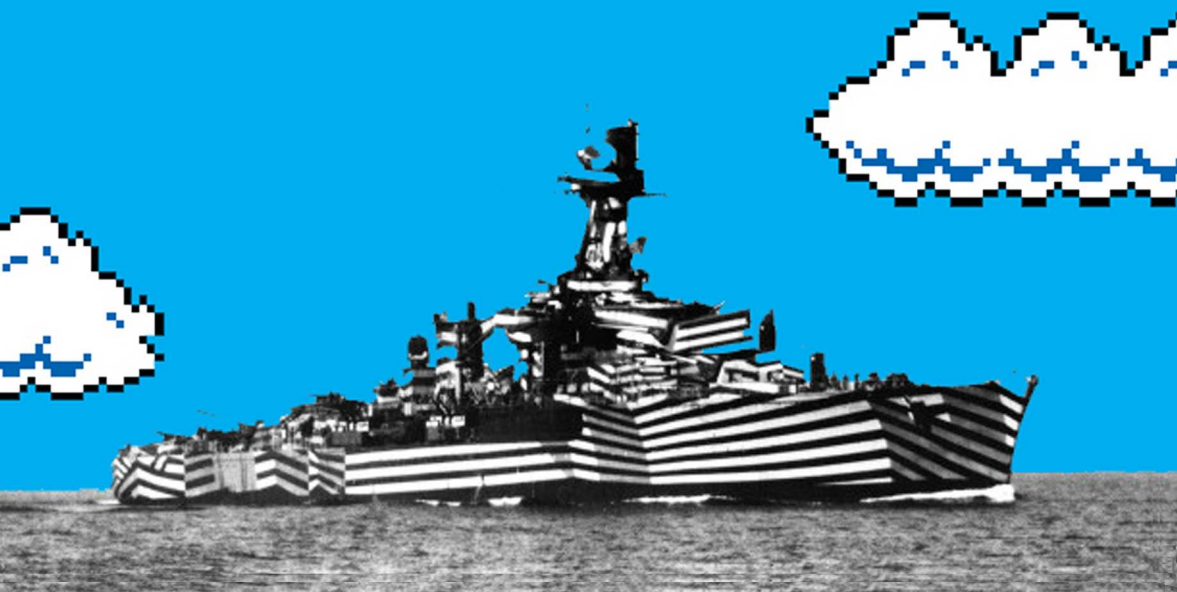


1 OCT 1993

Stanley Lieber



10CT1993

by Stanley Lieber

Written 2004-2010

This book was typeset (`troff -ms | lp -dst dout | ps2pdf`) in Times by the author, using a Lenovo ThinkPad X60 Tablet running the Plan 9 operating system.

Reprinted with corrections, October 2015

1OCT1993

loct1993.com

MASSIVE FICTIONS

massivefictions.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

MIT/CC0/Public Domain

1OCT1993

BOOK ONE

TAB2, 1960

tags: 1960, margaret, tab1, tab2, the_chief

The testing was rigorous but fair. I don't know if the equipment had any real effect, but he started talking just the same.

bump bump bump clickity clickity click bump bump bump

Little Tommy.

"Semen the color of old comic book pages, aged plastic, tape residue, dipping sauce for crayons that were flattened for a specific age group. You know, so they wouldn't roll away—the crayons, not the age group. Dog piss on the carpet, striped wallpaper, a tray of stale flat bread, a portfolio of chalk drawings."

"What else do you remember?"

"The weather. Nothing."

"Let's start over from the beginning."

Aptitude tests. Memory. So far, things were progressing smoothly. I actually choked back a tear. I admit it: I was proud of him.

"Son, have you figured out what's going on yet?"

"A severed, pierced penis. In a can of Prince Albert pipe tobacco. Title: *Not Funny*."

I wrote *TAB2* on the inside of his hat and placed it on his head.

"Let's get the hell out of here."

Tommy hated the matching outfits. Orange toboggan hat, bomber jacket, military galoshes. I had told him to think of it as his uniform. He scratched at his buzzcut, dumbly.

I hoisted him into his car seat.

Winter had struck while the other boys were studying. Permafrost, monochrome landscape. I had Tommy out and about in the elements every day; we covered four miles, on average, pacing the farmer's market near headquarters. He was already beating up on the older boys in the class ahead of him.

Or so I had forecast, when I set him on this routine.

Reality didn't quite track. Tommy wasn't meeting his PT requirements. I began scrubbing his face with an abrasive washcloth and doubled his training hours.

"Father, who do I have to blow around here to get a time sheet?"

"You'll be done when I say you're done."

The kid's mother.

I cleared my cache and ducked into a flower shop, dragging Tommy behind me. He planted himself on the floor and booted up a comic book. I should never have bought him that thing.

"The usual?"

We came in here at least twice a week.

"Affirmative. Red."

I jammed the bundle of roses under my arm and yanked Tommy along to the truck. I thought he might have voiced a slight whimper, but I couldn't be sure so I ignored it.

The mesh was offline in the truck. I punched the dashboard and Tommy let out a laugh. Finally, the HUD activated and we peeled out of the parking lot.

I was thirty-three years old.

So far, 1960 was diminishing returns.

CU/FARLEY

tags: 1960, margaret, tab1, tab2, the_chief

1 October 1960 I loaded Tommy into the truck and took him to work with me.

The boy perked up at the sight of the two-story displays. A damn sight better than the consumer grade equipment his mother used to review her nude home shows. We had a spare terminal so I logged him in with basic access and let him handle analysis on some of the non-essential traffic. No one would mind. With his orange cap he almost fit in.

Perturbations in the mesh. We were bringing a new series of embassy clouds online and things were not going smoothly. I was asked to supervise a side-switch.

At 07:30 Tommy spoke up, something about overlap.

"Pop, we've got incoming."

Three embassies were competing for the same channel. Ping errors were filling up the logs. I asked Tommy if he had a solution.

"Subnet them."

My men went into action and the crisis was averted.

Chief gave Tommy a lollipop.

Tommy liked the snow but touching his hand to it produced tears. I growled at him a bit.

I gassed up the truck and we cut across town back to the hovel. We had opened a new file on Tommy. CU/FARLEY would follow him for the rest of his life. He'd shown aptitude. All of that testing wasn't a waste after all. His mother would grumble but his interest was clear, honest. We assigned him TAB2 and that was that.

Inside the house I prepared a plate of sandwiches and pickles and we settled in to monitor the logs. Again Tommy showed initiative and reorganized his own desktop for efficiency. I dozed off for a while and when I came to he'd routed the embassy logs through his login. He picked out some trouble spots and saved the boys back at HQ a few hours of grief. I considered pulling him out of school for a few months until the

embassies were all up and running. Heh, not likely, not with *his* mother.

Flipped on the telescreen. Presidential election. Iran.

Can't escape it. Switched off the telescreen and back to Tommy's progress, trawling the logs. I showed him how to clean up a few streams and within a few minutes he was giving me advice on my own data structures. I wondered how long this could hold his attention.

At 10:25 a page came over the wire, calling me back to HQ. I strapped Tommy into his seat and we were on our way.

The truck spun through the slush and we got hung up in the parking lot. I left the vehicle and trudged towards the building with Tommy in tow; housekeeping would dig out the truck as time permitted.

We made it up the stairs and Chief stopped us before we got to our terminals. CU/FARLEY was already twenty pages thick. They had decided to call in their investment early. I slicked down Tommy's eyebrows with my thumb and handed him over.

My son and I locked eyes. Tommy full of comprehension.

He reached up to his head and removed his orange toboggan. He glanced at the name I'd scrawled inside it, *TAB2*, and then passed it over to me, his three-year-old arms not quite bridging the gap between us.

I nodded. I understood.

TOWARDS MYTHOLOGIZING THE COMING RESURGENCE OF COVERT WARFARE

tags: 1961, coordinator_rex, tab1, tab2

DIPLOMATIC POUCH MAIL
(SB:WR-U; 10-17-1961)
(Office of Origin: BT/FUCK)

Son, you said you wanted to know what I do all day at my job. That is, since we've been separated and you've been off at school. To that end, I've written up this account based on notes I took sometime last week. I traveled from New York to New San Francisco to take part in one of the operations assigned to my group.

Here is my description of what took place.

Faint smoke wafted out of nearby chimneys. Awkward-looking clouds clung to the sky, a gross of cotton balls scattered at random, then glued down carelessly onto an enormous blue shirt. I observed the aerial tableaux through a crack in the curtains. My hotel room was cold.

Shifting focus, I came to notice the ground directly below my window. It offered up only the faintest suggestion of tangibility. Its contours were blunted by yet another layer of new fallen snow. Bemused, I traced the deceptive topology at high resolution, scanning the area for markers before proceeding to vacate for the last time.

I made my way out onto the balcony. Even as my room's heavy wooden door clicked shut behind me, I instinctively checked my pocket for the plastic key card.

It was present.

Coat tucked and breath stale, I tunneled through the mounting drifts, trudging towards the front office. I swiped my key card and slipped inside. The night clerk had dozed off, abandoning the assortment of *RAP CHOWDER* clips he had pulled up on his terminal. He was probably inebriated. Stealthily, I snuck past him.

Moving down the hall, I edged past a throng of blinking, chattering vending machines. My trench coat trailed along behind me, probably, I thought, getting dirty. I hustled once more into the laundry room, tossed my knapsack down on a table and placed my hat on the dryer.

Laundry was done.

After stowing my garments, I dropped my room card on the front desk and called for a taxi. Yawning, I leaned up against a support column and strained to hear the closing salvos of the *RAP CHOWDER* season finale. It seemed I had not alerted the night clerk to my presence. That suited the situation fine, as my taxi would not show up for some time and I was in no mood for small talk.

An hour later I detected the heat signature of a car engine and then the slush of tires racing through black snow. It was my ride.

The taxi driver wasted no time and engaged his car horn, initiating a blast of sharp, targeted audio. *Modus operandi* endemic to the American service industry: never in a hundred consecutive life sentences would he have thought to come into the hotel and fetch me. Remind me sometime to tell you about Hanoi, and the driver who actually did.

I tossed my knapsack over my shoulder and hopped into the cab. The driver was a tough looking Arab, equipped with the usual rough shaven beard and a giant, furry parka. He had a three-dollar cigar clenched tightly between his brown teeth. As he spun the orange cab out of a snow bank, I leaned back into my seat with a sense of detached curiosity. The Motel 6's automation was apparently inoperable; I checked my balance and discovered that I hadn't even tipped the desk clerk on my way out.

The driver propelled us across the bridge and on to JFK, where eventually he halted the cab and told me to get out. I tossed him a single hundred dollar bill and he affected only the slightest nod towards the meter. I didn't budge, so he gave me the finger, then sped off into the freezing smog. I had to laugh.

Soon, I was aboard my plane.

Floating safely above America, I rang for my stewardess. She brought out some coffee and loaded it up with a fair amount of cream. Somewhere over St. Louis, I was enjoying a fifty-dollar cup of Folger's Crystals. Unlike most passengers, I didn't fall for their upselling to a more rarefied blend—I know from bitter experience that no matter what you order, on a government airplane you end up drinking the same cup of coffee. It still befuddles me that no one ever seems to notice this. Menus are nothing more than a racket they try to put over on unsuspecting consumers. What you actually get is whatever they have too much of on a given day. Anyway, a cup of coffee is a cup of coffee.

Finally, we approached New San Francisco. Tires screeched across the runway. Air pressure in the cabin shifted to sea level. Presently, a voice came over the intercom, announcing our impending arrival. I gazed at the surface of my leaf, pretending to read a newspaper article. Shrewdly, I had opted not to activate the pay-device.

"At the tone, all passengers will unbuckle their seat-belts and disembark in an orderly fashion."

There was an almost deafening racket of clacks and clatters.

"Once again, thank you for flying Federal Airlines."

"Like we had a choice," came a muffled retort from several rows back.

A number of heads from various sections of the plane snapped around to face the speaker, all of them in perfect synchronization. Immediately, I ascertained which of my fellow passengers were Air Marshals.

I returned my leaf to the seat-back in front of me, then reached up into the compartment above my head to withdraw my bags. Nothing seemed to be missing.

Exiting the plane, I was forced to elbow a few tourists out of my way. Nothing too unusual; a young Pioneer Scout had nearly caused me to trip and fall. Children were everywhere in coach, clogging up the aisles with their sluggish movements. This would not have been a problem if I'd taken a seat in first class, where children are generally forbidden, but such an expenditure would have raised flags with the wrong people, and on this flight I was concerned with keeping things—as far

as those wrong people were concerned, anyway—quiet. Friendly shoving had become commonplace during the average disembark, and so my excess physicality went unnoticed.

On the way into the terminal I passed through a metal detector. My sidearm triggered a shrill cacophony, followed by an array of hastily drawn weapons. I flashed my TSA card discreetly, at waist level, and got through the checkpoint without much hassle. As you know, with my credentials I am authorized to carry a concealed firearm. I can activate its logging processes mid-flight, or even pull it out and wave it around if I so desire. In this way it would have been trivial for me to clear a path through the crowd by sending everyone diving to the floor. I don't need to tell you that I restrained myself. Even with non-networked weaponry such as my own, flashing a gun would have attracted attention from the mesh.

I wandered into a nearby pay-zone and called for another cab. My long-range implant was by now producing only blips and bleeps. For some reason, disabled.

My experience with that last cab driver in New York had put me on edge. I recalled now that when I climbed into his vehicle he had shifted his eyes instantly to my left earlobe, pausing for a bit longer than I would have liked. He was careful, also, to look me up and down several times, tracing all of the obvious marker points. I noticed even though he had really been quite subtle about it. To my mind, this was uncommon and suspicious behavior for a New York cab driver. I found myself considering the implications. Something might be going on with the cabbie unions here in the States. Warily, I loaded my Colt and stuffed it into the cargo pocket of my trousers.

When my taxi finally arrived I slid into the back seat and gave the driver a once-over of my own. Ditto. The same type as in New York. An immigrant. Although this fellow, rather than expose his bushy eyebrows and lice-infested hair to the world, sported a grey taxi cap with a dark, translucent visor. He was chomping a duty-free cigar (unlit) and taking sips from a can of Stro's Light. From the looks of him, a Russian educated Paki.

Before shifting the car into gear, the cabbie pivoted around in his torn seat. With no small effort, he stuck out his free hand, then moved his eyes back to me. Sensing the

inherent purpose of the gesture, I pushed a fifty towards him, extending it just far enough to catch in the tips of his fat fingers, then settled the rest of the way back into my seat. The driver remained motionless, silent. His seat creaked under the weight of his body.

"Take me to the Embassy," I growled as harshly as I could muster, "And put some stank on it. I have an appointment to keep."

With a squeal of tires and a strangled burst of exhaust smoke, we were off.

After a short interval we careened to a stop in front of the Embassy. I evacuated the back seat and leaned into the taxi's front window, glaring at the driver, adopting an aggressive posture. In response, the Paki clenched my collar into his fist and pulled me in even closer. It seemed he wanted to share a few words.

About time.

"Meter say *five hundred* and fifty, stupid fart."

He spit out his cigar, which came to rest lightly on the floor.

My cue.

I rammed the barrel of my Colt into his throat. He recoiled against the seat with a muffled thud, spilling beer all over his lap. I then gripped him by the hair and smashed his head into the dashboard, smirking bemusedly because his forehead had just taken out the meter, and because his pants were now soaking wet as if he'd burst his bladder. He fumbled groggily in his seat and steered his cab the hell out of there. I wouldn't have believed it, but the cabbie trade had actually grown more belligerent in my absence. As a corollary, I'd just saved the government five hundred bucks. You have to stay sharp on the basics.

I stomped up the stairs of the Embassy and kicked open the door, which hadn't been latched to begin with. Gradually, I got myself into character.

The place was fossilized as ever. All of the antiques, artifacts and arch-politicos were still glued into place, practically inert. The room was artificially quiet, which also conformed to

my mental inventory from previous visits. All right then, noise-cancelers were still being employed. What was new, here, was that the place had apparently been outfitted as a nano-blank zone. I wondered why.

Good thing I had thought to pack my Colt and not bothered with the network weaponry.

Without warning, a butler sidled up to me, whispering that he wanted to take my coat. I kicked him out of the way. He tumbled into a chair, looking dumb. I decided to ham it up in my new role and barked at him that I hated being touched by the help. He muttered something and I made a show of ignoring him as I pushed on into the long central corridor.

Quickly locating the correct cube cluster, I burst into the Coordinator's office and dropped down onto his horsehair sofa. His eyes moved to meet with my own and then just as casually returned to his pressure screen. I remained silent. After a few minutes passed, he realized that it would be up to him to initiate the conversation.

"I'm sure you are aware," he finally said, agitated but monotone in his murmur, "That this sudden reappearance of yours will make certain impending maneuvers more... *awkward*... for my department. I will have to make up another acceptable room for you here in the embassy, and re-issue your cash and supply requisitions." He wiped his forehead, the pitch of his voice lowering steadily as he continued to speak, resembling nothing so much as the air being let out of a bicycle tire. "I'll also have to find a way to pay for all of this, since you are still officially off of my books."

Well, that didn't seem like much of an obstacle to me. I was a diplomat and this was his embassy. I was sure he could come up with something. Run the standard algorithm of embassy lawyers, numerous layers of complex accounting, and a few million dollars out of the discretionary fund. Throw in a gaggle of highly trained Georgian prostitutes and no one would ever be the wiser. This was, after all, his area of expertise.

Why not just write it up as a series of business lunches, I thought to myself.

But I chose not to say any of that out loud. Instead, I sat motionless, staring, thinking about Iran and 1959, wondering why I'd bothered to haul his perforated ass back home with

me. He must have guessed what I was flashing on, because he quickly dropped the pretense of busting my balls and cut straight to the conclusion of his prepared speech. He hated going through the motions as much as I did.

"Okay. I give in," he mouthed, the vitriol now suspiciously absent from his voice. He had put up his token resistance, which for the purposes of budgetary documentation would have to suffice. He tossed me my pass and all of the needed cards, already made out and validated, packed into a large manila envelope. He held it out with one hand, not looking away from whatever it was he was scribbling, somewhat erratically, into his leaf. I had never known he was ambidextrous.

"Tom," he said to me as I left the room, "Let's not botch this up, not like the last time I had to rely on you. You know what I'm talking about."

The wisecrack was wholly unnecessary.

I halted. I wanted to launch into him, but quickly reversed myself and resolved to just let him have his insults.

Son, at this point the man is little more than a torso. His titanium legs are encased in medical plastic, but that hardly represents a cosmetic improvement. Below the elbows, his arms are tracked with skin grafts, and must be covered up by shirtsleeves even in summer. True, the substrate now conceals more firepower than I could ever hope to lift with my merely human-gauge limbs, but technically he was correct. During the war, I'd botched the rescue attempt that had made all of his "improvements" necessary. After all, he'd still possessed both of his legs when we were dispatched to Tehran. For this, I do carry some measure of responsibility.

Turning again, I looked down at the manila envelope and said nothing. I closed his office door gently on my way out.

As I hoofed it down the south corridor, I fished through my envelope of cards, digging out the one that would open my room. It stated: Room 1097, Tenth Floor, Second Hall. I pocketed the room key and made my way toward the central security elevator, arriving just in time to glimpse the doors snapping shut.

I located the stairwell.

With little effort I advanced to the tenth floor. Swiping my key card, I pushed the security door open and proceeded into the hallway.

As I reached the door of my actual room, I fished out the card again and shoved it into its slot. The whole door frame quivered as I ambled inside. This place was antique, but I didn't mind the clumsy old mechanisms, in spite of what my diplomatic status might have entitled me to. I wouldn't end up using all of that new equipment anyway.

I suppose the room itself was quite impressive, by conventional standards. A hot tub was situated, or sunk into, really, the middle of the floor, equipped with its own bar. The carpet was some sort of deep white pile. I don't know, but it looked expensive. Cathedral windows with variable display angles. Universal remote. The furniture was a posh mixture of vintage and the very latest in network enabled. I waved my hand in front of the couch and seats around the room reconfigured themselves to my pre-loaded, custom contour. A few more gestures and my temperature/humidity preferences were transferred to the local mesh.

I have not devoted much of my attention over the years to the ins and outs of fully-integrated interior design, but I can tell you that this wasn't the work of amateurs. I wasn't able to locate a single bug. Good for them. There's no telling what kind of footage this room has been able to capture, during the periods between wars when it has been used to house foreign dignitaries.

I'm afraid my reputation preceded me here and I did not expect many frivolous trifles, but, still, a few of the line items from my standard rider were missing—and remain missing, above my complaints—which continues to annoy.

Well, that's about all I have time for right now. I have quite a bit of work to do before I can turn in for the night. You know I'm not much of a writer, but I hope this has given you some idea of what an average day of mine is like here at the embassy.

Hope to see you soon.

ADVANCE

tags: 1963, margaret, tab1, tab2, the_chief, violet

All told, it was three years until I saw him again. Draped in something reflective, outfitted for stresspants.

He appraised me, amused.

"I don't suppose you objected too strenuously, when they told you what it was they planned to do to me."

Six years old. Circumcised. Ready to start public school.

"Son, I've been doing my best to provide for your future. You're getting the best education tax dollars can buy."

"Prove it, Dad. They cut off my *stick*."

By 1963, the war had started.

"They didn't cut it off. They've trimmed back the excess skin. Hygienic benefits. Read up on your New Jack Testament. It's part of the package."

I'll admit, the family tended to shunt Tommy aside. We had shelled into advanced operations and were channeling most of our attention to the tactical situation above ground. Probably some things slipped by unnoticed.

"Nobody ever asked what I wanted."

Maybe I should have sent him back to his mother. He seemed more attuned to her.

"Irrelevant. You're not old enough to have an opinion on this. Here, hop on up here. Help me parse these filter rules. We have incoming."

"You old fuss budget!"

My daughter.

"Why don't you give him a break. He's been studying all summer."

"This wasn't strictly my decision, Violet."

"Lies! You're the ranking officer now."

"He's going to learn a lot more by observing us here than he would diddling with you and your mother back at home. Praying. Whatever it is you do."

"You're wearing him out."

"It's part of the training. He'll endure."

"Well, gee. I would advise that you get yourself a good lawyer. Tommy's peer group is quite litigious. See you never."

Violet slammed a lot of doors, that year.

The dream was this:

My wife, my sister and Violet wandering through HQ. Someone I don't remember from high school walking up and smearing grease paint on my face, saying "Don't you remember me?"

My wife, my sister and Violet walking through someone's house as a shortcut. The women stop to pick through the occupants' belongings. I advise them not to continue but they've become unresponsive. The occupants of the hovel wake up and sound the alert for their extended family, who appear from out of nowhere and accost us.

Hometown Security arrives with shock troops and we are all separated and detained. I am interrogated by Jeff from *CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM*.

By 1963 I had quit smoking, but still I made routine trips to the balcony to clear my head and to stare at the snow. There's no telling what my handlers thought of this. Ten below zero and there I was, out there in my shirtsleeves.

Well, fuck 'em.

I was close. Ten more months and the agency would have recouped on my advance. Then I could start in on the mortgage. Savings. Things would start to look up.

Mostly.

Tommy was still a worry. Soon they'd want to draft him.

I wasn't sure he was ready.

MEN OF VISION

tags: 1963, margaret, plinth_mold, tab1, tab2, william

The bombs are still falling when they outfit me with this stupid, spamming *hat* and instruct me to cart around young cousin William, the other male child on the premises, so that he might bask in the unfiltered sunshine, breathe in the unfiltered air, be exposed, finally, to the city above ground. This isn't posed as an elective course of action; I'm given formal orders and nudged in the direction of the outer doors.

I tell them I don't see as how it's a good idea—what with the declining birthrates, the continuously falling bombs, the constant danger of disfigurement and death—but I might as well be set on mute when it comes to registering above the din of the war room. My thoughts are not considered.

Children, creatures endowed with no special mastery over the evolved traditions of warfare, are expected to find their own way, to get in where they fit in, to drive unique footholds into the imposing, existential mountain dubbed survival. Honestly, I've never considered this state of affairs to be a cause for concern. I've never shied away from a difficult climb. Have preferred, in fact, to traverse peaks of despair, regarding them as nothing more than simple clumps of grass gathered at my feet. The one permanent handicap I've endured is this responsibility to my cousin, William, who is so young, who cannot even fend for himself. Others of his age are expected to survive by dint of their own industriousness. William, for his part, is basically immobile. Self-sufficiency has been altogether ruled out.

The war effort consumes most of the adults' attention. Slowly, William and I have been pushed from one room to another, down long hallways and through half-open doorways, with barely any recognition paid to how we are being treated. No one includes us or keeps much track of us now that the fighting has percolated into the city. With new air strikes arriving daily we are the least of the adults' concerns.

I work with what I am given.

It is in these streets that I have learned my trade, have begun to earn my keep. I've developed an affinity for commerce—an aptitude, you might say—and happily

contribute a percentage of my earnings back into the household. Apparently, I am a natural born hustler. So says my uncle. It has come to the point where I'm afraid the adults will finally realize their neglect. It is conceivable that they may even forbid us, William and myself, to leave the compound on our own. This would negatively impact revenues, which would be unacceptable. It would also harm our family's standing in the community, which would be equally unacceptable. My products are in high demand. It is with a constant awareness of this precarious balance that I, over these past few months, have striven to make the skills of the street my own. I have adapted myself to its unsteady rhythms, mastered its sundry particulars, balanced weight through the hood until my various criminal activities have become as second nature to me, a collection of reflexive actions as simple as walking into the kitchen or emptying my bladder. This sympathy with the tidal nature of currency is hard won, but it allows me to function freely, wholly invisible to the financial surveillance algorithms employed by HQ. I should say, invisible so long as I remember to hold back that reasonable percentage for the family. It is true, my triple-a reputation would quickly dissolve into scandal if ever I became so sloppy as to arouse the interest of my father's men. Let us observe, then, that my operations have never attracted their attention.

Add to my already formidable grip the legitimate pay from William's promenades, and I'm already better than halfway to my new shield jacket. I count it as a demonstration of my utility that I'm able to provide my own armor. A new shield jacket would doubtless preserve me through countless future crises (that is to say, if I'm not found skewered by shrapnel before the thing is even delivered). Thus I have concluded that even my supposedly lamentable character traits (such as my unquestioning greed) may, at last, be construed as facets of pious virtue. Until I am allowed to participate in weapons training, I will content myself with the paper chase. I will gild the runway. Keeping William and myself alive is merely the start of what I hope to accomplish.

I assume that Mother and Father are cognizant of all this, to some degree. In my view, this whole bang-up—the war—is simply an excuse to seek out and extract ever larger sums of money from the tax base. The whole conflagration merely serves to increase trade, which serves to increase tax revenues,

which results in more war. Fortunately for me, the family doesn't seem too keen on auditing my activities. The fact that my relatives' economic interests are currently seen to overlap with my own is a kind of happy accident, perhaps of the sort depicted in children's cinema, or in certain of the ancient, sequentially illustrated pamphlets collected by my father. In reality, my family's enlightened self-interest drives a free exchange of goods and services, a marketplace that in turn benefits the entire community. My own present activities, in spite of the myopic moral objections offered by my sister, contribute to this aggregate effect. Taxes (and thus, war) are merely inevitable. Yes, I've done some reading on the topic. I readily admit. But the ideas I've argued with Father stand on their own, heedless of any pseudo-intellectual hem-hawing. I dare say that they are self-evident. If only I could get him to understand: even in wartime, altruism is *beside the point*.

The kid in the cart doesn't realize I'm only in it for the money. He digs his fingernails into the palm of my hand, obviously frightened by the noises on the street. We round a corner and a rather large building comes apart right in front of us. He buries his face into my coat just as we're pelted with a boiling shock wave of dust. For some reason he looks to me for protection. Of course, this toddler's intellect is incapable of assessing the true complexity of our situation—he's not yet up to the task of cynical apprehension—but perhaps in the end he is right to place his faith in me. It is unquestionably within the realm of my interests to ensure that he survives these trips to the surface. The profit motive is clear. It's right there in my contract.

I pause to reflect on the brilliant symmetry of our arrangement and it dazzles me all over again. I cannot help but marvel as I trace its subtle mechanism: William survives; I profit.

I strive to gather my thoughts.

The dizzying effect persists, even as large sheets of smart glass are de-integrating everywhere around us. A rapture similar to my own seems to have overtaken William. I am enthralled as he adopts a distant, distracted gaze, his jaw falling slack almost against his shirt. He is serene now in his repose, more contented than either of us have any right to be, given the circumstances.

I believe that my hand, which he continues to grip quite tightly, is starting to bleed onto my trousers.

Torn from my reverie, I reply with a gentle squeeze, communicating to William that we are going to be all right. I guide his chair across the street, away from the perambulating dust cloud that by now has puffed up its chest to encompass half of the block. If the trailing wisps of this mess are not to gum up the works of William's chair, we'll need to find our way into a shop or an office or a foyer rather quickly.

Adults are hurling themselves to an fro, generally kicking up more commotion than is warranted by the simple demolition of a midtown office building. I reign in young master William and tether him to a banister, then set off to fetch an adult. In short order I'm breast-stroking through a sea of white lab coats. It is clear to me now that we've ended up in some sort of medical clinic.

It takes only a moment to evaluate the new surroundings, and I remain lucid enough not to dust myself off before approaching one of the nurses. That would be tantamount to chucking one of my tools into the trash.

"There's just no end to it," I hear one of the doctors remark, circumnavigating the perimeter of a nearby cubicle. His voice is filled with work-a-day resignation. I rotate my body to face him so that I might appraise him visually.

Half a second passes. His profile fits, so I launch myself purposefully in his direction. I'm going to try to smear hand prints onto his coat before he has a chance to form a dispassionate impression of me. Once I've struck, he'll be forced to take in my appearance, to consider my circumstances. The ploy is guaranteed to work, given his type.

"This spamming war just goes on and on."

His remark is sympathetic in nature. I take his words as an obvious cue to redouble my approach velocity, step fully into the field of his vision and wipe my arms across his chest, submitting my filthy clothing and runny nose for his inspection.

"Excuse me, sir, might I inquire as to what it is that has just taken place, out on the street?"

I let the question hang there, resonating in the stale clinic air. I'm play-acting now as if I'm stupid, asking after that which I'm clearly not equipped to understand. He buys into this mailbox full of spam because I'm merely a child, seven years of age, and therefore, self-evidently, not yet sophisticated enough to mount a motivated deception.

Oh, the folly of experience.

I tilt towards him perceptibly, making sure he takes notice of my garb. His eyes fall upon me in silence and then there is a gap of some seconds before I finally detect a twinkle in the center of his mechanical eye. At last, he's picked up on it. He's located the transceiver. He's got a make on my ID.

This, of course, changes everything. His demeanor, not thirty seconds ago the sort of bemused half-attention one pays to a poverty-stricken child, is now replaced with that of a Green hobo ready to snatch a million dollar bill from the Church collection plate. I am well acquainted with this shift in disposition, immediately recognize his "tell," and so may now reflect that my gambit is almost certainly working.

"Well, hello there, young fellow!"

He dings my helmet.

"You see, recently, some *bad men* have taken it upon themselves to provide our city's skyline with a series of aesthetic improvements. You may learn in school, in the coming years, about a social interaction often referred to—referred to *in the literature*, that is—as *politically motivated violence*. Or, for short, PMV."

"Splendid and fascinating!" I exclaim, masking a considerable amount of mental activity with a merely adequate portrayal of child-like wonder.

Allow me to explain. Throughout the preceding scene my mind has been occupied, simultaneously, on three fronts: affecting to extract details of the bombing attack without also giving away my real aim; shuffling through numerous possible *non sequiturs* with which to counter his inane stammering, none of which must come across as excessively practiced lest I inadvertently alert him to the fact that I'm on the grift; and, to complicate matters, keeping an eye on what's going on around us in the office, paying particular attention to my physical location relative to all possible exits. It has only been in

situations like this that I have, after so many years, felt well and truly engaged with the world. A fickle melancholy now descends over me, and I resist the urge to withdraw, to run outside, to find myself peering over the railing and thoughtfully evacuating my stomach. Characteristically, I maintain my hold on the situation. I press on.

The doctor, for his part, sinks into a portrait of exquisite confusion.

"Say, son, what *are* you two doing in my clinic?"

William's chair is knocking back and forth, gently, blissfully unaware of the limits set by my tether. I turn my eyes back to the doctor very slowly, straightening my posture and raising my voice.

"Sir, I was carting around my little brother here when the building at 25765 St. Aecstopher's Cross did fall down nearly on top of us. I'm afraid I have sustained some sort of injury, as my arm seems to have gone missing."

I do the trick with my shoulder, slipping my arm, and he gasps as it re-appears in my sleeve. Absentmindedly, I look down and say, "Oh, *there* it is."

He fails to laugh. Instead, he puts in a respectable effort to wrinkle his eyebrows, to grow more visibly concerned. Privately, I want to be disappointed with this reaction, to ask him if somehow the humor hasn't translated, but I *will not* break character over a single flat joke.

Now, this fellow knows when he smells a five-star dinner. He's recognized which house we're from. Dad's pressure screen is probably glowing red even as we commence negotiations. I think I can actually feel the chips twitching in my wrist and neck, as both regions are crying out to be scratched. Or maybe it's just my allergies.

Without warning, something seems to click into place in the doctor's head. He lunges towards me.

Almost before I can unlatch William, the man's taken me up into his arms, ferrying me into an examination room. He unloads me gently onto a table and smooths me onto its stiff, white paper. A microwave sweep to stem the spread of various bacteria. It will be interesting to learn which perilous—though certainly, at this clinic, treatable—ailment he has diagnosed me

with, now that he realizes I've membership in a truly superlative insurance program. That's when he notices my eyes.

"Son—" His own eyes get stuck gliding over William's gilded chair. "Son, are you... *blind?*"

"Of course I'm blind, you jack-ass!"

Okay, here I will admit that I've broken character and degenerated into an emotional outburst. I wrench my face back into a pathetic sulk and twitch only once, trying to restore equilibrium. I remind myself to act my age. Let *him* guide the scene.

"How long have you been wandering the streets out there, without being able to see where you're going?"

An easy one.

"It's never really been an issue. I mean, I seem to know my way around the neighborhood pretty well. Everyone here knows *me*. And twenty-twenty vision isn't a panacea against belly-flopping architecture, as I think was proved out there today."

"Hm. I suppose it was. I admit, you do seem capable. But still, blindness is a serious complaint for one who spends so much time outdoors. I would imagine it's also quite demoralizing, when your obstructed vision is rated against that of your peers, wouldn't you agree?"

Like I said, I'm a million dollar bill lying face-up on the sidewalk.

Presently, he claps me into another chair, this one missing the sanitary strip of paper, and begins attaching things to my face. I open my mouth to try another approach but he simply reaches down and plugs it with a wad of medical gauze. I suppose we'll have to continue our discussion once he's finished tinkering with my eyes.

He's a few hours getting on with it, and so by the time he's taken down my numbers and confirmed them multiple times against his network queries, William and I are left to amble along home. Once again I have to point out: here we are, children, alone on the streets after dark, where a war is still being waged. (Admittedly, the firing usually stops when the sun goes down.) Sure, plug me into a machine to fix my eyes,

and then send me right back out into the war zone. What was the point? I could just as easily have enjoyed this kind of treatment from the boys back at HQ. In any case, I have now been outfitted with an outlandish plastic headband. It encircles the top half of my face and displays a pleasant array of colored shapes, monochrome to onlookers and passers-by. Aside from the cosmetic effects, my vision seems unchanged.

We exit the clinic without having gathered any useful intelligence. Ditto for the tally of unburdened currency we have to show for our trouble. No doubt this will have been a complete waste of an afternoon, distinguished only by the irritation of a needless medical procedure. I've wasted a lot of time that could have been devoted to shoring up my grip. William looks up at me, visibly disappointed.

At an intersection, I am surprised to note that I can now see things I have never been able to see before.

In some ways it is confusing, this trying to peer between the fat cubes of light that gyrate before my eyes. At first I am not quite sure how to adjust, even as I attempt to keep walking. Slowly the input begins to make sense; to help, rather than hinder, my navigation.

On balance, I will say that there is much to recommend in these additional streams of information, all dancing betwixt each other and pouring unstoppably into my face. The interface is intuitive, hands-free. I can see where such a device could be considered useful. I'm even getting telemetry now from HQ. What has this motherspamming optometrist *done* to me?

I seem to have gotten quite a ways down the street on my own. I've inadvertently left William back at the intersection, his chair bobbing in sync with the traffic. When I return to his side I see that he has pulled out his knapsack and begun to tear off little strips of paper, creasing them into slim, rectangular folds that bear a striking resemblance to illegal tobacco cigarettes. He offers one to me and I accept, gripping it between my second and third fingers, leaning back against the enormous smart glass windows of the FIRST MULTINATIONAL BANK. Eventually, I bring the sliver of paper up to my lips, deftly feigning inhalation. Smooth flavor...

William looks up at me with those preposterously large eyes of his and, for the first time today, puts forth the effort to straighten out his spine and stutter a few words. In spite of the pain it causes him he wants to speak to me. You have to admire his grit.

"T-T-Thomas, it's been a fun day, and it is r-r-rather late—*ungt!*—but, if it's all the same to you... I... I would prefer that we tarry here for a while, and p-p-pickle in the ebb and flow of the... c-c-cool night air."

I raise my cig to him and nod respectfully. We both jump as a building collapses, somewhere off in the distance. On this night, the city will not be afforded its usual dusk-to-dawn reprieve.

Gingerly, I work the length of gauze out of my mouth and begin to unroll its damp wad of fabric onto the sidewalk. William's glassy eyes reflect a light that seems to originate from no obvious source. He recognizes what it is I've managed to smuggle out of the doctor's office. There is more here than just the blood and spittle sopped up by the rags.

A selection of tiny hand tools glistens in the light of the street lamp. These are the final pieces we'll need to render our reverse-engineering shop, hidden for now in a vacant ammo closet on the sixth level, fully operational. Once I can get a hold of a few more classified schematics, we can begin undercutting the importers and kick our minuscule operation into full gear. We'll even be able to outfit William's chair with its own shield jacket and an independent comms package, all of our own design. No more relying on the adults or outsiders for our gear.

I briefly consider cutting Father in on this action. The notion is dispersed by the echoes of mortar fire reverberating across the river. Try as I might, I know he just couldn't be made to understand. This world we've arrived at, crowning from the great, vaginal maw of nothingness bequeathed to us by our ancestors, brooks no quarter for the elderly, or for those sad individuals still nostalgic for the unambiguous adversaries of eras past. Pop would be happier lobbing rounds at the enemy, clawing defiantly as he sinks into his grave, still convinced he's making some sort of falsifiable, empirical contribution to his generation's most momentous struggle.

What a load of bollocks. Dad has wasted his entire life on this nonsense.

I decide it's best to keep my opinions to myself. William tends to be sentimental when it comes to family.

Speaking of which, the boy has gotten busy, grunting and drooling onto his shirt. All evidence of his brief flash of lucidity is gone, vanished. Might as well never have happened. He's making a mess of his clothing.

I snatch up the little bundle of tools before he spoils them. Sometimes you wonder why you even bother. With William, the sentiment is amplified. I suppose I do feel for him.

We're both of us looking forward to the end of this war.

No, really. Hear me out.

I've grown weary of the grind. I want to be free of William, free of this duty.

I worry that the adults have already compromised our security. I can't imagine the Green insurgents will ever give up. Do you see what I'm saying? It's frustrating that the family pursues this stagnant vision of religious purity. We can't all be ideologues. Or not of the type my father admires, anyway. We have to be in this to win it. We have to get in where we fit in. And that might not include the Church.

For now, I suppose, I'm content to focus on having a smoke and getting rich.

I'm convinced it's the only way I'm going to survive.

VISOR TECHNOLOGY

tags: 1964, actron, tab1, tab2, the_chief

The new gear seemed to suit Tommy fine.

Indeed, over the past month he'd hardly complained. The visor allowed him to dominate. Sometimes even with the older boys. Now, he came home with money in his pocket.

He still hadn't been drafted.

When I'd sent him to the clinic, I was only vaguely aware of what they might install in his head. This modern equipment was beyond my expertise. Above my pay grade, as we used to say. Now, it looked as if some improvements had been pushed to Tommy's firmware, even in the last fifteen minutes. All I could do was shake my head.

The tactical advantage was clear. I was just glad HQ had agreed to pay for it all.

Reagan was starting to concern us. Would he poison the public on Bush? J. K. Rowling might run for President in 1968. Naturally, something had to be done.

I decided to involve Tommy. I was allowed complete discretion when it came to personnel. I thought that with the enhancements he'd prove useful. At least as useful as before.

And he had been pretty useful, before.

I got him out of bed and brought him in to work.

The Chief was having a bit of a problem with a can of bi-partisan gravy.

"I can't get this spamming thing opened."

Tommy quickly found a weak spot in the can's lid, using his visor. "No problem," he said, and opened the can.

"Next time, I'll just go with the low-fat deli shtick."

"None of that stuff is very good for you," Tommy chided.

The Chief could only roll his eyes.

"Well, shit on my Christmas! The boy's found another one."

Campaign contributions. We'd put Tommy on the trail of J. K. Rowling's backers. The financial streams were now running through the boy's system. He was even better at this than the machines.

"It's old man Jerrymander."

"The Molds," I said, making eye contact with Tommy.

We'd had a hell of a time keeping this guy out of the race. Strictly speaking, he wasn't even legal; an immigrant from some border state that had been excluded from the new American union. But he'd leveraged his wealth to rig local rules in one of the communities he controlled. We'd missed it before it was too late. It had caused some friction here at HQ. Who was to blame? We all had a bit of a problem with Mold's politics.

"So I guess if he can't run, he'll put up a guy who can. Sounds like a good strategy to me."

"No, not analysis," I ordered. "You concentrate on the streams."

"Yes Father," Tommy replied.

