CONVERSATIONS WITH OBJECTS

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By

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ABSTRACT

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“Conversations with Objects” is a collection of stories that takes on as its explicit subject other writers and their works in order to establish a conversation with those canons and seeks to move themes and content toward a more contemporary context. This context is highlighted by the incorporation of emergent theoretical perspectives that interrogate the basic images and arguments of the texts themselves.
A Natural Selection

I will sing to you in the voices of the world; borrowing from the beauty and bestiality of those geysers gushing with experience and grace, gleaning lessons from glimmering sponges wrung of spilled milky memories. Each drip falls with abrupt percussive notes akin to chainsaw revs and camera shutters and with these I will demolish my competition as they hide deep in the foliage, rattling leaves with their quaking fears until I silence them with my song and still their visages in the quake and shadow of giants which makes a perfect setting to find your whole being completely taken in by my melodies, lulled into a sense of security despite hearing a collage of car alarms and radio chatter and engine sputters because each of those sounds in this new context can only whisper the beautiful cries of young love, each song hesitantly wondering how far had all other living creatures fallen into this abyss lined with bedded small red dots and swaddled red babies and what all of it means, but I know that it will mean one thing: you will be mine.

First, I must see you. I bought this suit of down and scales (completed by blue skin shoes) with my winnings from the wheel of fate since I bet red, expecting pools of oxidized hemoglobin to pour directly into the both of us, filling our moulds clear to the top of matter that matters; the existence of all existence relies on our coming into being and I have led the way though the path has been overwrought and overgrown with tiny trailblazing missteps, with each little footprint in the sand in front of us fluttering in all directions, so overwhelming that we turn our backs to where we thought we were headed and discover that any direction is marked with toe silhouettes and progress follows any path, not just the one laid out so I will whistle when we walk this path together to keep
you calm and so I can nestle in your plumage, where I can exhaust sexy agricultural
metaphors in every lyric I arrange to the rhythm of car alarms and radio chatter and
engine sputters, men plowing virgin fields for the first harvest and when it comes time for
the men in my song to reap their rewards you will be mine.

Here in the sand I will assemble a mound to serenade you from with the sticks and
twigs and rocks and plastic bottles and mud and berries and ferns and plastic bags that are
scattered throughout the brush I have made my home - It takes a keen eye, a bird’s eye
perspective, to craft beauty out of the everyday assemblage of sights that slip past your
periphery so I will make you see the sticks and twigs and rocks and plastic bottles and
mud and berries and ferns and plastic bags as the foundation from which I can sing the
songs that bleed right into your heart; this foundation will serve as the stage of my
greatest performance, the one that will adequately seduce you; I will compose notes that
you overlook, that you reduce, you simplify, you accidently ignore, and they will reverse
the way I have narrowly avoided your gaze for what I know is too long, drawing your
attention to something irresistible, something that does not represent my beauty but
motion to it instead; when you begin that path there are no detours; when you hear what I
hear there will be no more words, only the entire surrender that my songs demand. You
will be mine.
The Last Song of the Old Joshua Tree

In the desert, below the sea-level and in an ancient sea bed, stood a very old Joshua Tree. It was exactly three-hundred-sixty-five years old, though no one could tell its age from its fibrous trunk and lack of rings, but that long time was not more for the tree than just as many days would be to us humans. We wake by day and sleep through the night, and then we have our dreams: it is different with the tree, which keeps awake through three seasons of the year and does not get its sleep until winter comes. Winter is its time for rest, its night after the long day which is called spring, summer, and autumn. On many a hot summer, the Yucca Moth, the Prodoxidae that exist for only a day or two, had danced about the old oak’s corona, enjoyed life and felt happy, and, if for a moment, one of the tiny creatures rested on one of his large fresh leaves, the tree would always say, “Shame, insignificant moth! Life for you lasts miniscule moments. As if time itself were meaningless. Life must only be sadness.”

“I do not know what you mean by sadness,” the little creature would always reply.

“I mean, everything bright and full of love it must be hard to even think.”

“But your experience lasts only two of my days, then time exterminates you.”

“Exterminates!” repeated the fly; “what do you mean by exterminates? Are all things exterminated when I am gone?”

“Unfortunately I am set to live millions of times longer than you, and my day lasts whole seasons; it is so long that you could never reckon it out.”

“No? then I don’t understand you. You may have thousands of my lives, but I have thousands of moments in which I can enjoy happiness. Will everything blink when you depart life?”
“No,” replied the tree; “I will die and the universe will persist — farther that I can foresee.”

“Well, then,” said the little Yucca Moth, “we have the same time to live; we merely reckon differently.” And the little creature fluttered and floated in the air, rejoicing with delicate wings of gauze and silk, rejoicing in the dry gusts, laden with the scents of orange caltrops fields and California fuchsia, elder-blossoms and jewelflowers, from the small tufts of wild flowers, wild heliotrope, rhubarb, and all manner of poppies, and the presence of all these was so strong that the perfumes almost intoxicated the little fly. The long and beautiful day had been so full of joy and sweet delights, that when the sun sank low it felt tired of all its happiness and enjoyment. Its wings could sustain it no longer, and gently and slowly it glided down upon the hard flats, nodded its little head as well as it could nod, and slept peacefully and sweetly. The insect was dead.

“Poor little Prodoxidae!” said the Joshua Tree; “what an unbelievably short life!” And so, on every day not spent in slumber, the dance was repeated; the same questions were asked, and the same answers given. The same thing was continued through many generations of Yucca Moths; all of them expressed equal merriment and happiness.

The Joshua remained awake through the morning of spring, the noon of summer, and the evening of autumn; its time of rest, its night approached—winter approached. Already the warm winds were singing in choral, “Good-night, good-night.” Casually leaves fell. “We will rock you, lull you. Go to sleep, go to sleep. We will sing sleep to you, and shake sleep to you, and it will do your old twigs good; they will crackle with pleasure and saw logs. Sleep sweet, sleep sweet, it is your three-hundred-and-sixty-fifth night. It is safe to say you are but a youngster in the world. Sleep sweet and the clouds will drop rain to
drink upon you, which will sustain you, wet your sheltering feet. Sweet sleep to you, and pleasant dreams.”

And there stood the tree, stripped of all its companions, left to rest during the whole of a long winter, and to dream many dreams of events that had happened in its life, as in the dreams of men. The great tree had once been small; indeed, in its cradle it had been a seed. According to human computation, it was now in the fourth century of its existence. It was the largest and best tree in the national park. Its summit towered above all the other trees, and could be seen far into the Mojave, so that it served as a landmark to travelers. It had no idea how many eyes looked eagerly for it. In its topmost branches the loggerhead shrike built her nest, and the burrowing owl carried out his usual vocal performances, and his well-known notes echoed amid the boughs; and in autumn, when the leaves looked like well-patina-ed blades or rigid thorns, the birds of passage would come and rest upon the branches before taking their flight across the desert scape. But now it was winter, the tree stood friendless, so that every one could see how crooked and bent the branches were that sprang forth from the trunk. Crows and turkey vultures came by turns to sit on them, and they talked of the hard times which were beginning, and how difficult it was in winter to obtain food.

