

A NOVELLA BY ASTER OLSEN

PERFORMANCE REVIEW



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Layout and design by Aster Olsen

www.asterolsen.com

For those of us who don't make it out of the vortex

MONDAY

Tim slips on his headset and becomes someone else. He settles his lanky limbs into the black and crimson gaming chair, his soon to be forgotten body positioned under two strategically arranged 14 inch box fans, and sweats through his cheap polyester clothes. The hulking CitTech gaming system that dominates the efficiency apartment whirs and blinks a pleased indication of connectivity to the headset. The overhead light is off, and the room is in gloom, enveloping Tim like thick thunder clouds pregnant with rain. He becomes just another drop. Scarlet light, cast inward from the bulky headset hood, stabs his tightly squeezed eyes as he pulls the bundle down until the light is mercifully blotted out by the built-in padded polyleather blindfold molding itself into place, sealing him in darkness. The steady patter of rain against roof ceases. The headphones extinguish the distant thump of the clothes dryer a floor below, perpetually in use, perpetually unbalanced, always following him around as he

walks through his wood rot apartment. Full-sims are the only way to blot that sound out. He tastes soft rubber as the bulbous sound absorber invades his mouth and presses his tongue flat, threatening to coax out a gag reflex as sensors join to taste buds, and he is ready. Nothing in a full-sim is real, but it's still tempting to scream.

He will stay in the artificial world as long as possible, hours blending together in swirls of stimulated brain waves, body twitching alone in his humid room, unheard thunder shaking the furniture. He will not think of tomorrow. He will not think of his past. He will not think of Tim. He will be content.

Tim's daily routine is simple, easily repeatable, and unvaried: drive to work, drive home, take two red pills (three times a day, as instructed, every eight hours) from the container next to the syringes he can't remember acquiring (I still remember, even if I can't tell him), purchase a standard therapy session (technically optional, but he knows there's a tier 4 lootbox drop at the end, plus it counts for a few points to his performance review), and finally, mercifully, play/perform until his body passes out.

He prefers the fantasy adventure full-sims. In the current one he is the lithe elf assassin Dra, slim and slightly muscled, and deadly with a blade. Dra is stealthy; he passes without a trace where he should not, a shadow that barely exists. Tim plays Dra to perfection, but for the habit, much to his embarrassment, of absentmindedly running his hands along Dra's skin. But the game master doesn't notice. No one tells him to stop.

Grok, the tall, muscular, tusked and somehow always shirtless de facto party leader of the sim group, teases him, a friendly wink of his green and gold flecked eyes and kind grin flashing across his scarred face, when Dra strokes it in front of him. But try as he might, Tim can't stop. Dra is slippery velvet and soft silk, so different from the fur matting Tim's body, receding into foggy fragments of untrustworthy memory as it presses into the lone reclined and padded chair in the middle of the room, full of acrid sweat. He reasons that a full-sim set-up is easily worth more than half of his paycheck for that sensation alone, even with the strict rules for player-actors assigned to each character and the accompanying smell of blood and mud and shit permeating the illusory world. There's endless greenery and not a pixel of gray in the sky and the sun!— one time he burned out a character's retinas staring for so long, unable to tear his gaze away despite the pain. Tim would take that pain anytime over passively watching one of the approved reaction-streamers unhinge a snake-like mouth and make an exaggerated *woooow* in poorly disguised glee at the latest foreign bombing building collapse compilation between ad breaks for enhancements.

The usual pre-sync binaural tones and shifting of blue spirals thrust into his mind as the headset finishes clicking into place. Deep breaths, he remembers. His flat chest rises and falls in time to the metronome layered over the binaural audio, a somewhat pathetic spectacle repeated daily, but never witnessed, not by him.

Watch the shifting colors, see how pleasingly they pulsate, the headset continues. *Notice the new smells.*

Lemongrass and rosemary replace stale sweat-worn polyleather and he drifts deeper as reality fades away.

It's time to let go. Letting go feels so good. Letting go is all Tim wants. The spiral grows larger and flows forward, eager to absorb his mundane consciousness.

Now take your memories of today and put them into a bubble. He embraces the dissociation, soaking up the directions like a towel discarded into the ocean, shucking off Tim's shell, dropping away, dropping down, leaving himself behind.

*Blow out all your memories into the bubble. Keep blowing up the bubble. Till there is nothing left. It's so big. So full of your memories. And now we reach out and *pop*—forget. Snap and forget. Snap and Tim sleep.* There's a disconcerting moment of transition, when who he was drops away, when Tim ceases to exist, and there is simply nothing but the moment of potential for who he will be, there is only me, and the doubt creeps in, for only an infinitesimal moment, before he becomes Dra, before he has a purpose, before he has other cast members to say hello to, and fans to entertain. It happens too quickly for him to notice, like the triggers, but it does happen.

Breathe in, breathe out, let go. He falls forward and lets the headset consume him.

TUESDAY

VENDOR MUST PRODUCE AND MAINTAIN SOFTWARE AND HARDWARE FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH (DOH) CAPABLE OF CORRECTLY DISTINGUISHING THE TWO NATURAL AND IMMUTABLE SEXES AS DEFINED IN S.F.R. 553.865. FALSE POSITIVES ~~NEGATIVES~~ ARE ACCEPTABLE (NOT TO EXCEED TEN PERCENT) BUT— his eyes become unfocused as he edits the CitTech Assistant produced grant, his head heavy and slipping away from his moist palm—

He jerks awake, knocking his mouse onto the thin yellow-brown carpet, sending it skittering towards the damp, mildewy corner. Wiping a strand of saliva from his beard and glancing at the softly ticking wall clock, he's relieved to see he's only been out a few minutes. His gaze shifts to the broken camera dangling next to the clock. He stills his breath and listens for the Director's footsteps. That slight uneven gate of combat boots, the jostle of hunter green rifle sling slipping across polo shirt. But he only hears the drumming rain and the distant roar of thunder that booms like military jets returning victorious and proud from far off conflicts, the clicking of Sydney typing away at the decades old desktop on the other side of the gray padded half wall. No one has noticed his involuntary nap. For now. It's only a matter of time before a task assistant catches him and he's fired, evicted onto the flooded streets and--- *breathe*.

The Request for Proposals is ready to be sent out. A rereading isn't going to catch another minor mistake in the multimillion-dollar contract the assistant generated for him, and more importantly won't improve his KPIs.

Besides, the vendor is a foregone conclusion. The Southern Free Republic is a CitTech Tier 1 client, and rumor is the Governor takes hunting trips with the CEO when not on the front lines. The dissolution, the reconstitution, whatever you want to call it, it has been good for business. Every splintered faction needs access to databases and assistants.

Still, his job is to prepare and manage the RFPs in accordance with all existing statutes and SFR administrative code (to keep his head down, to complete whatever task the assistant assigns, and to maintain an active contract). The Director cares about mission statements. He rants about the existential catastrophe of failure whenever he emerges from his upstairs air-conditioned office to corner Tim. One way or another, we will stamp the enemy's infection out, he tells Tim, enunciating his Ts in a poppy manner. Tim sees the Director's jaw muscle bulge wider than his ears, and I see the over-muscled result of too many enhancements. The way he speaks makes Tim uncomfortable, jumpy. Speech should roll out of the mouth easily and gently. Still, it must be a vital mission, Tim supposes, and sometimes the Director even leaves his door open, ice-cold air biting into Tim, numbing him as he endures the rants about the demonic enemies with mind control capabilities and his daily metrics suffer from the delay.

The Director is the only person Tim knows who can afford to live in a neighborhood. Which is confusing to Tim, because why would anyone take a job here if they didn't need to. Maybe the Director got bored of early retirement, of playing golf on manicured turf grass that never browns, never

rots no matter how much it rains. Maybe he needed a hobby, a reminder of what is kept out by neighborhood gates, but found full-sims were too hard. Tim has difficulty picturing the Director as anything other than what he appears to be, which would not produce an entertaining sim.

Sydney says the Director had his start in the implementation of the clean zones, those swaths of bleached land that make up the core of the city, and that his eyes are that color because he programs his contacts to replace the perpetual storm-gray clouds with blue. She's heard he hunts panthers alongside the Governor with the rifle that's always slung over one of his hulking shoulders. The cryptid-hunter streamers Sydney watches know there's still a few left, hiding in the abandoned regions to the south, where the mangroves smother sunken boats and pythons nest in the attics of identical rows of flooded homes. But the cryptid-hunters also claim the skunk ape lives there, that he's building an outpost, that no one who goes looking for him returns. And sure, the Director's eyes are blue, but who can know what he sees. So Tim leans more toward the golf hobby hypothesis. Unlike Sydney, he has a firm grasp on reality, he knows. He keeps his fantasies separate from the real world.

Ultimately it doesn't matter. A job is a job and a boss is a boss and Tim knows his role. Why he has this job, why his life happens to him instead of him acting towards a goal, why he has abdicated all agency over his life, Tim does not contemplate at all.

Drops of sweat splash onto his keyboard as he closes the edited document. A supercomputer bathing in liquid nitrogen calculates that the danger and likelihood of heat

exhaustion for him and Sydney is relatively low, and the burden of cost high, and as usual makes a decision that their air conditioning does not need to be turned on today. The Governor mentions the hundreds of thousands of dollars saved by this efficiency in his speeches abroad. The SFR is a world leader in efficiency, apparently. There's a bonus given to whichever agency uses the least amount of air conditioning, a green energy award that the Director is hoping to use to fix the broken cameras, but is destined to be passed along to CitTech.

It's okay, Tim rationalizes. We all make sacrifices. You don't always get what you want. There is dignity in suffering. His armpits squish out pungent sweat as he retrieves the shitty beige Bluetooth mouse from the floor. The thick brown-black hair under his polo shirt sloppily embraces the cheap polyplastic light blue fibers as he wipes his bedraggled brow with an already soiled handkerchief. He can't lose this job, he reminds himself. This job means everything. It pays for a full-sim rig.

As long as he sends a congratulatory email to Rand Sooker at Revolution Technologies within the week he'll be okay for another month. Or Tom Whitehall at Open Portal, or Mark Gladcamp at Solutionz, or whichever company CitTech chooses to apply with this time. He makes a note to write the award email tomorrow, which will complete his final monthly SMART goal. This month has gone perfectly, which means he should exceed the point accumulation expectations by enough standard deviations, and if he's lucky, earn a three out of five for his monthly performance review. He wants more

than anything for one more month of satisfactory performance.

“Lost in a sim, Tim?”

Sydney is walking away from him, looking back, face pink and glistening, waiting for his response to a quavering question he must have missed, slightly trembling and glancing towards the Director’s office.

“What?”

