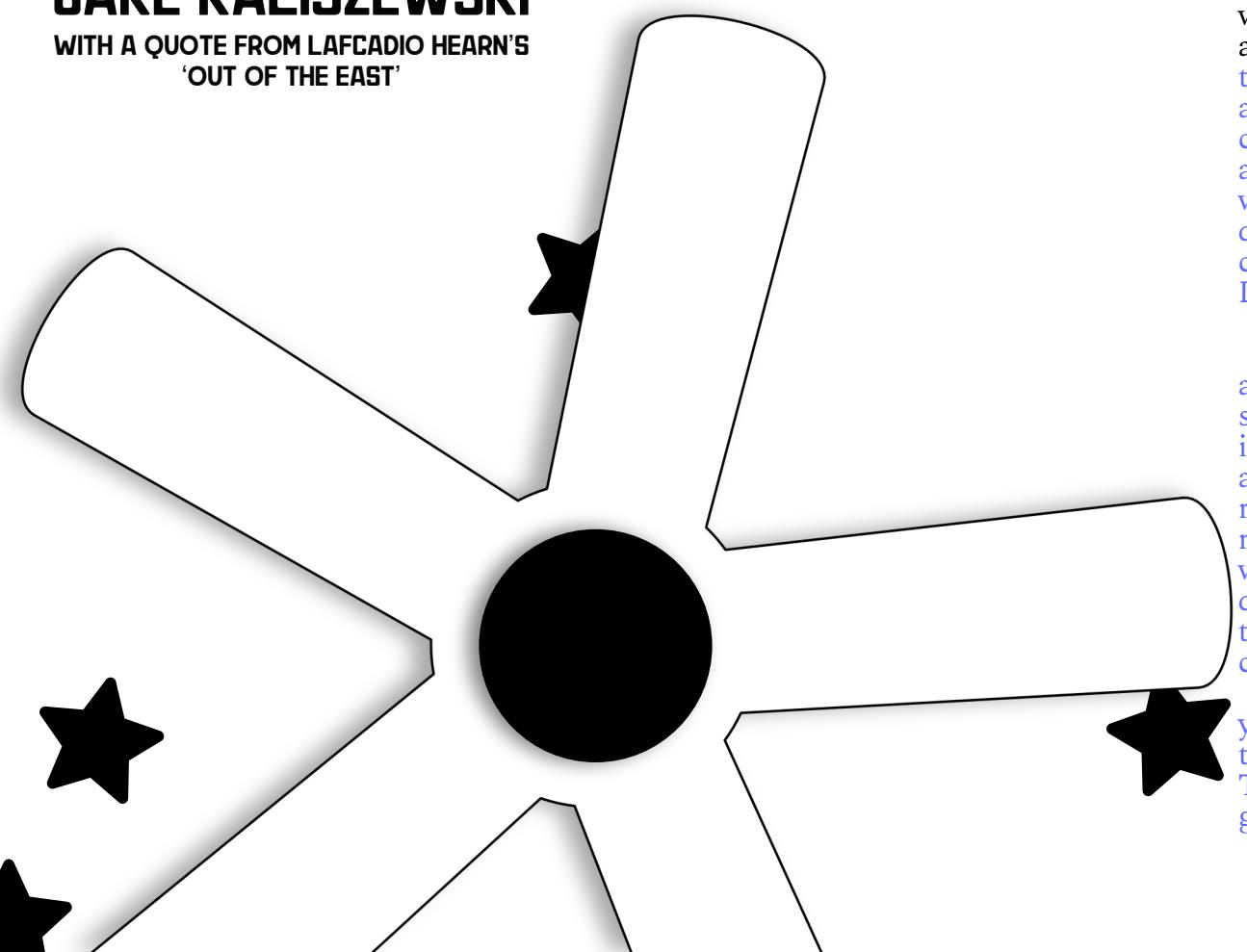


WHAT AT THIS MOMENT IS LACKING?

