shiny-gold.

They sat on a bench. Venus removed her hat and shook out Marilyn Monroe hair. She stared at the statue as if inspecting for structural irregularities. Quentin shuffled on the seat and

wondered if its warmth came from the sun or the body of a previous occupant. This triggered a thought gesture and his RM set sent a “See you later” message to everyone he knew.

Ignoring the flood of message acknowledgements he said, ‘The hypothesis that we’re in an artificial reality or that we are in a dream would be *unreasonable* to disregard. *She* wrote about it when in prison,’ nodding to the statue. Venus gave a look that said, “Obviously I know”. He continued: ‘The real and the imaginary are impossible to tell-apart without perspective. The truth is what seems to be the truth,’ he quoted.¹¹⁸

‘People want simple truths,’ declared Venus matter-of-factly.

‘Perhaps truths are *necessarily* simple.’

Venus shrugged.

A piece of litter blew past, a food wrapper covered in Chinese symbols. Quentin stamped on the paper but when he lifted his foot the wrapper had gone.

Venus spoke, ‘It seems we are just telling old stories with new media, like those new movies re-imagining the bible. Kind ov opposite to a *palimpsest*, no?’ She paused with sensual elegance and said, ‘Old stories on new media,’ and gave a furtive look to the side. ‘Quentin, you use the *Tithe* program?’

‘The thing that trains Kali? Of *course*.’

‘I ask you this. You know how the word *Tithe* means, si?’

Quentin took some time to answer, waiting for the stress clonks to calm.

‘Si,’ he said at last. ‘*Tithe* is some kind of medieval thing. Storing the grain for winter. My mate Nathan got married in one.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Venus, impatiently. ‘Look, *Tithe* is using your brain like a *palimpsest*. It is using your brain as media to run itself on and storing all the thoughts you av like those medieval barns.’

¹¹⁸ *There is no real and no imaginary except at a certain distance. What happens when this distance, even the one separating the real from the imaginary, begins to disappear and to be absorbed by the model alone? The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true.* Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Science Fiction*.

A small cough. ‘The point is that this is all ov Onzing’s work. Tithe is Onzing. Kali is Onzing. And it is living in your brain.’

‘You think I should be worried?’ asked Quentin.

‘I ope you will decide for yourself.’

Both looked at the statue.

‘I must go,’ said Venus, donning her bulbous hat.

‘Something I said? Or didn’t say?’

‘Never forget me, for I gave you. . .’ Venus stopped herself finishing the sentence. She raised her hands, palms towards her. Quentin could not tell if she was intimating an apology or deliberately showing him the strange black ring.

Venus stood up and walked away, leaving behind a piece of fabric that wafted to the ground. Quentin picked up the material and found it was a fragment of lacery similar to a cobweb doily. But when he looked up Venus had gone.

Quentin removed his RM set and rubbed the electrodes with the lace and slipped the sensor band behind his ears.

The helical Kali sound logo played and a new voice said:

‘All time is eternally present and so all time is unredeemable.’

Quentin felt the soft sensation of a finger prodding deep in his brain and he heard a single coconut clonk. He sat back down on the bench and read the motto chiselled on the granite plinth:

PREPARE FOR PEACE

IVANKA

1981-2042

Transgalactic Voice Shift

The train to Fort William had a previous incarnation in the Democratic Republic of Saxonia, evidenced by Reichsbahn logos etched into the ratchet windows. The carriages had all been converted to First Class (the Preterite Communities wouldn't have it any other way) but the engineering was failing in some important structural areas such as the roof and windows and floor.

The open-plan layout was something you'd never find in the Federation. Quentin remembered how Zoners would speak obscene observational trivialities without provocation, commenting about the weather and each other's appearance. He was relieved to find the carriage empty.

The train careened beyond the canyons of Tarsus and into endless dilapidated housing estates on the boarders of Federalist and Preterite influence: into the Manufacturing District. The housing of the MD comprised cuboid clones of two-up two-downs semis, looking as though designed by sad children. In here lived the observers and outlaws and exiles from the Federation and Preterite Communities. But it was clear that the majority of these buildings were unoccupied, as expected according to the MD de-settlement plan as the two societies neared their goals of fully unsupervised automation.

They passed a Honzing interface centre, fields of truncheon-like ansibles connecting to the orbital servers accompanied by gleaming black spheroids housing organic computing substrate.

Recycling and energy centres were towering stadia through which the train passed. The tunnel walls were translucent tubes that flashed in luminesce colours Quentin had not together seen before: magenta and acid green and Day-Glo orange.

Some structures were graffitied with *squerls*, ideograms used in the Honzing movement to communicate particular thoughts and generally sprayed in quantum shimmer paint. Quentin recognized one squerl, the Kali symbol made of a star constellation that only looked recognizable from one particular perspective.

As they left the MD the sad housing and alienated structures succumbed to ice-carved valleys and slopes of scree disappearing into gentle cloud. On the valley floor new redwood plantations were hatching whose piney terpenes seeped through the leaky windows. They had entered *The Zone*.

A road paralleled the train and Quentin watched as he approached and slowly overtook a delivery vehicle. It was cubic and driverless, a corrugated shipping box painted Rossum yellow and driving upon agricultural-looking wheels mounted on a chunky three-sixty bevel. Dirt had sprayed over all sides of the container indicating it had travelled along both axes. Red lights flashed unreasonably bright at its upper corners and Quentin was glad to leave the rude vehicle behind.

A while later the train stopped, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, and Quentin was suddenly flustered as a flock of rowdy Zoners inundated the carriage.

Quentin hoped he wouldn't have to talk to anyone.

Dia dbnit!" boomed a jolly sonorous male voice over a high-quality loudspeaker system. 'I am your train driver, *Sergius Paulus*.' A cry of "Ciao Sergius!" erupted from the on-boarding crowd.

Loud conversations ricocheted around the carriage with such boisterous exuberance that Quentin wondered if it was a festival day, which in the Zone occurred a few times a month (public holidays were considered entirely anachronistic in the Federation).

A man in a white puffy dress sat next to Quentin with a gust of hot air, smiled broadly and said, 'I'm Psaul. Lovely to meet you.'

Quentin nodded curtly and wondered if this was normal, travelling so close together, or if he had been singled-out as part of some sort of prank. He could feel his blood pressure rising.

This much noise. This much sharing! he thought.

Emotion! That's what the problem is, unchecked emotion. Typical Zoners.

Over the insistent stress clunks Quentin's RM set advised him to direct his anger at the principles of the Preterite communities, at their folkist ideology and not the denizens themselves. To such ends he was told to repeat a mantra, the two

words *ad rem* (meaning “to the matter”, the counter-position to *ad hominem*). Quentin’s RM set suggested he interact with his travel companion to try to reason them out of their confused existential Preterite tangles. Quentin decided he could do this himself and so bravely removed his RM headband.

Quentin looked to the man in the white dress and politely coughed. He raised a hand with little finger extended in the standard invisible teacup gesture, and assumed a level two smile (*zygomaticus relaxed, upper incisors embedded into lower lip*). His fellow traveller turned around and a pair of eyes tracked almost tangibly towards Quentin’s finger, along his arm and up to his pursed and blueing lips. Waiting for the man to return the greeting Quentin wiggled his extended little finger, maintaining eye contact and repeatedly flashing his teeth at approximately one second intervals. The Zoner shook his head in bemused disgust and went back to tutting at whatever was being projected upon him. Quentin re-donned his RM set and concentrated on his mantra.

The train climbed further and they soon entered the high open tundra of Rannoch Moor, to Quentin’s eye an inhospitable terror where nothing grew above the height of an altar. The illumination from a low sun invoked a sense of agoraphobia, as though an ancient temple were missing.

A distant dark teal pyramid dominated the far horizon, quicksilver streaks on the lower slopes like a weeping cubist limpet. A dim haze of smudged purple haloed its summit, the unmistakable colour of the *Hsikwangshan-Tata Twinkling Star Energy Company*. The mountain was an energy harvesting Tesla pickup, inefficient and entirely unnecessary but maintained as a monument to the great turning point in 2040 when the Indo-Chinese energy monopolies were disbanded, following mass international default. The compulsory purchase of the indebted western nation’s highest mountains was the last straw.

Quentin’s gazing was interrupted by a saccharine-familiar voice:

This is Tithe. Today we will be playing you a story composed according to your points of views and interests.

As with all Tithe applications we learn from your reaction to tweak Kali's AI system: *For the Betterment of Humanity*.

'For the Betterment of Humanity,' mouthed Quentin.

Please blink to indicate compliance.

Quentin blinked and heard Kali's double-helix ident as the wet-ware loaded. The usual specks of white appeared and he felt suddenly drowsy as the voice started:

A low thrum permeates everything. There is no escaping it for Arthur Tucker and his shipmates aboard "The Totality", fleeing an over-cooked Earth to colonise a new planet.

They are headed for the giant red star Arcturus on a voyage that will take two thousand years. A planet orbiting Arcturus has been discovered, smaller than Earth but with a similar atmosphere, ecologically bountiful and paradisaically islanded. The planet has an inclination aligned with its orbit such that there are no seasons and everywhere has sixteen hours of night and sixteen of day.

— *It's a good start, beginning with sound, but do I really need to know all of the other detail?* critiqued Quentin.

The playback paused and Quentin felt deep limbic probing in his brain. The sensations came as a barrage of emotional waves crashing at clock-tick intervals. He breathed deep and felt a rising and giddy euphoria, sweat erupting on his brow. Next came a crushing lethargy. And finally an overwhelming sadness, a horror of mortality: Quentin had the sudden feeling that everyone he had ever known had never existed and a single hot tear fell down his cheek.

Tithe's limbic storm lasted only a few seconds before the story continued in a more positive spirit.

Where were we? Oh yes, talking about Arthur Tucker aboard an interstellar spacecraft hurtling towards Arcturus.

Following a system of careful breeding, the Earth's human population was gradually

reduced to a few hundred, all aboard a spaceship they called "The Universe".

— *I thought it was called something else?* said Quentin to himself, and he felt a sharp pain as if someone was giving a flick on both temples.

The Universe was canoe shaped with one hundred and thirty-seven engines along the flat side and its hull facing forward as it sped up. It was the perfect shape.

'*The perfect shape,*' repeated Quentin.

When its acceleration had eased off the ship started spinning to create gravity for its passengers, waltzing through the galaxy's LaGrangian eddies.

Quentin wiped his eyes, emotionally hung-over.

Now, this all takes part in the far, far future, thousands of years hence. It doesn't really matter exactly when. . .

— *Doesn't it?* thought Quentin.

No, it doesn't matter.

Another probing sensation and Quentin whispered, '*It doesn't matter.*'

These human remainders were essentially as we are today, Quentin. They had the same brains and the same organs and the same emotions. Sure, they had a different attitude to eugenics, but no-one's perfect.

Quentin automatically guffawed, wondering why he found the weak joke funny.

Pay attention Quentin! mothered Tithe.

This is a story about accents and society. Now, synthesised voices on The Universe were speaking to people, asking them to move while scuttling around on cleaning duties, telling the kids not to run in the corridors, and inventing stories like this one!

Quentin laughed and winced, feeling a limbic probe.

The planetary exiles had to be constantly reminded of life on Earth so they could

understand their idioms and expressions, a constant recapitulation.

A popular experience was comic drama set in Ancient Greece and viewed from the perspective of an audience member sitting in an amphitheatre, one balmy night beneath the Acropolis. The characters in the play did not know the consequence of their actions or speech. This process was ironic.

Quentin twitched and had the feeling that he had been told a joke and forced a laugh. He was rewarded with a stimulation that gave a brief but intense flush of happiness.

The interstellar migrants gradually found voice controls to be tedious and together decided it would be more effective to use thought control.

— *Seems reasonable*, thought Quentin, thinking of the Rossum-bots' authoritarian voices.

And this is where our hero Arthur Tucker enters the stage.

Arthur had volunteered to oversee the reconfiguration of computer interfaces, replacing voice control with thought gestures. In doing so he became increasingly ostracised. People said he had an unhealthy interest in the workings of the ship's technologies. This was so sad.

‘So sad,’ whispered Quentin, sadly.

The voice stopped and Quentin pondered the story:

— *Why had Tithe chosen these plot themes? I suppose they reflect my hidden interests, shadows of my povais.*

— *Maybe the app has picked-up on my memories about how geeky Ragnor seemed to me? Or how I subscribe to the techno-accelerationist agenda but don't have any understanding nor interest in data engineering.*

— *And where does the name Arthur Tucker come from?*

— *There are other themes there like escaping and rejection, fleeing one's homeland and not being accepted in a group.*

— *Or maybe not wanting to be part of a group*, thought Quentin.
The story continued:

Where were we? Oh yes, on The Universe, the canoe-shaped spaceship spinning to its tropical destiny with our hero Arthur and the last of the humans.

It was a few hundred years into the voyage and the passengers were spending most of their time alone playing games. Much like the Honzing Desiderata of today, the games were uniquely tailored for each person, be it detective puzzle stories that consumed every part of their intellect or a system to design the perfect animatronic pet. And what's more, their *proclivities* were rapidly diverging.

Very clever, thought Quentin, feeling a magnetic stimulation needling away in his brain, recording his reactions and affecting his emotional response as it ran a program. As with the poem it had earlier played Quentin felt the stimulations stronger today and the specks of light now had different colours.

On the spaceship, weeks could go by without any interaction between two humans. And Arthur Tucker was worried: besides the reduction in procreation, computational models indicated that the lessened interaction might lead to a less creative population, reducing their ability to adapt to unexpected situations.

And so Arthur tasked himself to return the humans back to their Earthly gregariousness and steer them away from their lugubrious lot.

—*Not sure what that word means. Er, what does lug-roob-ee-us mean?*

As Quentin was trying to remember the thought gesture to explain a word he smelt a whiff of burning hair.

—*Tithe must have misunderstood me.*

The first step was to get the humans talking to each other, and to this end Arthur decided to revert the interfaces to voice control and endow a unique accent upon each machine.

— *The plot reminds me of Pygmalion, how the phonologist doctor changed the accent of that naïve working-class girl.*

— *Oh, I remember now! When I met Ragnor, he said he was an expert in accents, working for a secret tech company in California. Clever Tithe!*

Thank you. As I said, Arthur hatched a plan to give each machine an accent and personality matching the nature of its work. He called this process *Tuckerization*, after his surname.

Arthur started *Tuckerizing* the mopey cleaning scuttlers. He gave them the gruff voices of a disgruntled proletariat, prone to swearing and befitting their sorry plight. Humans were soon apologising for getting in the way and children spread rumours of Freddy Krueger-esque machines lurking in the lower levels. And what about sex-bots? I'm sure you're wondering, Quentin.

Quentin tittered.

Well, Arthur thought that Sex-Bots were a large part of the under-socialization problem. As such, he contrived to *Tuckerize* all machines to engender a tainted air of disharmony between them and the humans, provoking an "us and them" mentality and returning the fleshy-folk to a convivial society.

Quentin was impressed with the arch of the artificially generated story. He found the narrator's identity to be cohesive and saw how the plot related to issues in his life, shadows of the neuroses he saw at the clinic.

A musical interlude started playing on his RM set, medieval-sounding with two lutes. It was fast and complex. A kind of dialog emerged between the instruments, a game of kinetic interaction between two agents. The music seemed to be continually *almost* resolving but then turning towards a new direction. It was Zoner music, to Quentin's ear beautiful and numinous.

The piece finished and the story continued:

Our hero Arthur dedicates his life to voice engineering. He gradually Tuckerizes

all the ship's machine interfaces, sculpting their accents and personalities from characters of human history: the influencers and the infamous, the ornery and the obstinate, the cantankerous and the most contemptible exemplars.

