

6-foot pine:
life and romance in the chondemic age

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A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2021

Committee:

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Program authorized to offer degree:

Creative Writing and Poetics

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University of Washington

Abstract

6-foot pine:

life and romance in the chondemic age

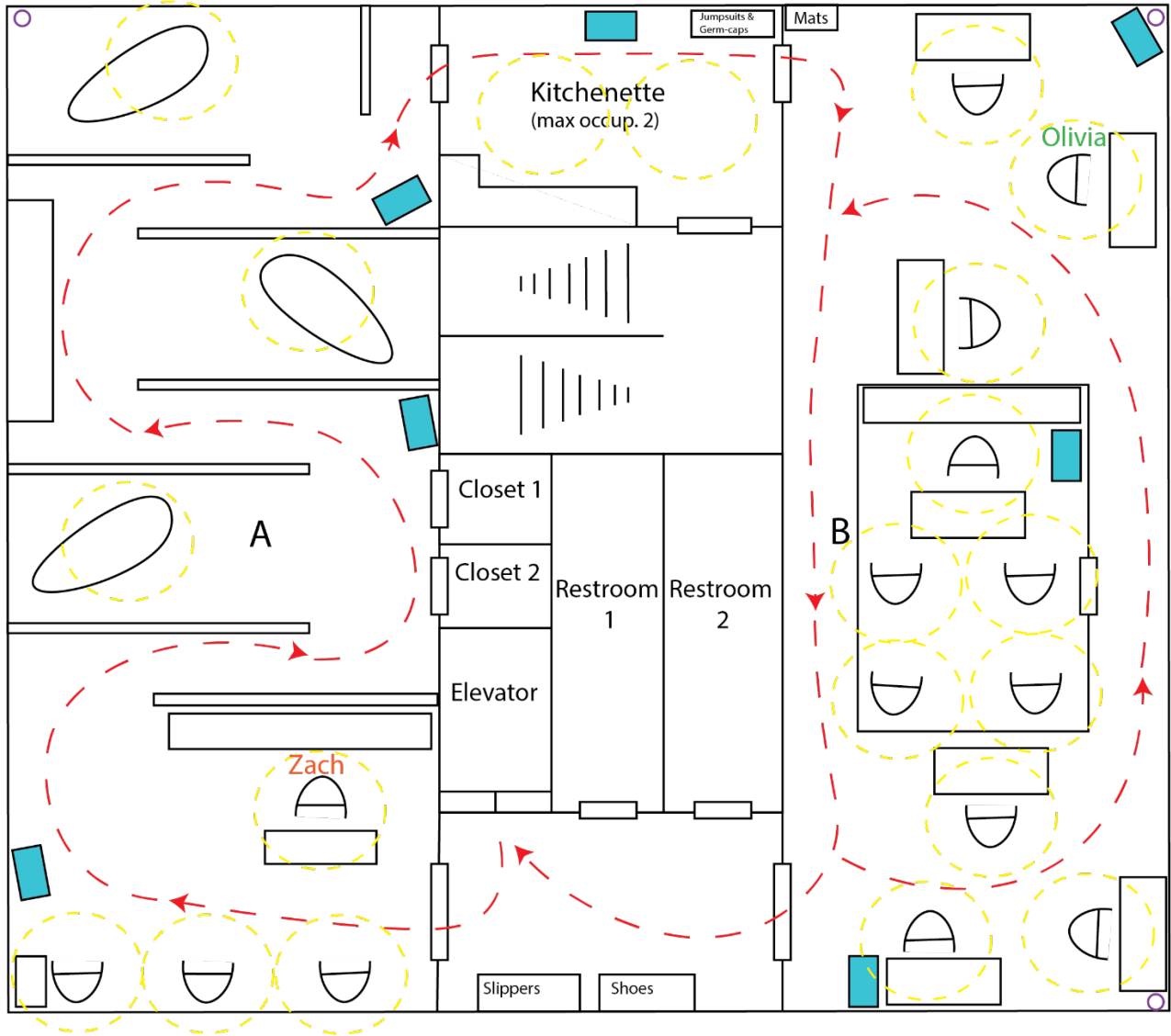
Cliff Watson

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

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6-foot pine: life and romance in the chondemic age is a hybrid work of speculative fiction that interrogates attraction and connection in a near-future time of chronic pandemics while under the persistent choking ravages of climate change. Zach, a dental receptionist, artist, and comic enthusiast, and Olivia, a get-it-done senior accountant, start a passionate office romance during the twelfth year of the latest pandemic, a time when their every movement and interaction is carefully circumscribed to prevent contagion inside, while their lives outside the office are shrouded in a near-constant smog. Despite these challenges, Zach and Olivia, guided by Captain Capsule, their comic-book muse, deepen their connection. Along the way, they navigate the constraints of office politics, corporate power, and technological intrusion, and face head-on their relationship to nature and personal monstrosity. As suggested by the title, *6-foot pine* explores distance and boundaries, whether physical, familial, romantic, or cultural. Mirroring how Zach and Olivia's relationship pushes against all confines, the story plays out across a diversity of forms including live theater, narrative prose, concrete poetry, and virtual reality to build an immersive and participatory world for the reader and audience.



Air cleaner



Clockwise path



6' safety zone



Locator beacons



Dental chair

Lovelorn Towers, 7th Floor

Office A: Wave Dentistry
Office B: Vortex Accounting

Zach
Olivia
Protagonists

Cliff Watson
Office Layout Supervisor
Lovelorn Towers
Flowplan redesign

6-foot pine

life and romance in the chondemic age

By Cliff Watson

for

Mom, Dad, Lili, Anabel, and Saffi

A note to the reader

Some thoughts on realization for live performance are available in the back of the manuscript.

Order of Acts

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Act 1 – Breathtaking

Scene 1: Directions

Zach checks in Mrs. Walker for her emergency root canal. *Glad I'm not her.* He rubs his hands with cleanser as he watches her follow the dotted line on the floor and sit in the puce chair, 6' from Mr. Yugio in the seafoam chair. Bored, Zach leans back at the reception desk and listens to the golden oldies piped into the waiting area. No magazines to tidy or coffee supplies to restock. They have a shelf with bottles of water but nobody has taken one in the last three years. With two pencils, his water bottle, paperclip box, and keyboard, he plays along with the drum solo from Phil Collins's *In the Air Tonight* until the hygienist leans around the divider wall and clears her throat. *Sigh.*



Olivia taps furiously on her keypad while staring at the receipt before her. *Ugh. Why can't these fuckers just send a digital copy?* Next one. Next one. Wearing nitrile gloves, goggles, and a respirator mask, she carefully picks each receipt out of the shoebox, enters its data into the tax accounting application, and deposits the receipt into a bag labeled *Entered*. After completing the data entry, she seals the box back into its delivery case, removes her gloves, and sanitizes her fingers with the Scrub-o-Matic, which still freaks her out because it looks like an electric pencil sharpener. She removes the Tempseal from her mug and drains the last drops of her mint tea. *I'm so thirsty today. Must be this new charcoal filter drying me out. Maybe Zach will be in the kitchen.*



Vortex Accounting Social Distancing Manifesto

Last updated July 7, 2020

Dear All Employees:

1. Employees will apply an atmoscleanse upon entering the building. Remove shoes promptly upon arrival at the 7th floor and use the provided sanitized slippers.
2. Employees will confirm personal hfone registration with building locator beacons, then sanitize their hphones. NOTE: IF AT ANY TIME YOUR ID TAG IS FLASHING CRIMSON, YOU ARE WITHIN 6' OF A COLLEAGUE AND BREAKING PROXIMITY GUIDELINES. STEP AWAY FROM YOUR COLLEAGUE.
3. Employees will wash their hands upon arriving. Open the bathroom door using the no-hands optical gesture entry system.
4. Employees will reach the office entrance via the clockwise circulation plan. Fraternalization with our floor neighbors, currently *Wave Dental, LLC*, is discouraged due to increased risks of exposure and transmission.
5. At our office entrance, employees will place a newly laundered company jumpsuit over their street clothing and a hair germ-cap upon their head. Note that we have discussed this at length and bald employees are still subject to the hair germ-cap company regulation.
6. Upon entry to the office, employees will pick up a disposable mat and follow the arrows on the floor to their workspace. IF YOUR ID TAG IS FLASHING TEAL AND BEEPING, YOU ARE MOVING IN THE WRONG DIRECTION.
7. At all times, maintain 6' of distance from your colleagues, and in the rare case that we have visiting clients. The bilirubin lines on the floor are provided to help you maintain this safety margin.

8. When leaving the office, wipe off your chair, remove your disposable paper table mat, follow the clockwise floor arrows to the exit, place your used regulation jumpsuit and slippers in the bin marked *DIRTY*, and exit the office.
9. Leaving the office during the day to use the restroom or kitchen requires reapplication of rules 4 through 7. Catheters and camel packs are available for an additional fee upon request.
10. If you are done for the day, collect your shoes, wave your hand to summon the elevator, and have a nice day.

Any questions regarding these regulations must be addressed directly with the Floor Captain, Ima Miser, Cubicle C. Failure to adhere to the rules of engagement will result in de-meritization and/or termination.

Thank you.

CG/im



“Hey, Zach. How are you?” Playing it cool. Still blushing.

Zach grins. *Getting unsuited was so worth it.* “Hey, Olivia. Time for a coffee pod?”

They both reach up to the kitchenette shelf to grab a pod; their ID tags buzz and glow crimson, two hearts beating. Giggles times two.



Zach removes the air filter from the MaxCleanse 4000 in the corner. A plume of dust motes erupts from the pleats; he leans back as it drifts into his face. He places the filter in a garbage bag and tries not to touch his mask. *I hope they upgrade the building HVAC soon. These filters are gonna kill me. What do they capture anyway, besides dust?* He reads the side of the filtration device: “MaxCleanse 4000 filters dust, soot, pollen, viruses, bacteria, and mold spores.” Great.

Zach drops the filter down the waste chute and returns to his desk. He spins slowly on his chair, lifting his feet to drift unimpeded. *I think she likes me. I'd ask her out, but where would we go? Every day we have sanitization procedures and proximity warnings inside. And smog inversions outside, except if we're lucky and the full moon pulls the soot particles away. Once a month. Ugh. I wonder if the filters capture pheromones? Maybe without them I would know if she had been in the kitchen before me.*



She gazes out of the window at the empty street below, careful not to place her hands on the windowsill to avoid another decon procedure. A sprinkling of sooty particles coats the outside of the pane. She turns and looks at the cleaning gizmos at her desk, at everyone's desk. Besides the Scrub-o-Matic, there's the pen dip, the keyboard UV-lacer, the anti-microbial seat cushion. She looks down at her regulation slippers. *If I could teleport over to say hi to Zach, I wouldn't have to do a full decon. If I left my badge and hfone here, no one would know. I wonder if that would kill the germs? Surely teleporting would remake my body from new molecules, new electrons when I was reconstituted over there. It wouldn't have to reform the germs too, right? Hmm.* She lifts her mask to sip her coffee and looks out at the lengthening shadows on the empty street.



The ComicRebellion Conference at the Evergreen Conference Center is packed. Not the thousands of attendees of yesteryear, but at least a person every 10 feet. Captain Capsule, Light Goat Comics's gender-fluid hit character launched in 2022, is the costume of choice because it makes desperate socialization simpler. Visuals, mini wrist-speakers, but no spittle. Depending on your model you might have a flip-visor to grab a bite to eat from the vending chute, otherwise you have to grab your item and step outside to a spot in the gardens, where you can slip out of character for a moment, exposed. To feel dangerous, alive, even in the smog. Zach is translucent pewter, with the pulsing argentine rim from Series 2. When Olivia arrives, she's classic Series 1. *Of course.* Honey gold with a Tuscan Sun garland. Zach rotates over her way.

"Hi. You look great!"

"Thanks, you too!"

Grinning like high schoolers, they head to the first event, a panel talk by the authors and illustrators of *Captain Capsule*, *Illustrious Girl*, *TKO-Smell*, and *DoughStar*. They take their seats, 6' apart, in the dim back of the hall. Oh so gradually they scoot their chairs together, ever closer to the floor-grid of electrobeam separators. They lose track of the on-stage happenings. *What discussion?* They are an inch apart, the hum of the grid raising the follicles on their arms, hands pressing the inside edge of their suits, their connection electric, defiance a hair's breadth from absolute, straining outwards towards divided coalescence, sweat quivering on foreheads, hearts pounding, *I don't know how, but I can feel her! I...*

“Ah-hem,” says Ms. Wong, the hygienist.

Zach’s chair tips all the way back, his head hitting the filing cabinet. He leaves the Captain Capsule action figure (Series 2) where it falls under the desk. His grin switches from fevered to professional. Blink.



A moment alone in the restroom stall, suit-free, in reverie. We’re sitting on a park bench. No. On the porpoise-slate rock in the park, the big one by the cedar grove. Yes. We turn our distance detectors off, no one can see that far from the main trail anyway. The air is uncommonly clear. We can still hear the screaming of the children batting an illuso-ball back and forth over a barrier net. Zach reaches out and unzips my extern-suit. Zach and zipper. Zounds. My heart pounding. His scent is strong and a rumble rises from my throat. Zach’s fingertips gently brush my skin. That part is no longer separate from him, it is connected. Alone goes away. I can extend that touch in my mind, with my imagination, make it real over my body, feel it over all my skin. So connected, do we become one being then?...

< Flush > <Slam>. Ms. Wong leaves the stall next door, hocks a loogie into the sink, and leaves the restroom without washing her hands. Whistling “Can’t get enough of your love, baby.”



No appointments this afternoon, just waiting by the hfone in case a patient calls. Zach scribbles on a notepad. *If Olivia walks at 3.6 mph, and I walk at 3.5mph (her legs are a little longer), is there a chance, in the clockwise office circuit, that we will forever trace non-overlapping paths, and never meet again?* He frowns. *Sometimes, I might choose the shorter path, not double-back to her desk after taking the shortcut by her boss's office if I had already seen that she wasn't there. To try to catch up. Would we be like quarantined ships in the night, looping in the fog, stuck in a relentless whirlpool, never to collide, yet also never to ground upon the shores of hope and good fortune?*

Sigh. *Olivia could solve this.*



She surreptitiously slips in one earbud. The ending of *From Sorrows to Sparrows* (1948) streams on her hfone. Savannah has left in a huff, Junco has won. She watches while Vesper Fox fixes her a martini. Cracked eyes. Ice. 2 ½ ounces Lloyd's distilled dry gin. *He really loves her.* ½ ounce dry vermouth. Junco no longer shaken, Olivia stirred. Strong, happy. Tears roll down her cheeks, drunk on love. She wipes the screen. She gasps when the toothpick pierces the olive.

Let's do this.



They meet in the 7th floor lobby. 4:30 AM. The building is open, but no one is in the office yet. They have some time. They leave their shoes, but don't put on jumpsuits, or sync their hphones to the monitoring beacons. Whatever. Wandering through the floor, touching all of the surfaces, walking backwards, forwards, counter-clockwise. They are dirty, disobedient. Devouring. Kick off their slippers. No suits, but no touching. Yet.

He finds a skydiving video on the internet, cranks it, the rush of air from the speakers palpable, projects it on the wall of the big waiting area, now their dark empty arena illuminated by the freedom of flight. They open the windows to feel real breeze on their skin, strip down to nothing, freeze, jump up and down, sweat, freeze, laugh, jump again. A flock of finches congregates on the building ledge, shares songs so close, then flits away. They raise their arms and mirror the stance of the skydivers, elbows bent, countdown from 10, stepping closer with every beat, radiant. *As I meet you where you are, and you meet me.* The rushing air lightens as dawn approaches, sun's sparks dimming the artificial screen. Hearts racing, their fingertips touch first, fingers slide together, palms pressed, they both shiver. *Are we ever changed now?* Faces so close, his and her warm breath, clouds from inside now outside, condensing on noses, cheeks, lips. *How can we be contaminated when we have become one?*

The first rays clear the far horizon, pierce morning's twilight. Eyes wide open, yet blinded. They move by touch, and exhale, and inhale, breaking the cycle again and again.



Scene 2: The shell of virtue

how it could play out

Characters:

ZACH MCDONALD-XIAO, 20s, office receptionist for Wave Dental.

OLIVIA ALI-OLAFSON, late 20s, senior accountant for Vortex Accounting.

MRS. PECULATIA LAMOORE, 50s, the accounting manager.

DR. TRYSÖN GNAWBIT, 60ish, partner of dental practice, European accent.

MS. JANET WONG, 40s, hygienist and Floor Monitor for dental office.

MS. IMA MISER, 50s, accountant and Floor Monitor for accounting office.

OFFICE STAFF, various persons.

The entire cast represents the racial, ethnic, ability, and gender presentation diversities of modern urban centers.

Scene 1: The noble choice

Lights up. Zach and Olivia are seated center stage, wearing only their company jumpsuits, not fully zipped up, without any other clothes on underneath.

The WAITING AREA has been turned into a trial room – on one side, the two office managers sit next to each other at a desk, blocking the door out of the office to the lobby. On the other side, by a doorway back to the dental service area, the office staff members sit in chairs less than 6' apart, with Ms. Wong and Ms. Miser in front. The occupants are bathed in an obnoxious yellow light from above, like being surrounded by a bile-tinged bubble. Where the borders overlap (between the chair occupants), a spear of burnt orange light descends, highlighting their separation.

Zach and Olivia's clothes are on the desk, and above the stage a skydiving video is playing on repeat.

MRS. LAMOORE. Right, thanks for the information summary Ms. Miser, Ms. Wong. That all seems pretty clear.

Ms. Miser and Ms. Wong look very pleased with themselves and sit down, ignoring the increasingly reddening orange at the borders of their 6' spheres.

Mrs. LaMoore stares at Olivia and Zach.

What do you have to say for yourselves, hmm?

Olivia looks at Zach. He nods.

OLIVIA. *(She stands.)* Distinguished members and colleagues of Vortex Accounting and Wave Dental. I apologize – we apologize – if this all seems rather unusual. I assure you, we did not intend to subject you to such an arduous cross-company trial process. There are fillings to attend to, receipts to file, clients to soothe, forms to be submitted. The important work of our professions, the lubricating of the daily grind of personal and bureaucratic care. That's what you, we, should all be engaged in at this time. And yet, here we are. And herein lies the problem at hand.

She paces a bit in the limited space.

Thank you, Ms. Miser, as always, for your astute attention to every infraction, your uplifting scrutiny of every detail of my, our, office lives. I don't know how we would *ever* get on without you. *(Pause.)* I'm sure my downfall, as you call it, from 9-time Employee of the Month, when my wisdom in the ways of the accounting world led me to be a resource for the entire team, nay, the entire company, when the senior staff gave me detail oriented tasks that no one could be bothered to do, or do right, when I clarified our understanding of the newest regulations related to the pandemic, when I... Well, to see me standing in a jumpsuit before you now... I'm sure this must be quite the blow for you.

Ms. Miser looks daggers at Olivia.

MS. MISER. Don't let them sweet talk their way out of this. It's not right what they did.

DR. GNAWBIT. Don't you worry, Ms. Miser, we've got everything under control. Everyone needs their opinion heard, and fairly, of course.

OLIVIA. Of course, of course. Everything is under control.

Pause. The power flickers briefly. An electrical whine down, then up. The colored lights dim, then brighten. The crowd mutters nervously, then is silent.

(With a *tight smile*.) And there will be no "sweet talking" here. Just truth, plain and simple. I admit, we did go a little crazy. But, aren't we all a little crazy in these pressure cooker times? With toxic haze outside, and inside – constant observation, endless rules, and any sterile connections that do occur are arduous to enact, and so brief, and... (*Breathes*.) These are no longer unusual times, they're what is, how it is. No caring touches. We need a drop of humanity, a crumb to nurture us. Maybe Zach and I did snap...

Zach jumps up, energized.

ZACH. No, we surged! All that passion, that mystery bottled up inside with no way out. We have to not only survive, but really live! (*Serious*.) The petri dish may be sterile, and needs to be, but we are under the microscope constantly, burned by the sun's eye! (*Sadly*.) The feelings and pheromones are filtered away. The air is dead.

Zach slowly sits on the ground, hugging his knees.

OLIVIA. (*Softly*.) Oh Zachary. (*Then, building with each argument*.) You're saying what's right. We should be freely loving each other, reaching out our hands, our clean hands, to touch the souls of those around us, to remind each other that we are real, that we matter. I can't touch everyone, and I wouldn't want to. But we could make changes. Maybe we could create pairs of tested, uninfected people, so that they can have a physical connection and know, viscerally, that someone notices their need, the emptiness,

their pain of separation, rather than strip away their humanity through company clauses and floor monitors!

Ms. Miser, sipping her drink, spits it out, spluttering.

Or, perhaps you're thinking you could send me away, to always work from my home-pod, shrouded in its germ-tent, nothing living passing in or out. But all that would do is kill my soul, alone.

Addresses the crowd of employees directly, slowly turning out to the audience.

Tell me, were you passionate about your career? *(A few nods in the crowd.)* Why did you choose your profession? Dental *care*. Removing discomfort, healing. Or, accounting, *a counting* of what is precious to our customers, what *they* care about. Unless you were just in it for the money, those career callings were your virtues talking. Thinking of others first. And that is noble.

But we are no longer there. I've heard you all through your masks, seen your postures, your gestures.

You feel the burden of distance, stuck, unable to be free. Am I right?

A few nods in the crowd, yeahs. Ms. Miser and Ms. Wong look uncomfortable.

Then with that frustration, embittered, you curse the client that actually does come in, fearful despite the protections in place. We cannot go on like this. We are dying from the inside out, disconnected physically, and emotionally, from our colleagues and clients, the building doorman, even the unknown person passed in the lobby. We are no longer living our values. The lives we want to inhabit, to explore, are too distant to be examined in our current state: we are only existing within the shell of virtue.

Olivia sits on the ground next to Zach.

The crowd murmurs, discussing, some nodding.

MS. MISER: *(Standing.)* That's as good as an admission of guilt.

MS. WONG: *(Stands as well.)* Guilty for sure.

The crowd is silent.

Dr. Gnawbit stands, nods.

Mrs. LaMoore stands, eventually nods.

DR. GNAWBIT. (*Resigned.*) The Floor Monitors have spoken. By company policy, your positions here are terminated.

Prepare the chute.

Ms. Wong walks eagerly down the hall, opens a garbage chute near the closets.

Ms. Miser approaches with a hypodermic needle.

The lights slowly fade.

OLIVIA. Will someone go to my house and water my plants, please?

ZACH. (*After some time, echoing.*) What if there was another way?

Blackout. Silence.

Scene 2: Wax and wane

The sounds of the air cleaner are heard first. The lights slowly come up on doorways, stage right and stage left, of the same WAITING AREA as before. The sun is shining through windows at the back of the stage. [The sun is a bright spotlight straight out at the audience.] A skydiving video starts playing above the stage, its soundtrack filling the room with the sound of rushing air as colorfully dressed humans, parrot-like, bail out of planes into the clear air.

Zach and Olivia are center stage, naked, entwined, and asleep on the floor. Coworkers gather in the doorways right and left.

Zach stirs and sits up. He is backlit, illuminated by the sun. The audience sees mostly his outline. He looks to the crowd of coworkers right and left, then to Olivia. Music starts playing and Zach sings.

[Song: Captain Capsule]

Your form, so small and low

A speck in a constricted world

Yet mighty like an infinite flock

Of sparrows

Singing their freedom

Together

Hand in hand

We'll flee the dead air

Soaring as, Captain

You protect us

With shields argentine and rose gold

Impervious

To the petri dish's sterility

Climbing past the avian crowd

Rising high

You shine so brightly, golden

You could be confused for the sun's eye.