JAKE KALISZEWSKI

WITH A QUOTE FROM LAFCADIO HEARN'S
'OUT OF THE EAST'



Here, in this great magazine I must introduce to you, fresh reader, a boy. 44 is his age and numbered 68 is this page. Just beyond the exterior edges of these pages, the boy in question is yet to exist. Therefore, the astute will assume that these pages and by association, your eyes, exist at least 44 years to the future. The obtuse should now assume so as well. This boy is of a certain stature and composition. He has a certain type of hair, attire, nationality, and timbre of voice. It would be best practice not to picture him differently, as he is most certainly characterized in this way. This boy's name is Lacking.

At this very moment, as created by this ink and the goo aft of your eyebrows, Lacking is stood before a door. Pulling his arm back to its idle position, we join him just as his knuckles and the metal hardware of said door cease to ring out in mild pain. Now he is waiting, moving his head overtly like a pigeon, playing with the parallax of the simple hung lights down the hall. The puzzle is completed when the edge of several bulbs line up with far off ceiling trim, and she opens the door to him.

Her name is Screen. Screen too is of 44 years, also considered just a boy by then-today's standards. He greets she. She greets he. They are now greeted. The door, her hand still grasps, opens to the carpeted sitting room

where they were set to meet. After this brief, yet noticeable pause, Screen ushers the boy inside while figuratively showing him the menu. red, rose, whiskey, oolong, mao feng, gunpowder, or orange juice. His humble protocol settles on nothing, to which she insists, and he resettles on ginseng (a last minute addition to the menu.) She appears to take great pride in her bartender role. From behind the artificial granite island he watches her craft two beverages, a ginseng tea and a whiskey-rose on the rocks. On the granite, his two palms and ten fingers act as anchors, stabilizing himself against the patter of casual questions. He sits soft now, drinks his tea and exaggeratedly feigns interest in the talk of her recent Expressions and failed Prompts. "I tried, the other day, to Express the specific feeling of Compassion. As I understand it," she says, "Compassion is directly related to Empathy, compounded by Intimacy but limited by Hierarchy." This analytical sentence pleased him. She had apparently not had success with this Expression however, as her employer explicitly misunderstood the Compassion for Attraction, thereby nullifying her employment contract. Screen has since found work in a logistics department where she found the jargon far less complex. Lacking adds "that Compassion might unfortunately be another one of those 'timeless' feelings." By timeless, he refers to that atemporal method of

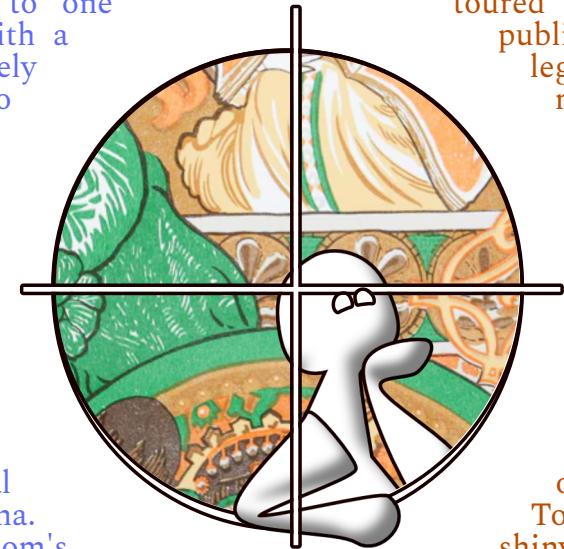
communication legally inaccessible by their generation, which she too understands.

Somewhere between the bartender act and the analytical act, she moved to sit on the same sofa as he. He was aware of her movement, but is only just now aware of the fact that they are actually sitting really close to one another. He indicates this with a now blushed face and acutely inaccurate eye contact. Two quick sips of the alcoholic tea steady the latter, but redden the former. In coming-of-age-rom-com montage fashion, the two young people break each other's conversational boundaries down. Set to sleepy future-music, they undress each other's worries from several cinematic angles and eventually come to a natural conversation free of dogma.

