

Brask

by moondog

chapters one through five

I

A brask creaminess in the wind, falling off and salty, wafts up the cliff. A chime of the sea, morning pooling. The buildings all were painted blue, even the church in the center and the stone of the fountain, sitting atop the high cliffy island. A great deal of nature was achieved with minimal employment of greenery, and the coffee-drinking locals lulled casually on the weekends. At the southwest corner the lighthouse, the second one built for the island. The first was fantastically destroyed in a thunderstorm so terribly that scarcely a trace of it remained. There was the general store, a bakery run out of an old woman's kitchen, the post office, the bowling alley. She lived across the post office.

Anita was awake. Lying in bed, now waiting for dawn, surrendering REM to RAM. She thought perhaps a dozen other villagers might also be awake, most of them busying in some animal way about pre-dawn daily activity preparations. Anita's semi-humorous getment of rare queries and browser window shopping. Jobs perhaps in cities that don't exist. Attraction to specific images, like specific memories but with that added freedom of forward projection. What separation is there between dreams, thoughts, and memories? She would stare into the hollow brocade of RGB and feel out whole ludic crescents moonlit consummations of network connections with beings represented only by an image or word. Volatile pangs like rug burn, the unavoidable muscular burn predominate to thrashing or treading through water, but now applied to the heart. The fluidity of time includes its viscosity, and the beat of the heart makes the ticking, and the stupidly hyperbolic promise of relativity, sore on. But eyes locked on. Edging it's called. Her dreams become wilder as more she becomes caged.

Sleep has failed to take her now. Maybe Anita would nap later. The dusty incandescent sun signed on to the world just then. The room suddenly appeared. Anita's little things were few. As an object may be a memento, so may its absence. She had cleared out her things a while before she moved. A reaction against self disgust. A miraculous transformation with roots she hardly admits. A lover left and leaving reason quick cutting to a fragile mind. What else can become of someone who loses that which they hold dearest and, searching for a reason, find the fissile cause only ever in their own

habits? They are figuratively destroyed. And so Anita destroyed herself materially, craving some alchemical affection of the inaccessible interior truth of habit by the manipulation, the severance, of its housing. She avoids the thoughts, mostly.

A great grandmother's blanket, dug up to replace a comforter too soiled with memories in bed. A dresser, a desk, a lamp, came with the place or found. A few boxes of never-unpacked, never-to-be-unpacked, artifacts and trinkets. Down the hall, the old couple of the house would be waking soon. The Mr and Mrs Cauly. Cheap rent, but nearly too much the feel of family for her taste.

Through the curtain she would likely see Geoff pondering some business about the mail. Though no one seemed to get any, it seemed.

There was Hank, who had coffee or something else you wanted in the general store, and who was one of the many people who floundered the bowling alley for an excuse to exist somewhere after hours. If there were a bar, they would've gone there, but the bowling alley served beer. It sufficed, seemed to sustain them. Hank was at least a little older just slightly than Anita, perhaps, and she occasionally had eyes for him, but he was too brusque and cobbled, a newsstand left open.

And they were all she knew there really. A population on an island that would nearly fit the ferry fipply tethered near the rock in communication with the outside world. An hour far patched the horizon to.

Anita would leave for the day to wander and be, just to excuse her being. Luckily there find a place to nap on the coast perhaps.

She scraped a scrap of bread and skipped the breakfast picking barely a goodbye to the Caulys. Door clasp crackle grain on the grain sill: snap, in another world. No birds singing, just the sea wind peening face, crisp and filled with salty vapor lace. Cobble stone garden path. Cobble stones were dumped long ago by ships using them as ballast. Like the little island was dumped. It was at one time a pylon in a long line of places holding up a bridge between a north and south side. But the belle before her time must have shared a fear of haunting, painted the ceramic town completely blue, periwinkle, cornflower, sky, lapis. Against the sky, it ceases to exist, so that all would-be visitors never know the town. It's a place people go to be quiet, a community of the alone. So escaping the breakfast wasn't rude, but sort of expected. They were all gluttons for silence. It wasn't that there weren't no birds, they just didn't like to sing.

Anita nibbling on the little bread, slithered down the road away. The only road of the island really, circling around one end. Her house and the things around it were on the north side, toward the middle of town, the church sat at the head of a place, nestling a silly fountain, facing west, and down to the southern tip was the lighthouse. She took her knolly path around toward the unpersoned eastern face. Crabled donkey ways putting up rutted steps, and the east wink grey and gold coming up. Down a bit from the century sound of crashing waves and into a clearing, an old fire pit fortress for hanging out with friends, a shrine in disuse and disguise. As a gift from the island, it was even quieter here. A dip down little bowl in the rock. She sat down.

Anita felt a knot forming in her throat. An aftertaste of dissatisfaction, or a premonition of boredom. A kind of twitch, like the involuntary tensing of the lower lip she experienced whenever she dropped something. It came not without cause, she thought, but in exaggeration of its cause. For years, Anita had defaulted to sadness, but she hadn't been one to exhibit physical manifestations of emotional pain for quite a while. At least two years since she really cried, except that one time she teared up farewelling to a lover leaving on a flight for the last time. She tried not to hypothesize to exhaustively upon this occurrence. The knot was maintained by those memories. There is shame which persists without action from the sin of losing something dear. For a moment, Anita craves the release of tears, wills every foul history for the encouragement of this expulsion.

A history of little pains: Anita first lived in a house with a bunch of cats, but she was allergic, so she moved. She moved to the shirty town made of pine straw. She got a job at a chocolate shop. Anita fell in love with someone for the first time. Anita cried for the first time. She started working on paper, doing little drawings and making up little games. More on games later, she'll remember. But she began to have difficult dreams of a tall and horrible man coming into her home, or that her life existed entirely on a cassette tape. So she moved again. She wasn't having any love luck anyway.

Moved to a grey little city. It was an embarrassing place, run by idiots who rode computerized bikes and took loans from one another constantly. The harbor was full of slime and everyone drank expensive beer. She worked at the theatre. There the company was pleasant. Some even became good friends for Anita. They would have many fantastic outings and parties.

In an ancient summer, out towards Shane's country, the sky curtained out with humidity. Cars by the twenty piled out with scrappy pals, partners, rivals. Herbal odors and notions of mushrooms sounded in the night, and kicking wild like fauns and Quasi playing tricks and everyone throwing unseen kisses. The pack promenaded through the pines. Shane led them out through the broken up tractors and ambiguous rusts, miles into his world. A sacred moonlight broke out upon a chorus of frogs, his diving place, a dreamscape inclusion of crystalized sounds and scents. The holy beauty was nearly lost to the momentum stampede. A horny horseshoe looped and ended in drink, a scattering before the dawn.

And months later, a knocking on the window in the night, Shane and theatrical crew. An outing, later performing a window jump rescue of some other damsel in distress type friend. Rendezvous and Quasi's hookah, shots, weed. They crashed a party, pretended they were from the Balkans, unhinged a door, stole Snozi's stout, trespassed abandoned shacks, found a moonshine stash, and saw ghosts in the cornfields. Anita got sick once or twice. All the while playing music, laughing it up, like idiots.

Anita met a professional Pokémon trainer on the bus around the city, on the way to the theatre. They had a delightful conversation about the concept of the duel. The duel is one of a few ideal games structures. Two players come to the game and make an agreement to compete, a calculation to evaluate one player as superior in some insular measurement of skill. Ideally, both players are given equal opportunity to succeed, and the outcome of the game is determined mostly by the exercise of some arbitrary skill. Then they discussed some poetry of imagery in games. Something about smaller numbers, concise systems. Afterwards, Anita made 'Beargarden.



There are twenty cards in 'Beargarden. Each card, except the Heart, has some effect on the position of a counter, called the stone, on a numbered board. The board ranges from 9 to 0 and back up to 9, with a 9 on either player's side of the board. All cards remain face up at all times. The game begins with all cards laid out in the center of the table. One player chooses a card that isn't the Heart to add to their hand. The second player does this also. This repeats until both players have 5 cards in their hands. The last player to draw a card begins play. Each turn, the turn's player may play a card from their

hand or from the card in the center pile. The played card is placed face up on a discard pile. The stone is pushed or pulled according to the value described by the card played. If the card played is the Heart, the opposing player will be allowed to play two consecutive cards in an attempt to return the stone to 0. The Heart player does not play a card between these. If the stone is returned to 0 by the first card, the player of the Heart loses the game. If the stone is returned to 0 by the second card, the Heart is returned to the center of the table and the returning player decides which player will play the next card. If the stone cannot be returned by two cards, then the player of the Heart wins the game. The Heart cannot be played if the stone is on 0. If a card pulls, that means it pulls the stone towards the player playing the card, and pushing pushes the stone towards the player's opponent.

