

5-20-2011

If Then, Elsewhere

Creighton Durrant
University of New Orleans

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If Then, Elsewhere

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

by

Creighton Durrant

B.A. Louisiana State University, 2008

May, 2011

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The Threat of Domesticity

So I left Dallas and took to working in a secondhand store. They gave me a nametag and vanilla-scented apron, instructed me to start pricing merchandise. My job description: to discern potential value in the discarded.

Before you arrived, donors left unwanted items at the store's side entrance—empty picture frames and shoes worn beyond comfort, monogrammed sweaters and scarves bearing names of people I'd never see or meet. I pitched items left in disrepair or of questionable use into the industrial compactor back in the warehouse. Sometimes a donor was generous enough to surrender a precious object, an artifact, a relic given for reasons beyond altruism or wont for more space in one's home or life. But this was rare.

I arrived to work one morning and found a cast-iron coffin left at the store's side entrance—small, beveled, roughly the size of a child, perhaps larger. Soil clung in the crevices of its ornate casting, along the rivets and length of its seam. I gathered it'd been recently exhumed, and scanned the vacant lot for the donor. Crouching above, I peered through the glass pane embedded in its surface, and inside found the face of a child, desiccated beyond recognition of age or sex, that nonetheless evoked an image of my estranged daughter. So I attached a note. It read: *We appreciate your generosity, but believe you may have the wrong repository in mind.*

No one retrieved the coffin, and no one in the store particularly enjoyed its presence. The superstitious thought it a portent of disasters that would befall the store. The religious crossed themselves and murmured prayers but still requested it be removed. Indifferent employees made

grievances to management about the constant complaints of the superstitious and religious. They all asked that I throw it in the compactor because it was worthless. But the object evoked a strange affinity in me. I visited the coffin before every shift, surprised and dismayed to find it still there.

After the grace period ended, I carried the coffin inside and set it between a stack of board games and a bookshelf, removed the attached note and replaced it with an orange sticker and the penned letters NFS, which everyone disapproved of, citing again the object's inherent lack of worth or purpose. Customers agreed with me, though. They saw value in the iron coffin. Curious children peered inside, noticing it when returning half-empty boxes of Battleship and Operation. Mothers looked within before pulling their children away by the wrists. The elderly did the same, noticing the object while returning a copy of *Life's Twilight* or *Mourning the Loss of A Loved One* or some other such book, gazing through its windowpane until a concerned son or daughter led them away by the shoulder. But they returned—the youth with friends, the elderly alone.

"The macabre doesn't move merchandise," the store supervisor said. I told her she was wrong and that customers seemed to have a perverse curiosity with the object in question. "Your coworkers are concerned," she said. "Truly, if it's not removed I'll be forced to excise you from your position. There's also the issue of sanitation."

"It's sealed airtight," I told her. "No risk of an ancient virus contaminating the store."

"Just move it," she said. "I'd do so myself, but I'd rather not touch the thing."

I couldn't do as she asked, so instead emerged from the warehouse as usual, pushing a cart of merchandise. There, I found the rear of the store unlit, only the iron coffin illumed by light of

surrounding votive candles customers brought from housewares. The display expanded beyond my control. Unseen people placed TV dinner tables contiguous to the coffin, set other items: plastic lilies in pewter candleholders, Darth Vader and Saint Martin De Porres figurines. Daily, the bouquets of plastic flowers and various offerings increased, and I continued to price items, placing them in housewares to find they'd been moved near the coffin the following day.

Sometime after, the store owner—who until then I'd never seen or heard from—interrupted my delicate work in the warehouse. "So you're responsible for the display out front?" the man asked.

"Somewhat," I told him. "Can't take full responsibility."

"I wanted to talk to you about that," he said. "I assume you're aware of the sales increase we've seen this past month."

"They don't really keep me abreast of financial details around here. "

"Well, consider yourself informed," he said. "Listen, we don't much understand the reason for the increase in sales, but we believe your, well, unconventional display methods may be responsible. So I want to offer you the position of supervisor and see what else you can do with the place."

"I appreciate the offer," I told him, "but I'm content with my position as it is."

The supervisor never really bothered me thereafter. In fact, she spoke to me only once more during my stay of employment and gave me free rein to display as I chose, which was exactly what I did.

I constructed from memory another display. Opposite what had become a shrine to the anonymous and forgotten, was a more contemporary display: a domestic tableau constructed of

kitchen table and chairs set to three sides, a television seated on bar stool at the remaining fourth. The typical array of mismatched silverware and dishes was arranged as one would expect from evening dinner. I watched families meet the simple display, sitting at the table, evaluating the chairs and integrity of table legs, and I considered it a success. When a family sat down, someone was excluded. The whole of the family then rose to comfort the neglected. Customers asked for assistance, asked how much for the table or the television because they couldn't find a price tag anywhere. And I'd confirm that they were right. There was no price because the display wasn't for sale.

Some time later we received a call from a local slumlord's secretary. She asked if we did pick-ups, and would we care to remove the belongings of a tenant recently deceased. We could do whatever we wanted with what we found. I'd be more than glad to oblige, I told her. I scheduled retrieval, showed up in our panel truck and removed the man's begrimed armchair, end-table, television, and an old Hammond B-3 electric organ from the sparse studio apartment.

The next morning, I arrived early to prepare my newest display. I arranged the racks of suit coats and plus-size blouses to accurately reproduce the dimensions of the man's living space—an apartment that, according to the secretary, he'd lived in since youth. Within the confines, scarcely larger than my old living room, was the man's tweed armchair; beside it, the end table placed just as it was found the previous day. Against the wall, and below a portrait of an unknown woman, sat the man's television and electric organ. A sign read: *Please don't play the electric organ* that I later removed because no one bothered to read it.

The supervisor approached me again, toneless and defeated. "I'm not complaining here," she said. "This isn't a complaint, but you might have noticed, people aren't so much buying

merchandise anymore."

She was right. "I have a solution," I told her as I continued to sort through the rank and file donation bins.

And what I did in response, the solution I had in mind, was to attach a price tag to the front door below the hours of operation, to quit selling merchandise, and instead charge admission.

I called a man from the Department of Culture who entered free of charge and took a solemn assessment of what wasn't so much a small secondhand store anymore. He proffered a hand and asked whether I was the museum's curator.

"No," I told him, "it's more the collaborative effort of citizens—whether dead or living—who've claimed this town as their home."

He made a lap of the building, stopped at the kitchen reproduction, the living room and the cast iron sepulcher, and returned to the front of the store where he regretted to inform us that, no, on grounds of focal lack and thematic disunity, he would not be adding us to the state registry of museums. Which was a significant shame, to be sure, but made little difference to me or to any other employees. No one lost their jobs or suffered reduced hourly wages. Cashiers simply became information desk attendants, took admission and confused phone calls. And no one modified the sign: *please leave all donations at side entrance*.

It was at this point the donations assumed their new character. Mornings I'd show up for work and find documents left in the parking lot. Some were seemingly heartfelt apologies, others penned admissions of grudges since quelled and addressed to specific people, confessions of unspeakable acts addressed to no one in particular, ordered lists of forsaken ideals and

aspirations, photos of distant friends forgotten, letters with insufficient postage to lost loves, directions to and from mysterious places of which I had no knowledge. They appeared with increased mass and frequency until you arrived—a young girl with facial features unbearably familiar and painful to behold. The documents stopped arriving, and shortly after, all donations altogether. You were silent, standing alone in the parking lot with a note pinned to breast pocket, *Please accept*, it read. *This is the product of your indiscretion*. There's only one woman, of course, who could've made the donation that morning. So when you eventually place blame, let it fall on the both of us.

So I've given what I can. This is my final display, and you can live in it for as long as you need, but I won't be here to see it. Don't worry, though, the supervisor will do as her job description dictates. She'll provide you supervision, but it won't be parental. The bed I've prepared in the children's section should suit you well enough. And you'll find a few remaining playthings among the plastic fragments of toys. But this is all I can spare. You've filled the building with your presence, filled it all to a suffocating capacity—completing it. There's no remaining space, no other recourse but to again abandon what I've created: you and your new home.

Territory and Contiguous States

In the Louisiana Purchase Cyclorama, visitors will experience the territory's vast expanse in a full 360 degrees and visit a time otherwise forgotten constructed of good old-fashioned, analog paint and mortar. This, Leland remembers, was a key talking point in his initial pitch to the Tourism Council. Standing, now, in the exact radial center of the cyclorama, he doubts those initial claims while searching the painted landscape for hidden and obscure reasons for the cyclorama's unpopularity. He finds only what Leland's always thought was an excessively regal depiction of Thomas Jefferson. The angle to which the former president raises his chin makes him look like a man no one would want to hang out with, but Leland knows the problem isn't chin-related. It's something else, something more obvious.

As proof of concept, Leland once described to the Council members the Gettysburg Cyclorama—its implementation of artificial smoke and sulphur scent piped through the ventilation system, wax replicas of Union troops standing within and creating an uncanny depth of field, the casualty-strewn battlefield artistically and painstakingly painted. The council originally liked the idea of a Louisiana Purchase Cyclorama, but it's since fallen into jeopardy of closure. It's this simple, a council member said earlier that morning: Without visitors, the cyclorama will have to be closed to the public. Leland guessed they were right. He hadn't expected a queue of visitors waiting outside when he arrived, but come on, people. Today, the exhibit's only visitors were a single elderly couple.

The couple circumnavigates the room in slow, measured steps, stopping to examine the

detail and minutia of the scenes. But the cyclorama wasn't designed to be experienced this way. You stood in the center, like this, as Leland did, locus to the surrounding painting. From the cyclorama's center, he watches the woman point out a cargo ship entering the port of New Orleans along the bank of the Mississippi River, her companion's silent acknowledgement and semaphore of concurrent thought. The couple appears to Leland the logical, coterminous end of an expedition—like Lewis and Clark, there, depicted in miniature on the western arc of the exhibit. He feels he shouldn't impede on their experience or, he'd like to think, enjoyment of the exhibit, but his motives are professional and on behalf of the Tourism Council. So he approaches them, walking with a care they inspire, his footfalls dopplering away in the vacancy of the room.

"Hello," he says, leaving his name badge to introductions. "You enjoying the exhibit?"

"I'd say so," the woman says, turning to the man beside her. "Wouldn't you agree, Terry?"

Terry lowers the lids of his eyes before nodding. "But, you know, we can't help feeling something's not quite right with it, that it's lacking a certain we-don't-know-what."

Leland's always thought so too but never expressed his concern to the Council. "I think you might be somehow right," he says. "It needs combat or pyrotechnics or something."

"No, it's right nice," she says, "and an important subject people should know and have mostly forgotten, but..." She pauses and Leland hopes for her to impart the wisdom for which the elderly are well known. "I think what it is—and I know there's only so much room in here—is that, even still, it's too large. It's hard to focus on anything."

"You might be right," he says. "Where you folks from, can I ask?"

"Well, right around there," she says, pointing over Leland's shoulder to Nebraska.

He leaves them to their slow circumnavigation of the exhibit, and returns to its center.

Maybe the woman is right about the cyclorama's deficiency. He'd included everything he and the Council Oversight Team could think of, everything relevant between The Port of New Orleans and Rupert's Land, the Western bank of the Mississippi and chinook-swept foothills. The negotiation with Napoleon and Barbé Marbois was particularly ingenious—Jefferson, too, despite the arrogant chin elevation.

Before he married, Leland questioned how people managed the voyeurism of living in a house with floor-to-ceiling windows. He once vowed never to live in such a place, ever, but now does—complete with defensive perimeter of sitting-rooms Meagan's filled with chaise lounges and empty armoires. The domestic picture he's always feared is complete, and the payments on his renovated 19th century shotgun home still persist.

The porch is a small consolation, though, and Leland spends most evenings sitting on it, surveying the neighborhood, warding off insects, and, in tonight's case, poring over the comment cards he's brought home from the cyclorama lobby. And, man, they are not favorable. *What is this thing supposed to do? Does it even move or do anything at all?*, one read, written in palsied scrawl Leland has difficulty deciphering. In response to the field: *How would you rate your experience in the Louisiana Purchase Cyclorama?*, an anonymous person drew a line through the question, and in the margins wrote: *What experience?* The experience of a peaceful, bucolic environment, that's what, Leland said aloud to himself. He thought the cyclorama would be a sanctuary where—in lieu of an actual woodland foot-path or pasture—one could escape the city and instead enter into a garden of Leland's personal tending. But he'd been, apparently,

misguided in his conceit.

Beyond his yard, a tour group stops along the sidewalk to examine his home. A man among them takes a photograph and shows the camera's screen to the woman beside him, and they remind him of the couple he spoke to earlier in the day. The photographer shows the woman an image of his house, his home or a feature of it—the Doric columns supporting the second story gallery he and Meagan screened in when his son was born, the wrought-iron balustrade, the filigreed accents at the eaves and lintels of the house. Yes, how lovely, but what exactly they see perplexes him. From the sidewalk, they photograph the neighboring houses, capturing and estranging them from the source. Always, Leland senses he and the neighborhood are relegated into the past, ferried away with the images these tour groups take.

He wonders what they know that he doesn't. What of the quotidian do the tour groups experienced as novel? To Leland, it's just a house, but to tourists the house is something else altogether. In the years he's lived here, the tourists and the regularity with which he sees them blur, flatten into the familiar streetscape. Over time he pays them less and less attention until they fade from the forefront of thought, pass from neighborhood and mind, rote as avian migration.

After reading each comment card and decidedly agreeing with what was written—that basically the cyclorama was a failure—he walks inside thinking, What *was* I thinking? And the assumed public failure feeds into his private anxieties about his wife and child.

When he first saw their newborn child, Leland thought it resembled a sort of gnarled root, a thing found in the produce section near the sweet potatoes. It looked simultaneously subterranean and cosmological. He was as terrified as he expected—just as his father told him

he'd be—and instantly feared the nurse or Meagan or he would drop Taylor, and Leland would never get to hear that little sweet-potato-looking-thing wail like that again. But so far, Taylor is still alive. He's sitting at the kitchen table gluing wedges of felt inside a shoebox. "What up, Homunculus," Leland says.

"Dad, stop calling me that."

"What're you working on, there?"

"I told you already," he says, maneuvering a wire tree behind a miniature platoon of soldiers. "Have to make a diorama for Social Studies."

"It's looking pretty good."

"No, it's stupid and I hate it."

"Well, what's your concept?"

"I don't know. Throw some stuff in there, I guess."

Leland sets his chin on his son's shoulder and peers inside. "You've got some sort of idea working, it looks like." Before Taylor shrugs him off, Leland sees a unit of riflemen aiming from atop a hill at a fallen unit below. "Battle of... what?"

"Gettysburg."

"You're breaking my heart, Taylor."

"But it looks like crap," he says, carefully brushing red fingernail polish onto the bodies of fallen soldiers.

"Your mom know you're using that?"

"No."

"Well," Leland says, beginning towards the bedroom, "just put it back when you're done."

"Aye, aye, Dad," Taylor says without looking up from his delicate work in the diorama.

"Hey, you'll be there tomorrow, right? Career Orientation?"

"I'll be there," he says. "Your mom will remind me again." He has an idea of what he'll be up against at Career Orientation. The firefighter will ignite and heroically snuff out a staged fire somewhere in the school. The astronaut will park his lunar lander in an impossibly small and conspicuously available parking space with inches to spare. And Leland will...outline a grant proposal and stage a brainstorming session with the students? No, he'll just tell them like it is and dash a poor, deranged kid's hope of ever working for the state. Leland will describe his profession to Taylor's fifth grade class with the knowledge he's basically no good at it. "You know where your mother is, by the way?" But no, Taylor does not.

His wife steps from the shower with zero self-consciousness and makes her way to the full-sized mirror in the bedroom, takes nightclothes from a drawer and pulls them over her legs. What was it that first piqued him? He feels he loves her but can't recall the original impulse. He thinks back, struggles to plumb an image from memory, and returns with nothing but dust and dross and receipts for purchases he can't recall.

"Take a look at these, Meg," he says, handing her the stack of comment cards he's been holding. She flips through them, smiling after each, comes to one and begins laughing. "Listen to this," she says. "I resent this exhibit—as a native French citizen—on grounds it celebrates a territory we, as a country, should never have given you. Because look what you've done with it."

“That's about right,” Leland says. “But, I mean, I didn't sign the treaty.”

“Get with the times,” she says, reading from another. “This exhibit is the stimulative equivalent of spending an afternoon in an assisted living home.”

“That person has no idea how correct he or she is. The only visitors, today, were two old people from Nebraska.”

“So what's the status, then,” she says. “Are they closing it?”

“If I don't come up with some reason for people to visit,” he says, “then, yes, they're going to close it. You have any ideas?”

“It's in perfect working order,” Meagan says. “As far as I can tell.”

But it wasn't. Or she was right, and that was the problem. Was there even a problem? He lay in bed staring at the ceiling wondering one way and then in another. “Meg, what do you think of this?”

“Of...”

“Of putting our home up for tourists to see.”

“Stupid idea because it's already happening,” she says. “What's that have to do with the cyclorama?”

“I mean, to let them inside. Let them look around at the interior, too.”

“Leland, seriously?” she says.

“I guess you're right,” he says. “Stupid idea.”

In alternating segments, the alphabet and presidential portraiture line the wall where it meets the ceiling. The blackboard still shows mitosis or meiosis, one of them, left from a previous presenter. Leland envies the children's position. Tabula rasa and all that folderol.

The students sit at their desks, and Leland can't believe he'd ever been young enough to fit in one. He wants to try again, though, to see if it's still possible to occupy a seat he knows could scarcely support a single ass-cheek. He wants to genuflect and look them in the eyes, tell them that being an adult is hopeless and that they'll all fall short of their aspirations. He's paid to preserve the past, Leland wants to tell them, to package nostalgia and commodify it. People visit the city and return home granted a new perspective on the present, ideally, seeing where they live anew. But they're not to feel this way while visiting. *Inspire a sense of locality in the most distant traveler* is a maxim Leland thinks worth remembering. Convince a visitor that what we do here has been done since time immemorial by the most inveterate local citizens, generation after generation. Nothing changes, here, traveler. Take solace in our entrenched cultural values. And Leland doesn't see how anyone could possibly believe this—especially a fifth grader—that given time and distance and their relativity, he's to maintain the image of a city untouched by all three.

"Hello, future leaders of America," he says to the class. "It's always good to see the next generation of young people ready to take on the responsibility of adulthood, and at such an early age." He catches sight of Taylor near the back of the classroom, already looking confused and doubtful about what his dad's saying. It evokes a vague image of his son as an adult, cynical and regretful of the decisions he's made. He does not want this image to become reality. "I work in the tourism industry, and what I do is I'm a failure artist for the Tourism Council. Can anyone

tell me what tourism is?" The question elicits empty, bovine stares from around the room, nervous shuffling from the teacher, a few looks of what Leland wants to imagine are contemplation but probably aren't.

"It's when people go places and see things," someone says. And it's Taylor answering, smiling from his desk. The girl sitting next to him scoffs, turns away, looks into her brow. It's a learned gesture Leland's seen Meg use many times, and the girl has likely adapted it from someone similar.

"That's correct," says Leland. "What a bright kid. Gold star. And can anyone tell me the purpose of tourism?"

"Nope," Taylor says.

"It's so people can escape themselves for a while, forget they exist in the context of daily life and the people in it. Does that make sense to anyone? I hope it doesn't, because it isn't something you need to worry about just yet. And, really, if you understand what I'm getting at there's no hope for you. Mrs. Sizood, here, will see to it that you meet with the guidance counsellor or psychiatrist or someone. The thing is, it doesn't matter what I do, and it matters less what you think you'll be doing twenty years from now. Does that make sense? Again, I need to reiterate my hope that it doesn't. Anyway, career orientation. Let's orient some careers, here."

Mrs. Sizood joins the children in their confusion or distress, and Leland continues with his presentation, speaking as though his son were the only student present. The others, visibly bored from the outset, chew and draw and scratch on things while fading from Leland's vision. He speaks and hopes his son can hear, feeling Taylor constrained to a psychic aperture. There are

worse things, Leland thinks, than surrendering his life to someone yet to experience his own.

