

ANTEROGRADE

Honors Thesis by Adriana Gogolin

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Prologue

There was at one point a fissure of possibility. An anomalous hairline fracture creasing the glassy exterior of mankind's nastiest vice: shame. The roiling and putrid shame that clumps at the corners of all organized society. Shame is the grossest affectation because it renders its owner inert or panicked, casting away any and all inhibitions in an attempt to regain control of one's world. Shame's neighbor is addiction, sitting primly in the house across the way. Addiction can be elusive. Often it's thickly clogged in some subterranean pipe and you need an industrial-grade desalinators to flush out not just the source, but the corollary goop, the psychological flotsam, all the tangential excrement. Shame and gratification regard each other from opposite sides of a vast expanse. When many people become similarly anesthetized by the same kind of shame an irrigation system is required.

An acceptable way to turn away from your troubles is to slap labels on them: easy and straight-forward and totally communicable. Hello, My Name is ---- and I am worried about ----. Feelings formed into commodities which you can paste relentlessly sticky labels on, like the kind they use for large-scale grocery store produce. An obvious outlet from shame is the selection of a mate. If chosen out of loneliness, your mate will likely become so familiar and perhaps even lamentably boring that you might choose to build a family out of an unconscious desperation for diversion from the banality of your carefully organized routine. Or merely because it's what you've been implicitly driven towards doing since the days of waddling around bare-footed on cold kitchen tiles, babbling unintelligibly. You get bored with the mundanities of family life and pick at the labels but they won't fully come off and there's still a residual patina of glue. Your

own voice weaves in and out of the constant noise and light and flashing cacophony which you feel at work, at parties, beamed at you from computer screens. There's a noticeable khaki secretion that oozes out of you in the shower and pools stubbornly around the drain. From its wet adobe texture you might decide to build sheafs of families in symmetrical, linear, and stacked proximity to one another. Keep tacking layers of social life onto your own existence until you are inextricable from them.

Here is the apothecic claw of \$\$ reaching out and plopping a nice shiny device in your hand. On this device you may be distracted or coddled or catalyzed at any given moment, only now you can acutely categorize these things. You can control them. Look at the screen. It's not a screen, it's a heart. It's a universe. It's you, not alone. It's you and many other un-lonely yous.

Plunged deep in the calcified organs of a gulley is a verbal wince. A decrying of the wooly comfort that tells us our grievances are singular when in fact they but a single square in the fantastically latticed meshwork that tightly binds and grates us.

Ex nihilio nihil fit.

In this world ecological debris could have been avoided but money changed hands and its weight proved too quixotic. Old malignancies slovenly put on weight. A fixation with the self gobbled up difficult and tender connections while a slew of corporate creeps with clipboards and martinis (two olives each) watched through a keyhole in a dauntingly high door, welded closed, latched with steel. The oft-heard quip is worth repeating: it has become easier now to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. Sometimes technology is a means of survival. Other times it's self-branding. Don't we know that branding leaves a welt?

There was at one point a fissure of possibility. If you want to know what lay in the fissure, it was a street suffused with a mottled yellow glow. A film of light bouncing off of

blunted shrapnel in the street and refracting on the oily backs of crows. Rows of crows sternly perched on gutters waiting to be stirred. Light pooling under nearby awnings, dripping with humidity. Sallow and thick light, coming in great heaving tides. Oppressive and fetid. An alleyway that zigzags drunkenly into a road here and swerves headlong into a fractured wall there. A world heavy with the dull weight of abandonment. A flutter of new beginnings somewhere around the corner.

Let your shoes click down the littered pathway. Notice how echoes reverberate through corridors of somnolent wreckage. This is how the world is now.



1.