We surge to the sun

To the sun

To the sun

[Captain Capsule instrumental music continues, building towards a climax with the scene.]

We see that Zach has a silvery sheen; Olivia has a golden sheen.

Zach gently caresses Olivia. She stirs, sits up.

They hold hands, stand, face each other, briefly grab both hands, then turn to face the windows. The gels throw a bile-yellow sheen over them, exposing them, the light becomes orange, then red red red. The golden sun gradually brightens, blinding everyone, blowing away the other lights. They wander hand in hand towards the window and leap out, disappearing downwards. White lights appear in back, the stage incredibly bright. A pair of winged shadows slowly rise up the back scrim behind the lights, towards the ceiling. One shadow tumbles down.

OLIVIA. Zach! Come back to me!

Blackout.

Scene 3: Sparrows

Fluorescent lights flicker on and buzz above the stage. Doors are stage right and left of the same WAITING AREA as before. The windows at the back have a gentle sun shining through. Chairs and tables are scattered, askew, around the stage. The sounds of sparrows can be heard through the single open window.

Zach and Olivia are naked, entwined, and asleep on the floor, center stage. Their clothes are scattered around them. Gentle, easy-listening-yet-ethereal waiting room music starts to play, but you can still hear the birds. Zach and Olivia both stir at the same time. They hold hands and look at each other. Still on the floor, and taking their time, they shyly get dressed. They stand up. Zach starts putting the furniture back in its proper locations, while Olivia grabs a spray bottle and cloth to clean surfaces. Olivia exits and re-enters holding two folded jumpsuits, cradling them in her arms like a small child. They meet center stage, smiling at each other, then walk to the windows. Zach puts his arm around Olivia's waist. Using his free hand, he closes the window. The bird noises cease.

Blackout.

END OF ACT 2

Interludes

Things that happen.

Gotta Bail

Take a memo *of course sir*
front desk to conference room to and fro back from the
brink rescue me flee the table one more number on the
heap *of course restock yes sir* must go must leap from the
heights of files piled high soar free of the contagion the
smell of sterile labor *yessir right away* well out on the wing
ready to fly she'll be there I know first step's a doozy but
can't stop can't wait see you later gators whoops tripped
aw shoot I mean 'chute here I come meet you for a laugh a
story share some dreams reach the supply closet to knock
some pencils loose you know what I mean before I go crazy
love you Olivia

Digiwallette, LLC "Your dreams, paid."

XR Statement Summary

Week of July 11-18

StreamVizWeavR Service

7/11 Together in Sepia, 2 viewer lic.
7/12 Tweets in Time (orig. 1963), 2 viewer lic.
7/15 It Starts as Friends in 4D, 2 viewer lic.
7/17 O Captain: Mile Captain [anim. remix], 2 viewer lic.
7/18 Bittie Wolf 3: In it fur love, 2 viewer lic.

Pirate Pharmacy ArrX

7/12
Cheesecurlz 3.79
Leatherette cond., 2 pk 2.93
Opticl r eyedrops 7.89
Glowstick cond., 2 pk 3.99
Buffalo jerk 5.79

Ming's House - Open 21 hrs/day - Take out / Dine in

7/11 *Welcome back user ZOsparrow, loyalty pnts x 20!!*
Garoupa w/ steam veg 14.59
Cumin lamb devour 16.89
Steam rice .89
7/14
Bean curd w/ eggplt 12.89
Singapre nood 13.29

Kixit Musicnet

7/12 Barry, Al, Smok dreams 1.9

On the ledge 

for a flock of sparrows

Your words of

freedom
flight

mean so much



View from above

*Zach and Olivia escape to their own atmosphere, breath, heart supply
above the emptiness of the banal core*

Floating flitting wending through bounding away our own floor ledge level above the fray reams and mugs and thumbtacks

sky

Where is Zach?
I need this faxed.

Delivery for M

the

Have you finished the

Stewie winning big in the
virtual league office pool!

to

Call on line 3

End of shift, restock
the copy pa

per

uphill

Your deadline for comple

flows

Olivia, do you have the
Thompson papers?

blood

Now

cannot do not reach not intrude upon not tap our meeting our flow our vein thick with our oxygen with us

Scene 4A: Deep thoughts, holo mind

Zach and Olivia coordinate their trips to the breakroom – so much decon, so little time. Olivia tears into a Nebuladoc Foamcafé packet and wanders over to the holoboard.

“Might as well fulfill my corporate obligations. You never know – I think there was something interesting posted a month or two ago.”

Zach smiles. He Quickbrewz some mint and joins her. Olivia is already slack-jawed, probably from some corporate drivel, so he glances at what’s in front of him. *I hope it’s just a notice about a potluck! It’s funny how we talk about having a “potluck,” but nobody is allowed to bring in a “pot,” just a sanibag of shareables that can be fed through the purifier. Words are weird...*

The familiar colorless hum cleanses his mind of other thoughts, a puerile *Om* devoid of internal eternity.

The message of the day pops front and center, filling every synapse:

Blastoconf Z89 [Prod data sheet BS-Z89 no D9]

Zero microbes allowed!*

Festive Rainbow Uniform Micron Particlebeams (FRUMPS)
ensure a safe meeting for e v e r y o n e

by
destroying Cloying Organic Germs (COGS)
and

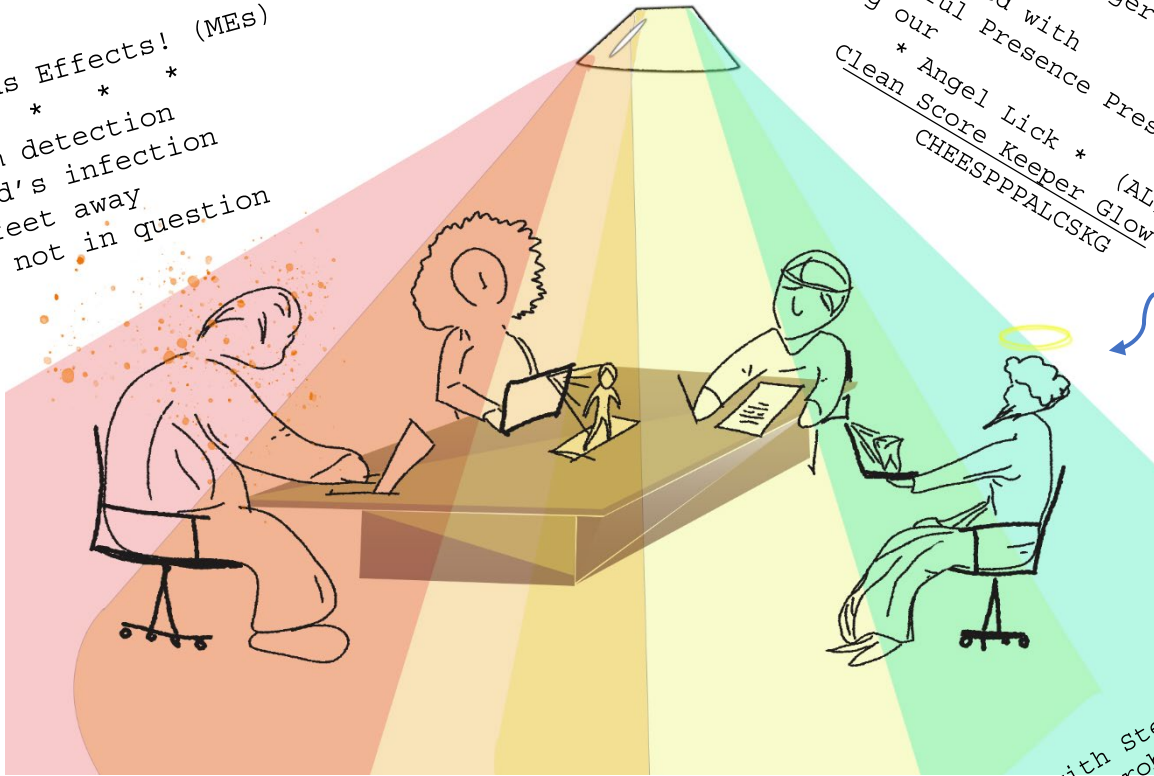
Eviscerating Expecterated Loogie Snot (EELS)

Let your valuable employees know you care!



Halo hallo to our
Clean Healthy Eager Employees
(CHEES)!
Get rewarded with
Powerful Presence Presents (PPPs)
using our
* Angel Lick * (AL)
Clean Score Keeper Glow (CSKG)
CHEESPPPALCSKG

Miraculous Effects! (MEs)
* * * * *
Germ detection
Fred's infection
6 feet away
Is not in question



Laugh with Stewie
- you'll probably be OK!

beauty casts a rainbow pall
vaporizing monsters yet
the optics of the prism schism
makes a chasm of wavelengths
between you and me and who I really am
are we hollow holo?
an illusory us
projected round a table
no meat in the meeting
just a sheen of acceptability
beaming

Side effects may include eye strain, nausea, flatulence, tinea pedis, skin tingling, static cling, office fling, ding-a-ling, elongated bowels, Scandinavian vöwels, moistened towels, Simon Cowell's
*89% effective as measured by FIB (Federal Infection Bureau)

As the image of the day fades, the emptily omniscient Om returns, duetting with a gentle matronly voiceover: “Thank you, Administrative Assistant Zachary. An educational subscription has been submitted for you and is waiting at your desk. Please evaluate the recently upgraded Blastoconf Z89 health apparatus (a CG Production) to better assist your fellow employees, then complete tracking form BIZ-TECHOPS-CONF-17. Have a nice day.”

The breakroom lights seem harsh on reentry. Plus fogginess. *All in the name of product marketing. Sign me up. Oh, never mind, you already did. Sigh.*

After a groggy kiss from Olivia he returns to his desk and reluctantly looks at his messages. Sure enough, the top holoitem is from Blastoconf. *Ok, as CC says, “Better bite the bit-bullet.”* He blinks to initiate the upload:

[Blastoconf Z89 Subscription – Action required!](#)

Zach is immersed in a 360-degree world of meetings. Following the instructions to observe and participate in the office “game,” he circles left to find employees discussing a merger. Up above them, a presentation on rolling out new accounting codes makes for riveting listening. To his right, new testing procedures for some kind of wonder widget draws heated responses from the participants, and melds with nearby conversations on investment opportunities, employee stack rankings, and morale budget. Nothing is clear, only certain words and phrases stand out from the looming din, like *process amelioration*, and *work-life balance*, and *scrum stand-up*. He tries to participate, injecting his presence into the gatherings, but all that returns are slogans, statistics, and legal disclaimers. If he moves down a hallway in the virtual world, he is admonished for not being in a meeting. He feels corralled, compressed and a little headachy.

Probably by design. In this world being in-the-game is all that matters. Does any meaning exist outside of participation? I am a strange visitor in a palace to hollow words. The looming meetings are like postcards from a staycation in a corporeal corporate hell.

Zach tries to rally humanity for one last push to escape. He enters

are we hollow holo?

But injecting visceral concerns into a fake world doesn't compute, and Blastoconf returns a garbled mess of Zach's words and its own.

Zero makes a chasm of wavelengths
microbes allowed!*
*89% effective as measured by
between you and me and who I really am
FIB (Federal Inspectorated Longie Snot (EELS)
are we hollow holo?
Eviscerating Expectoration Bureau)

Ah, at last.

And therein lies the way to salvation. For the structure that is created is almost beautiful, a colorful snowflake of truths and admonitions and double-speak where words overlap, turn-inside-out, and make

no sense in Blastoconf's defined domain. A rainbow reading to escape surrender to conformity, a foothold to the self and sanity.

Zach shakes himself out of the holoworld. He closes the message and turns away from the tracking eye.

Opening his secret administrative resistance file, he makes a note:

"BCz89 BS: Input poetry for a good time (wordflakes)."

Scene 4B: Holo mind, part deux: how I see the world through bare holes

Olivia lets the *Om* take hold. *Why fight it? It will be over more quickly. They can have my attention, but I get to decide if they get my care.* She is quickly immersed in the holo-ad:

My mask – a tragedy in 12 dodec-acts and two-and-a-half millennia

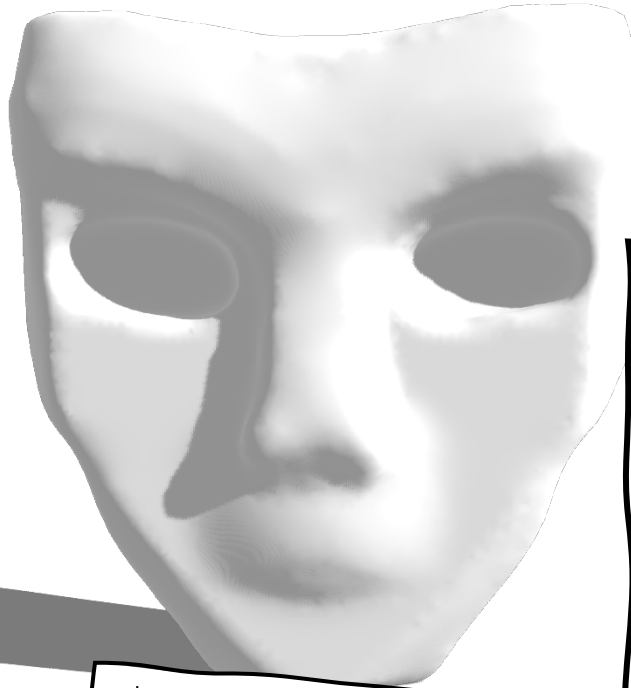
Custom ad rendered for Olivia (ID 14) in holo-*Om*-collab w/

Leventyear Manufacturing, LLC

"Ready for the mask-air-raid!"™

Leventyear Manufacturing keeps
churning out the hits!

"New models are spiffy sppiffy spffyy
splffy *spliffy* – breathe in!"
[nasal oral holes not an available option]



accessories to please
silico-elf ears! sani-feathers!
for your special alone place
to
separate
go fish swish swish
for protectish

round back
have your harness?
confess a hair muss mess
without it your visage
undressed

ready for you in any color you
don't want!
red pox to match your
fox?
I mean, locks, Goldie
er, socks

"I'm in my play
From leaving the pod
Till evening
When I wash my bod"
- Jingle, LM mfg. commercial
#72

**NEW – ketchup catcher
mask**
a red-rover cover-over
no eatin' with this bad boy
but yer ready fer
tomato fights

NEW – arctic lemon flavor!
unobtainable
artificially unreal
but all the rage against the
mask scene

NEW – fuzz fever
with ion-repelling
points!
brushed eyeballz
ogle the goggles
agog with antifog

where is your smile, employette
must should don't hafta
yet

a tall glass of maskenade
offers sweet protection
from airborne affliction
but sour deflection
from human connection

eye shields available at
additional cost!

socket lock it
germs can't rock it
spit L's not swell
these'll block it

So sorry, dude
nothing blöcks dirty lööks
but amygdalic fortitude

Leventyear Mfg.'s model 12.3 is for:
[best commercial voice please!!!]

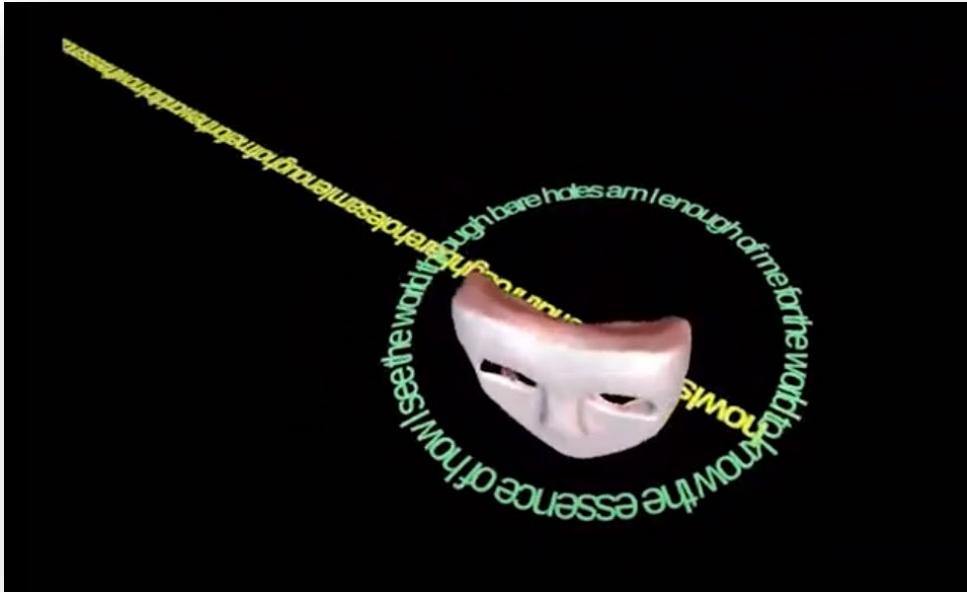
shielding the self(,) help
protecting others brothers mothers
complying with regulation nation
social pressure fissure
fashionable cobble
hiding how I ham, ma'am
hiding who I wham, sam
slipping in unnoticed
no "ping!" no no noping
self-promoting, (sup)posing as
vogue doge Venetian meme
dis guy's deceiving
make me someone new
speaking – don't mask don't tell
mask to
say it don't spray it

how I see the world
through bare holes
am I enough of me
for the world to know
the essence of

how I hope to reach
that singularly precious
peach

Snap, those ads make me dizzy. Hmm. That was a whole lotta confusing. Mask sales, I guess? I always seem to merge what I'm thinking about an ad with the ad itself. I wonder if that's how everyone experiences them? Oh so woozy...

[How I see the world through bare holes](#)



(a CG Production)

...

Olivia muses in her Herman Miller Aeron x29.

The late afternoon sun angles through the blinds, casting a barred cage into the floor, the wall, confining my desk, my shoulders, my face...no, my mask. Seared across my mask are tiger stripes, forging a frightful costume to terrify tiny foes in a daytime Halloween nightmare.

A brief glance at dull papers on the table, then a distant gaze.

My thoughts bounce. That's the only way I can imagine it: they bounce against the inside of my mask, amplify inside my skull, and make me want to howl. If I could remove this mask then I would be free to consider other ideas. But I am stuck waiting in this room, in this chair. In this concept of waiting. Worrying is up to me; actions are up to me. It is the waiting that persists. And there is no way to cut through the time, for no matter how urgently the gilded knife of me – my thoughts, my ambitions, my fantasies – slices through the danger that rings us, it can never cut all the way to the other side, for peril flows back in to fill any openings. Nature abhors a vacuum, they say. And god help me if the surge happens while my mask is tossed aside, angling to meet some other foe, or hanging loosely through my inattention. So, I must be alert and wait.

Looking about the office, taking in all that happens.

To be vigilant and patient is what a hunter does. Conserving energy, ready to pounce when prey is finally within reach. But now the tables are flipped and it is the prey who wait, I wait, always needing to be on guard.

Imagines Zach entering the room. His image slowly fades.

And how could I help my love if he fell sick? If I move to intercept his attacker – which I would do again and again a thousand times – my mask might slip and then I would be lost. Then he would be waiting behind his mask and I would be lying and dreaming, a mask of air sustaining me. Of course, what if my mask held strong? For it is now forged in tiger's iron! Yet, even a mighty tiger can get sick and die. The powerful can be vanquished by the smallest of foes.

She makes sure her mask is firmly attached and returns to her documents.

Scene 5: Interruptions

- Zach & Olivia -

Evening is falling, when the sparrows flitter flutter last announcements of how the light fades, returning to nests of sepia, chestnut, sienna, nests that leach to gray in the fade. A lamppost buzzes to life as the couple walk by, hand in hand, down the well-trod path, past the vacant jungle gym and the ever-running smog cleaners, up the rise and past the porpoise-slate rock, into the twilight of the cedar grove. From asphalt, to grass lawn, to bark-chip, the changing trail underfoot infuses their stroll with a curious meandering, a building of texture to shake the mind loose to wander and range far in the night.

- Ms. Misgr -

Only partially hidden behind a maple trunk, she peers through her spyglass at the couple entering the cedar wood. Her eyes narrow; she sneers. She slips the monocular into her great gray coat's pocket and heaves her bulk towards an unilluminated side path leading into the tiny woods. She fishes out a small penlight and flicks it on, the meagre illumination barely bright enough to see in the deepening dusk. In her gloved left hand she holds upright a used paper cup of liquid she found outside the flu testing clinic.

- Olivia -

Olivia breathes in. The cedar air instills the promise of renewal. Purity. After dark, this trail is mostly left to the raccoons, the coyotes. Joggers are home for dinner, the preschool children are having baths and getting ready for bed. The emerging full moon, and an earlier rain, has cleared the smog for now. The foliage does not completely block out the night sky above, and a few stars glint through the gaps. Zach's

hand is warm in the cooling air. *What I notice changes by the second. How could I be anywhere but here, and now? The silence and gloom. No, not gloom. Shadow? Yes, shadow, for the moon is rising, sending luminescent shafts of bone and porcelain through the trunks to the east. Silence and shadow open a time for reflection that the day's full-fidelity blows away. My thoughts are no longer trounced by crimson and canary and Kermit, but rather I discern the nuanced shades of bark and needle and soil as charcoal, ash, and platinum gradations. I see under the surface, see the branches' sweep as the trees' skeletons. Not just thighs and arms and fingers, but elegant as ossicles, for I hear their needles whisper as a night creature carried in their embrace shifts. As the moon, complete, rises, will it overpower my probing of our space together?*

- Zach -

Holding her hand on this trail to the moon. How could I be anywhere else? It is surely destiny, and why I can't but smile and wipe tears whenever she is near. I've been on this trail a thousand times, yet somehow it's different tonight, and I don't know where I'm going. This wood is so small; I can't get lost. Who's up ahead, near the bend? A guide? Yes, it must be a familiar to ease the path, to clarify the little uncertainties we meet day, or night. Or, it could be an ancestor! Am I on a spiritual journey? It does feel that way sometimes, for my lineage does stretch back and forth through whens and possibilities. What is it that Captain Capsule says? "Every step forward connects you more deeply to your forebears." Yes. Someone to show me the way. A phantom guide! Cool. I should remember that I can't ever be lost. I wonder who it is?

- Sparrows -

The sparrows are nervous tonight. A dark intention lurks, and spreads like death through the underbrush. They twitter, but not too much, for there is safety in anonymity. How safe can a nest of stick and twine be?

- Olivia -

I am connected more deeply now to everything. The darkness, the moon, they make me stronger. I wonder, do I make them stronger? What a strange thought! Yet, it feels right. We see through each other's eyes, a nighttime lunacy. Maybe I have moon fever. Just as I hold the hand of my love, the branches reach out to caress me, fir to fur, ready to... fur? Those eyes ahead in the dark do not frighten me, I want to watch the night, to make the night with them in sympoiesis, to range between the trunks, and howl in the glow. Is that too much to ask?

- Sparrow -

The sparrows are beside themselves with worry. They flit forth on brief sorties, uncharacteristically risking owls and worse to sweep the forest floor and warn of impending doom. For naught.