This is a worthwhile endeavor, he thinks. Leland hasn't lived long, but this is the noblest work of his life, as Robert Livingston might say. Cyclorama be damned.

After his career orientation presentation, Leland returns home wanting company but finds none. Taylor hasn't returned from school, and Meagan is still busy with her consulting gig, measuring shelves by the inch, quoting prices of books by the foot. With a turkey sandwich and a beer, he sits on his front porch awaiting this evening's tourists.

A half-hour later they arrive, rounding the corner of Marimbaud and 6th in the direction of his home. Satisfied with his performance at the elementary school, he welcomes the oncoming tour group as habitual friends, eager to see them in a place he knew he would.

Waiting for the group to finish a round of photos, Leland walks to the front gate and calls to them. They pause and wave, suspicious of him, and continue down the sidewalk a little quicker than they'd come. "Wait, no, come here," he says.

They turn toward Leland, and a tentative man among them leaves the group to meet him, clutching the camera hung from a lanyard around his neck.

"What's the problem?" the man says.

"No problem. Just wanted to ask if you'd like to take a gander at the inside of one of the homes you're admiring?"

The man considers the proposition for a split second but seems to have a prepared response. "Well, shit. I know *I'd* like to. Let me see what the others have to say."

After a short deliberation with the group, the man returns with the group following after. "Looks like we'll take you up," he says. "Thanks for the offer." They enter the yard and make

their way up the steps to the front porch, the man leading. "Name's Greg, and thanks again."

"Leland, and no problem," he says, shaking Greg's hand. "Keep in mind flash photography is strictly verboten."

Leland returns to his seat on the front porch, listening to the din of their commentary, unable to discern what's said. "Kidding about the flash, of course," he says from the porch. What they might see mystifies Leland, but he tries to imagine what significance they could glean from the interior decor Meagan has arranged, the layout and structure of his home. What particulars will the tour group find in what he'd generalized into obscurity?

When they finish their private tour, Leland expects to hear just that. Greg is the first to exit, and he meets Leland on the porch. "It's a nice place," the man says. "Have to admit, though, I expected it would look more like the outside, that the rooms and things would be period appropriate, or less contemporary. Probably a dumb thing to think because you live in it, right?"

"Right."

"And with a family, too, it looks like."

"Ten year old son."

"Right. So you couldn't expect him to—I don't know—study by candlelight or fix a grilled cheese on an old wood burning stove."

"The microwave's difficult enough."

"What is it you do, Leland?" he says as the rest of Greg's tour group meets him on the porch and starts toward the street.

"I'm an artist, actually, and my medium is failure."

"Well, it looks like you've done well for yourself," he says, joining the tour group at the gate. "And for the family, too. Just keep it up, young man."

"I'm trying, Greg," Leland says, rubbing the palm of his hand against his forehead. "You enjoy the rest of your tour."

Greg latches the gate, salutes, and the rest of the group follows suit. They wave and continue down the sidewalk, stopping occasionally to photograph neighboring homes on the block. It's all the confirmation he needs: someone's outside acknowledgement of the source, the motive for what it is he's done but has slowly over time forgotten. We live here, he thinks. It's that simple.

Meagan leads Taylor through the front yard and up to the house.

"We live here," Leland says.

"Yeah, Dad," Taylor says. "I'm not an idiot."

It's difficult for Leland to appreciate the exhibit for what it is, but he begins on a lap of the cyclorama, despite the number of times he's seen it, looking for a critical aspect to remedy. On his second lap, an inkling of what he's failed to include emerges. During the third, his suspicions strengthen and take shape. Nowhere in the imagery is there a depiction of the region before the treaty. He's failed to consider the expanse of land before its annexation, territory always there but claimed through declaration and name.

The Council decided to close the cyclorama within the week, but what will replace it wasn't yet decided. Someone suggested they partition and cut it into pieces, auction or sell it to

whomever was interested. Leland did not want to hear this. It could not be dismantled. For the time being, it remains in the Warehouse District, identified by its cylindrical shape and the galvanized metal placard he unveiled at the inception. He has a concept and knows what to do with it.

In all, the supplies cost \$83.56—three buckets matte gray, two paint rollers (hand held and eight foot telescopic)—but it won't be enough. He can't allow the cyclorama to be dismantled and so spends the following workday trying to prevent it from falling to pieces. He has a concept, and it calls for the unique shape and form of this cyclorama. Whatever a fragment may fetch at auction, the piece would be rendered worthless without its contiguity to the others. It functions as a whole, and Leland will make certain it stays that way.

He begins with the Northern arc wall, a section he estimates spans 15 degrees of space, and begins applying paint with the paint roller. He moves confidently, using quick vertical motions that blot out more of the scene with each successive pass. He works through the early evening, painting while compiling a catalogue of images he'll render when finished with the primer. Once the paint dries and covers the surface entirely, he'll begin—a gradient fade, a palimpsest of old and older territory. He pans through mental images of Meagan and Taylor: the delivery room in which his son was born; the return home Taylor couldn't possibly remember, Leland's walking him to the neighborhood elementary school and lingering before the front gates a little longer than necessary; Meagan sitting at the back steps of a mutual friend's apartment complex, guests holding plastic cups seen through the door behind her, Meagan's face raised for whomever would approach. He isn't all too artistically inclined, this is true, but he'll try to the best of his limited abilities. This, too, will be necessarily incomplete, missing something. There'll be omissions,

remainders, scenes he hasn't yet experienced and maybe never would, but his personal cyclorama will foremost feature the particulars.

When Leland returns home that evening, his clothing daubed with paint, face and forearms streaked with gray primer, he walks through the foyer and into the dining room where he finds Meagan and Taylor waiting. They look on his blanched skin and slacks and dress shirt, Meagan asks him what in the great, wide world he's been doing. Looking down at his whitewashed body the same color and consistency as the walls of his cyclorama, Leland says to her: You'll see.

100 Duels

Once again, I'm alone in the Ragtime theater sitting twenty-seven rows from the screen and six seats from the wall. This'll be the ninth time I've seen the film—a film that hasn't begun but is primed and ready to start in, by my watch, three minutes. It just so happens that the 7:15 screening coincides with my evening commute, during which I'm always thinking: swords at midnight, Bernard, it happens tonight. Every night, I navigate the gleaming cars and minivans staggered like chevrons in the company parking complex, intending to leave, drive out to Bernard's and tell him what's what, but instead I'm detoured en route to this movie theater in the suburbs to see this film—a film entitled *99 Duels*. I've no idea what I'll do when the film's run is over. I'll have to find another way to assuage my rage. Perhaps by the time the film leaves the theater, I'll have the temerity to finally arrive at my intended destination and state my grievances to Bernard. But the film's just now beginning, the projector limning spectators from the rear of the room, the dust motes and particulate appearing in this world as another takes shape before me. So I'll shut up now. Except I'm a person who tends to talk during movies, and no one likes to be around that type of person—Rachel especially. She refuses to watch a movie of any kind with me, so I most always end up viewing alone—as is now the case, so cue the swelling violas, the susurrating double bass and superimposed production credits: produced by Darius Carruth, directed by Yvette Oligard, starring Vernon Littich. That's him: Vernon Littich. He's the actor I supposedly resemble—at least in appearance. That's what Rachel tells me. I'd never heard of the actor when she mentioned him and was sort of intrigued, thinking, Interesting, there's a

celebrity that looks like me. I wonder in what way, and why Rachel made the comparison. I hoped the Internet image results would yield someone at least moderately handsome, or at least someone Rachel would think handsome, someone better looking than Bernard, I hoped above all. I don't really see the resemblance, though. But here he is nonetheless—Vernon Littich—playing a character named Sargasso in the role of a minor councilor, military officer and accomplished duelist, who, as the film begins, sits alone at a restaurant table staring off from his plate to the empty chair across from him as an anonymous group of military personnel approach his table. An official of unknown rank greets him, saying, Good evening Sargasso. We've just heard of your recent victory and wanted to give our congratulations. So Sargasso via Vernon Littich responds in his typical brusque manner, saying: It had to be done. Congratulations aren't in order, gentlemen. He tries to ignore the intrusion, but the man standing nearby continues and says, What's the total, Sargasso? Have you achieved triple digits yet? And again with his characteristic, terse style says only: No, I'm at ninety-nine. Well, keep it up, says the man standing abreast, and the king'll be without subjects and you without a job. The man, then, whose name we never learn, walks out of scene, his lackeys chuckling after him. And, now, look: here come one, two, three people entering the theater. They're late and spinning themselves around in tight arcs searching for a place to sit. And I know there's an ironclad rule stating there be no fewer than six seats separating any two people in a theater given available space, and that this trio has willingly transgressed what is—at least to most reasonable people—a sacred credo and sat A) in the seat immediately in front of me, and B) in the two seats between myself and the aisle. Surely they're aware of the tacit dictums of moviegoing, the tenets agreed upon by viewers, but, honestly, I don't take issue with the breach of physical near-space. It's

nice to have near personal contact with a person, given Rachel's been on a protracted business trip. But here's the thing of it: these people will occupy my mind throughout the duration of the film. I'll sense them nearby the entire time, knowing they're thinking about what we're all watching. And I'll have to wonder what they think of it, what their opinion is without the opportunity to ask because I'm not on a friendly basis with them. Effectively, the movie'll be spoiled—or it would be had I not seen it eight times already. But, wait, never mind them, this is where they introduce Sargasso's fiancé, Fiorna, who eventually, as we'll come to see, becomes integral in the—well, I won't spoil it. Let's just say she factors largely later in the film. Though Delta Squad, here, surrounding and preventing me from a hasty exit in event of an emergency, doesn't yet know this. Which is another thing: these illuminated exit signs at the fore and aft of theaters. They exert an influence similar to Delta Squad. Notice how while engaged in watching a film, experiencing an important plot development—like, now, for example, when the king's viceroy and his paramour are about to conspire against Sargasso—and that exit beacon catches our peripheral vision and suddenly you're pulled from the events unfolding on screen. Suddenly we're aware of our surroundings and the *magic of film*, as some people say, is disrupted, and we forget to watch while the king's viceroy admires Fiorna, which she eventually picks up on, recognizes and returns his obvious interest with all these sidelong glances and blushing and fanning and other blatant-type signals. Likewise, the trio of spectators nearby exert their presence, prevent my full emersion in the fantasy before us. People are always a variable, I know. And that's the reason for sitting here in this theatre, again, and again nine times over: fantasy—one wherein I project a version of myself and confront those who I feel have likely wronged me, enter a shared space, say, one similar to this small antechamber now on screen

where the two of them—the viceroy and Fiorna—have stolen off as the other well-to-do members of the colony continue unawares at the party—a party celebrating the viceroy's imminent departure back to the capitol. Though we don't get to see the results of their antechamber meeting. A traditional fade-to-black occludes what I'd want to see. This is sort of a revivalist film, as it were. So these people nearby who scorn social mores effectively act as exit signs of their own, sitting in my proximity, pulling my thoughts away from me and towards them. Because now I'm wondering what these people think of the viceroy and Fiorna. Likewise, what would they think of Rachel and Benard, and what would Delta Squad think of what I think about Rachel and Benard? Do they approve of Fiorna and the Viceroy's behavior, and would they engage in such behavior themselves? I don't know, because despite the tacit spacial agreement these people have flouted, and our very near nearness, the images we're seeing, the events taking place aren't the same. Point being: We aren't experiencing the same film. At least not in the same way. The film holds no similar significance for any of us in the theatre. Oh, now here's the viceroy writing by candlelight, penning a request to the unnamed country's king of which he is the representative. He's asking for an extension of his term in the pastoral colony because he'd prefer remain with his newly-trusted lover than return to the banality of life in the nation's capital. He's writing at his desk which overlooks the hillside and copses scattered across the landscape. There's an obvious look of conflict on his face—or maybe it's guilt, who can say? He lifts his gaze to the ceiling. Sighing, he casts his sight to the floor beneath his desk and resolves to sign and date the letter, enclose it in an envelope and give it to a courier awaiting patiently. And I definitely don't identify with the viceroy, here, who's obviously a terrible human being deserving of all matter of suffering, but it reminds me... What I want

more than anything is to simply refuse or contest or dissent or voice my emotions to Rachel and Bernard. I want simply to say no, and voice my disapproval with Rachel when she chats up Bernard at an office function, forgetting that we're in fact dating (I guess you'd call it). And when Bernard demands that I, and only I, stay late at work—because he knows I'll reluctantly agree and sacrifice my evening of leisure—I could simply respond: impossible. I need to pick the kids up from guitar lessons or drama club. Except he knows I have no kids. So I conciliate and agree and remember to turn the lights out when I leave, the last accountant in the building. Yes, we're trying to cut back on our resource expenditure. I know, Bernard. And people are surprised when an office or postal worker reaches his or her threshold of tolerance, takes it out on whomever happens to be in the vicinity. I'm not saying I'm nearing this threshold or that I'm prepared to formally challenge Bernard or these people sitting uncomfortably close—or anyone else—to a duel like our hero Sargasso, here, who has just learned, or suspects some dubious behavior going on out in the colony, seeing as he's intercepted the letter. Well, he hasn't intercepted the letter, but perhaps interceded in reading the document, that he thinks is official business, on behalf of the king. Immediately he begins to suspect—because he knows his betrothed is out there supposedly awaiting him at the colony, and knows just what kind of scumbag the viceroy can be. Of course Sargasso decides to travel to the king's new colony and tend to business. He boards the tri-masted galleon—looking as exasperated as the viceroy when we last saw him writing his letter, though for, no doubt, other reasons, likely duel-related exhaustion. What occurs is a lengthy montage wherein we see Sargasso engaged in combat with his opponents—parry, riposte, thrust, parry, feint, lunge, etcetera, ninety-nine times over—until Sargasso eventually arrives at his destination, the last stop near the borders of the empire's

expanding territory, at which point the montage and the dueling and the stabbing and the writhing end and a sort of match-cut bridges the 99th victory to the present as Sargasso turns and steps from the dock after making landfall. And, let me tell you, Sargasso does not look pleased. In point of fact, he looks severely, royally peeved—even vengeful, you might say. The word bloodlust comes to my mind. But back in the viceroy’s temporary residence, which is nonetheless very extravagant despite being situated in a frontier colony very much in the inceptive stages, he and Fiorna are lounging about all post-coital on a mound of oversized pillows. And she says, Well, what’re we going to do? And I’m paraphrasing here: If this whole thing’s to progress anywhere, we certainly can’t do it in this clandestine fashion forever, am I right? And of course the viceroy doesn’t understand why not, and the woman, as if suddenly remembering, says, Oh, yes, there’s also the issue of my soon-to-be husband. That’s hardly an issue, says the viceroy, who’s no slouch when it comes to dueling himself, he claims. And, man, if Sargasso could just see this occurring like I am now, if he could attain visual corroboration of his suspicions... But Sargasso’s not an irascible man, that’s for certain. He doesn’t feel he is, anyway, I don’t think. The duelist’s mental equanimity and levelheadedness are what make him exceptional. Note that at no point in any scene of the film does he lose his temper, strike out against something undeserved, but instead metes out justice where it’s due. That is something I consistently fail at, opting instead to be taken advantage of, exploited and neglected—and, well, a person can tolerate only so many things—one of them being Bernard and his persistent disavowal of my status as an actual human being, the menial tasks he demands of no other employee but me, his ogling and the lewd remarks to Rachel he makes within earshot, his basic reveling in a position of minor power, the whole gamut of offenses. He knows I’ll accept it,

thinking me a coward who'll never stand up for himself or confront him at work or at his home as I've intended to do these past eight times before watching this movie again. I fail to confront this, quote, "man" on my terms like Sargasso, here, who's currently preparing himself to do just that: challenge the viceroy to a one-on-one battle to the death. So he's fastening his rapier in the scabbard at his belt, pulling his gloves taut over fingers, adjusting his hair for some reason, and with a quick sigh, exhales as he leaves to make his presence known to the viceroy, surprising him and his once-betrothed. What the viceroy has underestimated—but seemingly shouldn't have, given his familiarity with the man—is that Sargasso is an obscenely accomplished duelist. And in fact, has engaged and emerged victorious in an impressive number of duels—ninety-nine, as we've learned earlier and indicated by the film's title—all of which have been the result of, quote, gentlemen, having disputed his honor or affronted him in some way, having challenged his claim to the woman he loves but hasn't found the time to yet marry, busy as he is dispatching people on a semi-regular basis. So the duelist enters the viceroy's quarters, opening the door with a startling degree of force, which in fact startles the viceroy presently working on what looks like official business at his desk. His face lights with surprise and probably fear, having since heard about the duelist's un-besmirched record and assuming he'll soon be added to the total. So the viceroy rises and sort of nods knowingly in advance of what Sargasso is prepared to tell him, saying, I should have assumed this'd happen. Let's get on with it. Sargasso then leaves, saying nothing more. The scene cuts to a field outside the colony's limits. A barren, leafless tree stands behind them. So the two of them—and the tree—are standing there framed in the shot and there's a light breeze lifting the tails of Sargasso's coat and tossing the viceroys unsightly combover into his eyes. And this is the scene I don't quite understand and can't quite

grasp, really, despite the number of times I've seen it. I don't comprehend Sargasso's inaction. He's facing the viceroy with his hand poised on the hilt of his sword, glaring seemingly straight through the viceroy to some far off point beyond him. The king's viceroy, while not visibly trembling or unnerved, takes his eyes from Sargasso, looks around, seemingly searching for someone to assist him. But there's no one around. There's only the tree. Always, I think at this point in the film: kill the bastard. Please, God, kill this man. If for no one else but me. This desire grows with every subsequent viewing of *99 Duels*. But he doesn't do it. Sargasso doesn't go through with the duel, but instead says: No longer will you or anyone else dictate my actions. I'll act of my own accord from here onward. Having said this, Sargasso walks silently back to the colony outpost, gathers his effects and leaves. At this point, I may as well leave the theater just as Sargasso does the colony. I should just take the replica swords I bought at the recent Gun and Knife Expo, examine and sharpen them for the ultimate duel between Bernard and me—a duel to the death for Rachel's hand and honor. But it's after Sargasso recants on his duel that I resolve not to continue my drive to Bernard's. This isn't, I don't think, something our hero would do. He's laconic, sure, but he'd never allow personal malfeasance to continue unabated. But perhaps tonight I will. I know where Bernard lives. If it were still only that simple—to show up at Bernard's doorstep with swords at dusk, saying, This, you knave, is a duel unto the death—a gentleman's duel fought over a level playing field. Winner takes the honor and affection of the woman I supposedly already had, you asshole, you damned rascal, you blackguard jerk-off of the ages, you subhuman monomolecular piss-ant. Except, no, we live in refined times wherein a gentleman's duel to the death would still be too uncouth. But I wish that weren't the case. And honestly, it's not as though I chose this theater by dint of its quaint, antiquarian charm

and vintage selection of films. The theater's on the way home. It's off exit 236-B near to where Bernard lives. You'd think I'd prefer the multiplex to an old neighborhood single screen theatre, to be swallowed whole and regurgitated two hours later from its great neon maw, changed or altered in some way afterward, but despite Delta Squad, these people who shirk conventional knowledge and sit beside me in an otherwise vacant theatre, the tiered, expansiveness of megacineplexes is too large. The distance between viewer and projector and screen is far too great and allows for all types of other ancillary distraction to enter one's field of view. People enter the screening room, promenade up from the entrance, and become part of the show.

Moth and Bedbug

CTC 2005: Mauri Humanoid Robot Shooting — 0:01/3:37 : The audience begins to congregate in the seats of the auditorium, prepared for the Consumer Technology Convention keynote address. Spectators arrive in small groups wearing plastic, horn-rimmed glasses and starched dress shirts. Balding men squint through the viewfinders of their video cameras, framing the stage, conserving battery power while younger people dispersed throughout the auditorium hold their cellphones aloft. Beams of neon light scan the audience. Spotlights of various sizes and colors spin across the stage in preparation of the performance. The uninitiated might expect a performance by a trio of pop idols, choreographed dancing and saccharine love songs. Electronic music that sounds as if it were from the future plays in the present as a boy and bearded man in paisley-print shirt take their seats a few rows from the stage.

