



SQUAT PARTS

three stories

ted hayden

SQUAT PARTS: THREE STORIES

BY TED HAYDEN

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CORPORATE STRUCTURE

First published in Angry Old Man: A Magazine of Experimental Art & Poetry Issue 2, 2018

The office building has four floors.

The first floor is where the creatives conceptualize, write, illustrate, and film ads. The space is electric, energized by a collaborative group of dynamic professionals and visionary artists, etc. Ideas are developed in an atmosphere of fierce yet collegial competition. Ads that sell products die a quick death. Ads that expose their products' souls are refined, elevated, polished to a blinding sheen, and unleashed upon the world, where they reveal deep truths, transform the global conversation, and so on.

Really, nothing distinguishes the first floor from the offices of any generic advertising firm. Similar work has been done better and worse. Occasionally, the corporation's street team devises pranks that go viral. More often, adblockers consign their five-second videos to oblivion.

On the second floor, a group of analysts pours through the first floor's advertisements, conversations, conflicts, and behavior. Economists, technology experts, and social psychologists analyze data, following creatives' movements from the minute they sit at their desks to the second they walk out the door and frown at the sight of the traffic-packed street.

Amidst the mass of ironic social media posts, emails to college friends, jockeying for status, conspicuously shallow creative tumult, and corporate-mandated brainstorming sessions, these analysts discover larger patterns. They intuit which inescapable technologies teeter on the brink of obsolescence, which color combinations

are about to come into vogue, and predict sudden evolutionary bursts that will send swarms of once-manageable pests out of the sewers and into blocks of apartment buildings.

By combining the talents of a carefully curated group of hyper-competitive businesspeople and trend-sensitive creatives, then combing through their obsessions, habits, and occasional productions, the moment just past the present is revealed in incredibly rich detail. Fewer young people will buy cars. Before its roof is secured, a certain skyscraper will become a suicide mecca for a city's self-aggrandizing depressives. Music won't matter anymore.

While slightly more interesting than the first floor, the second is simply a more focused, efficient, and thorough version of the work innumerable data-collecting businesses do twenty-four hours a day. It's fine-tuned and impressive, but it doesn't deliver the core of the corporation's revenue.

After the first floor's creatives lose their talent, they're moved to the third floor. Eventually, it happens to all of them.

The writers' adjectives lose their pop. The street teams' pranks fall flat. The illustrators' designs become irrelevant. The gift they were given disappears. Their compulsion to self-identify as artists fades with late-blooming maturity. One morning, they leave the nostalgic comforts of their home, filled with music from their college days and posters from their childhoods, and walk onto a street where they suddenly realize they recognize nothing, where the revolutionary styles of their teenage years have been ironically appropriated by mobs of red-eyed and pock-marked adolescents.

Their work no longer reflects the corporation's youthful and innovative brand, so they're assigned to their new desks. Installed on the third floor, they receive the second floor's analysis and summarize the data in memos, reports, and presentations.

Without any technical background or artistic talent, the ex-creative's summaries are mangled misinterpretations of the second floor's conclusions. Corporate structures that break down and merge into hyper-individualized units of trans-national cooperation become hard work and elbow grease. Movies that were supposed to become shorter and narratively simpler are warped into the first two installments of the Godfather trilogy. Any changes in the way humans interpret sound inevitably devolves into guitar-based garage rock. Food forged from asteroid-mined elements becomes grandma's hot apple pie left to cool on the windowsill. Both unable and unwilling to understand the information they're given, the former creatives twist it until it's something they recognize, something they can explain. Terrified of the new, with its self-immolating cars and un-hollow homes, they frantically reinterpret it as the familiar, sculpting and molding this strange present until it fits into the shape of their past.

The corporation only makes money on these summaries after they're sent to the fourth floor, which is not above the third floor. Instead, it's somewhere in one of the neighborhoods near the office building or in another, more distant neighborhood. The fourth floor produces the vast majority of the corporation's profits.

There, the third floor's work is delivered to clients. A small group of CEOs, influencers, and business gurus pay astronomical prices for the third floor's reports. These are the men and women who revolutionized the way we dress, making jeans a thing of the past and wrapping our legs in tentacles of high-performance superfluids. They told us to give up our smartphones, disrupting human curiosity and society's need for knowledge. Without them, we never would have realized that the universe's matter was built by the void and the physical world has no real presence.

They fought, pioneered, and disrupted until, one afternoon at 5 pm, while their least productive employees headed home for the evening, they looked out of their corner office window and gazed at a hometown that no longer felt like home.

In that moment, they realized that their work had gone too far. They had hunted culture and hung its taxidermied head on their trophy wall, but now, that dead beast's cousin, vicious, hungry, and deranged, prowled their city's streets. This new monster, adapted to thrive amongst the technologies they had built themselves, hid in the shadows, searching the wind for their scent.

When these distinguished entrepreneurs receive the third floor's reports, they grip the papers with sweaty and shaking palms, not waiting to sit down before digging into the pages.

Their hearts race, not because they've bought innovative advertising strategies, competitive forecasts, or market analysis. Traditional, conservative companies sell those products at cheaper rates. What the third floor's ex-creatives have written is something far more valuable.

In these texts, the thought-leaders see a world that's recognizably the one they created, a society incredibly similar to the one they transformed, a human identity that looks almost exactly like the one they re-built, yet entirely unchanged from the culture in which they were born, before they made their first breakthroughs and innovated their way into the elite. The present these papers describe is so close to the real thing, so near the actual fact, they can actually convince themselves it's true.

The third floor tells the executives stories in which the new is just a pleasant version of the old, where nothing will ever really be different than it was before, back when they were children playing with their cousins beneath the Thanksgiving dinner table. It shows them a reality where all the change they wrought changed nothing at all.