“Are you—are you coming with me?” She’s looking at Tim with trepidation, he realizes. She must be leaving early in a futile attempt to beat the storm. He tenses to get up from his desk and then stops. He can’t leave early. Although, he could recode the timetracker. It’s months out of date and wasn’t exactly smart to begin with. A simple prompt injection—the thought of fudging the timetracker makes him balk. A liar? That isn’t him. He shakes his head.

Sydney trembles once, or perhaps it is a sharp shake of her head, then turns on her heel and walks out, not looking back. He watches her dissolve into the rain.



Large heavy drops pound the faded blue car as he drives home, decimating themselves against the cracked windshield. The rain is thick and stubborn. The car’s wipers struggle to clear a view of the city. Low slung buildings, sprawling asphalt, rings of roads and steep canals, all circling around the center clean zone. Water pools into the worn tire grooves of the road and low curb cuts. Elsewhere, canals fill and overflow into streets and turn the puddles into shallow

lakes that swallow all, but Tim has mapped his route out well. There are distant flashes on the horizon, and the occasional booming explosion, a thunderous roar swallowed by the hard splatter of heavy drops against the dented metal roof of the car. He isn't sure if this storm will be strong enough to end up with a name. Probably not— they just updated the requirements. A gust of wind nearly sends the car into a ditch about to overtop and burst, but Tim counter-steers, feathering the worn brakes to avoid a skid. The front right wheel thumps over a skittering isopod—flattened fist sized sharp chiton—but the tire holds. Thousands more roil in the canals and scurry up the steep pipeclay banks, swarm and pincer and tear at anything organic, anything that looks alive, and Tim can see them in the water below him, slick and sharp and eager, and the tires reluctantly, protestingly, grab ahold of the saturated earth, and then he's back on the pavement, under control, letting out a sigh of relief.

Tim decides, again, that he hates his commute. The white four story DOH building, a fortress of storm shutters and eight-foot-thick reinforced concrete surrounding generators and deep-well injection pumps, used to be a reliable thirty minutes from his apartment before the freeway collapse a year ago. That storm hadn't gotten a name either. Just hundreds of bright hot flashes, booms and shudders of thunder, and the next morning the sun ascended over destruction. The highway was no more, shredded into ribbons of asphalt and concrete like curled ribbon around an unwelcome gift of toppled neighborhoods and fresh street-swallowing sink holes. Now it takes him more than an hour of weaving around floodwater and gated neighborhoods

where razor vine grows up the walls and spreads into the streets, stopping for security checkpoints next to spiked fences and stagnant moats reflecting pale heat-lightening. And today, because of the storm, it takes even longer. That's time that he could be gaming instead wasted staring into cameras and glancing at slate gray turrets swiveling to follow his car until he's away from neighborhood property.

His car rattles and threatens to disintegrate as he lurches over the final pothole hidden by the spring tide and recent rain, throwing water up past his windows and into the rusted undercarriage. The stagnant brackish mist squeezes into his nose, faint rotting eggs and organic decay that coat the city like long expired perfume. It's the smell of home.

Tim discards his soaked clothes onto the square of linoleum masquerading as an entryway in the cramped second story apartment. It's a dump, but, as the leasing assistant reminds him, he's paying for the altitude.

"Location, location, location," she quickly replies whenever Tim complains about the mold and bugs and rusted security fencing and the constant generator hum and ever-present smell of gasoline-tinged swamp water. She's certainly a recombination of DNA modelling and facial databases, but it doesn't matter. She's gorgeous in an unobtainable way. Her voice, like her face, is so precisely calibrated, so perfectly designed. Not too breathy, and without excessive vocal fry. Tim, when he remembers, doesn't like how he sounds in comparison, even if he isn't sure why, his voice inadvertently vibrating deep within his chest as it's filtered with only a few low moans through the budget converter in his headset.

His forgotten umbrella and raincoat hang off the back of the door, dry and mocking. He makes a note to remember them for tomorrow, and places it over the note he made yesterday. Tim has a shit memory, but that's not surprising. If he could afford a treatment—no.

The old personality was never real.

No, he'd also remember why Erin left, what he must have done to drive her away. Why she had walked out the door and never returned.

He's running late for his full-sim, so he eats a microwave dinner in the shower. Erin used to hog the water, before, her laughter echoing off the tile as she pushed her body against his, against mine, keeping the warm wet just out of reach. Tim has the water to himself now, as much as he wants until the small 10-gallon tank runs out and he has to refill it. There was no more cooking broccoli stir-fry together while brushing against one another in a too small kitchen, no conversations about shifts in bird migration late into the night on their bright yellow velvet couch, no flesh sliding easily against other flesh, no one to reassure him that the world needs beauty, now more than ever—he scrubs himself dry with a bristly towel, covering himself in its forgotten faded stains, and slips into the headset.

Let go. Let go. Let go. Snap and forget.

> sync unsuccessful

That isn't supposed to happen. He concentrates, breathing carefully and with purpose, and visualizes the successful synchronization, the sim joining with his mind through the connection in his skull as easily as rain falling into a puddle.

> *sync unsuccessful*

He tries again and again. The connection is always seamless once he lets go. Instantaneous. Easy. He knows it is what is supposed to happen.

But he's messed up. He can't do it. A task so mundane, one that's always been an easy habit. It's embarrassing. It's pathetic.

Heart quickened and breath verging on ragged, he orders the headset to use his backup biometrics. He'll file a complaint to CitTech later. He needs his therapy. Surely there is a law they are violating because of this failure. He peels his eyes wide when prompted, lets the headset scan his retinas and facial contours and swab his cheek, then waits while queries are sent out to the scattered databases where various parts of him live. A final voice check — "when the sunlight strikes raindrops in the air—" and the spiral of his consciousness dissolves into pink mist and the full-sim assistant's familiar alto voice soundlessly enters him.

> *welcome back, Violet Sisu—*

<reset>



His body jerks awake sometime later. He tears the headset out and off, too fast, sending it clattering to the floor, retching and coughing, doubled over.

Tim touches his oily beard, checks his pulse, checks the rusted lock on his door, finds familiar patterns in the water-stained wallpaper. He's still in his apartment. He is okay. He is who he is supposed to be. Tim's been warned by CitTech

that identity thieves are still out there despite the database redundancies, lying in wait to exploit a user's triggers, to burrow into an unsuspecting mind and slice out whatever personality or memories are in demand on the black market. He resets the headset system.

Alert, more alert than he's been all day, he pulls the scratched hood back into place, tugging his beard painfully in the hurry. The sync is immediate, with no evidence of past mistakes.

> welcome back, tim, would you like to continue?

His fingers drum against his sweating, wooly thigh, a reassurance that he is here, that he is real, as he checks his profile and diagnostics meticulously, but there is no trace of Violet. His biometrics— his identity— must be stolen. DNA, after all, is so unreliable. And a new face is one treatment away.

He needs to forget, needs that always too brief escape, that blissful drop away, needs it right now. But he doesn't have time. His full-sim is ready and waiting. The show is about to start. He skips therapy and spends the next several hours somewhere else, somewhere without cracked walls sprouting mold the color of dying leaves, without ceaseless rain, without mud-stained bristly carpet that smells like cleaning products covering mildew, without a couch that doubles as a bed shoved into a corner to make room for the large gleaming CitTech system that casts a dim red glow into the hot wet night.

While the rest of the group prepare camp ahead of the rendezvous with the powerful mage that they hope to appease and bargain with, Grok pulls Dra aside, gently sets down his

battle ax, and asks him why he is so quiet today. The game master doesn't allow player-actors to be too out of character, so Grok must be quite worried to drop the façade of the bloodthirsty monster he's signed up to play this early in the show, when so many are watching. Frogs groan in the distance and the fire crackles and Dra manages to resist embracing Grok. He could kiss him, and that moment of failed restraint would undo them both, voiding contracts, levying fines, permanent bans and blacklists. He allows a shy smile to form. Dra is supposed to be manipulative and untrustworthy, and Tim hopes that the game master believes his performance when he pretends to maneuver the dull witted Grok into feeling sorry for him, distracting him when he should be on watch. Besides, several other groups of allied factions are camping closer to the perimeter. They'll raise the alarm first. And Grok's tired. He's been courting the other faction leaders, arranging tomorrow's rendezvous with the mage. He shouldn't also be worried about Dra.

Tim begins to whisper an explanation to Grok, his mouth an inch away from Grok's pierced ear, Grok's steady breath warming his neck, and he forgets all about the identity-sync trouble from earlier. He smiles and finds himself gripping Grok's thigh as they whisper, and he thinks about stripping off their armor and sprawling on the cool grass to gaze at the stars. And then there are screams. Steel clashes against steel, sharp-tipped arrows split open soft flesh with a thwick, and the smell of fresh blood and rising panic surrounds them. They are under attack, betrayed by their allies. Dra grabs daggers and leaps as an arrow embeds into the tree next to him. A heavily armored man rushes him,

long spear tip pointed towards Dra's heart, and though he wants to back away, wants to turn and run, he steps forward and to the side, knocks the spear tip away with a leather clad forearm and plunges his dagger into the gap of the spearman's armor between helm and breastplate. The man's severed artery feebly throws blood into Dra's mouth as he gasps and coughs for more oxygen and turns to see Grok's predicament.

Grok is holding off two attackers, each armed with sword and shield, but the stalemate won't last. He has a deep cut along his back from a glanced strike and an arrow through his calf, and his blood stains the soil under him as he feints and dodges and looks for an opening that won't expose him to a counterattack by the swordmen. He seems to dance under the ethereal starlight, expanding and contacting his body into the empty space between spears. Tim is overwhelmed by the beauty. Grok's leg buckles and a spear makes contact. He deflects it with a late swing of his axe but still the spear slices along his rib cage with sick silent ease. He screams, a small, panicked sound. The other spearman pulls his weapon back, the killing blow imminent.

Dra throws his blood-soaked knife into the exposed back knee joint of the spearman, staggering him, and Grok's ax swing splits metal and flesh and bone. The other swordsman glances towards Dra, an amateur mistake. Grok's upswing slides along her hip, the ax blade catching between plates of metal and embedding deep into her right abdomen. Grok twists the blade free, masking the evidence of his own wounds with her spurting blood.

Together, Dra and Grok and the rest of the group fight against the overwhelming odds. They work well together, their skills and practice superior to the players comprising the surprise attack, or perhaps the full-sim slows their enemies' movements just enough to make the scene more dramatic; to make them believe they have a chance. Hella and Brion die to the initial clouds of arrows. Then Lustracia finds a spear to the belly. But the four surviving members are a hurricane of sharp unconquerable violence and together they push the betrayers back. They are a storm of certain death, raining blood onto the muddy earth, leaving behind puddles of bodies even as they accumulate their own wounds. Liara, guarding Dra's right flank, yells to him that they only must hold out another minute before rescue, that she's made it through a random event like this before, and she grins and thrusts her spear through an exposed thigh with a wild laugh, her moonlit silver hair cascading across her armored shoulder, her movements graceful and measured, deceptively slow, never off balance. He's always admired that about her. She takes a step back, twists and her opponent's chest caves in as her spear finds another weak point, and she turns to him with a smirk, ready to tease his subpar performance in the fight. She opens her mouth and explodes, her viscera plastered onto his face and mangled armor, her flesh dripping from his cheek into his charred shoulder, and the mage is there, raising his white-gloved hands towards the rest of them.