- MMZO -

Ms. Miser pulls her cloak's hood low over her head. *Olivia will pay for her treachery. Calling me out before the whole company. I know she put that no-good receptionist up to it, entrapment-by-Twinkie in the kitchen. 20 years there too!* Her heart is beating fast, the rush of blood loud in her ears. But not as

loud as the rage echoing in her head. She hears their footsteps on the trail and shuffles out, throwing her left hand, holding the cup, forward. However, her aim is not true, for what does she see but Olivia's eyes of balefire, her face a gray-furred mask of fangs in an extended snout, grinning and hungry for integration. Startled, afraid, Ms. Miser's arm jerks into a defensive posture at the last second, sending the cup's contents into Zach's face. With a strangled gasp, she turns, runs back into the woods, tripping over fallen branches, tearing her coat and shredding her arms and legs in her haste to escape.

- Zach -

Zach blinks the water out of his eyes; he is in the hospital two days later.

Scene 6: Coma chameleon – a musical

Cast

OLIVA

ZACH

DR. KIP KAPSOOL, Zach's doctor

AUNTIE BODA, Zach's long-lost aunt

MS. JANET WONG, Floor Monitor

DREAM ZACH, dancer

Hospital staff, patients, and visitors – nurses, doctors, orderlies, security, et al.

Scene. Our story commences in a hospital room, where we see a single bed containing a patient, a young man in a medically induced coma, fighting the ravages of the defining illness(es) of our times. A phalanx of devices pumps, slurps, and prods his body, sending and receiving medicines and hope to fuel his sleeping visions. A TV mounted high on the wall plays a silent video of skydivers. Olivia, in medi-shield and hospital guest jumpsuit, sits nearby, fatigued and worried. The fluorescent light is harsh, the sky outside the single window overcast. Olivia is reading a holomessage; she gently rubs her stomach.

NARRATOR. Welcome to Kapselglücklich Memorial. Bubble beds are standard issue, for they offer superior germ containment while allowing the passing of cords, suction tubes, and similar items through their surface. Like the way a magician passes a long needle through a party balloon. Nurses and doctors can enter via brief doorways to the patient at the heart of the bubble, the reflexive negative pressure providing a burst of viral security by sucking the air into the bubble rather than spraying contamination out upon those in the room.

Zach's bubble transitions through a variety of hues. DR. KIP KAPSOOL enters the room. Their coat sparkles with gold dust.

DR. KAPSOOL. (*addressing OLIVIA*) Olivia, it is nice to see you again. I hope they are treating you well?

OLIVIA. Yes, everyone has been very kind to me.

DR. KAPSOOL. That is good to hear.

DR. KAPSOOL checks the readings on some machines, and their clipboard. They pause.

In this induced coma, Zach is stable for now, and responding as expected to treatment. Zach is a strong young man and, while his condition is serious, we are hopeful about his prognosis. Olivia, as you know, Zach has indicated on his paperwork that while he is unconscious, you have ultimate decision-making power over medical matters. We have some decisions to make about how we proceed at this point. From looking at the data...

Dr. Kapsool keeps talking, yet their voice fades out under Olivia's song.

[This won't go on forever – Olivia's]

During the song, various hospital staff pass by and through the room, connected to reality in a way that she cannot be. OLIVIA tries to convince herself that everything can be okay.

So pale, so still

Where did you go?

To watch, with you not watching me,

Is the hardest part I know.

The fever burns,
Your rabid tether
But, no, this won't go on forever...

Filling all our days,
These pandemics
Rot the very core of us,
One scourge after the next.
Why should he come home
To this heavy weather?
Surely, this can't go on forever?

BRIDGE:

Oh, could we take hands
And dive into the sky.
With sparrows at our backs,
Away from trials we would fly!
Race to the sun and back
Then down the forest glen
Where my lupine attack
Would slay your tiny leviathan

It is your silence
That makes me afraid
Of losing you for good
For I can't find your words above the fray
And while the bubble's embrace, not mine
Halts your life's surrender

I know that this can't –

This won't – go on forever.

The music segues into a slow shuffle. The staff gradually changes from looking busy to dance-like motions.

[Asemic Chorus – Hospital Staff]

The janitor stylishly glides by on a floor cleaner machine, the dinner crew spins the tray rack, and the nurses start a slow groove. A dance number follows. The group will punctuate key phrases with accompanying gestures and a wordless vocalization, expressing disappointment, acceptance, or hope.

Unh

Hmm

Uh-huh

The hospital staff gently drifts back to work.

ENTER AUNTIE BODA. Auntie Boda enters the room wailing, looks at Zach, and wails some more. She looks at Olivia, stops wailing, raises one eyebrow, then starts wailing again. She dramatically puts down the packages she is carrying.

AUNTIE BODA. (stops wailing, picks up one package, starts and stops wailing quickly, then walks over to Olivia) Good morning. You must be Olivia. It's lovely to meet you. (Leans over for an elbow bump.)

OLIVIA. (*Bumping her elbow.*) H-h-hello?

AUNTIE BODA. Oh, where are my manners? I'm Zack's Auntie Boda, although he doesn't know me very well. (*Whispered.*) I'm a bit of a family outcast. Some disagreements about arcane practices – but we won't dwell on that, will we hon'? (*Speaking normally, if demonstrably, again.*) Anyhoo, I haven't seen him since he was 10. But, I do keep up on his Global Community Shares, which is where I learned about you. He is quite smitten! (*OLIVIA offers a little smile.*) Anyhoo, I saw what was going on and came straight into town to set things right. To set the people right. (*AUNTIE BODA looks closely at OLIVIA*) Set *all* the people right.

AUNTIE BODA takes a box out of the bag she's holding, and throws the bag over her shoulder onto the floor. Music starts vamping in the background.

Have some pie.

OLIVIA. (*Rubbing her tummy.*) Oh, no thank you.

AUNTIE BODA. (*She opens the lid.*) It's strawberry meatloaf pie.

OLIVIA. (*Brightening up*) Oh, really? Thank you. (*She takes the box.*)

Music starts.

AUNTIE BODA. Right, job one done. Now for job number two. What we need to do is instill his soul back into his body. You see...

[Song: You need to feed a body with love – Auntie Boda, Ms. Wong, Dr. Kapsool]

While singing, AUNTIE BODA pulls from a bag a Zach doll that lights up in rainbow colors. She proceeds to feed the doll using a miniature pie. Eventually, the doll blinks in synchrony with the bubble around the real Zach, and with the TV set.

When a body is down and out
Flat out for the endless count
Low on energy, stressed beyond belief
There's one thing that can bring relief
You need to feed a body with love

During the interlude vamp music, MS. WONG enters the room, wailing differently from Auntie Boda. She is carrying a small box and a large foil Captain Capsule balloon. OLIVIA looks not very impressed with MS. WONG's arrival.

OLIVIA. Ms. Wong.

MS. WONG. Oh, Olivia, I am so sorry that this has happened to Zach! I know you don't think much of me, but I feel terrible about what has happened. It's true, I haven't been the friendliest coworker. I let the Floor Monitor title go to my head! I got a little mad with power, and it's my fault that Ms. Miser was let go, which is what pushed her over the edge. Won't you let me make it up to you? *(She holds out the balloon. OLIVIA doesn't take it.)* I understand your anger, I do, and I have no right to expect forgiveness. With Ms. Miser gone, I have no competition, no foil at work, and no one else will talk to me. But that's probably as it should be. I need to change the way I am, to work harder to earn your trust. To shorten the distance between us to 6 feet of nothing. Won't you please accept my gift as the start of an apology? Maybe it will help? You need to feed a body with love...

Won't you please accept my gift?
An apology, to help uplift
And bring a golden sheen to your future
A feel-good nutritional high couture
You need to feed a body with love

During the verse, OLIVIA thinks for a moment, then nods. MS. WONG opens the small box for OLIVIA. OLIVIA lifts out a golden, glowing Twinkie, cradling and lifting it before her in the second half of the verse. DR. KAPSOOL enters and observes what is going on. Music vamp continues.

DR. KAPSOOL. Ladies, you're on to something here! This is the way to set a body on the path to healing!

BRIDGE:

The data agrees with all you say
Nutritional love will clear the way
Better to bless, and not to pray
To float beyond this dreary day

During the bridge, hospital staff enter, spinning the meal tray racks. DR. KAPSOOL attaches the Captain Capsule balloon to the head of Zach's bed. At the end of the bridge, beams of sunlight illuminate the room from the single window while the balloon dances by itself. Hospital staff enter dancing with trays, providing food to AUNTIE BODA and MS. WONG as well.

[Starting with "We can overcome...," AUNTIE BODA and MS. WONG join DR. KAPSOOL in the verse]

As Captain Capsule tells us all
We can overcome the wall
That separates living from somewhere else
And heals the soul's and body's welts
You need to feed a body (feed a body)
You need to feed a body, with love!

All the actors freeze on stage. Dreamy, meditative music starts, led by shepherd's pipes and woodwinds. The lights dim until only the rainbow lights on Zach's bed are visible. A white spotlight illuminates a slumped DREAM ZACH downstage, and real ZACH's lights further fade. He dances a paean to health, the chorus of gestures starting slowly, but growing in strength as the dance develops. Never frantic, but strong, graceful, heartfelt. Kneeling prostrate on the floor at the penultimate moment, he sits up straight at the climax, staring straight at the audience. In one swift gesture, DREAM ZACH's light goes out, ZACH's rainbow bed light becomes bright. ZACH sits up in bed. [DREAM ZACH quick-changes into a hospital outfit.] All the stage lights go on.

ZACH. Olivia, will you marry me?

Musical chord. Entire company sings.

As OLIVIA nods and hugs ZACH...

COMPANY. With love!

Blackout

End of Act 5

Act 2 – Us-making

Interludes 2

Another day *camping* at the office in THE DEN?

5:17 AM

Groaning dark cloaks
 our furious furry frolic
 tooth and claw
 imprints a vacant cubicle
 our grasps gasps
 naked nooks of us reclined up and down
 ack unexpected arrival
 stifled moans fits and spurts
 giggles
 scramble skedaddle
 only detritus
 scattered in shadowed corners
 would betray us
 oops back later
 for pieces of you and me



3:15 PM

I think these
 pants have
 wool in th
 em th ey m
 ake m y par
 ts itch and c
 hafe r aw s
 ome thin
 g fie rce.

today's menu

working woman has to eat

Hurling

Twinkies with guacamole
Marshmallows in tomato soup
Broccoli string cheese pork again

Hurling

Get that garlic away from me
Vegetables from his home garden

Hurling

They say it's a good sign
Clothes tighten
Belly hello

Why we need to love one another?

Scene 1: VR = very real

Gladys from Accounting rolls her eyes, smirking over the remains of a ham and cheddar sandwich in the breakroom. Her romance novel, *My Thighrippy Session*, sits unopened next to her crocheted lunchbox cover on the table. She studies Zach and Olivia closely as they lean against the counter, bathed in proximate red.

Forks descend into Tupperware, twirl, and lift out conjoined noodles. *Intense looks, and suppressed giggles.* Leaning in to masticate, their ever-converging chewing stops just shy of immodesty when they hear Gladys snort. Gladys chuckles and sweeps her debris into her bag. Cackling swells to belly laughing.

“Get a room,” she says. It’s the funniest thing she’s said all year. Really great. Tears are flowing and guffaws echoing as she exits, the door muffling the sound when it swings shut.

Hmm. Why not?

...

Zach circulates through the offices to find Olivia at her desk. Most people have gone home, but she’s head down, cheeks puffing, focused on a thick stack of yellow folders from a client she’d classify as a miscreant.

“Hey, can I show you something?”

She looks up, frazzled, but her face instinctively softens on his. A sweet face. Innocent. *Too* innocent.

She narrows her eyes.

“What are you up to, Zachary?”

“You’ll just have to see. Come on...” He starts to walk slowly away from her desk with a barely perceptible bounce and swing.

Olivia looks with distaste at the pile of papers, sighs, and throws her hands up in surrender. She applies regulation sanitizer and follows Zach along the office’s bilirubin safe-distance path, becoming ever more puzzled when they do the full decon procedure to enter the other office, enter the breakroom, then exit through the door to the stairwell.

“Zach, where are you taking me?”

“You’ll see. Very soon.”

Heading up one flight of stairs, Zach stops and looks at the wall. Olivia has only been up these stairs a few times and had never noticed the subtle outline of a doorway there. Zach produces an old-fashioned key from his pocket.

“Admin privilege is to hold the keys to the castle. This is an old storage room that nobody remembers is here. Well, almost nobody.”

There is no door knob, but he puts the key into a tiny hole in the wall, and turns it to the left. *Click*.

“Three weeks ago, when Gladys said to “Get a room,” I thought that not just any room was good enough for you. Come on in.”

Zach swings open the door, revealing a black hole of nothingness. Olivia shoots Zach a mystified look, but he gestures for her to go in.

“The light will turn on when you enter.”

As she steps through, she sees the blink of a holoscan above her, creating lenses calibrated for her eyes. Then the world explodes in fuchsia.

A room impossibly long stretches ahead of her, the plaster walls a warm bubblegum, as if mashed with a thousand pink-elephantine carnations. Zach gently touches her back and she steps forward. Twinkling lights ring the ceiling, reflecting off balloons of sparrows twittering greetings as they float across the room. She crosses in wonder to the end of the room where a bay window shares a sunset over a golden hayfield. Three steps and she's there. *Of course, it's not a real room. But...*

"Wow. I'm... Wow. How did you...?" She trails off and finds his face, watching her with his heart. He grins.

"It's an art project, using those media skills. I dedicate it to the best woman I know. That's you, by the way. I lov..."

Muh. Muh muh.

"...e you. You know, it's hard to finish a sentence while being kissed."

Muh muh.

Later, they had a very good night.

[Storage closet](#)

Scene 2: Entrails, part 1

There are no more appointments that afternoon and the “on-call” dentist has stepped out for an exceedingly long lunch. Zach pulls up the seating chart on the visio-screen and tries to make sense of it all. The reception is to be held in *Willie Longbottom Hall*, a community center named for the Hammerpants fabric magnate born in this neighborhood 55 years ago. Seating for 100, and a great rate, but the hall features an odd waist-high divider jutting in towards the middle of the room from the south wall, splitting half the seating area in two. These legs, combined with the brilliant purple and orange drapes, create the illusion that the room’s center is at the lodestone of a set of trousers, a fallacy. *Is there a good leg for seating? One that’s unseamly? How close to the crotch should I put Grandma Xiao?* His family don’t all get along so he has to get the distribution right.

Shuffling icons around on the seating chart is frustratingly ineffective, so Zach prints out the pages and arrays them in a grid on his desk. Still too sterile. *What was that thing Auntie Boda taught me when I was 10? ... Ah, yes.* Zach surveys the items he has cleared to the edges of the work surface, or placed on the floor to make room for the chart. He rifles through his pockets, the desk drawers, his lunchbox. *Pieces of life to read the signs from life.* He places a few dental records under the edge of the pages, part of an almond butter/raspberry jam sandwich at one corner, his Captain Capsule figure (Series III) in the middle. He walks around the desk three times, adding an item or adjusting an existing one on each rotation. *Hmm, still not quite there...* He brightens suddenly, takes out his hfone and punches in a request. “Crunch muffin” by *Lunasee* starts playing. *Olivia sang that for me when we first met.* Grinning. *Ok, gotta focus.*

Zach stands erect, stares at the board, right eyebrow raised. With sinuous motions he approaches the chart, humming the melody as the lyrics ring in his head -

*“The bite is a mystery
Where is the commitment?
In touch with history
Let’s do lunch
Crunch, muffin”*

Come on folks, let’s do lunch. Family history pulled from his temporal lobe: childhood days in Lampreyness Bend, Mom and Dad bickering. Cousins visiting on rare trips from Shenzhen, or Inverness. Trips to Chinatown, Auntie Aileen making him eat black pudding, Uncle Chen unsuccessfully teaching him to fish on a breezy estuary. Nose close to the page, his glances and thoughts are everywhere, merging the past with the present, trying to build a matrix of acceptability.

Combined with this is the detailed list (*of course*) of the Ali-Olafson clan from Olivia. Cousin Sven can’t be too near Uncle Ragnar once the drinks come out. Auntie Layla can’t be too far back because she can’t hear. *Maybe she can be near the PA system.* Watch out for the simmering blood feud (“They said they would behave,” *she said*).

Unexpectedly, the key turned out to be the dental records. For what else to bind them all but eating and good oral hygiene? Procedure codes, discount plans, treatment options, fluoride varnishes, extractions, fillings, implants, bite-wing x-rays, surgical masks all combined into a lattice from then until now, highlighting the connections that cannot be broken and those that should not, could not, exist in the current reality.

Zach finishes up his notes, satisfied, and leans back in his chair. The lazy late-afternoon light streams in through the western window. He watches the dust motes dance, musing. *It’s crazy how I got to... here. Why would anyone put me in charge of keeping medical records or greeting people in need of care? There’s literally nothing in my life that has prepared me for this. Certainly not my almost associate’s*

degree in general distribution studies and animation. But, no, that's just a symptom. The real stuff is earlier. My childhood is a haze, a maze of distant memories. Of standing in the kitchen while Mom stir-fries bean curd and bok choy, telling me things that I don't remember because apparently I can only concentrate on the popping of the oil, the smell of sesame. School days, winter's kiss making the asphalt drop-off area slick as absolution, a treacherous Olympic-level glide in my low sneakers but a dream in the making. Always a dream. On the playground, when kids piled-on to tussle or chase but I wanted to stand back and look, to see how they all worked together as a picture, a video, what made Doug slow and Steve fast, why Jeff walked with a swagger. How could I imagine that, and them, into a different reality; why were they that way and did they know how it made everyone else feel?

At the same time, Captain Capsule always seemed to understand. After bedtime, under the covers with a comic and a flashlight, seven CC series from gold through vermillion. Before the pastel phase. What they did, I did. I climbed that stockade to rescue the farmworkers; I travelled to Xarnonn to negotiate the peace treaty with the Puspeople. That's what instilled my worth as a person, drove me to accomplish what I have.

Zach sits up straight.

What am I talking about? It's true in my heart, but a lie to my memory. That was the Captain, not me. They're the doers, not me. All I've ever been is an observer.

Zach paces about the room. To do something.

So, Olivia has picked me, out of a thousand thousand humans, to spend her life with, to make strides, to reach goals. To do. Me. An observer. And Olivia is... there's no one like Olivia! Smart, impassioned about doing what's right. She accomplishes so much – I mean, she's already a Senior Accountant! And she's funny and elegant and beautiful and... and I'm a receptionist. With a Captain Capsule action figure.

Zach stops. He can't hear the air vent's wheezing.

What is she thinking?

~*~

Where is Zach? He's not picking up.

Olivia hangs up and looks out her window. Sunset was a half hour ago and the sky is cruising towards amethyst. She stands, grabs her fob, and heads toward the door. Stops.

Is he having doubts about us?... No, that's ridiculous. We've been solid for a while now. And it's Zach! But what if he is? She purses her lips. Was I too pushy? I mean, he asked me... but did he know? Is that why he asked? Belly touch. Sniff. Blink.

This is crazy. I'm going to find him. Jingle. Slam.

Driving under a universe of uncertainty, the heavens sparked, painted purple. Not perfect, their depth diminished by some haze and the city lights' intrusion. As Olivia drives, she remembers. *The important things. Or... those with resonance?*

"Put away that comic book and go study. You have a test tomorrow. Discipline builds character."

"We're so proud of you, Little Olive. You've brought us such honor."

"Olivia, your dress is a mess! I'm disappointed. But I know you'll do better next time."

"Congratulations on getting into the program. All of our hard work has paid off."

"Olivia, say 'hi' to your new math tutor, Dinah."

"Olivia, say 'hi' to Thomas. He comes from a very good family."

“Olivia, fetch me some cold compresses, your sister is not well.”

“Olivia, we’re going to have to leave you for a while, the medical care is too expensive here.”

“Yes, Nalla is making progress. But how are your studies? You must keep going.”

“Olivia, I don’t have time to explain, I have to return to the hospital. Congratulations on your promotion.”

“Olivia, oh Olivia, her light has gone out. You are our light now.”

“I think it would be better if you didn’t come. It’s too hard.”

“What do you mean you’re getting married? We haven’t even met the boy. How inconsiderate.”

“Alright, we’ll come. And the cousins are coming too. All of them.”

I’ve processed this before. It is what it is, the way they are. But does that make me the way I am? In some ways, of course. Nose to the grindstone. Respectful distance.

“Zach, you’re so funny!”

But I also had to cope in my own way.

“I love how you notice me.”

I've probably watched too many rom-coms. Read too many romances. Processing emotion takes time.

“Yes, let's try a dance class together!”

When are we done processing? Never.

“I tried baking shortbread for the first time. Happy birthday, my Zachary!”

But connecting over the small things, the fun things, the sad things, makes us whole. Or, less fragile at least.

“I love you.”

There he is.

Olivia parks the Glidewheel, dons a mask, and strolls through the haze towards the lake. A solitary figure leans on the railing near an airbubbler. She removes her mask when she enters the fountain's envelope of cleansing mist.

“Hey you.”

“Hi, Olivia.”

“I missed you earlier this evening. So much. Got a little worked up.”

“I know. I'm sorry. I got stuck in my head for a while.”

“Wanna talk?”

“Yeah. Mmm, you smell great...”

“Took a shower before dinner. Also, I got hungry and had some mint cookies.”

“Thanks, I needed that hug... Olivia, why do you love me? No, that’s not the right question. Why did you agree to marry me?”

“Go back to your first question for the answer.”

“But why? I’m not being clear. What I mean is, you are so fabulous in every way. How you think through problems from all the angles; the way you listen, how you move through the world with confidence. How you laugh at my jokes, and notice the birds with me. How you try new recipes for me, even though you don’t ‘like to cook.’ When I think of the places you could go, how the world could become a much better place under your care and guidance, I wonder why you are... settling for me. How do I make you better?”

Olivia doesn’t bother wiping her eyes. In the glow of the streetlamp, rose gold threads flow past her shaking mouth.

“Settling?” Softly. “Zachary, listen to me very carefully. How you welcome everyone into your imaginative world, with stories and pictures and performative explanation, whether they recognize your creative genius or not. Your thoughts on sparrow communication, and how they respond to our passions. Your concern for everyone’s well-being. Crazy little dances in the office, just for me, when you think no one’s watching – but they really are. Because most of them love your dances too. How could they not? You have shown me so much love. How can I not but want to spend the length and breadth of my time with you?”

And then there is kissing and holding.

“Oh, by the way, I’m pregnant. Isn’t the amethyst sky lovely tonight?”

You are cordially invited to the wedding of

Olivia Ali- Olafson



Zachary McDonald-Kiao

at Willie Longbottom Hall

6:00 P.M., First Full Moon in March

R.S.V.P.

Formal jumpsuits requested (themed projections available)

Presented by Jeremy Eco Documentary & Event Services

[*** DOCUMENTRY WORKING CPY - data drive OAOZMX001 ***]

~ *The Groom Awaits* ~

[TRANSCRIPTION 1 TRK 23, Mar 7 7:13:07 – interv w frnt of hall, groom]

Zach

Yeah, that's a lot of people – more than in Captain Capsule issue 37, *Minionpalooza*, ya know? It's hard to say who can or can't come. I think the pageantry of the event is what draws them in - everyone loves a show. That and a three course meal. We do have lots of cousins, though, and with the latest travel restrictions I guess everyone was itching for an excuse to get out. So, I can't blame them. It's not really our event. Hmm.

They'll be glad they came.