For the billionaires and innovators, it's comforting. For the corporation, it's a reliably strong profit center.

1: THE BROTHER

If he walked in a straight line, he would arrive somewhere. He would see a street he remembered. He would recognize a sign. A cop car would drive by with a city name stenciled onto its driver's side door.

He passed rows of gray warehouses. Cars didn't drive. Pigeons didn't fly. Rats didn't crawl.

There were barbed wire fences, traffic lights, and loading docks. Black graffiti hid a bus stop's list of route numbers. Buildings had no windows and gates were locked.

At a corner, he wobbled forward. A liquor store stood on the other side of the intersection. The blurry letters above its door spelled "AML LIQUOR" or "ANI LIQUOR."

He pushed the glass door. It didn't open.

Inside, a cashier flicked a lighter, her thumb rolling over the striker, sparking yellow flames. Her eyes were closed.

He knocked on the glass.

Something about the woman looked familiar. Maybe he had seen her before. Or maybe this liquor store looked like every other liquor store. And maybe this late-night cashier looked like every other late night-cashier. The more shifts these tired employees spent behind their counters, the more cigarettes they sold to 2 am drunks, the more fake IDs they took out of high school kids' hands, the more their shoulders stooped, the

more blood drained from their cheeks. He knocked on the glass a second time. Her eyes stayed shut.

No “CLOSED” sign hung in the window. Fluorescent bulbs flickered, chips hung from chip racks, six-packs cooled behind refrigerators’ sliding doors, and 24 Hour Energies lined the counter. Products waited to be bought, but the door’s lock kept customers from going in and buying them.

The lighter’s flame sputtered, disappeared, shot up, died. He slapped the glass with the palm of his hand. She didn’t react.

Smog rose over rooftops, shrouding stars.

His weight fell toward the sidewalk. Before he hit pavement, one of his feet flew out and kept him upright. He moved, careening from the curb to the warehouses and back again.

Hard surfaces constrained his path. Streets were built to support the weight of semi-trucks. Buildings secured goods. Fences kept thieves out. He had no license plate and no bar code. No conglomerate owned him. Stores didn’t expect him on their shelves by the end of the week. He was a bird buried in the dirt. The earth’s weight kept his wings pinned down. No breeze carried him away.

He stayed true to his straight line. At every intersection, he kept his eyes on the corner ahead. He wouldn’t be seduced by the roads that ran in unexplored directions. They wanted to betray him. To turn him around. On their paths, he would walk in circles. They would keep him. Trap him.

He passed warehouses and warehouses and warehouses. The landscape repeated. Nothing changed. Then, a break in the line of cement walls. On the other side of the street, light poured through windows. Another store. He wobbled to the door and pushed himself against it.

The door was locked. It didn’t move.

Inside, a cashier with stooped shoulders and blood-drained cheeks stood behind the register. She flicked a lighter. Her eyes were closed.

He took a step back. The store's sign was hard to read. It said "AML LIQUOR" or "ANI LIQUOR."

It couldn't be the same place. He hadn't walked in a circle. The store was a chain. It was a different store with the same name.

He threw himself against the window. He cried for help. He begged the cashier to let him in. Her blue lighter flamed. Her eyes didn't open.

His body didn't have the strength to stay standing on its own and he pressed his forehead to the glass. It kept him upright. He couldn't raise his tired arms. His calves ached. The night refused to let the sun rise and he didn't know how many hours he had been walking.

Inside, on top of a sunglasses display stand, a mirror showed a woman's reflection. Not the cashier, but a woman he knew. His sister. She stood behind him, her mouth hanging open, barnacles growing on the back of her throat, shouting. He couldn't hear her over the sound of his own voice.

2: THE SISTER

Her first memory was of the stairs in her childhood home. It took her too long to climb them. Her tiny hands fell forward and she grabbed the stair in front of her. She pulled her legs up one at a time. Before trying the next step, she looked down to make sure her feet were firmly planted. If they didn't stay secure, they might betray her. She might fall down. As she made her way up that very first stair, her brother, who had arrived there a half-second before her, came to the second floor. He was so much taller and so much

faster. He leaped while she crawled, knowing his feet would land exactly where they should be. She wanted to go wherever he went, but he had already left her so far behind.

She had no memories before that. Even in dreams, she couldn't go further back than the staircase.

After school, her brother rode bicycles with the other boys from the block. They climbed into dumpsters, found flat plywood, climbed out, and built ramps in the middle of the street. When they knew their mothers were indoors watching telenovelas or cooking, they took their helmets off and split into teams. Top of the street versus bottom of the street. Light-skinned versus dark-skinned. Older versus younger. They jumped off their ramps, threw rocks, and knocked each other off their bikes. She sat by the living room window and watched the sharp edge of a stone hit her neighbor between the eyes, snap his head back, and drop him onto pavement. He looked around. The other boys laughed so he laughed too, until he wiped his chin, felt blood, wiped it again, saw more blood, and shook. The blood kept pouring and his shaking got worse. His mom ran into the street, the boys darted into their homes, and the afternoon was over.

Her brother outgrew his bicycle. He didn't want a new one.

After school, he sat in the back seats of smoke-filled cars driven by boys who didn't live on her block, boys she had never seen before. Her parents mandated a strict curfew. He had to be home before dark and he never came home before dark. His friends dropped him off long after sunset.

Eventually, he had no more school to go to. When her alarm went off and she filled her backpack with books, his bedroom door stayed closed. He was quiet behind it, sleeping until the afternoon because he didn't have to be anywhere in the morning.

Her teachers assigned homework she didn't understand. Her backpack was stuffed with worksheets that were blank and would always be blank.

