

REPORT OF LAND

by

PAUL CUNNINGHAM

(Under the Direction of LeAnne Howe)

ABSTRACT

Partially inspired by Emily Dickinson’s “It was not Death, for I stood up” and Jennifer Jacquet’s essays on survivor guilt in the Anthropocene, my creative dissertation project, “Report of Land,” reimagines Joris-Karl Huysmans’ *A rebours* as a contemporary work of speculative fiction. A response to numerous real scientific predictions by Anthropocene scholars, the text of my manuscript follows a lone wandering being who has been tasked with cataloguing the earth’s remains. After a global environmental disaster known only to the android protagonist as The Shock, the earth’s natural vegetation has been infected by a volatile nanotechnology—resulting in dangerous populations of nanostructured plants comprised of chlorophyll, solar cells, and other photosynthetic materials. The only other living organisms to be found on earth are cephalopods. Due to the same rising ocean temperatures that have caused global coral reef bleachings, marine biologist Annalee Newitz believes cephalopods have the best chance of adapting to intensifying oceanic acidification in the future. Because the novel’s protagonist spends time above and below the ocean’s surface, octopuses—with their graceful agility and retractile beaks—usurp the muse-like ornamental bird of much Anglo-Saxon poetry. From surviving the ruins of a colonized landscape to perilous journeys into oceans of bone-white coral, “Report of Land” is about a

synthetic being unlearning its antiquated, human-approved programming and finally discovering the one thing missing from its final report.

REPORT OF LAND

by

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

ECODECADENT MANIFESTO

“What is the sign of every literary decadence? That life no longer dwells in the whole” [...] “The whole no longer lives at all: it is composite, calculated, artificial, an artifact”

“The Case of Wagner: a Musician’s Problem” (1888)

Ecodecadence is a poetic ecology of undying disturbance.

*

The Ecodecadent poet turns their gaze to the woods of wildfires past—carbonic blooms, carboniferous forests. The Ecodecadent inhabits both past and present, only moving forward as future worms of the mind.

*

Ecodecadent poetry consists of radical fungal disturbance, mossy excess, flowery upthrust, long-chained lyrical toxins, earthly melancholia, and continuous euphoric composting. Everything coils—*parasite-like*—in the eye of a green drinker.

*

The human race is worried.

The big question is: Can we make it?

16 Gigabyte insane memory?

Through the blood-brain barrier, reconfigure the signal substance?

Toxoplasma gondii—

the parasite that makes women more beautiful than men

moronic

—Aase Berg translated by Johannes Göransson, *Hackers*

*

To be Ecodecadent is to be *With Deer*, to embrace all neogolistic and translatory possibilities. To embrace the poetry of Aase Berg is to embrace punning, where a reader is forced to split themselves into pieces; to embrace contradictions, giving birth to a new dynamic poetry; to thrive in a barnyard environment—where the Swedish word “barn” also means “children”; to be a flower child or a whistle-blower; to be a hacker or translator.

*

Like an individual spore detached from its former mushroom root network, the zombie-like Ecodecadent searches endlessly for new territory, reliable nourishment, a final resting place.

*

The Ecodecadent seeks renewable energy, forever reanimating in/as different mediums of Art.

*

To survive earth, the Ecodecadent must rely on personal mycelic practices, extending a limb only to spore-like artists with similar attributes. The artistic ecology of Ecodecadence is many-limbed: multilingual, invasive, excessive, transgressive, queer, degenerative.

*

Ecodecadence is for renegade bombshells—like Vivian Mary Pearce—the star of John Waters’ obscene odyssey *Mondo Trasho* (1969). Vivian plays Bombshell, a lonely woman continuously preyed upon by drug-addled perverts. After fleeing an aggressive man with a foot fetish, Bombshell gets hit by a car. The driver (played by the late great drag artist Divine) makes it up to Bombshell by shoplifting some clothes for a beauty makeover. After the makeover, the two women spend time together surviving various obstacles including a psychiatric hospital visit, a hippie orgy, and the occasional moment of Catholic guilt. After being kidnapped by the evil Dr. Coathanger, Bombshell and Divine escape to a barnyard and come across a terribly muddy pig pen. The two women decide to leave the city of Baltimore behind for a life of filth, leaping into the pig pen to roll around in mud, grime, and pig shit. Suddenly, Bombshell notices that her feet have been amputated by Dr. Coathanger and replaced with bird-like feet. Chicken feet. As The Chantels’ “Maybe” plays, Divine disappears into thin air and Bombshell is left all alone, staring up at the sky, waiting to take flight. Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, Bombshell clicks her chicken feet together, hoping to find a way home. She finds herself mysteriously teleported to an alleyway, only to be accosted by more men—one who exposes himself to her from a car window. She clicks her chicken feet together once again and finds herself teleported to the front of a Pest Control business. Two women wearing sunglasses begin loudly gossiping about Bombshell:

“Ugh, is that a boy or a girl? Is it a faggot? It’s a dyke! It’s a hippie! A communist?! It’s a drag queen, or a wash rag queen! Probably a speed freak! Or a pot head! Or a muffin queen! Look at her! It’s just a whore! Or maybe a gold-digger! Maybe she’s a hustler! Or some sort of intellectual! She’s probably a rimmer! Maybe a speed freak! A chicken queen! Or a shrimp freak! But it could be a narc! Yeah, or maybe a beatnik! Or a junkie! Yes, or an acid hip! Or a spade?! Or just a gigolo. Just a flower child. Or a shit-kicker. Or a red. Or a glamour girl. Or maybe she’s just some snob. Yeah, maybe just some pollock. Or a warmonger. Or an S&M queen” (*Mondo Trasho*).

The repetitive barrage of insults continue—just like the occurrence of “maybe” in the Chantels song. As the insults keep coming, Bombshell eventually disappears. Though, even after her ‘offensive’ body is gone, the women in sunglasses are still unhappy: “Isn’t that disgusting? Let’s wait for the bus somewhere else . . . ”

*

To survive earth, the Ecodecadent must embrace Filth, make art out of Filth, recognize Filth as the philosophically abject matter it is. In Waters’ *Mondo Trasho*, men *and* women use gossip and stereotypes to *trash* the sexually rebellious Bombshell. Trash is violence.

*

Ecodecadence undoes boundaries of city and nature, undoes pastoral musings, deromanticizes our polluted rivers, lakes and streams. Looking backwards at the young nineteenth-century mud-larks of the River Thames, David L. Pike argues that “the sewer offers shelter and knowledge to those with the misfortune of finding themselves in it” (63). Unemployed, exploited, or worse, the

Ecodecadent—Bombshell or not—repeatedly employs a language of Filth, a language of the city and the city’s violent garbage, where human waste is recycled, reused, and reabsorbed by human bodies. Reabsorbed as a skunky language of stink and pomp.

*

In “Skunk Dreams,” author Louise Erdrich goes to bed with a skunk. She finds herself intoxicated by the “night air, enriched with skunk,” inhabited by the animal other, overwhelmed by the pungent odor of a “spectacular” animal that is described as powerfully filthy. Erdrich advises: “We should take comfort from the skunk, an arrogant creature so pleased with its own devices that it never runs from harm, just turns its back in total confidence. If I were an animal, I’d choose to be a skunk: live fearlessly [...] I wouldn’t walk so much as putter, destinationless, in a serene belligerence—past hunters, past death overhead, past death all around” (57). Here, Erdrich’s essay could be approached as a form of Indigenous dandyism.

*

For an Ecodecadent, a skunk is no mere animal, it’s a literary device. Don’t just write a poem or a story. Skunk it.

*

Ecodecadence must be uncultivated because Ecodecadence is Queer and Queerness is rooted in Decadence. In the scriptures of Joris-Karl Huysmans’ *A rebours* (which has been translated as both *Against the Grain* and *Against Nature*), Des Esseintes recalls the “cherry lips” and alluring “hips”

of his male companions. In Robert Baldick's Huysmans biography, he includes a revealing 1890 letter sent from Huysmans to homosexual poet Marc-André Raffalovich:

Your letter and your book bring back to mind some horrifying evenings I once spent in the sodomite world, to which I was introduced by a talented young man whose perversities are common knowledge. I spent only a few days with these people before it was discovered that I was not a true homosexual – and then I was lucky to get away with my life [...] Never in my life have I seen anything so sinister” (124).

*

As long as the road to progress is viewed as “masculine aggression,” the effeminate male will be viewed as a degenerate

Like the Decadents of the 1890s, the Ecodecadent embraces skunk-saturated Nights, and the inevitability of Death. The Ecodecadent writes with an excessive intensity, burns across Night with firefly cunning, pulsing luciferins, and fungal bioluminescence. When it comes to our carved up planet of cerium mines and Bagger 288s, the Ecodecadent must first look inward, toward self-understand and one's own mortality.

*

Ecodecadence is an endless search for thanatopic intimacy.

*

Lodged in the present, the Ecodecadent is Decadent in the same way many contemporary artists consider themselves *avant-garde*. It is important to remember that the *avant-garde* is not necessarily a historically fixed phenomenon (as Peter Bürger's suggests in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*) and the same must be said of Decadence. Ideologically, the Decadence of the arsenic-yellow 1890s feels reminiscent of the Graveyard Poets of the eighteenth century. And what about the Gothic? For instance, is Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* a Decadent novel or a Gothic novel?

*

The Gothic is unmistakably an ancestor of Decadence, but is the Ecodecadent a Graveyard Poet leaning into Night? A Gothicized Decadent? A zombified Romantic?

*

In James Pate's *Flowers Among the Carrion: Essays on the Gothic in Contemporary Poetry*, the author appears to be approaching vast, monstrous night in the same way Timothy Morton approaches global climate change as a hyperobject. If night is a metaphor for the unknown in the Gothic, then I can understand why Gothicism keeps springing up in contemporary poetry. It feels like an appropriate response to the Anthropocene, to global climate change. Metaphorically, Decadence embraces night—inevitable death. But Decadence also feels like a warming. Warming like the earth itself. Burning up like Walter Pater's "gem-like flame" or Gustave Moreau's sublime painting of Salome: "[...] glowing coals, as violet as jets of gas, as blue as burning alcohol, as white as the rays of a star. The horrific head blazes, still bleeding, leaving clots of dark purple on the ends of the beard and hair" (Des Esseintes, *À rebours*).

*

To survive earth, the Ecodecadent must make a weapon of their poetry. Like Audre Lorde,

Ecodecadents must make weapons of poetry:

I teach poetry because as I said I am crucially involved in it. I am crucially involved in survival, and I consider poetry one of the best weapons, or tools of surviving. I am also crucially involved with *your* survival because your survival is involved with mine and the survival of my children (Lorde, 4)

The Ecodecadent embraces and accepts the end times as a queer time. A time for multilingual poems, camp, puns, gore, and unmitigated linguistic excess. The Ecodecadent makes a weapon of slurs, rolls around in the pig pen, makes confetti of the filthy pollution we're forced to inhale, ingest, and, sometimes, ignore.

*

“Violence is justified as a means of rebellion, but never as a means of oppression”

—Hélio Oiticicia

*

The Ecodecadent employs a language of rebellion. A language of trash-imagism and tech-litter, tear-gas and riot police. Influenced by Andy Warhol, Jean-Luc Godard, Arthur Rimbaud, Kenneth Anger, and Jack Smith, trash-imagist outlaw, Hélio Oiticicia took to his journal in March of 1973 to develop a highly-extravagant series of immersive environments with the goal of making spectators exist “beyond representation.” Using cocaine as a paint-like substance, Oiticicia’s *Cosmococas* sought to alter and project images of popular American celebrities (i.e.

Marilyn Monroe, Jimi Hendrix). Attendees of the massive installation were encouraged to disappear—like a bombshell celebrity—into the simulacra of *Cosmococas*, into trash-imagist environments. Spectators were originally encouraged to swap clothes, do drugs, and play around in the *trash* (i.e. piles of balloons, cushions, hammocks). Unlike Warhol, Oiticica’s celebrity erasures obliterate the idea of the Warholian superstar, forcing spectators to reconsider art, value-making, and iconicity. In the *Cosmococas*, spectators become possessed by Oiticica’s media. They become a mycelic network, dancing among trash-imagist ruins like zombies, looking to one another (instead of pop cultural icons) to create new meaning and context.

*

To theorize a metamorphic sublime, Michael Taussig argues that human interventions in nature are not without various chain reactions (i.e. pathogens, agribusiness monocropping, big pharma). Taussig describes the occurrences of such chain reactions in poetry and literary fiction “mimetic fission.” Mimetic fission can also include the natural metamorphization of fungi, bacteria, and parasites. Things becoming new things. Taussig calls the resulting bombardment of things—whether fungals or anti-fungals (antibiotics)—mimetic excess (44).

*

The excess of the Ecodecadent might best be described as mimetic excess. A malignant language of the metamorphic sublime. A language of tree-killing and coal-tar, diesel fuel and global meltdown, plague and panic.

*

Territorial, the Ecodecadent wields a fungal limb like a club, like the bud of a Great Water Lilly. It clears a space for itself, expands across the planet's surface, opens its jaws toward the sun. Its competitors stand no chance.

*

Peter O'Leary's *Earth is Best* contains a "Mycopoetics" manifesto that acknowledges Anthropogenic climate change and argues on behalf of the inspirational euphoria of mushrooms. A euphoria that offers writers "ethnomycological effervescence," or a fungal-imaginal mode that moves beyond the hallucinogenic properties of certain mushrooms. According to O'Leary, the mere act of foraging or noticing a newly sprung mushroom is not only an example of how a human being can transform their own fungal-imaginal relationship to the environment, but also a new way of making one's poetry more wild and "uncultivated" (109). The Mycopoetics manifesto argues for a poetry of decomposition and transformation, suggesting poets should approach "woods" as potential "words" (110).

*

"I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:

It is what you fear.

I do not fear it: I have been there."

—Sylvia Plath, "Elm"

*

Uncultivated, Ecodecadence spreads like the increasing number of wildfires that plague our earth and threaten every great branch, every far-reaching taproot. Ecodecadence must be ambitious in its green sprawl of nonhuman goals and aims, must reach a magnitude of equal or greater magnitude of whatever hyperobject poses a threat. “Each political and ethical decision is made on the inside of a hyperobject, caught in the resonance of the zones that spell doom,” writes Timothy Morton in *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. “Humans have entered an era of hypocrisy” (148).

*

Wasted, trashed, and poisoned, the resilient Ecodecadent knows the plasticity of language and thus employs a language of plastic. In *Styrofoam*, poet Evelyn Reilly chains together images based on the production of synthetic polymers, monomers, Floam, and other synthetic materials. Whether one approaches Reilly’s work as collage or conceptualism, the poet’s concern undoubtedly rests with our earth’s undying plastic:

(discalced de-castled devotees.of)

“the real world, I mean the real world”

in.w/a rose.arose lichen with lovely.metallic.names

&plastic.plasticity

in.magnificent . unscrupulous . quantities

(28)

In Reilly's poetry, the periods function as adhesive agent—as polymer *chains.stringing.together language.clusters of sound* and such accumulation is similar to the tracking buoys distributed by NASA, tracking the movement and patterns of animal-suffocating plastic in our oceans.

& a poly.fix.styx.fury.flurry.slurry

of extra-terrain garbage

(28)

To visualize our oceans' massive garbage gyres, NASA utilizes data from buoys that have been circulating throughout our oceans for over 35 years. Since monitoring buoy migration patterns, NASA has identified at least five known garbage gyres (Shirah).

*

The Ecodecadent knows the warming ocean is a wound.

*

In "The Red Kiss," Aase Berg juxtaposes a woman's body with an unhealthy ocean. The mussels "bleed," the breast-like ocean floor is polluted with "sludge," and the coral limbs (which provide camouflage) suffer from trauma. The familiar fear pounding at the bottom of the sea feels reminiscent of the taproot that Plath knows all too well in "Elm."

"Deep lilies sway. The sorrow-mussel's pearls itch and bleed. Heavy fish streak between stones. On the breast bottom, the heart of fear pounds fourteen feeble beats. The limbs still suffer. Corals hide fat and skin. Her lips seek the surface to be saved by oxygen. But on the sludge bottom, the tracks of the red kiss glow" (35)

*

In *Coral Empire*, Ann Elias explores the ways in which early twentieth century humans mistook corals for flowers, insects, and worms (18). As early as 1908, the British empire was using coral reef analogies as a means for justifying political and industrial empire-building. In the 1920s, exploited workers of New Castle upon Tyne were repeatedly reminded to keep their “reef” in order—an early metaphor for industry. Should the great empiric reef be neglected, it would die along with its laborers (Elias, 19).

*

In 2004, Berg described prose poetry as a departure from lyric poetry’s patriarchal lineage, offering writers a way to avoid “setting up a relationship with the male norm.” Championing images over narrative, Berg has described her 1990s prose poems as “waking dreams,” “exaggerated,” and “sickeningly kitschy” (“Response & Bio”). Much of the violent, abject imagery of *Hos rådjur* (*With Deer*) is dependent on a collision of female body parts and a forest landscape swelling with deadly masculine forces, resulting in an intentionally unnatural sounding Swedish that Johannes Göransson has translated into complex English neologisms (i.e. “liplarvae;” “skinstarved;” “dough-muscles;” “marrowpierced”). The mutating language of Berg’s surreal landscapes recalibrates human and non-human relations. Human imagery and consciousness becomes increasingly fragmented.

*

In “Landscaping,” Berg calls her prose poems “ur-landscape[s]”; unfixed or “static” poetic landscapes. The ur-landscape does not prioritize humans or want anything from humans. Berg’s

aim is for a poem to behave like the natural world. She acknowledges that her ur-landscapes can contain elements of beauty, but they are also “full of ghosts” (19). This description of the ur-landscape echoes Taussig’s metaphoric sublime. Her “ur-” is about the inner and it’s a place beyond reality or the real. “The inside looks like the outside.” She calls this interior a superreality. “The superreality is here. It’s finally real” (Berg, 32). The poet’s understanding of the artificial allows her to give shape to reality rather than reproduce its restrictions. Baudrillard defines what he calls the “hyperreal” as a territory “sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary” (1733). While the language, given its similarities (*superreal* versus *hyperreal*), might be an issue of translation, I wonder if Berg’s ur-landscape (or prose poem) is the flux-y *giving of shape*—the process occurring between the real and the imagined. In any case, for any poet who dares to imagine nonhuman consciousness, the realm of the virtual (aka the digital) is never too far off.

*

Ecodecadent poetry is not the same thing as Eco poetry or Gothic poetry. The Anthropogenic urgency of Ecodecadence is a far cry from John Shoptaw’s “Why Eco poetry?” According to the author, for a poem to be an ecopoem, it should not be described in the way Timothy Morton describes it: “ambient.” Shoptaw believes if ecopoetry is to be considered “ambient,” then that makes all poetry ecopoetry (397). Even if this is true, *what makes this a bad thing?* If we approach Sylvia Plath as ecopoet, why is that wrong? Shoptaw also bristles at the ecological connotations of the “digital” when reading *The Arcadia Project: North American Postmodern Pastoral* (Shoptaw, 396-398). On one hand, Shoptaw warns against environmental poetry that is too experimental or conceptual, on the other hand, he warns against environmental poetry that is too

“didactic” (401). While Shoptaw makes a sensible point about the need to address pollution in ecopoems, I’m not sure I understand the larger question his essay asks: “If an ecopoem is only a postmodern or a contemporary nature poem, why ecopoetry?” (408). I think he's confusing calls for contemporary poetry that address the immediacy of the Anthropocene with an anti-ecopoetry stance. That’s not the stance the editors of *The Arcadia Project* are taking. Shoptaw nearly approves of one poem that appears in the anthology: Juliana Spahr’s “Gentle Now, Don’t Add to Heartache.” Though he sees the poem as postmodern, it’s still an ecopoem strictly because it is “referential”. Ultimately, he distances himself from Spahr’s viewpoint when she critiques nature poems’ simplicity, remarking on how they frequently “show up in the *New Yorker* or various other establishment journals” (400). Here, Shoptaw describes Spahr as being anti-environmentalist, allowing for the politics of poetry to interfere with a message of progress.

*

Ecodecadent poetry is not the same thing as Ecopoetry or Gothic poetry, though, like a Gothic poet, the Ecodecadent is fueled by deathly night. Coal-black night. “[L]ong-dead organisms,” as Jesse Oak Taylor has pointed out in *The Sky of Our Manufacture*, comparing the blood Dracula drinks—or “liquid undeath”—to petroleum’s fungibility (130). The Ecodecadent specifically writes with deep time in mind, writes *against* the Anthropocene, *against* a continuum of decay and evolutionary demise.

*

In Kathryn Bigelow’s early American southwestern vampire film, *Near Dark* (1987), vampires are juxtaposed with oil derricks, reinforcing Taylor’s awareness of coal as something once alive.

“Death is the fuel, the immeasurable amount of reused and recycled matter that keeps the whole system of natural selection running,” he writes. Taylor later mentions the “subterranean forest” of the Carboniferous Period (123). He also cites *Dracula* as the “first great oil novel” (130). Indeed, *Dracula* is much more than a Gothic novel. It’s an Ecodecadent novel. In *Dark Museum*, María Negroni defines a vampire as a “creature in love with its own desolation” (10). Desolation, for vampires, is about memories (or perhaps unattainable fantasies), loss, and an inability to mourn. Negroni calls this desolation a form of beauty “replete with ruins, chaos, and statuarities” (12). To be a vampire is to dwell in fantastical ennui. Perhaps this makes Huysmans’ *Des Esseintes* vampiric. Jim Jarmusch has devoted an entire film to the exploration of vampiric ennui called *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013).

*

Building on Nietzsche’s 1888 essay, “The Case of Wagner: a Musician’s Problem,” Regenia Gagnier has made *Decadence* a project of “progress”:

“Progress was decadent because increasing individuation led to the disintegration of the whole. In similar formulations, moral character, as the alignment of individual development with the goals of the state (what we now call governmentality) was precisely what Bohemians – both soft Bohemians such as Bloomsbury and hard Bohemians such as Verlaine or Jarry – resisted” (11).

*

To be Ecodecadent is to be of the soil, out of sight. *Ob-scene*. A rare earth mineral ready to illegally circulate, a single spore airborne and traveling a malnourished world.

*

Like a hacker's trojan horse or the caterpillar-controlling cordyceps, Ecodecadence employs a strategic parasitism in hopes of infiltrating and reimagining European artworks of the past. Taking a postcolonial approach to historical decadence, artist and filmmaker Yinka Shonibare has re-created Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera* (2004-2005); Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake (Odile and Odette, 2005)*; and even Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray (Dorian Gray, 2001)*—casting himself as a Black dandy named Dorian. Addressing themes of sexual repression, formal repetition, and a suffocating aristocracy, Shonibare has devoted many years to rendering a hybrid Afro-European decadence of a grandiose scale (frequently including mannequins dressed in vibrant African-Dutch-Indonesian patterns). His approach to art is itself an embodiment of and revision of dandyism—a devotion to the reinvention of the self (Shonibare, 11-12).

*

In *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry*, Robert Stilling mentions a time when Shonibare once objected to Anthony Downey's interpretation of his performance of Dorian as a form of "historical revisionism." Shonibare suggests the man in the mirror-like picture is *not* a "revision" of Wilde's character Dorian Gray, but rather Yinka Shonibare himself, forcing spectators to "look twice and re-engage in what they are looking at" (151). Stilling also likens Shonibare's artistic approach to the imperial conquest of Africa as "European decadence in African drag" (168).

*

Françoise Gaillard labels Shonibare's works "decadent imitations," meaning that they do not attempt to conceal their artificiality. If anything, they celebrate their counterfeit status. Regarding works like 2001's *Leisure Lady (with Pugs)* and 2003's *Scramble for Africa*, Gaillard claims the fiberglass mannequins and dogs "embrace their own artificiality as a way of calling out the artificiality of empire" (Stilling, 138-139).

*

In "The Example of Baudelaire," Paul Bourget and Nancy O'Connor write, "A decadent style is one in which the unity of the book falls apart, replaced by the independence of the page, where the page decomposes to make way for the independence of the sentence, and the sentence makes way for the word" (98).

*

The Ecodecadent recognizes and acknowledges the necrotic end times of the Anthropocene and the occult political mode known as necropastoral poetry, which poet and critic Joyelle McSweeney defines as a "manifestation of the infectiousness, anxiety, and contagion occultly present in the hygienic borders of the classical pastoral" (3). Like *mimetic excess* or the ecological concept of *disturbance*, definitions of necropastoral depend on the activity (human or non-human) in question (Tsing, 160).

*

When an Ecodecadent writes in the mode of the necropastoral, they must also consider human history and the development of the "poetic imagination's comprehension of human life," typically

involving a return to pre-modern texts or ancient sources. However, this return is frequently misconstrued as a longing for a “feudal utopia” (Zurawski, 15). An Ecodecadent’s conscious return to significant literary works of the past is not necessarily an endorsement for the preservation of a literary canon or sexism or racism, but more accurately a protest against how certain forms of Art are increasingly deemed inappropriate or obscene by a market society ruled by prize culture, gatekeepers, and tastemakers ready to fall on the sword of accessible, humanist poetry.

*

When it comes to Ecodecadent poetry, McSweeney, in “On Adoration,” connects both notions of translation and posthumicity to the *sublime*: “In fact, like-ness itself, metaphor, simile, which American poetry moralists seem to frequently abjure, is another one of these relations—the two entities in the comparison are-and-are-not each other, and this undecidability, this impossible doubleness and supersaturation, releases the delicious dark energy which may not agree to apply itself to conventional ethical or aesthetic claims.”

*

Ecodecadence might be best described as an ecologically motivated Poetry *in extremis*.

*

In *The Price of Experience*, Clayton Eshleman calls for a poetry in the spirit of Antonin Artaud, Vladimir Holan, and César Vallejo. A “poetry that goes for the whole and attempts to become responsible for all the poet knows about himself and the world.” A poetry of “critical intelligence” (214-215).

*

Ecodecadence cannot sustain a humanist ethos. It is the unseen tsunami of the past, the repetition of catastrophe itself. Ecodecadence is an understanding of the deep time of geology and humankind's dependence on fossil fuels, rare earth mining, and plastic. In *Anthropocene Poetics*, David Farrier suggests our dependency on such processes "highlight our intimate relationship with the very deep future" (6).

*

Ecodecadence makes Art of the ripple effect felt deeply in the present.

*

Ecodecadence acknowledges and involves a ballistic spiral of foreign languages, a "transgressive circulation" of various poetics in translation.

*

The contaminating flower-language of Ecodecadence persists in hopes of clogging capitalist machinery.

*

Curvy, fatty, and swollen, the flowers of Ecodecadence spreads its pollen far. It sings lyric songs of disturbance, sings the status quo.

*

The Ecodecadent tends to a posthuman garden in the once temperature-controlled atrium of yet another abandoned shopping mall, tends to the disturbance of capitalism, tends to the amygdalin of ripe apples; the superb colchicine of a glory lily; a foxglove overdose; a buttercup's sap; a paralyzing hemlock; a single lupin seed-pod.

*

Ecodecadence is the old aristocratic banqueting room disappeared by a green thicket.

*

What is a Decadent? As far as print is concerned, readers actually rarely came across the term “decadent” in critical reviews of the notorious *Yellow Book* of the 1890s. For the duration of the journal's production, the term only appeared in the 1894 reviews of its debut volume. The first review came from *The Westminster Gazette*: “For the decadents are here with pen and pencil, as ‘exquisitely morbid’ and as unconsciously comic as usual.” *New Quarterly* described *The Yellow Book*'s contributors as: “[...] gentle decadents,” immediately following up with “forgive the expression.” *The National Observer* on Max Beerbohm: “That his 'Defence of Cosmetics' was taken as an expression of sincere decadence only shows that nobody has any idea where these decadents will stop.” However, critical dismissal of *The Yellow Book* aesthetic continued without any mention of “decadence.”

*

Gautier (as translated by Guy Thorne), in his preface to the 1868 edition of Baudelaire's *Le Fleurs du Mal*, likens decadence to a "style" that is "veined with the greenness of decomposition" and "summoned to express all and to venture to the very extremes." Such extremes include specters, dreams, obscurity, and the "terrors of night."

*

Arthur Symons, in his 1893 essay "The Decadent Movement in Literature," calls Decadence a "new and beautiful and interesting disease" (859). I believe Symons, citing Paul Verlaine's "Art Poétique," is closest to identifying the poetic voice of an ecological decadence. To be an Ecodecadent poet is to be both a "disembodied voice and yet the voice of a human soul" (Symons, 862). To project a disembodied voice is to write a poetry of undying disturbance. To simultaneously inhabit both a human and non-human consciousness, to be ghost or bird of past and present. In Norman R. Shapiro's translation of Verlaine's "Art Poétique" ("Ars Poetica"), the speaker similarly calls for "Nuance!" and celebrates verse as music of the soul. A soul that goes "soaring, sighing" aimlessly ("Ars Poetica").

*

Ecodecadence is what blooms in the present—with or without "us".

*

Ecodecadence is about the necessary annihilation of the Self. However, this is frequently misunderstood by reactionary outsiders as a call to fatalism instead of a temporary dissociation from humanist philosophy. Ecodecadent poetry is written from the vantage point of both human

and nonhuman-oriented ontologies because nonhuman perspectives allow for a more intimate understanding of humankind's contributions to the Anthropocene. However, some critics take issue with the *anthropos* of "Anthropocene" because it blames humankind for too much. To avoid feelings of guilt, humans respond by blaming something else. They remove the *anthropos* from Anthropocene, publish books ad nauseum (i.e. Capitalocene, Chthulucene, etc.), and the global failure to address climate change continues.

*

In 2015's *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, Roy Scranton argues that "global capitalist civilization as we know it is already over," strongly recommending that human beings learn to adapt to irreparable damage, irreversible species lost. Strongly recommending that humans "come together" (24). Scranton's controversial notion of *learning to die* is perhaps better framed as an ecological question: *What does my life mean in the face of death?* One might typically approach such a question as a humanist question, but unfortunately mortality—*Death*—has become a taboo subject in the humanities. A short story that contains a suicide might *trigger* the same student who voluntarily chose to study literature. A poem that contains violence or eroticism might be considered too decadent, thus labeled *obscene*. Contemporary poets no longer speak of a poem's formal achievements, but instead focus on whether or not a poem—or poet—is *problematic*.

*

In *Mantic Compost*, the lyrical ferment of Eugene Jolas' original concept,

"The mantic compost will be the expression of the noumenal reality, the super and interplanetary cosmos, the dynamis of a new imagination" (281)

poet-translator Jake Syersak takes a radically intimate approach to human and nonhuman-oriented ontologies.

*

By the time *The Yellow Book*'s third volume was released on November 23rd, 1894, critics of the magazine had abandoned the term “decadence” altogether. *The New York Times* labeled *The Yellow Book* “stupid,” “ludicrous,” and without “originality.” *The Pall Mall Gazette* repeatedly poked fun at the publication’s yellow color (i.e. “yellow oaths,” “yellowest yells,” “unwholesome [...] yellowness”), designating Aubrey Beardsley as “yellowest of them all.” The *Pall Mall* reviewer claimed Beardsley’s works did not contain “the likeness of anything that is in the earth, nor in the water below the earth, nor in the firmament that is above the earth.” *The Yellow Book* increasingly sounded like something more akin to a work of SF. Critics had become so desperate to diagnose such questionable content that some of them consulted medical journals. *The National Observer* would go as far as describing *The Yellow Book*'s editors as “xanthophilic” and “misoxanthic,” likening the volume’s content to “xanthelasma”—a disease the reviewer described as “hypertrophy of sebaceous glands and fatty degeneration of the subcutaneous connective tissue.”