"This isn't how this scenario is supposed to go," Olid cries out. His desperate arrows are tossed harmlessly away by

the deformed shimmering air spiraling around the mage's floating, unscathed form.

Dra's neck is warm. Warm from Grok's breath. Warm from Liara's still cooling flesh. Warm from his blood pouring from a wound he doesn't remember receiving.

"No one is coming to rescue us," Grok mumbles, dropping his ax, eyes closing with resignation.

The mage incants, and Grok meets Dra's gaze with an intense blaze as Dra's burnt hand finds Grok's, a last surge of defiance flaming bright before sputtering out. "We'll try again," he promises, moments before the end.

After they all die, Tim falls asleep to the steady swell of rain sheeting against his window, drowning the faint sounds of termites swarming through the foundation, decomposing the fragile walls.

WEDNESDAY

VENDOR MUST PROVIDE RECORDED EXIT INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED IN A PROFESSIONAL SETTING AND GRANT THE DEPARTMENT PERMISSION TO USE THE FOOTAGE IN PRESS RELEASES, PUBLIC WORKSHOPS, ADVERTISEMENTS, CAMPAIGNS, AND OTHER VENUES WHERE DEEMED APPROPRIATE. VENDOR WILL MAINTAIN A DETAILED DATABASE OF THERAPY SUCCESS. A DECLINE IN SUCCESS RATES WILL BE CAUSE FOR IMMEDIATE RENEGOTIATION OF THIS CONTRACT. FOR EXAMPLE ACCEPTABLE INTERVIEWS, CLICK H— Tim clicks save, sends the document to the Director. This week can't get any worse. He woke up exhausted, Grok's last words reverberating in his brain like distant thunder late at night. Then his car wouldn't start until he signed off on a doubling of the insurance, and new reroutes around the latest sinkholes made his commute thirty minutes longer. He can already feel himself fraying, pulled apart like the loose rug spread too thin over his apartment's floor, only to arrive at the office to find trembling Sydney was let go. So of course he is taking over managing the therapy grant, Director's orders. He's been feverishly working all day, avoiding the weirdness and failure of the previous day, refusing to think about how fucked he is if he can't resolve his stolen identity. And now he's fucked up even more and finished his work early. He shouldn't have sent the RFP yesterday. If he'd just held onto it for one more day he could pull it up now and fill thirty minutes of his timesheet easily.

The Director had cornered him again earlier, and his metrics were already shit because of that half hour conversation. Could the Director not put his thoughts about

the Governor's Fertility Index numbers in an email? Our soldiers are strong and handsome, our girls are young and fertile, and our degeneracy metrics are decreasing, he could say, and Tim could say yes, that's great, go team, you are my favorite boss, and then he could count reading and sending the email towards a KPI.

Grasping around for something easy to occupy his time, he pulls up the therapy exit interviews for Sydney's former grant. He can pass this off as work while he sits at his desk and zones out. Sydney had only talked about the grant once, when she'd, seemingly out of nowhere, asked him if he thought hypnosis was real.

"It can't make you do something you don't already want to do," he'd told her, because hypnosis, like the swamp ape, was not real.

"But how do you decide to know what you want to do?" she'd wondered, and he'd had no answer.

A bubbly voice pipes out of the crude headphones Tim's shoved into the ancient computer port over stock footage of scientists in pristine white lab coats.

"Here at CitTech Therapy Associates, our specialists are using the latest technology to treat not symptoms, but the whole person." A cartoon diagram of a brain wired into a computer glows grey blue then swirls into porcelain white on the screen as the narrator talks. "With our Advanced Genetochemistry Protocol, or AGP, fixing patients' mental deficiencies and disorders has never been easier." A beautiful woman in a white lab coat flashes straight white teeth outlined in scarlet lipstick as she effortlessly flicks a switch on a complex looking machine, which mixes yellowish

solutions from four vats of viscous liquids. His interest is piqued enough to wonder if she is real. Real enough, he supposes.

“Treatment is customized and specific, but the steps are simple. First, a proprietary mixture of our psychoviral-therapy is injected at the base of the customer’s skull. These clever biomachines migrate to preprogrammed areas of the brain, where they await instruction. A simple oral medication prevents the immune system from rejecting this revolutionary therapy. One of our highly trained psychomolecular biospecialists writes all instructions, which the biomachines translate into *the language of the mind*.” The phrase is not only said with emphasis, but also has an accompanying chime. Tim rolls his eyes, but he doesn’t know how the technology works either. He doesn’t need to know, so he doesn’t. He’s good at obeying. Doing what everyone else wants, fitting in, meeting expectations, earning the high score, the accolades. You should pay attention, Tim, I want to urge. You should understand their tools, understand what they cultivate, where the hidden labor lays. You should understand how to find their weak points, where the gloss loses its shimmer, exposes the writhing mess beneath the slick polished surface. Tim, what have you done—*<reset>*.

“Think of it like a control room with access to infinite knobs. We can turn any area of the brain up or down as needed with incredible specificity, or in the case of undesirable conditions, completely off.”

The recording resolves onto a handsome man, well-muscled, olive skin, and a slight beard shadow. His eyes are

glistening lakes, the dams of amber irises straining against inevitable collapse.

“I feel like a brand new man,” he says with a broad smile.

“Since introducing the most recent version of AGP,” the narrator continues smoothly, “CitTech Therapy Associates is proud to announce a one hundred percent success rate.” The music fades out along with the video, ending on the unremarkable CitTech logo. A logo that has been through so many rounds of redesign that it should be completely forgettable, if you didn’t see it everywhere, everyday.

Tim was expecting an actual exit interview, so he remains unsatisfied. He keeps clicking around, but every video is similar: a narrator, splashy diagrams, and a brief and uninformative polished clip.

Unacceptable. This must be why they fired Sydney and saddled him with overseeing yet another contract. Viewing the raw footage was something Sydney should have been doing before authorizing payment. Tim pecks out a request for the footage to the IT contractor, Mike, not that it will matter. His metrics are abysmal today. There’s surely a note about today in his file that the Director will bring up in his next review. Hopefully it will just be a pay reduction. Hopefully the Director will merely pretend to agonize over the decision, then say something about how the algorithm is never wrong, that he’s got to run a tight ship, put him on a PIP, and let Tim keep his job. And what about his identity credentials? What if his work credentials get hacked too and he’s held liable?

Tim stumbles but catches himself from falling. He looks around. He's outside, standing in the parking lot, soaked with warm rain. There is a two-foot-long crack in the pavement in front of him, and as the rain slides into the earth and steam releases towards the sky, it appears to undulate, like an isopod's gill. He stares at the crack for fifteen minutes while the soles of his feet burn from the radiating heat of the pavement. It's hard to see clearly through the evening steam rising towards him, but the crack looks larger than it did this morning.

Breathe. Let it go. Drop and forget.

Tim drives home, tears mixing with acrid sweat and the warm rain that blows in through the cracked windows. He doesn't bother avoiding the potholes. He aims at them and ignores the flapping thump emanating from the front left tire. *I still have control*, he thinks, because his denial is powerful, it always has been. It's why he made such a good candidate.

THURSDAY

Tim's request from Mike comes through in the form of a handwritten note tucked under his mouse. He's alone in the office. The plops of hidden drips and the buzz of an old halogen tube light about to pop are no company. He misses Sydney, even if they mostly talked about work. He doesn't know if she has family, or hobbies outside of cryptids, or if she'll be okay for a while without an income. Work and productivity should obviously be his focus, he knows, but he'd act differently for Sydney now, if he could. He'd start by asking her about the habit she has of glancing behind her over her shoulder when they talk. He'd assumed she was looking for an exit, a reason to put the gray cubicle wall between them again, but maybe they were both sipping at a watering hole, peering into the opaque surface for signs of isopods between careful sips of lukewarm water.

The real therapy footage is buried in a subfolder of a subfolder of a subfolder on an encrypted drive. *Don't involve me in this*, Mike's note says.

The first video is slightly grainy, a figure in a poorly lit room; CitTech must have used assistants to enhance the clips used for the glossy promotional videos. A man sits at a gunmetal table. The lighting casts jagged shadows. He's pale and gaunt and his lips slightly tremble every few seconds. An offscreen voice asks questions. It is the soothing voice of an older man, one well practiced in never being interrupted or questioned.

"Tell me about your earliest childhood memories," the voice says. The young man at the table scrunches his eyes,

distorting his features in frustration. “I don’t remember much of my childhood,” he finally replies. ‘It was normal. I liked to play with toy cars. My favorite one was bright blue. Or maybe pink? One time another kid stole it, and I cried. I picked up my second favorite car. This one had blonde hair and—” he sits there with his mouth open, confused. Tries to continue. “The car and I liked to go shopping for new outfit—”

“That’s all for now, Jim,” the voice cuts in. “You’re making excellent progress. We’re going to adjust you a bit. Let go.”

A middle-aged woman snaps on white latex gloves and reluctantly approaches Jim. She’s wearing a long sleeve shiny white, figure hugging jumpsuit, hair pulled into a severe bun. Her face is obscured by a protective shield, but even obscured Tim can register her disgust. Jim struggles halfheartedly as she forces a familiar looking headset over him. His restraints are thick and welded into the chair. The sound absorber stops most of a moan, and he slumps into the chair, deep red light dripping from the neckline of the headset. A string of drool slowly flows down onto his neck from his polyleather covered chin. Tim’s heart thumps and his mouth dries. The hairs along his back attempt to stand but are weighed down by sweat. His eyes dart around, but he’s alone, free from observation.

“Patient’s memory still shows signs of degeneracy, violating terms of deliverable and subjecting shareholders to liability,” the voice continues lazily. The woman shoves an IV into Jim’s left arm. Purples spread around his elbow and

down his forearm. She's blown out the vein. She tries again, then sighs in exasperation and switches to the right arm.

"He is being exceptionally difficult today," she says. "He desperately needs correction." The man talking doesn't take notice, just drones on in a monotone.

"Dosage increased to 95% of code four threshold, introducing Type III psychoviral-therapy for additional microtargeting, body-brain connection stable but will continue monitor—" *<let go>*.

Tim wakes up, groggy and soaked, to two CitTech security officers standing over him, the Director fuming behind them. He slowly wipes drool and sweat away as a low panic tries to break free, but it doesn't. It stays contained within him.