The day's final school bell rang. She left, went home, and threw her backpack onto the floor. It landed next to the chair where her brother sat. He worked on the family's one computer, clicking the mouse, reading question after question, and choosing answers A, B, C, or D.

What compounds can be removed by organic solvents?

- A. Chlorides.
- B. Sulfates.
- C. Weld flux.
- D. Alkanes.

For a few weeks, whenever she came back from school, she found him staring at the screen, answering multiple-choice questions. He told her he had enrolled in an online apprenticeship program.

"For what?"

"Shipbuilding."

"You're going to build ships?"

"I guess."

Occasionally, his apprenticeship had classes downtown. Sometimes they were in the morning. Sometimes they didn't start until after he had finished dinner. If he had a class at 2 pm on Tuesday, the next week he would be home all Tuesday afternoon. Usually, when she came home from school, she found him working on the computer. But as soon as she started expecting him to be there, she didn't see him. He was

downtown, studying. One night, he didn't come home until 2 am. When he walked in, she rushed out of her room and to his side.

"You were in class?"

He nodded.

"Yeah, right. This late?"

"I was."

"Come on, tell me where you were. Really."

"I'm saying. Class took a while."

"Till 2?"

He didn't answer.

"Why are you even in class, anyway? Isn't an apprenticeship like, working? You work with a guy and he teaches you?"

"It's not like that."

"So what's it like?"

"I'm tired."

"Tell me."

"I'm going to bed."

"What kind of job will they give you?"

"That's not how it works."

"Then tell me how it works."

He shrugged his shoulders and went to his room.

What is the offshore operating pressure for a standard metal grip pipe connection?

A. 15 bar.

B. 20 bar.

C. My first grade teacher learned my name weeks after he learned the names of every other student in class. To this day, that incident negatively affects my ability to form new relationships.

D. 25 bar.

The apprenticeship schedule went from unpredictable to absurd. He spent the entire morning in class. Then he went to class at 10 pm and came back when she left for school. Then he disappeared for two days in a row.

Her parents whispered. In their small house, she heard every word. That, at his age, he shouldn't act like this. That they wanted to know what was going on. That as long as he lived in their home, he shouldn't keep secrets. Their conversations always ended with the same resignation. At least the boy had somewhere to go. At least he had something to do. It couldn't be too bad, not really.

For conventional process AH32-EH32, the maximum surface temperature after heating should be ____.

A. Under 650°C.

B. I worry about migrant worker conditions in Dubai.

C. While labor abuses may be widespread, their frequency is decreasing.

D. Under 750°C.

She searched for the Alfont Apprentice School's address online. The building wasn't quite downtown. It was between the city and the river. 1917 Bay Street. She hopped onto a bus on Central Avenue, got off, and walked the rest of the way. The

warehouse was as featureless as every other building on the block. It had a flat roof and gray walls. No sign displayed the school's name. She stood on the other side of the street, waiting for a teacher or a student to open the steel door. No one walked in. No one walked out. She waited. The street stayed vacant. She got bored and went home.

By the time she graduated, she hadn't seen her brother in months. All of her college applications had been answered with one-paragraph form letters that offered their best wishes and nothing more. The state schools that accepted any 18-year old at a fifth-grade reading level didn't accept her. She slept through the mornings and woke up when her mother pulled the sheets off her. Some nights, she left her room and crawled into her brother's bed. She was used to seeing the blankets cover his wide shoulders. The mattress had been too short for him and his feet used to stick over it, hanging above the floor. Back when he had been at home and she went into his room, he would tell her to get out and leave him alone. Sometimes, she stayed anyway. Eventually, if she stayed there long enough, he would talk to her. He let her sit on his bed and told her about things that he knew and she didn't because he was older and she was younger.

She lay on his mattress with her knees against her chest, hugging herself until she felt too small to be seen. Her brother never came back.

I don't live in Dubai and I'm not a migrant worker, so why do I care about migrant worker conditions in Dubai?

- A. 30.0 to 609.6 mm
- B. 25.5 to 619.6 mm
- C. 5.7 to 512 mm
- D. 15.0 to 606.9 mm

The mail arrived. She saw her name written on an envelope and she recognized the return address. 1917 Bay Street. The Alfont Apprentice School invited her to join its student body. An application that she had never filled out or sent in had been accepted.

She went to the school's registration day without telling her parents. They hadn't seen the acceptance letter and she didn't think they would want to know. The warehouse's steel door was open. Students stood around it, talking and smoking. She belonged at the periphery of the group, among students who looked at their feet and into the sky. Everyone close to the door knew each other. They were good-looking kids with laid-back vibes, the kind of boys and girls who had been cool since the first day they stopped playing pretend. She kept her distance.

The inside of the warehouse was one large room filled with rows of long tables supporting old computers. They looked like they had all been bought at the same clearance sale a decade ago. She waited and watched what the other students did. They pulled out chairs, sat in front of screens, and worked. She found a free spot in the very back row and turned her machine on. A message flashed. "Welcome to the Alfont Apprentice School." The questions started.

What areas should workers avoid entering?

- A. Tanks and enclosed areas during paint works.
- B. All areas during scaffolding works.
- C. Construction areas.
- D. Not here.

She never had to register for classes because classes never started. Day after day, she answered multiple-choice questions. Some of the other students chose to work from

home, but she kept going to the warehouse. Some boys looked like they might have been her brother's age. She sat close to them, hoping they would recognize his face in hers, hoping they would ask if she was his sister. They didn't.

The questions detailed technical problems she couldn't follow and used terminology she didn't understand. She picked A, B, C, or D, then saw "CORRECT" written in green or "WRONG" written in red. In the screen's bottom corner, a ticker showed what percentage she had answered incorrectly. It always hovered somewhere around seventy-five percent.

