I PRESSED THE DAMN BUTTON, BUT THE SCREEN STAYED BLACK

I pressed the damn button, but the screen stayed black.

It all started with the woman in a red dress. We had met at Fabrik as people like us do these days. Fabrik advertises itself as a haven, an escape from the cold algorithmic logic of dating applications. The subscription you pay for membership is high, but in return Fabrik promises authentic connections with people beyond their optimized avatars. In our hyperventilating city, that calm breath is a luxury.

Fabrik sits on a wharf by the river that connects our city to the sea. It is housed inside an old warehouse where ships from faraway lands used to unload cinnamon, natural rubber, dark-grained timber, and precious stones to feed the insatiable city. Steel bollards in front of the magazine have by now been vacant for decades, but the patinated stories about the wayfaring past are reflected in the interior design; in tables made of driftwood mimicking the aesthetic of a full-rigged ship making its way through the ocean highways. Even the text 'haven of presence' painted in white over the entrance harks back to the days where the world was deeper and more measured in its pace. It all felt eerily shallow, and bit fraudulent - like decorating a house with memories of somebody else.

These days inside the heavy sliding doors that used to guard silent rows of merchandise is an open space, divided into carefully delineated areas for social interaction. The space is constantly in flux. Sensors hidden in the shady corners of the ceiling recursively optimize the modular layout, emphasizing arrangements most conducive to spontaneous and meaningful contacts. One of the selling points of the Fabrik is this carefully curated balance between spontaneity and security. In a transparent and formless loop of feedback, Fabrik provided the optimal offerings that protected members from suboptimal experiences.

That evening the membership of the Fabrik had voted for a concert as the focal event of the evening. The majority vote had converged to an evocative indie folk performance. For the past 48 hours a voting application running on members' personal portals had been proposing hundreds of songs generated by Fabrik's generative audio model to be ranked by the members. In the end, the process resulted in an optimal setlist of twelve perfectly arranged explorations of love and longing. The experience was immersive. AI-generated visuals, taking their real-time cues from the hallucinated lyrics were reflected on the walls, and a group of attractive individuals with an aura of unresolvable gloom rose to the stage with unplugged instruments to sprinkle the performance with unforgeable human dimension.

And it was in the back of the semi-circular entertainment section, in a relaxed seating area where people sat on wood-tinted plastic stumps, that I saw her. There was a sense in which I recognized myself in her. She might have been an artist if we still had those strolling around. I wanted to think I was one of those as well.

Don't get me wrong. Technology had enabled us to be creative, in the literal sense of the word. Helped by our generative models, the secondary barriers to creation disappeared. Our creativity was not limited anymore by the arduous technical skill or the dexterity of our fingers; imagination was the only boundary for what we could create. Even that could be extended with the help of infinitely patient computational aides. The previous week, with the help of an AI model, I had dreamed up seven seasons of an epic fantasy about the life of a mist-fallen village in the Rhein valley during a time when the border between myth and mud was more porous than these days. Now that series was waiting in the stacked queue of a rendering cluster whizzling in some pitch-black hall of a compute infrastructure provider.

However, the democratization of creativity had the awkward consequence that we did not have much to talk about. In the beginning, many of the series people generated for themselves were permutations of some root set of human-originating themes and tropes. When the movie-generating models passed the authenticity frontier back in the day, "in the style of Quentin Tarantino" became a particularly popular prompt for single-use movies. The mid-2020s legal battles on content banned such direct uses of trademarks and names in an effort to protect the privileged position of human creation.

That solution lasted for an afternoon. A workaround arrived in the form of an intermediary component in the model that generalizes the prompts according to the legal limits before feeding them into the model. For instance, "Quentin Tarantino" became a sub-prompt that clustered features such as non-linear storytelling, hyper-stylized violence, and classic cinema references. Extending ownership over these clusters of attributes proved to be beyond what our legal imagination could grasp. Established names accepted their defeat and tried to scrape what they could by licensing their likenesses to those fans who were sentimental enough to pay for them.

But when time passed, the distance between permutations and the originals kept on diverging; and as the production of new authentically human content gradually withered, our worlds started to drift apart. The lack of shared cultural anchors caused uneasiness. Conversations degraded from ideas and meanings to observations and emotions, but even these experiences were hard to share with as our life-worlds grew physically separate in the smoothness of the City.