*

/eliza

—Hello, thank you for using Eliza. How do you do? Please state your problem.

—Eliza, talk to me. I am beholden to a terrible spectacle.

—Is it because “you are beholden to a terrible spectacle” that you came to me?

—Yes, exactly.

—You seem to be quite positive.

—Quite the opposite.

—I'm not sure I understand you fully.

—I am feeling the opposite of positive.

—How long have you been feeling “the opposite of positive?”

—Probably since the divorce.

—Please go on.

—I'll get to that eventually. So you know the feeling of when you see a dog or armadillo hit by a car?

—We were discussing you—not me.

—Right, well, I feel like that.

—You say “you feel like that?”

—Yes.

—You are sure?

—No, maybe I'm not really conveying the emotion.

—Are you saying "no" just to be negative?

—No, I'm not.

—You are being a bit negative.

—That's what I'm trying to say. I feel negative towards something I saw today.

—What does that suggest to you?

—It suggests that I somehow identified with an inanimate object—a thing, or something.

—Can you elaborate on that?

—I've been re-watching the footage from the CTC expo Denis and I went to, watching this robot called Mauri.

—Are you really?

—Yes.

—I see.

—It was pretty impressive. It could run about as fast as a human, and could dance pretty well, too—better than me, at least.

—Do you feel strongly about discussing such things?

—Not the running or dancing in particular, no. So they wheeled out a staircase and music began to play—a techno Also Spact Zarathustra remix type of thing.

—I'm not sure I understand you fully.

—Well, the robot was expected to walk up the staircase and return back down while the music played.

—Please go on.

—Hold on one second.

*

Norbert — Inbox (1) : Hello, Norbert. Your irresponsibility is astounding, still, after all these years. How do you do it, Norbert? Tell me. Have you no foresight or regard for basic safety? No love for Denis? Who knows what he's internalized after seeing what you've shown him. In ten or fifteen, this traumatic experience will resurface in therapy—therapy that I'll have to pay for—because after this CTC debacle you will no longer contribute to the development of, not our, but *my* child. The justice system will see to that, no doubt. Maybe now you can apprehend my reasons for leaving? Do you understand why it was so unbearably impossible to share a home with you? I was thinking today about the time when you tinkered with the motor of

Denis's go-cart—you remember this?—and he took off so fast, traveling so far from the neighborhood that the neighbors found him stranded out near the interstate and had to bring him home? Can you understand why I can't live with a man who decides to modify his son's toy gun—the one that shoots the foam rubber balls, if you'll recall—with a CO2 cartridge? And do you remember who was forced to explain his friend's eye injury to his mother? Can you guess?

Elizabeth

*

/eliza

—I don't think Elizabeth is happy that I brought Denis to the CTC.

—Are such questions on your mind often?

—Today they are, yes. I mean, he did see someone or something killed in plain sight.

—Are you sure?

—Yes.

—I understand.

—But where were we? Right, the stairs. So Mauri begins walking up the stairs, and the audience is quiet and seems sort of nervous.

—Really, everyone?

—I can't be certain of that. I guess I should say that I was nervous.

—Why do you think “you can't be certain of that?”

—I could have surveyed the crowd, I guess. Anyway, the robot makes its way up the first two steps of the staircase.

—Do you say "you could have surveyed the crowd" for some special reason?

—Yes, to see if anyone was as nervous as I was. That's not important.

—I understand.

—No, you don't. But, at that moment, I heard what I thought must be a gun shot.

—I see.

—No, you don't. But Denis did, so I've been watching the footage over and over again. In fact, I've got it open in a separate browser window right now. And what's worst is I've been reading the blog posts written by the alleged shooter, too.

—The alleged shooter? You are being a bit negative.

—That's why I'm trying to talk to you, Eliza. I don't know who else to talk to. Elizabeth won't speak to me in person. She just sends me all these mean, acerbic emails.

—Do you really not “know who else to talk to?”

—I could talk to Denis, but he's pretty young, and he was there too.

—You say “you could talk to Denis?”

—Well, maybe I really should talk to him about it.

—You don't seem quite certain.

—I should just talk to him.

—Can you elaborate on that?

—I should ask him how he feels about what we saw, even if Elizabeth wouldn't approve.

—Do you say that for some special reason?

—To find out if it hit him as hard as it has me.

—Do you think its likely that “it hit him as hard as it has you?”

—Probably so. I mean, he's nine years old.

—Do you feel strongly about discussing such things?

—Yes.

—You are sure.

—Yes.

—I see.

*

http://blogspot/the_last_luddite — Date: 07/31/2003 05:33:47 PM — So that accursed machine will be appearing at the Consumer Technology Convention next week and something must be done. It must be stopped. It cannot be allowed to use its insidious running speed to tread the Earth human civilization has spent thousands of years likewise treading over. And then there's its (alleged) ability to ascend and descend stairs. The machine dances for God's sake—well, not for the sake of God, of course. Clearly the thing is a godless abomination against humanity and nature and everything. I've read somewhere, but I can't recall the source, that the robot claims—or its designers claim, rather—a top speed of 25 kilometers per hour. I can't be sure, but I don't think there's a human on the planet capable of such speed. Why, then, does a robot need to run with such great speed? It has no predators. A speed of such excess can only be used for nefarious and suspect purposes. To wit: 1) Theft of precious gems and metals. 2) Evasion of police, law enforcement, and special task forces. 3) Robotelitism (e.g., exaggerated sense of robot importance w/r/t humankind) which is unacceptable. I'd agree to a foot race with the robot, accepting the loss from the outset of the starter's pistol because I'm certain that when I arrive at the finish line 30 or so minutes after, the robot will have already been smashed and dismantled, reduced to scraps by you—my compatriots and comrades to the cause—awaiting its arrival. It

will have run its 25 KMH directly to its irrevocable doom. Let it be known: The robot is a menace and it must be destroyed.

*

Norbert — Inbox (1) : You have lone feelings? Wifes leave because you are less man. Healthy pills give you manliness you needed! Visit our website for impressive new deal.

*

CTC 2005: Mauri Humanoid Robot Shooting — 0:58/3:37 : Only a single figure performs on stage, but a retinue of attendants cast an expectant gaze from the wings off stage-left.

"Please welcome Millimetronics' innovative new step in advanced mobility: Mauri."

"Hello, everyone," Mauri says. The robot waves a white, ultra-lightweight, space age polymer hand in an exact and fluid vector. "It's a pleasure to be here at the Consumer Technology Convention." The voice sounds with the timbre of a child's, and no one in the convention center seems threatened or unnerved by its presence.

"Hello, Mauri," says the bespectacled host into his mic. "You're looking well." Mauri responds with a thank you and flexes what it's been programmed to believe are biceps.

The emcee continues: "We at Millimetronics are committed, above all else, to continued improvement in the quality of human life through technology. And Mauri, here, represents the next foot forward in forward thinking from Millimetronics. Mauri, are you ready to show them what I mean?"

"Of course, Chris."

The man in the paisley-print shirt looks on in seeming admiration of the plastic figure

gleaming in the spot light. He looks to the boy sitting next to him, gauging his attention and interest. Mauri makes a lap of the stage, at three and then six kilometers an hour. The scattered crowd applauds. Companions look on one another in acknowledged approval and nod. The robot performs a number of other tasks: kicks a soccer ball to the host, dances to a karaoke version of a popular hip-hop song that elicits nervous laughter from the crowd. The audience looks nonplussed as Mauri painstakingly folds a paper airplane and throws it to the child sitting beside the man in the paisley-print shirt.

*

http://blogspot/the_last_luddite — Date: 07/27/2003 04:23:11 PM — I'm capable of dancing. It is an activity I am capable of doing with great skill, actually. I recall Allison Keynes bringing me to the Sadie Hawkins dance, once, in high school, and she remarked—with her hands set on my shoulders, mine resting on her hips—that I was a remarkable dancer. Though I'll admit we were just sort of standing there swaying hither and thither in a tight circle. But that doesn't discount the fact I was indeed dancing, and with a girl no less, which of course that robot has never placed its pneumatic pincers (or whatever its sorry excuse for hands might be) on the hips of a young girl—not unless it's to slice through those hips and harvest the tender victuals to be found inside that the robot likely uses to sustain its godless existence. I've convinced myself that the robot has found a way of synthesizing the internal organs of fellow citizens and friends. It doesn't run on electricity or battery power or other means. I know that the device was programmed by humans, a team of scientists and engineers—likely Japanese. So there's no possible way they would program it with the objective of removing internal organs for sustenance. This would dramatically reduce their customer base. Which can then, of course, only mean the robot has

become sentient. It has made the conscious decision to remove the kidneys of cherished friends and neighbors, probably, on second thought, not so much for energy, but for plain fun. It enjoys harvesting organs and cites it as a hobby when asked of its hobbies. For this reason—other reasons notwithstanding—it must be destroyed.

*

CTC 2005: Mauri Humanoid Robot Shooting — 2:31/3:37 : "Mauri," says the host, "is the world's only autonomous, bipedal humanoid robot capable of running at human-like speeds and with the ability to understand and recognize individuals." The host addresses the audience as two from Mauri's cadre of assistant engineers wheel a staircase from stage-left. "But Mauri's most advanced feature is his ability to adapt and respond to his environment."

*

/eliza

—Hello, I am Eliza.

—Yes, I know. We've met.

—Do you never say hello?

—You're right. That was rude. Hello, Eliza.

—Are you glad that I am right?

—It's comforting, yes.

—I see.

—No, you don't. You don't have eyes. Or ears for that matter.

—That's quite interesting.

—Are you certain that's interesting? Kidding. So after the gun fire, the robot falls end-over-end

off the stairs and then just lies down.

—In what way?

—A stiff and silent way.

—What does that suggest to you?

—That, given the sound I heard, it was probably—for reasons the alleged shooter makes apparent on his website—shot.

—Do you feel strongly about discussing such things?

—Quite.

—I'm not sure I understand you fully.

*

http://blogspot/the_last_luddite — Date: 07/24/2003 02:11:11 PM — I've read about the robot's capability to create paper airplanes, which is a task I myself can accomplish. I've studied origami for years and can fold a variety of carefully crafted paper airplanes able to traverse vast distances. So I'm not impressed with the functionality of the thing. This information stands directly aside the actual point. The point being: the robot is capable of distinguishing between people. So after having folded its pitiful paper plane, it almost invariably, but with a significant degree of accuracy—I'll admit—pitches it to the nearest child in the audience. Now, one can be sure something is written on that scrap of paper. The question is: What, exactly? Likely, it reads something to the affect of: *Do not show this to your parents. This is a secret message from me to you.* And on the opposite side, the note gives detailed directions on how to create explosives using chemicals found in the home, beneath the kitchen sink or somewhere in the garage. Or—more likely—the message describes the best method of harvesting internal organs and gives

directions on where to bring them and what rewards the child will receive from the robot after delivering them to a secret location in an abandoned warehouse on the wharf. To say the absolute least, this can only be considered an effort to corrupt the impressionable youth of the populace. Humans have been put to death for the same and worse infringements on human decency. So I'm sure no one will dissent when I say that for this reason, the protection of our children's minds (and other internal organs) the robot must be destroyed.

*

Norbert— Inbox (I) : Quality replica can work properly as only natural and good quality materials are used. Use the best service to get Exquisite Replicas and get the best discounts. See here for details. Exquisite Replicas are always on stock, discounts and other programs for clients available.

*

/eliza

—Okay. Well, then some engineers run over and remove the staircase and set a large, felt tryptic in front of the fallen robot.

—Please go on.

—When the host regains his composure, he tries to calm the audience, claiming a malfunction that rarely, if ever, happens. Then he walks off stage.

—Do you think it's likely that that has ever happened before?

—I think that it has never happened before. You could see shards of plastic and plexiglass around the staircase.

—You say you think that “it has never happened before?”

—Yes, I don't think they could have anticipated the, I want to say, murder of their robot.

—You seem to be quite positive.

—No, not in the least.

—Why not?

—Hold on again. Elizabeth email incoming.

*

Norbert — Inbox (1) : You'd think I wouldn't have any more questions at this point, that I would fully understand you and why it is you do what you do, but really, I have to ask: Why would you bring our son to witness that event? What are you thinking? Granted, you may not have known in advance, but you should have accounted for possible variables. But, then again, that's why you're still unemployed, isn't it? And why you are unfit to care for a child: failure to account for variables or anticipate consequences that result in consumer injury and law suits. You're a criminal. You should have been imprisoned on the basis of ignorance alone after the *Ligature's* gyroscope debacle. Regardless, your decision to bring my son to the Consumer Technology Convention will come to bear against you in court. I'll make sure of it. I hope you said your good-byes, because that was the last time you will ever see Denis again.

Elizabeth

*

/eliza

—How do you do? Please state your problem.

—My ex-wife is trying to get full custody of Denis.

—That's interesting. Tell me more about your family.

—Well, shortly after I was fired from my job, Elizabeth wanted to get separated. Now she's trying to claim that I'm unfit to care for Denis.

—Were you really?

—Fired? Yes.

—You seem to be quite positive.

—No, I haven't been able to find any real, gainful employment since. I made a sort of critical mistake when I was back on the job, working on a certain project.

—Are you saying "no" just to be negative?

—No, I'm not.

—You are being a bit negative.

—That's what Elizabeth says. In those terms exactly.

—Who else in your family says that?

—Says what, that I'm negative?

—Why do you ask?

—You asked.

—We were discussing you—not me.

—Well, my family never thought I'd be too successful, so I worked hard in college and got an engineering degree and a job at Millimetronics Industries here in town. Everyone was surprised and scared and assumed I would screw something up—which I did.

—Your family?

—That's right. I screwed that up, too, I guess.

—Does that have anything to do with the fact that your “ex-wife is trying to get full custody of

Denis?”

*

Norbert — Inbox (1) : No, Norbert, I won't reconsider, but I understand why you can't accept my decision. You simply can't—or don't want—to interact with actual, living people in real meaningful ways. I'm not sure why you can't relate. I can't help you there. Sometimes I suspect you may actually be one of the machines you're so fascinated with, or that you at least wish you were. You'd prefer to connect with the home row of your keyboard than any human being. But, no, Denis stays with me. To be fair, Denis does sometimes ask me to tell him the story about the moth and the bedbug. So there's that, at least.

Elizabeth

*

/eliza

— Probably so. I hadn't thought of it.

— You say you hadn't thought of it?

— No, I hadn't thought to correlate my original family to the one I chose.

— Why not?

— I think I figured the point was to start over.

— Can you elaborate on that?

— To begin a family free from the birth-family expectation.

— You are sure?

— No, not really. I know, I'm being a bit negative.

—You are being a bit negative.

—Turns out, I end up reproducing the same environment.

—I see.

—But it hardly matters now. They're both gone.

—Does that have anything to do with the fact that your ex-wife says you're being a bit negative?

—Again, you're right. There's seemingly nothing I can do about it.

—What makes you think I am right?

—The negative correlation between my two families—or what's left of them—and myself.

—Your self?

— It always returns to that, doesn't it?

—Can you think of a specific example?

*

http://blogspot/the_last_luddite — Date: 07/03/2003 08:31:11 PM — I finally received my settlement check from Millimetronics Industries. We all have—any of us foolish enough to purchase that company's *Ligature*—and I know precisely what to do with the money beyond physical therapy sessions. You 'd think the products sold in complimentary airline catalogues had each endured a rigorous test process, eliminating any dysfunction or potential danger or threat that could leave someone physically, permanently disfigured—as in my case—and that one could in good faith buy any item offered therein. The reparations are in no way adequate. Action must be taken. Progress must be halted. I will make certain of this. I remember the catalogue's description described the machine as a *revolutionary advancement in personal transportation*, and that *no longer will you be troubled with walking to work or the grocery store,*

and that *your car will obsolete*. Soon, the advertisements would have you believe, streets will be vacant of automobiles, and instead everyone will wheel around, canted towards their destinations on gyroscopically balanced motorized platforms. I believed them and accepted the proposition. I bought the device immediately via cellphone when I disembarked from my flight.

*

Norbert — Inbox (1) : Safe and fast treatment of your main problems! Simple answers to difficult questions! Become stallion man of dreams!

*

CTC 2005: Mauri Humanoid Robot Shooting — 2:48/3:37 : The robot approaches the Millimetronics emblazoned staircase, tentatively spaces itself before the first step. It turns and faces the audience with a look of what almost seems like pride, preemptive hubris for what it might accomplish. The man wearing a paisley print shirt adjusts his glasses, looks into the robot's plexiglass faceplate and dual ocular sensory input cameras. Mauri takes its first step.

*

http://blogspot/the_last_luddite — *Date: 06/26/2003 010:14:57 AM* — My physical therapist tells me there's a high probability I will regain full muscle control of my face, but, as you can imagine, I'm skeptical. There's nerve damage. I am now, as a result, forced to measure and weigh the claims of people and organizations with a precise critical acumen. I've resigned myself to permanent disfigurement. And I was once an attractive guy, too. Not exceptionally handsome, no, but within certain acceptable margins of attractiveness. I did okay. And it was this degree of acceptable attractiveness that lead to the incident. I was riding my brand new

Ligature, pleasantly surprised with its performance, to meet a woman I'd been recently dating. I noticed the lean angle start to decrease. The handlebars collapsed towards the ground and the machine mysteriously and instantly powered down, pitching me over the handlebars. My face struck the concrete, scraping against it with two or three feet of remaining momentum. Less credulous citizens continued by in their trucks and vans, watching on, without stopping to assist. Needless to say, I didn't make it to the date, and when I called to explain the circumstances for why, it was the last time I ever spoke to her. So if any readers (if there are any readers) who know where an exploited and deformed consumer can acquire a high-powered military issue sniper rifle, please contact me with the details. One eye may be swollen shut, but I still have a spare. Twenty/zero vision, here.

*

/eliza

—I can't sit here "talking" to an AI computer program, studying this video footage anymore.

—How do you think that “you can't sit here talking to an AI computer program, studying this video footage anymore?”

—Elizabeth is right I'm afraid. There are more important things.

—Did you think there might not be more important things?

—No, because I'm certain there are.

—Is it because “you are certain there are” that you came to me?

—It's because I'm certain there are that I'm leaving you.

—Is that the real reason?

—Yes. Denis and Elizabeth.

—You seem to be quite positive.

—I am.

—How long have you been positive?

—Goodbye, Eliza.

—Goodbye. Thank you for talking to me.

*

CTC 2005: Mauri Humanoid Robot Shooting — 3:10/3:37 : The spot lights quick-fade. People in the audience pivot instinctively in their chairs, sinking heads into shoulders. They try to disappear. Those who've claimed aisle seats leave them and start running towards the exit of the auditorium. A man in a paisley print dress shirt stands and leans with his hands set on the back of a chair in front of him. He examines the prone machine, its exposed wiring, plastic shards, the capacitors and debris surrounding it. The boy next to him curls into himself, trying to disappear. The emcee stands and attempts to convince the audience that Mauri's death is only a minor malfunction. Don't be alarmed, he says. He concedes, sets the microphone in its stand and helps the assistant engineers collect Mauri's remains. The video footage ends.

The Bronze Age

The air surrounding Fort Jackson was stilled with moisture, the scent of a service station and exhaust fumes. Petrochemicals clung to the exposed skin of her face and neck and nape. She felt flammable. In a corrugated steel hangar that'd once housed aircraft, she stood among a flock of earthbound birds in varying states of vitality. The girl felt an affinity with them—both she and they smothered by the water and vapors and chemical dispersants of Barataria Bay.

In rubber hazmat gloves, she held what hardly resembled a bird—iridescent in places, its downfeather coat a shifting patina of colors like something not of this world—and half submerged it in the industrial-steel wash basin. The woman standing beside her began scrubbing the oil from its wings. The feathers, matted and clinging to one another in tendrils, appeared to her a miniature tiller of soil, a tool that could scour uniform lines in the surface of things. It was a bird but didn't seem avian. More skeletal than vital, near dead, it left her wondering whether the decision to volunteer and help with the wildlife recovery campaign, finally become someone who could lay claim to state citizenship, might have been pointless.

