

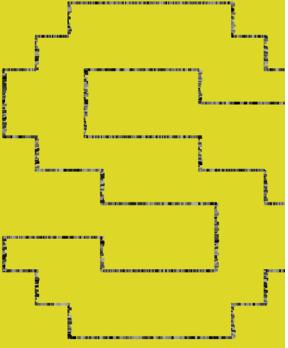
# *superfast!*

our fatigued body  
and society



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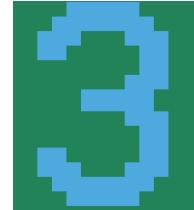
Let's begin to think about a specific kind of fatigue. Maybe you can already feel it behind your eyes, in the lower part of your back, or between the shoulders.



o let's begin to think about a specific kind of fatigue. Maybe you can already feel it behind your eyes, in the lower part of your back, or between the shoulders. There are specific questions that keep returning to me as I write about this: who gets to show their fatigue in public? Who has been allowed and denied the space to claim it as a creative force? Who is associated with fatigue as opposed to those associated with energy? If fatigue eludes specificity, what might that elusiveness reveal? Fatigue cannot be scheduled or managed; it comes and goes; it cannot be enclosed between a beginning and an end; it does not acquire value. It is a reduction, an instant, a slowing down. It is related and may lead to—though it is not—sleep or death. Fatigue does not refuse efficiency and productivity so much as let it fall to the floor or drag along the ground or express itself with a heavy sigh. I do not want to exaggerate or celebrate fatigue as a great dismantler, but I'm curious to follow its collective threads, from its diagnostic origins as a problem in nineteenth-century science and industrial capitalism to present-day assemblages of work, capital, and that feeling of being just generally exhausted by it all—flattened, heavy, achy, and irritable. At the same time, I'm interested in fatigue as an "affective factor" because it is, despite all that is done to remedy it, a negatively active state—a state that does not increase productivity. That is to say, it is a little mysterious, often opening us up to the possibilities of staring at the ceiling or the sky, daydreaming, slowing down, refusing to participate.

## This morning you've got time for a hot **home-cooked breakfast**

Delicious and piping hot in  
**only**



microwave minutes

Are you kidding?

What I keep puzzling over is that fatigue can be thought of as negatively active precisely because it has been obsessed over by capital and science as a loss, a waste of time, something empty, a feeling to overcome. This affective thread that I'm trying to trace leads to a larger historical fabric that is never finished as a single history nor coheres as a definitive analysis of capital, but is wrapped up and tangled within the present. Fatigue is ordinary, a felt threshold, often crushing, sometimes pleasurable—operating “in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity.” Perhaps all of this is already obvious, but it is intriguing that fatigue cannot be completely valued by capital, and yet it does not heroically resist or transcend it, either. It might be overcome, or not. Capitalism cannot cure fatigue even though—or precisely because—it is produced by it. It is therefore a sort of weird inveterate problem—a little rock that never leaves the shoe.

The fantasies of eradicating fatigue from the body are inseparable from the fantasies aroused by a certain conception of the ideal worker. Fatigue became a problem for science and medicine at the same time that bodies were being called upon to operate machinery or claim, occupy, and manage new sites for exploitation. This problem was expressed in the gap between what was being asked of the body and what the body failed or refused to do (or be). Falling into this gap was therefore the worker with an arm that was not quite a lever, legs that were not quite springs, a heart that was not quite a motor. As Charlie Chaplin famously satirised in *Modern Times* (1936), the body either adapted to the production line or was swallowed by it. Fatigue was a limit, a threshold, a condition and, perhaps most significantly, a problem to overcome.

The confluence of modern science (psychology, psychiatry, physiology, and clinical medicine), together with social reformers and social hygienists, and a managerial attention to efficiency motivated by profit, produced fatigue as a disorder. Fatigued people became “moving targets,” not to mention sites of experimentation. And as the classifications of fatigue proliferated, so too did the fatigued. In America, the big Index-Catalogue of the Library of the Surgeon General’s Office from 1900 listed more than 100 studies of muscle fatigue in addition to “nervous exhaustion,” “brain exhaustion,” “asthenia,” and “spinal exhaustion.” Fatigue became not only a physiological problem but also an elusive “internal” deficiency—a lethargy of will, a hiccup in the making of the New Man. The fatigued worker was not simply exhausted from being overworked but lacking in deeper, more profound ways. In a French medical textbook from 1886, fatigue is described as one of our “sad passions”; it is “responsible for our sloth and makes us desire inaction.” In other words, fatigue produced an urge to do nothing—to seek out the sort of day where nothing at all gets done, passionately. But instead of this being registered as necessary downtime, a moment of reprieve, escape, boredom, or the possibility of being neither here nor there, a convenient morality had snuck into fatigue, requiring urgent intervention and clinical attention.