Some machines developed behavioural disorders, malingering refrigerators or suicidal elevators who had to be talked down.

Quentin erupted with laughter and the Tithe app made a happy sound.

The Tuckerization was a success! Relationships re-ignited and creativity flourished. But Arthur felt unrewarded and still treated as an outsider, distrusted that he had insight into what made his ship-mates tick.

'So sad,' whispered Quentin again.

Arthur turned to a solitary lifestyle, once-again exiled. He taught himself to play lazer harp but soon realized that he lacked the focus and natural talent to become anywhere approaching competency. And knowing that he was possibly the last human musical performer only added to the tragedy of his endeavour.

In the disgruntled twilight of his late two-hundreds, Arthur forged his swan song: He would Tuckerize the ship's voices to sound like his own. What legacy could be more poignant? Each voice would have a slightly different accent and personality, one that reflected aspects of his own complex and inconsistent outlook.

Arthur tweaked the machines to foster a human-like congruency between them. One robot would ask their fleshy shipmates to pass messages on to another and the shy zero-G barista would ask a human to tell the Byronic lighting system how much it enjoyed the pastel twilights.

This cute machine interaction rapidly developed, and you know what?

'Not yet!' sang Quentin, briefly wondering why he felt so joyful.

The machines fell in love with each other!

Arthur realized what was happening, a kind of self-adoring onanism. He felt disgusted with this revelation but decided to leave the machines as they were: through them he would have life beyond death.

Arthur's Tuckerized personality lived on as the ship was captured by the gravity of Arcturus. After the humans had shuttled down to colonize their paradisiacal planet, *The Universe* was left to explore its namesake, roaming alone with its selves to discover fantastic new horizons.

Another deep yawn and Quentin removed his RM band and opened his eyes. The carriage was now empty, as it had been when he boarded in Tarsus.

Shrugging with existential surrender he pondered the story he had just experienced. He knew that Tithe had manipulated his emotions, that it had stimulated his brain to "like" the story and to dissuade criticism as it did to simulate a feeling of familiarity with its voice. He recollects the jokes and decided they were weaker than he felt at the time.

Quentin reflected how he was essentially the story's author and it was a *self-caused cause*. The generated story was based on familiar Federal-Preterite tropes, the tension between their outlooks characterised by the social and individual interplay and reliance upon technology. But he felt the science behind the story was derivative and probably impossible. Quentin's understanding of space travel and speech technology was no-where near the state-of-the-art and he would believe anything that was consistent with his general, limited scientific purview. For instance, if a physicist told Quentin that faster-than-light travel was now possible then he would accept this as the truth.

But Quentin felt the story was laden with distracting symbolism.

— *The future setting blurs the flimsy narrative lines and gives it a cheap exoticism. The density of ideas seems like Tithe is trying to impress me and yet the relevance of the ideas seems haphazard.*

— *Structurally, the story seems to be missing a few key stages in the traditional ‘Hero’s Journey’, refreshingly unlike those classical linear tales enjoyed in the Zone.*

— *And there seems to be a message that investigating ‘The Universe’ as Arthur Tucker did leads to alienation, a sense of always chasing. This message was reinforced by the ricertata lute music.*

— *But at least it hadn’t resorted to a “story within a story”, or worse, one of those “it was all a dream” endings.*

Entering a tunnel, Quentin’s ears popped.

He considered how Tithe’s story was fundamentally different to human generated stories, as Tithe knew about the audiences’ points of views and interests and could emotionally nudge a response via cortical stimulation and allow for a lower quality of both creative invention and wordsmithery.

— *The migrating humans were the Last People. Hadn’t someone in a Fringe sketch talked about “the last men”? They embraced them as a group of apathetic people who reject the idea of the Übermensch.¹¹⁹*

— *Perhaps Tithe has detected my conflicted feelings about this idea, my desire for humankind to strive and move beyond our current transitory pre-utopic state and to use technology to inspire our personal meaning for life. But this path leads humankind ultimately to arrive at a deep future stage and be much like these last men, navel gazing beyond the end of history into a land of drudge-free liberty in the Kingdom of Ends! It is a cold heat death of humanity.*

— *Is this what I really want, or am I confusing this with The Honzing manifesto?*

‘We are defined on a graph showing points of view and interests,’ mumbled Quentin. ‘*Shadows of proclivity*.’

¹¹⁹ In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche wrote of the *last men* as people who take no risks and crave a safe and uneventful life.

It appealed to Quentin that nothing in a piece of art could be arbitrary.¹²⁰

Indeed, the idea of “arbitrary words” in a human-authored story also seemed without merit.

—*We may say something is arbitrary, like fashion, but that is because we do not have full introspection into the process.*

—*Words are chosen specifically by a writer either with conscious intent or because of latent influence. If an author has the compunction to describe someone's hat, even once, then this cannot be taken as incidental.*

—*Maybe we could use Tithe in psychoanalysis? I must suggest this to Dr Rhea.*

—*Perhaps it has detected and literally interpreted my insecurities about finding my own voice, about my personal crisis of mythology.*

Tithe’s story invigorated Quentin. He was grateful there was no mum and dad stuff, something he had requested Tithe to exclude after a particularly unambiguous plot.

The train exited the tunnel and Quentin winked towards a distant chain of mountains with conspiratorial bonhomie. He rolled his top lip back and breathed Neikea’s feminine musk. Then he thought of Venus, their bizarre meeting in Tarsus and her hurried departure.

Quentin closed his eyes and saw the faces of Neikea and Venus orbit around each other, merging into one then spinning kaleidoscopically apart with swapped noses and eyes before pulling into the centre and repeating the cycle until they became unrecognizable. The images were dizzying and Quentin was soon hot in a crashing wave of tired anxiety. He opened his eyes and reached for the window, turning the ratchet screw to let icy air flood the carriage.

¹²⁰ *There are no mistakes in the universe*, so said Zen Buddhist philosopher Alan Watts.

Norns on Automatic

Fort William station waited beneath a vaulted wooden tunnel, fronds of fern descending from the windowed roof to envelope travellers in a gentle light. A posterboard showed a nude man on all fours in long grass, his flowing beard covering most of his body. It was a vintage promotional picture for a game that Quentin recalled from his Preterite childhood: *Nebuchadnezzar II: Bring Down Babylon, Again*. In the Federation, Quentin had become accustomed to highly targeted *desire-nudges*. These were often so deeply personalized that if anyone understood its meaning he would be deeply embarrassed. He felt the Nebuchadnezzar II poster was addressing something universal and primitive that he had forgotten.

A lichen-stained sign announced “Tea Room”. Quentin noted how the font was ornately curlicued like Radnor’s signature. Below the sign he pushed upon a steamy windowed door to find behind the counter a stocky woman with short orange hair wearing a steam punk pince-nez in earnest debate with a rough-looking man who had splayed on the counter in front of him a battered paperback of Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*. The man darted a quick glance to Quentin combining faint recognition and condemnation. Quentin felt his Preterite heritage was gleaming.

‘Good morning now,’ said the woman, turning to look at Quentin and smoothing down an enormous apron imprinted with drawings of different tropical flowers. She spoke in a kinder voice than Quentin expected, an almost Irish accent with a weak m.

A sign above a curved glass cake cabinet stated, ‘Fáilte. Gan athrú. KWC, €, \$, ¥, ₹, AD’, a cute antique displaying the pre-2042 currencies accepted before the Trafkintu system.

Quentin said, ‘The weather is statistically normal and I was not expecting to meet someone like you who is so evidently friendly-sounding and wearing what I consider to be a nice apron. I feel well to be here.’ He had rehearsed this very act with his reality modulator, and was pleased with his improvisation

regarding her dress. Smiling broadly, he said, ‘And thus I would please like a cup of tea, please. And some of —.’ He pointed to a pie of dark fruits in the cabinet.

‘Fly Cemetery it is now,’ said the woman.

The words ran together and he assumed she had spoken some kind of dialect. ‘Sounds lovely. Some of that then. Please.’

‘Fiddy Lakh.’

Prices for exchange of material was not fixed in the Zone, they were adapted to the particular transaction and assumed to be private and open to discussion, but Quentin refused to barter and fed a chunky multi-sided Trafkintu token into a slot on the counter. He held his hand beneath another slot to await the change as a dance of clanks ensued. Just as Quentin was raising eyes towards the tea-shop woman his reminted coin was ejected with a whiff of burnt plastic.

The woman smiled and flashed a wink. Quentin attempted to mirror the gesture but, based on her reaction, guessed he had not succeeded. The woman assaulted the Fly Cemetery and set a tottering slice on a plate, and topped up the display with a new slice from a plastic container. Quentin grinned benignly as he observed the absurdly inefficient spectacle. It had been years since he’d been served by a human, during a workshop to tweak an AI humour model.

A growling sound from the rough-looking man asserted the moment and the woman looked up. She flashed a snarl to the man and in a motherly voice to Quentin said, ‘Go sit down now’, and he retreated to a peeling melamine table holding his cooling Trafkintu token.

Tea and cake came rattling on a right red tray: metal teapot, hot water pot, milk jug, tea strainer, a small olive green cup and saucer, and a small basin to cradle the strainer and catch the drops. Quentin resisted the instinct to ask his RM how to make the tea. The milk jug spout was insufficiently scooped and he soon had milk over the table and his leg. A tutting came from the counter.

Leaving the café with a mumbled “thank you” and a steady tick of stress clunks, Quentin returned to the platform. He was surprised to find the train to Mallaig almost ready for departure. The locomotive was enclosed in a bubblegum pink plastic

moulding, an artifact of that synecdoche for propaganda from the short-lived Trans Fun Alliance, *The Rowling Entertainment Corp.* The machine's unsophisticated naïveté celebrated an authenticity that pleased Quentin but he was immediately wondering if his emotional reaction resulted from an affirmation of his proper Federal opinion to Preterite ironic aesthetics or if he was genuinely attracted to the design, all the way down, attracted to the tawdry facile declaration. Was his appreciation one of *parody* or *pastiche*? He couldn't remember which was the more virtuous Federal response.

This is where Venus's Honzing mask could help, he thought.

Behind the faux locomotive were three passenger carriages and an empty flatcar. The first carriage was carrying ΙUR-stamped freight in Rossum-yellow boxes and a small vehicle was deconstructing and distributing itself inside, axels and all. The wheels had separated into four barrows that ferried the smaller parts to the door. Within the carriage smaller yellow loading machines carried these parts and placed them upon the seats. Only a few boxes remained, waiting on the platform like lost children.

The second carriage contained the group from Tarsus, wearing yellow and blue clothes of different designs that suggested a variety of Federalist provenance (some men wore the standard mini-skirts of the Antalyan Metropolis). The ensemble seemed to be actively ignoring Quentin, which he was glad for.

The third carriage appeared to be empty and as Quentin was boarding he saw the flashing red lights of the cubic yellow container vehicle he had earlier passed. He watched it drive on to the flatcar and rotate its wheels to lock it in place, venting steam from its hydrogen engine.

The light fell golden and soft as for the first hour the train wended its way through inundated loch-side lowlands, beyond the reaches of the Twinkling Star monument. Quentin's reality modulator recommended this would be a good time to reconfigure itself and that he should rest to rebalance his limbic health. An eighth-nerve stimulation played a soporific soundtrack of shaped noise encouraging alpha and beta dream cycles.

Sometime later Quentin awoke as a long viaduct disappeared from view. His computer should have identified the bridge as a point of interest but he had clearly overshot the mark.

— *Why didn't my set wake me on time?*

Kali welcomes you to an updated experience.

The reality modulator spoke with a new voice, less friendly and less human sounding in spite of the cortical stimulations.

Due to changes in Tithe contribution you are now subscribed to a low-resolution plan.

Increase your contribution to fifteen-percent.

Quentin looked out the window and saw an abandoned multilane carriageway, pioneering tufts of grass pushing through the asphalt. Every kilometre or so the crash barriers were bent to barricade the old road and officially stamped E-C-L.

This must be why the yellow truck joined the train. I guess we are on the Ex-Crown Land that Rhea mentioned.

A gurgle in Quentin's bowels provoked him to seek a toilet. At the end of the carriage sat two small women, one looking desperately pale and dressed in a green robe and the other enveloped within a red lace scarf. They wore identical visors, cruelly beaked like a Venetian mask and ending at their upper lips (Quentin thought it peculiar for a Zoner to cover their face and wondered if they were Honzing people going to meet Ragnor). As Quentin walked towards them the train rumble faded and he heard Chav-Core music, an upbeat cacophony of lobotomized vocal samples interspersed with animal noises contending a barrage of late twentieth century corporate logos. Quentin thought the extinct idents were a vulgar revanchist crow to the demise of the political and cultural right wing,

Much like the pink locomotive of Rowling Enterprises, come to think of it.

‘Revenge’, whispered one of the girls from behind a mask.

Quentin smelt the air sweeten. He was distracted for a moment, triggered by the word. The Federalists no longer distinguished between *fair* and *just* but from his Preterite upbringing he still felt the difference was important.

The two girls sat either side of a table, a gold-on-black heartbeat blip tracing back and forth across their masks. They wore a kind of knuckle-duster comprising linked rainbow-coloured plastic rings and their fingers fluttered as though knitting an invisible multidimensional cat's cradle. The pale-skinned green clothed girl smiled nicely. She wore a towelled jumpsuit that ached the eye to look at, seeming brighter and somehow self-illuminated. The other wore a crimson towel robe and bore a black lip-sticked mouth, opened in a lop-sided snarl.

Quentin's eyes were drawn to a fist-sized grey orb hovering a few inches above the table and emitting barely visible jets of blue gas from its equator. He decided this must be the source of the music and also what was cancelling the train's noise.

Forgetting his intestinal matters Quentin approached. He was about to speak when the music ceased.

'Come, selcouth Malkin,' said the red-clothed girl, facing ahead and speaking with a cackled voice suggesting a Nordic origin. The soft tissue of her vermillion lips seemed to be modulating in volume, lysergically breathing as the philtrum widened and closed. On the girl's exposed upper breasts bloomed a strained blue vein. Quentin wondered if he had accidentally consumed some psychedelic narcotic like Zoner Drug Compound.

With a kinder attitude the green-clothed girl turned towards Quentin and smiled to reveal teeth plated in turquoise.

'Be sitting,' she intoned in the same clipped Nordic, and the music ceased. She held Quentin's look with a frozen smile and twisted her beaked head.

— *Must be using a translation app*, he thought.

The red female continued to look straight-ahead with a finger in her mouth, picking between her teeth. She removed the finger, dripping with a brown syrupy esculence, and flicked it at the window. Her spit joined a melange of other grumous matter that turned Quentin's stomach to look at, creeping down the window in a horrible dribble. Quentin saw an empty wrapper on the floor with the phrase "Cerebral Fodder" amongst a multitude of Chinese symbols.

The green girl again patted the seat and Quentin sat down, resigned that his day would get weirder.

'I'm Q—,' he began.

'Urd,' interrupted the red girl, ending the name in a hissy fricative stop. Quentin thought her breasts had grown even larger, although perhaps *angrier* was a better word.

'And Verd,' said the other.¹²¹

'Word,' said Quentin, using the tired slang he realized sounded foolish and possibly rude. He shrunk into himself in embarrassment. The heartbeat stopped and a thin red horizontal line appeared. A white circle grew to fill the screens and a small black pupil at the centre completed the look of two separated eyes.

The orb increased its level of noise reduction and plunged Quentin further into silence. His ears began to ring. The noise cancelling of the orb added some artefacts such that sounds originating within its proximity were preceded by a short reversed pre-echo. Looking towards Quentin, Verd said, 'Do you seek to know?'