It was just about equinox when the tree dreamed its dream. The tree had, doubtless, a kind of feeling that the stars were aligned, and in his dream fancied he heard the cosmic ringing from all the galaxies in the sky, and yet it seemed to him to be a beautiful summer’s day, mild and warm. His mighty summits were crowned with spreading fresh green foliage; the sunbeams played among the thin leaves and branches, and the air was full of fragrance from herb and blossom; painted butterflies chased each
other; the summer bugs danced around him, as if the world had been created merely for them to dance and be merry in. All that had happened to the tree during every year of his life seemed to pass before him, as in a festive procession. He saw men and women hunt and gather through the Oasis of Mara, collecting foliage from the desertscape to make hats and bows. The hunting horn sounded, and the arrows flew. He saw hostile warriors, in colored dresses and with glittering badges, and guns, and steed, saw soldiers, pitching their tents, and anon striking those living there out from the land.

The watchfires again blazed, and violent men sang and slept under the hospitable shelter of the tree. He saw lovers meet in quiet happiness near him in the moonlight, and carve the initials of their names in the gray bark on his trunk. Once, but long years had intervened since then, ocarinas and drums had been hung on his boughs by merry travelers; now they seemed to hang there again, and he could hear their marvelous tones. The loggerhead shrike cooed as if to explain the feelings of the tree, and the burrowing owl called out to tell him how many summer days he had yet to live. Then it seemed as if new life was thrilling through every fibre of root and stem and leaf, rising even to the highest branches. The tree felt itself stretching and spreading out, while through the root beneath the earth ran the warm vigor of life. As he grew higher and still higher, with increased strength, his topmost boughs became broader and more spindly; and in proportion to his growth, so was his self-satisfaction increased, and with it arose a joyous longing to grow higher and higher, to reach even to the warm, bright sun itself. Already had his topmost branches pierced the clouds, which floated beneath them like troops of birds of passage, or large mourning doves; every leaf seemed gifted with sight, as if it possessed eyes to see.
The stars became visible in broad daylight, large and sparkling, like clear and gentle eyes. They recalled to the memory the well-known look in the eyes of a child, or in the eyes of lovers who had once met beneath the branches of the old tree. These were wonderful and happy moments for the old tree, full of peace and joy; and yet, amidst all this happiness, the tree felt a yearning, longing desire that the stubbornly stalwart trees, bushes, herbs, and flowers beneath him, might be able also to rise higher, as he had done, and to see all this splendor, and experience the same happiness. The hardy Joshua tree could not be quite happy in the midst of his enjoyment, while all the rest, both great and small, were not with him. And this feeling of yearning trembled through every branch, through every needle, as warmly and fervently as if they had been the fibres of a human heart. The summit of the tree waved to and fro, and bent upwards as if in his silent longing he sought for God as the missionaries who named it imagined. Then there came to him the fragrance of poppy, followed by the more powerful scent of opium and violence; and he fancied he heard the note of the burrowing owl. At length his longing was satisfied. Up through the clouds came the spotty green summits of the desert trees, and beneath him, the tree saw them rising, and growing higher and higher. Bush and herb shot upward, and some even tore themselves up by the roots to rise more quickly. The California juniper was the quickest of all. Like a lightning flash the tangled trunk untied and shot upwards in a zigzag line, the branches spreading around it like green gauze and banners. Every native of the desert, even to the brown and feathery rushes, grew with the rest, while the birds ascended with the melody of song. On a blade of grass, that fluttered in the air like a long, green ribbon, sat a pallid-winged grasshopper, cleaning his wings
with his legs. Broad neck darkling beetles hummed, the bee assassins murmured, the birds sang, each in his own way; the air was filled with happy songs.

“But where is the little white flower that grows from the aquifer?” asked the Joshua, “and the gravel ghost, and the cream cups?” You see the Joshua Tree wanted to have them all with him.

“Are we here, here we are,” sounded in voice and song.

“But where is yesterday’s beautiful primrose? And the thick leaved ground cherry, which last year covered the earth with their bloom? And the wild cottonwood with its lovely branches, and all the glory of the desert, which lasts year after year? Even new sprouts could be liminal with us here.”

“Here we are, are we here,” sounded voices higher in the air, as if they had flown there beforehand.

“This is beautiful, unbelievably beautiful,” said the Joshua Tree. “I have them all here, both great and small; not one has been forgotten. Can such lightness be imagined?” It seemed in that moment impossible to the tree.

“By the grace of man, it can be imagined, so it is possible,” sounded the reply through the air.

And the old tree, as it still grew upwards and onwards, felt that his roots were loosening themselves from the earth.

“It is right so, it is best,” said the tree, “no fetters hold me now. I can fly up to the very highest point in light and glory. All my many loves are here. All—all are here.”

Such was the dream of the Joshua tree: and while he dreamed, a mighty sandstorm came rushing over high and low land, at the equinox. The dust and dirt rolled
in great billows towards the edges of the desert. There was a cracking and crushing heard
in the tree. The root was torn from the ground just at the moment when in his dream he
fancied it was being loosened from the earth. He fell—his three hundred and sixty-five
years were passed as the single day of the Prodoxidae.

On the morning after the equinox, when the sun rose, the storm had ceased. From
all the encampments and permanent settlements sounded alarm clocks and automatic
coffee pots, and from every machine, even of the smallest significance, smoke was
emitted into the blue sky, like the smoke from the coal mines or factories that produced
those same machines. The winds gradually became calm, and in a mall that resisted the
tempest during the night, banners were hung, signifying a sale.

“The tree is felled! The Joshua tree,—the landmark of our flat lands!” exclaimed
the men. “It must have fallen in last night’s storm.” This served as a funeral oration over
the old tree — short, and unreflective. There the Joshua lay stretched on the desert floor

Over it sounded the notes of a song from the radio in the dump truck that came to
collect the wood—a song of physical joy and destruction.
Multiple Menard
Thinking, analyzing, inventing ([Menard] also wrote me) are not anomalous acts; they are the normal respiration of the intelligence. To glorify the occasional performance of that function, to hoard ancient and alien thoughts, to recall with incredulous stupor that the doctor universalis thought, is to confess our laziness or our barbarity. Every man should be capable of all ideas and I understand that in the future this will be the case.

- Jorge Luis Borges,
“Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,”
Labyrinths

Menard! 1: [Menard=1! = 1]

Pierre Menard, alive all that night, mixed gasses and solids and plasmas and liquids, not caring what state any of the material was in. The play, he shouted loudly enough for us to hear, was all that matters. But long ago we forsook this dreary, outlandish man, our own mad scientist, who thought only in nightmares that fed on our nightmares. Even in the subconscious he was frightening, so on the night when there were plumes of smoke rising from every gap in the walls and bright, extraterrestrial lights flashing through it all, we closed our doors and taped our windows shut, because this time we were certain that it was poison gas wafting through the city and we had a duty of protecting our spaces first in that economy. He said that he was working to better our lives as he squirreled away precious resources we could have deployed to feed ourselves. We could not have known that in the laboratory Menard was becoming the subject of his own tests accidentally sprung on him. Only later, when we knew the threat that had emerged that night from his lab, we understood just how much he, too, had lost in the gas and reflection, in the smoke and mirrors.