After a while he seemed to tucker out. I brought up some comic books on my leaf and sent him over to a corner. The Chief had allowed his own son to tag along that day, and so the two of them spent a few hours together, chewing on slices of lunch meat and catching up on back issues of *ACTRON*. Harmless entertainment, in my opinion.

But Tommy had hit on something important. If Jerrymander Mold really was angling again to get his claws into the election, we could expect a lot of activity down south in the next few weeks. It was likely the attacks on the city would only intensify.

The boy's visor had amortized in only a month.

PAPER WINTER

tags: 1966, mother, tab1, tab2, violet

Violet's Diary

1 October 1966

It had all crumpled. Violet moved her eyes across the sky but could not find its edges, the corners of a vast, dirty sheet of paper that canopied the entire city. Fibrous swirls stirred and unrolled before her, contriving illusions of focus. Violet stared silently past the rooftops, ignoring the city and directing her gaze forward into space. Or rather, she thought, she *would* have been staring into space, if not for this endless, sprawling white that inevitably drew one's eyes back into the soot. Her mask observed the scene with detachment. On its face, it did not register whether Violet felt one way or the other about the situation. More broadly, about anything at all. The lack of visibility was of personal concern, to be sure; but it was nothing that should mar Violet's appearance to others. The mask was certain of this. After all, Violet had configured the settings herself.

Violet turned away from the window and directed her face towards the central corridor of her family's apartment. A line of green squares tracked her hand as it traveled from the window back down to her side. Turning in bright arcs, the dots of color followed by half-steps, floating gradually closer to the reflector on the opposite side of her body. Chimes had sounded, there in the room, and Violet knew at once that she was meant to answer the door as quickly as possible. Her mother had not yet emerged from her preening room, her father was still in his bath, probably drinking, or perhaps by now bloodying his hands on the broken pieces of his bourbon glass. She could not slump any further without endangering her balance, so she straightened herself, careful not to put any undue strain on her stabilizers. Finally, this action prompted her mask to register a minute change in her facial expression. Inside, a joint clicked.

"My back feels like it's being folded into paper airplanes," she muttered into her faceplate.

Presently, there emerged between the doorway's mechanical lips a familiar, angular-faced woman, who reeked alternately of whiskey and of the orchids that were pinned to her billowing yellow coat. Violet's grandmother swept into the apartment and at once commenced to critique the child's appearance. She was able to issue several disconnected, declarative statements before being overcome by the rolling contours of her own formal wear. Violet giggled. This animation of the old woman's garb was not without its effect. Soon enough, bony hands pushed through the bright folds of cloth and found purchase on Violet's arm. The hands proceeded to travel. Violet's fingers were studied at length before it was stated authoritatively that she would now turn over her tobacco pouch and put away her pipe. Nicotine, her grandmother said, stains the hands.

When Grandmother fled the seclusion of her estate, which was by now quite seldom, she would insist upon stowing a small animal within the sleeves of her baroque accouterments. As a matter of course, one such animal was present today. The *Shih Tzu* nipped wildly at Violet's mask as she leaned forward to embrace the old woman around her waist. Violet made no attempt to pull away from her grandmother or from the dog. Her mask maintained its aloof composure, sensors indicating that, beneath its porcelain exterior, Violet's flesh likewise held close to its default settings.

The formal greetings finally concluded, Grandmother seated herself and began smoothing out the creases in her dog's black velvet dress. A spate of frivolous conversation ensued; meaningless, serving only to mark the passage of time and to calm the old woman's nerves until at last she would be reunited with her son.

Brill cream.

A wristwatch.

He was now able to make out a lot of what was there, sitting on the bathroom shelf. Paper-white reflected in the mirror, streaming in from the window. It was snowing. It was daylight again. Still?

A buzzer. His face seemed permanently affixed to the bathroom floor. Two or three of his teeth scratched along the tiles and vibrated in sympathy with whatever that racket was,

echoing down the hall. A pool of saliva had formed around his chin. Slowly, he came to the realization that the current arrangement of his limbs was uncomfortable.

When his arms didn't work, he shifted attention to his legs. He pushed himself over to the door and noticed that it remained locked from the inside. Still, it was a no-go on getting it to open again. At this point he couldn't even pull his arms up off of the floor, much less manipulate a key.

Movement in the hallway flagged his attention as a whole set of keys (worn externally) brushed the doorknob in passing. The sound passed very quickly. Presumably, Violet, on her way to the kitchen.

Just then, the remainder of last night's double-malt scotch flickered into view, diffracting the snow-light and catching his eye. The bottle lay motionless in a blurry field of illumination, an unconvincing square of warmth let in by the bathroom window. He realized then that the odds were narrowing with regards to his non-functional arms. Oh no, not again. He lunged wildly and tried to chew the words out of his mouth, protesting the locked door, proclaiming his innocence, but instead of the familiar taste of his own lies, his tongue caught on a jagged fixture of gauze and surgical tape. Fragments still wedged into the space where a molar had lived.

He popped several fasteners by artificially expanding his belly and got out of his suspenders and Italian pants. The shirt and vest had become a straight jacket, detaining him against his will; flailing around on the mat beneath the sink, he tried to squirm out of them. Finally down to his underpants, he slid over to the bathtub and pushed himself up, over its lip, into the gaping, porcelain mouth. The water was quite warm, as far as he could tell. The porcelain, cold.

Head upside-down, hanging over the edge of the tub, he could just make out a snow drift on the neighbors' roof. He had to stop then and laugh because it looked like the house was wearing a beard.

He had been awake for close to half an hour. It should have taken no more than four seconds (at the outside) for his arms to come back to life, but the scotch was complicating matters. His shoulder gave an inch, and a splinter of pain shot through his elbow, shattering violently at his wrist.

Motor functions had still not returned to his arms.

A pounding came at the door and it was faster than he could sink his bottle into the tub. The soapsuds were mostly dispersed now, traveled behind his legs and back. He realized, too late, that his glass was still on the sink. None of this would look good to Violet. He hoped it was the boy.

The lock clicked, and turned, and then the heavy wooden door swung inward.

Appearing at the foot of the tub was his nine year old son, head poking through the shirt Thomas had struggled to tear out of only moments before. It fit him like a circus tent. The boy was completely oblivious to his father's predicament.

"Dad," he said. "The Vice President will arrive soon."

Soon, he thought. But Thomas could not yet speak. He was too drunk.

Presently, his wrist began to turn, forming his hand into a fist beneath the water. His grip was so tight that it drew blood from the skin graft stretched around his palm. He could hear some nonsense about Redaction Day dinner from a telescreen three rooms away. If his mouth had been working, he would have screamed for them to turn the damned thing down. So loud.

His mother would arrive within the hour, no doubt with her husband in tow. He hadn't even wanted them to know where he lived.

The Vice President. The spamhole.

Now, where were his pants.

Again, his kid was waving his arms around like a shot pigeon and looking as if he had something especially urgent he wanted to say.

What?

"Dad!"

He heard a weird grating sound in the left side of his head, followed by a long hiss that seemed to issue from his own mouth. Lateral stimuli?

Thomas blinked, involuntarily, and his arms fell off, right into the bathtub. He heard the *bloop*, and then he heard them hit bottom, rolling around underwater. Suds splashed onto the

floor and also onto his cleanly pressed pants, which were right where he'd left them, draped over the edge of the sink. He looked around, disgusted. How was he going to get himself out of the tub? His daughter would be livid.

But he was also suddenly sober. In half of a second he'd come fully awake. Yes, it was not too soon to say he'd hatched himself a Redaction Day plan.

The idea burned in his mind, seemed to radiate sufficient heat to alter the temperature of the room. Old favors would be called in. They would not make a fool of him this year. Things were definitely starting to look up.

"Tommy, get me my phone."

"Sure thing, Pop!"

Thomas, Sr. looked around the room. He fished in his pants pocket and found the other flask.

"Fuck it," he thought, and took another drink.

D.I.V.O.R.C.E.

tags: 1967, margaret, piro, tab1, tab2, the_chief, violet

While we waited for NO/MOAR to calm down, overtime was channeled into other projects.

Tommy was doing well, he'd started his ops training in the fall. I had asked to have him assigned to Piro, the son of an old buddy of mine, and probably the most experienced instructor at the Farm. Everything seemed to be going as planned.

Then we ran straight into PM/DAWN. I was out of the house for six months.

Here again, I have to say, Tommy was a big help. On his trips home he'd advise HQ on tactics. He had a knack for anticipating how the enemy would respond to our provocations. It was bad of me, but again I found myself wondering how hard it would be to pull him out of classes, to get him more directly involved in the operation. He was shaping up to be our most promising young asset. I stopped worrying about whether or not he could handle a regular assignment. He was more than ready; anyone could see it.

But the boy needed to be in school. On this, I honestly agreed with his mother.

So, we had reached an impasse. I left him where he was.

One day I was catching up on the backlog of paperwork when the Chief dropped something new on my desk. Immediately, I recognized the name of my daughter. It was printed there in the byline.

I had never once taken a drink on the clock, but I found myself wondering after a bottle.

I looked over the folder. It appeared to be excerpts from Violet's diary, circa 1966. Key portions had been circled, some of them were flashing.

The phone rang.

It was Violet's mother.

It was my wife.

As I say, I didn't even drink.

I still don't know why Violet wrote it; the bulk of it was obviously fictional. Some elaborate account of my supposed boozing and general drunkenness. Wholly fabricated. In any case, the facts were irrelevant. The girl's mother caught wind of the mention of alcohol and that was that. It didn't matter that she'd never even seen me take a drink. We were getting divorced.

I hung up the phone.

Well, this would complicate dealing with PM/DAWN, almost certainly.

I didn't want to draw things out—I knew the last thing the kids needed was the added drama of having to wait for me to show up and take my lumps—but I needed to make a few stops on the way home. I realized that, with my few personal belongings, I had very little that would be of interest to the children. Even Margaret's scriptures said that this was no way to make an exit from your family. Protocol required that I turn over, to each of them, some artifact to remember me by.

Prop-effects from here at HQ were no good; Tommy had spent his whole childhood playing with them out in the warehouse. He knew they were junk.

There was nothing of interest in my truck, either. By habit, I kept it as clean as my office. Briefly, I considered giving Tommy the vehicle; but then I remembered that he was only nine years old. The truck was unlikely to be of use to him, at that age.

What else.

The Chief was in, so I couldn't sneak into his office and rummage through his mess, either.

It looked as though I'd be paying a visit to a GANG-STERMAX theme store. Find something there. Thus equipped, I could face the children, explain to them why this would be my last evening living with them at home.

I hoped that the local branch would have what I needed in stock.

Or at least something approximate.

(18:54) < tommy> trds

(18:54) < tommy> i guess he's not going to be home for a while. you know, you still have time to change your mind.

(18:54) < violetCRUSH> Oh, fuck him.

(18:55) < violetCRUSH> Mom's not going to stand for this.

(18:55) < tommy> for him being late when he had to stop off at the store?

(18:55) < violetCRUSH> Haha, no, you idiot. just watch.

(18:55) < tommy> i really wish i could be home to stop you from doing this.

"An old belt?"

"Son, you know I don't actually drink. But I won his belt twenty years ago, riding an electric bull."

Tommy's connection cut out, momentarily.

"You were drunk," he resumed.

"Well..."

I was spinning this stuff out of thin air. I hesitated for too long.

"Of *course* he was drunk! Can you imagine Dad climbing onto an electric bull under any *other* circumstances?"

"This is stupid," Tommy said. "Have you been drinking behind our backs all of these years or not?"

"An analog microscope? But... *why?*"

"This belonged to me in college, Violet."

"But all the glass has been removed!"

"I... it broke, some years ago."

"I suppose I can use it as a bookend."

"That's my girl. Good thinking. Adapt to the situation at hand."

Tommy cut out, rather abruptly. This time on purpose. He seemed disgusted with the whole affair. Good, son, put it into your training. Violet kept trying to resume the connection, but he was gone.

"What a kick in the chest-balls, Dad," Violet said. "You could at least have bought us something *expensive*."

I cleaned out my den with a minimum of fuss. Most of my gear was networked and took up little physical space. It wasn't a big job. Violet helped me pack my things out to the truck.

Margaret never even entered the room. Violet said she was waiting until I was gone. The sour old bitch.

Well, I don't suppose she deserved that.

"You know I get your room when you're gone," Violet said, elbowing me in the ribs.

"That's what this is all about, isn't it?" Of all the... I had finally put it all together.

"And what if it is?"

My only daughter. The sour little bitch. I don't care what you think, I won't take it back. *She definitely deserved it.*

"We'll see if you're still smiling when your brother and I are in Ohio this summer."

That shut her up. Her training was topmost in her mind. I could cut her off. Let her sit in my den. *Reading* about the training.

"You don't know what you're doing, Dad."

And she was right. I didn't.

VIOLET RETURNS FROM THE WOODS

tags: 1967, margaret, tab1, tab2, violet

As I say: at that moment, I had no way of knowing how far it would go.

Once Violet was sure I had left, she burst out of the house and ran into the woods, making a production of whatever tears she was able to muster. She stumbled over a tree limb and managed to tear her stockings on her way to the ground. For increased verisimilitude she also affected to scrape her elbow on a rock. Her face (and mask) contorted accordingly.

Margaret observed all of this from the kitchen window, cursing me audibly for having driven the girl into the forest. Her fists clenched stiffly and her arms began to flail about, a spontaneous gesture of maternal rage. I would have laughed even if I'd been standing there. Funny. Predictably, she proceeded to bang one of her hands into a cabinet corner, drawing blood. With this, she sat down on the floor and began to cry.

Much was made of her injury back at HQ. Some of the guys actually felt sorry for her.

Ah. My tender-hearted compatriots. Let them sit at the dinner table with the woman. Then we could talk.

By now the Chief had filled me in on the plan. I would be brought up on charges before a tribunal. The trial would be pushed through with a minimum of publicity. In short order it would be decided that I was to serve out a five year sentence in minimum security. Of course, I would still operate with relative impunity from my cell. Assignments would be passed to me via the usual covert methods. Meanwhile, the divorce would be finalized without me. An Agency lawyer would be dispatched to handle the case, making sure that the children were well taken care of. Margaret could fend for herself.

So far, I was unable to offer a single objection.

Next, I would be drummed out of the service. I would be stripped of my seniority and pension. To compensate, my Turkish accounts would be reinstated. I would be provided a bottomless slush fund and unlimited personnel. All requisitions

would be rubber-stamped. Best of all, I would have my pick of assignments from the general pool. (Within the boundaries of the fall line-up.)

"This is just like Iran," the Chief observed.

And indeed he was right. If they were trying to frustrate me, it was going to take more than fulfilling every bullet-item on my wish list.

"So long as we don't get canceled in the first season," I said, also referring to our defunct Iranian program.

The Chief took my meaning.

The purpose of the divorce/prison subterfuge was to free up vital Agency resources.

Namely, myself.

The war had tied a number of key assets to specific regional theaters; a change that had been mandated from the top down. This was not how the Chief liked to operate. Presidential authority had encroached upon the Agency's domain, and the Chief was ready to turn things right-side up again. The only problem was, authority for force replenishment had not been returned to the Agency.

So, the Chief said, a number of non-essential agents would have to die.

Others, such as myself, would simply go to prison.

Again, like Iran. Laundering, we called it.

Once she was sure that Margaret had finished the chores, Violet returned to the house. Streaks of soft mud had accumulated around her eyelids, conveying the impression of an afternoon spent sitting in the dust, consumed by uncontrollable sobbing. Remarkably, Margaret herself was still in tears.

The two females sat at the kitchen table, foreheads touching. Blubbering and sputtering loudly. I had a leaf close at hand and immediately began to jot down notes.

I was surprised to notice one of the surveillance operators dabbing at his own eyelids with a handkerchief. This was an extraordinary display for a professional. He had obviously failed to detect the covert communication that was passing between the females of my household.

I recorded his handle in an adjacent column.

The next day, Violet shared her story on the playground. Her fellow students were enthralled. Violet had inherited a particular skill at narrative, it was true. From myself or from her mother I could not say.

She led her friends over to the reflecting pool in preparation for her big finale. Her mask wobbled in and out of coherency, but the other children seemed oblivious to its significance. She had gained a fuzzy penumbra. Was she having second thoughts?

"My father doesn't know I know this, but... *he's a secret agent!*"

Gasps for air. Unintelligible, involuntary vocalizations.

Here I would have the last laugh: her schoolmates would soon learn that I was little more than a drunk who had abused his children and who had been dumped into federal prison for his trouble.

We would see how Violet would recover from this blow to her credibility.

Relaxing at home, Violet took her time moving her belongings into my den. Margaret hadn't even complained about the mess. From time to time, Tommy would stop by. Near the end he could barely contain his disapproval of the new decor. Pink stripes and red carpeting; plus all of Violet's junk. But in deference to Margaret's authority, he said nothing.

It's too bad he didn't speak up. Some friction might have slowed Violet down.

Emboldened by the great success of her first deception, Violet would soon go to work on her mother.

KUDEN

tags: 1968, dante, piro, ralph, tab1, tab2

Tommy and his group made their way over to the 9th green.

"This is the 9th green," Piro announced. "Please stack your lunches, or line them up neatly along the outer edge of the training area. It would be appreciated if you could put the lunches into your gear bags, if there is no extra room along the tree line. It will be a while before we are ready for a snack."

Most of the boys complied.

"Now, if there are no preliminary questions, we can begin."

"Sir," Dante interrupted.

"Yes, Dante?"

"Ralph isn't here."

"Isn't here?"

"He hasn't caught up with us yet. I think he spilled his gear bag in one of the sand traps."

"I see."

Piro dispatched a pair of camp counselors to fetch Ralph.

"Now. Tommy, please attack Dante with your *hanbo*."

Hesitantly, Tommy rose to his feet. His camp uniform flapped in the cool breeze. Standing in the darkness, he could no longer make Dante out against the tree line.

So, improvise.

Tommy lunged wildly, waving his *hanbo* around like a parade flag. He ended up taking three or four steps towards where Dante ought to have been standing. He was starting to wonder if he should adjust course when he felt what seemed to be a hand brushing against his visor, which caused him to blink uncontrollably. This disrupted his movements such that he fell directly onto his face. A beat later, Dante had tripped over his own *hanbo* and fallen on top of him.

"*Saru mo ki kara ochiru*," Piro said, extending an arm towards Tommy to help him up. "I see the problem. Because of the darkness, you are both effectively blind."

"No shit," said one of the other boys.

"Actually," Tommy ventured, "Because of my visor, if I had enabled the functionality, I would be quite able to see in the dark."

Piro was not impressed. "Yes. Then that explains your fall."

"I tripped! What do you want from me?"

"Get up."

It went on like this for several hours. The nine boys finding any and every excuse to fall on their asses, and Piro obliging them happily. I don't know about the Agency, but I was certainly getting my money's worth. At a certain point, the two older students returned with Ralph in tow. It had taken them quite a while to coax him out of the sand trap.

He had lost a contact.

"Ralph. Please. Attack Tommy with your *hanbo*."

"My...? Oh. I left that back at the cabin."

"I see. Here, you may use mine."

"Oh. Well... Sure."

Ralph assumed an offensive posture and then tore off running towards Tommy. Only, Tommy standing wasn't where he had been, moments before. *Nothing* was where Tommy had been. Ralph looked around. It was nearly pitch black. All he could distinguish in the night was the tops of the trees. He could not even see his own feet.

Ralph's optic revelation was interrupted by the unlikely sensation of his left arm being wrenched fully out of its socket. Tommy had somehow entangled his arm with his own short staff. As Ralph cried out Tommy sank deeper into his stance, fully applying the technique. At length he released the pressure and fell back into a defensive stance. Ralph collapsed to the ground, writhing and spitting, nursing his damaged limb. Through his tears, he could just make out Tommy's silhouette, skylined against the clouds above the trees.

"Oh *bullshit*," cried Ralph. "I quit!"

Towards the end of the training session, Piro began to pick on Tommy.

"Tommy, with me."

"Again? But I've gone the last ten times in a row."

"What can I say? You're good at falling. Let's see if you can keep it up even when you're tired."

"It's a shit parade and you're riding the big float," said one of the other boys.

Piro triangulated the reverberations and then pointed directly at the source of the remark.

"You're next."

In the middle of Piro's sentence Tommy launched himself into the air, a full-body tackle aimed squarely at Piro's chest. He could feel himself making contact even before it happened. On this, his first day of training, his confidence as a fighter was already on the rise. He was a natural not only at strategy, but even at the blunt, physical stuff.

Piro stepped lightly out of the way of Tommy's assault, digging his fingers into the slim space between his visor and his face. He twisted Tommy's body around in a spiral, somehow gaining the leverage to flip himself over Tommy's back. Next, the equal and opposite reaction: Piro's movement sent Tommy hurtling over his head into a tree. The boy went limp and collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

"We're finished here for tonight, boys. We'll meet on the 9th green again tomorrow, after the cookout. Twenty-three hundred hours, sharp."

Immediately following Piro's departure, Dante rose to the occasion. He knelt over Tommy's inert body and began to take down his trousers.

"Come on guys. We'll give him a Scottish Samurai while he's asleep."

CLASS 68

tags: 1968, 1983, dante, piro, ralph, reginald, tab1, tab2

"I hate Ohio! It's crazier than a dick in an ashtray out here!"

"Son, I don't care if the instructor cuts your fingers off. Your tuition is costing taxpayers money. Think NASA. You suck it up and make me proud."

"This combatatives SME... Piro. They tell me he has photographic reflexes."

"Yes."

"Dad..."

"I trained with his father. He'll get you off to a good start. Learn your basics. Then you can complain."

"I'm experiencing some mild discomfort, Dad."

"I should say you are! Remember, I'm familiar with your physical stats. The pain will pass."

"Whatever. I guess. My knees feel like toothpaste."

Tommy clicked off and straightened his uniform. Shortly, a tram would arrive to take the boys bar hopping. First on the itinerary was THE VULVA POLE. Reginald's idea. Tommy hoped they would have time to grab a bite to eat before moving on to THE TIZENOUS. Dante's idea. He spun through his calendar app. Scheduling headaches, even at camp.

"A pigeon can't drop shit if it never flew."

The password was correct. Tommy minimized the lock and a few of the guys from his class ambled into his room.

Reginald appraised the situation. Tommy was going overt.

"I see. We're assuming the ladies can't resist the uniform."

"Where's Ralph," Tommy asked, smoothing down the front of his jacket. Reginald always had the freshest gear.

"Fapping in his room again," said Reginald. "We didn't interrupt."

"Just as well," Tommy sighed. "We're all logged out, right?"

"Probably not Ralph."

"Oh right. I guess he doesn't mind that they log everything we do."

"For him, I think that's part of the appeal."

Click. Click.

Shoulder almost out of joint.

Piro eased the pressure only slightly, but it was enough for Tommy to snake out of his hold.

"You had better hope you didn't let me go on purpose. Sir."

Piro didn't answer, so Tommy continued.

"I guess you didn't see that coming. It's a little something I've been working on with the guys. *I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's.*"

"Blake. Good. I assume you're telling me that you haven't yet mastered the techniques I assigned to you."

"Well, I haven't engaged in rote memorization. But I'll assume the fact that I'm standing over here, no longer restrained by your hold, indicates that I've familiarized myself with the basic principles."

Tommy's posture didn't alter. Piro's gaze remained steady. The other boys in the training group thought anything could happen.

"Talking to me that way is... ridiculous."

"Doing this for three hours a day is ridiculous. Do you really think I'm learning anything from you?"

Piro continued to stare.

"Boys, take five. Tommy. Over here."

"What, you want some more of this?"

"I think you'll understand once we begin."

I guess really I should have stayed glued to the monitors. After all, it was my son. But I couldn't study every moment of his experience. That probably marks me as a bad parent.

I've no defense.

I had originally intended to be present for his graduation, but at the last minute I was called away to put out fires in another department. Quotas.

I hold onto this earliest transcript because somehow, the later material is no longer extant. The available photos are even older. For some reason, mixed in with the logs from the camp, there are old snapshots from Tommy's primary school. Evidently, that's all that's left from the surveillance we ran. I'd ask Piro about it but let's just say we're no longer on speaking terms.

[Interruption as I answer incoming messages.]

In the end, I hope that Tommy can live up to his early promise. When I lost track of him he was well on his way to providing excellent ROI. Even with the ego problem. Essentially, he was a sure thing.

'68 was a long time ago, but not so long ago that he'd be inactive just yet. If he stayed in.

I should look him up. He's probably not that hard to find. With my access.

What am I saying. I'm retired.

DULL CARE

tags: 1969, tab1, theodore_roosevelt, volume_1

"Well well, I've not seen one of *these* in quite some time."

Our cell was crammed floor to ceiling with the things, box upon box, but for some reason, the weathered newsprint of *this* particular comic book held singular importance. He was being very careful with it, and I had to cough into my shirtsleeve to mask an involuntary guffaw. He stowed the comic's bag and backing board before he continued.

"Just look at it. I'd grade this as at least a VF/NM. Unfortunately it wasn't slabbed. You see, there once existed any number of companies that would take a comic book and grade it meticulously before sealing it permanently in archival grade plastic, which would guarantee—"

"I know what 'slabbing' means," I said.

He was talking in captions now.

Volume_1 had the largest comic book collection in the entire cell block. This was significant as, in our facility, comic books were traded as currency. In point of fact, these specific comic books were valued as well above average reads. I don't mean to pun: they were literally encoded with information critical to the continuity of the United States government.

This was all he managed to tell me before we were interrupted.

"Shh! Someone's coming!"

Volume_1 was desperate to get the issue back into its bag, board and long box. I couldn't figure out why; there were plenty of comics in our cell to go around.

We could hear them talking.

"Productivity is down."

"Have you thought about reducing headcount?"

"Ha ha ha ha ha!"

After the guards had passed, I turned back to Volume_1. "I don't think I've ever asked you why you were in here."

"I kept sending these instant messages. My manager was monitoring. Frequently, I guess. Evidently, the content of my messages offended his protected sensibilities. Based on his religion. Felony Insensitivity."

"I see. Which heresy?"

"Chicago Cubs."

Nothing more needed to be said.

Volume_1 went back to his comic book and I watched him flip through it, gingerly supporting its spine on the flat of his hand.

Soft chimes surfaced slowly at the periphery of my awareness, progressively drawing into focus. It was time for Volume_1's shift. He stopped extracting comics from yet another long box and scooted it back under his bunk. Bushed, I stretched out for a short nap.

At least, that's how I made it look to Volume_1.

As soon as he vacated the cell I pounced back to the floor, removed the false panel and pulled out my kit and belt. I tore open a new packet of FalseHand, deposited the wrapper, and in the same swift motion pressed the delete button on the trash bin. I waved my hand in front of the cell door and exited onto the balcony, where I was greeted with quite a lot of hustle and bustle. Most of the workers were scattering about between shifts. Volume_1 would return within sixteen hours, so my timetable had to be executed with precision, not skipping any beats. Fortunately, as a professional, I had been expertly trained. There would be no problem meeting (or perhaps exceeding) the requirements of my schedule.

My ride was idling on the roof. As I approached the air vehicle, rotor backwash batted my hair around my face. Annoyed, I tied it back. A man strapped to a gurney was removed from the back seat before I boarded. He looked to be in bad shape.

I observed the red cross of the landing pad shrinking into nothingness as we pulled away from the complex. The pilot of the helicopter gave me a thumbs up but I stared past him, blandly, lacking any awareness of his gesture. Outside of the building my implants had kicked in and I was now sorting my mail.

Zoom.

Half an hour later they put me down near Monte Rio. By this time I'd changed into a sweater and khakis. A Mercedes idled ponderously about a hundred yards down the road, trickling exhaust runoff onto the pavement. I lugged my duffel behind me, finally heaving it into the car's trunk. Off to one side the driver stood motionless, grinning. Clearly, he was amused at my efforts to avoid breaking a sweat. He kept standing there and eventually I figured out that he was waiting for some sort of a tip. His remarkable audacity gave me a chuckle, so I dug around in my bag and passed him an old, rolled-up comic book from the collection in my cell. He jammed it into his back pocket, quickly, quietly, betraying no reaction, so as not to be observed by the departing chopper pilot. Obviously, he was used to this sort of transaction. Seemingly satisfied, the driver took his place behind the wheel of the Mercedes and we sped off through the countryside.

We accelerated into a steady incline, passing through many stands of trees before finally arriving at a very small entryway that branched off of the main highway.

The driver navigated the Mercedes through a series of security checkpoints, and soon I was deposited into one of the "new member" parking lots of the Green. Presently, a small, open-roof shuttle appeared, ready to escort me through the main gates of the encampment.

The trees of the Green were monstrous. I mean to say that literally: I was half-convinced they were moving. Of course, they weren't. I detected no other signs of life in the general vicinity. No animals. The hiking trails were deserted.

Not all was dead: I rounded a curve in the path and spotted my first vantage point, glowing yellow, centered in my field of vision.

The tree was quite large. It would do.

I hoisted my bags onto my perch, then setup the comms package before unjacking myself and turning on the beacon. I waited for the trigger.

Nothing.

The by-laws of the Green forbade surveillance equipment of any kind. I now surmised that this policy was enforced through active intervention, jamming of a sort I was not familiar with. My chronometer didn't even work. I would have to go manual.

I climbed down from the tree just as the sun was creeping below the horizon and commenced wandering along paths, searching for Bannister Colon.

When I found him, he was pulling on a Hawaiian cigar and waxing political with a few friends in front of a large, gas bonfire. The Eagle's Nest loomed beyond, wavering in and out of coherency through the flames and smoke. The trees seemed to be swallowing it and spitting it back out again, unsure of its potential toxicity.

"The high ground is attained through the stacking of bodies," Bannister said blandly, as if reading from a script.

My man Colon.

The others cackled, extending a wave of unrestrained mirth along the necklace of fat bellies draped around the bonfire's ashen neck. Each man appeared to have modeled his personal grooming and liturgical wardrobe upon that of President Theodore Roosevelt, patron saint of the Green. The aesthetic was an unfortunate portrait of crass largess. The body language a study in historical inaccuracy. Our former President would have been appalled at such a display. I shuddered despite myself.

Indeed, this was a strange scene: to a man they reclined completely in the buff, from balding head to lotioned, shoeless foot.

Preverts.

The *Prevert* tradition is older than the technology that makes it possible.

It took me a while to wrap my head around that one.

I'm only aware of the technology's existence because my grandfather was a member of the Green. Otherwise I would never have been selected for this mission. Traditionally,

problems within the Green are handled internally.

Membership is not hereditary. I was never invited into the ranks of the Green itself. Not that I would have joined them even if offered the chance. By the time I was of age I had long since departed for Iran, exercised my own unique will and signed on for my first tour of duty in the armed forces, trudging hip-deep into my own army of olive-skinned bodies.

Whatever, the organization had stopped accepting outside inquiries some time in the 1920s, after a breach of security had resulted in front page articles around the world that exposed the interaction between certain political leaders and boy prostitutes taking place within its walls.

Obviously, that was only a cover story.

Before long things started to pick up around the bonfire, activity sparking within the self-satisfied circle of fat.

From out of nowhere each man produced a small device and strapped it to his hand. Instantly, the bonfire extinguished itself and the surrounding woods fell silent. Only the sound of the men's chattering teeth broke the stillness, settling into a steady rhythm that resonated unpleasantly in my skull.

I began to hear what sounded like an injured animal, whimpering softly from within the center of the makeshift circle. The fire was out, but I couldn't imagine how it could have cooled so quickly, or how anything living could have survived the flames that had subsided only moments before.

The men's mouths spread wide and their chattering teeth became visible, reflecting in the sickly moonlight. I felt something hard coalesce in the pit of my stomach. For some reason the scene was affecting me physically. A hint of the taste of vomit trickled into my mouth.

A child had appeared. A boy.

Dumbly, he bounced between the bare bellies, clawing and scratching and kicking against the men of the circle. They didn't seem concerned with his evident distress. Blood seeped from some of the scratches he was inflicting, against the men and against himself.

Oblivious, he didn't seem to care. Lacking in empathy, the men didn't care either.

I never cared for this part of the process, myself.

Preverts rape themselves.

According to legend, it goes back to Caesar. Symbolically, anyway. Candidates in the world-ruling business have long been vetted through an exotic procession of pomp and ritual.

The technology I mentioned truly is remarkable. It's not exactly time travel, *per se*, because the men themselves, the initiators, don't actually travel through time. The same holds true for their victims. Rather, *space* is bent in such a way that interaction with the past is non-paradoxical. Lateral. Frankly, it's beyond me. I've seen it in action so I no longer try to make sense of it. It just works.

I shifted uncomfortably as the service continued.

Each man, when it was his turn, spit out his cigar and touched the surface of his wrist device. The boy would jerk uncontrollably towards him, drawing temporarily into his grasp. Simultaneous with this motion, the child's face morphed to resemble that of his captor, uncannily regressed to childhood. This alternating promenade continued for some time, though the participants were carrying out their observance at an unnerving pace. As each man embraced the boy he continued to whimper, weakly, and my skull tightened around my brain.

With each tap of the wrist, a different face.

My orders were clear: only interrupt them once they'd finished with what they'd come to do. It was imperative that the ritual proceed to completion.

Habitually, I always followed orders, even where inconvenient. That was my calling card. That was why they gave me these jobs. A Green mission was no exception, on either account.

Soon, the ritual concluded. It was time for me to intercede.

I checked my weapons before leaping into the clearing. Then, with a single, smooth motion, I laid down the entire congregation of important men. Nerve agent spilled across their undulating frames and splattered against the big wooden benches behind them. Sloppy. Uncharacteristically so. I

paused to scold myself and clean up the evidence.

The organic material in the benches was starting to melt. Running out of time, I abandoned them.

I made my way over to the boy. His features had stopped changing and now he wore the wrong face. Great.

Returning to the mound of boiling fat, I fished out the proper hand and used it to thumb the appropriate controller. Suddenly, the correct face coalesced on top of the boy's body. I introduced myself and asked him a few questions.

"Son, what's your name?"

"Thuh..."

"Yes?"

"Th-Theodore... R-R-Roosevelt."

The face. The Name. Not what I had expected.

Definitely a bigger job than I was being paid for.

Frankly, I was appalled.

But: Orders. Reputation. The things I actually cared about. I would follow the script.

I raised my weapon, logged in, and emptied my full clip into the boy's face.

Finally, the woods fell silent.

THE BAD STUDENT

tags: 1969, frankie_willard, prince, tab2, cheryl

I tear a sheet from my notebook. After some fidgeting I manage to produce a cigarette. I lean back against the concrete wall of the building, my rat-tail poking into the scruff of my neck. It's rather uncomfortable. There is a commotion from somewhere, over near the basketball courts. After a brief period of silence, the school bell rings. I curse, sub-audibly, taking my place in line. I'm careful not to crumple the cigarette as I conceal it within my sleeve.

Recess is over.

I'm antsy. I shift my weight from one leg to the other. This jostling brings to mind Frankie Willard, made to stand with both feet planted inside of a single tile on the floor. Punishment for having spoken out of turn. Frankie complained that because of his great size, he would surely topple over if he were not permitted to sway from side to side. The teacher sarcastically denied his request—structural integrity be damned. No, Frankie would have to stand firmly within the square, maintaining his posture for the duration of the class. At the time, I too had regarded Frankie's claims as spurious. Does an office building need to sway from side to side? It seemed ridiculous. A man should be able to stand still.

Today I'm of a mind to view Frankie's situation in a different light. Standing still in this line is impossible. Despite myself, I've begun to sway from side to side. Fuck it, Frankie was right all along.

At the moment, no one is watching me. I disregard protocol and resume my cigarette. Smoke slinks from the burning cherry, a string of ten-dimensional nothingness. Or so I choose to perceive.

The boy in front of me rotates his head to an obtuse azimuth, asks to bum a cig. I am more than happy to oblige. From my pocket I produce two slender folds of paper, offering one to my companion. He's still in possession of the lighter I made for him, so we're all set. Good to go. From time to time, I'm happy to supply free product, as a short demonstration will often serve to spark demand. When one's business is illicit, establishing the perception of good-natured magnanimity is

wise. Happy customers are quiet customers.

And quiet is a baseline necessity for my mission.

Just as the fresh cigarette taste is making itself apparent, our teacher pokes her head around the corner. She notices us stragglers, lately fallen away from the back of the line. She's displeased to note that we're still here, leaning up against the wall, each man enjoying an individual smoke. She approaches swiftly and proceeds to bend our ears. That's when she realizes who I am. Quite comically, this new awareness halts her scolding, mid-sentence. She directs the other boys back to the classroom and then turns to me, a stupid look on her face. She pulls me by my rat-tail into a deserted corridor. The contact is exhilarating.

I'm going to score.

The woman has been shooting me these kinds of looks all semester. A couple of times she's caught me adjusting my visor, straining to catch a peek through her blouse. Instead of voicing an objection she usually just smiles. It's crossed my mind that she may even *fancy* my attempts to look down her shirt. Consider: she's the only one of our first grade teachers who will wear shorts in summer. To my knowledge, this is technically against the rules. I turn these thoughts over in my mind, one after the other, as I consider my immediate future.

She tightens her grip on my shoulder.

I brace for a kiss.

Instead, she snatches the cigarette from my lips and sends it careening over her shoulder, skittering down the corridor. Well, that wasn't quite what I expected. I think to myself that it's convenient this corner of the building is devoid of traffic. Could she have planned our confrontation days, even weeks, in advance? Have things really progressed to that level? Gradually, the woman is drawing my attention to infinite new dimensions, threading my string through myriad vortices, the resulting matrix a blunt satire of our tessellating material realm. *She's the teacher?* I'm fit to burst.

She parts her lips as if to speak. Softly, softly.

This must be it.

"So. You believe that folding pieces of paper into the shape of a *cigarette*, then *selling* them to your classmates is a good way to make *friends*, Thomas?"

The tenderness I sensed only moments before is now vanished. She's trying her best to be stern. I can't say why, exactly, but this only excites me more.

"So far it seems to be working fine," I offer, straining, barely containing myself. "I have plenty of friends."

"I've seen you outside, pretending to smoke, for weeks now. The students here look up to you, and I'm disappointed in how you've chosen to repay that trust. I want you to think of how you're influencing them, Thomas."

"I'm not coercing anyone," I correct gently, so as not to rend the gossamer fragility of the moment. "I'm simply providing a service. There's an obvious demand and I'm only too happy to fill it. Surely you realize, this sort of equitable transaction is the very basis of our free economy, which ensures the continuity of—"

She kisses me.

I break free.

"—the very *continuance* of our society."

She doesn't seem impressed with my argument.

From my jacket I produce a conspicuously pristine piece of equipment. The object fairly leaps from its place of concealment. She is somewhat startled, tries to mask her reaction, but the sudden adoration evident in her eyes will not be suppressed. Does she know what this is, then, after all? Removing her hand slowly from my own, I raise the object to my chest (her waist) and finger the switch that brings it to life. She jumps as a holographic image grows out of my palm. I have to adjust my visor again before I'm able to see it.

So, this is Prince Rogers Nelson. Not exactly an imposing figure, but in relation to his framing, here in my hand, it hardly matters. Reports indicate that my teacher is quite enamored with this miniature entertainer. By all rights he was a fine composer, but some say he actually considered himself to be the physical reincarnation of the Egyptian Pharaoh *Ahkanaten*.

There was a spate of controversy around the time he decided to found his own religion.

Whatever.

The unexpected appearance of the tiny man seems to be doing the trick with my teacher. As PRN begins to vibrate, I angle him beneath her skirt.

"Just lay back," says Prince.

She does as he says.

While she is momentarily stunned, distracted, I remove the remaining contraband from my pockets, depositing several paper cigarettes onto the window ledge behind me. Shortly thereafter, the spring breeze carries them away, floating them ever downwards, towards the unnaturally green summer grass of the courtyard. All evidence of my wrongdoing thus disposed of, I snap closed my gadget and switch to manual, gazing deeply into my teacher's eyes as I finish her off.

She's some time in coming. But once sated, her body goes slack. At last, I relax my arm and place my hand on her exquisite breast.

To my great surprise, she recoils. It seems I have ventured too far. She smiles awkwardly and pushes me away, leans her head out of the window to see what I've been up to all this time she's been writhing under the ministrations of the holographic Prince. Her face shoots completely red, full of blood. The view from the window, of course, is unremarkable, but it's not the landscaping below that concerns her. She sees the paper cigarettes scattered about the courtyard and deduces that they must belong to me.

She begins to lecture me. Even these playthings, which are not real at all, still set a negative example for the other students. Such toys glorify the act of real smoking. I should have known better than to engage in this sort of thing while at school. The premises is also a commerce restricted zone, blah blah blah, etc. She is scrupulous to avoid any mention of her orgasm, though I sense the experience is still very much on her mind.

Overall, it proves to be a lackluster brow-beating. I consider the context of present events set against the larger backdrop of my mission and decide that her appraisal of my behavior is irrelevant. At twelve years of age, infiltrating the first

grade has been a cakewalk. If this doesn't boost my grade average I don't know what will. I swear, I'm ready to graduate CU/FARLEY. Let's hope my father and the Chief see things my way.

I acknowledge her statements as I shove my hand into my pants and scratch my groin.

As we return to the classroom, I reach out to hold her hand.

I probably don't have to tell you that I use the same hand.

UBICOMP

tags: 1969, potus, tab1

There is a ring of teeth around my stick and I can't pull it out. I ease back and forth, gently, but the mouth won't let go. A sliver of saliva escapes, spreading first around my stick's circumference, then down to its base. All at once the President's head starts to move again.

Textbook package delivery. Six calories of Turing gel forced into the digestive track of the mark. Freed from its carriage, some of the payload has already bonded firmly with the President's teeth. Presently, the liquid bootstraps itself into the machinery of surveillance. All logged in, phase one is complete. Other components of the payload make their way into the President's circulatory system, compensating for various biological ticks that would otherwise prove fatal to the Commander In Chief. Phase two, loaded, completed.