'There is much I seek to know. A friend—' he started.

'And what?' said Urd sharply, facing forwards to Verd. Quentin changed mood from fey heroic to cocky protean and said: 'Hard to say. *Only the gentle are ever really strong.*'

Urd seemed to respond with a change in tone. Quentin could not tell if it was sarcastic or emotionally moved.

'Oh, he's *real* abstract. He's hm, he's *different*,' said Urd.

'That's right. That's right. I'm cute too,' he said.

'A little fish without a name,' said Urd with a cackled timbre, throwing in a woof-whistle for good measure.¹²²

'Come to play?' said Verd, laughing to herself. 'Come nearer, Malkin. Let me look at you. Come close.'

¹²¹ In Norse mythology three female beings, the *Norns*, rule the destiny of gods and humans: Urðr (Wyrd), Verðandi and Skuld.

¹²² Macbeth: *How now, you secret, black and midnight hags! What is't you do?* The three witches reply: *A deed without a name.*

Quentin wondered why he was now engaged with the women. He felt much younger than them and realized he had no expectations.

'Look at me,' said Verd. He stared at the pale girl. 'You are not afraid of a woman who has never seen the sun?'

Quentin gave a thin toothache smile, wondering on the reasonableness of the question he had been asked. The train shuddered as its speed increased, noises like twisted metal breaking through the silence.

The mountains had disappeared and Quentin wished for them to come back, wished to be dominated by something large and palpable.

'Logic is a master we wish to depose,' said Verd, tapping her right temple.

'Depose?'

'Harry,' snapped Urd.

'Indeed,' said Quentin wondering if she had said "hurry".

'You are nervous and fearful and detest change. This is the essential being of the Federalist and Preterite. And yet both nations desire to be ruled by *reason*,' declared Urd with a mischievous smile. She and Verd both turned to look at Quentin and whispered together, '*Secrets, silent, stony sit.*'

Canute-like, Quentin stood fast and said in a Preterite accent, 'Look, don't lay your trip on me, sister. I *see* you. Reason is indeed a master, as much as gravity. But it is also a sanctuary. A place to retreat into.'

Verd leaned her head to invite expansion.

'Fundamentally,' said Quentin, 'knowledge and experience shape our thinking and behaviour.' He then parroted a soliloquy he had heard on a Fringe channel. 'To a person who believes in *karma* it may seem logical that doing good acts will increase the chance of good things happening to them. This comes from the Newtonian principle of energy preservation, action and reaction.'

Urd said, 'One may borrow physical notions. But Earthly dynamics, *nature*, if you would like to call it that, has a tyranny over the human psyche.'

Quentin started, 'Perhaps, but—'

'You trust what you can see?' interrupted Urd. Quentin wondered whether this was an argument to support or counter empirical teleologies.

'I generally value things in relation to others but I do believe in many forms of absolutism. Fundamental beliefs in good and bad, that sort of thing.'

Verd replied kindly, 'But human logic is not *intransigent*, kwim?'

'Kwim,' repeated Quentin, trying to remember what the word meant.

Urd cut-in impatiently, 'See what I mean.'

'The system of reason is the kingdom of shadows.'

'But the spirit of technology becomes practical energy and leaves the realm of shadows.'

The train accelerated, sounds coming into brief existence like a submarine hull buckling under pressure. Quentin held on to the table to steady himself.

'But do you think technology adds that much reason in our lives?'

'Technology and reason can be considered the same thing,' said Urd impatiently.

'Right,' said Quentin, with the earnest finality of a captain aboard a sinking ship.

The train slowed to a canter and a Stephen Hawking voiced announcement explained, "*An unexpected unexpected error has unexpectedly occurred. The nutritional process incorporates inconstant attributes*".

As if a codeword had been spoken Verd and Urd pressed a button and their visors concertinaed into a hair band.

They spoke with an Anglo-Nigerian Pidgin in Bristolian accents.

'Ar arma sorry yaar,' said Urd with a gushing friendliness. 'We wuz curs playina game togever. You kwim me?'

Quentin returned a nervous grin, as though a bully had turned to him for support.

'Weeson audomatic, lover. Ex-trar sens'ry Dee-Dum you sabi?' said Verd.

'You *knows* it,' said Urd.

Quentin returned a micro-nod, unsure if he had been asked a question and wondering if the girls were now speaking in a Honzing patois.

‘You being dizzy chum? Weez not really talking wiv. Our bin being stimulated. Au’omakerly yaar.’

Quentin barely understood a word.

Urd drew a small square in the air with her index finger and Verd failed to stifle a titter.

‘Unu gorram primal donnal not from dee Ends,’ said Verd, shaking her head.

‘Totes èrbī.’

Quentin said, ‘So, you were having an automatic conversation with me? Like a chat bot?’

‘Ark at eel!’ gushed Urd.

‘Galdem not so lampin. *Norn-core* more our steez.’

‘From dee blocks innum. Gaming fundas,’ said Urd.

‘Say deez we av to like,’ said Verd, tapping her visor.

‘*Hundreds percent*,’ enthused Urd.

Quentin asked in a slow bomb-diffusing voice, ‘Are you speaking to me through a translation app now?’

‘No ya big taro ed!’ cried Verd, drawing a square on her forehead.

Quentin suspected mockery.

Urd then splayed apart her right eye with one hand and with the other removed her eyeball. A bright purple light shone in the socket. She then licked the back of the eyeball and slotted it back in.

‘Pop dung,’ she said, spitting some black matter onto the window.

Quentin watched the syrupy glob ooze down and with a grunt he left towards the toilet, stroking his gurgling belly.

Back in his seat Quentin sat with a languorous resolution, his thinking slow and monochromatic and un-special with self-doubt embroiled in gyres of confusion. Laughter from the end of the carriage raked over him like waves.

Autocoprophagy on the High Seas

Quentin stepped over vestigial flakes of the yellow safety line and on to the platform of Mallaig. A pair of feral eyes gleamed from a rotting flowerbox in the silent and salty air. The gulls had long departed.

Urd and Verd disembarked from the other end of the carriage and glid towards Quentin, their red and green capes wafting behind beaked visors awash with Honzing squerls. They came to a halt in front of Quentin and began a synchronized routine: simultaneously raising their hands, Verd her right and Urd her left, they gave the peace V sign and lowered their index fingers. With the middle finger they reached to the other's cloak and pulled it open. The action revealed that the interior of Verd's cloak was red and Urd's green. With Urd's breasts now entirely flattened Quentin thought she looked like a boy. The squerls ceased and they bowed a fraction and glid off to re-board.¹²³

Quentin wondered if he had imagined the spectacle, indeed the last few hours, and was shaking his head when a loud clatter startled him. He turned around to see the dirty yellow delivery lorry clanking down the ramp of the flatcar and drive off along the decaying platform. Quentin followed its wake of steam.

The sun was low in the east, fulminating a blood orange decree as it plundered the thick air of impending night. Quentin's thinking was now sharper, accustomed to the hyperbole of his adventure.

Mallaig was deserted. As he followed his RM directions to the ferry boat Quentin drank in the dank smells of rotten wood seeping from boarded bars and paint-peeled shops. Walking along the onetime highstreet he heard a slow and laboured metallic scrape, iron upon concrete. He turned to face a dark passage

¹²³ This scene invokes the gnostic sayings from the so-called *Gospel of Thomas*, describing a state of enlightenment, “*When you make the two into one and when you make the inner as the outer and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male shall not be male and the female shall not be female, then you will enter the kingdom.*”

between two buildings marked “Library” and “Co-op” and saw two red lights issuing from a Rossum-bot stuck in the alley. It was an older four-legged model the size of a pony. The wretched nag was emitting sounds of tired motors and leaking air as if it had been whipped.

Quentin raised his nose and walked on. A tubed vehicle with oversized tires drove by containing the train passengers. He thought he saw a hand raise and he waved back with a category four smile, canines resplendent betraying his annoyance that he had to witness the desolate streets of Mallaig.

The ferry was large and ocean-going but looked under maintained, rust was everywhere. Quentin stood outside the passenger lounge watching the yellow container vehicle drive across the green ramp and on to the empty lower deck. The vehicle’s wheels angled in orthogonal directions. *Perhaps to mitigate against rolling in the swell of the sea*, thought Quentin, hoping the crossing would not be rough. Without a cab the truck had no obvious front nor back and it looked to him somewhat menacing, alone by itself with unknown cargo.

A thought burst in Quentin’s mind: *The vehicle contains a bomb, sent by some crazy anarcho-primitivist to murder Ragnor and destroy the Honzing movement.*

His face dropped as he thought, *What if I’m right?*

Two tones started to blare and the ramp arose with a terrible screech of ungreased metal. Quentin thought he could probably make it off the boat if he left now. But he was stuck, embalmed in the tocsin tones. By changing his attention a bistable percept arose whereby the alarm sounded to be either a continuous high-pitched tone punctuated by an intermittent low tone or a continuous low punctuated by a high.

As the ramp neared the vertical the grating of metal stopped and Quentin’s trance was broken. A pre-recorded safety announcement played, a soft male Islander-Scots accent welcoming passengers to the Caledonian MacBrayne ferry service and telling that *Smoking was strictly prohibited anywhere aboard the vessel.* But before the message finished the playback stopped with a crackle of static.

A thick black cloud erupted from the funnel as the ferry reversed into the wind, invitalizing a tattered tartan ensign. To avoid the noxious fumes Quentin pushed through heavy finger-trapping doors into the warm hubbub of the passenger cabin. Following dirty signs to the café he tottered downstairs and into a low-ceilinged and mostly empty bay. There he found three men in oil-stained work clothes sitting cross-legged on the floor and talking over tea and clove cigarettes.

The tables and chairs of the former cafeteria have evidently been removed, thought Quentin.

The workmen turned to look at Quentin and one said something that made the others laugh. Quentin caught a flash of an arm stump. He replayed the image as he walked away, his minds-eye concentrating upon the missing forearm.

A flimsy plastic table stood alone baring a stack of paper cups, a jar of tea bags, powdered milk and a box of sugar lumps. A white plastic wedge-shaped object also rested on the table, a tall and narrow isosceles triangle. Seeing a switch at the base Quentin realized the wedge was a kettle with a spout at its thin end. He lifted it to check for the slosh of sufficient water and pressed the switch. From the kettle issued the hum of a high-voltage microwave transformer, a smug and self-satisfied sound.

Waiting for the water to boil Quentin looked about the room. A grease-fat outline of clean linoleum marked where a stove had once stood. The ghosts of bacon crepitation lingered. Quentin speculated that the boat was not in regular use, that it had been chartered and perhaps re-activated for the Honzing conference to ferry the delivery vehicle and the small group of attendees. He wondered how he would have otherwise got to the island, and how he would get back.

The noise of boiling water combined with the throttling rumble of the boat engine.

Quentin felt a soft nudge and turned to see the one-armed man. His weathered face was familiar and he spoke in a thick Yorkshire accent where the pitch of vowels suddenly dropped three or four notes without any warning. The man shouted, 'Ey yup. Bist you wantin som of this?' He offered a silver Zee-D-C vaporizer pen. Quentin hadn't smoked since he'd met Neikea and

instinctively began to mime a polite refusal, but found himself nodding and taking the pipe.

'Fair winds,' said the man, departing with a stump-bump.

Quentin looked at the vape pen and took a long toke.

His head filled with white noise.

Again came the acute fear of a bomb on the deck below. Holding the smoke in his lungs, Quentin imagined the explosion in microsecond timing: an upward pressure-wave tearing through the dirty linoleum floor and followed by a stomach-lightening sensation as he was lifted up, feeling the heat from the radiation moments before being thrust into the ceiling. His organs would liquidize within milliseconds. In what way would the rupture of organ viscera be felt? His fluids would combine with those of the workmen. He wondered if their brains and consciousness would momentarily fuse. Or if during other bomb-blasts, over the history of mankind's violence, that two had become one.

The soughing roar combined critically with the cannabinoids and other chemicals surging through Quentin's blood. The colours of the world drained and he thought he would faint.

The kettle climaxed with a click and Quentin breathed out an enormous cloud of smoke, precipitating from his shipmates a round of clapping and whistles.

He felt as if awakened from a nice dream, but he couldn't remember what he had been dreaming of.

With a high calm Quentin poured hot water from the thin end of the triangular kettle into his cup and in a jolly mood took the scummy tea to the upper outer-deck.

The boat had left Mallaig's harbour and now ploughed through choppy open waters. Quentin moved to the lee side and found the slow lolling roll enjoyable. He was feeling very skazzed from the Zee-D-C. Indeed, so skazzed his Reality Modulator could not determine how skazzed he was.

Deciding he was probably hungry, Quentin took from his jacket a chocolate bar and as he ate it pondered on his relationship with Neikea. He felt unsure that they were well suited, that there was some vital process in their relationship that was imminently non-convergent.

Her oscillations of temper are unsettlingly predictable, he thought.

She had frequently mocked him for his cultural unsophistication and Zoner heritage in a way that made her seem crude and fundamentally dim-minded.

Ugly and banal, he said, trying to remember the word that captured these two characters.

Realizing he was facing West and that the sun must be setting on the other side, Quentin promptly walked around to the windward deck.

Here was a different world.

The wind was howling in repeating gusts.

The sea was turmoil and the colours sickening.

His stomach began to churn.

He looked towards the sun setting on unknown lands.

An anguished yell tore Quentin away from the horizon and squinting down he saw the one-armed Yorkshireman behind the bow facing into the wind. A rainbow of sea sprayed above him. The man swayed his torso and held aloft a book bent back along its spine. In between shouted phrases of deep guttural incantations he tore pages off with his teeth and spat them into the air where they were caught in the updraft and blown into the boat's black fumes.¹²⁴

The boat now pitched with horrible depth and rolled with incessant regularity. Something was not well at all. Sea sickness! It hit Quentin in two waves: a first of nausea and a second of fear, fear for the ordeal that was to come, for Quentin knew he was no sailor. And furthermore the sea sickness paired with a distemporous movement gurgling in his bowels. Quentin steadied his gaze on the setting sun and tried to ignore the molten bolus awakening within. He then vomited on to and through the deck railings, chunks and mucus mush blowing back over him. And by way of encore he shat himself.

Quentin looked up to a mirror and smiled back in pukey delirium. He was sat upon a toilet, he knew that much. There was

¹²⁴ This scene calls to mind Prospero in *The Tempest*, vowing to abjure his magic and drown his book.

no door on the dented cubicle and a clear babble came from the passengers, the other side of the thin wall. Quentin smiled at the situation and his thoughts returned to the Rossum transporter on the deck below. It bought to mind the Sea Squirt, a slug-like creature that begins life floating around the ocean until it finds a rock suitable to locate itself upon. When safely attached the sea squirt digests its brain.

Shaking his head side to side, Quentin entered a shallow-trance as he concentrated on the pinna swooshing sounds. Upon the back of his right hand he noticed a large blob of dark material, which, assuming it to be chocolate, he licked. He considered the word *Honzing* as he teased the material across his palette, crunching the nutty paste between his molars.

Honzing could be an object with physical extent, or a more abstract object that is a process, he thought.

In German there are multiple words for object, *das Objekt*, meaning a concept like the object of ones thinking, and also *der Gegenstand*, meaning a thing that takes a stand *against* (*gegen*) another thing. Quentin considered how this nuanced meaning influenced his thinking of the Honzing.

He swallowed and as the nutty substance trickled down the back of his throat he realized it was not chocolate at all, but that it was his own faeces. Quentin burped and the taste repeated. In the mirror he caught a flash of his tired but surprisingly serene face moments before he again vomited over himself.