~ *The Bride Awaits* ~

[TRANSCR 1 TRK 25, Mar 7 7:21:34 – interv w bck of hall, bride]

Olivia

...Sure. I do wonder what it would be like to have a fancy wedding dress with a gauzy veil and lacy sleeves, and noodles of sparkling silver thread you could trace with your finger... Or to throw real rice, or to not have the fire-gel artists confined behind plexiglass. Of course, Mom wants me to have all those things because she couldn't – but that was because they had no money then. Now we can't have them because of PPE jumpsuits and masks and all that rot. My folks probably wouldn't have wanted fire-gel artists anyway. Still, what difference would those things have made to our wedding, to our lives? It's all so ephemeral. I mean, I would never have worn a fantasy dress like that again.

It's after the tux-aura jumpsuits go dim; after the cake is cut, snarfed, digested; after the karaoke quiets; when everyone goes home with their honeys to speak softly of inconsequential things: that's where real living happens.

[TRANSCR 1 TRK 26, Mar 7 7:24:09 – pro staff observ]

Bethany, Officiant

Knock knock... Hi Olivia, are you ready? Everyone is seated and Zach is waiting.

[indistinct voice heard]

Good – here we go!

~ Entrance of the Bride ~

[TRANSCR 1 TRK 27, Mar 7 7:30:02 – extend shot – bride entr, vows]

Olivia

Hi everyone. Yes, let's fade the music down a little more, Mr. DJ. Can you all hear me as I stroll here?

Spiffy. I'm so glad all of you are here. I really am! I hope everyone is warm enough. We're going to get both warmer and cooler starting...now. Jeremy, would you open the skylights? And let's bring the lights down. I've had enough of this wedding jumpsuit – down she goes, too. Thank you.

I love the caress of moonglow, don't you? With the smog inversions it doesn't happen often these days, but when moon is full and the sky is clear, it makes the thinnest, most elegant suit you'll ever wear. The only one you'll want to wear. Well, it's Zach's and my favorite anyway.

Zach, meet ya skivvy in the middle.

Again, we're so glad that you could make it. As you know, it's the twelfth year of the chondemic age.

Not humanity's finest moment, stumbling through restrictions, constrictions. Held back from human touch for the welfare of self and others. But this journey clothed in wedding PPE, filters and bubbles, this journey lined in plexiglass, this journey of testing and retesting, of international travel arrangements and quarantines, this journey, journey, this. This journey down the aisle, through family and friends, is a declaration of appreciation and love for the *work* of where we come from, of who is in our thoughts, our dreams. Our flesh and bones are built of you, by you, actively and passively forming the two people before you. The 'u' in 'us' as Zach says. Or maybe it's the Captain who says that.

Hi Zach.

Zach and Olivia

This bubble of us
a capsule of care is our promise that we will persevere,
together
with love and hope
no matter how the world
worms its way forward
through thick cloudy days
through sick society's
frayed health and nerves
to talk and touch with tenderness
to listen, when my heart splits my sternum
or when a quiet wood calls to
my weary, beaten-down soul
I swear an oath to be your shield your shelter
your Captain
your hope, your love
I'll polish your spirit your bubble argentine
and yours Aurelian
To keep you safe to filter you from harm
because it's what we can do.
It's what we must do.
As long as we both shall live.

~ *The Reception* ~

[TRANSCR 1 TRK 78, Mar 7 8:34:23 – pro staff obsrvd]

Dion, head waiter

Gus, back up Makenzie down on the west cuff. Remember, walk the seam all the way down the leg.

Walk the seam. Damn these crazy Hammer pants!

It's a thirsty crowd tonight, and lemon water is liquid gold. Too legit.

A gentle whistle like a summer wind.

[TRANSCR 1 TRK 106/114/115/122 , Mar 7 9:22:08–10:06:52 – guest intvw & roving ambient obsrvd]

Big Cousin Harald

Oh, ya, a beautiful joining. I'm a sucker for glow-ball dancers and some good champagne. They really thought of everything bringin' this together, they did. And it's nice to be included. I mean, look at this place, it's like a wall-to-wall United Nations of family!

But let's step over here a sec... They're not just bringin' us to the bosom, see. No, they're clever ones, Cousin Livvy and her man are. Puttin' me at the same table with Einar for the first time in twenty-odd years! Can't refuse with all this lot here, though. Don't make a fuss, Inge says. That's the way of it, then. More years, more complication. But can't forget history, can't. Blood doesn't forget.

This is some wine. Nice stemware.

Inge says I'm stubborn. Maybe. Ok, yeah, sure. You betchya. But dead sheep don't just come back from the grave except in nightmares. Einar had one job. I know he's made more for slippers than cold iron, but, by Mjolnir, just close the damn gate! And if you make an error, fess up like a man, like family. Don't stab me in the back. It took forever to clear up that mess with the town elders.

Inge says it's not so simple. "Unrequited rejection wreaks violence on the psyche," he said last night. Again. Holding on to bitter broken days won't make anything better, he said. Maybe. I for sure don't want to rain on this kos shindig. Sitting in Einar's close orbit is a start, I guess.

Well, she's not here, but I offer up this toast: I'm glad for you, Livvy. Glad for you.

The buffet's not bad. Never had halal lutefisk afore. Einar, would ya pass me the mustard? You betchya.

A flagon, a man, a gulp rings renewal.

Aunt Aileen

Well, I never! I finally got used to these PPE pantsuits and now it's weddings in skivvies with moon bellies. I just can't keep up with these new traditions! I'd prefer at least a modicum of decency, really. And Chen, would you believe it, my jumpsuit pattern is going dim already. Fully-charged battery my arse! What a scam, I tell you, what a scam.

Tsk, tsk, hrmph

Auntie Boda

Mmm, this is the magic right here, yes it is. Joints creaking, bodies speaking. The voices – and more - will emerge tonight, mark my words. I feel it in my bones.

Creeeeak, pop, pop, pop. Creeeeak.

Trysön Gnawbit, DDE

Yes, Zach's worked for me for 6 years now. We're all quite fond of him. I had no idea that Zach had so many interesting relatives. And some of their teeth look quite well maintained.

Clench, click, click, click

[TRANSCR 1 TRK 52, Mar 7 8:14:24 – obsrvd, roving cam 3]

The parents

So, do you come to the city often?

No, we haven't been back for years. It'll be 6 years next month.

Really? But surely you've seen Olivia since then?

Unfortunately not. We stay in touch by hfone. How about you? Have you kept up with Zach?

Yes, we're fortunate to live just a few hours away.

It must be nice.

Yes, yes.

Well...

So...

Sorry, you go

No, you...

So... Zach has been very kind to us. And he has quite the comic book collection.

Yes, a lifelong passion. He even studied animation in college.

And yet he is a dental office receptionist?

Well, Zach tried an internship at a tech company, but decided that his dreams didn't match the corporate mission. The monsters there suck your soul, not your brain.

So, he's been doing his own creative projects and chose a job on the side to pay the bills. One that wouldn't distract from making his art.

Ah, a true bohemian.

You know, I haven't thought about this in years – decades, actually – but I wanted to be an artist once. A weaver.

I had a little loom that sent the threads shuttling to-and-fro, crossing, caressing each other in poppy and flamingo. I was so proud of a sunset tie I made for my father. But he didn't care for it, and I had to milk the goats, you see, so that was that...

Mrs. McDonald-Xiao,...

Call me Michelle...

Michelle, I do hope that we can stay in touch.

I'd like that.

The cluck of approval, the tang of regret.

[TRANSCR 1 TRK 172, Mar 7 10:15:07 - THE WEDDING SONG cam 1 brd&grm table, merge with cam 3 @ dance flr]

Zach and Olivia

Olivia, I shyly said hi

And shyly passed by

But this guy, for sure, he knew

That to avoid being blue

So true

It's too far, to be 6 feet from you

Zach, I got so excited

And wished we were plighted

And requited, if I may say with tact

We're on the right track.

Fact:

It's too hard to keep a 6 foot compact

In the era of us

There was never any malapruss

For we've sussed, of course, from the start

That you've conquered my heart

My Bonaparte

We're no longer 6 feet apart.

[TRANSCR 1 TRK 172 CONT. FOOTAGE, Mar 7 10:21:22 – roving sly-cam 2, dance flr. ***NOTE: NOT 2B 4 INCLUSION – CLIENT Reqst – PRIVTE USE ONLY***]

Zach and Olivia

Bum.	“Nice moves, Zachy.”	Ba-DEE-
Ba-DEE-		yum,
yum,		“Those tango lessons paid off.”
Bum.		Bum.
	“Sure did.” <i>Prominent eyebrow wiggle.</i> “Whooo, I’m getting hot. I don’t think it’s just the dance. I’ve been under so much pressure to have the day go right. Thank goodness Mom looks happy talking with your Mom. Dad’s passed out in a chair. I didn’t know he drank that much now.	
		“Let’s get some air by the window.”
Ba-	“Yes, it’s better over here. Oh my,	Ba-DEE-
DEE-	burning, burning...”	yum,
yum,		“Olivia, your eyes are shining
Bum.		like amber coals! Maybe it’s the lights?”

“Maybe... I like that it’s less busy here
by the window, too. Like we’re our
own pack separated from the
innocuous herd.”

“I knew you’d like it over here.
The moonlight is really pouring
in now. We really lucked out on
clear air tonight thanks to the
Worm Moon. Oh, are you
panting? You really are hot!
Your lovely teeth are bathed in
blue, though, aqua in a lunar
bath.”

Bum. “The moon is lovely, calling, and this
Ba-DEE- night air heaven-sent. Ah, I’m really
yum, revving now... Zach, are you ok?
Bum. You’re shaking!”

Ba-DEE-
yum,
Bum.

“I...I’m not sure. For a moment,
in the moonglow your teeth
flashed long points in teal; in the
breeze your hair waved like wild
frosty fur. And then I heard, felt
a deep rumbling growl!

Maybe it was in the tango
music. It's gone now... Olivia,
what's going on?"

"I don't really know. Sometimes
something rises up from the depths
of a person. A heritage older than
culture. The amygdala talking. Don't
you ever feel it? I thought we all had
monsters inside."

Bum.

Ba-DEE-

yum,

Bum.

"I... am not sure. Perhaps we
do?"

Ba-DEE-

yum,

Bum.

"We do, I'm sure of it. And when she
comes out to play, her talons grasp
my neck and wring an animal scream
from my gullet. When my eyes flash,
and lock on you, there's no other
forest path to trod.

It's time to go, my brave Zachary.

Trust me, my love?"

Ba-DEE-

yum,

Bum.

"Always. I am pledged that your
demons are mine as well.
Olivia, take me..."

Ba-DEE-

yum,

Bum.

Ba-DEE ah-wooo.

[TRANSCR 1 TRK 204, Mar 8 12:37:28 – filmmkr POV, cam 1]

Jeremy Eco, Event Coordinator

...and that was when I heard the curtain rip. Fortunately, the place is insured for this kind of thing. You should have seen the damage from that bat mitzvah last July. But, anyway, I heard a great tearing sound, and an animal yowl so deep, that it sent the shakes right through me so as I dropped my camera. I looked and saw a silhouette bounding away from the center, toward Sweetcreek wood. Backlit by the moon off the pond, a big shadow maybe carrying a smaller shadow. I don't know what else to say about that. The event was pretty much over then, everyone drifted away soon after. Never did find the bride and groom that night, they must have slipped off, know what I mean? Happens all the time. Found a dead cat outside later too. Or, I thought it was a dead cat, although come to think of it all I saw was gray fur bits, so I don't know. Quite an event anyhow.

Scene 4: Unpacking

The scent of loamy decay, of fertility, lingers, as does that of sweat and the smell of him and of her. Dirt and moss cakes his knees and elbows, is ensconced under his nails and plaits his hair. Returning to the earth, perhaps? It's hard, on little sleep, to process what has happened. Zach lies naked under a gentle, giant oak on a small rise at the edge of the copse. His head is nestled against Olivia's bosom, her strong arm around his shoulder. Her breaths come slow and even, and surprisingly deep despite the child within.

The full moon has drifted lower as the night has progressed and is now framed by the oak's protective bottom branches above, and the trees lower down on the other side of the lake. The air still wondrously clear, its light illuminates every blade of grass in platinum clarity in the meadow descending to the shore.

Clarity. That's what is missing. I really don't know what has happened, whether I should be terrified or enraptured. Why I agreed to run into these woods after seeing – what? A demon? A monster? No, a wolf. I mean, she said the monster was inside, but what I saw on the outside was a wol... Sigh. I don't know what I'm talking about.

Movement catches his eye. A rabbit hops carefully out from the tree cover to nibble on some grass.

What's he doing up at this late hour? I thought rabbits were crepuscular. Early bunny gets the clover, I guess; best watch out for owls.

As if on cue, a large form glides silently through the air across the clearing. At the last second, legs with grasping talons extend for the kill. But instead of the squeal of death, or a quick bounding away, the bunny flips onto its back and kicks up with its broad strong feet. *Oh!* The owl shrieks in surprise and narrowly avoids crashing into a trunk. The rabbit turns back over and resumes its watchful munching.

How'd the bunny do that?! Is it stronger than other bunnies? Or smarter? Or... Ah, maybe it's more powerful through artificial means. Augmented. A bionic bunny with weaknesses addressed, just like... just like... Olivia?

When we were kids the waves of mutating infections started accelerating. The official quarterly vaccines could get delayed and some scared, desperate parents took their chances with more "experimental" treatments. I remember some people got sick, even died, from some of the syrups or injected serums. There was even an AI solution with nanobots that was briefly in the news. What was it called...? Wilson Nanotech?...Woolson...? Oh. Wolfson. Yikes. Tiny nanobots, too small for the eye to see, were injected into people to battle infections, tiny mechanical wolves on the hunt, hounding the viruses in packs and ripping them apart. I wonder, does Olivia have a bionic wolf core? Like Captain Capsule issue 162 (anim'sode 57) where Gamma-Ra howls at the moon to resonate the lunar landscape, causing the satellite dust to rise up and...

The owl floats in from the other side this time, coming at the bunny from behind. Talons extended, there is no trick move this time. It grasps the bunny and flies up towards a high branch to enjoy its late night snack.

Or maybe not.

Zach shifts to watch Olivia's belly rise and fall. Her skin, dusted with glossy spores and pollens, reflects the moon in miniature. He reaches his hand out, forming a giant astronaut with his fingers to walk the lunar surface. He wiggles his other digits like tentacles and now a Lovecraftian beast wanders the craters and plains, kicking up tiny dust clouds. Olivia dreams on.

I wonder if there is a culture that does not talk about the moon? Probably not. And wolves range from the Americas to Europe to Asia. That classic silhouette on the hill with a muzzle raised howling in front of a silvery circle must be everywhere too. And werewolves.

Zach pauses.

What is her family lineage's connection to wolves? I would need more information <yawn> to know where to start. I wonder...I...

Depleted from the day and night's celebrations and surprises, Zach drifts off into an uneasy sleep. Kept aloft by a stiff updraft, he soars with sparrows through craggy towers and canyons of white clouds. A map unfolds beneath him showing ancient lands as the flock travels from east to west. Crossing a mountain range, pillared Persepolis in old Persia rises below. Small wolves with light gray and tan fur roam outside the city's walls. A tiny she-wolf suckles a human child far to the north. Flying on, ancient Athens appears below where a robed Pythian priestess convulses, contacting what lies Beyond at Delphi. Honeyed strains of a paean to Apollo rise up to him, the refrain echoed by the sparrows:

Pyth-i-a crossing the bounds of the fathomless void to the O-ther,
Guiding our way to Apoll-o, He who lights all of our jour-neys
He son of Le-to, she-wolf-des/cend-ed-from Hy-per/bo-re-a
Temp'rate-home in the far north-lands, realm of-e/ter-nal sun-shine

The sun god Apollo raises his vast arm, directing a pack of gray wolves to run north into the forests of Western Europe. The flock swings north, following the lupine horde through plains, valleys, and mountains to a fjord on the west coast of what is now Norway. Under an aurora borealis two huge wolves with thick dark-gray coats accompany a one-eyed man. They lope out to meet the arriving pack, devour every wolf whole, and simultaneously birth a daughter. Swooping in closer, the sparrows alight on a tree next to the child. An olive tree.

Olivia?

Zach startles awake. *There are no olive trees in Scandinavia.*

A noise from the illuminated meadow draws his gaze. A tree downslope and to the right is raining pinecones. An agitated squirrel appears at the end of a branch and shakes its tail at him, defecates, and runs back to the trunk.

Weird.

A shadow flickers over the moon, but he's too slow to see what it is. Could be a flock of birds, or... A spaceship? *Hah, yeah, right. But it wouldn't be the strangest thing that's happened today. This whole business reminds me of Captain Capsule issue 289 where the furry alien Freki came down to Earth and body-snatched the people of Geriville. Freki made them howl at the moon and chase deer. Nobody knew what was going on until the Captain staged an intervention. They convinced Freki to release the people in exchange for passage to the Alaskan wilderness. That was such a good story! I remember it so clearly, that...*

Is this all my imagination overacting? I'm not used to drinking champagne. And all the pressure of the big day. Maybe this is all a fantasy. That would make a lot of sense.

The moon is almost at the horizon now, large, yellowing, and fading in brilliance.

Oh!

Zach holds his breath as a lone Canis lupus strolls into the meadow. It turns its head and watches him for several minutes, then turns to watch the moon sink below the horizon.

When Zach opens his eyes again morning has broken. Olivia is sitting nearby, dressed in the tattered remains of her tango dress, watching him. She lightly tosses his own torn clothes onto his chest. She touches her belly.

“Good morning, hubby.” She smiles. “We’d best leave the park before we’re cited for public indecency.”

Zach blinks and smiles. “Love you.” After dressing he takes her hand and they stroll back to their Glidewheel at the House of Hammer Pants.

Act 3 – Clarity

11 years later

Scene 1: A life of character

Dear Zachary and Olivia,

In case you have not read it, I wanted to bring this assignment to your attention. Normally I would wait until a parent-teacher scan to bring this up, but I was uncomfortable with the direction of this piece. I would encourage you to discuss this with Kidd.

Kind regards,

Genevieve Hartley

6th grade - English and Humanities

Douglas Middle Grade Academy

Respirare possunt in scientia et in posterum melius percolantur

~*~

Dear Mrs. Hartley,

Before I start the assignment, I wanted to tell you that I appreciate how much you teach us about all kinds of things. I particularly enjoyed our recent lessons on weather balloons and the history of fish poems. And I love listening to your voice. It's like a deep room with rough walls. My mom says it's husky. It makes Dad blush. Mom said it might be because you smoke, though, which would make me sad.

My Life

My dad says that I was born at an early age which kind of makes sense but doesn't. We live in a house that's blue like water on Reggie Street. Actually, it was originally Potter Street but it was renamed for Francis Reginald McSwindle who invented the "regular" ("reggie") Federal Portion Control size that restaurants have to offer which gives you just the right amount of fries and stuff based on your size and metabolism Q-rating. I personally think that's a little silly since I can eat more than Ahmed even though he's like twice as big as I am but whatever, I understand we need to conserve resources since our survival time is running out. Anyway, my house has always been blue which I really appreciate since the houses around me are some ugly color called "taupe" that looks like my dog Query's poo. Mom says those homes are part of a housing community that bought up all the lots except for ours and that's why we're lucky to not live in a poo house. Still, I find them kind of depressing, like the neighborhood is made from stinky walls closing in on everyone. Kind of like a solid version of the brown smog we get 29 days out of the month.

When I was small I would ride up and down the streets in a scrubber mask on my red tricycle, which was kind of retro but that's how my parents roll (I also had wooden blocks, and an easel and paint brushes). And of course Captain Capsule everything. I mean, who didn't? Or doesn't, I guess. My bedroom has red shag carpet which makes it hard to find the new series 29 pure crimson CC action envirofigures sometimes. But I mostly just keep them on the shelf. I'm too old to play with action figures but I can still collect them. Because we need some hope, right?

We haven't travelled to too many places because of the panstrictions. Of course, that's just like everyone in the class – it's all I've ever known. We did get a hoverbus through Oregon to see the remaining forest stands there, and the last redwood tree in California and the big greenhouse where they're trying to grow more of them. With the glass walls they can filter the air for the seedlings so that the gardeners don't have to wipe the black off their leaves all the time. I really love when the wind blows off the Pacific and we can go outside with just the basic yard air cleaner on!

My dad taught me how to draw humans, animals, clouds – all kinds of things! He's an outstanding artist working on a new holocomic (I can't say more because it's top secret). We painted my treehouse together, then he showed me how to reattach the filterSphere with power tools. That's probably the most mechanical project I've done. Now I can continue my singing practice in the tree house without bothering Mom if she's on a Biziholo telling people their numbers are wrong (she is an accountant and the smartest person I've ever met).

You see, I have big plans for what I call The End Game. It's clear to me that the panstrinctions are not going to solve all the problems we have. They stopped the pandemics from killing everyone, or making everyone too weak, but they weren't enough to stop the climate from imploding. I mean, travel reduced a LOT, but it wasn't enough to halt the climate problems. We couldn't get everyone in the world to agree to stop clearing forests, eating meat, burning oil, or making plastics in time and now the World Climate Solution they tried 30 years ago has created these smog inversions. It's just too late. I recently read that the methane burps are so big that every week is like a 1% chance we're all going to choke (I might be a little off there, but it didn't sound good). So it's time for The End Game.

And what is The End Game you may ask? I've been practicing a song I wrote, and I included a copy for you since it's my future and, therefore, part of My Life. When the firestorms get out of control, and the smog gets so bad you can't see your hand before your face; when the floods from rain and rising water wash away the last sea wall and levee; when the plagues change so fast that they overrun the quarterly shots. When these things happen, I will send out a FanHoller to the AetherBots that it's time for the show. Crowds will gather in the street outside my house. The people will be full of sorrow at first because they know that this is the end. But I'll stand at the outer door of my tree house and crank my off-grid speaker to the max. I'll flip on my psi-monitor to think the song to everyone there with soothing love. Because that's how everyone should go out, am I right? My mom and dad will be there, and Query will be at my feet looking over the crowd, and everyone will get the closure they need.

Life is quite a ride. It's been clear sonic!

Your student,

Kidd Iota Ali-McDonald-Olafson-Xiao

Go Doug Firs!