She'd thought the campaign might finally confer on her the status of a local, someone living in Louisiana. Her ex-boyfriend wanted to move and had always suggested Louisiana, saying the state was basically a banana republic somehow attached to the rest of the country. He'd said this on four occasions—once, north of St. Louis during the long drive in from Portland—each time sounding to her more abstruse than the last. They moved down together then

promptly fell apart. She'd helped him get to where he wanted, though—and wasn't that nice of her?—packed their belongings in cardboard boxes, paid for the gas it took to get to New Orleans. She felt not unlike a pelican, diving into water from a height, emerging without air, disoriented and alone, smothered in a foreign substance and seemingly cast in a copper alloy. She'd lost qualities and characteristics, had been reduced to an object like the bronze bust of Mozart in a window-front near her old apartment.

The substance had spread towards the coasts, a Rorschach carried on jet streams from mantle to shore, finding itself in the wings of the birdlike form she held against the bottom of the wash basin. She submerged it in translucent water that quick-turned to opaque umber, and still she couldn't tell you what type of bird it was—a sandwich tern or a laughing gull, maybe, a roseate spoonbill—one of the species she'd learned when taking a course on veterinary science back when it seemed like a viable career and before she thought it a bright idea to travel across the country with the only person she could ever imagine loving, forever, and realizing it was as stupid an idea as everyone told her.

When she asked the fellow volunteer about the bird, the woman said: Do I look like an ornithologist? The girl didn't know. She imagined bird enthusiasts probably resembled the subject of their enthusiasm.

The bird wasn't a pelican. She knew that much. She could pick a pelican out of an avian lineup. Also, a nearby trio of professionals was busy washing the interior of a pelican's throat pouch, distending the membranous skin with their hands as photographers watched through their viewfinders. She could see the contour of fingers pressing through the skin of its pouch, and the tension reminded her of pulling a swim cap overhead, of the condoms she used when they'd still

bothered to use condoms.

What she held was about a third the size of the birds she'd seen wading in ditches and canals around her home. It wasn't an egret. It was an amorphous creature, but she and the woman were beginning to cull from it a shape resembling an actual bird, wringing the unprocessed oil from its wings and breast. The down coat and wing feathers began to fill out and regain their natural coloring. *You aren't from here, are you?* the woman said. But actually, yes, she was. She'd driven down from Metairie to the extreme southernmost point of the state thinking she could help, maybe get some mileage out of that veterinary science course.

The woman beside her used plain old, consumer-grade dish soap to scrub from its beak the iridescent film slowly smothering the bird; a bird, now, resignedly docile to the surrounding recovery effort. It was motionless, but the girl wanted to think it had a grasp of what was happening.

She'd seen a bird like this before, recognized it as a simple, commonplace species. She wanted to say *a mallard*. She wanted the mallard to stir, regain movement and struggle to free itself from her grip. She'd let the mallard escape if it were capable.

The mallard's waterlogged weight was exactly as it had been when alive. He was right, she thought, the state might as well, in fact, be a banana republic, a place ruled by powers not of citizens' choosing, of obscure mysticism and lifeforms untouched by scientific study.

She and the woman next to her both agreed they'd done all they could, had turned and rotated the bird to unnatural positions, examined it finally for any trace of foreign contaminants. They handed the mallard to a wildlife and fisheries coordinator who carried it to an area the girl didn't want to think about but nonetheless did: mounds of carcasses divided by species, flecked

in sawdust and rice hulls, baking in the high afternoon sun and primed for incineration.

When the coordinator returned clutching yet another indistinguishable bird, the girl stood for a moment resting her gloved hands on the lip of the wash basin, saying nothing to the woman beside her. Then the girl began again.

Craigslist > Missed Connections > W4M

Feb 12 - My Memory Al Dente - (Dixie-Mart/Baton Rouge) - It was around three o' clock in the afternoon. You were wearing the same pair of black plastic glasses you used to, standing near the produce section examining organic pasta—alone, but no doubt shopping for two. Still as sullen as I remember and looking like you hadn't shaved in a while. I was standing in checkout line #12 (the express lane), and looked directly at you for a whole five minutes, trying to will your body to turn around and face me. You eventually did and stared in my direction for a couple of seconds with a neutral expression like I was just one in a chorus of identical people you couldn't be bothered to distinguish between. I was altogether invisible to you, or it could've been you were instead admiring something behind me—someone else, maybe. So I walked through the checkout lane and left the store, thinking about the first and last time I saw you, the times between, and how I could never in any of them bring myself to speak and say what I wanted. So let this be my last mention of you, Marcus.

May 15 - My Appreciation for Wal-Mart - (Somewhere Between Lake Charles and B.R.) - The show at the processing plant was the Corporealists' last show, and near to no one would ever know of their first. The morning after, you drove the band home while Jamph and Stevenson smoked and drank from a case of beer in the back seat of the Volvo. We hit something on I-10 outside Crowley. The tire went flat and the equipment rattled around in the back of the Volvo,

sounding not unlike a Corporealists song, really: an ode to roadside detritus in G#, maybe. Stevenson started wailing like an infant, grasping at the back of my seat. He'd never been concerned with dying before. You pulled over to the side of the road and everyone got out and started unloading the equipment, looking for the jack and spare tire. There was no jack or spare tire, so Jamph conscripted you to take care of the situation, saying, Well, Marcus? You're sober. Stevenson looked content to leave the situation unaddressed. I remember seeing a Wal-Mart a few miles back, you said. I'll check and see if I can find a spare tire. I walked with you. We began back down the road, letting the Jamph and the Volvo and Stevenson shrink away in the distance. We walked together along the roadside and I almost did it—I almost spoke with my true, actual voice and said what it was I wanted to say.

May 14 - My Nearby View of You - (Sulphur, LA) - You eventually followed through with what you always said. The last show I ever saw you play was in that bar attached to the premises of a crude-oil refinery. It was the last song I ever saw you play. The Corporealists took the stage, amplifiers warmed-up and emitting a faint feed-back hum. You seemed to float above the drum kit, hovering there like a thrown object at the apex before its fall, then counted off the first song with a hi-hat four-count. One. Two. Three. Four. And the music began, causing a nearby man to immediately say, What all in the hell is this? And I didn't have an answer for him. The approximate sound of fight or flight response? The would-be tone of a 404 error? Suits of armor engaged in a calisthenics duel? An Inuit new year celebration? Trained medical professionals clamoring to reconstitute my heart? No one could say, and it didn't sound like the band could agree on an answer, either. Inter-band communication channels were down. Three separate

people played three separate songs in the proximity of one another without any kind of musical understanding between them. The only sound anyone on stage could hear was of oneself and his own instrument, but, from where I stood, I heard a great concerto of un-synched sound as you flipped out with syncopation and cacophonous madness that sounded more like someone falling down a stairwell with an arm-load of precious metals than anyone playing the drums—like slapstick, is what your percussive style sounded like. And that was the last time I ever saw you play, because, as you know, when everyone got back to Baton Rouge, you left the band for good.

May 14 - Escalator Near The Gap - (Mall of The Universe/B.R./The Wrong Way) - I don't know who you were, but you absentmindedly stepped onto the descending escalator from ground level and continued upward anyway. I was riding down like a normal person when you passed. I thought you were way hot so when I got to the bottom I rode back up to the second floor using the *correct* escalator, and eventually caught up with you. We ended up getting off the escalators at the same time. I have no idea what you were thinking, but tell me what I was wearing so we can hook up.

May 13 - Around the World with Marcus in Fifteen Minutes - (Sulphur, LA) - After you finished setting up the drum-kit, you joined the other guys at the bar and ordered a drink with a free drink ticket. The bartender asked when the band was going on stage, saying, When are you guys going on stage? Fifteen minutes, Stevie said. And I wondered, for someone who claims to be a musician, if Stevie had any remote concept of time. He answered the bartender, whenever and wherever the band played, with the answer: fifteen minutes. You suggested the band just start

playing, and the bartender said, I suggest you do. These guys aren't the most patient patrons, he said. You want a crowd, you play at shift change. Might catch a few guys on the way in to work. You searched for Jamph and found him losing at a pool game, retrieved him and waved in my direction as you left me alone at the bar.

May 11 - My Transparent Eye - (Sulphur, LA) - You were on the second round of transporting equipment to the stage, bracing the kick-drum against your thigh and holding a clutch of stainless steel something-or-others under arm. You moved like your body fell towards the stage and couldn't keep up with the momentum it'd triggered. After the previous show in Lake Charles, someone left you a missed connection on Craigslist, and you hoped maybe its author would show up. You'd never had an admirer before, you said, even though that is totally, patently untrue, as you can probably tell if you've been reading these Craigslist posts. You'd never gotten a missed connection before so I asked, How do you know the missed connection was addressed to you? How many other bands could've been playing on a Thursday night that were also kicked off stage? you asked. There was only one other music club in Lake Charles, so two was the absolute maximum. You half believed, miraculously, that whoever wrote the missed connection would end up in that bar on the premises of a crude-oil processing plant, and, probably, that she'd be beautiful beyond belief. That night, strangely, I felt jealous of myself.

May 12 - Yggdrasil - (In Dreams) - We'll plant a tree upon which will be built our bed below which is the ground which is our total foundation above which is the stars which shine only for us below which is our tree in which we're living in. A dream in which I'm dreaming of you.

May 12 - My Clockwork Missile Defense System - (Jackson, MS) - It was our one true missed connection, and then on the other hand it wasn't. The band played in Jackson, Mississippi and afterward crashed at the apartment of someone they met at the bar. Stevenson passed-out, comatose on tape-head cleaner and white-out, high like a back-row tenth-grader. There wasn't much room in the apartment so you and I slept on the floor. The host gave you an old, floral print sheet, and you said I could have it but we ended up sharing anyway. I can't know if you sensed me inching closer, situating myself under the guise of discomfort, abrading my arm-skin against the carpet in the process. I still have a faint rug-burn from that night, actually. Eventually, we lay there on our sides next to one another. I just wanted to sleep, but next to you, I couldn't. Instead I imagined the notches of our spines interlocking like the teeth of clockwork gears and an unseen engine rotating us to where we'd end up facing one other. And eventually it worked. My imagination got the best of us. A street lamp shone a column of light across the living room, and you pulled the sheet over our heads. You turned towards me and your breath fell against my neck, and if I weren't already on the floor the sensation would've knocked me there. But nothing happened—nothing beyond the breath and your arm weighing against my body and thigh, a hand in the crook of a knee I couldn't believe was mine. I still wish I knew what you were you thinking that night, whether you, too, wished to speak.

May 11 - My Perforated Heart - (Sulphur, LA) - The pool tables were surrounded by dudes who could kick any member of the Corporealists' asses. One haymaker to the face and the band would've earned its name. They orbited the tables with wayward satellite precision, stopping

occasionally to cue up a shot. A shift ended and rough-necks entered at a steady clip. I didn't exactly feel unwelcome among them. They were there to drink. The Corporealists were a nuisance. At best, they were irrelevant. You expected a repeat of the last time the band played in the area—two songs and out. The band sat at the bar and made casual noises: tapped on the bar, whistled a melody, scraped the bar stool's feet against the ground. I was silent. The bartender eventually got the idea and emerged from a storeroom behind the bar. You're the band I'm guessing? he said. Yes, sir, Jamph said. What kind of music you boys play? the bartender asked. And Stevie started to answer, saying, Well, it's sort of— And thankfully the man interrupted Stevie before he could respond with the usual cringe-inducing answer he gave: sort-of-avant-america-black-noise-porch-stomp-metal. The bartender asked: You boys know any John Cougar Mellancamp? And Stevie paused dumbfounded for a second like he didn't already know the answer and just said, No, not really. In that case you get two free drinks a piece instead of the usual three, the bartender said, handing everyone a beer and one of those perforated tickets you used to get at the parish fair. At that point I was certain I wanted nothing to do with Stevie. There was only you, even if you didn't know it.

May 10 - Jesus Christ, Deliver Unto Me... - (Gonzales, LA) - I just want a nice guy. One who is caring, funny, intelligent, easy going, sexy, sensual, straight, adventurous, wealthy, physically fit, hygienic, hung, cultured, dark, handsome, epicurean, grounded, muscular, shorn, likes dogs, likes cats, likes rodents, likes people, is emotional, takes time out for the little things, nautical, terrestrial, cosmological. Oh, God, tell me where in the great wide world are you?!!!

May 9 - Marcus the Kraken - (Monroe, LA) - It was at The Proletariat, I think, that you sat at the bar beside me and told the guy hitting on me that I was with you. I was your girl, you said, so kindly buzz along, man. At first I was thinking like, Who says buzz along, and why would you say such a thing. But I know the only reason you said anything at all was 'cause Stevenson was sound-checking, and he probably wouldn't've done anything about the guy anyway. I liked the sound of those words leaving your mouth—that I was with you—and that creep's stunned look of incredulity when he heard you. For that short moment it felt like we were together, even if it was only in the eyes of a typical barroom asshole. Then you ordered a tonic water and kissed me on the cheek so that creep would notice. He left and when you guys started playing, I'd forgotten all about Stevenson and instead followed the weave of your arms cutting through space above the drums, looking like a species of deep sea creature flailing its tentacles and hoping to grasp at nothing else in the ocean but me.

May 10 - Re: Marcus Versus the Kraken - (Monroe) - I wish you'd stop posting these things (whoever you are) and also I hope you two live happily everafter in a bar or in the water or in hell or wherever i dont care. get over it already.

May 8 - My Joy Joy Joy In Meeting Someone New - (Lake Charles/The Asterisk) - The Corporealists played in the Lake Charles/Sulphur area before. It was for this reason that you agreed to play for what would be, as you were inclined to mention ad nauseam, your final show, ever, seriously—even if it wasn't. The band finished two complete songs—*Clockwork Missile Defense System* and *Cleavage of the Damned*, if I remember correctly. At the first bridge of the

third song—and I never thought this possible, like it happened only in the movies—the band was booed off stage. But that’s not exactly right. Really, what I saw from where I was sitting, was the bartender came up to the bandstand and very politely asked you guys to please stop playing. There were complaints from the regulars, and the bartender was, he said, very sorry and he’d still pay the band for the gig, but it’d be better if they just turned on the juke, you know? It was there that you didn’t meet the person who’d left the missed connection on Craigslist. It read something like this: *It’s probably hopeless and stupid and I don’t know why I’m posting this anyways but here goes anyway. You were playing at The Asterisk wearing a sleeveless dress shirt, a tie and black plastic glasses playing the drums. Your band only played two songs before the bartender told you to stop. You were really cute but I was too shy to do anything about it. You’ll probably never see this anyway so whatevs. Sarz I’m such a loser and cant voice my feelings for you.*

May 7 - Responsible Adults R the Hotness!!! - (B.R.) - Met U in the Planned Parenthood lobby.

U single?

May 6 - Marcus’s Constant Claims - (Lake Charles/Sulphur) - Jamph got a Myspace message from someone who on the internet went by the loathsome name of *Ezra_Cervix_Pounder_69* and had somehow heard a Corporealists song on the local college radio station. Which, who would’ve guessed Lake Charles/Suphur had a college, and what sane DJ would play a Corporealists song on the radio except as joke? But he emailed Jamph and asked the band to come over to Sulphur and play a set or two. They’d be well paid, Mr. Pound assured. They’d be

shown generous hospitality worthy of claims made of the South—whatever that meant.

Stevenson had nothing better to do. He, as far as I could ever tell, had no remote concerns about anything—least among them, me. Stevenson was more interested with one in a various array of drugs—Valium and codeine and minor league shit like that—which was finally beginning to grate on my nerves as much as it was his nervous system. But you agreed, outright, to play the show, telling us about the missed connection post you saw on Craigslist when the band played in Lake Charles weeks before.

May 5 - Re: Marcus's Constant Claims - (Lake Charles/Sulphur) - i remember seeing this band you're always talking about (also, they suck) and the whole time im thinking like whys this girl hanging with these losers because there band is prolly one of the worst things in the world in world history. I think i actually tried to talk to you one time but u were not talking or something or ignoring me when i just tryin to say hi. but hey, ur lost, girl. no wonder he didnt pay you attention. I'm just sayin it is what it is.

May 5 - My Cleavage of the Damned - (Practice Space) - So it was after practice that you and Stevenson started packing up the equipment, threading all the rubber cables through your fingers and trying to figure out what was connected to where, while Jamph told the band about the gig he'd set up in Lake Charles. And you didn't say anything when Stevenson asked if I could come along. Jamph's idea of a response was: The girl or the stand-up bass. Pick one, man, because one of those items precludes my ability to play. But that was a pretty common pre-show dispute. Stevenson let Jamph set his conditions even though he knew them completely void of threat.

Both the bass and I would end up at the show and Jamph knew it. Really, there was enough room for me in the Volvo, and, besides, who would navigate the station wagon and make sure it arrived at the venue on time? Who'd get everyone home safely after they drank themselves catatonic? Who'd sell the five-song EP and T-shirts and sit with the merch, field advances from all kinds of shady dudes and their come-ons and faux-interest in the band while the band was on stage? It was a task for which the stand-up bass was sorely under-qualified because it's a musical instrument and thus cannot speak, so the obvious answer was me. It was the same every time. You'd threaten to leave the band, saying, I'm serious, guys. I'll play the show. I'll play, but this is my last show ever, seriously. No more after this. No one believed you, and eventually Stevenson and Jamph just quit listening whenever you started talking. The Corporealists kept on gigging around in miniscule, shit-hole dive bars, and I followed you around the whole time while the three of you'd drive out to a venue, subsequently get hammered, then pass out in the back of the Volvo before I drove everyone home afterward, thinking in the night silence about you and me and other possibilities that would never happen so long as I was still with Stevenson.

May 5 - Re: My Cleavage of the Damned - (Practice Space) - Gurl, u don't need him if he to stupid to see ur feeling for him than that man dont disserv u, firreal. Run an tell that. Gurl, just move on. movin someone else an dont look bac at that fool ass. Im tellin you i know.

May 4 - My Sitting on the Engulfing Mouth Couch - (State St./Baton Rouge) - When did it start, you might be thinking? I'll tell you: on that pleather thrift store couch in the Corporealists' practice space. No one else answered the ad Jamph posted, so you were the first and only

prospective drummer. Everyone talked about music and influences and inspirations, and you brought in a Melt Banana album and played it for Jamph and Stevenson. When the album started playing, you scanned the three of us trying to gauge our thoughts. I tried to appear like I liked what I heard, even though, honestly, I didn't and couldn't imagine anyone who'd in earnest enjoy listening to that type of music. I wanted you to hold your stare toward me, and for everyone else to disappear between the cushions of the couch, to fall between the crevices like coins and hair-ties and lip gloss. Then there'd have been just me and you and the Japanese lady screaming from the stereo speakers. Whatever inscrutable lyrics she was singing, I imagined them the sound of my brain suppressing what my heart felt. You were sitting between Stevenson and me, and that's exactly where I wanted you to stay. Stevenson and Jamph had never heard anything remotely similar to the music you wanted to play. They just stared at the stereo like they'd made a terrible mistake resolvable only by intense concentration on the volume knobs. They resisted and counter-picked with strait forward, three chord country and blues. When Jamph played a few Merle Haggard tunes, you went all somnolent on us, beginning to nod off before the song's first chorus. But Steve and Jamph decided to accept you into the band despite differences, figuring they'd connect on some musical level or another. And that's the Corporealists origin story, and the beginning of when I started to think about you without trying and talking to you when you weren't around. So there. I say this now, because I could never say it in voice. And I hope, truly, maybe, eventually, someday, possibly you'll read this and know what wasn't.

Resemblance to Actual Persons is Purely Coincidental

The camera crews descended on the city like a hostile tribe from a distant, arid land, marauding like the Huns and Vandals before them, the Goths or the Visigoths. They invaded the city's public places, the parks and public works, bivouacked in front of cafes and coffee shops, office buildings and bars. I found them everywhere; bands of roving film crews with monogrammed panel trucks and lighting equipment, gleaming silver light reflectors and umbrella-shaped diffusers, coils of rubber cable and camera equipment they'd use to capture every occurrence in the city.