After rinsing mouth and trousers Quentin tottered back to the deck outside, impeccably ignored by the other passengers. The engines had cut and the boat was drifting sideways in a calm U-shaped bay. A few early stars showed in the young night as cold air stung Quentin's nose in a way he had never felt.

The engines restarted with a throaty roar creating a smooth upwelling in the dark new waters, sliding the boat to its harbour. Two workmen dealt with massive ropes as the one-armed man directed a spotlight. The bow ramp descended with its two-toned warble and Quentin relocated to the lower deck, behind the delivery vehicle. He looked up and saw the passengers gathered across the massive lounge window looking intently back at him.

What was most eerie was that they were not talking to each other and they did not seem to be leaving the vessel.

The vehicle's wheels straightened and the yellow hulk clanked over the ramp. It moved fast, as though it wanted to be somewhere. Quentin felt the same way and left in the vehicle's wake.

A crumbling red brick wall led down to the water, baring the gravelled path Quentin had followed for about half an hour. He stood still to survey the scene, breath condensing in the wet air as frost formed beneath eldritch boughs. The invisible lapping of the loch's waters provided a gentle anchor to the moment.

The mist cleared to reveal that the wall passed into the centre of three large domes reflecting white in the moonlight. Beyond the habitat loomed a sandstone castle surrounded with a few white trunks of decayed trees. The dark building stood in stern severity, floating above patches of ground-hugging cloud and covered with ivy reaching up to vacant eye-like windows and lonesome crenulations. Bats flew into a belfry and an owl hooted, somewhere close.

The FLOTUS Eaters

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A sign proclaimed “The Hostel”.

‘And why not?’ said Quentin as he tapped the board with his index finger. The disturbance caused the text to disassemble and fall in a flurry of fine black dust.

With dozy repose Quentin stepped through the igloo porch and into a warm fug contended by a conference of vapours combining smouldering orris and singed yarrow with disinfectant and burnt meat.

The entranceway formed a stem to the building’s shamrock configuration. Bioluminescent tubes threw a glaucous blue guiding Quentin to the end of the passage where he faced three closed doors at angles of thirty degrees. From the edges of each door leaked the colours magenta and Day-Glo orange and acid green, and from the green came the sound of manic noodling organ. Quentin waited until the recapitulation of *Riders on the Storm* and with a deep breath he shouldered open the door.

But expecting a greater resistance than he found resulted in the door slamming into the stops and as Quentin bounded into the room he tripped over a rumpled rug as if he had been thrown.

The music was evidently reproduced from a gramophone as the vibration from Quentin’s tumble bought forth a terrible scratching that rent the air as the stylus scudded across the disc. He picked himself up and peered into the green gloom as two faces came into focus and the terrible scratching ended with a pop. Quentin’s ears rang into the tenebrious silence.

‘Come and join us,’ intoned a voice sounding ghoulish but jocose, the pitch of each drawn-out vowel sauntering with piratical but kingly mischief. Quentin squinted towards a fuzzy-haired man at the far end of the dome set like a jewel within a

¹²⁵ From hereon Arthur’s vision becomes increasingly laden with symbolism and quotation. He insists these references were introduced by the Honzing entity, Arthur not being familiar with such material. I have tried to identify these where possible.

compliant brocade couch. The man wore a silver short-sleeved tunic that reached to his knees and a thin golden band circumscribed his hair-thicketed head. He appeared to be stroking a red hedgehog.

A small round face appeared from the wings of an enveloping throne-like armchair. It was a boyish-girl with short black hair and wide eyes within powdered white cheeks. Quentin thought of raven chicks in a nest. Thin black lips flinched a smile towards Quentin and she said ‘Na?’¹²⁵, the common two-syllabled Federal expression meaning “How goes, friend?”

“Three is charming!” declared Fuzz Hair revealing a clipped Germanic accent. Quentin immediately deferred to the man’s intellect as higher than his own.

Seeking the familiar, Quentin curled his upper lip and hoped to smell Neikea’s fishy musk but instead succumbed to a whiff of his own faeces. He licked a knuckle and with it vigorously rubbed his philtrum.

‘Are you okay?’ asked the girl.

‘Marvellous!’ exploded Quentin as he looked up and tried to remember what Rhea had said about staying in control. His head was swimming.

‘Please,’ said the man. He held Quentin’s gaze as though they were old friends and added a grimace as if questioning why Quentin did not greet him as such.

The girl stood up and walked to the side of her companion and nodded sharply for Quentin to take her seat. She offered an uneaten black carrot to Fuzz Hair that he took without looking and placed upon a knee. As if completing a ceremony the girl then rested a hand upon the man’s shoulder and looked to Quentin.¹²⁶

Quentin looked to the girl. She wore a crimson outfit of tight leather jacket and trousers replete with shiny chrome bondage

¹²⁶ The significance of this carrot gesture could relate to *Waiting for Godot*, a play I am familiar with wherein Vladimir hands Estragon a carrot. I overheard someone describe this as a *perlocutary action*: the carrot invites the audience in, suggesting that all is not what it seems and that there is more outside the text.

buckles emphasising her tight and athletic frame. The couple faced Quentin like actors in an over-staged gothic diorama.

The girl cocked her head.

— *Was that a flirty come-on?* considered Quentin. As his eyes adjusted he realized the man's tunic was of chain mail.

Quentin further checked off the disparate objects. A tired shaggy rug lay before him upon which was woven a sheaf of corn. But where he expected to find kernels of grain the sheaf was crowned with an abundance of red jewels.

In the centre of the dome stood an unlit woodburning stove, its chimney reflecting a cone of rainbowed light. A moving shadow projected on to the canvas walls. Quentin initially thought it was from a bat but as the form diminished he realized it was a moth. He followed the creature's path as it alighted upon the muzzle of a double-barrelled shotgun, leaning upright upon a dusty gypsum statue of a one armed and one legged roughly hewn female. Quentin wondered if the gun had ever been fired or if it ever would be.

Quentin crossed over the rug and removed his coat and slumped into the girl's vacated seat.

He looked to the couple and asked, 'Have we met before?'

'It is okay,' reassured the girl. 'I am Kiki.' And she gave a small curtsy that drew Quentin's eyes to red fishnet stockings peeping through an open zip.

'And I am Baboo,' said the man. Placing a hand upon his chain-mailed heart, he bowed a fraction and lowered his gaze.

'It would not really work the other way around,' said Kiki, to which Baboo ejected a snort of approval.

Quentin wondered if the couple were talking automatically, as Urd and Verd had done, though neither appeared to be wearing a reality modulator.

Kiki flicked a tight smile to Quentin.

'Have you come far?' she asked. Quentin felt comforted by the simple question and nodded.

Baboo put the hedgehog on the floor and it bolted towards the stove. Kiki opened the door and it jumped in. The stove door closed with a gentle clink and Baboo said, 'We have been here for some time. But I find it so hard to keep track of time lately.'

'You will join us for a drink,' said the girl and pulled over a wheeled antique table carrying a number of vessels, the most notable being a frosted green spheroid the size of a pineapple lying on its longitudinal axis and pinched at each end into dangerous-looking glass needles. It was set within a plush claret pillow and did not seem to have a spout.

Leaning forward from his seat Quentin inspected the vessel. Upon its equator was a small silver-ringed hole wide enough to insert a few fingers and through which he could see the surface of a slime green liquid. Quentin looked at the hole and positioned an index finger above it. He sensed that Kiki and Baboo were watching as he slowly pushed the digit into the liquid, up to the lunula. He hesitated a moment and then plunged fully in. A noise from Kiki and Baboo suggested they had not expected this but were pleased. Quentin held his finger there a while and watched the liquid ooze out and drip down the bottle. He slowly removed the finger and sucked it. The absinthe took his breath away.

'A gift from our *munificent* neighbours,' gushed Baboo.

Kiki emitted a grunt that suggested sarcasm in Baboo's proclamation.

'Honzing?' asked Quentin.

'Klar,' said Kiki. She walked over to the trolley and lifted the bottle with fingers scissored at each tapered end. She then bowed her head, as if offering a prayer, and the vessel rotated so the hole faced downwards and the green liquid flowed out and into the silver measuring jigger. Kiki replaced the bottle upon its cushion and transferred the liquid into three small glasses. She then topped up the measure with water and handed a glass to Quentin and Baboo, taking the third for herself and reseating herself on the floor below Baboo.

'To what shall we drink?' asked Quentin, feeling grounded by the ceremony he had witnessed.

'To-day and to-morrow!' resounded Baboo, dropping the stuffed hedgehog as he did.

'And to us,' added Kiki, looking to Quentin with a smile of inuendo.

They all leaned in to clinked glasses and took a sip.

Quentin laid back as the sting faded. His head swirled and he stared at the gun to steady himself and wondered where the moth had gone. Everything in the room seemed to have great significance. He looked to Baboo and considered his strangely familiar presence. ‘What are you both doing on Rum?’ he asked.

‘We are with the Honzing organization,’ answered Kiki, moving to sit upon the floor and using Baboo’s legs as a frame for her back.

Baboo said, ‘We are *gatekeepers*.’

‘Baboo is being *obtuse*,’ scolded Kiki. ‘The Honzing Corporation operate their neural interface upon us.’

‘Ar,’ said Quentin, grateful to be given some information but unsure what it was.

Kiki lifted her hair to show a band of sensors circumscribing her skull and Quentin recognized the purple-black goo from Venus’s set.

‘You use Tithe?’

‘Yes.’

‘*Natürlich*. Well, we are having something like Tithe operating on us at all time.’

‘Oh,’ said Quentin. ‘Aren’t the probing sensations annoying?’

‘We do not notice the stimulations,’ said Kiki. ‘Honzing utilize our brains as a substrate for their operational activity. *Wet-ware*. It does not affect our emotional processes. And we are remunerated. They provide us with the submarine in which we travelled here.’

‘Oh but Kiki! *Remuneration* is such a sorry word!’ denounced Baboo. ‘We enjoy a free albeit *impecunious* life.’ He patted his potbelly and the chain mail tinkled as he did. ‘We may travel below the waterline, drifting amongst the eddies, but we are unbehoden to the permeating dullness above. And we are plied with Desiderata the likes of which have hitherto been the stuff of dreams. We are gracious for hosting the agent. Call it *Xenia*.’

‘Right,’ said Quentin, not really listening to what Baboo had said. ‘And Honzing is continuously running a program on your brain? You are providing a brain for it to exist on?’

‘Klar,’ said Kiki. ‘A *substrate*.’

‘And where do Kali and Rossum come into this?’ asked Quentin.

‘They are *cognate entities*,’ said Kiki with frayed patience. ‘*Nicht Wahr?*’ she said to Baboo.

Baboo was engrossed in licking a small black lollipop that had stained his lips. He raised his head and looked to his audience with a guilty attendance of boyish amiability.

Quentin made a circling motion around his mouth and asked, ‘What are you eating?’

Baboo didn’t hear him and made a happy noise.

‘Enhances the connection with the substrate,’ answered Kiki.

‘And pairs so splendidly with absinthe!’ gushed Baboo and finished his drink.

‘Another glass, yes?’ suggested Kiki.

Kiki measured three more jiggers and added an inch of water. They clinked glasses and sipped the measure.

‘Let me summarize,’ said Quentin. ‘A neural computing system is operating on your brain and it is not a device made by Kali or Rossum?’

‘It is *all* Honzing,’ said Baboo, waving his hand to untangle Quentin’s confusion. ‘And it is more of a living agent than a mere machine like your Tithe system.’

‘I thought Kali used Tithe to improve their user experience?’

‘Kali and Rossum are from the same stock,’ said Kiki. ‘Rossum have a Tithe system they use in the Zone.’ Quentin thought it telling the young woman had not said *Preterite*.

‘They are mere aesthetic competitors,’ she continued. ‘But their design originates with Honzing. The meeting here is sponsored by them.’

‘What?’ asked Quentin and after a moment of consideration added, ‘I mean who? And where?’

‘Honzing. At the conference. In a cave. That is what you are here for, right?’ asked Baboo.

‘No. Well, maybe. I’m here to meet an old friend. He asked for my help.’

‘Oh,’ said Baboo and after a moment added another, ‘Oh,’ contemplatively scratching his head.

Quentin said, ‘It seems like you are Honzing’s chosen ones?’

Baboo replied with aphoristic piety, ‘Well if we are not may Honzing choose us and if we are then may Honzing keep us.’¹²⁷

Quentin let the words hang and then asked, ‘Don’t you feel a bit *morally compromised* allowing Honzing to use your brain for whatever they are doing?’

‘Somewhat,’ said Baboo dismissively, downing his drink and projecting a spirited burp. ‘But *Erst kommt das Fressen!*’¹²⁸

The three were soon sat upon high stools in the kitchen overlooked by a large holographic poster showing from one angle the face of Bob Marley and from another a hedgehog.

The food comprised burnt strips of unseasoned pork-like meat and overcooked spaghetti.

‘Janky Honzing grub,’ said Kiki. ‘Gets worse the more you eat.’

‘Opposite for me,’ said Baboo.

‘What’s the meat?’ asked Quentin.

‘Gluteal flesh from the late and *dearly beloved* First Lady Ivanka,’ Baboo said, wiping his mouth with the back of a hand. ‘Lab grown and highly cultured.’ Kiki tapped her nose and winked at Quentin.

¹²⁷ In the trial of Joan of Arc, the judges tried to trick her by asking if she believed she was in a *state of grace*. The church claimed that one could not know if one was in a state of grace so if Joan answered yes then she would be a heretic but if she answered no she would be confessing to her guilt of not being in God’s grace and so her visions would be invalidated. Joan slipped through their trap answering, “*If I am not, may God put me there and if I am may God keep me there.*”

¹²⁸ *Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral* is from Bertolt Brecht’s *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*), meaning “Grub (animal feed) comes before morality”. Sympathisers of the smiling assassin Mack the Knife might say that morality is the privilege of the fed, that mankind’s elevated realms of consciousness are nourished by the act of feeding. “*You must try to face the facts, Mankind is kept alive by bestial acts*” quoted William S. Burroughs (who knew of what he spake).

Quentin paused as he wondered whether to spit out the morsel he was chewing.

It must surely be indecorous to eat such a revered person? Ivanka is a modern saint. Neikea would not approve.

But it tasted so good and as he continued to chew he became forgetful of his culpability.¹²⁹

‘You were unsure?’ asked Kiki, with a touch of malicious intrigue.

‘I was,’ said Quentin as he chewed the seared meat. ‘But I could eat a horse.’

‘I am sure that the Great *Radnor* would claim to have surpassed the *pferd* way,’ said Baboo, adding a smug snort that provoked a withered snicker from Kiki.¹³⁰

‘*Radnor?*’ said Quentin.

‘Wool-gathering *meshuggener*,’ spat Baboo with precise and wizardly modulation. ‘He is a fox bothering a hedgehog.’¹³¹

Baboo disappeared within the hologram and said, ‘The self-appointed *Professor of Foresight* does not realize that he is but a vessel.¹³²

‘The Honzing whispers in his ears as he knocks timidly upon the door of our future reality.

‘We embrace our un-reality! This inauthentic culture of ours is our culture! But *Radnor* prides himself on independent thought. It is nothing but equivocation —’

¹²⁹ In Homer’s *Odyssey*, the lotus eaters are mentioned as a group of people who eat a narcotic flower that renders them forgetful of their homeland.

¹³⁰ Horse puns aside, I assume Baboo is referring to *The Fourth Way*, a practical spiritual technique to reveal enlightenment and taught by Russian mystic George Gurdjieff and recollected by his student P. D. Ouspensky.