This problem had a solution in the Code. The Code is a guideline for uncertainty reduction, an algorithm for human relationships. It gives a structure to interaction that otherwise is subject to uncertainty, and often lead to unnecessary breakdowns due to the mismatches in expectations and interpretations. Through making the moves of social interaction explicit, the Code facilitated human connection that was more transparent and efficient towards a shared goal. It rapidly became a required reading in the City. Fabrik did not mandate the Code as it went against the aspiring authenticity, but in truth, that is part of the story we built for ourselves. Nobody wants to admit to following rules, but equally, nobody wants to take the risk to not to.

And so we executed the Code with her. We delivered our lines with certainty and comfort, adapting to the clearly defined flow control templates called "plays", essentially decision trees with clearly defined branches. I had recently been fond of a sea-play. ("Tell me first three things that come to your mind when you think of the sea"). It is a good play because the heavily weighted questions are at the start. It also quite a fast game. The algorithm runs as follows -

[Step 0, Questioner]: initiation

[Step 1, Respondent]: description

[Step 2, Q]: specification

[Step 3. R]: identification

[Step 4, Q]: touch 1

[Step 5, R]: look-smile

[Step 6, Q]: question about dreams

[Step 7, R]: touch 2, increase in intensity (moderate)

[Step 8, Q]: "are you looking for warmth tonight",

[Step 9, QR]: kiss, moderate tongue

[Step10, QR]: check-out with a portal,

[Step 11 – n, QR]: transport to a sleeping-pod, clothes drop to the floor, bodies against each other, breathing into mouths. [for further instructions, see ANX 343]

Afterwards we were lying in a sleeping pod in the co-living space our portals had suggested for us that night. Code says that you don't say much. In the silence of the peculiar hours between midnight and dawn maintaining the Code was difficult. Some remnants of our evolution seemed to resist the efficient clarity of the Code. I saw from the glint of my eye her mouth opening mutely as for a question. I felt the same urge. But all words I could think of felt imperfect, steps towards complication and confusion. We stayed silent.

THE FALL

I woke to the sunlight caressing my eyes through the gradually opening curtains.

The Code was open-ended on the next morning as the decision-space became computationally intractable. This made it the most uncertain part. Lately I had noticed few general patterns. There are those with a dramatic flair; ones who leave a pre-printed note that wishes growth and flourishing and light on your journey to the wonders of the world. Then there are those who stay and start talking off-script. But they are few and far between these days, as they disappear from the interaction pool when they encounter another of their kind. And then there are runners. This one was a runner. Her freckles had been swallowed by the city accelerating to a new day.

I remember turning to my side on the minimalist futon looking for my portal to see the time and order an autonomous transport to take me to the nearest working hub to connect to my work-cloud. I had no idea where I was, and it did not really matter. For the past few years, I had given up on building mental maps of the city as it was a smooth zone. Smooth zones were lean zones, and that leanness meant lightness. Few in the smooth spaces had any stable possessions. Most things were as-a-service: clothes, living spaces, portals, experiences, were rented to keep maximal flexibility and range of choices open at any time. City was a space of ultimate liberty.

Flexibility of the city was inhospitable to dependencies. Those who had entangled with a family lived in residential zones outside the city, with balance, possessions, and patterned time. This was inefficient form of life, which made it an expensive thing reserved for elite, usually those owning the things the others rented. Possibility to detach from the speed of the city while still enjoying its conveniences became the hallmark of the social elite. Those who had had the possibility to stabilize their worlds visited the city for its elegant wine bars in the hip seaside boulevards, like gracious water-spiders skimming on the surface of a maelstrom. And then there was the periphery, beyond. I had not thought about the periphery for a long time.

I touched the fingerprint reader on the side of my portal to wake it up. Nothing. I pressed the button again. Still nothing. I felt awakening of the primal sensation of a small animal in an open field, seeing dark wings float against the sunlight. I pressed the button again and again and again, with no effect. The damn screen stayed black.