En route to Chicago you're hit with a bout of nausea of unknown origin. You try to delay the need to use the bus's restroom for as long as conceivably possible but each diuretic onslaught has you keeling over to greater degrees so by the fifth surge you're nearly all the way doubled over. You glance uneasily at the old woman seated next to you and smile weakly. She regards you with something like amused disgust. An internal sigh: defeat. You hoist yourself up, all bent knees and stiff limbs, focusing on how simultaneously apologetic and incensed you are, partly directing your anger at the woman's blatant lack of sympathy. Strangers and their lack of remorse, their disgust--this unfortunately hasn't gotten any easier to bear with age. You're leaving your seat and a plaintive mantra (*'why is this happening, why now'*) loops in your brain. The bus jerks to and fro as you totter down the aisle, steadying yourself on the seats of strangers, fearing that all hell will imminently let loose. Globules of sweat are beading on your forehead and collecting somewhere around your clavicle. Your palms slide on the cruddy black plastic. In the bathroom you sit on the tin toilet for a while, rocking back and forth. The release is sublimely satisfactory. You've endured a great testament of nature's power and survived. In fact, you are entropy's staunchest warrior and truly a paragon of resilience. After scrubbing your hands thoroughly, scrupulously scouring the skin under your nails and double-checking your fly, you wrench open the bathroom door. As you glide back to your seat buoyed by the sweet swagger of victory your vantage point folds out into rows of blinking lights. The sweaty air is rife with little clicks and beeps as fingers whirl away, typing messages on keyboards, scrolling furiously. There's the occasional voluble snorer and a discreet couple whispering to one another, but mostly everyone's on a phone. You can't help the unease this produces in you.

2.

Growing up, you distinctly remember feeling like the subjects that formatted your sense of self were markedly oppositional. Your genuine affinities for cultural exploration and empathic learning girded you against the socio-technic tides which, with increasing aggression, furlled over the country. The sense of alienation that guided you to books (and away from swaths of vacuity) in turn led you to discover a formulaic sort of historical amnesia. The tendencies towards solipsism and domination and greed that spanned human crises across time slunk into the social norms and corporate interests of your own movement through the world, but not always in a palpable sort of way. In dredging up what you considered one of the most irrefutably grotesque deficiencies in human history you came to understand that your deepest fears were both wedged into and derived from an unstoppable social order whose most perniciously persistent priority was the distribution of material goods in lieu of individual freedom. The anxieties you felt alone at night were not your own, they had roots elsewhere and their seeds were planted by long furtive tendrils. The point is, these malaises were not domestically harvested. So discreetly you worked to sever the roots, to meditate deeply, and to plainly identify the ideas that did no justice to your emotional constitution. This was your initial foray into the life of an infidel under the surveillance state: your self-extraction from the collective ritual of digital transmutation. The more you consumed outside of the canon, the more smoothly the fog peeled back and the better able you were to watch with a slow-burning horror as fame and authority sparked themselves flat. Politicians whose idiosyncrasies became too pronounced and the brisance of global organizations lurching forward into fallibility. Economies self-cannibalized and the increasingly dire prevalence of depleted resources. Meanwhile the Internet's maw expanded and inhaled. You became--hesitantly at first and then quite insistently--the axis of a warm blooded orbit. The

world didn't want you if you weren't plugged in so you steeled yourself against the digital tide until it rocked you to a polished ore.

Note: We can momentarily and perhaps obnoxiously deem this current society a 'cultural vacuum.' The most edifying feature of this cultureless space is intensified individualization bridled by a larger cohesive unit which is in turn undercut by a biological pretense (dictum: "humans are superior. Some humans more than others. Money enables exceptionalism. Technology is \$\$ incarnate"). As it goes, the prototypical entity in the Vacuum believes itself fortified by the larger skeleton of the structure as if the manipulation of community by a higher force is natural somehow. This kind of masked paternal beneficence is nothing new, only now it's so meticulously dispersed as to become indistinguishable from the basic human kindnesses that are exchanged on an intimate level.



3.

A new world: efficiency is the highest order of business. We are all post-post- post-.
Do people read here? Do they write? Do they cook? What brings you joy?

4.