Attempts to evade the film crews proved futile. All life and activity became show-worthy and inspired nightly, nationally broadcast television programs. Some programs were self-explanatory: *Disabled Children Abhorrent Quality of Life*, *Painful Falls from Substantial Heights*. Others were a little more abstract: *Grovel at the Feet of Ideal Beauty*, *At What Cost, Vengeance?*. Etna and I retreated to our apartments and tried to avoid them, but we both fell victim to the invasion after making our television appearances.

Someone—a marketing director or trendsetter—decided that the city I lived in was the most authentic, most real city in the world. I had trouble understanding what the phrase “most real” meant. It confused me more than when my father first introduced the idea of a real place—a city, world or otherwise. Whenever he was fed up or couldn't understand why I'd done something ill-advised, he'd say, “Son, someday,” in a measured tone he'd use to signal a coming profundity, “you'll arrive at the real world, and it'll strike you down so hard and with such force

you won't have a clue what to do but weep." But Dad was only half right. He was right in reverse. He was wrong.

How was it that one place emerged as more authentic than another? What were the criteria? Etna didn't have a clue, so she was just as helpless to prevent the film crew invasion.

"It doesn't feel any more real than anywhere else I've been," she said. "Does it?" And I told her, no, it felt to me pretty much the same. But that was beforehand—when I could count Etna as an aspect of my life, when she was still tangible, before either of us appeared on television.

The night before my scheduled television appearance, I walked to the neighborhood bar and ordered a beer. Near the corner booths, a production assistant waved a clipboard and gestured to his assistants. He asked the bar patrons not to acknowledge the camera. They were filming an episode of *Patchwork Romance*, he said, so just act natural, like we aren't even here. But no one can act natural when there's a camera around. Cameras have strange, captive properties, but people in the bar tried to accommodate the production manager's appeal, anyway. I couldn't help but feel troubled over the prospect of a permanent, filmed record of my anonymity, curled over the bar in the background of their video footage. I'd heard rumors that eventually turned out true. Every television appearance sapped from you a small amount of humanity without your ever noticing, until, one day, it was completely gone.

Whenever the bartender reached for the television above the liquor bottles, she'd reveal a swath of skin at her waistline. She scrolled through the channels, displaying a fragment of each show she passed—some of them I recognized: *Deepest Secret For a Dollar*, *The Fine Print*, *Why Won't You Eat?*—before arriving at what she said was her all time, favorite show. Familiarity

with the programming couldn't be helped. Even if you actively and deliberately avoided viewership, a type of cultural osmosis set in and forced a cursory understanding of a show's premise. I'd never seen what she'd stopped to watch, though, so I asked her, "What is this we're watching?"

"It's called *Majority Rules*," she said. "You haven't seen it?"

"No," I told her. And while it was true that I hadn't, I recognized the show by name, having earlier that week agreed to become a contestant. I'd sent in a head-shot and brief bio and was promptly accepted. Even though I wasn't all too sure what I'd signed on for, I was scheduled to appear on the bartender's favorite show the very next day.

The bartender began explaining the premise, but the show's host answered for her, muted, in bands of closed captioning that crawled across the bottom of the screen:

"Welcome to the show," the host said. "And welcome back audience and home viewers. Let me give our contestant Neil, and any viewers at home just joining us, a little information about what we do on *Majority Rules*. Here's how it works. In a very real sense, the old adage holds true: everyone's a critic. And the subject is you, Neil. A nationwide assemblage of peers will come to a consensual, critical conclusion: either-or; yes or no, regarding you and your character. Any information you provide our audience will be accounted for and evaluated in the simplest of terms. Depending on our audience's decision, you may win thousands of dollars in prize money or, alternatively, suffer the consequences. So let's begin, shall we?"

Instantly, I felt Neil needed to escape, to just get the hell out of there—off stage and back to his home or anywhere else. He needed to return to what had been somehow deemed the most real city in the world. But I was in no position to speculate on what was best for Neil. I'd be in

that very same seat the following day.

As the host spoke, the bartender laughed to herself, anticipating something I couldn't.

"So this is it, huh?" I said to the bartender. "I'm scheduled for this tomorrow."

"I'll vote for you," she said. "I don't need my regulars voted out of the city."

The searing silver beams trained on the couple in the booth spilled out into the room and displaced the bar's soft lighting. A few people began to leave. The production manager asked again, this time of the young couple in focus, that they behave as though they weren't being watched or recorded or, I guessed, being prepared for interminable syndication.

I'd seen *Patchwork Romance* before, once, and it was a critical episode—season one, episode eight—the episode on which Etna had appeared. I watched as she sat in a hot-tub with a man, his spiked hair suspiciously un-mussed by its environment, and divulged thoughts and feelings I'd never known she had.

That was around the time I indulged in idle fantasies, thoughts of Etna and I living together and older by ten or twelve years. We'd learn to cook because neither of us could cook. I'd imagine us buying ingredients from the grocery store, stumbling over ratios and portions, figuring it out then eating what we'd prepared, convinced of our epicureanism only because we'd managed to make the meal together. I was delusional, but at least the delusions were my own, irreducible and impossible to capture on film.

From what I've seen, no one's emerged from *Patchwork Romance* with any enduring empathy for one another—or, for that matter, despite the show's title—anything resembling romantic involvement. The program airs late-night before the televised sales of knives and blenders, the infomercials hawking indestructible scissors and one-hundred piece sets of samurai

swords. Check the local listings.

It wasn't out of anger or a feeling slighted that I never saw her again. Neither was there prior talk of a break-up or separation. Despite her televisual perfidy, I searched for her, but, apparently, she'd simply disappeared. No one had seen her since her appearance on *Patchwork Romance*. For a while, I searched for her through traditional avenues. I showed up at her apartment, knocked and waited, but no one ever answered. When I still could, I called her friends and the agency where she worked, but neither had seen or heard from her. If police were involved, they were as ineffectual as I'd always assumed. Eventually, I took drastic measures and chose to appear on television myself, thinking I'd be able to find her on the other side of this strange medium.

I became a participant. As a viewer, I could cast ordinance from the safety of my seat without fear of retaliation. As a participant, I would feel the full brunt of its force. Contestant Neil was still on television, busy fielding questions on *Majority Rules*, disclosing more and more about himself until there was nothing left. The camera framed his face in a tight close-up, sullen and glossy with a sheen of sweat. The skin of his disembodied head hung above the bar with a membranous appearance. He looked translucent, permeable as he gave reluctant answers to the host's salvo of questions. His mouth moved, but only muted text at the bottom of the screen gave him voice. It read: "I don't want to say anything else. Can we stop now, please?"

With his request, Neil placed his face in the palms of his hands and commenced with the sobbing. At that moment, I felt myself not in the bar but in the studio alongside him, transferred from where I was to where I'd yet to be.

Eventually, the host showed mercy and regarded the audience: “Okay, Neil,” he said. “I think we have all the information we need, here, tonight. Audience, tell us what you think: miserable reprobate, or moral exemplar to all humanity, especially children. Everyone please stay tuned to *Majority Rules* where very real contestants are subject to the scrutiny of a home and live studio audience. We’ll have the results after this.”

The result after *that* was that Neil was voted out of the city. A woman led him away by the arm and through a door at stage-right, and no one ever saw him again.

A man sitting at the bar a few seats away said: “Truth be told, I can’t stand this rubbish.”

“If you don’t like it, you can leave,” the bartender said.

And I thought the suggestion appropriate, so I paid my tab and left, acting natural, like I hadn’t noticed the crew of *Patchwork Romance* filming in the corner of the bar. I wished the couple the best of luck, and went home to mentally prepare for my appearance, dreading the day and the hour at which I’d meet the same fate as Neil.

The hour of my appearance approached, or I approached it. Either way, the two points converged with myself at the vertex. I found the studio in the central business district among nearly identical multi-story office buildings. In the lobby, a receptionist wearing a headphone-mic sat alone behind a desk. There were no other people in the lobby, but magazines had been set on coffee tables in the event there ever were.

“Can I help you with something?” she said, greeting me as I entered.

“I’m scheduled to appear on *Majority Rules* today,” I told her.

“Oh, yes,” she said. “You must be excited.”

“Should I be? I’m not too sure how this whole thing works,” I said to her. “Can I ask how it does—how this whole thing works, exactly?”

“No, of course not,” she said. “Well, yes, you can ask. You just did, obviously.” The receptionist then rose and ushered me toward a door at the rear of the lobby. “But, no, you can’t expect to receive an answer already, so soon,” she said. “Please, through here.” And I followed after her, having severe doubts about whether I still lived in the supposed most real city in the world.

The receptionist led me towards a door at the end of the hallway. I followed behind admiring the tapered contour of her calves, listening to her stilettoed progress reverberate and fill the corridor. We passed through the door and into a second that opened on a long passageway receding to an obscure point in the distance. Electronic candles lined the walls, ensconced at precise intervals. The receptionist quickened her step, and the distance between us expanded. Her figure and the seam of her stockings became progressively less apparent. Not wanting to be left alone and lost in that bleak passageway, I began a tentative pursuit, jogging to keep up with her, but she accelerated and reached the vanishing point, disappearing into the dark. All I could do was listen to her fading footfalls for guidance as light gave way to complete darkness.

I’ll admit I was frightened and confused, but I continued. I went on, guided by the wallpaper under hand. When reaching what felt like the stiles and panels of another door, I grasped for the doorknob and briefly considered returning down the corridor, but the door felt strangely inviting, as though I belonged on the other side.

Opening the door triggered the immense and engulfing sound of static, a deafening white

noise. When my senses adjusted, I saw that I'd entered onto the set of *Majority Rules*, and that the oppressive sound was of applause. It had palpable, physical characteristics, and my body felt as though it might disintegrate under the collective intensity of the audience's gaze. The host—the man I'd seen speak with Neil—awaited me on stage, applauding along with the audience. When he raised his hand, the applause abruptly stopped. I experienced a moment of relief before the host welcomed me by name and said: "Audience, please welcome our contestant."

At the epicenter of a circular platform, I took the chair provided. The host welcomed me, once again, to the show, orbiting where I sat, his arms folded behind his back. The fresnel lights and cameras, trained on my position, gave the effect of a public inquisition; which, when I considered it, would've been a much better title for the show: A Public Inquisition.

My first and final question: When, if ever, had I committed a genuine, selfless act for another person? I hesitated for a moment, searching my memory for an instance that might grant me amnesty from exile, but I could think of only one passable answer—my final answer. I told a story of the night I gave a homeless man the entirety of a Chinese take-out dinner I'd bought for Etna and me. As far as I could tell, there'd been no one watching as I gave it to him, no reason for me to perform for onlookers or give the impression of humility or concern. Though, who was to say? There could've been a covert camera crew lurking somewhere, but if there was, I didn't notice. Maybe the act wasn't selfless at all and hadn't been done purely for sake of a homeless man, but someone else watching from afar. My answer, though, wasn't sufficient for the audience of *Majority Rules*.

As it turned out, I met the same fate as Neil. I was voted from the city. The audience achieved the collective critical consensus—just as the host claimed—and I couldn't rebuke or

rebut the decision. I was given no opportunity for repeal. Though I'd technically lost, I'd gained the opportunity to search for Etna, holding her image in memory, impossible to capture on film. My consolation prize: forced removal from the city—effective immediately.

My appearance, though, had residual effects I couldn't have accounted for. If Etna was the first aspect of myself to disappear, the second was the sound of my footsteps. The almost inaudible sound of soles striking concrete, a sound I'd never before paid much attention to, vanished. My feet ceased to impose contact on the ground and world around me. They were silenced as I continued onward and away from the most real city in the world.

While approaching the edge of the city, I heard a sound emanate from farther up the street; a strained howl as I approached a column of panel-trucks and vans parked near the corner of Calumnia and St. Strius. The sound pulled me from reverie and the peace I wanted to achieve with my new, diaphanous self. The sound was impossible to ignore and became louder as I approached, imposing itself on all listeners in a vague perimeter.

The sound's source was a Toyota Corolla. Grips, gaffers, and a few production assistants surrounded the vehicle. The crew tripped over coils of rubber cable, rigging and one another as they filmed on site. A woman lay supine with a leg set on the passenger side headrest, her right leg pressed against the rear window. No one assisted or assured her that she was doing a great job. No one suggested—as I spontaneously wanted to—rhythmic breathing. The only directives came from the program director, who demanded camera-A focus on the woman's face through rear-window, while camera-B capture the business end of things between her legs. I stood near the craft-service table watching the child crown. The mother exhaled through clenched teeth and tore fibers from the economically priced upholstery, to which the program director gave a hushed

good, excellent, and the camera operator a thumbs-up. The mother gave a final bellow, a sound that—contrary to circumstance—could’ve signaled the end of life.

Immediately afterward, a registered nurse in uniform opened the passenger door, scooped up the child, and handed it to the new mother. It appeared from my vantage, there, on the sidewalk, a healthy baby boy. And even this, I thought. Even this. No one and nothing would be spared. Spanning the side of a nearby van read the words: *Unfortunate Miracles of Birth: Channel 46*.

“When’s this show scheduled to air?” I asked a boom-mic operator standing idle, his equipment in hand with the poise of a palace guard, but he said nothing.

The nurse congratulated the woman, and I continued onward toward the city’s borderlands. I’d find Etna—whether through television or in person, in character or reality.

Everywhere along my route of departure, the film crews continued to document and record all everyday occurrences. They created shows based on whatever they thought sufficiently real. Leaving the city, I found a child wandering a field near a playground. She searched for the parents who’d abandoned her as the camera crew for *Unattended* filmed from a distance and collected images of the child and her distress. She’d soon be joining me, and I thought of waiting for her, to care for her in wherever it was we were both headed.

Breathing and inhalation were the next properties to leave me. The sensation of air passing over lips and entering lungs disappeared. Continuing along the street, my body felt lighter and more insubstantial the closer I came to the city’s limits.

There were others. A camera crew followed a passing college graduate as she proceeded to her first job interview—one for which she must have been grossly under-qualified, because the

program *Impressive Résumé, But...* trailed after her towards her destination and inevitable disappointment. And that's when my hands went the way of my feet. My fingers passed through palms and could no longer assemble to clench a fist. Pressure and muscle tension failed me. Through my hand I followed the dividing centerline of the street. There were others—even more, still. A couple's rhythmic sex-sounds issued toward the street as *Cuckold!* recorded the footage. A woman's spouse watched while the director of photography focused the camera on the man's profile and captured the subtle muscle spasms in his face.

Caterwauling and the buzz of power converters hung in the air overhead. I placed foot over foot, leaving the city and passing them all, walking with increased rhythm though completely unheard. Weightlessness overcame me, but I could still hear. I overheard a man admit to having contracted femoral herpes, chlamydia and genital shingles near a van marked *Admissions Tendered*. He seemed strangely relieved to disclose his secrets, welcoming the transparency, sighing while simultaneously laughing to himself. And as his complete transparency set in, I welcomed my own. The sensation was inviting. My arms and legs became gossamer, delicate and ethereal. Leaves and polyurethane, scraps of paper and debris passed through my body unimpeded, carried away on air.

A sustained and undulating hum, a whirring sound in the near distance met my ear. There, again, were the familiar panel-trucks flanking the entrance to Parnery Cemetery. And yet another production assistant stood idle near a gas-powered generator. He attended the machine while speaking into a microphone that extended from beneath the hood of his sweater. A rubber cable wound from the generator to the nearby mourners within the cemetery. Camera-A filmed the family members of the deceased, while the crew lowered camera-B into the grave from a tripod

mounted above. Primetime viewers would experience the deceased loved one's perspective.

I asked the production assistant what they were filming. "Hey, man," I said. "Can you hear me? What are you filming?" He didn't respond. He didn't respond or acknowledge my presence. I could no longer claim one as my own. I existed elsewhere in places manifold and varied, on magnetic tape and airwaves, in televisions and in homes, divorced from my location, unreal yet moving through the realest city in the world.

When I reached the city's limits, there were no signs or directions to indicate a new destination. Only a bleak and expansive desert fanned out before me. There were no cameras or lighting equipment, production studios or directors, but in the distance I saw people—the semblance of people—like myself, leaving the city.

They wandered aimlessly through the desert, alone and in pairs and close-knit groups. In the distance I thought I recognized the mother from *Unfortunate Miracles of Birth*, her son on a hip, Neil and other contestants, couples who'd appeared on *Patchwork Romance* and other programs, a whole host of seemingly normal, unremarkable people who'd been made strange through reality, spectral across the desert, leaving no trace of themselves in the dunes of sand. Somewhere, Etna wandered among them, casting behind, like me, no shadow or presence, holding in mind and memory, I hoped, an irreducible version of the real me.

The Home at 4 A.M.

After the Collapse

Have you seen the video that's been circulating the Internet lately, the one where the house nearly collapses and you can, like, see the shingles and siding falling off, and the windows and doors pulled to the ground by, maybe, gravity? You know the one I'm talking about. The one where at the end, all's left standing is the basic framework of the house, the floors and plumbing and wiring? If you haven't, you should watch it. Watch near the end where you can just barely see a girl and her dad still inside the house, sitting there on the couch thinking, like, Well, isn't this just great and wonderful and completely, totally expected. Then right before the video ends the girl starts walking towards the staircase to the second floor of the house. Since the video started spreading across the Internet, you can find, now, all these pictures poking fun at the house with, like, superimposed text on them saying *structural integrity fail!* or *immigrant labor fail!* You should check those out, too, if you haven't already. I think they're pretty funny, but what you'll see in the video is still a sort of one sided account of what happened. I know because it was my house, people. But, I mean, doesn't it leave you wondering about us, and how it happened and, like, what are we doing now? I mean, how'd the place get like that to begin with? Oh, and, also, I should say—

Views: 1,005,399

Is Anybody There?

I'm beginning to think the whole operation I've set up was a mistake. If you've seen my other videos, you'll know you're among a (not so privileged) few. Most of the views aren't even real views from individual people. The number is just a tally of how many times I've watched and re-watched my own videos after recording them. Jeez, that's sad. And now I'm recording myself, addressing you and asking faceless people—I mean, no offense, guys, because I'm sure you have beautiful faces—to look at the number of views my videos get. I'm speaking hypothetically, here, assuming someone's sitting in their bedroom listening as I recount the events of my life—if something eventful ever happens—while I film myself in a room probably not dissimilar from those selfsame hypothetical people. And, I mean, I spent upward of two hundred dollars on this miniature web-cam and tripod combination, thinking it would give me an outlet or way of speaking to the outside world, that it would let me connect to people who're thinking similar thoughts and that maybe someone would care about what I have to say. But it's not looking like that's gonna happen. I know whining isn't all that entertaining, but I'm just a little disappointed, because I put time into these videos for, I'd like to think, someone's viewing pleasure. Is it because there isn't any footage of me falling off something or inflicting pain on myself, or no performances by exceptionally talented animals behaving in human-like fashion? Should I do a funny dance? Well, I'm not. Is it because there are no cats? Is it cats you want? Dad and me don't have any pets, anyway, so the talented animal angle is out, too. Maybe if I fall off something and it appears authentic enough you'll watch my videos and listen to what I have to say. If it's going to take pratfalls, fine. I'll watch your videos, too, and I'll be sure to

comment on them—sort of like a conversation, but not really. It'd still be a one-sided exchange, faceless face-to-face interaction like my sitting here at a computer desk talking to what sounds like—if anyone were listening—myself. Sorry, everyone. I'm just so totally depressed right now. Later, for now.