Every day, fewer students came to the warehouse.

What is the leading cause of death for American males between the ages of 20 and 24?

- A. Unintentional injury.
- B. Suicide.
- C. Don't worry about it.
- D. Homicide.

She had breakfast at school. There was a table with a coffee maker, a basket full of fruit, and a box of granola bars. She poured herself a cup of coffee, grabbed a banana, and ate standing next to two or three mute students. The people who had been in the crowd on that first day, the ones who talked to each other and laughed, never returned. The students that were left acted like her. They were people who only looked at other people when they knew the other person wouldn't look back.

She woke up after dreaming that every multiple-choice question was already written on her bedroom walls. A single layer of paint hid them. She couldn't go back to

sleep, so she got on the bus and arrived at school early. The room was empty except for a man carefully arranging the breakfast table. He was incredibly small, no taller than a little girl. He gently placed one apple into the basket, as if using a stronger grip would bruise the fruit. No one in this warehouse ever talked, but this man didn't look like the students who came here. He didn't seem wary or scared.

"Hey."

The man dropped a banana.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to surprise you."

"Pick it up." His tone was accusing.

"What?"

"You made me drop it. Pick it up."

She leaned over, grabbed the banana, and put it on the table. "I've never seen an employee here before. I mean, you're an employee, right? You work for these people?"

"What people?"

"The administration."

The man raised his bag above the fruit basket and turned it upside down. Oranges and peaches fell out. "I don't know them."

"Okay. But do you work for them?"

Granola bars were in the second bag. He threw it onto the table and dashed to the door.

"Do they pay you?"

He escaped into the street without answering the question.

When communicating with a team member in a loud environment, which hand signal means “stop.”

- A. Raised thumb.
- B. Palm open and out.
- C. It’s impossible to communicate true meaning, even with a person we’ve known our entire lives.
- D. Raised index finger.

A few nights before her brother left home, before he disappeared, he came into the living room. She lay on the couch watching a late-night movie about a baby. The child was in danger, but the police didn’t know where to find it. No one knew how they knew that the baby might die, but the chief had locked himself in his office and a mood of existential dread pulsed through the station. None of the officers could work up the courage to leave and search for the infant. Her brother sat next to her and watched.

“What’s this movie called?”

“*An Infant Undone.*”

“Huh.”

The police took out their wallets and showed each other pictures of their children. They asked what they would do if that was their kid out there, lost and dying. After intense arguments and soul-baring monologues, they agreed that they couldn’t leave the station. Even if the baby had been their own, it was too scary to go outside.

It felt good to have her brother there, to be next to him. He hadn’t been at home much and she didn’t like to be alone with her mom and dad. They were older than the other parents on the block. They talked in hushed tones and watched her quietly, thinking things they wouldn’t say out loud. Her brother radiated warmth. Even as he

sat on the opposite side of the couch, she could feel his body's heat. When he talked, he spoke loudly, and he looked in her eyes without imagining all of the awful things that might happen to her.

"You know, after I finish this, I can go anywhere I want."

"Yeah?"

"There are ports all over the world. Korea, Indonesia, Dubai. I can see things, meet people, get paid."

"Cool."

He wore sandals and his toenails had grown too long, their edges yellow and thick. Details like that never bothered him. He wouldn't notice unless she pointed them out.

"It's like, I've been here my entire life, and do I even know anybody? I know people's names, I know where they live, but what's that? It's like everyone here's too fucked up to actually connect. Their screwed up insides can't plug in."

"You think people in other countries will be better?"

"Maybe. At least I can go there and see."

They watched the end of the movie. She fell asleep. That was the last time she talked to him.

If he works at the Dubai port, which policy is it his responsibility to follow?

- A. Navigation policy.
- B. Pilotage policy.
- C. Port operations policy.
- D. The question's premise is flawed. He can't work anywhere.

Sitting at a computer all day made her limbs numb. When she came home, her parents asked questions she couldn't answer. They talked and she tried to listen, but she didn't understand what they said.

"What is this school?"

"Do they know where your brother went?"

"Is he with them? Did they give him a job?"

"Will they give you a job, too?"

When she was alone, after they had given up and she had retreated into her bedroom, she untangled their words and put them back into a meaningful order. But when her parents looked into her eyes, she only heard the same two sentences, repeated again and again.

"Is our son dead?"

"Will you die too?"

Instead of going home, she stayed late at the warehouse. Her schedule shifted. Its hours moved into the evening. She slept through the days and answered multiple-choice questions at night. After her mother and father had turned off the lights and gone to sleep, she snuck out of her bedroom. The only time she saw her parents was in the early morning, when she came back from class. She avoided conversations, telling them she felt too tired to talk. In dreams, she saw crowds of people in foreign ports, coming and going as ships arrived and departed. She looked at their faces, studying the way they moved and the details of their expressions. She never saw anyone she recognized.

When preparing pipe systems for paint, what is used to remove contaminants?

A. Caustic soda.

- B. He's been gone for months. He hasn't called. He hasn't emailed.
- C. There's no reason to come here. There are no answers.
- D. Sulfuric acid.

One question became another became another. Her index finger ached. She shifted the mouse from her right hand to her left. In the corner of the screen, a clock counted seconds. She didn't look at it. All of the students were gone and she had been hungry for a long time. She clicked through questions faster, searching for the one that would answer all the others. The computer screen seared a permanent square in her vision. She didn't breath. And she found it. Right there, in front of her. "Where is your brother?" The answers were blank. A, B, C, and D had no text. She chose C. "CORRECT" flashed in green.

