

William Gibson

Fragments of A Hologram Rose

That summer Parker had trouble sleeping.

There were power droughts; sudden failures of the delta-inducer brought painfully abrupt returns to consciousness.

To avoid these, he used patch cords, miniature alligator clips, and black tape to wire the inducer to a battery-operated ASP deck. Power loss in the inducer would trigger the deck's playback circuit. He bought an ASP cassette that began with the subject asleep on a quiet beach. It had been recorded by a young blonde yogi with 20-20 vision and an abnormally acute color sense. The boy had been flown to Barbados for the sold purpose of taking a nap and his morning's exercise on a brilliant stretch of private beach. The microfiche laminate in the cassette's transparent case explained that the yogi could will himself through alpha to delta without an inducer. Parker, who hadn't been able to sleep without an inducer for two years, wondered if this was possible.

He had been able to sit through the whole thing only once, though by now he knew every sensation of the first five subjective minutes. He thought the most interesting part of the sequence was a slight editing slip at the start of the elaborate breathing routine: a swift glance down the white beach that picked out the figure of a guard patrolling a chain link fence, a black machine pistol slung over his arm.

While Parker slept, power drained from the city's grids.

The transition from delta to delta-ASP was a dark implosion into other flesh. Familiarity cushioned the shock. He felt the cool sand under his shoulders. The cuffs of his tattered jeans flapped against his bare ankles in the morning breeze. Soon the boy would wake fully and begin his Ardha-Matsyendra-something; with other hands Parker groped in darkness for the ASP deck.

Three in the morning.

Making yourself a cup of coffee in the dark, using a flashlight when you pour the boiling water. Morning's recorded dream, fading: through other eyes, dark plume of a Cuban freighter - fading with the horizon it navigates across the mind's gray screen.

Three in the morning.

Let yesterday arrange itself around you in flat schematic images. What you said - what she said - watching her pack - dialing the cab. However you shuffle them they form the same printed circuit: you, standing in the rain, screaming at the cabby.

The rain was sour and acid, nearly the color of piss. The cabby called you an asshole; you still had to pay twice the fare. She had three pieces of luggage. In his respirator and goggles, the man looked like an ant. He pedaled away in the rain. She didn't look back.

The last you saw of her was a giant ant, giving you the finger.

Parker saw his first ASP unit in a Texas shantytown called Judy's Jungle. It was a massive console in cheap plastic chrome. A ten-dollar bill fed into the slot bought you five minutes of free-fall gymnastics in a Swiss orbital spa, trampolining through twenty-meter perihelions with a sixteen-year-old Vogue model - heady stuff for the jungle, where it was simpler to buy a gun than a hot bath.

He was in New York with forged papers a year later, when two leading firms had the first portable decks in major department stores in time for Christmas. The ASP porn theaters that had boomed briefly in California never recovered.

Holography went too, and the block-wide Fuller domes that had been the holo temples of Parker's childhood became multilevel supermarkets, or housed dusty amusement arcades where you still might find the old consoles, under faded neon pulsing APPARENT SENSORY PERCEPTION through a blue haze of cigarette smoke.

Now Parker is thirty and writes continuity for broadcast ASP, programming the eye movements of the industry's human cameras.

The brown-out continues.

In the bedroom, Parker prods the brushed-aluminum face of his Sendai Sleep-Master. Its pilot light flickers, then lapses into darkness. Coffee in hand, he crosses the carpet to the closet she emptied the day before. The flashlight's beam probes the bare shelves for evidence of love, finding a broken leather sandal strap, an ASP cassette, and a postcard. The postcard is a white light reflection hologram of a rose.

At the kitchen sink, he feeds the sandal strap to the disposal unit. Sluggish in the brown-out, it complains, but swallows and digests. Holding it carefully between thumb and forefinger, he lowers the hologram towards the hidden rotating jaws. The unit emits a thin scream as steel teeth slash laminated plastic and the rose is shredded into a thousand fragments.

Later he sits on the unmade bed, smoking. Her cassette is in the deck ready for playback. Some women's tapes disorient him, but he doubts this is the reason he now hesitates to start the machine.

Roughly a quarter of all ASP users are unable to comfortably assimilate the subjective body picture of the opposite sex. Over the years some broadcast ASP starts have become increasingly androgynous in an attempt to capture this segment of the audience.

But Angela's own tapes have never intimidated him before. (But what if she has recorded a lover?) No, that can't be it - it's simply that the cassette is an entirely unknown quantity.

When Parker was fifteen, his parents indentured him to the American subsidiary of a Japanese plastics combine. At the time, he felt fortunate; the ratio of applicants to indentured trainees was enormous. For three years he lived with his cadre in a dormitory, singing the company hymns in formation each morning and usually managing to go over the compound fence at least once a month for girls or the holodrome.