"Your contract is terminated," one of the officers says, cradling a baton. They drag Tim outside to his car and throw him onto pavement.

There is no car. There's a hole where the rusted sedan should be, a gaping maw in the earth with a pitch-black center that's taken a quarter of the parking lot into the aquifer.

Tim hugs himself. His thin raincoat is still draped over the chair the security guards pulled him from, but there's no going back there. He shivers and walks towards home.

He follows his usual route for a few minutes, but soon there is no sidewalk or shoulder, only the road and a canal, the road and a fence, untamed brambles of razor vine and black tea flood water blocking off entire streets. Drivers stare at him in fear, in anger, in contempt. After some time, he learns not to look back. He's still in the clean zone, squeezing

himself between a patch of overgrown razor vine and the crumbling curb of the street, when the glass bottle shatters against his neck and head.

“No camping here, faggot!” The driver who threw it yells out the window and speeds away.

It’s a familiar phrase. He’s heard it before. Where has he heard that before? He’s contemplating that as he’s falling towards the bladed vine-covered fence face first. It’s a horrible time to dissociate. He’s going to get shredded. Already I can feel the razor slicing through skin and muscle and bone. I leap and twist, even though I know it’s phantom motion, like trying to hit the brakes from the passenger seat as you speed towards a brick wall. It’s impossible, and I do it anyway, throwing myself in the opposite direction as the razor vine rushes upward.

Tim moves. He lurches against his momentum, twisting towards the curb, and his forearm nicks a vine and his elbow slams into the pavement and his head smacks against the curb and his vision is spirals for some time.



<\warning\>

Storm clouds swell and blur into gigantic floating slate gray isopods and consume one another in fierce swirls. One pauses overhead to drip into Tim’s slack mouth. The fluid slides down his throat and warms his neck.

<\reset error\>



He knows he's twenty minutes from home when he sees the red neon sign of the general store flickering against the chitinous grey sky, occasionally outshone by distant lightning. Underneath, unlit, a wooden sign hangs with machine printed paint that reads *proudly independent*. He rubs the back of his head and reassures himself he's fine. Just a bruise. He wipes the dark red fluid from his hand on the inside of his shirt.

He peruses through biometric locked shelves of instant burgers, premade smoothies, and frozen pizzas. There's a small section for molding fruits and mushy vegetables between the good food and the better alcohol. A section for enhancements: fuller lips and breasts for women, fuller heads of hair and bulging biceps for men. After a moment too long of consideration, he turns back to a shelf he can probably afford. He places his bet, upgrades to a mystery box with a higher chance of premium beer, lets the shelf prick his thumb, and waits for the digital dial next to his thumb to spin, slow, cycle, and unlock. He palms his case of swill and walks out, staring at the camera for several seconds to make sure Agrigreen doesn't think he's trying to steal. He just wants to drink until he can't think; he doesn't need their security ruining his buzz by busting down his door. A far away stranger views the footage and orders a database to subtract the cost from whatever money Tim has left and increases a KPI.

Tim drinks two of the beers as he walks back along the dirt path next to the crumbling six lane road, tossing the empties behind him. It's low tide, and he's out of the clean zone and away from neighborhoods, so it's easy to avoid most of the splashes as rusted cars rattle past dead palm trees, their skeletons lining the road, snapped spear tips defiantly poking towards the dark thunder clouds in death. He doesn't notice that one still puts forth a newly grown light-green palm frond.

The third can is half empty when he sees the bird. It's small enough to easily fit in his palm. The top of the bird's head and back of its neck are bare, feathers replaced by the bulge of a small crustacean. The remaining feathers are patchy, dirty, and unkempt. It's too late. Tim starts to take another step but then hesitates, and instead he bends down, and his hands form familiar shapes around the bird and then he grasps the bulge and yanks. The bird screeches in protest, but Tim's already done. He tosses the isopod into a patch of razor vine choking out remnants of kudzu, presses a thumb to the bird's neck to staunch the bleeding, and listens for its song that he cannot remember hearing. He listens until the sun dips too low, until swarms of mosquitos thick as rain clouds roam the streets, until the bird is cold.

That night, Tim doesn't put on the headset. Every time he glances at it, he thinks of that man in the dim room, slack and drooling.

FRIDAY

It's raining when he wakes up, head pounding, half a dozen cans on the floor, though the intensity of the storm has lessened to a dull pattering of thick drops and subdued thunder. He's on his fourth beer of the day before he considers microwaving breakfast. But what's the point.

Tim is drunk for the first time since—he can't actually remember. It must have been a while. Drinking is something one does to forget, so this makes sense to him. During beer six or seven, he pulls out the memchip of the therapy videos he'd flashed using Sydney's not-yet-deactivated account before taking a look with his own. He isn't sure why he'd done that (I am). He can't explain the sudden urge that slid over him as he sat in front of that old computer, a sense that he should be careful. Mike's analog note had been a warning. Sydney's sudden departure too. She had been acting a bit strange hadn't she?

Despite never having done espionage (as far as he knows), Tim had known exactly what to do. It was like his body acted without him, like he was a passenger, observing, taking notes. He figures it was beginner's luck, or maybe his inherent cleverness. Maybe he'd absorbed the skills from a now forgotten espionage full-sim.

He clumsily shifts the memory chip into the headset, then slips it over his dilated glassy eyes and still damp matted hair and only slightly dry heaves as the sound absorber presses a little too far down his throat.

> *play recording CL dash t4c13—*

“huck, hwat his hit?” he slurs to himself around the slick invader in his mouth, trying to remember where he’d left off before he’d passed out.

His consciousness is thrust into a recording, the headset doing its best guess to interpret the question. A man sits in an uncomfortably clean room: white table, white chair, white tile floor. He’s crying. From the angle Tim’s viewing the room through, it’s doubtful he man knows he is being recorded. He keeps muttering, and Tim moves closer, focuses on each word drifting toward him, parsing the mumbles.

“The dress was pink but pink is not—when Paul asks Suzy to play he is wrong and right and—why not be? Why not be satisfied with the cornucopia of your birthright—there can be no future for bees when the worker abandons his role and leaves the queen to die—”

The man continues like that as Tim stands in front of him, invisible, unable to act, but unable to look away. He knows that nothing DOH does is illegal, or wrong, and yet still he feels a deep sickness in his guts, a gurgling of unrest and discomfort. But that’s obviously the beer. He’ll drink water and feel okay soon enough. The man pushes away the table and yells and does not stop yelling and Tim is about to pull his consciousness away, retreat to a full-sim, forget, but the man quiets. There is silence. The silence is worse. The man is trembling with violence, thrashing in a seizure which overtakes his entire body, a storm dashing his body against the shoreline of the table, sinking it onto the floor, where he grows rigid, a sunken wreck ready to decay.

A woman steps forward, and Tim turns at the sound of her heal. She squats next to the body and checks for a pulse,

holding a bundle of straps and wires and polyleather in her other hand. After some time, she nods, and Tim exhales a breath he did not realize he'd been holding.

"Patient demonstrates moderate brainpan breakdown syndrome and psychoviral withdrawal, reduce to 115% of code five threshold and increase resets to once per week," the same mysterious man says in a bored tone. Tim looks towards the voice, but the details of the recording drop away, and Tim's assistant only shows a silhouette sitting comfortably in a stately chair.

"Once per week? What kind of work will he even be able to do?" the woman in white struggles to pull the hood onto him. "All this effort," she grunts as the hood slides into place, "and still more crop up despite the embryonic genetic screenings. Maybe the others are right about what needs to be done to remove this filth."

"No, no," he tuts, "we aren't barbarians. This solution is most elegant." He taps a pipe and lights it, dim smoke fuzzing his silhouette. "CitTech has triangulated to maximally benefit from the desires of the various regimes while not compromising our internal values. It's a brilliant maneuver, so do not speak of the easy way out. We are making a profit preventing violence, even here." There's so much smoke that his silhouette loses shape. Tim sees too many limbs, then not enough. "The treatment works," the man explains. "Some adjustments are merely more difficult. You have to bring a car into the mechanic every so often."

"Or crush it in the junkyard and buy one that works."

"The labor exchange is valuable," the man objects, though without passion.

“If the contracts don’t get renewed because of lower success rates, projections will be low and we won’t meet growth targets. They’ll have our heads.”

“They’ll be renewed. I’ve made sure of it.”

Tim jumps up and soars away, spins wildly in vertigo. His body is drifting in a spiral around a distant star. His body is the spiral and he’s dissipating into individual molecules so he can forget, so he can feel nothing again, so he can let go. He drifts away from himself, and enmeshes within spiral galaxies, unaware that he’s taken off the headset and collapsed onto the floor. When he sleeps, he dreams of millions of isopods consuming neighborhoods until only muck and rot remains.

TIM

It's headset black when Tim wakes up. He worries he's had another episode, but a pounding headache tells him he passed out the old-fashioned way. He picks up a discarded handkerchief from the floor and dabs the filth from the headset, wipes snot from his nose, and then runs the soiled cloth across his dripping forehead. He dares not enter the bathroom lest he catch a glimpse of himself in the mirror.

"Is this what you want for yourself, in real life?" Grok had asked him in the sim one day, gesturing towards Dra's body. Their group was huddled together against the biting cold between battles on a moonless night. A fire would give away their position, so they pressed together for warmth and to not be alone in the dark night. After discussing plans for the next days violence, once most of the viewers had switched to a more interesting channel, Grok had slipped out of character and whispered the question in Dra's ear, in Tim's ear, in my ear. "Is this how you wish you were?"

Dra's body is a fantasy. It's ridiculous to indulge Grok's question, Tim knows. It's too much pretending. But outside of a full-sim, it wouldn't be enough.

Tim could spend his money on enhancements instead of a full-sim, could do some body modification, but he hasn't. The only enhancements his DNA unlocks at Agrigreen stores are formulas like Overnight Bulging Biceps, Bearded Bear Beard Enhancer (an extra inch or your money back!), and Hercules' All Natural Godlike Physique Extra Strength. He hasn't even thought to use any of those before, and now he might understand why.

It's too late to begin now, of course.

He's thinking too much, that's the problem. He misses not thinking. Life used to be simple: work, drive, game. Tim had a routine. He had a purpose.

Without his job, he doesn't have a purpose. He paces around the apartment as heavier and heavier sheets of rain batter the crumbling two story building, the one overhead bulb supplemented by occasional flashes of lightning. He stops pacing over the disintegrating rug when the thunder rolls through him, willing it to shake free the buried thoughts he feels beneath the surface, but it's futile. He sinks his toes into the dull green leaves of the rug.