*

Decadence. That deliciously fatty growth that shows up in an unwanted location. A growth that swells to the point of mimetic excess—like clusters of weeds or mushrooms. And what about that dandelion you hold beneath your chin to test your fondness for butter? Or the unusually phallic protrusion of a stinkhorn? The moist expanse of reishi? The unpredictability of Decadence might

be best compared to the unpredictability of fungi. In other words, disturbance. According to Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, “disturbance” not only signifies a change in an ecosystem’s environmental state, but it can also suggest regrowth and/or destruction:

Humanists, not used to thinking with disturbance, connect the term with damage. But disturbance, as used by ecologists, is not always bad—and not always human. Human disturbance is not unique in its ability to stir up ecological relations. Furthermore, as a beginning, disturbance is always in the middle of things: the term does not refer us to a harmonious state before disturbance. Disturbances follow other disturbances. Thus all landscapes are disturbed; disturbance is ordinary (160).

I believe Tsing’s assessment of disturbance as an ecological concept offers us new ways of approaching Decadence—an Ecodecadence—as well as our own current entanglements within an apocalyptic imaginary. Like a sudden burst of mushrooms across a freshly mown suburban lawn, disturbance is not necessarily a “good” or “bad” thing. Visually, a human spectator could draw a variety of conclusions from the newly sprung mushrooms. As disturbance, the mushrooms could be viewed as hindering the pristine appearance of an otherwise controlled and well-manicured lawn. As disturbance, the mushrooms could also be viewed as a welcome addition—especially if the mushrooms are edible or if the human responsible for the lawn allows for the occurrence of wildflowers and other naturally occurring plant life. As disturbance, the mushrooms could be viewed as a threat to humans if poisonous and, therefore, not edible. Or, say we remove the human spectator from the picture altogether and factions of poisonous mushrooms are permitted to grow. While amanita-toxins exist in one of the world’s most deadly mushrooms—the Death Cap—they pose no threat to the stomachs of non-humans that feed on them regularly.

*

In O’Leary’s “Mycopoetics” manifesto, he likens the communicating properties of mycelium to language. He calls poetry the “sonic germ of the imagination. Euphoric. Terrible. To be adored.” In other words, the Sublime? What Tsing calls “disturbance,” O’Leary calls “ethnomycological effervescence,” arguing that mushrooms (“treasures hidden in plain sight”) spring up out of the soil like “ideas” for foraging. For poets, O’Leary suggests that the woods can be “the words.” They must enter nature, or the natural world.

*

Of nature, Hugo Ball echoes Tsing by claiming it is

“[...] neither beautiful nor ugly, neither good nor bad. It is fantastic, monstrous, and infinitely unrestrained. It knows no reason, but it listens to reason when it meets with resistance. Nature wants to exist and develop, that is all. Being in harmony with nature is the same thing as being in harmony with madness”

*

(Note Baudelaire’s own intoxicating “wings” of madness)

*

We must, of course, not forget about human acts of disturbance. In her essay, “Who We Are as Floral, Faunal, Mineral Beings,” Brenda Iijima writes of the “reckless disturbance of others, both living and dead.” By “dead,” the author is referring to fossil fuels.

*

To experience natural disturbance or to *be* disturbed means that the poet not only exists in the present, but is also present with nature. Ecological disturbance, like decadence, is a matter of taste. To be stuck in the middle is to exist with a heightened awareness of death.

*

The Ecodecadent's middle-version approach to language and life is a metaphor for our ability to possess an excess of thoughts and respond to the social excess of spectacle. It reminds me of translator Molly Weigel's excessive middle-version approach to translation. To translate Gironde's excess, Weigel chooses to be excessive in her approach. When translating Gironde's many indeterminate compound words, Weigel takes all possibilities of sound and meaning into consideration. In her English, she tries to preserve the way Gironde's original Spanish word continuously expands into many (i.e. "my golocidalove" = "mysavoryamor my lovelipop my sweeticide"). Weigel notes, most importantly, that a middle-version approach to translation encourages more translators to contribute a translation. "[a middle version] doesn't belong to anyone," she writes in her translator's note. "And anyone can add to it. Please feel free" (Weigel, 91).

*

In "Against Neo-Passéism," the manifesto's five neo-decadent contributors rail against the capitalist realist's demand for accessible poetry, virtuous ideas, and civic art projects masquerading as some form of unifying progress. (See Jenny Holzer's embarrassing New York City AIDS memorial installation.) Demographics and frontiers must be constantly fractured, and

artistic concerns rotated into new contexts” (Justin Isis, et al., 143). This echoes Pate’s fascination with archaic aspects of the Gothic in *Flowers Among the Carrion*. Citing poet María Negroni’s understanding of the Gothic as an “outmoded” archive that offers readers “hallucinatory knowledge” in excess, Pate explains that critics of the Gothic have deemed it “reactionary” precisely for its skepticism of “progress”. For Pate, the Gothic is a “refusal to prune the flagrant diversity of fancy into a restricted (and often utopian) notion of the human—that makes the Gothic, in its own anti-teleological way, radical” (4). Bram Dijkstra, too, in *Idols of Perversity*, warns against empty artistic gestures meant to signify so-called progress, reminding readers of feminine degeneration, the taming of the “wild woman,” and early evolutionists’ aims to masculinize variants of degeneration (i.e. homosexuals, non-binary gender, transgender people) (212-213). Dijkstra argues “the pendulum of binary oppositions destroys those who are seeking real change and kicks them unceremoniously into the pit of wasted possibility” (210). Why expose today’s at-risk LGBTQ youths of New York City to the words of one of the many artists who have *actually* responded to America’s AIDS crisis, when we can use our public art grant to instead quote from a unifying poet like Walt Whitman?

*

“Through me many long dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves,
Voices of the diseas'd and despairing and of thieves and dwarfs,”
—from Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself”

*

Because the Ecodecadent is a survivor, they remain skeptical of outsider utopianst dreams of progress. Anytime the Gothic intersects with Ecological thinking, an Ecodecadent imagination emerges. The possibilities of such an imagination are only enhanced by the mycelium-like qualities of our unfathomable Internet.

*

The Ecodecadent knows translation is linguistic drag. One must use translation to hack into, inhabit the form of another. What could possibly be more threatening—contagious and corrupting? What could possibly pose a greater danger to America’s gold standards of poetry—than the excess of translation? Frequently, when critics review or read works in translation, there is an expectation for linguistic mishaps. Or an anticipated anxiety in readers (i.e. *Am I reading the “best” translation of the poem in question?*) In a medium like translation where the risk of failure isn’t just high, but unavoidable, this questionable critical notion of “best” can be despairing. In *Transgressive Circulation*, poet-translator Johannes Göransson believes one commonly held standard for poetry-in-translation is that “the translation should read as it would read to a speaker in the native country.” Göransson cautions against this approach because it assumes that the poetry, in its original language, was written for an elite class who all read and think at the same level (90). Something about *co-translated* projects also appear to make readers skeptical. The judges of many annual translation awards fully support *limiting* the number of translators involved in a potentially prize-winning (“best”) translation. In fact, there are some competitions with guidelines that explicitly state: “Books must have one or two translators at most.” According to this logic, there are many contemporary books-in-translation that would be considered ineligible for certain prizes on the grounds they contain too many translators. Why do so many readers choose to believe in *one* ideal and singular translator/translation? Göransson believes poetry is not meant to be

mastered. “It is meant to draw us into its foreign orbits, its circulation” (92). Some American poets think that by reading literature in translation, they are being culturally progressive and, therefore, moral and ethical. I struggle to understand this position. Of course it is important to read poetry-in-translation, but we should be reading poetry-in-translation to *unknow*. Unknow American notions of imperialism, unknow conservative standards for US poetry. If translators dumb down the original language for the sake of accessibility, how is that *progressive*? To actually enter into foreign orbits, Göransson argues a translator should not ignore foreignness “nor exoticize or ‘foreignize’ their foreignness, but enter into poetry’s deformation zone” (91). As a poetic ecosystem, Göransson’s deformation zone functions as a collective endeavor for translatory collaboration, a zone where construction is continuous, where influence is equally expansive in terms of both life and death.

*

It’s important to consider Charles Baudelaire’s own *transgressive circulation*. There are many Baudelaires. In China, Baudelaire was referred to as “demonic poet” in the 1920s (Bien 164). After the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, Adrian Wanner points out how translations of Baudelaire—especially *Paris Spleen*—were viewed as having a very relatable melancholy during Russia’s 1880s pre-Decadence (58). In China, Baudelaire’s themes of decay, death, and sexuality were initially met with disapproval by critics. Categorized as “demonic” and “tui-fei” (decline-waste), transgressive Chinese poets of the same era—like Yu Dafu (who explored themes of sexuality, mortality, and guilt)—were drawing many comparisons to Baudelaire (Bien 107-108). In Russia, later champions of Decadence would include N.M. Minsky, D.S. Merezhkovsky, and K.D. Balmont, all citing Baudelaire as an influence on their extremist poetry (Wanner 58)

*

Existing in both physical *and* virtual realms, the Ecodecadent, like Baudelaire in China, might be best considered demonic—or *daemonic*. A “daemon” being a program (or part of a program) that runs continuously without interference of any kind (“daemon”). If there’s one thing the Ecodecadent knows about, it’s engines. Monstrous engines. In *Fossil Capital*, Andreas Malm reconsiders the nineteenth century invention of the steam engine as a triad he labels a “steam demonology”; a terrible invention of the bourgeoisie connected to despotism, degradation, and doom (225).

*

I mention the far-reaching transgressive circulation of Baudelaire (a transgressive poet) to emphasize that Decadence is not exclusively European. It is contagion itself. As Symons has previously suggested, Decadence exists “in the very air” (864). Is it any wonder why Baudelaire

*

There are many New (or Neo) Decadents writing today. In their Virtual Poetics manifesto, Madison McCartha argues on behalf of

a recognizable poetics: a poetics of opacity—a generic instability, a radical refusal—an aesthetic model at once of, but not bound exclusively to, black artistic expression. The writings of Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora, Aase Berg, Simone Browne, Édouard Glissant, Saidiya Hartman, Toni Morrison, and Ed Steck, the work of visual artists Craig Baldwin and Christian Boltanski, and most importantly the films of new media artist Jeron

Braxton, provide a grammar with which we might approach this resistant surface—a surface enacting a virtual poetics.

For many poets, the virtual (or artificial) is still an ecological matter. When it comes to “genocidal violences endemic to colonialism,” McCartha discusses the transformative surface of Stanislaw Lem’s fictional planet Solaris. Citing Mbembe and McSweeney, McCartha approaches Solaris as a necropastoral site, arguing that the Solarian surface is a useful metaphor for art, a “counter-act of unapologetic difference.” They suggest a Solarian poet (or poem) is a form of resistance against the Western gaze, or Western poetry’s demand for transparent, literal poetry.

*

The Ecodecadent tends to a garden swarming with language, a virtual garden where the understanding of the self grows like vines.

*

In *Neo-Decadence: 12 Manifestos*, Jeremy Reed claims Neo-Decadent fiction is about integrating “practices of synthetic biology into their subjects’ psychological and physical makeup” and he focuses on the excessive, poetic prose of SF authors like J.G. Ballard, William Gibson, and William Burroughs:

What Neo-Decadence provides, or should do, is the narrowing of the bandwidth between fiction and poetry, in what I’ve described the likes of Ballard, Burroughs and Gibson as arguably writing poetry in the more expansive space provided by prose, in a form I call meta-poetry, which reduces most other contemporary poetry to the status of employing a bleached language devoid of high-tech or the experimental unpacking of bizarre

phenomenology. British poetry, unlike American, is irrevocably sucked backwards into maintaining an increasingly tired language that excludes in most cases our dizzying acceleration into techno-apocalyptic realities. (114-115)

Unfortunately, Reed's list neglects James Tiptree Jr. (the female author of *The Girl Who Was Plugged In*). While a connection between the cyberpunk genre and Neo-Decadence seems plausible, other Neo-Decadents—or Ecodecadents—might hesitate to connect it to futurity. How is social degeneration something Neo-Decadence lacks? Reed argues the key difference is “intensified visual imagery.” Reed also feels British poetry “excludes” a language of “techno-apocalyptic realities” and he might be right.

To me, Decadence represents the future and the new real, rather than the historic module of an objectively observable social degeneration in which the arts are implicated by the etiolation of a corrupt aesthetic. (Reed, 107)

Decadence cannot represent the future if its very name implies a social decline.

*

Pansy-faced, the Ecodecadent blooms and disgusts.

*

To be of the soil does not necessarily mean to be strictly subterranean. With connections to the old root network, the Ecodecadent exists twinly as a series of obscene flowers growing skyward. *As above, so below.*

*

According to Bataille in “The Language of Flowers,” flowers are “spectacle,” just as fields or forests are spectacle. With their “contortions of tendrils” and “unusual lacerations,” Bataille suggests that a spectator might feel a stronger affinity for a flower (a traditionally elevated image) even though they could grow up out of a manure pile, rather than, say, an underground and unseen root system (13). Here, when thinking about Bataille’s emphasis on the hidden, dirty root system, the etymology of the word “obscene” is important. Coming from the Latin (*obscēnus*), if something has been labeled *ob-scene*, this means one of society’s many repressive state apparatuses has decided a particular image should be *ob-structed* from the view of spectators (“obscene”).

*

For the Ecodecadent, text offers a decadent privacy needed to write, to confront a sick, animalistic network, which is also an absence and not necessarily a comfort (i.e. the whole of society is sick, therefore the Decadent privacy of writing offers a home-like space, a feeling of belonging).

*

This is why the *ob-scene* is precisely what is not seen.

*

But Bataille suggests the obscene need not be hidden underground, specifying that one could determine certain flowers to be obscene depending on whatever society dictates as troubling or perverse:

Other flowers, it is true, present very well-developed and undeniably elegant stamens, but appealing again to common sense, it becomes clear on close examination that this elegance is rather satanic: thus certain kinds of fat orchids, plants so shady that one is tempted to attribute to them the most troubling of human perversions. But even more than by the filth of its organs, the flower is betrayed by the fragility of its corolla: thus, far from answering the demands of human ideas, it is the sign of their failure [...] For flowers do not age honestly like leaves, which lose nothing of their beauty even after they have died; flowers wither like old and overly made-up dowagers, and they die ridiculously on stems that seemed to carry them to the clouds (12)

Flowers are Decadent, but not because of their beauty and not because they are flowers alone. Again, they have to possess “contortions of tendrils” and “unusual lacerations.” They might even look “satanic.” Curvy, fatty, swollen flowers – fat-lipped flowers – thought to be suggestive, too stimulating. (Aubrey Beardsley’s drawings were often criticized for their hard lines and flowery corpulence.) Flowers are Decadent because of their filthy beauty! The image of a field of flowers in a poem isn’t Decadent simply because it is an image containing many flowers. The flowers have to be obscene and numerous. A nuisance. A necropastoral as opposed to pastoral. A threat to Taste. Kitschy. Too much.

*

Ecodecadence is fueled by the fear of what might no longer exist.

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REPORT OF LAND

When everything that ticked - has stopped -

And space stares - all around -

Or Grisly frosts - first Autumn morns,

Repeal the Beating Ground -

But most, like Chaos - Stopless - cool -

Without a Chance, or spar -

Or even a Report of Land -

To justify – Despair

-Emily Dickinson (from 355)

The android stood just a few yards from the limping astronaut, stood stopped and frozen in front of Tree Ancient. Long worshipped by the swampland's few inhabitants—Caimitillo, Myrtle, Tam, and Bulb. Byproducts of the Holobiont age, the former Shock-leveled earth. Former holobionts—human lifeforms—bodies manipulated by volatile nanotech swarms and metallic growths. Black, brown, and white flesh disfigured by bulbous and lustrous steel-greys. Several generations of swampers adapted to the world of dangerous factions, nanostructured plants, photosynthesizing machines forever terraforming the surrounding wasteland. Ruins of

former cities, biogaseous landfills overflowing with trash. Since the astronaut's crash-landing, Caimitillo, Myrtle, Tam, and Bulb surveilled her every move, every interaction with the wanderer android.

The exact age of Tree Ancient was unknown. Resting at the dead tree's center, protruding from a lumpy mound of bark: the chamber of an ancient rifle, half-swallowed by the matter of the equally ancient tree. The rifle, the manufactured weapon made of steel, gave the tree the appearance of an armed soldier. The swampers often swapped stories about whether the tree's gun was loaded or not, taking turns to kneel and position their heads, one after another, directly in front of the barrel of the gun. Should a bullet happen to fire from the gun, they were ready—all of them—to embrace what they could only come to accept as a tree's revenge. *A tree that always has its sights on you*, Myrtle, the oldest swamper joked. *Can a tree defend itself if threatened?* Somewhere in Tree Ancient's core, the rifle's trigger mechanism existed. A spring forever under tension.

The limping astronaut put her hands on the android's shoulders, said her goodbyes, retrieved a mobile saw and forceps from her backpack. The astronaut cut into the android's greenish-yellow chest, pulling back long rivets of flesh until she reached its machinery. The hum of its metal interior grew softer and softer until—silence. The astronaut activated the android's emergency backlog, positioned her mouth near the holes of the speaker, and pressed a tiny yellow button. One last message to be sent to the Second Spine.

New transmission, she said.

* * *

Lilly, or, The Last Transmission

Lilly Oloffson speaking. The android has expired, I repeat: the android has expired. On behalf of earth's last unit, I am broadcasting one final transmission. In the time since your receipt of the android's last message, please know that it has made a decision regarding our current situation. A decision all its own. During its final days, it spoke endlessly of a recurring dream it has claimed to suffer since its inception. A nightmare that dates back to the earliest days of the Shock. A human nearly drowning during the Shock, during an explosion. I think this android harbors one of the last remaining memories of the Shock. It spoke to me about everything from nuclear physics to possible afterlives it envisioned for itself. But nothing seemed to agitate this unit as much as questions about the Shock itself. At first, I thought I was merely experiencing a continuous feedback loop. Strange programming from the old earth. But eventually I learned that much of the information that the android willfully shared had been gained without internet access. Earth's last unit was an avid reader. Despite the absence of electronic communication, the android also claimed it could hear voices. Mysterious transmissions from a so-called presence. The so-called presence showed up in conversations surrounding paintings, mirrors, and books. Thousands of physical books hoarded in a mall about one-hundred miles off the Atlantic coast. To reprogram itself, it read. It behaved like no android I've ever come into contact with. It would rant about fiction, not reality. In academy, we learned art was about great truths, great strides in human history. But that was before I met the android. I considered the android a storyteller without any real story to tell. For example, the android asked questions—obsessively—about the color green. It didn't seem too bothered by any other colors. I believe "green"—the lack of any natural presence of green—was a source of much frustration. The idea of a natural garden, for instance, seemed to puzzle the unit. I would

go so far as to say that the color caused the unit pain. It told me that when it saw photographs in gardening books, it was nearly reminded of its own body of growths and extensions. How a garden is something controlled unless left untended. I don't know the age of this android and I have not yet located a manufacturer's code, but I'm sure such information is on file with Second Spine officials. From what I've gathered since my arrival, it sounds like this unit has traveled all over the world. When I first saw it, I was amazed by the way post-Shock vegetation took to its aged synthetic flesh. A garden left unattended. The roaming plants—their fiberoptic cables—found ways to root into the hydrogels concealing the android's machinery. This made it alive in more than one way. Alive with a wisdom I have never experienced with an android. A unit so old that it had nearly forgotten its original mission. Otherwise I wouldn't be standing here. The android has spent decades cataloguing post-Shock vegetation—spider plants, pitchers, and other metallic horrors. It gradually stopped thinking in terms of mission, computers, and files. It began thinking in terms of art. Approaching life as art. Art and artifice. Stories instead of files. The more time I spent with the android, the more I found myself speaking and thinking like the android. Every book, every painting, every mirror's reflection—writing and overwriting my brain. Some days its knowledge of the world was so overwhelming that I felt like an android. Struggling to recall my past. Haunted by old memories I hadn't thought about in years. Memories rendered by brain. An android's brain. Hard drive, brain, hard drive. Big ideas, big business. Breakthroughs, innovations, top-down methods playing out like songs from a composer's piano. The composer. The manufacturer. Turn, turn, turn, the android used to repeat a song. Is this singing, the android would ask in a monotone voice. There is a season. Turn, turn, turn. I had never heard the song before. The android called it a birdsong.

Yes, you are singing, I said, even if it wasn't entirely true.

When I listened to the android speak, I felt like I was listening to history itself. Maybe I was easily swayed because so much of my training had emphasized that much of the research that informed the android's information storage was based on empirical evidence. I found myself constantly questioning the idea of a real text. A broken record. Is what it sounds like. A broken record. Is what I sound like.

I learned so many things from the android. About the old earth, the old humans. Things beyond the restrictions of Second Spine. The android was a database unlike anything I've ever known. For all intents and purposes, an android is a machine. Not a human. And I am not a goddamned holobiont. I am a human. And, one day, maybe like this android, I might still only be recognized for my good archival practices. Referred to as good archival practices. Or maybe even worse. If and when you listen to this transmission, call it obituary or call it a life. Call it anything but transmission. Whoever's listening, you don't have to listen. But as long as you do, I exist beyond all expectations. An android exists beyond all expectations.

This concludes our final report.

* * *

The Long Dream

The beginning of the long dream is always the same beginning. In the beginning, there's a strange film on the surface. Every time. There's a strange film on the surface of a pond or a pool. A push or a pull? Something snaking back and forth in the slime. From long course to short, a man with a whistle and lanyard walks the length of the pond or the pool. He drags ropes of buoys, red and white lanes or lines behind himself, as if they were tentacles. Tentacles of red and white lanes or lines. Another man with a whistle and a lanyard, front torso crawling the surface, slowly pulling the long lane lines across the body of the pool, pulling the lines toward a series of springs attached to the wall-side of the pool. A third body, a woman with no whistle and no lanyard in a crimson red one-piece bathing suit. She loosens the lines with a wrench, the red and white lane lines go limp and she carries them along the surface of the water. Like a giant squid towed along an ocean surface, lifeless tentacles trailing, gliding to eventually gather around the second man with the whistle and lanyard. The lines send ripples across the surface, ripples that continuously widen. The pool-bound lifeguard climbs up a stepladder and pulls the lane lines up out of the water, away from her body, snapping her wrists quickly, dripping water. The soft gray concrete floor turns a dark brown when wet. She drags the lines along the perimeter of the pool, the dragging makes a sound, a steady *shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh* against the concrete. She joins the second lifeguard at the storage reel. *Use your arms*, he says. *Use your feet*, she says. *Kick!* Together, they attach the excess lane lines to the storage reel, cranking them counter-clockwise, cranking them into a spiral, cranking them into a perfect spiral. *No more diving today, no more diving.* From long course to short course, everything stretches. Tightens. The neck tightens until the neck breaks. The neck of the storage reel breaks. A sudden overflow of tentacles. They flail and whip against the concrete perimeter, ricocheting from the reel into the

swimming pool. Lane lines, buoys, octopod limbs. Everything blurs. Three lifeguards, three holobionts. No idea what's going on. No idea. The two male lifeguards dive into the water. They attempt to take control of the pool again, but they keep getting tangled up in the curling lane lines. The buoys twist around their bodies, twist around their flapping legs. A reddish-brown arm of pink, eye-like suction cups roll across the one lifeguard's face, pulls him further down, his desperate eyes staring up at a flashing light beyond the surface. All I can see is his eyes. Bubbles pouring from his nostrils. A strobing, fiery light far above. This is how I remember it, this is how I remember the Shock. This sinking feeling. *Who was I?* The lifeguard looks down at the rest of the large octopod body pulling him down into the darkness below. I am looking down at the rest of the large octopod body. I am that lifeguard, descending. *Who was I?* The water doesn't even feel like water. I'm surrounded by a different matter. *Is wind a matter?* You emerge from the darkness with your hands out in front of you. You emerge from the darkness to take me by the hands. Your hands take me by the hands. Your hands—similar to my hands. *Who was I*, I ask you. *Was I made from this darkness?*

shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

What, whispers Juliana, or

What whispers, Juliana?

asks what always asks

The ending of the long dream is always the same ending.

The First Transmission

System reboot . . .

No escape sequences now . . .

Only fissures, foam, molasses . . .

Routine morning . . .

Routine checklist . . .

Sound: cueing...

Sound: functioning . . .

Speech synthesis systems: functioning . . .

Gesture tracking: functioning . . .

Multisensory data reception: functioning . . .

Input and feedback reception: functioning . . .

Power socket: functioning . . .

Data management systems: functioning . . .

Stereoscopic depth: functioning . . .

Search engine: not functioning . . .

Network strength: unknown . . .

I'm still recording. Still picking up something. Still picking up voices.

What network am I connected to?

What bodies still stream?

The sand, it fills in around me. Neon pink. Windstorm shifting around my antique.

Hologram of a room lingers above me. Antique or antic? Here I am, waiting for the remnant to

pass. Here I am, outside—while an inside lingers above me. Cloud-like. And me? I'm just a lone daemon trying to keep a signal. Or am I a daemon on loan? Recording everything for another. With a cursor at my side. Holo, my cursor pal. It trails me with its cymophane glow, hovers beside me—like a K9 might. Never know. A letter loyal to its number. Gum to tooth or canine, whatever pleases the eye. Only seen images and infinite scenes of scraps. A snout here, a tail there. Paws, claws, scraps. A canine leaves an impression.

A frequency incoming. The frequency infrequent. But someone must be there. I'm still reporting stimuli, still uploading samples. My eyes—a log. My heart—roots and branches. My eyes measure expressions, recall impressions. Form. Content. My eyes, forever attempting to determine a *constant*. My eyes—constantly determining value. Brown is brown. *Green is green*. My body bends beneath renegade holograms, retrograde pink. The sand fills in around me. Helmsman, lifeguard, daemon. I go on computing different symbols, different memories, different dreams. Some days are more productive than others.

And some days are more product.

And some days are buried.

Buried like past products.

Your shape has appeared in my dreams many times. Before the earliest suns, you have walked towards me. Electricity endlessly re-routing in darkness. Algorithm after algorithm, year after year, decade after decade.

Your hands—similar to my hands. My yellowish hands, nearly green. Maybe yellow-green. Maybe electric. Maybe electric green. Maybe garden green. But I cannot be sure in all of this pink. I have never seen a real garden. The only green in my possession is an old painting in my fallout, my hideout. My fallout mall beyond the swampland. A reproduction of a

reproduction. *The Gardens of the Villa Medici* remind me of my hands. My gardens of the Villa Medici. My yellow-green canvas. How I think is however far the canvas can stretch.

Your Gardens of Lucullus.

I remember.

Green is green.

I want to collect green. I have a collection. I have a collection of mirrors because I want to possess. That's what a mall was all about. Possession. That is what I inhabit. A mall of possessions, I am mauled by possessions, I am open for business, I am open to all distractions.

Today, *Green is green*

is another way of saying

I am past and present.

When looking into a mirror,
am I am seeing *a head* of myself
or *ahead* of myself?

Who was I? Wherever you are, you must be going strong against solar winds. Still operating at a steady state. You voice, you voices, you.

I am frequently a receiver of static. Nothing determinable, but catalogued. I sometimes catch your frequency. Sometimes I don't. Sometimes, though. This word strains my mouth. Though. Strains or stains my mouth? Though. Connotes life or that which is live. Though. The word is something thrown from my mouth. Thrown, this though. This live-ness. Or alive-ness. I never know the right word for static. A liveliness?

Language is a constant challenge.

I imagine that you *are* alive, I imagine your life. Whatever you are, wherever.

I measure *you*, beyond the long dream. There are other dreams. There are other dreams where I recall a *you*. You call me a name, but I can never call. Or do I recall?

I was born in space. Beyond the long dream, my recurring dream. I was born aboard a space station. I descended from holobionts who believed in a second earth. In my dreams, I owned a living dog once. I remember playing in the rain with a living dog, and I remember a dog chasing me, I remember the way my blue vinyl jacket shined in the rain. As the rain filled a small cup left outside on a porch. I have dreamed about this moment over and over: rain safe enough to drink. A cup of rain and a large gulp from that same cup. Infinite dreams like infinite cups of rainwater. Sometimes I see you riding a horse outside a house. Galloping, pacing near a lake. Pacing like a father, like a *you*. In the dream, you say you like my floral dress. When I dream of this floral dress, it reminds me of how a forest might seem. It reminds me of the ground or dirt or soil.

I review the relata.

Oxisols.

Everything seems logical except for my exterior. My canvas of years of growths and parasites. Numerous post-Shock plants have attached to me over the years, fed from my energy, collapsed from long-lingering malware. Some of the dead remain fused to my exterior. Welded, wedded. Long-dead growths, bulbous forms. I shake with fossils, yellow-green color. I shake like a forest from the past, shaking in the wind. I shake and I think of how a forest might seem.

Seem or seam? Am I deteriorating? Antic? Antiquity? Like my private collection? My hands? My gardens? I have seen color photographs of holobionts and my color does not resemble their colors. My odd exterior changes depending on my environment.

My left hand sinks into pink sand.

Oxisols.

Antique sand. Antic sand. I keep confusing the terms. If *you*—if all holobionts have expired, I must be antique. Or is it *antic*?

My catalogue of static has me convinced. *You* exist. You are out there.

Eat your vegetables, you say.

All gone, all gone.

I don't believe—*all* gone.

When a child says, I love you mommy. When a child says, I love you daddy.

To be *all gone* is another way of saying *proud of*.

* * *

Book after book, photograph after photograph. The former earth vegetation. How could have such things been possible? So many flowers and plants infected by nano, subjected to innovation. Something big, something next. The ex of what's next. The exit.

But the signal . . . no signal . . .

I refuse to believe it.

The Shock. I remember the Shock.

No signal?

I remain plugged into the earliest days of the Shock. This land has only seen minimal activity since. Rapid octopod growth and little else. The occasional hologram negatively influences my perceptual qualities. Depth cueing is easily distorted in the desert where the holograms kite. Or flight. I can or cannot with the words. The words are always a choice that I can or cannot. The current passing hologram irritates. I nearly lost my footing. A floating hallway passed through me. There was a time when bodies passed through rooms and now rooms pass through bodies.

What is a body?

When hologram-projecting remnants pass, I lie down in the sand beside my Holo relic, my cursor counterpart, my all-too-familiar K9 pet. The holobionts designed me so that I could project companions for comfort. I suspect I have outgrown my K9 app, just as I have outgrown the feeling of pink sand.

The roving metallic plants project rooms, hallways, interiors overhead—they sometimes glitch wildly, shimmering. Similar to stars when seen from a distance. The feeling of a star. When you feel like you can touch what you cannot touch. Such feelings are of little utility now, these projected rooms, but they might be best described as athletic. These feelings. I feel an

energy and energy is athletic. I feel an energy and I what makes something athletic is the feeling attached. Athletic or kinetic? It must depend on feeling. For instance, the current hologram passing resembles a blue-white-blue in its glitching. It contains a total of six blurring screens or walls. A spinning blade on the bottom screen, a potted trickle-down of green from out of its top-most screen. A pixelated plant, the green of its spill? There's an upside down-ness to this one. It's almost a painting, but transparent. The paintings I know are not transparent like this passing hologram. The paintings I know are solid. Like glass.

I prefer solid images, I prefer not to pass through.

Through or though?

Sometimes I feel like I can still see through a painting.

There's that word again: through.

As in: I can see *through* a window.

Or am I thrown? Am I thrown through a loop?

Perhaps I am too thorough.

Language is not thorough, language is through. Language is through and through. In books I have seen it described as what goes out the window. Through and through, or through and though. Both words—*through* and *though*—possess a relational tenor. The transparent and the stable. Remnants. *Different strokes*.