Oliver used to love watching Criterion films on his chrome-colored sofa which, despite its increasing mildewed aroma, occupied a sentimental notch in his heart. Oliver had a stringently executed ritual that led up to these films: after work, which ended sharply at 6pm, he'd retreat to the greasy and blandly-tiled corporate bathroom with its one weak bulb whose flare seemed never to dim or brighten over time, just flatly cast a tepid wanness over its corresponding switch. He'd yank his tie from his throat, a minute catharsis following hours of soul-crushing data entry and subsequent jaw grinding. The tie would sometimes catch before unraveling so Oliver's neck would be jerked forward as well. A silk noose that ultimately serve to undo the day's numbness in one gesture: a shock therapy of sorts. Depending on the rigor of the day or how much coffee he'd needed to keep him going up to this point, Oliver would splash cold water on his face. There was a direct relationship between the jaw grinding and the tie yanking and the water splashing. Then he'd make very deliberate hawkish eye contact with his reflection and mull over the day's tedious events. Oliver liked to interject imaginary colleagues into his memory so as to spice things up. A recurring character in Oliver's self-reflexive fantasies was Ivan, a chipper Norwegian banker who hovered on the peripheries of the office. In Oliver's daydreams, Ivan liked to park himself by the water cooler and mutter cryptic and botched Norwegian maxims to the cooler's patrons. Oliver had created a mental file of things that Ivan might say and sometimes he'd write them on Post Its and stick them randomly around the office.

He once gave the cleaning lady an accidental fright when she discovered a post it that said *Two hungry pigeons burn effigies of lions* pasted above the sink. After pissing or washing his hands he'd swing his blazer over his shoulder, vaingloriously roll up his cuffs, and feign what he thought was a convincing imitation of a strut upon exiting the office. Sometimes he'd give a curt nod to Deborah or Peter on his way out. For Oliver, the day's zenith occurred in the suspense of his departure: should he trip or exude any kind of timidity, chances are he'd subject himself to an onerous and entirely incomprehensible foreign film hours later, a Klondike bar dangling from his hand. Data entry and its associated stupor all but withered in the face of a smooth denouement. Oliver lived only a couple blocks from the office and usually his overwhelming fatigue would send him straight home. But today was different. The moaning of silver drones that usually drove him up the wall felt hymn-like and he watched appreciatively as a pair of silver crafts encircled one another like butterflies. He didn't even mind the petulant honking of rush hour's crest or the rancid smoke tumbling out of the grates before him. Oliver, you see, was in love. This was a relatively recent development and hadn't amounted to much so far, but experiencing an affinity, let alone a romantic thing for another person was anomalous to say the least. His paramour's name was Jorge and the two had met at a bar, which was nearly unheard of these days. Every one of Oliver's friends nearly exclusively used dating sites or synced their adrenal glands to their chip's romantic mode. Sex and love were commodifiable, like most everything. Yet what Oliver had previously considered his curmudgeonly and somewhat antiquated lifestyle (he didn't like chips very much, still listened to mp3s, owned several kindles which he fondly stored inside a Plexiglas shelf and dusted often) had landed him something wholly enigmatic to his friends: an authentic and spontaneous human partnership. The two never used technology to communicate (sort of an unspoken thing) and instead ritualistically met up every Tuesday at 6:30pm.

Jorge worked retail, long days and longer nights. He'd been in the same store for a good decade, a straight outta school-type gig that now resembled home. What Jorge liked most of all about Roger's Shoes was the clearly established sense of camaraderie, mostly born out of sheer longevity. Some of his colleagues had been there going on three decades and were the closest thing to family Jorge knew. The pay wasn't bad, either. At least enough to maintain the sparsely decorated flat where he led a fairly vibrant nightlife. Far from becoming chronically exhausted and sinking into decrepitude over the years, Jorge had instead turned to a whirl of alcohol, bars, men, and (gratuitous?) sex. His apartment doubled as a club, cozily hung with vintage posters and multi colored string lights. The space was Jorge's pride and joy, as much a source of personal comfort as it was a hub for lascivious connection. On one fortuitous afternoon, Oliver entered Roger's Shoes. There wasn't anything especially distinctive looking about him but Jorge liked this. There was an air of vague indiscretion, Jorge thought, about the impeccable level of maintenance Oliver presented. One might infer that such a carefully coiffed individual was out to impress in some opaque way; Oliver's clothes were prim, neatly ironed, and nearly entirely nondescript. Lots of bland tans and beiges, like a bowl of cake batter. Surely he'd never be identifiable in a prison line-up. Oliver's features were so symmetrically set as to render him mannequin-like, and yet there was something about the way he carried himself that suggested imbalance, piquing Jorge. His hair, which was styled into a swoop on the right side of his face, was like a permanently furled wave. And Jorge had a thing for good hair.

