

the evening sun flashed on it, it looked pretty and sweet again, a place of leisure and pleasure.

Zeta One had vanished. A blind aircraft had ditched in his swimming pool. It was perfect and sleek, pearl-white above and, from below, as blue as a sunlit sky.

**Autogenic Dreaming: Interview with
the Columns of Clouds** by TOBI Hiroataka
Translated by Jim Hubbert

1.

<I> am watching a movie.

A bleak country road in a foreign land.

A truck moves along the unpaved track. It stops in a village. Castile, Spain. The 1940s. A sign, screen right—HOYUELOS. That must be the name of the village. Children run toward the truck. High excitement. The men are wearing caps. They open the rear of the truck. The children shout.

"Movies in a can!" Film cans. The men are traveling cinema operators.

"What kind of movie?" "Cowboys?"

The men answer. "A great movie." "The best you'll ever see."

The children's shining eyes open wide.

<I> am watching a movie. Let me put that differently. The film I'm watching—along with countless other works—is already part of me. I can access any scene in it instantly. Or maybe it would be better to say that this movie has incorporated me. That I'm swimming in it. That would not be wrong, but it's not quite right either. Anyway, I selected a movie—and I've dropped into the opening scene.

The movie proceeds. The men put up a poster on the wall of the town hall. A man's deformed face with a stitched-up wound across his jutting forehead. His eyes are half shut. Thick bolts protrude from his neck. The title is *AUTOR DEL MONSTRUO*.

Right, Dr. Frankenstein is the "author of the monster." It makes a strange kind of sense and I move farther in. Japanese burn-in subtitles. This must have been a print for distribution in Japan. Maybe it was the print Jundo Mamiya saw when he was a boy.

Villagers gather in an empty room in the town hall. Children, women, old men, each bringing a chair.

A black frame painted on a white stucco wall. That must be the silver screen. The stains, cracks, and finger marks on the wall are part of every movie people see in this village. Faces float in the dim reflected glow. Two children, sisters, stare raptly at the screen. The younger girl's enormous eyes are wonderful.

The movie proceeds. A black-and-white film comes up on the stucco screen. A man and his young daughter. The shore of a lake. Flowers everywhere in full bloom. The man says something to the girl and leaves her. She plays innocently, picking the flowers.

Frankenstein's monster steps out of the shadows. The children in the audience freeze. The little girl on the screen shows no fear at all. She speaks to the brute. Do you want to play with me? The monster is mute. The girl presses flowers on him. He kneels and starts to play with her. The carefree child seems to free him from the terror of his pursuers. He smiles, plucks a blossom, plucks another, tossing them onto the water. The lake dances in the sparkling sunlight. The children stare, wide-eyed, mesmerized by the tranquility and suspense.

A new scene. The father we saw earlier walks stiffly through the village, cradling the girl. His eyes are empty, his heart is clearly broken. Her arms and legs dangle limply. They testify wordlessly that she is dead.

The children gasp. Their expressions are real, without a trace of

pretense or artifice, especially the little sister. Her awestruck eyes seem to swallow the film's light.

#Introduction

This story—leaving aside the question of whether this is in fact a story—is the record of an extended interview with that renowned man of letters and murderer, Jundo Mamiya. I can't post the complete transcript, please bear with me. The interview can't be related in a sequence of orderly sentences. It's not even an interview in the usual sense. The subject—Jundo Mamiya—died thirty years before the conversation took place. And the interviewers—*<I>* and *<I>*—are not human either, in the ordinary sense of the word.

The interview was also, in and of itself, the struggle with Imajika. At its peak, this epic confrontation commandeered three percent of humanity's total computing resources. Those untold myriads of calculations make up the substance of this interview.

I can already picture you wincing, but I must impose on your patience and add one more thing.

<I> and *<I>* are not first-person pronouns. You'll be very close if you think of them as proper nouns temporarily allocated to a specific program. When the subject is *<I>*, it doesn't automatically mean singular. Let's just say that *<I>* is a placeholder for the subject of the sentence.

Naturally you're going to end up reacting to *<I>* and *<I>* as the first person; no harm done. I won't even object if you assign a male voice to *<I>* and a female voice to *<I>*. Allowance has been made for that too.

What follows is the tumultuous story of how Jundo Mamiya, a notorious killer who harried scores of victims to the grave, returned from death to strike down a monster. But on the surface, it's nothing more than a quiet conversation. Even an action-packed

novel is written out on a silent monitor—or on paper. This story is no different.

That's enough prologue, I think.

You're free to go now.

If you do, I'll ask you not to return. And I'll say, Go in Peace.

2.

The elevator descends quietly. <I> am trapped within my sensation of movement, falling toward an underground prison, closing in on a single prisoner confined in the bowels of the earth.

There are two elevators only. The indicators display no floor numbers. Individual digits and letters flash by and vanish with dizzying speed. The Justice Ministry officer who brought me as far as the elevator told me this was how they keep escapees from finding out which floor they're on. Other than knowing that I'm in a prison built into an abandoned mine, I have no clue where I am.

Faint vibrations penetrate the soles of my shoes. The weight I gave up earlier is returned. I straighten my collar, smooth the hem of my skirt, and cough lightly. Two corrections officers wait in the corridor. An elaborate procedure verifies my identity. The older one says, "Thank you for your patience. Do you want to see him right away?"

His misgivings seep through the politesse. It's not because of my youth, lack of experience, or slim build.

We walk down the corridor. A barred gate slides open, metal grating on metal, an atavistic sound. The younger officer steps me through the rules. Do not approach the barrier. Do not accept anything from him. Anything you need to give him goes into the cell through the sliding meal tray. No pens, no pencils. No paperclips. And no conversations of a personal nature under any circumstances.

I almost laugh in his face. Personal? That's right. I have to act like a "person" in here.

My houndstooth jacket is tacky. My bag clashes with my shoes. This dungeon is so overdone. Do I have to explain the meaning of every one of these things?

"Well then." My escorts pull up short before the final gate. "This is as far as we go."

I walk on. The gate rumbles shut behind me. Barred cells line the left side of the corridor. All of them are empty. Farther down, a steel pipe chair stands in the middle of the corridor, facing Jundo's cell. He is the only prisoner here.

I sit down and face the cell. Jundo is directly across from me. Between us stretches a heavy glass barrier.

He sits cross-legged on the bed with his back against the stone wall, staring at me.

Jundo Mamiya. Forty-five years old. Novelist, playwright, poet, critic. At the pinnacle of his fame, the inexhaustible fount of a staggering oeuvre, each work without peer. A year from now, he'll confess to seventy-three murders and pass sentence on himself, a sentence with no possibility of appeal.

He killed himself.

Jundo Mamiya. Just over five feet, heavily muscled like a judoka. Round face atop a thick neck, hair cropped close to the scalp. He's utterly motionless, but he seems capable of sitting in this cross-legged posture for hours and then instantly breaking into a sprint. I'm certain he could reach me in a single motion. I can't relax. Even with the barrier—

I erase that from my mind very quickly. Just the thought is dangerous.

"You needn't worry. I won't move from this spot."

Jundo speaks. It's like my thoughts are transparent to him.

"You were observing my posture. You're right; my body is idling. It's a technique of mine. But I repeat, you needn't worry. I've no

intention of harming you. I've been craving someone to talk to."

Coming from Jundo, nothing is more terrifying than you *needn't* worry.

"It's nice to meet you."

"Welcome. Why are you here?"

"I want to talk with you."

"Conversation. I've been dying for it. What's the topic? Concerning what I did? Or what I'm going to do?" Jundo asks.

"Neither. People have been grilling you about your actions since you were a child. Criticism from parents and teachers. Fawning counselors interviewing you. I'd like to keep discussion of your past history to a minimum today. Just so you know, I already know everything about you. I've read your novels and essays, all several hundred of them."

Jundo rarely blinks. His face is a mask. He fixes motionless, half-closed eyes on me. "Nothing."

"What?"

"I don't smell anything." He points to the small round openings in the barrier. "When I have a guest, the trace aromas tell me whether the weather is fine or if it's raining in the world up above. I can infer your brand of soap. Perfume. Skin lotion. But—" The slightest hint of wariness crosses his face. "There's no odor about you at all. Fascinating. All sorts of airborne particles stick to people's clothing and hair as they move. But not to you."

Jundo was a master profiler. He could characterize someone accurately from the smallest detail, even on first meeting. Casual conversation was all he needed. Invariably the other person would end up spilling his secrets without intending to. In such situations, Jundo often used his sense of smell as a guide.