The indenture would have terminated on his twentieth birthday, leaving him eligible for full employee status. A week before his nineteenth birthday, with two stolen credit cards and a change of clothes, he went over the fence for the last time. He arrived in California three days before the chaotic New Secessionist regime collapsed. In San Francisco, warring splinter groups hit and ran in the streets. One or another of four different 'provisional' city governments had done such an efficient job of stockpiling food that almost none was available at street level.

Parker spent the last night of the revolution in a burned-out Tucson suburb, making love to a thin teenager from New Jersey who explained about the finer points of her horoscope between bouts of almost silent weeping that seemed to have nothing at all to do with anything he did or said.

Years later he realised that he no longer has any idea of his original motive in breaking his indenture.

The first three quarters of the cassette had been erased; you punch yourself fast-forward through a static haze of wiped tape, where taste and scent blur into a single channel. The audio input is white sound - the no-sound of the first dark sea... (Prolonged input from wiped tape can induce hypnagogic hallucination.)

Parker crouched in the roadside New Mexico brush at midnight, watching a tank burn on the highway. Flame lit the broken white line he had followed from Tucson. The explosion has been visible two miles away, a white sheet of heat lightning that had turned the pale branches of a bare tree against the night sky into a photographic negative of themselves: carbon branches against magnesium sky.

Many of the refugees were armed.

Texas owed the shantytowns that steamed in the warm gulf rains to the uneasy neutrality she had maintained in the face of the Coast's attempted secession.

The towns were built of plywood, cardboard, plastic sheets that billowed in the wind, and the bodies of dead vehicles. They had names like Jump City and Sugaree, shifted constantly in the covert winds of a black-market economy.

Federal and state troops sent in to sweep the outlaw towns seldom found anything. But after each search, a few men would fail to report back. Some had sold their uniforms, and others had come too close to the contraband they had been sent to find.

After three months, Parker wanted out, but goods were the only safe passage through the army cordons. His chance came only by accident: Late one afternoon, skirting the pall of greasy cooking smoke that hung low over the woman in a dry creek bed. Flies rose up in an angry cloud, then settled again, ignoring him. She had a leather jacket, and at night Parker was usually cold. He began to search the creek bed for a length of brushwood.

In the jacket's back, just below her left shoulder blade, was a round hole that would have admitted the shaft of a pencil. The jacket's lining had been red once, but now it was black, stiff and shining with dried blood. With the jacket swaying on the end of his stick, he went looking for water.

He never washed the jacket; in its left pocket he found nearly an ounce of cocaine, carefully wrapped in plastic and transparent surgical tape. The right pocket held fifteen ampules of Megacillin-D and a ten-inch horn-handled switchblade. The antibiotic was worth twice its weight in cocaine.

He drove the knife hilt-deep into a rotten stump passed over by the Jungle's wood-gatherers and hung the jacket there, the flies circling it as he walked away.

That night, in a bar with a corrugated iron roof, waiting for one of the 'lawyers' who worked passages through the cordon, he tried his first ASP machine. It was huge, all chrome and neon, and the owner was very proud of it; he had helped hijack the truck itself.

If the chaos of the nineties reflects a radical shift in the paradigms of visual literacy, the final shift away from the Lascaux/Gutenberg tradition of a pre-holographic society, what should we expect from this newer technology, with its promise of discrete encoding and subsequent reconstruction of the full range of sensory perception?

Rosebuck and Pierhal, Recent American History: A Systems View.

Fast-forward through the humming no-time of wiped tape - into her body. European sunlight. Streets of a strange city.

Athens. Greek-letter signs and the smell of dust...

and the smell of dust.

Look through her eyes (thinking, this woman hasn't met you yet; you're hardly out of Texas) at the gray monument, horses there in stone, where pigeons whirl up and circle - and static takes love's body, wipes it clean and gray. Waves of white sound break along a beach that isn't there. And the tapes ends.

The inducer's light is burning now.

Parker lies in darkness, recalling the thousand fragments of the hologram rose. A hologram has this quality: Recovered and illuminated, each fragment will reveal the whole image of the rose. Falling toward delta, he sees himself the rose, each of his scattered fragments revealing a whole he'll never know - stolen credit cards - a burned out suburb - planetary conjunctions of a stranger - a tank burning on a highway - a flat packet of drugs - a switchblade honed on concrete, thin as pain.

Thinking: We're each other's fragments, and was it always this way? That instant of a European trip, deserted in the gray sea of wiped tape - is she closer now, or more real, for his having been there?

She had helped him get his papers, found him his first job in ASP. Was that their history? No, history was the black face of the delta-inducer, the empty closet, and the unmade bed. History was his loathing for the perfect body he woke in if the juice dropped, his fury at the pedal-cab driver, and her refusal to look back through the contaminated rain.

But each fragment reveals the rose from a different angle, he remembered, but delta swept over him before he could ask himself what that might mean.