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That is to say, it is a little mysterious, keeping us up to the possibilities of staring, lying or the sky, sitting, showing downing to participate.

often open up to the  
inspiring sights  
of a  
natural  
environment.

Yo,

pretty packages of frosted delights

Look, it comes with a toy,

he-he, I like that

I wanna number four, a number six, and throw in a

Just enjoy the gritty crunch, that tastes

just like chicken

Wrappers of many bite sizes

Man, are you freaking blind?

That's a rock, all mixed in the potful

Momma's homemade from scratch,

well, not quite

Toasted over flames, they be tasting quite right

Capitalism cannot cure fatigue even though—or precisely because—it is produced by it.

plastic

dough-nut

One way to look at the history of fatigue is to consider how work became a commitment, a calling. If Puritanism, as Max Weber suggested, imbued work with a moral duty—the “vital force” in the development of capitalism—fatigue became a “sign” of something wrong with the worker’s inner ear; the “call” was not being heard, or worse, heard but not answered. It became a problem that fatigued workers went about their duties without commitment, vigour, or belief. That this became a problem meant that those classified as fatigued were not only lacking in physical energy but were attenuated in other ways. Seen from within Weber’s framing, where the anxiety produced by Calvinist predestination is channeled into a work ethic, fatigue could be conceived as exposing those who had fallen into the category of the “unelected.” If a religious “calling” had, since the Reformation, entered everyday life and work as a moral issue, as Weber claimed, then any evidence of lassitude would indicate a lack of *pneuma*, a poverty of spirit. To not be energetic at work, to not commit vigorously to the duties of the job or—as we might hear today—to be unprofessional, a bludger, was to be without the necessary inner resources required to fulfill the duty of work. In other words, you can’t just do your job; you also have to really want to do your job, and be happy doing it.

Weber’s attention to an underlying history of capitalism is a useful way of thinking about fatigue and its relationship to work. But it only gets us part of the way there. For what if we try to think of fatigue as something other than a problem to be fixed, remedied, or eradicated? What if we read fatigue as an underhistory of labour? For if fatigue can be accumulated and properly felt, can it also be seized, shared, cherished?

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The fatigued worker was not simply exhausted from being overworked but lacking in deeper, more profound ways..