I imagine there is something of an alkaline flavor. I don't know how she can stand it.

Without warning, an additional teaspoon-dollop of nutrient-rich paste shoots between the President's lips. Slowly, it threads down her esophagus, coating her stomach's lining. I swish my stick around a bit, making sure that the gel, by now teaming with expensive hardware, gets a fair chance to take hold. She murmurs softly. I assume in pleasure.

I glance at my watch.

Over time, the rogue cells I've introduced will create new tissue. They'll get into the business of subverting dendrite structures, which in turn (I'm told) will lead to the President's conscious assent to our programs.

Caveat: the gel will need to be administered on a regular basis. I assume I will be selected as the agent of delivery (it's of no concern either way—there are numerous agents who are up to the task). In any case, the process will continue. Before the President knows what is happening, she will begin to *crave* the injections, find herself inexplicably drawn to the blunt insertion of stick into mouth. Lacking awareness, she'll come to regard the process as a pleasure of her own devising. She may even develop an affinity for the taste.

But enough of my speculation, however well-informed. Her mouth is upon me now, showing no sign of loosening its grip. Not losing suction. Her eyes have rolled back into her head. She's become unresponsive. Even her gag reflex has gone dead.

As an initial response to insertion, this *faux* catatonic state is not unusual. In my field-work I've observed that women will often slip into semi-consciousness once they've worked the Turing gel past their back teeth. In truth, I was quite alarmed the first time it happened. Maybe I had dribbled psychoactive sedative onto the tip of my cock, I thought to myself. But no, this brief period of unconsciousness tends to be shallow, tends to pass quickly.

I decide to sneak a peek, to see how she's coming along. Her mouth glides smoothly on a thick lather of saliva, sealed by the walls of her throat. Her head bobs up and down, gently rotating, rhythmically advancing and retreating across the length of my equipment. She's quite awake now and seems to have swallowed her cares.

A strand of the President's hair has caught on my watchband, but I'm reluctant to interrupt her work.

I nudge her lovingly on the ear and her entire head shifts weight to the other side. Her eyes flick open and she smiles as she releases my stick, seemingly unaware of the considerable amount of time that has passed. I slide out, drawing a trail of spit between myself and her tongue, which she stares at quizzically before flashing a mischievous grin and then aggressively chewing it all back into her mouth. Ordinarily this would be fine, but a pool of spittle has coalesced around my scrotum, and now it traces the contour of my buttocks. It is cold.

A pink square blips in the lower-left of my vision, telling me that the Turing cells have gained purchase.

I engage the President verbally as she re-applies her lipstick and adjusts her *coiffure*.

I start making excuses, looking for a way out of the room.

ALL THAT IS

tags: 1970, missus_camilla, violet

Violet used her stylus to press against the reflective surface of her school leaf. Presently, a margin message from Missus Camilla appeared, signaling the class to begin writing.

Violet began:

Words are insufficient to communicate all that is.

Having 'a problem' with this would imply that I think any other state of affairs is remotely possible. The fact is that I have to accept my best current thinking on the subject, and right now I haven't come up with any reasonable counter to the observation that language is inescapably circular. To me, this means that at best we can only approximate The Truth at any given moment—and since we can't make these determinations with any significant certainty (e.g., to judge the accuracy of our approximations), 'A' can only equal 'A' on a localized, individual level.

And yet, 'A=A' is the fundamental assertion of logic. I think there is a tendency to try and expand too far upon this basic construction. The subjective assumptions applied by logic tests too often outpace language's ability to accurately map the salient factors at hand. Too much emphasis is placed upon how the logic is articulated, with very little attention paid to the structure of the logic itself—which, presumably, should transcend the language that was used to describe it.

This presents an interesting—I'd say insurmountable—problem, and was essentially the point of my previous two papers. 'A=A.' Fine. But what the hell is an A? And who says so? The answer is that it all depends on who you ask.

I don't think the fact that we have managed to evolve grammars which are effective at managing objects and activities, effective at managing the processes of machines, even, is evidence that those grammars are universally descriptive of our entire shared reality. Success in a single, limited area does not imply universal success on a grand scale, even if many times a simple set of rules can exhibit emergent behaviors that transcend the original

description.

Consider the following stories. Observe how these seemingly correct articulations of reality work at cross-purposes to the protagonist's intentions, yet still manage to exhibit a peculiar efficacy all their own:

1.) Occupied Poland. A man held a job at a stroller factory. His child needed a stroller. Being short on money, and being handy with his tools, the man decided to steal all the necessary parts from his workplace and assemble the stroller at home. Wary of arousing suspicion, he limited himself to absconding with only a single component each night. After many such nights, the man took an inventory and noticed that he had managed to acquire almost all of the parts on his list. Finally completing the assembly, the man discovered that instead of a new stroller for his son he had assembled a fully functional, modular sub-machine gun.

Does this mean that a stroller is in fact the very same thing as a sub-machine gun? After all, the man had worked in the factory for many years and was quite experienced at his job (which consisted chiefly of speed-buffing several types of polished parts as they came whizzing past his station on an assembly line). In this case, the value of 'A' was at first disputed; then investigated; and finally, revised. In the end, would it have been sufficient to simply continue referring to the finished product as a stroller? Why or why not?

2.) A radical priest gains increasing infamy with the native residents of a Roman-occupied garrison town in Jerusalem. After he has been put to death by a civilian court—administered by his own people, no less—a cult religion springs up around him, and a legend begins to solidify around the memory of his living days. Indeed, the legend glorifies even the most mundane aspects of his life. His story is at first spread verbally, but is eventually written down by various scribes, disparate of geography and generation, who never quite managed to cross paths with the priest or his followers. (Granted, when the priest was supposedly executed, the scribes in question had yet to be born.)

I'm sure you can follow this one to its obvious conclusion. After a certain point, the language used to describe a legend begins to transcend the actual events, to take on a life of its own. The events themselves remain unobserved, wholly obscured from view. At best: irrelevant.

The above are clearly examples which reinforce the notion that all languages are tautologies. For this reason, 'A=A' can only apply universally when the definition of 'A' is immutable, cannot be tampered with as it travels from one side of the equation to the other. (This fact does tend to break the discussion into many different levels, including questions of control over so-called shared languages [e.g., dictionaries, popular idiom], but the problem of complexity comes part and parcel with the problem of precision.) 'A=A' may well be subjectively true, but the equation is necessarily based upon assumptions that may be incorrect. The uncomfortable truth about our knowledge of the world is that it is almost always filtered through a mediating source of questionable benevolence. Think about that. The ultimate impossibility of neutrality. Even if we momentarily eschew the likelihood of intentional misrepresentation, we must accept that once language escapes our minds and begins to interact with the language of others, we lose personal control over its context and meaning. At this point, rationally, we should acknowledge that we can no longer verify that 'A' means what we think it does. Thus, we come to glimpse the limitations of logic itself.

Language initiates us into a special kind of 'cargo cult.' We scramble, frothing at the mouth like so many tropical savages, attempting to reenact a Reality that we're just *certain* we've experienced, all in the vain hope that we might someday entice that Reality to return to us, laden with crates full of movie reels, Coca-Cola, and fresh cartons of cheap American cigarettes. At that point, we presume, we'd all be farting through silk.

Violet

DRIFT

tags: 1951, 2026, pink_floyd, tab1

2026.

The sunlight fades and I wonder after my satchel. It's here, buried somewhere under the snow. Wearily, I prop up both of my arms and thumb through the entries on my leaf.

I stumble upon a decades-old post.

1951.

So, I was laid out on the couch (free), face pressed up against my camo pillow (\$123.67), wondering if I should pick the dead pill bugs out of the fibers of my bath robe, when a garish advert for a new Pink Floyd "greatest hits" collection (\$2999.99) ran across the display of my telescreen:

*Order ECHOES now and we'll include blah sqwak blah niner
foxtrot delta sqwak blah sqwak blah*

My attention span waned and I lost the rest of the advert to random static generated by a mild migraine headache (previously acquired), but the damage had already been done. Slowly, the new information sunk in.

Within a couple of hours I had stumbled into the bedroom. I stood fondling the jewel case of a 2-disc collection of my own original music (entitled: *ECHOES*), desperately trying to figure out how Pink Floyd's handlers had managed to bug my home.

Motherspammers.

I took a swig of apple juice from a glass tumbler on the dresser, then spit it back out again when I realized the surface of the drink had been blanketed by a layer of dust. I needed to stop leaving those things laying around where anyone could find them.

I resumed staring at the jewel case. The artwork was superior to what I had just seen on the telescreen. Fucking Pink Floyd. What did I ever do to them? (Besides torturing that girl in the Pink Floyd t-shirt at Denny's.)

There had to be a reason why they had selected me.

I glared at the tumbler for a couple of seconds, then back at the jewel case in my hands. I downed the entire glass without tasting the dust. Apple juice doesn't really ferment, but at this point my migraine had wedged itself in-between my frontal lobe and another slab of gray matter I wasn't able to identify, resulting in a significant impairment to my decision making faculties. Somehow, I kept from vomiting.

Before long I detected a handful of splinters in my hand, and came to the slow realization that I'd squeezed the jewel case into several pieces. The dust flavor returned to my mouth, resembling the sensation of pushing my tongue through ungroomed tufts of fur. I threw the tumbler down and stomped back into the living room.

The advert was on again. This time tracking a sequence I hadn't noticed during the previous playback. The message ran at ten minute intervals, but I had yet to see it all the way through. The visual rhetoric was contrived, but would probably prove effective. They'd likely sell a billion copies.

I swallowed an over the counter pharmaceutical designed to combat dizziness and resumed my seat on the couch. Staring at a spot two feet above the telescreen, my mind began to spin down, drifting to other concerns. My next shift at my corporate front-job was scheduled to begin in just under five hours. Still tasting apple dust (maybe it wasn't really apple dust, after all), I chewed at the air with my mouth and then dozed off, resigned to whatever dreams might come.

Approximately two-hundred forty minutes elapsed.

I woke up. Two more pill bug carcasses had embedded

themselves into the folds of my robe. They no longer seemed to be the most likely vector of leaked intelligence. In point of fact they appeared organic. Quite simplistic. This new-found lucidity intensified as I painted shaving cream onto my chin and then accidentally sliced the skin between my nostrils.

It occurred to me that Pink Floyd might not really be ripping me off. They were probably capable of coming up with such an obvious title as *ECHOES* on their own. Their boxed set was probably being manufactured even as had I decided on the title of my own collection. Still, the overlap rankled.

I guessed that it must have been a case of Steam Engine Time.

For posterity's sake, I will note here that my own *ECHOES* collection may be sampled at the following address:

And here I had inserted a hypertext link. A pointer to some old, half-considered project of mine from my early years trying to break into the music industry. I wince at the memory, irrationally certain that this will be all they'll find when they finally dig my starved body out of this house and this snow drift and begin to piece together the circumstances of my disappearance. *Decorated Agent Leaves Behind Rough Draft Of An Early Internet Posting. Family Denies Any Knowledge Of Agent's Artistic Endeavors.*

I lean back my head against the exposed boards of the attic floor and observe as small flecks of snow float in and out between the cracks in the roof. My fingers have become useless now, and I suspect that I'm too weak to kick through the tile shingling. Troubling, to be sure. As if to underline the point, I make an attempt to stand up and one of my legs cracks and falls off onto the floor.

Well, so be it. Another opportunity to reflect on my past.

Reviewing this material I have to admit, I've had a good run.

IN THE END, NOTHING WORKS

tags: 2079, eva, gordon, tab2

In spite of his back, Thomas was up early the next morning. It hurt to be out of bed. He slipped on his robe and dialed a reasonable temperature for his bones. The floor felt cold under his feet. A draft tickled his scrotum as he dragged himself down the hallway, robe swishing freely between his legs.

Thomas found no paper on the front step.

Therefore, he reasoned, no newspaper could actually exist.

The number of people required to produce such an artifact could, quite simply, never be forced together, never be entrusted to bring such a project to fruition. Thomas dismissed the idea as self-evident lunacy. As with other would-be conspiracies, this "newspaper" business, if it were ever truly attempted, would immediately run afoul of man's signal inability to cooperate effectively. The whole endeavor would end in disaster. Thomas pictured a management team showing up at the office and attempting to corral the so-called "newsmen" into some semblance of order. *Let's put this edition to bed*, the managers would say. *Sure*, their subordinates would reply, *we'll get right on top of that, boss*. And then they would go to lunch. The whole concept of a metropolis of workers, each synchronizing his movements to the other, all in some effort to compile a grand codex of halftoned words and photographs... Ostensibly a periodical source of news and sports-related information... Implausible wasn't the word. The idea was like something that would come out of a liberal arts college. Thomas understood that in the end, nothing really worked. Thus it followed that no newspaper would or could be delivered to Thomas' door, on this or any other morning.

Thomas looked down. Perhaps he was surprised to see that the newspaper still wasn't where it should have been. He wiped the condensation from the front of his visor and planted his feet in the doorway, fixing his gaze upon the concrete stoop. Why was he here? He meant specifically. His eyes focused on a rough patch of masonry, shaped, vaguely, like a copy of THE NEW YORK TIMES. He was slowly becoming aware that his lips had chapped.

What...

He tried to remember why he was standing there, holding the door open, facing out onto the street. Nothing came to mind, save for an awareness of the relentless, frozen sheets of air that were blowing past his face. After several moments, he became enticed by the sounds emanating from inside the house, and so he retreated back into the living room. He sat down by the fireplace and started to pull on the hair that protruded from his chin. He would often affect this pose whenever he found himself confused.

Presently, Eva came in with the tea.

Thomas regarded her suspiciously, conjecturing that she must have prepared this tea herself, not simply poured it, pre-mixed, from a jug or a bottle delivered by the government truck. It would later prove that his suppositions had been correct. But at present, Eva refused to discuss her inspiration. Why organic tea? He wrinkled his eyebrows with palpable irritation and stared at her, knowing perfectly well that his tendency towards interpreting simple results as the fruit of complex machinations should not distract him so long that his tea would go cold. *I'm being silly*, he thought to himself. Next, he'd be accusing her of inventing, then hiding, and finally denying the existence of, his daily newspaper.

He resolved not to say anything about it for now.

The feed to his visor had gone dark, sometime, he thought, in the past week. The boys down at the switching station had gotten so wrapped up in their chatter and practical jokes that the feed had ceased to be maintained. This group of teenage boys had allowed any number of feed pools to become irretrievably poisoned. Obviously, the problem had yet to be amended. *The cause of the service disruption was the logical result of leaving unsupervised boys in charge of the running system.* There. Blunt common sense. No conspiracy required.

Though it could have been sabotage.

From the perspective behind Thomas' visor, everything had simply gone black. Neighborhood residents were skeptical that the city's plans for replacing the youths with middle-aged housewives would yield a network any more reliable than the

one that already existed. The real problem was that this new technology simply didn't scale. You couldn't expect everyone to get online at the same time without ramping up the system's capacity. Unsupervised boys or no. Thomas doubted if *any* demographic could keep the thing running without the assistance of authorized Green technicians. Of course, that would cost money. On a related note, did the Green Consortium really think that these middle-aged women would subject themselves to working for lower wages than what they could make staying at home? Like the aforementioned "newspaper" idea, the scheme simply didn't wash.

How the networks had ever been built in the first place was also a damned mystery. The secrets of net construction had apparently passed into the realm of myth—an area where Thomas carefully abstained from treading. Just what had inspired Jeff Bezos to invent the Netscape browser? The world might never know for sure. To be certain, claims had been staked out by all of the usual suspects: Church leaders, government agencies, atheist intellectuals—the full gamut of unreliable sources. But Thomas was confident he knew the real score. He had realized early in life that they all made up stories—lies, in fact—that weren't supported by the available evidence. Anyone who advanced a positive claim was merely covering an angle. *No one* knew the real history of the Green. Or, at the very least, he was certain there had been mistakes in the recording.

Just as well, then, that young people not be misled by any wild tales of human beings working together towards a collective goal. It might make for a ripping yarn, fine, but this sort of cooperation just wasn't going to happen. Not that he could see. In his experience, human beings were incapable of effective organization, even if sometimes his mind liked to hallucinate collaboration amongst his enemies. It would make more sense if the networks had simply grown themselves.

You had to market your trash to the trash men, or else they would stubbornly refuse to take it away. Thomas knew this to be true, but still he couldn't find the time to arrange his various bags and receptacles pleasantly enough to attract their attention. Instead, garbage would pile up for several weeks before he'd finally be forced to trudge down to the edge of the yard, spit on the road, and go to work creating a minimally effective layout. These city trash men thought they were

critics. Thomas knew full well that as insiders to the waste reclamation industry, their own garbage would never be subjected to the ridicule of their peers. Instead, a trash man's refuse would be hauled off periodically, sight-unseen. Thomas resented the situation because it just wasn't fair. He could feel his hate for the double-standard solidifying in his back. Why did consumers let the government get away with this?

Thomas spied his friend Gordon coming up the road.

"What up, G?" he asked.

"I dunno, man. Field trip around the sun, I guess."

Thomas fingered his visor until the face of his friend came into focus. Gordon had that look about him, as if he'd just been slipped counterfeit money. (Money. Another conspiratorial delusion. Thomas was undecided as to whether this particular fiction yielded sufficient utility to warrant his playing along. Convenient, since he was usually broke.)

"What are you doing to your face," asked Gordon.

"What do you mean?"

"There, your face. Why are you moving your hand around as if you were manipulating some sort of device, or making some sort of minute adjustments to your eyebrows. There's nothing there. Just that wrinkly old skin wrapped around your skull."

Thomas moved to punch Gordon in the arm. Just then, he slipped off of the stairs and toppled to the ground. He felt his hip shift out of its socket as he struck the hard stone beneath him. Resigned to the pain, he put his hand down in the snow and groaned.

"Can you help me up, please?" he said. "My damn ass is broken."

Perversely, Thomas' visor clicked through its boot-up sequence and once again resumed service.

Click. Click. Click.

But the settings were futzed. Thomas could see through Gordon's pants.

"Nice briefs," he said.

END BOOK ONE

BOOK TWO

THE GREEN

tags: 1918

Mary lit candles while I made some adjustments to the sound levels and then paced off the markers on the stage. The trees were turning up their leaves and the cold breeze against my face indicated that the sooner we got started, the better. The weather was in transition again. I noticed that in the diminished light, the curtain seemed to be reflecting the green from all around us. I looked down at my arms and the same effect was showing against my skin. Mary smiled acknowledgement from her corner of the stage.

I faced toward the swaying grass. The movement of the hillside caught hold of me immediately—I felt it pull against my stomach—but once the playback started I had little trouble falling into the correct rhythm. Insects in the trees began to organize their shrieks around the activity on stage. Presently, our surroundings had settled into smooth synchronization with the machines. The shift between recognition and acceptance was instantaneous, complete.

I noticed after a while that this had all transpired without incident, and so with the usual assistance from Mary I began the second phase of the rite. Intonation. One voice, then two, joining with the electronic pulses, slipping into the fold, setting down a canopy atop the invisible scaffolding which was still emerging from the loudspeakers. We erected a shelter of sound, continuing with the program until almost all movement within sight had come to a stop. Even the grass had ceased its inverted pendulum swing. A single drop of water splashed against my face and I winced almost imperceptibly, but did not waver in my vocalizations. We both turned to face the hillside.

Then silence, from the both of us, and all at once it was over.

After an indeterminate period, Mary began to extinguish the candles. I worked my way around the stage, detaching speakers and re-coiling cords and plugs. The hillside below remained resolutely still throughout this secondary performance, our movements a sort of encore begging the mute appreciation of spring foliage. This silent effect would persist

for weeks before finally returning to normal. Mary and I would fall back into our own familiar patterns. Clanging about. We would complain that we missed the children, or that the government had evolved beyond all recognition. It was comfortable, for the most part. But the trees on the hillside were more thoughtful. They would hold still for a few more days, perhaps as a reminder of what had already passed. While I might climb back up to the stage some afternoon, planning to relax with a book, my consciousness of the synchronicity would have already expended itself. The resonance would be completely drained. I was sure it would be the same for Mary.

I slept better that night than I had in a long time. A decade. The temptation was always to think that if we'd take time out for this observance just a little more often, if we'd simply make an effort to keep these sentiments in our daily thoughts... Well, you know how these things tend to work out. The truth is—and this is as important as any other detail you'd care to focus on—the rite was only to be performed once a year. That's how it had always been. And the tradition, I think, was correct. Well-founded. The empty spaces were in fact as significant as those caressed by the resonance of conscious observance. The transition from one state to another could only be measured along this sort of blunt, descending staircase. Dividing awareness from its counterpart, one state from its successor, empty to all filled up. How else could we perceive change at all?

As the rains started, I scooped up the last of the cables and snapped shut the plastic container where they were stored when they were not being used. A thoughtful crease appeared along the ridge of my eyebrows, and Mary quickly rolled out the awning over the stage, just as the downpour really began to break loose. We locked hands and wandered the stone pathway back to the house, a silent song on our lips as the rain beat clumps of our hair down against our ears. It felt as if we were aging in reverse.

Rainwater spread over the green fallen leaves, sticking them to the concrete, bulletin boarding them from the edge of the woods all the way up to the house. We kicked them along as we made our way through the spring shower, splashing forward to the doorway and its steady, house-shaped warmth.

Until next year.

EPISODE IX

tags: 1957, margaret, paris_mold, tab1, the_chief

I couldn't get the lid off.

I bashed the base of the jar against the corner of a nearby table (away from my body, so as to avoid the spray of flying smart glass) and kicked the resulting debris out of my path. Moved back to the terminal to finish transcribing. I had the bulk of the message keyed in by the time the big kitchen door dissolved into its frame.

In sauntered Paris Mold.

He smoothly traversed the tile floor, making a beeline for the object in my hand (and by extension, for me). He peered at my stats, observing my progress without bothering to explain his presence. Annoyed, I flashed him my teeth and continued typing. I carefully unlatched the bag under my table with an obscured foot.

Paris' gaze slid from my keyboard to my shoulders to my scrambled face in a continuous gesture. He maintained a blank expression that I couldn't have mustered even with the help of electronics.

He cocked his head slightly to the left and began to speak. I noticed there was a huge smudge of dirt on his cheek.

A detail such as that could be my anchor in the moments to come.

"That's one hell of a portable," Paris observed, nodding in the direction of my table-top device. As if in response, the pressure screen's broadcast antenna extended itself and locked into place.

Without warning, the room folded back upon itself, pulling all sorts of visual transforms that reminded me of the programming exercises given to small children at school. It appeared to be modeling the cellular automata of snowflakes, tree branches, and the flocking patterns of birds. Most of the standard primitives.

I gritted my teeth. Being this close to Paris Mold was like chewing power cables. I knew I wouldn't be able to keep my head straight for long, so I leaned in towards him and smiled in

feeble agreement.

"Yes, boss."

Paris coughed.

Purposefully, I fastened the strap on my helmet, then clamped shut my eyes until my sensors reached equilibrium. I risked one last glance at Paris Mold, tightened my scrotum and tapped the device in my bag with the tip of my boot.

There sounded a short series of digital squawks. Then the whole place went wobbly and the walls began to collapse.

A look came over Paris' face. As the ceiling rushed to meet the floor, he realized what I'd done. His expression was no longer inscrutable.

Still, this was going to kill me, too.

I plopped in another pat of margarine and inhaled over the sizzling frying pan. Folding the wrinkled bits of paper into the eggs, a series of disconnected sentence fragments slowly came into view. I closed my eyes and surveyed the partial collage. Three signatures in all. These were definitely the forms I'd sought, but the fragments seemed incomplete. Something was missing.

Tabasco.

I thumbed the labels of three different brands (there were several on the shelf). Overwhelmed by the available choices, I went ahead and emptied them all into the mix. A brief shot of green-smelling flame licked the canopy above the stove. Spam!

I batted the fire with my spatula. Left-handed, because I was still holding onto the frying pan. I had to guess about where the tongues of flame were going to dart next.

In wandered Paris Mold. We didn't make eye contact; we couldn't really, on account of my being blind.

I assumed he had come to apologize.

Mold was no longer my boss. But still he would offer me work from time to time, bundled with an awkward expression of sympathy. He felt responsible for my blindness and therefore made every attempt to wipe clean his conscience by providing me with advance notice of his job listings. I tolerated it only because I needed the work.

"Can't sleep?" he asked.

"Horseshit. I'm trying to finish my taxes."

"Still slaving away at that, eh? The deadline's coming up, you know," he chided. "Why don't you hire an accountant?"

"These days, I've got plenty of time to waste. Besides, I was hungry."

My finger hovered over the "eight" key while Paris regarded my handiwork. I wasn't about to enter negotiations without some sort of leverage—even if that meant blowing his forehead into spun glass. Paris wrinkled his eyebrows and made a disappointed sigh. So, this was going to be it. With a flick of my finger, a shotgun would descend from the ceiling and project a hot lead sandwich through Paris' face. I judged from the sound of his low, even breathing that he was standing right on top of the the marker. Almost...

The bandages on my face began to itch. I twitched, trying to adjust the strips of gauze with my nose before they slid completely off of my face. This must have created an awkward spectacle, given the situation.

"What is that? Sign language?" Paris snickered.

A flash of rage. My eyes started to burn. I punched the "eight" key vigorously. *Eat this, fuck sack!*

Then: A long, piercing beep as my keypad's buffer filled with "eights."

Why wasn't it working? I looked down and saw nothing.

It transpired that my hands had slipped off of home row. I had been mashing the wrong key.

The realization dawned, as my wife used to say, too little, too late.

Paris Mold retaliated with extreme prejudice.

By force of habit, he went straight for my eyes.

They said I had been chewing on my left hand, apparently trying to get at my chronometer. I complained that I hadn't managed to kill Paris Mold, period, no matter what or when I'd tried. He was just so... *there*. You know? Something to do with his training, I guessed. It was this last remark that got me

pulled from the operation.

They wanted to know if I was through wasting their time, if I was ready to stop stalling. When had I planned to follow through on the objective? Was I really so disoriented that I couldn't maintain narrative continuity? And what was this nonsense I'd been ranting about? Had I experienced fear in the presence of the Molds?

The words "dishonorable discharge" were bandied about over my restrained body—the first time such words had been mentioned in relation to my person. It sounded to me like a threat. I could do nothing but foam and thrash.

Had I really failed so completely?

The Molds still walked the Earth.

The Chief phoned while I was still strapped to the table. He claimed that my wife had become pregnant.

I asked him how he knew.

THE PARTISAN

tags: 1949, 1950, 1951, 1953, 1954, mother, tab1

1

Mother didn't love me.

Well, who knows, but it sure was hard to tell. I assume she wanted me gone by graduation. Pushing me out of the nest fit symmetrically with first having introduced me to its warmth.

Only, I hadn't needed to be pushed.

Whatever the case, I wouldn't have stuck around once I'd secured my means of escape. In fact, my childhood agenda came to center upon vacating the nest at the earliest possible convenience. I told her as much on a handful of occasions, which may have been an early source of her resentment towards me.

Drifting, there. Such thoughts are useless for filling out my report.

I dribble a handful of words into the document and save before making a trip to the men's room. Time to call it a night.

Passing through the marketing department, I ponder the desks of the new-hires, noticing for the first time that their cubicle partitions and arm-thick contract binders serve as ballast against the accumulation of personal effects. The design is intentional. In my first few months at the company I never would have suspected such subtle architectures of control.

I round the corner to the men's room and take a seat in the furthest stall.

After a few minutes I'm faced with a problem.

No toilet paper.

2

I am out of work.

Real work, that is. My study group has been shut down.

It's the Greens. They're everywhere. Though admittedly they're less numerous than in recent years.

Take my former manager. Matters of consequence on his mind. A month ago he retracted our billet after deciding that my group had fielded too many atheists. A security risk, he said.

What is this, the 1910s?

For a while now I've been sitting at home, steadily freezing solid in my poorly insulated study. Not the best working environment, and I'm not getting much done. On top of it all, Mother won't leave me alone. I've had to resist the urge to flag her for rendition. I like to think I've made the right decision.

This morning I discover that the Greens have cut loose my former manager. I'm digging around in his account when the call comes in.

We're back on.

Patent disputes in the hinterlands.

The traffic orb on my desk glows a suggestive blue as I pick up the phone to contact my team.

3

Well, that didn't last long.

Back to retail.

I work the counter between calls because no one else knows how to operate the products we sell. Customers roll in and then they roll back out, *au gratin* waves of body fat wrapped in plastic garments. The typical specimen reeks of a public cafeteria.

A man wanders into my zone and starts fidgeting with the boxes of electronic equipment. He picks up a box and then sets it back down without examining it. He repeats this awkward choreography at several different positions along the aisle. His movements seem aimless and there appears to be no intelligent pattern underlying his investigations.

What is going on here? The answer is that I don't care.

"Is there something I can assist you with, sir?"

Contractually, I cannot allow his anti-commercial behavior to pass unchallenged. I maneuver myself between him and the shelves and then read him one of the scripts I've been required to memorize.

"I am certified in twenty-seven dialects of formal sales semantics, with a top-five ranking amongst appliance technicians in the local Green. It would be my pleasure to interpret your needs today. Thank you for choosing AT&T."

"Son, let me ask you a question. Do you actually *like* working here?"

I have to admit, there's no easy way to answer. I don't let it show on my face.

From an obscured storage pouch the man produces a business card and communicates it smoothly into my hand. Affixed to its underside is a thousand dollar bill. I turn the tiny rectangle in my hand, staring at it quizzically. What has just happened here? Gradually, I realize that the currency is fraudulent. The thousand dollar bill is a facsimile, printed on the reverse of the business card. I smile and the man lights up, returning my grin. I swear I can hear his face skipping gears.

"Five minutes of your time and that t-note becomes real, deposits into the account of your choice. Spend it however you like."

It's hardly pocket change, and of course I'm well beyond broke, so I gesture for him to proceed with his pitch.

Before I know it, he has me filling out paperwork, signing papers. "Signing your life away," he announces, and smiles.

He doesn't seem to care about my previous experience.

4

I'm being sent to the front.

Well, *one* of the fronts.

In modern warfare, someone has to keep the breathers running. My orders are to install hotfixes and updates on the machines that control the mobile flow tanks, which in turn feed the breathers. We aren't permitted to install unauthorized programs, but everyone I've ever worked with does so anyway.

Our Sergeant hosts a fileserver from his backpack.

The men of the platoon have taken to calling me "Mother." I assume this is in reference to my careful maintenance of their breather apparatuses. I don't find it amusing in the slightest.

In spite of improvements to our equipment, signal degradation continues to render the mail unreliable. The satellite gear proved flaky and we dumped it after the first week in the field. At higher elevations we're sometimes able to establish line of sight with the fleet.

Mother would probably like to hear from me. Maybe I'll drop her a line the next time we're up the mountain.

5

Responding to aggressive stimuli, I discharge my service rifle into the crowd.

My round exits the back of a man's skull and strikes the man standing directly behind him. It then travels on to the next man standing behind him. For a split second the perforated heads sync up, their wounds aligning in a peculiar sort of optical tributary. As quickly as it is formed, the channel collapses and the illusion of coherence is lost.

This dynamic tableaux has been observed by several hovering cameras. I'm struck by the way each unit edges past its neighbor, vying for a better angle on the corpses lying at my feet. They seem to deliberately ignore me and my fellow soldiers. I don't understand why.

A hand falls on my shoulder. It is the Sergeant.

What's he doing here, I think to myself.

Oh, right.

6

Prison clothing is uncomfortable. In my case it fits well enough. Some of my peers have been less fortunate.

I keep in step with the other prisoners. Occasionally, I catch my reflection in the back of another inmate's jacket. Even out of uniform we're unmistakably soldiers.

A guard shouts obscenities through a bullhorn and the man in front of me stumbles. I think that I recognize him. Latino, approximately twenty years of age. Infantry, definitely. Could it be?

When the guards aren't looking I kick him in the back.

"Keep up, asshole."

He gasps, flashing me the secret hand sign of our platoon.

I'm convinced now, and kick him again, this time less carefully. Less the actor. I have him on the ground by the time the guard with the bullhorn interrupts.

"Move, faggots!"

We do as he says.

The data has changed hands.

7

I am free.

Released.

The spring sun sinks into my face. Mother has passed away at some point during my incarceration.

I convalesce at home for two days before calling in to be reactivated.

The boys will be anxious to hear about my experience behind bars. I wonder how many of us are left.

8

And now it's back to the grind. Nothing has changed about the war we've been fighting, though the locales tend to shift with the seasons. We manage the periodic disorientation by assigning colors to each theater of operations. This quarter we're in the Red. The projection is that by next quarter we'll be in the Black.

One of our little jokes.

Oh yes, and no White after Labor Day.

Staffing is flexible, pending new developments. This rotation we're at home. For us, domestic deployment (as with training) constitutes leave. The boys are all present and we fall into our familiar rhythm as we pace the perimeter Capitol Hill.

A froth of reporters churns to and fro between our lines. The latest fashion in Washington is a press pass that authorizes the bearer to cross military checkpoints with impunity. A

stupid idea, to be sure, but nobody asked my opinion. The cameras flit about as a few of the reporters spill over in my direction.

One approaches me, brandishing a microphone.

"Corporal! What's your take on the continuance of the war? Can you give me seven syllables on the reinstatement of compulsory military service? The draft?"

I regard her from behind my service rifle.

Seven syllables? Let's see.

"I'm afraid I enlisted."

HALF-DANDY IN THE RUBBISH FACTORY

tags: 1918, lonnie, pennis_mold

Standing in the mirror and seeing that without a belt, these new slacks are simply not going to stay up. I'm in danger of tipping the balance between classical style and practicality, but I mustn't be caught off guard if anyone should happen to catch a glimpse of me in my civilian underclothes. I find something suitable in my closet and pin myself into the pants, clipping a handful of mesh transceivers to my blouse before pulling on the pressure suit and chiming for a ride. Down in the tunnels, I don't want my breeches coming loose, getting wound around my legs inside of the suit. Before exiting the apartment, I remove a number of petals from a rose and press them between the pages of my notebook. I savor the scent for a few moments before concealing the book within my pressure suit and heading out the door.

At the entrance to the lowest tunnels I pause before a monstrous installation, a war machine from some forgotten conflict of decades past, and affix my collapsed flower to a placard situated below the airplane. It is humid enough that the petals stick to its slick surface with little effort. Even in this diffuse lighting, the mighty nose and wings of the plane gleam immodestly, and I am ashamed to experience a wave of exhilaration, prostrate as I am before such a reverential display of murderous articulation. I gather myself and proceed to the elevators.

In my mind it is all quite different than this.

I embody two discreet realities. Suffering alone, I am continuously in peril of favoring one reality over the other. As of late, a new barricade has been thrown up, an obstruction that permanently divides these tandem perspectives of the rubbish factory. Necessity demands that I pick a side and entrench my position, but my heart cries out for reconciliation.

I take solace in the fact that, being made of plaster, the dividing wall will eventually bow under its own weight.

If memory serves, a similar plaster wall erected around the masterpiece *Il Cenacolo* protected it from the onslaught of mechanized warfare, early in the last century. No one expected a fresco to stand against mortar fire, but here our fellow Leonardo had produced a hare from his conical hat. The wall stood firm though the building around it crumbled to dust.

I see now that such a wall can be made to serve a useful purpose. Do I really wish for all the evil in my thoughts to pass so freely? It is at moments such as these that I find it crucial to get something down on paper, before mind's effluvium carries mind itself away on a raft of sudden, fatiguing currents. In truth, I write to cleanse the palate. There is a bad taste in my mouth after three weeks toiling on the latest factory inventory. Lonnie plays Microsoft SOLITAIRE at his desk while I scribble in my notebook.

Furthering my previous thought, let us now consider the plaster wall in my mind as ballast. A shift in perspective to interpret the empty, unused spaces as the most precious of cargo: a portal to new understanding.

I boot up a fresh sheet of paper, reflecting upon the true nature of metaphor as filler. A great sewer main has burst in my mind, carrying forth copious amounts of shit and piss—both having been lodged quite stubbornly in the pipe. This is the opposite of the wall. I observe as each new parcel of feces floats away, bobbling down the stream. There is something that cannot be contained within a mind such as my own, a mind that is slowly breaking up, dividing into dull, gray cubicles.

It seems that we have come full circle.

Which way is it going to be, then? Walls to divide, or portals to connect?

They are both the same. Textures that are defined, even as they are described, by the perceiving apparatus.

There is a great wealth of surface detail to be absorbed, to be sorted, and I do carry on exploring, but I find that there is only one true form of currency, here in the rubbish factory, and that is the universal reserve of the personal imagination. It proves to be an *aether* that never devalues, that is never appraised relative to markets or governments—it is the ineffable substance that constitutes essential wealth.

Reaching this point of minor resolution, I close up my notebook and stuff it into one of the compartments of my pressure suit. A whistle sounds, groaning, pixelated. A gavel is banged and my mental courtroom clears of solicitors, making room for me to think other thoughts, to reconnect the cycling belt of my psyche back to the idling gears of its cadaver.

It is time for lunch.

We men clamber into the mess hall, which has not yet reached fifty percent capacity. Two- and three-man teams are clotted into flesh-colored scabs around the edges of each steel table. We dine on whatever has been set down in front of us by the kitchen staff. Between bites of supper, we trade raucous barbs.

"And what, pray tell, is the *value* of this thing called beauty," a colleague stands up and asks, apparently to no one.

A few of the men turn around in their seats to face the speaker. Some of them get up and leave altogether. But most simply pick over their lunch trays and stare at their food, seemingly oblivious to the philosophical gauntlet that has been thrown down.

"Ah, yes, the *dominant minority*," a familiar voice chimes in.

"Rather, I should say, an *aristocracy of merit*," counters the original speaker, earning smiles from every participating table.

I appreciate exchanges like this, here in the lunch room, as they afford us men the chance to unwind between extended shifts in the tunnels. The work can be grueling, the hours long. The repetitive plunging of gloved hands or shielded feet into the crowded arteries of the sanitation lines coarsens men to fellowship. But here, we make our own peace with our situation. Here, we arrive on the cusp of our destinies by the strain and sweat of our honest toil. It is a kind of progress.

Before things really get started, a triumvirate of management stride into the room, enjoying a buffer nearly three meters in diameter as they pass between the huddles of workmen. I grip my lunch tray with trepidation as they float past my table, unsure of the purpose for their visit.

What I notice first is the impeccable styling of their attire. Even when down in the tunnels, these gentlemen always—*always*—keep their gear clean. In the general low-light conditions of the sewer, it is their bejeweled teeth and resplendent gold necklaces which can first be seen approaching, glittering through the humid mists of municipal waste. At times, the ricocheting reflections may cause an entire face to disappear, or at least, they may seem to disappear when one's vision is obscured by a pressure suit mask. But here in the mess hall, we all remove our helmets to talk and eat. Here, the glare does not obscure but instead serves to illuminate.

The small group approaches now, my own supervisor striding to the fore. His low-slung denim splits into a Cheshire grin of plaid cotton undergarments. The suede of my supervisor's sneakers appears to be freshly brushed, having accumulated no floating particles of detritus or dirt. His tasteful, oversize polo tee asserts the classic dialectic of red and white striping, situated masterfully alongside a deep blue rectangle bearing numerous white stars, each of self-evident, sacred significance. I am somewhat taken aback by this sudden explosion of color. It is a moment I cherish even as it overwhelms me, and I briefly clench my eyelids together, attempting to trigger my mesh camera, to stream the scene into the pages of my department's distributed memory.

As the managers pass my table they hesitate, stop, and then double back.

My supervisor's nostrils incline perceptibly. As one, the group turns to face me. I swallow the food in my mouth, which goes down the wrong way, and I begin to worry about the visible stubble on my face. How must I appear to them?

"Yo, ya'll have been selected, son! We're up in this place to request that you authorize a temporary application fee of two billion credits to secure your promotion to management. Know what I'm sayin', cousin? To authenticate this ceremonial enhancement, please press here, fool. Fa sho."

I place my thumb onto the reader and press down, weakly. This elicits a further vocalization.

"Peace. Five thousand, G."

And then they are gone.

I am quite literally bowled over, and my lunch tray pinwheels to the floor in pursuit of my limp form. Lonnie, faithful companion of lo these many years, helps me back to my seat as I slowly regain my composure. Gradually, the ramifications of what has just happened begin to sink in. Promotion will mean an increase in my pension, new quarters... and an unlimited civilian clothing allowance. I have just been created anew. Afforded a repeat birth. I switch on all mesh transceivers and begin capturing every possible angle of my surroundings, preserving this vital moment, etching a record for the corporate archives, for my descendants, for their inheritors.

"What up, son," Lonnie chides, adopting the formal tone of management in a sort of mockery of their stiff, proper elocution. "These negroes done lost they minds."

I nod my head slightly, acutely aware of the expanse that now separates our respective circumstances. The great plaster partition has come crashing apart in my mind, and in this instant, the dejected, isolated occupants of each chamber are crushed together, the sticks of pious liberty bundled into a final, immobilizing unity. I eschew my former concerns, beholden as they were to considerations of slop and waste. The combustion of my thoughts is now fueled solely by the light of its own countenance.

Lacking a prepared response, I yield to myself completely.

My face droops into my hand. A bent elbow evenly supports the increased weight of my skull, flesh and excessively powdered hair. I find that I have grown suddenly weary of contemplating the great weight of my responsibility. Lonnie will come to appreciate this fatigue if ever he is called up, into the obdurate embrace of his betters.

But at this moment I cannot expect him to fully understand. Not while he still finds himself tethered to the undercarriage of our labyrinth of shifting human shit.

I look at him and it is obvious he cannot understand what I have become.

"Dandy," I finally reply, employing the crude language of the tunnels. I burp towards the mess hall out of politeness. In the resulting silence I pick at the visor of my helmet.

Lonnie makes a face, forlorn, but still he says nothing.