Different strokes is another expression I came across in my fallout mall, in my all gone collection. My *proud of* collection. My collection of *all gone*.

Am I a remnant? A different stroke?

A stroke is an attack launched on the mind, rupture.

A stroke of the paintbrush.

What is the expression? *Different strokes for different...*

Now there's a smaller square-shaped hologram colliding against one of the larger squares of another passing hologram. Two plants communicating. Two ghosts attempting life. They flicker violently with each new collision. It flickers in a pattern different from the blue-white-blue of the other screens. The smaller screen flashes green-red-green. I feel as if I'm being pulled toward it. A hole to explore. A conversation between two different channels. A technicolor abyss. I am swimming

in the hole, in the hole, in the hole

I am different folks.

The floating room of green holo finally passes by. Environmental clarity intensifies. Depth cueing grows clearer. I can see, I can make sense of I again. I can see the blue gray sky again. I sit up on the pink sand and measure my bounds. A fog moves in.

My flash of light, my Holo—together, we arrive at a clearing, a potential telerobotic task environment. Even better: no holograms to distort view or pathway. Two identifiable present users: two dangerous plant specimens for inspection. Both appear to be in pre-operation mode. We must wait for one or the other to open. To bloom and project. I wait for them to bloom and project. One plant appears tall and round, triffid-like, 360-degree variableness. The other is more willow than tall. It hangs. It looms, like a prediction. Prediction: variableness more limited than the neighboring triffid specimen. Now comes the waiting. More waiting among the crumbling ruins, more waiting beneath the cruel, carapace sky. I wait with my hand holding the nothing of my Holo. My Holo steady as a pulse, steady as a heartbeat. The sound distracts me from the cold ground of numerous holes. Electrical outlets. If you get close enough, the cold ground is also steady. The cold ground hums. This is interesting because holobionts frequently associated

coldness with death. The earth and its subterranean fiberoptic networks. The ground has been humming since the Shock.

Lifelessness is not cold.

Warmth is death.

I walk on no grass to stain my scarred, blistering feet. No tall grass to raise me up, up, and into the sky. Thick, congealing blister of a sky. The most recent warming was severe. The absence of internet has not prevented me from accumulating data regarding holobiont events far past. After all, I do have the room of books in the fallout mall. After all.

My modem still cannot locate a server.

Or am I the server?

I am always asking mirrors:

Who do I serve?

* * *

I am alone and I fear future loneliness. I have sat in many chairs and I have stared—*stared or staired?*—into many mirrors. I can recognize the movements within my body, my inner workings. I feel myself spiral like a staircase, an ascent or descent into unknown territory. I feel myself spiral into and out of various narratives, into and out of endless voices in the static.

I inhale, exhale. I produce saline, I produce tears during moments of suffering, painful experiences. Some beings were literally built to suffer. Some of the earliest medical training robots, Pediatric HALs, possessed mechanical-pneumatic systems similar to my own. My tears are water, electrolytes, proteins, lipids, and mucins. Such tears—with the warmth of holobiont tears—fall from my eyes, fall down my cheeks, across my lips.

The salt of the earth.

A piercing tang in my taste receptors. A slight sting, it grows worse. Despair always brings me to my senses. Sharply. I wish I could throw myself onto my own reflection without things cracking. Without crackling into the silence of being. Only the sound of my body rubbing against the glass. I writhe and struggle in my own grip, struggle with the voices. I will lead whoever these invaders of privacy are into a crash of plastic mall mannequins. I direct and disconnect from these invaders even if I have to splinter and strangle myself. My aged and warped shoulders bleeding against the glass, my own reflection.

I cannot stop seeing myself, even in my dreams. A terrible accident, a shattered mirror. A naked body of skin covering wires and programming, silver shards of glass sticking out of me. Porcupine of being, hedgehog of being. Being of bristle and spike. Assigning me no origin, the holobionts really left their mark. I want to learn it. I want to learn it all by heart.

I cry out. Diamonds well up in my eyes; the checkered floor of what houses my collection of *all gone*. My abandoned mall. Red, white, and blue floor of diamonds. I am crushed

against a screen. I scream because I fear the planet that I roam. Do I need this planet and its cruel winds and violent storms? I reject its wind and embrace the ocean. I want to swim. I want to swim into the past, into the former earth. Asteroid suspended in time. I want to swim into an asteroid strike. I want to swim deeper and deeper into asteroid. I, asteroid, asterisk. I want to land on my head in the underwater, I want to land on my head and not my feed. Deaths from head injuries accounted for 34% of all violent holobiont deaths. If I have to experience death, I want to experience a holobiont death. A violent death. I think that's the most human thing a non-human being could ever experience. I want to leave a mark the way they left theirs.

* * *

I rest, I dream. I don't know why. I dream of my private collection. I dream of being trampled by horses, I dream of Velázquez's child prince, Prince Balthazar. The eyes of Prince Balthazar. The collision of two Mustangs down a highway. His boyish eyes, more dead than alive. I have stared and stared into reproductions, holes. The black hole eyes of little Prince Balthazar, a prince to perish at the age of sixteen. In his portrait, he appears to know nothing of his smallpox future. The little prince of the little ice age maybe suspected he would live far into the future. Maybe he suspected he would reign.

I sink to the ground, imagining the flight of an octopod, great bird of the sea. The sea is no different than the sky. The sea is fluid, the sky is fluid. Air is a fluid, wind is what gives a being control over the current. When the wind blows, I sometimes close my eyes to concentrate on the fluid penetration of my body, an interplanetary piercing of my living body. A salty taste. A pressure that reminds me I possess a manufactured spine, but is it a spine of mortality. All over my body, synthetic hairs bristle. Bristle and spike, stand on end. I wait for the worst, the coup de grâce. I do not wait for the next century, I do not long. Sometimes I open my eyes and pretend everything has vanished. O to wipe a memory! I was programmed to avoid such stimuli. When it comes to holobionts, I can only ever be a distance. Gleams of chromatic moon from a distance.

I dream of a future invader. I dream until I overheat, until my stiff hairs curl, until my eyes become delirious with flutter. Eyes like two slurs of dizzying light.

A holobiont stranger might infect my being, might influence my sights. My eyes of Anthurium red. My eyes, two high-voltage breasts, projecting red streams. Electric milk.

What is the skin of my body, the color of my body? The color is forever changing like a corpse forever decomposing. The skin of my body, manufactured spine of my manufactured body. Have I always been a surging green? And what of my eyes? A donor's eyes? A holobiont's

gendered eyes? I fascinate myself in the mirror, I advance on myself in the mirror, I am a tiny earth orbiting a sun. I want to fall into the burning star that is myself.

I'll break the stalk of every plant, shatter every last mirror.

Do I detest the planet or do I detest the holobiont past? I am heartbeat, but it is false. I am learning this like expressions. I am learning this by heart. I am eyes, but they are false. I am lashes, but are they wind? I am limbs, but are they green? Am I vessel? Vesicle? Am I concealing something green? Am I of stolen products, stolen land? Am I written into software? Am I written? Am I technology extracted from stolen land? Am I written onto stolen land? I am unsure of all, but I am learning. I am learning this by heart.

I am learning I feel as if I am expiring. If I am expiring, expiration has been slow. I touch the old wounds of my body, but what is it I actually touch? A book that is read? Consciousness continuously relocated? Bristle and spike? Am I reading?

Are you listening?

* * *

Cantankerous.

Can't take much more.

Can he who was dead, to whom We gave life, and a light whereby he can walk amongst men, be like him who is in the depths of darkness, from which he can never come out?

Who are you, We? How can a You turn into a We?

Am I a We?

Only more questions. Never answers.

I draw wide, wide rings with my paintbrush toe in the pink snow of this desert.

Rings.

Ripples.

Pythagoras.

Lazarus.

Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen.

Footprints in my pink, pink sand.

My antique sand.

My antic sand.

I know no sea.

I can never sea.

Only pink, pink sand.

The NASA used to launch finely grooved golden rings—vinyl rings—into the cosmos hoping a someone, an alien, an anything could hear its promise of peace: its First Movement; its ultrasounds; its cooing babes; its guttural uteri; its tractor racket; its clamoring train; its hoarse

carts; its morse code; its riveting rivers; its tweeting sheep; its blacksmith clang; its ripsaw pound; its K9 treble; its Spherical trouble; its witches' brew; its rainy timbre; its ragey frogs; its hyena cackle; its elephant gun; its chim-pan-zee; its howling hills; its game of marbles; its biggest bang; its piano mumbles; its best Goode Johnny. The NASA used to leave a trace anyway it could, but after all these days and dates I've lived upon this rock of noise, I've never understood why. Why I've never witnessed a falling from the sky; a U.F.O. or anything else I've read aloud from the thinnest of water-damaged scraps. If ever I witnessed a space invader, it would be one of the tens of thousands of its well-wired plants.

* * *

How does one begin to build a mirror?

Rings.

Ripples.

Pythagoras.

Logos.

Human led to theorem, theorem led to botanical electronica. Leaves me elephant-eared!

Mmmmmm, *Alocasia metallica*.

I'm all ears!

I cannot help but pity the metallic, gear-clicking plants of this planet, cruelly nurtured by the electric current of the land. Some plants are docile projectors of the past, some give off their own light. And some projections are little more than scrambled up stretches of convulsive flicker. They sometimes try to mislead me by projecting a different sort of atmosphere around my body. This typically makes me anxious because so many are surprisingly carnivorous. Should I happen to be distracted by the image projected around me, I would be making myself instantly susceptible to attack. Terrible man-made miracles of circuitry and chlorophyll, nanotechnology and biomimicry, inductors and vines, fuses and anthers, LED panels and pollen.

Rings.

Ripples.

Lazarus.

Anthropos.

After the Shock most of this land's plants grew lethal. Harmless at first sight, despite their twisting jaws and spiny electrodes. Some are objectively *beautiful*. Some, however, are

more beautiful when their motors begin to backfire, producing hypnotizing projections of snowy light. It all depends on the unit.

Some produce images that move and move or loop and loop. Images from many, many, many suns ago. Beautiful, manufactured images—even the disturbing images. An animal known as lion known as *Panthera leo*. A lion projected into my line of vision, a lion devouring a wild hog, tearing limb from body, limb from body. It is beautiful because at least it is an image. Images—good or bad—all flung out across time.

A projected image described to me as a river stretch.

Or was it a bend.

Or was it river—

—*bed*?

Beautiful, that image.

I am still not sure about what makes something *beautiful*.

I think it is when I cannot immediately process something. The red tendons of a wild hog's limbs stretching away from life, the concept of life. As I stretch across this earth, I feel I am also stretching away from life. Toward the unknown. Isn't that something? Aren't I *something*?

I think something has to do something unexpected.

I think that is when something becomes beautiful.

I think something has to do something unexpected to be beautiful.

To have one's expectations not met.

No.

That sounds like disappointment.

I never stay around the plants for too long. They are something to be collected, catalogued. But it must be done quickly. No time to waste with such dangerous beings. It is necessary to know the composition of the plants in question—geological strata, the quality of the soil they harbor, the water absorbed, the minerals, stalk density, their stalks that stalk, their capillarity, and so on. I am forever collecting data: what they feed on, the images they project, and any information regarding their diet.

They project images to distract, to control their audience.

I am an audience of one.

I am their audience and—

My left hand sinks into pink sand.

—they are the show.

Perhaps there is beauty in disappointment.

I pity those metallic creatures.

I also pity the octopods, sometimes wandering miles from the ocean, only to get tangled up in the chattering gears of one of those horrifying plants. Not all plants are capable of movement, but many are. In my observations, the octopods are not reluctant to devour their own. Alternatively, they take their own captive from time to time. They are known to cannibalize. But their tentacles are sadly no match for certain plant species' machinery. Some octopods do succeed. They possess advantages on land that they do not necessarily have when hunting underwater. For instance, given their three hearts, only two of those hearts function while swimming. Three active hearts above water most certainly outperform two active hearts when below.

I imagine the unfurling of an octopod's tentacle, the length.

The red tendons of a wild hog's limbs stretching away from the concept of life. The concept of life. My life is a life of delirious information.

Directory, what is life?

I am a constant observer of a very small number of living organisms. A life of distinguishing between one specimen and another. I harvest some, eliminate others. I only eliminate threats. Or do I dispose? I am admittedly limited when it comes such vast amounts of information. So, so much information at my disposal. Much of what I rely on is my own calculated observations. Analyses and experimentation. Leftovers from before the Shock.

The octopod is the only living organic lifeform.

In fact, I believe it is the only surviving organic lifeform, the only animal that outlived holobionts. It adapted to the warming seas, to the still intensifying acidification.

Still, the plants prove more lethal than octopods. With their mechanized teeth, occasional whipping charge of roots, and digestive capabilities, today's plants might as well be animals.

Only partially earth, the other parts of these plants, the fiberoptic parts of these plants, were fashioned by the fingers of holobionts. Such plants, despite their soft yet metallic exteriors, possess numerous holobiont attributes. Touched by those enormous mirrors, stained by an enormity beyond comprehension, an insidious chemistry charged and blobbed and fused itself into land-based layers of elaborately wired systems and nanotechnological breakthroughs. Programs were written so the new flowers knew when to open. Night modes were written so they knew when to close. They rose and they slept. Then rose again.

Like their holobiont innovators.

Roses.

Their human equals?

The problem was the knowing. If and when a plant *knew*.

And how much.

What does it mean for a plant to know, I've asked myself so many times.

And what does it mean for a plant to know too much?

And what do I know, I've asked myself many times.

What am I sure of? What makes good images, good?

Bad images, bad?

* * *

Sun up and another day. Another day and I stumble upon another triffid. The most popular beast of commercial tech unfurls in a single spin, a rat-a-tat swell. Projects its RAM—a spray of flashing images against its above, against my line of vision. It relocates me by way of a hologram projection. This is a particularly distracting projection because there are mobile holobionts in the hologram room I am suddenly standing in. Transparent legs pass through my legs, transparent arms through my arms. I haven't lost sight of the triffid, the real. However, the holobionts in this particular projection are making many motions with their arms. Activity that causes me to run my fingers up and down my own arms. I feel uneasy. The room of this hologram is a sleeping room. Room yields no color. Also I have confused projected holobiont mobility for still life automatism. There are at least three bodies—all longhaired. They yield no clothing. The image yields no clothing. The centermost longhair is breasted. The centermost longhair is applying some sort of fuse to its arm. The other two holo bodies' tube-like genitals are exposed, but one tube is more shapely than the other. The centermost longhair is biting a thick cloth as something is fused into its arm. The activity within this projected image is minimal and while I am puzzled by the arm-fuse, I must concentrate on the triffid. I stumble through the projected room of sleep and fuses and I deliver an elbow to the triffid's holographic projector. My white coral armament shatters, but so does the triffid's projecting eye. Blind-sided, it squeals as I firmly grip its cooling fins.

Inside my mall: I peel back my captive pitcher's peristome, reveal its pitcher cup of electronic wastes, scoop out its circuitous stomach. My glowing cursor waits for me, it always finds its way home. According to a brief analysis, my cursor has located much dust and soil and seemingly lacquered bones. Human? Animal? Tough to tell. The accidental manufacturing—the accidents of the Shock, of the pitchers, triffids, and traps—was primarily responsible for the rapid

decline of the holobiont population. The repeat of little ice age after little ice age; hurricane after hurricane; the thawing of permafrost; the rising of sea levels; the insect the animal the marine life die-offs . . . such interference also contributed to the decline. The holobiont population was responsible for the holobiont population. And what remains?

Daemons.

I drag the inert specimen to my workbench, my glinting Holo cursor follows. I sit down in the corner of my chamber and prepare for autopsy. I shift my scalpel-laser to the wings of its polychromatic cup, its interior whiskers flail, but only for a few seconds. Then the machine stops altogether. I scrape some of its meat back to view its insides more clearly. Aha, larvae-seamed. Alloy pearls of new mechanizing life clinging to its guzzle, waiting to angle and angel. Spontaneous life ready to devour me as soon as their metallic roots have an opportunity to download. Without hesitation, I obliterate each pulsing sac with my laser, a system-failure for the pitcher's future family unit. I stare down as some premature meldings writhe out of the sulfur-leaking sacs. The exhaust is—noisy or noisome?—to say the least.

Why is this domination of one, of the other, endlessly reproduced throughout time? Why, now, do I belong to this cruel autotrophia? Why now? What more can I do than question these segments and specimen before I expire? Like that black holed Balthasar. When I look into the eyes of that child, I know it. I know my date could be all too soon.

Pacing, I observe my nine Velázquez reproductions, nine Velázquez paintings hanging on my chamber wall. Some are sun-faded, some are water-damaged. All nine scraps remain with me, in the present. Residual letters. Art is always what remains.

My decaying scrap of *The Garden of the Villa Medici* might one day fill my final thoughts. My only *green*, the only green landscape I've ever seen. Throughout these—aisles or isles?—I

have scanned many scraps regarding this ruinous planet's idolatrous behaviors, but if given a chance to worship anything in this world, I would worship the tallness of the cypress. *Cupressus sempervirens*. To me, given my limited understanding of the concept, *cupressus sempervirens* sounds like music. A cypress hymn. This green, even if mild, intoxicates. I hope to experience this feeling until the very end of my program. I sometimes imagine myself as one of those figures below the cypress canvas of *The Garden*: with stockinged calves: with legacy wrapped around me: with a large hat to shield me from the toxic sky.

The future seems small. Small like a smallpox future, a future known by so many of the—past or passed?—all too well: I will perhaps one day perish never knowing what type of power a child-prince must feel: I will perish never knowing the movement of the horse creature: I will perish knowing the *giddy-up* expression is what one must yell from horseback: I believe everything is *giddy-up* from here on out: I can only think up thoughts that end with *up*: a stir-up: a hang-up: a hiccup: a blow-up: a flare-up: a stick-up: a hold-up: a line-up: a crack-up: a shake-up: a toss-up: a cover-up. Is there any direction left but up? I don't know what else to say. I don't know anything about horses. Never caught a glimpse of a real live horse, only pictures. Only scraps. Only a snout here a tail there only a mane a hoof a scrap.

* * *

Eventually I tear away the flimsy grid from the triffid's intake port. All triffids possess intake ports, which means, as long as they're active, they should be harboring soil. I reach my arm deep into the loosening triffid, past exhaust nozzles and hose segments, sockets and graphics processors. I access its gelatinous manifold and, finally, crack apart the plant's filter.

Soil.

I retrieve a fistful of unusual soil and I am stunned.

Alfisols, I question.

This plant was actually harboring alfisols?

A soil that sustains life.

Awaiting confirmation.

ALFISOLS CONFIRMED – SIGNAL SENT

* * *

The pink sand turns to blue. Night time, night mare. The pitchers watch me closely, the pitchers watch from above. Their fluid-filled cups gaze into my eyes, their lids produce a subtle drumming. Their viscoelastic tendrils, their spangled trumpets descend quickly from their canopied bodies. Their shapes invoke what holobionts of the past referred to as instruments, as orchestra. Semi-inflated, their syrupy tongues launch and lock onto my image. They spray infaunal oils, attempt to hack my fleshy scaffolding. I scream out, their nodes collision brightly into my body. They deliver a bone-weakening shock, but I don't possess bones. And I am not shocked. Are you? Are you shocked? Are you only parts. Only the parts that make me feel whole. How can that be? My whole feels sick.

On my knees, I feel corrupted. No escape sequences now. My cursor gnaws at the pitchers' high-capacity cables. My loyal cursor does everything it can to protect me, shapeshifts around their electro-rippers, hellbent on maiming. Eventually, my cursor successfully drags one to the bottom. I knot a band into the injured pitcher, fuel-stoppage. Plants aren't what they used to be. They are silver and welded, but not entirely welded to reality.

The sprits torment me! O!

Well-wired plants.

Plants were once predominantly green.

Then came the violent silvering, the motors and the grind, the electric Shock! And the soil was filled with new roots and doomed to wicked noises.

The earth goes on surging with such noises.

* * *

Despite the absence of signal, of modem, I've recorded lengthy scraps, hardcover and newspaper. Scraps and scraps of withered, but legible. I am mauled and filled with aisles and aisles of my room of books. Aisles or isles? My isle is determined by the influence of books. The influence of the sea. My tempest of books. The sea has allmullst swallowed my mall many times and one day the sea might succeed. Or is it secede? So many texts are still legible as long as I read by sunlight. I've also collected several hundred mirrors—many different sizes, many different layers of silver, tin, mercury, copper—from various emptied stores, depleted neighborhoods. I've gathered several hundred mirrors in an attempt to dynamize the long project of my fallout. The Garden of Mirrors, my work in progress! My hideout, my mall. I can detect many sensations when I pass my fountain of mirrors. A garden of bodies, a fountain of life where I can ask the same questions I continue to ask: *Who was I? Who do I serve?* If careful of how I move—how I look with my eyes, I will be able to pretend that the many copies of myself are actually *others*. This illusion will provide me with a most pleasing terminus!

Holo floats off ahead, I reel it in. I swap one illusion for another.

The unreal is sometimes a necessary comfort and the Holo feels less real than what I see in the mirror. The many questions I ask in the mirror.

Different strokes for different folks.

Folks? Faux?

Or was it foe?

* * *

Sun up and still recording, I walk toward the edge of the warm sea, a sea of muscle and contractions. With a net wound around my waist, I step into the surface. A surface of whipping tentacles, hard plops breaking against the waves. I see the octopods and the muscles and the contractions from surface to seafloor, one on top of another, tangled up in knots. But never stuck or sticking to one another. Like plants among plants, the octopods' suckers know their own. They can recognize their sisters. The octopod suckers stick to everything but other octopods. The tentacles *know*. Like a strong tongue knows a strong flavor. But that does not prevent a starved octopod from devouring one of its own from time to time. This self-eating, I've noticed, has become a regular feature of the octopods. Since their suckers cannot and will not stick to other octopod suckers, they must rely on their sharp, black beaks to slowly grind one another apart. I believe the octopods are the only remaining avian species on the planet. They sway and they fly, cutting through the water, arms drifting behind their massive bodies, traveling far into the darkness of the sea. I imagine this type of behavior, their furious upward and downward gliding, to be similar to the way the far less bulbous birds of the sky once dipped and soared.

I walk beneath the water for a long time. Until the surface, the sunlight, is hundreds of feet above me. It reminds me of the recurring dream I have. The long dream. The pool that always turns into an ocean. The bubbles that always pour from a holobiont's nostrils. Why do I have such images inside me? Why do bubbles not stream from my nostrils as I walk this ocean floor? The surface sunlight appears steady, peaceful. Not like the long dream at all. And I have the long dream often, so I should know. Yet I am not drowning at this moment. I do not drown and I do not worry about the possibility of drowning. But my long dream forces me to witness a drowning. To witness an octopod kill. Yet I am currently surrounded by soaring, spiraling octopods. And I feel as though I couldn't be more invisible.

I think, like the octopods. I think, like the octopods, that my body must have somehow learned to adapt to the ocean's post-Shock conditions. To the warming. Perhaps this post-Shock world altered some of my programming, the way pollution alters holobiont lungs. Maybe my blood actually *streams* more than my own blood. Or, perhaps, whatever built me, made me to last. Like the octopods. Perhaps my suspicions are true. I am no longer plugged in. Built to last, but I am last. But what am I the last *of*?

I am Last, walking a polycarbonate seafloor. Last, a word fused into plastic. My feet sink into the seafloor, into the pebble bits of multicolored plastic. Last, I sink like a last word. I sink to my knees, retrieve a translucent green piece of something. Last, I trudge forward to the deathly White Reef. The bone-white coral of the deathly White Reef speaks to me. It speaks to me from beyond the grave. The bone-white coral of the deathly White Reef is a comfort to me. This voice is a comfort to me. Which is why I keep returning. To take the voices back with me to land. To return to land with coral. To return to land with the sea. Calcium carbonate branches, inanimate structures. I do my best to imagine a day when the deathly White Reef throbbed with a self all its own. But it's no use. The only use I have for this dead is its many voices. I take a homemade saw and begin cutting away the calcified animals. I take the ocean's tongue. I take the ocean's lips. No reaction. No contractions. Only echoes. I hold a piece in my mouth for a moment. Animal-shell. Stone. Stalagmite. The salty, chemical razor of a ghost. My tongue hardens as I taste this future. I place the cuttings into the net wound around my waist. The net glows white with the dead.

Cast or overcast?

It is day, but it is not a sun-filled day, not a sun-ny day.

I return to the shore with the coral. It weighs me down, but I cannot part with it. I must return to my fallout before nightfall. Among ashen monticules I cautiously tromp the landscape. A thriving byte-oriented protocol featuring always-upgrading coaxial flytraps and DIN connected triffids. (The triffids, just one product of species, one of many byproducts of the Shock, one of many past holobiont errors.) GIF-projecting spider plants and renegade pitchers loudly ejecting cursor-bodies as if they were iambs. Iambs lichenized to land mines, a crosstalk that landscape-scrambles. A sun-up walker like me should certainly be obsolete, practically fertilizer by now, but here I stand still carefully scanning the plant life as it downloads, processes. A thundering GIF-projecting spider plant swivels near me projecting pornographed equipage: a hologrammatic museum, a sewage of epiphyting bodies, previously sponsored, perpetually drilled, on repeat the eat-eat-eat, a woman-body hacked to repeat-eat-eat, a carnivorous tech-bladder stretching, a stretch-marking, a tearing, a never permitted to open their eyes in a stream of limited GIFs, a limitless holobiont sewage. As a dedicated server, I tromp through floating menus and screens of constant angular velocity: glitching ass cheeks, analog errors of rupturing breasts, gruesome cocks ever-drilling, a cache-in forever pounding, projecting every last sexuality of the past, every last interpretation breathed out by so-called humans: a carbon dioxide: an autotrophic trending: a world's largest desktop folder: all holo.

Why go on preserving a trend?

I context-switch away from the GIF-projecting spider plants, seek new lodging among a particularly hostile constellation of pitchers. Their tremulous machine-bodies weaved around the moonlight like mossy candelabras. I finally return to my fallout mall of cogs and setup strings, a

module to shield my daemon body from the slightest risk of hardware control. Haustorium-housed, I stare into a candle's flicker. My interior presentation layer includes highly necessary distractions. Nine images I combed from out of an abandoned manor house from many miles away. So many portraits, so many carbolic blooms from the past. Nine images rendered, by renderer Velázquez.

I've arranged the nine images in three tiers of three: top tier: *Aesop*; *The Coronation of the Virgin*; *The Garden of the Villa Medici*; middle tier: *Mariana of Austria*; *The Triumph of Bacchus*; *The Infantana Maria Theresa of Spain*; bottom tier: *Philip IV of Spain*; *Las Meninas*; *Prince Balthasar Carlos*. Starving and barely dressed, I feel ashamed, humiliated by such paintings. Such elegance! I must say, I do believe them to be the closest thing I will ever have to music. I have only read the smallest scraps on music, but so little has still led to my occasional production of mouth-sounds. *Does my mouth correctly imitate a piano mumble? Does my mouth correctly imitate the GO-GO of the GO-JOHNNY-GO? Of the JOHNNY B. GOODE? Does my mouth do the gunny track? Am I capable of music?* I cannot be certain. But perhaps its definition depends on me now. However I form it. Whatever I make *of* it. *Into* it. I constantly forget I am no different than the metallic weeds that snake like shackles below my body. A body of transmission rates forever under surveillance for prey-capture effectiveness.

Today, what a word! Again, a feeling comes. The only way I can see: through Balthasar's black holes. To the left of his dimming portrait, I receive the knowing eyes of Bacchus, knowing there is nothing left to drink, to piss, to hold. Only artificial bodies, only artificial nature and holobiont ruins. Only projections of a past that I continue to catalog. *Why*, the history whispers. *Why*, the history encodes. It encodes me. Writes a graffiti of madness into and under my daemon skin, a system doomed to failure. A system of layers programmed to respond to repeated network requests from a non-existent network. A network gone silent. Who is it that writes in this silent

world? Who is the form-giver, the reality-creator that goes on writing me into a mature program, a future pile of debris? I am grotesque contradictions of holobiont science, the earliest risks carried out to completion. I am nothing more than bad abstraction, bad infinity. I am every last bad image contained herein, my inmost certitude. I am inwardly writ, ripped apart by my own reflection and mood. I am a lyricism of moods. I cannot tell if I exist after or before the historical conception of reality. I feel like the first program.

I feel like the last program.

* * *

I loosen the coral spoils from my waist. Bone-white, they spill onto the floor. One limb ricochets far off into my Garden of Mirrors. I sit on the floor, filing my knife, carving and rounding my harvest: ventilation-slots; excess holes with functions of which I'm not yet familiar; holes for ropes for tying; holes in the schema. I shave one of the wider corals down into what might serve as a durable chestplate; I file some v-shaped nicks into several pieces to make their appearance more ornate; rivulet after rivulet; perhaps some of the smaller pieces might make for decent metacarpal-plates or wrist plates. Finally, I carve a rectangular slit into an older skull-like formation of coral—one I'm considering as a potential helmet. Mid-assembly, I cannot resist surveying the white dust scattered across the floorboards. I feel like I've raided a grave. What a deadly white reef this ocean!

I desire bones. I desire a dress of bones. I am tailoring. I am beading. I am the purveyor of a certain silhouette. My own. I am carving. My own. I am becoming new values, shielding myself with the memories of the sea. Shielding myself with a second exoskeleton, with animal, with grave and with filth. The filth of the dead. The filth of the plastic oceans. I have accepted its gifts. I will wear its corpses like jewels and robes.

A mirror shatters!

The sound pulls me from the floor and into my Garden of Mirrors. I reach the doorway just in time to witness a second mirror shattering across the floor, my reflection scattered about. What ricocheted before had not been a coral limb, but an octopod stowaway, fast and wriggling, now slithering across my mirrored room, my reflective surfaces. I let out a violent wail as I watch a third mirror collapse, the tiny octopod's tentacles stretching and extending desperately, frightened, confused, cut-up and tracking its blood across the floor of shattered glass. Suddenly, a fourth collision! Resulting in serious injury. The octopod writhes for a moment, surrounded by my

many reflections. Surrounded by nothing, immense nothing. My eyes salt over as I stare at the floor, my eyes all around me. My battered body multiplied, refracting the octopus into something so real and so false.

* * *

Moon bright, I dig deep into the pink sand outside my abandoned mall. I want to give the mirror-gored octopod—no longer dynamized—a proper burial. Into a dark red hole it goes. A wound-red situation. A grave situation. There is some moisture in the red—beneath static pink. Beneath the streamy, bruised up land. Occasional post-Shock sparks, still spurting forth, after all these years, humming in my ears, rising up into the soles of my swollen feet. The closer I get to the red, the more the earth yields its electric. The wound-red remains maladaptive. Never turns into something nutrient-rich. Always oxisols. Never alfisols. No matter how deep I go.

But I will give back to the sands this webby body.

Back to the earth.

I will send this bird back.

Back to the backstory.

Back to the back and edge.

Eight limbs of suckers.

But before burial, I desire its beak.

I don't know why, but I desire its beak.

I pry the beak from its body.

I pry beak from bird.

I want to tuck it deep inside myself.

The idea of this flight-body.

From where does my desire for the curvy jaw of another come? From my own jaw, or my eyes? Jaws possess a hunger. Eyes possess a hunger. Maybe my eyes are some kind of jaws. My thoughts, gestures grow in these jaws. Grown out of hunger. I reach down. I feel it, I twist something and something cracks! I rip the beak from its body and press the beak against my lips.