The cards are as follows: 1 Heart: a special card used to exact victory. 1 Bear: pulls the stone by 3, but pulls the stone by 6 if the last card on the discard pile is the Mountain, Forest, or Storm. 2 Horses: pull the stone by 2. 4 Hounds: pull the stone by 1 plus 1 for each Hound in the player's hand. 2 Daggers: push the stone by 1, but pushes the stone by 2 if the last card on the discard pile is a Hound. 2 Pistols: push the stone by 1, but pushes the stone by 2 if the last card on the discard pile is Short, and does not move the stone if the last card on the discard pile is Long. 2 Rapiers: pushes the stone by 2, but pushes the stone by 4 if the last card on the discard pile is the other Rapier, pushes the stone by 6 if the last card on the discard pile is the Sabre, and does not move the stone if the last card on the discard pile is a Dagger. 1 Sabre: pushes the stone by 1, but pushes the stone by 2 if the player has a Horse in their hand, and pulls the stone by 3 if the last card on the discard pile is a Horse. 1 Long: does not move the stone, but pulls the stone by 5 if the last card on the discard pile is Short. 1 Short: does not move the stone, but pushes the stone by 5 if the last card on the discard pile is Long. 1 Mountain: pushes the stone by 3 if the stone is closer to the player than their opponent, or pulls the stone by 3 if the stone is farther from the player than their opponent, but cannot be played when the stone is on 0 or 3. 1 Forest: pushes the stone by 2 if the stone is closer to the player than their opponent, or pulls the stone by 2 if the stone is farther from the player than their opponent, but cannot be played when the stone is on 0 or 2. 1 Storm: pushes the stone by 1 if the stone is closer to the player than their opponent, or pulls the stone by 1 if the stone is farther from the player than their opponent, but cannot be played when the stone is on 0 or 1.

If a player loses, but they had two or fewer cards available to play from their hand or the table, the victory is considered stale and the game should be settled with another hand.



Anita fell in love with the romantic partner of a coworker at the theatre. Nothing ever came of it. Instead she married another coworker, one whom she did not love. It was a gross kind of cowboy you know it regular sort of thing. Love became a saturated word. Then supersaturated like it had no meaning, like a thing so salted it cannot be eaten. Love rang in her ears like mockingbirds on summer nights, it sang out in the lonely nights without meaning, it sang into the day on every conceivable not without meaning. Love fell apart. She cut it from herself, baked it into a loaf of bread, and through the loaf out. Anita was afterward content never to really love, and that was when she stopped crying so much.

Then Anita moved to the last place she lived before moving to the little blue town: she moved to the City of Flames.



Far out in Texas, just outside of a little town called Earth, someone sits in a cheap truck watching lightning strikes. Thick pebbles piddle patdle dimpling down on a tin top truck stop, and Poison is late, thought Snakes. He blaze glowed his face, nearly singed a mustache hair on that stovetop lighting of a cigarette, LED radio indicator off but able. Where was Poison? SMS: fuck are you? and no response. How to interpret response time? or punctuation for that matter? What does it mean when a girl you like responds to a text message using all the same punctuation marks as the initial text? and capitalization logics?

A selection of text messages acquired from a secret text message intercept script on noqtis.com:

FulminographyInfo

Fulminography is the documentation of lightning strikes.

FulminographyInfo

When lightning strikes a negatively charged

FulminographyInfo

ion cloud discharges into a positively charged ground.

FulminographyInfo

may also distort space if the pressure is great enough.

FulminographyInfo

The extreme increase in pressure from the thunder

FulminographyInfo

There is also the possibility that the closest possible positively charged

FulminographyInfo

ground is not accessible in three dimensions.

FulminographyInfo

In this case

FulminographyInfo

the lightning will arc across the fourth dimension.

Interior bar architecture of interior trailer.

Howard

p give me the strikes.

Howard

comon i don't need this

Howard

shit.

Howard

i will fucking come over there and kill you if you dont help me get back to last wek

Poison

calm the fuck down

Posion

wrnt buna et thise fukcers oafter dhat stash

Howard

fuck of

Poison

don't move it, we still can mak the deal

Howard

easy for you to say you fuck

Poison

x said wensday so that what eerll do

Poison

you ghave the whitney dont even tell me

Howard

.

Snakes watched the lightning, waiting for his friend to arrive, somewhere out through the field, so they could go home.



II

Horned coughing children. A Beautiful Scandinavian girl with a golden Casio watch, and its opposite, a gun blue steel Casio, oscillating between matte and gloss, matte and gloss.

Four dogs are in a room. The first is large and wooden, made from sliced two by sixes, conglomerated with five-eighths dowel joints, and shaped to form with an angle grinder. It's painted a deep sky blue, the deepest sky blue imaginable. It poses, frozen mid-turn, precariously articulated against the logic of natural weight distribution, staring eyelessly before a grid of small green hearts on a dried blood burgundy. Inside the dog's heart, visible through the cracks in its personaliry, is a small painting of a phone with a longing text message barely able to be made out. It would later step on the words. Beside the dog is a vinyl bowl inscribed "WANT" and filled to the brim with pale blue puzzle pieces, partially assembled to eventually constitute an image of flat blue, only blue.

Next is a wild dog. The wild dog is frighteningly tall and comprised of scraps, steel, plaster, mulch, and plexiglass, covered in blackened and whitened plastic. It commits to a musculature of necessity, salutes vaguely towards a painful independence. Near it, a gold leafed boken levitates inside a steel ribbon vortex. Both the dog and the boken cast isometric shadows with reflective gradients. In stifled reluctance, the wild dog says, "I truly did love you, and all these things I am left with, all our memories of the rivers and wild nights; they weigh down on me. The word which is your name is sharp, honed by the truth in your gait. Thinking it cuts me, every time. And saying it, I fear, might kill me. You quoted Atonement, and I remember Winterson. Where are you now? I could reach out into your city, but I fear the spark between my hand and your back would throughly seize the rhythm of my internal windings. I have a habit of shaking broken watches, trying to make them work, but I'm trying to kick it."

On the floor is a brown dog. It is sewn from soft regret, unstuffed and flat. It lies there, inert, while some idiot walks around outside wearing a hat of similar design. On the wall nearby is a black and white shelf supporting a small bottle of wormwood oil. This dog is simple. It has given up on memory. It lies about the time, waits on its luck.

The last dog sits nearby. It's hollow and metallic, an incomplete preface to; and scuffed by yellow marks of



The painful noonsun glared down a gaudy glare of disbelief and “what are you doing, Anita? Get up and go do something!” Boring zephyr warps off the coast lift thermal return gently abraded her body, once a cozy hello, and twice a get up and go. The little stone nest then lost its comfort, became a slack gladiators pit of sorts. A pleasant space, mixed to kindling tinder with empty bottles and wet cigarette butts, involving some diameter of twenty feet around. Protruding boulder walls barely obscured a view of the water on the north side. Anita resolved to return to town.

It was a cheap walk, littered with lizards basking. The island fortified the coast with dumped concrete blocks. Every summer, the coast guard uncle, temporarily retired, would impress the family by hauling the rock by hand, across the yard, to safeguard the inheritance. The rest of the family, offended or awestruck by these displays of power, would occasionally join in, but most often curse him from his excessive flex and enthrusting expectation. But then again, the island survived by his action a little longer than it perhaps would without his intervention.

Sprouting out of a decaying stump was a naturally occurring bonsai, most likely a cyprus, stunted by its strange roothome.

A ledge, somewhat out of reach, was incredibly populated by small stones. It seemed that passers by, the bored and unemployed, would entertain themselves with their tossing.

The road, the singular street of the island, materialized not by the marked difference in a planar texture, but simply in the enveloping proximiry in the parallel placement of buildings. Distraction was the primary goal, overwhelmingly, and secondarily driving was the sensation of hunger. Anita passed the bowling alley, not yet deciding on the diversion of a cheap hotdog, deliberating yet on the availabilities of Hank's general, or that old woman's bakery deli. Or the possibilirity of fixing up something at home. A row of domestic flowers curated by an unknown mom played audience to Anita's parade, then her halting, and finally to a reversal of direction concurrent with a determination of hotdog. The postoffice was nearly in view, but nothing on the island was

ever far. This was the definition of a small place. In a small enough place, the issue of distance becomes nonexistent, and the decision of being in any specific place is a matter of exerting will. Teleportation is a commonplace exercise in forgetting the burden of short walks. A butterfly swathed a tip of twig nearby.