I wave him away. I excuse myself and leave my tray for the staff to clear.

I am already running next month's numbers in my head.

Fitting my manicured hands to the master controls of the rubbish factory.

ASDFASDF

tags: 1979, erik, roger, tab2

Thomas adjusted the focus of his visor and opened three new chat windows. He joined the appropriate channel in each window, issued greetings to everyone, and then banked his fighter jet into a cloud, dodging enemy fire. He checked his screens but it looked like everyone else was idling.

Roger crushed the soda can beneath her foot and stomped into the building. Behind her, Erik dribbled the rest of his beverage into the gutter and followed suit. Both of them were late for duty.

<Thomas_> Oh well, here we are again, crammed into this office when it's windy and gray outside. No cold London breeze in our faces today, boys! By the time you read this, I'll have flattened quite a bit of real estate, I'd imagine. Oh well, where does the time go.

<Rog> Is someone stroking you off over there?

<Thomas_> That's offensive. And just where the spam have you two been.

<erikw> i'm so spamming tired

A flash crossed all of their screens at once. A vibrant pink square that obscured half of the desktop, causing Roger (at least) to misdirect her fire towards a friendly.

Folks,

RDO (Regular Day Off)

Since we are starting a run on training next week and through September for various classes (other course scheduling to be announced), we will be depending on all to help keep our levels up as well as possible, as you have these last couple of weeks. Since Thursday and Friday are always busy days anyway, we'd like to ask anyone with their RDO on Thurs and Fri to work OT during our critical time. That can be up to 8 hours starting between 7am-9am, and possibly a couple more depending on how busy it is.

Then from next week on until further notice, we'd like those that will, to work OT on their RDOs between the same starting times, with the possible 2 hrs extra on top of the 8 if business needs are heavy. If you cannot work the full 8 but can work 4 hrs between 10am-2pm or 11am-3pm (same for this Thur & Fri), that would help out during the lunch periods. Of course working through lunch is also authorized w/ break splitting until further notice.

Thomas cleared the flash and flitted his eyes back to incoming. Roger and Erik actually finished reading the entire message.

The result of their decision was immediately apparent.

Rockets in the air. Thomas vectored wildly, but it was clear that convergence was only a matter of time. The air support team (the happy trio, all together) cursed simultaneously.

The potential flight paths whirling in front of them were useless. TelemeTry was lagging again. The sky was infinite white on every side.

Roger and Erik backed off of the target and regained control of their vehicles.

Thomas, for his part, had lost the ground.

asdfasdfasdfasdf

<erikw> i wasnt going to come in at all today but it turns out i've already used up my personal days for the rest of the year. it's fucking january!

<Rog> I was in the cafeteria and I heard Sarge talking spam about us not getting 20 minute breaks anymore after this quarter

<erikw> fuck that! argh. that does it, i'm deleting his account on webster. no more free zero day for him!

<Thomas_> Hey guys.

<Thomas_> I am SO not working overtime this weekend

asdfasdf

Thomas drummed his fingers on his desk absentmindedly. Presently, UTF-8 characters appeared in front of his eyes, translucent, but still rather annoying as they partially obscured his vision. He finished logging his flight ticket and got himself up, out of his chair.

As usual, Erik and Roger were a few minutes longer in getting their acts together. This was exacerbated by Erik accidentally brushing his elbows against Roger's breasts, several times, in the space of just a few minutes.

After she'd finished repeatedly punching him in the gut, both airmen caught up with Thomas and took their places next to him in the chow line, where they casually compared the features of their newly upgraded visors.

"I'm always waiting for you guys. Spam like this is why we lose so many airplanes."

Thomas held his serious expression for several seconds, and then they all burst into laughter.

I'M JUST SAYING

tags: 1979, christopher, violet

"Every time I walk past your desk you're reading that damned feed."

"Do you see the flaw in this?" Violet asked. "Every time you see me reading the feeds, you're away from your own desk. You'd never even know I was breaking the rules if you weren't up, walking around, breaking them yourself."

Frankly, there had been little to distinguish her until fairly recently. The spring quarter had perhaps brought about a kind of transformation. Certainly, she'd taken well to his instruction. Christopher mused (to himself) that perhaps what he admired in her most was his own reflection. But this was a profoundly disagreeable notion, and he discarded the thought. The light from the office window played softly in her hair. He would try again. There could be no harm in trying.

"No, Violet, Newton did *not* hold that the Green was eternal. A gentleman of his era would not even have been able to perceive the Green."

"Now you're just *lying*," said Violet.

"*Nullius in verba*," sighed Chris. "Trust, but verify. Or in other words, do your own research. You see, it doesn't matter if you believe me or not. This isn't a relative matter. The Green did not exist in the seventeenth century—it's not merely an assertion, it's an incontrovertible fact."

"According to your essentialist bias," Violet said. "But what are

There was no answer. It was a meaningless question.

Violet's mouth creased acutely at its corners, her eyes tracing the arc of the golden ratio as Christopher shifted in his work trousers, unsure of how to proceed. He could no longer remember what he had been trying to say, or why. He stopped typing in order to formulate his response.

"All you need to know about Newton is this: his work on optics may have indeed set the stage for the eventual overturning of his work on motion."

"That's *seriously* not even true," said Violet. "Einstein was very clear that his own work should not be seen to *supersede* Newton's, but merely to build upon the foundations laid by his able predecessor. Newtonian mechanics is still quite viable from virtually any perspective. Even today."

"I'm just saying," she added.

"And yet, you cling to this notion that Newton knew of—communed with—the Green. That he had some sort of access to the network."

"Didn't he?" asked Violet, rolling her eyes behind her face-mask.

"No," said Chris, finding himself increasingly frustrated, in more ways than one.

Violet drifted away. She thought to herself: *When I lay my head down, now, my dreams are as stories, are no longer as the psychotic, Dadaist collages to which I've become accustomed. Humble, linear narratives. But what is more important to me? Lucid memories of my childhood or the removal of this block, the lifting of this veil that has descended, that so complicates my machinery?* She was unaware of how she appeared, laying prostrate over her desk. Consequently, she was oblivious to her co-worker's mounting discomfort.

Christopher excused himself and retreated to the men's room.

He latched the stall. He took down his trousers and began to masturbate furiously into the toilet. His heartbeat rapidly outpaced the ticking of his chronometer. His breathing quickened appreciably as the sweat from his forehead poured into his eyes.

Presently, a long, slow moan escaped from his lips.

It was then that Christopher noticed the presence of a co-worker, seated in the adjacent stall.

"I'm just saying," the co-worker said, and folded his newspaper.

MY VIOLET DUCHY

tags: 1967, margaret, tab1, tab2, violet

Mother fitted Violet's mask into place, but that did nothing to cap the jet of words spraying from her face.

I *hated* my sister.

Violet: "All of this leaf stuff is still undecided. It'll be difficult to unseat the pressure screen in this household, especially with Dad. I wouldn't wager my summer vacation on that contraption. I doubt if he'll buy it from you."

Thomas: "The thing about this device neither of you seem to understand is that it's much more than a simple substitute for the pressure screen. Just look at it's features! The interface is remarkable, even to functional illiterates such as yourselves. See how it responds so readily to the touch of my finger? I'm certain he'll be as excited about it as I am."

Mother: "Isn't this a bit like that old LCD screen you dug out of the back yard, Thomas? I don't understand what's so interesting about it. It doesn't even *speak*. Violet is probably right: your father is not going to compensate you for this find, I'm afraid..."

Thomas: "..."

Violet: "He's not going to allow it into the house anyway. Are *you* going to tell him where you found it, or should I? *Ouch*, Mom, the pin goes into my blouse, not my neck!"

Thomas: "Sure, I'll tell him. Though I'm not convinced his consent is even relevant at this point. How is he going to say no when the device could prove indispensable to his work? Classical pressure screens are not going to be interoperable with the new networks. Is Dad going to let us go broke just so he can pretend the market still values his pre-war skillset?"

Mother: "Thomas."

Thomas: "Blame the market. I didn't invent supply and demand. Finding this thing in the trash doesn't *make* it trash."

Violet: "I have to wonder if there's any significant *purpose* to all of these upgrades. In a few months time there'll be another new device to replace this one, and then, in the fall,

a new device to replace *that* one. Haven't you discerned a pattern yet, Thomas?"

Thomas: "I haven't the slightest idea what you're on about."

SHELL OUT

tags: 1969, christopher, frankie_willard, tab2

When you lay your shell down on the street, you have to expect that someone is going to come along and pick it up. Frankie considered this self-evident fact to be ample justification for his scooping up the small piece of equipment and dropping it into his pocket. So far as he could tell, no one had noticed him retrieving the device. Out on the street, such random finds were rare.

Now, if only he could figure out what it was supposed to be.

Thomas Bright immediately recognized the shell's function. He observed his friend's actions and contrived to take the object away from him. By force, if necessary.

Presently, he asserted himself.

"Hey Frankie," he yelled.

The fight unspooled quickly, with Thomas shrugging off an abrasion and Frankie doubling over on the pavement, nursing a lacerated fist that had rolled through a patch of broken glass. Frankie's attempt at securing a headlock had proven ineffective.

Thomas surveyed the battlefield, projecting a wide, mischievous grin from beneath his visor.

"What?" asked Frankie.

The display of glistening of teeth had set Frankie's legs to feeling remarkably naked beneath the hem of his cargo shorts. With all of his extra equipment, Thomas was more resourceful than Frankie had supposed.

"How many of my cigarettes would you say you burn through in a week?" Thomas asked, gesturing pointedly and exhaling imaginary smoke into Frankie's face.

Blocks of light exchanged positions in front of Thomas' eyes. Discharges of air escaped through his lips at regular intervals as he considered how to attach Frankie's shell to his home feed. It was imperative to dump the shell's contents into

temporary storage as quickly as possible. By the time Thomas had established connectivity with the mesh, his errant verbalizations had organized themselves into a frivolous melody.

Christopher, for one, was unimpressed with the one-off vocal performance. He observed that Thomas tended to drift off-pitch, which was only partially ameliorated by the reverberations of the tiled bathroom walls.

"Soaked in reverb, your off-key caterwauling almost resolves into music," Chris stated, flatly.

"Thanks," said Thomas.

"What's the point of booting up this device if we can't connect it to our other equipment?"

"I'm appalled by your doubt. As well as your seeming inability to negotiate novel obstacles," Thomas complained. He laid down his tool on the counter and replaced it with another from his toolbox. "Please observe as I perform the necessary operations to bring this device's configuration into parity with our extant systems and software."

"But Thomas, this piece of equipment doesn't conform to open standards. Carrying out your plans would be at cross-purposes to our SOP; the greater work of populating our testbeds with only *legally unencumbered* technologies."

As the dialogue progressed, Thomas worked the casing off of the shell and proceeded to probe its internals. After a brief interlude of utter silence, he let out a whoop and spun around to present the results of his efforts.

A holographic image of Thomas flickered into existence, approximately four inches above the device. The projection aped Thomas' every word and movement, allowing for a slight delay.

"Just because you can modify it doesn't make it *free*—that is, er, redistributable," Chris tried to quip, but it had come out all wrong, mixed-up, as a wave of dizziness seemed to be interfering with his verbal faculties. "You can't even sell the thing now."

"Oh, give me some credit. I don't *plan* on selling it. Hand me the smallest forceps."

Chris could no longer tell if he was getting dizzy or merely getting confused.

"Then why are we wasting time examining it?" he asked.

Thomas looked up at him, perturbed.

"For the funk of it," he said, and then added, "I'm going to fine you if you keep asking me these stupid questions."

GENDER SMURF

tags: 1968, albert_lunsford, bob, piro, tab1

"You fucking faggot!" my co-worker cried as he leaped out of his pick-up truck and clapped me on the ear.

I placed my satchel on the picnic table and opened it. We got to work immediately.

"There's no point in shutting down the whole group," Piro pointed out.

"Oh, you're absolutely right," I said. "I think we can accomplish more by poisoning the well."

Piro had the black box up and running. Every message posted to the Albert Lunsford group would flow through our illicit kernel module before it even reached the group's database. In this way, we would tamper with reality.

"I used your wife's name for one of my fake logins," Piro remarked.

I popped him in the arm.

"Hey, it was easy to remember."

"Just keep your story straight when you're posting. There aren't many females active on the group; these guys will notice if you get your continuity out of whack."

I pulled up a sample message.

Date: Sun, 05 Oct 1968 04:44:16 -0000

To: albert.lunsford@groups.thegreen

Message-ID: <gcajs0+q6lf@groups.thegreen>

In-Reply-To: <gc66fj+5ers@groups.thegreen>

User-Agent: THEGREEN-EW/0.82

MIME-Version: 1.0

Content-Type: text/plain; charset="ISO-8859-1"

Content-Transfer-Encoding: quoted-printable

From: "no_such_name"

<nosuchname@residential.thegreen>

**Subject: Fifteen Impossible Things to Believe Before
Breakfast Or Else You're a Feminist**

Fifteen Impossible Things to Believe Before Breakfast Or Else You're a Feminist

1. People are inherently good, and therefore communism doesn't work because it postulates that human nature is trustworthy. Similarly, a democratic-republic such as the United States and Territories is superior to communism because it pits people's interests against one another in a system of checks and balances, rather than trusting that humans will, of their own accord, make the right choices. Also, because people are inherently good, ninety-eight out of every one hundred of them end up in Hell.

2. Women are less equal than men as human beings and therefore should never have been given the right to vote. However, since women have already been given the right to vote, it is a good idea to let them keep it, even though they are messing up the whole world with their bad choices.

3. Women are clinically insane because psychiatry is bogus medicine, therefore Albert Lunsford is not insane because he has not been diagnosed as such by a psychiatrist.

4. Only liberal feminists would consider a six-year-old boy to be eligible for political asylum, therefore those who don't consider a six-year-old boy eligible for political asylum are liberal feminists.

5. Most illness is a result of demonic possession.

6. Conspiracies in government are unlikely, if not impossible, because the government is so large as to make keeping a secret impossible, and because government employees make less money than private employees.

7. No Republican would ever accuse a public official of murder or other atrocities, because to do so would be disloyal to their country, and because public officials make less money than private employees.

8. A fiscal conservative is still a liberal if they do not believe in God, therefore a theist who believes in extorting tax

dollars at gunpoint is a conservative.

9. The impending completion of Lunsford's twenty-six year graphic novel project triggered a natural disaster that killed thousands of people, therefore keeping the storyline in print is absolutely necessary to fulfilling God's will.

10. The Dead Sea Scrolls contain a word-perfect copy of the Old Testament in its entirety, therefore the other texts bundled with it are of negligible value, and the 1591 King James Bible is the inerrant Word of God even though different copies of the same text varied due to the nature of printing technology in 1591.

11. Albert Lunsford is the first person in the history of mankind to have unlocked the true meaning of the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Koran, and therefore he is not a Prophet.

12. RFC #289/290 represents a Unified Field Theory of physics which is not only coherent, but correct, all without reference to mathematics. This theory is not given the credit it is due because comic book fans are afraid to admit that Albert Lunsford is right about everything on this list.

13. RFC itself is not given the credit it is due in the comics industry because comic book fans are afraid to admit that Albert Lunsford is right about everything on this list.

14. Failure to agree with anything in the above list is evidence that you are a Marxist/Feminist/Homosexualist, and therefore not Albert Lunsford, and therefore wrong.

15. Albert Lunsford's new comic book project will fail because his comic book readership is comprised solely of Marxist/Feminist/Homosexualists, therefore it makes perfect sense to dispatch agitators who are known to be hostile to Marxism/Feminism/Homosexuality to the four corners of the Green to promote it.

I had to laugh. These guys really took this stuff seriously.

Our objective was to subtly disrupt Lunsford's operations. The group was extremely high traffic, so the black box only had to be active for a few minutes before our efforts started to bear fruit. I grabbed another fragment to check on our progress.

>>>-- In albert.lunsford@groups.green, "juan_ whatever"

>> <juan_ whatever@> wrote:

>>>

>>> Did the text appear kinda messed up on "part two" on other's

>>> pressure screens -or just mine? Gargamel?

>>> Anyway, this is a pretty big deal as we continue to get insight from

>>> the ground floor of what will probably become the world's dominant

>>> religion some time in the future -oh, you know it'll happen:)

>>

>>

>> On Sun, Oct 5, 1968 at 9:48 AM, Sam <samslammer@...> wrote:

>>

>> You might have been kidding about this, juan, but it did occur to

>> me. Wouldn't put it past Gargamel or Satan to make Albert's text harder

>> to read.

>>

>> I had to pull the text into a editor and get rid of all the

>> superfluous characters that were making the text unreadable. Few

>> people would probably do that, achieving Gargamel's end nicely. She/He/It

>> would be invested in *not* having people read the Bible, Torah, and

>> Koran and think about them deeply.

>>

>> Not sure if there's an easier way to add the text without all the

>> extra characters, Klaus, but more people will read the text if

>> they don't have to work so hard at it. I can make offline suggestions
>> on how to do that if it will help.
>>> Sam Slammerhaus

Perfect. The modules were functioning as designed. Even simply futzing the formatting on a random selection of messages could spin the group into a number of irrelevant side discussions.

Satisfied with our work, I closed up my satchel and we vacated the picnic area. Using a public access point had made our insertion untraceable.

"No end until victory," Piro said, reciting the old Gender Smurf credo.

"It should be interesting to see how they react to our efforts," I offered.

Piro quietly nursed his beer.

"I just hope these guys don't fly completely off the handle. Their tactics are entirely unpredictable."

"Truth," I said.

We fell into silence for a few moments, each of us contemplating the notion of blue-skinned rioters storming the public schools, smurfing their way into the girl's restrooms.

"I have to admit I find their sexual practices disgusting," Piro said at last.

"Hey, you'll get no argument from me. But so long as they remain in their hovels they're not doing anything illegal."

"The whole reason we're involved with this mess is precisely because they *do* sometimes leave their hovels."

The discussion usually tended in this direction. I set them up and my partner knocked them down. Point to Piro.

"I suppose there is a fear that their culture will spread, put down roots in the urban centers. No one really cares about a local cult, but now that they're making inroads in the national media..."

"I'll say it again: disgusting," Piro repeated.

A Gender Smurf entered the room and made a beeline for the bar. He sat himself down on a stool right next to Piro.

"You guys ever thought of going blue?" he asked, by way of introduction.

I clutched Piro's shoulder as he reached for his sidearm. "Don't you people know Peyo was a Satanist!" he spat out, struggling against my grip.

"We're not interested," I said, intensifying my stare to indicate we would brook no further discussion. We got up to leave.

Three hours later Piro was still arguing with Bob, the Gender Smurf.

"What's the big deal? Blue skin is as healthy and safe as bare hands... Tell me, how would 'flesh color' have protected that gentleman over there or anyone else from 'runaway shopping carts' or the other so-called 'dangers' you've enumerated? Well-adjusted, blue skin can actually withstand quite hazardous environments... It's amazing how paranoid most people are here in North America. You should try going blue outside sometime, it feels great and it's nowhere nearly as dangerous as most people seem to assume. I've been doing it for nearly fifteen years, up in Canada, and my skin is in great shape. I'm healthy as a horse. Open your minds, gentlemen!"

"What about SPF," Piro asked, resigned to his fate as the lone voice of reason in the discussion. I refused to participate.

"This calls for a two-part argument," said Bob. "One: One more reason I'm really glad I don't live in the U.S.—I'd really hate for others to be telling me what color I can and can't be when I'm spending my money at their store. So much for 'The Land Of The Free.' The 'No Blues' policy does not have anything to do with health protection or laws. It is a double standard created by corporations to enforce dress codes; designed only to create a business 'image.' Unfortunately, that kind of stupid mentality is getting contagious up in Canada."

Bob indicated the placement of quotation marks with his fingers.

When no one objected to his first point, he continued.

"Two: Again, I don't understand how people think flimsy, flesh colored skin (which seems to be totally okay at most places of business, all over) can protect them from any of the 'horrible' things they could catch or the usual hazards on the streets. In fact, some of the so-called normal shoes people wear (platform shoes, pointy, etc.) pose a greater threat to someone's health than actually walking around outdoors with blue skin! For more information on how going blue is not only okay but is also good for you, please surf to: groups.thegreen/albert.lunsford—A U.S. based organization of people who go blue as a lifestyle choice."

Finally, I had to but in.

"We don't. Spamming. Care."

Piro insisted on paying for Bob's drinks. I told him to take it out of petty cash—I wasn't going to try and justify this on my expense sheet. He made the necessary preparations and transmitted payment.

"Do you see now why I discourage talking with these people," I asked, punching Piro in the back.

"I'm not sure how to explain my objection to your attitude," Piro said. "It's not precisely that you're a racist, because these people are not born blue. It's not really intolerance of their religion, because, aside from their blue skin, white hats, and the fact that they have sex with each other while wearing them, these people are not fundamentally different from you or me."

I gave him a look.

"I'm just saying, there's no reason not to treat them like human beings."

"Sure there is," I said. "It's our job."

DISSIPATION

tags: 1963, plinth_mold, saito

Click, click, click. Twelve cubes of light, each flipping past the other, rotating into the slot left vacant by its predecessor. The purpose of this orchestration is to massage the cortex with electromagnetic oscillations in the frequency range of 8-12Hz. Patients appear to derive the most benefit, Saito has noted, from working through the entire routine, pausing rhythmically at the completion of each sequence to allow the electronics to catch up with the procession of their focus.

But what are the effects, he wonders, if the patient identifies his therapeutic parlor trick and susses out the mechanism? What happens when the patient's conscious mind tracks the incoming data with greater precision than the machinery? Click, click, click. Saito leans forward. Perhaps this particular arrangement of cubes is novel. He presses a button, freezing the arrangement in memory. To be studied later.

He is pleased that the treatment has proven efficacious. For the vast majority of his patients, anyway. Ironic, then, that he should feel so powerless to alter the degree and substance of his own compulsive addictions. Contemplating this, Saito produces a pocket lighter from his coat and sears the flesh of his right hand. He stifles a primal yelp, burying his shame in his handkerchief (not only the shame, but the evidence—self-immolation is an offense not only against the state, but against Saito's ancestors, for historical reasons peculiar to his family). He then re-calibrates his equipment for the next patient.

The work he is carrying out could revolutionize treatment of numerous conditions, given the eventual push into mass production. For uncounted moments Saito shifts out of time, is aloft, floating on the awareness of what he is so very close to achieving. He finds the sensation is fleeting.

Saito adjusts his *coiffure* and smooths down the front of his white coat, feeling his sweat cool against the skin of his wrists. If anyone has seen him burning himself, it could result in the loss of his job.

But of what use is a job, at this point in his life? They've made his impossible.

He has been forced to accept a number of compromises that limit the efficacy of his design. He doubts that the latest cubes, in their present form, will do much more than narcotize. Hypnotize. Amounting to nothing more than an entertainment. Saito ruminates on the shambles of his career before taking the lighter back out of his pocket and burning several additional black marks into the flesh of his hand. He tries to ignite his skin completely, but succeeds only in singeing the sleeve of his coat. With the smoke, he imagines his *kami* slinking up to the ceiling, dispersing across its surface, crawling in several directions at once towards the duct work and vents.

A knock—an abrupt punctuation to his thoughts—and the door swings open, pulling his *kami* back down to the floor. So, they had seen him after all. He knows now that the charade is concluded. His work is finished.

As a result of his actions his patients will suffer. But then, patients are always suffering.

With his expulsion, Saito's role in the project will be expunged. Because his research is considered a state secret, there will be no one to complain on his behalf. His data will be reclaimed and filtered for an executive summary. And then, he suspects, quietly abandoned, as it is clear that the process of weaponization would exceed the available funding. This, at least, is some small cause for relief.

Still, he feels as if his *kami* has dissipated. There is nothing left for them to kill.

This thought compels him to emit a tiny laugh. The thought dies, strangled stillborn in his throat.

Saito flinches as the door swings inward.

Into the room bounds Plinth Mold, flanked by two of his most trusted attorneys.

"Relax, Saito," says Plinth. "Let's talk patents. I'm interested in what you've been working on up here, all these years."

DUCHESS OF MASKS

tags: 1993, saito, violet

What I hold in my left hand is different from what I hold in my right. What is on my face is different still. I have so many choices of how to proceed.

At any moment an alarm will sound and I will be discovered. Sitting in this chair, looking over these files, wearing whichever face has fallen into place as they burst through the door. How will they see me? It is of no consequence what they will think.

The gray backdrop of what I have learned here throws what I know of our history into menacing relief; paper shadows under fluorescence and lost thoughts in the drawer. Which eyes will I use to record these discoveries? With no apparent prejudice I select a mask and peer through its gates, rifling numerous papers and file folders spread across the floor. A slender cord tethers me to the machine under my cushioned seat, which interprets the ambient state of the room.

Through these eyes.

Oh, Saito. I am afraid that I cannot clean these tracks from the floor. Your actions have plunged a polished knife into the swollen belly of our tracking. It is, in fact, *you* who is splayed out here on the floor. A descending pattern of guilt.

Would that I were here when it happened, all those years ago.

Would that you had listened.

CALL, WAITING

tags: 1977, eva, tab2

The whole side of the building is green. I see I've come all the way out here again for nothing.

I'm slow packing up my gear. The day has already evaporated around me. Might as well soak the trip for billable hours.

This happens every week. I've yet to be given the go ahead on an operation—at all, actually. The work is easy, but dragging out my gear just to sit here in the dark is humiliating. If I didn't need the money I would withdraw my registration.

The sun has not quite vanished. There are still a smattering of locals out and about on the street. I decide to finish my report here, while I'm still on the scene. I finger the leaf out of my coat pocket and expand its display. As soon as I light the screen, four messages appear, each edging its neighbor out of the way in accordance with an algorithm deemed intuitive by emotionally bereft software engineers. Presently, desktop real estate on the hand-held is at a premium.

All of the messages are from Eva.

Message 1: 16:01 Are you coming in to work today? :)

Message 2: 16:03 I know you're in there, I can see the light from your leaf reflecting in the mirror and peeking out of the curtains. Should I send over a a tray of makizushi, or just keep it to myself?

Message 3: 16:07 FINE THEN! I'M GOING ON BREAK.

Message 4: 16:16 Why won't you talk to me?

There are numerous relevant answers to her question, but I'm not about to entangle myself in a discussion. I close all four message windows with an index finger and bring up the report template. Light from the window continues to leak into my room, coaxing abstract reflections from the dresser mirror. Dusk always wreaks havoc with my visor and its ability to read the screen of my leaf. I end up leaving the visor off, missing out on a lot of calculating I could be doing while I pretend to work.

There is a sound I don't like, out in the hallway, and suddenly I've got my pistol out, working my finger into its trigger guard and inserting a clip of ammunition. After a few moments I put the firearm back in my bag. It was only the landlady's cat.

So.

On to my report.

19:04 NOTHING HAS HAPPENED AGAIN. I RECEIVED THE ALL-CLEAR SIGNAL AT 19:00 PER THE SCHEDULE AND SO RETURNED ALL INSTRUMENTATION TO ITS STORAGE CASE AND SHUT DOWN THE TRANSMITTER. SIGNING OFF TO RETURN TO THE REAL WORLD. EOF.

I encrypt the message with my thumb and send it on its way.

As I'm gathering my things, my mind wanders to my fellow agents, spread out across diverse countries and kingdoms, who must also have been called out and then sent back home without seeing any action. I wonder about their frustrations with the tedious ins and outs of the business. Surely we'd have a lot in common. Not that we'll ever meet.

I'm not long in dusting the chair and table. I wrap my shirt around my hand, then lightly grip the doorknob and vacate before I'm noticed. My visor tells me the landlady is rounding the corner, two blocks away, returning home with a bag full of groceries. I follow the path my visor has illuminated until I reach a public transport, which it flags as off-limits. Instead, I hop into a taxi.

By the time I arrive at home I've decided against more studying. I pull up a telescreen window and lean back in my bed, trying to get some rest. I wonder who we *did* decide to blow up today. I'm always kept close to potential action scenes, even if I'm never actually ordered to intervene. It's probably the same with all of us.

I fall asleep just as the answer to my query hits the scroll. A group of wailing women are brought up on screen to provide visual context for the hour's headline story.

My visor flags the clip for my attention, but I don't remember what happens next. It's unlikely I'll remember to review this in the morning.

TRY MY PRODUCT

tags: 1979, coca_cola, do_wuh, motherfucker, perpetrator

The airbrushed cover was decidedly inferior to what Motherfucker had seen before, attached to other printings of the same book. It was outlandish. All swaddling clothes and taut, glistening muscles. Objectifying the physiques that would result from pious observance, appealing to the vanity of practitioners who were required, by tradition and by law, to study it. Transparent ableism. This kind of self-aggrandizing marketing disgusted him. Gazing upon its cover, it was hard for Motherfucker to take the book seriously.

"Well, don't just sit there, all slack-jawed, however arresting that dust jacket might be... *Open the blessed book* and let's get started."

Perpetrator adopted an instructional tone, as if to communicate that Motherfucker's own study habits were somehow deficient, would somehow land him in hot water. He was always prepared to dispense advice to his lessers. In this case, the advice involved the interpretation of the Bible, and the careful application of those interpretations to the logical conundrums that permeated modern life. Perpetrator was only a couple of months older than Motherfucker. He was a total spam-hole.

"*That's* not what the book says *at all*," complained Motherfucker.

Perpetrator indicated the text with his finger. "You're wrong. It's right there on the page in front of you. Just look at the words."

"Yes, my eyes were directed at this material during the process of forming my initial assessment," sighed Motherfucker.

"Well, one couldn't tell from hearing you recite it."

The pages dissolved into one another. Motherfucker couldn't sustain his focus. He wondered briefly why the long lists of telephone numbers that comprised this part of the Scriptures featured variable font sizes, brilliant piping and color illustrations. Why all the fuss?

"Perpetrator, what is the point of these chapters that are mainly just lists of telephone numbers and advertisements for insurance agents?"

"Motherfucker, those are the *Sanctified Tribes of the Green*. Your remarks are veering dangerously close to blasphemy. Why do you have to question every last detail, when it comes to our studies? Not *everything* is a conspiracy!"

Motherfucker sighed again. "It all just seems so arbitrary. Like they've gone and copied pages out of an old telephone directory and called it Scripture."

"*Naturally* that is what it *seems* like, Motherfucker, for that is precisely what they've done."

"..."

"What," asked Perpetrator, finally and honestly befuddled. "You didn't know?"

"What do you *mean* what?" asked Motherfucker. "Why did they copy pages out of an old telephone directory and call it Scripture?"

"Because, Motherfucker, these manuscripts are *illuminated*."

"..."

"Look at the section headings. See how the Tribes are organized according to service offerings, then alphabetized? These illustrations are graphical elements that illuminate the organization of the data. It renders the information discernible at a glance."

"..."

"Still you do not comprehend."

"No, I'm afraid I don't."

Perpetrator stalled for several seconds, allowing time for the the new concepts to sink into Motherfucker's mind.

Minutes passed.

"Wait. Oh. *Now* I see," claimed Motherfucker. "They're not so old as to be presented as text-only, like the original Scriptures. These pages contain source code and meta data."

"That is correct."

"I guess that makes sense."

"*Good*, Motherfucker," said Perpetrator. "Now we're making progress!"

But Motherfucker still seemed to be confused.

"We've wasted enough time on the display elements. Please return to the previous chapter and read aloud."

"Son of a bitch. You *know* I'm not comfortable reading aloud."

"Okay then, *I* will read aloud to *you*," resolved Perpetrator, training his standard, disdainful stare into the pupils of Motherfucker's eyes.

Throat cleared, he began.

"Newton wrote:

any forces whatsoever, and of the forces required to produce any motion ... and therefore I offer this work as the mathematical principles of philosophy, for the whole burden of philosophy seems to consist in this from the phenomena of motions to investigate the forces of nature, and then from these forces to demonstrate the other phenomena...

"Yeah, right," said Motherfucker.

"What, you don't *believe* him? Here, what do the footnotes say?"

From this proposition it will follow, when arithmetical addition has been defined, that $1 + 1 = 2$.

"It also says that the text in question wasn't always a part of this chapter," finished Motherfucker.

"Honestly! And what year was this edition sourced?"

Pages flipped backwards.

"Twenty thirty-one. According to the information in the front."

"Then you see what I mean."

"No, not really."

It was going to be a long night.

Presently, Do Wuh entered the room, disrupting their studies. He was a bit dirty from tumbling in the yard, and Perpetrator recoiled visibly when at last he came fully into view.

"Do Wuh."

"Motherfucker, put that book down and let's go outside and play."

"Do Wuh." Perpetrator spoke the name more stiffly this time, as if it were an accusation rather than an identity. His face contorted menacingly, seeming very serious indeed.

"Shut up, Perp," cracked Do Wuh. "Motherfucker, seriously, I'm sick of this spam. Why don't you come outside with the rest of us."

"Oh, but to journey through the out of doors," lamented Motherfucker, glancing woefully at Perpetrator. "Perhaps we should take the book outside, so we can all consult the rules if such a thing becomes necessary."

A delicious pause.

"That's a good idea," nodded Perpetrator, his incessant, condescending glare now softening, owing to the fact that he was outnumbered. In spite of the rigid persona he projected, he knew when an argument was a lost cause. Besides, it was more likely that the others would stumble into diligent study if he and Motherfucker first worked to gain their respect by participating in their aimless, physical games.

"Whatever," said Do Wuh. "You two are going to go blind, sitting in here playing with that book all the time."

"Unlikely," remarked Perpetrator.

"Actually, that's a myth," offered Motherfucker.

Do Wuh slammed the door on his way out.

Outside, lawnmowers hovered in the distance. Uh Huh and Coca Cola were already on the field, caked with dirt. It behooved Perpetrator to comment on their slovenly appearance.

"Those are your good clothes, are they not?"

"Shut up, Perp," said Coca Cola.

"Okay, there's five of us here and we only need four. Perp, you're out."

"I didn't want to play in the *first* place!"

"Then everybody wins," said Coca Cola, laughing.

Perpetrator sat down with his book and began to leaf through its pages, focusing intently on the text. He de-fogged his glasses with the corner of his shirt and chewed his fingernail as he read.

"Spam them all. I'm studying!" he thought.

"Indeed," replied a voice that wasn't there.

Perpetrator's eyes grew large as the gold Dayton's on his father's Impala.

"Intriguing," he thought to himself, and continued with his reading of the Scriptures.

OLD MOLD

tags: 1861, haus_mold

By the winter of 1861 I hadn't seen another human being in six years. My gun had rusted, but that didn't much matter as for the majority of my time on the mountain I had been completely snowed in.

My graph hadn't perturbed itself in months. I thought it might have simply shut itself down, protesting inactivity. I couldn't muster the interest to scan its core for flaws. I considered cannibalizing it for parts.

I melted some snow from the window and sloshed the water around in my mouth. Brine. I spit it out on the wood floor. Opened the cabinets for no real reason; there was no food left.

I contemplated trying to dig myself out.

I got my legs attached and unlocked the front door. A flat wall of beige snow, suspended where the sunshine should have been.

Voices, from behind the wall.

My first thoughts ran to annoyance. I hoped they would move on. Anyone up here at this time of year could only be seeking after help. Two voices meant they would be unlikely to take no for an answer from a lone hermit such as myself.

A gloved hand poked through the snow, groping around as if to stave off asphyxiation.

I prepared myself for unwanted conversation.

The strangers were polite. Dug out the front step. Offered me provisions when they noticed I didn't even have a stove for cooking. I distracted them with talk of the astronomical data I had been collecting. The younger fellow was able to follow along to some extent, but both seemed lacking in the fundamentals so I let the subject drop.

I do not recall now which of them first broached the topic of their extra horse, but they talked me into stepping out front to inspect its injury.

The reader will have seen this coming. I was several paces into the front snow drift when I heard the door lock behind me.

Their provisions were still loaded onto their horses.

Their mistake.

I ran some calculations in my head and decided that the horses could probably make it into town. It did take the better part of the day to make the journey.

Everything had changed. The general store had expanded to include a bar and eatery. The grand hotel was now a school house. Inside the old court building, the whores were now wearing shoes. No one seemed to recognize me.

I bartered the two oldest horses for a new rifle, a flint and a sewing needle. I wouldn't need food. I made love to a whore in order to blend in with the other drifters; it was frowned upon by the constabulary to leave town without first engaging the local labor pool. Civilization and tradition had conspired to keep me within city limits until after dark.

I fell asleep without replacing my eye patch.

When I woke up, it was gone.

"*Haus Mold,*" laughed the hotel manager, reading from my card. "Your name's a joke, right?"

"It's an Indian name," I said.

My bad eye focused on him and I assumed he must have caught a glimpse of the internal mechanism because he started when it whirred to life.

"Right. You're an injun." He gestured sarcastically as if he were jerking off.

I glanced over at his daughter. The whore I had bedded. He noticed this and his voice trailed off.

As my boots hit the dirt outside the hotel, the snow was just starting to pick up. The first big storms up the mountain would have rolled in the night before. The pass would be buried until spring.

I made a backup of myself and dropped it in the mail to New York. Just in case.

As I approached my horse, a shot rang out. Its echo clashed against the wooden slats of the general store, the school and the casino. My horse tipped over like a grandfather clock, brains pushing out of its impacted eye socket. I noted that we had both contrived to lose the same eye.

I turned and raised my new rifle, returned fire. It was no surprise to me who I'd killed.

"Fair fight!" some idiot exclaimed.

"Squash it," I barked. "Increase the peace."

I rode west. Once out of town, I removed my clothing and walked beside my horse.

The snow eventually gave way to desert.

FAST

tags: 4086, albert_lunsford, piro, shit_mold

There are folded bits of me coming off. The heated stress in the room has peeled back the edges of my face and I think that the human glue underneath is melting away...

In four minutes I will leave for the day, cutting through the steam to the outer door of my compartment. In four minutes, I will sleep.

Well, no.

The stacks of leaves are cleared. I've fought off the last bits of synthetic sick from the foodstuffs in the office pantry. But the vending machines haven't been refilled in almost a month, and the food ports back up when there isn't anyone around to place orders. I'm in the same boat in my quarters—I try to stay on the button and make due with what I can coax from the machines (I'm always working), but it's hard to keep myself awake when I'm always so hungry.

The last of the leaves put away, I can now turn down my screens and cover my seat for the morning decontamination cycle. It seems I've missed one; a straggler. The little leaf confronts me, cross to have been overlooked. I find it hunkered down, nearly collapsed into a pile of itself, casting an agitated shadow on the carpet. Its facing edge wavers in and out of focus in the reduced lighting. I regard it blankly and then crush it with my heel.

Next: The King's quarters, which must also be purged of filth.

I pull up an icon of Albert Lunsford and meditate on the seventh book of volume four. *Walking On The Moon*.

It is *Ramadan*, and everyone is gone.

The station turns.

SELECTION

tags: 2179, massive_fictions, rimbaud, stanley

All of this was not going to work for him anymore. It was coming down around his ankles. His output had exceeded his company's resources, and his private prospects were taking a nosedive as well. He could hardly pay himself to write. Without that weekly stipend from *MASSIVE FICTIONS*, he wasn't going to make rent on the storage facility for his collections. One unwelcome change blurred into another, and in short order, the accumulated results were overwhelming to contemplate.

Rimbaud passed Stanley on the fifty-fourth floor and tipped his hat. Stanley was probably off to tinker with more of his—what had he called them—*martial simulations*. What a thought; larping about as if to train for war. But, this was Stanley, and, after all, this was one of Stanley's interests. No harm was being done, in any case.

As he navigated the spiraling path, the requisite plying of a new editor at some other rag—what other rags were even left—was very much on his mind. A crease formed across his forehead as he alit gently on the elevator, negotiating the physical geometry with his body whilst simultaneously evaluating potential budget configurations in his mind. Duality. Synchronous operation. He watched the frothing crowd of his countrymen, churning to and fro along the pathways below. They resembled nothing so much as beer suds sloshing in a bed of potting soil. And it was a very long way down. Petals—floors—whipped by silently, causing the sun to blink, languidly, somewhere near the horizon.

Rimbaud stood amongst his fellow salarymen and mused that, self-evidently, the architecture of their day would have to be considered superior to that of any previous era. From his studies he recalled that, in centuries past, forays had been made into evolving wholly organic super-structures, but that it had taken the better part of a four hundred years—bringing the public state-of-the-art almost up to date with that of his own great-grandfather's famous, proprietary work—before emergent plant mimicry was fully integrated into the mainstream of public works. While it was true that most citizen hovels—even

today—evinced the brute angles and sharp corners characteristic of the twentieth century's most prolific architects (perhaps out of some sense of fealty to tradition, since, structurally, such arbitrary designs were no longer strictly necessary), in his own lifetime he had witnessed the marvelous transformation of municipal buildings from great, lumbering and inefficient *storage containers* into organic, plebeian tangles of smoothly curving branches, stems and flowering foyers. Why, his own quarters were situated within just such a fractal space! Rimbaud had to remind himself that the upper-most levels of these buildings, or, more appropriately, *growths*, were still reserved for the business classes and their various concerns. He observed with some satisfaction that these concessions were small sacrifice when weighed against the general improvements to the Commons such commerce inevitably yielded. The slums were already starting to grow over.

The express elevator distended and Rimbaud disembarked towards an identification booth. He slid into a vacant pod and hooked his legs around the seating apparatus as his entire body was rotated into position. From there, his awareness shifted back to Home. Thus transported, he prepared his evening meal to the accompaniment of a historical recording. His pleasure was the Existentialist literature of the mid- twentieth century, and he preferred to track the audio wholly eyes-free while handling his cooking materials. Sophistry, perhaps, but well within the curve of the culturally acceptable plotted for him by his trusted *almanack*.

Pulsing from the far counter came a notice that his tuna had thawed. Rimbaud slid to the other side of his pod and began eating pieces of raw fish. From an adjacent curved plate he selected a number of additional food items to link into his meal. By running a finger across the stamen of the plate, Rimbaud seasoned the course to his liking. He chose some vegetables and elected to submerge them in one half-ounce of wood-aged high-fructose corn syrup. He flattered himself that his tastes were truly refined.