If you are your brother, in which location would he most like to live?

- A. Bali.
- B. France.
- C. Bakersfield.
- D. Dubai.

A career counselor sat in her living room. He asked where she saw herself in five years and if she had any hobbies. Her mother, who had invited him, tiptoed to the couch, asked if he wanted coffee or water, and ran away when he said no. A few minutes later, she crept out of the kitchen, tapped him on the shoulder, and said she also had cookies or tea. He was fine. He didn't need anything.

While he described long-term value of making strategic career choices, she thought about a cat that used to hide in the neighborhood's backyards. Large patches of its fur fell out. Circles of ringworm ate into its skin. It looked wet, like it had crawled up from the grates that led to the city's sewers. Birds flew over its rat-bitten ears and it watched them hungrily.

The career counselor had no hair on the right side of his scalp. She couldn't tell if he had been burned or if he had the cat's ringworm. Like the feral animal, his hairless patch was a perfect circle.

After he drove off in his decade-old Chevrolet Cavalier, her mother asked if any of the jobs he had described sounded interesting.

"No. I have to go to class."

"Mija."

"I have to go to class."

The SS Boeningi has been in operation for decades. Its rudders have been repaired. Its bow thruster has been replaced. Its satellite communication systems have been updated. Many (if not most) of its components are different than the ones it had when it first left port. Is the SS Boeningi the ship it once was?

A. Snails are hermaphrodites. During their mating ritual, snail pairings communicate for up to twelve hours. Both snails deliver eggs fertilized during the coupling.

B. After rising sea levels washed away the last remaining Solomon Island, the area that had once been differentiated by the islands' unique beaches and peaks

became an undifferentiated swath of empty sea. The SS Boeningi, like this empty land of waves, will one day be at one with itself.

C. Kind of.

D. Earlier this year, the SS Boeningi sank in a freak storm off the coast of Dubai. Whatever the ship once was, it's now a wreck at the bottom of the Persian Gulf. Its crew is presumed drowned (although, in Iran's Hormod Protected Area, there was an unconfirmed sighting of a man who claimed to be the SS Boeningi's engineering officer).

The warehouse was always empty. Every other student had dropped out, graduated, or matriculated to a higher level. The snack table ran out of snacks and no one refilled it. She stayed at the computer until she couldn't. Sometimes, she woke with her cheek sticky against the keyboard.

She left and walked through the streets at midnight. She left and walked through the streets at noon. The difference between the two became less apparent. Whether crowds filled the sidewalks or no one walked there, people didn't see her. Whether commuters drove bumper to bumper or the roads were clear, cars didn't stop when she stepped into the street. Identity had never worried her. She went to school, watched TV, lay sleepless in bed, and who she was when she did these things had seemed irrelevant. Too much time had passed. She couldn't make it up. She tried to avoid the open sky. There was too much of it and too little of her.

Do you ever think that all this talk about Dubai is just a way to distract you from thinking about where you really are?

A. Definitely.

- B. Where am I?
- C. The better question isn't where I am, it's where I will be.
- D. -20°C to 630°C .

A man, too old to be a student, appeared. Whenever she came to the warehouse, he was there. If she went to a computer far from his, he moved and sat in the chair closest to hers. While she clicked through questions, he watched. The tips of his fingers looked soft and he kept his fingernails carefully trimmed. He took her free hand and measured her pulse. He felt her forehead. As he studied her, she ignored him. She never looked at his clothes or the style of his hair or the color of his skin. If he had no characteristics, maybe he wasn't really there.

Eventually, he pointed to answers on the screen. "I liked the lizard. Even better than my bike. I found him in the garden and kept him until he died." " $R = 6\text{ mm}$, $40^{\circ} - 60^{\circ}$." "The center position parallels both battery banks." "I expected my parents' undivided attention and felt betrayed when my mom had a second child." Every time she chose an answer he suggested, she saw "CORRECT" in green.

He was always inches away, careful to keep to the confines of his own chair, except when he reached out to check her pulse or take her temperature. His legs stayed neatly tucked beneath the table. His eyes stayed on hers.

She didn't know when she slept. She didn't know if she went home.

What's the best way to minimize distortion in welds?

- A. By welding from the center outwards.
- B. By performing a cross-weld tensile test.
- C. By using low heat.

D. By removing intrusions at the weld toe.

Late on the night she had watched *An Infant Undone*, after she fell asleep, her brother's bent and broken outline crouched on the living room floor. He looked like a man with shattered knees trying to pull himself to his feet.

Her eyes were closed, but she heard the TV. A disembodied pitchman hawked arthritis medication to the crows that flew through her dreams. Cold filled the featureless sky. Its empty air carried the pitchman's voice. Words started at the unlit edge of the horizon and spoke their way through birds' black feathers. On the other side of the void was the living room carpet, where her brother suffered and clawed his way toward her.

The crows threatened him and the sky's gray wasted away. A logic unknown to language twisted the advertisement into threats and warnings. This belonged to the nightmare

But her brother crawled on the floor, in pain. That was real.

As long as she stayed close to him, as long as she braved the swooping crows and the sky's stinging voice, he wouldn't give up. No matter how his body twisted or cracked, he would crawl. He would force his way toward her and they would be together.

The crows dove. She put up her arms and shielded her face. The TV said "natural herbal treatment" and meant a truth artificial and toxic, a truth that forced bile from her stomach.

What is the ultimate goal of scientific objectivity?

- A. Small handprints on Stone Age cave paintings may not be prints of human children's hands. Instead, it's likely that they're the handprints of lizards the artists killed.
- B. To inhabit and thereby transform human subjectivity.
- C. All predictions aren't testable. This, unfortunately, is the invisible line that circumscribes knowledge. There's no way to understand the difference between an unknown fact, i.e. what's outside the observable universe, and a human fantasy, i.e. a benevolent God.
- D. If I were a midget I would want to be the shortest midget on Earth.