We assumed, from the assembly of fragmentary details much later that Menard succumbed to that outrageous flaw of believing there was no one but him in his universe;
this problem of his was one of the quirks that allowed us to overlook the dangers of keeping him around. Among us, he was utterly unique. Quite literally whatever formula he was working on was causing him to fall apart at the seams.

In this loose state, his life flashed before his eyes. He saw the childhood spent in boarding houses, reading and rereading *Frankenstein* and wondering why a monster might be drawn to books, then later, why that monster may want to create friends, and later, why that monster would turn on his maker. He saw an educational system devised to hold up a liberal ideology that rejects torture while reinforcing some of its most gruesome tenants on its economic captives. He saw the conscious move to a small city where his efforts might come to his own ends, conceiving it as a kind of retreat from a world that he never had had the self-possession to capitalize on, and the new world, our town, would allow him to freely browse his genius.

In this loose state, he ruptured in tears. This process was extremely painful, and our imaginations could only see it practiced in extreme circumstances. We hypothesized that it happened at the shoulder that has not been reciprocally cried upon. Then stitching slowly snapped, the threads that held Menard together must not have tended to their stress well, and likewise, dissolved in the tears of the host.

The split continued down the flank, the oblique muscles untangled themselves and released gradual responsibility. The flanges of his flank, after they released their folded hold, curled into claws that burrowed into the chest cavity, cracked rib bones and dislocated disks to open a mouth where the skin had been smooth. We imagined that from the side Menard’s lungs could have been visible. The diaphragm shuddered in quick, immediate gasps of pain. Menard might still have thought it emotional. He might have
conceived the sinking feeling in his stomach as a descent into despair, not as a metaphysical disembowelment. When this halving reached his groin, Menard definitively noticed that these pains accented the real feelings he was having. He probably fell in a pool of cleaved limbs and groped for stability, his silhouette resembling a spider, crawling in a shamble to the mirror, where he ultimately collapsed. Here, each lobe, divided in two, likely wished for the same thing – I wish my testicles just went their own separate ways, that dividing the reproductive system meant one testicle to each allotment of flesh – if he was conscious enough to fully apply the theoretical models that drove him to this to begin with. This method of separation demanded each organ to be divided at the cell level, not just cherry picked between the organs that occur as two in the body. So his testicles individually pulled apart, as did his kidneys, ears, nostril-linings, lungs. His eyes, previously two whole, now four semi-spheres, possibly looked at his obscene form and came to realize what we knew all along; he was on his way to becoming one whole half. But vision eventually became less problematic for this pile of Pierre, as his portioned eyes assembled into four full seeing sensory organs. He, in this state, could have been experiencing a unique species of double vision. The fingers of his oblique muscles grasped into the void around him, suturing to nothing, singularly so. And then as the singularity increased, his sense of being duly alone followed, until two Pierres found themselves complete and husked.

Menard! 2: [Menard= 2! = 2]

Our speculation ends here, for by morning the quite real duplicate emerged from the lab with its original, and the events, once released into the world, left us to deal with
the pair of abominations. We immediately knew that we should have seen this coming. Over and over again he would corner us in supermarkets to ask us for free samples, of blood or skin or gametes, and we would, shocked by this open solicitation, decline. He would bring a finger that he’d duplicated from the samples he had on hand of his hand, that he kept in a pocket sized ice box and would point to us with the finger, saying something to the effect of “science has chosen you to become the muse and material of progress,” and his face, as earnest in its heinousness as it could be, would await our response, as if there were ever the shot of us agreeing to submit ourselves to his experimentation.

Their emergence from the laboratory was marked by a strange twinning fashion sense, since the clothing Menard had on hand to cover his shame just so happened to fit his doppelganger perfectly. And with the both of them made of half of the first whole Menard, each Pierre could not exactly be said to be original. The uncanny sensation that flooded our bodies as we looked from one Pierre to the other unsettled every repressed interaction with Menard, every memory half recalled because each Pierre was only half a self. But our shuddering and spine-chills and hairs standing on end did not stop them from walking around our incredulous gawks as if this occasion were something to be celebrated. Their faces were brighter than any of us had ever seen.

And so right from the beginning, when we recognized the horror of having two mad scientists in our town, we knew that a meeting was to be held to make sure that our next action was unanimous. Our pamphlets announcing the meeting were titled “how do we deal with the menard problem.” All the letters were in lower case because that is how you keep a secret. So we drew up plans every night until the meeting and brought them
after a leisurely meet-and-greet with light refreshments. We made suggestions arbited by our socialized, fragmented body; tar and feather them, encase them in cement, grind them up and feed them to the dogs, bury them in the abandoned strip mine, alive or dead. When the venting ceased and cooler heads prevailed, we decided simply to run them out of town.

We grabbed our pitchforks and torches, modeling our rage on other pivotal scenes where monsters are driven out of small villages. We stormed every street and raided all of our homes, stores, and holy sites until at last we turned over the last leaf and discovered the pair of them in a motel parking lot, exploring the voids of their self, absent halves that groped wildly into a shared oblivion. And when their desperate fingers hooked into the body of their mirror image, they tore each other in half. And the shreds of Menard stretched and stitched and sutured to the fabric of the universe. We were taken aback by their gaps. We witnessed their transformations, their production of hideous progeny, and from these observations we hypothesized the original instance.

Menard! ₃ : [Menard ₃!= 6]

We were horrified by the two of them going at it; the six that came out of the frightened action were equally revolting. We circled them, perhaps to try and contain the hexature Menard, but we wondered silently whether or not this was what they meant when sociologists suggested that people behave as sheep stereotypically do, in that they follow some external shepherd’s influence. And what, we wondered, was influencing us? What drove us to corner the hims in the motel parking lot as they tried each of the fleshy
boundaries left to them first as halves, then as sixths? And what could we have known, looking back now, about what was to come?

It was a silly problem to have had, certainly considering how we now live, but when we could not look each other in the eye out of the shame; we knew that something had to be done. We reasoned that only when events take place that either affirm or resist our anxieties can we even begin to worry about the formation of those anxieties, to gain critical distance and learn about ourselves without having to resort to the terrible things that Menard had managed to accomplish on his own. And Menard capitalized on this fear, deftly arguing all the purposes and functions a mad scientist could perform for a community of people who lack his expertise and ambitions. He promised to solve hunger by inventing new ways of producing food efficiently, to provide new conceptions of labor to autonomize the work force, and to defend territory by preparing an indefatigable armed force. Against our better judgment, our hoard opened up a path that cut right down our middle to let the six Pierres go.

That night we went off thinking that we had made a fair call, since our show of force had proved that we could keep him in check if need be. And when we woke up the next day, the sun warmed our skins and our hearts, and we felt like we could shop for sustenance in peace. This serenity lasted for weeks as none of us heard from Menard for a long time, and then, just as we’d forgotten all the reasons to live in fear of every day of progress, of what Menard had promised, he emerged from his lab, then emerged from his lab, then emerged from his lab, then emerged from his lab, then emerged from his lab, then emerged from his lab, then emerged from his lab, then emerged from his lab, then emerged from his lab, then emerged from his lab, then
emerged from his lab, then emerged from his lab, then emerged from his lab, then emerged from his lab, then emerged from his lab, then emerged from his lab, then emerged from his lab, then emerged from his lab, then emerged from his lab, then emerged from his lab, then emerged from his lab, then emerged from his lab.