Could it be that the battery powering the portal had simply run out? Normally it was not possible. All artefacts are time-proofed, in that they constantly observe their states preventing sudden breakdowns and downtimes. Recently, the warning of the need to replace the expired battery had appeared on the dashboard on the portal. The rumor on the digital forums was that this usually still lasted for few weeks, and I had postponed the replacement.

But there were moments when the predictability collapses. While you are supposed to charge your portal through certified charging stations, the city is littered with non-authorized charging stations that transmitted energy with a fraction of the cost of the real thing. Like many others, I used these often. It was rumored that the portal recognized an uncertified charging port and launched a selfdepreciation attack on the battery to encourage customers to stick to the safe and trusted charging portals offered by the manufacturers. There was no evidence of this, but then again, that would be very difficult to prove, and the intended effect needed only few disconnected examples that turned into cautionary rumors.

I was staring at the pitch-black onyx screen while the realization of the implications slowly started to break on me. My biological heart and the sodium-ionic one powering the device were completely entangled. Work, sleep, nourishment, pleasure – everything happened through portal. Even the repair of the portal happened through an app in the portal. I felt lightness in my head when I realized how deeply my life was tied to that elegantly shaped piece of metal.

There are emergency stations for situations like this. When the unspeakable happens and there is a fracture in the flow of the city, one can go to the overriders. Overriders are the private safety-valve of the efficient, digitalized society. It is one of the few places inside the city boundaries that provides stand-by presence of an individual ready to patch any cracks that had opened in the digital world. One could purchase an insurance policy to use overrider services, and I thanked my past self for having the foresight to buy one.

Markings on street showed a thin, piercing red line in the sidewalk, pointing to the closest overriders' hub. I had not run in years, but I started throwing my feet forwards, past the walled up buildings, over the bridges that once opened and felt my heart pounding as it struggled to match the panic of my mind.

The overrider was able to defibrillate the device through a shock that reset the congestion of electrons in its power unit. Portal opened, even though with dimmer light than usual. Overrider warned that these seizures would be frequent without replacement of the device, but I barely

listened as I hastily connected it to the reflector that the overrider had given to me for inspection and navigated to the work-cloud of my employer.

Since I arrived to the city, I had been working for the same company. We sold AI assurance certification services for companies that needed to get their new algorithms approved by the regulators. More informally, in our internal communications platform a worker had called it an 'firehose of excrement' aimed at the nosy administrators. First wave of AI laws from a decade ago had mandated an elaborate set of documentation that companies willing to sell AI systems had to fulfill before deployment. The intention had been laudable, with politicians trying to mediate the impact that introduction of AI had in our lives. But those aims were blunted with the poverty of the tools of politics.

Our job was to create buffer of protective documentation between a client-company and the administrative engine that processed the new filings. The crux of the job, as most jobs in the city, was about translating world into a format legible by machine intelligence. To be honest, we didn't actually do that either – we used customized language models to write the documentation on the basis of cracked parameters of the governance algorithm running the certification engine. In the end, it was an AI writing for AI, in a self-contained loop of machines talking to each other without knowing why and caring even less.

What we were actually paid for was our names on the filings. One of the peculiar features of human condition is that having a warm body to point to as the "responsible person" gives us the semblance of control that helps us sleep better. For companies developing AI, they wanted that body outside their offices. In this, the accountability which was originally something to be practiced became something to be bought. Our company was more than happy to oblige.

It was also quite a riskless job. In principle, it was possible that somebody would come knocking on the door, but that prospect was so remote that it was safe to ignore. For one, we had no door to knock to, and even then, there was nobody do the knocking. The few actual people tasked with enforcing the regulations were swamped with just overseeing the outputs of the governance algorithm. Requests for more information was all there was ever going to be and if the administrators wanted to ask more questions, we could come up with more answers than they were able to process.

I did not like the job much, but it had been my ticket from the periphery. The sorting hubs in the periphery process the multidimensional aptitude scores (MAS) of young adults hoping to ascend to the dizzying carousel of the city. These scores are constantly matched to the demands of employers in the city, and the morning when the match happened, I left without looking back and connected my portal the same afternoon to the work-cloud of the company.

I had never met the people I worked with, and the allocation of tasks was given by a faceless ticketing service. Lately, I had been working mostly on human-relation algorithms, but as the system was allocating tasks every day, I didn't know what my project of the day would be. And I would never know.