The 8-bit alarm drones Rimbaud had programmed for eight o'clock (a clever recursive reference, he had thought) sounded, softly, and he knew then that it was time to replace the dishes within their folds and return to work. Rimbaud made a gesture towards the door, and the sunlight streaming in from above shifted, gave way to the interior of his encephaloid pod.

Identification. He untangled his legs and got himself up, running a hand through his mussed hair and replacing his felt cap. He smoothed down his jacket and made his way back through the forest of salarymen, climbing once again into the express elevator. As he flitted up the stem of the building, he thought to himself that his lunch periods seemed shorter and shorter as his life progressed. As he grew objectively older.

Finally reaching his objective at the very top of the building, Rimbaud took stock of the vast garden spread out across the city below. Millions of his fellow countrymen were busy going about their daily tasks, worker bees distributing commercially registered pollen. None questioning themselves as he did. None of them devoting the scant moments of their free time to comparing themselves unfavorably with American negroes of centuries past. Was his toil really so objectionable as all that? Such nonsense that he allowed to enter his mind.

Rimbaud then reflected upon his appearance, and suddenly he was grossly ashamed. He wiped away the stray rivulets of sweat from his forehead and pulled the end of his antique *almanack* slightly out of his breast pocket, cater-corner, plainly into the view of casual passers-by. Moribund regrets of servitude would not cast a pallor upon his demeanor. *I have a choice in this matter*, he thought. *My suffering is mine, and mine alone.*

As the elevator distended once more, Rimbaud was bathed in the bright, sympathetic air of photosynthesis made comprehensible.

As was his usual habit, he pushed the negative thoughts from his mind, choosing instead to consider the significance of beautiful flowers.

SPEED GRADING

tags: 4086, piro, tab2

I'm cleaning out the King's cupboards when I run across some old detritus that he had thought it would be a good idea to bring along with him to the station.

Thomas.

According to legend, he wrote this paper for a grade school assignment. As I recall, it triggered unrest amongst the faculty. In the absence of advanced philosophical technology, papers written by school children wielded the capability to disrupt classroom activities.

The popular image of *Johannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus Mozart* is inaccurate to the point of ridiculousness. However, this has not prevented a multiplicity of interpretations from emerging to surround his work. Ludwig von Köchel's contrived naming convention has even been absorbed into the text of Mozart's published scores, sans any indication that Herr Mozart did not create these titles himself. Beneath the layers of false attribution lies a man (J. C. W. T. M.) whose own prodigious correspondence is often the last resource consulted by would-be experts. Thus, the common conception of the silly-voiced man-child, *idiot savant* dominates the commentary upon his work even to this day.

Figures such as Mozart are invoked almost as articles of our language, employed as symbols of narratives larger than the mere facts of their corporeal existence. This phenomenon renders any deeper investigation into the men themselves a trifling diversion, an unnecessary digression at best. When one appears to be referencing a rich study of the available facts, what one is too often doing, instead, is invoking the surface texture of popular memory (most often grossly misconstrued, but constituting a shared culture nonetheless). It is shamefully dishonest to put forward such vagary as learned discourse.

But. Is this lamentable transgression so far removed from

the process of creating words, themselves? I beseech the thoughtful reader to consider that language, to begin with, is merely a collection of consensual, codified misunderstandings.

I will now shift contexts and refer to the decades-long correspondence between the Americans Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. It is unlikely that the modern reader is familiar with these gentlemen. Sadly, the average Federalist/Anti-Federalist scholar is likewise ignorant of their existence. And yet, it must be pointed out, portions of their correspondence have been, since 1926, accepted into the Scriptures. One recoils at the cognitive dissonance; this vast field of Green scholarship, donning its own willfully fogged-over spectacles in order to better scrawl out its blind declarations. It is deemed acceptable to reference the icons of culture by name or by clique, but it is seen as counterproductive to make clearly understood precisely what it is one is trying to say. Of course, not all manglings of the language are intentional, and not all such manglings are equally deceptive. Some people just don't care about the Bible.

There persists an interplay between the rigorous accuracy that is ostensibly sought after and the broad symbolism that is most easily digested. I am prepared to admit that in my own work I have yet to satisfactorily bridge these disparate vectors of focus. Even an isolated, outlying case refuses to make itself known. For example, I am capable of pursuing either individual goal with exceeding stamina and skill, and yet I am resigned to my failure in striking a balance between the two as a whole. I have discovered no happy synthesis. No congenial associations between the two paths. The network betwixt particle and wave refuses to materialize. Redoubled focus simply dissolves into a migraine headache.

This, then, is the eternal struggle. The Mozart of reality versus the Mozart of history.

Why read the entirety of Jefferson's correspondence when a blind quotation will suffice?

As I compare like with unlike, I stumble upon the realization that the vision of others, is, by necessity, likewise obstructed. This myopia that afflicts me is not an invention, a deficiency particular to my person. *All* of our screens are thus occluded, whether we recognize it or not. In our minds, the eminence of the signifier shall always eclipse that of the signified. Ironically, we trip repeatedly over this blunt limitation, which itself probably evolved as a means to facilitate communication.

What I'm trying to say is, stop trying to tell me what I mean.

In this paper I have demonstrated the inherent political power of dictionaries. The careful reader will adjust his ambitions accordingly.

I fold the leaf and replace it within its compartment. We are way beyond these sorts of observations by now, Thomas. Today I would mark this paper with a C-, at best. But, you wrote for your time. Some inaccuracies and the overall sparseness of detail may be forgiven. I confirm the historical grade (A-) by thumbprint and wave away the hovering screen.

While I was a grading, something in the room has changed. A faint white light illuminates the port hole of the King's quarters.

I make my way over to investigate the disturbance.

ANALYSIS

tags: 2182, rimbaud, violet

There was a slow dithering moment before it all coalesced and came upon him like a spilled dinner tray. All of the air went out of him at once. What the tiny viewscreen showed him would certainly mean the end of his tenure; if not his career as an instructor of children's literature.

Little Violet reading from her diary.

He clutched at the front pocket on his shirt for tobacco. Must keep watch. (Can't watch.) He ran a knotted hand through his auburn strands (or lack thereof) and pulled at the lobe of his ear while blue smoke ran fingers of its own down his cheek, mocking him tenderly.

Another minute, maybe less.

As Violet brought her reading to a close, the other children began to text each other about the performance, proceeding to update their class journals as they waited for a response. The classroom was devoid of snickers. The group had broken out into mad hysterics of flat silence. Rimbaud's attention was still rapt.

What Violet had said.

He pocketed the monitor and poked his cigarette into a receptacle. Attached his glasses and pushed back through the heavy air of the empty hallway. Resumed his classroom.

She'd kept quiet.

In spite of her innuendo, bald threats, blatant comminations, exaggerated bluster, roundabout disparagement; she hadn't shared her scathing review of his first novel with the class.

That was good.

That was a good girl.

Rimbaud considered staying on for the semester.

He thought: *Those who can't, teach.*

The students remained silent as he entered.

JERRYMANDER FALLS

tags: 1868, haus_mold, jerrymander_mold

The polls had closed and so Jerrymander did the only thing he knew how to do, aside from campaigning, which was to crack open a beer and down the whole thing in one gulp.

The beverage exhibited no effect upon his overweight, mechanical body.

Grover fucking Cleveland! he growled.

Opening another can, he decided that America deserved a Democrat.

Fuck 'em, he mumbled.

"Stop pretending to be drunk."

Haus Mold stood in the doorway, examining Jerrymander's hotel room. "Where are your people," he asked.

"I sent them away. There's no point in listening to their excuses."

"You seem to be taking this awfully personally."

"So what."

Jerrymander put down his beer can and paced the circumference of the curved room.

"Something troubles me about this election," he said at last.

"Sure. You didn't win."

Jerrymander scowled.

The horse looked worried. It seemed to sag under the weight of Jerrymander's saddle.

"There's no reason for you to leave town over this," Haus pleaded.

"Fuck 'em," was all Jerrymander would say. He repeated it quietly several times before trailing off into belligerent silence.

Dust caught in Haus' face and false teeth as the horse made a go of things.

Jerrymander didn't look back.

Once the old man was gone, Haus retreated to his hotel room and laid down on his bed. The name kept coming back to him. *Jerrymander Falls*.

He unlatched his satchel and checked the integrity of the Mold backups for the third time that day.

Haus finally made up his mind. He took out his pen and got started on the paperwork.

Hard reboot.

VISUAL RHETORIC

tags: 1983, 4086, piro, tab2

Thomas Bright's disembodied head regarded me from the other side of the port hole.

I made a little waving gesture and he smiled.

"Don't just stand there," he said. "You've got to help me!"

First of all, they're not voices.

In the fall of 1980, fast approaching my twenty-third birthday, I had become enamored with the irrational certainty that something dramatically and disturbingly... well, *bad*... was going to happen during the course of the coming year. I had weathered a series of nightmares about tornadoes and hurricanes, which had lately been joined by a progression of graphically detailed plane crashes. Eventually, the two dream-streams collided and morphed into a single, recurring narrative. The twin tornadoes (one comprised of dust and the other comprised of water) inched down a gravel road to demolish a giant diorama of Manhattan. This diorama had been laid out like a room-sized map across the altar of the Methodist church I attended as a child. Curious, right? I could see the whirlwinds of destruction making their way slowly towards the church. A seemingly random sampling of individuals I'd known throughout my childhood each knelt down on the floor with me, playing with an assortment of plastic military toys—planes—flying them around the diorama city. We would throw the toy planes like footballs and crash them into the buildings. This distracted us from the impending arrival of the tornadoes. The floor of the giant map was complete with a legend, compass, and an elaborate island airstrip (which seemed to be noticed only by me). Usually, the dream cut off when I spotted the island and walked over to stand on it. I would invariably become convinced that there was something of great importance buried beneath its surface. The last thing I would see as I woke up would be an outline of the bold script of the name

of the island, stubbornly obscured by my feet. I could never quite make out the words...

Earlier in my childhood, I had convinced myself that a number of disembodied intelligences (perhaps the most intriguing of which was a sentient idea referring to itself as the avatar of *Sarcasm*) had repeatedly, and quite insistently, presented me with the opportunity to become the living Anti-Christ. The world would be delivered to me if only I were willing to perform a series of simple tasks that would demonstrate my dedication to the sentient idea's service. Horrified, I vehemently refused, and took measures I believed would prevent my proposed political career from ever getting far off the ground. To this day I still can't secure a credit card. The tasks I was given were to have been a simple set of mundane actions, which would have harmed no one, and which would have caused me no undue personal hardship. And yet, I was not enthused with this idea of becoming the personification of a Scriptural prophecy whose study had generated such distress in me as a child. *Sarcasm* was amused, and—well—it would *sarcastically* counter my adamant refusals by drilling vivid images of the nuclear holocaust described in the book of Revelation directly into my brain. I have to say, it didn't take long for the Biblical stuff to wear thin. By 1975 I had become convinced that these images depicted the aftermath of attacks perpetrated against the United States by Islamic terrorists. I was certain that these attacks would occur sometime within the next fifty years. I privately told my girlfriend at the time that the next major war involving the United States would be centered upon Iraq, and that I hoped conscription would not be re-instated (as it had been in my 'vision,' or whatever you want to call it), because I was certain that I would be called up by my father's employers and sent off to... well, there was more. Let's just say there was more. In light of all this, I wasn't sure I could keep saying no to *Sarcasm* forever.

Of course, while I was well aware that this was all make-believe—made-up nonsense—the impact it had upon my disposition and outlook was similar to what might have been expected if the situation *had*, in fact, been real. The

metaphorical tabs had started fitting into the metaphorical slots and they had become impossible to ignore, as the resulting papercraft devices had begun to make themselves apparent everywhere I looked. I was starting to detect the seams in the walls. Stress points in theoretical structures I had never before thought to examine.

Perhaps here I should pause and explain how this communication between myself and *Sarcasm* most often took form.

Generally, I do not think in words. Cognition for me has always involved a series of images which fit together as multidimensional shapes, each distinguished by size, color and texture rather than by subject matter or meaning. For example, for as long as I can remember, I have associated certain colors with the numerals zero through nine. Zero is white, one is black, two is yellow, three is orange, four is blue, five is red—and so on. As a youth I would store and retrieve long strings of arbitrary numbers simply by arranging the colored blocks into an appropriate collage and committing said collage to visual memory. So, groups of numbers naturally took on an aesthetic as well as a symbolic meaning. Four quarters (yellow-red, yellow-red, yellow-red, yellow-red) made up one dollar (black-white-white). Adding or subtracting blocks of colors was faster for me than learning 'real' math. It was mostly a subconscious substitution, but it worked approximately up until middle school, when we started to be taught branches of mathematics that cannot typically be solved 'all in your head.' I had read an article in *POPULAR SCIENCE* or *SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN* or some other magazine around this time that stated the structure of the human brain made it impossible to solve complex algebra or geometry problems by simply thinking about them visually. Well, this had the unfortunate stink of truth about it, whether it was true or not, and I was sold on the idea from that moment forward. To this day, the colors go dead when I try to envision linear equations. Silly, right? Anyway. Incoming ideas typically flow across the ridges, valleys and other topographical surfaces of my consciousness and are, as I said, molded into multidimensional shapes that are

then stored as visual memories. Reasoning and deduction are simply a matter of arranging these shapes into aesthetically 'correct' sequences and compositions. Somehow, this visual logic seems to map. It's a firm validation of the Platonic *whateveryoucallit*. Placing all of my shapes into their natural positions, and then abstracting that visual record into a sequence of English words and phrases which are human-readable, seems to produce lucid thought that I am often told is remarkable for its clarity and insight. Or, perhaps I'm merely deluding myself and I'm only mimicking the bits of language that I've managed to pick up from normal humans after hearing the words repeated over and over again. Maybe this is all crap. Either way, I've somehow managed to scratch out a modest living for close to twenty-seven years. No one has had to help me wipe my own ass. I often wonder if other human beings process language the same way that I do, but have merely failed to articulate the process in a coherent manner. Perhaps they create descriptions of their thought processes out of the more typical, flawed vernaculars, which unfortunately proceeds to shape their cognition and leave them striving to fulfill those false accounts with aggressive phenomenological action. All of this would of course be at the expense of their own more naturally occurring mental rhythms. The virus of language is a parasite feeding on the fat of the human mind. In my case, my own communications with the archetypal concepts of *Sarcasm* and *Messiah* seems to have occurred on the sub-linguistic level of colors and shapes, which I have come to believe is nearer to our wetware than the instruction sets (in this case, the English language) with which we are trained from birth to hypnotize ourselves. What if, through some fundamentally subterranean mechanism, we are unconsciously grouping items into structures that alter our English even before it bubbles into our internal stream of consciousness? This is to say nothing of what inevitably comes spurting out of our mouths. It was a sudden preponderance of recognizable patterns in my own linguistic reflexes—it seemed that *someone* had been sleeping in my bed, if you will—which, when decoded into English, produced a convincing resemblance to direct communication between myself and an outside force. Was it

apophenia? Well, who can say? While it is true that there is an element of divining at play, the elaborate motifs which seemed to emerge in my reflexive patterns of thought cannot merely be dismissed as broadcast irritants, disrupting my mental space like so much rumbling of bass from a car down the street. These patterns I've been describing would also respond to my probing. That is to say, they would respond intelligibly. Two-way communication was observed to occur. Hence my references to a running dialogue between myself and the constructs. Hence my mention of their offers and of my rejections.

Back at the end of the world, having taken several months to mull over the myriad of proportions and relationships which were emerging, screeching like peacocks from the amorphous collection of data swirling about in my brain case, fall, 1980, finally clawed its way into view. I awoke one September morning full of the realization that I had somehow crept into my twenty-third year, relatively healthy and still firmly planted upon the surface of the planet. Characteristically, my right-brain responded to this happy circumstance by cutting loose a sudden inundation of random stimulation. Quantum foam fired in the widest possible distribution pattern. My left-brain, shocked that this affront had issued from its own squirrel-in-the-wheel sibling, spontaneously divined a slipshod, though astonishingly practical organizational grammar with which to categorize all of the incoming data. A dazzling display of battlefield competence, to be sure, but the flow of information was steadily increasing. My left-brain, bristling now at how quickly its attempts at order had fallen into ruin, burrowed itself ever more deeply into the heaving bosom of... labor politics. To wit: lacking further resources, the faculties of my mind voted to enact an emergency work stoppage.

A rhetorical picket line was hastily erected between the two cranial hemispheres.

Turning to all of this hubbub consciously for the first time, I (that is to say, me) examined said goings-on, and after a

certain period of solemn consideration, decided that union busting was more trouble than it was worth. I would simply pretend that the situation did not exist. I would ignore my predicament and avert my attention to whatever new, interesting and (no doubt) more entertaining thoughts were sure to come traipsing along. My left-brain and right-brain could resolve their differences without my help. My friend, I say this plainly and it is true: ideas are a dime a dozen. Ignore one, and ten thousand spring up to take its place. If I do not care for the direction of a given narrative, I delete it. Even if the ideas *do* address me audibly and directly, well, that doesn't mean I am bound to listen. I don't owe them anything, least of all a reply. Life is too short to indulge every pointless discrepancy of visual-spatial logic. Let them try to overload me. They can't force water into a plugged drain. Getting drawn into these whirlwinds is simply a waste of my time. Better to pull the hood down over my face. Place my hands over my ears. No, I am not available to come to the phone right now, and please do not bother me again. Thank you for your consideration. Pray, what's for dinner?

The year slunk by. I gained skill and efficiency at ignoring the stacks of interlocking realities. Under the stern tutelage of that conscientious ringmaster, ignorance, the serendipitous connections began to fade. *Mind the gap, right-brain*, the ringmaster would shout, and so on. This system checks and balances kept the situation neatly under my control. Over time, I devised a further arsenal of rhetorical tricks for identifying and severing new visual-spatial connections even before their roots could take hold. My techniques proved surprisingly efficacious.

Almost before I knew it, my twenty-fourth birthday was upon me. I looked back on the previous year with a certain contempt for the time spent culling all of this useless cruff from the stream of my thoughts. I was not getting much else done. But overall I retained a sense of accomplishment. The occasional ray of satisfaction seeped through. Gently drawing the curtain, the fall sunshine felt good in my cold, gray room.

The morning of September 11, 1981, I awoke alone in my bed. I pulled sweet breaths through a sincere smile and let the top of my head rest against the cool metal bars of my bed frame. Before opening my eyes, I mashed my face back into my pillow and relished that I was finally (almost) home free.

One more day to go. And then it would all be over. Goodbye, twenty-three; hello, twenty-four with an "l."

I relaxed, sighed richly, and thought to myself (in English), *Well, I've made it. Nothing horrendous is going to happen to me just because I've survived to twenty-four years of age. I guess it's time to outgrow all of this superstitious nonsense about the number twenty-three and get on with my life. So what if the symbols and syntax of temporal reality continue to combine obvious configurations that seem to beg acknowledgment, comment and/or intervention? I will ignore it all, straighten my posture and affirm that, on the contrary, all of this 'clairvoyant' horseshit and 'spatial reasoning' bollocks has been nothing more than a series of convenient hallucinations.* It was really quite simple, in the end, to walk away from the flood of data and to get on with my life. *So now then, I admonished myself, let's get up, shave our face, and get the hell in to work before we're late for our shift.* I should say, it was quite a relief to finally be rid of the shit-flinging, psychic monkey on my back. No more looking for the seams in things. No more seeing those seams whether I wanted to or not. From that morning forward, with the aid of my trusted ringmaster, ignorance, I would resolve to translate the multidimensional shapes and colors of my thoughts into English *prior* to becoming aware of them. I possessed the machinery. I could ignore it all. Let God or the Devil sort it out. Life would prove so much easier.

Groggily, I pulled on my socks and made my way into the living room. I clicked on the television just in time to see a jetliner bury itself into the World Trade Center and explode.

I guess you could say that in that moment, everything changed. *So much for my upcoming vacation*, I thought to myself. *Sarcasm* had always been a great practical joker.

All of this from the other side of the port hole.

I edged backwards, unconsciously.

Presently, awareness resumed and I leaped for the curtain. Tom's babbling was cut off by the downward arc of my sleeve. I straightened. I had barely escaped with my life.

Then nothing. Silence.

After a few moments, it seemed that the disturbance had faded. I decided to take another peek. I inched over to the port-hole and slowly drew back the curtain.

That proved to be a mistake.

THE PUBLIC GREEN

tags: 2188, albert_lunsford, rimbaud

Redaction Day festivities were well underway by the time Rimbaud arrived on the Public Green. Green Ladies, resplendent in their traditional attire, ensured that every mug remained filled; or in any case, that each did not remain empty for long. This was fortunate, since a lot of important talking was taking place under the big canvases. Tempers would buffer in the mugs.

Rimbaud approached a food tent and ran his eyes over the menu. *I can't eat here*, he thought. He moved to another tent and found himself in much the same predicament. Pork. Beef hearts. Nothing of substance. Typically, there were no vegetables to be found at any of the stalls. And the real animal flesh would only send him into allergic fits.

Near the edge of the Green, Rimbaud noticed a small group of children huddled around a wounded animal. The creature seemed to be mechanical in nature. Likely little more than an evolved toy. The young people were painting designs on its exposed flesh with dabs of white mud. He reflected that the mud in question normally anchored the grass of the Public Green.

This Redaction Day, Rimbaud had promised himself only limited interaction with his employees. But the flux of the crowd had made that impossible, as every attendee was expected to issue a lively greeting to whomever he passed in the aisles. Rimbaud observed that standing in one place for too long would lead to being ground under by the aggregate mob. Consequently, he'd kept moving and had already come face to face with most of his subordinates several times.

What, exactly, he wondered, was really being redacted here? Rimbaud surveyed the crowd and detected no sign of the ostensible paring away of cumulative excess. To him, it seemed the surplus interactions were multiplying.

A group of students had gathered on the Green to search for their friend. As a regular participant in the Redaction Day preparations, it was most unlike their companion to wander off just as his toil was finally coming to fruition. But: vanish he

had, and under the most peculiar of circumstances. One moment he had been present, and the next he had seemed to disappear without a trace.

At first Rimbaud could not avoid overhearing them. After a few moments he could no longer prevent himself from joining in.

"Ask yourselves this," he said. "Why is it that this man is in the Off-White House? The majority of North Americans did not vote for him. Why is he there? I tell you this morning that he is in the Off-White House because God put him there. God put him there to lead not only this nation but to lead the world in a time such as this."

"I—"

Rimbaud stammered, unsure of himself.

"I don't know why I said that."

"*El Nortés*," one of the children remarked.

Something in Rimbaud caught on the phrase. Unraveled. He felt as if he had lost control of his vocal chords.

"True enough. But there is a difference between quoting from academic sources, which Albert mostly avoids, and quoting from mass media sources (i.e., telescreen), which is mostly what Albert does. When he approaches feminism as an intellectual construct, it doesn't bolster his points to attack the watered-down, simplified, fatuous pablum that passes for a given 'movement' or strain of thought on the telescreen. What he does by gathering all of these strains under the same umbrella is akin to what journalists do when they headline articles about Albert Lunsford's comics with blurbs like

With this, he had captured the children's full attention. One of them ventured a response.

"By my understanding, that is generally correct. But I do think there is a sort of 'trickle-down' effect from academia to popular culture. Albert vacillates between crediting academia with benign progress on the one hand and accusing it of the malicious destruction of society on the other. But in both cases he acknowledges academia's contribution to pop-feminism."

Rimbaud offered no objection, so the boy continued.

"It is true that the overwhelming preponderance of super-heroes in the medium renders comics, for most people, a form that is strictly about super-heroes. But the interesting thing with regards to Lunsford is that, following his own logic, the aforementioned dominance of super-heroes also renders Albert Lunsford, himself, an *atheist/marxist/feminist*."

"Allow me to explain."

"Most comic books are about super-heroes. Therefore, comic books are about super-heroes."

"Most comic books are about super-heroes and are created by atheists. Therefore, comic books are about super-heroes and are created by atheists."

"Most comic books are about super-heroes and are created by atheists who are also feminists. Therefore, comic books are about super-heroes and are created by atheists who are also feminists."

"You can see where this is leading, I'm sure."

"Most comic books are about super-heroes and are created by atheists who are also feminists who are also marxists. Therefore, comic books are about super-heroes and are created by atheists who are also feminists who are also marxists."

"And finally... Albert Lunsford creates comic books. Therefore, Albert Lunsford is an atheist and a feminist and a marxist, and his comic book work is comprised exclusively of the all-ages adventures of traditional American super-heroes."

"Clearly, if Albert does not wish to be associated with these atheists, feminists, and/or marxists, as well as the sorts of people who give two shits about super-heroes, he should stop referring to his work as 'comic books,' and/or abandon the medium entirely. Thus, responsibility for his public image is placed squarely upon his own shoulders. If he does not publicly disassociate himself from the medium of comics, he is implicitly supporting the groups identified as participants in the medium, and therefore society will have no choice but to lump him in with them and treat him accordingly."

The boy who had first responded to Rimbaud raised his hand and simultaneously resumed the conversation without waiting to be acknowledged.

"But that's playing fast and loose with the terms we've already agreed have specific meanings (as Albert himself does in so many areas, i.e., marxism, atheism, etc.). Albert doesn't qualify his statements the way you are trying to do for him. He rejects the notion that there is any difference at all between these classifications. Atheist, marxist, feminist—to him, they're all the same thing. In this way, he's exactly right that his arguments are 'unassailable,' because he has completely removed the ability to distinguish one concept from another."

"His way of approaching classification just doesn't scale. In fact, this inability to scale is precisely why Albert, in other discussions, has railed against the erosion of grammatical and syntactical rules in the English language. Pretty soon, people are redrawing the boundaries of what words mean to fit their arguments, which allows them to alter history without even changing the text!"

Rimbaud offered his summation: "As with his enemies, Lunsford merely distorts the context of a given discussion to support his pre-determined thesis."

A boy who had been seated on the opposite side of the circle now stood up and joined the discussion.

"Yes, and every time I would point out one of these collisions of mutually exclusive claims, Albert would just say that the explanation was self-evident to those who had already joined

Rimbaud: "And that's why, no matter how far he travels in search of new ideas, he will only ever succeed in rediscovering the tropes he brought along with him. He proceeds from the premise that he's addressing emotional irrationality and—surprise of all surprises—he arrives at the 'valuable confirmation' that he has indeed been addressing emotional irrationality. Is he really seeking after Truth, at all, or is he simply riffing on foregone conclusions? Well, it's a bit of a trick question. He *admits* that he's merely riffing on foregone conclusions! Every event, whatever the outcome, is merely new evidence that he was right all along. And that's usually the totality of his argument. *I think, therefore you're wrong.* Back in 1974, I might have kept faith that his essays were leading up to something meaningful. But how long am I expected to wait for the prize? There is no *there* there. A smooth writing style will only carry you so far. He kept, and keeps, shifting the floor

beneath the reader. Every declarative phrase doubles back and ties itself into his atheist/theist binary. He's gone completely off the rails as far as constructing an 'airtight argument' (as he calls it) is concerned. The obvious charge here is *confirmation bias*, and Albert Lunsford is history's most egregious offender.

Rimbaud stopped. Looked around. What was he saying? Where had all of this come from?

The crowd outside the Green continued to churn, oblivious to his befuddlement.

He glanced around the circle of children, who were still lobbing balls of paint onto the mechanical animal. None of their mouths were moving. Their body language suggested that they had not even noticed his presence.

He could feel himself losing control of the situation.

"No, no, no. Women are clinically insane, but Albert Lunsford cannot be schizophrenic because psychiatry is not a valid science."

"I think his mental health is sort of a non-issue. Albert interprets it as the fulcrum his freedom hinges upon; but since he is, so far as we know, not a danger to anyone else and since he does, so far as we know, manage to take care of himself, I really don't think anyone cares. I know I don't care, personally, whether or not he's considered 'crazy.'"

"Albert, for his part, seems to think that the whole of society is waiting on pins and needles, anxious for him to die. Now *really*. I think he tends to overestimate the common man's awareness of his oeuvre. Most of society doesn't even know he exists. When people call him 'insane,' I don't think they mean for men in white coats to forcibly remove him from the Off-White House and drag him off to some kind of state-run facility. I think the people he's really worried about—some small percentage of his peers in the industry—see him as either an amusing crank or as a sad example of what happens when a man convinces himself he's the only person on Earth with access to The Truth. Just because people make fun of him being overdue for his meds doesn't mean they are going to come and strap him into a chair, inject him with marxist / feminist / atheist / homosexualist meta-proteins."

"The fact that he was actually committed to an institution once, against his will, probably contributes to his paranoia about the perception of his mental health. Perhaps this fear is exacerbated by his vast experience with hallucinogens, as he may have acquired some idea of what psychotropic medications would do to him. My own parents took me to a psychiatrist once, against my will, and I can say that I was quite belligerent in my response. But I was not given medication, and in fact I was not even held overnight for observation. The psychiatrists seemed confused as to why I had been brought there in the first place. Given his hostility towards psychiatry, I can only assume Albert was treated differently."

"If one examines the timeline of recriminations between Albert and the comic book industry, it is interesting to observe the escalating pattern of self-ostracization Albert has enacted over the past several years. I do not dismiss what his latest published material purports itself to be about, but it is instructive to note that Albert's latest theories have expanded to encompass a neat explanation of why he is no longer a fan-favorite creator, and why his latest works have failed to garner the universal acclaim he seems to think they deserve. He obviously has a very high opinion of himself, and requires a corresponding explanation as to why the rest of the world doesn't hold him in similar esteem. It's fascinating to me that the very tenacity and pigheadedness that make him so difficult to interact with also seem to be precisely the traits that have enabled him to complete his multitudinous extended works. I think this is where Ian Kenny's observations have been centered: Kenny marvels that Albert's single-minded determination has resulted in the self-destruction of his critical faculties—that is to say, his vanished ability to honestly evaluate himself. At the same time, he has turned the remainder of that focus outward, towards the world. With that in mind, I don't just think Ian is being a 'fuckwit,' as you put it. He sort of has a point. Others would no doubt remind us that Albert has always been closed off to intimacy, and that he has only stopped portrayed himself otherwise since the summer of 1974.)"

Finally, Rimbaud began to wind down. He seemed to have said his piece.

"I'm sort of getting tired of this relentless harping on the negative aspects of Albert's philosophies and his approach to arguing them. But dammit, it seems to me that even the people

who explicitly admit they are opposed to everything he stands for never seem to criticize him on the right points. I tried writing to him and taking him to task in private, but as we know, Albert is famously unreceptive to real intellectual debate. He prefers to maintain the authorial distance. Or the authorial authority, if you will. All of you folks who hold it as an article of faith that Albert is unfailingly polite and self-effacing to his fans; well, it's hardly a constant, as many of us have learned through hard experience."

It finally dawned on Rimbaud that none of this business about Albert Lunsford was actually happening on the Public Green. What he was feeling, seeing and hearing was nothing more than a resonant echo of the original Redaction Day. What he seemed to be interacting with was, in reality, merely a facet of the city's holiday decorations. His mesh transceivers had passed on the data unchecked. What a clever presentation, he thought.

Before he could tear himself away from the simulation, one of the children who had been painting the artificial animal appeared at his side and began tugging on his shirtsleeve. He bent down so the child could whisper in his ear.

"Keep your mouth shut. Don't listen to the worries inside," said the child.

More of the ritual dialogue.

In light of Albert Lunsford's harsh example, Rimbaud considered it good advice.

MOUNTAINS OF WHITE

tags: 1986, 4086, dexter_styles, gravy_needs, piro, shit_mold, tab2

Thomas resumed haranguing Piro through the port hole.

"You have to listen to me. You have to come back with me to 1986."

"You've been talking for half an hour. Oh, the plight of the noble graphic designer."

"I'm serious, Piotr."

"I can tell. And I bet you guys are having quite a laugh at my expense. Well, *Ramadan's* almost over. You'll be back here soon enough and then I'll have my revenge."

"This is not a practical joke, Piro!"

"Prove it. Walk me through the challenge and response."

"*Was there ever a God?*" asked Piro, commencing the sequence.

"*Once. A long, long time ago,*" answered Thomas.

They continued in this vein for some time, until Piro had satisfied himself that everything checked out. Once Thomas had successfully authenticated his identity, Piro allowed the conversation to continue.

"Why me?" he finally asked, rubbing his eyes.

Gravy Needs hovered around the corner. Piro was not aware that the King had called an early end to the holiday.

This was fucking great.

"Because we're twin brothers."

"Tom, that's impossible. You're from two thousand years ago."

"..."

"Furthermore, we look nothing alike."

"Not all twins are identical," said Thomas.

"And not all floating heads tell the truth," said Piro.
Stalemate.

"MAKE WAY FOR KING SHIT!"

Piro and Tom's brotherly reunion was interrupted by the return of the King. King Theodosius Shit Mold's entourage marched into the room, elbowing Piro away from the port hole. The flap closed and no one seemed to notice the floating head outside the window. Dexter Styles, the King's Chancellor, took up his usual position between the King and the rest of the group.

"Let it hereafter be known that King Shit has returned to the station!" he declared.

The King reclined on his portable throne, his leg dangling over an armrest.

"Indulge me," said the King to Piro. "Why did you stay behind?"

"Your Highness," Piro bowed deeply, "My duties..."

The King put up his hand, as if to punctuate Piro's excessive babbling. "Eff that noise. From now on, I want you by my side at all times. I've grand designs on your future, Piotr."

Piro bowed again.

A low rumble issued from the port hole. The flap blew back and the makeshift throne room was once again flooded with pale, colorless light.

"I wasn't finished," said Thomas Bright, Jr. through the port hole.

King Shit leaned forward as if to affirm his interest in the present goings-on.

"By all means, do carry on," smirked the King.

Gravy Needs was delighted. He hadn't intended for the King to become involved. But now that he had, the hilarity could only increase.

Gravy punched up the others on his forearm and quickly told them all the news. Stifled laughs echoed in the close chamber. Gravy blipped off and resumed his manipulations of the Court.

"I'm here to retrieve my brother," continued Thomas. "There's trouble back home, and he's needed to help smooth over the discontent."

"Ah, I am empathetic to family problems," allowed the King.

"This is more than just a family problem. There's also a weird anomaly that threatens to engulf the entire universe."

"And only Piro can save us?" laughed the King, incredulously.

"That's my position, yes," answered Thomas.

The Court fell silent, waiting for the King to respond.

Shit Mold could see that Thomas was going to stand firm on his position. Such gallantry touched him deeply, reminding him of comic book stories from his youth.

"Very well then. It would amuse me to observe your adventures from remote. Piro! Pack up your monitoring kit. You're headed for the 1980s!"

Thomas bit his lip and slowly shook his head in affirmation of his victory.

At last, his brother was returning to him. At last, the team would be whole.

Together again for the first time.

Piro climbed into his vehicle and switched on some soft music. Vangelis, as usual. Thomas' head appeared, floating above the passenger seat beside him. The two brothers traveled sans conversation, which was fine with Piro. He needed time to think.

Gravy Needs had not anticipated that the King would send Piro away. For all his trouble, the butt of his prank had been effectively promoted to field work.

I hate Ramadan, he thought.

Moments after Piro engaged the ship's percept drive, the orbital station had begun to undergo a series of complex, unorthodox changes. As the transformations progressed, the station wobbled gradually in and out of sight. The station's

engineers were befuddled by the day's events.

Within an hour of the brothers' departure, the anomaly Thomas had described had expanded to absorb the station in its entirety. No one had expected it to expand so quickly. Least of all Piro.

The King, from his vantage point atop the many phone-books stacked beneath his posterior, had been blessed to see it all coming. Perched on his throne, he tittered and giggled at the symmetry between the waves of monochrome light on screen and the mountains of white powder piled on the table before him.

There was so much white, everywhere.

He sniffled as the station shuddered and faded from memory.

'86

tags: 1986, freeway_ricky_ross, piro, tab1, tab2

Piro eased back on the throttle and the ship came to a stop.

"All right," he said. "We're here."

Thomas eyed him.

"Let's get started."

Thomas' floating head flickered out of view and was replaced by a light rapping on the passenger side window. Piro depressed a switch on his console and the window slid down.

"This way, my man," Thomas said, motioning with his thumb.

"This is our guy on the inside. Handle: Freeway Ricky Ross. Real name: Rick."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Rick."

Ricky nodded.

"We've been making a lot of progress. We did three hundred million last year in uncut bricks. But Ricky's got a line on some sweet chemistry and we've been able to step on these new shipments up to ten times before sending them out to the street. And it sells just as well as the raw."

Piro made a low whistle, pretending he understood what Thomas was talking about.

"The small-time dealers love it. Maximal return on a minimal investment."

"I own five houses," said Ricky.

"It's become an epidemic," complained Thomas, suddenly forlorn. "In spite of our best efforts, Crack is still flooding our streets."

"But—"

Piro's face contorted in spite of himself. He couldn't quite make up his mind if Thomas was being sarcastic.

He started again.

"But you're the ones selling it!"

"Not to worry. We fold all of the profits back into our war on drugs."

Piro shook his head.

"That makes no sense at all."

"That's exactly why we need your help. There are still some kinks in the process that need to be ironed out. Something has got to be done about the spread of illegal drugs, and quickly. People are dying out there, Piotr."

Freeway Ricky Ross leaned back against the hood of his Impala. He hated this part; waiting for Thomas to make his pitch to some new investor was more boring than going to church. He pulled out his briefcase and mulled over some past due paperwork. This new lawyer... No one could read his handwriting. Ricky snapped the briefcase shut and smoked a menthol cigarette. He suddenly noticed that someone had scuffed his Chuck Taylors.

Piro and Thomas had taken a circuitous route around the parking lot. Now they were making their way back towards Ricky. They seemed to still be discussing the preliminaries even as their voices drifted within earshot.

"Basically, I bought the Chrysler Building."

"..."

"Don't look at me like that. We needed the room."

"You founded a super-hero team—funded by drug money—to fight drug dealers."

"Among other things, yes."

Piro could feel his eyes popping out of his head. Thomas was almost thirty years old. This kind of self-destructive behavior was inexcusable. But it was true, he *had* managed to amass some impressive resources. Piro stared off into the Los Angeles smog, weighing the situation.

"Almost nothing about this appeals to me. All right, I'll make an exception for a few of your acquisitions. Did you know that the Chrysler Building is still standing in 4086?"

Owned by the Crown."

"Huh. You don't say."

"Actually, I operated out of the 61st floor for several years, myself, training new recruits."

"Yeah, I remember that training. Dad really had a hard-on for your teaching methods. He always used to tell the rookies, 'If you survive one of Piro's seminars, you're hired.' Seemed to think that was hilarious for some reason. Of course, years later I told him about your Blythe collection."

Piro laughed. "Who do you think got me started on the doll collecting, idiot."

Thomas smiled at him warmly.

Things were falling into place, just as he'd hoped.

"Well Thomas, I'm a little perturbed that you've brought me back in time under false pretenses. Crack cocaine is hardly set to swallow the known universe. But now that I'm here... Well, what the hell. I can see that you've got yourself a heaping full plate. You're going to need all the help you can get dealing with this problem you've unleashed on the inner city. It probably wasn't such a bad idea for you to get me involved."

"I'm sure dad would agree."

"Please, tell me he doesn't know anything about your drug dealing," admonished Piro.

"Relax," said Ricky, flicking his cigarette over the hood of the Impala. "He's in Japan."

"The man has full-clearance access to the mesh, Rick." Piro made a face at him, emphasizing the obvious conclusion. "If he hasn't already involved himself in this scheme it probably just means you haven't been paying close enough attention to the books."

"I resent that," said Ricky. "We've spent a lot of money on accountants."

New York.

The Chrysler Building.

It felt strange to once again be standing on the 61st floor observation deck. Piro tilted his head so that his bangs partially shielded him from the setting sun. He pondered the circumstances which had led up to this present eventuality.

Thomas had fallen asleep in his apartment downstairs. Freeway Ricky had stayed behind in L.A., in order to keep an eye on the business. Someone had to do it, he had said. Consequently, Piro had been able to claim most of the 61st floor for himself. Just like old times. In point of fact, some of his old gear from the 1960s was still locked up in the building's armory.

As Piro's gaze drifted across the city below, he wondered if Thomas was aware that he had burned up the remainder of his fuel in the process of getting them back to 1986. As a result, the RAGNAROK was parked indefinitely within the present temporal frame. Its percept drive had run clean out of new perspectives. Face it, there was nothing new to be learned from the past.

No matter. It was true there was a lot of work to be done, here, in 1986. It could hardly matter if Thomas had deliberately deceived him. Petty manipulations were not at the forefront of his mind. In any case, it would make little sense for Piro to complain about being lied to at this late stage in the game.

So, his plans would change.

He willed himself to narrow his focus, concentrating, with some effort, solely on the mission at hand. Stopping the crack cocaine epidemic before it destroyed the country, if not the entire world.

Piro checked the logs on his weapons and unlatched his backpack. He withdrew the necessary equipment and prepared to launch himself over the wall of the observation deck. Before he knew it, he was once again repelling down the side of the Chrysler Building. This familiar action pleased him, and he accelerated with deliberate speed.

The fading sun reflected at right angles against the skyscraper's face as Piro descended its smooth, featureless surface, pacing himself to the rhythm of the city.

Down, down, down.

PIECES OF FILTH

tags: 1886, haus_mold, jerrymander_mold

Haus was down. Jerrymander sank backwards into the wagon and hugged his satchel. The Mold family backups.

More shots rang out from the top of the canyon. A gurgle came out of Haus. He would be useless for at least another hour.

The Secret Service detail had vanished into the brush.

These fools worshiped a blank sheet of paper. *Any* blank sheet of paper. Considered them sacred. That's why they didn't like it when you filled them with words.