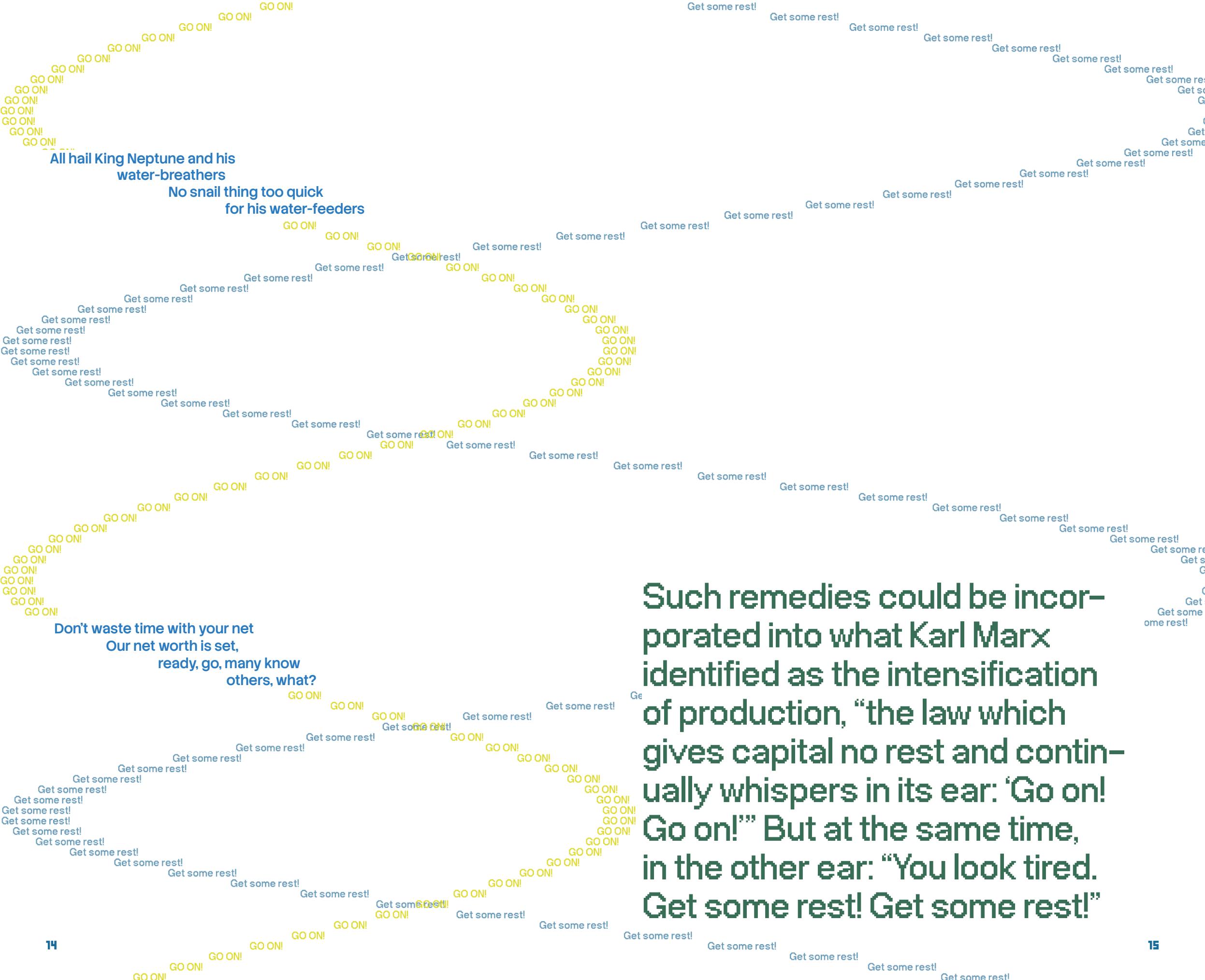
imone Weil, who thought of work as either the awakening of consciousness or the crushing of the human spirit, wrote of “Joys parallel to fatigue: tangible joys, eating, resting, the pleasures of Sunday... but not money.” Let these joys be our coordinates.

Like waste that has nowhere left to go, fatigue is produced as an everyday underhistory of efficiency and progress. Where there is capital there is another particular form of fatigue that is always arising as a shuffling nuisance or unwelcomed break in mind. Complimentary coffee, tea, eugeroic drugs such as Armodafinil or Modafinil, vacation packages, energy drinks and diets, health retreats, vitamin powders and pills, the option of working from home or devising your own schedule, are all thin solutions and inducements that, if they do not in their own way exacerbate fatigue, lead back to it. These solutions and inducements have their origins in nineteenth century “cures” like the vaccine promised by Weichardt or, less

**In other words, you can't just do your job; you also have to really want to do your job, and be happy doing it.**



obscurely, drinks such as Coca-Cola. Such remedies could be incorporated into what Karl Marx identified as the intensification of production, “the law which gives capital no rest and continually whispers in its ear: ‘Go on! Go on!’” But at the same time, in the other ear: “You look tired. Get some rest! Get some rest!” This inherent contradiction of working and resting—or turning rest into work, or resting to work again—is an indication that no one really knows how to handle fatigue, since it cannot be isolated within leisure or completely dis-gorged from work. To be sure, fatigue is a market. What we need to work out is whether there is a difference between the products and methods for masking fatigue and fatigue as an ordinary, albeit contextual and conditioned, moment of awareness, and whether this moment can possibly be shared.



All hail King Neptune and his  
water-breathers

No snail thing too quick  
for his water-feeders

Get some rest!  
Get some rest!

Don't waste time with your net  
Our net worth is set,  
ready, go, many know  
others, what?

Get some rest!  
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Such remedies could be incorporated into what Karl Marx identified as the intensification of production, “the law which gives capital no rest and continually whispers in its ear: ‘Go on! Go on!’” But at the same time, in the other ear: “You look tired. Get some rest! Get some rest!”

The separation between person and world is an impossible surgery. Nobody can invent other worlds without being in one to begin with. If labour is the making of something, an invention, then this making need not be heroicised on the scale of a factory or a building; labours can be small and quiet. Instead of separating these two forms of fatigue—one bodily and the other ecological—what if both were knots on the same metabolic thread? What if we followed fatigue out from our polluted and disorderly selves and into the polluted and disorderly world to discover that they are not so different? What if there was a shared slowness between person and world? As Michelle Murphy has written with an attention to the molecular, “when it comes to questions of pollution perhaps it is more appropriate to discuss the historical emergence of a chemical regime of living, in which molecular relations extend outside of the organic realm and create interconnections with landscapes, production, and consumption, requiring us to tie the history of technoscience with political economy.” For a negative image of this, consider that survivalist Silicon Valley billionaires are buying land in New Zealand. Former missile silos are being converted into well-stocked, luxury bunkers in preparation for an ecological or nuclear apocalypse.