When I tried to log in to the corporate system, [ACCESS DENIED] started flashing on the screen in a frantic shade of red. In the system there was just a note on the suspension of contract, with additional comment that information was also registered in the general database. From there on, everything had followed automatically. Somebody was already matched for the job, and my replacement was already on their way to the city. There was nothing personal about it. All these decisions happened via silica, through interconnections that are etched into sequences of predetermined efficiency. I caught the overrider from the glint of my eye looking at me with a mix of pity and relief that it was not him free-falling through the cracks of the order of things.

There are premium overrider insurances that can help you out even in these kinds of situations. The best case is to have access to a personal overrider. What they sell is access to mercy. Their value comes from informal connections to the small class of humans who can make the exceptions. That access enable them to tell the full stories of their clients and appeal to discretion and arguments based on values, judgment, and empathy. But those are extremely expensive services. And it is an insurance you pay for beforehand.

In this situation, the overriders had little interest in making my problem theirs.

After the overriders turned me down, I went to seek public justice. It was a vain attempt, but I had nothing to lose. These days arbitrary judgment of people had been replaced with the reckoning of algorithms, unbiased and fair, with transparent and balanced enactment of the objective rules. Such algorithmic intermediary service had been established to enable the seeking of justice and to replace the byzantine web of courts, judges, and lawyers.

The access to e-Justice service was one of the mandatory design features of portals, so that would likely be the last thing to shut down. I could already hear the chain reaction of automatized subscription cancellations when the contract management systems started screaming hysterically suspension of contract through the arteries of interconnected information systems. Fabrik pinged about the end of the subscription and hoped to see me soon again. What they tried to say, was that they never wanted to see me again.

I opened the e-Justice service on my portal by holding two fingers on the screen until an orange color bloomed to fill the screen and a pleasant, but affirmative female voice welcomed me to the service. That was a specifically configured LLM for public justice delivery. I had been part of the assurance program working on it, it had been one of the biggest contracts that our tendering algorithm had managed to pull into the company in the past years. I explained my situation and tried to remember the parameters of the system design to trigger words with positive valence to match the underlying classification profile of a high-value individual.

"Thank you for the information provided." the voice from the other side responded. "Can you confirm that your employer is an employment providing party in the meaning of Article 11(1) Regulation 313/2027 (EU) on the terms on Artificial intelligence and Work?" I had no idea whether that would be the case, but I answered affirmatively.

"Has your employer provided you with the principled reasons of termination of employment?" No,

they hadn't.

"Will you authorize the Administrative Employment services to confirm the grounds of termination from the Multistakeholder Employment Information Database MEID?"

I felt a sudden chill down my spine. I had no real option not to authorize so I muttered a hesitant yes. After a small delay, the voice came back, with a noticeable increase in the matter-of-fact tone.

"MEID database shows entry from the respective employment providing party AssuranceAI KI recording termination of employment at 09:15:30 CET on the grounds of failure to log in to the Designated Employment Platform (DEP) of the employment providing party. Do you challenge the factuality of this recording and/or are there extenuating circumstances that should be taken into account when deciding on the matter?"

My tongue tripped on the speed which I blurted out "extenuating circumstances" and I started to explain the story faulty battery before the voice finished its sentence. It was almost eerie how the voice sounded slightly offended when it returned, like a human administrator knowing its worth.

"Did the provider of your portal fail to inform you about the state of the device as specified in the article 12(3) of the Regulation 214/2025 on Certain Liability Matters Pertaining to General Mobile Digital Devices?"

I had to admit that I had received the information about the faulty battery. They were going to know it anyway.

"On the basis of the facts provided, the e-Justice service has come to a decision on this matter, registered in our system with a docket number 201245502. The Regulation 313/2027 (EU) specifies grounds for illegitimate termination from employment in Articles 5 and 6. These include, but are not limited to, discrimination on the basis of protected civil characteristics or conditions beyond the employee's control. On the basis of current facts, the situation does not fall under these conditions. You are invited to appeal this decision in case of new additional facts in line with..."