The End Game - lyrics, by Kidd A-M-O-X

Hey, it's a dirty world
And we didn't try hard enough
The mists that choke us swirling
Brown and mucky, making life tough

Chorus

Wasted time
It's been lame
But together we know
That when we go
The world will get better
After The End Game

The only things that made the grade
Were shiny, rare, and fast
And while the memories fade
It's the poisons that last

Chorus

Wasted time
It's been lame
But together we know
That when we go
The world will get better
After The End Game

Bridge

So, as we sing in failure
Together for one last rhyme
Don't be sad
You'll miss mom and dad
For only a very short time

Last chorus

Wasted time
It's been lame
But together we know
We're ready to go
To make the world better
After Our End Game

~~~

“Zach, come read this,” says Olivia, wiping her eyes. Zach puts down his sketchbook and comes over to the holocenter where Mrs. Hartley’s letter and Kidd’s homework are writ large across the room.

Caught up, Zach and Olivia hug for a long moment.

“I know things are grim in the world right now, but this is too much,” says Olivia. “We need to do something.”

Zach bites his lip and looks down, thinking, but keeps hold of her.

“Maybe we should pull Kidd out of school, for some time together. Go on a family vacation?” she continues.

“Maybe. Actually, yes – I think that’s a great idea. I was also thinking about what would help me get out of a funk when I was Kidd’s age. My family was pretty active and connected, and I was kind of shy. Often I wanted a little time to myself to draw or make up stories – or read the Captain, of course. And after I had created this elaborate world in my head, with characters and places, adventures and mysteries, reconnecting with the family could be a little tricky. What helped was something my dad gave me. He saw me eyeing it in a store once. Just a sec.”

Zach disappears into the basement. Olivia rereads the homework and letter. *So much certainty about what’s going to happen. But nobody knows how things will turn out. Nobody! Kidd’s too young to despair; we need to help Kidd find a way off of this dark path.*

Returning to the living room, Zach puts a cloth sack on the low table and unwraps the leather cords at the top. Gently opening the mouth, he eases a squat cardboard box out of the bag. On the lid,

*Captaintales!*

calls to the reader in faded red and teal. Underneath, a beatific Captain Capsule (from Series I) floats in a clear blue sky, offering a welcoming hand to the reader. But it's not just the Captain. A family of four, dressed in otherworldly outfits, surround them, joyously spinning while holding a map, a communicator, a holographator, and other old technology. Along the bottom of the picture, in antique gold letters, it says:

*When injustice strikes, bring everyone together to save the day! To save the era! An adventure game for 2-6 players, all required pieces are included inside – except for your imagination and your will to make a difference in the world! Playing time 8-36 hours.*

“Oh, Zach, you’ve mentioned this game before.”

“I would get lost for days spinning up adventures, researching problems that needed solving, devising environments where I could collaborate with my players to find a solution. I’d surface to guide my cousins through compassionate exploits. For example, once we returned a stolen python back to its rightful place in the dank swamp, restoring inter-species balance by building a reptile-canal. Another time we saved a village by redirecting a polluter’s smokestacks to blow into a giant sack and floating it to the moon. Usually the answer wasn’t about us, but about reimagining how what was already there could “be” different. And working together we would end up with solutions I couldn’t even imagine when we started out. It really was my passion until I had to... well, adult.”

“It sounds wonderful. Do you think you could come up with something we could play with Kidd? Something that clears a trail to the light?”

“I can try. It will take a little time to organize things and come up with a plan. While I get started on this, do you want to start researching taking a trip somewhere?”

“Yes, on it. Let’s clear the smog from our eyes.”

Category: Vacation planning (File under: Travel, Personal)

Date: May 15<sup>th</sup>

By: Olivia AO

Notes:

Requirements:       Where is joy? Or hope? Distraction to Motivation. A sense of.  
                          Places of wonder. New life, birds, Query's speed.  
                          Clouds can't all be brown.  
                          Holding hands. Laughter. Together.  
                          Some *place* happy? Or...

Ideas:

Let's go to the beach, cup shells oreille-to-oreille for nature's word. But from the risen ocean, waves crash, scouring our feet and ossicles, washing away layers, messages, mumbling voices.

Still, we should admire the boats! The boats! Rocking in freedom for offshore passages. Yet their lines will sing a hazy sorrow, a smokey, salty tune flung by sails' flaps to 'morrow, wrapping round the shore a dreary cloud again.

Is it enough to feel the sand's rub between small toes? In touch with movement, small things that work together. Beware, though: life's grit can chafe. I conserve my momentum; seagulls cry so I don't have to.

The farm is a place of life, where orchards drop sweet globes in juicy reds, tangy yellows. Where Query runs and we chase, holding hands, growing together, inside and out. Glowing, too, under a dome of artificial sunshine that repels the sooty shade.

No one place is safe, sure to find all hope. The wilds at the shore and the coaxed life of cultivation. Between and beyond we must take the open road, lifted above pallid lands to see what thrives in earth and air, eyes wide kept skyward for parachutes like petals, to spot sparrows and, flocks to packs, down to trees and soil. We cross borders on colorful trails, inside and out, in and out. In and out.

Not one place, not any place. But maybe all places can shake hope free? What we have for hope is hope, and you and you and me, all three.

Logistics Analysis:

Distances:       Beach off El-87; farm (check appoint\*), bird sanc, chute drop site, back home  
                          SUM(245, 72, 320, 27, 342) = 1006.

                          Current max range (non-ideal cond.): 604.

                          New Gdub regen GLIDE model req. Call for appt\*. W-M takes Vortex discount.

Food:             14 days max, 3 fam meals, 27 per meal  
                          PRODUCT(14, 3, 27)= \$1,134

Hope:             Together, play, watch, touch, laugh, listen, smell, taste. Breathe.

*Redirection*

Dear Mrs. Hartley,

Thank you very much for your note. As you may know, we have arranged to withdraw Kidd from school for a short family vacation trip. Even though we are together so often because of the panstrictions, some focused time together, without distractions, would benefit us all and generate positive viewpoints and goodwill. We will see you back at school in two weeks.

With appreciation,

Zach McDonald-Xiao and Olivia Ali-Olafson

Scene 2: What I cannot create, I do not understand (R. Feynman)

Zach finishes arranging the holopages on the low table; their comfort-sheen adjusts to the room's light.

"Okay, I think we're ready to start."

"Do we have enough snacks?"

"Yes, I think so," laughs Olivia. "And didn't you eat an entire blueberry JamBlam *after* lunch?"

"I was hungry."

"Yes you were."

"Okay, here we go." Zach puts on an over-mysterious vid-announcer's voice. "Our story begins..." Kidd snorts and eye-rolls, and Olivia throws a pillow at Zach, so he stops. "Our tale begins in earnest today. We have created our characters, the players in our drama, who we will introduce in a moment. Each of them is special in their own way, just like Kidd is special, and Olivia is special, and Zach is special. The characters relate to each other, and to the world outside, through thoughts, feelings, and actions. And there is, of course, like in any game, a problem to solve. Now, there are many problems in this world. There is an illness that afflicts individuals, and we manage it by being careful in our actions and through quarterly inoculations. There is a sickness that pervades society. This one is trickier, for there are a host of issues that affect all of us – inequality and selfishness, for example. And the largest one, and perhaps the hardest one to tackle, is an unwellness in the planet's environment wrought by humanity's inconsideration and greed. Now, just three characters can't be the heroes to solve all of this in one go..."

Kidd interrupts. "What the world needs isn't a hero – we need a solution."

"An interesting observation. Can you say more? What kind of a solution?"

Kidd rolls the dice, looks at the result, and picks up the dice to roll again before reconsidering and putting them down.

"The kind we don't have. At all."

Olivia glances nervously at Zach. *Is this where we want to go?* But Zach continues.

“Well, not yet. But maybe we can come up with some ideas.”

Kidd strokes Query’s head, not looking up.

Olivia says, “Why don’t we finish packing for our trip and then we can keep playing?”

Query sighs.

## CHARACTER SHEET 1

NAME: Tsakk-tan

PLAYER: Zach

### STATS

Good Humor: Oh yeah

Creativity: Undeniable

Devotion: Until the end of all things

### SPECIAL ABILITIES

CC-knowledge repository, class A++

Brushes repaint reality

Sketchsparks

Distracto-presto wiggles

### WEAKNESSES

Physical prowess

A travels clockwise at 30kmh. If B enters at a point...



### Scene 3: Clearing the air

“And thank YOU for your business. Drive safe, y’all!”

The scent of Steve deFalcator’s aftershave fades into an unpleasant memory as they roll away from Wiggly-Man Motors, the cheapest of the “premiere” auto dealers. Their new Glidewheel Long Illuminated Distance Extended – abbreviated to GLIDE – features a more robust rooftop solar collector that supposedly gives the vehicle an easy multi-state range.

“This is gonna be ecosonic! Can we really go forever in this G-dub?”

“Well, Kidd, I think Steve may have oversold its capabilities a bit. But, yes, it will go much further than our last Glidewheel. And the new tires are completely free of petroleum residues – we’re riding on trees!”

“Awesome... Why didn’t we get the helisphere again?”

“Does money grow on trees? Also, this way there’s more time for all of us to just hang out together. And we can stop more often along the way.”

“Okay. Next time we should fly though.”

“Okay!” Query lets out a quick bark and looks at Kidd. Kidd wrestles Query onto his back and rubs his belly.

Olivia pumps the power with her bare foot; they roll free of the transport center area and hit the elevated out of town. At auto-cruising speed, she kicks back to join everyone else in looking out through the continuous tinted window. Endless skyscrapers, their glass windows in the millions reflecting the low clouds and brownish sky, stumble around them, their constructed glory deficient in the anemic sunlight. They pass several long blocks of sullied concrete buildings from the Brutalist revitalization, still providing

inadequate homes for poor urban dwellers. The outer walls of the buildings are covered in meandering runs of calcium carbonate, leaching from the walls like full-bodied tears of clouds and guano.

Olivia glances at Kidd with concern and turns on some music. *Keep it real...but positive, the counselor said.*

Finally they are whizzing by a hazy sequence of suburban neighborhoods, each presenting a broad sweep of white, reflective roofs to the horizon, with the occasional translucent pandemic house-bubble popping up above the roof level. A forest of leafy trees – Douglas firs, of course, but also maples and dogwood – sprouts up along the streets between the homes to filter the air and shade the antique asphalt, providing a muted mix of new green growth and air-blackened foliage. The trees get more frequent, and the homes less so, the further out they go from the urban center until the final Urban Green Boundary is reached, an engineered mile-wide swath of trees to buffer the flow of urban heat out into the surrounding lands.

After two hours they have broken free and entered the desolate lands. Devoid of nutrients, and over-salted from fertilizers and irrigation, the lands closest to the megacity are on a twenty-year purge with 6 years to go. While the ground has not been as quick to recover as the experts had claimed, some scrubby vegetation has taken hold in the last few years – elongated scraggly bushes with yellow flowers, like a Scotch Broom and a thorny squid had a baby.

“Kidd, look, there’s a red-tailed hawk on that bush!” says Zach, pointing out the left side of the Glidewheel. A rare sighting.

“Skew! I wonder what’s for lunch?”

“I’m guessing a mouse or little bird.”

“Ew! No, what are we having for lunch?”

Belly laughs for Olivia and Zach, and eventually Kidd. "A good question," smiles Olivia. "Your dad made some picnic fixings for us that we can break out in a bit." *Real but positive. Honest laughter.*

They spend the day watching the world around them, snacking, playing games. Some of the tension leaves Olivia's body as they meld, family-like, enjoying each other's presence. *Zach seems anxious.* She gives his hand a squeeze under the small fold-out table.

"So, Kidd, I had a question for you," says Zach. "It's about our adventure."

"M'kay?"

"We're getting out into somewhere else. Together, all of us. We haven't done this enough, and there's much more of the world that we can explore as a family. In fact, there's so much that we can see, so many choices, that we need to decide pretty soon where to go. We could head out to the coast to see sand and waves and driftwood. We could glide into farm country to see crops and greenhouses. Or visit the real desert with rattlesnakes and cacti. Or meander along the edges of the big river. Mom can get us to all of those places, and more, but we can't see all of them on this trip. Do you have someplace you really want to go?"

Kidd leaned into the window and looked up, pointing at the low brown clouds making a mess as they scud across the sky. "I want to go above those. Into the mountains."

Zach glances nervously at Olivia. "I'm...not sure if we can get there in the Glidewheel. Can we?"

Olivia does some quick mental calculations. "Well, the elevation climb does require significantly more energy. But, if this updated solar converter is as good as our fragrant salesman claims, I think we can get high enough to top the brown clouds. We'll give it a try." *Confident. Look confident.*

Kidd smiles a little and nods and kneads Query's head resting in his lap.

After a while, Olivia swivels the driver's seat to the front and plots out a course with the holonav system. *It'll be close. Not too much gliding uphill.* She enters a new destination in the mountains and maximizes the efficiency rating at the expense of power, and speed, before setting the glide program in motion.

They drive for hours, often being passed by road-trains delivering goods to the cities, 40-wheeled hinged behemoths with wide wing-like solar collectors moving all manner of wares, often in quantities too small for rail or with values too low for the dirigibles. There are some personal Glidewheels out on the highways as well, but their occupants appear mostly focused on completing work, their desks folded out or holodomes donned. *Even out here, it's all commercial. People in their personal spaces but still in the office. Not many out and about on vacation. Or discovery.*

Olivia stops the Gdub three times and they stretch their legs. Once when the view of rolling hills strikes her fancy; twice when she needs to break the tension. *The counselor said we won't find an answer, but that it's the connection to the journey that matters. Kidd needs to find a path to hope but can't be shown one. Your job is to carry, only to carry.*

They continue on until they can only see rolling evergreen hills to a horizon brought close by low clouds. They've seen no vehicles on the elevated for the past hour.

"It's getting pretty late so we should probably stop for the night to sleep."

"Where will we stay?"

"Well, I think we can be comfortable if we fold out the seats. And Dad packed us plenty of food for dinner too."

"M'kay."

Olivia enters an exit code and a downramp appears, dropping them onto the old, pre-lifted highway. It's immediately darker down amongst the trees. She pulls off onto an overgrown shoulder.

They step out and listen. Nothing. A crow caws in the distance, then nothing again. A warm, anemic breeze kicks up, bringing the scent of smog and evergreen needles. Kidd coughs. Zach gets the already-apportioned food ready quickly, and they eat standing around in silence. Olivia arranges the vehicle seats for sleeping.

It's full-on night already when they see a tiny wobbling light approach up the old highway. A little bell dings. Query barks excitedly.

"A bicycle!" says Kidd.

Zach and Olivia look at each other nervously. "Not too many people live out here."

"Skew!"

Almost upon them, a man atop a vintage ten-speed bicycle pops into view, illuminated by the Gdub's side lights.

"Evenin', all. Good breath to you," he drawls out. His voice is thin, desiccated by filter-free rural smog living. In the dim light they can see he's wearing a dark-colored suit jacket and slacks, perhaps gray or blue, and loafers dusty with road grime.

"Good breath to you too, sir," says Zach. "It's a dark time to be riding an old road on a thin-tired bicycle."

"Yes, yes indeed," he wheezes. "The wheels catch the cracks and grooves so I take my time. Take my time. Just returning home from the post drop with some supplies." They can see a med box strapped over his back tire. He smiles and wipes his face with a shaky hand. "We don't get too many visitors off the el down here. What brings you by?"

"We're headed up to the mountains," says Kidd. "Up to the clear air."

“Ah, yes, the clear air,” he says. His gaze grows distant. “When I was small we had more clear days. Not only when the moon is full and pulls away the particles. But not anymore.” He turns to face Kidd. “What are you going to do in this clear air, little one?”

“See forever.”

“A worthy goal, indeed. Well, I’d best be off before I’m bear food, ‘though I haven’t seen a bear round here in ages. May the breath be with you.”

“And also with you,” Zach replies automatically.

The visitor rides off into the night. They listen to him leave until the squeak of the chain is inaudible, lost to the hills, then climb into their vehicle.

Kidd is quickly asleep. Olivia dims the lights and soon drifts off as well, the newness of the travel experience, and anxiety, taking its toll. Zach lies awake for a while. *What do you see “at” forever? It could be an ending, or a beginning, or something else entirely. Perhaps infinity wraps around and we’ll see the backs of our heads! Or will we see anything at all? Above the clouds, it will be clear, like having a full moon all the time, but there won’t necessarily be a full moon there. We’re so used to clarity by moonlight that, without it, will we be blind to what is before us?*

#### Scene 4: Far beyond these castle walls

“So, we were talking about heroes, and ideas for finding solutions,” says Zach.

On the map, Kidd moves a green GLIDE token out of the urban core and into the wilderness.

“The winners are the problem – where the sickness creeps in.”

“What do you mean?”

“They start with knowing something special, getting a little bit more, then hoarding it. It’s like at school, watching an argument in ontology class, say between Mikael and Juhi, who are really smart. When their argument gets out of control, I can see they’re focused on winning and that everything else fades away. They aren’t caring about bringing anyone else in, or even thinking about their own selves really. They could lose their own bodies. It’s all about knowing you’re on top, in a high tower, while the rest of us are lost in its shadow.”

“But you don’t have to stay in the shadow...”

“Sure, at school Mr. Verrus, our philosophy teacher, is there to explain what happened and keep everyone knowing together. But what if there is no teacher, no sage, to keep the winners connected with the gray-folk? They don’t even know we’re here. And there’s nowhere not in the shadow: the tower blocks the sun.”

“Is there anything we can do about that?” asks Olivia.

Kidd rolls: Zach reads the dice and places a blue tower some distance from their token.

“If we could talk to the Tower-Folk, then we could learn from them. And they might discover that they were missing out in their tower, stuck in their own story of how the rest of the world is gray when, really, it could be blue.”

“Ok, let’s talk to them.”

“To do that we need to find them. Then breach their tower’s defenses. It could be catastrophic, but we need to try. Only then will they know, or care to know, what they’ve done.”

Zach turns over a *Prescience Card* displaying Sygny the Dove, the Protector of the Path. Kidd flips over a *Revolution Card* showing Growel, Beast of the Wild Change. Cross-referencing those characters on the *Vision Table*, Kidd reads: *The Winged-Way leads to the Tower of Stolen Light. Your Promise to the Breath of the Beast is absolute. Soar!*

“Do we follow this road?” asks Olivia, pointing to a red squiggly line crossing the map close to the tower.

“I don’t really know. Although, I think if it were that easy, someone else would have done it already.

We’ll need to make a new way forward.”

## Scene 5: Back pack

The next day they take their breakfast early and experience ablutions in the forest, a novelty for them all, then head out into the foggy dawn. Olivia signals for an on-ramp. The transport system out here is slow to respond but eventually a connection appears and they are able to rise and rejoin the elevated. Soon, with Olivia watching the numbers, they are cruising at an economical 40 kmh.

They continue to climb through the foothills, out of the range of cities and hospitals and communication towers, ever higher up. When the mist shifts, they get glimpses of the mountains looming about them. The Glidewheel switches to satellite mode for location tracking. This works for a while, but the rock walls around them interfere with the signal, and the Gdub indicates their position as in a river or on a hillside, and in other odd places. A software update partially downloads and gets 60% installed. Olivia glances back at Kidd and Zach, who are looking through a book on origami, and switches off the navigation completely.

“I think I’m just going to drive manual for a while – for the practice,” she says.

“M’kay.”

Zach doesn’t say anything, but gives her a questioning look.

“The nav is being flakey. It’s fine; we still have onboard map guidance.”

They continue for another hour and a half when Olivia slows down. Orange traffic barrels line each side of the elevated; they look beat up and faded, like they’ve been out in the elements for a long time. She checks the nav map which flickers in and out on the holoscreen. *Fabulous. Probably need that complete new-vehicle software update.* The word “Construction” appears in red in the center of the image. She stops the Gdub, gets out, and walks 20 feet ahead into the cruddy mist. And stops. The roadway ends,

the vehicle deck hanging in mid-air. *Huh. When the government switched all funding from transportation to emergency conservation efforts 20 years ago, they really did stop everything immediately.* She looks over the edge and spies a rough road heading up the mountain. *We can't see forever yet.*

She returns to the car. "The highway stops; we're going off-road. Buckle-up honey-bunnies."

"Whoa, skew!"

"Olivia, are you sure the Glidewheel can handle it?"

"We're on a quest for clear air. It had better."

The downramp takes 20 minutes to materialize at this far end of the highway, but then it works flawlessly. Taking that as a good sign, Olivia coaxes the vehicle around the debris on the old mountain road and keeps climbing. Tufts of grass sprout in the middle of the track, and she steers around the occasional large rock fallen from up the slope. But they're on the move again.

Kidd, energized by the mystery, is glued to the window. However, the murk has deepened, rather than lightened, with altitude, and it's impossible to see much beyond rocks and the first ranks of Douglas firs around them. With the monotony of the view, and rocking of the vehicle, Kidd is soon asleep.

A while later, the road flattens out, traversing a pass between two lower peaks in the range. The lane seems even rougher here, as if the lack of angle has enabled disruptive elements to pool on its surface. Navigating the divots and winding crevices slows them to not much more than a walking pace.

"Olivia, stop! Look!" says Zach.

About 100 feet to their left, in the middle of a wide muddy plain, is a crystal clear blue puddle. In the middle of the puddle swims a swan.

"Oh, how beautiful! Kidd, honey, wake up and look..."

Kidd stirs and watches the swan. In one swift move, the door is open and Kidd and Query are bounding towards the majestic bird.

“No, wait..!” Zach gets tangled in his safety clip but follows as soon as he is able. As he arrives, he sees Kidd and Query sitting at the edge of the pond looking at the swan, who is eyeing them suspiciously, but otherwise not reacting. *How odd.*

“Kidd, back away, okay? Swans can be dangerous. They’re very strong.”

“Mm it’s okay. This one knows me.”

“Kidd, we really should go.”

Kidd remains completely still for a minute, then says, “M’okay,” and saunters back to the Gdub. Query follows without making a sound.

Zach backs away slowly from the puddle. The swan starts to mutter and ruffle its feathers, agitated. Zach quickens his pace. The swan spreads its 6-foot wings and closes on Zach, squawking and lunging. Zach gains a little distance circling the vehicle once before diving inside to safety.

“Go go go!” The angry bird attacks the side door.

Olivia starts up again, fast enough to lose the running bird, but a little too fast to avoid all of the potholes.

“We’re on the right path now, Mom, Dad. I think that was an echo of what’s above the clouds.”

*No judgments no judgments no judgments...* “Okay, honey.”

They continue on as before, down the other side of the pass, up the next higher one, and again for two more passes. The brown clouds are all around them now.

A whiz and a buzz, and a whine slides down to nothing. Olivia sighs.

“Our fabulous solar converter has given up the ghost – we’re out of power after all that climbing in these clouds.” *Courage.* “We’re going on foot. Zach, break out the gear.”

There was no denying her determination. And why would he? *Conviction to clarity; order out of chaos; here we go.*

They slip on their filter masks and heft their backpacks with snacks, water, lanterns, and a change of clothes.

Kidd starts up the trail holding Zach’s hand. The going is steep and slow. Small rocks tumble behind their steps. The road narrows to a trail, and trees close around them. After 45 minutes Olivia takes the lead. *The Gdub wouldn’t have been able to pass through here anyway. And I know where we are. Something is familiar. How do I know that?*

They are walking through a brown veil that gets darker with each step. Olivia can only see a few yards in front of her. If she reaches out her arms she can touch the trees on each side of the trail. The trees are getting scrawnier, more sparse. Soon they have crested the tree line completely into a desolate land of shale and scrub. Yet still the brown veil persists.

“Keep going, Mom, we’re almost there!”

*How does Kidd know that? “Okay!”*

Their filter masks are completely clogged now. They resort to tying t-shirts around their noses and mouths. They are all coughing.

A shadow appears ahead of them on the trail. Olivia stops. Gasps. A huge wolf is watching them through the mist. It bares its fangs and growls a low rumble. Instinctively, Olivia pulls the shirt from her face. The growling stops and the wolf steps forward. Olivia breathes in the fog’s stench and stands her ground.

“We’re here for my child,” she says. “Please, that’s why we’re on this trail to the summit. Please.”

The wolf cocks its head slightly to the side, as if listening more closely. Zach and Kidd are frozen in place behind her, barely daring to breathe.

“Please,” she continues. “We just want some clear air. I know it’s up there somewhere behind you. It has to be! Unless...there is no land high enough to break through the fog...”

The wolf growls a little.