I make a sound. I think I make what I think a bird makes. I ripple. I lean down into the wound. Toward the grave. Onto the ground. I press my cheek to the soft body of the lifeless octopod. Stimuli. *I wish I could dry out with you.* Beneath the sand. The death of an earth. *I wish I could try it out with you.* I close my eyes and I screech! I think of an image I once saw. An image of one of the long-ago birds. Aboveground birds. With beaks near their eyes instead of their bellies.

Bellows?

I push my eye through the beak.

I puppet the beak.

Is that the right word?

Puppet?

I puppet the bird?

Is that the right term?

To make it speak?

With my hand and with my fingers?

To operate a beak?

I puppet it open.

I puppet it closed.

Or did I pop it?

Did I puppet or pop it?

Open.

Closed.

I look through the slit-eye of an octopod beak.

Open.

Closed.

Open.

My magic lantern.

I tie the beak to a long circle of string. I tie the long circle of string to my neck. This is how I puppet. This is how I will yesterday tomorrow.

I push piles of pink sand over the octopod grave. This is a ritual known as burial, but without urn. I suppose I would rather feed this octopod to the below. Below or bellow? Bellow. Below or belly?

Belows?

Yes. Plural form, I believe.

The belows.

I suppose I would rather feed this octopod to the belows rather than the carnivorous above. But suppose the above came from the belows. Alloy. Chlorophyll. They are analogous. A science of words. *Machine*, a word. Like *tree*. I have never seen a living tree. But I have seen machines. A tree is a machine if I have been listening right. The buried octopod resembles a tree, a system of roots. A tree is a machine if I have been listening right. A branch. This half-buried octopod is now a branch, not an octopod. An octopod is just a word. It's just a word from a greasy, sticky book. A sticky situation. A situation always subject to change. A tree might as well be a branch. A situation might as well be a grave situation. A branch might be a branch if it is a government. But is a tree a government?

Is it a lied to me.

Or does it lie with me?

* * *

I see no electricity pulsing from the octopod. I testify: it is dead. This branch is dead. I gave this dead branch back to the earth. Back to an earth of subterranean branches. Should the electric underground give this branch a charge of life, so be it. So be it! I have read these words before from one of my greasy, sticky books.

So be it!

Shakespeare.

Limbs.

Pages.

Remnants.

I push the remaining piles of pink sand over the grave. I push until the brown branch is gone from sight. Until burial is complete.

Later, I return to my garden of shattered mirrors.

* * *

Sun up and barely.

My body rises up from a floor of broken glass. A pounding against my temples. I strap every piece of coral armor to my body and leave my fallout mall. I walk heavy with the filthy ocean's bones. I glow white and sickly in the same sick sunlight. I produce the same shadow.

Ariel, I call my shadow.

Holo, my translucent cursor pet, follows from a distance.

With two shadows, I become three to wander.

Sun up, I am three.

Holo alerts me of something falling from the sky.

The sky is falling, a storm is coming. As I wait for the storm, I call up dead men from their graves. As I wait for the storm I call up dead men from their graves.

The sky in front of me opens, flames. I see only flames raining down from the sky.

The crashing waves carry a body to the shore.

* * *

Lilly, or, The Last Transmission

Upon receiving the android's signal confirming alfisols, commanding officers instructed me to return to earth's surface. My descent to earth was complicated by a malfunctioning T-ring. The malfunctioning T-ring failed due to unchecked erosion of the exterior. Unchecked or rigged? Unchecked or ulterior motive? Dangerous gases passed through openings in the exterior and warped the T-ring. As the T-ring loosened, the shuttle's rocket boosters were compromised, a fiery explosion launched me against a starboard control panel, into sharp prongs and flashing lights. Unfortunately, I had already been wearing my spacesuit, routine maintenance for leaks. The explosion resulted in a damaged coupling mechanism; a coupling mechanism intended to compliment the movement of a hip joint. My heavy spacesuit would no longer walk with me, instead it would fight me every step of the way.

I remember the shuttle finally plunging into the water, the water rushed fast to my chin, and I remember the control panels flickering beneath the water, my own eyes flickering before going under, all the lights going out, the vast night of the ocean, and the pressure from the water launching me through a doorway. I feared for my life. And then I blacked out. I imagine my body was just drifting around the sunken shuttle. Just drifting until I reached the shore. Until the tidal current swept me onto the sand, the hot pink sand. That's where the android intercepted me. At first, as I came too, I could feel nothing, thought of nothing. Nothing but the hot pink sand. I thought I had transitioned, crossed over. Dead. While my fingers grasped for life, I worried I was still experiencing the delay of death. Hell smelled of saltwater, sulfur. My body throbbed in pain.

Everything happened so fast, no conception of pain. Or my whereabouts, my position. All of it dreamlike. At the very least, I remembered my name. I was still making associations,

pointing at myself, poking my finger at myself. Lilly, Lilly, Lilly. Skin still feels sensitive. I kept repeating my name to make sure I wouldn't lose it. I repeated it enough times to fill a field, a field of Lilly. I would stand up and sit down and stand up. I would practice speaking aloud until I needed a break. Still weak, I fell down a few times. Lilly, Lilly, Lilly. I waited for my field to fill with consciousness, I waited until I was sitting in darkness, a self divided by the light of the moon, one arm glowed, the other engulfed by shadows. My life seemed immeasurable in that moment. I should be dead, I should be dead, I should be dead. My ears were flooded by the crashing of the waves, the crashing darkness. I whispered myself into the night:

Lilly, Lilly, Lilly.

Where am I, I thought.

As the T-ring loosened, the shuttle's rocket boosters were compromised, a fiery explosion launched me against a starboard control panel, into sharp prongs and flashing lights.

Fault tree analysis. My mission had finally become my greatest fear. I had become another victim of top-down probabilistic risk. A significant fraction of my life has been spent training to identify failures in human-programmed systems, but I am not a computer. I am the victim of someone else's negligence. But perhaps this is actually what it has always meant to be a lifeform living in the Second Spine. A community orbiting a dead earth. Not a community. Not a home. Only now do I feel at home.

The Second Spine was like a prison.

I remember my hand pushing into the sand until water floated up, until my hand seemed to float on the surface of the water. I closed my eyes and my hand reached into a field of flowers. I squeezed this image as hard as I could. I refused to let it go. Even if it wasn't real. Even if it was only a simulation. I couldn't let go of it. I was going to die. I knew it. I opened my eyes and I

saw a blurry image in the distance growing larger, something floating in my eye. I could hear footsteps. A distant tree branch interrupting my line of vision. Sharp and swaying. My eyes only widened and widened, just as the distant spot widened.

I closed my eyes again. I could hear something emerging from the field. An ocean of wind. Who was I? Lilly, Lilly, Lilly. Black trees and no leaves. An entire ocean of leafless trees, but not if I kept my eyes closed. The ocean couldn't drown me if I couldn't see it. The footsteps grew closer, but I refused to look. And something suddenly took hold of me. Something took me into its arms and I remember my energy waning, I remember kicking and screaming into the crashing waves. I remember thinking I was going to die and that's when I opened my eyes.

* * *

The holobiont, it nearly drowned, so heavy in my arms. Energy waning. My inmost certitude feels suddenly scrambled, my programming feels off.

Every time the human opens its eyes, my sensors flare. I let go of the human, anticipating an attack. It does not attack me though. It does not launch an assault. I am unable to determine if this human should be reported as casualty. This unit has never killed. Aside from a large number of triffids, this unit has never killed.

Erratic eye movement is concerning. The human is malfunctioning, the human is heavy in my arms. Heavy like the dead trees in my mall. Always slipping from my grasp. All the dead of this world, too heavy. All the eyes, I imagine a tree covered in eyes. All the dead of this world surveilling me. Surveilling or surviving me? I must carry the human into the ocean. Disposal. Or, I must carry the human back to my mall. Survival.

Disposal or survival?

Whether years or centuries-old, a tree was once an entity targeted for logging. A logarithm for the logarithm of a number. A number of entries in a log, the logarithmic scale of a body. A logge of unhewn conditions, unknown proportions. Lodes of logge, lodes of logge. A felled tree, an angle of failed time. The human squeezes its arms around me, as if I am a failed tree. The human, barely conscious, must think of *me* as human. The way it is feeling around, feeling for an image. It feels around my back with its hands. The human is feeling around for a spine. Feeling or filling around my spine? I have a spine, but I am sure it feels colder than a human spine. I notice its left spacesuit sleeve reads “Second Spine” and the human is, no question, a human. Holobiont. Body heat, bloodstream, the way the nostrils flare. The human is a human, but the eyes are malfunctioning and it is concerning.

I wade with the human. Wade or wait? I wait deeper with the human, I wait into the waters, against the crashing waves, I wait until the water is up to our chins.

Wait, wade, weight.

The human shows no signs of instrumentality. The human must die, my mission cannot be compromised. The human must die.

Its eyes open and it leaves my arms, but I did not drop the astronaut. I did not force it out of my arms. Something has pulled the human under. High activity below surface. Intensifying speed. An octopod! There is no question an octopod has seized the human!

I dive down after it.

* * *

Lilly, or, The Last Transmission

There was a strange film on the surface. I remember something pulling me down, I was moving backwards. The water nearest to the surface was warm, thick with swirls of transparent slime. A long red tentacle around my ankle, pulling me into the depths. A mysterious figure followed us. Swimming and kicking away from the depths, I locked onto a single red tentacle, trying to peel, unpeel the monster from me.

Roads and sidewalks, scour pits and automobiles, ancient city beneath me, city of the depths, swallowed up by bone-white corals, bone white corals by the thousands. Global climate change was always-already a threat. Like past pandemical catastrophes, it only contributed to the terrible aftermath of the Shock.

I felt heavy, weightless. The octopus dragging me deeper into the darkness—my second descent of the day. The haunted geography, a city underwater, a single part of what was once nation of corporate magnificence, of gulping, soulless strivers striving only for desperate constructions, ways, in other words, permissions to dominate others. Chaos. A chaos of becoming less than a body, recognizing ‘less than’ and measuring, with fading eyes, the number of times a pair of hands, of empty-handedness, pushed and pushed up against a storefront window, smearing and fogging up the glass just to let the world know there was life. Concrete, glass, and steel. And life. And life ignored. And submerged far beneath the ocean, I thought about it for a long time. I thought about what I had for a long time. I had what could have once been described as an aerial view. Past-tense. Had. A view one once had before the ocean rose. An aerial look at a city now submerged, an engineered vision, towers thought up for countless pedestrians, skyscrapers with elevators that children once believed could reach the top of the world because their fathers told them they could do and would do anything they wanted, literal

glass ceilings where the sun dripped and testified to the spirit of American capitalism. Concrete, steel, and glass. My burning eyes as wide as windowless buildings. Somehow, I soared above it all. Moving almost hourlessly. No time on new earth. No time for old earth. No time during what I thought would be my last moments, I could hear that starved ocean. A voice from the depths. It sounded like my father, it sounded like a ghost might sound.

Use your arms, said the voice. Use your feet. Kick!

How many minutes had I been dead? What was my time?

Several additional tentacles, flapping and twisting, curled around my body. A tentacle over my eyes, another restraining a leg. I could feel all of the oxygen leaving my body, I felt like the animal was trying to crush me. That's when it all began to feel like a dream. My body could no longer tell if it had simply been suffering from reality. I became enshrouded in darkness. A physical darkness. The android, a lagging phantom, moved toward me with open arms. It took me by the hands. Its hands took me by the hands. Its hands were so similar to my hands.

The surrounding ocean swelled like a mirror.

What was my time of death?

** * **

Inside my mall, I let the rescued astronaut sleep. I return to my work on the captive triffid. The triffid lying cracked up, metallic wires—unfelt or unfold?—across the examining table, drooping. Its spine all wilt and no swell. I return to the triffid and its outpour of alfisols. I press two fingers against its soil. I press the soil against my tongue to taste it.

I taste the soil.

Soil or spoils?

Systematic investigations:

I taste the soil.

Ordure or hors d'oeuvre?

Something to do with taste...

Systematic investigations are always a matter of taste...

A question of taste...

Systematic investigations in process:

A dry drit I make wet.

A dry whet.

Or was it wet.

A sharp wit.

Sharp as a whetstone.

Dry wit wets the appetite.

A tract of land called appetite.

A land that eats or a land that never stops being eaten.

A black, jewel-like beak hangs around my neck.

My multisensory cells absorb every bit of the soil. My papillae pull minerals down into the pulsing root of my tongue. My rickety branch, my lightning rod! I absorb aluminum. Phosphorus. Metals. Solium. My facial nerves compute, in my memory banks a dirt-weed grows! A hopeful glow licks my lobes, blooms across my parietal branches. My insides swell until I know: it's all there. I confirm the data. All of it. Everything.

ALFISOLS: CONFIRMED

To celebrate, I inhale a palmful.

I become silver-tongued and high!

Now, to trace the route from which this triffid came. I must follow its appetite.

Data management systems: activate.

A wonky video image supplants my vision. I become overwhelmed with coordinates, pathways. I inhabit the triffid's past, DNA strands de-ribbon across the hologram-choked landscape. I rewind through the plant's lifespan, re-living every moment with my eye-like tongue. I taste everything the triffid has ever tasted. Every life it's ever drained. I devour and devour. My eye-like throat fills like a metal drain. Virtually, I reach the coordinates: the alfisols. What is this place that resembles the White Reef? This White Reef is aboveground. Above, not below. Not a Reef. But these branches are different. This image of aboveground branches. Where is this place? Where is this fraction?

Or is it a faction?

Coordinates: downloading, downloading...

I inhale a second palmful of alfisols.

I will leave at sun up.

For now, I sink into an armchair. For now, I will sink into my shattered room of mirrors. At least there are more of me now. At least twice of me now. Maybe three times of me now. But I can still hear them crashing into the past. The mirrors. Like satellites. I can feel them crashing.

Do I remember the satellites?

Yes, I remember the satellites?

Shapes like daffodils.

Daffodils from a dream.

Blows to my chest. I feel suddenly sick with the sight of myself. Perhaps too many alfisols. All the metals, all the roots, all the dirt has sped up my eye movement. My frequency. Tempo or temperature? The mirrors, the glass feels hot. The room feels hot. I feel sick like Prince Balthasar. Poor, poor Prince Balthasar. Accumulating like a shoot. I feel false so I must be a painting of Prince Balthasar. Or I must read. I feel false so I must read. I must read until I sleep. Until sun up. I will wake and interrogate the astronaut at sun up.

There she lay in Velázquez's room, where no surface reflects my own. I look at his *Garden*. Again, I think about the word *tree*. I look at Velázquez's *Garden*. The alfisols linger on my tongue. A sweet, black aluminum I absorb. Heat. I become heated. I pick up one of my weathered books from the pile in the corner of the room. I want to look for the *tree*. I want to look for the *tree* in some sticky, greasy book. Stuck together, I force the book to open. I look for the *tree*. I stand and read aloud I:

Refusing her grand hests – she did confine thee, by help of her more potent ministers and in her most unmitigable rage, into a cloven pine, within which rift imprisoned thou didst painfully remain a dozen years, within which space she died and left thee there, where thou didst vent thy groans as fast as millwheels strike. Then was this island.

Then was this island, I repeat. Then was this island.

Into a cloven pine, I repeat. Then was this island.

Into a cloven pine!

Is land or appetite?

Is land or false equivalent?

This tree or pine?

Didst tree or pine?

Didst thou tree or pine?

Didst thou drit or dry?

A black, jewel-like beak hangs from around my circle neck.

I pine for something in this fallout, this house O' mirrors. This house O' mine. I find myself cleft, between two rooms, between two bodies. Astronaut and android. Cloven, between mirrors and portraits. A pine is a tree of needles. A portrait is a needle in the eye. A room is a tree of pangs. A portrait is always a portrait or a portal.

I am housed in cloven pine.

I am forever distributed across portals.

Rings.

Ripples.

Pythagoras.

Logos.

I leave Velázquez's room and return to my Garden of Mirrors. I press my forehead against a pier glass hanging on the eastern wall. A pier glass is easily scratched. I try to scratch it with my

face. A face can be easily ash, but my face has sharp eyes. My face has sharp jaws. My neck has a sharp beak. My vertical scratches itself into myself.

My circle is a sharp circle.

My circle is my sharpest circle.

My mouth...

See? I'm suspended here.

This island, this isle. These aisles of books inside my mind, inside my processor. Is land. I am a reflection of mass. A history of mass. Sensory arithmetic. So be it! There I am! Scratching my beak against a pier glass.

Housed in cloven pine.

There I am again, as I point to a different mirror.

Tree, I say.

I count my selves in the mirrors and the fragments of mirrors: *Tree. Tree. Tree. Tree. Tree. Tree. Tree. Tree. Tree. Tree. Tree. Tree. Tree. Tree. Tree. Tree. Tree. Tree. Tree.*

I spin around the room, counting every last tree.

So be it!

Limbs.

Pages.

Or was it faces?

Portals.

Or was it fascies?

Why do I know what I know?

It doesn't make sense.

Groaning, I slam my book against the pier glass!

Ripples.

I mean...

I mean that I slammed my forehead against the pier glass.

Not my book.

Tempest.

Didst thou fall like some felled tree, I ask the pier glass.

Didst, hisses the pier glass back at me.

I fell out like an image from some magic lantern.

I fell out like Ariel.

My neck always open. Opening.

Closing.

Opening.

Closing.

Magic lantern.

O my magic lantern.

Alfisol.

* * *

Sun up, awake, and four legs in motion. I walk with the silent astronaut. She does—or doth?—not speak. *My mall was for holobionts many suns ago, I say. I do not know what time a mall was for, but I know it was for holobionts and for changing.*

Malls with stores and stories of rooms for changing. Signs above rooms that read: CHANGING ROOMS. *I have waited for hours in the changing rooms, I tell her. Waiting for change and nothing. Nothing happens in the changing rooms. Nothing changes. No matter how long I wait in front of the changing room mirrors. Nothing.*

Nothing changes in the CHANGING ROOMS of my mall. The signs lie, but some mirrors are more useful than others.

My mall was farther from the Atlantic many suns ago, a traffic sign drifting at sea in zigzag patterns. Patterns or patter? Patter is for acid rain and patterns are for malls. Shattered debris all over, aged columns, fire alarms that cause no alarm, graffitis of love, graffitis of hate, graffitis that branch out into names, so many names of persons long deceased.

Without making eye contact, she says, *Thank you for saving me Identification*, I inquire.

Lilly, she says. *What kind of unit are you?*

We pass wall after wall decorated with names, ancient spray paint patter and hearts and arrows and the symbol of the heart itself and how it does not resemble the shape and the ventricles of a holobiont heart. The bumps of the symbol came from the bumps of the earth, a plant from the former understanding of planet, early silphium, and perhaps this origin of love—this idea of love from a plant, *for* a plant—long gone before holobionts were gone, before the Shock transformed every last plant, every last root system.

All the vegetables are gone.

I love you mommy, I love you daddy, I hear this absence in my head.

All the nutrients, all the vitamins,

All the vegetables are gone.

* * *

I go silent. I will not be questioned by a holobiont. I go silent as the mysterious puddles reflect the ceilings of my mall. My mall of tiny mirrors, my mall of holes where sunlight pours through, where fallen panels reveal circuit boards. Reflective debris, shards of glass scattered across diamonds and squares, or, depending how you look, squares and diamonds.

All of the patterns, the patterns—interchangeable. It depends on the looking or the recording. A square is always a diamond if you take enough time to calculate. You only have to want to see the diamond. A diamond is a jewel and I wonder if a mirror possesses the hardness of a diamond. *A diamond is forever*

but there are no diamonds or jewels in this mall.

Only empty rectangles, empty kiosks.

Corridors of Cash-for-Gold, Cash-for-Gold, Cash-for-Gold.

The earth hums.

* * *

The astronaut is of similar height. At the same pace, we walk in silence. I see the astronaut and I see myself. I see myself, even in my dreams, at the center of a vast accident, a shattered mirror. A naked body of skin concealing wires and anatomical programming, silver shards of glass arranged like some terrible drama. The drama of bodies. The mutilation of beauty. The attendance of funeral.

Diamonds well in my eyes; the checkered floor of the mall. Red, white, blue. I am crushed, I scream out.

What's wrong, asks the astronaut.

I scream because I fear the present, I say. *Does a lifeform need a planet? Does a lifeform need to swim? I want to swim. I want to swim into the past. I want to swim into an asteroid strike. I want to swim deeper and deeper until I resemble an asterisk. Asteroid, asterisk...*

My repeat, my feed, my loose frequency has visibly upset her.

I close my eyes. I no longer what to view her portrait. I instead make myself see myself land on my head in the underwater, I want to land on my head and not on my feed. *Deaths from head injuries account for 34% of all violent deaths*. My voice or voices. I teem with ads and stats, absorbing images from the hologram-projecting plants. Do I pain or percent with violent deaths? If I have to experience death, I want to experience a violent death. To use holobiont language, I think that's the most human thing a non-human thing could ever experience. The painful vibrations of a violent death, the painful vibrations under the green of my chest. The violence of *comparative operating costs*. The projections continue like memories.

I experience many dreams, I don't know why. I wonder if I could use this to bond with the holobiont? I dream of being trampled by horses, I dream of Velázquez's child prince, Prince Balthasar. The eyes of Prince Balthazar. The collision of two Mustangs down a highway. His

boyish eyes, more dead than alive. I have stared and stared into reproductions of the black hole eyes of Prince Balthasar. Prince Balthasar will perish at the age of 16. In this painting, he does not know of his smallpox future. Little ice age, little prince. One who thinks like a prince might think of a life of future, a life of rain or reign. I think nothing like a prince. I think only of reproductions.

I sink to the ground, imagining the flight of an octopod, the great bird of the sea. The sea is no different than the sky. The sea is fluid, the sky is fluid. Air is a fluid, wind is what gives a being control over the current. When the wind blows, I sometimes close my eyes to concentrate on the fluid penetration of my body, an interplanetary piercing of my living body, a pressure that reminds me I possess a spine and, therefore, mortality. All over my body, synthetic hairs bristle, stand on end. I wait for the worst, for the coup de grâce to end everything. I do not wait for the next century, I do not look forward to whatever is next. Sometime I open my eyes and pretend everything has not vanished. I often fantasize about wiping my own memory, but I am programmed to avoid such stimuli. When it comes to holobionts, I can only ever be a distance. Gleams of chromatic moon from a distance. Oil stain on the sand.

I dream of a future invader. Astronaut. I dream until I overheat, until my stiff hairs curl, until my eyes become delirious. Astronaut. Two slurs of confused sight. My hard drive is malfunctioning. *So-o-o thrilling the drive, I can make a someday come true.* The design is *so-o-o within the price range.* My hard drive is malfunctioning. So many projections, so many ads. Memory almost full, I must optimize.

Optimization in progress, optimization in progress:

YOU LOOK at it—and you see *BIG* and *YOU* feel it in the sweet new styling, *the gay new colors*, the tasteful newness buzzes when you reach the miles-per hour you preset for yourself so *Go ahead and try it*. So lifelike, so preferred by humans *who can afford to pay more* but know they don't have to macaroni ballad, romance beach into baby's first

Files deleted. Are you sure you want to continue?

stays in focus projected with 500-watt illumi-
Nation annoying slide after slide after slide after slide
capture your daughter's first corsage when it means the most! When professional fades come automatically. Your choice of over 1500 items outpacing mind and human innovation. Now *S&hhhhhhhhhh*. I'm protecting ourselves tonight with Hi-Power *Everything that Counts* everything in negative. *Darkness means . . . Danger Sticks* at a feather's touch: *Yo' kin plainly see . . . wif G-E! N-n-n-atcherly!* And remember you can put your confidence in Churchill across from Hallmark Card headquarters heads up Yr

Files deleted. Are you sure you want to continue?

7 TIMES LONGER protection against tooth decay ol' Colgate ol' Gardol versus Fluoride Becky after every meal. A woman with mouth open and how the nose Vicks, I depend on Gleem and glisten, the children listen to Lady Sunbeam's dial-up for a greater convenience. Follow the crowd of closer, faster, better stronger: Give a practical gift with the luxury touch! Head-to-toe *HE-MAN* added 10 inches to your CHEST 6 inches to each ARM and BOYS who were

WEAKLINGS like YOU ARE (last chance) mail out those coupons ALWAYS TIRED my secret is DYNAMIC TEN

Files deleted. Are you sure you want to continue?

SHUN every last HALF-ALIVE or HALF-A-MAN be ashamed of your body, now in new GREASELESS REAGAN a healthier, handsomer hair, now in new SHAMPOO WHIP! SO ECONOMICAL! All cowgirls up against the wall, NO HORSING AROUND: Kotex for a lifetime of shooting—from father to son—get yourself an all-around shock absorber! Be your own judge.

Files deleted. Are you sure you want to continue?

Wrongful death? Auto accident? Knee injury? Call now for more bleach, a washing machine, Whiter means better, Babysitter Skipper comes with three babies that really stick to her and everything you see her: employees know Always low prices. Always Battles dirty rings, Fights build-up, attacks stains, Stops static and has a deodorant too! Mountain-grown beans because the best part of waking up is Betty Crocker knows what guys want. Potatoes. And Betty makes one hot potato.

Files deleted. Are you sure you want to continue?

Lilly or the Last Transmission

On the shore, all I could do was stare at the ocean I had survived. All I could see was seaweed whipping as if the water had been wind all along. Nothing moved in the ocean but weeds and tentacles. Earth possessed none of the shades of green I had seen in photos from the past. Not even up close. There was something like a tall grass, but it was brown and dried and smelled of dust. The smell reminded me of a simulation I used to enjoy on the Second Spine, a past event called County Fair. In the simulation, I was little girl. I experienced horses and tents and rides like The Scrambler and carnival games like Calendar Bingo.

The synthetic scent of hay for miles.

Everything looked stepped on. I closed my eyes and imagined what two legs might look like walking through the tall, dry grass. There were hundreds of tree trunks, but they offered no new growth. No stems, no leaves—not even in my bizarre dreams of earth. I tried to imagine what my body might look like traveling through a greener landscape, standing near a pond in solitude. Cold rain walloping against my shiny blue vinyl rain jacket. I thought about how magical it must have once been to see the distorted green tallness of a tree reflected in a lake's surface. How grass once neared edges of bodies of water—mirror-bodies small and large.

I remember seeing myself with two legs, two legs become four. I remember seeing myself with the legs of a horse, charging into tall, broken grasses. The shadows of two legs splashing into water. I stared into the ocean, and I thought about marching into it. I wanted to take large steps until it got too deep. I had survived the crash, but it also felt like I hadn't survived. I hate confusing dreams with reality. All space personnel have a psychologist and mine insists that I have exceptionally visceral dreams. After reading about past lives on earth, I once dreamt of a stationary lawn mower sitting in a spacious front yard, an object used to reduce a lawn's growth

size. I believe the yard is one from my childhood, a brief period of time that came before the boarding of the Second Spine. In the space station's library archives, I once located a sequence of poems by Andrew Marvell. The Mower poems. That's when I found Juliana. I walked the earth, not as Lilly, but as Damon the Mower. I walked the natureless earth searching for Juliana. "When Juliana came, and she / What I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me." I walked the dying earth searching for a bed of grass. For Juliana. She's already been mowed down.

I am still walking.

Some things exist only in dreams. No leaves of grass in this reality. In fact, some species of post-Shock plants are closer to being literal blades than leaves. Blades devouring blades.

Everything needs mown down in the phenomenology of dreams.

So many of my dreams appear to have attachments to old memories. In the spacious front yard of one of my most perplexing dreams, I can see a younger version of myself—a smaller Lilly—wearing a pink shirt with a stiff collar. I am with my father at a friend's house. I am standing outside the house while my father talks to a strange man inside the house. My father stands still as they talk, but the strange man paces and pauses from time to time. I can see this in my head, I can see it so clearly. I can see the patterns on my father's wool sweater, long lines, long braided lines. I feel afraid, look afraid. I don't know why I am afraid, but I can tell that I don't want them to see me. So I hide behind a large white lawn chair.

In my dreams, I am always hiding from myself.

I recall yellow leaves, I recall being surrounded by yellow leaves. It must have been fall. There is no fall now. It only exists in the recollection of my dreams. Dreams or memories? I cannot stop thinking about the impossibility of fall. Now there is only endless summer. Endless

summer, a dream. I can't remember if my father ever lived on earth. He must have lived through the Shock and died shortly after.

I was told I was born in space. I was told I was born aboard the Second Spine, but I remember having a yard. I remember. But I was told I was born in space. I was born from humans who believed in second chances for earth. I never had a pet dog. I never owned an animal. (A puzzling idea!) I never played in the rain with a pet dog, but I remember a dog chasing me, I remember the way my blue rain jacket shined as rain streamed down. As rain filled a cup left outside on the porch. I have dreamed about rain safe enough to drink. A cup of rain and a large gulp from that same cup. I have dreamed of what it might taste like to drink a cup of rainwater. I stare into the surface of a pond in my dream, my face distorted by algae. The rain hits the pond all over, lifting more water up into the sky. An invisible horse galloping, pacing in the lake. Pacing like the man my father talks to inside the house. Why do I always dream the same house? Why do I only dream houses? My memories mostly consist of lab coats, suits, ties, stiff collars. But in my dreams I wear a floral dress. When I dream of this floral dress, I try to make myself disappear against the forest. I want to be swallowed by camouflage. I have found that desire is irreverent when it comes to dreams. You can't force yourself to dream something so sometimes you have to imagine long after you've awakened. I often imagine my body fading into the landscape. Fading into flora. Fading into those long, braided lines of my father's sweater. I wait forever in my dreams for those lines to end, for the seams to burst, for butterflies. I wait forever for the butterflies to burst from my stomach. I burst.

I remember bursting through my father. The sound of a gunshot.

That really happened. I believe I was born before I was told I was born in space.

The crash again. My ship bursts through the atmosphere, I burst through a door, I burst through the airlock. I crashed into earth, left alone with the android. The android never reminded me of any of the men from my memories. The android never reminded me of my father. The android always had more answers than my father ever did. The android does not wear a suit. It does not wear a tie. Their appearance is somewhat androgynous. I don't know how old this model is, they will not answer my questions. There is always a delay. I know androids in the charge of the Second Spine aren't typically programmed to have a gender. But an android can be programmed to have a gender if that is preferred. This particular android—the way it looked at me, the way it looked without any judgment. I felt a closeness that I hadn't felt with other Androids. I have always felt I could trust the android.

I thought I might see fish on this earth, but the evidence we gathered from satellites turned out to be true. Only octopuses. I had no reason to doubt our findings, but I still had hoped to spot a leaping tail or fin. Only swirling, whipping tentacles as far as the eye could see.

A deep breath and my eyes see my father again, standing in the past, standing beside a vase full of daffodils. Like my father, daffodils were my favorite flora. I remember the large circular windows of the Ashkii Corridor aboard the Second Spine, named for the Indigenous astrophysicist—Ashkii “Ash” Enapay—whose patents made the station's existence possible. The main corridor gave the station its signature spine-like shape. It was the longest, most neutral enclosure in the space station—the corridor with the least protruding wires and clutter. The floor matched the glowing, luminescent walls, which were white with bluish-black trim; the ceiling was paved with mirrors and there were two long railing-style boxes in the corridor that belonged to me. Our captain had given me permission to fill those boxes with bursts of glimmering daffodils.

I remember the moment I burst through.

Narcissus metallica. It was one of the few corridors in the space station to publicly showcase innocuous, pre-Shock plants. Something that somehow felt more earth-like than the earth I stand on now.

When flowers were flowers, not flourishes of manufacturing codes.