Menard! \( 4! = 24 \)

The twenty four Menards presented us with a master plan, which consisted of thousands of scripted pages, outlining every detail of daily life and how it might be improved by signing on to their ideological overhaul. Each section had several subsections, and each subsection had further subsections; there were subsections all the way down the twenty four foot stack of pages, until the enumerated indents went right to the right margins and back again. Each Menard claimed authorship of a single foot of proposal, and offered to us times to meet to discuss each section, an hour a piece for one whole day. Menard gave us the stack and we looked it over as thoroughly as we could, but our attempts to hold all that information in our heads and conceive properly what it was that the documents spelled out proved difficult. Section by section reading yielded vagaries that were too tremendous to parse word by word and much less manageable from sentence to sentence or page to page. But our quick glances did reveal that it had provisions that seemed to have some mysterious ways of feeding us, protecting us, and making us comfortable.

Work began soon after to concretize the conception; large processing plants were built on the grounds where we operated farms. The fields burdened with low-yield soil
were slashed and scorched because in the time it would take for the corn and squash and carrots to be harvested and treated for consumption, the factories would produce twice the volume of edible food. We poured cement foundations that entombed the once fertile land, and let loose the manufacturing capacity that could be contained in the walls we raised as well. The ribbon-cutting ceremony we co-hosted, we and the Menards, announced the end of famish on the surface of the Earth. And, while we worked at processing the tremendous input of food, we were off put by the sad fact we had no idea where all this edible material was coming from. The Pierre who oversaw the operations of the factory swore that the raw material for their edible product was coming from the other fields that were harvested and turned into factories, that our situation of not sparing the food was utterly unique. We were worked too hard to be given the opportunity to even have found ourselves in the situation of asking too many questions. And then, one day, we were asked not to come back.

Menard! 5: [Menard 5! = 120]

On that day, the factories began their real operations, which the Pierres insisted meant we were no longer allowed to participate in their development for fear of throwing off the master plan. The Menards asked us as a parting gift to erect gates around the factory designed to keep us in the outside world. And the factories still managed to run without us. They made deliveries daily to all our shops, allowing us to sell this heavily processed food that alleviated so much stress in our day-to-day lives. We discovered what it felt like to be excluded from the labor force, which in a world where there is an unlimited supply of all the essentials, meant that we discovered relief. We made use of
what we had previously termed “working weekends” by working on ourselves and our happiness in all those ways we promised to ourselves as we labored toward what we imagined as the possibility of having that chance. We discovered old friends, new hobbies, old habits, new vices; in a way, we found ourselves once again fresh in the world where we were free to pursue anything that held our interests. We picked up the arts as a whole community because if none of us were required to work in the factories, then we were all now part of the leisure class. And our arts reflected the skills we had developed as a skilled labor force. What had been butchery became taxidermy. What had been cleaning became interpretive dance. What had been diagramming became illustration. And we used these new outlets to explore our souls. With our eyes turned so far inwards, we could not see what was coming, and it never dawned on us that we ought to be worried for our very existence.

Menard! ₆: [Menard 6! = 720]

This is why we did not notice when our stores were purchased by here-and-there Pierres, and our jobs occupied by more determined Menards, because all that meant to us was that we had more “me” time. We didn’t notice that we were buying and selling from Menards exclusively, and that one day, and none of us even knew when, we’d moved to picking up rations of things instead of buying them. Our economy dissolved and it didn’t even matter to us. Our unemployment was at 100%, and somehow it never came up that we had all lost track of our jobs because we all lost track of the lives we had struggled to build for as long as we had lived. Without that essential struggle, we forgot our previous work, and the lives we were leading were more of a leading-on than a command and
direction that would ever produce anything that was worth the consideration we had liberally given to ourselves. And the worst of all was that it was not going to change unless we gave up some of our creature comforts. The free meals had to end so we could go back to work and starve.

Perhaps our first real mistake was that we were too late in this realization.

Menard! 7: \([\text{Menard } 7! = 5,040]\)

When we knew once and for all that we had arrived at the incorrect verdict in our judgment of Pierre Menard, we stormed the gates we assembled of the first factory we had built. Because they thought they had already destroyed our fighting spirit, we were able to destroy the barrier and enter the factory, which we immediately noticed bore no resemblance to the space we left for such a relatively short amount of time. Divisions and partitions had been erected to guide the Menards through the factory quite literally: they worked at several different stations: manipulating levers to process the protein paste, monitoring temperatures at the heating and cooling stations, and wrapping proportioned dollops before being worked by the machines themselves. We had been ingesting Menards, likely from the beginning.

Naturally, we were horrified.

Menard! 8: \([\text{Menard } 8! = 40,320]\)

At about this time, the Menards surrounded the building and sent in a whole division of their armed forces to occupy the factory and escort us to a kind of permanent holding facility, complete with test tubes and electrodes and metal beds. We were
corralled in a laboratory, quarantined for science, and tested much in the way we had handled Menard himself.

Menard! 9: [Menard 9! = 362,880]

   We broke out almost as many times as we were taken in. They broke us almost as frequently as we were broken. We broke up almost as effectively as they broke us up. In captivity there was no solidarity of any kind. We stood only alone.

Menard! 10: [Menard 10! = 3,628,800]

   But we tried. We tried to remember the mad scientist that would interrogate us for tissues he would make personal use of. We tried to remember shunning him. We tried to draw naked comparisons to other historical models.

Menard! 11: [Menard 11! = 39,916,800]

   We signaled through our group distresses, hoping to warn our bodies in faraway countries that the Menard infestation was out of hand. Lacking other means, small bottles carrying messages to that effect were let loose to sea.

Menard! 12: [Menard 12! = 479,001,600]

   And when we realized two steps later the population of Menards would be ten times the population of our planet, we silenced ourselves.

Menard! 13: [Menard 13! = 6,227,020,800]
I could not.
The Tortoise We Lived In

We moved into a very small house with a proportionately tiny tortoise. To some of us the choice made no sense; the house only just barely housed us all when we toured the grounds, but the fact that the bedrooms lay upstairs and out of the way appealed to our aesthetic preferences, which demanded an expansive inner space. The bathroom being up on the second floor posed a significant problem for our hedonism, but a problem that never stomped out the satisfaction of our desires that led us to the property and kept us touring the grounds under supervision of a real estate agent. Light tripped on the blinds and fell haphazardly onto the floor of the great room; in this room we settled, deciding it our favorite, and we signed all necessary paperwork. So we moved in, all of us and the tortoise, and we crammed against the walls. To move, we elbowed our way through corpulent piles of bodies wrapped around the tortoise, swam over the swells of this charybdis, front door ways or toward the backyard. The mass always churned with disapproval at any motion that did not follow its own waves, the sine of respiration. We all, in those days, heaved synchronized breaths, those days before all the walls receded beyond the zenith of the horizon.