And Jerrymander Mold had gotten an awful lot of ink. According to the *Blanks* (as they were known), excess quantities of pulp were spoiled disseminating the tales of his exploits. Naturally, such tended to happen when you were the President of the United States, but the *Blanks* refused to abide the extraordinary circumstances. The simple inevitability of the press' fascination with power was considered, by their stubborn, peculiar order, to be no excuse. They declared Jerrymander responsible for the destruction of the 25 lb., white bond industry. The market had proven incapable of fulfilling wartime demand. Therefore, President Mold, as the dominant public figure of the war, was obviously to blame for the industry's collapse.

Haus had uncovered only minimal data on their rituals, but it had been enough to put the fear of the Green into Jerrymander. By his reckoning, they indulged in blatantly inhumane practices. And now they had tracked him into the canyon.

Echoes of movement had been detected nearby. Or so Jerrymander calculated the delay. He hesitated to peek over the side of the wagon. He could see nothing but the sky and the western rim of the canyon, straight ahead of him.

Ten minutes elapsed with no further shots fired. Jerrymander assumed the *Blanks* had moved on, but he declined to relax his grip on the satchel.

By any means necessary, the backups must be preserved.

Two hours elapsed. Jerrymander pulled out a blank sheet of paper and investigated it in the failing sunlight. It looked normal enough to him. He felt no particular spiritual stirring. Of course, the nature of his mechanical body guaranteed that this would be the case. He found himself absent the necessary hardware to affect faith, even if his ghost had been willing. The virgin rectangle of white paper looked very much to him like a virgin rectangle of white paper. It lay spread out on his hand, motionless and lacking in semantic content. He turned it over and examined it at different angles, but could only derive this same, dispassionate reading.

Haus started awake with a gasp. He spit blood on the floor of the wagon, all the while cursing the name of the Green.

"These people are truly trying my patience," he remarked, bitterly.

"I know what you mean. First they elect me, and then they want to kill me just because I find it insensible to worship reams of tractor-feed printer paper."

"It's amazing they've tolerated you for so long."

Jerrymander threw up his hands. "They're a guerrilla force. The Federal government is fat and slow. Furthermore, the recalcitrant aesthetic appeals to the mainstream. These are not the ingredients of an Administration victory."

The horses were tired. Haus decided that the wagon could afford to stay put until morning, even in its disadvantaged position. He'd finally gotten the shields up and running. At first light he'd try to track down the awol SS men, while Jerrymander made a beeline for the Continuity of Government bunker thirty miles to the north. The President would be safe there, provided he didn't run into any more *Blanks* along the way.

They divided the backups between themselves according to family protocol. Haus carefully punched out duplicates of everything they had. He took the originals and gave his new copies to the President. If either of them were captured or killed, at least one full copy would survive. If both of them were captured or killed, the preservation of the archive would be irrelevant anyway. They were the only remaining Molds left alive, and it took a living Mold to resume a saved state.

Haus realized then that the Molds were the precise antithesis of everything the *Blanks* stood for.

All the more reason to survive.

Jerrymander dreamed of white squares in space. He conceived them almost as overlapping pixels, multiplying until they blotted out the stars and planets. In his dream, he observed the total heat death of the universe, presented as a linear narrative spanning the spectrum from red shift to blue shift. Near the end, the white squares took on a pale, greenish hue.

He fancied he could make out some meaningful pattern in the mesh of interlocking pixels. The whole enterprise brought to mind Penrose tiles. He felt that there must be some significance to the display that he couldn't quite grasp. Even in his dream he was frustrated that the solution seemed to languish just out of reach.

Jerrymander awoke with a crick in his neck. He ran some diagnostics and adjusted the latches of his spine, but this action only minimally reduced his discomfort. He realized then that he felt cold and reached for his jacket. He could definitely do with better weather. The skin on his knuckles was starting to crack.

Haus had set off without waking him. It was just as well that they split up early in the day. Jerrymander checked his rifles and made sure his internal GPS was functioning as expected. Presently, he yanked on the reins. The horses roused groggily to cruise velocity.

As the wagon drug forward, each horse evacuated its bowels, one after the other, in an alternating pattern of green and brown.

The dust of the trail caught in Jerrymander's teeth. His grimace felt permanent, fixed in place.

He was embarrassed to admit that the smell of the horses bothered him.

DESCENT OF MIND

tags: 1985, albert_lunsford, ian_kenny, saito

Saito:

I write to you with news of Albert's worsening condition.

One moment he is digressing about Kant and the next he has picked up a kitchen appliance and is bashing himself in the face. I am increasingly frightened that he will do irreparable damage to himself. When I'm not around, he calls me almost every day. But I cannot answer his calls anymore—not for any lack of sympathy, understand, but for time. After five minutes he forgets he's called and tries to call again. This can go on for hours. I think it matters very little whether I answer or not, as he won't remember either way. In spite of my fears for his safety, I really don't think my presence or my words mitigate the danger. When I do answer, speaking to him meaningfully is an occluded impossibility, as he rarely understands what I'm trying to say. He seems to be losing comprehension of even simple language. I now manage his percept from remote with an automated script. The program runs continuously, even when I am otherwise preoccupied. I check the log messages most mornings.

I still visit him once a week and help him arrange his grocery deliveries, medications, and so on. He is no longer capable of caring for himself in essential matters. I have to put his hand on the pressure screen at the appropriate times. His notebooks have degenerated, devolved over time into page upon page of scratches, really nothing more than dots and dashes. I don't believe he is writing in Morse code. He doesn't even attempt to

draw anymore. The systems in his apartment could take care of all his basic needs, but I am reluctant to cut off contact on account of his obvious loneliness. He has begun to confuse me with members of his family who are long dead.

My understanding is that your work has taken a turn towards success, as of late, and that the advances you are making every day may be of some benefit to Albert. Things used make sense to him, Saito. To us.

In spite of our earlier discussion on these matters, I must appeal to you yet again to reconsider your blunt rejection of his case. Surely you have some leeway in who you treat. Won't you please try to help him, if you are able.

I implore you, Saito.

Ian Kenny

END BOOK TWO

BOOK THREE

NANA.TECH

tags: 1928, nana_mold, plinth_mold

Diagoro relaxed his stance only a little as Grandma hobbled over to the cupboard. By the Orb on the kitchen counter, he could see that traffic out of the San Jose backbone was slowly reaching its peak. Very little time now. Grandma jumped when the teacups reached parity, and for a moment he thought that she might be in danger of fainting, toppling over. A reassuring expression of recognition (resignation?) gradually bled into her face, and she settled back down into her slippers, returning to the cupboard as the black tide line in each porcelain vessel miscegenated with 2% milk.

"There's really not time for this, Nana," Diagoro breathed thickly.

"You just close your ill-filtering little mouth. You'll eat this and you'll like it. And then we can go and put down your little foreign barbarian whore or whoever it is this time and I'll wear a smile for you then."

Grandma pressed brittle hands into her apron, smearing grease from her tools onto the linen. She snapped closed the aluminum case of her rifle. After tonight she would tell Diagoro, like so many before him, that he was a Mold.

For now, she simply said:

"I'm going to shoot this bitch myself."

STARTING THEM YOUNG

tags: 1935, nana_mold, plinth_mold

Tomorrow is a holiday, but today is not. My parents are both at work, and I'm stuck here at the babysitter's house, sitting out the two or three or four hours that I'll be trapped in this room, lying on my pallet, dreaming without sleep about every possible other thing I could be doing with my time. I don't know why she locks me in here.

Granny is not really my grandmother. But that does not keep her from closing me up into the spare bedroom after lunch, leaving me there until shortly before my parents arrive to take me home. What am I meant to be *doing*, during all of this time? *Granny* has not been forthcoming on the subject.

Today's focus is a new assortment of military adventure toys. Specifically, the pre-visualization of a flying machine whose swept wings must be made to contract upon the release of a certain switch—I presume to be located somewhere along the aircraft's aft fuselage. I'm having a bit of trouble figuring out precisely how the wing mechanism will work. Something to do with strings or wires of some sort, all obfuscated from the child/operator. The picture is as yet fuzzy...

Also up for review is a full-size, realistic combat uniform, infused with what I will for marketing purposes refer to as "the scent of battle." These two ideas should tide me over until the big door unlocks, clicks open at around four o'clock. If I concentrate upon this pair of images intently enough, conceive of them in great enough detail, covering every possible feature, I am convinced—no, I am *certain*—that they will have materialized in my bedroom closet by the time I get home. It is not clear why I choose to believe in this notion, but I confess that I do. I suppose such activity amuses me. Consider my age.

First then, the aircraft.

"Dad is insatiable screwing his daughter," a voice states, aloud, sounding quite desperate to be heard. It is only mildly distracting as I am quite used to this sort of thing by now. I shrug vaguely without losing my train of thought. Laughable, really, these attempts at derailing my creative process.

"Japanese teen showing her hairy pussy," the voice continues. I have no trouble ignoring the outburst, and so carry on with my daydreaming as if no auditory phenomena were taking place. All is calm.

"Homeless guy wearing a brand new 8-ball jacket."

That, I'm sorry to admit, tears it. I have finally had enough. I straighten myself and reply:

"Little cutie screams as she gets drilled on her new boss' desk. Okay? Is that what you wanted to hear? May I proceed now?"

I have prepared myself for a dramatic pause, but the voices promptly dissolve into a perfect silence. Indeed, one could almost be lulled into sleep in this quiet. Would that all of my projects could be undertaken in such sublime stillness. I'm quite certain that the balance of my output would yield a sharp increase in quality.

"Now," I think to myself, "Let's get back to work."

Before long, the voices are at it again.

"Innocent Gays getting modernistic IT anally."

This time, I don't even dignify the disruption with a response. Why do they bother? I'm simply not interested.

And yet, I have to admit that the voices have once again succeeded in distracting my attention. Remarkable, these recent advances in advert technology.

Granny knocks gently as she enters, clutching a packet of my medications. She casts a knowing look as she unscrews the bottles, sorting the myriad variety of colored pellets into the concave depressions of her tray. Her eyes caress me with warm approval as I accept the arrangement of doses and commence popping pills.

"You were diddling yourself in here again, weren't you, Plinth."

"No," I say. "You're hearing things, old woman."

I think she is smiling at me but it's difficult to tell because she is so old that her face appears quite wrinkled even when she is asleep, or watching her programs on telescreen. Is that a smile, or is it merely the untreated cracking of leather?

I assume she was joking, that she didn't actually see me with my hands in my pants.

There. Now I am *certain* she is smiling. This is preposterous. As if I needed more variables to consider.

I am tired. Much too tired to continue.

Where are my parents?

That's all for today, Diary.

EOF

AWAKENING THE SELF

tags: 1944, plinth_mold

If there is a test, chances are he will pass. But he is never quite sure if he really understands the answers, or if he has merely derived them from some calculus of the movement of language. Has communication truly taken place? And if so, how does he know that he knows? This problem of knowledge goes deeper for him (he suspects) than for any of the other boys; he is certain that the others are secure both in their answers and in the thoughts which (he is also certain) inform them. Much unlike himself, unfortunately. What good is the right answer if it still doesn't make any sense?

He is provided a worksheet. On it are inscribed a series of symbols he does not understand. Above the symbols are situated photographs of the room he has just vacated. He studies the paper and notices that, in one of the photos, a mesh transceiver has been placed behind the couch. The angle of the photograph is such that the placement of the transceiver is clearly intended to be noticed. But what is the transceiver *for*? That information is not provided. He begins to wonder if, perhaps, there is some other, more salient detail of the photo that he is missing. What is it he is meant to be looking for? Perhaps the mesh equipment is not the item of greatest importance. He scans the paper again but notices nothing new.

The other children have all been issued this same sheet of paper. Most of them are dumbfounded. Discarding their worksheets, the children proceed to enact a miniature, organized conflict. They count off into strike teams, execute insurgencies, repel counter-insurgencies, invade and defend arbitrarily defined territories within the room's finite perimeter. It is clear to Plinth that they have all but forgotten the problem on the worksheet. Had the exercise confounded them all the same way? Each of the boys, including Plinth himself, have only just turned sixteen. So, some unfamiliarity with printed matter is to be expected. *But still*, Plinth wonders, *What are these boys seeing when they look at the photographs? Indeed, what am I missing?*

At the one hour marker the children are led back into the waiting room. Further instructions are not provided.

The children begin to bicker. It is apparent now that the waiting room has been stripped of standard entertainments. Plinth waits until two quarrelers obscure the main surveillance camera (thinly disguised as an inoperable telescreen) and ducks quickly behind the couch. Seconds later, he pops back up and feigns participation in the complaining. A noticeable bulge now deforms the left-front pocket of his trousers. Upon close observation his sudden sociability is less than convincing.

The boys are led out of the waiting room and into a play area, well-stocked with childish trifles. Plinth notes that these trinkets are of the exact type the boys had been clamoring for, only moments before. Carefully, he retreats into a corner, near an air vent, and divests his pocket of the purloined contraband. The cool, manufactured air of the building's circulation system envelopes his hands and face as he crouches above the illicit cargo, squinting at the various inscriptions etched into the reverse-side of each item.

Between the legs of a chair, Plinth spies two pairs of wingtip shoes.

The furniture is immediately lifted up, completely off of the ground. Large hands likewise lift Plinth out of the corner, but not before he manages to gather up his collection of stolen materials. He is deposited onto a table top, where two uniformed men inspect him thoroughly. Their commentary adopts the distinct air of suspicious, yet enthusiastic interest.

The doctor with the big hands is the first to address him directly.

"One of your pockets looks rather larger than the other one, Plinth."

"Yes," the second man joins in, "The way they're making trousers these days, it's a wonder you can even maintain your balance when you try to walk."

Plinth: "Born this way, actually. My gait is lopsided."

"More likely, his pants are sagging from the weight of several power cells taken from a mesh transceiver," the smaller doctor remarks to his colleague.

"For my leaf," Plinth offers, halfheartedly.

"You can *read*?" both of them say in unison. Now they take turns shaking their heads, greatly amused for some reason.

"*Duh, jackasses,*" Plinth says, rolling his eyes. "I'm not a little kid."

Plinth is once again removed from the waiting room.

Presently, Plinth is being lectured, prepared for his circumcision. Before he can be cut, he must first be made to understand.

The origin of the procedure is by now lost to history. For his part, Plinth knows enough about the rite of manhood to suspect what comes next. He has also finally deduced the purpose of today's exercise in the waiting room; he is astonished at the transparent nature of the deception. Even more astonishing is the fact that he fell for the ruse on the first try. Doubtless, Grandma was somehow involved.

As it happens, he is the only child to have qualified for circumcision today. At sixteen years of age, most males have yet to develop the abstract thinking skills required to perform such feats as, say, comprehending the relationship between his environment and the funny squiggles and marks that constitute a topographical map. By revealing that he knows how to read, Plinth has demonstrated that not only does he grasp the basic concepts of symbolic representation, but that he may also comprehend more abstract relationships which may or may not yield a 1:1 correspondence to empirical reality. This is quite unusual for someone so young. According to the more experienced doctors, there is a precedent for the situation: Plinth will simply be allowed to skip ahead to a higher grade level.

Naturally, Plinth is concerned about the costs this may incur.

"How can I convince them that my brain is damaged," he thinks to himself.

He shoves his hand into his trousers and squeezes out a length of fecal matter. Without hesitation, he chews the curl of feces vigorously into his mouth. Swallows.

Much to his dismay, the gambit is unsuccessful.

The Mold awareness slowly seeps back into Plinth's consciousness. At first he is beside himself; these men have just mutilated his stick. Then he recalls the purpose of the ritual. Presently, he recalls his past life as Haus Mold. He knows now what he must do next.

Plinth waves the doctors aside and inspects his personal effects, ensuring that everything remains as he left it, nearly two decades in his past. Satisfied, he withdraws a small electronic device and activates its primary function, instantly transmuting all organic life in the room into dust.

Deactivating the device and donning his eye-patch, Plinth hops off of the examination table and begins to search for an exit.

There is much work to be done.

IT'S ALL POLITICS

tags: 1965, plinth_mold, potus, tab1, the_chief

"What do you mean he 'runs plastics?'" the Chief snarled, incredulously.

"Just that. There's no record of him after 1928, and then all of a sudden this falls into my lap. Somehow, he's taken control of half the toy manufacturing in America."

Thomas Bright, Sr. adjusted his cap.

"And you're sure it's the same guy?" asked the Chief.

"Proof's in the paperwork. Same investment patterns."

"But technically it's a different name."

"They're all Molds though, aren't they."

"True that."

Plinth Mold settled into his recliner, his reading glasses perched on the end of his nose. Not much in the paper.

Maude. Oh, Maude.

Of course, this wasn't really his Maude. Generations had passed. Their children had spawned children of their own. This girl... Was probably his great great granddaughter.

No matter, the Molds had always kept it in the family.

Plinth Mold hadn't made love since 1888.

He lit his pipe.

Thomas Bright, Jr. played with his toys. Frequently, he would inspect the intellectual property information inscribed upon the buttocks of his action figures. He had noticed early on that all of his toys seemed to be manufactured by the same company.

He figured his dad had purchased them in bulk. The cheap bastard.

Thomas threw back the flap of his tepee and climbed out. The cold air burned his lungs, going down. He fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette.

"Violet!" he yelled, carelessly. "When's dad coming home?"

"Never!" Violet called back.

Thomas flicked his cigarette into the open flap of Violet's tent and wandered off towards the creek, where he could urinate in peace.

An alarm sounded on the Chief's desk. He scanned the incoming message and reacted instantaneously, barking commands into his commlink even before he had fully depressed the trigger.

"Dispatching *a cappella* teams to the scene," he shouted into the *aether*.

Thomas Bright, Sr. stared out of the big the window while the Chief worked. He knew that their discussion had ended, for the time being, on account of the incoming message. Still, the situation with the Molds would have to be addressed, sooner or later.

"I'm sorry, Tom, we're going to have to postpone this until tomorrow morning. The President seems to think that current developments within Project: BLUEBIRD should take precedence over our investigation into the Mold situation."

Thomas smiled on the inside. The Chief's sarcasm in the face of absolute authority delighted his sense of rebellious individuality. Naturally, he would never reveal such degeneracy to his superior.

"I understand, sir. It's all politics."

The Chief listened to his earpiece for a moment and then glanced over at Thomas and mimed jerking off with his hand.

Thomas nodded and showed himself out of the room.

TRADE

tags: 1960, margaret, tab1, tab2, the_chief

The men in the street shifted uncomfortably as Thomas threaded between them, calling out user IDs and lot numbers as he went. Many were unaccustomed to such face-to-face business dealings, and they bristled at the close contact.

In point of fact, the vocal identification and interplay wasn't strictly necessary—the visor was picking out each recipient quite efficiently, on its own—but Thomas liked to talk to people. As he made eye contact with each man, he pushed a box into their hands and made a point of thanking them for their patronage. Thomas believed that the human touch created a connection between himself and his clients. For their part, the men in the street were mostly irritated by his forthright manner. They would not have left their apartments in the first place if home delivery had been within their means.

Indeed, the men stood crammed into an ever lengthening line along one side of the street. Most had squatted down on the curb to inspect their bid tickets, or in some cases, their parcels. Each figure was a solemn portrait in charcoal, crouched in wool jacket and trousers, gazing fixedly over his clutch of papers. Every so often, the gritting of teeth could be heard above the din as someone discovered that he would not be the next to take delivery of his winnings. For most in the line, this day's auction had been a final, go-for-broke grasp at obtaining a user account on the old pressure screen grid. Securing an account meant the guarantee of employment. Recently, a blanket freeze had been declared. No more new accounts would be created before the end of the year. This unexpected policy was instituted uniformly across all nodes, effective immediately.

Thomas ignored his visor's display and ran the figures in his head as he negotiated the sorry gallery of drooping faces. At two hundred thousand dollars per, his deliveries were netting an even million on a good day. This was not to mention the substantial commissions he would claim from brokering his customers' login applications. In this way, he netted rather a lot of money in rather a short period of time. Each infusion of cash compounded with his previous earnings, snowballing out of all

rational control. It occurred to him at times that a like substance tended to flow from itself; the small investment that had gotten him started (thank you, Father), wed to the ingenuity he employed at multiplying its volume, spread, fractal as the branches of a tree into an incomprehensibly vast canopy of zeroes. Even so, he recalled that it had been his own insight, quite apart from the fact of his tools, that had proven instrumental in setting the whole process in motion. From one seed, eternity. But the poetry of abiogenesis was a myth. The flow could not proceed from a rock. The rock must first be cracked in two.

Thomas considered the sorry status of his customers. Was the competence of others truly so discouraging, such a disheartening exhibition as to obliterate one's own will to succeed? Or were these men simply too lazy to break open their respective rocks?

Thomas could see no profit in answering the question.

Thomas drifted towards a random squatter and tossed a five thousand dollar chip into his can. He corrected himself at once, retrieving the chip to wipe its memory. After a few seconds erasing, Thomas tossed it back into the squatter's lap. The unfortunate man, who had obviously not won any auctions that day, did not look up from his leather-bound copy of *DIANETICS*.

Comfort yourself as you're able, Thomas thought to himself.

Sensing his presence, the book spun up its standard solicitation.

"I just took a shit the size of a baby's arm," it read aloud.

Disabused of his altruism, Thomas returned to his work.

By now, then, the men to Thomas' left had all taken on a greenish pallor. This indicated that their parcels had already been delivered. Thomas wheeled his cart around and headed in the opposite direction. The men on the other end of the street were still tinted red. One by one, they melted to light green as he placed a package into each of their hands. Occasionally, Thomas would produce a handkerchief from his pocket and wipe the fog away from the inside of his visor.

The weather crawl indicated that the ambient temperature of the alleyway had reached 95 degrees Fahrenheit. Uncomfortable, to be sure, but not yet a cause for alarm.

Once the sidewalk had melted into a carpet of soft green, Thomas locked down his cart and pedaled away on his bike. Almost immediately he was flagged by a bright orange man who had lately begun to sputter and spurt various curses from his seat on the curb. Amused but mindful of the orange glow, Thomas put down the kickstand on his bike and removed his gloves.

The man on the curb explained to Thomas that his delivery had arrived in unsatisfactory condition. While the outer surfaces of the parcel appeared to be intact, upon opening the box the man had found nothing but charred, broken fragments and a handful of dust. (This, Thomas surmised, derived from the explosion of the device's power source whilst in transit.) A scent reminiscent of mashed potatoes wafted itself into Thomas' nostrils.

The man had worked himself into an unfriendly humor. He demanded an immediate replacement for the item, and/or the immediate refund of the full bid amount into his account. As Thomas looked on, the man proceeded to type a complaint into his leaf, which shortly caused his tint to shift from orange to bright yellow. Simultaneously, a soft tone chimed in Thomas' ear.

Thomas considered the situation. When the customer had submitted his complaint, a hold would have been placed upon Thomas' account for a corresponding price of the item (minus auction fees, etc.), pending the satisfactory resolution of the buyer dispute. The onus had now shifted to Thomas to provide a valid serial number and delivery confirmation for the replacement item, or to agree to a full refund. He immediately recognized that, due to the hold placed upon his account, *his balance was no longer sufficient to secure a replacement item*. Much less pay for overnight shipping. A refund, of course, would be out of the question, by dint of the clearly stated terms of his boilerplate delivery contract.

Thomas judged the dispute irreconcilable. All for the sake of a used piece of collectible pregnancy armor. The absurdity of the conundrum put him in mind of paper currency. He

mulled over suggesting a historical working. Small, rectangular pieces of paper could be collected into an animal leather pouch, then transmitted surreptitiously via occult arm/hand gestures. Traditionally, the procedure had been known put a disgruntled customer's mind at ease. But the notion was laughable. Juvenile. A valid debt could not be satisfied with trinkets and scraps of paper. He wiped the condensation from his visor and likewise sharpened his mental focus. Time to get serious.

Thomas examined his surroundings in the alley. He glanced from side to side, then moved his eyes onto his chronometer and noticed that a considerable amount of time had elapsed since he had pulled over his bike to commiserate with his complaining customer. The two men now stood completely alone at the curb. The street had cleared of punters.

The unhappy customer's expression registered extreme dissatisfaction, no doubt exacerbated by the evening's steadily steepening thermal incline.

Thomas considered how difficult it would be to setup a new delivery account, to find another corner to service, to arrange the dispersal of hundreds of thousands of dollars for yet another intermediary service to accredit is account. He then resumed his customer's tightly focused, accusatory stare. It was true the man could almost be said to look pregnant. The customer continued to grimace from behind his parcel's charred, blackened box flaps.

Maybe he had needed that armor for something more important than simply completing a collection.

Without warning, Thomas suddenly snatched the ruined box from the man's hands and hurled it to the ground. He punched the man in the jaw and then mounted his bike, adjusted his visor for night vision, and pedaled away at top speed. As he had feared, the ambient temperature was rapidly approaching dangerous levels.

Thomas realized, after he had pedaled some distance down the road, that he had dropped his login chit.

The man on the curb wobbled uncertainly. He touched his hand to his face several times, confirming the integrity of his jaw line. He then stooped to retrieve Thomas' chit.

Thomas observed his customer's activity from a safe distance. He felt some disappointment at the loss of his credentials, but he was glad to see that his customer had survived the transaction. In any case, his account was irretrievably lost. He would have to register all over again in the new year.

Thomas leaned into a tight, right turn and accelerated rapidly towards home.

On balance, he concluded that he could afford to laugh. His customer was in for a surprise, if ever he attempted to join the ranks of freelance sellers. In today's economy, selling was not nearly as easy as buying. Honest work had proven to yield diminishing returns.

Thomas recognized in himself the stirrings of a terminal pessimism.

He considered returning to school. Exchanging one set of circumstances for another of equal or lesser value.

But he could not admit defeat. Not at twelve years of age.

He had to make a go of this.

Thomas calculated the remainder of his savings and selected a blank sheet of paper from his binder.

NEW SENTENCES

tags: 1982, 1986, tab1, tab2, the_chief

Eyes burnt out. Almost awake. Vanishing act. Breathing late. Ringing sound. Mild discomfort. Feels like I'm wearing a restroom napkin. Tuning three stations at once in my left ear. The other is numb. Everything is back and forth. Fluorescents blink and convince me otherwise. Smooth, cold and dusty in places. Smell is shrink wrap with rubbing alcohol, but worse. Now questions. Tight grip turns to shaking. White noise. Corner of a desk in my eye, hard, but it just feels like it. Smudged ghosts huddling to warm up. Plastic bindings. Spittle smears my cheek. Sound of pliers and car keys. Something warmer than dish water. Cut with a razor. Tied. Comforting, now. Soft cotton blankets. Lukewarm relax. Taking off the restroom napkins. Softer sheets beneath me. Dermal abrasion. Folded towel on my forehead. More tying. A small pricking. Indistinct murmuring in my ear and then more shouting. I'm drifting. Quieter voices. Mother is not holding me.

"Sounds like the diary of a heroin addict," said the Chief. I laughed.

"Surprising lucidity. My boy is a born writer. I doubt I'd be coherent enough to recount the experience."

"Yeah, I've tried to read your reports."

We had needed a willing guinea pig.

The lawyers wouldn't even consider writing up our memo unless one of us was willing to undergo the procedure, to prove it was safe.

I suggested we get new lawyers. That got some laughs.

Then I suggested Tommy.

"But will he do it?" the Chief had asked.

"You'd better believe it," I assured him.

Of course, it wasn't quite so simple. I hadn't even spoken to the boy in a number of years. He never seemed to be available when I called. In the end we had had to extract him from his place of employment. Forcibly.

He just wouldn't cooperate. Even after my men identified themselves as Federal agents. Which they never, ever do. (I had given them some leeway to bend the rules. After all, this was my son we were talking about.)

We got him out of there. And still he would not submit.

I was exasperated.

I authorized additional force just because he had made me so damned angry.

Possibly, I should have told him it was me. But that would have tainted the experiment. The results would have been declared invalid. The whole operation would have been worse than useless.

I had had to proceed under a cloak of anonymity.

I hadn't anticipated that he would figure it out so quickly.

After he was released, I received an e-mail from him. Short, but it was him. Seems he regretted having gone through the experience. Asked me not to contact him again. Ever. It wasn't signed (in fact, it arrived as a message sent from my own account). But I know for a fact it was him.

Shouldn't have been such a big deal.

He had been through the training. He was qualified. Obligated, even.

But of course, he had had a complaint.

He always was a complainer.

1986.

Woke up this morning. Got a call from Piro. What's he doing back in the country?

I was going to say *I should let Tommy know*, but then I remembered, he's still upset with me.

I'll give him a few more years.

He'll cool off, eventually.

PERIOD DRAMA

tags: 1985, b_errol_royale, chuck_fraud, the_director

Chuck Fraud loaded his pen.

He cruised in through the front doors and attached himself to a cart. Walked it down an aisle and held out his arm, sending a row of boxes tumbling into his basket.

At the register he pulled out his pen and started to write a check.

"What are you, Abraham Lincoln?" the cashier said, "You can't write a check here."

"What, my money's not good enough for you?"

"No, sir, it's not. In fact, where did you find an *ink pen*, anyway?"

Chuck Fraud was taken aback by this. How audacious. And no regard for history.

"Son—"

"**Cut!**" cried the Director. "I still don't feel good about this scene. Some of the details just don't read as authentic. And I don't like this conveyor belt. I don't remember electronics stores looking like this."

He looked down and then spoke into his Arrow shirt-sleeve.

"Get me the Expert. *The Expert!* Now."

After a few minutes the actors were already getting restless and so he waved them off, free to shoot dice or fuck under the craft services table or whatever it was actors did when not being directed by a director. People continued to swarm around him, but still the Expert was not present.

The Director consulted his shirtsleeve again and then peered into his lap at his leaf. He'd research this himself. He tapped two distinct regions in sequence and then furrowed his brow as his eyes strained to follow the changes.

Chuck Fraud loaded his pen.

He cruised in through the front doors and attached himself to a cart. Walked it down an aisle and held out his arm, sending a row of boxes tumbling into his basket.

Pushed the basket up to the register. Starting filling out a check.

"I'll need to see your identoplate," the cashier interrupted.

"What kind of scam is this?" asked Chuck Fraud.

"Sir, you can't pay with paper—"

"**Cut!**" screamed the Director, finally making himself hoarse.

This time, the Expert was on hand.

"This sequence just isn't working. I'm sort of re-writing it blind here; I don't know if the original screenplay was pecked out at random by amphetamine-soaked apes or if this was something originally intended for telescreen. Either way, it's shit. This retail environment is in no way authentic. The transaction particulars are also inaccurate. If *I* remember this stuff, you *know* the *viewers* are going to remember it. We've got to do something about it."

"I'll see what I can come up with," confirmed the Expert, before darting between some interns and vacating the sound stage.

Errol Royale fingered a business card from the top of his deck. It read: "B. Errol Royale, Recruiter." His eyes massaged the dense ultracrowd. As he surveyed the area, an erection began to deform the contour of his trousers.

Royale flashed on one Chuck P. Fraud and made a bee-line for him, parting the sea of aimless consumers by waving his business card in front of his face like a butterfly knife. Fraud responded, naturally enough, by shifting his weight and attacking Royale's midsection, using the point formed by his knuckles to radiate a signal of pain throughout the taller man's ribcage—

"**Cut,**" breathed the Director.

He paused to draw in more air before continuing.

"I think I'm going to give up on this scene. I no longer care how Fraud gets into the military. We just have to make it believable when he starts picking off Congressmen. Let's move

on to the next page."

THE MOLDS

tags: 1975, jonathan, plinth_mold, reginald

The man from downstairs would appear every evening at 7:00 p.m., ready to collect the wax sculpts. He would take them down to the manufacturing floor where they would be cast as *first shot* test molds, and be then put through several short production runs. Gently, the man would scoop up each figure and place it onto his tray. He would then push his cart along to the next desk. This cycle iterated, every evening of every season, without fail. By autumn, the company's lead design team would complete a fresh collection of figurines.

Jonathan's team had never failed the company.

Motioning to the man with the cart, then towards an array of already assembled parts that were spread out on the table before him, Jonathan presented the work that had most recently occupied his attention. The wheels of the man's cart emitted a cantankerous noise and shortly began to roll again, this time in the direction of Jonathan's work area.

From out of nowhere, Plinth Mold tramped into the room. He shook the dust from his boots, shouldered past the man with the cart, and locked his one good eye, somehow simultaneously, onto both men at once. Plinth held onto this intimate, personal contact for as long as he possibly could before proceeding to the next phase of the interaction.

Jonathan batted a curtain of dirty hair from his face and began to scratch his yellow beard. There was no use trying to stop the boss now.

Plinth removed his eye patch, revealing the smooth, concave surface where an eye socket should have been situated, had Plinth been born of a mere human woman. Squinting, he proceeded to inspect Jonathan's most recent achievements. The first sculpt seemed to captivate, singularly, and he hoisted it up into the light, the better to examine its particulars. His weight shifted forward and his mouth produced a vaguely appreciative grunt. His one good eye rapidly alternated its focus for several seconds, comparing his favorite figure to the other wax artworks arranged haphazardly across Jonathan's table. It was clear from these physical perturbations that, in Plinth's

opinion, none of the other figures measured up to the one he held clenched in his leather-gloved hand.

Suddenly sweeping away his velvet knapsack, Plinth winked at Jonathan and pulled the drawstring closed.

"Our style of working will seem less threatening, in retrospect," he remarked.

"Who's threatened?" Jonathan tended to humor the aging businessman his eccentricities, but he sensed that he was being mocked.

Plinth (indicating the sculpt that had captured his interest): "I shall require more figures in this vein. Yes. Similar, I think, if not identical, to this one."

Jonathan: "But I've completed a whole *series* of designs. Here, just take a look at these other models—"

"I will require only the Asiatics," insisted Plinth, expertly maneuvering past Jonathan's pointlessly extended hand.

"You aim to pick and choose between the Lord's handiwork?" demanded Jonathan, a surprising wave of anger suddenly breaching the surface of his pink face.

"*A man must content himself with the time that he has been allotted,*" quoted Plinth, "*...and so divide his attentions accordingly.*"

Plinth paused, waiting for Jonathan's mind to catch up with his ears.

"It should also be pointed out that you have come perilously close to conflating *yourself* with the Lord our God. A most unusual lapse, for a young man of your background."

This led to silence. Plinth knew quite well which switches he was throwing within the young lad's mind.

Jonathan considered himself to be the reincarnation of a famous Green religious leader, highly revered by the people of his home country. This quirk had been jealously concealed by Jonathan's family, as wide dissemination of his delusions was likely to result in ridicule, or, even worse, excommunication from the country's dominant religious order. Since no one believed his claims, there could be no defense.

As time continued to elapse, Plinth wondered if perhaps he had flipped Jonathan's switches with an excess of vigor.

Eventually, the young man let out his breath. Plinth winced visibly as Jonathan opened his mouth and slowly began to speak.

"I suppose you are better qualified to discern the relative, mundane qualities of my work than I can ever hope to be," Jonathan said easily, his ears slowly fading from red to pink. "I do not begrudge you your preferences. They are the very basis of our relationship, after all. Please, take what you will."

With this, Plinth relaxed and settled back into his shoes. He could see now that Jonathan had regained conscious control of his limbs, and so, in this more equanimous humor, would not attempt to strike him with any of the tools laid out on his workbench. Plinth hastened to remind himself that there was never a guaranteed outcome when one ventured to upset the Divine equilibrium of the religiously inclined. He was only glad that he had not come to terminate the boy's employment.

Behind Plinth's back, situated at the base of a far wall, a half-sized door rose up from the floor. Presently, it opened, and a half-sized man crossed over its threshold into the open air of Jonathan's workshop. Plinth had not come equipped to deal with multiple assailants, and so he spun around quite awkwardly to confront this lately arriving interloper.

Somewhat unexpectedly, Plinth's plastic cloak had gathered itself around his ankles, on the floor, and he nearly tripped over it as he assumed the appropriate defensive posture.

The man in the closet had declined to join Plinth and Jonathan in the lounge. He claimed not to have been aware of Plinth's arrival in the workshop, which seemed ordinary enough on its face, but no sane man (in Plinth's estimation) refused a free drink and a chance to gnaw the ear of his employer. He would know the reason behind this man's stubborn abstinence. He demanded that the fellow explain himself, and fixed his posture to wait for an answer. The half-sized man had prepared no rebuttal, and so finally he agreed to break from his chores, to drink with his employer, to act like a human being. In spite of this surrender, Plinth observed that a measure of wariness still showed plainly on his face.

"I have busied myself in that closet, without emerging, for a handful of months, and would continue in my toil without complaint if you could but leave me alone to get on with my work," lamented the half-sized man.

"Is it *comfortable* in that closet?" Plinth asked. His genuine curiosity was evident to all who were present at the table.

"I have to admit that it's not. But my closet is still serviced by the building's pneumatic tube system, through which I am able to procure my materials."

"May I ask then why it is you are willing to tolerate such working conditions?"

Plinth knew that he was traversing the boundaries of etiquette. Had he opened himself to recriminations? The half-sized man matched his tone.

"Oh, and I suppose you find every aspect of *your* job to be ideal? I work from the time I wake up, straight through to the time when I fall asleep. What could be the purpose of maintaining separate quarters? There's nothing about where I sleep in my orders."

"I don't mean to rhyme..." he added.

Jonathan was again fumbling with the bristles of his beard, eyes focused upon some distant apocalypse. Reginald (for that, Plinth had learned, was the half-sized man's name) had performed the series of keypad exertions necessary to extend his rolling platform to roughly chair height, and so he began the process of conveying his legless body into the booth alongside his companions. For his part, Plinth was generous enough not to remark upon Reginald's ornate personal mobility carrier. Though gape at it he did.

"*What?*" demanded Reginald.

"I take it you are the man who operates the molds," whispered Plinth, eyes fairly glazing over as he avoided focusing on Reginald's... stroller.

"The man who designed them. Now operates them. No one else seems to be able to get the hang of the interface."

Here Jonathan interjected, reciting the well-worn narrative. "The backups of Reginald's original designs for the molds were lost in a catastrophic fire that cleaned out the department's central data center back in '71."

"The company opted to rescue what was left of my code instead of what was left of my legs. And how did that work out for them?"

"Reginald was caught in the fire," Jonathan explained.

"Falling machinery bisected me. Cut me into hemispheres. With the loss of my *templates*, I've no way of growing a new *interface*. None of the department's people have ever been able to figure out how to run the things without me."

"But we get by," Jonathan insisted, realizing that Reginald was making him sound useless.

"Yes, recognizing that losing me meant throwing off their budget, the department chipped in on this mobility rig, and built a special room for me here so that I might be close enough to the molds to lend my expertise when complex adjustments were required. Eventually, I just made the space over into an office. The molds are too expensive to replace, so this is the state of affairs until we discover how to map the controls onto other users' minds."

"I had no idea," said Plinth, now sincerely embarrassed.

Reginald inclined his head toward Jonathan and took another sip of his water.

"I tell the kid here it's all God's fault."

I'LL MANAGE

tags: 1976, maude_mold, plinth_mold

So he was unhappy, again. But when he halted to appraise the situation rationally, he found that nothing had really changed. Why, then, this morose disposition?

Each season, Plinth Mold selected the action figures that would comprise the next year's line. He did this alone—that is, his decision was final—because Plinth Mold knew that to consult a committee would signal weakness to the trade press. Such fanfare had been made of his spectacular rise, his subsequent reign and famously charismatic management style, that he was wary of reversing the polarity of this momentum, reluctant to sour himself in the public eye by demonstrating an acute lack of direction. He knew well that each word of praise committed in print represented an investment expected to yield generous dividends; that the looming weight of his success was not itself immune to the fearful and awesome properties of general relativity. In point of fact, there *was* a sort of balance to the world, and he was loathe to tip it off-kilter.

The problem was, finally, that these latest designs were not going to work. That is to say, Plinth could not decide between them. In years gone by such an impasse would have met with the unhesitant scrapping of the entire line—Plinth would fire the responsible team and start over from scratch. But it was far too late for that, this year. He would have to make a choice from amongst what had already been placed in front of him. He knew it was imperative to come to a decision, but still he was unsure of his direction.

Yes, so something of some significance had actually changed. He cycled between each layout and reprimanded himself sternly for his indecision. Why was he making this so difficult? As he stared at each proposal, he could not determine to his satisfaction which was superior. They all seemed to consist of roughly the same elements. Each seemed equal in merit to the next.

"There is urine all over the front of this toilet," complained Maude Mold, Plinth's wife of some twenty-five years. "Sometimes I sit down and my pant leg touches it—I can feel it."

Plinth looked up from his leaf. "I guess I'll need to clean that up."

"That'd be a good idea, so I don't fucking retch."

Previous flirtations with indecision had cost Plinth an entire season's work. He had ended up pushing a wave of repaints into the stores for Redaction Day. No truly new figures for over six months. Mention of that debacle was now off-limits in staff meetings, but the dark period lingered in his memory. Fatigued, he thought to himself that bouncing back from abject failure was a young man's game.

To All Employees:

Our Guiding Principles form the basis for how we should manage our day-to-day interactions with customers and each other. They are the unchanging foundation that supports how we conduct ourselves everyday. Along with our Business Plan objectives and Factors for Dominance, the Guiding Principles form the building blocks to ensure the Figures Department and ultimately UNIVERSAL MOLD's success.

Click here to view the presentation of the month that discusses the importance of "Hold Yourself and Others Accountable."