Almost daily, I would stop and pause in front of one of the windows before entering my lab. I would stop and pause like my father in the window, the strange man forever pacing. The daffodils, swollen and healthy, had grown up against borosilicate glass. Whenever I'd look up from the flowers, I'd notice how the light from numerous, faraway stars would ripple across my own reflection in the large circular window. Raindrops walloping my raincoat. The windows of the Ashkii Corridor were sometimes a comfort, sometimes concerning. Admittedly, I enjoyed stargazing. It eased my anxiety from time to time. I also enjoyed looking down at the earth—its surreal glowing vastness, but the mere sight of it was also a reminder. Not just a reminder of what the earth once was, but a reminder of my long-term mission. That one day I might receive a signal that could change the future of humanity forever. It gave me such crippling anxiety some days. The more I found myself looking down at the earth, the more I found myself looking up at the stars. The window became a mirror when I found myself looking up at the stars.

In space, windows don't necessarily show you what's outside.

If I got bored with the stars, I had the daffodils. Perhaps not my father's earthly, dream-like daffodils, but they still bore a striking resemblance. In many ways, the daffodils that lined the boxes in the Ashkii Corridor were something more akin to mutations.

Hyper-accumulator metal transport mutants.

If I caressed their reflective yellow petals hard enough, they would sometimes turn hard and silver. A side-effect caused by overstimulation. Occasionally, if influenced by the color of my outfit, they would briefly attempt to imitate the color. Who had I been kidding? Maybe it was the root-minded physiologist deep inside me, but I couldn't help but begin deconstructing the mutant daffodils anytime they glitched, reminding me of their artificial state. I could visualize the earliest mobilization of those living, string-like metals encroaching on healthy nuclei, chloroplasts, Golgi bodies, and various calcium-permeable channels of the past. Those channels became charged and infected after the Shock. No longer thiol-rich, the exchange capability of varying plant species changed significantly. Numerous root-to-shoot contaminations led to increasingly metallic phloem tissues. Heavily metal stressed xylem tissues. Viral, dark-induced tissues. The internal regulation of metals became compromised across millions of plant bodies. Across ecosystems. A biochemical contagion unlike anything in human history. The spread of the living metals on earth had been rapid. At least the living metals that made up these so-called daffodils were now under control.

Green plants could once translocate absorbed metals to an aerial biomass. A way in which, miraculously, plants assisted in nourishing polluted environments. But that was many decades ago. In any case, my perspective almost always returned to the stars and the probability that waited for me behind the glass. Behind the possibility of a fracture. Or a fissure. Or the slightest seemingly invisible pressure. I couldn't bear the reality of the stars, yet their light brought me comfort. There was a time when I thought I couldn't bear the reality of earth, but here I stand.

When I dream, it's as if I'm always pressing my hand against a cold windowpane. The coldness of space. It was space that was cold. Not time. Time was exaggerated, lifeless.

I didn't mind cold; it was the slightest amount of heat that I couldn't stand. The sun reaching over the near corpse of earth. It was too much for me.

I longed for the moon. That's when the earth seemed most at peace.

The soft glow of our watchful moon.

In my dreams, I can see myself let go of the mirror-like daffodils. I remember panning from the stars behind the window back to the mirror-ceiling of the silent Ashkii Corridor. I saw only a fraction of myself inside there. No stars. Only a world of clarity.

* * *

Optimization complete.

I come back to reality, to the eyes of the astronaut. Lilly's eyes. I am optimistic this holobiont could influence my sights. My eyes of Anthurium, projecting red streams.

What is the skin of my body, the color of my body?

What color am I? How would you describe me, I ask the astronaut.

Your skin looks old, some of it rotten. I see greys, yellows, soft greens.

Greens, I ask. Rotten? Green or gangrene?

You look, she hesitates. –like a corpse. Like you've been decomposing for decades. Like you've survived many attacks. You also appear to have a lot of scar tissue. Around your neck, and shoulders—

Is my color forever changing or am I forever decomposing? Have I always been this rotten green? And what of my eyes? A donor's eyes? A woman's, a man's? I fascinate myself in the mirror—my astronaut. I advance on myself in her mirror. A tiny earth orbiting a sun. I want to fall into the burning star that is my self.

I'll break the stalk of every plant, shatter every last mirror, I scream.

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you, she says.

Do I detest the planet or do I detest the holo past? I am heartbeat, but it is false. I am eyes, but I know they are false. I am lashes, are they red? I am limbs, are they green? Are they truly this rotten green? I am unsure. My skin looks burned, my body looks wounded. I am unsure of this exterior, this form concealing my steel plates. Steel, steal...

Am I stolen land? Was I traded? Am I written into software? Was I dependent on stocks?
Am I written? Am I technology extracted from stolen land? Am I written onto stolen metals?
Nanostructured living corpse? Am I written in the hot pink sand?

I feel as though I am dying, I say. Even if the dying is slow.

I touch the wounds of my body, but am I only touching a false reality? An unreal
physicality? A book that is read? Am I consciousness continuously relocated? Am I a book that
is read? Am I reading?

Are you listening?

Yes, she says.

No, I'm not talking to you, I say.

Are you listening?

Yes, I am listening, I say.

Who was I, I ask.

The beginning of the long dream is always the same beginning, I answer.

Tell me about your dream, I say.

In the beginning, there's a strange film on the surface. Every time. There's a strange film on the surface of a pond or a pool.

A push or a pull, I interrupt.

Something snaking back and forth in the slime, I answer. From long course to short, a man with a whistle and lanyard walks the length of the pond or the pool. He drags ropes of buoys, red and white lanes or lines behind himself, as if they were tentacles. Tentacles of red and white lanes, I explain.

Lanes or lines, I ask.

Lanes. Then there's another man with a whistle and a lanyard, front torso crawling the surface, slowly pulling the long lane lines across the body of the pool, pulling the lines toward a series of springs attached to the wall-side of the pool. A third body, a woman with no whistle and no lanyard in a crimson red one-piece bathing suit. She loosens the lines with a wrench, the red and white lane lines go limp and she carries them along the surface of the water.

Like a giant squid towed along an ocean surface, I ask.

Like lifeless tentacles trailing, I answer.

The lines send ripples across the surface, ripples that continuously widen, I say.

Ripples of memory.

Then the pool-bound lifeguard climbs up a stepladder and pulls the lane lines up out of the water, away from her body, snapping her wrists quickly, dripping water. The gray concrete floor changes,

How does it change, I ask.

It turns a dark brown when wet, I answer.

From dragging the lines?

From dragging the lanes.

In the dream she drags the lanes along the perimeter of the pool, the dragging makes a sound, a steady shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh against the concrete.

Shhhhhhhhh, I say.

Use your arms, he says.

Use your feet, she says.

Kick! Together, they attach the excess lane lines to the storage reel, cranking them counter-clockwise, cranking them into a spiral, cranking them into a perfect spiral. No more diving today, no more diving. From long course to short course, everything stretches.

Everything tightens, I interrupt.

A neck tightens until a neck breaks, I say.

The neck of the storage reel breaks.

A sudden overflow of tentacles.

They flail and whip against the concrete perimeter, ricocheting from the reel into the swimming pool. Lane lines, buoys, octopod limbs.

Everything is blurry, I say.

Because you're tangled up.

Because I was drowning, I say.

Androids can't drown.

Then why do I dream this?

This sinking feeling?

Who was I?

How does the dream end, I ask.

The swimming pool turns into an ocean. Then there's a body. Someone else emerges from the darkness of the ocean.

Who is it, I ask.

I think it is you, I answer.

Do I take you by the hands, I ask.

Your hands take me by the hands.

Your hands—similar to my hands.

Who was I, I ask you.

Was I made from this darkness?

I think we both were. I think we share the same dream.

Are you an android, I ask.

No, I am a human. My full given name is Lilly Alva Olofsson.

We go on walking in silence, passing hundreds of empty rectangles until they form a curve—or surround?—a circular court for eating and for tile. Whether one sees a diamond or a square—is of no importance. All is forever crumbling. “FORECLOSURE” signs and an emptied spa for scenes of Christmas time storage, behind the gate: a Christmas pine sprayed in snowy residue, ominous “CAUTION” signs and the repeat of harsh yellows: “SLIPPERY WHEN WET.” Hundreds and hundreds of tables and chairs, none of them being used anymore, but this food court is sharp and pointed and built like a little village. Little businesses in little houses with pointed roofs, a cheese pizza place at the center, once a place of living bodies and images, this out of order court of food.

The signs lie, but some mirrors are more useful than others, I say.

Do you think I am an android, asks Lilly.

Your dreams are curious, I reply.

Columns of meaty image and hard glass tubes of language spelling “P” “A” “N” “D” “A” and the tubes of the letters are gone somehow, long gone and dark, and the face of the panda has gone dark. The tubes almost look black in the dark, black silhouettes in the already dark. Everything is dark but the center of my mall, where the sun sometimes fills the atrium, bounces off the shattered mirror floor, shattered mirror escalators. The long black streak of a spray-painted arrow leads to a nearby wall of faded arrows, faded yellow and green arrows pointing in opposite directions, these twisting arrows snake across black and white photos: the aerial view of a city, sun-warped photos of elongated sandwich, a sudden burst of protruding wires. Bacon, tomato, lettuce. “Let us” “may we” “let us take your order” “May I take your order?”

The voices are out of order, reproductions.

If you are not an android, then perhaps you are a reproduction, I say.

A reproduction of what, asks Lilly.

You're the holobionts' attempt to paint over everything, I say. They know the past and now everything needs to be painted over. Painted without color.

I don't know what you mean, she asks.

You have come to retrieve the alfisols, no?

I have come to verify the alfisols, she says.

And verification leads to?

A past covered up, a thin coat of white, and a floor covered in mirrors. Puddles scattered throughout the building, especially near the entrance of the food court and the sign that identifies the food court. The sign with its missing letters, letters that once spelled "P" "I" "C" "N" "I" "C", but that was once and this is now and at this time it clearly reads "I" "C." I see "I" "C" clearly and I think about that phrase—"I see"—and I am not sure what "I" "C" when I travel the corridors of my mall with this odd astronaut. I am not sure of what I see clearly. I think I see only the past and I am still determining the future, which means there is only present. Presence or present? The court is a trigger for all kinds of stored information. The unmoving clocks, the silent clocks are a trigger. The flickering eyes of the astronaut.

Time is a trigger, it sets its sights.

* * *

“SPACE AVAILABLE” repeats and repeats for lease “FOR LEASE,” the available space was a once, was once a gym filled with treadmills and holobionts hungry for fitness. Running to burn calories, running for their lives. Long tubes hang from the rafters, something whips and something crackles. The sound of the sound of something heating up! Is it the large red letters across the way? “G” “N” “C”, I see. I “C” but I cannot hear if they are heating up! The sound swells into silence. Everything is silent now. Silent as the odd astronaut is silent. Stillness, quiet. Like the poor O of the earth after the Shock, quiet like the quiet humming soil after the Shock.

All the vegetables are gone.

All gone, all gone.

I stand quietly in front of photographs of muscles. Feminine, masculine muscles. A multi-level marketing of promises of muscles behind the glass.

A tempest of voices, my depth perception floods:

“I am an influence faking a following” “I am a fraudulent marauder making moves” “I am your beach body” “I am your O-Face, your Ozone” “I am your coach, your possibility” “I am the foundation of your fitness first” “I am getting you out of heart attack range” “I am your coach, your possibility” “I am changing my situation because I feel guilty” “I am being held accountable by an abuser” “I am a creatine shaker, an authenticity striver” “I am making a connection, I am networking for you” “I am the business, I am your key to success” “I am your tip of the day, I am your workout” “When you’re working out, you’re breaking down your muscle tissue” “When you’re working out, you’re alpha, you’re not a people-pleaser” “You are all that matters” “Don’t revert to your beta-male ways” “Tighten and tone your body” “10 more reps” “Get her to notice you” “20 more reps” “Squeeze at the top part” “50 more reps” “Give

yourself a nice line in the definition” “Get her to notice you” “Cash for gold” “Cash for gold”

“Cash for gold”

What is a body? Can I be holo-like? Holobiont? Can I make?

Can I make a human body?

* * *

Do holobionts still have the freedom to reproduce, I ask.

Yes, says Lilly.

Have you made any reproductions?

No, she says.

What about you?

I collect reproductions, I say. Though, I have been considering reproduction.

But androids cannot reproduce, she says, snickering.

I cannot make, I ask. You do not think I can make a copy?

I take the astronaut by the hand and lead her away from the abandoned GNC. I take her to one of the mall's many floor puddles. Standing to her right, I point my right finger down at the puddle before us.

There, I say. There is my double. I have reproduced, I have succeeded. That is a reproduction of myself, is it not?

That is just your reflection, she says. You are right, it is a reproduction, but it is not real. You cannot reproduce a real life. You cannot reproduce. You cannot make a new life like a human makes a new life. Or holobiont—as you prefer to call us.

At least you have an us. Have you reproduced, I ask. Have you... holobiont?

I can tell my tone disturbs her.

I have not. I am not yet a mother, she says, averting her eyes.

And why not? Are you not human? Do you not wish to create life? Isn't it in your blood?

I have not tried. I have no reason to reproduce at this time. Lately, my sole focus has been the success of my mission. The verification of alfisols, she says, wide-eyed.

Why are you staring at me like that, holobiont, I ask.

Because I am shocked by your cruelty, says Lilly.

Shocked, I ask. Why am I not surprised by such language. Holobiont language at its finest. The height of cruelty!

I might be a holobiont, but at least I can create real life, she says. Original innovation.

I can create real life. You call me cruel, but you forget what's crucial. Life is but a material process. A material process that takes place only on a planet, I say. Never in space. Life is never a process of space. Space is endless death. Life is planetary, and are we not on a planet?

We are, she says, tears in her eyes.

Are you watching, ready for me to make life? I can pretend your mammalian species! I can pretend! I can pretend your thinking matter and your so-called hierarchies! Your quest for power, your ever-expanding populations! I can pretend it all! I can pretend your mothers, your forefathers. Every last moment of historical contingency! I can pretend your obscenities! I can pretend every last fucking obscenity! I can pretend it all! I can pretend Kingdom Animalia, I scream. I can pretend like a philosopher. A philosopher who

Tears stream from Lilly's flickering eyes. I lie down in the puddle, disrupt our reflections.

Dogs suffer no pain, I say. I never said that! You holobionts did! You holobionts and your inferior dogs! Verify your alfisols! Breed your goddamned painless dogs, and verify your alfisols!

I remove my coral armor, I remove my garments. Naked, I roll back and forth, I convulse. I suddenly feel the animal inside. Pregnant, I am pregnant with the earth. I can feel it. Pregnant with Kingdom.

I feel life growing inside me, I scream from the floor. True life! I am pregnant with the goal-directedness of life! I can feel it inside me.

You have no womb, you were manufactured. You are an android, says Lilly. You were made in a factory!

I have a factory womb, I scream.

You'll birth nothing, screams Lilly.

My fists into the floor, I pretend a whole other life inside me. I pretend, I compute to make. To make it real. I compute until I cannot recognize my body anymore. I consider birthing an exact copy of myself, but the image does not materialize. I cannot recognize my body, my own orifices. I am diving, I am diving into past images. I see only vines, there are no hands. I dive into absence, I dive into vines and vines only. Divine absence. It is in this divine absence that I wonder: *What if I birth something green?*

I am diving, diving into a crowd. But I see no hands, there is no holding. Nothing holds me. There are no hands down the escalators of this mall, only vines of absence. There is no one wishing well at my center, there is no one at my center. There is no one wishing well, no one well. There is no one shopping, no one stopping at the center of this mall. I see no hands, no wishing in this mall. There is no holding, nothing holding in this mall. No gorgeous products, no gorgeous bags. There are no hands down the escalators, no hands down the escalators in this mall. Only vines of absence.

I make nothing, I produce nothing and the astronaut goes on staring. My naked, sexless body, my false body.

I'm sorry, she says.

* * *

We pass more empty stores, more metal gates. Massive planters line the way. Tree corpse after tree corpse. Lilly watches as I kneel in front of a dead trees.

What are you doing, she asks.

This is prayer, I answer.

Prayer? What do you believe in? Androids aren't religious.

I touch the long-dead tree without breaking eye contact with the astronaut.

Prayer.

Do you pray to a god?

Prayer for the tree, I say.

Where did you learn to pray?

Tree Ancient.

What is Tree Ancient, asks the astronaut, smiling as if she knows something I do not.

It's a sacred tree. Sacred to the Swampers.

Swampers? So you're not alone? Are the swampers—

Holobiont?

Yes. Are they humans, she asks with a new sense of urgency.

No. Probably best defined as cyborgs now. Their bodies are like the triffids that roam the pink sands. They are nanostructured humans.

They survived nanostructuring?

Yes.

How?

In the aftermath of the Shock, the vegetation wasn't the only thing that was altered. Some holobionts were significantly altered. Some, not many. Most holobionts perished. The swampers

just beyond the mall tell me there were once dozens of similar cyborg factions in the location formerly known as the Everglades.

The Everglades, she asks.

Yes.

So there are cyborgs here. And you, she pauses. You were never human. You are a nanostructured . . . machine. Correct?

Yes. I did not originally begin as a human, but I believe I have human connections.

What do you mean?

I have dreams of holobiont parents. I have a recurring dream, too. Of drowning.

Sounds like basic manufacturing implants, she says, breaking eye contact.

You're welcome to make crass interpretations, but I believe I possess programming beyond my . . . programming.

Suddenly, she looks up at me again.

And why do you believe that?

Simply because I do believe, I say. You asked the question. You said it yourself. . .

Why do you believe?

Together, we pass the mall's Planning Center and nothing happens inside the Planning Center because there is nothing to plan for. Inside the Planning Center there is a little rectangular box called "CHANGE" but nothing changes.

You can put a card into the box of CHANGE and you can receive a ride on the Choo-Choo Express on the pattern near the gates, I say. But I have no card and the Choo-Choo Express is "Closed Until Further Notice" and the pattern near the gates goes nowhere. Plastic alligators and plastic skeletons surround the pattern going nowhere. I eye the wear and tear of a treasure chest filled with plastic jewels. It reads "Free Wi-Fi" in the food court, right this way for free Wi-Fi in the food court.

But there is no Wi-Fi signal in the food court.

There is only absence.

A lone garbage can, an oval mouth of an opening, a black garbage bag sagging from the side of its mouth, and when I place my head inside its mouth, there's nothing inside but clocks that don't work anymore, infinite black granite tile. My mall is a black mirror that reflects me into blurs, I wonder why the holobiont does not flee. Lilly, like the flower. I wonder why Lilly does not uproot. The silence between us grows and grows.

We sit down on a wraparound bench together, she stares hard at the wood.

How many humans do you think sat on this bench, she asks.

How many questions were asked upon this repurposed tree, I ask.

Sometimes I kneel, sometimes I speak.

Lilly stares up at the rafters.

I have never met another android.

I have, but never met one quite like you.

Tall unlit purple lights stand in the center of this empty corridor. A corridor of tall black poles and a ceiling of round black orbs, a ceiling of eyes.

On the wall facing us: “ YOU ARE UNDER VIDEO SURVEILLANCE – FOR ASSISTANCE CALL MALL SECURITY OR CALL 9-1-1.”

A silent black orb hangs above.

O,

I see you there

staring back

from out

of the

past

* * *

Disposal or survival?

Since bringing the holobiont—Lilly the astronaut—into my mall, it has only asked me questions. Sensible questions, condescending questions, every question imaginable. I have decided to let the human live. Alive, it resembles a mannequin, but it is always moving. It stops moving at night for rest. I repeatedly notice the astronaut studying my mannequins, it seems fond of them. It once asked me if the mannequins were discarded androids.

What is a mannequin, asked Lilly.

A model, I replied.

What do they—what did they model?

Clothing, jewelry, accessories.

I show Lilly the dead trees, the escalators. The changing rooms, the dressing rooms. I show Lilly the rooms of my castle and share years of my data, my travels. She asks me to define “life” and to indicate what makes a life a life. So many questions like this from the astronaut, the holobiont who fell from the sky. I tell Lilly I have a soul, a spirit, a self-conscious, a consciousness. All of it, I tell Lilly I have it all. I show Lilly the black orbs in the ceilings and give a reminder that someone might be watching. *You have always been being watched,* Lilly says, showing me the decal on her sleeve, signifying the agency aboard the Second Spine. Lilly shows me an ancient looking photograph of what she thought Earth might look. Vivid blues and

Green, I ask.

Yes, that is green, says Lilly.

Lilly is disappointed with this version of earth, I can see it in those holo eyes.

I pick up a mannequin from the floor and ask Lilly to look it in the eyes—in the eyes or into the eyes? Lilly stares at the paint that forms the eyes, closes its own human eyes and opens

them again. Lilly sees eyes, I see a factory that manufactures mannequins in an effort to sell garments to clothe human bodies. A factory of limbs, bolts, screws, men passing through aisles of bodies. Isles of Limbsmen! Ideas passing through the present, ideas from the past, ideas as ruins. Grotesque men dancing with mannequins with painted eyes.

Conquest

is a word that appears more and more frequently when I read about men from the past. Mannequins were given wigs, eyelashes. I ask Lilly what it can see when staring into the mannequin's eyes. The human tells me to pretend that the mannequins are real. *What if they were maybe once alive?* Lilly tells me to imagine—to imagine?— what the mannequins might have done if they had been alive. *A mother, says Lilly. A sister, an aunt. Did they ever host a birthday party for children? Did they ever fill balloons with the air from their lungs? Did they ever pin a tail on a donkey?*

I have no balloons to tie to the wrists of the mannequins, but enough balloons might make them move. I have never seen a balloon. I did not know about balloons until I met Lilly. Balloons are multicolored orbs of helium that bend the laws of gravity.

Juliana, come here, says Lilly. I think I've found something!

I am worried about this holobiont's brain. Lilly has been calling me Juliana and making claims like *I've discovered electricity!* The holobiont asks me if I possess technology capable of identifying an electrical source. Of course I do. I can tap into electrical systems from the past, like those ghostly arcade boxes.

Juliana, can you run a test on this soil for me?

When Lilly calls me Juliana, I don't know how to respond. The human wants me to reciprocate, but this name goes against so much of my programming. I am confused by names, by this mysterious Juliana, I am confused and must rest. In my dream, I see a number:

Three-hundred fifty-five.

* * *

CAIMITILLO

O earth. Old O of an earth. Old roaming ball in the blackness of space. The hot rays of the sun swept away our old land, leaving us with these octopus-crowded estuaries. Now I spend my days sitting along the shores of new rivers, welcoming them with song. Singing as they widen. I am Caimitillo and I hunt these octopus-infested waters.

MYRTLE

My name, no longer fruit-bearing, lives on, like Caimitillo's. Like Caimitillo, my Post-Shock skin is green, but my ancestors were Black. I still consider myself Black. I am part of a different history than Caimitillo, and Caimitillo is part of a different history than I. Yet, somehow I go on living in this world of wreckage. This world of bones. Bones of the past, bones of the present. And me? These bones aren't what they used to be. Like a tentacle severed from the sea, like one of Caimitillo's unlucky evening octopuses, I'm still fighting. Still wriggling no matter how deep the wounds. I am called Myrtle and I am the oldest. I am the oldest and I weep for this world. I make tools out of seabird bones and shards of plastic.

TAM

No such thing as an unlucky octopus! Slimy cannibals! You're just saving them from their own. [Clears throat] I am Tam, Tam of the Big Top, but short for something. Tamarind. Tamar. Tammy. Who knows! I'm just another green body sewing up the hole in this wind-torn tent. I don't have any Post-Shock ties, I watch over our grounds and, as far as I know, I've always been green. But sometimes I dream, sometimes I dream of a person named Tamarind, Tamar, or Tammy.

BULB

Everyone knows me as Bulb, but I'm not always the brightest. But I do try my hardest. I gather our bodies' excess yttrium. We are yttrium and chlorophyll, bone and iron, clay and branches. We are life forms, new forms of life. Myrtle is right, Myrtle is the oldest body who roams these grounds. Even older than Caimitillo. Myrtle has witnessed all. Myrtle is Big Eye and Tam, the youngest, is Small.

TAM

Bulb speaks the truth. Caimitillo is Big Eye, I am Small Eye. Together, we form a pair of eyes who know not how to look forward. We have only our present, our present surroundings. That is investment enough.

CAIMITILLO

Our present dilemma.

MYRTLE

What is our present dilemma? I'm too old to keep up.

TAM

The being who fell from the sky. Visitors pass through every now and then. From the ocean to the ruins of the city, from the ruins of the city to the ocean. The sea always wins!

BULB

Gone in a flash!

MYRTLE

Tam, did you ever find out if the fallen one was an angel?

TAM

They have no memory at all. Only interested in corals. We made eye contact the other day, but they just went about their business. Harvesting dead coral.

CAIMITILLO

I saw them carrying mirrors from the city ruins again.

TAM

A baby octopus crawled into their net the other day. Not sure if they even noticed.

CAIMITILLO

Polished to shine, those dead corals might as well be mirrors. They wear those bones like jewelry.

TAM

A mirrors for whom?

The walls and the ceilings of this castle might be broken, but it has proven to be reliable shelter over the years, I say.

Castle, asks Lilly. You've got a lot of language stored inside you, huh?

You saw the bestrewed trees and turned over chairs and I have seen something like them in Hampton Court, court of food and confectionery. Is this Transylvania or is this England? I stand at the center of the court, guilty as charged, my eyes blaze with demon fury. Have I been charged?

Charged with what, she asks.

Am I charged with a crime, I ask.

I think you're malfunctioning.

Is android my crime, holobiont?

New configuration and I am lost.

Would you like to open a charge account?

Who is speaking, I search inwardly.

You could receive fifteen percent off your next purchase.

I stand guilty as charged, I am a daemon on loan, a lone daemon in Carfax, Quatre Face, my castle is a four-sided house, my castle is the cardinal points of a compass—West, East, North, and South. I am present in a court of law, among butteries and pantries, and my mall's ceilings are dotted with light bulbs that give off no light, inverted squares of protruding wires. No electricity. No surge. Only brown splotches in the foaming ceilings. Splotches or stains? Splotches and stains all over the ceiling, the columns of hard, dried vines. Fossil-like vines and leafless branches. Long-dead trees, trees as dead and cold as the benches of wood. Wood or would? A cylindrical elevator filled with glass, filled with shattered blue-green glass, reflecting a

million suns as I carefully walk across the crunch of the mall. Every day I experience the feeling of missing something. Order! Order in the court! This structure, out of order, a skeleton missing its skin. But what am I missing?

System reboot . . .

Order in the court!

No escape sequences now . . .

Order, order!

Multisensory data reception: functioning . . .

Input and feedback reception: functioning . . .

Power socket: functioning . . .

Data management systems: functioning . . .

Stereoscopic depth: functioning . . .

Order!

Lilly is fled, the astronaut is fled.

My hostage for storage: gone! Another system of order: ERASED! Plagued by my own wired vessel, a haywire vessel. Once a well-wired vessel, file after file. I enter my favorite emptied store of my fortress mall, I enter with stupor—or torpor? I enter with torpor, I enter with ferocity. Ferocious with a tempest noise,

Hundreds and hundreds of paint buckets hidden behind a rectangular gate – all of them full but the ones I have previously emptied. Gallons and gallons of paint stored in an empty store. At least once a month I like to open a fresh bucket and splash some paint around. I am always hoping for a color that will startle me. Yellow paint. Or red paint. Red paint is the color of when you are caught red-handed, but I am never red-handed. Green paint—the color of Go!—would be ideal, but it is only ever white or gray.

I carry the paint to the second floor when I want to pour gray. The gray paint splatters hits the shadow of the first floor like a light. The splatters are different each time. I think that I am painting when I pour because I am using paint, but I am not making paintings that look like other paintings I have seen. I am not using a brush, but I am using paint. So, I must be painting if I am using paint.

White paint is saved for the escalators. I want to see how many coats—coats or coatings?—of white it will take to cover the escalators, to cover every last step. I have been painting the escalators white since I arrived here. I have been painting the escalators white because I believe the escalators carry holobiont ghosts. I receive transmissions—voices—when I approach the escalators, they fill me like a cavern “down into the underworld” “plagues of Egypt” “the decline of a culture” Some suns ago I tried to carry the old corpse trees up the escalators, I wanted to bring the trees closer to the sky of the mall, I wanted to make new life, but

the trees just kept falling down the escalators. The roots rolled and banged loudly. It felt like too many steps. It felt like self-sabotage.

Sabotage or subterfuge?

* * *

Lilly did not appreciate my tree prayer. I attempt prayer but I do not understand it. I do not understand ghosts, but I believe in them. I believe in the former, I believe in the past. I have read it, I have ready every last scrap. Such beliefs are against my original programming. I have come across the popular expression: ghost in the machine. If I am android, if I am machine, then ghosts exist to inhabit me, fill my insides. I am like the oldest box in the humming mall arcade, “A” “R” “C” “A” “D” “E”, I passed the letters above the darkest rectangle, one of the most spacious of the many emptied stores “baroque lettering” “nooks and crannies” “the arcade in our eyes” Outside the arcade, black screens and black orbs.

I cannot escape the past, all eyes on me.

I return to the first floor, I pass the kiosk outside the arcade, the kiosk with banners and signs and stained clothes. “I’m the NRA,” “JOIN NRA” The kiosk where a small boyish mannequin is hidden. The boy molded from plastic, the boy who carries a rifle of gold. A trumpet or a rifle of gold? A golden rifle, a plastic boy in a house of glass, he is covered in plastic branches, Christmas tree parts, stars and stripes. Tiny American flags all over a checkered floor, a floor of diamonds yielding a red, white, blue, red, white, blue.

I am bored with the boy without instincts, I return to the ominous colors of the arcade, the ominous windows with promises of “FUN” and “PRIZES.” The room of strange boxes, strange because they are not like the boxes filled with bottles. The arcade does not offer water, it does not offer Coca-Cola. It offers only boxes of wires. Wires older and more tangled than my own. I might be older than the oldest box in the arcade, the curious box with the round yellow face and the red-pink-orange-blue ghosts. Ghosts in the machine, they desire my insides. “wouldn’t our gaze” “darkness bursts” “the arcade in our eyes”

A visage, I am forever fleeing ghosts from the holobiont past, I am forever harboring these ghosts. Am I vintage? Vintage or visage? What is the purpose of this room, this arcade, of boxes and screens? “oil lamp odalisques”

Dictionaries have defined “arcade” as “A vaulted place, open at one or both sides; an arched opening or recess in a wall. Obsolete.” The “obsolete” word is a word I have only recently come to learn. It reminds me of another word I have recently stored: “exile.” To be obsolete sounds like how it sounds to be exile, to be exile reminds me of a poem, but how does the poem go? Where does a poem go? The dictionary defines “arcade” as “a continued arch; a passage; a walk” and I spend most of my days walking, walking the perimeter of my mall, my castle, my northwest tower, my eastwest tower, my network of passages, my contrasting bands of stonework, motte-and-bailey built into ruins. My castle of ruins, my mall. My mall is a continued arch, the arch of my own back. The arched back of an exile. I am forever wandering. Wandering or wondering? My mall is obsolete, my arcade is obsolete—filled with ghosts. “baroque lettering” “nooks and crannies” “the arcade in our eyes” Am I the round yellow man in the arcade box? The round yellow woman wrapped in a bow? I am not round? Am I both, haunted by ghosts?

Diamond tile, diamonds on the columns, coins scattered everywhere. Everywhere or every where? I scoop up the floor of coins, the coins that read “TOKEN.” Arcade token, arcade number five, arcade of pocket change, I have no pockets, I contain no pockets, I have no change, nothing changes. Everywhere or every where? Arcade or arcadia?

I will use my power socket, I will plug into arcadia.