We sat Indian style: our legs crossed, our knees platonically touching the upper inner thighs of our amiable neighbors. That is not to say that sex never happened amongst us. The meetings of indexed flesh frequently led to salient dissolution, but it lacked in its origins the intent to raise carnal concerns to the forefront of our consciousness; some things just happen. The whirlpool of sloshing and splashing expressions of temporary physical desires, funneled around the tortoise who sat at the center and spun unchecked. We feared for our desert lizard only after we thoroughly enjoyed our fill. Then we
worried about it drowning, about the tortoise getting the wrong idea about our play. Overcompensating, we returned to our circle, folded our limbs into place, our living leather covering our shame. We sat as lattice of skin and bone, and taught the tortoise to form its shell.

Our memories collected around us in the intermissions of our intercourse, piling up high as we settled on our preferred postures. We began our collection with those perfect little memories of childhood, when the impossibly large world flooded with the dreams that lend pigment to the desert landscape - - color materialized in moments of uncontrollable euphoria. The tortoise responded well to the solid moments that encourage growth and expansion in this vast existence and fortune favored us as the memories grew, the tortoise, and the house along with it. Not one of us recognized this strange situation until we noticed that the tortoise no longer fit in the palms of our hands, and our hands lifted above our elbows to turn the knobs of doors that we opened to push the boundaries of the group out, widening our circles and currents. And we, too, grew in number, certainly, since the room continued to breaks us apart and bring us closer as it expanded, though the density of bodies remained unchanged. Our hearts and heads and rocks and upper inner thighs soon numbered in unfathomable quantities, and pressed up against the walls, crowding the tortoise. The front door allowed others to pour in, to fill every nook and cranny, stripping bare like the rest of us and offering their stones. In this dense thicket, we coerced the tortoise to stain its own home with the emphatic and tumultuous dyes of childhood instability.

When our knees lifted above our hips while climbing the stairs to clear out the second level of the house, we wondered about the state of the growth of our throngs;
transients cesspoled in the bedrooms, lured in by the promise of unconditional love. We
opened up the doors, mopping clean the now dedicated empty space. And as our home
towered over the desert landscape, we forsook the aerie lavatory, retreating to the great
grand room for support. Our discouragement came at our heels, as we noticed for the first
time that the tortoise saw us eye to eye. Only as it stood so very close to our eyes did we
notice that its firm shell also possessed an intrinsic softness, a cloudy aura similar to the
one childhood itself is permanently bound by, despite the hardness of our recollection
vessels.

We determined the sharp edges of our adolescent geodes capable of fixing this
nebulosity, of hewing clean the surface of the shell, of creating finite boundaries for this
swelling tortoise. These geodes, filled with glimmering crystals, captured in their coarse
exteriors delimited and infinite geometries through intangible, impossible rules. For the
tortoise to fully comprehend these memories and the lessons affectionately
communicated, imperative directed us to crack the geodes, revealing cavernous mouths
filled with jagged teeth both beautiful and terrible to speak the truth through errant
oxidized minerals pigmenting otherwise colorless structures aligned in rigid, inferred
rows. Razor crests ripped our arms when we presented these shattered shards anchored in
earthly crusts to the tortoise. In this way, hours carved into our bodies as they carved
through the shell. Patterns blossomed across the dome of our rocks, guided by those
influences that justified jutted spikes in the geodes. Hexagons and pentagons replicated as
the shell aged, deepening from our collective experience.

We cried as the lines conformed to the meticulous contours of the shell we
nurtured previously with our dense recollections of childhood, of trauma. Our tears, a sea
salt brine recalling every visit to the distant ocean, of the ocean’s own visit to the ancient shores previously located in our arid land, eroded that perfection to an immaculate semi-sphere housing the tortoise in the house. The soft innocence slowly accumulated in that simple shell now worn to its familiar shape known to the outside world, perhaps a tabletop map in three dimensions of both hills and valleys, perhaps just a starburst.

As the last of our tears finished slicing through the exterior of the tortoise’s armor, the peaks of the shell reached up from our sight entirely. It was still there, of course, just much farther from us than we ever expected the tortoise to reach. Our thousands of elbows and genitals all still fit in the house, in the great room no less, though those of us closest to the tortoise, closest to the center, no longer saw the edges of the room. Even the window with the Joshua Tree stood outside our visual range, the echo of light tripping barely audible. The ceiling disappeared long before even then. The stairwell, by this time, appeared just as another wall, and its leading edge slipped into the darkness of the abyss above us. We still overlapped, despite the incredible increases in size: of the tortoise, of our ranks, of the house we all lived in. Our orgies still took place without any instigation beyond the casual collusion of limbs. Our masses still writhed in identical respiratory modes. Our fears of drowning the tortoise dissipated as the possibility of it inhaling our liquids evaporated. The absence of light, though, chilled our spines. We clustered together, our density rising, the contact of our limbs becoming more frequent, our viscous fluids constantly leaked from tired frames, and we shivered from exhaustion and exposure.

No fear penetrated our hearts when the light retreated, but we preferred illumination all the same. Our prepubescent rocks, polished chronologically, reflected
and refracted light in exemplar fashion, which led to our strategic placing of them across the dark tundra of limbs and tortoise. Each stone, positioned just so portioned the light, spreading modest illumination across the room. The geodes, too, split beams of light in wide rays, blanketing our hearts in gossamer light. Our constant scattering, though, proved useless directly under the tortoise; it not only towered above us, but also lacked translucence. We positioned our naked forms to act as mirrors as well, the prisms of our geodes too difficult to grapple with in this tortoise umbra. Our slick limbs behaved as many reflective, lubricated surfaces, lustrously. Our juices salted the increasing darkness against our wishes; a pinch of light here and there, to the taste of our peristalsing presence. From our observations of the tortoise feet, it remained unphased.

As the room faded to a new moon midnight, we remembered our rocky childhoods as cosmic distances because of their glitter, shards of the farthest remembered edges of our massive mass. And we began to remember the tortoise as this comprehensible thing, a creature we perceived beyond blind groping in the dark of the living room. Those of us at the center of the room, tortoise adjacent, told those on the outside stories of the tortoise, of its immense size and general shape. The story slithered in whispers through the group, right to the outer edges, where the stories rebounded and took on descriptions of the walls that crawled up into the sky, of the molding in the doorway that pushed beyond the visible long before the light disappeared.

The stories followed the natural waves of the group, escaping with the carbon dioxide slipped from our lips. Panic spread in our swarm. We inquired our basic knowledge of our circumstance. *Could we know for sure the turtle rests at the center of our room? Could we say with certainty that we still sexed in a room that started to grow*
when our tortoise’s shell swelled? Our arms reached out for the edges of the tortoise. By now, our fingers felt only the flesh of its legs, standing as pillars far too wide, definitively not built by us or our hands. Our liquids sloshed and our heads whirred, fearing the terrible and particularly disastrous oncoming existential crisis. Imperative made us clamor for confirmation of at least our tortoise, so we started to climb.