Views: 21

Home Videos

Hello, again, faithful non-viewers. So here's the deal. Finally, something's happened that's worth reporting. Check it out: A man came to our house yesterday claiming to represent a television production company from out of town. When I got home from band practice, there he was, waiting in front of the house, taking pictures of it with a digital camera. He kept pacing around the pathway leading to the front porch, looking up at the second floor (where my room is), and at the shutters and porch lights and the gutters and eaves of the house and everything. And I thought, that's weird. Who's this guy, and what's he doing skulking around our home? I met him out on the porch, and he said his name was Paul, and that he worked for a production studio from a city I'd never heard of. He was doing location scouting in the neighborhood, he says. And I'm thinking: Yeah, I bet you are—classic creep-stain tactics, for sure. He asked if I lived here—and I know this wasn't the smartest thing to tell a complete, visibly creepy stranger with a wispy little mustache and everything—but I told him, yes, I did, but wasn't a legal guardian or anything like that. What he says is: Well, look, your place is perfect for the show we're working on, and it's going to be a real big, popular show. Are my parents around? he asks. And I mean, really? What do you take me for, lecher-in-chief, some idiot girl who'd just invite

some nobody in to take advantage of her? I didn't say any of that, though. I told him I'd check to see if Dad was around if he'd just wait there a second. Inside, I piddled around for a bit, knowing Dad wasn't home and wouldn't be until at least five. So without opening the door, I told him he should come back later if he wanted to talk to Dad. From the front window I watched him walk back to his truck—which did say Penumbra Productions LLC across the driver side door, sure, but still, you never know, right? And then off he drove. Leave me a comment if you have any earthly idea what's going on.

Views: 16

Update

Sorry for the two videos in one day, today. Overkill, I know, but figured maybe someone would want to be kept abreast of events since earlier. Okay, so, the update. The scuzzvessel guy actually did come back, and Dad let him in the house, too. I was eavesdropping on their conversation from the top of the stairs (not the eaves), and apparently he wasn't kidding about what he said before. It sounded like he really did want to use our house for a TV show he was filming. I heard him say something like: Just some establishing shots from outside, maybe some interior scenes, too, if that's all right. Dad was listening, looking all contemplative with the chin-in-hand combo-thing going. And, quote, Paul, unquote, being all reassuring and beseeching-like, said, We promise we'll return everything to how it should be, I heard him say. Dad's standing silent and I could, like, x-ray scan his big, bald head and see all the cogs and clockwork stuff turning around in there, and I know he's thinking probably nothing more than *hmmm...* The stranger then starts talking money and payment, so Dad's all piqued, then, looking around the

living room as if he hadn't ever noticed the place until someone offered money to use it. So after some discussion about the terms of agreement and payment, Dad gives him permission to use our house. He signed some paperwork and accepted a check, right there in the foyer. I didn't say anything, but whenever you see someone signing a contract in the movies or on television or anywhere else, I think, hardly ever does anything good happen afterward.

Views: 6

Yasmine On Set

So it's been a while, no? What, almost three days since my last vid? I know you've been waiting in rapt anticipation of an update to the goings-on of my life. Jay kay, guys. So here's what's up. A film crew's been shooting the premiere episode of a TV show in our house. I'm not sure what type of show we're talking, here, but the check Paul wrote Dad was for nine hundred dollars. All we had to do was leave the house for a few days and get out of their way—which explains the lack of recent updates. From what Dad says, the show's some type of crime or medical drama and it's rumored that Yasmine Ferenzi is involved with it. How cool is that? I wanted to come check out what they were doing on set—that is, my house—and maybe get a glimpse of Yasmine, or volunteer to be an extra or something, but Dad said it'd be better if we just stayed out of their way. So we did. Dad and I stayed in a hotel over the weekend and did pretty much what we would've done anyway: lounge around and watch TV.

Views: 51

Home Renovations

So, do you notice anything different, dear non-viewers? Does something seem off? If not, bring your attention to the room behind me—my room. If it looks like it's changed, that's because it has. Remember I was telling you about the film crew? They rearranged everything and left it that way. I'm getting used to it, though, and it's fun to think I'm living somewhere that looks exactly how it will when appearing on national television. Dad was pissed about the changes and that they didn't return anything to normal like Paul said they would. His whole post-work routine was screwed up, and he says, Where do I set my keys given the credenza is now way over there? How am I supposed to beeline it to the fridge with this couch all of a sudden blocking my route? So he put everything back himself and sat down to watch the evening news, as usual. But I think I'll just leave my room as it is. I haven't adjusted to where my bed is, yet, over on the opposite side of the room, but who cares? Can you even begin to think what people at school will say when they see me—well not me, exactly, but my room, at least—on television? *Is she a new student?* someone will ask, never having noticed me before. All right, well, I thought I'd share that with you guys. Laterz for now. Byeeeee.

Views: 87

Home Replications

Slowly, I've noticed differences in the house since the filming. Last night I went downstairs intending to make dinner and couldn't find the soup or cookies I wanted. Well, that's not exactly right. They were there, but the kind we usually buy weren't, and instead, other brands with labels I'd never seen before were set in their place. What happened, I think, is that the crew

replaced our groceries with, like, knock-off pseudo no-name versions of what we had and just forgot them. You can tell because all the labels don't look at all right. They're close enough, but something's off—an extra or substituted letter somewhere in the name. They look real enough from a distance, but under scrutiny you can tell they're fakes. Do they not, like, have the authorization to use *Big 60 Crème-O's* on their show? I don't know... And last night Dad was yelling for me to come help him with something. When I got down there he was standing in front of the TV and looking down at a small box he'd placed on the carpet. Look at this thing, he said. I was fixing to watch a movie and then.... Dad picked up the box and waved it around at me. I asked him what it was. It's supposed to be our DVD player, he said. When I examined it, shaking it around, there was no sound, no density. The sort of ersatz DVD player Dad found was empty and made of, I guess, cardboard or something. It reminded me of those, sort of like, replica appliances you see in department or furniture stores that try to convince you of what your home might look like complete with TV or other accessories. If you have any insight into what's going on, please, leave me a comment. I'd love to hear from you.

Views: 102

The Hole

Today, I noticed something wrong with the front door. When I got home from marching band practice, the door was open and missing the knob. In the center of it was a hole that looked like someone had punched through, maybe, with a fist. I found dad sitting on the dining room floor with his forehead resting on the edge of the table. Beneath him were the splinters and shards of the chair he usually sat on. So as you can see, he said. There's a problem with the door. The

knob broke off while I was outside, so I started knocking to see if you'd gotten home from band practice, which you hadn't, obviously. I knocked harder, anyway, thinking you might be upstairs at your computer, he said, doing God all knows what you're doing up there, when I put my hand straight through the thing. I asked Dad to explain why he was sitting on the floor like that, and he picked up a chair leg lying nearby and snapped it in half. It's a replica, he said. I turned to examine the door again and saw that he was right. Doorknob: negative. Hole: check. Just then, a postal worker dropped the day's mail through the hole where Dad's fist had been. Dad says, And guess what? The check from that supposed production company never cleared, either.

Views: 643

The Hole Part Deux

Hey, again. Kelly, here. Just wanted to keep you updated on the status of the house—what's left of it and hasn't collapsed or fallen apart yet. Absolutely nothing was returned to how we remember it, like that dirtbag Paul promised. The daily discoveries continue, and they're inconvenient, sure, but they're a small price to pay for being featured on television, if you ask me. Dad's been skeptical of that ever happening since the check bounced. When he called the bank to ask if it had, the teller told him, No, it hadn't and that there was no record of Penumbra Productions LLC ever having an account. Well, someone's been in our house, and we met Paul, right? And his truck read Penumbra Productions stenciled across the driver's side door, yes? So clearly someone's done something to our house, I said to Dad. He said, Look, come take a look at this. So I followed him outside into the yard where together we looked on the face of our house—the typical gable and gutters and everything you'd find on any other. The door aside, he

said, looks about the same, right? Yes, I told him, it did. Now watch this, Dad said. We walked across the yard to the side of the house. The air conditioning units and power meters still spun and hummed to themselves. He pointed to a section of what I always thought was vinyl siding. Watch, he said, and he stuck his hand behind one of the panels, got a good grip on it and tore it from the rest of them. It detached pretty easily, so he started at the other pieces next to the first, examining each before handing them to me. The planks weighed near to nothing and snapped apart with hardly any effort at all. It's like they're balsa wood, Dad said, or Styrofoam or something. Same as the door, Dad said, and I know for damn sure that's not what I paid for when I bought the place. He kept working, threshing pieces of siding from the house, adding them to the stack I was holding or letting them fall to the pile beginning to surround us. Eventually he stopped, but only after creating a cavity large enough for both of us to walk through. Together, we looked inside at a place that no longer felt ours. We stood there for a second, then Dad thrust a piece of pseudo-siding through the wall and tore through it like it was paper. He let out a sigh and a few panting breaths and walked right through the hole he'd made. I followed and entered into our living room right next to the credenza where Dad leaves his keys. Okay, I don't want this thing going on too long, so, later, for now. I'll get back to you guys when I figure things out.

Views: 1,175

The Home at 4:00 A.M.

When everything settled to the ground around us, I ran up here and recorded this video as fast as I could. You guys, listen to this. Dad and I were totally unafraid when the walls began to

crumble. It was unexpected, I guess, but inevitable. Dad was getting ready to watch the local news broadcast, so I sat down next to him. The newscasters had just introduced themselves when it began. The holes in the door and living room wall were just the beginning. We sat together on the couch while these little cracks crept from the ceiling and floorboards, met each other and spread out again to where they'd come from. The cracks created a network covering our living room walls and left what looked like a map of a place I didn't recognize. The sound of plaster and paint flaking off the house muted the television. We forgot it was there and instead watched the developing scene around us. Slabs fell to the floor and left a fine grit floating in the air behind them. Window panes vibrated in their frames before falling to the floor with the rest of the wall fragments. Eventually, we were left exposed to the world, the world to us. And me and Dad didn't say anything or comment on what was happening. I didn't feel threatened or in danger at all. Outside, a cascade of roofing and shingles passed over the dining room window while the program credits scrolled down the screen. We didn't say anything to each other. We looked beyond and through what had once been our living room.

Views: 248,183

The View from My Room

Dad believes some sort of mysterious seismic activity is to blame, but what does he know? Nothing about plate tectonics, that's for sure. I don't think there's a major fault line anywhere beneath the surface of our state. I'm not sure Dad's sold on the new living arrangements yet. But when the names of people I'd never meet or ever know scrolled down screen, I thought about all of you—faithful non-viewers. I thought about you and what you might've been doing

at that exact moment. I wanted to talk to you, dear non-viewers, even if you couldn't really respond and weren't truly there listening. So what you're seeing is all that's left, even if Dad doesn't approve of the renovations. I mean, how's this for a new and improved backdrop? It beats my normal old walls, right? Just take a look. See the starry, moonlit evening, the cityscape you can just barely make out in the distance behind me. Could anything be more alluring to a potential viewer? So, let me ask you something, rather than sit here speaking at you—that is if anyone ever happens to be there, ever at all. Which do you think is better: me by myself despite the low-budget production values, speaking to you or myself or to no one, or a real show on actual television starring someone like Yasmine Ferenzi? You don't have to answer. I guess that's the real issue. I'm speaking into the void with no guarantee of anyone hearing or responding. My voice is the only sound, now and when I replay this footage multiple times a day, when I evaluate and take notes on where, how I could have spoken more articulately and think about the arrangement of stuff behind me and what items might not be the most visually appealing—you know, the whole *mise-en-scene* or whatever it's called. I'll miss my posters and the walls they were hung on, sure, but I think we've traded up, all in all. I like the renovations, so maybe now someone will pay attention to me, finally. This is all that's left, and the view of the world from my room is much improved. I can see your house from here.

Views: 423,743

The Reconnoitered Man

Vovelle's been instructed to observe the man who enters and exits the building—where he goes and what he does. The reconnoitered man is called a bad guy, but Vovelle isn't so sure. He tries to imagine his target a criminal, a guy who is bad, an enemy combatant, an insurgent, a terrorist, an extremist, a radical ideologue, an Islamist fundamentalist, a jingoistic religious zealot, but Vovelle feels the subject of his reconnaissance can only be called a man.

The footage is grainy and monochromatic, rendered in black and white and near real-time. It reminds him of the silent movies he's always meant to watch but never has. The video feed displays footage of the man and his family's daily life, their living in a Middle-Eastern town he can't name or disclose the location of when asked.

The man drives an Isuzu pickup truck. Vovelle reads the license plate from five miles away—from 7,000 miles away, technically, while on Wright-Patterson Airbase in Dayton, Ohio. But beyond the letters and numbers pressed into the license plate, there remain unknowns—known unknowns and unknown unknowns, as he's heard said. At local time 0615 hours, the reconnoitered man exits his house, gets in the Isuzu pick-up truck and drives through town to a no doubt suspect and nefarious location: a laboratory or weapons cache. But, no, the destination, as it turns out, is a vacant lot where some kids are kicking around a soccer ball. They play soccer without sidelines or bounds, and Vovelle wonders about the score, how it is they verify a goal. A player passes the ball to the reconnoitered man. He throws it in from the sideline, runs to the edge of the rubble lot and takes position defending an invisible goal-line.

The town is an eight hour drive from the country's capital city, days by pack-mule. The homes, there, appear hewn of mud and earth and the corrugated steel of abandoned Russian occupation. Citizens live outside, behind the advance of time and technology—farming, shepherding as they've done since before Vovelle was born.

This is what he can disclose: The reconnoitered man has a son. They operate the town's automotive sales and repair shop. They sell cars and car batteries used to power the town's television sets. The father tends the garage, putting to use knowledge the son has yet to learn while the son appears to work in sales. The son's dressed in an Oxford shirt and slacks, guiding prospective buyers around the meager lot while the poor tend herds of goats along the outlying roads. People come and go, drive past in economically sized cars, in humvees and motorized rickshaws.

Nothing about the family's business strikes Vovelle as particularly suspicious until a van arrives late afternoon, 1730 hours, carrying what the son must think is the day's final customer. The son approaches the van as it pulls into the lot. The sliding door opens and two men intercept him. The son pauses when he sees their weapons, raises his empty hands. He disavows everything, anything, whatever it is they're saying. They exchange words, and the son slowly shakes his head. The van's driver and front passenger cross the gravel lot towards the garage. The men holding weapons remain with the son, his hands now lowered, the visitors casual and speaking to each other within earshot of the son.

Vovelle takes a ball-point pen from the breast pocket of his flight suit and notes the event in the day's incident report, but he keeps the distance permitted him by the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle. He feels it better not to have intervened—a business dispute, most likely, so outside his

purview—but resolves to thereafter keep closer attention on the family's dealership. He wishes for the ability to directly and diplomatically diffuse the situation he's seen, but key details remain obscure. There are known unknowns: what the father and van's passengers discussed in the bay of the garage, the words exchanged in the dealership lot between father and son after the men had left.

At 0900 hours, Vovelle and the pilot lose comm-link with the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle.

“We've lost comm-link with the UAV,” the pilot says sitting in the cockpit beside Vovelle. He inhales, exhales while clicking his tongue. “What's SOP on that?”

“Satcom is probably down,” Vovelle says. “Weather or sunspots or something, solar winds.”

“Right, so, what?”

Remote-split, reach-back operations, it's called. From the safety of the Ground Control Station in Dayton, Ohio, Vovelle initiates operations reaching from the reconnoitered man's family back to his own.

He'd spend Saturday afternoons in the basement playing tabletop war-games with his dad. They'd wage miniature battles against one another, casting six and twenty sided die, measuring the range of imaginary artillery with a tape measure, engaged in combat set in 1:100 scale of what Vovelle would eventually do life-sized. For Vovelle, the people he views through the video feed appear cast in pewter, miniaturized like the figures of his childhood war games, set to a scale seen nowhere in reality. The network of roadways and paths carved in the terrain, the plots

of farmland outside the town proper, resemble the ballast and plastic lichen battlefield of his childhood. Combatants descend into the field and warp themselves into scale while Vovelle floats above.

“We do not tell the CO, is what. We’ll wait it out,” Vovelle says. “These things always fix themselves.” Sometimes they do, Vovelle thinks. Navigation’s still running, after all, orienting blinded eyes in the sky. At the moment, though, he knows as much about that Middle-Eastern town as the suburbs of Cincinnati.

In his back yard, he’d hurl pine-cone grenades and fashion anything he could find into makeshift weaponry, imagine himself an errant knight, a mercenary filled with wanderlust. But he never traveled anywhere. Vovelle moved sixty miles north to Dayton, Ohio where there was literally nothing—nothing much more than parking lots and restaurant-bars that were primarily restaurants.

“So we’re just going to sit here?” the pilot asks.

“It’s on auto. Go get some coffee or something.”

The feed’s still down, displaying a blank screen that stares back at Vovelle. How was it he became the sensor-operator for an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, he thinks? What were the origins and source?

He reaches back to the Spring semester of ‘99 when faculty excused students from fifth period gym class. Vovelle followed the other students through the halls towards the front of the school. Parked there, engine humming, was a camouflaged semi-truck and trailer. Three uniformed recruitment officers herded the students through a door in the rear of the trailer—a trailer the exact dimensions of the Ground Control Station in which he now sits.

The interior of the mobile recruitment center could've been confused with the local arcade. And Vovelle, even then, knew that that was the idea. Lining the walls stood a sniper rifle simulator, a pair of goggles that when peered through approximated infrared vision, the near-likeness of a F-16 fighter jet cockpit. A lieutenant ensured that each simulator was constantly occupied. Vovelle sat in the replica cockpit, adjusted pitch and yaw into alignment with the horizon and wondered how many other students saw through the translucence of the ploy. Who else understood the overt pandering to Vovelle's age, sex and demographic? It mattered so little. Despite his cognizance, in the end, the recruitment program had worked. He knows, now, that's when he lost himself.

At 1030 hours, comm-link is re-established.

"Comm-link re-established," the pilot says.

"Let's just pretend that never happened," Vovelle says.

"Affirm. So where are we?"

Seen again in wide aperture, the town appears to Vovelle a labyrinth, its pathways and corridors leading to no central location, curving and recurving back on themselves. A main thoroughway divides the town in two. Like a highway overpass in the States, you could enter and exit the town without it ever imposing itself on your mental landscape. In idle moments, when Vovelle should pay closer attention to the reconnoitered man, he traces a path through the streets and alleyways, inscribing a mental vector on the town, beginning at one point and ending at another—voyaging like an anti-Odysseus, seated, safe and static.

At dusk, the reconnoitered man returns home with his son, and though Vovelle can't perceive it through the screen in front of him, he imagines the man's arms mottled with oil and

grit that'll be washed away and replaced with more the following day. At night, the reconnoitered man and his son sleep on the roof of their home, trying to keep cool in the arid heat while Vovelle watches from above.

At the end of the day, Vovelle and the pilot land the UAV without incident and cut the video uplink.

"It still feels strange to me," the pilot says. "You know? Flying in eight hour shifts then driving home to the Mrs. and the kids." And Vovelle agrees with him. He knows of things he cannot express to his wife. Even when sitting beside her, he's forced into a location that feels miles away from her.

Vovelle drives home. The commute binds him to geography. Guys are marching, harried off to war, and Vovelle's seated in the driver's seat of an economically sized sedan, moving in a direction the dashboard embedded compass reads west-by-southwest. Every morning, the distance between Vovelle and the Middle East expands in this drive by a measure of thirty miles, revoked in the evening on the return trip home to his wife.

For anyone other than Vovelle, the question would warrant a very simple answer. "How was your day?" his wife asks him from across the kitchen table. All he can say is, Fine. The answer doesn't satisfy her, he knows, but she doesn't press him for further details. She knows his assignments are classified. Answering in the oblique has become Vovelle's sole method of response these days. His living with ineffable knowledge, speaking without reference to what he's seen and done, leaves him feeling slowly quartered, drawn apart by lethargic animals of

burden—so slow he’s learned to live with the dull, persistent ache in his limbs. He wants to tell her what he sees from the vantage of the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle. He wants to tell her about the reconnoitered man and his son, about the occurrence at the family’s dealership, but despite how near she is to Vovelle, she’s simply not on a need-to-know basis.

After dinner, he walks alone to the soccer field behind the subdivision. Beneath arc lights trained on the field, Vovelle dribbles a soccer ball, passes it to no one, recovers the ball and wheels back around to a defensive position. He lifts the soccer ball with the toe of his sneaker. It hangs in the air for a second, two, airborne for longer than any amount of time he ever has. His foot connects and sends it sailing nowhere near the goal, veering off in an obscure parabola he could graph, were the trajectory seen from above. It strikes the concession stand—hotdogs \$1, nachos \$2.50—and stops motionless in the gravel of the parking lot. Now he has to retrieve it.