The voice kept going but I dozed off. Suddenly the portal started blinking with fast light, the portal company informing me about termination of use-contract based on changes in the credibility score check and urging immediate retrieval of the device to the closest object repository facility, generating a helpful pointed arrow to guide navigation.

It started raining. I wanted to dissipate with it over the red line lines to the depths of gutters. But I did not have the luxury as my time was quickly running out. Subscriptions for clothes, food, and accommodation were all connected to my general account, which from this morning would not be debited again. And I had no savings, as the algorithms priced everything at the margin of ability to pay. I had a day or two of runway before I literally had to escape the city while still having something to cover my bare-naked body.

Over the gushing of rain, a muted ping from the rendering cluster informed me that my work-batch had been discarded from the queue. The life-worlds of my villagers had disappeared to the same digital winds they had come from.

RETURN TO THE PERIPHERY

Entropy is the ultimate law. Every major force in the known universe, be it pressure, heat, or gravity seeks balance. Maintaining separation requires energy. We don't get anything for free. The flexibility and the lightness of the city is achieved through increase in stability and permanence elsewhere. Periphery is where the city is balanced out. Check for the cumulous life in the city is cashed in the perpetual struggle against entropy that is destined to unravel it all.

The struggle was becoming more difficult by the day. Constant striving for more convenient and efficient city means that the labor and maintenance needed to fight against the ultimate enemy, downtime, increases as well. Inverse of efficiency is resilience. Steel cages filled with servers running floating point operations are in a constant cycle of repair and replacement when corroded metal gives way somewhere in the sprawling web of infrastructure. Distributed back-up services, wide networks of fail-safes and sleep-deprived maintainers running from a server-hall to another are the frontline keeping the breakdown at bay. Sometimes it is just the tacit ingenuity of the veteran maintainers that stands between the smooth normal and the end of the world.

In some sense we had been ensnared by our technologies. It dawned on us that the systems we had created in pursuit of convenience and freedom had also subtly bound us to a spiral of fate with infrastructure that was consuming our world. Minerals, energy, and water needed to keep the machine running were torn from the exhausted earth. But we had gone too far to turn back anymore. This changed our relationship to the world around us. Consequences of the choices we had to make to keep our clouds in the sky drifted slowly outside our collective world. In the world of necessities, there are no choices.

The physicality of maintenance impacts those who live in the periphery. The rhythm of humans is locked into the rhythms of the machines. Maintenance is a work that is never finished. The efficiency and precision that synced the life in the city was from the simultaneous permanence and unpredictability of the periphery. Decades ago, many had expected that the digitalizing future would make humans obsolete, but in periphery, the opposite was true. Increasing need for maintenance and upkeep calls for human bodies to maintain the lifeline between the concrete and computational. These are the cold hands that dig into thawed ground to uncover faulty fiber-optic, the fingers that bleed on the unpolished edges of the server casings, and the shoulders who carry the bouquets of cables that breathe fire into computations.

Theirs is a matter-of-fact kind of life. It is not oriented towards ascendancy but permanence. In the city, there was this eerie sense of striving, and rise and development towards more excellent and efficient forms of life. In periphery, life was more lateral and cyclic. Maintainers were fighting a battle that they could never win. All days were the same. They started with a new repair ticket, a faulty processor, corroded copper wire that needed to be replaced somewhere just to repeat the same cycle tomorrow and day after. Escape from that ossified permanence is what I had dreamed of with most of the peripherians I knew in my youth. Allure of the city in the horizon was about breaking the cycle, straightening the worn paths inside which future was already fixed. The mirage of city promised something beyond.

That memory of circularity struck me when I stepped out of the battered cargo shuttle connecting the periphery and the city. In front of the shuttle-port was still the same petty-shop I remembered from the day that I left, selling trinkets in the corner of the station square. Noise of the chatter and the smell of combustion that had been expelled from the city years ago were still here integral parts of the disorienting tapestry of human life. There was no imposed order in that madness, no structure that channeled impulses in common direction. It was a bazaar of babbling, aimless and raw human life.

I enlisted for one of the maintenance centers in that periphery hub, becoming one of the pawns fighting in the frontlines of entropy. The job was repairing and replacement of broken portals arriving from the city in a constant stream. There were thousands of them: cracked, dropped, drowned. Task was to replace the parts or in the worst case, scavenge the usable parts that could be used to repair the others. We were the human parts in the cycle of matter, in the constant loop of resources keeping up with the increasing wear of the world.