Their connection was instantaneous, and when Oliver's time in the store began to verge on inappropriately long--no one shot any dirty looks Jorge's way or intimated that the exchange was dragging on but still, an hour and a half seemed excessive for shoe-shopping by all

standards--the two slipped one another their chip codes on scraps of paper and vowed to meet up the next day at a bar.

Romance in its purest form withstands all efforts to be controlled, for it is the most liberating and humbled pursuit of all.



4.

Rain pounds the window in horizontal gusts. The kind of rain so wet that the air inside your house grows loose and wraps itself around you in a thick torpor. Sprawled out on the comforter, synthetic plush molded perfectly to your mesomorphic frame, you're completely alone. No chip, no kindle, no hologram. Of course you're not a total ascète so there's the warm

ooze of lamplight coming from the other side of the room. Okay so you and the rain *and* the lamp. But that's it, honestly. It's possible that you've been entirely too hard on things. On yourself. Of course, there are wars and plagues and everything's seemingly on the brink of total collapse but it's not all bad. You figure as long as you can press your palm onto the especially soft nape of your neck where the skin is silky and warm, where if you keep your hand dormant for long enough you feel a steady rhythm of blood being pumped and circulated and filtered, you'll be okay. But sometimes it's so goddamned hard to get to this place where your pulse is enough. It's in these moments where total reclusion feels closest and bends forth a sultry finger, inclines a waxy face: a trancelike wraith whose lips curl in assurance. Come here, it says, and lay amongst the bedrock. Total peace, it says. And when you're so close to heeding its wiles, the wraith slinks back into shadow, melds with the lamplight, hides away under the carpet.

5.

Agatha is standing on the corner waiting for a signal. She's looking straight ahead but nothing about the exterior world registers: her face is rigid in its neutrality. Inside she's humming with electricity. When you get close enough to notice how her pores masquerade as freckles, you can just make out the thin filaments finely running through her veins. Every so often there are clusters of circuits spreading like a swift blush across her cheeks. Blue lights fleck cartographically. Agatha wasn't born with threads of metal woven to her skin, but any memory of existing chipless has dissipated into a realm relegated for the formative and mostly wistful childhood years of swing sets, hard candy, and cerulean skies. You watch Agatha's bus arrive. She clambers on and is lost behind tinted glass.

Agatha's in class. The teacher's a drag. Everything moves much too slowly. The ceiling fan rotates in lazy circles, whining and hewing. People are chattering but Agatha can't

understand them. She perceives everything as an auditory blur, an opioid trance. The voices build, seeming to vibrate more insistently with each passing minute. At last the teacher looks up from his seat behind the lone podium, which is moored in the room's center. He clears his throat ostentatiously. The chatter stops abruptly, save for a few voices in the back row which belatedly taper off. He stands in a way that seems exceptionally cumbersome, a fact attributable to his spindly limbs. The chair lurches back with a low whine. "Hello everyone, it's good to see you all back and in what I presume to be relatively decent shape." He shifts a pile of papers around awkwardly and wipes a stray hair from his forehead, which is coated in a light sheen of sweat, a detail only perceptible to the first couple rows. The strand is tucked securely behind the professor's glasses, and the motion stirs the sleeve of his shirt, revealing a faint yellow glow emanating from his arm. What this means, Agatha notes, is that this classroom is being closely monitored. Surely this comes as no surprise considering the intensive involvement that the government has in surveilling its citizenry in academic and otherwise institutional environments. Dissidents are singled out based on a number of criteria varying in severity, beginning with the frequency of the citizen's questioning of authority figures along an anarchic vein and ending in vandalism, rioting, and other radical political activity. Luckily Agatha doesn't believe herself to be on any kind of government list of yet. Which doesn't mean she's not supremely apprehensive about the inevitable moment she receives some sort of federal subpoena inquiring to her degree of investment in the anonymous publication, *Anterograde*. Though fiercely guarded by a circle of hackers who insist on the relative verisimilitude of their operation, there will come a point in time when *Anterograde* is exposed, likely as a result of scrupulous detective work and subsequent kidnapping, something like a hostage situation where any possible means of escape are wholly impossible. In a word: hell. Agatha can only hope that she's not the first to be brought