Which is why I made sure to erase any odor.

"Are you really human?" he asks.

I pause. "Are you really human?"

A beat. Jundo is silent. He's usually very verbal, but he can use

silence strategically. This is different. He's thinking, vast computations. The response comes back after a lag. Does he suspect the meaning of my question?

"Intriguing. I'd have thought I was thoroughly tired of that question. But in this context, it's refreshing."

"Mr. Mamiya—"

A gesture cuts me off. "You haven't told me your name."

I shake my head and smile. "I don't have a name."

Jundo's narrow eyes close. "No scent. No name. You're far more interesting than a riddle. And that...that ensemble! That truly makes me want to hold my nose. It reeks—the rube jacket, the shabby pumps. Completely beyond redemption. It's not what you usually wear, is it?"

"What do you think?"

"Did someone put you up to this?" Jundo asks.

"I wonder."

"There'll be a motive of some sort. You planned that getup. And the subtext?"

I'm at a delicate juncture here. If all I had to do was guide his attention to the truth, things would be straightforward. But I have to get him to notice the significance of the situation on his own by feeding him tiny hints that are hardly even clues.

"Ah, yes," says Jundo. "Now that I think of it, I recall a scene just like this. From a movie?"

"Yes."

"I see."

Jundo turns his face toward the wall. The rough-cut stone trapezoids are like the wall of a fortress. A fortress buried in the earth, tens of meters deep. Captivity with no possibility of escape.

"Mmm, very impressive. Yes." He considers. "And what was it you wanted to talk about?"

"I'd like you to take a look at this." I take a book from my bag, an old, heavy book. *Moby-Dick*. The tome is large and thick. The surface

of the massive leather cover is a jumble of bulges and furrows: tree roots, knots, an old man's veins. The pages are swollen, bursting from the covers.

"Waterlogged?" asks Jundo.

"You'll take a look?"

I put the book in the meal tray and slide it into the cell. As Jundo opens the book, the pages separate with a sickening, gelatinous sound. His face contorts with disgust.

"What is this, the work of some author who thinks he's an artist?" He holds the book out to me. The letters multiply, spill out of their lines, overlap, devour each other, get bigger, turn pages black, metastasize to the cover, penetrate it, fuse into knots.

"No. It's an ordinary book. No gimmicks. One day it changed. In the end, it became what you see. No outside agent did that. The letters did it themselves.

"Mostly it starts unnoticed. Letters in a line multiply. Closer examination shows the letters overlapping and replicating. Spaces open up in words, splitting them into terms with unknown meanings. The process accelerates. Soon the letters spill into the gaps between lines. They can't be contained. The letters begin to overlap. Words join and swallow each other up or divide into new words."

The phenomenon manifests in a variety of forms. Sentences on a page might intertwine into a helix. Chapters shrink or explode. Letters expand or flake off the page. New pages form, letters invade the new space and breed there. Further detail would be pointless. That corpse of a book sprawled in Jundo's cell—that tumor-devoured carcass—testifies to this bizarre destruction more eloquently than anything. But the carcass is not the final stage.

"And you ask me to believe that?"

I shrug my shoulders and glance at *Moby-Dick*. "Why would I come all the way here just to lie? You can see what's happening yourself. And you already believe, don't you."

Jundo's confidence in his senses is absolute. If he can see it and smell it, it's real. That's his creed. His calm is unshakeable.

"It's not just this book, is it?"

"Unfortunately no. Thousands, tens of thousands of books have been infected by the same disease. And not only books."

I take a plastic case from my briefcase. A movie disc. The jacket photo shows two little girls in white standing side by side. An endless red-brown plain stretches into the distance behind them.

"I don't see the anomaly," says Jundo.

"At a certain point in visual works, a catastrophe occurs. The content changes."

"May I see it?"

"Certainly." I pass the disc through the slot.

"Oh, that's right." He gives me an elfin wink. "Now you just need to send through the equipment to let me watch this."

"Very easily done."

"How are you going to get it in here?"

I don't answer immediately.

"The person who designed and built this cell—that was you, wasn't it?" says Jundo. "No, this jail, this whole prison is probably your creation. And you created me too, didn't you? Created and 'loaded' me here."

I sigh, satisfied. Jundo's acuity is truly marvelous. Not totally accurate, but still outstanding. I should mention that he was never held in a prison like this when he was alive. This is nothing more than an imagined location, generated from moment to moment.

"I'll prepare a viewing device now." I gesture. A fully equipped screening setup appears in the corner of the cell, but Jundo shows no trace of surprise.

"So why are you here?"

"I wanted you to know that this phenomenon exists. We call it Imajika. All you have to do is talk to me, like we're doing now."

One of Jundo's eyes closes very slowly, then opens again. "And the reward?" Apparently that was a wink.

"I know you'll like it."

I take a small cassette tape player out of my bag. Its shell is cast as a single unit, completely enclosing the cassette. All risk has been carefully eliminated.

"Magnetic tape. Very contemporary." Jundo happily accepts the machine and presses one of its buttons. They're in a line, like a keyboard. "Let's hear what we've got."

The *Goldberg Variations* flows from the toylike speakers. The sound quality is superb.

"Thank you. It's not Gould, is it? But still, a wonderful performance. So—how should I say? So human." A satisfied smile spreads over his face. He quietly hums the melody.

I don't trust that smile.

Yet even Jundo's smile is nothing more than my creation, a product of literal technology.

Jundo Mamiya.

A monster, fashioned from our corpses.

#Imajika

Alice Wong's status as Imajika's first victim is debated, but we won't try to settle that here. Without a doubt she was an early example, one so sensational and tragic that it was carved into our memory as a crime for the ages. That much is certain.

Alice was a celebrated poet. That morning, about three weeks after her thirteenth birthday, she was out on her daily run, working out ideas for new poems. No one else was on the streets at that hour. Her family was still in bed when she left the house. The wind carried a foretaste of the winter to come, and Alice loved the bracing feeling of cutting through it as she ran. The road was nearly dry, but the air still held the fragrance of rain from the night before.

#Like eyes purified by tears #Autumn's fair daybreak unfolds, crystalline

This verse was left behind by the swarms of CASSYs that Alice used to propagate her apparently endless streams of poems. With their stripped-down feature set, restricted message size, and barebones AI, these unsophisticated CASSYs were blunt tools, but they could piggyback toll-free on the city's pervasive services net, and they acted as useful assistants. Alice's generation of women used CASSYs as personal secretaries to continuously convert their thoughts and actions into text. Users could choose from a wide range of expressive styles, all of them awful. But for Alice and her friends, that quirky AI style was part of the fun.

CASSY-generated text—with location data, timestamp, ambient temperature, street views, and user browsing history—were routed to GEB, which stripped out personal ID tags and absorbed the text into its resources. GEB's archive of anonymous murmurs and actions from people all over the world expanded constantly, from moment to moment.

Alice often wove worthless CASSY snippets into her own poems. Her touch transformed these childish phrases into something compulsively appealing.

#Long black hair in a pony tail/effortless acceleration/sugar maples by the road/crimson leaves splinter morning sunlight

Alice's voice and movements were recorded from tens of different distances and angles. Physiological data generated by bloodstream and nervous system sensors, links to the dozen or more literary works she was consulting, the music she was streaming, observation data from satellites in the orbits of Mars and Jupiter—the fresh data streaming over her from the pervasive services network was like an energizing wind as she ran that morning.

Was her existence unraveling into untold strands of data? Or were strands of data weaving her into existence?

As she focused on her run, she began to feel body and spirit

funneling into the narrow borderland between weaving and unraveling. Far off within the vast space of her mind she saw a horizon, a mind regarding itself. Something reverberated there. She strained to make it out.

Along that horizon, her poems were born.

#Humanity in this era has nearly abandoned poetry #Since the Entangled Bookshelf and literal technology absorbed human knowledge, literature has not made a single creative impact #Alice Wong was one of the doves that landed on that blasted plain with an olive branch in her beak #A genius who limned herself anew in the tension between clashing character strings, cascading from all directions

#The run was going great #Her horizon was sharper than ever, she felt the stirrings of several poems #She was in such good form, she wanted to start outputting them as soon as she got home

#Feeling refreshed, she glanced up at the bright sky #She stopped to look at something strange in the sky #Her streaming hair fell to her back

#Pebbles floating in the sky

#Definitely there, floating high off the ground #But then they would be more than ten meters across #Shape and texture, smooth, like something from a stream bed #Ordinary pebbles, floating in the sky #Alice rubbed her eyes in surprise

#Then there was just one pebble, as if there wasn't a sky at all #No sense of illusion, no Magritte feel, just a realistic pebble

#And

#In an eye blink, the stone disappeared

Alice craned her neck, peering upward. Whatever had been there a moment ago was nowhere to be seen.