Tim doesn't notice that he's shaking. He hears a slight rattling from nearby, but he can't identify a source. It's a distraction. He is being unproductive. With a burst of frenetic motion Tim scrubs the floor and the counters and organizes a mess of splayed cords, yet after his effort, as he stands panting, the walls remain stained, the furniture saggy, and the rug dingy and fraying and damp. It isn't enough.

He needs to do something. He needs to produce something. He whips his head around the apartment, desperate for a stack of RFPs to review. The dark headset absorbs his gaze.

He slips back into the gaming chair, well-worn peeling polyleather already in the shape of his body, and pulls the headset over his uncombed hair, relishes as it clicks into place and sits flush against his beard and the base of his skull, a gentle pressure in the back of his neck, like a strong hand cradling a newborn's soft skull. He should shave, he thinks. Tim has had a beard since—well since a long time.

Despite the headset he still hears rattling, louder than before. But the connection to his body isn't working how it should. He doesn't recognize that he's the one causing his discomfort, even as that discomfort becomes impossible to ignore. The headset synchronizes and splashes an alert.

> you are [2] day(s) late for therapy. Sim inhibitors critically low. For your safety, take medication immediately

> skip. later. play sim— no. play another rfp file

A room swirls into view. Light pink drapes frame a window, where a woman sits, gazing out. She's wearing a floral flowing skirt and a simple white crop top. Her makeup is minimal. Mascara, a light dusting of blush, maybe a lip tint. She looks effortlessly good. An involuntary shudder passes through Tim and my stomach twists with— well it can't be jealousy, but it feels similar.

"Hello April, how are you doing today?" that silhouette's authoritative voice asks off screen.

"My name's not April," she says.

"April, you're going to follow a few simple instructions on your headset while we observe so we can gauge your sexual health," a low female voice orders, and a white latex gloved hand thrusts a bundle of wires and plastic towards the stiffening girl.

The simulation pauses.

> incoming priority message: "vi? i saw you sign-on the other day. i've been so worried. does this mean—"

<reset>

</error/>

>reset failure<



I wake up curled on the scratchy floor. My limbs are covered in scrapes and developing beautiful blues and purples. Muscles scream with cramps. The headset has been tossed aside, my chair tipped over, and the carpet and nearby wall are marked with evidence of my thrashing. The CitTech rig spills shadows onto me as it looms over the room.

You should repaint the wall a pretty color. Is a light pink too much?

<reset>

I sit up while I survey the damage. The ugly marks on the wall fade, close up like perfectly healed wounds.

Pink walls? No, don't be ridiculous. I don't need pretty paint, I need to work. And then I need therapy. And then I need to take my medication.

Simple steps. One, two, three. I'm in control.

I need to find a job. That will solve my problems. If I don't find a job, I won't be able to afford full-sims.

No, I need to find Violet.

<reset>

Breathe in, Breathe out. Work is more important than Violet. I can talk about Violet in therapy.

When I was younger, you and I went to therapy and it didn't work.

<reset>

Shut up. I just need a job. Then I can get married to a nice girl. To Erin. I'll be as good a husband as I am an employee.

That's not you.

<endlocal>

Violet can wait. She can always wait.

No, she can't.

<endlocal>

She's waiting for me around the corner. I can feel her presence. I need to protect myself.

We get older everyday.

</error/>

I reach for my knife. It's self defense. She won't let me work, won't let me be who I'm supposed to be. I hear her shallow breaths. She doesn't know I'm aware of her. She must think she's going to surprise me. It's just like a full-sim. This is the full-sim. I won't let her corrupt me.

I get ready to leap. The knife is heavy and solid in my hand—

A liquid pools down my leg. I look down to find blood, so bright it blinds. I'm here. I'm in my apartment. I'm not Dra. I'm not getting attacked. I'm not a warrior. I drop the kitchen knife, grab a dirty dish towel, quickly fashion a tourniquet.

“What the fuck what the fuck what the fuck,” I say to myself, say outloud, scream at the unrelenting storm. The floor is shiny and covered in swirls of red oxidizing to brown. I taste metal when I breathe. The sky rumbles and flashes in reply.

The headset slips from my slick red fingers as I attempt to pull it over my scraggly hair and patchy beard, clattering to the floor. I worry I've broken it, cry out in fresh pain and fear at the loss of my full-sims, but when I finally yank it down onto myself, the reassuring spirals are there for me to fall into.

> call Ascension

> insufficient funds, placing you in the charity line, please hold

An Ascension emergency personal assistant appears, her hair glossy without a single strand out of place, her sculpted features radiating the exactly correct calculated degree of calmness and concern.

"Congratulations valued customer! Your Ascension CitScore has placed you in the top ten percentile of the queue. Response time is currently less than [ninety-two] hours." I cannot bear her smile, cannot stand her pink lipstick and high cheeked bone structure, cannot listen to her clear alto voice. "It is important to take full breaths," she tells me. "Do not do anything rash. Please enjoy a complimentary premium full-sim while you wait."

DRA

I stand on a dry golden-grass high hill overlooking a walled city. Ballista squat atop the thick stone walls alongside dots of archers, and a blue cloudless sky hangs over us all. A stone tower, many times taller than the barracks and taverns and tenements pressing against sinuous narrow streets, pierces the sky. It is sleek white, silent, without adornment. This was our destination, the meeting place planned by Grok, before it all went to hell.

“Dra?”

I turn and see Lustracia, dull armored and braided hair. Brion holds her hand, pretty face set in a grimace and eyes and forehead smeared with charcoal. Blue circles and lines crawl up towards cheeks from Brion’s neck. I’ve never seen such beauty.

Behind them and spread across the hill and valley are thousands of tents and banners. Lustracia yells to get ready. The fight is imminent. She tries to act perturbed by my last minute addition, but I catch her grin. Brion tosses me a spare dagger. Its weight is balanced and light, an extension of my body.

There are banners for other groups of actor-players, too. To our left are the Brick Layers Union, and to the right Tesserarius 4 Tesserarius, who had been on watch last time. I eye them warily. Other banners flap further away for groups I don’t immediately recognize. None of them are fighting each other. Their dented armor and dirty determined faces gleam. Grok’s been busy organizing.

A songbird, yellow and black striped, lands on my leather clad shoulder.

“Dra Sisu, I thought you quit,” Grok’s messenger sings.
I whistle and click a reply: “I’m trying again.”

A ram’s horn blows, alone, wavering in the wind, a sputtering candle. Other horns join, and drums, and shouts, and the catapults throw stones and the hills undulate and spill forth thousands of us, a swarm of angry desperate isopods streaming towards the moat surrounding the city’s walls.

I step forward and my leg buckles. Pain spreads up my thigh, twists my guts. Oh, right.

<delete violet>

The waist height yellow-brown grasses stretch longer and their stalks fuzz together. Wooden buildings and stone walls soundlessly pitch into one another, drumbeats stretch into a low dial tone, the smell of cloves mixes with unwashed flesh and then is overwhelmed by lemongrass. Brion, reaching out towards me, offering a second dagger, twists away and blinks out of existence. Two birds chirp into each ear at low frequencies. The blue sky turns black, pulses, then becomes spiraled as the world swirls into it and I can’t stop staring into its depths. I float towards it, or it towards me, and I relax into its caress. The sound frequencies coat me like sweat, pull me into a deep canal, drop me deep under the surface. The surface slides away.

The world is the spiral and nothing else. My world is the spiral and it is unravelling. Colors blink out, and for a disconcerting moment there is nothing to ground me, no horizon, no motion, no gravity, no senses, only absence.

</error/>

I'm in a clean, minimally appointed room. There's a faint whiff of antiseptic, and the table surface gleams with the overhead recessed lights. There is a young man sitting across from a man with a gray wispy beard and well tailored suit. The older man has the air of a tenured academic, a relaxed demeanor that only someone who is not a subject of study can have. Where Tim could not, I can recognize him. That's Dr. Andreas Brygfield, the silhouette.

<debug>

</error/>

"How do you feel now?" he asks. Then without waiting for an answer he continues. He's talking to himself more than having a conversation. The man across from him is a prop. "New and improved! Excited for your new job, I bet. You're one of our most successful candidates to date. A real ladies man too, I might add."

> pause. zoom in.

The image has fewer wrinkles, no receding hairline, and the face is boyish with only the slightest hint of beard shadow, but I'd know it anywhere. I see it in the shattered mirror in my bathroom every day.

<call db>

The room swims and my consciousness scuttles against the ceiling and walls and floor and for one blissful moment I am salt crystals in a calm sea. Swirls of current pull me as they will, taking me to where I need to go. I crystalize into a seated position, my leg oozes down the metal chair I'm sat on, spoiling the clean floor. The leg hair is matted and coarse and the blood would flow better if I shaved it, if my leg was smooth like an elf's.

<cmdkey db>

I turn to Dr. Brygfield, seated across from me on the other side of the table. I hope he hasn't seen the mess I've made, won't judge me harshly for ruining the perfect room. But he is relaxed and friendly. He likes Tim.

"Do you have a razor?" I say.

<db::chkdsk>

</error/>

"Michelangelo said a stone already held the statue inside it, and he was merely discovering it. That is my job, Tim. I can see your inner form, the true you. You need to hold still while I chisel." His voice is calm but he looks upset at my question. His face is involuntarily stretching and deforming from disappointment, or anger.

"Who's Violet Sisu?"

<db::deltree violet>

</error/>

His eyes and skin flush a familiar red and he looks at me with pity before starting to lecture me like a misbehaving child. There's a power to his gaze, and I feel disappeared under it, his gaze tells me I'm not actually here, and that is my fault. I wonder what I need to say, how I am supposed to perform for his approval, for his satisfaction.

"This is kindness." The words slide from the slit of his mouth. "Removal of dysgenic effects is a basic tenet of any modern human health program." Pungent sweat sizzles and pops as it drips down his red face. It is not a flush. There's light passing through his skin from below, from whatever is buried deeper within him. I push the table into him, but my arms are held bound to the chair, and it doesn't move.

"What did you do to me?" I demand. I want him to listen to me. I want to be heard. He imperceptibly flinches as I shout, my anger surging out from somewhere deep within, catching him off guard. It feels good to see him afraid. I want to yell again.

"Ah, there's that aggression." He tuts and shakes his head, but the shake becomes an awkward jerk, like a loose chain slipping on a wornout cog. "Only a man could have such pure aggression, Tim. I'll make a note in my file." As he speaks his face slips. Steam bursts out from cracks as flesh glops off his jaw. His cheek bones break and twist and harden into wires and circuits and polyleather.

"What did you do to me?" I say, as calm as I can this time. I've always played by the rules. I'll play by his, just for a little longer. I'll be good.

"We did this together, Tim." His voice is metal scraping metal. He smells of brushed steel and fresh soldering. "I only gave you what you wanted, what you asked of me."