Her nose ran and she didn't have tissue in her pocket. She could have asked the man who sat silently next to her, but she didn't turn to look at him. Her sinuses dripped, tapping some flat surface deep inside her head.

The questions didn't make sense. By the time she reached the end of each sentence, she gave up trying to understand the muddled grammar and misspelled words. Every answer was incoherent. She guessed randomly.

The man moved his chair an inch closer to hers. Its metal legs scraped the cement floor.

Her runny nose got worse. It ran over her lips and down her chin. She wiped it away with the back of her hand, then answered more questions. Nothing she chose was right. The computer flashed "WRONG" in red. The first words of sentences became too difficult to read. The letters curved in the wrong places. The alphabet deteriorated.

More snot rolled down her chin. She wiped it off with her palm and spread it on the table, focusing on the computer screen.

His hand moved onto her leg. His foot pressed against hers. Fingers ran slowly up her thigh.

The questions needed answers. She was a student and she had work to do. She had to pass the test.

Her t-shirt felt wet. Her eyes left the screen. A red stain expanded on her chest. On the table, at the spot where she had rubbed her palm, red streaked. She put her finger to her nose. Her nose didn't run. It bled.

The next moment hid from her. Its seconds or minutes or hours dug beneath the warehouse, hiding where they couldn't be heard.

Her back slid against the floor, her ankles in the quiet man's hands. He dragged her toward an open closet door.

After never looking at him, after never turning in his direction, after ignoring the space that held his body, she saw him all at once. His jaw was gigantic. His hairline rose a half-inch above his eyebrows. He wore thick, white, and rubber clothes. His suit stretched unbroken from his work boots to his exposed neck. He gritted his teeth and pulled his lips back. The hands that held her ankles were huge. Their grip tightened.

As he pulled her across the floor, her shirt slipped and exposed her stomach. She tried to grip the ground, but the cement was flat with nothing to hold. Her fingers slid across its cool surface.

He pulled her into the closet. A yellow plastic bucket and a wet bath towel were in the corner. With one foot pressed against her stomach, he leaned over and grabbed the towel.

"Behave." He had a high, prepubescent voice.

He sat on her. His knees pinned her arms and his body's weight kept her back against the floor. She spat. The spit flew into the air and arced back down, landing in her open eyes.

One long light bulb lit the closet. An electric note buzzed.

He raised the wet towel and dropped it over her face. She couldn't see.

His weight shifted. It all went to the knee that pressed against her right elbow. She freed her left arm and hit him blindly, slamming her fist into the hard line of his ribs.

His weight went back to her chest, heavier than before.

Water flowed.

A massive amount of water.

It poured onto the towel. It was dense and impenetrable. She opened her mouth and sucked in wet cotton. Her lungs couldn't expand or contract. They froze, paralyzed, with no way to get oxygen in or out. One more short second, then they would collapse.

And the water stopped. His thick hand pushed the towel against her face before pulling it away and she could breathe and her lungs found oxygen and the moment they did she saw a needle, a long and thin needle attached to a cable, a needle that gently touched her lips, and as she breathed in it slipped into her mouth and fell toward the back of her throat and hit soft unprotected flesh. It pierced her and it plugged in.

You know your brother as well as you know anyone. Do you know your brother?

- A.
- B.
- C.
- D.

3: THE DOUBLE

If she walked in a straight line, she would arrive somewhere. She would see a street she remembered. She would recognize a sign. A cop car would drive by with a city name stenciled onto its driver's side door.

Across the street, a sign glowed above a store window. It said "AML Liquor" or "ANI Liquor." It couldn't be the same place. She hadn't walked in a circle.

Inside, a cashier with closed eyes flicked a lighter. She didn't know him.

A sunglasses display rack stood next to the counter. Had it been there before? She pressed her forehead against the glass, trying to remember if she recognized it.

In the mirror on top of the case, she saw a man's reflection. Her brother. He shouted. Barnacles grew on the back of his throat.

Her scream buried his voice.

INTER-DEPARTMENTAL MEETING REGARDING PROPOSED CHANGES TO CORPORATE PHILOSOPHY

Originally published in L0wL1f3 #3: The Political Issue, 2018

It's not that there aren't enough seats, Gerald. It's that there's no chair for you. Look around. Everyone else is sitting. Chairs aren't the problem. You are.

Why? Because if you hadn't been mewling on the phone with your wife, you would have been here on time. Maybe then you would have a chair.

Oh. So sad, Gerald. She's leaving you. Buck up and stick to the schedule.

Anyone else want to whine or can I get started?

Great.

There's been a lot of chatter about the direction of our organization. People are feeling bleak, section heads are getting canned, and no one really knows how to turn the ship around. As the head of Prisons, I understand that none of you expect much from our department. Traditionally, we're here to clean up messes, not think big-picture.

But the reason I've asked you here today is that my department has had a bit of a breakthrough. If you'll be patient and listen, I think you'll see that Prisons has discovered a set of values that can guide our entire organization through this difficult time.

It's an unfortunate fact that most of you think of Prisons in purely negative terms. That's a mistake. I mean, it's an understandable mistake. We're not birthing baby penguins or curing colon cancer. But still. It's not right.

Here's the thing. Every department, including Prisons, shares the same fundamental assumption: Progress is possible.

Start the PowerPoint, please.

Check out this graph and you'll see exactly what I mean. Two years ago, our recidivism rate was 33 percent. Last year, it was 31. In March, thirty prisoners killed themselves. What is today, April 17th? We're than halfway through the month and the suicide count is only thirteen.