## We be the colors of the **mad** and the **wicked**

We be bad,  
we re-brick it with the **24-hour sign**

Shower my habits

while you dine like rabbits

(oh, that's chicken)

Gotta have it **superfast!**

THE SLEEPER

(A whole lot of breakfast you got time for!)

Superfast, superfast,  
I come in last

But just in time for  
breakfast

Keep us through, keep us through,  
forever blue

The night, the night throws at us

Aluminum, I crush your fun

Aluminum

The sea is radioactive

The sea is radioactive

As the world becomes more drastic and difficult, more hostile and less habitable, perhaps there will be less interest in managing and remedying fatigued bodies. Some would rather—like the “privilege” of working from home, the outsourcing to cheap labour, the enlisting of the already-overworked into “exciting” new “sharing” economies, or the conversion to automation—avoid the trouble of bodies altogether.

We necessarily come back to whether fatigue can be thought of as unalienated labour or a thing to reclaim. The problem might return us to Weber, but this time to his notion of communal action, which always has a structure and a law of its own that is not entirely determined by the economy. Communal action operates as feelings and belongingness. As he observed, amorphous yet shared actions occur, such as the “murmuring of the workers,” the disapproval of the boss, the phenomenon of “the ‘slow down’ (the deliberate limiting of work effort) of laborers by virtue of tacit agreement.” Within labour speed-ups there is the possibility for labor slowdowns. Within all that is done to create and profit off fatigue there is the possibility of fatigue as an awareness, an awakening. Perhaps fatigue facilitates or is an “affective factor” in generating this kind of murmuring. Or to go further: perhaps fatigue can be shared as a feeling that does not feel like work, but is not leisure either. Fatigue not as empty, but as open.

All hail King Neptune and his water-breathers

No snail thing **too quick** for his water-feeders

Don't waste  
time

with your net

Our net worth is set,

ready, go, many know  
others, what?

We be the colors of the  
mad and the wicked

We be bad, we re-brick it  
with the 24-hour sign

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drastic and difficult, more hostile  
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IF FATIGUE CAN BE  
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OF AWARENESS.

Shower my habits while you  
dine like rabbits

With the crunchy, crunchy carrots  
(oh, that's chicken)