Beginning at the base of the leg, fingers wrapped around the bulbous protrusions that formed the skin; our feet sought footholds. We rose up from the legs that found square places to push from. Our limbs tangled as vines crawl. Once our knees stopped shaking (they wobbled each time ascension progressed), we stretched out our phalange tendrils to wrap around our possible grips, growing into the lizard wall, anchoring us against possible falls. Only then, when we felt safe, we began to consider the next step. Move by move, we scaled the reptile. Upon reaching the shell, we looked down, the singular moment we did. Our bodies covered the trunk of the tortoise leg like aphids, squirming carapaces trying to understand existence. We turned to the rest of the leg, the horizon that receded into the shell over the shoulder, and stared into the darkness, surprising us that even in the tortoise there existed more intangible space. We relayed the information to our comrades on the ground and we screamed to the ceiling this concern. Those of us on the ground looked up, seeing soles rise into the dark, by inches and feet.

Raising our arms as sextants amidst an imaginary sea, we tried to calculate the location of the window, of the door, of the stairwell. We wailed about the angles that our legs must make to ascend each step. And while we surveyed, the terrain we stood atop grew, reducing our desire to summit the tortoise. We just wanted to retreat into our throngs, swallowing ourselves whole, an oroboros centipede. We dreamed of how sweet
our flesh must be, how it must complement our salted shapes. Our dreams started at the feet, and nibbled each delectable toe off each of our delicious neighbors. From there, our dreams unhinged their jaws, accommodating the devouring of the shins, one at a time, essentially whole; our lower limbs served as a warm-up for the hip. In this fantasy, we ate the flesh first and worked inwards, a miniature model of reverse conception, until we reached the digestive system. And further, depending on how long we took to eat each other, our priorities shifted at one specific trigger. The moment when we encountered our partially digested neighbors, our ribs, by necessity, cracked wide, by our devourers or to devour, the end result being the same, our mouths becoming a Venn diagram in triplate, three overlapping forms juxtaposed in an uncountable fractal spread out all over the living room, all over the tortoise. This arithmetic stretched out into the world, we said, unsure where the world started or the dream ended, or if the room finally swelled to encompass it too, or if the tortoise reached planetary proportions.

We looked again to the shoulder, to the crevasse, now off in the distance, a craggy mountain range at the other end of the shoulder valley, the room now so dark that the visibility of the shoulder itself rested on our eyes’ ability to distinguish between black and negative space. Those of us on the tortoise determined the daydream seemed impossible, despite our appetite – climbing the tortoise reduced contact between knee and inner thigh, and through this, we found our ability to fill denied. In order to replace the sex, we decided to retreat into the tortoise, to climb into the gap between shoulder and shell, right into the heart of the dark.

During our stationary intermission between migrations, the shoulder expanded into a treacherous terrain. Deep canyons ran around each scaly protrusion reaching
upward. We no longer gripped the tortoise’s stony skin; our fingers, our arms, just lay flat against the surfaces, even spread wide. Climbing through the gullies and trenches of the tortoise shoulder proved far easier. Burrowing into its flesh, we climbed like mites most of the way to our salvatory portal, scurrying and leaping, sleeping and eating the dead skin of our focal object.

The portal stirred our spines in the chilly and fearful sea waters that caused our first migration. Liquid collected on our dermis, and our senses lacked skills to discern their origin. We assumed it sweat, shivered all the same. As we walked into the vast gap between tortoise flesh and shell, we felt the warm darkness embraced us with open arms. The entrance to the shell appeared darker still than the room, where light itself vanished from our eyes. But we wandered in the corridor for a short time before we found the central chamber of the tortoise, a space that even willingness to accept the universe on its face possessed in our very souls a grand sense of amazement. Above us, we assumed, the shell enclosed the space. Glitter embedded in the ceiling shone light down into this new cavern. We entered from all four leg holes, instinctively moving towards our bodies, separate and alive and synchronized, where we met again as one mass, enveloping the tortoise, entering the tortoise, without any fears of drowning it. As we slowly swarmed its surfaces, our desires pulled us towards the center, where our bodies shelled each other, where our sex resumed, where we rested under a starry sky without fear of diminishment; the turtle’s leading edges still felt the warmth of the desert sunlight. Our memories, refined and refracted by our ever-developing sense of identity, formed the stars, we formed the stars, we formed our stars. And we held each other for the rest of our time, as the inside of the tortoise shell, too, lifted up into the sky, like the walls, like the window,
like the stairs, like ourselves, and we lay in piles inside the tortoise, contiguous limbs overlapping in erotic positions, flooding the chamber inside the tortoise we lived in.
Moctopus

My eyes are wet and the world wavers, undulates, gives everything a distinctly parabolic shape, and I notice you are underwater. Deep in and the pressure mounts, I panic, flailing my limbs in that slow motion that occurs when you are under water and I am too far from the surface to surface, so I rest at the bottom and wait for my life to flash before my eyes. Minutes go by, more than three, more than five, more than seven - - all prime moments to go, and no memories are evoked, no images explode to distort my perception of my death, no framing narrative, no dark frame to give rise to melancholic retrospectives, and no pain from breathing water. And then I notice that there you are, observing me, so I swim over to you and look you in the eyes and you gesture down to the floor. There I see a sign: You are an octopus.

I glance back to you, you who wiggle your limbs in a salutary hello, and I do the same, I raise an arm and wiggle it, I notice I have suckers, as if the presence of suckers would be conclusive proof of my octopusness, but since when? I can’t rely on the simple strengths of empirical data to resolve every existential crisis I encounter. It is not in ideal form. I am forced to rely on the stories we tell to determine what it is you and I are.

My friend the cuttlefish comes to visit us sometimes, and sometimes I recognize him and sometimes you do not; all those cuttlefish look the same, and who is blameless when there is a moment worse than méconnaissance, you know, pas de reconnaissance, when there is not anything that seems to trigger the memories that make socialization unnecessarily awkward, and you know it because you are in the tank as well, you who have been my constant companion for so long that I can barely remember the times without you. As we are in way over our heads, we cling to the bottom in search of a
directive, of something to tell us how to use the divisions of space we occupy. When we scuttle along the bottom in cuttlefish postures, shame washes over the two of us and we blush the rocky colors of our clear prison floor. Our suckers taste the remnants of visitors. Amongst the intruding flavors, we taste each other.

You are me, for all intents and porpoises, as I cannot assume for one moment that anyone could suffer the act of identifying with the ramblings of a deranged octopus except another one, but here we find ourselves, alone and stuck in a Plexiglas bin with many differently sized holes. They must be watching us from the outside; we must be performing our lives for them. The pressure in the water drives us to perfect our performances. When they built this box, I intuit, or is it you intuiting, they put holes the size of quarters in Plexiglas sheets and divided up the larger box into smaller chambers or smaller boxes depending on how you reason space. In each of these spaces, the box designers expect us, you and I, to behave differently; what space we choose to occupy seems to be up to us - - this command is in the architecture of this place, it is the voice of brailled stone that we read and replicate in our transformative skins.