We constantly improve. Or at least that's the goal.

And, like other departments, Prisons has changed a lot. Over the decades, in order to be better, in order to continually progress, we've reorganized, restructured, and innovated.

I'm not sure if they still teach this in schools, but back in the day, Prisons restricted prisoners' freedom of movement, cut them off from their relationships, and confined them to cells. No matter the crime, no matter the motive, Prisons always proscribed the same punishment. The only variable was the length of time criminals were confined.

Counterintuitive, I know.

Our system had a fatal flaw. Eventually, we had to let prisoners out of their cells. But when we did, the prisoners' relationships were gone, the prisoners' jobs were gone, and the prisoners got desperate. Our department took so much from them that they had no choice but to recommit the crimes that had locked them up in the first place.

While trying to fix the situation, we made a mistake. We thought gene therapy and other scientific developments would let us eliminate punishment. Rehabilitation became the order of the day. In some ways, it worked. Violent criminals got their violent tendencies erased. Shoplifters got their compulsions removed.

But borderline cases, people who were inclined to murder but could have sublimated that desire with binge eating or masturbation, used our department as a cure. Obviously, this... What, Gerald?

You know all of this already? Well, you didn't know your wife was cheating and everyone else did. So stop interrupting and let me finish my goddamn presentation.

Change the slide.

Okay. Now that we've got our focus back, take a look at this.

It's a series of news stories from the National Archive. If you want to read the articles, shoot me an email and I'll send you a link. But here's the gist - again and again, these borderline cases killed old women and punched out kid cashiers. Again and again, they had same motive. They murdered and robbed and raped in order to force Prisons to provide free access to gene therapy, one-on-one spiritual counseling, and self-help seminars. Ultimately, they saw rehabilitation as a reward. It was an incentive to commit criminal acts.

So, in the name of progress, we changed. Crime demanded punishment.

After the failure of both the punitive and rehabilitative systems, our most obvious choice was to create a third model. But we didn't make that choice. We developed a system that combined the best features we had used before - and we named it Punitive Rehabilitation. It was all about creating bespoke punishments that nullified the individual criminal's motive.

Serendipitously, Punitive Rehabilitation provided your departments with critical resources during a period of crippling staffing shortages.

For those of you who need a refresher, let me refamiliarize you with your workforce.

This is Ted, from LA. He murdered his landlord because he couldn't pay rent, so we moved him to a town in Iowa where he could rent a three-bedroom house for half of

what he paid in the city. In Iowa, he murdered again, and it became apparent that we were dealing with a serial killer. We taught him how to interpret atmospheric data, put him in a Department of Extra-Solar Exploration rocket, and sent him to a star surrounded by orbiting rocks.

It's simple. We gave him a job, we gave him a purpose, and we took away his motive to murder. If any of the planets he surveys is actually terraformable, he'll be dead long before the terraforming crew shows up. The only person he can kill is himself. And like I said, we're working on lowering our suicide rates.

Another example. This is Don, from New York. He sexually assaulted a woman, so our doctors dug into his immune system and made him allergic to that woman's pheromone print. If he ever approaches her again, he'll go into anaphylactic shock. Unfortunately, he went out and attacked a second woman. He ended up being a serial rapist. We sent him to you guys at Extra-Terrestrial Terraforming, you taught him the fundamentals of oxygen-mining, added him to a crew, and the crew flew to Gliese 682.

Now, Gerald has pointed out that we don't know if the rapist crews are raping each other. But we think Gerald's a buzzkill.

Everybody in Prisons, it's time to pay attention again.

Next slide.

You'll recognize this. It's the last image we received from the colony on Wolf 1061c. When they arrived, they changed the planet's name to Tiantang, but it looks like they didn't survive long enough to make the name stick.

Now, how well are our other colonies doing? Officially, I don't know. Only employees in the Department of Colonization have access to that information. But honestly, all of you who attend these inter-departmental meetings will agree with what I'm about to say. We see you guys from Colonization across the table. We read your

expressions. And let me be real. You don't have the best poker faces. It doesn't look like your colonies are doing great.

That pretty much sums up where we are. Now, I want to talk about where we can go.

Change the slide.

Take a look at this kid. A good long look. I know he's not pretty, but get acquainted. Because he had a great idea. An idea we should replicate at a larger level.

His skin's a little too white. Like his grandparents and his great-grandparents and way too many grandparents before that spent all of their time in the same gene pool. And not many of them jumped in any less stagnant water.

If this kid got a paper cut, he'd bleed and keep bleeding, bleed some more, then pass out dead. He's that kind of white. Gross white.

Anaheim is his hometown, but his dad grew up in Weedpatch, California. It's an unincorporated community outside of Bakersfield. Dad's parents still called themselves farmers way after they sold their farm, auctioned off their tractors, and started harvesting Oxycontin scripts instead of cantaloupes.

Shut the fuck up, Gerald. It's stereotypical? So what. It's true. I'm trying to explain something here. Listen.

The point is, the kid doesn't look like much and he doesn't come from much, but, despite that, he's pretty smart, pretty eloquent. He transformed our idea of what Prisons can do. Of what all our departments can do.

Before I get to that, though, I've got to explain what happened to his dad.

The next slide's the video, right? Cool. Play it.

"We used to go to the beach, when I was too little to swim. I went to the wet sand and kicked at the surf. My dad picked me up. He carried me deeper. The water crashed over my face and covered my lips in salt. It was scary, but I loved being there, knowing

that if he let me go, the current would pull me away. After a while, he brought me back to our towels, told me to stay there, and ran to the ocean. Waves swelled over him, rolling his body through their breaks, and I jumped as high as I could, trying to see where he swam, hoping I would be able to spot his face beneath the surface, still there, still breathing. I wanted to be those waves, holding him in my current, submerging him under my weight.”