A multitude of greasy scents cascaded up the olfactory reception most closely belonging to Anita along with an equally greasy hello and welcome. Otis, owner of the Dandy Alley bowling alley, catchall pub and place of general distraction. And she responded, “oh » hellow, Otis,” having only recently learnt his name and eager to boast the feat. He was a loud man, though she was unsure whether the volume stemmed from some affect in his upbringing or the acoustic hostility of the alley. It was not entirely unpleasant. The Otis booms of “what can I do for you today?” spotlighted the receiver, at once terrifying and swelling of localized bowling-eating honor. “Could I please get a hotdog?” One sufficed, they were decent hotdogs, and Anita still felt the nap fast lingering.

“Of course. Anything else?” Advertising, it seemed, to the entire island. And beginning to grill up the dog, toasting up a hearty, down-the-road-made bun. A soda, it would be. Order up and a quiet sit, people watch those three friends trying three hundred over there. Silhouetted against cramped field of vintage slickwood and orange stucco, some nylonwearers halted the line. Yeah right, no bowling shoes here. Working boots for dancing shoes, these early morning nights weren’t made for you. I’m a little spent, could you take me home? I knew, I knew it all along. The nylonwearers, old buddies, through times unknown, probably.

One of ‘em was tall and curlyhaired, held an air of knowing it all about the game, made jokes at the shorter, shorter tempered one. And the third was in-between heights and in-between hairs, half focused on the discourse about the game, more so something on a phone.

It was a strange long building, fading gradually from a dingy pub into an infinite bowling void. Eight lanes. One of them seemed conspicuously shorter, but that was perhaps a trick of the lighting. Regardless, no one ever really used it for fear of being thought a cheat. Old wooden mismatched chairs in the front, around a couple funky handmade round tables. One table was painted red, one had a slick black top, and one was painted a colorful blue-green checker with red lines. A teal dropleaf table chipped to betray a previous red layer. The bar section of the establishment had a dark green floor with white spots painted in a grid. The bar itself seemed to have been fashioned from a

door at some point. A cackle chuckle chord cavorted amongst the nylonwearers. 'Is that what I want?' thought Anita. 'A slim escape from loneliness. That's not what I want, not if it means I end up bowling like that.' The soda was a pale grey birch beer, local favorite, peppery with a slight throat burn, like honey. 'An escape from loneliness certainly would be nice, but not a slim one. What other things might make me happy » what is that word » not happiness, but fulfillment? or satisfaction? Sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll. Masterpiece, making a. The one? A distraction? A job again? I've had jobs, and they don't lead to the feeling I want. Need? Do I want things?' Like a kettle left on, Anita's bones let out a howl of forward lurching. A silly person got a strike. 'Another game?'

"Hey honey, haven't seen you around for too long. 'Re'ya visiting someone on the island? Hup hup." An Otis had not necessarily adopted the customary respect for the peace and quiet of solitude.

"No, just here by myself » not sure how long I'll stay. Wanted a change of scenery; to get away from the city or something. You know." Anita curdled in a cocktail of [not wanting to interact with this Otis in the slightest] and [not wanting to remember the city in the slightest].

"Huak! Well this'll be the right place for that. It's certainly away."

"I'm staying with the Caulys, across the post."

"Oikay, I know the Caulys. They'd been here longer than near any'un here, 'cluding all 'em born here and hardly left. Huak. » » 'Ave you picked up some work somewhere out? Or maybe caught a boy on the line, though may to soon in the spring to be calling like that, harhar."

"Oh no and no, I'm working freelance on some web design gigs," a lie, "and am very much taking a break from romance et cetera," also potentially a lie.

"Ah you kids and your internet. I barely know how to check my email. Huak."

Anita, a laugh of humoring, not of humor.

Otis, searching, not able to sustain conversation with a reluctant Anita, but not willing to concede a conversation, "And good luck to you should you find yourself looking for a beau 'round here. I don't seen many cute boys too often, heh, unless you're trying to snag one of 'em fisher chads un their step of the boats in the even, eh eh." An eyebrow wobble, little snicker sneer. "Or that bachelor boy up on the hill by the mayor's place."

Anita had built an immunity to blushworthy infractions of polite conversation. And it was a local misconception, which she happened to be aware of, that this bachelor

boy was not living in close proximity to but was in fact the mayor » perhaps self appointed? A Mayor Fuglycool, a weaselly boy with terrible eating habits and a penchant for collecting unnecessary and impractical weaponry, a collection constituted primarily by movie and anime replicas. Fecundity of imagination was neither the mayor's nor the Otis's forte. 'Would it be anyone's on the island?' Anita felt suddenly drained of self-importance. Perhaps there was some innsmouthian specter afoot, draining slowly all attractive cognitive properties of the inhabitants. But she didn't have the attention to fret the normal tide.

She put her finger on it, or at least pointed next to it: the solution: Occam's razor, or a silver bullet. It was a discrete object or event, but not yet with a shape. She'd recognize it when she found it, but could only pace, not chase. Minimal satisfaction. At least she knew there was maybe a thing.

Otis trailed off, busying with something bar related, or pretended to be busy. Anita busied her tray or bottle or cup or scraps, waved Otis goodbye to a nine-pin crescent.



Daytime computing feathers in an at as much less attractive than nocturnal networking. But sometimes one logs on early, much less to work than play. What a writer's block, she thought. Clean up the desktop for a hot minute.

Hello, start thinking about how I'm thinking. Stopped listening to music. Stopped fantasizing so much. Give me a break » you know, a crack too look through. Muse not music. Learn the tropes that rule-fuel-full the world, more like. She was terribly frustrated at the burned-in notion of book-cover judging. How slow eyes were to know. A slowness that grows. So she knew she'd never know again, that love was exponentially out of reach. Out of theoretical bounds, past a triple-point event horizon escape velocity. After the great banana blight, the truest tasting bananas were wiped out. The taste of candy bananas, based on bananas of that era, are the closest you can get to the authentic banana taste. She remembered that little german boy, Dana. Then the impossible glance in the subways of Flame City. She met eyes through the window of a car on the opposite platform, opposite direction forever. Convergent bodies, meeting to

transmit an unrepeatable moment, cross and separate, doomed forever to diverge. She prayed that euclidian geometry did not govern her xxx life.

A lot of faces on the internet. A lot of potential. But statistically, no opportunity.

Doodling some ideas for games: space battles, board games, roleplaying games. Sex games? Console games, light gun and dance pad.

Idea one: game is played with with a dance pad and light gun. The game takes place on a space station. Space station is under attack by alien. Character must run to escape pod before entire station is destroyed. Running through obstacle course, occasionally shooting things to clear the way. Each stage of the game is a different part of the station and has different sound track. Jumping to one side causes character to slide to that direction. Forward is break, backward is jump? Maybe boost. Upbeat, good for arcades.

Idea two: fencing simulator. Inspired maybe by Neil Stephenson? Controls are like Qwop; each key on the keyboard controls a different arm movement. Graphics are 3d. Game is high-speed and very competitive.

Idea three: non-euclidian flight-combat game. Inspired by the tactical egg, or post and tether, air combat maneuver model. Two players control airplanes in a non-realistic combat flight simulator. The two airplanes are confined to move across the surface of a 3-dimensional curved form (which maybe also is deforming in real time?). The airplanes may turn left and right, accelerate, and pitch up or down. Pitching also causes the airplane to decelerate. Toroidal space?

Idea four: remake Pokémon without levels. Remake Magic: the Gathering but as a closed set of cards, not collectable. Make a good RPG.

Idea five: a gesture game, or a word game. A twitch game. Look up Mornington Crescent.

Idea six: Anita remembered a dream she had about a museum devoted to her game ideas. A card table display, surface covered in foam weapons. The weapons are multicolored and covered with duct tape. Swords, shields, axes, maces, clubs with spikes, spears.