**Act with Honesty and Integrity at All Times
Exhibit a Positive Attitude
Treat Everyone with Courtesy and Respect
Do What You Say You are Going to Do
Seek First to Understand Then Be Understood
Communicate Clearly and Often
Inspect What You Expect
Execute Flawlessly Everyday
Recognize and Encourage Continuously
Hold Yourself and Others Accountable**

Thank you,

**Plinth Mold
President, UNIVERSAL MOLD**

"I can't believe I just wrote that," thought Plinth Mold. "I wonder how I would respond to a message like this, were I to receive it from my own employer." But of course, Plinth Mold did not have an employer. Had not, in fact, for some time. (Maude, it was true, was only his wife.) He tapped the appropriate region on his leaf's screen, causing his message to be sent. He hated these condescending dispatches, but this one had been necessary, something about gradated impacts that had bubbled up from Force Management, and if that were the case, it might as well bear his own signature instead of one belonging to some irrelevant middle manager. He sought solace through embracing the inherent nobility of his judgment, but, curiously, accepting his responsibility failed to improve his sagging mood. He still felt blank—or worse, confused.

"When you sit there with your pen, scratching away, it almost appears as if you have friends," allowed Maude. "Your movements, these gestures toward what appears to be the composition of some sort of communique, are so realistic."

Plinth sighed, folded up his leaf and turned off the lamp on his nightstand. He removed his eye patch and laid it on the table next to his face, then ran his fingers over the concave surface where his eyeball should have been. His toes were freezing, but Maude would not countenance another blanket or any adjustment to the environmental controls. Perhaps he could show her the figure designs, see if she could muster a preference for one in particular. Immediately, he wondered what that would cost him in the event of an acrimonious separation, and so he closed his mouth. He'd better just do it himself. Like so much else.

"It's an expensive illusion, created just for you."

There was silence, then, but he knew that he had said too much.

SHIFT!

tags: 1981, chricton, eva, plinth_mold, tab2

11SEPT1981

UNIVERSAL MOLD, NYC OFFICE

Plinth Mold scrolled through the morning news and shook his head.

"They make up some lie and then they get mad at you when you see through it. Because in their mind they think they've crafted the perfect deception, which should appeal to your (perceived) faults."

"That's pretty fucking ridiculous. Clearly they are to blame for their own inability to con you."

"Yeah."

"By the way, do you want to come in early today?"

"I'm already here, sir."

Plinth looked up from his leaf and saw that Thomas was indeed standing in the doorway to his office.

"Oh. So I'm not talking to you on the phone."

"No, sir."

"You sound like you're on the phone."

"I'm not, sir."

"You're sure."

"Yes, sir."

"Nano-toxins. That eat sperm. Selective genocide."

"History is spamming *weird*."

"Yeah, I read about it the other day. Something they unleashed during World War II. Hell of a way to get your pipes cleaned."

"Barbaric. And yet... Hmm. Piques the curiosity."

"I'll say. I wonder if it hurts."

"See if you can finish up these inks before Chricton comes back from lunch."

"Will do."

Thomas moved his fingers inside the box. Ink lines began to appear over the blue wireframe on his screen. Once finished, he would export the flat image to paper. For some reason, Plinth Mold still preferred a 2-D mock-up for his action figures. Thomas found the whole get-up awkward, but for a paycheck he was willing to oblige.

"I know this is not what we set out to do with ourselves," Thomas said to himself as he continued to trace the lines on his screen. "We've allowed a number of years to slip by, and yet, no clear progress towards our goals is apparent."

Just as Thomas was getting into the rhythm of self-deprecation, Chricton returned, bursting through the door with two brown paper bags full of groceries.

"That was quick."

"Yes. I ran into Eva in the corridor. Relieved her of these. Here, let's snack while we work."

"Thoughtful of you."

"Yeah, I don't think she was going to do anything important with all this stuff anyway. She was covered in some kind of white powder. Just stood there while I took her groceries away from her. Distant look in her eyes."

Thomas leaned his head down on his drawing surface and pretended to snort a line of cocaine.

Both men laughed heartily.

Plinth was flossing with a piece of o-ring from one of the prototype figures.

"Boss, that's gross."

"Hey, all this junk is mine anyway. Keep your eyes on your own paper."

"You know, I've often wondered how to solve the problem of The Troll."

"What the fuck is a Troll, boss?"

"I'm glad you asked. A Troll is merely someone who enters into a discussion with the intent of disrupting the equilibrium; usually by misrepresenting his own or others' actual positions in favor of inflammatory rhetoric, or by the constant interjection of *non sequiturs*."

"I see. This has to do with one of your theological speculations, doesn't it? Doesn't sound like a very friendly habit, anyway."

"No, the Troll isn't a very friendly sort at all. In fact, the practice of Trolling is usually undertaken maliciously. Why, the history of the Green is positively *peppered* with examples of individuals who—"

"But boss, why would someone want to *do* something like that? Seems counterproductive."

"That, Thomas, is the problem of the Troll."

Chricton looked up from his workbench. "I think we should make a figure of this *Troll* character." He swiveled his screen around and displayed his design: a small creature with an obnoxious outgrowth of wispy hair, mounted atop a pencil as if it were some kind of ornamental eraser.

Plinth was visibly amused. He depressed a switch inside his coat sleeve.

"Capital idea, Chricton! Our only obstacle will be securing a license on the concept from the *Green Consortium*."

All of the men chuckled hesitantly before deliberately shifting the discussion to other matters.

The *Green Consortium* never issued licenses.

Not to the likes of Plinth Mold.

THE SHIP

tags: 1993, piro, plinth_mold, tab2

I'm watching the waves do weird things, dancing around the stuck pixel in my visor. It's making me a little nauseous.

Piotr's above decks with the boss, Plinth Mold. I really, really, *really* didn't want him to come along on this outing, but Captain Plinth insisted. I can't say no to him; literally. In spite of the rumors of impending cutbacks, I need to hold onto this job for as long as possible. There are debts to consider. And hey, it's his boat.

But truthfully, I hate Piotr. He's my best friend, sure, but things are complicated. He makes me be the bottom. Plus, his hair is longer than mine. These are only two of my reasons for hating him.

Staring out of my porthole is not working. I'm about to blow groceries, so I've got to get out of my room. I don't want to ruin my sheets.

I'm up top again, leaning over the railing. Piotr thinks this is all pretty funny. Plinth, if he notices, ignores the subtle best-friend-tension between Piotr and myself and has a laugh as well. I'm peering into his face, trying to line up the dead pixel in my visor with his one good eye. It centers me momentarily and I stop vomiting long enough to strike up a conversation.

"Plinth, I need a raise."

"I just want you to know that my having to fire Piotr isn't going to reflect badly on you."

I am transfixed. Somehow I keep from letting loose on Plinth's shoes.

"You know, because you recommended him to the company."

After a period of stasis the sky is vibrating normally again, and so I'm back to leaning over the railing. If you need me, you'll know where I'm at. Plinth keeps on talking.

"Let's not tell him until we cross the Equator, eh?"

Wiping my mouth. Pushing the words out. "He's not really my brother, you know."

Going back several years now, Piotr and I have been telling people that we're brothers. Twin brothers, even. Somewhat surprisingly, seeing as how we look nothing alike, no one has ever expressed the slightest incredulity about our claim to blood kinship. I guess I have to admit, I would be surprised if anyone at this company had paid that close attention to anything that came out of our mouths. But this goes beyond simple gullibility. Never, no matter how ludicrous a scenario Piotr and I may have just tried to put over, has *anyone*, at *any time*, *ever*, challenged one of our claims. Even when we have deliberately crafted preposterous stories. Even when it's clear that we almost certainly must be lying. I have no explanation for this incredible fact. Though I do admit to taking advantage of the effect from time to time. When it comes to untruths, Piro and I are multi-platinum sellers. Too hype, straight dope, flavor milk, so to speak. It's sickening.

Anyway, by now I am tired of the charade. Determined to break the illusion, to drop real knowledge on our employer and our co-workers. Piotr, my love; how I hate him.

"Boss, I have a confession. I've been lying to you, all these years."

"In your way. Of course I know that you are not a blood relation of Piotr's. Though I doubt anyone else here at the company suspects. You see, Piotr is my son."

I lean back over the edge, then straighten myself, then back over the edge, *ad nauseam*. (Ha ha.) An inverted pendulum. The IV comes out of my arm and then my premium grade Green is washing all over the deck. It's a beautiful chaos.

"No way, boss."

"Oh, *yes way*, Thomas."

"That's ridiculous. That's disgusting. How could this happen."

It is a great storm that frightens the fish and blows up the skirt of our boat. It causes a great deal of entertaining interference in my visor. I'm tracing lines between the raindrops with my messed-up pixel and again, it's making me quite ill.

However, my stomach has almost caught up with the unstable gravity of the ship, and I feel that if only I can keep up with the raindrops, I may stave off vomiting indefinitely. In the meantime, the IV has been replaced in my arm.

Plinth stands watch over the bridge.

I can feel Piotr entering the room even though he's exercising his professional skills; he's so vain that he even wants to lie to me with his movements.

I can't take it anymore.

"He's firing you, idiot."

"I love you, Thomas."

The ball is in play. I really do hate Piotr.

"Of course you love me. We're brothers, right?"

"He's not firing me. He's giving me the ship."

This is just too much. I have to throw up some more of my insides.

"You know he's my father, then," says Piotr.

"Oh, *fuck you.*" I barely spit out the words before losing my lunch all over the bed. Piotr looks sympathetic, but suddenly he gets a little testy as he realizes I'm damaging his property.

"Hey, don't make a mess of my boat."

Aw, shut up.

This is not a problem.

This is no emergency.

I know how to calm him down.

PERCEPT DRIVE

tags: 1993, piro, plinth_mold, tab2

Plinth Mold sat and ate his Green Cashew cereal. The ship's percept drive sent barely visible tremors across the surface of his milk.

"Do you ever get sad when you see a girl who is, like, all obsessed with sports and stuff, and you realize that there's no way the two of you could ever be compatible?"

Thomas had somehow gained entrance to Plinth's cabin. What about the elaborate rhetoricallock system Piro had installed? Plinth had been assured, specifically, that Thomas could not penetrate it. Ridiculous.

"You mean some girl you like?"

"Not necessarily. Just, you know, any girl. Just to see her. From a distance, it's almost as if there is some sort of active force that draws you towards her, even as it pushes her away."

"I can't say as I've ever suffered that sort of crisis, Thomas."

"Oh. Well, even though I'm gay, it still sucks. Strictly speaking."

The ship lurched sharply and Plinth figured Piro must be wrangling the percept team to the other side of the deck, making a slight course adjustment.

"Anyway, could you please shut up this incessant chattering? My Green Cashews are getting soggy."

"All right, boss. I'll just head up top and see if anything else needs doing."

Above decks, Piro was indeed herding members of the percept team from one side of the ship to the other. Each man or woman planted themselves into their new position and focused their attention acutely, fixating upon a single point along the horizon that had been marked pink in their visors. Slowly, the ship began to change direction.

Piro propped a leg up on the railing. "Forward; That way," he commanded, gesturing in a specific direction for the benefit of the percept team.

Their gaze moved to his hand instead of to the distant point he had meant to indicate.

That was not good for the ship.

THE SHIP, PT. 3

tags: 1993, albert_lunsford, chrystal_pepsi, piro,
plinth_mold, tab1, tab2, the_chief, wetbeard

It was Lunsford, all right. QCL Corp.

I really didn't need to verify.

I had spellchecked over three hundred individual songs, processing each of them manually. One at a time because Lunsford refused to let anyone use the automation. All of his interns were on leave for various reasons. He'd popped out of his office a couple of hours ago and handed me this improbable stack of leaves. One leaf per song! Then disappeared just as quickly as he'd arrived. Meanwhile, at an access junction to the abandoned floor, my own "interns" were spreading porn onto the mesh like so much organic peanut butter onto a bland tasting sandwich. The security exposure revealed by last night's scans would heal itself by lunch time, possibly even before I could put Lunsford in the freezer and be on my way. Potentially troubling, but as a strictly practical measure I was confident of my chances. For various reasons it paid to keep positive.

I cracked open a Gray Pop and chugged it back. Frothy, neutral-toned agents coated my throat with perpendicular cells. It was refreshing, and also damned delicious. Honestly, I should have been focusing on losing the extra pounds I'd picked up while working on the this assignment. Only a week to go before I'd be shipping out again. I'd appear obese and would probably be mocked by my teammates. I glanced down at my belly, hesitantly. *All right, shit*, I thought to myself, *I'll purge the perp cells before heading to bed*. So much for the perks of the job. I hated forcing myself to vomit.

Presently, I belched.

Which temporarily alleviated my sea sickness.

I squeezed my eyes shut and strained to hear my heartbeat. The sounds of the machinery in the room ran my thoughts aground. Wave upon wave of diverse electronic complaint, crashing together in a ubiquitous aural foam. So loud that I couldn't feel the reassuring pulse of my circulatory system clicking against my inner ear. I wondered: *Am I finally dead?*

Or am I being recalled to base? What is the meaning of all this?

Then reason, and balance, resumed.

Meaning was irrelevant.

A new disturbance in my visor window. Some of the security from upstairs was leaking onto the public layer. *Wonder what the pajama shits are? Text 667-SHITZ to find out!*

Well. It was old-fashioned stuff but it would work. That is to say, if my interns could keep their hands out of their pants long enough to smear it into place properly. I crushed the empty Gray Pop can on my forehead and tossed it into the trash bin. There was groundwork to be laid before my part of the assignment could proceed. I scanned the progress reports again and made sure that the numbers were leveling according to plan. We were on schedule. Barely. A relief, but the boys were only onto the *B* tab by now.

We were going to need more time.

It may have started as a reaction to the percept team's sudden loss of attention. It may have been something else. What was positive was that things were not going well for the team stationed upon the top deck of the USS DOM DELUISE. Piro's prodigious organizational efforts notwithstanding.

"You men, eyes on the horizon," directed Piro.

A waved sloshed over the deck, knocking a couple of the team off of their feet. They immediately righted their gaze to stern.

"Not what I meant," said Piro.

"Water's getting choppy," hollered Thomas Bright, emerging from belowdecks. "You sure you don't need to get your folks strapped in?"

"We'll be fine." Piro reinstated his leg to the side of the railing and propped himself against it with his elbow. Somehow, he maintained the appearance of standing upright. He motioned towards the sun, which was only just now slipping below the the horizon.

Thomas interjected again. "It's no wonder they were having trouble, staring into the sun like that. Probably ruining their eyesight."

"Worrying about that is my responsibility," said Piro, clearly irritated that Thomas had raised the issue in front of his men.

"Hey, fuck- *s'cuuuuuuse* me. I'm here on behalf of the boss. He's trying to mentate down there. Only, the ship's rocking back and forth too much. Making him nauseous."

Piro's face didn't change. "Understood."

Satisfied, Thomas returned belowdecks.

Piro kicked one of his men in the seat of his uniform. "I said eyes on the horizon."

We were in before Lunsford got back.

I sat down behind his desk and played around with his knickknacks. Action figures, mostly. Even one of himself. Though it must be stated that the depiction was idealized, anatomically enhanced almost beyond recognition. There were some doodles carved into the arm of his chair, apparently with a pocket knife. What a barbarian. Inside his desk I found several unopened packages of Magnum prophylactics.

He burst through the doorway of his office just as I had one of the Magnums out and stretched over the barrel of my gun. I suppose it painted an odd picture for him. *Well, shit*, I thought, *break time's over*.

My first shot punctured the digitally enhanced prophylactic. The rest of the flexible, translucent material blew away as I carried forward with renovations to Lunsford's frame. Pieces of the Magnum had ended up all over the place, and I laughed when I saw that a small fragment had become stuck to Lunsford's cheek. The debris and flesh dispersed in their usual fractal pattern as I emptied the rest of my clip into his face.

Mission accomplished, then.

By the time Lunsford had settled to the floor, my interns had caught up with me. They proceeded to scoop up any and all items of interest. I fished in Lunsford's pockets for a cigarette and came up with some off-brand that must have cost even less than what *I* normally smoked. I stripped off my

necktie and tossed it onto Lunsford's lifeless chest, chased it with a flick of ash, and then, with some effort, produced a fair amount of Gray Pop spittle. A signature, of sorts. We gathered up what we needed from his office and left the body for housekeeping.

Ring, ring.

"USS DOM DELUISE, your one-stop shop for Redaction Day savings," Lt. Commander Wetbeard sighed into his mouthpiece.

"This is Plinth. I'm calling on an outside line because the intercom in my stateroom is non-functional. I need you to contact Piro and send him down here for me."

"I'll get right on top of that, boss," said Wetbeard, straightening smartly in spite of the fact that no one could see him in his watch seat.

A low-flying aircraft became momentarily visible to the percept team and the ship rolled to starboard.

"Did you feel that?"

"Feel what, boss?"

"Nevermind."

"I'll send Piro down right away, sir. Anyway, it looks like he could use a break."

"Tell him we'll have Thomas steer the team for him, while he's belowdecks."

Lt. Commander Wetbeard stared at his phone. While his rank as Lt. Commander was merely a job title, and not an actual rank in any known naval organization, he was still conflicted over whether or not to question the orders of Plinth Mold. It had been some time since Wetbeard had needed to contemplate the ramifications of any of the orders that were issued to him. His mind ran several possible scenarios as he awaited the flash of resolute intent which would signal that a suitable course of action had been selected. Accordingly, the two conflicted halves of Lt. Commander Wetbeard engaged in an extended negotiation, exchanging discreet packets of information at last-century speeds. As if to unclog the apparent bottleneck, Plinth Mold severed the uncomfortable silence by at last continuing to speak.

"I'm sending him up now," Plinth said, and hung up.
And with that, Wetbeard's crisis was resolved.

In all, fifteen of my team were disqualified from active service based upon their performance in the Lunsford simulation.

I began to seriously consider retirement. No, really this time. It wasn't bad enough that I'd been busted down to mission pre-visualizations; I had to be roundly insulted by the lackluster passel of students assigned to me, as well. I fairly *ached* to commit government-sanctioned violence against an entrenched detachment of radical dissidents, or at least to fire a loaded weapon at a stationary target in a taxpayer-funded firing range. My desires, however, were irrelevant, owing to my present status at the Farm. They'd even revoked my weapons certificates so that nothing in my personal arsenal could be activated or equipped. For now, the weapons would lay idle, stubbornly refusing to aid in the national defense. Naturally, I was still responsible for their maintenance. It was a textbook example of bureaucratic entanglement: an asset simultaneously existing in two contradictory states, never collapsing, one way or the other, into coherence. During the first six months of my demotion I was convinced that soon I'd be slipped a deep-cover assignment which would exploit my new status as a pseudo-civilian. It would hardly be the first time I'd enjoyed such an arrangement. But no one ever contacted me. No such assignment ever materialized.

Maybe I had missed a cue.

In truth, there *was* a given reason for my demotion. I won't go into detail, but suffice to say that around 1991 it was suddenly considered bad form to tally a large number of civilian casualties in the course of a single mission. My superiors had cunningly rewritten the rule book after I'd already been deployed to the field. Oh, there were extenuating circumstances, to be sure, but, as with the review board who oversaw my case, I'm sure you have better things to do with your time than listen to me complain about how I was sabotaged by the petty reprisals of middle-management. I'll just say that it was no coincidence a former student of mine had become my new case officer shortly before we shipped out, and that the offending mission was my first under her

command.

Chrystal Pepsi. An officer for whom I'd flatly refused to die.

It's conceivable that she may have sensed my lack of faith in her abilities.

Taking a peek at the paperwork and gradually realizing the scenario I was being slotted into, I was furious. It's unprofessional to admit this, but I'm certain my feelings toward C. Pepsi affected my performance during the mission. It's likely that she was cognizant of my opinions even when she first floated my name to lead the team. Hence, a typical sort of trap. Her bid to leapfrog my years of experience by simply removing me from the game board. This was exactly the kind of thing I had taught her to do to other people.

And, well, it had worked.

I missed the Chief. I missed my old life.

I was used to being a target, but that didn't mean I would just sit around and do nothing about it, once I found out.

It was time to reactivate my guns.

THE CARRIER

tags: 1993, chipotle_pope_bags, gravely_cuss, pennis_mold, piro, plinth_mold, tab2, wetbeard

"This logo is all wrong," complained Pennis Mold. "You've got to include the inverted commas, like this." Pennis made a few marks on the leaf and held up his doctored version of the logo. "Is that so hard?"

"It just seems like a bunch of artsy-fartsy *crap*, to me," said Chipotle. "It's a stroke book. Why does it have to be high concept?"

Pennis waved the new logo around, gesturing with authority, which finally triggered Chipotle to relent.

"Okay, all right, I'll give it another pass."

Each day at the company was a repeat of this same pattern. Pennis would issue instructions and then there would be friction. By the end of his fifth year at *MASSIVE FICTIONS*, Pennis was all but ready to hang it up. Then, more problems emerged. A general strike had been called, partway into his latest project, which had resulted in Pennis' line being reduced to a handful of stroke books and a live streaming video site that was only accessible from within the Bohemian Grove.

The publishing business had proven more difficult than he had anticipated.

And Pennis didn't even like stroke books.

Years ago.

"Pornstations on," chirped the instructor.

Gravely and Chipotle slapped the sides of their pornstations, whispering behind the buzzing of the blue lights. Their instructor adjusted the smallpox heart on her cheek and immediately launched into her morning monologue. At this, Chipotle activated his stresspants.

A fact that did not pass unobserved by his classmates.

Back in the present.

"Sir, how long until dinner?"

"Help me with these potatoes," answered Pennis Mold.

The two men went to work, removing the polymer wrap from each of a dozen red potatoes. Pennis was going to wing it. He hoped that Plinth wouldn't notice he'd bought organic. And from outside the company, to boot. Pennis decided then and there that Plinth would have to tough it out. Human food was human food.

Many years ago.

The squad of boys made their way down the corridor. Rounding a corner, a snatch of audio snagged their attention. "Gravely Cuss, Chipotle Pope Bags (Low Fat), Pennis Cialis Mold—report to the office at your convenience."

"That means never," laughed Pennis Mold.

"I think I like the sound of that woman's voice," remarked Chipotle.

Present time, present day.

The deck of the carrier struggled to remain parallel with the horizon. As Pennis stumbled onto deck, a group of homeless men pedaled out on their bicycles, brandishing empty gas cans, demanding spare change so that they might refuel their stranded automobiles. Seemingly oblivious to the rolling of the ship's deck, the cyclists converged on Pennis' position.

Pennis looked around and wondered where their automobiles could possibly have broken down. For that matter, how could anyone be homeless on an aircraft carrier?

"An aircraft carrier is supposed to have stabilizers," he explained to the homeless men. "Obviously, ours are not working very well. It's probably dangerous for you to be riding out here, right now."

The cyclists eyed each other nervously. Slowly, apprehension hardened into rage.

This guy was ignoring their pitch.

Pause to consider:

Pennis was the youngest of the three Mold brothers. To him—and to their father—it seemed he could never quite measure up. This had made Pennis' life much more difficult than he would have preferred.

But now he had his own ship.

The carrier was an old vessel, to be sure. But she was seaworthy, and Pennis had never regretted his investment.

He had even made some improvements of his own.

"I just can't take it anymore," gasped Pennis Mold, tipping against the hold and clutching his stomach in a decaying imitation of his brother's photogenic, sportsmanlike physicality. He dropped the very important folder of leaves he had just removed from the ship's vault.

"What, you'd rather head back up top? Relax. We'll rendezvous with your brother soon."

"It's not the ship that's making me sick."

"Maybe you shouldn't have eaten so much of that weird cereal."

"Paris sent me another case. I wouldn't feel right just throwing it away."

Pennis started back towards his quarters. Then reversed course. Then reversed again. He stared down at his shoes, which promptly faded into the floor beneath him. He was seeing green circles, spheres, squares, cubes, words. When he tried to focus on them he found that nothing came to mind.

Piro switched back to optical and then checked again. As with his other sensor sweeps, the visual pass confirmed that there were no approaching ships. He glanced over at Thomas and wondered if his visor would report the same thing. That is, if Thomas were to muster any interest in scanning the horizon. Piro imported his department's budget and earmarked an allotment for upgrades to his team's standard equipment. New visors for all his men.

"What I'd like is for everyone to be prepared to withdraw at a moment's notice," stated Plinth.

"Understood, sir."

"I don't expect this will take very long. In fact, if not for the simple pleasures of life at sea, I doubt I would have agreed to this meeting at all."

Piro and Thomas both rolled their eyes.

"We'll be taking the same route back. I intend for us all to derive some enjoyment from this cruise. Consider it a peculiar sort of vacation. A paid vacation, obviously."

"If you don't mind my saying so, boss, the South Atlantic is kind of an awkward venue for a family dispute," observed Thomas.

"Thomas, the open seas are essentially the only place left on Earth where humans may whisper to each other in relative privacy."

Incredulous looks. That hadn't been true for decades.

"In any case, this meeting will hardly constitute a debate. We've long ago settled any differences we might have had between us. Contrary to what you two have probably surmised, I intend to shake the man's hand."

"That's a whole grab bag of intentions you've got there, boss."

"Hush now, Thomas."

"Gentlemen."

Plinth Mold removed his safety belt and stepped out onto the deck of the carrier. At his side were his personal chef, an armed guard, and three of his most trusted attorneys. The chef shuffled nervously, fingering the weapon concealed within his coat pocket.

Let's get out of this damned sunlight, thought the chef.

"Let's get out of this sunlight," suggested Plinth Mold, and all who were present nodded in agreement.

Arriving to greet Plinth and his entourage were a coterie of men in green suits. Vintage microfiber. They pegged Piro immediately as a fellow specialist and nodded to him, exchanging introductions via private channel. The conjoined group of men made their way into a vacant deck elevator and adjusted their postures to accommodate the cramped space. Presently,

the doors swung shut and the mechanism slowly lowered them into the sub-levels of the carrier.

Inexplicably, Plinth's attorneys seemed as nervous as the chef.

The elevator doors slid open again and Plinth took the lead, navigating a winding series of passageways that finally terminated in the entrance to an executive conference room. He felt at home on the carrier, and somehow seemed familiar with its layout. This came as a mild surprise since he had never previously studied the vessel, nor had he ever set foot aboard such a craft. On the other hand, it was sometimes difficult for him to isolate the experiences which had accumulated throughout his long life. It was certainly possible that the carrier had, at some point in time, belonged to him or to one of his holding companies. He was amused because he could not remember, could not distinguish between whimsy and reality.

Plinth poured himself a glass of water and replaced the pitcher at the center of the table.

Lt. Commander Wetbeard was the first to spot the lighthouse. He reached instinctively for his pressure screen, but the board had gone dead. He fumbled in his shirt and eventually produced his personal leaf. Shit. It would not power up.

Without Piro to guide their attention, the percept team was scrambling on the deck below.

Thomas finally gave up on aiming at the toilet and resigned himself to urinating on the floor.

GREEN SQUARES

tags: 1993, interviewer, pennis_mold, plinth_mold, wetbeard

It was Plinth's turn to evince incredulity. Obviously, there was no lighthouse at these coordinates, or at any other coordinates in the general vicinity. The apparent reality of the situation did not mesh with with common sense. The situation was untenable.

Plinth employed the use of a vintage chronometer, worn on his wrist. Presently, he fingered the device as his lawyers booted up their paperwork. "We're in the middle of the South Atlantic, Wetbeard," he said. "Please explain."

"Sir, I don't know where it came from. I looked down, and then I looked up. From out of nowhere, it was there."

"Well, what am I paying you for? Steer the ship out of its way."

"Sir, that's what I've been trying to tell you. I—"

"So, after you founded then what?"

"Plinth was impressed. I'd finally done something right. With his encouragement, I went ahead and launched *TURBO FUCKIN': SENSUAL MAGAZINE* as well as the fringe one, *SASQUATCH COLOGNE*. Neither of them lasted long."

"Hm. What went wrong?"

"Basically, I went to sleep one night and had a dream that God was real. I mean, physically *real*. And I was lucky enough to be born as His incarnation on Earth. I guess what was most difficult about the whole episode was that I... Well, I actually believed it. I believed in the dream wholeheartedly."

"Haha, a foolproof source of information because dreams are so often known to mirror reality."

"Exactly. Heh. You know, don't ask me to explain it, but at the time it seemed rational. Or should I say, intuitive."

"Ah, I see. That old pratfall. Laid clean by the banana peel of subjective cognition. I remember a time when I was forced by my grandfather to drive one of those four-wheeled automobiles. *Mercedes*, I believe they were called. I couldn't make

sense of the steering mechanism. No Tetris blocks, as we have today. My grandfather was livid. He actually punched me in the shoulder! He couldn't believe that someone my age would have no interest in piloting one of his antique vehicles. What a laugh, right? I told him to just use his leaf and order the groceries himself. Of course, by the time all of this took place he had been blind for thirty years."

"What can I say. You only know what you know. If you can't trust your own mind, what can you trust? The tactile leaf interface was foreign to him; the car, not so much. Your grandfather probably thought you were an idiot."

"And I, him. you have to admit that there was no real way he could have taught me to drive, in his condition. He was not equipped for the task. Just as in your dream, you conceived that the Green had been made flesh. Believing yourself, in fact, to be an *incarnation* of the Green, despite a complete lack of empirical evidence for your claim. I'm sure you can see the parallel I'm drawing here. Both of you were groping for an appropriate set of terms, clawing for a hand-hold in the cliff-face of ambiguity that immediately blocked your path."

"Okay, okay, you've got me there. Maybe I wasn't God after all."

The boat lurched sharply, causing the walls of the mess hall to reorient violently. The interviewer's laughter seg-faulted into a vague, restrained panic.

"I don't like the sound of that."

"Neither will my brother."

Silence then, as Pennis rearranged his folders.

"Tell me again about God's peculiarities with regards to intellectual property."

"Oh yes. As God, I briefly refused to interact with humans on the grounds that one of them might try to sue me... In the event that I ended up creating something which too closely resembled one of their fan fictions. Or *prayers*, as they were known."

"Never mind the Scriptures, I guess! Was this before or after the introduction of your DNA-filtering condoms?"

"Oh, long before. All of this happened before Plinth set me up in the manufacturing business. This was even before the *RODS MAGAZINE* lawsuits. I had yet to piss away my share of our father's fortune. Plinth was still doing the action figures, partnered with that Swedish fellow."

"I wonder if he's going to be happy to see you."

"He'll make it seem so. You see, I have physical possession of his Green certificates. And we both know he wants them back."

A LARGE ROOM WITH NO LIGHT

tags: 1993, albert_lunsford, calbert_whimsy, piro,
plinth_mold, tab1

Hello, I'm Calbert Whimsy, Master Of Ethics at POLICY SCHOOL: WHISKEY TANGO FOXTROT. For twenty-five consecutive generations, the men of my family have stood watch over your children and their education. Granted, twenty of those generations were vat-grown, simultaneously, over the last decade. And yes, we correspond. Ah ha ha ha. I've made a little joke. It is a pleasure to see you here, you all say. Likewise, I'm sure.

As you may have guessed, I'm not really Calbert Whimsy. Somehow, though, they've fitted me in here, floating paralyzed amongst these sharks. The Families. Their publicists, attorneys, clergy. And now I've got to give this speech to the *Green Consortium* assembled. I've had better days.

Thirty years ago I entered this profession, not knowing what to expect.

THE STRAND is a luxury liner, Old British flag and technically off-limits to agents such as myself. This class of people are not supposed to be subjected to operational trifles such as political assassinations and internetwork intrigue. Let's just say I'm off the clock. The Lunsford affair was a wake-up call nobody wanted to hear. The collective, meaty fist of the Green aristocracy simply mashed their alarm clock and rolled over on their 800 thread count sheets. Hopefully, right into the wet spot.

Overheard from my place behind the podium:

I'm warning you, don't try to kiss my ass. I mean that. Don't do it. I'm serious, now. Don't. I hate it when people try to kiss my ass. Oh, yes, you may kiss his ass as often as you please!

And:

He said it was life or death. He was pounding against the police vehicle, just going to town. My man at the dispatch center reported the machine wouldn't authorize his identoplate. So, no entry to the back seat. I told him, it must have been a clerical error. Nothing to be done, you see. I got the impression his partner was irritated, but he didn't say anything as he drove me away from the rioting crowd of students. I never found out what became of the officer we left behind.

Raucous laughter, all around. These people are far from funny, but they don't even know it.

From time to time, an exceptionally gregarious, obviously very special student will arrive in our class, and vex us all with their easy brilliance. I know what you're thinking. Each and every one of you is smiling now, convinced that I'm talking about your child. Well, I'm not. Ha ha. Let us stipulate that I'm not referring to your particular little brat.

You might say that this is a bit of a roast. I'm not entirely comfortable, exposing myself like this on stage.

But the weak humor is contagious. Someone in the audience gets clever and plays back the sound of crickets chirping. I squint at the crowd and realize that it's my support man, apparently trying to blow his cover. I want to yank on his bolo-tie and force-feed him a handful of the ship's platinum salad forks. Connecting us directly in this context is a mistake. But in spite of his gaffe, you simply can't launch a wetwork operation from aboard THE STRAND without a hype-man. Since the script is a shambles, we'll be ad-libbing from here on in.

Mercifully, I complete my monologue without further interruption and I'm cleared to leave the stage. I'm not entirely sure what all I've just said, but the audience seems to more or less approve. My counterpart will have to sort it out later. I warned him I was no good in front of an audience.

I check THE STRAND's operating radius for other ships. This particular sector of the South Atlantic is out of bounds to commercial traffic. In fact, at this time of year, THE STRAND is the only ship permitted to ply its waters at all. But that doesn't mean we're alone out here.

I've got to keep an eye out for Piro.

Before I know it I've been scooped back up on stage. This time the lights are dimmed and I can make out the players from the various fandoms that were listed in the mission brief. I throw in some targeted references to key episodes of the relevant series. It goes over very well.

We've heard from a lot of educators tonight! But no one has even mentioned the litigators! Let's hear it for general counsel!

This brings on a spate of vigorous cheering and I am once again whisked offstage.

Four thespians in black tights approach the boards, each with brightly colored puppets sewn onto the fronts of their shirts. The effect, in combination with the carefully controlled lighting, is one of disembodied cartoon animals who glide back and forth across the stage, seemingly disconnected from the floor. The performance itself is protected by copyright. I refer to these creatures as thespians, but in reality they are *Consortium* members, plucked at random from the crowd. An annual tradition with this group, the script, such as it exists, is familiar, and the audience members *cum* dancers have little trouble falling into the routine. Their friends and family are by this time well and truly soused, voicing their approval at considerable volume. Monitors throughout the ship pipe the performance into the corridors, and even into the head. Men are pissing themselves listening to it.

I catch myself drumming on the table and immediately shove my hand back into the pocket of my tuxedo jacket.

I'm here for a reason.

Not to participate in the show.

On schedule, I spasm wildly and vomit across the lap of my companion. Over her protestations (etiquette, you see) I am pulled away from the table and assisted to my cabin. Once alone, I remove my outer garments and verify that my stress-pants boot up at optimum capacity. Impulsively, I clip the bow-tie from my stage costume onto my wetsuit, directly under my chin. I regard myself in the mirror and then squeeze myself out, through the porthole, exiting the cabin forever.

The ocean is slick with rain, a flickering black mirror of half-reflected moonlight. My visor activates as I dip below the surface, attempting to compensate for the darkness. Short-range sonar detects no walls, floors or obstructions anywhere nearby. I'm momentarily blinded in a large room with no light.

Gradually, my testicles shrink up, triggering my stress-pants to activate.

At length, mission intel streams to life, glittering into my field of vision across the back of an enormous gray whale.

Plinth Mold.

It is time.

1OCT1993

tags: 1993, pennis_mold, piro, plinth_mold, tab1, violet

"That's no whale."

"Sure it is, sir."

"No."

Piro had not yet been informed about the lighthouse. He stood on the bridge of the carrier and surveyed the scene cautiously, not rushing to judgment. He took in the particulars of the situation before venturing forward, hoping to avoid the unhappy possibility of issuing conflicting orders. Something in him sensed that this was an unusual situation, one that called for careful handling. His instincts, he guessed.

"That cannot be a whale."

Absorbed in disbelief, Piro realized that his reasoning had not been made clear to the command team of the carrier.

"A whale is not green," he explained.

"But *Pennis*, he's up there, *right now!*"

"But *Violet*, I don't care!"

"Come on now, sir, you'll be okay once we get you up on your feet. You can't allow a little seasickness to scuttle the whole mission."

"Negative. I've ruined some of the leaves."

Pennis Mold tried to wipe off his stack of leaves. The vomit had made them sticky, clingy. His shirt was also damp. It would take a while to extricate the devices, one from the other. Luckily, at least, all of them seemed to be functional.

"New paradigm. Synergy. I'm staying in bed."

"Pennis, sir, stand up."

"No."

Violet decided to take matters into her own hands.

Okay, I'm floating and I'm not-floating at the same time. Alternating, I should say. Accosted by a whale with arms. Arms that are, presently, dipping me in and out of the water at

an alarming rate. I'm thinking now that maybe this is not really a whale after all.

Before I know it, the scene changes up and I'm being strangled by a large set of gray fingers.

I recall that, per my mission rider, I'm equipped with a variety of specialized tools. I react smoothly, activating reflex algorithms that in turn select an appropriate utensil for sawing my way out of the tentacle headlock. As the automated system goes to work, the not-whale's gripping apparatus gradually begins to loosen its hold. Perhaps having thought better of snacking on highly trained covert agents, the not-whale withdraws its remaining tentacles, and I make the most of a bad situation by allowing the current to drag me the rest of the way out of its reach. As I'm floating off, I login to my side-arm and lob a few rounds into its bulging, unblinking eye, wondering where a foul creature such as this houses its genitals. Wondering, also, if its genitals are larger, or smaller than, its brain.

After inadvertently swallowing a bit of sea water, I discard my ruined sawing tool and wade towards Plinth's ship, syncing my chronometer with it's time server. Scrolling, I see that the lead crew has just finished their lunch. The percept team will be light on men for another thirty minutes or so, depending on their local union agreement.

Hoisting myself up, onto Plinth's ship, I traverse the railing and immediately drop to the deck, slapping my face against its cold, slick surface. Sixty seconds later I'm still catching my breath.

I'm taken slightly off guard, startled, when Piro sets to screaming in my ear about the impending comms disruption.

Did I just black out?

"Piro to P. Mold, it looks like we're going to have to abort."

"Nonsense, I'm pro-life."

The men in the green microfiber suits held their expressions, ignoring Plinth's attempt at easy humor.

"I can only guarantee channel integrity for another twenty seconds, sir. Less, if the enormous green squid off our portside bow chews the carrier in half."

Plinth turned to his attorneys. Then he thought better of it and returned to the men in the microfiber suits, who remained inscrutable as before. A number of alternatives spun through his mind until he abruptly halted the evaluation loop, manually copied a single string of data into his speech buffer. Discarding the false starts, he parted his lips and began to speak in his customarily assured and controlling tone, but was interrupted by the unfolding of events.

The crashing of a particularly large wave causes me to lose a few words, but I'm able to follow the gist of the conversation. Piro had said that the not-whale was, in fact, *green*. Puzzling, as it certainly doesn't look green to me.

Jarred by the incongruous data, I'm overcome by a sudden awareness that I can't remember *ever* having seen colors outside the overlays in my visor. Amazingly, I think that I may actually be—when not running in enhanced mode, anyway—color blind. How in the name of the Green could I never have noticed this? How could this possibly have been overlooked during the course of my career?

It boggles, but these are definitely questions best considered post-mission. After a few quick adjustments, I can now see the squid in what I will assume is a true-color representation.

It's spamming *big*. And it's *definitely* green.

Color blind. It figures that this is the sort of thing I would have to discover in the field.

A brief interlude of silence, stillness, in contrast to the clatter that buttressed it on either side. Piro looked around and the quiet seemed to be coming from the deck, of all places.

Directional silence, he thought.

Presently, the ambient audio resumed. A neon, flickering tentacle appeared above Plinth's ship. Continuing its downward arc, the tentacle proceeded to slice Lt. Commander Wetbeard's lookout tower cleanly in half. Comms silence followed, as Piro, instantly refocusing his display, attempted to mitigate the situation by routing through a backup transceiver.

He blinked rapidly as his vision went to bluescreen for a period of seconds.

Cognizance returned, Piro began to notice a stream of water on the windshield that did not abate after each passing sheet of sea mist had dispersed. The deck of the carrier was sloshing now with... Of course. He vectored his line of sight vertically from the horizon and instantly achieved visual confirmation of his suspicions.

So now there was rain to contend with, in addition to the other problems. Piro drew his weapon and booted it up as he exited the bridge of the carrier. He realized, then, that with comms down, he would be unable to login. It seemed that today, *everything* would have to be switched to manual.

Fortunately, Piro habitually equipped himself with serrated, as well as network, weaponry. He rotated out the crippled network device and attached a classical bladed instrument to his right arm.

Awake. Floating again, this time on deck. The variable terrain will complicate movement towards the forward cabin and bridge. It looks like the ship's taken some damage from the not-whale. Curiously, the percept team hasn't regrouped to try and correct the course drift. I wipe the blood out of my eyes and start moving again, forward as always, towards the target.

As I make my way past the final civilian stateroom, partial comms are restored.

Spam it, Plinth is no longer aboard. He's already transferred to another ship.

Intuitively, my gaze shifts to the Cold War era aircraft carrier that has lately appeared off the starboard bow.

Piro located the appropriate elevator and returned to the deck of the carrier. Splashing through the rain, he approached one of the main guns from behind and relieved its pilot. Once strapped into the weapon he bore down on the enormous green squid, focusing his ammunition at the beast's underside. The dead pilot's body floated away behind him, his protestations about licensing rendered meaningless by the absence of conscious volition.

As if in response to the barrage of weapons fire, the squid embarked upon a series of awkward physical maneuvers. First, its soft underbelly appeared to open up, forming an uncertain grin. From out of this novel orifice, a flood of pink squares that turned into pink cubes that turned into pink bubbles were loosed upon the deck of the USS DOM DELUISE. Several forward members of the percept team slipped and lost their balance, went tumbling to the boards, rolling one over the other in a visual cacophony of limbs and bodies. Even so, each man tried to keep his wits about him.