The kid’s mom was dead or MIA, I don’t remember which, so I guess the dad left his son unsupervised while he swam. Seems like a dereliction of parental duty, but what do I know? I’ve never even owned a dog and my cat left me to live with my neighbors. As Gerald’s wife can attest, I’m not exactly the nurturing type.

Anyway, this two-person family was close. That’s what I’m trying to say. They loved each other.

The dad’s crime was too commonplace to be worth describing. Who he killed, exactly how he killed, all of that’s no different than the same repetitive crap you hear on every nightly newscast.

Sure, maybe he got a bit too trigger-happy, maybe too nervous. For whatever reason, he took a shot when he had no good reason to shoot. X led to Y led to Z; a guy’s dead and dad is who did it.

What put dad in that situation, the reason that he pulled that trigger, wasn’t blood lust. It wasn’t that he wanted to get rich. It was his son’s hunger. The kid had to eat and dad had to feed him.

The cops caught dad and grilled him until they were satisfied with his story. They sent him to us and we designed a bespoke punishment that nullified his motive.

At the time, the case seemed pretty simple. His son was fifteen, old enough to ship to a government institution. For the next three years, he would live on campus, eat

cafeteria food, and spend his days in class. Once he turned eighteen, he'd be out and on his own. No big deal.

We couldn't allow dad to have any contact with his son, because the kid was the reason he committed the crime. So, our doctors went to work and re-jiggered dad's immune system. If he went anywhere near his boy, he'd collapse. His throat would swell, his pulse would disappear, and he'd either have to run in the opposite direction or die. We alerted the banks, blocking any family transactions, and that was that. Motive eliminated. The file closed and went down to Records.

I think we've got another video from the kid's interrogation, right? Great. Play it.

"I don't remember my mom. It always hurt that she wasn't there, but it never hurt more than it had the day before and I knew the next day would hurt exactly the same. My pain was like the color of the sky, always gray, smoky. I don't remember the sky being clear, so even if I want to look up and see blue, it's kind of okay that I can't. I don't know what a blue sky looks like, so all that smoke can't make me feel like it's gotten worse.

"With my dad, it's different. I had him today, so if I don't have him tomorrow, tomorrow will feel awful."

Now, keep in mind what he said as you watch this next video.

This is security footage from 7th and Hill. If you look beneath the big marquee, you'll see the kid standing there, doing nothing.

Fast-forward through this, because he stays there for a long time. Go ahead about forty minutes. Yeah, thanks. Now play it, normal speed.

I want to point everything out as it happens. First of all, there are the two beat cops who walk into the frame. Right there. They're probably about five yards away from our kid. And now, watch the kid go up to that bald guy. Witnesses said they

talked for a few seconds. They didn't seem to know each other. If I remember right, the kid asked for directions.

Yup. There it is.

You can't see it, but the kid took the knife out of his pocket. And... Hold on. Can you rewind the video so we can watch the murder again?

Look. The second before the kid sticks his knife into the bald guy's throat, he makes eye contact with the two police officers. He made sure they saw him.

Bring up the third highlighted section of the kid's interrogation video. Thanks.

"You were going to take my dad away. I knew you would. It felt so bad, to know that tomorrow would be worse than today. But I could change that. If today was as bad as tomorrow, then tomorrow wouldn't feel worse. It would feel the same.

"It's like, if you walk out of a bright room and into a dim room, the dim room will look pitch black. But if you walk from one dim room into another, nothing will change. Your eyes will be used to the darkness.

"There was no way to make you give my dad back. I knew I would never see him again. At least, though, I could make today as awful as tomorrow. I wouldn't be blinded when I walked into its dim room."

Okay, stop it there. That pretty much sums it up.

You guys probably more or less get why I've asked you here.

This meeting isn't about changing the Prisons Department to make it better. I don't care about finding a solution that works for that kid. He's fucked.

We're fucked.

What, Gerald?

Really? My language upsets you? Fuck it. I don't care. Maybe if you were fucking your wife, she wouldn't have left you.

Stop crying, Gerald.

Let's pause. Take a breath. It's time to be honest.

We think progress is the engine that drives our departments forward. We believe we've gotten better, more efficient, more productive. But what if we haven't? What if progress isn't real?

For example, look at the Department of Geology's history. Extra-Solar Exploration and Extra-Terrestrial Terraforming needed materials from the Earth's lower mesosphere. Geology dug down there and got them. No one predicted what their mining operations would do to the frequency of volcanic eruptions. No one understood how they would affect fault lines.

Today, none of us remember what a clear sky looks like. We have to watch old movies to see one and even then it doesn't seem real. How could something so beautiful ever have been above us? How is it possible that our grandparents lived under a blue heaven?

It's unbelievable.

We've come to a point in history where progress has hit a wall. In fact, it looks more and more like everything we thought was progress wasn't progress at all. It's collapsing under its own weight. We tried to go to the stars and only caused volcanic eruptions at home. After exploring and terraforming distant planets, we sent our best people to colonize them. And they choked to death on methane-ammonia atmospheres. I'm sleeping with Gerald's wife. Is this really the best I can do? Is this the best any of us can do? If so, how horrible. How depressing!

What's left? What remains?

It's this kid and his idea.

If we all agree that progress never existed, that it was all an illusion, a mirage that tricked us into believing that tomorrow could be better than today, if we come together and admit it was a lie, then maybe we'll get through this.

It's the only way our departments can continue to function.

Because tomorrow's not going to be better. And we have to make that feel okay.