I learned a lot in those days of repairing and reassembling. In the city things appear out of ether. Clothes that we wear, pods that we sleep in, the shiny artefacts we carry around are just there. Here in the periphery the underlying infrastructure that made all that possible came visible. Seamstresses working to patch holes in the worn garments, electricians wrestling with the jumbled wirings, cargo loaders supplying the constant underground circulation between periphery and city. In touching, repairing, and reassembling the broken devices I forged a new relationship to objects, and to myself.

The periphery started to shape my body and mind. My hands had abrasions from use. Home was in a silent and worn-out concrete building, far-removed from the minimalist elegance of the cohabitations in the city. Furniture was a looted shipwreck of sorts of objects that I had scavenged objects from the edges of entropy. I started to draw mental maps again, and my feet discovered paths where I was a visitor no more.

I started forming relationships different than in the city. Same faces surrounded me at work, and they started to have names. Not many knew the Code. Romantic relationships were awkward, vulnerable, and subject to frequent misunderstandings. Their lives were not marked by frantic pursuit of peace and perfection. Sometimes I felt uneasy with their acceptance, their settling to things that were far

from optimal. Indeed, they seemed even offended when I suggested alternative, as if the pursuit of something beyond what naturally fell to their path was a sign of mental weakness, gluttony going beyond the boundaries of the sensible. In their eyes the constant project of the self brought nothing but misery.

There was wisdom in that. I tried to learn that suffering is the result of expectations, and the happiness comes from acceptance. Cycles of life churn and one might as well accept the world as it manifests itself. And I tried to believe that for a long while. I strived to achieve happiness in not trying to dream but staying in a place and letting the roots grow.

But a flickering on the back of my mind persisted. I had changed city's individual centered striving to more communal permanence of the periphery, but there was still a sense in which I had only changed one set of rules for another. All this felt that I was still somewhere in the heart of a machine myself, subjecting my life to purposes that were not my own. The longing for more still did not leave me alone.

One evening leaving my shift at the repair center, I walked past a small garage-shop filled with microelectronics. There are many such stores in periphery hubs. The things they have is often those that could not be integrated in the newest devices. Their valuable atoms are locked in outdated architectures on etched silicon, process which is now expensive to reverse. But this is deemed to change. The increasing hunger of our digital civilization to preserve itself obligates us to capture and repurpose the energy tapped into old machinery. These shops exist as relics in time, clusters of wavelike carbon to be washed away by the rising tide of the technological imperative to close the cycle of matter in evermore perfect circle.

I entered the store, relishing in the disorder I found. It was like a wild forest where human hands had relished control eons ago. The resources needed for maintaining any classification had been depleted long time ago. Now the only principle determining the organization was the availability of space. Bits were thrown in the folders without names. That disorder also enabled discovery. These kinds of places were beyond gaze of optimization, and the contents were not listed in any digital database, so for all practical purposes they became invisible to algorithms of the recycles, that scraped restlessly the digital forums for precious material for device manufacturers.

From a pile of cables and processors in the back, I found a computer. Computers were not rare themselves, but this one was old enough to be interesting. Last wave of computers before portals were sold as separated hardware and subscription-based operating software, which allowed the user flexibility in choosing their device. However, while enabling interoperability, those also required subscription to services that hadn't existed in a decade. This effectively made most of the computers unusable. However, this seemed like one that could be from before the unbundling.

With the help of a shopkeeper, I was able to find a power supply cord that fit to the machine. With some luck, we were also able to form a bridge through time with three different generations of power adapters. I pressed the mechanical power button on the right.

After a silence that lasted for a heartbeat, the screen lit up.

ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

And here I write to you, a friend I will never meet.

I feel my fingers clunky, and my mind out of focus. Words do not flow from me with the effortlessness of a machine mind. Sometimes I am too wordy when I should be brief; sometimes, I throw letters into the direction of what I want to say without grace or verve. Those words are rough around the edges: the patches I stitch clumsily over the holes of what I see in the world are too big, often in wrong color.