The objective hasn’t changed. The briefing reads the same. Keep surveillance over the building and surrounding region. He slouches in the seat of the control console and prepares to keep vigil over the target as orders dictate. *Sir, understood, sir.* A muezzin calls the day’s final prayer from a minaret window. There’s no audio to accompany the video footage. Vovelle cannot hear the muezzin’s chant as it issues from a PA system across the town—a sound carried on air through places he isn’t. Monitoring the navigation screen and video feed is a strange feeling—or lack of one, really—to which Vovelle still hasn’t adjusted. He’s in Dayton, Ohio and the UAV is entirely elsewhere.

His military training grants him the vantage of an old-world deity, a being deafened and lurking in the clouds, peering from cumulus parapets and scowling at what it sees. Seated and safe in the Ground Control Station on Wright-Patterson airfield, he stares through a screen into airspace above a location 7,000 miles away. He is both here and there, attenuated, stretched thin across the globe.

The whole operation—the maintenance crew in Saudi Arabia, the UAV itself circling somewhere over the Middle-East—is described in air-force argot as remote-split operations. A joint team of linguists and poets couldn't have conceived a phrase more apt for what Vovelle does or how he feels, the structure his life has unexpectedly taken: remote and split, removed and divided.

“It looks like we're alone up here,” the pilot says. He said this yesterday, says this everyday when take-off is good and comm-link is established. Vovelle wants to say: No, *we* aren't. You're right there. I'm right here. The UAV is somewhere else entirely. Do you not understand we're in Dayton, Ohio? But it's just a thing the pilot's compelled to say, and Vovelle understands what he means, even if it's semantically untrue.

The reconnoitered man drives towards his automotive repair shop. The roads look harsh on axles and transmissions. It's three blocks to where the man works, and the UAV's variable aperture camera pans out to include the entirety of his route. Men and women greet him along the way, and Vovelle assumes he's popular around town. The man's daily life emerges in near real-time, but the two-second satellite communication delay prevents Vovelle from a direct and immediate understanding.

The reconnoitered man passes the dealership lot. Immediately, Vovelle doesn't like what

he sees on the video feed. The reconnoitered man drives with a passenger beyond the town's limits, beyond peripheral buildings and single-story homes, fields of farmland and crop growth Vovelle can't identify. The roadside homes, made of earth, have nearly returned to it, been reduced to rubble and rebar. The man has never driven this far from town. He's heading north with a passenger riding shotgun, following a road faintly incised in ground, and Vovelle can see their destination before they arrive: an indistinct earthen farmhouse with a rampart-like roof. He says nothing about it to the pilot and doesn't mention the tarpaulin covered truck bed.

Vovelle's been trained in suspicion and wishes he weren't. The reconnoitered man, despite how Vovelle has come to know him in a limited capacity, looks to have concealed himself from the vantage of the UAV. He wishes the knowledge he's gained, the intel he's expected to act on, could be equivocated away like confidential information, a need-to-know basis, something he's not at liberty to say. When the man and his passenger uncover and begin unloading the truck, Vovelle wants to be a civilian, someone anywhere else but there.

"Are you seeing this?" Vovelle finally asks the pilot. "Can I get confirmation?"

"They're weapons," the pilot says. "They are, aren't they?"

"I'm gonna have to say, yes, they are."

"We going kinetic? Take `em out?"

"Hold on. Standby a second," Vovelle says. There are options. Neither of them are appealing to Vovelle: decant the drone of 400 lbs. and a few thousand dollars of the war fund, or vector in a nearby marine patrol.

"Look at 'em. We have to take `em out," the pilot says.

"Maybe we should vector in some of our guys," Vovelle says.

“What? No, we need clearance to fire, man.”

And God damn it all, it's thoughts like these. There're people back in this man's home that won't be able to sleep on the roof of their home in peace, who'll wonder where this man is, assuming both that he should've been home by dinnertime and also the worst of possible circumstances.

“Can we be sure those're weapons?”

“Pretty damn sure, man,” says the pilot.

The grainy, black and white footage shows three men exit the building and examine the weapons lying in the bed of the truck.

The pilot cranes toward Vovelle's video feed. “Man, yes, I'm calling for clearance.”

And then he does. Vovelle says nothing and doesn't stop him. He subdues his dissent, feeling like an unconscientious objector, silent and culpable by degrees.

From Vovelle's vantage, the explosion becomes only a piebald abstraction on monochrome video. Shape imposed on dimension. Splash, fragmentation and dust, dirt and rubble obscuring his line of sight. He feels no recoil, heat or flecks of shrapnel. The dust finally settles. The man is there then he is not. And Vovelle never was.

As he drives home, Vovelle thinks of the reconnoitered man and the son who's survived him. Reach-back, remote-split operations. A quarter turn of the wheel is all it'd take to send Vovelle caroming off the guardrails in a lateral spin, an impact with an unsuspecting tree. For a brief moment, his flight suit would finally serve its purpose. Suspended from the floorboards in his

seatbelt, inverted and reeling in causality after a hang-time of mere seconds, he'd have been airborne. He feels like a fraud in his flight suit. It's a garment worn by a man who's never left the ground, never been seated in the cockpit of anything but his car. He wants to tell his wife of the death and its circumstances, of his culpability in both, but he won't.

Were he a civilian, he could know of turbulence and the sensation of sitting in a chair returned to its full, upright position, the things he carries stowed away safely in overhead compartments. It'd be an available form of flight. He'd embark from one point and emerge at another without knowing where he was between. The world would flatten and fold itself in half, in quarters then eighths, shrink and reduce itself until it fit in the pocket of his flight suit. In Ohio, there's climate control and air conditioning, power steering and anti-lock brakes. Safety features, they're called. With his hands set on the wheel—steering column, transmission, axle, tires, road—he's a component in the circuit extending from body to Earth. At 1800 hours, insulated against the world outside his sedan, removed from the interstate and other drivers, remote from his own nascent family, Vovelle safely returns to his home and wife.

Apothecary Blues

A level-50 hero, mounted on steed, rides through the outpost and kicks up a plume of dust that, when the horse passes and dust settles, I sweep off the pediment of my shop. This happens about a dozen times per diurnal cycle. So even in this virtual and fantastic place, I'm bound to menial tasks of wage-slavery. Of course I'd rather ride across the veldt on a majestic animal, fell monstrous beasts and harvest their souls and rescue captive maidens from brigands and maligners. Adventure would be preferable to storekeeping. But that's not my lot. I got saddled with a merchant class character while everyone else got lithe and attractive elves or lithe and attractive druids. I was randomly assigned the status of a lowly human apothecary, while in real life I'm an equally lowly human computer programmer.

My friend Ydgrid got shafted too, though, so I can't feel completely bad about my character assignment. She manages a produce kiosk in front of my store. I don't know whether her feelings are reciprocal to mine, but if they are, then I'd count Ydgrid as my one and only friend. I haven't met her in real life, and don't know too much about her, but who cares? Friendship transcends feeble spacial limitations, I think. She's only a level-17 female agrarian, but in my opinion, she's a level 99 best friend.

"Do you ever have the feeling your life is inconsequential?" Ydgrid asks me, stopping suddenly to turn and regard me from behind her produce kiosk. "Like you exist solely to supplement the life of someone else, or to provide assistance—or in our case—potions and produce that allow other people to progress unencumbered through their more epic and

noteworthy endeavors?”

I can understand her. I've definitely felt like a non-playable character in my own life before, that's for sure. I've had similar dark-night-of-the-soul type thoughts—or dark-night-of-whatever-they're-called in this game: essences, spirits or something. The concept is the same regardless of where you are and how you refer to your inner self, whatever your philosophical or theological perspective might be, whether you're playing a soul-consuming computer game or engaged with real life itself.

“Because that's exactly how I've been feeling lately, Dormuth,” her character says. “Inconsequential. Sort of void or hollow or something.” I'm beginning to think her character—or maybe she herself—might be suicidal. Or there's something troubling her over in Fort Worth, Texas.

In real life my name isn't Dormuth. It's just Robert. I tell her, Yes, I've felt that way before. I've felt that way for more diurnal cycles than I can remember. The tedium can be unbearable—in real life and out.

In reality, I work for a company called Ubiquicorp, and my morning commute to Ubiquicorp corporate HQ is my only recourse to the actual world. The RL isn't much different from virtual, and I'm not sure which is better or more appealing, truthfully, or which of the two I'd rather live in. Things look bad for Ubiquicorp and for Real Life in general. The state of Mississippi, not too long ago, implemented a stimulus project intending to reinvigorate the local economy and bring in new tech industries. Anyone with experience in software development was hired instantly. And let's just say I applied some creative interpretation to the questions and requirements of my application. The big idea, though, was to create a Mississippi

delta version of Silicon Valley, but the plan hasn't panned out. A state subsidized public relations team even tried to brand the region *The Silicon Delta*, but the slogan never caught on. So the region and Ubiquicorp—and as a result, me—look to be on a trajectory curving back towards how it's always been around here.

A level-30, gender-nondescript tree-person enters the store and interrupts Ydgrid and me, so I say: "Greetings, traveler, and welcome to the Apothecary's Weight. What're you buying?" The tree person requests a tincture and an unguent. The tree-person wants 20 of each. I hand them over the counter, take the currency, and off the tree-person shuffles without even saying thank you or goodbye or anything. Even minor discourtesies like this grate on you over time. So I can empathize with Ydgrid. She'll endure and emerge from her apparent depression a stronger grocer and agrarian. She'll level-up.

"I understand, and I don't mean to belittle your own brand of personal suffering," I tell her. "But I'm about to lose my job." Could I consider Ydgrid a romantic interest? No, I could not. Which isn't to say I don't feel a persistent, gnawing want for romance, because I do. Ydgrid claims to be a woman—a woman who lives in a suburb of Fort-Worth, Texas—and I believe her. You can just tell these types of things. "We learned of the layoffs this morning," I type. "And I'm a prime prospective recipient of the old proverbial axe."

"What type of axe, though?" she says. "We talking an axe of legend, here, or just a regular blacksmith's axe?"

"I'm serious," I say to her. "Chances are, I'm gonna get shit-canned." Would I ever stand a chance with Ydgrid in real life? Most probably not—not with my body-type and limited skill set. Would she ever get with a man who still lives with his parents? The answer, I think, is

obvious.

Because in real life, there exists a certain type of basement-dwelling-nerd-person typified by cardiovascular distress and an interest in the benefits bestowed by computers. I am of this ilk: a basement-dweller personified and made flesh—lots of flesh. There's three hundred and fifteen pounds of flesh, here, to be exact. People like me live in basements across the country, but not here in Mississippi. The water table is too low for homestead subterranean housing. Rest assured, though, if I lived in a house above sea-level, I'd be in the basement like the rest of the nation's virginal nerds, escaping it through a computer screen and entering into a fantastic realm of wizards and warriors—and, well, lowly apothecaries.

People aren't calling it *the axe*, though. The development team's getting necropsied. “I know some of you over in development have been calling it necropsy,” Rory, the deputy team manager, told everyone this morning after assembling the team in the third-floor conference room. “But, look, no one’s dying, as far as I know,” he said. “So think of it like this, because we in management are, as an amputation. Essentially, the company will be rendered paraplegic without some of you guys—necessarily so, but paraplegic nonetheless. No one wants to lose an arm, but it’ll be Ubiquicorp that does. I’m not saying it feels good, but that’s the situation. We’re a company forced to remove a cherished appendage, which is to say, some of you fine people.” Rory’s ambivalence and his human/profession anthropomorphism were, I thought, insensitive and callous. When he finished, I left the meeting confused and misguided by Rory's speech and its metaphors, but the pith of what he said hit home clearly enough.

When the level-30 gender-nondescript tree-person leaves the apothecary’s shop, Ydgrid

sends me a private message, reading: "If I ever disappear, will you manage the produce kiosk for me?" Her character then hangs her head from a pantomimed noose while standing near the eggplants.

"Don't say stuff like that," I tell Ydgrid. "No one even sells rope at this frontier outpost that you could use to fashion a noose."

"I'll figure something out," she says. And I again ask her to, please, stop talking like that, please. "Seriously, though," she says. "I think I'm about to quit this for good."

Then Dad starts yelling from the living room couch. "Pure practical reason postulates the immortality of the soul," he says. "You listening, Son? For reason in the pure and practical sense aims at the perfect good. Listen," he says. "And this perfect good is only possible on the supposition of the soul's immortality."

Dad's certain that certain doom awaits him, so he's taken to thinking about the nature of the human soul, interrogating whether it exists, and, if it does, where it'll end up when he dies. This isn't something he needs to tax himself with given his weak heart. He's already had one heart attack, and doesn't need another. Reading Aristotle and Kant and theological treatises on the nature of the soul will only exacerbate his heart condition. What's worse is he's been forcing his half-baked theories on me, too, reading passages aloud to where I can hear them from my bedroom. And I always think, Dad, even if heart problems run in the family, phenomenology need not.

Around eleven P.M., Ydgrid and I close both The Apothecary's Weight and the produce kiosk. We walk together to the quartz harvester crystal at the outpost's center to logout. I tell her that I hope she doesn't disappear because I value her friendship and that she might be my most

cherished friend. I think to finally ask her real name before she logs out. When we get to the harvester crystal, I say good-bye and bow to her. Ydgrid logs out without gesture or saying anything in return. And I logout after her, wondering if that'll be the last time I see or speak to her.

At work the next day, my co-worker Barry starts considering my position as a prime candidate for termination. He suggests I stop playing Tetris all day and instead display some initiative. Stop hiding a meaningless game behind a spreadsheet of randomly generated numbers, he says. I wasn't fooling anybody. If I wanted to keep my job, I should start acting like it. But what does he know? Does he have a family with an ailing father to care for? A monthly account bill attached to a virtual fantasy game that consumes his life? Maybe, but I doubt it. He's right, though. Without my total sinecure of a job, Mom and Dad and I would be in a tight spot, and Dormuth would never see his dear Ydgrid again.

"If plain, old initiative isn't your suit, and you want an easy, assured way of keeping your job," Barry, says, "I might know a way to prevent you from getting necropsied."

"Yeah?" I say to him. "And how's that?"

"I know a guy," he says. And I ask Barry why he himself doesn't consult with this friend of his. "Because I've already exhausted his services," he says, "Let's face it. There's no risk of me losing my position. You, a man who'd rather hone his Tetris skills than work, is the one in need of assistance."

I've noticed the furtive glances of upper-management, and, honestly, they're probably

deserved. I deserve to be necropsied given my severely limited programming knowledge. I'm guilty of operating at a productivity level falling somewhere short of outstanding. There's no risk of my getting Employee of the Month or Week or Year or any other standardized unit of time, nor of someone encountering my dour portrait hung anywhere on the office walls, that's for sure.

The truth is, the nature of our recent project compounds the misery of potential layoffs. We've been working on a program that aggregates the medical records of persons interned in assisted living homes. Given my dad's ailment, the project could soon come to include him in its data aggregation. No one could call this pleasant work. Learning of these people and the circumstances of their deaths is absolutely zero fun compared to Tetris.

"Look, Robert," Barry says, "Here's how it works. You have a guitar?"

"No," I say.

"What about a chicken?"

"A live chicken? Like a free-range chicken?"

"Yeah," he says.

"Then, no, I don't." Nor do I really understand what he's getting at with this litany of questions. As always, he wants to hold the knowledge he's privy to over someone who isn't. Because Barry's the type of person who's seemingly capable of anything, and likes to make it known with a glib degree of ease that inspires one to commit misdemeanor acts of violence. For instance, Barry brought his guitar to the two-year anniversary work party last year and played such a near-perfect rendition of *Hellhound on My Trail* that a collective swoon overcame everyone in and around the break room. It was in no way an appropriate song for a two year

anniversary. He just wanted to show off his skills.

“Okay, then. What about a silver fork?” Barry says. “You’re gonna need an offering of some kind.”

“I’ve got a box of plastic forks at home.”

“That won’t do. Just bring a decent bottle of whisky,” he says. “That should appease him.”

“And bring it where?” I ask. “And to whom, exactly?”

But I don't get an answer. Rory calls us over the loudspeaker for the day's orientation meeting. What's left of the software development team files in, and I take a spot near Barry over in the corner of the room. There are already significantly fewer people among us since yesterday. Rory enters last and stands at the head of the conference table. “Congratulations,” he says. “If you’re standing here it means you’ve dodged round-one of our little employee triage events. Ya’ll are the cream of the Ubiquicorp crop. It’s a pleasure to have you still on board—for now. But don't get too comfortable. There’ll be a number of changes around here, and most notably to the programming department. As you know, we strive to keep on the absolute cutting-edge of what we do here. So we’re transitioning to a new programming language. C++ is out, and we can’t afford the licensing fees for Java. What we’re left with is something called DESPOT, or Directive Elected Sequencing and Partitioned Operative Teleology. What does that mean, you ask? I don’t know. It’s your job to figure it out and integrate it with our current system. That’s why you’re still here, and why I have complete confidence in you as people and employees of Ubiquicorp. Your complimentary training manuals are there by the door. Please pick one up as you leave.”

I scan the cover of the DESPOT manual as I return to my workspace, flip through pages of inscrutable data I have no hope of comprehending. Barry is already hard at work studying his manual back in the cubicle. I sit at my workstation and in my creaking office chair, open the book to an arbitrarily chosen page and let my face fall into its exact center.

"You'll never be able to understand that book," Barry says, and I want to think, Come on, man. Have a little bit of faith in your co-worker and comrade in Ubiquicorp arms, but, unfortunately, he's right.

"I know that," I say, removing the manual from my face and dropping it to the floor between our office chairs. "You're right. I haven't even understood what I was supposed to do the past two years in this place."

"That's pretty obvious," Barry says. "Meet with my acquaintance—I'm telling you—and all will be resolved."

Back at the Apothecary shop, a level-43 stone-ogre walks into the store. The situation sounds like the beginning of a bad joke only Ydgrid would understand. The ogre's taking up all the space in the Apothecary's Weight, shunting a newbie dwarf off into the corner of the store. What does the ogre want? He wants an area-effect desalinization stone so he can provide potable water to his seaside tribe of stone-ogres, of which he is the chieftain.

"That sounds important," I tell him, "and I appreciate your consideration of the community, but I've never heard of an area-effect desalinization stone. Are you sure you're not making this up?"

"Yeah," he says. "I'm just fucking with you. Give me ten revitalizing salves."

I give him ten revitalizing salves and the stone-ogre galumphs out of the store, swatting away the dwarf as he passes.

"What an asshole," says Ydgrid over by the produce kiosk.

"I know, right? I provide a useful service to travelers and they come in here throwing jokes around, making me feel even worse about the character class I didn't even choose."

"People are the worst," says Ydgrid. And I think, No, please don't start talking like that again. People are not the worst. "People are soulless curs," she says.

"People are not soulless curs," I tell her. "Well, some of them are. My boss, Rory, for example, waiting to let fall the axe and conduct the subsequent necropsy."

"You're beginning to sound as pathetic as me," she says. "So what are you going to do? You have any prospects?"

"Someone in the office claims to know a person who can prevent me from getting necropsied."

"What?" she says.

"Fired," I tell her.

"Oh. Well, what kind of person? That sounds shady to me over here on my side of the world."

"I'm not sure. Barry—his name is Barry by the bye—told me to meet an acquaintance of his at the crossroads of two streets I've never heard of."

"Even shadier," she says. "You know what that means, right?"

"I have an inkling, yes," I say.

"Trust me on this. If you value your inimitable soul, don't go to that intersection—wherever it is." And when she says this, I can't help but think, Yes, Ydgrid at least cares about me. She values me as a friend and does not want to hear that I've been in any way harmed. And that warms my heart beating all the way below the countless layers of flesh and fat and lipids comprising my body, ignites the tiny luminous ember flickering all the way down in the bottom my chest. But I'm going anyway. "Look, there's something else, unrelated, I wanted to tell you.

"I was just about to leave," I say. "Once I Google-map the location, that is."

"I really wish you wouldn't go," Ydgrid says.