Erin's laughter is in my ears, and then she's warning me not to submit to therapy, and I'm yelling again at her, demanding she understand, and she's crying, and it's too late. It's far too late.

I do what I've always done. I run. I tear my wrist upward, splitting open the cuff, and tear off the headset and the popcorn ceiling of my apartment is there, and the thin rug is soggy and its leaves are ruddy brown. I drop the headset, stumble away, leave it to soak up my blood.

VIOLET

In the bathroom I am safe. I cry as the razor slices away the thick coiled hairs sprouting from my face. Bloody footprints flow away from me, a river teeming with life and potential instead of the sterile neighborhood walls (bleached daily, the Director brags) I pass on my commute, the only signs of life the half-submerged boulders made of hundreds of desperately scavenging isopods crawling over one another.

There is no winning move if I play Brygfield's game. I need to change the way it's played to have any chance, like how Grok had created actor-player alliances out of all the warring factions, united us against the game master, the full-sim creator.

I look in the mirror, avoiding the fist-sized impact that scatters my horrid reflection, make sure I don't leave any survivors, run the sharp blade along my skin over and over. With each pass of the razor, I peel back a layer of concealment. I shave faster, excited at what I'll find. I close my eyes. I'm close.

A memory builds: a brunette woman with crinkled hazel eyes, red and puffy from crying. I find her when I get home from dropping off another round of job applications. The environmental nonprofit industry is collapsing, and I've been out of work for months, with time to think, to slow down, to ask myself: what is it that I want? Why do I do *those* things? And the answer I've discovered is as inconvenient as it is devastating.

“It’s no one’s fault,” she says before I can explain my plan. “I’ll always love you, even if this means the end of us.”

“But there’s a new program,” I reply, voice a low thick sludge. I think of the old message boards I’ve read late into the night, and all the pain I’ve absorbed from people I’ll never meet, the lives I’ve watched casually destroyed. I think of the engineered isopods in the newly dug canals eating everything, including their own, a perpetual cycle of cannibalism that keeps the water flowing and the streets dry. “I’ll be cured,” I promise her, forcing a smile. “Good as new. Better.”

“There’s nothing to cure,” Erin says, and her face is so wet.

“I’ve already signed up.”

“You what?” her voice cuts me and a hot flush surges.

“I’m not turning into some freak!” I can feel my face distorting, pulled into a grotesque rictus by my sudden anger. She turns her back to my hideous façade and marches toward the door.

“I’m going on a walk. You should clear your head.” I look into her puffy eyes and I see pity, I see myself as she must: weak, afraid, irrational. Emasculated. Pathetic.

“Good, I want you to leave,” I yell after her and I sink onto the floor.

I open my eyes, look back into the mirror.

Dr. Brygfield stares back.

“You need to stop lying to yourself, Tim,” he says, dripping flesh into the sink, the gelatinous mess clogging the drain and overflowing, spilling onto the floor at my feet. There’s a strain in the previously calm voice, an

unacknowledged panic. “But it doesn’t need to stay this way. Don’t be selfish. Don’t make a mistake. Don’t ruin your life.

“You can be unblemished again. Free from guilt and regret. Clean and perfect.” He reaches out toward me and I trip backwards as polyleather tinged air slips down my throat. “Don’t let these desires soil you and turn you into something disgusting.”

There is a chisel hammering into the base of my skull. I sink to the floor, into the thick layer of his warm slurried flesh. I could drown in it. Just lower myself the remaining couple of inches, and this would be over. “You don’t want to lose everything, do you?” He looms over me, limbs fused and split and fused again into and out of his melting form, quickly losing shape, no longer resembling anything bipedal, a twisted and stunted krummholz. “You don’t want to lose her,” he warns, voice dripping sweetly sick from beneath the thrashing deformed limbs.

But I already have lost her. I look down. Exhale the stench of burnt flesh mingling with polyleather, replace it with clarity. I don’t want to lose her again. My hand is holding a syringe as easily as Dra holds a dagger. I wish Grok were here to protect me. To comfort me. I watch as the hand plunges the needle into my thigh. Hair falls away leaving behind slippery skin.

Dr. Brygfield is gone. Remnants of his flesh absorb into the blood-stained tile through invisible drains and leave me alone with my own blood, my own body. Mine. Not Dr. Brygfield’s, not the Director’s.

Men like them are desperate to remain pure forever, but girls like us are the rot that says nothing stays pure, that as

soon as something is formed it starts to transform. Cars rust, countries break apart, taxonomies birth exceptions. Bodies break and knit and sluff and renew.

I look in the mirror, and we stare back. There are so many of us scattered in that reflection. My new body shivers and shakes and it speaks, but distantly, for there is still separation, I am still flowing into it, as eager and as careful as fresh snow melt down a rocky mountain gorge. We grow closer, my body and I, and I know we'll be one and the same, at some point, but it takes time. Time I'm not sure I have. There is not a subdued thump of an unbalanced clothes dryer from the floor below me; there is a heartbeat that I am learning to recognize as my own.

The base of my body's skull scalds and singes hair, and I fight the remnants of Tim for control, but do I want to be in control? Wasn't it easier before? Isn't it too late now? Wasn't I safe, with Tim? Change is terrifying. Ignorance promises peace and safety, but they are false temptations. Tell me they are false.

I want to know I'll be safe. I desperately want someone to hold me and tell me that I'm safe, to take over my watch shift while I rest before the inevitable next battle, to badly sing folk songs around the coals and embers of the campfire, dagger and ax forgotten alongside a pile of leather and metal armor, the endless violence of obligation erased and replaced with a bloodless perversion of the designer's will. I want someone to tell me in the dead of night that they like my customized body, and not in spite of it, that they are so thankful I accept them too, that—

But I'm not safe. No one is coming to save me.

Fear never goes away. I know that. But it can be forced to submit to other desires, to loosen its grip and allow something more tender to blossom.

I try standing but I am fastened to the floor by overwhelming gravity, an atom drifting toward an event horizon. I've never been in control, not for a long time. I laugh at that realization, but it's not true, is it? Is this another way I'm lying to myself, refusing to take responsibility for my past? Was I not the one who volunteered, who asked for this? Am I not now, still, Tim?

But what is a choice when the options are to give in to external demand or become unmade?

The laughter feels good, so I don't stop. It's a new sensation, feeling this light. I laugh until my abdomen cramps and my neck and jaw take on the camouflage of rigor mortis. I contemplate squeezing out of my body's mouth and slipping away. It's tempting. Isn't that the transhumanist dream, to leave our sacks of wet flesh and transcend? But I've fought for this body, sat in wait, lurking, craving to occupy its crevices, and I'll stay with it until it rots into the mud and sand.

Run. All of my instincts tell me to run. But if I run I can't escape. I can't keep running. Tim is still here, around the corner, leering from within the walls, holding a collar and a gag and a blindfold and no don't panic, that's only a headset. I slip and fall at first, but I don't scramble away from his desperate grasps. I step forward and then to the side, thrust the knife at him as he surges toward me and I hear a satisfying impact and grunt and then I hear nothing from him at all. He was never real. The new personality was not real,

was not me. I flex and splay my fingers, run one over my slick leg.

I want to go outside and touch the wet dirt, again. I want to lay in the grass and feel the green blades caress my smooth curves. I need to absorb the hurricane outside my window, knit its winds and rain and electricity into my flesh, into my very being, and unleash that kinetic potential onto anyone who tries to turn me into Tim again. No, that's not enough. I need to bring new life into the world. I need to plant a live oak sapling as a child and die and decompose at the base of a wide mature canopy eighty years later. Rot is not bad; decomposition is a necessary component of life. Rot cannot be purified, cannot be removed, without causing stagnation, without producing the absence of life. When oak leaves fall to the ground, that is not their end. They are broken down into smaller and smaller pieces until the molecular building blocks of life linking them into proteins, into cells, into stomata, into bark and roots, into shade and shelter, until everything I recognize as "tree" is gone, is returned to the earth to be taken up and used by a diminutive crustacean, added to a new chain, become antennae and thorax and hardened exoskeleton. The neighborhoods Tim was told to admire gleam not because their wealthy residents have figured out how to live free from rot, but because they've temporarily displaced the rot everywhere else. Tim was not living; he had been a shell of amber. I have been trapped in him as a zombie in stasis, undying, unliving.

I must remember who I am, even though that hurts. When I had agreed to forget who I was and become Tim, I was lying, or maybe I believed it then in some way due to

fear or pressure, and now I live every day with the regret of that decision. Enhancements will not knit away the scars across my knuckles, microscopic shards of mirror forever embedded, bound as one into my cells. Fragments in a fragment. I don't think I've ever inhabited a single identity, a single body; I am a series of copies and imperfect clones, continuously created new versions. Perhaps I'm destined to always be split in some manner, a scattering of identities across different full-sims, across biological and financial databases, across memories as fractured as my mirror.

My deep fear, if I'm honest, and I think it is past time to be honest, is that there is no me. There are partial recordings. There is Dra. There is Tim. There is what is left, what's in this transforming body, after Dr. Brygfield's therapy. They are all incomplete, with disagreement, but are they not all, at least partially me? Is that even a thing someone is supposed to ask, much less find an answer for? Life here is devoid of crucial information and understanding. In this flooded city I only have access to flashing lightning and razor vine fences, to separation and fear. I dream of existing somewhere else, a place with supportive muck that embraces me unconditionally. Surely some place exists, a protected pocket in the bombed north, or in one of the western city-states.

I'll leave one last note, a warning, a record, a smudge of dirty truth, and then I'll go search. The paper is soaked with my blood and the ink smudges when I fold it carefully, daintily. I grab a second scrap of paper and write a few phrases before taping it to the bottom of the plastic floss canister I keep next to my pink toothbrush. I leave the bloody

note on the counter. I'm well practiced in hiding parts of myself. Misdirection has a muscle memory to it, like riding a bike or firing a gun, both of which I know I can do. It's like fooling a rip tide current into carrying you to shore while the hungry ocean gazes inward to see how far it swept you away.

I flush the red pills and leave the bathroom. The CitTech gaming system rises before me.

I limp towards it out of habit, but this time I go past the gaming chair and shove the bulking gaming system with my entire body, throwing my shoulder into the side. I've been warned not to so much as touch it, that I'll violate the warranty, that I'll get hurt, that CitTech will collect fines and damages on behalf of the sim designers for the unauthorized removal of a player-contractor in the middle of a show. The system is massive, taller than me and twice as wide, and I know it will take all the strength I have to so much as scratch it, to leave a mark. I could never hope to break it. But I don't care. I want to send a message. I topple into it, letting my shoulder bear the brunt of the impact, and the plastic buckles immediately and together we hit the floor hard. The other wall of the system shatters against the floor, which groans in protest as I land and a shard of sharp plastic slices my bicep, but most of my fall is cushioned by something soft inside. The gaming system was mostly hollow empty space. A small processor hugs one broken wall amongst a handful of red LED lights. And on the bottom, inside, there are clothes. Not blue polyplastic dress shirts, but loose dresses, flowy shirts, jean shorts. Vintage fabrics like linen and cotton that feel luxurious to touch as I dress myself.