A few other tables, plastic and folding. The first, out towards the center of the room, has, embedded in two mounds on opposite sides of the table, two sets of three arrows. The mound closest the entrance of the room is made of raw sugar granules. Encircling the mound is a piece of string made from graph paper. The three arrowheads

stuck in the mound Anita forged. The shafts are slathered with cinnamon, vinegar, and concentrated cherry juice. Three guinea feathers are tied to each arrow using paper string and soldering lead. The opposite mound is soil from Anita and Ethan's childhood home, and it is encircled with a piece of twine Ethan made from a wisteria vine. The arrowheads were forged by Ethan, and black and white feathers are tied on with wisteria twine. A museum audio guide explains the history and title:

“In the fifteenth century, a Welsh nobleman named Owen Glendwr led an uprising against the English. There were two significant battles in which the geometry of the landscape dictated the outcome. In one, the English attacked a Welsh encampment, but even though the Welsh were outnumbered three-to-one, because they were positioned on top of a hill, their arrows were able to hit the English before they were close enough to retaliate, and the Welsh were victorious. In a later conflict, the Welsh invaded England and took up camp atop Woodbury Hill. The English had stationed themselves atop the neighboring Abberly Hill. Because they both had strong defensive positions, neither force attacked the other. The Welsh eventually retreated because their food ran out.”

On another table is a wooden snub dodecahedron. Each of its ninety-two sides are magnetic. It sits on a small truncated wooden cone. The cone is made from laminated rainbow poplar. Some small multicolored cubes and cylinders are attached to the faces of the snub dodecahedron.

Final table: an angled black cardboard stand supports a selection of bound notes regarding the designs of various games. Many are related to space and trigonometry. In front of the notes are a few sets of cards. The first two are games Anita made in her childhood. They are computer printed paper glued to card stock, drawn when she was first figuring out how to use Photoshop and Illustrator on her mom's computer. Beside them are a set of woodblock printed American playing cards and a set of Hanafuda. At the end of the table is a set of Beargarden cards, illustrated in black, blue, green, red, and gold leaf.

On the wall, a silvery birdlike .obj makes loops in a mountainous environment.

A USB game controller is plugged into a USB AC adaptor which is plugged into a power outlet.

There is an unopened box containing a single orange marble which was purchased from an online store which only sells marbles that represent emotions.

Idea seven: a board game about consciousness.



Broken comeback, child return. Wondering about age. The devil child is capable from birth, a hideous miracle. The child prodigy is more believable than the devil child, but Anita was far past that age. Then there were the innumerable teenage legends. All great mathematicians, scientists, warriors made their mark on the world in their teens. Anita was at the Prussian prince mark, the age of medieval leaders. Also the average life span during that time.

YouTube videos of red hot nickel balls being dropped on various surfaces. Ballistics gel firing tests with exotic ammunition. Top ten videos. Top fifteen life hacks for productivity. A channel with a bunch of pixel drawings of dogs paired with chip tunes. The dogs are sad, longing, reassuring, stupid, silly. A green dog stands in a white field. Snow is falling.

Cold outside
cold outside
holding on
to
something
I've been
meaning to
tell you
but haven't
had the
courage
to
but
after
winter
comes
spring
or

so they
say
perhaps
it's the
bear
again
another
mistake
and
senseless
trouble
but
never mind
that
I'll still
act
perhaps
still
fail
perhaps
still
want
perhaps
still
have
something
to
tell
you

The music plays out as snow collects on the dog's back. Another image of a dog face shifts and dissolves across the screen:

SOMEDAY ALL OUR HEARTS WILL BREAK AND I'LL WAKE UP TO
FIND US BOTH SITTING THERE QUITE FRIENDLY AND ALONE AND I'LL ASK
IF YOU WANT TO GET ICECREAM AND WE WILL HAVE A GREAT TIME BUT IT
MIGHT ALL BE A DREAM AND THE DEADLY BEAR THAT STALKS IN THE
DARKNESS MIGHT HUNT ME DOWN AND THAT WILL BE THE END OF ME

dogofsky.mov:

I see the bear.
It stalks me.
It haunts me.
It wants to kill me.

Storms happen
in hearts
like weather
doesn't.

Patience can be
such a curse
when it's the virtue
of the restless.

Victory is
still very
far
away.

It is not often
realized that both
the moon and sun
always feel sad.

One of the stars in
the sky loves
you but will never
be able to tell you.

Anita signed on to an adult chat room.

Private conversation

ifeasr:
sweet jesus 'obviously im halucinating... but in this case, i dont want it to stop um... ok...
so, youre perfect...
swanyskinned:
thank you
ifeasr:
i just read your about me, and almost fell then scrolled back up, and lost my breath
swanyskinned:
i didnt think anyone would ever read it, but i'm so glad you did
ifeasr:
dear god ive never seen anything quite so beautiful as everything i have witnessed in your
room do you write lyrics or poetry?
swanyskinned:
sometimes, i've got some things lying around. i havent been writing much lately, but i'd
write you something if you want
ifeasr:
music or poetry or prose? um... i think id die omg where did you come frm???
swanyskinned:
poery and prose mostly, i like to play music, but not really sing, so i dont end up writing
lyrics often where?
ifeasr:
im going to cry... i dont know why... youre just overwhelming
swanyskinned:
the night sky, baby, moonstruck, i fell
ifeasr:
the dimples on the small of your back need to be immortalized in sculpture
swanyskinned:
maybe some garden, where the fruit sweats in the morning, sweet pain of ripeness,
ifeasr:
im actually in love with you i actually just fell in love

swanyskinned:
follow me quickly before the power goes out, i'll be coming back and hoping to see you
ifeasr:
i actually have a garden... i recently started growing stuff... i have roses, plumeria, lillies,
figs, and stuff that i literally want nothing more than to pick all the blooms and cover you
in them
swanyskinned:
i'll be your north star, bite me, and hold on to me. my grandmother has a fig tree. we eat
them with cream and sugar i love figs
ifeasr:
i inherited my grandmas house... this fig tree is like one hundred years old... ive been
eating them with cream and sugar since i was two my grandma garden... im learning
swanyskinned:
wow, that's beautiful. a beautiful coincidence
ifeasr:
i am totally at a total loss for words and comprehension of what i am seeing and reading
yes! and my mom is a poet. and author. haha!
swanyskinned:
i'm feeling very happy i can show you my body like this
ifeasr:
not as happy as me! you know you are angelic and completely extraordinary, right?
swanyskinned:
that's not usually how id describe myself, but i'm flattered
ifeasr:
you are literally a living sculpture... erotic, sensual, perfect
ifeasr:
how would you describe yourse f?
swanyskinned:
hmm oh, my camera died,lemme change the battery real quick
ifeasr:
i could write a book... not in beautiful prose like yours, but i could fill a few hundred
pages describing what makes you singular and exquisite
swanyskinned:
darling i'll tell you some things, stories maybe? or things i do?
ifeasr:
i cant imagine being able to leave your presence once in it... im like scared to blink, in
case you vanish as quickly as you appeared yes please
swanyskinned:
easy intros, like how much i enjoy baking bread
ifeasr:
omg what kind

swanskinnd:
haha, super simple bread, just flour, salt, yeast, and water, sometimes a little sugar i guess
it's not so much a rype of bread
ifeasr:
ive mastered banana and corn, and i would die to make them for you... wow like spiritual
baking... creation like meditating
swanskinnd:
it's super easy. you just have to wait for it to rise i really enjoy the wait
ifeasr:
wow
swanskinnd:
and it's so magical that such simple ingredients can make something so fantastic. nothing
beats a hot loaf of bread
ifeasr:
omg you dont understand
swanskinnd:
lets see, what else when i write, i use either a fountain pen or a rypewriter
ifeasr:
what you saying that to me at this moment means... the universe is absolutely magnificent
OMG i collect both
swanskinnd:
i have a 1950's underwood mechanical
swanskinnd:
green, i think from a military base in norfolk
ifeasr:
wow does it have a bell? for when you advance lines
swanskinnd:
yep! switches between black and red ink too. tab set, umm, what else
ifeasr:
amazing... where do you find ribbon?
swanskinnd:
i got some at a weird office stor that went out of buisness, but it wasnt on the right size
spool,
ifeasr:
the art of writing is like sacred i think... the amount of energy you impart to the words
you write with ink with your hand is tremendous and powerful
swanskinnd:
but it came with a pair the right size so i rewound it
ifeasr:
i collect quill pens, fountain pens, ink wells, and hand made paper like velum and
papyrus and stationary, and try to write something every day i think from now on, i will
write something to you

swanyskinned:
i think it's magical, i've heard writing on vellum is like nothing else

ifeasr:
i had to try to soak mine in an ink pad... disaster... yes! and books... old books... and i have a couple desks/tables i like to write at... different surfaces for different writing wow

swanyskinned:
it's not super fancy, but i love it, what kinds of surfaces??