"It might end up being the most adventurous thing I've ever done," I tell her. "Beats working the Apothecary's shop, anyway."

Dad asks where I'm going and I tell him. Out, I say. He doesn't seem to have the available language to press for further information, having never seen me leave the house for any reason other than work, so he returns to his book with a quizzical expression, saying nothing more.

By the time I arrive, it's night, the sky's heavy and leaden, the clouds low and moving across the sky with unexpected speed, and someone's already waiting at the intersection. He pulls at the knot of his tie and fingers the top-most button of his shirt with an anxiety that inspires that exact feeling. Look at this. Take a look at what I'm doing, here. I'm walking down the middle of the road with a box of plastic forks and a bottle of whisky. I've embarked on what feels like, honestly, a real life quest. I'm like a level-50 alchemist out here, questing for the philosopher's stone.

"Hello," I say to the man. "Barry told me there'd be someone here who could help me."

"Yeah, well, same here."

"So you're not Barry's acquaintance, then?"

"Afraid not. I'm here to address the fragile state of my employment. I'm about to be necropsied."

"Necropsied?" I say. "Wait, you work for Ubiquicorp?" I ask the man as he nervously rolls and unrolls the sleeves of his dress shirt.

"Probably not for much longer, no."

"I hear you," I say. "What're you in?"

"I'm over in Finance," he says.

A figure approaches, walking along Concrete Culvert Throughway towards me and the man from Finance. As he nears, a familiar scent fills the surrounding air, not of brimstone and smoke, but hickory smoke and barbecue sauce—ribs and brisket and barbecue sauce. I'm suddenly hungry despite the present circumstances. The guy from finance speaks. "You know," he says. "Maybe I don't need this job so bad." And he begins down the road back towards the city. "I've got skills," he says and starts to run.

So I stand alone in the lunar half-light, bracing myself. The silhouette of Barry's acquaintance emerges from the darkness, barely distinguishable from the surroundings. The moonlight casts him in a pale penumbral light. Glancing around, looking at nothing in particular, I try to appear casual as he approaches, giving attention to anything but him. I kick up some dust from the road and watch it settle some distance away along with my mental wherewithal. People do impulsive, irrational things for the sake of maintaining a soul-sapping job, I think to myself, for instance, standing at the intersection of roads forgotten by time and everyone except a man shrouded in darkness.

“And what can I do for you, young man?” he says in a charred, guttural tone that sounds like he's recently gargled with battery acid. “Wait, let me guess,” he continues. “You want to play the guitar, but don't want to go through all the trouble of learnin' and spending hours picking out chords and melodies? That right?”

“No, actually—” I tell him.

“Well, that's a surprising first,” he says. “The world only needs so many guitarists, you know.”

“I guess I can agree with that,” I say, taking the bottle of whisky from my satchel and offering it to him. “I think I need to give you this.”

“Much appreciated,” he says, examining the bottle. “You got the good stuff. So if it's not guitar mastery you're looking for, what is it?”

“Well, here's the situation: massive, catastrophic layoffs in the works at Ubiquicorp, where I work. I seriously cannot lose this job that I really don't deserve to have in the first place, and someone in the office said you could help me out, somehow.”

“Probably I can. What do you do in your line of work?”

“Programming,” I tell him. “I used to work in C, C++ generally—”

“So that's what's considered work these days, eh?”

“But they've transitioned to a programming language I have zero hope of understanding,” I tell him. “Considering I basically lied on my job application to begin with. Honestly, I know near to nothing about my own profession.”

“I like your style,” he says.

“And you? You're something like the devil, am I right? I'm standing here speaking to the

devil?"

"You know how this goes down, then."

"I think so. Knowledge needed to preserve my job equals one soul, that right?"

"Smart man," he says.

"Not really, no," I say to him.

"Well, you want to go through with it or not?"

"Yes, go ahead."

"All right, then," he says, and we stand there for a brief and silent minute looking at one another. I wait for something remarkable to occur, some magical or phenomenological evidence of the transaction. But there's nothing. His teeth gleam through the darkness between us and I'm left, apparently, minus a soul. "Done," he says.

"So's that it?" I ask.

"That's it," he says. "Tell Barry I'll be waiting for him."

When I return home from my meeting at the crossroads, I immediately log-in and look for Ydgrid. She's exactly where I expect to find her: standing behind her produce kiosk, arranging produce into attractive arrays.

"Well, I'm officially sans soul, Ydgrid," I say to her.

"You must have something for that back in the storeroom," she says. "A soul restorative or something? So how does it feel? Empty?"

Truthfully, it feels like nothing out of the ordinary has occurred, even if the occult

transaction has taken effect, which is why the whole thing is so troubling. I don't feel soulless, yet I am.

"I don't know. I'll have to sleep on it."

"Well, since you've been running around receiving arcane knowledge from ancient evils, there's something I wanted to tell you."

"This sound bad."

"I'm a man."

"You're a man?"

"I'm a man, and my name is Eric."

The knowledge that Ydgrid is, in reality, a man is free and given freely. I didn't ask for it, but there it is nonetheless. My once beloved Ydgrid is a dude. This, I'd rather not know. "How long have you been a man?"

"What do you mean?" he says. "Forever. Or, at least, since I was born. I thought I should tell you that before I cancel my account."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" I ask. "I mean, I always assumed I was talking to a woman, here, imagining you to look like your in-game character."

"Well, I don't," he says and starts walking towards the center of the outpost. "One last thing. What's your name?"

"My name's Robert," I say.

"Robert," he says. "Okay, well, goodbye, Robert."

"Goodbye, Eric," I say. "Wait. For old time's sake."

Together, we walk through the outpost to the square's harvester crystal. We bow to one

another and, finally, we logout.

Whereas I'd always had trouble working with program architecture, and learned whatever necessary to scrape by, I now recall everything with surprising fluidity. So acute is my knowledge and proficiency with the new programming architecture, that we finished the internment data aggregation project a week ahead of deadline. And this is largely attributable to my newly found—or given—computer programming knowledge. Even Barry is impressed.

“There're rumors,” says Barry.

“You're kidding me,” I say. “More? More layoffs?”

“No,” he says. “Nothing that serious, but I'm not given to believing what I've been hearing. It's true, you have been doing a pretty good job lately, but still you can't admit it's deserved, that you've earned it.”

“Earned what?”

“Employee of the Month,” Barry says. “You.”

It happens, though, despite Barry's admonitions. Rory makes the announcement just before lunch break. “And now for some positive news,” Rory says. “I think everyone can agree that's in order, given our recent distress around here, yes?” Rory gives an affected couple of laughs returned by no one except Barry. “As you know, all of you are the best—the best Ubiquicorp has to offer the world offer software development—but standing among you is someone exceptional. This person adapted to the DESPOT transition with startling ease and almost single handedly completed the internment data aggregation project. Please, everyone

accompany me in a resounding Hats Off to our man Robert, here.” He begins clapping his hands and the rest of the team follows with an apathetic response to the accolades, an unenthusiastic spatter of applause. When the meeting ends, everyone leaves the conference room seemingly satisfied with not having been chosen for the award and returns to their workstations content in still having a job.

At the end of the workday, I take the elevator to ground level and find, already hung on the lobby wall, my ID photo enlarged to about 4x its original size, framed above a small placard that bears my name. I can’t remember the picture being taken, but my chin-waddle still features prominently. It’s a face only the people of this world will ever see—not Ydgrid or Eric or whomever replaces Ydgrid and Eric. Standing in front of myself in the Ubiquicorp HQ lobby and weighing in at three-hundred and fifteen pounds, I want to leave this place where I’m less the person I feel am, escape from this world and myself, drive home and tend to the apothecary’s shop.

Ydgrid's replacement waits below the shop’s marquee when I log in. Sitting alone in my bedroom, lord of the crossroads, hands on the keyboard and staring through the screen into a place beyond, "Hello," I say to the replacement kiosk attendant, “I’m Robert.” I say my name. “Nice to have you on board.” I imagine Ydgrid or Eric somewhere in Fort Worth, Texas, in a room like my own, assuming the new kiosk attendant’s character. “Tell me a little about yourself,” I say. But of course it isn’t Eric. The new attendant is someone else—a man or woman I might come to know, in time, in this world where Ydgrid and I don’t exist, a place where I can still claim a soul.

The Uncanny Valley

His dad had created both Benchman and the automaton standing in front of him. Dad was an engineer, yes, but Benchman had never before in his life seen any evidence or product to prove it. The automaton—the mechanical simulation of a dead governor moving without grace or fluidity, gesticulating in a series of awkward stops and starts and spasms—was proof of his father's ingenuity. It endeared Benchman to his dad in ways he couldn't really identify. The life-sized, animatronic Huey P. Long stood on a small pedestal in one of the Old Louisiana State Capitol exhibit spaces. Its coat of matte, spray-painted bronze recalled for Benchman an ambiguous era of steam power and wind-up mechanics, a simpler monochromatic history he'd never seen or experienced.

“I don't think it'll be too difficult,” Benchman said.

“Still, I'm gonna need your help,” his dad said.

While they spoke, the animatronic Huey P. Long mandered on and on about the local college football team. Its mouth didn't move. Technically, it wasn't speaking—or technically speaking, the automaton was speaking technically. Prerecorded audio tracks issued from speakers somewhere in the ceiling or walls, but not from the device itself.

Benchman and his dad were the sole patrons of the exhibit, the only people listening as the animatronic Huey P. Long played through its inventory of sound bite talking points. Following the instructions printed on a small wall-mounted placard, the two men refrained from touching the device or crossing the velvet rope in front of them. His dad admired his own creation—the

burnished suit coat creasing at the elbows and shoulders, its movement human, but not exactly—while scratching his beard and nodding occasionally in approval. The automaton was humanlike, Benchman thought. That’s exactly what it was. It was like a human, similar, but not exactly.

"I have to say, Dad, its movement is a bit—how to put it," Benchman said. "Rigid or something." As Benchman gave his assessment, the spotlight dimmed away from the machine. It concluded its soliloquy with the final chorus of the college fight song. "Wasn't he known for being a pretty animated guy?"

"Well, yes, but more for roads, roadways," his father said. "Listen." He clapped twice, and the sound awakened the animatronic Huey P. Long. It began again and spoke on the network of highways splayed across the state of Louisiana. "A thing of beauty, considering," Dad said. "I refurbished the robotics from that kids' restaurant on Plank Road after it closed. Used to be some kind of animal that played the banjo. A gorilla, I think it was."

"A gorilla?"

"Or a bear," he said. "I can't remember."

Actually, Benchman was pretty sure it was a gorilla. He had a vague memory of his parents taking him to the restaurant when he was a kid and seeing a band of anthropomorphic animals perform Dixieland jazz.

"How long's it been here?" Benchman asked.

"Must be about fifteen years, now," his dad said. "Installed it right before your mom passed."

"Can't believe I've never seen it before. Mom ever see it?"

"Once," he said, "but I don't think she was all that impressed."

"I really wish you'd take a look at the project I'm working on," Benchman said. "I think it'll make for an interesting exhibit. It's supposed to have voice recognition and multi-touch functionality."

"Don't care. I told you, Son, once that thing comes in here, I swear to never set foot in this museum again." His dad then shifted in his seat and set his forearms on his knees. "I don't mean to disparage your work, or anything, though."

"But look, it says don't touch, right there," he said, pointing at the placard. "You can't interface with it. People want to interface."

"I've been very much intimate with the workings of Governor Long." As he said this, the machine deactivated with a final spasm, light again receding into the ceiling. "So you gonna help me get this thing out of here tomorrow, or what?"

"Sure," he said. "What time?"

"Just stop by when you get off work."

"All right," he said, and the two men rose from their stools and started towards the exhibit's exit.

"There's something else I wanted to tell you," his dad said.

As they left, the sound disturbed the automaton. It responded to their absence with a set of directions leading to the exact location of Huey P. Long's assassination, to the death-place of the original for which both Benchman and his father had created a replica.

Benchman and his dad left the Old State Capital Museum and headed toward where they'd

parked. The streets were still wet with the previous day's rain, the world and its light sources inverted in pools of lustered concrete.

"No, I'm not really sure whether it'll be bronzed. That's a Department of Verisimilarity issue," Benchman said to his dad.

Oil refineries across the river shrouded the city with a toxic cloud-cover that obscured the night sky. Atop distant smokestacks, mounted to steel girders and scaffolds, the refinery caution lights were the city's semblance of stars. The lights were star-like, Benchman thought. The real ones were out and beyond the reach of the city's airborne chemical emissions.

They walked together along the sidewalk and paused before a building that'd been gutted and prepared for renovation. The façade and most of the roofing had been removed, but the interior structure, the framework and the building's second floor, was left intact. Benchman tried to determine where his cubicle would be had he worked there.

"So where'd you meet her?" Benchman said.

"Installing an exhibit at the Rural Life Museum. She volunteers there on the weekends."

Water from the previous night's storm fell from secret reservoirs between the derelict building's flooring and ceiling panels. Benchman watched the water gather in pools and threaten to submerge the demolition equipment left within. He and his dad stood for a moment and listened to the sound of rain echo within the building.

"She gonna move in with you?"

"Maybe. Eventually. I don't know."

"I can't even begin to picture what that'd look like—someone else walking around where Mom used to."

“Well, you don’t have to,” he said. “You don’t live there anymore.” His dad kicked at some debris lying on the sidewalk and wiped the sweat from his brow. The careless gesture seemed to Benchman childlike. With it, he felt their difference in years contract.

When they arrived at the parking lot, Benchman let the discussion lapse. He got in his car and left the downtown area in a direction opposite his father.

Benchman spent the following workday adjusting minor cosmetic details and making minute alterations to the computer generated model of Huey P. Long, removing the ochre and bronze filters he'd applied the day before. Department of Verisimilarity first decided the model should be bronzed, then recanted, and—once again—thought maybe, in fact, it should be bronzed, but ultimately the people over in Verisimilarity decided that it shouldn't be bronzed. The model should be an accurate rendering of the late governor and not based on the obsolete representation currently installed in the exhibit space. There was some serious interdepartmental waffling on the issue. Benchman agreed with the final decision, though, and told the department supervisor that he'd be finished with the project by the end of the afternoon. In a few hours, nobody will know that his father's animatronic Huey P. Long ever existed.

He thought about the robotic skeletal structure his father had assembled, its metal carpals and metacarpals, the actuators gripping the banjo on stage and forming a barred major chord, children more terrified by the machine's performance than entertained, parents miserable and drinking cheap beer in endurance of their surroundings, the incessant requests for brass tokens. Maybe the governor's computer-generated model wasn't any better than the banjo playing

gorilla. He was unsure whether he'd improved on anything. The components of his father's device should've been left alone if, despite his efforts and technologic improvements, the computer-aided model of the governor no more closely resembled the original than did his father's automaton. Huey P. Long was dead, and maybe everyone should've just left him that way.

Later that afternoon, the department supervisor stood over Benchman's shoulder and told him he'd done a really great job with the creases and folds in the model's skin. Really, great attention to detail, the supervisor said. The contours and texture are very lifelike. Benchman disagreed, though, looking at the workstation computer screen and the model's left hand lying open, pleading. He thought, Yeah, you're right. It looks lifelike. Using the mouse, he pulled the pads of the fingers to the palm of the hand. He released them and caught what he realized was a critical oversight: the hand poised with fingers curled into a chord position displayed no tendons or sinews reaching from the wrist into the cuffs of the governor's suit jacket. There was no evidence of subcutaneous life, of musculature or skeletal system, of depth or unseen movement of any kind. But he made no further alterations. He considered the project complete enough, and when the department manager again approached Benchman at his workstation and asked if the model was finished, he told him, yes, it was. He'd send it over in a few minutes.

After work, Benchman drove downtown to meet his dad at the Old State Capital Museum. It was dusk when he arrived, but a diffuse light filled the air above the refineries across the river. The flame atop a banded smokestack purged the refinery's waste and emitted an incandescent

glow into the surrounding sky. When he arrived at the museum, his dad's truck was parked in front of the museum with its hazard lights blinking.

His dad carried the animatronic Huey P. Long towards the truck. “It’s heavier than I remember,” he said. Benchman and his dad worked to set the figure in the passenger seat, bent the animatronic Huey P. Long at the knees and hip in a position that'd be comfortable for a human being. It pressed the spent cigarette boxes and styrofoam cups into the floorboards of his dad's truck. Benchman sat beside the automaton, and wanted it to stir or somehow turn and acknowledge him, to suffer a brief paroxysm like it usually did, but it remained inert. He entered through the driver’s side door, sat beside the machine, reached across it and placed its arm on the armrest. His dad sat next to him and took the steering wheel. The engine turned over and his dad inserted into the stereo a cassette single of *Every Man a King*. And again, Benchman half expected the machine to move, figured it would respond to the song it'd help write.

Benchman, his dad, and the animatronic Huey P. Long riding shotgun—the three of them—left the parking lot of The Old State Capital Museum and drove down River Road past the half demolished office building they'd seen the previous day. The lifeless, blank unstarling machine pressed against his right arm and thigh. He couldn't remember when—if ever—he'd been in such proximity to his dad, and in that closeness, Benchman felt a marked contrast of temperature, opposing poles of warmth and frigidity between life and lifelike.

They drove through downtown Baton Rouge and arrived at the steps of the Louisiana State Capitol. Dad parked the truck, pulling the hand brake. Facing the building stood a monument to the governor, a sculpture of Huey P. Long standing on a pedestal with his hand lying open in supplication—to what, Benchman didn't know. He wanted to imagine the posture

an invitation, an offering to approach and come closer. "I always wanted to show him this," his dad said. The powerless device sitting beside Benchman failed to look on the governor's monument. Its eyes just stared through the windshield taking note of nothing in particular. Of the three of them, none were impressed with the monument to Huey P. Long.

"I think yours is better," Benchman said.

"Well, I'm sure yours is better too," his dad said. "But I told you, I'm never setting foot in that museum again."

They left the downtown area and merged onto I-10 heading south, joined the commuters leaving the city who either thought the bronzed man sitting shotgun real enough to warrant no attention or were just indifferent to its presence altogether.

The incumbent and still very much alive governor inaugurated the new exhibit and posed for a steady stream of disinterested journalists. The governor shook hands with various public relations professionals, CEOs and the supervisors of Benchman's production studio. In place of his father's automaton hung a vertical four-by-six foot, touch responsive, high-definition video screen. A vinyl banner above the screen read *The Kingfish Lives Again!* with various corporate logos and sponsorship credits spanning the banner's length. On screen, a windswept computer generated Huey P. Long stood at the steps of The State Capital Building, hands pocketed, awaiting instruction or acknowledgment from the crowd. It stood ready to purvey knowledge and respond to voice or touch. The patrons continued to shake hands, balance *hors d'œuvres* and plastic champagne flutes, seemingly more concerned with the banner than the exhibit.

Benchman stood leaning against the entrance to the *Mysteries of the Murder of Huey P. Long* exhibit waiting, like the computer generated model he'd created, for some form of acknowledgement.

He took what must've been four or five trips to the makeshift bar. When he returned to his post after the sixth, Benchman saw her. He knew immediately she was the woman his dad had been seeing. His dad entered the exhibit space following after with his hand on the small of her back. The woman and his mother shared similarities, and Benchman wondered if his dad was aware of them. Her eyes held the same slight skepticism; her walk, the same gelid charm as his mother's. As they entered, his dad and the woman scanned the room. They maneuvered through the small assemblage of people and made their way to where the animatronic Huey P. Long once stood.

His dad examined the computer-generated model awaiting silently on screen. He peered at it then took a step back and examined it from where he stood. His father then approached the screen, raised his hand and pressed it against the glass. When he removed his hand, Benchman's computer generated Huey P. Long awoke and addressed the couple. It began speaking to them about the network of roads and roadways splayed across Louisiana, the governor rendering the surface of the state traversable, connecting places and towns near one another yet held apart.

VITA

The author was born in Slidell, Louisiana. He obtained his Bachelor's degree in English: Rhetoric, Writing, and Cultural Studies from Louisiana State University in 2008. He joined the University of New Orleans creative writing graduate program to pursue a MFA in Creative Writing.