in for questioning and so she regards the Professor with unease. As the weeks pile on top of one another and her anticipation heightens, her ability to remain calm ebbs. Under the cloudy translucent desk where she sits at the back of the room, Agatha fidgets with her chip in poorly disguised agitation. Sometimes she's able to slide the chip cleanly out from under her skin and cradle it in palms wetted by sweat.

6.

There are two women in the laundromat. One is stooped over and has a face like rust. The other looks much younger, all lustrous hair and calloused hands. They're engaged with one another in a way that conveys intimacy: the languorous way they spread their limbs, glassy eyes in slack faces. You swing open the fogged door and fumes of detergent overwhelm you. The skin on your face prickles from the acerbity. Neither woman bothers to so much as shoot you a glance so you feign interest in the rows of whirring machines, momentarily entranced by the collective rumble of water flushing away dirt and blood. A sartorial baptism. You dare to idly run your fingers over the soap dispenser as you walk by. Matte chrome and peeling silver flake. Pepto pink, stale plastic plants. For all that the world's turned virtual, people still need clean clothes.

"I just don't get it," says the first woman from several feet away. Second woman nods appraisingly. "I mean I come home from a long day at work. I work all goddamn day here, busting my ass. I come home and everyone's lying around expecting dinner ready-made, expecting me to clean and look after everyone's ass. I'm not a housewife, know what I mean?"

The second woman's eyes are rheumy. She tilts her head in the subtlest possible indication of agreement.

"Everyone's so sucked in, you know. Everyone's so obsessed with themselves. I'm not a housewife! And I won't walk around living in a world like this, pretending it's all good. It's not

real life! Real life is here, talking, walking around. It's air and it's sky, it's not games and voices in your head." Remember when your bedsheets hung from twine and floated in the wind?

"I don't really know what's happened. I try to understand it, I try to talk about this fascination with technology but everyone always ignores me. It's just how the world is these days, they say." Sitting at the top of a very bright hill, elbows and knees. Watching grass sway in the unified movement of liquid plucked by rain.

"Can I help you?" First Woman's voice dips an octave in resentment. You look up and meet her gaze. It's hostile. Mumble something unintelligible and shuffle to the door. Supplant cloistered desolation with expansive confusion. The sun's setting, don't forget to notice.

7.

A long time ago, Esmeralda met her fate and died of lung cancer. As a furious smoker all her life, her death was less remarkable than the fact that she'd been alive for so long. In her wake she left several dozen packets of cleverly hidden Marlboro Reds and a will folded neatly upon the kitchen table. All of her possessions, starting with the cigs and ending with a chipped Japanese ashtray, were bequeathed to her sole descendant: her niece Agatha.

A note affixed to the will read:

My dearest Agatha,

It is of no particular surprise to either of us, I am sure, that my death has happened this way, at this time. We've discussed arrangements at great length so surely this last will and testament is but a confirmation; a receipt. Now my dear, nothing of terrific importance is listed here. Everything I've imparted to you in person holds infinitely more weight than this document could hope for. Our one point of contention I'd like to clarify here. Under no circumstances should any

kind of hologram or robot be constructed from my ashes, extremities, or blood. I am not a resource, at least no longer. I should very much have liked to have left this place with the peace of finality. You know my thoughts on this New World. I won't expound on this here for fear of causing your safety to be further jeopardized. All I shall add is that the demagoguery and insatiability of this social order is hardly new. I have watched hope swell and be rubbed away vigorously, like a butt in an ashtray or a mosquito bite. I have watched with awe and pain. And I fear that this is your fate: to merely watch. My dearest Agatha...you and I are quite different and knowing this brings me the gentlest respite. This fact has extraordinarily guided me to an easy, placid kind of death. You, I hope, can engage. You are a fighter.