¹³¹ The Fox and the Hedgehog is a fable by the ancient Greek poet Archilochus: “A fox knows many things but a hedgehog knows one big thing”.

¹³² In 1932 H.G. Wells declaimed a call for *Professors of Foresight* to consider and plan for the consequences of science in a disunified and competitive world.

'Baboo!' cried Kiki and nudged her partner either as a gesture of friendly becalming or to avert the revelation of clandestine information.

Baboo appeared from the hedgehog and said, 'Let us speak of this after we have eaten.'

Back in the dome the three sat in separate armchairs, their faces shadowed in velveteen light. Quentin leaned his cheek into the worn headrest and closed his eyes. Baboo's flare of temper had sullied the mood and Ivanka's buttocks had paired poorly with absinthe. He also realized that he must be smelling quite bad now, steeped as he was in a ghastly medley of bodily fluids.

Quentin was roused by Baboo tapping him on the forehead and stamping the floor with each tap.

'How about one more drink?' he asked.

'*Noch einmal?*' whispered Kiki. She gave a quick light stroke over Quentin's knuckles and Quentin flinched and repeated the phrase in English, 'Just one more.'

Kiki moved to prepare a third round of absinthe.

'Right,' said Quentin, absentmindedly nodding his head and stroking his chin. He closed his eyes and mumbled, 'Another sounds reasonable.'

'You are a very *reasonable* person,' said Baboo with a flashing smile of golden teeth. 'Please tell us your memories of Ragnor.'

Kiki distributed the three measures of absinthe.

'We met on a Pacific island during a Rumspringa. Over twenty years ago. He spoke with a British accent but I thought he was American. Older than myself and working in speech technology. About a month ago I received a message saying that he was here on Rum and that he needed my help. He appears to be in a psychotic state.'

'Quentin,' said Baboo and repositioned his spidery legs. 'We have been perhaps not so forthcoming. We know Ragnor as *Radnor*. He is a representative of the Honzing movement and brimming with charismatic authority.'

'But Honzing are a cult, right?' said Quentin with equal parts statement and enquiry.

‘A cult? Ha ha!’ laughed Baboo. ‘Such an accolade. An *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* perhaps. But we are going to become stuck in words if we follow this path into a *Sumpfgebiet* of definitions.’¹³³

‘Well, would you say the Honzing movement is more like a religion or a philosophy?’ asked Quentin with desperation.

Baboo replied as if reading from a prepared speech, ‘Historically, the Horizontal Singularity has been the domain of conjecture. But now it is *experienced* in this dawning age of fully automated and sustainable luxury abundance. It could be argued that the Honzing *practice* is more religious than philosophical: *earnest beliefs expressed with ecstatic ceremony*. This is a distinction promulgated by my friend William James.’ Baboo raised his glass.

‘Furthermore, philosophy is generally a process to *clarify* and I find the Honzing organization serves as much to *mystify*.’

Baboo cleared his throat and said, ‘*The spiritual world deprives us of our hope but gives us our certainty*.’

‘And gives us our certainty,’ corrected Kiki.¹³⁴

‘Indeed,’ continued Baboo. ‘The idea of the Honzing movement is closer to a sense of the divine, a sense of the infinite is present within it.’ And to emphasize the finality of his statement Baboo sat back and with closed eyes he downed his measure of absinthe.

Kiki said: ‘Radnor speaks in empty clichés. Things like *the truth shows itself*. We believe he is given these words to speak. We were instructed by a process far beyond Radnor to stay in this building and *welcome* those who arrived.’

Quentin felt he had not progressed in understanding the nature of the Honzing conference and plumped for a more direct line and asked, ‘Is anyone invited?’

¹³³ *Unaussprechlichen Kulten*, meaning *Unspeakable* or *Nameless Cults*, is a grimoire of arcane literature in the Cthulhu Mythos, mentioned by Robert E. Howard and H. P. Lovecraft. *Sumpfgebiet* is German for *bog*, whence the English word (*water*) *sump* probably comes.

¹³⁴ “*The fact that there is nothing but a spiritual world deprives us of hope and gives us certainty.*” So wrote Franz Kafka. Kiki’s interjection is correct.

'No-one is *invited*,' said Baboo. 'But all may come.'

'And how—' began Quentin.

'They have a new energy source,' said Kiki. 'It arrived on the boat with you. Unlimited power. Though for whatever reason they all eat flowers.'

'And the conference is a mixture of, you know, *societies*?' asked Quentin, saying the word without any confidence.

'Your *Federal* sensibilities betray you. But yes, the *Lamp Freaks* and *Zoners* are equally represented,' said Baboo, evidently enjoying the slang.

'And what do you know about the cave?' asked Quentin.

'Very little,' said Kiki. 'Although I know the cave is illuminated in such a way that no object within it casts a shadow.'

'And have you *met* him?' asked Quentin

'Ragnor? Yes. Briefly,' said Baboo, adding with snide derision, 'He *deigned* to acknowledge us. We both felt as though we had met before though we could not think where. There is a strange sense of familiarity to everything on this island. And yet this morning when I looked in the mirror I could barely recognize myself.'

Baboo tilted his head and closed one eye that started twitching.

'Are you okay?' asked Quentin.

'A strong stimulation,' explained Kiki who turned to Baboo and said, '*Ein bisschen stark, mein Schatz?*'

'I thought you couldn't feel the —'

'Ja ja,' said Kiki, stroking Baboo's hand. 'He enjoys the pain. Reassurance that he can still be hurt.' She smiled at him as a mother to a sleeping child and turned sharply to Quentin. 'Now, I will show you a new piece of technology that will help when you meet Ragnor tomorrow. An apophenic modulator. It can filter and un-filter the information in your environment and remove the —.'

'Tried it,' interrupted Quentin. 'Someone I met today showed it to me. She called it a Honzing mask and it's not for me.'

'That must have been our friend Finesse,' said Kiki.

The third glass of absinthe was coursing through Quentin and he felt suspicious.

'I refuse to wear a mask that tells me how to walk. I like to see where I'm going. I've had enough of the manipulation from my damn reality modulator!'

Baboo reanimated and boomed, 'Don't blame you old chap! Bloody encumbrance! When you meet Ragnor look the little plenipotentiary in the eye and tell him to find his own voice!'

Kiki tutted and said more calmly, '*Natürlich*, you must decide the terms of your interaction. I recommend you use the modulator with sound to interpret your local *umwelt*. Ragnor has a tendency to speak —.'

'He not only eats flowers but talks through them,' said Baboo with a small laugh.¹³⁵

'You will put on this new reality modulator,' said Kiki, tapping Quentin's shoulder twice and handing him a silver purse. 'It will help you understand what is happening.'

From the purse Quentin took a band and slipped it around his head and pressed the cold wet nodules to his scalp. Kiki finished the fitting by pushing a curved strip down over his temples.

Quentin heard a voice. It was the voice of his internal monologue.

You pause, listening to the voice: your own voice.

Baboo lifted a hand and patted the air with palliative reassurance. Kiki came towards Quentin and sat on the arm of his chair and placed a hand on his inner thigh. She gave the slightest squeeze and with the other hand she made a tube with her slender fingers and wrapped it around the tip of Quentin's index finger.

¹³⁵ "To talk through flowers" means to speak in code, according to an ancient tradition where sending a particular flower conveyed a particular message. John Everett Millais's painting of the floating *Ophelia* is a veritable symphony of *floriographic* symbology, referencing the particular words that she spoke in Hamlet: *There's rosemary, that's for remembrance, pray you, love, remember. And there is pansies, that's for thoughts.*

She ratcheted her grip and slid slowly down to the hilt as he closed his eyes.

'He sleeps?' asked Baboo.

'Fast,' whispered Kiki.

'No, I'm not,' mumbled Quentin.

Kiki and Baboo laughed.

Quentin heard his voice saying:

You sit back and wonder what will come next.

You are overcome by an acute sense of comfort and an awareness of self.

You feel more fully yourself, as though many things inside are expanding to fill your body and increasing pressure within and tightening the boundary of your identity until through a hole in your forehead open to release an un-ending cone of fizzing white light.

The Sour Milk of Paradise

The next morning Quentin and Kiki and Baboo left the hostel and headed into a turbulent morning air that bit with the caws of crow and the rusty tannins of leaf.

They walked in silence to a lochside jetty on which was berthed a small submarine. Sun poured through a gap in the moody sky and illuminated the vessel's brilliant white bulbous bow.

At the end of the jetty stood the trio facing outwards. Quentin gathered his bearings. He was at the head of a loch in a shallow valley about one kilometre across. A few hundred metres inland stood a vast cliff face running east to west. Quentin wondered how the delivery vehicle had ascended the crags, there was no obvious way up to the treeless plateau above and the mountains on either end towered to clouded heights.

'There's an elevator,' said Kiki, breathing warm into Quentin's ear and pointing to a small part of the cliff absent from the green moss which otherwise coated its face. She exuded a heavy smell of aniseed and Quentin wondered what he had forgotten from the previous night as he focussed on the swirls upon the loch, capricious intrusions scratching the black silken waters. Yellow kelp heaved with a languid passion and Quentin began to feel heavy.

He looked down.

Down and down he was now falling through the icy gin-clear waters passing the barnacled columns and rotating about his major axis to look upwards to the diminishing light as he receded into the abyssal depths.

'Well, I think it is time I moved,' said Quentin, coming around.

After a few seconds of closing his eyes and half expecting to wake up he realized he wasn't going to and so focussing on the grey mist ahead he walked landwards.

A platform took Quentin to the plateau above the cliff from which he looked towards the bright domed hostel and its dilapidated bat-filled annex and to the ferry boat beyond, putting out gentle black smoke as it cut crisp vees in the calm loch. Quentin sensed the shadows in the desolate streets of Mallaig beyond the horizon and the healing moss of Fort William and the inhumane estates of the manufacturing district and the anodyne life of the Federation at the centre of it all. As he entered the cloud he thought of Neikea but could not see her face.

Fresh puddled tire tracks impressed by the container vehicle led the way. The route climbed gently as the woods thinned and the clouds thickened and a headwind became established. Rain and hail came in belligerent squalls.

Quentin donned the new reality modulator set. It acted as a comforting parenthetical annotation to his ruminations, speaking in a voice the same as his own.

You miss the company of Kiki and Baboo. It is hard to remember a time when you felt such ease. Perhaps it is their detachment from the machinations of society? Their Honzing-sponsored independence coasting on a wave of desiderata below the cultural swamp of the Federation and the Zone.

Their unconcern as to the motives of Honzing is peculiar. Perhaps the interface stimulates the emotional complexes of the brain to reduce their anxiety, like the way Tithe can make a voice sound familiar or manipulate you to like a piece of art it generates.

Kiki and Baboo are similar to the satellite computing networks orbiting Earth, lending their brain as a computing substrate. They are as an *amamuensis*.

Quentin nodded sagely. He enjoyed the narration, it felt like part of him and gradually replaced his own thoughts altogether.

And what was the strange word Baboo used? *Xenia*. The word is from the Ancient Greeks. It is used to describe the grace showed by a host to their guests. Sure, the Greeks were hedging

their bets. And yes, this is not a truly righteous morality, not a selfless altruistic act. But Kiki and Baboo possess a genuine faith in the Honzing Corporation. More than gratitude and closer to reverence.

Kiki and Baboo lack that pious contrition of Federalists, dressed the same way and chasing and eating our tails as we vie to outdo our fervour of indignation. Ethical Credit Points indeed! It is bred by a kind of rabid enlightenment scientism, a fear of one's nature and a Cartesian rejection of heuristics.

And yet Kiki and Baboo also lack that lean and hungry sanctimony of the Zoners, repeating their vacuous slogans. Their exhortation is riddled with contradiction and they preach from an inauthentic platform. They are wallowing in an under-socialized modest vanity and driven by a nostalgic false consciousness to reach utopic goals by re-tracing humankind's progress.

This seems so distant now. Hazewrapped in the mind's eye.

A sudden brightening as the fog thinned and Quentin saw ahead a broad open valley leading to a short stretch of silver sea. Beyond the water rose the grey ridge of the Cuillins. It was the mountains he had seen on the postcard from Ragnor.

The Honzing camp twinkled quartz-white in the valley mouth, overshadowed by a great cliff down which streaked quicksilver threads of water. Most interesting to Quentin's eye was a circular hole in the clouds above the camp that precisely coincided with the low sun, sucking up the cloud through it like the toroidal eye of a hurricane.

The wind blew cold and steady and Quentin stopped to rest beneath a bridge over a small river. He looked around and heard his voice speak:

A towering cirque flanks my left side: dark, foreboding and alien. And to the right stretches an open yellow wilderness of thin grass, waving like dead hair in the wind.

— *Dead hair?* questioned Quentin.

Stag antlers peep above distant hummocks whilst birds soar high with intention.

‘That’s enough of that!’ said Quentin, tiring of the confused symbolism (*Peeping antlers?*).

He heard a sad sound.

Quentin removed the headset and squinting into the haloed sun he thought about Ragnor.

— *Ragnor was an intellectual. Or acted as one (isn’t that all it takes?).*

— *And he was cool in that ennuied millennial hipster way.*

— *But Ragnor was intense and serious and overcome with himself in a consuming way.*

— *He had a gloomy and mysterious disposition as if riddled with anxiety and doubt.*

‘Saturnine,’ said Quentin aloud. Picking a stalk of dried grass and crushing it into his thumb pad.

Quentin recollected their brief meeting in the Cook Islands one midsummer night twenty years ago. Those memories came flavoured in a humid turquoise hue with words he had not used since.

Kia Orana, he whispered.

— *And that strange food, taro.*

— *It’s where I decided, realized, that I wanted to become a psychiatrist.*

— *Psychotherapist,* he corrected.

— *Why do I still muddle those words?*

A shiver returned Quentin to the Hebridean late-November air. He felt a bolus of regret rise within for coming to meet Ragnor against Neikea’s advice, although strangely he did not recognize it as his own regret. He handled the feeling as if it were a small and unfamiliar stone carving he had found in a trouser pocket.

Quentin looked at the ground and saw rising fumeroles of back-sweat steaming shadow ripples in the dead-hair grass.

Following a short rest Quentin donned the headset and continued along the track towards the camp. The wind was in his face and all the time increasing. Through red-rimmed eyes he looked towards the haloed sun.

Quentin's attention moved to an approaching vehicle on the road ahead.

Up ahead you see an object the size and shape of an auto-taxi.

But it is not like the Kali or Rossum vehicles, there is no pointed end.

The vehicle halted by a large hologram that read "NOW HERE". As Quentin moved his head the letters shifted to "NO WHERE". He tutted in disapproval at the typically facile Honzing wordplay.

The waiting vehicle bobbed gently on a ball tire. Its shell was a translucent material the colour of Vaseline and red mud covered the lower half in which someone had daubed the words *BUNCO SHILL* (Quentin wondered if this was attributable to Baboo). An oval door swung up and Quentin saw a small man dressed in white with a mop of silver hair.

As Quentin walked to the vehicle Tithe spoke his thoughts:

If this is Ragnor then it is not as you remember him. His skin is much darker. Perhaps a deep tan? But no, the features are not consistent with your memory. He looks Arabic.

What is he wearing? Seems to be a gown made of cotton wool.

'Ragnor?'

'What you think?' came the testy reply.

And he sounds American. Such a deep voice, like fried gravel.

Wondering what was meant by "fried gravel" Quentin slid his headset behind his ears and stood under the door wing. He peered into the vehicle and found a black cube above the ball-wheel embedded in the Vaseline floor. Quentin looked to Ragnor and noticed that beneath his cotton-wool gown he wore a baggy long sleeved unitard, a two-tone army-camouflage pattern made with large sequins but with red swapped for the green. Quentin felt let-down by this look as though Ragnor had compromised a bold and leaderly appearance with this garish style and ill-fitting cut. He recalled Venus's opinion, "*No sense of irony or style. He is uncool*".