ifeasr:
the writing implement has a big effect on how and what you write, i think... when i write with a staedler fine line marker, i write in all caps, bullet points, etc. fountain pens, i take more time, use cursive, more vocabulary, you know? um

swanyskinned:
oh yes, and with the typewriter everything is all rhythmic when i write with my fountain pen i feel like i can think more clearly.

ifeasr:
i have a writing desk that was my swedish grandparents from sweden when they immigrated... its birdseye maple, very scandinavian in its design... its so simple and elegant... i put an old leather mat from a bank in connecticut that was built in the 20s. its deep brown suede, with ancient ink stains on it... its great for fountain pens... so that desk is for like fancy writing

swanyskinned:
may i save that little paragraph? i think that's beautiful do you like leather?

ifeasr:
then theres a modern minimal simple white laquer desk with a white imac in the corner and a white lucite lamp... i sit there when im working on design stuff and use like technical pens, haha! wow my mom is like that

swanyskinned:
design stuff??? what do you design??

ifeasr:
shes an author and stuff, i mean, she writes for a living... but she has never gone a day or anywhere without an ink pen and a paper bound journal. she literally thinks on paper... i love leather

ifeasr:
and fur actually! haha! i like the simpliciry and elegance of good things, old things, timeless things, elegant things. are you serious?

swanyskinned:
umm, also, how do you feel about watches?

ifeasr:
i have my dads danish saddleback from when he was in gradeschool in the 60s uh oh you know me already watches are a passion of mine for a couple reasons...

swanyskinned:

i swear i don't know you, but perhaps we are alternate universes or something perhaps i know you without knowing you what about watches?

ifeasr:

oh... and i design a few related but different kinds of things... including restaurant and nightclub concepts, brand identities, interiors and concepts for product lines, but related to music and fashion... i don't really do any of that anymore, honestly... i decided to go back to school and get a phd in psychology. i used to be a record label exec when i was too young, and then did a bunch of other stuff during my time in nyc.

swanyskinned:

oh my god, you're amazing

ifeasr:

um... i know that our souls walk together on the eternal plane.

swanyskinned:

that's quite a list of fantastic things! i can't say i've done anything close to that, but xxx

ifeasr:

no, truly, i'm not! i am extremely blessed though, to have had the tremendous opportunities i've had, and the drive to take them as far as i could... but i spent 10 years in complete misery. isolation, chasing things and doing things i shouldn't have been. i was also blessed by the universe because it let me learn a lot of valuable lessons all at once in a relatively short time, and now i have a new understanding and appreciation for how everything works and i know what i want and who i am, and that's important! wow what's your favorite xxx

ifeasr:

ok... this is an honest and factual statement... i have never in my life seen any figure, male or female with the unbelievable, astonishing proportions, curves and shapes of your body

swanyskinned:

i don't know what to say, i guess i'm just glad i can show it to you

ifeasr:

you are by far the most striking, insanely beautiful, gorgeous creature alive... and the truly incredible thing is that, you are even more beautiful inside... your spirit, and your heart are glowing

swanyskinned:

oh, one sec, bat died again

ifeasr:

i don't know what to say either! except that you're a blessing, and a gift of mind and body. you move like a majestic big cat like a lion or leopard

swanyskinned:

my dear, it seems my batteries have all run out

ifeasr:

i'm sorry! it's late on the east coast too

swanyskinned:
it's okay, i don't have class tomorrow haha
ifeasr:
i would love to read anything youd like to send me, and id love to write you too... can i
give you my email maybe/?
swanyskinned:
yes, please give me your email!
ifeasr:
i followed you, obviously as well
ifeasr:
haha! my name is xxx, because my mom couldnt help herself... but you are welcome to
call me anything... darling, love, honey, babe, um... xxx, dear, etc, all work great. haha!
swanyskinned:
xxx for short? i'll try out all those words, but for now i'll call you darling, darling <3

III

They built the City of Flames first from cardboard in 1975. The grand architects, Phillip Roebuck and Sally Cruikshank, conceived it as the set for a black-and-white eight millimeter feature length film, Quasi's Cabaret. The stomping ground of a notorious pilot. He flew to rescue the love of his life, but she was always out of his reach. A civil war and fire destroyed most of the original architecture. Great elevators and refrigerator shaped buildings, some actually constructed from actual Westinghouses, followed. Later technological advancements would allow for flying cars, floating houses. The great Quackadero marked the city's zenith before it imploded to the doughnut effect.

Quasi sits up in bed as his animated furnitures waddle in place. A personal fountain spits in the background. He chuckles and exclaims, "I love to look at pictures of people working!" as he peers in on a cake assembly line from the television mounted in his four-poster bed.

"Quasi!" enters Anita.

"Oh! Hello, Anita."

"Why aren't you ready? You know we're going to the Quackadero today. Rollo's already in the car."

"That no good set of training wheels!"

"Aw shut up!" Anita fires two small daggers at Quasi from each of her pupils. "And get a move on. We'll be waiting for you." She leaves, gets in her round red hover car, and exclaims to Rollo, "Honestly, Rollo, I really will be glad to see the last of him."

Quasi hops out of bed and rides his rocking dinosaur to the door. His house tells him goodbye. They fly over the neighborhood and City of Flames to the Quackadero.

Crowds of people are marching in. Two local women drinking chilled coffee exclaim the number of weirdos out that day, noting also Anita, Quasi, and Rollo. A couple meet each other at the entrance and kiss. Animated cars putt around a track. Suns and faces gleam in gaudy colors.

"Welcome to Your Shining Moment!" A bug-eyed bipedal robot rattles off in his near-accurate chirp of language. "The puzzling game where we probe your past and let you relive one of the shining moments in your life. Today's lucky participant is Winky

Orlando. All ready, Mr. Orlando?” A giant screen flashes illustrations of the speech, punctuated with an image of Winky’s face. Winky nods, and the robot pulls a lever.

“Winky, remember that time at the national vegetable convention when you were given the wrong key by mistake?” A the screen depicts Winky receiving his key from a smiling desk clerk, unlocking a room door, and entering. “And remember your surprise when you found a lovely duckette on the bed?” A nude shrills some small squeaks and covers her exposed breasts. “And did you run out? Why no, you... wrrrrrr.....” The robot pushes the lever back to its original position. The screen goes black. “Sorry, Mr. Orlando, your time is up.”

“That never happened to me!” cries Mr. Orlando.

Anita and crew make their way to the Hall of Time Mirrors, See Yourself at Every Age! Mirrored revolving pathways and orbital rooms showcase a number of magical mirrors. Quasi examines his skeleton in one hundred years, and Anita and Rollo their pudgy and flat-tired selves in old age. A childhood Anita in pigtails stands next to a woman wearing leather and fur, and reconstituted animals hover on the other side of the mirror. A cow, pig, and chicken quiver before their ominous future depictions as hamburgers, hotdogs, and drumsticks. Rollo rolls back time to reveal a pre-Flame-Ciry landscape.

Over at Think O Blink, Paints Pictures of your Thoughts, Quasi insists Rollo goes first. A painting of Rollo and Anita riding in an Anita car from an Anita house with Anita flowers. Anita’s mind paints her wearing a duck-themed outfit with a duck-themed bra and dancing on a stage in front of a very suave band. “Now you go, Quas.” Quasi’s thoughts show a giant Quasi gobbling up Anita and Rollo.

Trippy dream sequence. They eat at Porky’s Diner.

9 Lives 2 Live. A man with a circular head yanks Quasi off the street with a shepherd’s hook. “Young man, I see by your face you must have spent numerous lifetimes on this grand planet, merrily traveling from one incarnation to another. And, I bet you would leap at an opportunity to get one good look at yourself in those other lives. And who wouldn’t? Well, young man, I’m offering you that golden chance. Yes, on this very stage, I will summon for your amusement, and delight, no less than five, yes, I said five, of your former incarnations. Ah, who could pass up such a chance, and only for one silver ticket. What do you say to that, my good fellow?”

“Oh, of course he’ll do it!” Said Anita, forking over a ticket.

“Fine! Fine! Now just step this way and make yourselves comfortable while I transgress with the spirits and prepare them for their stage debut. Now don’t expect any conversations; they’re timid, you know. But they will call your name, I do guarantee that.”
“What did you say your name was?”

“Quasi!” smacked his forehead in frustration.

“Ah, yes! Quasi! Here’ goes, my boy.”