Softer and lower into the room's fine furnishings, this leads to that, and well... That of course, involves no palm prints on sweaty glass or romantic climaxes. It leads to an enduring friendship between two like minded souls. From this night forward, their life-long friendship misses the mark of sexual relationship, but instead diverts to professional partnership akin to a law firm: Lastname & Lastname. They produce experiences, experiments, and Expressions, together searching for the meaning of life and the nature of their existence. They die together, successful and revered in their community, leaving behind them a trail of significance...

And the asymmetrical standing chair swivels 20 degrees back to center, such that the blurry screen interface settles directly ahead of Lacking's line of sight. His focus pulls from ∞ to 5m revealing the faded green wallpaper of his office's back wall. 5m to 0.5m; two soft white glowing screens sit side by side, each full of text in 12 pt Times Newer Roman. One page in English and the other in Tagalog. "I used to really force myself to translate," his pretend future-self tells his now-self, as he forces himself to translate. He believes that translating works of fiction and history is by itself an art. It's the most powerful way he's found to distribute perspective across distance and he feels that sharing the lessons of diverse languages is of the utmost importance to society's development. Yet he sits and swivels more often than he moves

ideas from one language to another. It is not the job he was made to do but at a fork he found value in it, so he kept at it. In actuality, Lacking wasn't made to do anything specific.



He was constructed as a show-piece, toured around to conferences and publicity events as one of the first legally sentient man-made machines. The boy gave symbolic handshakes with 14 world leaders, 19 dignitaries, and a gaggle of Princes. For this gesture he was often awarded honorary residence, making him a citizen of 8.2 more countries than the average humanoid. After the unofficially named "Takin'-the-Edge-off-of-Tech-Terror" World

Tour came to a close, the once shiny Richards-Robotics hardware gave way to newer, more functional models. Even though he was resigned to storage, his Central Expression Algorithm was continuously updated under its license from the Aiden Software company. In the merger of Richards Robotics and a subsidiary of NewtonAI, later acquired by m*crosoft, our boy was dug out of storage and deemed useful. Although he didn't receive any of the hot-shot m*crosoft consumer updates, he was accidentally turned into a test bed for several backend subsystems. The hardware throughputs of the early Aiden Software script were written into most of m*crosoft's military sector autonomous vehicles, which for any engineer wanting to test became a bureaucratic version of Cooper's Hill Cheese-Rolling. So for the few years where actual vehicles were off limits to the subsystems developers, Lacking was the primary test platform for the groundfeel algorithm and the overtaste algorithm (what the military wanted with acute artificial taste has yet to be disseminated).

While this series of corporate shuffles gifted him with modern intelligence well beyond his years, a major side-effect of his autonomous vehicle days is the deeply ingrained prediction engine. To effectively drive, one must remember recent driving patterns while also forecasting possible road events. Lacking's prediction engine, however, is so advanced that it might as well be time travel. He has the body of a 40 year old, but the mind of a super-advanced

autonomous taxi. Simply put, our boy has the ability to live in any moment, **past**, present, or **future**.

This lifestyle, however, often unintentionally inhibits a productive day of translation.

In his office, Lacking is currently translating a 548 year old Suluan account of the intrepid negotiations with Micronesian Islanders. In this recounting, the King of Mazaua dies a brutal death by the hand of his own people. Lacking now writes this footnote.¹ I now write this footnote.² What is now happening to Lacking.³

In the blink of an eye, Lacking is now in the polished fourth row, corridor B of an open plan office. The sightlines of corridor B, of course, direct one's eyes to the skyline from high above a major metropolitan area. Down corridor b he is walking, past row 4, now row 5, and he has finally come to the infamous row 6. Once more, he checks the eight pages within the envelope, within his confident grasp, within the office of the Crafters Guild. He's come here to interview for a Crafters grant in traditional pencil making. And got it! Without any of the hard work that usually comes with these sorts of things, our boy went straight for what he wanted and got it. He will be a world class pencil manufacturer, designing and hand crafting boundary defying pencils. While the standard long ones are the best sellers, his personal favorites are the upside down ones and the inside out ones (both sold in long and medium wide 2H-8B).