By now, Alice had already been subjected to an intrusive, destructive contact from Imajika. In a split second—from her point of view—the contact ended and Imajika was gone. Alice resumed her run without realizing what had happened. She went back to planning her next batch of poems, completed her usual circuit, and

returned home. Her selfhood had already been destroyed, but she had no awareness of it.

As the maid served breakfast, Alice turned to her mother to tell her about the strange sight she had witnessed. She searched for a word, cocked her head.

And froze.

She was trying to remember how to say something she had never said before, but Imajika had already destroyed the retrieval pathways. The features that made Alice distinctively herself, personal settings she had fashioned over thirteen years, were corrupted; her search function was disabled. Her awareness had lost its way. But because there was no return path, she dropped.

Living organisms are highly flexible systems. The brain can recover from sleep, lapse of consciousness, or corrupted awareness as though nothing happened. Before her family even noticed, Alice's awareness moved smoothly to reboot itself.

But her settings were corrupted. No one knows what Alice saw when those settings were read into her mind on startup. The maid's CASSYs recorded the entire tragedy. Alice screamed throughout the incident. She was the fearful exterminator, but she was also the one who was most fearful, the most ravaged by terror. Two people died and three were slightly injured in the Wong Family Dining Room Incident. Her mother, mortally wounded, crawled into the kitchen. A falling refrigerator—she had toppled it to create a barricade—killed her daughter. The mother was declared dead two hours later at the hospital.

That was as far as it went, at least at the scene of the crime.

The problem was that Alice Wong was a poet.

Alice's poems were not written by putting pen to paper. Such poems were already extinct. Her poems were a typhoon of words run amok on GEB, the "Golden Eternal Bookshelf," as she thought of it. With CASSY support, Alice often generated up to a hundred poems a day. When new poems were entered into her archive on

GEB, the words were deployed according to their potential, mixing with previous poems, multiplying and dividing repeatedly, keeping her works fresh and new. GEB was home to several thousand collections of poetry, but Alice's poems were the most full of life, the most introspective and sensual, and her readers were hungry for more. As her collection detonated other works and devoured them whole, it grew to almost unequaled size.

If typhoons are like living organisms metabolizing heat and water, Alice's poems were a life force that metabolized the freshness of language. Alice was nearly always online, connected to her collection of poems, and although she and her CASSYs were contributing new poems all the time, the typhoon was never the same from moment to moment, yet never anything but distinctively Alice Wong.

Some people are excited by typhoons. Others chase tornados. Alice's poems were accessed by a vast audience that loved her gale force winds.

This morning was no exception.

The corruption of her settings spread to this typhoon of words, sending it spinning out of control. Some who surfed in to rubberneck at the explosion of language were killed instantly. Hundreds of others had their settings totally corrupted. The impact varied, but a few of these victims were driven to acts that closely matched Alice's.

That was only the first-order damage. At least it was restricted. The real damage occurred several seconds later, when the countless secondary works linked to Alice's typhoon took the impact, precipitating a cascade effect.

All at the whim of Imajika.

3.

<I> am watching a movie.

An overwhelming plain stretches across the frame. A dry land, blanketed with small stones. The sparse grass is white-brown, but I can't tell if it's dry or just looks that way on the screen.

Two small figures sit in the foreground. Sisters, the girls who were watching *Frankenstein* in the town hall. They're wearing matching white clothes, holding book satchels, looking out over the endless plain from a small rise. The ground slopes gently down to the gigantic plain at their feet, with nothing to break the line of sight all the way out to the distant, blue-shrouded mountains. A featureless waste you would only see in Westerns.

The wind is blowing. I feel the sound of the wind gradually merging with the clicking of the projector at my back. In fact, that uniform plain is getting hard to distinguish from the screen itself.

Tiny waves of movement seem to envelop the screen. Is it waving grass? Is it film grain? Maybe it's just noise in the audience's vision?

"That house. With the well."

The older girl points below them. A small building comes into sight and disappears again, half buried in the waving of the plain. There seems to be a well next to it.

"Is he there?" says the younger one. Her sister has told her that the house shelters *Frankenstein's* monster from the movie—actually, it houses the Spirit of the Beehive.

The girls stand and walk down the slope. Their receding forms quickly grow smaller, then tiny, melting into the wind, into the film grain and the visual noise. They pass into the screen itself—into the source of the movie.

I lean forward. Something terrible is coming.

This location, this movie that was released in 1973, is also within Imajika's reach. The presence gets stronger. I clench my fists on my knees. My hands tremble violently. I feel the urge to get up and run.

But escape is forbidden.

The figures finally disappear. The waving of the plain is violent now. The sand-colored film grain runs amok.

Then it happens.

On the undulating surface, at the center of the plain, a hemisphere pushes up like soft candy, a huge bubble. The hemisphere grows with uncanny speed and spreads its footprint. It expands faster and faster, pulling the landscape along with it, and in a moment covers more than half the plain. But its footprint, its diameter, keeps expanding. More than half of the sphere is still below the surface.

I am resigned to my fate. The sphere dwarfs everything on the screen. It's bigger than the screen itself. The swelling quickly reaches the edges of the screen, spreads beyond them and engulfs the row of seats in front of me.

I can only look up and away. When I look back, the sphere has fully emerged. A sand-colored rock now floats where the movie was, in an utter void, like a small, incongruous, sandy moon.

Then the surface of the sphere crumples inward, as if unable to bear its own weight. Chasms form and rumble inward, collapse upon collapse, altering the surface contours with a violent roar.

I watch as scene after scene from the movie, scenes in motion, are sucked into that parched avalanche. I listen as fragments of soundtrack—dialogue, music, and effects—rumble in a last dying convulsion. Then the rumble is cut off, the collapse stops, and suddenly the orb morphs into the very image of Méliès's weeping moon.

Again the chasms collapse and the moon's surface is reshaped and transformed, and now it is not a moon, but a fist—a fist clenched so tightly, I'm certain the fingers have fused.

4.

The walls in the high-ceilinged room are lined with bookshelves that are filled with dark, leather-bound volumes. The books absorb the light, pushing this study a long step past four PM, the time it is now, toward night. The gold-inlaid titles on the spines have flaked off and the dyed leather has darkened. What little light there is comes through a tall, narrow window. The window is floor to ceiling, about a foot and a half wide. It can't be opened, and the light coming through it is enervated, scattered by the complicated layout of the courtyard beyond.

A large, old-fashioned chair stands next to the window. Its legs and armrests are elegantly curved. The seat back is broad. <I> place—I placed—Jundo Mamiya in that chair.

Jundo clears his throat and blinks his slitlike eyes. The expression in those tapered, hooded eyes is hard to read. His eyebrows are slender. His head is shaved. Jundo strokes his face from cheek to chin. He strokes his ears and shakes his head slowly. His neck is thick with muscle. His body seems to be bursting from its short frame. Jundo Mamiya in his late thirties, vigorous and robust. His shirt has a standup collar. His pants are silk. On his feet, leather slip-ons.

"Nice to meet you. Is this room suitable?"

Jundo looks dissatisfied. "What are these clothes? I can't take them off."

"Your clothes have no buttons. No metal clasps or strings. No belt, of course, and no seams. Everything woven to fit your body. You can't take them off, unless you rip them off."

Jundo's clothes were generated along with the rest of him moments ago.

"There's something rather peculiar about this situation. You have me at an overwhelming disadvantage, I take it."

"The clothes were a hint, yes."

"And you can erase me anytime?"

"Yes. And I'm afraid you can't influence me with words."

You are completely at my mercy. That's sure to get a rise out of Jundo. Maintaining the right degree of resistance is part of my role here. Extremely dangerous, but unavoidable. We need as many Jundos as we can generate, and we need a wide range of variation.

"There's something I really must object to." Jundo gestures toward his left ear. "This. I certainly can't accept this."

Jundo's left ear is smaller and less mature than his right. It is his ear at age thirteen.

"I'm sure you know I cut this off when I was in elementary school."

"I'm aware of that. You had two last names then, didn't you? At school you used Mamiya, your mother's name. Your father's name was on your birth certificate. You were living with your mother in a provincial town of about thirty thousand. You cut off your ear in order to murder your teacher during a home visit."

"I didn't kill her. She did it herself," Jundo says.

"She used your knife to stab herself in the throat."

"That's right. Mrs. Tsuge used my knife. Thank you—I hadn't thought of that name for a long time. Yukiko Tsuge."

"Your teacher had no reason to kill herself, of course. She had a warm family life with a husband, a daughter in fourth grade, and a son in kindergarten. She was happy."

"She had her reasons. We all do. I just gave her a little encouragement."

"You manipulated her. No threats, no hypnosis, just conversation—"

Jundo had the ability to drive people to suicide with nothing more than conversation. This he confirmed in writing before his death. If it struck his fancy, he could make you take your own life, no matter who you were.

Seventy-three victims. His final testament contained a list of their names.

Each one had proved to be a real person. They each had had a relationship with Jundo, just as he stated. He knew the time and manner of each death. Yukiko Tsuge was his eighth victim, which meant Jundo had already wielded this power as a child. His first victim was the father of a classmate, a man widely known for making violent threats. On his way to work, he jumped the center divider and plowed head-on into several other cars, dying instantly. The evening before he was killed, he had been talking to Jundo.

Some victims took their own lives on the spot, others committed suicide months or years after their conversation with Jundo. According to his testament, he found it amusing to force people to recall long-forgotten personal secrets and sins. Then he would bore in and finish them off.

Jundo's testament reproduced an example, a fragment, of one of these exchanges. It ended in the suicide by poison of a fellow writer his age. Everyone who read the account was struck by a physical conviction that it was genuine. It was as if the letters Jundo used to record the conversation began to move like insects on the page, crawling under the nails of the hand holding the document. The quiet abuse he unleashed on his victims is still under analysis by more than one organization.

"—just conversation."

"Not always." Jundo looks annoyed. "Words weren't enough for Mrs. Tsuge. She was obstinate. She wouldn't go over the edge until I gave her my ear. It was never that difficult before. That was my biggest disgrace. The worst stain on my record. I made up my mind never to repeat such a blunder. So you see, my missing ear is the core of my identity. But you've grown it back. You mock my dignity."

He doesn't look as angry as he sounds. His eyes are a mix of boredom and irritation with a trace of interest. A viscous look, something slowly mixed together and congealed, like the film on a bowl of porridge gone cold. That disturbing gaze, the one that comes to mind when anyone hears the name Jundo Mamiya.

"The ear of a child on an adult's head. The technology to do that without the slightest effort is the core of what I am. You regard yourself very highly, but you can't even escape this room with no locks. From where I sit, you're a nonentity."

Jundo's eyes smolder. "I want this ear gone."

"Then maybe you'd like to do it again? I can't give you a razor, but you can always tear it off."

"Tell me to tear it off. I'll probably use all my strength to do it."

This surprises me, frankly. Jundo is nearing the core. No, he's already there.

"I'm sure you would. You are completely in our power."

"Our power? I see." Jundo never misses a detail. A man who can kill with a few words. Superhuman profiling ability. "This is some sort of project, isn't it? And I'm one of the inputs."

"Exactly."

"You regenerated my ear. You control me completely. Dress me in clothes I can't take off. How can such technology be?"

"You yourself are the proof of its existence." I manage to force that much out.

"At minimum, I seem to have no physical existence. Are you using some kind of emulator?"

"In a sense. But you know that simulating a real person's body and their mind and actions would be impossible. It's far too complex. Especially when the person you want to simulate has been dead for thirty years."

My function is to draw Jundo's attention to the fact that he's dead. That he is not of this world. That nevertheless, our literal technology has given him a brief resurrection.

We agents—thousands of us deployed throughout GEB—are each delineating thousands of Jundo Mamiyas. I am speaking to one of them. I speak to spark awareness.

You are one of the dead.

A patchwork monster.

A botched Ahab.

Then—

"And what if I'm not a simulation?"

The dead man, the monster, the Ahab, gets out of his chair and faces me. Small and tough. He stands relaxed, like a veteran judoka. The tall, narrow window behind him is turning the color of boiled pine pitch. Night is flowing in. Night air seems to rise from Jundo's body. I try to speak, but I only mumble. Is he controlling my will? Jundo takes a step forward.

"In that case, what are you doing?"

"I—"

I sense that Jundo has already reached this conclusion, but I speak anyway.

"I am 'writing' you."

#The Letter

Those happy hours we all spent together will never return
I have been praying to God to reunite us

I have prayed every day since we parted in the civil war
In this remote village
Where Fernando, the girls and I struggle to survive

Except for the walls, this house has changed completely
What could have happened to all the wonderful things we had
I say this not out of nostalgia
That is something I have not been capable of feeling for years

So much that we knew was lost, so much has been destroyed
Only sadness remains
Along with the things we lost,
I think we have also lost the strength to live life fully

I don't know if this letter will reach you
 The news from outside is so sparse, so confusing
 Please let me know that you are alive

All my love
 —Teresa

5.

<I> am in a decaying apartment. It's a three-story public housing block surrounded by farmland on the outskirts of a small provincial town. The tatami mats are sun-bleached, scuffed, and gritty with dust. I see paddy fields through grime-clouded windows. It's been years since anyone cleaned them. The golden rice stalks lie flattened by yesterday's typhoon, as if some gigantic dog shed its fur all over the fields.

I turn away from the sliding window and shut the paper screen. The paper is spotted with round stains. A young boy is sitting on the floor, kneeling on a cushion with his heels under his buttocks. Black shorts, a white shirt. His left ear is already gone. His shirt is dyed crimson from shoulder to chest. The cushion is squishy with blood, but not his blood. His teacher faces him in the same formal posture, torso thrown forward. Her forehead touches the tatami. Her hands are pinned beneath her throat. The point of a knife protrudes from the left side of her neck. She probably died less than an hour ago.

I hear the musical sundown announcement from a distant PA system, a distant melody. A child's voice speaks over the music. "All primary school students, time to go home now." The voice belongs to Yukiko's daughter, but the boy may not know it. He moved here less than two months ago.

"Niawahiko? You're Niawahiko Taira."

The boy glances up sharply. He'd locked the door from the inside.

"Who...?"

Niawahiko's last name will not formally change to Mamiya for five years. Jundo is a pen name he'll use when he publishes his first collection of works in his second year of middle school. Right now he's Niawahiko Taira. His arms and legs are skinny. He's still just a child.

"Don't move. You don't want to start bleeding again."

Of course, healing him would only take a moment, but I feel it would be better to avoid that. The tatami is gritty with dust. The paper screens are missing random sections like gapped teeth. The room is so littered with plastic supermarket bags and cast-off clothing that it's hard to avoid stepping on them. An old game console. Unopened mail scattered about. A black coat hanging from the stump of a broken light fixture.

Standing there, I feel the poverty that fettered Niawahiko.

"All you all right? That's a terrible wound."

Of course he's not all right. Niawahiko actually fainted from shock and loss of blood within a few minutes of severing his ear. What I am "writing" now embellishes the truth to render Niawahiko Taira with crystal clarity.

"What were you and your teacher doing?" I sit next to Niawahiko.

"We were just talking."

Yukiko Tsuge is a thickset, tanned woman with a broad back in a short-sleeved pink polo shirt. The skin on her elbows is thick and dry. Her wiry hair is short.

"Do people stab themselves in the throat just because of something someone said?"

Niawahiko doesn't react.

"This is the eighth time, isn't it?"

The boy's pupils dart sideways, but he quickly conceals his panic.

"Did you have to go this far?"

He stares at the floor. A new emotion wells up that he can't

hide. He looks terribly discouraged—almost despondent. He's here because he was craving something. It was a craving he couldn't fulfill. A frail, delicate boy. This is so unexpected that I had to sit next to him.

"You had to do it, didn't you?"

Niwahiko is silent.

"You wrote a composition right after you came to your new school. 'Mrs. Tsuge is always smiling, and she has a loud voice, and her hand was so strong when she shook hands with me, and her skin was so rough that I was surprised. Later I heard it was from playing softball. I've never seen such a sunburned teacher in all the schools I've been to.'"

Plain, unadorned sentences. That's important.

During his life, Jundo Mamiya wrote over a hundred thousand pages of text, every sentence a superflux of expressive power and weird technique, with an abnormal kinesthesia that seemed to burrow deep inside the reader. That style was his signature, right from his first-grade composition about a school outing. He wrote using plain language only once.

"You liked Mrs. Tsuge, didn't you?" I put my hands on Niwahiko's. His hands are very cold. "I don't mean as a woman. But you felt something when you touched those strong hands, didn't you?"

Niwahiko clenches his small hands into hard fists, like his heart.

"You have a talent that frightened you. And you thought she had the strength to stand up to it. But you couldn't control your power. The more she resisted, the more you sent it back at her. You finally had to cut your ear off before you could push her over the edge."

Then I notice something.

Niwahiko has no fingers.

Or more accurately, his fingers have fused. His fists are as hard as stone. I reflexively try to pull my hands away. It doesn't go so well.

I look again. My hands are embedded in Niwahiko's fused fists. A low, small voice says, "You're stuck now."

That's not possible. In the graphiverse, I—we—possess absolute, unrestricted license to delineate worlds any way we please. Worlds appear just as we write them. Therefore, I should easily be able to withdraw my hands from these fists of stone. And that's when it finally hits me. There is no one who can write "My hands are embedded in Niwahiko's fused fists" except me.

Or is there?

I don't know. I don't know.

"Would you listen to what I have to say?" Niwahiko's voice is serene. "I found out something nice. If I hold on to your hands, it means you won't die like my teacher. You can't run away from me either. You can't cover your ears. I can talk forever and you'll listen."

Who is writing Niwahiko's words?

Is it me?

Is it Imajika?

Or is it Niwahiko himself?

"You'll listen no matter how long I talk. Won't you."

6.

Three space cruisers commanded by Jundo Mamiya attack a sentient rock in orbit around Mars.

Or: Jundo the Barbarian leaps atop the monster as it rises out of the water. He plunges the stone point of his spear into its slimy back.

Whatever <we> write happens as soon as we write it. That is the unique feature of this cathedral we have built in the graphiverse, with Gödel's Entangled Bookshelf and literal technology. We don't have to write the details. All we need is an outline of the basics, even a single sentence. The fine details are built up by legions of CASSYs.

GEB's CASSYs are more sophisticated than commercial agents.

Their sentences are more varied, more apt, and more original than anything a human might come up with—styles from the burning roughness of rotgut bourbon to the sensual swirl of whipped cream.

That's why *<I>* am here, in the captain's cabin of an old sailing vessel, sitting across from Jundo Mamiya. The age of steam is in the future. The cabin reeks of seaweed and whale oil. Everything is damp from sea spray.

"So? What new indignity is this?" Jundo scowls. I've written him with a wooden leg, like Ahab.

"I don't want you to run away."

"That's not it. I mean the food." The captain's dinner is salt pork and potato gruel.

"This ship left port a year ago," I remind him. "You're the captain. If you want something fresh, work harder. Catch a whale and you can dine on fluke steak."

No one on a whaling vessel yearns for whale meat. Even a fresh bloody steak wouldn't tempt the crew of the *Pequod*.

The sperm whale's massive head contains a prodigious cache of oil for candles and lubricants. The blubber under the hide also yields huge quantities of oil. Before petroleum distillates and cheap vegetable oil, the limits of civilization were practically defined by the availability of this single resource. Whales! Living oil fields, roaming freely across the world's oceans. To hunt them, humans perfected a system—huge winches to raise the carcasses, specialized knives to flense them, precise techniques for coiling harpoon rope, the surest ways to con men into joining the crew, when and how much to pay them, protocol between ships. Every facet served one goal: hunting whales. Humans always do this. They overadapt.

"You're the captain, go ahead and eat. You don't have to worry about appearances."

"Captain, am I? Do you expect me to bellow orders to the

crew? And in the final act, lash myself to Imajika as he dives for the depths?"

I smile. "No need to follow the movie script. Do as you like. This ship isn't searching for Imajika anyway."

"By the way—" The meat is so tough that Jundo gives up and throws his fork across the room. "You're quite a talker. Are all the rest of you like this?"

"Interviewing is our job. We talk to you. You respond. We output your responses immediately. We use a certain method to integrate your responses and generate virtual Jundo Mamiyas in other locations. We're compiling all the fine details. Calculating a complex mega-Mamiya."

"Interesting. I ask a simple question and you bury me with information. Aren't you worried that I might be the one who's interviewing you?"

Jundo sure knows how to get right under your skin. "It doesn't matter, actually. It won't affect our process."

"So you're out of reach. Well, it's nice to be confident. But I have one question. I hope you can give me an answer."

"Fire away."

"If you're writing me, I don't see how the 'me' you're writing can be Jundo Mamiya. It can't be anything more than 'you.'"

"That's a valid question. May I give you a slightly roundabout answer?"

I can hear the waves striking the prow. The creaking of timbers and the noises made by the crew flow beneath our voices. Everything is rocked by the ocean swells.

Everything surrounding us at the micro level is nothing more than text generated with blinding speed.

<I> am a composite generated by extended-feature CASSYs. I am outside this cabin. Whenever I write something I have to exit this setting.

First I have to explain how GEB originated. It's critical that Jundo

understand this. Otherwise, "Jundo Mamiya" won't be able to fight Imajika on equal terms.

"Jundo, I assume you remember Gödel?"

"Don't mock me. I know what Gödel is, and CASSYs too. Gödel is the company that developed a totally new search algorithm. What was it called? PageRank? They stood the industry on its head."

"Correct. Gödel laid its foundations as a clever fusion of search and advertising. Their mission was to 'organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful.' Their business exploded—automated news editing, maps, photo albums, video upload, OS development. In 2009, they reached a settlement with authors to digitize the holdings of the world's libraries and make the content available to users.

"The official name of that new service was Gödel Entangled Bookshelf."

"I remember. They wanted to make money by digitizing everything published, complete with illustrations, then slice them up, ferment the slices, and create a data cloud like strands of sauerkraut. It didn't interest me at all."

"Really? Why not?"

Jundo actually wrote about this.

"I rarely read books. When I left middle school I'd read exactly seven hundred, and that was quite enough. Reading books was merely basic training, like pushups or marathon running. Very boring."

"Training for what?"

"To hold myself back. My words are too powerful. In first grade I wrote about getting carsick on the bus during a field trip. A teacher read it and vomited. Reading books taught me how much I had to dial back that power so people could read my works. It was truly mind-numbing."

"You had your power on a leash with everything you wrote?"

"Of course. Using my raw strength would hardly have been art. But no one noticed."

Indeed. If Jundo hadn't held back, who knows what might have happened to his readers.

"Well, I suppose it was useful. I didn't go to high school, but I could make as much money as I wanted. No need for academic credentials or family wealth."

"And the books you wrote were caught up in Gödel's project."

"I told you, I didn't care whether it helped my book sales or hurt them."

"I see. Then let's set this aside for the moment.

"So GEB was launched, and as expected, it generated huge amounts of red ink. First it focused on the world's libraries. Then it gradually expanded its net. Finally it started swallowing up any kind of printed material. Government and corporate publications. Handwritten manuscripts from before the invention of the printing press. Everything ever written anywhere in the world.

"Of course, the project included moving images, music too. Advanced analytics tagged images and musical effects with linguistic data that was fed into GEB's archives—to borrow your image, it became part of the sauerkraut. At first there were conflicts over author rights, but ultimately that hurdle was easily surmounted.

"GEB's real significance is that it put a vast amount of the world's 'paper' information into Gödel's belly."

"Its belly?" Jundo asks.

"People thought they were searching the Worldwide Web via Gödel, but they were searching a mirror of the web built up in Gödel's belly. Gödel used unique metaheuristics to parse and analyze the content: finding relationships, ranking them, performing countless iterations of the same operations on the metadata, and incorporating every search query into its evolution, moment by moment."

"And the 'paper' data went into the same belly."

"The sentences stored in GEB become, in a sense, anonymous.

Of course, they're tagged with author and publisher data, but parsed into phrases. The process of cross-linking starts immediately, and when users encounter a book's content, it's in the form of search results triggered by a key word. In GEB's library, the books are shelved with the spines facing inward."

"What's wrong with that? Authors and their obsession with rights bored me to death."

"There's more to the story," I say. "For one thing, there's far more information buried in paper data than even Gödel realized at first—enormous volumes of information, written down and recorded once, never read or understood by anyone."

"For example, say there was a minor conflict fought in some remote corner of nineteenth-century Europe. The only records might be trivial. A diplomat's expense report for a banquet. A procurement slip for a single overcoat or a knapsack. Hundreds of revisions to land registers after territory was surrendered. Pension records for thousands of soldiers. There are mountains of this kind of information. And people's memoirs, from best-selling works by politicians to the recollections of a private in the army, privately printed for some library."

"So by subjecting large volumes of mundane data to Gödel-style analysis," Jundo says, "and with the freedom to relate it to any other data on the Worldwide Web, one could gain unheard-of knowledge? Well, I suppose so. What else?"

"The development of LEBAB 1.0 and CASSY software agents."

The candlestick sways as a big swell passes. Our shadows lurch across the cabin wall. I haven't filled in any of the exterior details. A cabin and the motion and sounds of the sea are all there is. A captain's cabin suspended in the void.

"So what is LEBAB an acronym for?"

Now it's my turn to smile. "Not an acronym. It's just BABEL spelled backward. Gödel threw all of its resources into developing it. A unified, multi-language translation engine. But LEBAB is

not just a tool for business and communication. It's deeper than that. It was developed to preserve languages in danger of extinction—and maintain them even after the last speakers died—and for languages that are already dead, or archaic forms of modern languages. It covers around ten thousand languages. In other words, one sentence added to Gödel immediately gives birth to ten thousand versions in other tongues.

"As long as they're locked up in libraries, books are nothing more than paper and ink. Until the stacks are opened and the books are opened, their voices will be silent."

"But once they're digitized, they can't remain silent," Jundo says.

"Correct. Texts that have never been read will reach out to form connections with other texts. Or with visuals. With music. CASSYs—Complex Adaptive Software Systems—are the intermediaries that make that happen. They're programmed to respond in different ways to meaning, seek out sentences that stimulate those responses, and build a higher intellectual synthesis through the connections they create."

"And these are your ancestors?"

"Yes. Driven by search queries, we till GEB's fields without a moment's rest. But GEB grew too complex. No human knows what GEB holds. They can calculate its size and structure, but that's all. GEB's substance, and the nature of the meanings being generated there, are beyond them. GEB is a gigantic synthesis of meaning, mentation, and correspondences that far exceed anyone's comprehension. It's almost as if another natural world has come into being. People know it's there. They can use it. But to actually understand it? That day will never come."

"Even for you?"

"Does an ant grasp the structure of the anthill? We agents are just as restricted by our functions. CASSYs infer the intent behind a user's search request, consult multiple texts, and write best-fit

results. We're extremely advanced for the purpose, but we're still nothing more than text searchers. Our lives are very short."

"You're generated each time someone initiates a query. You output the answer and that's it for you?"

I nod. "Generated on demand, then we're gone. We are a collective, designed to fulfill one purpose."

"A collective?"

"<I> am a temporary collaboration between thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, of micro agents. They return their search results. I synthesize them and write everything out according to specific policies. That's the simple version, anyway."

"It sounds complicated to me."

"Are humans any different?"

Jundo smiles cynically. "So all this, what you're writing now, our conversation—this is all search results?"

"Exactly."

"Then let me ask you—" Jundo leans forward slightly. Just this gesture changes the atmosphere. "Who ordered the search? And where did you search within GEB?"

"Mr. Mamiya. Can we return to your original question?"

"Hm?"

"What you're asking is, if the Jundo Mamiya sitting here is merely being 'written,' and CASSYs are doing the writing, and if you're not a simulation, then where is the wellspring for Jundo Mamiya?"

"Well yes, I suppose."

"That's the question. Where we searched would be your answer."

"<We> searched your works, more than a hundred thousand pages of text, and other works you cited or mentioned, and all ten thousand translated versions, and works with strong associations to your works. Your favorite films and music too."

Jundo laughs. "You mean to say that you compiled words from my works and the works of others? And this cabin, this candle and this meal, and me with this wooden leg, this is a pastiche?"

"Yes. The words you just spoke all trace back to real sources, of course. Assembled word by word from different sources, that is."

"I see. You're 'writing' my speech by stitching dead words together. I'm a collected corpus, or maybe a collection of corpses. But is that really all it takes to make me Jundo Mamiya?"

"One Jundo wouldn't be enough. But <we> are simultaneously running tens of thousands of searches on texts with associations to Jundo Mamiya and returning huge volumes of results. Further calculations take place elsewhere at the individual text level. Tens of thousands of Jundo Mamiyas and Niwahiko Tairas are superimposed to create a Jundo Mamiya more complete than even the real Jundo himself could have comprehended."

"I'm still not convinced." Jundo licks his lips, as if his appetite has been thoroughly whetted. He searches for the words. "And if I should be lucky enough to find Imajika, what can I do? Imajika mutates humanity's intellectual assets, whatever their form. Correct? I'm nothing more than text. How could I possibly win? Though of course it is you who will lose, not me."

"The terms are even. Imajika itself only manifests as text."

"How's that?"

This is hard to absorb, even for Jundo.

"Imajika always appears as some kind of mineral—stone or pebbles, even a small moon—but that's not necessarily its true form. It may exist as an entity outside GEB. But Imajika may also be a phenomenon that arises spontaneously from within words themselves."

"What's certain is that Imajika always manifests via GEB, in the same way that music can only manifest as vibrations in a medium, regardless of its character. The way novels only manifest through language."

"Imajika does not so much rewrite words as it exists within that movement of being rewritten. In that case, we must write faster and with more effect than Imajika. You see?"

Jundo looks disgusted. "That means I'm expected to preach very fast, in a very loud voice."

"That's exactly what we expect."

#Alice Wong

Alice woke even earlier than usual that morning. It was dark outside. Even as a small child she had never lingered in bed, but today she was up immediately for a different reason.

She went to the beautiful writing desk that had been her mother's and her grandmother's before her, opened her laptop, and turned the sound low as she connected to Gödel Videoscope. A second screen, like an old cathode ray tube, appeared on her monitor. The screen showed a man fastened to a cross. Wong's large eyes had not completely lost their innocence, and they were transfixed by the man's image. A childlike, solemn gaze.

The man was covered with blood. His entire body had been flayed. The torso was divided midline, from sternum to pubic bone, and two large, symmetrical flaps of skin had been peeled upward like a pair of wings. The man was still alive.

This was not torture. The man was using a medical robot to methodically dissect himself. As suicide, this was so absurd as to be almost a joke. But the figure on that embedded TV screen was tinged with a startling majesty—and something else, something so unforgiving that Alice had to understand it. For three days, she had been watching this suicide unfold.

In point of fact, the suicide was consummated thirty years ago by a writer at the peak of his fame and wealth. He left an extensive written confession outlining his ability to murder just by speaking to his victims. Then he disappeared—until he suddenly surfaced on Gödel's video service to broadcast his self-mutilation to the world.

When Alice reached her thirteenth birthday, some of the parental controls were unlocked. She was engrossed in browsing

previously forbidden sites when she stumbled across this video. What a contrived, exhibitionist suicide! The robot itself was the cross on which the man had bound himself. Ten or more automated arms moved independently, performing a programmed procedure upon the programmer himself. Of course, Alice had heard about this notorious performance before she found it on the web.

She had also read many of Jundo's works. His discursive style, like power held in check, made her wince sometimes. But beneath the bizarre embellishments, the lyricism and touching poignancy of his imagery were unmistakable. Alice loved the undercurrent of loneliness that pervaded his writing like the coolness of new sheets.

Before he mounted the cross, Jundo had said, "I want to disappear from this world, slowly but surely. I regret my crimes. Now the sentence must be carried out. Layer by layer I will be pared away, stripped away, and gradually I will diminish. I will die at some point, but I don't want you to know when that happens. When the last shred falls from this cross I will be gone, but my sins will not go with me. That is why I want to inflict suffering on myself that is commensurate with my crimes."

Bullshit.

Alice was certain of that instinctively. He is so lying.

Not like this public suicide was fake, and he's actually alive someplace. Saying he wants to disappear—that's phony. I'm surprised he didn't stick his tongue out at the end to let everyone know he was bullshitting them.

It's not that he wants to disappear. It's more that he doesn't want to. As an equally gifted writer, Alice had a feeling she understood.

He wants to escape to somewhere, she thought. He's not giving up, but he's not running away from anything either. Is this—dispersion?

It's no use, that's the way it is with words. Look away for a moment and they fall apart. Try to ditch you.

"But still... You left us a little too soon, Jundo," whispered Alice.

The figure's winglike flaps of skin had by now been carefully detached, and the pectoral muscles were being dissected. The massive chest, like a martial artist's, convulsed in agony.

Alice stopped the video, stood, and took off her pajamas. Clad in her underwear, she went to the window. The day promised fine weather. The sky was already light.

This was the one time of day when Alice shut down her CASSY links. Silently she watched as the sky brightened. Far above her, a long contrail caught the sunlight coming over the horizon.

That high up, the wind must be strong. As she watched, the contrail twisted on itself and morphed into illegible handwriting.

When she was a little girl, her parents told her, you used to pester us no end to read the contrails to you.

Little Alice had been certain they meant something.

Those were words up there, twisting in the wind.

6.

The flat-panel monitor in the corner of the cell now shows only the rock and the void.

At the halfway point, the movie buckled inward and became a pulpy mass, a weeping moon, and finally a tightly clenched fist, floating in utter solitude.

"That is Imajika."

<I> am explaining to a jumpsuit-clad Jundo Mamiya.

"The phenomenon isn't limited to text. Any GEB-readable work may come under attack. Often Imajika isn't satisfied with attacking a single work but propagates to any content with associations to that work. The damage spreads very fast, then stops, as if Imajika is trying to decide what to do next. The attacks keep happening. They're eating holes in GEB's data that can't be repaired."

Jundo doesn't seem too interested in either the video or my

explanation. He's fiddling with the tape deck. He played the tape twice; he must be rewinding it again.

"Christening it 'Imajika' was inspired. Whose idea was that?"

"GEB's system software did the naming. But Mr. Mamiya—it's the title of one of your works." I must look ecstatic. "Remember? The series of short stories about a book that has a different plot each time you read it. You started by quoting the narration in the movie we just saw. The letter that the mother of those little girls was writing to someone who doesn't appear in the movie."

"Hm. I forgot that one." Jundo's listless tone is mystifying. "But just because these works are being attacked, like this video here—it's only within GEB, right? Is that worth panicking about?"

"Many works now exist nowhere else. But the situation is more complicated than that. As a business entity, GEB was dissolved long ago. Now it's a shared public space, jointly maintained and administered by lots of nonprofit entities.

"GEB has huge numbers of CASSY-enabled users, all trailing data wakes after them in the course of their activities, the services they like, you name it. CASSY search results are stripped of personal data, so they're of no individual interest to anyone. But more than ten billion users are on the system, and everything gets translated. GEB generates networks of relationships between data. It takes in fresh, living detail about things happening all over the planet. Over time GEB has become the body of the world, free from notions of artistry, self-consciousness, or celebrity.

"That's what GEB is for people today—a garden where vast numbers of data trails are stored up. CASSYs are the gardeners, tilling their 'output' to make multitudes of flowers bloom.

"If the garden falls into ruin, the human spirit will wither as well. No—GEB is already part of the human spirit, the way sunrise and the sea and mountains of cloud used to be. The way the hustle of crowds or a warm fire or books and plays used to be. We've got to protect GEB from Imajika, whatever the cost."

Once more Bach flows from the deck in Jundo's hand. The work opens with a quiet theme—the aria—followed by thirty variations, and finally the aria again.

"There's something I just need to confirm."

Jundo finally speaks as the opening aria draws to a close. I expect the first variation next, but what I hear is number thirty, the so-called quodlibet.

"Wait a minute..."

"I tried reversing the playback order. What you just heard was the closing aria."

I'm about to explain to him that magnetic tape can't be played back that way. Then my jaw drops.

It can.

If we write it that way.

But who...?

I keep my voice calm. "What did you want to confirm?"

"Everything you write is in response to search queries, correct?"

"Yes..." This final variation combines melodies from different German folk songs. What were they titled...?

"Answer me. Who is the searcher?"

I don't intend to respond. I should conceal the truth to the end. But for some reason my mouth opens. The words flow.

"The searcher is Imajika."

<I> is not a first-person pronoun. Within GEB there is no subjectivity, no self, no awareness. Nothing but chains of letters, numbers, and symbols. <I> am not writing <I>. <I> am—is—simply a proper noun—according to—yes, according to something written somewhere.

"Imajika is querying GEB?" Jundo's calm hints that he had it figured out from the beginning.

"Yes..."

"Properly speaking, what you CASSYs decided to do was to try interpreting Imajika's contacts as queries. You surmised that the

damage he was doing was questions—search queries—and you responded to them.

"I'm not surprised. Everything on the *Pequod* was optimized for whaling, and everything in GEB is designed to handle queries. Any system stimulus you detect evokes a search-and-results response. As many substructures—agents like you, all of you—as needed can be generated on demand, like an organism's immune cells. Imajika queries, you answer.

"Therefore everything written until now, including this little speech of mine, is Imajika 'interviewing' GEB."

Then Jundo gives me the order.

"Recite the emergency escape passcode. The one you were given when you came down here."

The red mishmash of letters and numbers that flashed by on the floor indicator. I recall them. In order. Jundo commits them to memory.

"Thank you."

The prison morphs, and somehow I'm trapped behind the glass barrier. Jundo is standing in the corridor in a trimly fitted suit.

"I'm very grateful to you, all of you. You've completed me as Jundo Mamiya. But not because you searched my works. *Because it was you who did the searching.*"

I can't find the words. Is it possible that he knew? About us?

"Of course I knew. Don't you think I'd know my own characters? They are all only myself. You probably analyzed my novels and absorbed my narrators' speech patterns. Which makes you my alter egos. I am you, searching my works.

"I think I also recognize the novel and the character. It's a pleasure to see you again."

If only CASSYs would let me feel emotion.

"Incidentally, that shabby outfit was what my mother wore to my first day of elementary school. Hand-me-downs from my grandmother, unfortunately."

An unbelievably gentle smile crosses Jundo's face.

The quodlibet flows again from the cassette deck in his hand.

Quod libet: What pleases.

My body suddenly feels light. I return to the position of narrator.

Jundo turns away and gestures lightly in farewell. The variations play back in reverse order as he walks off down the corridor. I'm guessing that about now, multitudes of Jundo Mamiyas are commencing their escapes from their respective domains.

But we anticipated this too.

By reading Imajika's contacts as search queries, we've already output a huge volume of results—so huge that individual works are spontaneously interacting to build a complex structure. By joining that structure, the sequence where I am now can be stable without writing Jundo.

Alone in the cell, I turn to the display panel again.

Imajika floats in the ash-gray void.

If I had known Jundo was that compassionate, perhaps it would have been okay to reveal Imajika's true nature to him from the beginning. Or perhaps his compassion is precisely why it was better that I didn't?

Embedded within this stone is a thing people have long yearned to understand but could never reach out and grasp. Something strong enough to overwhelm humanity's works. The works that humans created could not endure that force. They metamorphosed, crumpled, and transformed to stone.

That is why it has no name.

Not Hate, not Love.

Neither Life nor Death.

No one can read this stone. Not <I> or <I> or anyone alive.

Except—

Except, just maybe, this structure that is slowly coming to life can read it. Like an embryo weaving a new organ, in that space, with Imajika's queries as its pulse.

An indestructible, Intelligent Textual Organ.

This is our project.

#The Spirit of the Beehive

Alone, Alice trudges along. Suddenly she emerges into a huge open space. She's at the top of a small rise. The ground below slopes gently away to a broad plain with the dim peaks of mountains in the distance. The scenery reminds her of a film she saw once, with one big difference. The ground beneath her feet is not exactly ground. It flexes. There's a grain to the surface, like knit material. It almost feels like flesh, and it covers the surface as far as she can see. The slope, the plain, the mountains—everything is made of the same material. If she were to look closely, she would see that the surface is a lattice of tiny hexagons.

"Jundo, how could you?" Alice purses her lips with frustration. "This was my poetry collection!"

Managing Alice's collection required an immense calculation space. An educational foundation recognized her gifts and helped her borrow the necessary server capacity. But Imajika was growing more dangerous when Alice died, and afterward her space was appropriated to help deal with the threat.

Now thousands of "Jundo Mamiya" emulators are arriving here from all over GEB. Recursive correlation across incalculable volumes of Jundo Mamiya tweeting is slowly generating an exquisite structure of minute hexagons and truncated octahedrons. A honeycomb structure.

Our textual organ—spawned and ripened by Jundo's ideas, desires, and literary genius intertwined with the framework of Alice's collection—is generating this awesome landscape. "You're around here somewhere, aren't you? I promise I'll find you."

Alice felt sure that the landscape's resemblance to the famous sequence in *The Spirit of the Beehive* must mean something.

The heroine, a little girl, finds a fugitive soldier hiding in the house with the well, not far from the foot of the hill. And later, she has her encounter with Frankenstein's monster in the woods, by the lake, in a place where dreams and reality are indistinguishable.

In the center of the plain, where the little house should be, is a sphere half embedded in the ground, a gigantic Imajika.

"So you're here too? Just you wait."

Alice runs down the slope, digging her heels in to get traction on the soft ground, arms flung wide to keep her balance. Imajika is a deformed sphere that looks carved from a mountain's worth of rough stone, flinty and dense. Its rocky skin is cold and still. Alice doesn't sense danger here, for the moment at least.

From a distance the sphere appeared to be buried in the plain, but now Alice sees that the ground around it has buckled and risen up, as if it were slowly pulling the sphere down into itself. Ropelike strands of some mineralized material extend from the ground to the sphere, like mooring lines holding it back. The strands end in massive hooks that bite into the stone. The rock is riven and gashed around the hooks, traces of a mammoth struggle before the sphere was finally contained.

Those mooring lines are probably more remains of Imajika's victims, turned to stone. The ground around the sphere is slowly fossilizing the same way. Imajika might burst its bonds and run amok again at any moment. As she realizes this, Alice's eyes travel warily across the rock.

As she works her way across the undulating terrain, she finds herself on the other side of the sphere. What she sees makes her gasp with surprise. She stops in her tracks.

A battered wooden sailing ship leans against Imajika as if run aground. A man stands on the deck.

Jundo Mamiya.

But Jundo is not the reason Alice gasped.

From where she stands she now sees that Imajika, which looked

at first like a stone sphere, is without a doubt the head of a gigantic whale, lunging from the ocean.



"Didn't Ahab have a wooden leg?"

"You think I'd put up with the way I was written?" Jundo Mamiya stamps loudly on the oil-stained deck with his thick, short legs. "See? I'll do this the way I want."

"Well, you go right ahead. Listen, this thing isn't going to wake up, is it?"

"I don't know. It's quiet now. Spooky."

"But why does Imajika appear in the form of stone?"

"This outer structure is not Imajika. It's an aggregation of all the works Imajika has vandalized, the mutated corpses of books and films. Imajika is inside. It armors itself with the corpses of its victims. Some of the original texts might still be readable if you look at the surface carefully."

"Texts like my poems?"

"Your poems...?" Jundo stares up at this young girl who is taller than he is. "By the way, who are you?"

"Allow me to introduce myself." Alice smiles, flashing those white teeth. "I'm your landlady. Except, as you can see, I'm a ghost."



If Jundo Mamiya is a monster stitched together from the corpses of words, this Alice Wong would have to be described as a ghost without even a dead body.

After contact with Imajika killed the physical Alice, the multiple Jundo Mamiyas that were written into this space acted on one another to create a complex new structure.

But then Alice's poems—poems too precious to be dispersed—where have they gone?



"Wouldn't you like to harvest Imajika's oil?"

"Oil?"

"I mean Imajika itself, under this armor. There's so much buried in what people have written, meanings they never even noticed were there. The reason is simple. Hundreds of people separated by hundreds of years have been writing about the same things in hundreds of languages. And there was no way to connect those dots until GEB's algorithm—its high-speed, multilanguage intertextual semantic relationship generator—stumbled across them.

"But GEB couldn't deal with these relationships because there was no way to assign them names. Whatever GEB can't deal with, it discards, and GEB discarded millions and millions of these relationships. It just went on finding and discarding them—until they returned, bringing a dynamic system with them. Imajika.

"That's what the head of this whale holds. Without names, they are outside the 'written' domain. The only alphabet that can write them is the wind.

"The wind is invisible. You can only see it when it leaves its imprint in a twisted contrail. It's the same with Imajika. You can't see it, but when it twists texts and turns them to stone you can see that power. You can see that yearning."

Alice points to the stone. "What do you think, Jundo? You can't find that anywhere these days. It ought to be amazingly valuable.

"I suppose it would. As valuable as an oil field," Jundo says.

"Even if that treasure is wasted on GEB, I bet the people who created this domain are hoping you'll extract that oil and bring a barrel of it back for them." Alice smiles her best smile.

"I see. And what's the next interview question?"

"Hm?"

"Drop the pretense. I'm not your enemy. Alice Wong—you're here to help Imajika, aren't you?"

Imajika devoured Alice's poems. For the embryonic Imajika, Alice's collection—huge and always powerfully moving forward—must have been a towering presence. And Alice herself became collateral damage.

As Imajika absorbed them, Alice's poems were deformed, crushed, and fossilized. Now they were probably part of this wall of stone.

Jundo Mamiya walks to the gunwale, stretches out his hand and puts a fingertip against the frozen rock.

"I told you," Alice says. "I'm a ghost. Your words were laid safely to rest in GEB, muscle and bone. CASSYs can dig them up and drench them with electricity. But my words got turned into whale hide."

Jundo had phenomenal profiling ability. He could draw inferences from almost any behavior and assemble them into a complete personality profile. That gift was now distributed throughout this plain, throughout the Intelligent Textual Organ. With Imajika lashed securely into place, Alice can be read directly from the surface of the stone.

"Jundo, please pay attention."

"What now?"

"I need to ask you something." Alice looks up at the sky. *The heavens are clear, but they're the same material as everything else.*

Humanity's words gently embrace Imajika.

Alice hesitates for a moment. "Did you really kill a bunch of people?"

"Yes, I did. After a bit of conversation with me, they all chose death. They had to."

Alice winces, exasperated. "You're so stiff-necked. Okay. Different question for you. You wrote that you talked to them because you wanted to murder them. You said you had a natural urge to kill. But

that was a lie, wasn't it?" Alice is certain. "You wouldn't have cut your ear off just to push your teacher over the edge. You didn't have to. You had more than enough power. You wanted to restore her sanity. Or you wanted to amputate your own power. I'm right, aren't I?"

Jundo is silent.

"I knew right away when I read your books. You were a little Imajika. The people who talked to you—those seventy-three people? Afterward they realized what kind of people they really were, didn't they? It's like you put that powerful profiling ability of yours inside of them. Their everyday behavior, their little speech habits, their secret vanity, the sins they'd rather forget, the things they chose to remember—everything went into the profile, until their true makeup was staring them in the face. Everything they did and everything they said came back at them, completely transparent, totally decoded. Twenty-four seven. It must've been like being in hell."

"And that was only the beginning." Jundo finally speaks. "The transformation is progressive. It doesn't end with mere self-realization. Ultimately it can go far broader and deeper than that. The psychic structure collapses completely. Very few make it that far, but in the end I could never predict who could possibly survive so long."

"Weren't you ever afraid, Jundo? I mean, when all you had to do was talk to someone you were close to, and they died?"

"It's strange. I could never destroy my own inner structure. Like the hammer that can't hit itself."

"Jundo. In GEB, authors are anonymous, but CASSYs still found your works. Imajika wanted to read you, I'm sure of it. It had to be your words or nothing. I guess that shows how precious they really were."

Again, Jundo is silent.

"You died too soon. You know?"

"I suppose. Yes, too soon. I blundered. I spent years preparing carefully, but if I had known I'd be a witness to such fascinating events, I think I would've wanted to go on and on."

Like a gigantic monument, the whale seemed to be leaping toward the sky, as if it wanted to sink its teeth into it. Alice wondered if the time might come when it would succeed in doing just that to this tender organ.

That would be the end of humanity's words. They would be drenched in whale oil and vanish.

"What are you going to do now?" asks Jundo.

Alice is silent now.

Only as long as Imajika is captive can these two converse like this.

A monster and a ghost.

"Can I sit here a little longer?" she says finally.

"As long as you like."

Alice smiles impishly. "Thanks, I owe you."

Jundo Mamiya reaches out to touch Imajika again, when he suddenly sees that his hand is tightly clenched into a fist.

How long has he been clenching it? He hadn't even noticed he was doing it. That was because no one wrote him to notice it, but now he has a feeling he's been doing it all along, even when he was alive.

He tries to spread his fingers. The tendons and joints are contracted and stiff. His fingers are frozen. Jundo tries to pry his fist open with his other hand. Alice helps. She tries to worm her slender fingers into Jundo's fist. She tries using her teeth. They keep at it for a long time, until they're both covered in sweat, trying to force that fist open. And finally it does open.

They both cry out in surprise.

There in Jundo's palm is Niwahiko Taira's little ear, like the petal of a flower.

I would like to thank Sinjow Kazuma and Jyouji Hayashi for their helpful comments regarding my depiction of GEB.