Three underwhelming creatures prance across the stage and say “hello, Quasi.”
The last jumps out and chases the three friends out of the theatre.

Their last stop is the Time Holes exhibit, hitchhike on a streamer tail. Many cyber folks and two-headed gorillas people the building. A man in a business suit fell into an exhibit and became part of a rowing team. Anita and Rollo conspire to lure Quasi to the prehistoric Time Hole with a chocolate cake and push him in.



A successful strike enabled the union of sanitary workers to seize political control over all of Flame City in the nineties. Since then, all class separations based on employment have been completely reversed. Doctors and lawyers are a dime-a-dozen, the lowest of the low trying to scrap up work wherever they can find it. Mechanics and farmers are among the highest echelon.

The legendary aviator made his way as a repair man. It was said he could fix anything using only a hammer; a hover car, broken window, computer, opto-axion, lon drivers, gyroscopes, snapped hazard aversion cables. It seemed he had the ability to transform any effort he exerted into the appropriate method without changing the amount of effort needed.

All the taxis are limousines. A great hotel stands as the tallest building. Its lavish walls are adorned with great blue glass panels and screens. Every floor is two stories tall. A glass spire tops the tower.

A metal box, painted blue, occupies an ally near the restaurant everyone dreams about. A pale green light is in conversation on an opposite wall.



One night, Anita and friends are having a drink on their porch. One jokes to her, “you think those are your sexy pants, huh?” They were ripped up grey jeans that she did in fact think were sexy, but for the sake of humor, argued. A unanimous desire for a katana was achieved. Later, they went out for an adventure. First stop: river. It was just getting dark. They made a fire and chilled for a while. Second stop: the bank.

It was an abandoned bank. Or rather, it was a bank emptied for renovation. Work happened during the day, and at night the bank was completely empty except for the work lights. The group shimmied up a trash shoot while Anita watched out for witnesses. When everyone was safely up the shoot, she followed, but her shoe slipped on a wet spot. Things happen quickly. Sliding down one story of shoot, one story of fall below. Instantaneously, Anita processed the safest way to land and reversed direction. Instantaneously. There was no turning. The one-eighty change in direction did not follow Euler’s metaphor. It was not right or left, but only reversed. Anita absorbed the impact with her legs and rolled. After checking herself for injuries, she found scratches on her stomach and back with perfectly horizontal lines connecting them across both sides.

They climbed to the top and look out over the city.

The descended into the basement. One of Anita’s friend’s hijacked a forklift and stalled it out stuck.

Anita found the vault. Its heavy door was propped open and the intricate silver and gold plated mechanical workings were visible from the back. Inside was mostly emptied, but on a shelf was a sword and a piece of inscribed vellum. The sword was a long, two-handed, leaf-shaped blade forged from two nineteen-forties military jeep suspension springs. There was no cross guard, and the handle was a clasped two pieces of some rust colored exotic hardwood. Inscribed on the blade was the phrase “boy’s night out” on one side. The vellum read:

Denying hearts or wanting hearts enforced,
Our actions break away from hope’s intent.
We wake with dreams endured upon our eyes,
But shuck them quickly by our will to rise.
Wherefrom do wants upwell into my mind?
I know a summer beat cannot be made to
Beat at rates conducive to a want of something
Easy to obtain, nor a thing to bear in pride.

An ethyl dose in southern liver sparks a
Wilder fall into the night, but then
Suspended sanity does not invite our wants
Into our reason, yet defers the mind until a dream,
To reason, wanting only lends itself to reason want.



They say eagles always fly in pairs. So if you see someone with only one eagle
tattoo, don't trust them.



IV

The rain slowed to near mist. Late night. Snakes got the feeling that he was inside a cloud. As the drops descended, they imparted their minuscule energies and pressures to the ground atmosphere, compounding a thick miasma of increasing viscosity. A flash of lightning in the distance coincided with a supersaturation compression and the aqueous motes absolute cessation of movement. The discharge of electricity unlocked the air, and the rain resumed its falling. 'That must be it,' thought Snakes, and started the truck.

Those rugged tires ripped through soft, flat soil, soaked up, muddy. Rolling over pocked doodad shrubs and snake holes, bumping and bobbing cavortiously. Sticky red silt, soil rich in iron. Bumble rabbits live here for a few months a year, moving in and soon regretting their decision. A speck comes into view in the distance as the truck gently downs the half-foot dip that marks entrance into the sacred territory. It was the site of an ancient meteor strike, filled in by infinite rain and depositing. It was scarcely known that many social groups buried their dead machines there, a graveyard for ferrous and conductive waste, so much so that compasses would occasionally malfunction. Snakes near readied himself to draw, but recognized the figure as in fact Poison waving his arm with a large rubber bag at his side. Honked the truck horn trumpeting, pulled up, and he hopped in, upset.

"It was off. Not when it was s'posed to be." Snakes complained of the lightning not occurring when it scheduled.

"Intentionally. They didn't want unexpected visitors on the return spark. It was just a one time drop in a national park, but they're cautious fuckers. Makes sense why 'ough, we ought to be more fucking cautious. They already had some of our numbers » not the ones we bought off Sam; those were fresh, but some of our watches. Not as detailed as ours, but still useable. There's a possum in our house, Snakes. Fuckin' possum." It was a rare occurrence that an amateur fulminographer would pop up in such an unused station, but still possible. At least that might mean that somewhere down the line their spot would become more popular.

“Fuck. Were they are house numbers? Did they have many of ours? And they weren’t reflections?” Snakes turned the wipers up a notch.

“No, no. No house numbers. Not reflections. Not many. They still gave me a pretty good deal.” Poison opened up the bag to reveal an assortment of golden coins in various and obscure currencies. Yes, gold. Fulminographers and time travelers deal in gold because it’s one of the few currencies that has value across time, space, and social structures. They store it and any other metallic objects in thick rubber bags as to not throw off the delicate constellation of lightning strikes they so utterly depend on.

“We knew this might happen eventually. Did they let on who? Well known or leftovers from The Projector?” Snakes noticed his driving agitated when a clank truck suspension made a noisy contact on a burrow sink, and he slowed up a bit, tried to relax and process options for this possum.

“No hints. Said they don’t get involved in turf wars. No hints at all. As polite as they could be, given that, but I dunno » we can go about fixing this one of a few ways.” But knowing Poison, the selection would likely be violent. “Try and make a deal. Or chase ‘em out. They might not know they’re trespassing if they’re new. I know which ones they’ve seen » made note of it, got that much information at least.” Scrawled out on a eight-by-eleven in pencil, a set of strike numbers. “Triangulate their possible hole-up based on what angles they got wrong. I’m betting they’re only using one shot from how dirty these sketches are. Knock on their door and ask nice. Or not.”

Snakes was quiet. Poison was assuming the interloper was small time, and he was probably correct, but there was as of yet no way to tell. Snakes, unlike Poison, had a acute fear of the unknown. This new didn’t sit well, he wouldn’t be sleeping much until this got sorted out. They had enough cash for now, but it never lasts. That deal felt heavy returning at the moment, but was nowhere near the mark they anticipated making with the fancy new 3d spectroscopic camera gear they recently bought off Sam.

“Howard gave me back the Whitney.” Poison had an enthusiasm for adventure that too far exceeded his aversion to danger.

“We should be careful on this. We don’t know what we’re up against.”

“But we should also deal with this now, before whoever is stealing our shit realizes. » » We’ll talk to Sam. He’ll know what to do, maybe.”

Wet driveway in the dark. Poison and Snakes bought a shirty little house with one of their first hauls to serve as a base camp. It’s not too far from town, but far enough

to have a clear view of some of the more productive fields for stationary recording. Fulminographers don't often work out of their home » don't want thieves to direction find your recording spot by the errors in your numbers. Snakes and Poison didn't record from home often » usually only when there isn't enough lightning to warrant a field recording » and they often keep their house numbers for personal use, or only sell to trusted buyers.

It's a live-work space. Their near-constant presence also helps keep their expensive recording equipment protected. It's unlikely that another fulminographer would know where to find them, or want to » the real fear is that a petty burglar would stumble onto a stash of cameras and computers that haven't been invented yet. Triple lock the doors. Bullet proof glass in all the windows. The unassuming walls were reenforced with barred concrete down to the basement. A steel-ceramic-steel sandwich was hidden under the shingles to prevent a thermite drop. What looked like a normal rancher was in fact a formidable bunker.