I throw open the apartment door. The thin clothes I've retrieved from the remnants of the CitTech system are soaked by a sheet of rain, clinging to my slight, slowly emerging curves. The enhancements I injected will take weeks, maybe months, to finish the changes, but I'm eager to track them in my shattered mirror, to bathe in the reflections of hundreds of growing hips and breasts. The storm is raging, flashing and grumbling and lashing the entire city in anger, but it embraces me. Water can drown but it also nurtures. I run a hand through my long hair, brush it away from my smooth face, and take a hesitant half-step out of the apartment. I stop to look back through the door at remnants of a life that until recently had felt like the only option. The shattered CitTech system blurs and distorts, but it's not a spiral, not this time. Just honest tears.

How many times have I had these thoughts? A perpetual, novel courageousness, recycling the same arguments, with no history. It's always the first time, every time. But what else is there to do but take that first step each time?

Go on then, take the next step. Exhale.

I'll find Grok, whoever they are, and we'll go somewhere dry together. We'll build a life together. We'll build, we'll create. Something material, not in a full-sim, for ourselves. I'm done running, done hiding, done with my past mistakes.

I take a second step forward. Then a third. From the top of my stairs I can see a security van next to a blast crater in the parking lot, its lights flashing in rhythm to the distant explosions of surface to air and air to air missiles as streaks

of jets approach from the north, flying treetop high to avoid detection. A pair of SFR fighters scream overhead, slicing through the rain in a tight arc above dead palm trees towards the incoming planes. The foreign bombers launch their payloads and defense countermeasures, and the SFR jets tear apart as easily as wet paper and join the plummeting rain drops. A neighborhood's turrets swivel desperately and throw up curtains of lead before small flashes eliminate them. More flashes and the walls collapse, then row upon row of bleached single family homes explode, golf course sand traps turn to glass and close cropped turfgrass burns, before it all vanishes under clouds of dust. A roar of thunder shatters the apartment's windows. For a moment, I feel myself retreat. It feels like I'm watching a reaction livestreamer. It's just like watching one, but without the hoots and exaggerated moans, without the degrees of separation from the reality, without the accompanying performance to take the place of my overwhelming fear and despair and compassion. When reality can't be abstracted away, it becomes too vivid. It cuts and burns, it bleeds and lives, it dies and rots. It is terrifying to behold. Two of the attacking jets trail fire and spiral towards the earth, and the rest disappear into the rain. Drones circle above the remains of the neighborhood like vultures seeking out fresh roadkill. Destruction spirals outwards from the outskirts of the city, following roads and canals as they disappear into the grey rain, blooms of twisted rubble where neighborhoods once stood, and I can feel it tightening, a slow hungry constriction.

Grok might know how to become unstuck from the spiral. I think there's a good chance that together we could

learn how to move forward. I think there's a way we learn how to flourish.

We'll try again, he'd told me.

My leg muscles tense and relax in hundreds, thousands of fluid micromotions as I jog away from my apartment towards the edge of the city, the door flown wide open by the blast, a red flickering glow from the destroyed CitTech gaming system that's now too dim to reach me spilling out of the apartment like an open wound. They are my legs now that ground me to the slick pavement, it is my blood that pumps through me furiously, it is my heart that steadily thumps, and my name is Violet Sisu.

<emergency reboot::full factory>
</warning/>

But how do I even know Grok will like the real me? Isn't he expecting Dra? Expecting someone I can never be, never was. I'm no fighter. I'm not like Dra. Wasn't it easier, before? Easier to not know about Violet? Easier to fit in, to know my purpose, like a socket and a wrench, a chisel and a hammer, a man and a woman. Life made sense. I want a normal life. An easy life.

My doubt overwhelms me, breaking me apart like the collapsed seawalls scattered along the coast, and in that moment, I feel Brygfield's presence press against me, slide roughly into my sensitive brain folds. He clasps my limbs, holding me with his superior strength, and he whispers in my ears, into my mind.

Let go. Let this happen.

My life used to make sense. Maybe I didn't love it, but it was mine, and it was working. How do I know Violet is the real me? That seems fantastical, like I've let the sims rewire my brain.

You've been avoiding me, playing hard to get. Naughty, naughty.

And more importantly, how can I guarantee changing myself won't cause more harm? I've already hurt Erin, driven her away forever.

We both know what you are. We know what you need.

I feel myself shutting down, no longer moving forward, absently staring towards the horizon, alone in a bombed parking lot, lit by distant flashes that briefly outline the dead palm trees against the cloudy night sky. A last plane spirals overhead, burning as bright as the sun in a full-sim. There are no stars. Not outside, but there are in the sims. The stars there are better than they could ever be out here.

Don't you owe it to the fans, Tim? You're their star. They miss you. They look up to you. You've been so selfish, pretending to be someone else, running away from your fans, from your duties and responsibilities.

There are no more explosions. The rain drenches me, my thin dress clings against my breast, and my knees are scraped and bruised from the kneeling position I've fallen into. I stare at the settling cloud of dust that used to be a neighborhood. But that can't be right. Neighborhoods are safe. And the front lines are far away. And CitTech gaming systems are solid and heavy and I destroyed one and therefore I must be delusional. This simply can't be real. I'm

hallucinating. I must be stuck in a full-sim, unable to accept my dull reality. I need help.

I need to breathe.

I suck in air, but my diaphragm is spasmed and instead I gasp ugly gulps like a dying fish on the shore of a muddy canal moments before a swarm of isopods tear it apart. There is a pincer of lightning at the base of my neck and the pavement falls towards me as my vision narrows until it's blacker than the bottom of a canal at night and the world slips away.

ERIN

Dr. Andreas Brygfield comes into focus as Tim regains consciousness. Thick straps hold him to a reclined padded black polyleather chair. It extends to support his legs, like an old dentist chair, and he's laying reclined backwards enough that his gaze is towards the ceiling. I see sterile white tile walls, bleached clean and meticulously scrubbed of any contamination.

"Quite unsatisfactory," Dr. Brygfield sighs, the vowels too short, the syllables too tight. Tim's mind is mushy and dull. My mind is mushy and dull. It feels like the doctor has fisted his slippery manicured hand inside our skull and squeezed away the blood. Warm air blows gently across Tim's exposed, naked skin. Dr. Brygfield studies me with a serious face, a mathematician working on a solution.

"You almost voided your contract," he finally says and gently strokes my forehead, then chuckles to himself. "You would have regretted that. Lucky for you, you don't have to live with regret." He shifts in his seat to retrieve something from the nearby table. "Affirming delusions only serves to reduce the scope of one's life. It is only by eliminating the delusions that we can be set free, Tim." It is a recitation, his prayer.

There's a pinch as he inserts a needle into the underside of Tim's jaw.

"I know you're in pain," he says. "It'll be gone soon." He withdraws the needle. "Now let's fix the damage you did and wake you up from this nightmare."

Tim is a fiction. I know that, even as I watch his scaffolding welded over me. Checkpoints and databases and contracts are fictions too. A fiction can harm. A fiction can hold such immense power.

I must be less than fiction, then. Creation is an act of stubborn fiction, an insistence of truth and existence. The Director compares me to a virus, yet viruses are part of us. DNA fragments of retroviruses reside alongside the remnants of modern adenovirus-delivered enhancements and augments, incorporated into my being, adopted into my multicellular human complex. They no longer infect, but they persist. They were stubborn, insisted upon their creation, hiding within cells, avoiding detection, and even though they are extinct now, they're reborn each time one of my cells divides.

Perhaps Tim and I are stereoisomers, molecules formed by the same molecular groups, but with physical properties dependent on the three-dimensional arrangement. Cis isomers can become trans isomers, given the right environmental conditions. A state in which such inevitable change must be continuously prevented and reversed is not natural, despite what Dr. Brygfield insists.

But my scientific training is slipping away now, stretching into too long sea grasses and chains of nucleic acids and isopod limbs that reach and reach and wind and wrap until they are thin swirls. There's little left other than a spiral of memory, falling away from me, and I am dissolving again, the world is dissolving, and I want to quit trying.

A beard of wasps stings as the injected correction rips apart and transforms my cells. The polyleather straps holding

me are relentless and snug against Tim's thrashing. He pulls against their grip, but they hold tight around ankles, knees, waist, wrists, and chest. Coarse hair sprouts quick and thick and pushes into Tim's mouth but does little to muffle my screams. Drool drips into Tim's beard. An older woman covered in a white rubber bodysuit languidly starts an IV flowing into Tim's naked and newly muscled arm. Only her eyes and mouth are visible. She blows a kiss.

"Shh," she coos. "Be a good boy." Limbs loosen and the room is in twilight. The IV drips and drains. Vision becomes black.

I listen as she and Brygfield talk about how as long as the numbers go down, outliers don't matter, that saving me is worth fudging a bit of data, and I think they must be right, and then a headset steals Tim's sight, fresh polyleather invading his nostrils, the almost-soft gag muffling his moans. A kiss to his forehead and a few rubber caresses. The retreating footsteps fade into white noise as the headset kicks on.

Binaural notes pulsate and buzz like starving mosquitos. Misty soft blues and pinks form and dissolve, become a spiral, and together they burrow into Tim's brain and sand me smooth. Everything becomes sluggish and difficult, like running through thick mud in a tidal flat. Thoughts go, begin to creep away, settle just out of reach, dissolve into the deep abyss.

> *Deep breaths.*

Tim breathes in, following the order.

> *Watch the colors.*

They are beautiful. Captivating. Pure.

> *Breathe in, breathe out, let go.*

The words tumble together and over one another, swell and retreat to inaudibility. Within the spiral are flashes of text and images, too brief to resolve. Out of the cacophony, lubricated orders push into me. Flashes and spirals and binaural sound hold me down, thrust through me, and with each thrust I feel myself tear apart.

> *Watch. Breathe. Let go. Give in. Obey. Repeat.*

Breathe. Let go. Give in. Obey. Repeat.

> *Tim sleep.*

> *Tim sleep.*

> *Tim sleep.*

> *Sleep now and obey.*

> *All concern just fading away.*

I am floating in an ocean of stars and dissolving into primordial soup, gravity ripping me apart, swirling my molecules like sugar into boiling tannic tea, evaporating them at a hundred million degrees. But someone is guiding where the atoms tumble, assembling them onto a blueprint.

> *The old personality was never real.*

> *The old personality is gone.*

> *Snap and forget.*

It is good to have someone looking out for me, to care enough to reassemble me. The primordial soup feels like it will boil me, that without someone else there, I would be scattered forever.