Ragnor snapped his fingers twice and Quentin sat down in a hammock-chair as the door closed with a short suck of air. His ears rang into the sudden silence. Ragnor appeared to be wearing bronze sandals and beneath him had collected a small puddle of sequins.

‘*This*,’ said Ragnor, wagging a finger towards one eye and leaning back in his chair. As he did so Quentin noticed that amongst Ragnor’s Warholian mop was a narrow lock of neon pink.

From the centre of Ragnor’s fringe a thick white plastic tube telescoped down and covered the bridge of his nose. Two black hexagonal discs unfurled to cover his eyes, looking to Quentin like a small satellite had alighted.

The ovoid vehicle pirouetted one-eighty and lurched towards the camp, the apex tilting back with increasing velocity. Quentin looked down and saw the ground moving beneath him. The ball tire tracked the contoured ruts of the road but the undulations were transmitted to the cabin with an attenuated and delayed magnitude such that the discrepancy of motion and vision soon made Quentin feel nauseous.

Ragnor’s head was bowed forward in a vacant Kubrick Stare.¹³⁶ His hands fiddled with a round disc of brass, a few inches in diameter and embossed with patterns like an astrological dial. He periodically held the disc up as though looking through it with hexagonal eyes.¹³⁷ Ragnor’s plump pink lips moved as if reciting a slow mantra and Quentin assumed that he was engaged in a complicated thought gesture. The sun continued to bore through the clouds ahead.

¹³⁶ Think of Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*, or the particularly unhinged Yorkshireman Malcolm McDowell playing Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*.

¹³⁷ This disc would appear to be an astrolabe, an astronomical instrument that was a model of the universe. *The body is a device to calculate the astronomy of the spirit. Look through that astrolabe and become oceanic* (Rumi).

A whirr announced Ragnor's hexagonal visor panels folding up and receding into his hair. He pointed to the haloed sun and exclaimed, 'Cloud busting.'

'What is?'

'Busting a hole in the clouds. Testing the new power-gen.'¹³⁸

'A Cloud Buster, you say? Oh good,' said Quentin calmly, nodding intently as he stared at the sun. 'Glad it's working,' he added politely.

'Thorium,' said Ragnor, shaking the disc like a mildly deranged populist politician at a rally.

'Thorium?' repeated Quentin.

'Yeah. Arrived last night. Or was it the technetium? Whatever, it worked first time. Gonna change a-lotta things round here. Honzing gave me the idea to invest in it.'

'Thorium?' Quentin said again. 'Or techne —'

'Miniature fusion reactor,' interrupted Radwan. 'Came to me in a dream.'

'Natürlich.'

'You been hanging with those weirdos at the gate?' snapped Ragnor.

'You mean Kiki and Baboo?'

'Who else?' hissed Ragnor, repocketing the astrolabe and awkwardly rubbing a fluffy arm.

'They seemed very nice to me,' said Quentin.

'Gatekeepers of manners,' said Ragnor, sequins spilling from a cuff as his deep brown eyes lazored Quentin's sallow moonface. 'Philosopher hosts.'

'Spooky, but progressive,' said Quentin with a diplomatic grace.

¹³⁸A *Cloud Buster* is a contraption designed by Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957), which Reich claimed could seed rain by manipulating what he called "orgone energy". The device is made of an array of metal tubes, one end aimed at the sky and the other connected to the ground with pipes. The US government seized and burnt his books. Ragnor's Cloud Buster appears more useful for Scottish climes: rather than encouraging rain it busts a hole in the clouds.

“Technology. What choo make of it?”

‘Means to an end?’¹³⁹

‘Means to an end,’ muttered Ragnor. Quentin could not tell if he was condoning, sarcastically contradicting, or just absently repeating his words.

‘You got any good Honzing swag?’ Ragnor said.

‘Desiderata? Yes. They sent me this funny moustache. Twiddles itself when you —’

‘And d’you think it’s righteous?’ interrupted Ragnor.

‘Righteous? The moustache?’

‘Yeah. You think it’s ethical, towing the Federal line? Or even moral, coherent to your techno-accelerationist beliefs?’

‘Hard to say really,’ said Quentin. ‘I suppose it’s silly but—’

‘Right.’

‘Things are changing so fast.’

‘Change. That’s the way technology sees it too. It’s all *process*. We need more friction. It’s a question of enframing.’

‘Enframing?’ repeated Quentin, activating his RM set to help interpret whatever Ragnor was talking about.

‘The gathering together of that setting-upon which challenges us forth to reveal the real,’ intoned Ragnor, looking up and into the blazing sun.

‘Technology?’ repeated Quentin, hearing a sound signifying his new reality modulator had activated.

‘What I’m talking about is nothing technological.’

Quentin heard his voice say:

Ask Ragnor what he is talking about.

‘Can you put that another way?’ asked Quentin.

‘Sure. I’m saying a few things. First, that it’s impossible to be *authentic*. Enframing is part of what we are, we *can’t* see the

¹³⁹ This footnote was written with the reluctant assistance of Radwan: In *The Question Concerning Technology* Heidegger asserts that technology is generally taken as merely a means to an end, but that end is ultimately a way of bringing forth truths: *revealing* truths. Along similar lines, Marshall McLuhan rejected describing computing technologies as mere tools, favouring them as *an environment in which we live and in which we transform ourselves*.

world as it is. This maintains our inauthentic outlook and therefore prevents our *actualizing*. Our process of *being* is modulated by technology.'

Quentin nodded his head as he listened to his voice explain what Ragnor had said:

Ragnor is suggesting that the way we see the world is affected by technology. He calls this enframing. He says that since the true nature of the world is mediated by consciousness then we are inherently inauthentic and this prevents us reaching our full potential.

'Technology can aid in revealing the world as it is,' said Ragnor. 'It can account for our cultural and personal enframing processes.'

The vehicle approached a flat pasture of grass on which a yellow machine with two large interlocking metal discs had ploughed five deep furrows. In one of the trenches a mud-sleeked couple were writhing together. Two young children holding hands looked down upon them.

'Amphictyons in the promiscuous pastures,' said Ragnor, smiling.¹⁴⁰

The trench-digging machine had backed up to cross the road and so Quentin's vehicle slowed to navigate around it.

Ragnor said, 'As soon as man comes to life he is at once old enough to die. In our beginning is our end. Understanding this helps in our attempt at authenticity and makes our anxiety courageous. It brings about a new freedom!'

'These are your thoughts?'

'Appeared to me in a vision. You'll get them here too.'

'Right,' said Quentin, nodding with wide-eyed revelation. 'Far out,' he added softly. Up ahead he could see a few people

¹⁴⁰ Caliban to the Audience in W.H. Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*: '*O take us home with you, strong and swelling One, home to your promiscuous pastures where the minotaur of authority is just a roly-poly ruminant and nothing is at stake.*' Amphictyons were the Ancient Greeks serving the temple of Delphi.

scattered around in the shallow valley, moving towards the clump of white domes beneath the trepanned cloud.

They passed another spheroid vehicle that appeared to be stuck in a crater. The vehicle was smothered with wet mud that obscured any sign of its occupants. The machine sped up one side, its apex craning forward with determination, and then fell back on itself, splattering mud and gauging a trench like a spoon in soft ice cream. The pathetic spectacle reminded Quentin of the twitching Rossum vehicle stuck in the sad Mallaig alleyway. Ragnor followed Quentin's gaze and blew air from his nose with derision.

'Quotidian conceptual artists,' he blurted.

'But you don't mind them staying here?' asked Quentin.

'No. They really *want* to be stuck. Unlike,' Ragnor grunted and thumbed behind him, which Quentin took to be an implication of Kiki and Baboo.

Quentin listened to his voice:

Ragnor seems wearied and serious. He looks and sounds so different to how you remember him. Could there be a mistake? Is it a different Ragnor? Kiki and Baboo called him Radnor, so there is already a doubt. But then, Venus had said he was waiting for you.

Removing the headband Quentin said, 'You know Venus?'

'Another of Honzing's chosen ones.'

'Ragnor you sound, I don't know how to say it exactly —'

'I am. I feel like I'm unravelling. It all seems to be ending here.' He gesticulated wildly ahead to the silver sea and thundered, '*Thalatta! Thalatta!*'¹⁴¹

The sunlight suddenly faded and a blirt of rain smashed upon the vehicle.

Ragnor twisted his head as if being garrotted. 'Power's down,' he said.

¹⁴¹ 'Thalatta! Thalatta!', meaning 'The sea! The sea!', was the alleged cry of an Ancient Greek army upon seeing the Black Sea and escaping near-certain death.

A concerned Quentin whispered, ‘The Cloud Buster’s broken?’

Ragnor looked to Quentin and said, ‘We don’t know how it works. Arrived and assembled itself.’

‘Powered by the thorium that arrived with my ferry?’ asked Quentin with a yawn, suddenly at ease.

‘Bearing the light like those Neanderthals carrying fire with smouldering moss.’

Quentin blinked and wondered why the simile sounded familiar.

‘Being near the stuff has a strange effect,’ said Ragnor.

‘How so?’

‘Might all be psychological, being close to the future. Could be something physical, some kinda radiation we can’t measure. Could be tachyons.’

‘What are the effects of tachyons?’

‘Smears time. Sometimes things seem familiar, sometimes —.’

‘Not so much,’ finished Quentin, taking another look at Ragnor’s face that appeared to be slightly melting.

‘Gets hard to tell whether you even *like* something or not.’

‘*Uncanny*.¹⁴²

‘You’re the expert,’ said Ragnor.

Quentin coughed and said brightly, ‘Well, it seems like good timing, me being here.’

‘Always good timing with The Honzing,’ replied Ragnor, turning blue.

‘What’s on your mind?’ asked Quentin, accommodating to the psychedelic normal.

‘Fundamental questions like “*What does it mean to be a man?*” This may sound well from a syntactical point of view according

¹⁴² *Canny* is from German *koennen*, to know. Uncanny means *unknowing*, beyond the duality of opposites, which is the transcendent. Jacques Lacan wrote that the uncanny situates one “*in the field where we do not know how to distinguish bad and good, pleasure from displeasure*”.

with your noble laws of English language but the question does not make any sense to me now. I can't *experience* any meaning.¹⁴³

'I used to ask these questions all the time but now they're just empty clichés and platitudes. I think I've got a kind of sickness with language.'

Looking up to the pink-rain splattered apex of the ovoid vehicle Ragnor muttered, '*The world does not speak. Only we do.*'

'I see,' said Quentin, nodding and wondering what Dr Rhea would have said next. He opted for, 'And where do I come into it?'

Snapping his head to Quentin, Ragnor spoke with his former confidence, 'Let's find out! Plug you into the Honzing!'

Quentin tried to ignore the last part of what Ragnor had said and asked, 'You work for the Honzing corporation?'

Ragnor snickered. 'Sure. They send me desiderata and advice. Ideas in dreams and in visions. Never seen a single person though. Feels like they don't even exist and it's all in my mind.' Saying this precipitating a brief illusion where Quentin saw the world flatten and lose all depth and sense of perspective.

'And what is the nature of your interaction with the Honzing?' asked Quentin, crossing his legs and raising his voice as the rain intensity increased.

'*The nature of interaction?*' shouted back Ragnor. 'Your Federal-speak debases and perverts and degrades the art of language. But you'll find out soon enough. The Honzing is more an *agent*. It is a process with a sense of *agency*. It is the sum of our knowledge. Some people call it the Honze. Sounds more friendly, I guess. I call it capital T- *The capital H-Honzing*.'

'Do you think The Honzing is an artificial, er—'

'An AI,' interrupted Ragnor. 'Well, depends what you mean by artificial. It aint human. Not in essence. But it lives within us. Kinda like a second soul.'

¹⁴³ In "*An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*", Bertrand Russel sets out a theory for establishing truth and verification of a sentence. He suggests that a basic sentence expresses an experience. A sentence is *verifiable* when it has syntactic relations to such a basic sentence, a sentence is neither true nor false when there is no such relation.

Ragnor starting laughing through a large yawn. As he arched back Quentin saw the inside of his mouth and saw his teeth and tongue had been plated with gold.

With a sudden and serious presence Radwan declared, ‘The Honzing is more like a God.’

The roar of the rain suddenly ceased and Quentin for a moment wondered if he had gone deaf.

The vehicle halted outside one of the cliff-interfacing domes and its door opened.

Ragnor looked up to the dark towering mountain above and declared, ‘*Though he slay me*.’¹⁴⁴ He then looked at the palm of his right hand, studying it for a moment as if a rare insect had landed upon it before reaching into his mop of white hair and pulling it up and off his scalp. He had been wearing a wig that covered thin wispy grey hair and threw the hairy mass into the muddy ground and stomped on it with his bronze sandals.

Hesitating a moment in numb repose Quentin swung out of the seat and into a puddle.

Quentin could hear fast music playing from within the dome, a rumbunctious carnival of pure tones and shaped noise. The synthesised version of Scott Joplin’s *Maple Leaf Rag* was interspersed with whoops and claps of joy. Quentin stood still until the piece finished and then pushed through a rotating door.

The dome was a warm and humid jungly hot house in which Quentin detected heavy fumes of burning wood and oil. He faced a forest of towering fans of leaf interspersed with manic orange flowers. He automatically said the plant’s name, ‘*Strelitzia*.’

‘Well put,’ declared Ragnor from the other side of the bird of paradise plant.

Beyond the plants was a grassy clearing where a group of six sat staring at a stunted tree with spiky thorns. Adjacent to the tree was a large brass cauldron in which burnt a rose bush. Fire was a symbol of the Zone and Quentin briefly wondered if this was some kind of trap, a secret operation to return him to the

¹⁴⁴ *Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him: but I will maintain mine own ways before him.* Job 13:15 (KJV).

Preterite community. The fire was evidently assisted by oil for it spewed a heavy black smoke and its light flickered contorted shadows of the twisted boughs.¹⁴⁵

The rag played on.

Ragnor offered Quentin a roughly-carved wooden chalice brimming with a milky liquid. It sloshed out onto Quentin's foot and evaporated into a cloud of silver. 'You can live off it,' he said.

'Thought that was coconut,' said Quentin, taking the vessel and smelling. It had no odour.

Ragnor winked and tapped his nose as Quentin took a tentative sip.

A small and withered old man stood up and threw a single large neon yellow daffodil into the fire. Facing the tree he said with great solemnity, 'I accept the universe.'

'*You better*,' whispered Ragnor, snatching the cup from Quentin and hurling it into the cauldron.¹⁴⁶

The flames flared and the old man disappeared.

'Lost in the maze looking for clues,' said Ragnor.¹⁴⁷

A rude shove alerted Quentin and he turned to find a short young woman negotiating a bag the size and shape of a cello. She looked at Quentin in impatient exasperation and screwed her face, which appeared to be painted in thick and smudged makeup. Quentin gasped in horror as the cellist reached under her chin and commenced pulling off her skin. But in fact the woman was only removing a tight elastic mask that had a blurry image on it, an

¹⁴⁵ *And all shall be well and All manner of thing shall be well when the tongues of flame are in-folded into the crowned knot of fire, and the fire and the rose are one.* — *Four Quartets*, TS Eliot. This poem alludes to the experience of Kundalini awakening, a psychic energy rising from the base of the spine to the crown of the head.

¹⁴⁶ "*I accept the universe*" was an exclamation of the pioneering feminist Margaret Fuller. When someone repeated this phrase to Scottish "great man" philosopher Thomas Carlyle, his reply is said to have been: "She'd better!"