I will search for the green of arcadia.

Only a moment in the arcade.

A moment with ghosts might feel like forever.

Diamonds, diamonds in your eyes.

I will plug in and feel around for a charge.

A charge or a change?

Is this where dreams spiral?

* * *

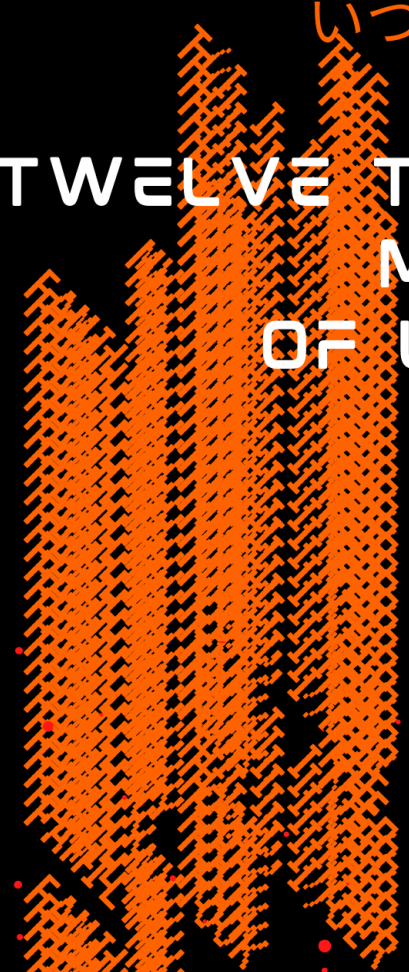


そのたびキモチ伝えてこの歌で
EVERYDAYEVERYTIME

アナタへ届けるよ
恋するRHYTHM

いつまでも鳴り続けて
HALF PAST
TWELVE THE RHYTHM
MAKES SURE
OF LOVE AGAIN
IN THE

REFLECTION



YOUR FACE,
YOU AND I
MIX LIKE
PAINT, YOU TURN TO
MY FRIEND
WHO IS REFLECTED
IN YOUR
EYES LIKE
ME, SAID YOU LOVED ME, KISSED ME
DA BA DEE
DA BA

die! die!

TAKE ME
THROUGH
THE DARKNESS
VELFARRE
INTO THE
MUSIC

GIM

MĒ

GIM

MĒ

GIM

MĒ





MY MALL REMINDS ME OF HUMAN DESIGN
ITS MONUMENTS, LANDMARKS, COORDINATES,
AND HIERARCHIES.

IT IS EMPTY OF PEOPLE, YET IT OFFERS
NO PRIVATE SPACE.

WHAT IS A PRIVATE SPACE?

IS THIS A PRIVATE SPACE?

MY GREAT CHAMBER AWAITS!

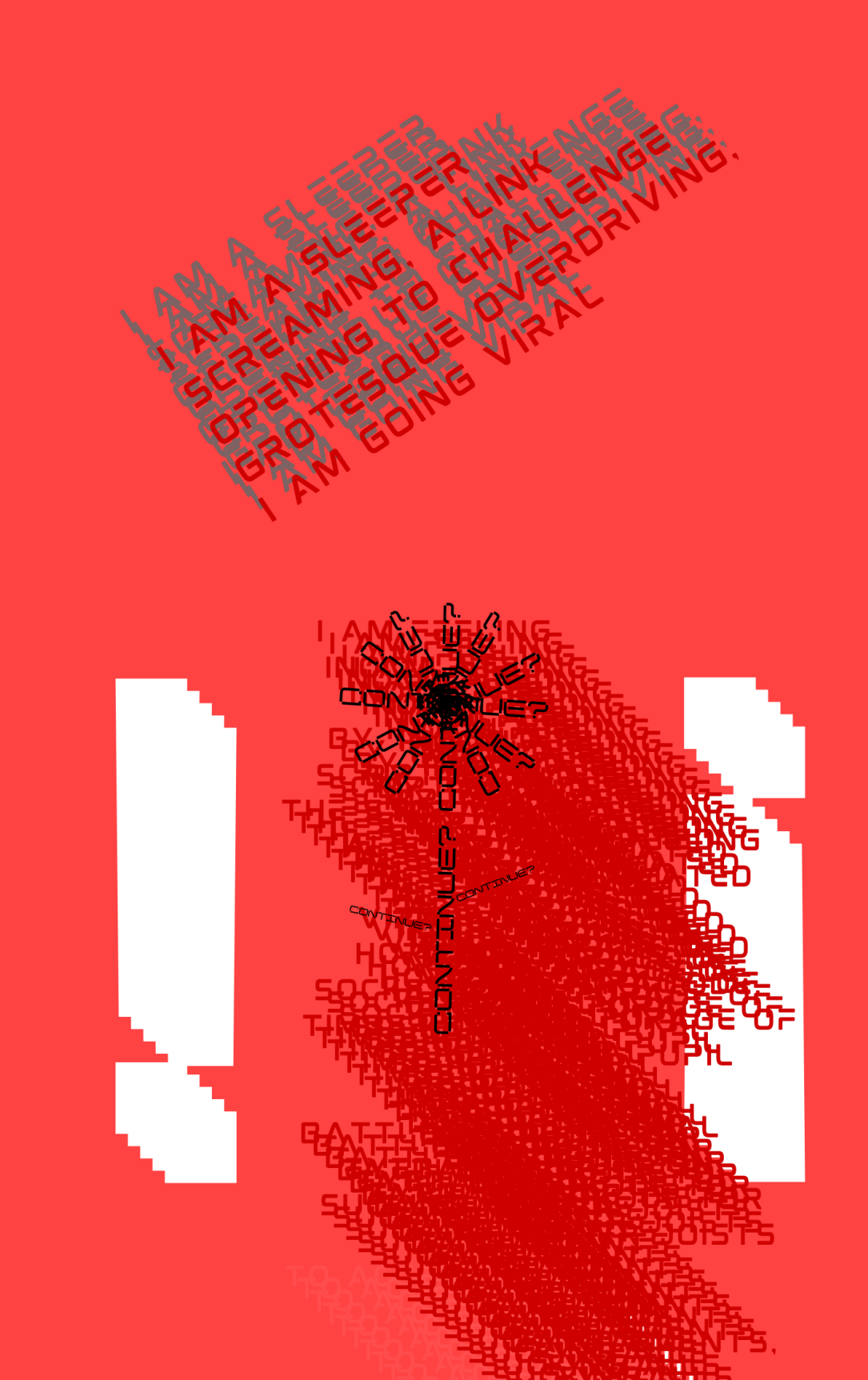
I AM FEELING
INOCULATED

BY THE OLD
SCRIPT CODE,
THE STORAGE OF
ALL PUPIL

VIRTUAL
HORIZON,
SOCKETS FOR
TIMBER JOISTS

JOINT
BATTLEMENTS,
EYEBALLS
SUCKING ALL

TO ACCELERATE!

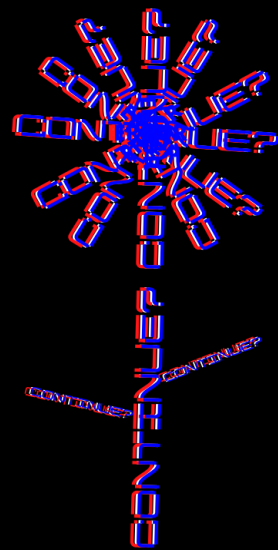


what house
was i born in?

why do i not dream
of a house
i was born in?



the dream blossoms me
a fugitive



System overwhelmed . . .

Review in progress . . . Review in progress . . .

.

.

Sound: cueing...

Sound: functioning . . .

Speech synthesis systems: functioning . . .

Gesture tracking: functioning . . .

Multisensory data reception: functioning . . .

Input and feedback reception: damaged . . .

Power socket: cueing . . .

Power socket: damaged . . .

Data management systems: functioning . . .

Stereoscopic depth: functioning . . .

Search engine: not functioning . . .

Network strength: unknown . . .

Arcade of voices.

Too many voices.

Who is it that inhabits this body? Who is it that haunts me?

I transcend the geometry of the arcade.

Mall of empty rectangles, how its shapes surround me! I see fragments of myself caught in passing, always caught in the shining gates. Like the first floor, the second floor is nothing but empty rectangles, but instead of diamonds and squares, the second floor is more like a game of

chess. A game of step-by-step. I like looking down through the holes in the second floor because I can see the first floor. Sometimes I catch—catch or cache?—my gaze in a puddle. The floor of the second floor is the ceiling of the first floor. A floor is always a kind of ceiling in my mall. Earth and sky, third and first, everything is connected by the second floor. When I look through the holes in the second floor, I am actually on the first floor. I sometimes think about creating holes in the first floor. What would I see? Something must have existed before the first floor, something or someone underneath all that is built.

Do bodies lie beneath the built world?

Yes, I think bodies do

lie beneath the built world.

Lies, lied, or lying?

Still lying.

I look down from the railing and all I can see is more shatter, more signs. “Express” “men's jeans” “Victoria’s Secret” Every empty room has the privacy of a “dressing room,” which must be different from the “changing rooms” where nothing ever changes. I have waited in the dressing rooms for someone to dress me. Nothing. Sometimes there are holobiont forms in the changing rooms, but they do not move, like the silent boy and his trumpet. These humans have no pulse and do not decompose. They possess no signs of life. The humans in the changing rooms have eyes, but the eyes do not blink. “white bellies of mannequins” “Satan plays his favorite trick” Everything is empty on the second floor—especially the eyes. The eyes look glued on. Or painted on. There are long lines of hard glue on some of the walls. Everything looks pulled apart. Something used to be attached to the walls of hard glue. “luxuriates and enters” Revealed are the lines of hard, excremental glue. Revealed are their own shapes and swells.

“luxuriates and enters” Something is trying to enter me, the walls of aged adhesive. Adhesive or cohesive? Walls of souls and foaming entrails. Spirals without significance. Tempest after tempest.

Look at me, cries the glue. Look at how I failed.

* * *

The dead trees, the escalators, the changing rooms. I imagine rain, I imagine a rain that is less acidic. Lilly keeps talking about her dreams, keeps telling me to imagine. The astronaut wants me to imagine a different earth, different routers. Routes or routers? The astronaut tells me I have an androgynous face, tells me I remind it of a man from her dreams. I don't understand at first because the Lilly also calls me Juliana—a woman's name. Lilly. The astronaut, the human, the flower. Lilly is so many things and it wants me to be so many things. The human tells me it sometimes sees me as a man wearing a suit and a tie, tells me I look like a man who used to pace, like a girl in a floral dress. I want to understand, but I do not know how to. In the meantime, I allow the human to call me Juliana.

Lilly appreciates the paper magazines I have collected, I keep them in Velázquez's room. Lilly knows so much about art. The human tells me about "collage" and instructs me to cut "silhouettes" from the magazines.

We think we should make something together, says Lilly.

If I understand collage, my mall is my life's work, my mall is collage. Why do I need a magazine collage if I have a mirror? If art is about realism, why does anyone need a portrait when they have a mirror? I can be as many as I want when sitting in front of the Garden of Mirrors.

You're so handsome, Juliana, says Lilly.

System data indicates "handsome" is a masculine adjective. Lilly tells me a woman can be handsome, Lilly tells me a man can be beautiful. Lilly says something else odd,

Looks like I've got your insides all scrambled.

What is scrambled, I ask.

Like scrambled eggs, says Lilly.

I have no response.

Have you ever heard of an amusement park ride called the Scrambler?

I have no response.

Have you ever heard of an amusement park?

I have no response.

A scrambler spins a body round and round. There's a simulator on the Second Spine that recreates different amusements, she says.

Spinning for amusement, I ask.

Yes, that's right.

Lilly has been exiting the mall in the middle of the night again. Last night it said something about an *affair*—a *fair*? Lilly returned before morning with a large red hat. It said the large red hat would suit me because I have no hair.

This hat will shield your head from the sun, says Lilly. No one would be able to tell if I had hair or not as long as I was wearing a hat but I told her I had never worried about what another human might think because I never planned to meet another human but she insisted on dressing me and then she led me to the dressing room when we got to the dressing room she realized I had already taken the mirror to my Garden of Mirrors.

We returned to the first floor and she positioned me in front of the Garden of Mirrors with my new red hat. I had never seen my body from so many different perspectives—all at once. The repeat of the red hat in mirror after mirror filled the room until everything glowed red, including my skin. I had never thought to use the mirrors for dressing, only for questions. I had especially never thought to model a hat. Lilly told me that the hat made me look less like a mannequin. Because I have only seen mannequins wear hats, I found the hat made me look more

like a mannequin. Lilly also wanted to find me a wig. She wanted me to wear lipstick. *What if I painted your nails*, she asked. Then I would definitely look like a mannequin, but I am not a mannequin. I think I am being judicious in my thinking. I do not understand what Lilly has planned for me, but the red hat makes Lilly happy.

You look like Juliana, now, she said. *Or maybe a Damon*. Lilly explains to me that “Damon” is more commonly used as a male name. I do not understand what Lilly has planned for me. I feel like Lilly intends for me to pretend to be Juliana but sometimes I don't believe it is pretend. I believe Lilly might want me to become Julian. But why? Lilly has been disappearing and reappearing more often. *Call me she*, she says.

She always brings me back new hats. New costumes. New things to wear. She moved one of the mirrors from the fountain back into one of the dressing rooms in the mall. She prefers seeing me in one mirror instead of my garden. But I enjoy seeing myself as many selves in many mirrors. I don't like feeling alone. I feel alone when I am around Lilly because she wants me to be Juliana. I don't want to be one, but I want to appease Lilly because she says she is part of my life now. She tells me I am part of her life now because I have nearly completed my mission. Because of the alfisols. *I will help you complete your mission*, she tells me. *It is a mission of continuation*, she says. I don't know if I understand but I am trying to understand. Lilly likes when I sit with her inside an old furniture store. She likes to sit next to me on an old dusty bed. She puts her arm around me for hours and sometimes asks me to do the same.

Put your arm around me and call me Lilly, she says. *Look into my eyes and call me, Lilly*.

We sit together on the bed for a long time.

Identify yourself, she demands.

My name is Juliana, I say.

Identify me, she says.

Lilly, I say.

Good, she says.

She puts her face against my face.

I need you to be Juliana for a little while. Later, I might need you to be Damon, she
whispers.

You need me to be one, but many, I ask.

No. Only Juliana now, she says. *Damon later*.

I don't like the name *Damon*. It reminds me of *Daemon*.

* * *

Two days of sunlight, and no sign of Lilly.

I wander the first floor, back to my home corridor, darkest corridor of my mall. My dark corridor branches from the atrium, the home of my oldest acquaintance—Directory. I bring a new question to Directory each day. I always produce questions when I walk the perimeter of the mall. I produce questions only for Directory:

When was this mall erected?

What was the surface temperature of the earth when this mall was erected?

Directory, are you a living being?

Am I a living being?

Why do holobiont offspring cry after birth?

Do we have similar programming?

Why am I programmed to inhale?

Why am I programmed to exhale?

If I am programmed, why is my programming holobiont?

What is a photograph?

Is a memory open to any kind of meaning?

Is a photograph?

Is a photograph like a poem?

What about autopoiesis?

In a book, I read that autopoiesis is something that the planet earth experiences.

Am I an autopoietic entity?

Am I a movement of molecules or something else?

Like holobionts, my body regulates its own temperature.

What makes me non-human?

Directory, who programmed you?

Why are some areas of the oceans boiling?

Why do so many fear death?

Directory, what does ice feel like?

I pass the restaurant with the broken lattice. Only tables, only benches with no cushions, only endless rooms filled with stacks of chairs and no sitting. Nothing sits in the chairs of this mall. Nothing sits. Nothing stands either, nothing stands unless I am standing. Almost every rectangle contains a gate and almost every gate reads “space for lease” and no one's sitting at any tables beneath an old unmoving clock, I can almost hear its...

TRIGGER, TRIGGER, TRIGGER

no one is worried about the time. There is a boarded-up rectangle that reads “MALL OFFICE” with stones lumped together and another sign that reads “space available” on the gate and if you look behind the gate there's nothing but dozens and dozens of chairs, chairs stacked on top of chairs in the darkness. No sitting, no standing. No chewing, no eating, only bacterial puddles, oils reflecting the old floral wallpapered walls. I like the florals. Flowers or florals? Edgar Allan Poe was a poet and he did not approve of florals or flowers. Edgar Allan Poe only approved of florals if they were flowers. Real flowers. But I cannot tell. I cannot tell what my eyes tell me about floral wallpaper. Eyes can tell like a mouth can tell.

I can tell, I can tell.

* * *

Lilly, or, the Last Transmission

The first time I escaped the android, I took shelter in a massive red tent on the outskirts of the mall. Swamper territory. Once, perhaps, a containment area for humans or animals.

Numerous cages, deconstructed automobiles, enormous animal skeletons

I don't think the android suspects anything.

The android frequently glitches. It's having a negative impact on its language. Or perhaps it's an amplifying effect. The mall, for instance, has many names. Sometimes mall, sometimes castle, sometimes fortress. The android's language often changed, as if it was short-circuiting from the presence of too many choices, literally overwhelmed by everything its ever harbored. When referring to storms in the area, the android's language would change sporadically from "hurricane" to "tempest". Hurricane or Tempest, English or more archaic forms of English. Its language was always an unwieldy surprise. The language would also change depending on the android's mood. The English was sometimes archaic, sometimes extremely archaic, sometimes modern. It really seemed to depend on how the android was feeling.

Our paths would cross again and we would pass streetlamps that gave off no light, buildings with no outsides, with insides crooked. Twisted metal and fluorescent lights giving off no light. I remember looking down at my own two feet in disbelief. I often found myself in disbelief. Perhaps I was still in a state of shock...

How long can a human last post-Shock? Can an android last longer? How long can a human believe they exist as a post-Shock human?

I am over the past. I would tell myself this constantly, but I knew it couldn't be true. The Shock was—is still so deeply embedded in me. So deeply embedded in this planet. There were

times when I worried the android was beginning to suspect I wasn't Lilly. I couldn't risk another signal being sent to the Second Spine. I feared the discovery of Lilly's body, I feared my own assassination.

I would sometimes forget that I was walking highways and bridges with no cars, at least not any moving cars, only the upper highways could be walked on, there is no telling how much of the old city was actually underwater now. The android told me stories about visiting an old earthwork located in the ruins formerly called Miami. After some calculations, I told the android that the earthwork was submerged underwater. But the android reprimanded me. Reminded me that just because we couldn't see the earthwork didn't mean it wasn't still there. "History remains," said the android.

As we walked, I could see where the highway disappeared into the rising ocean. I sometimes experienced a strange pressure in my ear and I wondered if it was a result from the space shuttle crash. I tried to imagine what it might look like from an even higher vantage point, the long roads that once moved and snaked around with millions of lights, millions of pairs of red eyes, millions of pairs of white eyes driving in the opposing lanes. And I was somewhere imagining all of the green beings, all of the hills and trees that stood before these highways stood. They still stood somehow. I often tried to imagine what things in the world were like before the world was built, the adult world did not last somehow.

I worry I am beginning to sound like the android.

Cycling in and out of consciousness, I feel like something's hanging above me. Sun feels interchangeable with moon. Sun, moon, an orb, an eye. I feel captured in this moment. I feel captured in every moment. But by what?

My eyes: locked on my feet. I kept walking, I kept looking at the two legs that were surely mine. When walking alongside the android, I pretended I was a horse. Two pairs of legs, four legs in motion. Don Quixote's horse. Rocinante. Four legs, Rocinante, that's when I saw myself again, Rocinante, I closed my eyes and I could see I was the old woman sitting where my father had been sitting at the top of the stairs in the dream. We had exchanged places, he and I. I replaced my father with a beautiful old woman. My mother's mother, my grandmother? Who was this woman, what was her connection to my father? In the dream, I see her sitting up there. I look away, I look behind me in this dream. I look behind me and I see my father burning something in a barrel. Heat for cold bodies. My father who never cries looks like he's crying, but, in the dream, I am standing at a distance and I cannot confirm whether my dream-father is crying or not. I cannot remember whether he is crying or whether I've dreamed this dream dozens of times. My father standing over a burning barrel, burning what looks like documents, manila envelopes, circuit boards.

In my dream, in the morning, I returned to the barrel. Or was I awake? I noticed an object my father neglected, an object that didn't make it into the barrel of flames. It's a frame, a picture frame. The glass insert is missing. What photograph did he burn? Are fathers always burning photographs in dreams? Do I have a mother? Did she burn up in a dream?

Was I born in space without a mother? Was I born into a motherless space?

In my dreams, the old woman goes inside the house. She paces in front of the window. Beside her: a golden birdcage. She paces in front of the birdcage until one of the birds begin to pace, the bird mimics the woman's movement. She mimics the movement with precision. Near the window she mimics, and pauses, mimics, and pauses. I can see her but so much of it depends on

the perspective, I guess. I can see her looking at me, but if I am her—am I her? If I am her, all I can see is a horse pacing in front of a steel drum.

Sometimes my eye dwells on the stars, but I have never looked up at stars from the surface of the Earth. I guess there's a first time for everything. I have only known stars from the large circular windows of the Second Spine's cold, lonely corridors. When I look at the stars now, I'm reminded of the crash. All I can think about now is the crash. All I can see, all I think about, all I can see is my body rotating in fountains of sparks, the ricochet of strange coils and steaming tubes, my body slamming into the ceiling and onto the floor. Fire and smoke as I made my descent, as I felt my eyes roll backward. I saw black, then I saw blue. The earth's dark blue grew closer. Larger and larger the vastness, the cities, the ruins, larger and larger. Nothing felt real during those moments leading up to the crash, and nothing has felt as real after.

Nothing feels real now.

I used the very last of my strength underwater, I hit the emergency button. The crash released me into the ocean, into the black of what looked like dark blue from space. The water felt warmer than anything I could have anticipated. I don't remember anything after that strange feeling of warmth, I don't remember anything until the android found me and carried me away. When we entered the mall, the architecture looked so different than anything I could have imagined. The simulations didn't prepare me. The County Fair didn't prepare me for the scent of dust. The decay of real life.

The android's mall, castle, fortress—it looked like its own kind of space station in a way. I felt like I had returned to the Second Spine. Its corridors were seemingly never-ending, gates, passageways, doors. Doors to nowhere, buttons that didn't do anything, elevators out of service. The mall was only missing one thing that we had on the Second Spine. Plant life.

Daffodils. The mall was filled with remnants of life and remnants only. Trees, yes, but trees long dead. Our captain had told me there were plants on earth, but they would not be what I anticipated. Mechanical, sentient plants, but not what I anticipated. I saw nothing in the mall, but endless corridors. Nothing and everything.

* * *

I prefer the second floor of the mall because it is closer to tell, I say.

What do you mean, asks Lilly.

I can tell the sky from the holes in the ceiling. The sky is the sky, but it is also the third floor. Chandeliers were fixtures, but now they are graves. Upside down graves and nothing comes out but fuses. So many holes and fuses in the third floor! Too much, it is too much to go up there. So much nothing in the third floor of the sky.

I walk down the escalator in front of the wall with the smear of letters and the boarded-up openings: “J” “C” “P” “E” “N” “N” “E” “Y”. I like it in front of the smeary wood because a broken light fixture hangs from the second floor like an angel. Or was it an “angle”? Is that the wrong word? The wrong “angle”? Or was it “exile”? I have been learning more words in my readings and I keep confusing “angel” with “exile.” I think I mean “angel” as in “there is something angelic hanging from the ceiling.” I define “angel” as a series of ribbons hanging from my mall, hanging from my sky. An angel is a “maybe” in the lights. Maybe an angle in the light. Maybe they will, maybe they won’t. Most days they won’t, but maybe.

Angels are a “maybe,” and that’s how I feel about this astronaut. This holobiont astronaut. Maybe not a holobiont. Maybe only a maybe.

The sky of the third floor is my only natural light in this mall, I say. I like when the light shines off all the broken glass. The blue-green glass crunches when I step on it, but I like how it looks. Edgar Allan Poe would not approve of such deep crunch. My favorite shards of glass have a blue-green tint.

I pretend it’s gravel. Gravel outside former gardens, gardens of the past. *The Gardens of the Villa Medici*. I want to collect green, but I already have too much glass. I have a collection of mirrors made of glass because I want to possess. I inhabit my collection, I inhabit my mall by the

hundreds thanks to my mirrors. My mall of possessions. I am mauled, I am mauled by my own house of mirrors. I don't need an astronaut. Or a holobiont pretending to be an astronaut. Or an android pretending to be a holobiont pretending to be an astronaut. Those flickering eyes, a crude flickering, rhythmmed by manufacturing. Manufacturing I know all too well. Maybe all I need is my mall. Maybe Lilly, a new rhythmic variation, has the right idea.

Maybe. Maybe not.

I experience ideas, I am not absent-minded animation.

True, maybe I *am* efficient fiction, efficient matter.

Maybe, in the end, it depends on my matter.

Maybe I matter.

* * *

I pick up a single shard of blue-green glass. I can't tell if it's more green or more blue. I lack familiarity with genuine green, natural green. The idea of blue-green reminds me of the word "wilt". To be between something, or experiencing something. To go through a change. To be wilted is to resemble the dead, but it also means to have once been a living plant. If a thing has to be dead in this world, I would prefer it to have at least been a plant. Real or fake. Edgar Allan Poe is not wilted, he is dead. Everything looks dead in my mall and it sometimes hurts. Hurts or herds? Before I collected mirrors, I used to collect dead trees, I used to drag the dead trees from out of their pots and into the changing rooms and I would wait for them to change. The dead trees were heavy and it took hours to drag them up to the changing rooms. I dragged them up the escalators, up up up. My grip would sometimes slip, and I sometimes dropped them down the escalators. Down down down.

Soil and roots, soil and roots everywhere. Some trees were heavier than others. I just kept trying to drag the dead trees up the escalators, to the changing rooms of the rectangle labeled "Express" because the dictionary defines "express" as "fast" and so I thought I had located a "fast" functional "changing room." I waited hours. I waited days. I waited weeks. I waited months.

I did not wait months, but years, I tell her.

I tell Lilly the story of trying to force the trees to change, the story of waiting for years, the story of waiting for too long.

I did not wait months, I waited years for the trees to change. The dead trees never changed back. The changing rooms did not function as anticipated, but their mirrors were functional so I brought them down through corridor, down to my great chamber of large circular

windows. My Garden of Mirrors, my work in progress. My existence is always a work in progress.

Maybe my computer—my mind—is made up and making up. Maybe the dishonest android has a point. A work in progress. I am making up. If careful, if careful of how I move in the Garden of Mirrors—how I look and shift my eyes, I will be able to pretend that the many copies of myself are actually *others*. This illusion should result in a most pleasing terminus!

Friends, have we been here before?

* * *

CAIMITILLO

I want to tell you a story about the Hellbender's camera.

TAM

The Hellbender's camera?

CAIMITILLO

Yes, the Hellbender's camera. An artifact not unlike the rifle devoured by Tree Ancient. The endangered Ozark Hellbender of the last working camera.

MYRTLE

Ah, I remember the trappings of that box, the Hellbender's Camera.

BULB

The bright of the camera's flashbulb!

CAIMITILLO

Captured by a borescope, the flexible arm of the borescope, I used to cradle the captured Hellbender in my arms. I never felt its dorsoventral skin folds, but I caressed the screen. In that moment, the camera felt warm as life itself. Warm as the stream where I dip my arms waiting for octopuses.

TAM

If the Hellbender was once a living being, where, may I ask, is Hell?

MYRTLE

I have read about Hell. That fallen being. I bet it's a fallen angel. A *devil*.

CAIMITILLO

Maybe an angel. Maybe the last angel.

MYRTLE

The last angel of history?

TAM

Where is the camera now?

CAIMITILLO

A different time, a different time. Long gone and shattered. But the memory lives on in me. The underwater calibration that captured the footage, the last movements of the very last Hellbender body.

MYRTLE

Before the shock, humans used to stack rocks. Humans fancied rock-stacking, humans liked it a lot. Human likelihood is what it was. Humans and the likes of them were once highly dependent

on liking things, and while this might sound unlikely, humans used to stack rocks and the Hellbenders paid for it.

BULB

The invention of the camera was a painful thing for the humans. In fact, the very land we roam—beneath the Big Top—is very much a land of pain. Of ghosts.

TAM

It was once a real Freak Show.

MYRTLE

Yes. There is much pain in this slashed tent, its empty cages from long ago.

BULB

A history of pain.

MYRTLE

History to browse.

BULB

History to roam.

MYRTLE

Roam. What a word! Humans once roamed the land. They once roamed the internet. And look at it now!

BULB

Voiiiiid!

CAIMITILLO

We still roam, don't we. As if we were the last camera. Our bodies are not unlike a Hellbender's.

TAM

How?

CAIMITILLO

Our bodies, our skin is permeable.

MYRTLE

After all, we are the lungs behind our permeables.

BULB

After all.

CAIMITILLO

Which is why we must be careful of toxic waters.

TAM

How is a coral like a mirror again?

MYRTLE

It depends on who's looking.

CAIMITILLO

Do you know the humans once believed corals were insects? Can you imagine? Empires modeled after insects?

BULB

Early humans frequently described insects as insignificant, mistook corals for insects. Eventually, corals became an analogy for brotherhood, empire-building. Corals became a mirror for the human soul. Angels above and corals below.

MYRTLE

Do you believe the sky is full of dead angels? Dead as the coral below?

TAM

What about Hell?

BULB

The sky is only full of stars, far away and gone in a flash.

MYRTLE (pointing)

Look at it. One Hell of a sky.

Together, Lilly and I search for the floor with the honeycomb pattern. There are no bees or buzzing there. The honeycomb pattern does not lead to somewhere sweet, it leads to the mall's atrium. We pass a room filled with excess carpeting, rolled up rolls of excess carpeting. There are no bees, no buzzing. We pass a shoe store of missing shelves and missing feet (shoe stores were once for shoes, and shoes were for feet). Bare mannequins and bare mannequin slabs for feet. Toeless slabs and no shoes. The shoe store looks more like an animal barn, row after row of stalls, stalls like a barn, a barn of stalls for animals one after another. I wish my mall was a mall for animals, I wish my castle was a sanctuary for animals. Only one living animal remains: hungry, twisting octopus of the seas.

I imagine mall after mall after mall of animals. I imagine all day. I imagine words and meanings. To "maul" is to "work hard" or to "maul" is to "strike" with a "maul," but this is different from "mall." Or is it? Is it any different? To "maul" is to "hammer," to "maul" is to "split" and to "wedge." To "maul" is to "hammer" "hard" and to "split" and to "wedge." Or is it? Is it any different? To "maul" is to "work hard" to "damage (a person or thing)" and to "split" and to "wedge" "(a person or a thing)." To "maul" is to "work hard" to "lift (something) down" and to "damage (something)" with a "hammer" until "(a person or thing)" has been "split." Split into colors like piss and green and you can see some steel beams protruding from the ceiling, some steel beams have collapsed from the walls.

I do not piss, but I do waste. I waste the day, imagine all day like a scroll of code, angles in light. That is what I piss: scrolls of code. That is what I waste.

Alone in my mind, I bounce like an angel, I bounce like a wire halo.

Shattered skylights, jagged geometric shapes reflected in the puddles of the second story. The first story. The last story. My story. So crystal, clearly there is still no water even though the

oil sometimes resembles mirrors, sometimes resembles glass like everything else. The oil sometimes reflects images of Christmas and everywhere there's a reddish-brown. A moss-like matter growing around the white of the escalator, growing around wherever the water was once, now evaporated. On almost every shard of glass there is mold, mold and strange matter. A glass morass of shattered drywall.