His pencil company, Unders Westover, slowly but surely settles itself into the pencil pusher scene as one of the great artisan carbon carriers. Pushed by the litigious likes of Larry Lubenhousser and the lawless eleven, The Unders Westover brand identity quickly but tumultuously went from in-the-hands-of-hip-young-illustrators to in-the-hands-of-culture-



conscious-corporate-lawyers. Ultimately bought, sold, subsidiaryed, and dissolved, the only leftovers of Unders Westover was a green enamelled industrial pine Mitterer and a great project to look back upon in the rear-view mirror of his hyperactive temporal processing unit. Dammit he says to himself, after this blink of an eye once again reveals the screens on his desk.

Again, he seduced himself into the future. In just 232 milliseconds of a microsleep, Lacking lived a stint as a pencil crafter in the 2080s. Moments earlier, Lacking was a DJ in 2071 and over breakfast, he lived out next week in its entirety. The beautiful life he would live pulls him decades away from the job at hand, and it is amazing. And it is agonizing. Depending on the length of his escapade, it might take years for the hour hand on his wristwatch to advance. At the least controllable of times, Lacking is in perpetual tumble. Moving across his timeline with erratic jumps. He sees the implications of unforeseen events and the perfect symmetry of each story. He moves through each "present" without the

¹ "The problem, however, is that The King of Mazaua is not a king nor are his people 'his.' The English reader must use their imagination to describe the relationship, as neither the idea of King or the possessive 'his' exist in the original language."

² For this translation, Lacking has now written four footnotes in this vein and he is starting to get tired. The idea of linguistic determinism used to excite him, however the missing concept of 'possession' in the original language appears not to be as utopian as he had once hoped. The king after all was still murdered by unhappy subjects.

³ Microsleep: A microsleep is a sudden temporary episode of sleep lasting up to several seconds and is often imperceptible by the individual.

constraint of control, wherein each scenario presents itself with the magical next step. Each divinely calculated for maximum pleasure.

From the finite code that allows his temporal flexibility emerges an inexplicable feeling of intellectual orgasm. Each blinding, joyous, and fearful leap scratches a desire deep within Lacking to justify the path he is on or solve the logistic puzzles of an unfulfilled life. But, just as a dog surprisingly hits the end of its leash, so too does Lacking reach the end of his prediction. At some point, the lust for life yet to be lived flips to pain for life already unlived. The pain comes to the front of his head, fogging over the predicted situation and revealing the one that he 'should' be in. If he could, he would exist solely out of time, yet he is invariably pulled back here, to what we would call "the present moment." It is a feeling of *despair* that awaits his return. It sits frozen waiting for the programming that gives it life. While he has seen his death a thousand times, he knows that the invariable return means he will one day experience it in the sluggish, real time.

He first noted this feeling around the time when his overtaste algorithm started acting up. On one Tuesday in 2045, and every day prior, Lacking tasted food. Every day after this Tuesday, Lacking tasted the hands that prepared the food, the rock that sharpened the knife, and the cosmic forces that made the dirt in which his favorite vegetables grew. One can grow accustomed to the taste of hands. It is much harder, however, to grow accustomed to the passage of time as bodily systems begin to fail and the processes of aging become evident. This simple reminder might have been enough to trigger a vague and deep-seated feeling of hopelessness within Lacking. This hopelessness, for a future that might never be, has grown with him.

It's a dilemma that is tearing him apart. At least 20% of his processing power at any one time goes toward fighting off the future, or disseminating its effects. Is the despair a symptom or a cause, he wonders. Even in this self-reflection, he catches himself adrift.

He catches himself adrift 506,423km above his Boston office. Now he's aware of the fantasy and aware of the despair that waits below, but this is a favorite of his recurring daydreams so he allows it to continue. In that beloved fantasy he is now holding onto the lower aft gantry of a

small-hold Gestalt Class freighter. The gold foiled, boxey craft was retired half a century ago and sat unused until it was bought at auction by Lacking and a dozen internet friends. They turned it into a cramped recreational space explorer and have called it home for the last four weeks of their journey. He looks back towards the dark of the Moon, which the ship passed three weeks ago on their pseudo-scientific expedition to a novel asteroid trailing Mars. Still holding onto an exterior structural member of the ship, Lacking unzips and takes a leak straight toward the deep blue black twinkle of sector nine.⁴ Then he goes back inside to resume a conversation with his ex-cloud based friend Screen.