Fridge, well stocked. Poison grabs a cheap cheap beer and tosses another to Snakes. Cigarettes, cheap cheap, but not the cheapest, cigarettes. Sit, drink, smoke, examine the loot. All real gold, of course. There was very little doubt that it would be, but it's still fun to nibble. Lightning cowboys. Thunder riders.

"Tomorrow morning, we'll go to see Sam." Poison reclined.



Snakes was awake by nine AM. He started scanning the web for any evidence of property purchased or rental adds deleted around the time their numbers were stolen. Minimal results. No detectable vans or appropriate trucks, no evidence of a beginner slip up.

Poison was up by noon. They ate some cereal, trucked out. The Earth, Texas summer noon. Dusty, wire grass choked, the rain was dispelled by the sun, the rain existed only as a dream. Blistering vultures and mosquitos, coyotes wailing at night. The occasional hog bear would moose across the road, and locals were careful not to hit them for not to total their vehicles. White churches stained mustard. Trees beat near to death.

The fields are fallow. A solitary wheelchair of unknown origin stands monolithically in one of their centers. Aspirated noises from the irrigational ditches

indicate an invisible ecosystem, life between the fields, under the fields. My grandmother would here dig up tilled Native American artifacts in her youth.

A one street town. The most exciting thing to happen in half a century there was the establishment of a soft-serve ice-cream parlor » it had gone out of business. Sam's place was a mechanic's shop. A sign proclaimed specializations in body work and transmission, but those in the know knew Sam specialized in far more valuable fields of work. Sam was a retired fulminographer, made a respectable fortune recording in New Mexico and got out before business got too hot. The mechanic thing was just a hobby. He had taken a liking Snakes and Poison, helped them get started on the right track when they found their way into the business by mistake, would always be their go-to sage. Also their go-to source for used equipment. A step up to the door, dingy shop, peeling paint, and a ring on a doorbell of questionable functionality.

A small rustling of the window blinds, nearly undetectable, preceded the door's opening. Sam. "Ess and Pea, what are ya ding-dongs up to now?" A warm, agreeable old man with a practical sense of cautiousness that Snakes appreciated.

"I don't think it's that big of a deal, but could we step inside to talk about it?" Poison led.

"Mm'm." Nasal agreement, they stepped into the air conditioned office. There was an impossible lack of visible paperwork to clutter the desk space, and the shelves were decorated excessively with miraculously preserved antiques, vintage curiosities, and unusual military trinkets from various time periods and countries. The room smelled sweetly of caramelized pipe tobacco. A pristine victrola chanted the last few bars of some Jonny Maddox ragtime rendition. It was a decent time to hide in, a comfortable space between industrial advancements in creature comforts and an onslaught of government regulations and dissolvements of privacy. Lightning hopping would never become public knowledge, at least not in the accessible future, but it would become increasingly hard to perform in secret.

"So the gist of it is » someone's getting the same numbers as us. Not as good numbers, but it's just a matter of time 'till we run into problems." Poison divulged in nervous conciseness.

"Well, ya knew it might be a matter of time that someanother tapped this spot too. It's getting harder to find green spots, and it'll only get harder. But honestly I'd say

get out of Texas what ya can, sell to who ya trust, and move on. It ain't worth the trouble scrapping with our own kind, believe me. I've seen some nasty shit go down."

"Um, okay » I dunno. It was really damn hard to land a spot like this. That spot in Tennessee turned out to be all twenty minute duds."

"Ya'd be surprised what kind of havoc someone can bring with a twenty minute jump."

"But not twenty minutes when you're an hour from any kind of cell service, on un-landable terrain, and two hours from any civilization. No one buys it, not the Royals at least."

"The Royals aren't the only players. You'll break through that eventually as long as y'all play it safe. If ya really want to push this guy out, make contact first. Be friendly, try an' offer a deal. Ya got a viewpoint on him?"

"Just some dirty numbers."

"Dee eff 'em. Make your move smart, now. Don't get yerself killed."

"Thanks, Sam."

Some small talk about how Sam was doing, distracted. No stopping at the diner on the way home, not until this business got sorted out.



Back at the fortress, the duo got to work crunching the numbers on the strike errors. Sixteen matches over two months. Not too many, could be a hobbyist, but maybe not. One or two could be ignored, but not in the double digits. The projected times were off by a few minutes on some, and an hour or more on others. Arctangent, cosine. Compare to their more accurate readings. Snakes and Poison were pretty sure theirs were more accurate. They normalized vectors and averaged tangents. The intersection cluster implied a quarter mile search radius. Not too bad. Maps indicated no residencies at the location, just some offbeat farm road. They'd check for a permanent setup locally before trying a spark back in time to intercept. Poison cleaned and readied the Whitney.

The Whitney Wolverine T9 was an Olympic Arms remake of a nineteen-fifties twenty two millimeter pistol with a beautifully curvy profile. Chambered for nine millimeter type B special unhaltable chrono-fragmentary mercury-caesium rounds, it was one of the few accessible pistols able to bypass a synchro-phasing skipper. The frame and

receiver were cast titanium-50, an extraordinary gift from Sam to the kids. Intuitive to aim, decently reliable, pretty accurate at medium range, absolutely necessary in the anticipation of a time traveler skirmish.

Augmenting their arsenal were two handy future gadgets no self-respecting sparker would leave home without: a skipper chest plate, and a Snapback. The skipper chest plate, as the name might imply, was an bullet-proof vest composed of synchrophasing metamaterial with a potentiographic controller. The controller was capable of detecting atmospheric pressure changes in the immediate future. When the wave signature of an incoming bullet was detected, the armor would yank the wearer temporarily into imaginary time-space, thus avoiding the bullet. Theoretically. The Snapback was essentially a very powerful capacitor with a composite imaginary-real charge with a tuned discharge electrode. When activated, it's singular use before needing to be recharged would hurl the wielder back in time two seconds, just enough to fix a mistake. Its two modes allowed for reactive twitch triggering and a failsafe dead-mans switch. But each weapon or gadget a time traveler might use is countered by another; there was no perfect solution to self defense and preservation.

“So how do you figure we should go about this?” Snakes asked.

“We drive to the spot and see what we find.”

“We can bring a zoom-metals lens. If there's anything there, we can drive by and record, then examine the vid out of sight. Could be underground, too.”

“Yeah, okay. One quick peek, then we'll work from there. If there's cover, we can do a stakeout. Otherwise we'll have to rewind.”

“What if they're more than we can deal with? like big shots with tanks and shit.”

“Then we run away and find a new spot. Like Sam said, not worth the risk.”

Snakes sighed. Poison slid the Whitney upper into the titanium lower receiver and snapped a full magazine into place. Snakes readied their smallest camera with a short-range zoom lens. The two locked up and saddled the truck.

Not far from their location, just down some underused farm roads. As they neared the convergence point, the target became obvious. A lone single-wide trailer sat beached conspicuously some twenty yards from the roadside. Snakes switched on the camera and followed the structure as they passed it. No car. No outward signs of people. The windows were obscured with curtains. It was, at least, connected to the power line

that stretched down the road, but this was the only indicator that the thing had not simply fallen off the back of a Mack.

“Keep going, don’t slow down. We’ll look inside on the filters back home. We don’t know that it’s empty.”

They drove on, found an alternate route up to a main road, and made their way back home.

Downloaded video. No cracks in the curtains to zoom in on » intentionally opaque. Trailer showed no outside damage, must be brand new or fake. Switching to magnetic image revealed electro-metal signatures associated with a fridge, a few incandescent bulbs, a netbook, a microwave, an air conditioner, and a camera in standby. Thermo showed almost nothing, the walls were likely insulated with an infra-diffuse metamaterial. Extremely likely to be a recording den. Unsure if occupied.

“Alarmingly conspicuous. Surprised it hasn’t been reported as a meth lab or something,” concluded Snakes. “So, can’t tell if anyone’s inside; do we watch, or knock on the door?”

“Fuck, I dunno.”

“Lets go back, wait a bit, then knock. You take the skipper and Snapback, I’ll wait in the car where it’s safe.”

“Hah, okay? Snakes, my dude, you’re scaring me now.”

“Okay, I’ll pull up to the side and cover you as you run away after knocking. Honestly, at this point we just need to make contact.”

“Alright, lets do it » before sunset.”



Long shadows. Truck pulled up, sun at their back. No sign of recent arrivals. Shut off the engine. They waited, hoping something would happen unprovoked. Silence. Summer evening, full of foreboding.