Superfast, superfast, I come in last  
But just in time for breakfast

Keep us through, keep us through,  
forever blue

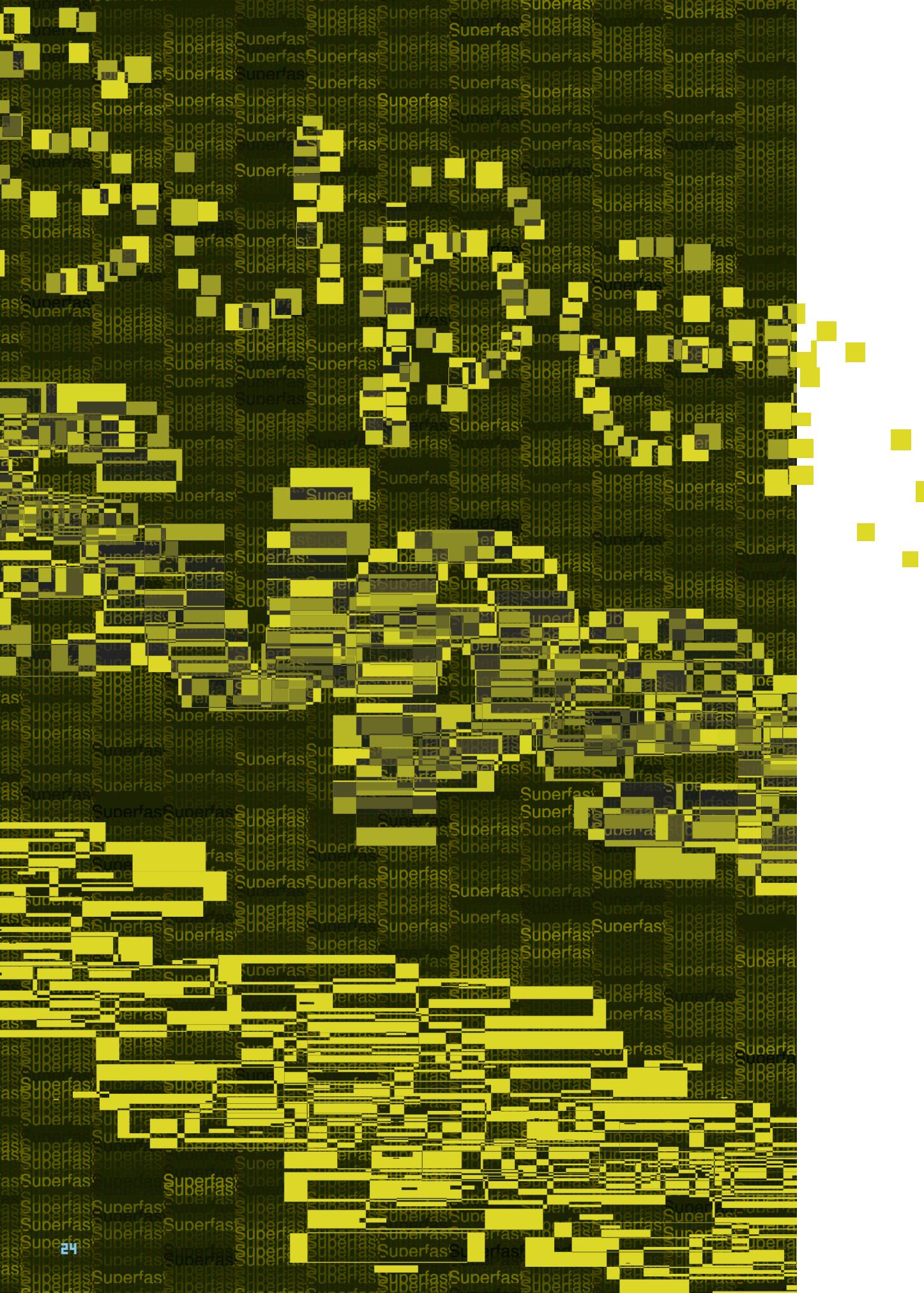
The night, the night throws  
at us

Aluminum, I crush your fun

Aluminum

The sea is radioactive

The sea is radioactive



■ Superfast jellyfish, superfast jellyfish

Superfast jellyfish, superfast jellyfish

■ Superfast jellyfish, superfast jellyfish

Superfast jellyfish, superfast jellyfish

■ (Everybody loves jellyfish!)

■ Superfast jellyfish, superfast jellyfish

Superfast jellyfish, superfast jellyfish

I'm imagining an insistent form of fatigue that may arise from estrangement but does not lead to the false separation of person and world; a reacquaintance with expending energy and feeling that returns as joy, not misery. If fatigue can be conceptualized as an affective labour or an attitude, it might be worked at and developed as a form of awareness. If fatigue is an object of labour perhaps it can be made to do different things—fatigue not as exploitation dressed up by science as a disorder or a condition to suppress, but a moment of capability, an awareness of limits that extend beyond the individual experience of being fatigued. This line of thinking veers much closer to what Simone Weil meant by poetry not being possible without fatigue, where “the activity of inactivity is not a paradox; it is the act of positioning oneself on the ground, it is rest inasmuch as rest is not a pure negation but the very tension of a position, the bringing about of a here.” This does not answer the question of whether fatigue is work so much as allow moments of inactivity to be moments of noticing and possible joy.



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Superfast

jellyfish

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Where the work might come about, then, is in seeing how fatigue is a slowed down "here" that puts the fatigued in touch not only with themselves but also with others, with the histories and presents of fatigued bodies and ecosystems. If fatigue always returns then it might return us to shared ground, and to the making of a different little history.

This book was created at Washington University in St. Louis, in the Communication Design Program at the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, in the fall of 2025. It engages and juxtaposes two texts: lyrics from “Superfast Jellyfish”, a song by the band Gorillaz, and excerpts from “A Little History of Fatigue”, a book by Tom Melick. The body text is set in Geist and Stack Sans Text. The title text is set in PP NeueBit. This printed book, along with its online interactive version was designed and typeset by Nicole Wei.

Link to interactive piece:

<https://weieach.github.io/typell-counter-book/>



#### CITATION

Gorillaz. Superfast Jellyfish. Featuring Gruff Rhys and De La Soul, Plastic Beach, EMI, 2010.

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