“Wait! You are so right! And the world is so wrong. This trapped air, poisonous, is not free. Is not free to flow. It poisons you, and it poisons us. It poisons me, and my husband, and my child. And it took my child to break my heart, our hearts, with a story of an ending, an ending for us all, for me to see that we can’t hide from it any more. That we can’t wait for full moons to suck the badness away. I had to break my heart open and look for a new way, with a child, our Kidd, as a guide.”

Kidd calmly walks up and takes Olivia’s hand.

“And this revolution in us will not be holovised to the world, will not end up on the news. And, I know, we may not make it back at all. We’re so, so far outside of where we’re supposed to be. But, dammit, where we’re supposed to be isn’t doing us any good right now! So with the help of a small child, up the mountain we go to find the light above the darkness. Please... Please. Won’t you let us pass? I promise to bring the light back for you. I swear.”

Olivia is crying looking at the powerful, beautiful creature before her.

The wolf stretches its long legs in front of it, nails clicking on rocks, then stands erect. Raising its muzzle, it sounds a mournful howl that sets their ears to ringing and echoes off the rock walls hidden behind the trees. After the echoes die down, they hear howls from far off in the distance, but they cannot determine the direction.

The wolf looks at her again.

“I swear,” she says.

And with three loping steps the wolf has disappeared into the mist.

The strength leaves her body, but before she can fall to the path, Zach and Kidd grab hold of her and bear her up. Even Query pushes up on her with his head. Steadied, she takes a choking breath and nods. Together they take one step, and another, slowly making their way up the shrouded path. No one looks for the wolves out there around them, for what could they do if they were attacked except die?

“I think it’s getting brighter,” says Zach. And, sure enough, as the family pack climbs, with each step the mist brightens, gradually changing from brown to tan, to light gray, to white.

And with one final step they break free into the clear air. A dazzling sun shines overhead in a cornflower sky. As if they had crossed the finish line of a marathon, they fall to their knees and crave the air, drinking it in with deep ragged gasps until they vomit the remaining bile in their systems onto the warm earth.

“Look!” says Kidd, standing. “I can see forever!” They follow a small finger on a small hand pointing at the sky, and they gaze in wonder for what could be an eternity at the purest blue they have ever seen. Their gaze travels beyond the sky and they see the stars and the planets and the comets that should have been blasted away from their senses by Sol’s presence.

Standing, they join hands and walk in beauty, in awe, up the trail. “Good breath to you!” they practice saying to each other. “Yes, and good breath to you, too!” they laugh. They crest a rise in the path and stop dead in their tracks.

“Skew...”

## CHARACTER SHEET 2

NAME: Howlivia

PLAYER: Olivia

### STATS

Smarts: Runs logical circles round mortals

Emotions: Palpable

Rhetoric: You won't know what hit ya

### SPECIAL ABILITIES

Lupine power core

Blazing-gazing eyes

Nano-numbers-of-the-Nexus

### WEAKNESSES

Duty-bound

Needs-a-nudge for engagement

Lunacy



Scene 6: What are the odds

“Ok, so we’re breaking open the gates of the tower where the winners hoard their knowledge. Kidd, is that the overall mission?”

Kidd checks the Oracle card against the character stat block.

“It’s, ‘To be happy.’”

“Is that it?”

“No, there’s more. We do need to be happy ourselves, build it in. But we also find happiness together. Everyone everywhere, actually. CC says the boundaries between us are stretchy.”

“What does that mean?”

“That I can touch you, and I can touch Mom, and still be me. But now with you.”

“That’s a wonderful idea, Kidd. Can you tell me what you mean by touch?” asks Olivia.

“Well... it’s like this. I ask and you accept that I can touch you with my hand. Or, that I can give you a hug. And that means my skin touches your skin. Or I can say something friendly, or do something for you – like, clean up the whole house when you’re busy. When I do that, just like when I touch you with my hand, it means that we’ve shared responsibilities – my boundary has become your boundary and we’re connected. Alone goes away.”

Parent eyes are shining.

“Kidd, that’s exactly what we need for this... game. We need the boundaries to go away. We need to be happy.”

Kidd looks up from studying the stat blocks.

“We’re strong enough. It’s time for something audacious.”

## CHARACTER SHEET 3

NAME: Qiddh

PLAYER: Kidd & Query

### STATS

Precocious++

Observer extraordinaire = True sight

Sheds: at will

### SPECIAL ABILITIES

Para-conjoined being

Ontological-pattern matcher-catcher

Quad speed

Dirt rolling

Caring, always caring

### WEAKNESSES

Hope deficient

Aloneness

Fleas



## Scene 7: The crater good

Spread before them is an enormous caldera lake, reflecting the blue of the sky, in what was once a massive volcano. Huge scree slopes ring the lake, although the far shore is so far away as to be invisible.

Two islands, green with foliage, rise in the center of the lake.

But that is not what has caught their attention, and taken their breath away. For below them, at the shore of the lake, are bungalows fronting onto a sandy beach. And people. Lots of people.

A snatch of jaunty song floats up to them on the breeze, a sea shanty singing, "...so we're pirates, ay mates, pirates 'gainst conformity, makin' a new reality."

They scamper down the trail heading towards the lake. As they get closer they can see seagulls circling overhead and smell salty air.

"Dad, is this a lake or the ocean?"

"I honestly don't know."

The way down is easy and soon they are walking in yellow sand, removing their shoes and scrunching their toes in the warm grains. They stand and watch the people for a while. Some are lying on towels sunbathing. A volleyball game occupies some teens and pre-teens a little further down.

As they wonder what to do next, a short woman in a red flowered sarong walks towards them.

"Hi, I'm Erable Subreptice, the Beach Monitor. You must be Kidd's family. We've been expecting you – it's so wonderful to finally meet you!"

"Hi, uh, hello. Yes we ar...how did you know? And, uh, where *are* we, Ms. Subrep..Supret...?"

She laughs. "Please just call me Ms. Erable. I know this must all be a little confusing. Let's head over to the canteen to grab some lemonade and croissants and I'll tell you all about where you are." She gestures towards a corrugated metal-roofed shack further down the beach. She takes tiny steps towards the building and they follow easily.

"This is the Crater Good colony, founded 90 years ago by my great-grandparents, Lucy Faire Nguyen, and Werner Taksall. It's a special place that provides a respite from the world outside for a – well, for a special kind of person. We have a very exclusive membership list. The last person to *walk* in was over 50 years ago. Most new members join by invitation. You should consider yourselves very fortunate."

"So, this is a club?"

"In a manner of speaking. I'd call it a generational organization, focused on the long view for society."

"I don't understand." Seagulls cry overhead; Kidd looks down and starts kicking the sand as they stroll; Query bounds ahead.

"Since the founding of Crater Good, or CG as we call it, we have focused on creating a layer of protection for extraordinary world citizens, global citizens that have the virtues and fortitude to make the world more successful. Those who control the flow of that which makes everything run smoothly. We provide not only an escape for those world citizens, but support them with tools and information. We take the long view on society, prioritizing excellent leadership. The world would be in a much sorrier state were we not looking out for it."

*Qiddh: I initiate BS detector...*

*Olivia: Kidd!*

*Qiddh: ...using psychic pattern analysis. There, I got a 15. Do I get a bonus because of Query?*

*Tsakk-tan: [rolling a die] You do not, unfortunately: Query is distracted by a seagull.*

*Qiddh. Ok, what do we know?*

*Tsakk-tan: It's inconclusive, but something might be amiss.*

“Pardon my ignorance, Ms. Erable,” says Zach, “but what you’re describing sounds a lot like a secret society. Like the Illumatorrs in Captain Capsule terms.” Olivia squeezes his hand.

“Ah, Mr. McDonald-Xiao – may I call you Zach? – thank you for your question. Yes, don’t be confused. We are not the evil “Puppet Masters” of the world. Far from it. We encourage our members to give generously to their communities in the field, to give of their time and knowledge and credits. We aren’t nefariously plotting the downfall of society – we seek to bolster society to weather any storm through subtle guidance. Let me introduce you to the board and you’ll see what I mean.”

The canteen building is small and airy. The walls are white-washed cinderblock, the entryway and window openings uncovered but shielded by the shade of a faded awning. Stepping inside, it takes a moment for their eyes to adjust to the relative dim. Before them, 5 people in tropical-wear lounge in wicker chairs around small tables. A man in a muted Hawaiian shirt stands at a bar on the far side. The family is pulled closer to the group by Ms. Erable. Small plates of international delectables rest on the tables – finger sandwiches, curry rolls, dragonfruit – along with iced mixed drinks sweating in the heat. The temperature is somehow perfect.

“Our guests have arrived, gentlefolk,” says Ms. Erable. “Although I dare say that young Kidd may be more entertained outside.” Kidd is staring longingly out the window at the young people playing volleyball not too far away; Query has already joined the fun. “I ensure you that Kidd will be quite safe, and might enjoy some youthful company...?”

Kidd looks longingly at Zach who looks at Olivia and nods. She subtly nods in return. Before Zach can say anything, Kidd is tearing out the door and across the beach.

*Qiddh: [turning over a Spirit Card] I summon the Spirit of Family.*

*Howlivia: [picking a marble from the Bag of Beginnings] 14.*

*Let me check the table...Ok, 14...*

*Qiddh, thou shalt gainsay those who doth inflict the ravages of ill-experience ‘ponst the near-born.*

*Qiddh: Huh?*

*Howlivia: Protect the children!*

*Qiddh: Okay!*

“Gentlefolk, you already know our guests, Zach and Olivia, but let me introduce you to them. This is the Board of Directors, charged with fulfilling the World Leadership mission of CG. Helmsman Greer is a holorealist who crafts the images that hide unnecessarily worrisome problems from everyday people. He is currently working on remapping urban brutalist structures into an exciting new visual paradigm. Wang Zhi Ge (“Call me G!” he interjects) is a re-auditorian who calms the people by placing appropriate commentary in public, or private, spheres. You’ve heard his messages in announcements all over your city – and in personal compliance advertisements, Zach. Agnes Slaughter is a healthguide who, again, mainly works with pressing the right messages for the distribution of goods and services, profitably, in the interest of public safety. And, last but certainly not least, we have Sai Kolojia who works statistically with citizen mindset. Reducing confusion about sources and meanings.”

No one says anything.

“So... again, I apologize for being dense,” says Zach, “But... why us? Why are we interesting to such a...large organization?”

“Allow me to clear things up for you,” says Sai. “I have calculated the Principles of Meaningful Confluence, the *kujiunga na ushawishi*, using all available data. Including the diversity of your backgrounds in mixing four major cultural V-factors; the visual and imaginative creativity-index of your artistic and problem-solving projects; Olivia’s high-functioning numeric, emotional, and articulatory-rhetorical engagement; and, the perspicacity quality-elements in Kidd’s journaling, I have calculated a 98.6% probability that Kidd will be the next board member of CG to guide us into the next phase of the global remaking. Of course, this will require years of grooming to ensure success, but my methods are well established and I have no doubt that we will be successful.”

Olivia and Zach stare wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

Zach looks out the window. “Are all of those children to be future board members?”

“Dear me, no,” says Helmsman. “Those are merely the children of CG Vassals out in the world – field associates, if you will. They only know this place to be a fantastic, camp paradise for their children. It helps to ensure goodwill.”

“How do you keep it a secret?” asks Olivia.

“No one living has betrayed us in 90 years.” Helmsman smiles; Zach and Olivia shiver.

“Why don’t we take a little break and see more of the community, shall we?” interrupts Ms. Erable. “We can continue these conversations later...”

Ushering them out the door, Ms. Erable guides them further up the beach. They watch Kidd playing volleyball with a gaggle of youths. Seeing them walk by, Kidd runs over.

“Everyone’s going on a boat! There’s fishing and snacks and they have an extra swimsuit, and someone brought a guitar and...”

“Hold on, hold on. The kids are going on a boat by themselves?”

“Oh, no, no,” says Ms. Erable, laughing. “Look there. Master Frimm is our head lifeguard, and Ligaya is his assistant; they will both be there. They’re both highly accomplished in their fields. He will drive the boat and she’ll make sure that everyone wears a life vest. And I know Kidd can swim well so will be fine.”

Olivia raises an eyebrow.

“Please, Mom? Pleeeeease?”

“What do you think, Zach?”

Zach looks at the sky – still clear. *Did I just hear something?* He looks back at the pass where they entered the caldera. *Is it a bit hazier over there?* “I think as long as the weather holds, it will be fine.”

*Tsakk-tan: [turns over an Omen Card] Clouds of Mystery - intriguing!*

“Excellent. You tell Master Frimm to not head too far out, okay?”

Kidd yells something, possibly affirmative, while sprinting back across the beach. They watch the kids get organized and head to the boat. Olivia speaks.

“Not to put too fine a point on it, but I’m still confused about Crater Good’s mission. If you have all of these capabilities, and want society to progress healthily, why are we standing here in all of this goodness while, on most days, the rest of the world is swirled in miserable brown murkiness?”

“Let me show you something; perhaps it will help answer your question.”

They follow Ms. Erable over to a stand of bamboo against a cliff at the back the beach. As they approach, a middle-aged woman in greasy overalls pops out of a door hidden in the rock. She wipes her forehead, takes a drink from a sky-blue bottle, and leans against the rock wall. Through the open door they can only see a few blinking lights emerging from shadow. Seeing them approach, she stands.

“Hi Bella. This is Bellasonica Maganewt, Head Engineer for CG. Bella, these are our guests Zach and Oliva. Could you give them a brief tour?”

“Yes, Ms. E,” she says. “Call me Bella. This way please. Mind your step, and your head.” She ducks through the open door and they follow. Inside, they find themselves in a dim cave. Stalactites and stalagmites bite, fang-like, from the edges of the space, but they have been completely cleared from the middle of the cavern. Churning machinery, a mess of cogs and pipes, with tanks and drums and gray-green metal boxes, interspersed with blinking lights, whooshing vents, and flickering dials, fills the center, creating a grinding roar. The air smells of grease and damp.

“This is the ultrasonic carbon constrictor. Air enters at 173 points around the rim of the caldera and is funneled through our extraction band. After 17 clarification cycles, the excess carbon and other gaseous impurities are syphoned into a vacant former magma holding chamber 8 miles below the surface, where

they are crystalized by the intense pressure. We monitor this remotely through concretion drones.” She gestures to head back outside.

“We’ve kept the constrictor running for about 55 years now, and the sky is full-moon-clear every day. That about covers it, unless there are any questions.”

“Thank you, Bella. Do you mean to tell me that at CG you have been able to clean the sky for over half a century?”

“Yes, of course. Where we lead, the worthy will one day follow.” *She sounds like she’s quoting a manual.*

“The worth...” Olivia starts to say, but Ms. Erable interrupts.

“Let’s not take up any more of Bella’s time. I’m sure she’s very busy.”

Bella nods and promptly disappears into the cave. The door closes behind her leaving an almost imperceptible outline.

“Olivia, don’t let me read too much into this, but I am sensing some disapproval from you with our philosophies. What can I do to ease your mind?”

Olivia bites her lip. *The wolf is choking.*

“Ms. Erable, I, of course, don’t yet have a complete understanding of CG.

And with its complexities that might take a while. But what I have seen

so far disturbs me. Not the caldera’s beauty, not the care for your peoples’ children, and certainly not the impressive technology. But the lack of compassion for those *not* in-the-know. For the billions excluded, for decades, from the benefits found in this azure wonderland; those who dwell in highly degraded environments. And all of this so-called leadership in controlling what ordinary people can know and see as real, ensuring compliance. This smacks of authoritarianism-by-subterfuge. I cannot

*Howlivia: I apply Logical Circles and Rhetoric to the challenge.*

*Tsakk-tan: Double advantage – proceed!*

agree with these methods when there is real environmental suffering, by all life forms, that could be alleviated out there.”

Zach takes a step towards the water to get a better view of the pass. *Yes, there’s definitely more mist there. And I hear noises that are not seagulls. Guttural.* He looks towards the water. *The kids are out there in the boat. I think that’s good.*

*Tsakk-tan: I use the Ur-brush on the mists for a spark of insight. [rolls] 20! What do I know about the children?*

*Qiddh: My course is stable – focus on Mo... I mean, Howlivia.*

“Well, Olivia, I’m sorry you feel that way. I hope it’s clear that our intention is to guide the world to a place of enlightened order. But we cannot get there all at once. For many centuries, man has turned to bitter war to solve his problems, to the selfish grasping of non-renewable resources for the benefit of his little corner of the world. Man’s inherent darkness and savagery within has come to the fore. It is what has led to the collapse of the healthy civilization that concerns you, and all of us, so much. There would be chaos in the markets if we released this capability into the world. World leaders would fight over the technology, more wars would erupt, and any advantage at maintaining control would be lost, perhaps irrevocably.”

*Got you.*

“Yes, you wouldn’t want to lose control. And that’s what this is really about, Ms. Erable, isn’t it? Your narrative has you as the civilized savior, shepherding the world’s sheep along in their innocence, to save them from their own predatory barbarism. But you have deluded yourselves here in your nauseatingly entitled hygge-den. You are not the saviors. You are the inherently evil mob, the selfish killers of a society and environment that you could have saved with your proprietary technology decades ago. Think of the resource conflicts that could have been avoided with your intervention! You cannot see that the world’s decapitated head is sitting on a spike on your beach.” She pauses. “I would like to go home with my family now.”

*Tsakk-tan: Whoa, triple Pivotal Moment execution points. I'm in love!*

*Qiddh: Was that in character? Anyway, I'm still on the boat.*

*Howlivia: Aw, shucks... Okay, I engage Power Core and enter riled-mode*

Zach turns back from watching the pass and sees that same inner fire from their wedding night light-up her eyes. He feels the energy roll off her in waves. *Oh boy. And there's not even a full moon. Here we go.* He looks out to the boat, then back at the pass. *The mist is starting to flow down the pass. I hear baying.*

Ms. Erable looks daggers at Olivia. "I'm sorry that this *shepherd* is not acceptable to you right now. But we'll continue to protect the World's

flock as we do best. She touches her necklace and says, "Bring in the helisphere. Our guests are... departing."

"Ms. Erable – remember that the shepherd doesn't always win."

A shadow passes over them. Looking up, a large sage-green helisphere arrives with a whoosh. Maybe 30 feet across, it is peppered with small windows and air jets; the name *Vortex-Wave* is printed on one section.

"Come on!" shouts Zach. He grabs Olivia's hand and dashes to where the sphere hovers over the beach, pulling her behind him. *I can hear howling over the noise of the sphere.* A hatch opens and an entry ramp lowers.

Looking up they can see Trysön Gnawbit, DDS, and Accounting Manager

Peculatia LaMoore in the entryway. Gnawbit waves for them to come up. Zach looks at the boat with the kids. They are still some ways off shore, but he can see that they are also staring at the pass where mist is now pouring in. And not only mist, but a pack of wolves, large wolves, has crested the rise and is descending towards the beach.

"Kidd! We've got to get Kidd!" shouts Olivia.

*Tsakk-tan: I use my CC expertise points.*

*Qiddh: Yes!!*

*Tsakk-tan: It's a Grade 7 helisphere, commercial-class*

“There’s no time,” says Zach. “We’ll have to pick up all the kids from the air.” He turns and grasps her head between his hands. He stares into her amber eyes, totally unafraid. “We’ve got this. You’ve got this.”

She nods. Together, they mount the ramp, quickly reaching the doorway. Gnawbit is holding a gun.

“Take your seats over there,” he says. “We’ll take you back, but Kidd is staying here for his protection. And yours. Spheri, ramp up.”

Zach realizes that Gnawbit, focused on them in the cocoon of the sphere, hasn’t noticed what is happening further up the beach, 90-degrees to the open door.

“Dr. Gnawbit, Ms. Erable wanted to show you something up the strand. You should take a look.”

“Nice try, Zachary. Peculatia, see what he’s talking about.”

Mrs. LaMoore heads to the still open doorway and screams. “Trysön, wolves, oh my God!”

Gnawbit shifts to look out the doorway. His eyes grow wide at the carnage starting below.

Olivia takes the opportunity to act. She grabs his arm and knocks the gun onto the floor, snarling. They dive for the weapon but, terrified of her fearsome demeanor, Gnawbit scurries backwards into Mrs. LaMoore,

knocking her out of the doorway and onto the beach below. Zach retrieves the gun and tosses it far out onto the sand.

“Peculatia!” shouts Gnawbit, collapsed on the floor by the entryway. He watches, horrified, as the wolves methodically work their way up the beach. He turns to Zach and Olivia. “Please,” he says tearfully, “please save her.”

*Howlivia: [rolls]  
19! Rage on!*

*Tsakk-tan: There’s  
a weapon  
involved...*

*Howlivia: Do I  
look like I give a*

Zach races to the controls of the helisphere. Pauses. He whistles a sparrow's chirrup, then smiles.

*Tsakk-tan: [rolls] Ugh, I got a 2. Having a moment of doubt. <exhales> Summoning courage-from-depths.*

*[Actual red sparks appear; a form materializes]*

*Captain: Zach, what are your wells of hope and strength?*

*Tsakk-tan: [automatically] My hope crosses all boundaries, it cannot be contained. My strength rises with the sparrow's every-song that sings the air the World over.*

*Captain: Yes, you know this.*

*Qiddh: Skew... Reroll!*

*Tsakk-tan: [rolls] 18!*

*Captain: Be well, Captain. [fades away]*

*Tsakk-tan: And also with y... Oh!*

*Captain Capsule piloted these in several episodes, particularly in series 4, 7, and 13. The details of the controls were particularly detailed and interactive in the holocomic versions.*

Not wanting to take the time to re-lower the ramp, he carefully brings down the entire sphere, until it hovers a yard above the sand. Gnawbit and Olivia are wrestling a dazed Mrs. LaMoore through the doorway when Olivia stops and stands.

Standing on the sand, 6 feet away, is an old friend with a thick coat and long limbs. Olivia's eyes meet his. A challenge.

"I've kept my word. We'll use this place to clean the air. Don't take the one hiding in the rock wall – we'll need her. Good breath to you."

There is a flicker of understanding. Perhaps. He looks away, howls at the sun, and bounds back up the beach.

They finish dragging Mrs. LaMoore into the sphere. She and Gnawbit are done for and collapse into two seats. Zach raises the

sphere and heads for the open water. They don't hear Ms. Erable screaming from the beach to come back. She doesn't scream for very long.

Floating over the water, Zach lowers the ramp over the boat. All the kids climb aboard, one by one.

Many of them are sobbing, traumatized by the scene on the shore. Kidd, carrying Query, is the last child to board.

“Hi Mom. I knew you’d be here.” Olivia wraps Kidd in a fierce hug. She stumbles through the crowd with him to Zach and hugs them both until Kidd wriggles free.

“It’s terrible what happened to those people. But I think things were not quite right there. Dad, come on! We’ve got to get my friends home. And *we’ve* got to get home – there’s work to do!”

Lifeguard Frimm and Ligaya board last. Their youth counseling skills kick in and they devote themselves to comforting the children as best they can.

The sphere at capacity, Captain Zach closes the capsule hatch. He smiles. Slowly rotating the sphere, he programs a course for their home in the City. Then they rise sunwards, clearing the slopes around the caldera. But he makes sure to not fly too close to the sun.

## The Final Word - with Sam Pastille

Dear Loyal Readers,

Thank you for joining us on another ram-zam-bam adventure with your, and our, favorite Captain. Our next issue is going to be a doozy - our diamond jubilee! And in true celebratory fashion, our 75th anniversary bonanza will feature an amazing guest artist, Zach McDonald-Xiao, who we know you're going to LOVE. Zach is an animator, game designer, and artist from The City. I had a moment to chat with Zach about his plans for the release and have shared some excerpts below...



### ComicRebellion Conference coming in August!

Join the writers, artists, publishers, reenactors, and videographers of Captain Capsule, Illustrious Girl, TKO-Smell, DoughStar, Gram Grimy, Qiddh, Terrior4, Quan Brooke, Agent Jayne Spazinsky, S'kew J, and so many more!

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Sam the Editor: Zach - or perhaps I should say Captain Zach. Welcome aboard!

Zach: Thank you so much, Sam. It's an honor to be here. I couldn't be more thrilled.

S the E: What do you have lined up for us in your first issue?

Z: Well, I can't give away all the secrets, but I will share a few thoughts. First, as a loyal CC fan forEVER, know that your and my favorite bringer of togetherness is in faithful hands. New adventures, for sure, but the core spirit of CC will shine through stronger than ever. We all need a light in the haze. Second, I'm introducing a new character to work with CC, named Qiddh, who is a

THE END... for now

Some notes on realization for performance

Interludes - notes

### **Gotta bail**

Frantically told straight out to the audience.

### **Digiwallette, LLC**

Receipt broadly displayed on large screen, pointed and picked at by eye-rolling, smirking office staff while Barry and Smokey do their thing.

Unboxing - notes

These can be imagined as digital dream sequences, or scenes staged within the office environment with social distancing conventions worn as armor. The scenes should flow freely between the real and the illusory.

### **what we put in boxes**

The protagonists take charge of the constrained words, joined by one confused office staff member who eventually comes round to the mindset of the madding throng. The other office staff

surround them, box them within 6-foot bubbles-of-lack by daily happenstance, unintentionally wielding manifestos like weapons. The effect is to strip the constrained words from the workday vocabulary.

### **pandemic jumpsuit PPE**

Office staff in various stages of jumpsuit un/dress popcorn the constrained phrases, ending the scene without resolution. Cut-off words and word spacing should be respected in performance.