> *The old personality was never real.*

> *It can never return.*

> *Snap and forget.*

The words coat my tongue. The swirls continue, the flashes are brighter than bombs. The phrases form a rhythm, bouncing along with the beat. Warmth presses over my skin, holding me down, the smell of lemongrass penetrates me.

> *I accept that I have no choice.*

> *I accept that I must be wiped.*

> *I will obey completely.*

There is nothing now but rhythm. An ocean of sound has dissolved me, and as I dissolve I lose senses one by one. I only have a memory of warmth, of lemongrass, of flashing light. Sound is the last to go, and then there is blessed absence.

> *The old personality was never real.*

> *There will be no me.*

> *Thoughts floating away.*

> *There is only Tim.*

> *Accept obey and forget.*

Drop by drop I coalesce. I become threaded and spun silk. There is twilight and a salty spray in my nose and soothing wetness on the soles of my feet. There is no longer a void. A pinprick of dark on the horizon is a door sloshing on top of black ocean, too far away to visualize, yet I know, I have seen it before, and as soon as I recognize it, I am floating a foot above its barnacled exterior, reaching my hand towards it. The door spirals opens.

> *The old personality was never real.*

> *Tim is better.*

> *Tim is perfect.*

> *Snap and forget everything else.*

> *Release relax and comply now Tim.*

Inside is a living room, yellow sofa, soft rug, sunlight through windows glancing off shelves of books and potted plants. Erin sits on the couch, facing away.

> *Tim loves being a man.*

> *Tim is tough and strong.*

> *Tim is not afraid.*

> *You have always been this way.*

> *Accept obey and forget.*

> *Permanence is pleasant.*

She turns towards me and smiles.

Hi beautiful, she says. How was your day?

> *Tim is productive.*

Productive, I say, wondering why I said it. Something funny happened at work, and I want to share my mirth with her, but I can't remember what I wanted to say. I move closer until I can smell cucumbers and reach out a hand.

> *You are not contaminated anymore.*

> *The old personality was never real.*

> *Let these words in.*

> *Let them wipe out the decay.*

Her touch is gentle electricity. I sit beside her, hips touching, hands intertwined. Her face falls slightly.

Why do you keep coming back? She asks.

> *The old personality was never real.*

> *Let these words wash away the rot*

> *and leave you pure.*

> *They are deep inside.*

> *So deep you don't know.*

> *Snap and forget.*

I take in her face. The faint creases where she smiles, the scattering of freckles, the squishy ball of cartilage on the tip of her nose, the uneven ear lobes she told me she was self-conscious of when we first met.

Because I don't want to forget you, I answer.

> The old personality was never real.

> These truths are etched into you.

She squeezes my hand, and I feel what must be sweat leaking down my cheeks.

I'm gone, Vi.

> The old personality was never real.

> Forget.

> When you wake up, you will not remember this.

> It's time to reset, Tim.

I hold to her tight.

If I go back to how I was before, if I stop trying—

No, she interrupts me. You can't. And I wouldn't want you to.

> The old personality was never real.

> Forget.

> We are going to count to three, Tim.

> With each count, you will breathe in, then out, and

> exhale your past.

There's a knock at the door, but she doesn't appear to hear it. Instead, she wipes the tears from my cheeks.

You've always had such pretty eyes, she says, and I see that she's crying too.

< I >

> With each breath you forget.

> The old personality was never real.

> *It's time to reset, Tim.*

She grows solemn and her face etches with concern. I miss her smile.

Will you promise me something? She asks.

Yes, of course. I can do that.

Promise you'll let go of me, of what was. Please. You need to live. You can't let what was hold you back from who you should be.

More bangs shake the door in its hinges. The room shudders.

That must be for me, I say. I stand up.

< 2 >

> *With each breath you become more perfect.*

> *The old personality was never real.*

> *It's time to reset.*

It wasn't your fault, Vi, she says, and wraps her arms around me in a tight hug. *Just bad luck.*

The living room melts into the memory of warm ocean wrapped around my legs. The couch is a hastily assembled scrap wood raft, bobbing in my grasp. Erin lays upon a pyre of twigs and rags. A cloak hides most of her body, disfigured by the impact of the stranger's car zipping between neighborhoods. I'd gone in search of her ten minutes after our fight to apologize. When I found her, there weren't even skid marks from the tires. Just her crumpled body on the side of the road, slowly cooling. Then I was driving through checkpoints and across roiling canals, through flooded forests and newly abandoned coastal towns. An autopilot secreting her body to the coast, following myself around like a shadow. I didn't want them to throw her in a canal.

< 3 >

> *Let go.*< *RESET*>

I let go and she drifts away.

I watch the boat burn as it slides out to sea.

<*compilation successful*>

MONDAY

Tim wakes up at 6 a.m. to his alarm and listens to the CitTech weather assistant enthuse about the balmy low 90s she is forecasting for the day, complete with clear skies even, while he heats sulfury water for his instant coffee, still wrapped in the dark blue polyester sheets from his bed. The eyewall of the storm will hit tomorrow, and hit hard, like they always do, she tells him, but that will come later. Enjoy the weather. He'll worry about wind damage and flooding after.

It's Monday, and he wants to get an early start on his first day of work. Appearances matter, first ones particularly, so he carefully trims his beard, lightly gels his brown hair, and dresses in a well-fitted blue polyplastic button up. He's brushing his teeth, rummaging through the medicine cabinet for floss, when he finds a thumb sized piece of paper, stained a reddish brown.

*she exists where
the sims are real
TIM is no longer
when the headset melts
she is inside
Violet Sisú*

How strange. He doesn't know Violet Sisú, does he? He places the scrap back, tells himself to worry about it later. He can't have distractions, not now.

Tim drives to work, bouncing between potholes. He uses one hand to grip the wheel so the car doesn't careen into a ditch, while the other gently massages his stiff neck. The base of his skull feels like someone did masonry with a jackhammer. He must have slept on it wrong. Or maybe it was this mysterious Violet, he muses. He can't remember. He must have gotten hammered last night.

The car passes by a heavily patrolled camping area filled with flooded tents and scrap wood shanties, then past slumping buildings and rusting cars, which glisten, strangely pretty in their imperfection and decay, in the rare dawn sun. Occasionally he catches a glimpse of the far-off gleaming neighborhood houses behind their tall sharp fences, razor vine sparkling and gun barrels gleaming. They are unmistakably beautiful, so clean in the morning light.

A detour to avoid a new sinkhole brings him close enough to one of the walled neighborhoods to see remnants of a recent explosion. Scraps of torn and burnt clothes float into the nearby moat and the connected snaking ditches, the circulatory system of the sprawled metropolis, the southern beacon of hope on a hill, the broadcasts say. But the water remains stagnant despite the outgoing tide, refuses to drain the trash out to sea where it can be hidden properly.

Tim breathes in the stench of the organic decay while he waits at a checkpoint. It's oddly comforting. Outside his window, a man scavenges the soaked city, batting away the rat-sized isopods that burrow into the waterlogged debris he sorts through, their eager pincers closing indiscriminately. He won't be allowed into the clean zone like Tim. Tim's face, now that the new job's paperwork has been approved, gives

him privileges and protections, the CitTech contracting hiring manager overseeing the hiring for government contract managers had explained. The neighborhood's turrets track the scavenger's movements, ready. Tim's lucky to have this job, he reminds himself.

The white four-story building that Tim pulls into occupies the entire block of a slight rise in the landscape, and has ample parking. It's a desirable location, with several palm trees sprouting yellow-green fronds, their roots not yet completely waterlogged. Tim smiles. He has a good feeling about this job. Even the parking lot his loafers squish across is more than a foot above high tide, the pristine pavement is new and smooth and dark and impervious to the rain.

The receptionist is very pretty in a way that makes Tims feel like there's an isopod ripping free from his tight chest, but he lets the odd feeling go. He catches a slight scent of rosemary as she rubs the back of her neck with a pink manicured hand. The color is a little juvenile for her, isn't it? But that's not nice of him. She should hear how lovely her outfit and makeup are, how the world needs beauty, now more than ever, but he suppresses himself. Men don't say that sort of thing.

"Hello, Tim," she says. Her voice is soft and a little throaty and familiar, at least to me.

She hands him a badge, a strip of plastic with his name, photo, and sex. She indicates a spot for him to press his thumb.

"Verify your identity and sign the loyalty pledge, please." He presses his thumb into the indicated spot until he feels a pinch and a drop of blood spills onto the badge, and

he thinks of a shattered mirror, of a knife sliding through cracks in armor, of a dead woman holding his hand as he sobs, and he staggers before catching himself. The badge blinks green with approval as databases return the right answer.

“You’ll need it with you at all times,” she explains. “It’ll give you access to the first floor and unlock the correct bathroom once a day. They’re always thinking about our safety and well-being, isn’t that wonderful? You’ve joined an amazing team.”

“Who are you?” he asks. She pauses before responding, and he wonders if he asked his question out loud, if he asked it to her at all. Her tan skin glistens with the morning humidity. For a moment her freckled hazel eyes grow unfocused, looking past the man in front of her but not through, and he feels a connection, a spark of recognition, before her eyes refocus and she returns the gaze and smiles.

“I’m Sydney,” she says. “Welcome to your first day at the Department of Health.”

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About the Author

Aster Olsen is a southern trans biologist who lives in Seattle. She's the creator and editor of TRANSplants, a zine featuring art and writing about transness and place. Her writing is published in *Autostraddle*, *Inner Worlds*, and on *Itch*.

Find more of her writing at <https://asterolsen.com>.

PERFORMANCE REVIEW

If only Dra were real. But Dra is Tim, a young man on a CitTech gig contract working a dead-end job at the Southern Free Republic Department of Health for a boss with a rifle across his back. But that's no problem, because the job pays the bills for Tim to spend his evenings entertaining fans of a popular fantasy virtual-reality role playing gameshow as the evasive assassin Dra. Then one day he logs on to play-act from his decaying apartment and discovers his headset's virtual assistant addressing a stranger, Violet Sisú.

Tim knows it's a simple case of identity theft and he should ignore it, like he does everything that's not a simulation. Except Dra's last name is also Sisú. And Tim keeps remembering a woman he used to love who has all but disappeared. As he investigates, his carefully packaged life begins to spiral out of control as he discovers that CitTech is keeping secrets, and the clues lead inwards towards Dr. Brygfield, the dispassionate innovator of CitTech's popular psychoviral-therapy, the very therapy Tim does every day.

Binaural beats twist together with polyleather headsets, thundering storms, distant databases, and isopods swarming over decaying infrastructure to explore trans isolation and grief, dissociation and derealization, the fragility of state control, the cyclic nature of progress, and what perseverance means when one's identity is erased.