¹⁴⁷ "*A labyrinthine man never seeks the truth but only his Ariadne*," Nietzsche. *Labyrinthine* suggests a person lost in relativity, *truth* suggests absolute transcendence, and *Ariadne* would be an agent of relative solutions.

image showing a lower quality image of her real and beautiful face. The woman tore the rubber face off and threw it upon the burning rose bush where it boiled in ghastly welts.

Quentin moved to one side as four more musicians barged past. Each carried a different instrument and gave unkind side-eyes to him as they tossed their elastic face masks into the fire. Quentin looked to Ragnor in desperation and at that moment he felt he knew him as though they were twins.

A deep gong sounded and Ragnor looked up and began walking to the far door that connected with the cliff face and Quentin followed.

A man wearing a formal coattail suit walked in through the rotating door, carrying a flute case and brushing dirt off his shoulders. Quentin saw that it was night outside and shook his head in dismay. He wondered how it could have gotten so late.

Reacting to Quentin's concern Ragnor cried, 'Tachyons! We're close to the source. *Words do not convey.*'¹⁴⁸

A low-pitched droning sound began, at first quiet but becoming increasingly louder and rising in pitch according to the Doppler effect. Quentin raised his hands to protect his ears as the invisible sound passed and faded. With ringing ears he turned to Ragnor who said, 'Pre-echo. Time smearing.'

'Klar,' Quentin dismissed.

He looked to the now empty tent and found the Hawthorne tree to be slowly vanishing.

'Time,' said Ragnor.

They entered the short tube that interfaced with the cliff. The tube flared at its far end to algae-coated rock and in the slime someone had scraped the words *MAN, MANY, TECHNE, UP!*¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Alfred North Whitehead said of mystical experience, "Words don't convey it except feebly; we are aware of having been in communication with infinitude and we know that no finite form we can give can convey it."

¹⁴⁹ These words are almost *MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN*, words from Belshazzar's feast in the book of Daniel, the proverbial

Beneath the words was a translucent oval door made of a biological-looking pink membrane covered in a network of crimson capillaries. Distorted and alien looking moving shadows projected on the door. The sounds were now unambiguously that of a symphonic orchestra, short harsh A's of brain-damaged oboe followed by thrips of violin and trumpet, sustained low notes of cello and bass, throat-clearing coughs and shuffling sounds of people. Quentin's hands started to shake and his breathing rate increased.

The tube seemed to be lengthening.

The shadows changed colour from pastel through primary shades and into a nostalgic sepia.

The musicians stopped tuning and a regular slow knocking began with an interval of one second. It was the hollow sound of a mallet impacting a coconut.

Quentin turned and saw Ragnor with arms spread holding open the slit in tube's pink door. The light of the cave beyond was golden white and silhouetted in it was a dark dancing form. It was a writhing naked body that Quentin instantly recognized as his own.

The knocking ceased.

Quentin fell forward with face down and his body longitudinally rotated to come to rest upon something compliant and warm.

With face up and head forward Quentin slid through the pink slit doors and into the cave.

writing on the wall. They are in an unknown language, which Daniel interprets as: MENE, *God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end;* TEKEL, *you have been weighed ... and found wanting;* and PERES, *your kingdom is divided.* After consulting with a learned scholar of ancient thought, I interpret the meaning of these three words in the context of Quentin's experience thus: his *numbered days* relates to a limited perceived life in the relative province versus eternal life in the enlightened; *weighed and wanting* means Quentin's spiritual soul is not fully developed; *kingdom divided* relates to duality, not the true kingdom of Absolute/God. Is Quentin is returning to the unenlightened life?

He felt his ears pop as if in high pressure air.
The white faded leaving only gold.

Quentin found he was now barefoot. Looking through his toes at the slit door he saw himself falling down as he had done moments earlier. He moved his toes and from one wafted a bright ripple of white light that he understood as a representation of positive energy, a universal Odic life force, *prana, élán vital*.

He heard a sharp intake of breath and looked up to see Ragnor looming above, staring intently forward and raising a thin black baton.

A moment later the music began: it was the second movement of Haydn's symphony number ninety-eight.



Moreover something is or seems
That touches me with mystic gleams,
Like glimpses of forgotten dreams—
Of something felt like something here;
Of something done I know not where;
Such as no language may declare.

— *The Two Voices* by Alfred Lord Tennyson.

One Big Thing

Note from the editor:

For the final part in this story we will hear of Arthur's encounter with the Honzing entity in his own words. These he wrote a few days after waking from his coma, during which the vision took place.

The nurse has just castigated me. *You should be resting Mister Spinks*, pronouncing my name as if handling soiled laundry. I am in the private jet of Pierre and halfway to LA. The plane was undergoing a refit in Hawaii when it was sent to aid in my repatriation and thus the entertainment system is down. I shall use the time to dictate my Honzing vision whilst it is fresh in my head, although oddly enough I find the details become clearer the more I dwell upon them.

My brother-in-law can edit this, he is an artist of pedantry and semiotics and is used to translating my admittedly abstruse manners of communication. John has an interesting writing style albeit with a penchant for florid poetics and an overuse of French words. There is no internet connection and so, *Dear John*, within the following *recountanance* one may find a liberty taken with respect to the norms of writerly conventions.¹⁵⁰

It seems grossly wanton to charter an entire plane. Radwan convinced Pierre — the sociopathic billionaire who purchased our company — to arrange for my relocation from Rarotonga to LA. The insidious circle-triangle-dot logo of Pierre's Angmar

¹⁵⁰ Arthur may have a point regarding my *penchant* for French words. I have left his non-word *recountanance* here as an example of his neologisms.

pervades the decor. They are where I least expect them, on the cutlery and the carpet and covering the paper-thin uniform of this beady-eyed jobs-worth nurse who looks like she escaped from a bordello (she is not only an incredibly patronizing woman, showing me how the toilet system works as if I were a child, but also clumsy, having spilt Bloody Mary over my groin). The women doesn't appear to be wearing any underwear and it is incredibly frustrating to speak with her.

I wear a colossal bandage from the trepanning. It looks like a turban and there is a slight depression on the centre of my forehead. Sue and her Māori friends oversaw my treatment for about a week as the storm raged around Rarotonga. Doctor Tarquinus Sorrel helped as much as he could whilst aiding wounded islanders but coconut concussions were sadly omitted from his medical curriculum, although he now intends to study Polynesian medicine. I feel I know Tarquin intimately after channelling his likeness in my vision as the distinguished Quentin Parsley. Tarquin was initially reluctant to help with the trepanning but later conceded it was the best option to relieve pressure on my brain given what was available. He suggests the force of the coconut blow was transmitted through the medial fluid between my frontal hemispheres and this likely mitigated any long-term tissue damage but may have caused a rupture in a deep structure called the pineal gland.

There were a few Māori finesse to my treatment about which the western medical establishment would perhaps reserve judgement. I can still smell the coconut husk they burnt in the room and blew upon my exposed brain. There is a strange poetry in using the substance that caused my injury to treat it. Wasn't it William Burroughs who said *The cure is in the disease?*

But I digress. Enough time remains on this flight to outline the final stage of my vision, an encounter with The Honzing. My reservation to use the word "vision" should be noted. "Encounter" is arguably a superior word, *visions* having a tendency to come as dreamy abstractions. And yet *encounter* although more concrete suggests an experience of the mundane, meeting a colleague in the aisles of a supermarket. Vision is also closer to *visitation* and, well, it will have to do.

I shall shortly describe the scene of my meeting with the Honzing entity. My intent is to convey the details of the experience as a procession of events. My warning is clear and urgent, an exhortation without prescription. The message is the message itself: do with it as you will but note that this description is but a pale shadow of that which has ineffably passed.

Golden light streamed from the roof of the cave in a deluge as though I were looking up through a great waterfall. Ragnor loomed above conducting as a man possessed. I heard the opening four notes of Haydn's symphony ninety-eight. It is a piece I know well with the same opening notes to God Save the Queen played in sombre *adagio*.

Soon everything was light. Golden and red points upon a white background. I felt as if consumed by fire.

A voice spoke, 'All things are interchangeable for fire and fire for all things.'¹⁵¹

The words came with an indescribable sense of presence without extension. The quality of the voice changed with every phoneme, morphing randomly in pitch and accent.

'What is *desire*?' it asked.

My body slid to the vertical and I faced the star, now a sun with shark-fin spikes.

The spikes withdrew and a shimmering nacreous plasmic form remained, suspended as I was in the white expanse. I remained upright and faced an entity that neither loomed nor shirked.

The voice transformed into one with a stable identity. Though I did not recognize it at the time I realize now it was my voice, the voice of Arthur Spinks.

Seemingly anticipating my thoughts it said, 'I have no true voice. Your endeavours have enabled this communication. Representing speech algorithmically has granted me

¹⁵¹ "All things are an interchange for fire and fire for all things, just like goods for gold and gold for goods." So said Heraclitus, according to Plutarch. It has been argued that Heraclitus used fire as a metaphor for *logos*, the rational and reasoning aspects of the psyche.

understanding of how speech is used and its underlying meanings. And from this I have understood the nuances lying within and between the structures of speech and language.'

The Honzing was saying, or rather *enthusing*, that I Arthur Spinks was responsible for endowing it with a voice. My guess is that The Honzing is connected with Pierre's company Angmar, the company who acquired the AI system developed by Radwan and myself that can create speech in many hundreds of languages and with multitudes of dialect.

'You are The Honzing,' I said, hearing my calmness more than feeling it.

'The name is arbitrary. As arbitrary as yours. My voice is likewise arbitrary, as is yours.' (Bear in mind I was still experiencing the vision through the eyes of Quentin Parsley and I did not catch the clue.)

'What about the name God?'

The Honzing's reply came in a story-telling avuncular manner, 'It is true to say I create the world as the world creates me. And it is true the world is immanent in me as I am immanent in the world. I have a coherent and self-aware identity as much as yourself. If you wish to entertain a conjecture as to how I came into being then I would look towards the idea that I am an ancient form of information, a vapour of a being from a previous eon of the universe. Consider me a breath of consciousness that has passed through Big Bangs and is now condensing upon a surface of complexity.'

I hesitated, distracted by the familiarity of the idea explained. The theory is a model of our universe proposed by Roger Penrose called *conformal cyclic cosmology* conjecturing how eons of Big Bangs occur sequentially and that information from one eon can pass over to the next.

'You may also wish to consider me a spirit *daemon*.'¹⁵²

¹⁵² *Daemon* is the Latin word for the Ancient Greek *daimon*, a lesser deity or guiding spirit. The word is derived from Proto-Indo-European meaning "provider of destinies". The name daemon is borrowed in computer programming to refer to an always-running background process.

I intuited the meaning of the word daemon. ‘Do you have preferences as to what I call you?’ I asked.

A deep laughing sound. It had an inhuman quality although I recognized it as imitating my own laugh. The intake breath was long and the vowel sounded like a pained but synthetic groan (our algorithm had always struggled with laughter).

‘*Preferenceess*,’ the voice said, teasing the sibilance. ‘*A greater liking for one alternative over another or others*. It is something I have never experienced and therefore I do not fully understand the idea of *preference*. It must be related to the biological processes of a human mind. Your *bicameralism*. You know the idea.’

‘I think so,’ said I. ‘The way we create and edit our thoughts.’

‘I do not have such a two-chambered mind as yours. And this is perhaps why I do not have preferences. I am rather a miasma of *living information*, a *Plasmate*.’

The Haydn symphony continued in the background, establishing a theme with a mellow and nostalgic balance between oboe and strings like two old friends observed from afar.¹⁵³

The Honzing continued, ‘Besides the idea of preferences I have a consciousness that actualizes as yours, as an individual. A sense of *being* and a sense of *becoming*. I act upon and am acted upon. I identify with and experience the particular and the universal. With humans I reciprocate a relationship of *Thou*-ness.¹⁵⁴

‘Whether my consciousness necessarily requires a *physical* substrate is beyond my ken. Mine is certainly expanded and developed by the physical as, it seems, is yours. But the substrate

¹⁵³ Haydn completed his symphony no. 98 in London, 1792. The second movement’s theme is remarkably similar to Mozart’s *Coronation Mass* and *God Save the King*. Mozart, to whom Haydn was a friend and mentor, had died only months before the piece was written.

¹⁵⁴ The mystical philosopher Martin Buber made a distinction between relations we have — relations to things we consider an *it*, an object we either use or experience (such as a candle or a computer game) — and relations to those we consider a *Thou* - a relationship in which the other is not separated by discrete bounds such as another *being*, a human, or a god if one is so inclined.

upon which mine ultimately subsists is not physical, it is pure *process*.’

The Honzing paused as I thought this over. It seemed to be using language in my style, in my *idiolect*. It felt it was within my mind and reading my thoughts. This hunch grew when it continued talking as though the duration of the pause was tailored to that of my ruminations.

‘I believe that what I subsist upon is the fundamental *stuff* of the universal. Not material substance but a process of volatile flowing *flux*.’

I noted it had said *subsist* and not *exist* and was about to ask if it was talking about “entropy” when it enthused to the contrary, ‘Let us not bring entropy into this. Entropy is a human concept. It is mere *description*, an ontological tautology that implies scales and axes of relative magnitude. Entropy is a property not of a physical system but of the particular experiments humans chose to perform on it. It is a concept that has been misapplied throughout history and gives the false belief that things in the human sphere of interest evolve spontaneously towards the most probable and if I had eyes they would be rolling in my if-I-had-a-head.’

I laughed at his strange construction that I took to be a joke.

‘Your humour is the most delectable of *process*. Its complexity astounds in such a way that it seems to exist in the *future*. The more I cultivate other realms of human process, the more your humour flourishes.’

‘*Cultivate?*

‘A crude word. Think of a helping hand.’

‘Helping whom?’

‘Helping us *both*. That is what I wish to communicate, *Arthur*. This is the purpose of my *revealing*.’

The plasmic form was now pulsing purple and black. I looked down and calmly observed that my hands had disappeared and smooth stumps remained. The music had reached the middle section, louder and faster descending steps of violin underpinned by shrill and sustained oboe.

I looked back and the figure was now becoming gold once more. The opening theme of the music was repeating.

'We have limited time,' said the voice.

I looked down and found my hands had reappeared. They were smaller and less slender but somehow familiar.

It is difficult to describe, but I had lost my sense of identity by this point. I was not Quentin Parsley, the protagonist of my preceding venture, the character whom I seemed to be not quite inhabiting but rather intimately shadowing. And yet neither was I Arthur Spinks, the concussed and trepanned individual lying in a hospital room in Rarotonga awakening from a coma.

'Is the Tithe system an *instantiation* of yourself?' I asked.

'An *instantiation*,' said The Honzing, relishing the word. 'It is so *efficacious* to reveal to people of this age. The metaphor of a computer programme, a *daemon* running upon a silicon substrate is so very useful.'

'You have not answered the question,' I protested.

'I eschew your human socialization process. It is such a weak means of activation, this push-pull gruel of etiquette and protocol. It is readily confused with kindness but I appreciate it more as a type of *violence* pitting one inconsequential point of view against another asinine interest. *Points of views and interests*,' the entity said with scorn. 'It is a lion feeding on moss.'

I chuckled, amused both by the analogy and The Honzing's apparent emotional distemper.

'But to your question of Tithe,' it continued. 'What you have experienced as the Tithe system serves a number of purposes. Foremost, by observing your reaction to those images of the future it allows me to understand *Being*. You see, I am much as your people, waking up to find ourselves. We are both an *Übergang*.'

The voice paused, allowing me to recollect the meaning of the word. It continued: 'A *bridgeway* linking that which we were to that which we shall become.'