Sometimes you think about our friend the ammonite architect; sometimes I don’t remember it died. When you remind me of its passing, I can only remember its obsession with crafting the perfect domicile; its personality is etched ever so slightly in the flavors of the stones at the bottom of the tank, almost foundational in our beds of rock. You tell me about the geometry of its mobile home, of the strict adherence to that prescribed form, but that was because all the ammonites built the same kind of quarters, tracked them in style then trekked them sea wide and bragged to locals, constantly passing through their paths: look at our fractal chambers, the ammonites said, look at how precise our jets of
water squirt out from those storage spaces are, look at how they move us forward, ever forward; our ammonite comrade was no different from its species, extolling the tremendous good that living one’s work produces. Our architect friend built chamber after chamber to display its superior design skills, to store more water, to propel itself through the ocean. Our ammonite amigo made his home out of ostentatious ammolite like the rest of them, living on the combination of flash and substance, and when our ammonite pal passed on it turned out to be that its home, its body of work, was an extravagant sarcophagus, propelling the ammonite architect forward, ever forward, right into the grave.

My friend the cuttlefish comes to visit us and sometimes you recognize him and sometimes I do not and he always brings with him what new and exciting thing he has discovered about the other chambers of the tank; we have managed to piece that much together about him. If we could always remember what he tells us… but there are a few times that seem to stand out, that call attention in our minds. When one of us asks, have you seen the cuttlefish lately, the other responds: the guy who talked about the vents, and the other of us says, no the devilfish who spoke of the ocean incessantly, and one of us says the guy who was all about tubes and filters and being able to go wherever one chooses, defying the machinery of the tank, and one of us retorts, yes, that guy, where is he, we both shrug and drift.

The box we are in, you and I, we find ourselves in this box and I can see the room our box is in has silver tubes. The men sit under the tubes and watch us. They look with their eyes in predator positions and they watch us. With their predator eyes they look at us and we have our conversations and they stimulate us with activities. They show us hi-
definition televisions and we watch them; they watch us. They, with their goggles to protect them from who knows what, they watch us watching television and they give us toys to play with. We get toys and they watch us. We make things, they watch us. They are surprised to find us doing things and we surprise them with the objects we make. And their surprise is inferred when they watch us because our observations are not valued when not recognized. And their surprise crawls our skin into a secretive thicket of kelp.

I wake you up completely submerged and rehearse a moment of complete terror; I know that I am drowning, floundering as it were, know that you are no different than me, clearly we are drowning; when I discover my octopusness every day from that sign at rock bottom, I follow its direction: I write down on the blank space of my tentacle with the ink from my sac: You are an octopus. Don’t forget it; it gives me permission to continue throughout the day, permission to be in ways I may have been or do things I may have done or listen and tell stories as if for the first time; I find with these tales I may just have never been done with them and they were never so easy to cast away, but that may have more to do with using a series of suction cups to hold on to things or having eight appendages made for moving through the world. Of course this occurs only on the days you assume I do something. Other days don’t matter so much. Other days pass by until I find strength somewhere in the chaos of sinking memories and depressing visits with other cephalopods who claim relations. You should see yourself, they say, the scientists outside do.

I move, following you or leading from behind, to another space in our massive tank, right through the quarter-sized hole. You convince me that us octopuses can pretty much fit into any space designed for us intentionally or not; I watch you slip carefully
through, one arm feeling out a path and pouring your gelatinous body from one side to the next. I mimic you as close as I am capable, which turns out to be fairly close since I must be some sort of cephalopod to be able to execute such a smart maneuver, the movement being in my blood and the act rushing through my limbs, me living the memory; there is a pleasure in being able to fit in places you are intended to go, an undeniable satisfaction in knowing that because you fit, that is where you belong. If contract and squeeze in, I fit perfectly though I bulge at either side. Why anyone would move from that hole is beyond me, and I hesitate to leave my space, this place between chambers, I belong here in the Plexiglas, capable of seeing both sides and choosing not to have to settle, here I am ruler of the tank, monitoring who comes and goes, controlling who comes and goes, yet I get lonely in my privileged position and slip towards you, wondering why I ever lagged there.

You tell me the story, or maybe I tell you, about that squid scribe who used its ink to write a story on both sides of the page and we agree that writing with one’s ink is absolutely superior to writing with one’s blood; blood is just too macabre and too melodramatic. Writing is definitely a secretion, we agree. Ink is secreted in a moment of fear, to defend against predators or to escape for however long it takes or to ward off the possibility of being lost to the drift of shifting tides; it just fits better. I asked how the squid wrote it under water and you said it had to surface to write because the ink diffused into the water, spread out in a haze, but the squid dried out at the surface – he must have dried up you said and I asked about the two-in-one page story, about the ink – did it bleed through the page – that must have dried too. The wind and the air and the light carried
water bit by tiny bit from the surface of the page and from the squid’s body until both
dried. One of us thinks the object left behind must be magnificent.

One of us, you or I, we pass the time by ascending and descending the edges of
the tank. If we could remember the boundaries, I or you say, this would be a useful
exercise. But stocking the structure of the tanks is the same as chasing the terrible
restrictions that we are expected to conform to, and with our bodies and their shape
taking abilities, when we meet the corners in the corners where the walls do, our bodies
take that shape. Our forms find the shape of the tank and adopt it; we become the tanks.
And when our bodies find that point, we launch to the center to meet in the middle; when
you cannot feel the edges they don’t feel like they are there.

I tell you the story, or maybe you tell me, about the nautilus potter who collects
volcanic clay erupted from the sulfur vents at the bottom of the sea and gives it shape by
forming objects and placing those forms in bisque, and you or I ask about how they dried
the clay at the bottom of the ocean so that the objects didn’t have pockets of water or air,
so that it did not explode when fired and heated unevenly. One of us suggests that the
nautilus could just fill up his chambers with air to rise to sea level and dry the clay, then
submerge by filling those chambers with more-dense-than-air water to dive deep into the
smoky entrails of the natural kilns that mark the deep holes in the crust at the bottom of
the ocean that persist well into the liquid mantle of the Earth. But one of points out that
the process of surfacing seems like so much effort to produce objects of exquisite beauty
and challenges the negative of the pottery exploding; one of us says that the shards have
to be fabulous.
We, one of us, tells the story of the kraken actor who knew how to perform, who just knew how to work the stage, who knew how to deliver lines and make grand entrances but found the tides to sweep away its amphitheaters as he was performing. As such, in each performance, the kraken would script in moments of rebuilding the stage into all the dramas and act them out; sometimes to rebuild the stage and to add a moment of high suspense, the kraken would glide along the bottom of the ocean and pick up rocks and coral skeletons and stack them to show the limits of the fictional world, the kraken would surface and drag the hulls of ships to the bottom to sprinkle gold and rum barrels across its stage, arranging them to show the limits of the fictional world. We, one of us, say the performances have to be stupendous.

We, the both of us, we bring to the other our collections, the fragments of our brethren, of their labor. One of us has the shell, one of us has the page, one of us has the pottery, and one of us, yes, one of us has the stage. And then the scene is set. One of us enters stage left. The scientists are concerned. The other enters stage right. One of us says, Nothing to be done, and the other, I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. One of us continues, Why don't you help me? and the other adds: Sometimes I feel it coming all the same. Then I go all queer. One of us says I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Coloured they were. Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty. That's where we'll go, I used to say, that's where we'll go for our honeymoon. We'll swim. We'll be happy. And the other: You should have been a poet. The scientists applaud and we return to the ditches of the rocky floor.
Our friend the cuttlefish, the one that neither of us has seen for awhile, yes, that one, have you heard from him? When was the last time you tasted him on the rocks or heard echoes of him eating or swimming or smelled his changing colors in one of our many chambers? I only am reminded of him because at some point, I am sure we lost him, did he vanish you ask and I cannot remember for the life of me if, why, or when for that matter. I thought my suckers tasted him for a moment in the water; my arms caught a sense of him for an instant, but it drifted by in a cloud that left me hazy.