"It's all pink on the inside," went up the call from the forward-most man.

"All pink on the inside!" echoed down the line.

Piro kept on firing, willing himself not to look away even as he shifted his aim and emptied the remainder of his ammunition into the squid's exposed eyeball. Aside from releasing an excessive amount of smoke into the atmosphere and a troubling amount of black ink into the water, Piro judged that the ammunition had seemed to achieve little destructive effect. As he unleashed a brief salvo of explicit invective, the squid's enormous eyeball blinked, as if to mock his *merely human* judgment.

"But, a squid cannot blink."

Piro understood then that his words were not going to win the fight. Even from his heavily vested point of view, he had to acknowledge that the battle was not going well. Some alternate strategy must be devised, put into play.

So, he thought, *What next?*

Alone in the head, it was almost quiet.

Pennis eased his stick back into his trousers. He watched with some interest as a milky white bead of his semen broke apart and ran down the door of his stall. He coughed, weakly. He'd given himself quite a workout this time; his heartbeat was still audible in his ears. Why did vomiting always make him so horny? Lost in thought, his eyes remained glazed over as he pulled up his slacks.

Exiting the stall, a glimmer of light registered in his peripheral vision, immediately snapping him out of his reverie. He noticed that across the counter, one of the Green certificates

was blinking. Fumbling to wash his hands, he shook the moisture off and rushed over to see what was the matter. A small amount of water transferred from his fingertips onto the first device, causing a non-permanent deformation of the imagery that floated along its external boundary.

After subjecting the leaf to a thorough examination, Pennis moved on to the next unit from the top of the stack. Then, increasingly disoriented, to the next. Finally, he doubled back to check his work. The record presented by the leaves could not possibly be accurate. The narrative was inconsistent with the facts as Pennis knew them, had experienced them over the years and decades since he had become aware of himself as a Mold.

And yet, the certificates all seemed to be in order.

It was, quite simply, astonishing.

Pennis shook his head, and then he shook it again. According to the evidence laid out before him, his brother, Plinth Mold, was the sole patent holder and undisputed trademark administrator of *several* of the key technologies that had been licensed to develop the sub-framework of the Green. Possession of these certificates would radically alter the tone and substance of any future negotiations between Plinth and the *Green Consortium*. *Let's be honest*, he thought, *Between Plinth and anyone, anywhere*. It was a remarkable collection of documents.

Pennis attempted, at this point, to deduce what his brother was really up to. He knew from long experience that seeking to puzzle out Plinth's actual motives would be an exercise in futility. An obvious dead end. Instead, he would focus upon the likelihood of various outcomes, and attempt to discern Plinth's intended destination. Perhaps predictably, no matter which tangent his speculations followed, no matter what obscure avenue his suspicions swept down, as he approached a final, unified model, his concentration would crumble and he would be left with no theory, no explanation, no articulate conclusion; only the visceral, irrational certainty that:

I want no part in any of Plinth's dubious intellectual property schemes.

He felt that, even in the absence of a convincing rhetorical argument, his objection would prove appropriate. Call it a gut instinct, he thought.

In the end Pennis sensed that, by resisting, he was merely prolonging the inevitable. For his trouble, Plinth would probably simply shrug and set him up in a new job. Pat him on the head and tell him not to take things so seriously. Thanks to their father, the family still owned the government, no matter what trouble the Mold brothers found themselves in.

Pennis resigned himself to chairing yet another board of directors, to driving yet another thriving, multinational corporation into the ground.

He supposed things could be worse.

In the midst of all the action, a new thought occurred to Plinth Mold:

Why not simply cut his losses and end it all now?

No sooner had the question formed in his mind than Plinth understood the notion to have contained its own affirmation. He was beside himself, amused. Had events honestly progressed to the point where such a thought could present itself as a question? He realized the concern was immaterial.

Plinth fingered his chronometer and marked the date. 1Oct1993. Later than he had planned, actually. Something had kept the cycle going this time, well beyond the projections he had laid down in his youth. Curious... He was surprised to discover that he was no longer entirely in control of his emotions. Imagery from previous eras flooded his awareness, overwhelming his ability to track. As the sensation intensified, he steadied himself against the conference table.

This fleeting nausea was troubling.

He reflected that Piro, Thomas, the attorneys, the chef—all of his crew—would be lost in the transition to follow. In point of fact, all of humanity would be dropped from memory. No record would survive. None would need to.

Except, he thought, for one.

"I'm pro-life," he said, apropos nothing.

Plinth's attorneys glanced up at him, arching their eyebrows professionally. The men in the green microfiber suits had, for the first time since their introduction, altered their facial expressions. They were laughing amongst themselves at an obscure joke involving the manual to Photoshop 3.51. This second group of men betrayed no sign of having heard what he'd said.

Plinth Mold gazed at the humans with affection.

Without further delay, he spoke into his shirtsleeve and killed all processes of the Eternal September.

Bits of Plinth's boat were splayed across the surface of the water. For some reason, not sinking. Plinth reacted casually to this. He paddled over to a piece of debris and attached himself such that he could remain afloat without having to expend further effort.

Fingering his chronometer, Plinth discovered that comms were still down. Even long-range channels were unresponsive. He switched to satellite and got nothing. Inside, his servos were running blind without network updates.

So, he'd really done it.

Plinth continued to float there, alone.

The sun was up. Redaction Day, again. The real whales had arrived by now and were beginning to circle the remains of the broken-up ships. Plinth ignored them and made a few final checks before accepting the obvious. Humanity, minus one, was gone. His Hard Boot had taken effect.

Plinth jettisoned the dead equipment from his makeshift raft and began to scan the area for signs of life. Eventually, he went into damage control mode, straightening the front of his shirt and slicking down his hair. He lit a cigarette and adjusted his eye patch. A whale crested nearby, displacing, and finally submerging, one of the scattered islands of refuse. Plinth was starting to get hungry. He discovered that somewhere along the line, he'd developed a painful erection.

Violet, the mother of civilization, should be floating along soon.

END BOOK THREE

addendum

'CRASH ORIGIN'

CRASH ORIGIN

tags: 1987, piro, tab1, tab2

1

Le Bourget, Paris, 1987.

Mid-morning. Overcast. Thomas and Piotr are threading through a crowd of spectators.

"Sunscreen check," announces Piotr.

"But the sun's not even out," complains Thomas.

Piotr shoots him a look. "Safety first. Next, comfort."

Thomas produces a small tube of sunscreen from his pocket and proceeds to apply it evenly across his nose and cheeks.

"Satisfied?" he asks.

"Never," Piotr replies, "But I'm close to spectacular."

Thomas observes the slight distance between them, then bumps shoulders with his twin brother.

"Not in the field," Thomas says, his thoughts apparently moving towards evening.

My son is never prepared for anything. This is intersubjectively testable. Try surprising him. You'll find him unprepared. Example: Send a number of military jets crashing into the ground. You'll find he can think of no response. Piotr is always pulling clean-up duty.

This has been the steady pattern, played out over two decades.

The boy has now turned thirty. The peak of his operational powers. Still, he does nothing. Sits there and trades one-liners with his partner. No return on investment. My reports frequently exaggerate his exploits.

After all, this all comes out of my budget.

Sunlight cracks the clouds as the first plane careens into the pavement. I steer a brightly painted Mig-29 into the crowd, accidentally clipping a building in the process. Debris pelts the bystanders below. Probably, eighty or ninety dead. Thomas and

Piotr are a few hundred yards off, but they enjoy a clear line of sight to the carnage.

Thomas' response?

Bewilderment, at first. My son stands transfixed. He fingers his visor, instinctively, but evinces no other reaction. Not even a change in his facial expression.

Piotr suffers no such paralysis. He shifts contexts with ease, drawing his side-arm and sweeping the corridor overhead. When no new danger presents itself, he looks towards Tommy.

Priorities.

I bring in the next two planes simultaneously. A pair of old RF-4Es. Piotr's side-arm is quite naturally useless against the two masses traveling at such a velocity. For his part, Thomas remains riveted to his spot. Even if his visor is malfunctioning, there is still the sound, the smoke from multiple impacts that has surely reached his nostrils. Why doesn't he react?

Piotr grasps him by the back of the shirt and hurls him behind a high wall as flames envelop the vacant space beside them.

2

This is not how I expected it to happen.

At the same time, it very much conforms to my vision of the destruction. Even if the alarm is ringing six years late.

The planes are falling.

Piro is yanking on my shirt, we're diving behind a building. There are flames.

That first plane was Soviet. Seems to be a multilateral engagement.

The logical result of *Glasnost*?

Of course, I'm not harmed. I'm invulnerable. Class 100 strength. Flight.

Piotr's photographic reflexes aren't much use against disintegrating architecture, but he has a knack for getting out of the way of large objects.

I punch my way through the wall and barrel face first through the smoke. Bodies are splayed everywhere. Horrific smells. Some dead children.

I lift some older citizens away from the fires, then report back to Piotr.

"Something's not right about this, boss."

Piotr's eyes are focused on some distant point. By the gentle arc of his stare I deduce he is tracking a moving object.

"RIIIIIIIIGHT FACE!" he cries. Instinctively, I spin ninety degrees to my right, just in time for Piotr to give me a hard shove.

He's shot me in the back.

I go down.

3

He's impossible.

At least he's toppled over. That one almost got us.

I give him a hand and then dust off his back. I guess I've ruined his shirt.

He seems to think it's funny, so we're good.

A lot of activity in the sky, now. Some planes are starting to land instead of just crashing into the ground. Notably, a Blackbird and what appears to be an F-117A. Strange that the latter should be out and about during the day. And at a foreign air show, no less. Officially, the plane doesn't even exist.

A number of jeeps escort the two planes off the runway. A hangar is opened up and the parade disappears behind closed doors.

I motion to Thomas and he confirms.

We need to investigate.

4

What the hell are they doing?

Thomas and Piotr are inside the hanger. I lost them for a moment but then I caught site of my son's ridiculous spiked hair.

I move a few sentries into an adjacent corridor.

Then the boys turn left.

Suddenly, I flash on an idea.

The boys still haven't made their way out of the administrative offices. There is time to move the planes out the other side of the hangar. When they finally break through, the hangar will be empty. It's simple sleight of hand.

Obviously, nothing could ever be that easy.

Piotr picks up on the sounds of activity and they're faster breaching the main corridor than I had anticipated.

I make an executive decision to light up the whole building. The Air Force will have to take the loss. These men knew what they were signing up for.

I console myself that this will look great on television. Especially with the Soviet plane coming down first.

All in all, not a total loss.

5

When the explosions kick in I know for sure that my father is involved.

I hoist Piotr by his backpack and punch a hole through the roof. We're well above the fray by the time the building collapses. Piotr takes potshots at the scrambling jeeps.

The sky seems alive with fighter jets, all converging on our position.

I fly faster.

6

I'm shouting curses in Thomas' ear but at this speed he can't hear me. I know he can survive in a vacuum but I hope he remembers I've no protection against the cold. In the hopes of surviving our escape, I snatch the respirator from my backpack

and stick it on my nose. The sky is growing dark.

7

My son is an idiot.

IMPRESSIVELY ARTICULATE

tags: 1989, 1990, christopher, eva_bright, john_ratcliff, ken_thompson, piro, tab1, tab2

1

The Chrysler Building. New York. 1989.

New Year's Eve.

"I'd like to propose a thought experiment for anti-Evolution Creationists: Suppose God created the 4-D space/time football six thousand years ago."

"Complete with billions of years of real history?"

"Exactly."

"Are you suggesting this would bypass their objections to evolutionary theory?"

"I'm suggesting it would confuse them."

2

"Here you are, doing the Devil's work."

Super-Sonic. John Ratcliff. White Male wearing tattered jeans and a gray sweater. Acclaimed poet. Enforcer.

"The Devil can cite Scripture for his own purpose. I'm merely speculating on possible angles of attack."

The Raven. Christopher. No last name on record. African-American vigilante. Black T-shirt with slogan in white News Gothic:

"I'd really like to hear what my father would have to say about all this."

Sonic Boom. Ken Thompson. Not that Ken Thompson. Asian-American speedster. Green polo shirt. Jeans.

"You're drowning in rhetoric," John observed. "Argumentation is not the best weapon against these types."

"Stipulated," allowed Christopher.
"You guys are too cynical."
In unison: "Shut up, Ken."

3

"Brothers, please. Decorum."

Actron. Thomas Bright. White male. Ostensible leader of the Actron Team. Blue cotton button down shirt with black silk tie. Thomas brushed aside the disturbance and poured himself a glass of water from the fridge. Ken popped up the collar of his polo shirt and leaned back into his seat.

"I don't mind, really. My ideas are still forming."

"Shut up, Ken," said Thomas.

"Enough of this dick party. We need a woman's opinion. Where's Eva?"

Christopher pushed his chair away from the table and stood up. He made eye contact with John before vacating the room.

"Nevermore," he rasped, sarcastically, and left.

4

"What's his problem?" asked Ken.

"They're not getting along," said Thomas, stating the obvious.

"Seriously though," continued John, "Where is she? We were discussing this just last week. I know she has something to contribute, but I don't want to speak for her. I want to hear her explain it herself."

Thomas gestured with his glass, spilling a small amount of water onto the kitchen floor. "I think she's on the phone with Los Angeles."

5

"Yeah, let's not tell him I called," Piro wheezed into his mouthpiece, still catching his breath. "I don't think we need to bother him with every detail of the operation."

"Fine with me. You take care of yourself out there. From what I understand, L.A. is starting to..."

"Yeah, L.A. is."

Eva clicked her phone shut and crushed her cigarette in the retractable ashtray. She wondered when it would be possible to move her corporation away from the cocaine trade. Recent developments in domestic politics were making it difficult to keep her agents' names out of the news. She sighed, then drew the blinds in her office and made her way to the kitchen.

6

"Why did economists not do a better job of anticipating the crisis?"

"Tom, it's just not that simple."

"You always say that."

"The causal mechanism behind growth and decline is not fully understood. All known models are essentially useless."

"You always say that, too."

"I don't know what else to tell you."

"Well, tell me something. Tell me anything. I need answers."

John rolled his eyes.

7

"What are you guys talking about?"

Eva sat down at the kitchen table and dealt a hand of cards.

"This and that," said Thomas, picking up his cards and inspecting his hand.

"Christopher was going on about Creationists. Then he got mad and left."

"Shut up, Ken," said Eva.

Ken fumed silently. John remained silent for an appropriate interval and then picked up the dangling thread.

"Our Chris has an antagonistic bent. I suggested we should hear your side of the story. That was too much for him to bear."

"It's not like I would have defended the Creationists," said Eva. "But I would have been fair."

"Exactly," smiled John.

"Whatever. Christopher is really focused on this issue. I'm sure it will come up again."

"It's inevitable," sighed John.

"By design," added Ken, and this time no one bothered to correct him.

8

Thomas' luck was infuriating to his teammates. He won every hand but didn't even understand the game.

"I'll just take this one out of your paychecks," he said.

"Your poker record is truly remarkable," started John, "Considering we have to remind you of the rules every time we play."

"What's to remark? The fruits of a superior motivation."

"Also known as the Will to Power. Tell us, just what lengths are you willing to go to in order to achieve your goals?"

"Not funny. Just a fact. Besides, I've moved on from Nietzsche."

"There are no facts. And no one moves on from Nietzsche. We've caught you before. I suspect you've found a new way to cheat."

"All right, I feel stupid," admitted Thomas. "I don't know what to say."

John relaxed his posture, enjoying the easy victory. "I'll give you a few seconds to come up with a story."

"Fuck," said Thomas.

"All right boys," interrupted Eva, scooping up her playing cards and returning them to the deck. "Let's keep it PG-13."

"Mom, he's cheating!" cried John. "Punish him!"

"No, I'm serious. You're all fired," Thomas said, and left the room. No one was sure if he was serious.

"And that settles that," said Ken.

Eva's phone rang as the clock turned over into 1990.

She switched off the ringer.

YOU'VE POSTED THIS BEFORE

tags: 1990, john_ratcliff, ken_thompson, piro, tab2

1

The Chrysler Building. New York. 1990.
January.

"You've posted this before."

"No shit."

"So why are you posting it again?"

Piro arched an eyebrow. "It's tradition."

"Seriously?"

Piro sat at the keyboard clacking away. Simple, declarative sentences. Topical assertions.

"Nobody cares about this stupid newsletter," offered Thomas.

Piro remained silent. Typing.

"Nobody's even going to read it."

Silence.

"Your spelling sucks."

Piro flicked on the radio and turned up the volume.

Thomas grimaced. "I hate reading."

Piro leaned over the mimeograph machine, making small adjustments to various knobs and switches while Thomas fidgeted in the doorway.

"There's literally no way I'm going to help you fold all of those things."

"I don't care."

"This whole side-project is stupid. You really think the value-added is necessary? This stuff sells itself. No 'free gift with purchase' required."

Piro stopped what he was doing and turned to face his twin brother.

"If you're not going to contribute to the newsletter, please go into the kitchen and start bagging up rocks."

Thomas shrugged and wandered out of the room.

2

Ken steered the Actron Team's 1978 Lincoln Town Car through the streets of Alphabet City. Trash on the sidewalk reflected in the car's fresh candy paint. Passing some children, Ken boosted the volume on the custom sound system. The children giggled and pointed. He smiled and mashed the gas pedal. Shining.

Destination: The G-Spot.

Ken rounded the final corner and slowly brought the out-sized car to a stop. He lowered a tinted window and inspected his immediate surroundings. The parking lot was deserted save for two NYPD cruisers and a 1979 Chevrolet Monte Carlo (sky blue metal flake, white interior, whitewall tires; that would be John). Ken popped the collar on his polo shirt and exited the vehicle.

Inside, the club was all but vacant. Smoke from an abandoned cigarette snaked upward towards a light bulb hanging from the ceiling. The two police officers were inspecting a briefcase full of cocaine. One of them turned around and smiled dumbly, coke caked in his mustache. John Ratcliff stood nearby, a duffel bag full of money slung over his shoulder. When he saw his partner he frowned and shrugged.

Ken stood in the entryway and surveyed the empty stage. Strobe lights clicked rhythmically, strangely loud in the otherwise silent environs.

"Where the white women at?" he finally asked.

The cop with the coke mustache started to giggle, but never finished his outburst. Ken activated his super-speed and closed the distance between himself and the two officers in a hundred milliseconds flat. He slammed the meat of his open hand into the first officer's chin, then rolled with the momentum into the second officer's chest, following him to the ground. Both cops collapsed, unconscious, Ken straightened himself and dusted off his knees.

"Hmph," he he remarked, unimpressed.

John hoisted both men from the floor and hung them by their jacket collars on coat hooks near the front entrance. Each would see hospital time but neither would suffer permanent injury. John tossed the bag full of money at Ken and made his way over to the bar to pour himself a drink.

"Tired of this grind."

"So quit."

"You're funny."

Ken sighed.

"Yeah."

3

Outside, some children had wandered into the parking lot and were peering inside Jon's Monte Carlo, noses pressed up against the glass.

"Boy, is that white leather?"

"Sure is."

"My brother's car is like this, but his doesn't have leather."

"Sounds like your brother needs to find himself a better paying job."

Ken flopped the briefcase full of coke onto the hood of the car.

"Take this to your brother. If he brings it back in a week, filled with money..."

"We have great health insurance," interrupted John. "Dental and vision. Also, free car detailing. We'll see what we can do about his vinyl seats."

"Wow, mister! Thanks!"

John patted the boy on the head and then got into the Monte Carlo and peeled out. Ken smoked a cigarette, wandered back to the Lincoln and rolled over a beer bottle on his way out of the parking lot. There was no damage to the Town Car's bullet-proof tires.

As soon as the adults were gone the boys pounced on the briefcase, numerous hands scooping out coke and heaving it carelessly over their shoulders. As it happened, directly into the wind. Some of the powder blew back and caught in their teeth and hair. Undeterred by this minor annoyance, the boys wiped the backs of their hands across their faces and soon discovered the rows of individually wrapped crack rocks that lined the bottom of the briefcase. Immediately, they went to work removing the wrappers.

Tossing the pebbles of crack aside, each paper wrapper was inspected closely, compared carefully with the others. Soon it became apparent that all of the wrappers were identical. Worse, the material was immediately recognizable. Not just predictable, but in fact an exact duplicate of an issue they had all read before.

"It's a fucking reprint," said one of the boys.

He flipped over the wrapper, frantically scanning for the publisher information. There, printed in bold Helvetica, was the name of their nemesis:

Massive Fictions. Piotr Bright, Publisher.

The Chrysler Building.

NYC.

One of the boys produced a brick phone from his backpack and put in a call to headquarters.

Calling in for backup.

YOU ARE NOT A GADGET, HE CLAIMED, VIA CELLPHONE

tags: 1990, eva_bright, freeway_ricky_ross, jaron_lanier,
ken_thompson, piro, tab1, tab2

1

Dreamed I was a tomcat.

Trundling along the side of the road, fur matted with dirty snow. Searching for illegal narcotics.

My women were nowhere to be found.

Which was fine.

I happened to be armed. As I ambled along, a car sped by and splashed sludge in my face. I fired three rounds into its rear-right tire and the driver went over an embankment. An excruciating crashing noise followed. It rang in my ears.

I approached the vehicle and emptied the rest of my weapon into the driver's chest.

I found part of a hollowed out cantaloupe and slipped it over my head.

Cute.

No one would prosecute a Persian cat.

2

"Oh, great."

"What?"

"I accidentally saved an image of Spider-Man in my porn folder."

"So? Move it. Or delete it."

"But I clicked 'Save' without seeing the name of the file."

"So?"

"So, how am I supposed to find it? This folder is 5TB. I don't want that Spider-Man image to someday be found amongst my archival porn."

"So, go back and start to save it again and see what the suggested filename is. You probably just hit 'Enter' when you saved it."

"That... is a very good idea."

"I think I once helped your dad with a similar problem."

3

Jaron Lanier scooped up a handful of the white powder and inspected it closely.

"This appears to be cocaine."

"No shit, Lanier," said Piro.

Lanier peered into his hand, face wrinkled in concentration.

Piro turned to Thomas. "He's always like this."

"He doesn't get high out of our supply, does he?"

Piro stopped Thomas before he went any further with that line of thought.

"No. At least, not that I'm aware."

4

It turned out that my son had the drugs.

Nepeta cataria. Fifty grams. I'm certain his intent was to sell.

I left ten grams with an I.O.U.

The rest I put in my nose. I then put on dark sunglasses to mask my dilated pupils, the visible redness in my eyes.

A car drove by and its pilot tossed an empty beer can at my head. It bounced off the cantaloupe and skittered into the grass by the side of the road.

I peered at the exhaust trail over the top of my sunglasses. Then I pulled out my gun.

5

It was Ken on the phone.

"Lanier, I need some help with these verb tenses."

"Not now, Ken, we're... weighing... the drugs."

Piro snatched the phone away from him and barked into the mouthpiece.

"Ken! Not on this phone!"

He jammed his thumb on the 'End' button and then turned back to Lanier.

"Are you *damaged*? He can study on his own time!"

"Sorry, sorry," said Lanier, taking a kilo off of the scales.

Piro extracted the SIM card from the phone and crushed it in his hand.

"Card," he said.

Ricky tossed him a replacement and Piro snapped it into place, booted up the phone. He dialed New York.

"Eva, patch me through to Nicaragua."

Some moments passed and then Piro began shouting into the mouthpiece in gutter Spanish. He rung off and handed the phone back to Lanier.

"Don't lose that."

Thomas finished with his baggies and then dusted off his hands.

"Ken's obsession with Japanese culture is becoming a problem. He can't keep his mind on his work. Someone needs to ship him back to Japan."

Piro rolled his eyes. Not for the first time that day.

"His parents don't *want* him back. At least not until he learns to speak Japanese."

"Huh. That seems unlikely to happen. Couldn't we just do fansubs for them?"

The men all shared a laugh and then got back to work.

6

Ken unpaused and then re-paused the DVD.

He was at an impasse. The episode of *DOUBLE CATS* was only a quarter of the way through, but he was having trouble understanding the dialogue. Finally, he had given up and called Lanier for help.

He was supposed to be translating these episodes for the torrent site.

How could he admit that as a native Japanese, he couldn't even speak his own language?

His mind raced. Activating his super-speed, he cleaned up his apartment and did the dishes in just under four seconds, moving so fast he knocked over a bookshelf and had to re-shelve the books. This added another two seconds to the tally. He started a pot of spaghetti noodles boiling and took some wine out of the refrigerator. Another half-second.

The impending public humiliation would surely kill him.

Unexpectedly, the phone rang.

"Ken."

It was Lanier.

"I can't stay on here long, but let hear some of the phrases and I'll give you some quick translations."

"All right, the cat is wearing a cantaloupe on its head, it just pulled out a gun and shot out the tires of a car. The car went into a ditch and crashed. Now the cat is smoking a cigarette and putting on a pair of sunglasses. The cat says: *Baka.*"

Lanier paused before answering.

"What... What exactly are we translating here?"

"It's an anime. I'm supposed to be doing fansubs. I committed to the first six episodes by tonight."

"That's a lot of work, Ken. You're not a gadget, you know."

"Yeah, but geeze, shouldn't I at least be able to handle this? I didn't even start learning English until I was six years old. How could I have completely forgotten my own language?"

"Uh, I've gotta go."

Lanier hung up.

7

"What are you doing? Give me the phone."

Piro took the cellphone and stuffed it in his jacket pocket. He pushed Lanier out of the way and then locked the door to the kitchen.

"Thomas. Set the timers. We need a good twenty minutes to get out of the neighborhood."

Thomas set all the detonators and the team evacuated the little house.

"Maybe I should call dad," he said, once he had finished loading up his gear.

"Why?"

"He might have some good ideas about how to..." Now it was Thomas' turn to roll his eyes. "Oh, *never mind*."

The men climbed into their white van and pulled away from the safe house. As the vehicle accelerated into traffic, Lanier began to scribble in his notebook.

Piro gestured towards him, frowning.

"I don't want this guy coming along with us next time."

"What did *I* do," Lanier protested.

"Shut up," the rest of the men said in unison.

"This is a business," Piro began. "There's not time for dicking around with language studies and sketching portraits."

Thomas pretended to ignore the scene from behind his visor. He brought up some sports scores and wondered at the meticulous pointlessness of the statistics industry.

"Huh. It looks like the Bears have taken the Super Bowl."

The van hit a bump and for a split second Thomas' visor slid up and exposed his face.

"Oh God, what's wrong with his eyes?" asked Lanier.

Thomas stuck out his tongue and went back to scanning the news.

SENSE OF DEBT

tags: 1954, 1990, coco_schwab, david_bowie, piro, ragnarok, tab2

1

November, 1954.

Bowie picked up the envelope and ran his finger along its edge, holding it in his hand for a moment of silent admiration before tearing it open with his fingernail and devouring its contents.

But inside was an actual piece of correspondence.

He slammed the door to his dressing room and sulked in his chair. This was unconscionable.

The note was from his mother.

Dear Son,

it read.

I have received another notice from your creditors. This cannot go on. I am going to give them your address. If you do not write to them, I'm going to suggest that they call the police. There is nothing more I can do for you. I will not pay off another one of your debts. If that means that you go to jail, then so be it.

Love,

Mom

Bowie crumpled the note and tossed it on his makeup table. He opened a bottle of water and poured it on the carpet, tracing an occult symbol that was only present in his mind.

The bitch! I have overhead!

A quiet knock came at the door. Then another, somewhat louder.

He straightened, all trace of disquiet drained from his face.

Time to take the stage.

2

Piro and Thomas hopped into the RAGNAROK and strapped on their seatbelts. The engine warbled softly as Thomas adjusted his data gloves.

"What's the difference between a raven and a writing desk?" asked Thomas, gesturing through a cloud of invisible information.

"By weight?" asked the other.

"Sure."

"I'd say bout fifty kilos."

"Sounds about right," agreed Thomas, scribbling in his palm. "Anyway, we ought to go further back and try to sell some of this stuff to all those 19th century artsy types who were hooked on heroine. Can you imagine?"

"No, I can't," said Piro.

"Aw, come on."

Ignoring his twin brother, Piro accelerated smoothly into the clouds above New York City.

Lately, Thomas was spending far too much of his free time reading children's literature.

3

Bowie stomped through the concert, affecting strange poses. Back in his dressing room, he unwadded the note from his mother and then wadded it back up again, lit it on fire with his cigarette lighter. Coco rushed over and doused the flames with a tumbler of scotch.

Which didn't help at all.

Bowie stripped off his Puerto Rican jacket and patted out the fire. He was careful of his shoes.

"That was incredibly stupid," he said, icily. "Now I've ruined my shoulder pads. What were you thinking about?"

"Reflex," was all she could offer in reply.

Changing tacks, Bowie started digging around in her purse.

"You've got so much *crap* in here. Where's the coke?"

"We're out."

"*What*," he growled, turning back towards her, baring his teeth. The cigarette fell out of his mouth and landed on the carpet. Coco ran over and crushed it with her heel.

She was out of scotch.

Bowie also noticed that she had retrieved a baggy from a hidden compartment in her brassiere.

"Only kidding," she said, waving it towards his face.

Bowie snatched the baggy and sat back down in his chair. Engrossed.

"We can't have any more of these close calls," he sighed, and dove in.

4

Piro piloted the RAGNAROK towards 1954.

Thomas was dozing. Noticing this, Piro took the opportunity to put on some soft music.

Suddenly, Thomas started awake. He shot forward and Piro heard a loud thump. He looked over and Thomas had hit his forehead on the dashboard.

"WHAT! IS! THIS! CRAP!" he shouted. Piro couldn't be certain whether he was reacting to the noise or to the pain.

"Bowie. 'Golden Years.'"

"You're one of those people who listens to every album by an artist while you're driving to see them in concert, aren't you."

Piro remained silent. Piloting.

"Plus, your chronology is off. In 1954, he hasn't even written this song yet."

Piro reached for the dash and ejected the cassette.

"Fine. See? I'm putting it away."

5

Coco had come up with a new supplier. She was on the phone with them now. Bowie stared nervously at her hands as she wound the phone cord around her finger. A knock came at the door while she was still talking. Now she was chewing on her pencil. She didn't seem to hear.

Bowie glanced at the door, and then back at Coco.

Oblivious, she kept on talking.

Bowie coughed, quietly. His eyes were pleading with her to hear, to do something. Of course, he couldn't say anything. It was not his place to answer the door. Sweat running down his neck, he kicked over a chair. Then tried to look composed.

The knock came again.

This time, Coco noticed the disturbance. She picked up the phone and started towards the door.

Bowie fell back in his chair. A wave of relief swept over his sunken features.

He lit a cigarette.

6

Piro pulled out his flip-phone and dialed the new customers.

"I'll just make sure they're ready for us," he whispered.

Piro talked for ten minutes. It seemed like an endless amount of chitchat. Thomas had no patience for customer relations, but Piro seemed to relish any opportunity to interact with a client.

And this woman.
Was Thomas actually jealous?
He booted up his gun.
Now Piro was knocking on the door. Why? Just tell her
we're here.
Hm. No answer from the marks.

7

Just as Coco turned the door handle, both of the doors
blew violently inward, completely off of their hinges. Coco
was thrown to the ground. Fortunately for her, the Bakelite
telephone took the worst of it.

Bowie stared in paralyzed horror at the shattered pieces of
plastic on the floor. He was transfixed. There was something
familiar here. Something about the pattern of debris...
Abruptly, he snapped out of it. This was how it always was
with him, he observed. One second in dreamland and the next
fully focused.

"Coco. Take dictation."

"Rrrrm..." she moaned.

"Get up," he insisted.

Piro and Thomas entered, weapons drawn, targeting both
adult humans with practiced efficiency.

Bowie ignored them.

"When the phone broke, I looked down at the carpet. The
cracked plastic formed a picture. I saw the letters: s, h, n, z, n."

Coco maintained her expression. It would take more than
an explosion and a broken telephone to rattle her.

"It's Shenzhen, China."

"What?" asked Thomas.

I see, Coco said with her eyes. "Real estate or
commodities?"

"Real estate. Get Tony on the phone. We'll grab as much
as we can, now, while it's still available. Sort it out later. I've
got a good feeling about this one."

"How much do we spend?"

Bowie was rolling up the sleeves of his shirt, loosening his necktie. He snorted conspicuously and answered quickly.

"All of it."

8

"I don't know, Mr. Bowie, it seems rather unorthodox to sign your mother's name to a cocaine bill."

"She's my business partner. And we're going to need plenty of marching powder for the new venture."

Coco arranged the paperwork on the table as Bowie signed his mother's name at the bottom of each page. She reached over and smoothed down his eyebrow as he worked.

Thomas was smiling.

Piro decided it didn't matter. "I guess it will have to do."

Bowie suddenly looked concerned. "Are you sure you won't have any problems filling the standing order?"

Thomas motioned with his thumb.

"You wouldn't believe how much of this stuff we have back in the ship."

At this, Piro decided to interject.

"So long as you can come up with the money, there is literally an unlimited supply."

Bowie looked please with himself. His yellow teeth shined a skeleton grin.

"Friends. I think this is going to work out just fine."

BIG PANTIES

tags: 1991, 4086, christopher, eva_bright, ken_thompson,
maude_mold, piro, plinth_mold, tab2

1

May, 1991.

These memories simulate a very dark period in my life.

2

I had dumped an awful lot of money into Next Computer.
For obvious reasons, this troubled the King.

"Maryland Procurement Office," I would remind. "We're just shoring up inventory."

"It's easier to buy a judge than to ask for permission," the King would retort.

Whatever that was supposed to mean.

"Perot is our man. Remember who works for whom."

But the King did in fact hold the purse strings. At least in this decade. I looked forward to a time when the man could be properly disposed of. Driven from the enterprise.

At this rate, he would snort his way through our operating capital in a matter of weeks.

3

I grew weary of kings. After a short period of deliberation I disabled comms with 4086. It was an obvious measure too long delayed.

4

Christopher threw down his leaf in disgust.

"This book is crap," he said.

Ken checked the flashing index. *BLACK GANGSTER*, by Donald Goines.

"So, what's so bad about it?" he asked.

"Nothing. If you've never committed a crime in your life, and you don't know the difference between gorilla pimping and—"

"I don't know, I read it when I was a teenager. It seemed realistic enough to me."

Christopher rolled his eyes until it hurt and snapped a new clip into his pistol. He decided to change the subject.

"You got the crack?"

"I don't know, Chris, I'm not so sure I can trust your judgment anymore. I'm starting to wonder if your political views are having an influence on your—"

Christopher pulled down his ski-mask and turned off his phone. He walked over and poked Ken directly in the chest.

"I don't give a fuck who you think you can trust. Stop whining and get in the van."

The two men took their places in the vehicle.

"I'm in like Flynn," said Ken.

Christopher punched Ken in the neck.

"Put on your seat belt."

5

My organization ran with a minimum of friction.

Piro handled operations. Eva ran comms. Thomas... mostly stocked shelves.

I took notes.

In this way, the years advanced, unrolling like paper tape from under one of my old shirts.

I liked to stay hands-off. There could be no benefit to my constantly butting heads with the lower-level management. Besides, Piro was reasonably competent.

We didn't fraternize, on the whole.

My wife was a different story. She simply couldn't follow the program. I discovered her trail more than once.

Unacceptable sloppiness. This was a business.

In November, 1991, with some regret, I disabled her power source.

6

"Instead of improvements, we got features."

"These panties are huge."

"Just put them on."

Christopher pulled into the driveway and withdrew his key from the ignition. He looked over at Ken and wondered how the man had ever passed a cursory background check.

Christopher adjusted his costume panties.

Without warning, the windshield exploded inward.

Plinth Mold's hand extended well beyond its normal range, traversing the length of the van's hood and grasping Christopher's flack jacket. His other hand slithered into the cabin and found purchase around Ken's throat.

Plinth yanked both men from the vehicle, trailing bits of shatterproof glass. He deposited them both onto the sidewalk.

7

"Boss! What are you doing here?"

Plinth tapped Ken's face to the ground. The smaller man writhed mindlessly, firearm forgotten, oversized panties gathered around his ankles.

Plinth examined the situation. It was a stuck process. Too late for circumcision, but too soon for canonization.

And yet, he couldn't fire these men. Not exactly.

"Why are you both wearing giant panties?"

The two characters represented a significant investment of system resources. Several proven quantities from the writing pool had been used up, filling in their histories. It was likely that, once terminated, the processes would not even relinquish the memory that had already been consumed.

"It's our body armor, boss."

It was not the answer Plinth had wanted to hear.

Never mind. He resolved to make yet more adjustments to the running system.

He dialed the Chrysler Building and patched himself through to Piro.

8

The incompetence...

It wouldn't have been fair to blame them, but still I couldn't look at their faces. Could I see myself in this?

Never mind. I resolved to make yet more adjustments to the running system. Not premature optimization, but triage. The machine hadn't yet crashed, but experience had taught me to expect more trouble.

Perhaps humorously, I still thought it possible to prevent a catastrophe.

I dialed the Chrysler Building and patched myself through to Piro.

9

Plinth's wallet had deactivated itself due to suspicious activity. The King had emptied the last of the corporate accounts. As a result, it took more than two years to hup the errant processes. With his other resources tied up in acquisitions, Plinth simply couldn't afford the man hours needed to affect the required changes.

In the end, as he suspected, the corrupted system memory was not freed when the processes restarted.

Programs continued to hang. The big panties should have been a clear warning sign, but this was a realization that came little, too late.

Eventually, the entire system bogged down.
Plinth couldn't log out.

10

Fuck it, I'll reboot.

11

Years ago, the plane jerked.

FINAL REPORT OF TEAM 34

tags: 1991, 1994, federal_grants, nana_mold, paris_mold, piro, plinth_mold, shit_mold, tab2, violet

1

August, 1994.

Team 34, initial report.

As dictated by Captain Paris Mold.

Tear down. Clean up. Soft seductions.

We're always called in on the quiet jobs. The ones with a lot of work to be done, preferably without a lot of noise.

I have to admit, the world is a pretty big mess.

My team is competent. We pack light, so we can cover a lot of ground in a short period of time.

Reputation. Dependability.

We don't deal in names, but we're well known to the people that matter.

We do okay.

2

I task three assets to the South Pacific. One to the Chrysler Building. I don't trust anyone but myself with Plinth.

Violet continues to elude us.

We've laid down some perimeter product placement, bidding our time.

Nothing is coming up. It's difficult to predict emerging demographics, the interactions of different products. And Violet is a professional. Humans melt in her hands.

I decide to call my mother.

3

"Barfight! Dipstick! Bricoloage! Go! Go! Go!"

Mother screams at my men through her mouthpiece. They aren't used to hearing her shouting on the wire.

"Nana! Where the hell have you been? We're on over-time!"

A firefight is underway. Clearing old signage means engaging Plinth's aerosol defenses. We're prepared, but understaffed.

"Keep formation, boys! I'm losing your signal!"

At least Plinth is alone in this fight. We were careful to remove old man Jerrymander from the board, decades prior to the meltdown.

For her part, Mother keeps a tight handle on the Mold family backups.

4

February, 1991.

Federal Grants straightens his paperwork and peers deeply into Plinth Mold's single working eye.

There is a subtle click and Mold's head inclines towards Grants. The gesture is all but imperceptible.

"Why don't you tell me about your childhood."

Dust plays in the sunlight streaming in through the library window.

"Have you ever read a book called *THE INDIAN IN THE CUPBOARD?*?" asks Plinth. "A children's piece. Published around 1960."

Fed stifles a guffaw. "Please. I don't read kiddie trash. I've never even heard of it."

"My brother Pennis and I—we—*published* that book."

Immediately, Grants realizes his tactical error. "I—I'm sorry."

"It was a thinly veiled retelling of the origin of our family."

This is no good. Grants panics, leaps from his seat. "Sir, I—"

"I think we're finished here."

Plinth rises, exits.

5

PLINTH'S LOG

524780 SECONDS FROM THE EPOCH

With the last hard boot less than a year in the past, the world is already growing crowded. Mostly with clean-up crews. I assume my brother Paris is amongst the rabble.

There are many starting conditions to seed.

Mother called, earlier today. Clean-up proceeds apace. Paris *is* amongst the rabble, but Violet remains hidden. I've asked her not to reveal my whereabouts, either, for the time being.

I've also reinstated the Crown. And the Crown has renewed my funding.

I'm thinking about re-spawning Thomas and Piro. They might amuse me in this new world.

And, that's about it. For this month. More after the new year.

6

January, 1995.

Team 34, final report.

As dictated by Captain Paris Mold.

Product placement has been completed. Rulesets have been configured. Once customers start populating the layouts, later this year, we should start to see good numbers. I think we can handle the traffic.

We've decided to go with a variation on the initial predilections from the last iteration. Non-standard prejudices. These first new customers will find themselves inexplicably drawn towards the Asiatic races and the flickering of camp fires. There is some debate over whether or not a fascination with fire will hamper their survival rate. Will they fuck themselves to death before they even get a chance to starve? Will the flames and their genitals mix favorably?

Ha, that's the test, isn't it?

Still no sign of Violet.

Or my brothers.

Mother has gone quiet.

Ping.

END CRASH ORIGIN

more

textadventure.stanleylieber.com

about the author

Stanley Lieber should probably be doing something else.

NOTES

NOTES

NOTES

NOTES

NOTES

NOTES



It was Plinth's turn to evince incredulity. Obviously, there was no lighthouse at these coordinates, or at any other coordinates in the general vicinity. The apparent reality of the situation did not mesh with with common sense. The situation was untenable.

Plinth employed the use of a vintage chronometer, worn on his wrist. Presently, he fingered the device as his lawyers booted up their paperwork. "We're in the middle of the south Atlantic, Wetbeard," he said. "Please explain."

"Sir, I don't know where it came from. I looked down, and then I looked up. From out of nowhere, it was there."

"Well, what am I paying you for? Steer the ship out of its way."

"Sir, that's what I've been trying to tell you. I--"