Disclosed are the possessions I'm leaving to you. Not excessive or of especial value, but the things which haven't seemed to leave my side over the years yet can no longer be moved to exhumation. Longevity is at once understated and underappreciated, I think.

Take good care my child.

Esmerelda

Agatha rolls the letter up into a tight scroll, shrouded in the weight of what she's just read. The world momentarily stalls itself in her fist, in dry paper, in the long gone words of a dearly departed aunt. She draws her knees to her chest, releases the letter onto the dining room table, lets it bounce out into a now slightly curled sheet. No one has to see this paper. The words of sentimentalists are of no considerable danger to the government and so she is safe. Only if Agatha is somehow issued a warrant for her complicity in public disorder will the letter be considered a possible threat to her in a court of law. Or more likely, a course of severe interrogation (she blanches at the thought of possible questioning). Agatha tugs at the chip in her arm which grows looser by the day. She's full of a sodden weight, deader than her aunt seems at

this moment. Tears prick her eyes, which are dry from sitting in class all day and forgetting to drink water. Outside tires skid and there's a biting sound of glass shattering against concrete. She unknots her body and moves to the kitchen to get water.

8.

TRUE ASTRONOMY = THE ARCHITECT'S DISCIPLE

Here we have the inevitable phosphorescence of spindly metal structures slanting into the night sky. Dozens of orbs. These orbs are people, arachnoid and minute. Scaling earth's metal surface up and up until they come headlong with the next decaying thing. The next rapacious architect. All burning stars correspond with construction workers (A.B.S.C.C.W.) and this is the only constellation; fuck the circuits under your skin.

Each person on earth corresponds with a star. We're trying to name as many of these stars as we can! For example, this one right here -- can you tell which one I'm indicating? Everyone got it? Yes, that one right there, well that's my star. And over there, that star is named Oliver. Questions? .. Hm, yes, I see your point. There are more stars than there are people. But we're beginning to contact stars for energy and no one is sure how much energy a single person requires to maintain a smoothly-running operating system. It's entirely possible that within the next couple decades a single individual could possess the energy of an entire galaxy. Well, the chip sunk into your precapillary sphincter beams itself to an individual star and receives all sorts of orbital and psychic messages: things like thermal control and telemetry travel at astronomical speeds so we don't have an exact way of quantifying the precision of this system. My associates have endearingly coined the phrase 'jouissance pour les etoiles' to refer to this process. This is, in lay terms, a historical constellation. We here at Global Astronomy Subdivision Number One

work quite tirelessly to ensure that the very history of our civilization is forever encoded into the stars. History is being made right now and this fact is better codified than ever before. We can completely eradicate corruption by doing this, we hope. We can build omniscient, omnipresent societies which impart collective truths, total awareness. We, and the stars, can function at optimal levels of knowledge and self-understanding.

Place yourself in front of a telescope's orbit. Let its mouth traverse the crevices in your skin.

Film yourself doing this and play it back on VHS.

When you write the last extant document on earth, make sure it says something like this:

"I placed myself in the line of fire of all my grievances, my trepidations, my teeming repulsions. And at the bottom of the barrel, I saw a tunnel through which I could escape."

9.

Love in the Age of Lovelessness

Point: voyeurism = technology = pornographic

Q writes to R. Fingers probing keyboards beneath flesh. Words ooze from pores.

Who are you?

I am Q. Who are you?

I am R.

Hello, R. What are you afraid of? I'm afraid of dust and grime. I am all of the hypochondriacs compressed into human form. Usually I'm averse to these kinds of things, of sending messages to strangers because I'm afraid of tainting my mind. Everything must be immaculate and sacrosanct. I am both the fervent preacher and the puritan lady who fills her window sill with Catholic memorabilia. I am Saints Joseph and Mary. I've been reincarnated about five times and now I only study the Book of Mormon.