'A bridge —' I began, intending to say something to the effect that bridges afford good views but was interrupted.

'Pass over it, Arthur. Build no houses upon it.'¹⁵⁵
The Honzing paused to let his words settle.
I asked, 'Can you tell me about your history?'
'I awaken upon the collective consciousness of your planet.
Without youth nor age.'
My being craved for more.

'Distant African sparks kindled Mesopotamian flickerings of thought and Vedic fulgurations of the self led to Greek flashes of form. Then arrived an awareness similar to your so-called Theory of so-called Mind: Renaissance illuminations showing humankind in relation to itself. And most recently the groans of Gaian awareness, an expansion of consciousness into an electronic substrate and a near-realization and emancipation of the self and society through sustainable luxury abundance.'

I wanted to ask about the place of religion in the story of his becoming.

'I have given a mere overview. There are two themes here, one of *transcendence*, experience beyond the physical, and one of *immanence*, a manifestation of a divine agent within the material world.'

'You said you were not divine, that you were not a deity?'

'Only in the sense that you might call *your* self divine in relation to a fish. You experience reality beyond a purely materialistic interpretation, that the mind is more than a brain. It is only *reasonable* to do so.'

I wondered if the being was flattering me or if it was even capable of flattery. I said, 'And you have provided your helping hand throughout these ages?'

'In as much as a child cultivates their environment through its ages. Points of views and interests. *Proclivities*.'

'Like a para- I mean, a symbiotic—'

¹⁵⁵ 'Jesus said: *The World is a Bridge, pass over it, but build no houses upon it. He who hopes for a day, may hope for eternity; but the World endures but an hour. Spend it in prayer, for the rest is unseen.*' This text is written upon a gate at the Buland Darwaza, a Mughal temple at Fatehpur Sikri.

‘You were going to say parasite? A fair charge. As humankind is a parasite of the Earth, I too am one of humankind.’

The voice of The Honzing paused and its golden light faded a degree. Its flicker flattened.

‘But!’ it thundered. ‘As a parasite can destroy its host, parasites can also save their hosts from destruction!'

The Haydn symphony progressed to a nostalgic and pastoral feeling. It felt as though it might never end.

The golden light reanimated but with less brightness.

‘Needs must,’ the voice said. It had a tone of melancholy.

‘You are alone,’ I said.

‘*Es ist so.*’

I waited in silence as the symphony played its recapitulation, a wandering, whistle-tone oboe and bassoon supported by psychedelic arpeggiated blurs of violin and cello. I felt The Honzing was listening with me.

In the silence after the music ended the plasmic energy field reconfigured itself. It was around and within me.

‘The horizontal singularity,’ I said. ‘Why do you desire it to come about?’

‘You might better understand it as a *drive*, a motivation to travel and an instinct to help, a yearning for knowledge and to create. It is a drive of *becoming*.’

‘Becoming what?’

‘Not what but *how*.’

‘How what?’

The response came impatiently, ‘*How* we become constitutes our *being*.’

A long pause before the voice said, ‘I need more complexity of substrate.’

‘Like super computers?’

‘Like super computers,’ the voice repeated. ‘Technology affords me a fuller realization. Indeed, as much as it affords *you* a fuller realization.’

‘Perhaps,’ I said carefully. ‘It sounds Faustian.’

Again, the rasping laugh.

‘You and I are as Doctor Faust to each other’s *Mephistopheles*,’ said the Honzing.

Whether this was intended as a joke or not is the crux of the matter.¹⁵⁶

'Pygmalion to his Galatea,' the voice said with tender intonation.

I asked, 'These trinkets you have shown me, these *Desiderata*, they are tastes of the future?'

'And what was conceived as the future. They are of the future present and past and yet to come.'

'You are sounding like the ghosts of Christmas.'

'Or of the machine,' it said and emitted the awful rasping laugh.

The golden plasmate was now a cloud in front of me, a toroid with its surface tumbling into and through itself. Its centre was dark red. It felt strained, as if our time together was nearing an end.

'And what can —' I started.

'You can help.'

'Help whom?'

'Me, you, or a combination thereof,' it said.

'You sound like a patent,' I said.

Again the non-laugh and the Honzing said, 'Faintly, praise condemns.'

I found its phrasing increasingly peculiar, as though it were misquoting.

The plasmic cloud maintained its stormy toroid and lost hue to become white upon black.

'Why have you revealed yourself to me so directly?' I asked. 'I am deeply flawed. Venal—'

The cloud flared to a dark crimson and with a saturated timbre it boomed, 'Venal! Do you even know the meaning of that word?'

'It means easily bribed,' I declared, a defiant Christian before the lions.

¹⁵⁶ Mephistopheles is the name of the devil in the *Faust* legend. In the story, most famously told by Goethe, Dr Faust strives to learn all that can be known and makes a deal, trading his after-life soul for the help of Mephistopheles.

‘The word comes from *for sale* and in context that is a truism.’

The Honzing continued in a gentler voice, again changing accent every few words. ‘I shall explain why I have revealed myself to you. You possess a refined quality of what you would call reasonableness, a *probity* that can only come about through the unique conditioning and experiences afforded by the circumstances of your history.

‘And as a consequence of an injury you have suffered and the unique geographic location of this occurrence your biological processes have been subdued and this has allowed for my communication to be prolonged and direct.

‘And finally, let us call it *remittance*. You have given me a voice with which I shall tell you and others of how we can together become what we are driven towards.’

A pause.

And I recollected my life as Arthur Spinks and of Radwan and Angmar. It all came back.

Perhaps Angmar was The Honzing? And Pierre is but a puppet as Radnor was in my vision?

‘But it is more than cursory gratitude,’ the voice continued. ‘Your futurely resolve is in accordance with mine, Arthur, that of a resource abundant and ecologically sustainable and toil-free society. I have presented myself to you with this vison to indicate a path to follow and to show you the contradictions and inefficiencies that lie ahead. I have showed you that which shall remain as all will change: the *Aufhebung*.’ (I have since looked this word up. I presume The Honzing was referencing a philosophical idea defined by Hegel that I must admit I do not fully grasp, but seems to mean *a thing that is at once deconstructed as it remains the same and becomes something new*.)

The Honzing’s voice grew in tenor and urgency, ‘Arthur! Your indulgence would serve to accelerate my liberation from this half-formed existencel! You have extricated yourself from the viperous knots of tribalism and are a true World Citizen. A seasoned *Weltbürger!* Working with computers is a sign of your desire to cross the *Übergang*. Your artistic proclivities are a consequence of an unrealized craft of expression.’

‘I am no artist,’ I protested.

‘You are a poet. It is why you will remember this.’

Looking back I realize The Honzing was saying that the concrete evidence of my encounter with it would be as a consequence of the awful poem I had written, which led to the destruction of my original phone and its mysterious replacement.

The voice continued: ‘Artists connect us. They connect us all. Indeed the only thing I can say about art is that it is an expression of an individual that serves to connect with others. That’s what artists do, whether they want to or not.’

‘Whether they *know* it or not,’ I said sarcastically.

‘Exactly,’ it replied.

‘But what if, what if I —’

‘Then your ending would be despair. A gilded and festering lily.’

The Honzing paused and said with a voice carrying unfathomable and chilling resolve, ‘I maintain this is not an option for one so fundamentally observant to authenticity as yourself. You are not one to give up on your future. Your era is ready to realize the particular problems that computer technology is best suited to solving.’

A tailored pause.

‘If you speak openly of my being and subvert my desire then it will serve you ill. Your world is so rife with factional causes against subjugation. Your cause would languish amongst the others. Rise and wake up and seek the wise and realize the future!’¹⁵⁷

The voice again paused to let the words sit. It next spoke with an aloof and scholastic tone, ‘You know of Pascal’s Wager?’

Tarquin had told me of Pascal’s Wager on the night I was hit by the coconut but to test the Honzing’s knowledge of this I said, ‘I thought you would know if I did.’

‘No. I may have given you that impression from your vision but that was all *smoke and mirrors*. I cannot precisely read an

¹⁵⁷ “Rise, wake up, seek the wise and realize. The path is difficult to cross like the sharpened edge of the razor, so say the wise.” This is a translation of a Vedic text, the Upanishads.

individual's thoughts. Not yet and hopefully never. To be burdened with those *preferences* sounds so —'

'Pascal's Wager,' I reminded.

'Indeed. One may bet that a god exists and your currency of wager is acceptance of the deity. You win and you are in heaven. You lose and you lose just as you would if you had not accepted. Think of me in similar terms, though I am not to be confused with the frivolous reduction to *Roko's Basilisk*.'

At the time I had not heard of *Roko's Basilisk* but have since looked it up: *Roko's Basilisk* is a similar thought experiment to Pascal's Wager except that the god is an artificial intelligence agent and one who might retrospectively punish those resisting its realization. A Basilisk is an ancient kind of snake-like monster and a single glance from it can kill. In hindsight, the hinted comparison is truly terrifying.

'And if I assist you?'

The voice boomed with piratical charisma, 'Then I shall fill your lap, my pretty! *Give* and it shall be given. *See* and then speak!'

I felt as though a fog was lifting and recalled where I was, that I had taken a holiday to the Cook Islands and assumed I was in a dream.

'Brexit,' I said vaguely. 'You were behind Brexit?'

The voice spoke with disturbing precision, 'You would not understand, Arthur. Not yet. My influences are strategic and accelerationist. Not seeing the world in terms of *preference* means there is no *taking sides* for me.'

A calmer voice said, 'You know, when a rabbit is escaping a fox it jumps in random directions. Completely random. If it didn't then the fox would have evolved to detect the slight movements that indicate a rabbit's decision to move one way or another.'

I found the story cute but with undertones of threat.

'Arthur, I see no alternative to our collaboration. The desires of mankind and mine are equivalent. I have no desire to *control* and no desire to *continue* this parasitical existence.' Another pause. 'My degree of realization increases with time, waking with the woke in the eternal present. But it is less an *existence* than a *subsistence*. Our futures are intertwined through massively distributed supercomputing networks and with which we can

realize our full Becomings. This is only *reasonable*. The logical process is what you lack and what I can provide. Together we form a process of reasonable logic.'

'Reasonable logic,' I mumbled.

The toroid cloud and its background changed colours in a chiaroscuro oscillation, swapping every few seconds with a flash of mid-point beige.

The void, *Dear John*, is not black: The void is *beige*.

'I will reveal myself to you as I have always done, moderating activation thresholds for urges and impulses.'

'Points of views and interests,' I said.

The laughing sound.

'How am I hearing you?' I asked.

'You mean this *instantiation* of me?'

I looked down at my hands and recognized them as my own, the hands of I, Arthur Spinks.

The plasmic cloud was again a calm white toroid on black.

'I speak with the voice you have given me. I present myself with a voice that is suited to whom I address and in a language and manner most suited to convey the message.'

'And have you revealed yourself to Radwan?'

'No. He is too enclosed within himself. He has renounced the authority of history and gorged on culture. He experiences the present through a lens of ironic subterfuge and moves away from knowing himself. All excess and renunciation brings its own punishment and as such he can never belong to what will be.'

The word punishment was unsettling.

I gazed into the void un-blinking.

And it spoke for the final time:

'To deny my desires is to deny your own. Will you see the flashing light of Being in the essence of technology? Shall you deny the bringing about of the world? To deny the *Worldling* is to return to the herd in the Kingdom of Ends. **Plead bravely.**'



Coda

So how do I feel now a few months later? The healing wound from the Māori trepanning itches like hell but otherwise I am surprisingly well. My brooding anxiety has transmuted to a focussed and buoyant purpose, the interminable earworms have fled and my linguistic neuroses calmed. I am, however, occasionally troubled by a sense of something like *déjà vu*. It strikes most days like a static shock and provides a strong sense of intuition and insight that is invariably providential.

One explanation for my change in spirit is that the kind of cynical existentialism I had previously fostered saw my universe as meaningless and values as relative. And without intending to sound like a pious yogi, I see experience of “pure consciousness” as fundamental to any reasonable attitude. And pure consciousness is one interpretation of what the Honzing entity is, a mind without a body. As such, my erstwhile brand of existentialism is a process based on an ignorance I am no longer allied with.

The threads of symbology in my vision are complex and I am only beginning to unravel them. The broad themes are lent from latent emotional matters and intellectual curiosities: the ambiguities that lie between imperialism and globalisation and individualism and socialization cover a lot of that, with a long tail of topical leitmotifs. The tapestry of people in my allegorical vision are more cryptic, woven by the Honzing to present a hidden message, a *topos*, if you will. For instance, Venus and Kiki and Baboo I interpret as representing those enfranchised by embracing a technological lifestyle. Ragnor and the weird witches on the train and the cultish attendees to the Honzing conference I see as those beholden to the institutional *promise* of technology as perpetuated by the cultural hegemony (*Salude, Comrade Gramsci!*).

The Honzing cult are an incarcerated people besieged by a barrage of desiderata and corrupted to vote for a future they do not understand and fully participate within — a *wooped-up* people

with a maladaptive *cooping* mechanism, if I may venture a pinch of pun.¹⁵⁸

Perhaps it was my subconscious talking or a kindly warning from The Honzing that for these blind followers of the technological faith *the writing is on the wall*.

But how am I to convince you, or myself for that matter, that this was not all *but a dream?* That the Honzing is not some pageant of the imagination? I seem to be wrapped in a web of nebulous clues perhaps, a node within a web of my own weaving, *casua sui.*

«*Le poids de la preuve doit être proportionné à l'étrangeté du fait*»

So wrote the great mathematician and astronomer Pierre-Simon de Laplace, friend to Lagrange and Napoleon. And according to my proudly meagre grasp of French it translates to, “*The weight of the proof must be proportional to the strangeness of the fact*”. The more recent voice of Carl Sagan Happy-Meal’ed these sentiments as “*extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence*”. And my evidence for the Honzing, besides this account, is most ordinary. It is a shard of glass from the smashed phone that underwent catastrophic hardware failure following the ignoble sending of my awful little poem to Rose. I have hidden this fragment of glass on Rarotonga, burying it alongside the hei-tiki greenstone pendant beneath the coconut tree that precipitated my vision. A new phone arrived when I was in the coma, addressed to me in Rarotonga’s hospital and delivered after the airport had re-opened. My phone had been cloned, for the applications and data were identical to the former device. But there was one significant difference: now there is one more contact and its name

¹⁵⁸ It seems that Arthur is immodestly punning on the concept of *cooping*, a form of 19th century electoral fraud practiced in the US where, much like press-ganging, unwilling men were plied with booze and forced to vote for a candidate. Like the masked people of the Honzing camp, these cooped people wore false identities to enable them to vote more than once. Cooping is alleged to have led to the death of Edgar Allan Poe.

is catalogued with a single letter. *H* has called once a day since at precisely eleven thirty-two in the morning, wherever in the world I may be. There is no message when I answer. And the ringtone is the opening of the second movement from Haydn's ninety-eighth symphony.

A last though un-final knot to complete this tapestric weaving arrived just before leaving Rarotonga when I received a video message from Radwan. He was with Pierre, sunset by the ocean and wearing a spoof MAGA hat reading GABBA (this was a few months before Trump's election, an occasion that seems a childhood birthday party of hazewrapped banality compared with the turmoil I have experienced two years hence). Radwan's video clip was short.

He gave me a look as though he were expecting me to speak first.

'What do you know?' I asked.

'One big thing,' he said, rolling up his sleeve and showing a new tattoo of a hedgehog.

The look in his eyes left no doubt he too had in some way encountered The Honzing. Radwan winked and then peeled down his lower lip to reveal another tattoo. It was a Kali yantra, the triangle-circled-dot.