### **on the ledge**

Olivia has a conversation at the window, real or imagined, with sparrows who communicate their portion as best they can.

### **the best laid traps**

After yet one more demoralizing encounter with Ms. Miser, Zach leaves a regulation box of Twinkies open within the kitchenette, baiting a trap for Ms. Miser's lack of restraint. Ms. Wong observes through the barely-open door and, gleefully, gets to participate in Ms. Miser's removal in expectation of attaining the numero uno floor monitor position. Unless she changes her ways, she shouldn't be too gleeful...

### **view from above**

Zach and Oliva have a meta-conversation via texting, quick words, and body language, creating their own imaginary world of pounding hearts above the banal, hollowed-out soul of the office

environment. Office staff are unable to see Zach and Olivia's true communications, immersed in their own Gestus.

holo mind – notes

### **Blastoconf Z89**

In a reversal of the norms of “virtual work,” live actors are working together on laptops and documents in the middle of the empty stage while the conference table is projected on a screen behind them. In this way, the archetypal space of impersonal labor and requirements is living a purely virtual existence. The impact on the employees, however, is real, so the employees are bathed in actual “cleansing” rainbow light that follows them around the stage. All the lines can be spoken aloud. When the line is marketing- or corporate-speak, the actor should boldly declaim it with the least amount of sincerity possible in Gestus-like manner. The central poem, starting “beauty casts a rainbow pall,” should be rendered in half-light with full sincerity for the audience, before the sterile rainbow returns for the ending. Certain motivating mottos will also appear on the projection as can (optionally) the central poem.

### **My mask**

The stage is configured with a projection screen behind the actors. A projection operator *performs* the poem by projecting various sections of the material behind the stage in provocation of, or in response to, the actors' verbatim or improvised renditions of sections of the poem. The sections of the poem in cascading squares are divided into pairs-of-accountability, and scene partners should choose adjacent sections to encourage each other – sincerely, or not, depending on the sensibility of the text – to fulfill

the statements' visions. Any insincere "marketing speak" can be improvised. The final text block, starting "how I see the world," is read in overlapping renditions by the actors while the projected scene changes to different incarnations of the text as each individual struggles to find their own way forward. In all cases, the turning of the mask is relentless as the "play" they cannot escape continues.

## Interludes 2 - notes

### Another day camping at the office in the DEN

A straight farce. An "animated plant" (digital or costumed) plays keep-away with anklet and underwear during an uncomfortable garment retrieval.

### today's menu

A smorgasbord of interesting foods, embodied/enabled by the office staff (or, optionally, digitally), pursues Olivia relentlessly, and she samples them all. Ultimately she caresses her belly, and glows.

## Role-playing game and vacation

Both the game and the vacation take place simultaneously. The actors must switch between playing the game and performing vacation activities, such as driving the car and climbing the mountain, as the scenes progress. The background adjusts between nature and animated renderings of the characters and game board. When the final conflict arises these worlds merge and the characters climb into the fantasy milieu, which ultimately becomes a new reality.

## A few notes

- In the office scenes, I took inspiration from ideas prototyped by the real estate group Cushman & Wakefield ([www.cushmanwakefield.com](http://www.cushmanwakefield.com)) in their plan, *The 6 Feet Office*.
- Parts of Scene 2, *The shell of virtue*, were inspired by the legend of Icarus and Plato's Apology.
- The image I used as a template for the outline of the PPE jumpsuit:  
[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/cc/Man\\_in\\_jumpsuit.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/cc/Man_in_jumpsuit.jpg)
- How the birds on the ledge may communicate: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morse\\_code](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morse_code)
- The poem *View from above*, an office heterotopia, was inspired by the work of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller. Their videos frequently highlight the separation, yet co-habitation, of imaginary and ordinary worlds.
- The noticing of forest details in Scene 4 was inspired by the observational way-of-being promoted in John R. Stilgoe's book *Outside Lies Magic*.
- The spiritual sympoiesis of the wolf within was inspired by Carla Freccero's article, *Wolf, or homo homini lupus* in the book *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (U. Minn. Press).
- The *Asemic Chorus* in the musical was inspired by the grunting sailors' chorus in Benjamin Britten's opera, *Billy Budd*, although they are nothing alike.
- The ending role-playing game (RPG) scenes were inspired both by *Dungeons & Dragons* (*Wizards of the Coast*) and the collaborative RPGs of game designer Avery Alder.

## Media credits

The following externally-created resources were used in creating the videos linked in the text.

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All sounds are licensed under the Creative Commons Zero (CC0 1.0 Universal) license.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Amaranth Borsuk, for her insightful commentary and positive, supportive energy throughout the creative process. A hearty thanks, too, to my second reader, Joe Milutis, in particular for stepping in, unexpectedly, to provide feedback in the “middle third” of the thesis year, freely and frequently giving of his expertise as I navigated placing my words off-the-page. Thank you to all of the MFA faculty for a wonderful year of creation and discovery, which provided a bumper crop of brain-fodder for this work. Thanks to Diana Khoi Nguyen for the space in her class to explore the characters and themes that became my thesis. Thanks to Phillip Carpenter for sharing his thoughts and experiences with visual and digital arts. Thank you to Miriam Bartha for all of the MFA administrative support. A big thanks to my MFA cohort for freely sharing of your work, your thoughts and feedback in discussions, and for sticking with it through our Zoom time together. And, finally, hugs and thank you to my family for the love and support, and for providing a lifetime of generative muse-moments.

## 6-foot pine – a poetics

### Introduction

*6-foot pine: life and romance in the chondemic age* is a hybrid work of speculative fiction interrogating attraction and connection in a near-future time of chronic pandemics while under the persistent choking ravages of climate change. Zach, a dental receptionist, artist, and comic enthusiast, and Olivia, a get-it-done senior accountant, start a passionate office romance during the twelfth year of the latest pandemic, a time when their every movement and interaction is carefully circumscribed to prevent contagion inside, while their lives outside the office are shrouded in a near-constant smog. Despite these challenges, Zach and Olivia, guided by Captain Capsule, their comic-book muse, deepen their connection, navigating the constraints of office politics, corporate power, and technological intrusion along the way. Their path is strewn with questions of worthiness, doubt, the acceptance of family, the relationship between nature and personal monstrosity, and obstacles from legal trials to medical trauma. They eventually become pregnant and marry, joining their two families who are geographically separate and different ethnically and philosophically. Their story concludes (for now) with a game-driven quest to save both their child and the world from the fog of despair. As suggested by the title, *6-foot pine* explores distance and boundaries, whether physical, familial, romantic, or cultural. Mirroring how Zach and Olivia's relationship pushes against all confines, the story plays out across a diversity of forms including live theater, narrative prose, concrete poetry, and virtual reality to build an immersive and participatory world for the reader and audience.

## Origins one: the office

In April of 2020, the real estate group Cushman and Wakefield issued a widely-cited white paper called *The 6 Feet Office* that provided guidelines for the safe operation of an office under Covid conditions (“6 Feet Office | Australia”). This included recommendations on physical workflow along office thoroughfares, cleaning and covering of surfaces, protective shielding between occupants, and appropriate distancing of coworkers. While socially appropriate distancing is not new, and in fact has been much in the news in light of the #metoo movement, the nature of the *6 Feet Office* constraints suggested a new paradigm for a draconian rule-based autocratic workplace. Their guidelines brought to mind my own 20+ year career as an office dweller and spurred me to wonder what it would be like to “talk around the watercooler” in such an environment. To up the ante, I wondered what it would take to *more than talk* in such a repressive setting. Thus, the love story of Zach and Olivia, both of them wearily bearing the mantle of pandemic fatigue, was born.

To create a “constrained” environment and find interesting ways to bring the two lovebirds together I drew up a floorplan. I have always been fascinated with maps at the start of books for the placement of characters and actions in space, place, and time. I designed the layout of Zach and Olivia’s office building, Lovelorn Towers, to choreograph the flow of individuals through space and carefully circumscribe their actions – a characteristic reflected in the very names of their businesses: Vortex Accounting and Wave Dentistry. I placed sanitation burdens on workers when they transition between office spaces, and even added a little uncertainty by including an “eddy” in the traffic flow pattern, which causes some concern for Zach. Because I could visualize the space, more scenarios for interaction came to mind; these formed the framework for the first three scenes.

Requiring the payment of both emotional and physical pandemic taxes in the corporate environment produced any number of rules, devices, and duties to frustrate my protagonists – for example, mandated viewing of corporate safety ads; a problematic air filter change; filing procedures with potentially contaminated papers – so as to keep the pressure on and force them to cleverly seek means of passionate escape. A key part of building that environment was in amplifying the burdens of a technologically mediated world beyond “reasonableness.” Covid’s inspiration was obvious as we currently face mandated Zoom meetings and cobbled-together online solutions for what would have been a walk down the hall and chat during someone’s office hours the previous year, a distancing both enabled and enforced by technology. I was also able to draw from my own office experience to instill bonus sad-/realism into the scene. My memories of ridiculously repetitive and convoluted physical test procedures (and their documents!) as an engineer, of emailed screeds from disconnected managers, of overly career-minded team mates and leads preening for success inspired features like Vortex’s obdurate procedural manifesto for employees, finger-cleaners that look like pencil sharpeners, and the unwholesome office Floor Monitors. Overall, we are left with the disconcerting notion that this virtual conceptual rendering of an office, uncannily close to our own, may herald aspects of our actual future workplace.

### Origins two: on hybridity

The impetus for *6-foot pine*’s sprawling hybrid landscape of forms, including prose, visual poetry, virtual reality, computer game, musical theatre, comic book, and others, arises from my own diversity of performance, technical, cultural, and literary experiences. I have performed in (mostly musical) theatrical productions and choirs since I was a child. Over two decades, I have explored fringe theatre,

puppetry, opera, musical theatre, and other genres, performing over 30 roles. Beyond the joys of performing live and building a connection to the audience, I find that having a solid narrative core, with memorable lyrics and interactive dialogue, are essential to the theatrical experience for both performers and audience. This inspired me to include a significant theatrical component in *6-foot pine* and to consider what would happen if it were to be “performed” in its entirety as a dramaturgical work.

Through a fortuitous connection while performing in *The Pirates of Penzance*, I found myself interviewing for a software test engineering position (“What’s that?” I said). I enjoyed the creativity involved in ferreting out software problems and solutions and worked my way through various flavors of software engineering for over two decades. In this work, I was highly influenced by the practical matter that points of integration between sets of code / designs / concepts are the major points of interest where the *magic*, or problems, happen for users in real-life technical scenarios – for example, where your contact information intersects with your order information. I found that applying this way of thinking, by focusing attention on the interactions of complex systems, was an effective, and more interesting, way to explore scenarios in general. A technical intersectionality if you will. For *6-foot pine*, this mindset led me to explore using technical solutions as foundational narrative forms, flavoring them with the speculative genre and content of the story to promote particular meanings important to propelling the action or evoking an emotional truth.

Similarly, the work’s focus on mixed identities arises from my own and my family’s own lived experiences and my specific investment in representation. Initially growing up in a small college town in rural America, when I was in elementary school we moved to Hong Kong, and for the next ten years I attended schools with students from over 35 countries. Almost all of my friends were Asian (of various backgrounds) or biracial. After secondary school, I headed to a progressive American university which brought not more but a different mix of racial and gender diversity conversations and actions into my life. After graduation and moving to Seattle for grad school, I regularly commuted to the International

District to visit my girlfriend, Lili, who lived with her Taiwanese-speaking grandmother; we have been married for 26 years. Beyond my history steeped in cross-cultural connection and care for a broadly diverse coterie of people, my role as a parent to biracial children propels, at a very personal level, my interest in promoting the normalization of mixed characters in literature.

Finally, my interest in experimental and/or hybrid literary forms blossomed under the MFA program in *Creative Writing and Poetics* at University of Washington Bothell. While I had written poetry and prose fiction before the program (and an abundance of technical or project management documents and reports), I was not intimately familiar with the immense range of hybrid literary forms that has bloomed in the world for centuries. I was fascinated with how 17<sup>th</sup> century poet Matsuo Basho responded to his personally transformative journey in Japan by combining haiku and travelogue to create the haibun of *Narrow Road to the Interior*; how M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* transformed the language of an 18<sup>th</sup> century legal case about insurance into an emotionally powerful fragmentary poetry tackling slavery and people-as-property. I decided to participate in combining and creating form anew, utilizing my poetry and prose writing as a base while playing to my strengths in technology and performance.

### On technology, performance, and translation

As I considered how to include my passion for performance in *6-foot pine*, I was already imagining what life for the protagonists could be like off the page. My initial thoughts were partially inspired by Zach's appreciation for geek culture, in particular animation and comic books. I wondered how the third protagonist, comic book character *Captain Capsule*, would have imaginary conversations with Zach and how I could describe those visually. My performance background certainly influenced my decision to include theatrical scenes in *6-foot pine*. Yet, because of the much reduced in-person collaboration

during the Covid-19 pandemic, getting off-the-page had to travel in safer directions than readings with actors (or workshop participants). Given my recent experimentations with digital media tools and new media formats in the MFA program, the decision to go virtual in the service of narrative was obvious.

Towards that end, after investigating several tools for suitability, I implemented a number of prototypes in service to my story. From the virtual reality (VR) demonstrations of XR designer Don Allen Stevenson III at the *Adobe Max Conference 2020*, I learned about Adobe Dimension, a VR creation tool, and Adobe Aero, a VR sharing platform. Significantly, these tools are built for use by designers rather than coders, democratizing technologies that enable artists to experiment and create works for VR headsets that before required dauntingly complicated coding and expensive equipment. I used Dimension to create one scene, “Behind the storage closet,” but found that its capabilities were lacking if I wanted to create more textual interactivity, so I focused on the Unity platform for subsequent prototypes of my theatrical ideas. The Unity platform combines a purpose-built application with C# scripting; it is chiefly used for creating computer games but also capable of cinematic creativity. After taking free online tutorials on basic tool usage at Unity Learn, I was able to make progress. I quickly found that the advanced text manipulation needs of my poetic ideas were not mainstream game-platform scenarios and required additional online research in coding forums as well as my own experimentation. Techno-visual-poetry is not a turnkey experience.

One of the core challenges of *6-foot pine* is to effectively communicate an emotionally fulfilling and cohesive narrative in this complex mixed-genre technical-live performance environment. I build my narrative through various forms, augmenting theatrical stagecraft with creative text forms (including visual and concrete poetry) and new media technologies (AR, VR, live projection, etc.). My goal is to develop a carefully crafted script that provides an integrated, immersive experience for the audience that offers a better, or more intriguing, understanding of the humanity of the characters. In doing so, my hope is that the connected narrative is strengthened through an expansion of the characters’ world

space and its dimensions, and by communicating in novel methods that open new perspectives for the audience. I do not know for a fact that this is, or would be, true for my new-media text presentations. *Beyond Text*, a 5-year strategic program funded by the *British Arts & Humanities Research Council*, among other goals sought to discover how to “help inform educational practice at a time when traditional notions of literacy are being challenged by advances in communication technology”. One research study, *Poetry Beyond Text*, based at the University of Dundee and led by professors and researchers of art, literature, and philosophy, including Andrew Michael Richards, Martin Fischer, Mary Modeen, and Lisa Otty, studied the impact of text materiality across physical objects, paper-bound works, and new media work on viewers’ perceptions and artistic interpretive responses (*Materiality - Poetry Beyond Text*). Using visual poetry consisting of text and images as test objects, they found that more “visual” works were judged by study subjects as being more like “challenges and puzzles,” but were “equally liked” as more “textual[ly]” perceived works. At the same time, study participants “rated works in which they felt the text and image mutually enhanced one another more highly than works which they felt were ‘fragmented’ or disjunctive.” So, depending on how effectively my visually augmented poetic renditions have been implemented, rather than enhancing human understanding, I may have instead contributed a sense of enticing mystery to *6-foot pine*.

In trying to realize that connected narrative I became aware that some of my key questions at the beginning of the exploration required further technological intervention: *What is a hybrid textual-virtual performance? How would I display what I had created in a public setting? How would the audience interact with what was presented?* Additionally, the fact that not every scene is explicitly theatrical begs consideration of how the entire work can (though not should) be read, those scenes included, for pure literary enjoyment, with the action existing solely in the imagination of the reader. Indeed, there are enough undefined variables across the entire work (How many non-protagonist office workers do we need in the *View from above* scene? Should oration be synchronized with text movement? Which do we

say first, the “unboxed” or the “boxed” text in the *Crater good* finale? Etc.) that any particular staging would be dramatically different from any other. This vagueness of actualization may actually be a reasonable state to exist in to draw in and enable readers to envision their own stagings.

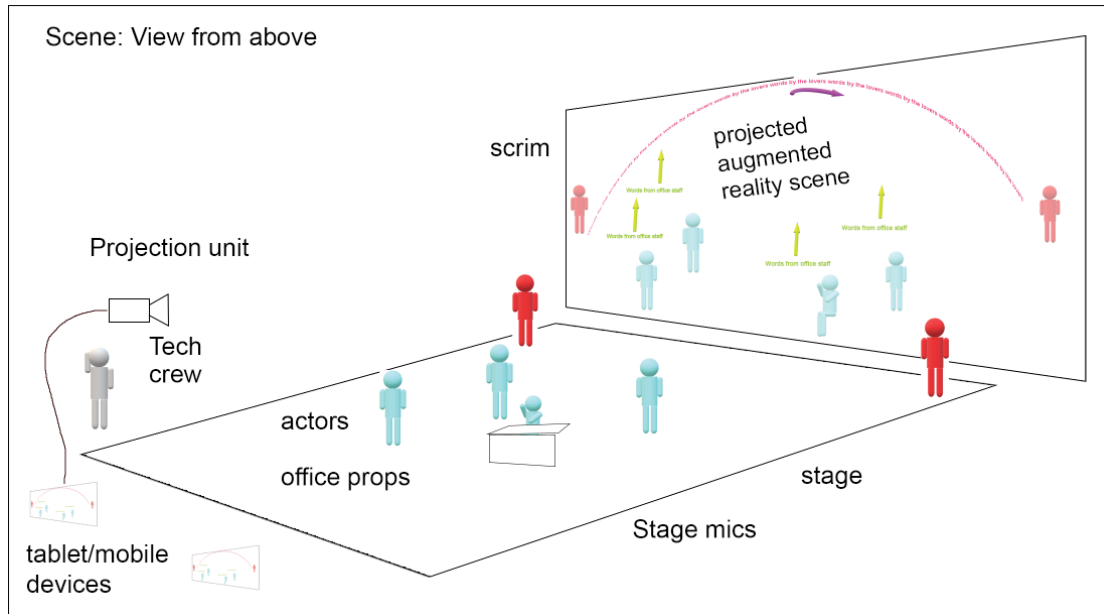
I should add here that my experiences as a performer in musicals and operas have ingrained in me the joy of live performance and an appreciation for how the unique embodiment of roles and text by different actors can completely change the experience and interpretation for the audience. As Helfgot and Beeman note in *The Third Line: The Opera Performer as Interpreter*, there is a virtual “third line... of interpretive dimensions,” alongside the music staff and lyric, consisting of all the context and individuality that the performer can bring to bear on the performance(Helfgot). So I needed to provide sufficient supporting text, through appropriate notes on spacing, motivation, and other context, for the actors to bring them along in the spirit of the story that I am promoting, while at the same time giving them wide latitude in character reading.

These questions pushed me to sketch my thoughts and develop more detailed staging notes to get closer to workable production solutions and, hopefully, work through some of those questions. As an example, the first scene I developed was for the visual poem *View from above* which I described as follows:

Scene 1, *View from above*, explores the separation between the banal conversations and requirements of regular office staff from the metaconversations between the lovers Zach and Olivia. The conversations are spoken and rendered as moving visual poetry that responds to the position of the actors through augmented reality ARKit body tracking. The poetry moves – rotates, rises, zigzags – according to the players’ actions/role, whether conducting common office actions or thinking of a lover. The audience experiences the performance through their own device (with a downloaded app), one of 4 provided capable tablets, or from the projection

of the AR scene (from one, or several, of those audience-held tablets) on a large screen/scrim behind the players behind the players

(Note that I did not actually include this particular snippet in the final draft of *6-foot pine*.)



Using this combination format of staging notes and diagram, I hint at the appearance of the scene, the actions of the actors, and the technology involved. For each integration point of the narrative with virtual or augmented reality, I coded a proof-of-concept application, created a video of the behavior, and integrated the video into the narrative by linking it from the page within a relevant narrative scenario. Note that the use of technology to envision and create each scene fundamentally changed the embodiment of the narrative. I would have otherwise imagined a very different aesthetic realization had I not been constrained in implementation by the exacting and unforgiving medium of code. This constraint-by-forging goes both ways, however, for while I am limited by what I can “make the program do,” I also learn as I go which brings forth new ideas for how scenes could be rendered. For example, in the *my mask* programming work, I learned new ways of rotating and coloring text that I likely otherwise would not have described or envisioned for the text version of the scene. Constraining my creation to

scoped engagements of text motion and color adjustment in a theoretical quasi-3D presentation environment may also have unintentionally (but helpfully) made the scenes more intimate. Janet H. Murray in her classic text on new media (chiefly online) narrative, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, discusses the effects of true 3D sensations on movie goers as being more effective when used for telling “more intimate stories” of humanity where the focus is localized on the protagonist as opposed to the creation of a “three-dimensional panorama” where the impact of more complicated rendering is washed out by distance (Murray 52). My videos of moving text certainly are intimate, I dare say even meditative as the text weaves across the screen, with the text (or an accompanying sculpted mask, reflecting the visage of a character or even the viewer) the only possible protagonist seen.

The foil driving the conflict for the characters in most of these scenes is the corporation or management. I felt that the virtual environment provided an appropriately artificial, unfeeling separation of corporate needs and wants from the real humans behind each employee role, a clear representation of work-life separation in a world even more technologically mediated than our own. Management instigates manifestos for employee behavior, mandates egregious procedures to follow in the name of office safety, and generally dehumanizes workers. I pulled and extrapolated from the worst of my own lived experiences in corporate culture to build in tangibly gross facets of office life to motivate our protagonists.

The visual poem *my mask* comments on the impact, whether good or bad, of safety masks upon the social and other interactions of employees, represented by a 3D theatrical mask that I had rendered in the 3D artist software tool *Blender*. The messages directed toward employees by the corporation and its corporate PPE provider include the false hopefulness of the manufacturer’s marketing-speak, corporate messaging of compliance from the employer, and some misguided misogyny from management. The mask is masquerading as a safety device, but in the spirit of the treachery of images it is also a theatrical prop that heralds the employee’s role in the office drama. In the words of Murray again, the mask is also

a “participation” marker signaling the continuing part that Olivia plays in the uncomfortable pageantry of the pandemic show(Murray 139). The mask allows the employee some physical protection, but also guards their emotions and obscures their sense of personal identity, culminating in doubts about their own ability to represent themselves and be fully perceived by the world at large. In that case of unknowingness, with a virtual self standing in for the actual self, how can an employee achieve their ambitions?