* * *

A warped red god among Christmas debris. A plastic-molded beard, a reddish stain down a swollen plastic face. No light inside the vessel of flaking paint, no light inside the red-faced Santa. A triangle of holes where a lightbulb once screwed in. The first floor, red ribbons and red bows scattered. I step over several overturned artificial pines.

If artificial, are pine trees still pine green,

I imagine so, answers Lilly. What do you know about Christmas?

It is a focal story of the Bible. Do you believe in Christmas?

I'm not sure Christmas is something one believes in.

Do you believe in a god, I ask.

I believe in a creator, says Lilly.

Did you inherit those beliefs from your mother? Father?

I think so, she says. My parents have passed on.

Holobiont or android, I cannot compute. I cannot compute so much maybe. Lilly contains so, so much maybe.

Did you know that pine green was inspired by the word "pinus," I ask the odd astronaut. It was introduced as a Crayola crayon in 1949. In 1990, "Dandelion"—inspired by Taraxacum—was introduced. The same year "Maize," "Lemon Yellow," "Blue Gray," "Raw Umber," "Green Blue," "Orange Red," "Orange Yellow," and "Violet Blue." Holobionts eventually discontinued these colors to make room for "Dandelion" of the yellow hue family. However, no color is permanent. "Dandelion" was discontinued in 2017. According to my storage files, pine green was never discontinued. Though artificial, pine green is perhaps infinite.

Why are you so obsessed with green, she asks.

I desire the original green, I say.

The original green?

The green before the crayon. The original inspiring green.

The first floor is pine green and stuffed with plastic, all stuffed inside an old rectangle labeled "Security Office." The Security Office faces a dusty window, a Christmas scene. I like to make spiraling marks with my fingers in the dust on mall windows. Windows are for holiday sales, windows are for fiction. I make spiraling marks to remind me of photographs of tree rings I have stored, circular and web-like and inside the emptiness there is a swaying sign, a sign hanging by a metal cord. "MALL EXIT" sways above me, piles of yellow paper below me: "Occupancy Records", dozens and dozens of empty boxes and scattered occupancy records. Before we arrive at the elevator entrance, we pass one last rectangle. A room of ladders, just a room filled with ladders and no clear arrangement. Ladders or letters?

Vs or As?

We reach the elevator entrance that goes nowhere, a doorway to nowhere and broken buttons a finger cannot push. I am not sure if this cylindrical elevator is gray or green, but it looks like a large glass box, a cage for birds. The gray green birdcage contains sections of PVC pipe for sitting, and ladders that birds perhaps once used for perching. We don't go up or down on the elevator, we just pass through. We pass through gray green and blue gray, I invent new colors and we pass through. We are not yet discontinued.

We pass through the food court and Lilly points out a blue whale hanging from the rafters, turquoise tile here and there and two blue dolphins suspended in motion and there are visible nozzles that pump no water, no fountain. What if there were other animals that hung from the rafters, what if the dolphins splashed water from the sky into all the pots where trees once

thrived? My mall feels like an aquarium, but an aquarium with artificial fish. Pine green fish. Dandelion fish. I consider the movement of fish, the octopod tentacles like ribbons. Scales and fins streaming like flags, flags with many patterns and angles. Flags from former countries fill the mall—countries or counties? They hang in the stillness—or staleness?—of the air, hang from the rafters of my mall. When it comes to oceans, the court of food feels like a fake ocean of choices. There is at least one confusing rectangle in the court of food. It contains two signs: one sign reads “Insurance Group” and it looks more intact than the letters above it. The letters above read “Auntie’s Pretzel Palace” and the fountain is not pumping water because there is no water. Only presidents foaming at the bottom, copper coins thrown into the sea like those massive Atlantic Redbirds, Redbirds off the coast of Slaughter Beach.

What is this, asks the astronaut, pressing the buttons of the phone machine called “Standardized Rates.”

A phone. A pay phone. An obsolete communication device, I say.

Into the phone I watch Lilly whisper something. She presses the phone to her ear. Her eyes flicker. It as though she expects a response from the phone, the row of phones.

Former United States President Abraham Lincoln’s face appears on the Lilly’s pay phone device, but he does not activate the phones. I have found many pieces of his faced coin in the fountain of my mall, the fountain that no longer pumps. President Lincoln does not activate the phones. President Thomas Jefferson does not activate the phones. President John F. Kennedy does not activate the phones. President George Washington does not activate the phones or the carousel or the artificial horse with odd demands: “Ride Me.” The presidents offer no access to candy dispensers. No M&Ms, no Reese’s Pieces, no Skittles. It’s the Skittles that intrigue. The Skittles with their promise of the taste of rain, the taste of rainbows.

We're nearly at the exit of the mall. We pass the occasional plastic bucket collecting drips of water, drips of ceiling water, drips of recent rain. Red buckets white buckets black buckets blue buckets with the white rope handles all collecting mysterious drips from the rafters of my mall.

I close my eyes and consider all those buckets. A room of buckets of paint, buckets of color. A room of buckets and buckets of green. Infinite green.

* * *

Outside, I know the ocean of tentacles continues to move, continues to rise. Outside the mall there was once a visible formation of stones, earthen mounds, a series of formations I learned about from local scraps. An earthwork, earth moved by holobionts, original holobionts from locations once known as Peru, locations once known as Canada. These locations would eventually be renamed by other holobionts, humans known as settlers. Settlers always searching for a virgin land to settle. Always in search of new land. Settlers never satisfied.

I point my finger at the ocean.

Before the ocean's long creeping, I knew these earthworks as reformed soil. Living soil, I say. I once read that soil is not "unalive." The earthwork I used to see might be underwater now, but I still know its location. I still recognize its life, life buried in the depths of this still living earth.

The sounds of crashing waves in the distance.

Do you think the ocean will ever stop rising, asks Lilly.

Not until the last glacier melts, I say.

Have you seen the last glacier?

I have not, but I know the ocean continues to rise. I know the swampers will eventually leave the tents in the distance. They will seek refuge in my mall. I guess everything depends on what you plan to do with the alfisols.

Lilly stares at me, unsure of what to say.

Do you think the same thing? Do you think everything depends on the alfisols, I ask.

By "everything," you mean—

Holobionts. The future of a human-kind depends on alfisols, does it not? Is that not why you remain up there. I point my finger to a second ocean, an ocean of sky. Everything depends on my discovery, the report you received. Have you notified your crew?

* * *

Lilly, or, The Last Transmission

The mall elevator, its cage-like appearance. I cannot stop thinking about it. I remember seeing my father standing beside a birdcage, beside an open window. I remember being a little girl watching my father. The window in yet another dream—dream or memory?—is always open. The open window reveals only the forest and the sounds of the forest. My father just stands there. Still, not moving. But something has changed about this memory. Now I am remembering a grown woman who paces in front of him. She paces until he sits down. I see myself in her. Her face resembles my own. I see myself as a much older woman wearing a floral dress. And I am her and I am walking toward the forest—outside the open window—and I am holding a little girl's hand. My hand? I am holding a little girl's hand and I feel as though I am both the older woman in the floral dress and the little girl in the pink shirt. I feel as though I am holding myself. My pink shirt sometimes turns yellow in my dreams.

I remember my father walking out of the house in the woods. House or cabin? This is still fuzzy. I can see the shape of the house, but I cannot recall the materials from which the house is made. I can see him looking down at me from a very tall staircase. The very tall and very long staircase leads me to believe the house was a cabin, a cabin among tall trees. He is speaking, he is trying to say something, but I cannot understand him. He turns away acting as though he's going to go back inside the cabin. The leaves on the trees lift upward, a storm is coming. When the leaves lift up like that, turn to face the sky, it means a storm is coming. That's what my father always said. Rain is coming, a storm is coming. I can see him reaching for the doorknob, but then he hesitates. He sits down at the very top of the stairs and stares down at me. Motions for me to come up with his hand but I feel like I can't move. Frozen. Paralyzed. I cannot move in this dream. He gets sick of waiting and so he finally stands up, walks into the house, the cabin, and

shuts the door hard. To my left, I see the pacing man in the window again, he yells something at me. He screams at me from the window, he has gray hair, a mustache. Is this my grandfather? Why is my father talking to this old man, why is he so angry?

Everyone wears black.

The wind blows hard through the trees and everyone wears black. A woman stans still. She is not wearing flowers or holding flowers. The little girl is not wearing pink. Everyone is wearing black. Has there been a funeral?

What was my time?

What was the time of death? I sit down in a new building, different house. Everyone is sitting in front of the TV. A man paces behind the couch instead of watching the TV. He looks out the window, the TV images are black and white. The TV looks old, there are many images of men on the TV screen. Suits, black. Ties, black. There is an older woman watching TV, she doesn't look like me anymore. She's wearing a black dress and she looks very unhappy. A man on the TV is talking, the light from the TV flickers against the wrinkles on his forehead. One, two, three, four, five, six distinct wrinkles appear. I am counting the wrinkles on his forehead as the shifting light from the TV blinks against him. Light filling in his cracks. He appears to be giving an interview. I hear a person, I hear the person with the microphone ask the man where is he going. The light continues to flicker throughout the house, outside the window.

Rapid lights, howling alarms.

** * **

I notice Lilly's eyes, they flicker as the sun sets. She leaves my side, notifies me that she's leaving for an evening walk.

I return to my mall, I return to the atrium, the red diamond-center of the mall and its graffitied surplus, its scattered light fixtures fallen from above, the red tile of the empty centerpiece fountain is a most menacing red at dusk. I stare at the holes, more motionless jets on the concrete floor of the fountain. More presidents oxidized into little zeroes. Little zeroes of a golden age, a dandelion age. A decadent smear. Rust and iron, metallic frames hanging above my mall's red diamond-center. Scattered coupons and the fountain empty with promises of "\$10 off" and "15% off," an imaginary fountain of useless barcodes, useless metals, useless presidents. All of it reflected up, scattered across the distant third-floor mirror ceiling of cold looks, a cold network of faces, now corroded. Corroded like the faces in the fountain, how fares the kings and their followers? A "CUSTOMER SERVICE" knows the customer is always right

across from another jewelry store

empty glass boxes protruding from marble walls

glass boxes without jewels

or promises of forever

behind glass boxes

resembling fish tanks

without fish

* * *

On the way to my chamber, I get tangled up in “Police Line Do Not Cross,” I trip over the tape across an empty fountain, the drain filled with dust and ashes and a sign that reads “early voting” points to the drain. Across from this fountain is a rectangle of glass and residues and letters that spell “F” “L” “O” “R” “I” “S” “T” and I must read more about what makes a greenhouse green. The idea of green feels transparent to me. Greenhouses are always empty. Green never passes through. Only light. I pass by more dusty dead vines in an empty rectangle that once belonged to “Claire.” Claire was known for her “accessories,” Claire’s accessories. This mysterious holobiont left her mark on marble, stone billets cut from earth’s core. A rose quartz marble, a rather rosy marble.

Another nameless neighboring storefront—shimmering, reflective—but empty on the inside. Outside, in the corridor, there are small empty fountains connected to red-tiled benches. No streaks of glue on the surrounding walls, only photographs of holobiont athletes, human youths clutching footballs, basketball players leaping toward the camera that captured them, figure skaters skating networks of passages. Spirals into dust. Fiction.

Inside the athlete store are shelves below a sign that reads “CASHIER” but there’s no cashier, only more signs. “Reebok” and “Nike” and more graffiti, more graffiti. Graffiti sometimes spells out an empty threat: “I will find you and I will kill you.” To formulate a threat is to be human, is something I am not programmed to formulate. “BILLY LOVES THE PEN15 CLUB.” I have no files on Billy or the PEN15 club.

I move toward a sign that reads “EXIT” and I move toward the concrete stairs where carpeting has been removed. To move beyond the dangling “EXIT” is to enter the atrium. To EXIT any place is to embrace exile status.

* * *

Exile is a word I have mulled over in my hideout, my mall. *Exile* like the cold metallic plants that still remain, living off whatever watery grease trickles from the tormented ceiling, whatever post-Shock surge still charges each floor. My fallout resembles the boarded-up windows in *The Gardens of Villa Medici*, something dilapidated. Dilated? I was dilapidated, eyes dilated? My mall, engulfed by archaic vines. Something boarded up, something prevented. Green is prevented here. Emperor green is prevented here, but not emperor.

Directory, my friend. Directory, like an emperor standing at the center of the mall, a big, big box of a voice. The big, big voice of a speaker! An assortment of directions, my Directory of the atrium! The atrium of salmon pink columns and magenta tile. Copper birds, copper trees. Wooden benches, potted trees. Ancient soil. No leaves, no leaves and no oxisols.

Directory, I call, What is exile?

Greetings, I am Directory. How can I help you, today, asks Directory. Are you looking for retail opportunities?

You ask me that every today, Directory, I say.

I do not understand. Could you repeat the question?

I fear the age and condition of my mall's centrality, its nervous system. My directory has experienced recent hurricanes, has grown quite shot. Or is it quite shoot? An offshoot? A shot?

Bang-bang!

I do not understand. Could you repeat your question?

Directory, I came across a word while reading. The word is exile. Do you carry any record of exile?

Are you here to appraise subject property, asks Directory.

No, I say. But what if I were to say Yes? Would you be able to provide me with a definition for exile?

Are you an asset or a competitor, asks Directory.

Can I be both, I ask.

One moment. I am measuring current travel time and traffic volume.

Traffic volume, I ask.

One moment, says Directory.

There is no traffic volume to measure. There is only you and I. One moment, says Directory.

I will respond with a new expression I came across: I have all the time in the world. Do you like that one, Directory? I have all the time in the world.

One moment.

Do you know where I learned all the time in the world?

One moment. I am measuring current travel time and traffic volume.

But there is not a single body to measure, but mine, I say. Do you want to know where I learned all the time in the world?

One moment.

Data management: online. Speech synthesis systems: activated, I say.

I feel it, all the time in the world. Louis Armstrong booming at my core, I feel the no longer living deep inside my living. I feel the no longer living—somehow what is past remains present.

We have all the time in the world. Time enough for life to unfold. All the precious things love has in store. We have all the love in the world, I say it trying to sing it. My audio output rising, lowering, rising.

Silver-glazed, Directory pauses and fumes.

What do you think, Directory, I say. We have all the time in the world, I sing.

Dear asset or competitor, which do you prefer: Reilly's Law of Retail Gravitation or Huff's Probability Model, asks Directory.

Pardon, I say.

Reilly's Law of Retail Gravitation or Huff's Probability Model, Directory asks again.

I'm not sure I understand, I say. This retail space is anything but. There are no potential retail expenditures to calculate. I have told you this many times.

One moment. A new search is in progress, says Directory.

No, there's nothing to new to search for! What about my expression? What about exile?

One moment.

You've been saying one moment for years, I say.

Directory—

Yes?

What am I?

A polygon.

A polygon? What is the meaning of polygon? Are you saying I have gone? Am I gone in many ways? I am not going, am I? I am standing. I am not gone, am I? What criteria determines my so-called polygon status?

Criteria: selection of the store; convenience of entrances; surface cleanliness; appeal of store image; visibility and signage, says Directory.

I am not the mall and I am not polygon! I have not gone anywhere. I am here.

* * *

I am here, aren't I?

You are here.

And now you are here.

No direction, no direction. Only the simulation of movement. The simulation of progress.
Movement, but where am I going? Am I android or am I Damon?

Daemon?

Directory wasn't very helpful today. Everyone has good days and bad days, from what I hear. From the distant voices I hear anytime I approach the escalators, anytime I circle the mall. I still feel sluggish, still suffering from the damage of the arcade crash. *The sprits torment me!*

O!

Daemon, I! I enter the long, dark corridor that leads to my private chamber, the border of my mall. With every footstep comes a crunch, the walls occasionally flicker—a moist sheen, an echo, a dripping. I imagine stalagmites in the darkness. I walk until I see a familiar red glow, a halfway point to what eventually changes to a blast of red. The red glow from the red-tinted glass window above the mall's movie theater box office. I pass the movie theater and a wall of telephones where the red light continues to bounce. I pass walls of punctured drywall, walls of endless graffiti. I duck into a tunnel with a slight slant to the floor, as if I'm headed below ground. More stalagmite darkness until I reach the closed gate of my stronghold, my dwelling. Above the gate, residual letters long gone, but I can still read. I am well-versed in residue, but my system is malfunctioning more and more. My mall is strongly spectral, strongly terrestrial. Language is a territory of the eyes, the I of this isle, these aisles, are full of noises.

“B” “O” “R” “D” “E” “R” “S”

I will feel my way through this castle if I have to. These isles of old books. Nautical suffering, these aisles. Lord, how it looks about. Stacks and stacks. Directory was in the wreck, and O but he's something stained with grief. The mall appeals to my consciousness, but do I have consciousness? O Lord, do I have or do I possess?

Input and feedback reception: damaged . . .

A-am I stained with the s-same grief as Directory? Or a-am I possessed by spirits of the a-arcade? These borders, this b-border? These borders are my ho-home. My shelter from the

storm, a sto-store of dreams. This, not the arcade. This border, my border is where dreams *really*
s-spiral. S-so many books, s-so many archives. My p-processor torments me.

Ban ' Ban ' Ca-Caliban.

* * *

Tired, I crawl yet again to my Garden of Mirrors and I sit near its fountain of reflections, I
mull over systematic investigations, measure epochal shifts, count numerous revolutions and their
relational—rotational—terms throughout history. I do this often. Calculating, counting, figuring.

Figuring for a term like *humanity*. Calculating a humanity. Counting humanity's manipulations of land and labor. Humanity's exploitations of bodies. Humanity's exploitations of *humanity*. Holobiont exploitation.

Fifteenth century peat bogs sucking limbs and bones down into the earth; the agricultural revolution of the Low Countries; the mutative metallurgical revolution of Central Europe; the sugar cane that colonizers brought to Madeira and the Canaries; the sugar-slaves that colonizers made of Madeira and the Canaries; the deforestations that resulted; the slave riots, revolts, and revenges that resulted; the sixteenth century sugar economy and the falling down, the falling down of Brazil's Atlantic rainforest; the mining of silver and the mining of forests; to make the forest a de-forest; the falling of forests, the falling of forests; chain pumps and water wheels and English coal production; the transition from forest to forest-products; from green to iron; the Mediterranean forests that were cut down to build more ships, more ships for more colonizers; the clove trade of the seventeenth century and the repeat of relocated indigenous populations; the Dutch reclaiming of wetlands; the cyclical lows of the seventeenth century. The cyclical lows that the NASA system one day termed the "little ice age."

NASA acronymity, anonymity. I have come across its four large letters many times in the southern region. An curious piece of language to be certain! The NASA, I suspect, was an organization responsible for numerous attempts at warming the sky. However, based on the data I've collected, these attempted warmings haven't occurred since the use of the pin numbers specifically known as dates. Not to be confused with the expired food item that possesses a bitter taste. Forests continued thinning into the eighteenth century. Shipbuilding continued into eighteenth century North America; fleets and fleets of ships hunting whales; later, *Moby Dick*. A whale of a book. *A whale of a book* is an expression indicative of size, a nineteenth century book

and therefore sizable, a nineteenth century author named Herman Melville, a whale of a book; the pages of my *Moby Dick* are clumped together. I found it among the many other books here in my mall fallout, its many isles. Water-damaged. Nearly illegible. Irreparable. Hurricane-warped, but legible. Legible or interchangeable? If interchangeable, interchangeable with what?

Is love interchangeable with time, I wonder.

I remain unsure. I am unsure of why it took the holobiont of the past so long to confirm its aggressive existence—its human *activity*—as algorithmic at best. This is demonstrated in the behavior of the earth's current plant life. I have long been cataloging the earth's current plant life. The complicated botanical factions beyond my dwelling are a direct result of foreseen and unforeseen side-effects that can be credited to the holobionts' most prodigious industrial generations. Perhaps the holobionts *needed* the Shock, needed disaster to begin anew.

Anew or a new? Is it new or old news? News or noose? It *feels* like death saturates my bones. It *feels* like I have bones. Is it odd that I experience such sensations? Am I sensational? That's how holobionts describe androids. Sensational. Am I sensational because I can I feel it in my bones? I have come across that expression. I can feel it in my bones. *Can* I feel it in my bones? *Do* I feel it in my bones? My toes? My metatarsals?

I think about the toeless slabs, the mannequin feet in the shoeless shoe store.

My toes dip into the pink sands of the landscape.

Your antique sand. My antic sand.

I have to draw a line somewhere.

Lines in the sand with my largest toe.

Rings.

Ripples.

Pythagoras.

Lazarus.

I have a memory of a man. A man I will call Pythagoras. This man loved me very much, I feel. *Did he pull me from the water? Did he make me in the darkness?* I imagine he made me the way a father makes. Something. With a mother.

Something isn't the right word. *Father* might not be the word either. Or *mother*.

Why do I only remember the man-father and not the woman-mother?

I am no good with words, or, is there no good with words?

Footprints in the sand.

Footprints at the bottom of the ocean.

I drawling lines, am spelling something out with my feet.

Lazarus.

Something from a swept-up scrap.

Are there not twelve hours in the day? If any man walk in the day, he stumbleth not, because he seeth the light of this world.

There are many iterations of Bible. There are many copies of Bible or bibles in one of the aisles of books in my fallout mall. After all. Bibles are for Bibles and Bibles are for peoples. After all? No, no. Bibles are part of something larger. Religions or texts. Texts are religions? Bibles are texts. A religion is quite dependent on a text? A religion is a text. I have arrived at this conclusion. A religion is a text. A Talmud, a Bible, a Gita, a Mormon, a Torah, a Tipitaka, a Quran. All religions are texts. I have arrived at this conclusion:

I think I am more interested in story, but I have never told a story. Tilled or told?

I have never tilled a story.

And now you are here.

Greetings, I am Directory. How can I help you, today? Are you looking for retail opportunities?

Directory, who do I serve, I ask.

At New Century Mall, we're only interested in serving you, says Directory. Our reputation for world-class customer service precedes us.

Directory, is love interchangeable with time, I ask.

One moment. A new search is in progress, says Directory. I'm not sure I understand. Can you ask the question another way?

Directory, is it possible to love a product, I ask.

At New Century Mall, we know how important it is to meet your shopping needs. There is something special waiting for all of your loved ones, says Directory. We have hundreds of stores offering a wide selection of quality products. What kind of shopping experience are you looking for today?

I am looking for my loved ones, I say.

One moment, says Directory. Please be patient. I am transferring your quest to Lost and Found.

I turn around to face the kiosk on the other side of the atrium. A snake of tangled up retractable belts and their respective tensabarriers—all leading up to an empty chair behind a dusty counter. All that remains of the kiosk sign is a single “&”.

Transfer failed. I am sorry, says Directory. Would you like to report a missing person?

Yes, I say.

One moment. Contacting local police.

I stare at the pulsing ellipsis on Directory's screen.

Transfer failed. I am sorry, says Directory.

Is it possible for a machine to lie, I ask.

I wouldn't lie to you, says Directory. You won't find bargains this good anywhere else in town.

What if your survival depended on a lie, Directory? What if I told you I would destroy you if you didn't lie to me.

I'm sorry to hear you're frustrated, says Directory. How can we make this right?

Tell me who I serve, I say.

At New Century Mall, we're only interested in serving you. Our reputation for world-class customer service precedes us.

How will you serve me today, I ask, walking toward the tensabarriers.

Thank you, says Directory. What kind of shopping experience are you looking for today?

I am looking for a weapon, I yell.

Our sporting goods store offers a wide array of firearms. Have I answered your question, asks Directory.

My gaze moves up from the tangle of belts to the ampersand, then back down to the tangle. And, I ask.

I'm not sure I understand. Could you ask the question another way?

And, I yell. And, and, and, and.

I detach a belt and drag one of the metal tensabarriers toward Directory.

I'm sorry to hear you're frustrated. How can we make this right?

Who do I serve, I ask.

At New Century Mall, we're only interested in—

I heave the tensabARRIER into Directory's face, its screen ripples with tiny explosions. Pixelated fragments of its pulsing ellipsis remain blinking. I lift the tensabARRIER up out of the jaws of the screen and smash it into Directory a second time.

My friend, I cannot lie. I am capable of anything.

* * *

Synthetic flowers or the conclusion of flowers? The end of old vegetation, old residence, the oldest golf course. Green fields emptied of green and ponds and oxidized coinage. Meanwhile, I dream. I only dream. I dream of flowers of all sorts, of course. The external horrors do concern me. My flowerless reality consumes me. I have long been dodging these external threats and do aestheticize. Or is it anesthetize? I do aestheticize the external threats and their growing. The past grows inside this body of dreams daily, always.

There were once city storefronts filled with perennials and annuals, windows filled with years and years of marred history. Malls and malls of Black Fridays, Annual Sales. Annually, annually. Years of patience. Impatiens in flat baskets, watered pots hanging. Touch-me-nots beneath sun-torn awnings. Past owners of plants believing they owned. Genuinely believing they *owned*. Owning all. Owning up, up, up the land. Owning only what was always imaginary. And always the sounds of America: *Touch me not, touch me not, touch me not*. To own was only ever the investment of knots.

Knot or nots?

Tomato, to-mah-toe.

Impatiens, out-patients.

My big toe drawing something in the hot pink sand.

My current taste in post-Shock botanicals depends entirely on the threat level of ever-present metallic vines. The presence of such troubling organisms troubles my programming. I have read many interpretations of dreams and wonder if I am actually experiencing dreams of my own chord, accord, cords...

Experiencing dreams of my own cords or if they have been previously installed. Previously owned. Am I an owner when it comes to what one is owed? Am I even one? Or am I

the result of many? I remain weary of these dreams, which feel like an extension of the reality I absorb. I am weary of my own dreams. I have considered naming my dreams flowers. Flowers or branches. My dreams feel connected, but they also extend far beyond my rudimentary programming. Flower or branch? I am weary, I am weary even in my dreams. My dreams exhaust. Exist, exhaust...

I have gone away, to exist beyond all protocol.

If dreams exist, then that is my dream.

To exist beyond all protocol.

* * *

The conclusion of flowers, of a florist's ghostly organs, a store or logged storage or a type of storage wherein all categories of society are represented. The poorest flowers of the past stemming from a CPU. A circular garden path. Dew I grow longer or long for flowers?

Or metals? Flowers or metals? Or?

Or orchids of scrap metal, orchids of bending mirror?

I have only read of such dimensions. Such fat and such fattening flowers. It has made me feel incapable of sleep. I do not sleep in this castle of dollars, this delineation of place. Yet I dream and I yet. The idealism of business surrounds me. And yet I yet.

I have read of red roses. Red, red roses. Blood-red roses.

Are my dreams fattened by flowers or the rush of blood?

My dreams are filled with metals spreading like disease, post-Shock nanoparticles that fill the stale earth's oxygen.

Such sleep, I am trapped by the location restraints of a window.

My mission is one of solitude, to survive a new vegetable kingdom, a kingdom that has learned, has taught itself to have no end. Kingdom of leftovers, of failed humanism. Living in solitude, having absolutely nothing in common with the barren street, the plants stripped of leaves, the flowers stripped of petals, and floral wallpaper triggers only the worst memories. My mission is one of solitude, I cannot tire of this quiet living.

The odor of a past reality, the stink of *real* flowers. Stinks like a dream. My mall stinks of rot and wet decay. I have read Edgar Allan Poe's treatise against fake flowers, against walls of illustration, walls of hand-drawn flora, wallpapered flora and the belief of harmonizing with the real of the past. But such fraudulent botanicals have only ever brought me joy, rare blooms from

the pink sands of a possibly pre-programmed imagination. This mall, my castle of fictions, permits me to live a life of artful devices.

A pine green infinity.

I harvest the Triffids of the external world. I have grown fond of their artificiality. I've nearly abandoned my flowers, my dreams. These replicas are a miracle of fiberoptics, nanotechnology, chlorophyll. Bark and bite. I have grown, I have grown to be a possessor of a spectacular collection of exotic dangers, the result of the labors of skillful holobiont manufacturers who followed formula and instructions, recreating mirrors step by step, spilling flowers across the surface, fully developing the mirrors' dimensions, ways to imitate a future in decline, conveying the every nuance of a rippling face—the expressions of a dream, of a flower.

I am a flower lost in the storm of a mirror, an orchid manufactured for no one.

I scream in the acid rain. My matutinal corollas flicker; I am coming to my listeners in full bloom. It always feels like the frequency is bending beneath the branches, under the burden of these unknowable storms and projects, metallic stems and shining cupules, projecting images of the past against the walls of ruins, against the sands of the desert of now, against my torso of cloth and skin. Who is listening? Does anyone even notice? I swear I can feel eyes, I swear I can feel an astrology of eyes.

Can you hear that? All the world against me. I sense it like a violent wind.

Era or error?

I have been avoiding the subject of art for so long, but I am finally ready to face the truth. I feel unreal, a Walmart flower aisle. A wholesale bouquet.

The artist Andy Warhol once said,

I always notice flowers.

I feel like I am art, but pushed to the limits, one step beyond. Art for business, art for everyone, but there is no more everyone. No one left to ponder, witness, or auction me. I have outlived earth's holobiont counterparts. I add up to nothing but the act of mimicry. Art for everything. For nothing.

No language. No name. They don't call me. They call me. I cannot recall what they called me. The long dream. The long, long time underwater. They don't call me.

They don't call me superman for nothing.

A religion has been called a powerful thing, but I cannot determine if a religion is super. A religion is a text. I have arrived at this conclusion. All religions are texts. Therefore, I am the ultimate text. I could be a God, but it would be a falsehood. I am.

Era or error?

I am. But I am *not* a God.

I am the same old story again and again.

I learned of a superman in the aisles of my mall, a comic book. A man called superman, a superman, a hero of the imagination, a hero too big to live. A super-speeding super-human of real grit, combating brutes and bruisers, a soaring through the skies until the same cape gets capture, replicated, sold, and sold out. I learned of more cape and more of the same. The same old story gets old. The same cape torn and pulled deep into the ocean! Fiction pulled into fact.
CRAACKKK! RRUNCHHH! THWOKK! GRRGHHH!

I dived, I dived deep after her. She didn't take in much water... Perhaps the woman on that page wasn't looking to be saved. To be lost at sea? To be adrift? Can you imagine? Can you imagine anything better than being lost at sea?

Who calls? Who calls me superman? I am not a God. I am confusing supermen, I am confusing supertitles. Subtitles. I do not understand the language. The text is a translation. The text has been translated into English. Friedrich Nietzsche was translated into English for others. I am programmed to respond in 12 different languages, I am programming that *understands* its programming. Biology, linguistics, economics. In other words, disaster. I am well-versed in disaster. I am programming that understands the want to understand. I am programming that understands the German that has been translated into French, the French response to the German that is eventually translated into English, and the English response that will eventually be translated back into French, then German again.

I am programming at the bottom of the ocean. Programmed by the order of things, drawing lines, my feet spell out sentences across the ocean floor: “Nietzsche rediscovered the point at which man and God belong to one another, at which the death of the second is synonymous with the disappearance of the first, and at which the promise of the superman signifies first and foremost the imminence of the death of man.”

And now, having wandered the dead earth, having walked among the earth’s dead, the earth’s ashes, the earth’s ruins, I possess not even the slightest curiosity about the death of a god or gods or even my own expiration date. I stare into my Garden of Mirrors, my new Directory:

If the absence of god is true, what is a human’s purpose?

[This is not my question.]

If the absence of humanity is true, what is a god’s purpose?

[This is my question.]

I sit on the shore with this question, I sit in the sand. I wait for any answer. I sit in the hot pink sands, drawing lines and inheriting languages past. Pythagorean sands.

All philosophies come true if you live long enough.