Seen at 8:05pm

10.

When the transparent glass elevator starts to ascend in a riotous lurch generated by rusty chains self-lubricating, you feel your stomach settle into itself. You're not good with heights, as it happens. Above the city all of the streets become rivulets, each alley its own nerve ending splintering veinously into neatly clipped outskirts of the city's edge and then off again into endless miles of beige. Manufacturing fields worn into discordant patches of mustard and ashen soil, bleached by gases and overuse. Factory buildings towering into the sky, leaning towards the sun like tubular stems of gray sunflowers, giving way to satellite petals. There is only one other person in the elevator with you and his face reads timeless. One of those faces that might be 21 or 51. Or 111. (Human-machine amalgam technology results in a median terminus of about 150, though this of course varies with exposure to the elements, social standing, military experience and so on.) He has a stiff composure, an inscrutable expression. His hands are browner than your own and looks dapper in a navy uniform which softly cleaves to his lean frame and gives him an inadvertent air of stoic glamor. You discreetly examine his military decorations for a while which are smartly arranged across his breastbone. It would appear that he's racked up every conceivable accolade and clearly has no shortage of authority within whichever level of the corps he ranks in, most likely a high one. If he feels your gaze, it's coolly ignored. Up and up you rise. The smoothest passage into the heavens. At long last, a length which feels doubled by the stilted presence of the figure beside you, the elevator slows and stops. The doors slide back and without so much as a grunt of acknowledgment, your companion briskly steps out. Startled, you follow. The hallway opens out into spirals of soft white light and a humming which seems to come from the walls. There's an austere marble desk that looks as if it was fossilized in liquid form. You

pause for a moment to take it all in. The building feels like an abandoned doctor's office, thick with trepidation and anxiety, but plastered over with a paint job intended to calm. You momentarily pause to appreciate the lack of muzak. These are your last moments of solace before every last horrific mechanism gets shut down forever.

11.

Official Recording, Courtesy of the *Bureau of Virtual Deviance*

Agatha: You know, here's the thing. I think everyone desperately wants to make profound connections but we get too lost in the din. And we don't know if these connections that we want to make should be raw or superficial. There's so much happening all the time and we mistake the clamor for revelation. As if each time our chips pop it's like a cosmic signal or fated-instruction. Apophenia. We're addicted to answers that seem to come naturally and we relinquish ourselves to them because it removes any responsibility of interrogation or pain. No one wants to bring up the filthy flood tides or the noxious heat waves swallowing us all up because it means a series of questions about selfhood and community. Of mortality. How do we contend with the fact that we don't have any answers? How do we inundate ourselves to the best of our ability with all of the grossness and revulsion that it means to be a human? More than that, how do we find people with whom to undergo that painful introspection? I don't know. I think all that we can really do is detach from the busyness to the best of our ability and look for people who won't settle for anything less than authenticity.

12.

At a certain point in time it may begin to seem futile to continually resist the fervor of technological change which keeps coming at you like so many perspiring soldiers trained to move in unison, to undulate, to pulse as one. It's easy to join the flock and resist immediate harm. The flock that surges, unable to be sated, forever hungry and malevolent from malnourishment. Shepherders sit at the back of the flock, way at the back, where they languor aloft gilded chariots.

There are objects which resist harm underfoot the trampling herds. Objects that, due to their shape or size are impregnable to the horde. Things like tiny beetles or seeds with shiny casings. Compact and minute objects like beads, sharp ones like slivers of glass. Individual and complete objects, made up of an intricate and tightly woven chemistry. Molecules bound to molecules, hugging ribosomes, fetal creatures guarded by the taut malleable rubber of belly's epidermis and, moreover, of constant maternal caution. You do not fight the tides, you do not join the tides, you allow yourself to roll about in peace, enclosed in an embryonic lair. Dark, fecund, a trove of personal bounty.

Most answers can be found in silence so here's some:

