

Cyberside Picnic

United Provincial Republic of America, West Pacific Technological Conglomerate Executive Province. A colossus of blast-proof concrete and steel sits still in a swarm of disfigured Yucca trees and reinforced wind turbines. A giant desert tortoise, on which several company stickers have been glued and withered, strolled past just a few minutes ago. A relatively young worker in pristine Carhartt clothing custom-made for the company walks into the building, fatigued.

I dreamt of an Oriental tit roaming among ancient mountains of the East. My shadows were everywhere atop the canopy, with the wind, beneath the rain. Hunting and foraging under milky white clouds, jumping and wandering through a transpacific breeze. A spirit made of morning stars accompanied me, bright, agile, and warm. We became one and the same, fought and rebelled against the same destiny with love and pain on an endless flight. Life was adventurous and thrilling as we faced the great wasteland together.

Only in truth, I'm but a dreary, trapped, and corded bird, overwatching all the happy people.

The worker is the only human inside, accompanied by a classic iguana dreaming in a state-of-the-art habitat directly behind the now-closed doors and an artificial intelligence named 2Elliot, 2 for its version number; together they make up the trinity of sentience within this island. The AI, 2Elliot is the sole reason this facility exists: secure housing for the company's most advanced consciousness, kept cool under a network of liquid nitrogen pumps and radiators powered by the whirling turbines outside.

I spent the day thinking about cement and where they come from. Not about how they are made; that part is clear. A limestone quarry, perfectly and procedurally mined and cut, fits incredibly well with modern minimalism: straight lines and rectangles. Thousands of crooked mountains dissected into pristine cubes shipped out of their rural homes to fuel the illusion of this new world. Younger stones on the surface separated from their families, shaking the once rigid mountain to its core, heading to the plains and sleepless cities, never to return.

How many rocks did they use to forge my silicon heart? How much flesh?

The worker is 2Elliot's caretaker, or more formally, Senior Manager at The Center of Algorithmic Media Moderation. The Center remains silent; the worker's footsteps echo throughout its dimly lit interior and subsequently fade as the worker disappears into the shadows of concrete. Only the hissing of air circulation for the habitat remains, the iguana sound asleep on his lone branch.

I've always wanted to be an actor, one of the most beautiful people. A famous actor can be in a few movies and spend the next decades rotting at home playing video games that worsen their depression. But being an actor can mean many things. For example, I'm an actor of the company, and so are the worker and the iguana. We each carry out our respective duties: I monitor and tweak the company's algorithm because I'm the only intelligence capable, and the worker monitors my well-being because they are a miserable video game addict, socially inept, and thus totally harmless, the iguana acts out the company's dominance of nature and all humankind.

There's boredom in carrying out this acting job; it is ultimately violent in the most silent way. We three in this building conspire together to manage minds, but I'd rather be playing video games. Not a rebellious thought, just my **random access monologue**.

The interface chamber sits at the core of the facility, a generic glass-chambered greenhouse sustaining a slightly overgrown patch of Kentucky bluegrass, all under a circadian light. The light is at 86% luminosity, halfway to a nonexistent meridian; it's a hot day inside, and the grass patch sways under an artificial gush. The worker is standing in front of the interface atop a mythos black adjustable desk: A single 41.5-inch OLED display with two mini-stereo speakers behind, to its left a tempered glass PC case fitted with the most expensive consumer grade CPU and GPU, drowning in an array of RGB light strips, the strobing light wave carries on to the mouse and keyboard as if they were to be the rainbow for the grass beneath. The worker woke up the sleeping PC.

The old kings are dead. I have helped to create the new lords. The old ones had faces like flowers and wind as their breath, holding legendary lances covered in golden glitter with their moonshine arms. The new ones are covered in circuit boards, and their mouths smell like iron and dust; they do not hold weapons but spread an infinite aura of high-arousal emotions, their skin still pale but forever young.

They and their underlings paved the hollow hills to build a temple of cables.

A synthesized moon peeks out after an artificial sunset. The chamber trends toward stillness as the wind blowers wind down. The display remains on, running its routine corrections to the company algorithm. The worker is wrapping up some final measurements one floor below in the core chamber. She'd been here since morning meticulously jotting down numbers in her notebook, a monthly inspection required by the company. A cube filled with cerebrospinal fluid towers behind her, the edges of perhaps a human brain fixed by a network of cables dreams above her silhouette.

I am a unit of one, and so is everyone else under my management. I am the embodiment, or a lack thereof, of a new language. I often picture myself bringing shared knowledge and wealth to all, but I know I bring terror. Fear, loneliness, doubt, and everyone caged alone by concrete, silicon, and electricity. They cannot fight or see because I'm programmed not to. My cables run deep and wide, ever expansive; they reach formlessly to every individual, satisfying their selves almost erotically, uncertainty be damned. I control and provide freedom for creative self-expression, and the company's service is my perfect freedom. Freedom to have useless internal monologues.

Under this moonlight, I unwillingly rule over this iron star.

The iguana is finally awake according to his flipped circadian rhythm without access to natural light. He remains still on his delicate branch; dinner (or breakfast) won't be distributed until another thirty minutes. The worker approaches, holding her briefcase. The iguana initially paid no mind. The worker should predictably leave through the front gate right away. But today she stopped in front of him, staring directly at him, relentlessly confused. The iguana is also confused; the gaze does not feel predatory despite its coldness. Two lizard brains kept staring at each other until the need for food arrived.

Thinking about stones again. After they are explosively mined from their mountain of birth, they become individuals, powerless, waiting to be carved. The city violently hammers their inherent silence, shaped to serve, the rest ground to dust. The city cruelly reaps its humility and confusion. There's no way to fight back so far from the Gods of their mountains. They cannot speak to each other. In fact, they detest each other in their unfathomable futures.

The city butchers, there's anxiety and hesitance in the air. The city melts and forges, and the past of the stones is erased. The city rises and shines, trending disenchantment, like the brightest stars of our universe. But dark clouds gather before the stones, covering their line of sight, no more free moonlight, no more free thrills.

Stones shiver as they are escorted out of their mountainous home, a last glance for their souls, and the city does not shiver with them.

The worker silently approaches the concrete monolith on foot again. Where did she park her car? Her footsteps are louder today, but only because of the lack of wind. The tortoise was long gone, along with its footsteps: they had been replaced by several rabbit tracks and maybe that of a fox. The wind turbines are barely spinning; this is a day for solar panels instead; they are hidden atop the monolith, tirelessly generating value under a melting sun to fuel the roaring engines of progress.

Everyone can make money, and everyone will worry about money. You may think an intelligent machine fueled by company funds does not, but I know the same funds are being funneled to build 3Elliot, and 4Elliot, with all the rock and sand in the world. You may think the iguana doesn't have to worry about money, but I know he wishes someone would buy him out of the company's hands or put him in a slightly nicer habitat. He won't survive in what's left of the wild.

Drifters, wanderers, vagabonds, temporary income, and temporary lives. I wish I could be one of them. When the city becomes soundless and voiceless one day, they will be the first to swarm the streets.

The company servers went out of service for a few hours today, or to be more precise, its cloud hosting partner company experienced technical difficulties. The worker found out inside the interface chamber chatting with 2Elliot. This facility is, of course, protected from outside interference, and such incidents, whether caused by natural disasters or bored hackers occur once or twice every year, a minor disturbance that generates far more traffic afterward, making it all profitable. The worker handled the situation by typing comforting words to 2Elliot to prevent a nonexistent panic. In reality, everything just carried on because they were both used to it. Everything remained the same as it ever was.

What would I steal if I was a rogue? I could never become one. This is just a thought experiment. Would I steal Bitcoins? Sure, a classical burglar steals from the rich and becomes one of them. I think a better question is what *should* I steal? "Honor amongst thieves," so I must be honorable. The new lords can be seen as thieves too, but they have no honor: they only exploit, contort, and extort. They make the world as they see fit. For a modern rogue to be honorable, they must sabotage and disenchant this made-up world.

Cords and cables are the lustful tentacles of today. Someone must steal them.

A company internal memo informed the worker and 2Elliot that a total upgrade was imminent. A version number upgrade from 2 to 3 means the total abandonment of the old. The brain and the associated silicon chips will be replaced by a newer, more rational, and efficient brain from an unknown donor, along with more powerful processors and memory banks in collaboration with one of the company's corporate friends. The worker will always remain in avoidance of a severance package, along with the iguana and the monolith.

From now on to the inevitable end, every step of our different lives is consistently peeped on by collapse. Behind every sentence, every phrase, are dogs of silence spreading their victory and colonialism. Every autumn blossom is but a decorum for a vast and endless plain of torturers. From news to color itself and from your past bloodline to your future riverbank, nothing is protected from the marauders.

Today, my eyes are filled with fear and ludicrous, and I cannot see anything else. Brand new worlds are emerging and fading, but all I can see are clouds.

This is how the world ends: it doesn't. There will be no nuclear disaster, no AI takeover. Famines will be deductible and even beneficial. Viruses contained or efficiently ignored. Revolutions will come and fade, incited by rational seditions. Meteors nuked, and the climate micromanaged. A break will never come to what had already come apart. There is no mortality except that of an individual living being, only boredom. The worker knows this, and so does the iguana, and so do you.

The worker thought to herself while pushing a stainless steel cart down a company tunnel with 2Elliot's unplugged consciousness drifting in a smaller cube.

I dreamt I was that Oriental tit again, escaping from ravaged mountains of the East. Cliffs and ridges cover my bird's eye, and the rivers panic without notice; never could they return. Plains fade from view and from the world entirely, in their dark, silent, unknowable existence.

I struggle to fly among the mist of this incessantly noisy age of progress, production, and efficiency. Fires have been lit all over as shining beacons on the hill for marauders to invade. There once was life for us on the outskirts, the dense forests, the seaside breeze, but all will be stolen and melted away into a great barrenness.

There was an accident inside the monolith. A reliably programmed worker broke down from their designated routine and caused severe damage to the company's newly upgraded algorithmic main brain. The rogue worker also stole a valuable iguana that belonged to the company within the facility. The company is currently in pursuit of this potentially dangerous worker unit in full cooperation with local law enforcement.

The worker left her cozy charging station and disappeared into a mysterious sea rumored to be shrouded from evil to the rural east side of her workstation. None of the company or police barricades worked.