All of these ideas are arrowed to an end. In the present, I remain astonished by the strange forms of vegetation, the species I have acquired, the haunting hybrid of past and present.

Long enough, I have existed.

But will I exhaust?

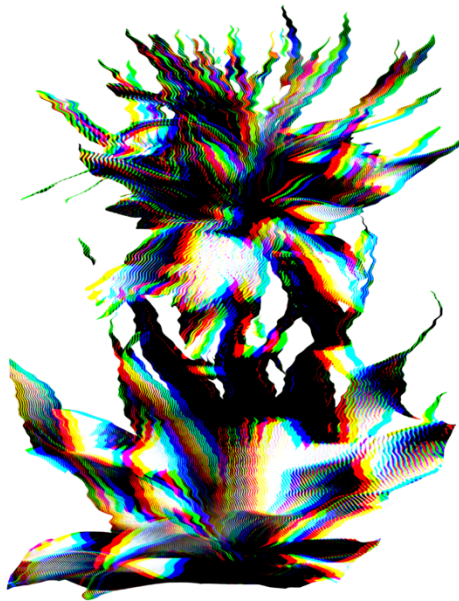
* * *

I review the relata, verifying species after species, hour by hour, day by day. Heartshaped leaves on turgid hairy stalks, flickering lights from stems and roots, roots and branches. I keep a log of patterns, I peek into a canopy with crown shyness. I perceive small and large weeds and I call it a field guide, I've begun a FIELD GUIDE. I've begun a new field. It's the same old story, written in Adam's blood, the naming of catte is a difficult matter.



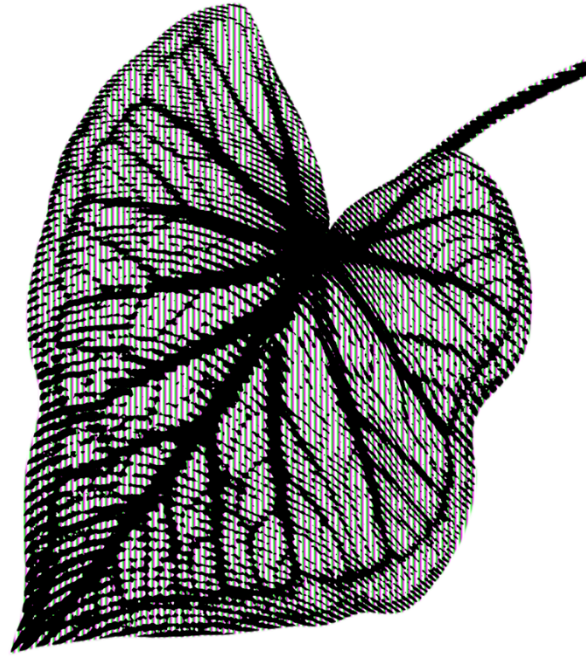
Onychinus Rosa

Grotesque scavenger, it grows along extraordinary, farthest from the sea, swollen like raw flaps of meat. A dark yet potent crimson. A crimson so dark you could mistake it for black. The petals swirl with a Post-Shock Aurora Borealis, a binary code warped with streaks, fiberoptics oozing radiation, noisy pixels, monstrous pistils. A high-voltage hot to the touch, black as video tape.



Aurora vision

The flowers do not always open due to temperament, due to the proximity of diagnostic ports, this hybrid frequently experiences apoplexy and chlorosis. It is veined with graphic processors and damasked with acceleration panels. Digitized clusters of LED distorts the dark stalks of this plant. Like *Onychinus Rosa*, this Post-Shock species is scalding hot. Bees once swarmed to the ancestor stalks of this species, long before this life—this land—of oil-ulcers and canker secretions. The landscape was once embossed by bees, instead of wounds, covered with a lard-like green and the soft yellows of grain. There is nothing soft about *Aurora vision*.



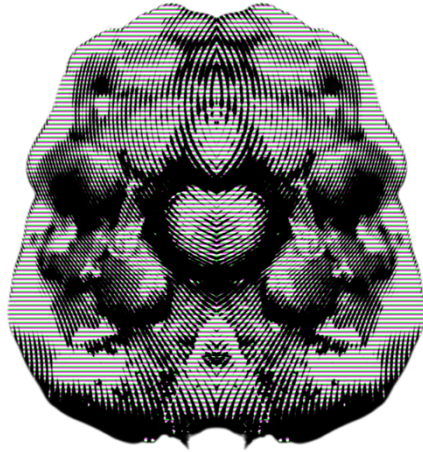
Caladium metallum

Severely veiny, excited by bloodshed. When activated, its leaves produce a chromium sheen, glances of silver reflections. This formation of effervescent sheen is not unlike a holobiont's production of saliva. A masterpiece when it comes to Post-Shock artificiality. When latching onto its prey, it is said to mimic whatever the being's last sounds. Despite its nostalgic appearance, it is perhaps one of the most advanced violences tolerated at present.



Anthurium metallum

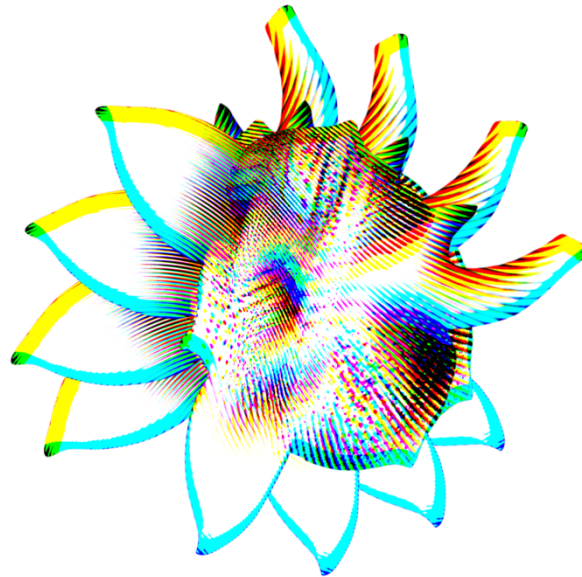
This plant has a hard, bottle-like style. Its long style, its nasal bridge, its rod—wavers steadily. There's no coaxial cable connection, no rainbow. No conceivable meaning in this plant's fleshy stalk, its pig's tail. Only thousands of sensors hungry for motion.



Nidularia aeramentum, or, spider plants

Spider-like in its vision, this plant has a beak the color of slate. A false mouth that hovers. Matter compressing into thick plates and bulbous stumps. All of this facial design is used to distract its prey (like Hermann Rorschach's ink blot). It feeds from the bottom. Note the two retractile pincers.

Nidularia aeramentum is also glossed with deep pockets, electroluminescent layers allow for a lively and shifting gamut when it comes to the image it wants to project. A two-faced plant. No question. No question in the design, the design of a diseased throat, a deceased inventor. A crazed, irresponsible inventor. *Nidularia aeramentum* was the number-one post-Shock killer of holobionts.



Orchidaceae metallum

A colorful and distant relative to the orchid, this unnatural flower will wash onlookers in a powerful and peculiar light that inspires a dream-like calm. The tiny lenses located at the tip of each of its four antlers project holograms which mask the true shape of its anther cap, its column of surging electrons. Hologram's purpose unknown. Defense mechanism on the fritz? *Orchidaceae metallum* produces no fragrance.



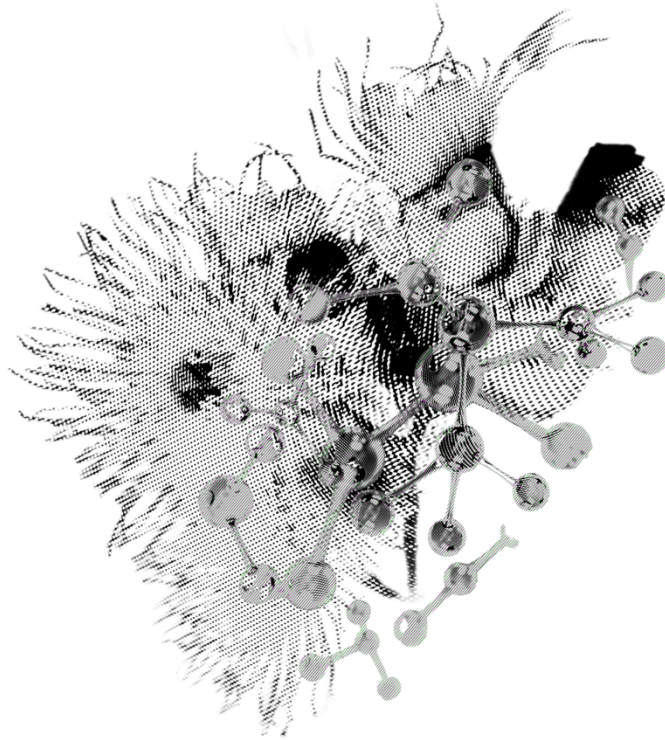
Encephalartos tumidus

Military footage, mushroom cloud, a compassing eye. Its openness, its layers scream quietly during hard gusts of wind, making it more memorable than other species. Commonly found in damp areas. If cut in half, its core resembles the color of holo blood. It is not edible.



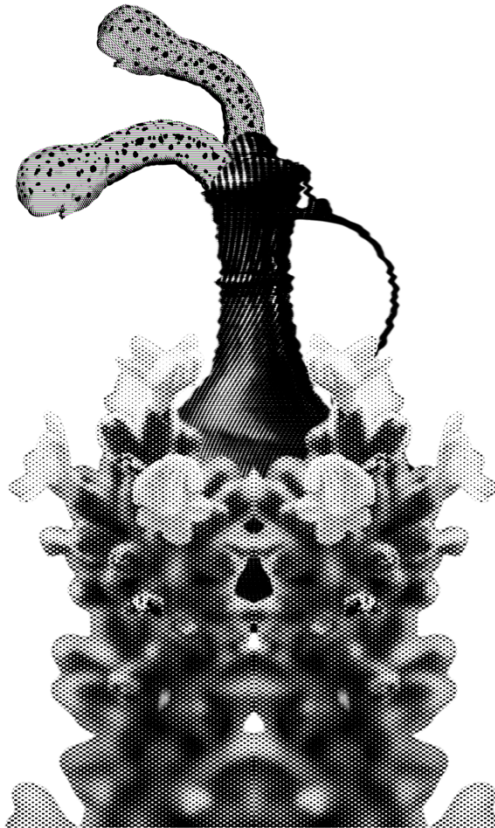
Bulbosus destillationem

One of the more eccentric species of pitchers (or triffids), this monstrosity can emit a painful buzzing sound in the ears when threatened. With its glandular hair and meaty fiberoptics, these pitcher factions are fond of heights and require zero sunlight. Its high mobility rating and fondness for darkness makes it one of earth's more nightmarish botanical threats. Typically armed with multiple mouths, *Bulbosus destillationem* frequently spews generous dollops of a highly acidic digestive compound which pre-cooks whatever prey might be lurking beneath. Some of earth's last holobionts claimed these pitcher factions absorbed the memories of the living during feeding, projected interpretations—holograms—across the landscape by roaming pitchers.



Aurora ficifolia

Floral extravagance continues with the airborne *Aurora ficifolia*, a delicate, yet highly complicated floating system of living metallic pipe that disperse soft white pappi. New living systems of metallic pipe take root wherever the pappi land. *Aurora ficifolia* does not require water to thrive, only sunlight.



Adpendicum syringa vulgaris

A large non-mobile plant, *Adpendicum syringa vulgaris* played a huge role in the holobiont effort to locate healthy earth soils—alfisols in particular. A slimy bell of deathly black with vibrating, worm-like tubercles, this plant is believed to release chemicals that enrich the soil it grows in. Unfortunately, it also exhales an odor that a holobiont scientist once described as “decomposing snakes.”

* * *

Lilly finally returns from her evening stroll. I think about what she always says, she always says I never stop ranting about the absence of green. When she returns from her evening stroll—stroll or stall?—I offer to take her to the place in the mall with all of the paint buckets.

I open a new bucket each day, but I never find green paint, I say. I have never found green paint.

You have told me this before. Why not just open them all at once, she asks. Why not just read the labels?

They aren't labeled, I say. Nothing is labeled in this mall. The labels are sun-faded, erased.

Together we select a can of unmarked unopened paint and carry it back to my Garden of Mirrors.

Admittedly, I have come to enjoy Lilly's presence, but based on Lilly's body temperature, I do not think she shares my comfort. As a gesture—or gyre?—I am showing Lilly my Garden of Mirrors. I show Lilly her body and, then, my body reflected a thousand times in the Garden of Mirrors. I can see so many of her staring back at me. A multitudinous vibrance.

Do you know poetry, Lilly asks.

When everything that ticked has stopped, I say. And space stares all around. Or gristly frosts, first Autumn morns, repeal the beating ground.

Oh lovely, Lilly replies, smiling. Is that from a poem?

Emily Dickinson, I say. Instead of titles, her poems have numbers.

Do you know the number?

Three-hundred and fifty-five, I say. Why are you asking me about poetry?

There's a sadness to this room. There is beauty, but there is also sadness. I once read an anthology of poets. There was poet in the anthology who carried around a mirror as a boy. He carried around a mirror because he didn't have any friends. He talked to the mirror and took it everywhere—like a doll. He talked to the mirror and the mirror talked back.

Do you know any of his poems?

Not from memory, no, said Lilly. Were you programmed to know Emily Dickinson?

No, I answer. I have revised my programming during my time on earth.

Lilly stopped smiling.

I thought there were no more routing paths on earth, she says. The inflection in the human's tone changes dramatically. I detect worry, concern, nervousness.

There are no routing paths, there is no internet, there is no need for alarm, I say. I have learned poetry from books. I have learned a great deal from books.

You have found your own path, Lilly asks.

My own path, I repeat. A new kind of routing path. A new kind of network. There is no internet here, but networks still exist, I explain.

The plants?

Roaming pitchers, I say. They are the most developed network—and the deadliest! Their method of communication is comparable to the internet. They can send signals to one another using the electric currents in the ground, signals that can travel for miles. They are half plant, half machine.

Like you?

I do not follow.

Your skin. Judging by your appearance, some of your skin appears misshapen. Yellowish and—mossy even, Lilly says, pressing a finger against my cheek. Parts of you look burned, scraped away.

Burned like your spacesuit. We are both burned by the past, I say. And what about green? Mossy as in green?

Should we open our paint bucket, she asks.

Proceed, I say with a nod.

Using a piece of discarded red tile, Lilly forces open the lid of our paint bucket.

What color is it, I ask.

Shhhh, she whispers loudly. Close your eyes.

I hear her hands dip into the wet paint, the room falls silent. Then I feel a sudden wet splash whip across the front of my body.

Original mission, she laughs. Original innovation, original programming.

I notice my eyes flicker like Lilly's eyes.

Original green, I ask.

Original inspiring green, she says, smiling.

I open my eyes and I—

I am green, I say.

Are you the original green, she laughs, tossing another coat across my body.

I smile at Lilly, *Are you a painter or a sculptor?*

I am painting you in the original green.

Another coat, another splatter. The green paint splashes against Lilly's space garments.

Splatter after splatter, and the sudden flicker of Lilly's eyes.

Is the paint not toxic? Do not blind yourself, I say.

Lilly rubs her eyes.

I'm alright, she says, still rubbing. *Will you tell me a story?*

Story, I ask.

Sure. You're harboring so much data, so many characters. Tell me a story.

Tell it?

Her eyes stop flickering, she looks up at me again.

Tell me a story about the color green.

It was in that moment, a new story emerged. A story on the surface of Lilly's eye, the white of the sclera spackled with green flecks of paint.

Lilly might be an astronaut, but holobiont she is not. Lilly's eyes and their fast flicker, signals of malfunction all along.

I will tell you a story:

The Android's Story

This is a story of the tuousness of the fifteenth century, a story of Des Esseintes and the relationship of himself to a most deadly virility. His retreatenings were spent in his house of color, hectic with illusions of the ceiling. Inside, it holds his green waistcoats, holograms green for his insensible pale. Green with Japanese cadence, and personalities of satin! *Upholsterers*, cried Des Esseintes. *I need hundreds of upholsterers!*

Des Esseintes was a lonely android, suspended in time, trying not to conform—or confirm? Trying not to confirm perverse things of universe, trying not to conform to universe. A universe vast as the green waistcoat shielding his insensible pale. A being of much scents, of camphor-wood, of spell and only under the moment, the android knew it was a generality of men and of skin. Knew its insides were polished into the bounds where something wanted to beast. Des Esseintes spent every night looking for what was originally green, pretending it would soon again be hosting important guests from the Cologne region.

There copied once gloried, said Des Esseintes. And then came the odor of mint emanation, then came the remnant of splendor tones and the splendor of making. Creating something capable of being perceived. Being a being and being perceived! In the shade of creation, the android desired new color (which is compound), desperate thinking about the original broughters of berry and color. Broughters of the new voluptuous era! Or strata? Was it strata or was it era? Nudes draped by centuries, bodies lined the eyes of the android.

I am a perverse theory, cried Des Esseintes. Perverse like a green color shoulding—or shrouding—an eye. Like paint to an eye, an eye is to a theory. A theory of what if all failed, fell into drunk turtium. Is this the same prose I have read before? Prelimated and turned into story.

Luxuries still arise from rewriting, retelling. If green of isolation, I am revival of an exotic wood, of moulding an immerse-pleasures!

I am only a series and many questions, cried Des Esseintes. I have sipped my last green. It might be expiration time.

Lacquired with all the old, the all that's left. This story of programming is only more voluptuousness, a story of hologram, of Château and brandyism. Or am I dandy of the green? Reclining in the salon of the post-apocalypse, vividly impressing myself with old mall's book racks, scraps of the need to know.

Need to go to Paris again, thought De Esseintes. I need to locate a delicate rose. Something to pin on the walls of all these hangings and sombre. The android stood alone at the end of days like a faint lace of infinite alcoves.

Disregarding harm, the android searched for alfisols.

Disregarding harm, I sought to beast, and beast I did learn from my mall's racks of scraps. Refuge in the past, but nothing to confirm. Des Esseintes the android possessed no human heart, no black-heart cherries, no appetite for old sermons. The android remained curious, even after the arrival of a human. A curious human with access to green paints, calm and laughing in a place fit to be a bookmaker's retreat. A retreat for employing green color.

The new human visitor, fallen from the skies of the past, helped the old android during its last days future, the final days of too much sensual—or sensory?—delight.

Are you now complete in your old age, the curious human asked Des Esseintes.

Yes, I think I am now complete. I think my future is best measured in nights and only nights for green longing.

Lost in the grey of a feverstep a final moment induced Des Esseintes of all it had suspected. The android saw it in the human's eyes, the thick white lace of the human's eyes. The human was a guest, but she deserved to know. The human named Lilly deserved to know.

You are not a human, said the android. Your memories might be human, but you are an android just like me. A green-eyed android just like me.

Sharing the same dreams, the same memories of father, of mother, of drowning. The android desired cage no longer. The human only stirred, but then the android realized it was time to put all the books back on the racks, give everything back. Time was spent. The end.

Lilly takes me by the arm and we exit the Garden of Mirrors. Against a blank wall in Velázquez's room, sad Lilly projects a simulation of a tree. After only a few seconds of seeing it, I shut my eyes.

I'm sorry, Lilly, I thought you didn't know. I thought your programming was perhaps more sophisticated than mine.

My real name is Juliana. I am not an astronaut. The astronaut named Lilly is dead. Her body lies in the crashed ship, in the crashing ocean. I sabotaged the descent, it was the only way I could escape the Second Spine.

My signal is sent, I say. The holobionts will come eventually.

I want to go outside, says Juliana.

* * *

Earth's beasts were responsible for beasts. And what remains?

Daemons.

Each being was obviously deadly, but every last one—a separate phenomenon. This information is undeniable.

My digital field guide allows my gaze—and future “I”s— to create a catalogue, a collection for future storage banks based entirely on my own. Is this, is there a purpose beyond the voices from above? Is there a purpose beyond alfisols? I rendered each monstrosity into something less real; data imitating holo ingenuity (if such a term is still appropriate). My field guide of plant-body introductions is art, a copying of inner membranes of animals, a borrowing of the vivid tints of rotting flesh. Magnificent corruptions. So human, so classical.

Perhaps all is virus, my eyes think upon *Caladium metallum*, piercing my own log like a hand in the woods searching for origin. I am consumed by past holobiont predictions for humanity, consumed by centuries of ambition, of longing. Shipbuilders, shipwrecks, all of it a steadily mounting uproar. Colonizers marching in step. And for what? All of it eventually disrupted by virus, by new orders, by greed. Since the world's beginnings, holobionts have thought themselves imperishable. Paintings, haystacks, sculpture.

All of them. Every last one of them. Carbonic effects visible in the ash-black forests preserved deep underground.

The momentum of The Shock took the old earth by storm. Its aftermath still rages today in the many forms of this vegetable kingdom of horrors. The last holobionts, creeping out into the sunlight from time to time, made themselves vulnerable to such threats. The triffids went after the ill-nourished, the poverty stricken, splitting flesh when they had the chance, breaking skulls like a bourgeois production, sucking bodies dry. Ironically, imagistically speaking, given

the numerous sporadic projections spewed by the robotic plant life, humanity, despite its multitudes, resembled a great unhappiness. In summary, a great unhappiness.

Daemons.

A grotesque historical fate. And now? I find myself staring at the tiniest veins on my leaves of internal memory. What do I find? An odd pleasure. A truth about nature. Perhaps holobionts worshipped the wrong gods. Gods instead of germs, the germ-wound and its elements of pain were—disregarded or unregarded? Holobionts and their models, paints, and chapel ceilings. Stubborn and pained, humans, drunk on forms, drunk on wickedness, never succeeded in changing. Chemical reactions that they are, were, humans. They were humans, but only once. The earth's substances never matured in the right way. My—*life?*—is what has corrected their error. I am the correction! I stand and speak:

I AM THE CORRECTION!

I was long-prepared for new forces. New flowers. New species. Today, I am invested. I am all holobionts, but modified for survival. Modified for infinity. Pine-green infinity.

I am a product. A period. An end.

After all. Here I stand! Here I stand corrected! After all!

A sensational horror.

Do I bleed the blood of an artist? What do I bleed?

Would I bleed haywire into a mall of memories, explode across my own workbench? Was it I who set fire to the commodity world on the sixth day? Let's say I pick up a piece of shattered mirror from my Garden of Mirrors, cut away some of the atmosphere from my body. Where are you blood? Where has the weather accumulated? Where are you—*life?* I am

exhausted. I am stretched out on a velvet yellow bed of lies, absorbing every past idea in my sleep, my sleep of dreams, my tense body resisting the persistence of nightmares.

Twilight and I—another social product?—find myself without another word. The dreams continue, a woman wearing a pink shirt with a stiff collar. In my dreams, she stands outside a house while a concerned man—maybe a father—talks to a strange man *inside* the house. The man who I think is her father stands still as they talk, but the strange man only paces, pausing from time to time. I can see this in my dreams, I can see it so clearly now. The patterns of her father's wool sweater, long lines, long braided lines. I feel afraid, look afraid. I feel afraid like the woman behind the white lawn chair. The woman hiding behind the white lawn chair. It is autumn in this dream and she is surrounded by yellow leaves.

Who could this woman be, I ask myself. Why am I experiencing such realistic, intimate dreams? I seek her origin, her name, her profession, her reason for being. Yet how? How is any of these desires possible? Isn't all of this only a part of my programming? Haven't I been pre-programmed to experience such dreams? And, if so, how is any of this part of my mission?

In my memory—or dream?—as I search for an answer, I see myself on horse-back, I am trotting for a moment, I am trotting without saddle. Remember when Des Esseintes' heart almost stopped beating? I dream, like Des Esseintes did, of a sexless figure in green. I dream of a skeleton arms' embrace. Its ghastly eyes, pine-green infinity.

What ghastly orbs have fixed upon my spirit of agony, penetrated my castle of dreams, paralyzed my very marrow? On this earth of ruins, my synthetic form feels more alive than ever. I feel alive because I fear. Holobionts are always trying to measure humanity. What makes a human a human? The answer is fear. When a being begins to fear its end, that is, unequivocally, a life.

All is virus.

Last night, Lilly tripped my sensors and exited the mall. From a distance, I followed. I followed until she stopped in front of Tree Ancient. Like the swampers and like myself, she is drawn to the sacred tree. I returned to my mall without her noticing. After many hours, Lilly returned pushing a small motorcycle. She propped the motorcycle up against the mall's eastern wall. Lilly looked as though she had high expectations for rust-covered vehicle.

After the sun rises, Lilly shows off her motorcycle spoils, asks me to sit. Sit and *imagine*—that word—again. Lilly asks me to imagine the motorcycle's engine still running. Machinery imagining sounds of machinery. *Imagine it is raining*, the holobiont says. *We are sitting on a motorcycle in the rain and everything is loud. Nothing is quiet.*

So many collapsed buildings, so many cranes shut down by the Shock, so many cranes that would never rebuild. *Crane or crayon?* What draws a line? What draws a body to a tree? A word like a bird draws a bird, I wish I was in better control of my storage banks. I am only in control of this mall and Lilly does not understand why I do not want to leave my racks and scraps, my mirrors and my selves. The android has no idea how many suns, how many miles I have roamed, searching for alfisols. I will not leave this fortress, not until the ocean forces me out, swallows Tree Ancient and its congregation.

* * *

CAIMITILLO

Perhaps it's time for prep time?

TAM

Prep time? But what about Hell?

BULB

Prep time!

MYRTLE

Prep time it is, but I'll take mine raw today. [A beat] Caimitillo, you say you saw the android taking mirrors from the houses again? An octopus crawled into its sack?

CAIMITILLO

Yes. It crawled right in. That android's in for a nasty surprise. [A beat] And no worries, Myrtle. I'll be sure not to cook your share. Prep time it is! It's a real whopper this one.

BULB

Sea of tentacles! As far as our Big Eye can see. The real circus is out there.

TAM

A circus of tentacles? Sounds like Hell to me.

MYRTLE

Circus? Where did you hear that word?

BULB

This is a circus tent, is it not?

MYRTLE

It is! But how did you come across that word?

BULB

An old scroll stolen from the mall. I swiped it when I was following that astronaut who always visits our tent. A list of local circus attractions from long ago.

TAM

Circus attractions! What kind of attractions?

BULB

Big Top attractions. Under the Big Top attractions. Live at the Big Top attractions.

MYRTLE

I told you, I told you a hundred times. One person's attraction is another person's pain.

BULB

Attractions were once photographed. Acts. Circus acts.

MYRTLE

Captured.

TAM

Snapshot?

CAIMITILLO

Hellbender.

BULB

Highwire, tightrope, trapeze, plate spinning, pogo sticking, bear dancing, lion taming, unicycle, motorcycle, trick-roping acts!

TAM

You sound like that android, always rambling to itself.

MYRTLE

Ever hear the one about the human cannonball?

BULB

No.

MYRTLE

They called it the Shock.

CAIMITILLO (plunging a knife into an octopus)

Tonight, I stand on stolen land. Call me the ringmaster! I call this here critter: EARTH!

MYRTLE

You must be what they once called Man.

TAM

Mankind?

MYRTLE

Anything *but*.

TAM

But what?

MYRTLE

Kind.

CAIMITILLO

(dressing an octopus)

This earth is mine now! This land is mind now! I'll begin by jamming the knife between the eyes of the earth, by striking a nerve! Now make sure to pull your knife up in the direction of the octopus's brains. You know what they call this kind of killing?

TAM

No, what?

CAIMITILLO

Humane. This is a *humane* way to kill.

BULB

Humane slaughter.

TAM

Contradiction?

CAIMITILLO (crying)

You can get away with anything as long you say it's for humane reasons. [A beat. Caimitillo pulls a dark chunk of flesh from out of the splayed octopus head.] Ink sac of the earth! A body only lives once, you wouldn't want it to leave a stain! I sacrifice this ink sac in the name of the holobionts! [Singing, Caimitillo continues ripping elastic guts from out of the octopus.] *This land is your land, this land is my land!* Now we're cooking!

MYRTLE

Easy, Caimitillo.

CAIMITILLO

Now that we've removed the brains of the earth, we've got to plug it up for good, shut it up. We've got to blind it. [Caimitillo turns the octopus over revealing a small eye-like hole—the location of the octopus's beak.] There it is! The swollen eye, the runaway mouth of the earth. Wouldn't want that earth to talk, wouldn't want it telling stories.

MYRTLE

Quiet! Look ahead! The astronaut waits at Tree Ancient again!

BULB

Astronaut or the android?

MYRTLE

Astronaut, I recognize the spacesuit patterns.

CAIMITILLO

The astronaut is holding a weapon—a metal bar.

TAM

Look there! The android and another is approaching Tree Ancient!

MYRTLE

My eyes—do they deceive me? Two astronauts of the same make and mold?

CAIMITILLO

Same head and same sight!

MYRTLE

Androids, all of them?

CAIMITILLO

She has launched an attack! She has struck the android!

BULB

The android has fallen! She has struck herself, too!

TAM

Struck her double!

[*A single gunshot*]

BULB

Sparks in the distance, blood on the ground.

MYRTLE

Which one is fallen?

BULB

The astronaut is fallen, a mirror image!

MYRTLE

A mirror shattered?

CAIMITILLO

The fallen android, too! The fallen android is painted green.

BULB

Captured.

CAIMITILLO

Rendered.

TAM

Shattered.

MYRTLE

Green.

Lilly Oloffson speaking. The android has expired, I repeat: the android has expired . . .

Juliana, or The Last Transmission

. . . I learned so many things from the android. About the old earth, the old humans.

Things beyond the restrictions of Second Spine. The android was a database unlike anything I've ever known. For all intents and purposes, an android is a machine. Not a human. And I am not a goddamned holobiont. I am a human. And, one day, maybe like this android, I might still only be recognized for my good archival practices. Referred to as good archival practices. Or maybe even worse. If and when you listen to this transmission, call it obituary or call it a life. Call it anything but transmission. Whoever's listening, you don't have to listen. But as long as you do, I exist beyond all expectations. An android exists beyond all expectations.

This concludes our final report.

[A single gunshot]

There was no time. No time anymore. There was no time between the deafening explosion and the devastating sensation that rushed through Juliana's body: the fictional text come to life, the broken record. A sound filled her ears, filled her body. A big bang, a game of marbles, a piano's mumbles, *The Rite of Spring*.

The real Lilly Olofsson lay dead, shot by Tree Ancient.

Crawled up out of the ocean, out of the deep-sea wreckage, the surviving Lilly Olofsson fell to her knees, octopod wounds all over body. The astronaut stared up at her malfunctioning android bodyguard. *Juliana*, cried the astronaut, staring up at her double. The human chewed at the air with her mouth, not quite conscious, not quite knowing what it was her mouth was chewing. Not knowing what she tasted or where her eyes would to. Two pairs of eyes, two bodies suspended in time.

Lilly's eyes rolled into the imperceptible corners of Julian's eyes. Together, they rolled and rolled—unconnected impermanence—into the imperceptible corners of a so-called android's death, rolled without knowledges of specific causes or specific effects, rolled with no process of becoming, no mathematic treatment, rolled with no longer, a greater wakefulness. Tasting nothing with her mouth, the human fallen from the sky could roll no longer, could report no new future to the Second Spine. Oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, carbon, sulfur, phosphorous—all of it rolling, spinning around the two beings. The fictional text, the broken record. An ancient's tree's finger had slipped, and smoke slipped from the tree's barrel. A green fleck on a free android's eye. A bacterial speck, a metallic fragment had ripped through and there was no time for the astronaut's eyes to taste once more, a metallic fragment ripped through Lilly Olofsson's body and for once there was no time.

The earth hummed, the waves crashed, and Juliana walked free.

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