One interesting property that creating this in a game platform allowed was the ability to inject a controlled *randomness*, i.e. improvisation, into the acts. I was partially inspired to do so by the philosophical approaches of the Ouvroir de Litterature Potentielle (OULIPO) where poetic verses are created under the constraints of quasi-mathematical principles(Academy of American Poets). One apt comparative example would be creating a poem using the paradoxical OULIPO “N+7” formula that modifies an existing poem by replacing significant nouns with a “wholly different” noun 7 nouns away in the dictionary. This is an algorithmic methodology with an improvisatory bent, for noun substitutions will be non-deterministic considering the variability in dictionaries and noun-difference-tolerance of the poem’s author. Similarly, for *my mask*, I added a section of code called *waver* that allows the performer-controller to modify curve properties of word phrases, like the arc or radius, and thus loop a phrase, or to tweak textual aspects such as small caps or individual letter colors. However, the interface, OULIPO-like, constrains the user in how and how much properties can be changed, and is deliberately vague on the ways some of the limited controls work, requiring the user to play in the interface and improvise towards understanding. I further made the controls non-deterministic by adding or subtracting random factors from text and form adjustments. These injected, game-like chance effects enact what Murray calls a *symbolic drama* where the real-world is compressed and represented in symbolic (game) action (176). In this case, the same messages are displayed over and over for Olivia with her actions restricted to inconsequential reformatting. Her agency is also at the mercy of chance which models “our basic

helplessness in the universe”(216). Thus, in this environment our protagonist is refused closure, unable to make meaningful change and her game/ad experience mirrors that of real-Olivia in the endless pandemic and climate change nightmare.

*Blastoconf89* uses the lens of a commercial conference room safety tool to explore the confusing costs of making employees presentably-present. The beautiful rainbow lights both create an illusion of germ-fighting togetherness and are a distance designation signifier of apart-ness. This creates an anxious push-pull of presence-making for the employees such that they cannot be truly present together (if they ever can be). The cost includes not only physical limitations, such as distance, but the numbing tax of jargon, the subconscious and conscious fear of the safety system failing or having adverse effects, and the burden of “fitting in” to the glorious, yet sterile and required, rainbow of conformity. The safety tool is implicitly a fear-making device hidden behind obtuse terminology and a colorful manifestation, with a concluding statement of uncertainty (from FIB, the Federal Infection Bureau) as to whether anyone is really in charge of all this or knows what they are doing.

Including a rainbow light to bathe the player when they “attend a meeting” has a multitude of ramifications. While a beautiful way to hide germ-fighting technology, it simultaneously induces feelings of alienation by appropriating this symbol of natural beauty and diversity for the purposes of corporate hegemony. In configuring technology that co-opts beauty to bring people together, the result may be a greater separation of individuals from the natural and social world and a forced prisms of the representatives of humanity who *are* together. Perhaps this shines a new light on the need for greater separation of humanity from work entirely, and a motivation for increased social connection elsewhere.

Note that the forces yanking on corporate serfs are very real. I have been one and retaining one's soul and individuality under the assault of company culture and language requires consistent effort. The inbox's relentless assault of new company initiatives, buzzwords, acronyms, changes in org structure, and new technologies to absorb and implement can be quite overwhelming. I can only assume that the impact of those forces would intensify in this more technologically mediated world with more intrusive mental immersion such as with Zach's holo marketing experiences. This could easily turn into a PTSD situation for no other reason than a by-the-numbers accounting of being mentally bludgeoned in the tool simulation: if a health device is 89% effective at stopping a contagion, then a participant will become infected 1 out of every 10 meetings. Talk about real world anxiety!

This is simulated for Zach with the Blastoconf Z89 as both an advertisement (Learn this! Buy this!) and a morose game that he is required to participate in. Words are flung at him from impersonal (mask-like) corporate stock photography, piling one atop the next to produce an uncoordinated din of biz-speak to dull his senses to anything that is not in the approved lexicon. Further, after being immersed and boxed-in under such an onslaught, by the combinatorics he is guaranteed to become infected and die within a few game moves, making the entire experience fruitless.

Zach's creative solution to this unsolvable conundrum is via a classic artistic intervention, turning the phrases and devices of the oppressor into multicolored "wordflakes" of overlapping phrases. This colorful conundrum floats in the air, rendering ineffective the enforcement of the company line by converting hollow jargon into a tangle of new meanings. Interestingly, the wordflakes were initially created by my own real-life software bug, the overlapping poem text caused by a variable not being properly cleared somewhere in my code. A happy accident providing new directions, new angles, and a solution to Zach's conformity problem by the simultaneous viewing of multiple perspectives.

One final comment on the technological narrative offered by this ad-game. There is still an incompleteness in the gamified digital experience as coded, which might be ok given that the world is a fake one. (And which artificially created world is that – a paternal corporate superstructure, or a digital holo-realm?) For example, I could add visuals of germs to add manipulated emotional depth, or a score reminder to keep the player on-leash for that high-score rush. Such a score would go up meaninglessly with the number of meetings attended, rewarding the player with mandatory mantras, jargon, and premonitions, when the only probabilistically realistic result is eventual illness and a further pulling back from human interaction.

## Identities

One can consider my corporate foil's projection of a cleansing rainbow spotlight onto its employees as a phony allyship ("We're all fighting germs together!") that instead washes away their identities. By leaching away their individuality and rendering them in company-determined hues, individuals are reimagined as replaceable laborers, thus creating a hollow environment where authentic diversity of representation is replaced by bland corporatism. Of course, our protagonists take their opportunities to resist and assert their individuality, such as by realizing the "wordflakes" mentioned above.

This struggle for identity against the corporation is also at the heart of the overall dramatic arc. Augusto Boal's book, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, argues that all theatre is political, and explores the Western theatrical philosophical lineage. Stating some of his main themes very broadly, Boal argues that a classical Aristotelian theatrical approach is concerned with coercing the individual to conform to society (Boal 39). Machiavelli's (and Shakespeare's) approach is to flip this focus and, rather, to exalt the exceptional individual from out the bourgeoisie based on their superior reason and virtue and lack of

emotional distraction (62-63). Hegel considers characters in a true drama as fully individuals, and free to act according to the ethical principles (virtue) that they “immanently embody,” but that the drama must resolve any conflicts and end in harmony (74). Brecht overturns this yet again to say that characters in a drama are not free at all, but rather are *object-subjects* at the mercy of external economic and social forces (92, 96). Boal ultimately arrives at his own methodology and philosophy of theatre games and exercises which provide participation and practice for spectators-as-characters to exercise their free will, in so doing serving as a rehearsal for real life revolution (155).

Looking at my work through this lens, I was struck by the similarity of Boal’s argument’s progression to *6-foot pine*’s treatment of the protagonists-as-individuals within the narrative arc. The start of the story concerns the coercion of Zach and Olivia into the climate and corporate box through the environmental constraints of pollution, society’s sickness, and an actual trial before the people. Truly, they are being pressured to conform to society according to Aristotle’s demands. Olivia demonstrates characteristics of the exceptional virtuous individual with her quasi-Shakespearean speeches during the trial, displaying clear reason and strength of character. Act 2, concerning commitment, family, and inner-monstrosity, moves into the realm of the individual-in-action, free to philosophically ponder and take action (or not). Yet, here they are buffeted by external forces: social convention (a wedding) and by nature itself. Brecht might also say that Olivia is not free at all to be her individual self. Rather, she is pushed by nature itself, manifested as membership in a lupine society, to metamorphose into another being entirely. When we get to Act 3, the action exactly mirrors Boal’s focus. The game that the family plays – and games can be thought of as a rehearsal-like, symbolic representation of life – indeed changes the world!

During the writing of *6-foot pine*, the high profile murder of George Floyd occurred, along with many subsequent attacks on people of color, including an increase in assaults on individuals of Asian heritage.

The right to engage in supportive protest, frank discussions concerning racial and gender identity, and national and international matters of equity have featured prominently in the national news cycle. All of these events have been much on my mind, and likely filter into my work in ways beyond what I am aware of. I do know, as a parent of biracial children, that I am committed to representing well-rounded characters of mixed racial background in my writing. I did not want to create this narrative with the assumption that all characters are white simply because the author (or potential reader) is white. Rather, I wanted to provide a place to belong for those crossing racial and cultural boundaries, whether they be my characters, the actors portraying them, or my readers and viewers.

I have been blessed to be surrounded by a rich variety of races and cultures throughout my life, both nationally and internationally. In Bellevue, Washington, where I live now, 39% of the population was born outside the US, from no fewer than 90 countries (“Cultural Diversity”). In truth, multiculturalism feels familiar and monochromatism seems dull, flavorless. Early in the winter of 2020, I heard episode 346, *Changing the defaults*, of the popular *Scriptnotes* podcast featuring screenwriters John August, the host, and Christina Hodson. The discussion focused on promoting character variety in film scripts. The phrase that stuck with me was, “...when we send [scripts] to casting if it doesn’t specify race, 100% the casting list comes back and it says Caucasian now suddenly next to their name” (August and Hodson). In the *Writer’s Chronicle*, Claudia Rankine quotes novelist Toni Morrison, saying, “In this country, American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate” (Rankine). It was important to me to create persistent *opportunities* for “hyphenated” actors, and build that variety into the script in such a way that swapping those actors out for a monochromatic cast would be a challenge for those doing the casting. Thus, my story features a cross-cultural cast of characters with the inclusion of that diversity as a key plot point in the finale of the work. My characters are also diverse in gender identities, another population segment currently under siege, which I have been entrusted with intimately learning about both by my peers and colleagues and, most personally, within my close family.

International novelist and essayist Xi Xu frequently writes about transnational, multicultural characters. In a post for *Brevity Magazine*, “Three Commandments for Writing About Race,” Xu examines C. Y. Lee’s novel, *The Flower Drum Song*, which has been adapted to both stage and screen. Despite concerns in later decades about stereotyping, the novel’s focus on individuals going about their daily lives in San Francisco’s Chinatown has allowed the story to persist across play and film revivals. Xu promotes that example to a commandment, saying to “Stop writing about race and write about how people live instead” (Xu). I believe my way forward is to write the best story I can about a diversity of humans, using the vantage points I have experienced to write about our many human similarities, yet with sensitivity to and flavor of, differences. And, in doing so, I can give those creating or viewing my narrative the chance to experience cast members as full-fledged human beings.

I should also mention that my general approach to challenge is not to engage in confrontation. My life has been spent supporting others be it family, youth groups, students, fellow actors on the stage, or in an engineering supporting role in the office. In general, I am more comfortable working by strong example, or using humor, or beauty, in thinking of possibilities and gently redirecting than in raising my voice. I feel that this carries over into my writing as well. As such, the representation of diversity in this work is gentle, focused on creating the opportunity of what-could-be rather than on direct protest, providing opportunities for both actors and audiences to hopefully find a piece of themselves in the work. But maybe creating opportunity and diverging from the status quo is a form of protest? The focus in particular has been on applying (my old favorite) hybridity to people as well. Thus, the main protagonists’ families are each hybrids of cultures much like my own family is. I have my children, both of whom perform artistically, firmly in mind when I imagine actors creating my work. Write what you know. Besides being familiar, it is also hopefully more interesting when family understandings and ways-of-being fit together in novel ways, and the people we care about in the narrative can climb out of merely playing a token part to become something new.

## On color and form

As I negotiated the boundaries of technology, performance, and character diversity, I considered what textual and visual language could adequately express my dramatic requirements. When I thought about the impact of the pandemic on everyday people, I heard the language of separation and saw the colors and words of distance and fear. Six feet apart, away from the red zone and into a comforting teal. PPE as a blank slate – a pale lack of color for a mask and jumpsuit – for anti-viral security. Protection as color-coded rules in manifestos. The colors I use to describe a monstrously unpleasant experience must therefore be monstrous too. The repulsiveness of bile-colored bubbles and bilirubin lines on the floor (Act 1, Scene 1: *Directions*) literally paints the scene with viscera for the characters and (pandemic-fatigued) reader. Similarly, the too bright, even gaudy, Kermit and canary of daytime tableaux are burned away after dark (Act 1, Scene 5 *Interruptions*) to the forest's charcoal and ash. The brightly colored and reflective muse, Captain Capsule, also serves as a foil to the brown-gray smog of our protagonists' climate-challenged reality.

Off the poem's page, I made use of the aforementioned staging notes, a few hints to the reader/director on how to render the poem as theatrical motion. For example, the farce *Another day camping at the office in the DEN*, solely notes that an animated plant could play keep-away with the protagonists' undergarments. On the page, I sought to embed the staging within the design of the words. I found inspiration in poetry that visually painted movement and emotion. Poet and performer Douglas Kearney's book, *Patter*, is a performative work that explodes with angst and wordplay while meditating on themes of miscarriages and fatherhood. *Patter* features several pieces where text piles upon other text as the emotion drives the language away from the horizontal line. For example, anger at racially

loaded/insensitive children's garments for black babies in *THANK YOU BUT PLEASE DON'T BUY MY CHILDREN CLOTHES WITH MONKEYS ON THEM* results in ooo's and ah's dripping down the page (Patter 48). In *6-foot pine*, the poem *The best laid traps* features multiple forms of proprioceptive or spatial text representation. A referenced box is constructed as a square of words on the page; O P E N is spread out; we know that Ms. Wong is peeking through the door because the words describing her actions are placed peering around the box of Twinkies being devoured by Ms. Miser.

The poetry in *6-foot pine* is a mix of concrete and visual poetry. For example, *Digiwallette, LLC* is text only, but plays with the materiality of the text, adding meaning through the fading of the receipt into the past like a foggy memory, a pleasant dream. *On the ledge* goes beyond text to combine morse code with pictograms to express the language of birds in appropriately obscure means. In Zach's fantastical dream of Olivia (Act 2's conclusion, *Unpacking*), the verse in dactylic hexameter is explicitly formatted like an incantation with spacing and syllables broken down for accurate oration. In terms of prose, Olivia's emotionally devastating discussion with her family (Entrails, part 1) is reflected in jagged, shifting lines. The happy wedding invitation (Entrails, part 2) is shown in a predictable flowery script; further, the wedding scene itself contains a variety of material forms to fit the scene: multi-column formats when there are simultaneous or convoluted arrangements of speakers, and red text when the passion heats up.

Thoughts of expanded separation in our real-life pandemic led me to visualize separation on the page and motivate the inclusion of a visual-spatial-textual rendering and meaning. In Scene 3, *Unboxing*, the most obvious example is the text-only concrete poem *What we put in boxes* which blocks in what we miss about living, such as human touch, with words as actual physical barriers on the page. The visual poem *Jumpsuit PPE* elicits words of dissatisfaction in the wearer, for the bounded words are sometimes cut off and not fully pronounced when read. The suit also raises feelings of emptiness, for it cannot be removed by its wearer for safety reasons and thus the suit's black line of separation must remain.

Envisioning my piece as stageable, thoughts of kinesthesia for experiencing poetic words both on and off the page were front of mind. Particularly influential for me in this regard was filmmaker Justin Stephenson's engrossing film *The Complete Works* that showcased the performative work of Canadian visual and sound poet Barrie Phillip Nichol, better known as bpNichol (Stephenson). This retrospective captured the range of bpNichol's playful language and humor in a breadth of performative styles, often using various new media animation techniques. Particularly memorable for me were the scenes of giant letters, rendered as motion graphics, flying over a landscape of trees and fields while watched from a moving vehicle. I wondered why these letters were where letters shouldn't be, doing what letters don't normally do and, in particular, why were they so *large*? This led to some early experiments with floating phrases from my poem *View from above* using Unity Augmented Reality Foundation, imitating the swirling and swerving motions of the text I had placed on the page and using 3D modeling to change letter sizes as they approached or withdrew from the viewpoint. Due to some technical limitations, and pandemic distancing preventing any experimentation with volunteers/actors in a fully immersive AR world, I strayed from a full AR approach in search of a new mechanism to share words and tie them to image and motion in performance. My direction came from the new media work of poet and sound art performer Caroline Bergvall, in particular her haunting *Drift* performance piece that uses spoken word performance and ambient music to accompany an animated text that flows like ocean currents across a backdrop. This inspired me to consider projection, behind the stage and actors, as one way to involve text with motion, or even agency, in a staged environment, which I described in detail for *View from above* in the section *On technology, performance, and translation* above. The last video I created, *Storage Closet*, blends the voice-over of a prose paragraph, sparrow images and chirping audio clips, dynamic motion from the Unity game platform, and augmented reality phone recording. The result is a cinematic experience in visually and audibly realizing the emotion of the scene, *VR = very real*, where Oliva experiences Zach's gift, the fuchsia VR room, for the first time. That scene, itself, is a retelling of an

earlier stroll with sparrows, rescuing for our protagonists the happy parts of their memory in the cedar grove that, otherwise, ended in an attack and hospitalization. This hybridized and layered approach to get words off the page, with layers of technology and echoes of meanings for the characters, is entirely consistent with *6-foot pine's* overall theme of crossing boundaries to make imagined worlds more tangible for the protagonists and readers alike.

### On sparrow talk and world boundaries

One of the most influential factors on my work were Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's many audio and video walks highlighting the separation, yet co-habitation, of imaginary and ordinary worlds. They realize elaborately conceived scenes using soundscapes, props, and actors which the viewer/listener generally experiences with a handheld video or audio player while walking through the scene's location. As the visitor walks, their temporal awareness and proprioception are modified through the uncanny blurring of the scene's reality with Cardiff and Miller's superimposed virtual world. I found *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk* particularly compelling for its integration of passersby, actors, and multiple visual and audible stories of time periods, from World War II to today, told in a single camera pass (Cardiff and Miller). This work in particular inspired the creation of the poem *view from above* in Act 1 and, in general, the office heterotopia I had created. Zach and Olivia communicate in their own world of magical realism with predictive occult-like dental records, conversations with birds, human flight, and skydivers. They even enter magical fuchsia rooms completely separate from (and unknown to) everyone else's banal existence. Time and consequence move differently there, too, as we can see from the range of outcomes enacted on temporal repeat in the scene *The shell of virtue* showing the consequences of their waiting room tryst.

The world surrounding Zach and Olivia is also a gray and dangerous one, dystopian, confining, and in conflict with a more balanced ecological order. Our protagonists dip into a parallel world of animals in symposiums as an antidote to the brown haze and pathogens, frequently finding allies without or within themselves. The theme of birds (and, by extension, flight) recurs throughout the piece, with the presence of hand-holding skydivers in blue skies, a gravity-defying Icarus-like liftoff, and with sparrows in conversation on high ledges, or flying to their defense in the woods. Sparrows of the natural world even inhabit the virtual one, singing in the *Storage closet* video of the fuchsia VR room while engaged in new ways of flying, reimagined as floating bird-balloons. These signs of freedom enacted in superhuman (or superavian) capability fight the pandemic-imposed boundaries that plague our protagonists' (and our own) pandemic-induced psychosis. Carla Freccero, in "Wolf, or Homo Homini Lupus," in the anthology *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, points out the human responsibility for a spectral wolf that *could* inhabit lands from which they are now missing, i.e. from which they were hunted to extinction (Tsing et al.). So, why not allow that spectral spirit to emerge from someone with a strong sense of duty? Thus, the wolf reappears as a magical motif, bringing forth the wild spirit of Olivia too long constrained by a ravaged world externally, and tradition, respectability, and duty internally. It is foreshadowed by, of all things, old romance movies (doubly referencing the freedom of birds with "Sparrows" and "Junco") and references to rom-coms and romance novels as items that distract or momentarily appease the constrained emotional self. Zach *and* the full moon is the key that allows the beast to surface and be recognized and, perhaps, accepted by our protagonists as something that cannot be fully contained or understood. Just as pandemic constraints are impermanent, so too the constraints of societal pressure cannot hide or contain the real self forever.

The delving into magical realism for much of *6-foot pine*, while attempting to maintain the semblance of an authentic emotional connection between the characters, owes much to the concept of heterotopia, the distance and separation of worlds, whether I initially recognized it as such or not. Above all, I am

interested in creating narrative that sparks with magic (whether figurative or “actual”) yet normalizes things like the front-and-center recognition of a real diverse citizenry, caring for others, and that people will still be people, no matter where/when they are, with foibles, oddities, needs, wants, and interesting personalities. In our own challenging times, I believe these are the things we also need.

## Conclusion and translation

6-foot pine stands on its own as a hybrid-text work, able to be experienced in the imagination of the reader with or without its linked digital features, and with or without any (or all) sections being theatrically produced before the reader’s eyes. Of course, including all of those “options” adds to the work’s individuality, and something of its flair is lost if they are not fully considered, even if only in the imagination as opposed to onstage. Mentally crossing all of these boundaries of technologies and performance attributes enables the audience to view our protagonists’ world from a diversity of vantage points. But, by fostering this author’s eye for story in a way that is unlimited by bounded form, it also *created* the work, and *recreates* the work with each new unique realization of the narrative on stage or otherwise.

I would add that this carefully crafted conglomeration of formats and intentions, if it is to be used in a performative manner, is an intermediary. It must be. Directors need something they can hold and envision with entrances and exits and an arc. Actors need dialogue and intention. Stage managers need dimensions and stage right props and lighting cues. *6-foot pine* is short of a show in its resting format.

However, the prose and poetry and diagrams and digital pizzazz could be translated into meaningful directions for how to put the performance together, with what dialogue to say, where or how to move

on stage, when the technology should roar – in short, how to place the work into a “live” theatrical setting. While I have some snippets of staging information for the more outlandish narrative forms, they are quite brief, and many longer prose sections have no such direction. Of course, many talented performers can improvise given suitable source material, and books are endlessly adapted to film or the stage, so bringing these scenes to life is not an insurmountable problem by any means. Given those conditions, a resulting performance might diverge greatly from my vision for *6-foot pine* should I not be directing the project.

Yet, at the same time, that seems very much in line with my initial choice to use hybrid genres. I can only speculate that I would have written quite a different piece had I constrained my imagination to work within a pure script format, or even a “book,” storyboard, and script. One of the biggest differences would have been in how I explored ideas of space and time. The arrangement of words on the page in visual poetry or the appearance of 3D words in virtual spaces worked with another degree of freedom than a pure script would have in terms of separation and distance. Similarly, the novel visualizations of overlapping 3D textual concepts from variability in timing and the ravages of chance took the narrative in directions I would not otherwise have considered. Handing this unbounded-yet-complete content to a director or actor should lead them in novel directions too.

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