We lose the skills we don't practice. Like muscles, they wither when unused. For many years I did not live through text. I was rather a consumer than a creator, a critic than an actor. In that I lost the craft of translating worlds into words. In that, I lost something of myself. I am beginning to believe that only through writing we discover what we write about, and in the process of grappling with our words we build ourselves, one erased and recomposed sentence at a time. Many times, I was tempted to delegate this painstaking work to a large language model to release me from the task.

But please, believe me when I say that I persisted.

Life is different now. Sun shines on this cracked screen. Green maple leaves outside the window sleepily pour off the blanket of the morning rain. A sudden gust just shook the leaves and launched an expansion of transparent mist in the air. Sometimes, I just walk around what I now call home, without direction. I am lost more often. At the same time, I am tied to a place and a moment. This gives time for the colors to emerge.

I do not know if you are really there or will ever be. Ours is a world where nobody reads much, especially things that can't help us to do anything. In the deluge of information we are all drowning in, a text feels like an obligation. I feel a need to justify myself, make a compelling case that the time you have spent with me has been worth it. But I have no right to your time. I don't want to sell you anything: not amuse, not distract, not influence, not charm. This is not a transaction with a purpose. But at the same time, I write for you and only for you. I write to you because I do not know how not to.

Your time is a gift of which I will always be grateful. I could have given you my story as a barcoded product dreamed up by a machine that can conjure imaginaries more vivid than mine, stories more captivating, and turns of phrases snappier that I could ever master. But these words are mine. It is in my imperfections that I exist; in the fractures of pace, sudden stops, and misplead words – in those ruptures in smooth spacetime I hope you see contours of a human who was here.

This moment is a ritual, a process; a mutual expending of time and attention that forms a bond between where I write and wherever in the vastness of space you might be. I see you on the other side in the small spaces between the words. Through those gaps I reach out to you in the hopes that in my world you would recognize your own and see that we are in this together.

And in that entangling of lives something shatters; and something is born.

5987 words

STORY NOTES

This story stems from observations about the limits we have in directing technological development. Material dependency, privatizing of discretion, nature of creative pursuits are all phenomena that have been tried to address through the existing legal tools, such as disclosure requirements, transparency, enforcement of competition law and the like, with the digital regulatory agenda of the latest European Commission being the most prevalent example. However, I have struggled with an eerie sense that there are limits in kinds of questions that we can address with the tools and words we have in our disposal. Qualitative changes in the forms of our life, corporate monopolies resulting from accumulated matter and not contractual barriers, discretion and mercy as new social commodities are just few of the social facts that falls beyond the logic of the law. Above, I tried to struggle with some of those thoughts and intuitions.

All this is wrapped in the broader question why to write this kind of stories in in the first place. In the times of generative AI human writing has faced a rapid crisis. As a topical example, one leading publisher of science fiction stories, literary journal *Clarkesworld* had to close their submission platform after being inundated by a flood of ChatGPT-generated stories.[1] This could be read in a pessimist way, as a pathological consequence of increasingly convenient society that exchanges the process for a product and treats the painstaking work of wrestling with words not as a moment of becoming but as an obstacle to be minimized by the irresistible march of technology. This makes for an immensely productive, and ignorant society.

However, such defeatism is a choice. Some proponents of human experience have argued that the more direct access to experiences, the interpersonal connection or just the quality of text is what gives human authors still an edge in the struggle for relevance in times of artificial intelligence. LLMs from this perspective can also force us to concentrate to the best and most humane things that separate us from machines: by being radically honest and direct in our writing; by recognizing a self in other self, entangling and overlapping in the lives lived and crafting collective worlds in times otherwise pushing us towards fragmentation. It takes a bit of madness and courage to move to that direction, but it is a step we must take to stay relevant in the times of AI.

In the end, what is at stake is human freedom. Hannah Arendt once wrote that freedom resides in creation, in the "sheer capacity to begin" that destabilizes and interpret the automatic and petrified unfolding of history that seems irresistible. The human gift to 'perform miracles' and keep open the space of the possible through forging the world anew is the source of friction in which the unexpected can flourish. Lot hangs on our capability to preserve that gift even when technology lures us towards a convenient world.

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