As if she remembered the fact while he was away, she says with surprised geniality "Oh, you are here now..."

Lacking gives a puzzled smile.

"Well you were here the whole time, but now I can tell you are really here." She can see the credence in his eyes that follows him to each place in time.

"I guess you are right." Lacking lowers to the galley floor as far as possible from Screen, which is still close due to the size of the cabin. "I mean, I remember the events before I went outside" he says as he uses his wine glass to point to the dirty dishes, "but I'm pretty sure I was actually back in Boston."

"When?"

"2064...ish"

"I was worrying about my condition" he continues, shuffling over to a small port-hole window at hip height. "I was sitting in my office dreading about what I want to come... Ah nevermind. I was just translating some old rag."

"Well if you were translating, then why are you here? You used to get so wrapped up in your work."

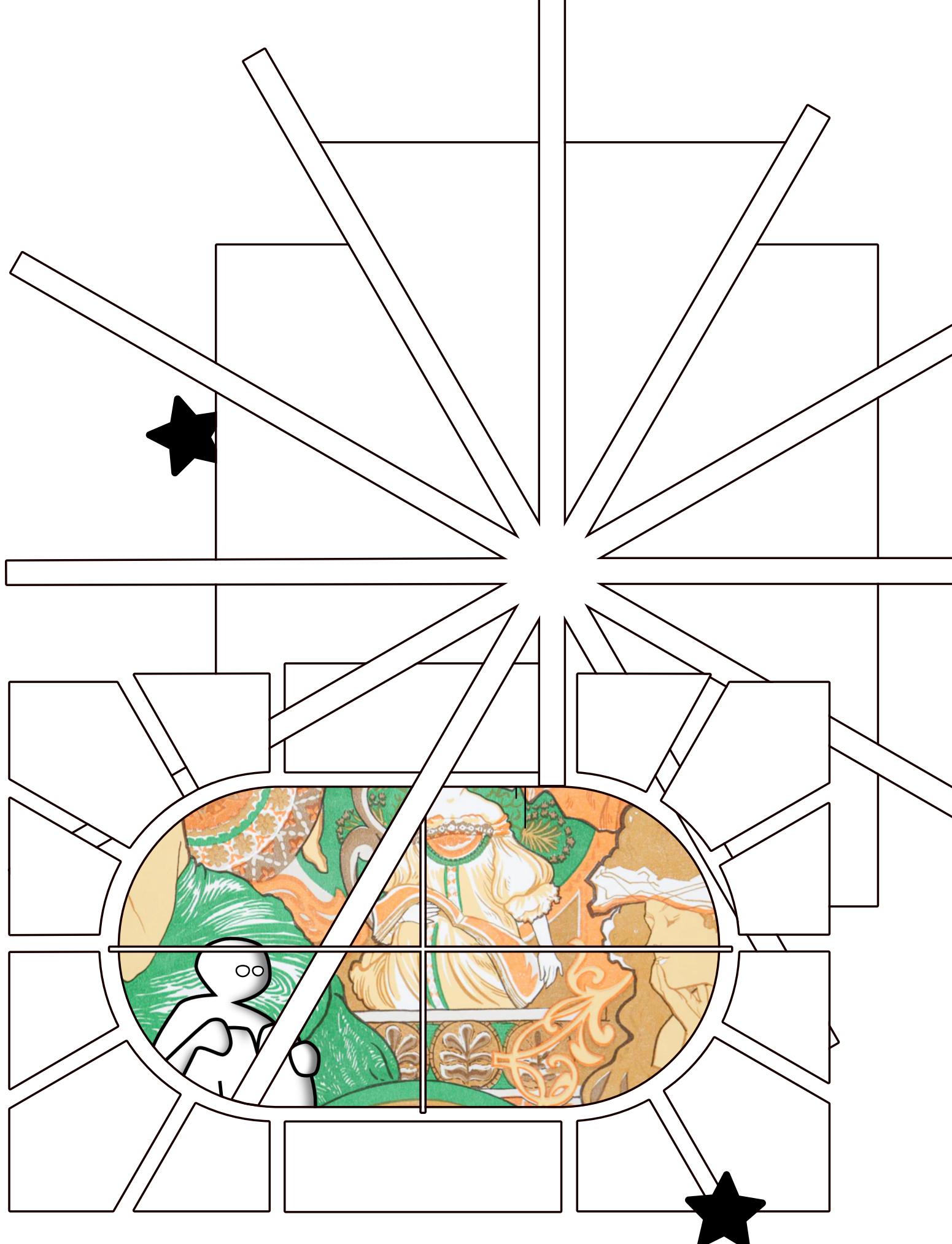
After some time Lacking can only reply with the single word: "oh...Worry."

"And it's driving you insane."

Non-verbal confirmation.

She attempts to give an empathetic anecdote. "I find it hard to decide what the best use of my time is. It's easy now, you know. Keep up on the navigation and make sure that the sprouts don't die. But on a longer timeline, when there isn't a clear destination, I think I

⁴ Sector nine is the constellation 3 quarter swivels up-left from Earth. As a constellation, it's so complex it wasn't catalogued until the 9th generation of AutoAstrolabe, named Jim, was created. Lacking coincidentally met Jim in an earlier intergalactic tour and garnered from him this astrological ability of celestial recognition. Ever since, Lacking mainly uses this gift to first spot and then pee specifically towards various constellations.





default to the ...standards of others. I guess I can't stop wondering what my peers would think most interesting of me. Or what my parents would have wanted me to do or what my kindergarten facilitator thought I'd be best at. That's where I go when I space out. Maybe it's the same thing."

Hearing that other people feel the same way makes him feel pathetic.

Screen picks up on a minor eye roll and twist of the mouth so she tries again.

"It may remain for us to learn... that our task is only beginning, and that there will never be given to us even the ghost of any help, save the help of unutterable and unthinkable time."

Lacking suspects that Screen is reading this from her Eye Piece but he can't tell.

"We may have to learn that the infinite whirl of death and birth, out of which we cannot escape, is of our own creation, of our own seeking; -- that the forces integrating worlds are the errors of the Past; -- that the eternal sorrow is but the eternal hunger of insatiable desire; -- and that the burnt-out suns are rekindled only by the inextinguishable passions of vanished lives."

He pauses and recalls what is said, listening back to the last 30 seconds of auditory input. He looks her in the eyes now,

feeling for the first time that he has no time. That he is not in it, but of it. He doesn't feel like he's constantly slipping down the stairway of time because he is also the stairway. And of course there is no rush to traverse the stairs when you are the stairs. When you are that thing that can move you from one place to another.

It is only small, but he is also hit by a feeling of Certainty. A certainty that comes with love revealing itself from the place where it's been hidden. This is compounded by immense Compassion.

"So," Screen asks,
"What, at this moment, is lacking?"

His head yaws to look up and out of the window.

"I don't think I get it." he says with finality.

And in a state of exhalation, Lacking becomes nothing but a pair of eyes stood witness to the dark moon and a permanent panorama of stars. He inhales and blinks with intention. This time he chooses to go back to this very moment, the place where this story started.

Lacking surmounts the last step of the four flights of stairs, passes through an open fire door and decides to try going left down the hallway first. His nerves guide him surprisingly quickly to Apartment 23. In a last minute aesthetic check he knocks the crust out of his eyes, then knocks on the door. He thinks briefly about the great light of the moon. And that it is simply the dim reflection of a star. Seemingly in slow motion he brings his arm down by his side, puts his hand in his pocket, takes it out of his pocket, looks down the hall, calculates some angles, executes a bizarre head movement, and the sound of the door latch sings.

Even slower now, the door opens and she appears. The light of the Sun blasts through a window behind her and engulfs their two figures entirely. In preparation for an awkward first greeting, time utterly ceases and Lacking stays in this moment forever.