“Here’ goes.” Poison shut the shotgun door, door towards the trailer, shut it normally, not quietly, not carefully, just casually. A mistake? Unlikely. Not strategic, but not necessarily an issue. Armor concealed under a sweatshirt, finger on the Snapback trigger. Poison preferred the twitch mode, trusted his reflexes. A great deal of research was conducted regarding the predictive abilities of fighter jet pilots which suggested a

human capacity for short-proximity pre-cognitive abilities in high-stress situations, but no legitimate conclusion was ever reached. Poison was at the door. Knocked. No response. Knocked again. Came back to the truck. “Sounds pretty dead in there.” A wait and a weight. A Poison rummaging behind the seat. “Do we still have that crowbar in here?”

A terrible gut feeling. “Yeah, should be back there. Break a window first. If you pry the door you won’t have a hand on the Snap.”

“Here it is. Okay.” Back out of the car. Crowbar in one hand, unconcealed Snap in the other. Slower approach this time » to the front window, to the right of the door. A pause.

Imaginary time: a great and terrible sound. Two seconds were entirely compressed, spaghettified. An extraordinary disruption in space-time and the Higgs field. Two seconds vanished from the local universe. A duplicate Poison appeared halfway between the trailer and the truck, running away from the trailer. A flash of red light, a tremor. The trailer disintegrated, the original Poison vanished. A burst of hot air and thermal radiation enveloped the cab. A greater force was exerted on the far side tires. Poison was running, panicked. Eyebrows singed off. The trailer was a fireball. Snakes ripped the engine, pumped into drive, and punched the injector. Poison was in before the vertically launched debris landed. Out of the dust and onto the road. A fortunate wind swept under the cloud granting a moment of visibility.

“Boobytrapped!”

A secondary cause for alarm: a black form barred ahead. Tertiary: another in the rear view. Military vehicles of some kind? The truck was again enveloped in dust.

“Take this.” Snakes transferred management of the Whitney to Poison. Chambered, safety off, readied for the invisible threat. Snakes let off the acceleration » slightly. Timing, chicken. Dueling with the immediate future, the unforeseeable. He turned into the wind, off-road. The form returned to view. Certainly a military transport of unknown origin. Agile, without mounted weapons, probably lightly armored. They followed off road. Maybe the truck could stay in front of them, if it could get around, but they couldn’t outrun. “Tires, get their tires!” Snakes ducked down as an tweeting chatter of something automatic whirred past and a popping crack destroyed the passenger-side mirror.

Poison took one second of aim, three rounds, one sunk in the sidewall, front left. The enemy veered off their sharper turn. The truck overcame the perpendicular

threshold, Snakes turned back towards the road. A crunching sound behind them: the assault vehicle flipped, rolled onto its side, landed upright in the wrong directions. They weren't professionals? But had the time to dig camouflaged sub-ramps. Out of non-mounted firing range » barely. But the flipped would be back on track, and the second would catch up.

“Call Sam. I know » it's an emergency. We can't go there, can't lead them to him, but we need help.” Snakes. Focus. Maximum speed.

Poison, phoning, “Sam, we ran into some shit. Found the snoop, was a trap. We need help quick, won't let them find you.”

Sam responded: “four minutes, you know where, number two oh eight. It'll be unlocked. Check in when safe.”

Course set. Jack Rabbit Self Storage. Little chance trying to lose the pursuers, going straight there. Poison watched the back. They cut through neighborhoods, took the hypotenuse. Four minutes. Ducking between lead hail. Avert the occasional bystander. Finally, Jack Rabbit. A tall steel fence surrounded the facilities. Snakes parked the truck diagonally between the brick gate posts. Pull the emergency break. Run to the two-hundreds. Rows of narrow buildings, rolling metal doors. Corrugated shipping crates at the other end of the lot. Two oh six. Two oh eight. Unlocked. Both lift the door. The sound of colliding vehicles » at least one of them made it there.

Sam's stash. Not much time to pick through. Behind a mask layer of junk, a plastic tarp covering rectangular things. Shed to reveal a number of black cases, quickly equip:

Poison:

A Lone Eagle, vector-four, stock attachment, Mueller APV “Freezer” scope
infinity jacketed shells.

Two more Snapbacks, charged.

Two time-space compression grenades.

Snakes:

1822 Chekov revolver with a tachyon-synched sight, nine caliber retro.

A phase-repeating Karbax shotgun, three-echo, twelve gauge.

A Snapback, charged.

A skipper chest plate and collar.

Poison, Eagle raised, glanced down the row of storage units. “We’ll make a break for the crates and climb out. We can’t stay here » don’t know what they’re packing. I’ll cover, you advance.” He ducked back in, screwed a Snapback into the Eagle’s grip mount and set it to dead-man. Snakes nodded, chambered a round in the Karbax. Poison returned his eye down the row. Snakes sprinted.

A face poked around the corner. Poison, ready, engaged the Freezer. Three seconds of aim time. A silenced pistol was visible just under his eye. Poison took the shot. A beam of solid lead extended from the Eagle’s firing pin to the wall behind the target’s head, and the bullet rechambered itself. One down. How many left to go? Time returned to flow. Maintain eyes on the corridor. They weren’t wearing phasing armor?

Snakes called the sign for clear and follow. Poison advanced backwards along the wall. Back in proximity. They rounded a corner. The crates were in view, but with many open corridors between to pass. Cover and advance, like they practiced with normal weapons.

A dim flash. Temporal grenade. They missed the launcher. Poison disappeared, rewound back to Sam’s locker. Snakes spun around, dazed. A bullpup-wielder in full phase armor. Snakes unleashed the Karbax in that general direction hoping some shots would land. The attacker phased out. The Karbax rewound. Snakes spun around, dazed. A bullpup-wielder in full phase armor. Snakes unleashed the Karbax in that general direction hoping some shots would land. The attacker phased out. The Karbax rewound. Snakes spun around, dazed. A bullpup-wielder in full phase armor. Snakes unleashed the Karbax in that general direction hoping some shots would land. This time a shot landed. Injured, dominate shoulder and forearm. Blood splattered on the building’s corner.

Poison glanced around the corner. The body was gone. He called out to snakes. His previous target glanced around the corner again. Freezer. Aim. Miss. The lead beam connected with the far wall, but missed the target. A pair of return shots, one completely off mark, the other avoided by Poison’s phase armor. Poison activated his Snapback. The target appeared at the corner again. Freezer. Aim. This beam landed. Downed again. For good measure, Poison hurled a time-compression grenade that way to prevent his pursuer’s reincarnation. A gust of hyper accelerated atmosphere whipped up dust devils and scattered the atomized blood. Snakes called cover. Poison made a run for it. They

neared the crates at the far side of the facility. There was an accessible latter on an exposed side. The fence would be easily cleared once they made it to the top.

Poison climbed. Just as he was overcoming the top wrung, a massive bolt of mercury and cesium bypassed his phase armor and tore a hole through Poison's chest. The force propelled him over the ladder and on top of the crate. Snakes scanned the scene. Snakes triggered his Snapback. Snakes saw in time a momentary glimpse of a fabric over the roofline of the storage buildings. He took aim with the Chekov and counted. Fired. The bullet traced backwards in time, struck the sniper through the eye. Rewind.

Rewound. Poison made it to the top of the crate, covered for Snakes. The sniper on the roof was down. Snakes ascended.

A confident thud resounded in their bones as the duo made contact with the solid soil on the safe side of the fence. They ran. Ducked into a shed in an alley way. Safe?

V

shorefront@theriver

No one wakes up early on an overcast day.
No one survives an overcast day.
Flotsam ebbs
An umber cyprus log bobs and postulates undulates a sense of life.
The marsh is asleep with flies.

c Kouhk

Interr'd a wasp forwhat waterborne goings, a sidewinding canoe, fisher fisher.
Creeping up in the canals bywaywise o' animals, shakers stick breakers. Winding sway
twoway coursed, think copperhead, think cottonmouth.
There's a snake what only lives here, only in blackwater.
Near gone, sheathed at farsides o' verisimilitude, never seen it, heard it never bites.
Heard it's the only friendly snake in existence.

shorefront@theriver

c Kouhk

Ill lead slew, it, through, snake is slain.

Gross mud and black water.
Quick rises
Like quick alive.

c Kouhk

Ford begone to game, and game begone to day for day.
Antax oft be beox dun oldel.
I shot a snake today. The rainbow snake.
The snake which never bites.
In my fear I thought of all snakes to bite, but then forgot.
Of the only time I have seen a rainbow snake,
Of the only time I have ever seen the rainbow snake,
I killed it.');