Sometimes, in the chamber where we are expected to eat, we pitch our cephalopod bivouacs and predate on provided prawns, because surely the designers observe our picnic. Sometimes our meals are released in the field and we scoop them up, other times our meals are locked in perforated boxes and sealed in glass jars and we can see or smell our desires just on the other sides of the artificial boundaries, the obstacles introduced into our daily existence as a way to complicate our regular routine so we comply and work around these impositions because we know what we want and how to get there so we pick the locks or avoid picking locks by going on unanticipated paths and we twist off the lids of the jar or shatter them outright; if we don’t we won’t eat. I am sure if I could remember their names, we could be friends, prawns or people, acquaintances like with the cuttlefish, but once the loss sets in, there is both no chance of remembering those who time has forced you to brush up against and only remembering the tactility of that, remembering the feel of charcoal but not the rubbing itself; attempting this as an aquatic creature leaves the waters murkier than one would expect. And as we sat at the edge of a sea burial, years ago it must have been, looking at the discarded corpse, you and I, we thought about how tragic it is. Then we eat the crawfish,
we give them a little bite from our beaks and secrete just enough venom to still their many hearts. With lobsters, you say, the situation is different; with lobsters, you say, sometimes a little physical contact is required to fully express love and receive it. And I feel warm behind the eyes and worry that this warmth is just another symptom, but of what, what, do I have something? And I feel slimy, in all of my crevasses I ooze discomfort. And everything is hazy and I don’t know where I am and there is an octopus and I am underwater, but you spot this and remind me who I am.

Together, you and I, we slip right on through a quarter-sized hole, into a pipe we discover, you first and me, I trail, each sucker feeling forward, ever forward, continuing as we discover it is a tube, allowing our bodies to roll and squeeze and distend and extend forward, ever forward. We grab the edges of the tube and I tell you a story or maybe you tell me, you tell me a story or maybe I tell you, in the tube we are so compact, so close, I cannot tell where you begin and I end. Our arms feel, the suckers on our arms, they taste, they touch, they determine the limits of the fictional world we have been placed in, and we move forward, tell stories, discover boundaries, right until the moment we have emerged on the other side of the tube and I don’t know where we are, but the place is clear, cubic, there are rocks on the bottom, there is the taste of cuttlefish, our friend the cuttlefish, when was the last time we saw him? Saw who, you ask, and when I have no idea, the conversation is dead in the water.

Then I panic about breathing, about being underwater, about the octopus you are, you who leads my way, why am I following the octopus in this tank, I wonder, why am I not drowning, I wonder, and you gently remind me about my state of being, that I am an octopus, too, that we are in a tank, that we are, well, what exactly? You cannot be sure
that we are not prisoners, not lovers, not slaves; you only know that we are cephalopods, that we are in the tank, and you have reason to believe this was not always the case.

One of us declares: I am crafting something, and the other asks: what of it, asks: what is the value of declaring that anyone is making anything to the whole tank. On the one hand, I say, there is such a thing as making things for their sake and that such behavior counts for something.

On the other hand, you say, would we tell stories about the ammonite or squid or nautilus or kraken if they never finished the things we remember them for, no matter how disturbed or infrequent or impermanent those memories are? On the other hand, you say, what value is practice in the absence of some manner of practical application, how useful is the act of doing in a world that requires things having been done? On the other hand, you say, have you ever crafted anything; have you ever demonstrated you have what it takes; do you have it in you? When they watch, will they understand?

On the other hand, I say, no piece of art is ever complete; the artist gets tired of it or gets buried by it. On the other hand, I say, all art is only a mark of the state of having been at some point, the expression of having lived. On the other hand, I say, even if I died before I was done working, the mark I managed to make would be enough, evidence of me being here; there would be no need to “finish” it; in the absence of me, it would be done.

On the other hand, you say, we’d still be stuck here; we’d be giving in; we’d die here.

And I know that this place was designed for us, I know that I fit in places here, I tell you that and you say that we’d fit anywhere, that we are octopuses, that any place is
for us because of this, our bodies can fill any space, any container that would hold us accommodates all our needs. This space, you say, was made for us and we do not belong here. You say:

Know the entrance known run and x ray detection cleanup kraken outdoor stage actor. Rebuild every moment of each kraken stage dramas, scripts, and performance. Additional slide, only 1 choice 1 barrel = drag world suspense high aerial rum 1 kraken kraken hull swing world skeleton coral rock stack limit moment step. We say one of the performances.

Sometimes think our architect friends squid; sometimes remember Don’t death. Remember the full address of the dedication of the craft forward notification; stone nautilus etching. Tank, until the bottom of the taste of most characters. Fractal path, water jet, Ammonite, education, mobile home, form and style, local history exactly how continuous compliance sea; in honor of first generation from structures of the city. Chambers of Commerce and the Chamber Chamber of Chambers of Commerce and industry and Chamber and industry and Industrial Chamber of Commerce and industry and Chamber of industry, Chamber, and industry and Chamber of Commerce and industry and Industrial Chamber of Commerce Chamber of Commerce and industry Chamber, chambers of Commerce, Chamber Chamber of Commerce Chamber Chamber of Commerce and Conference products of industry and chambers of Commerce and industry Chamber of Commerce and industry and Chamber of Commerce Chamber of Commerce and Chamber of Commerce and City of Industry and Chamber of Commerce Chamber of United States Chamber of Commerce and
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Talk about me or maybe ink, squid, provides a narrative on both sides of the page. Blood 1 tax included, wrote an excellent ink; accept blood dance and melodrama, the next write. Forget the tide defense predators secretion smoke repellents full screen Shredder low ink agreement; just fits the description of the dehydration of the drink. He squid North squid page bleed dry water 1 ink slurry expanded question 2 FAQ questions. Most of the surface, water, wind, air, light and some pages went from the corpse of the squid. It is a grand idea behind the object.
These objects is a Harry-Potter collection Bisque sulfur Airpocket clay formation probably heard as a mobile form sea volcanic clay water line submarine Nautilus. Durable, Nautilus cholera high liquid Earth mantle air dry density natural drying clay hole engine room sea kiln room mantle fluid Earth clay, sea level rise, water, his persistent deep hole room level. Object types, water and air. Stop the effort to handle one of the objects of exquisite beauty and positive issues; says great work clothes.

Kraken or ammonites, squid, Nautilus, close, and permanent memory frequency. Says working values of world events. On the other hand, so far were crafted to say nothing; indicates something. Just do it. Test your trading, dollops, unobtrusive observer information or other breeding costs! Prevents the enjoyment of the border-box world power. Easy to remember here, all the mysteries. All rooms of the fit. All hostages held design path error to generate big business only, or maybe I do.

We do not belong in the captivity of observers, you say, along with the other specimens, traded in species for discreet dollops of information, and at the cost of you, us, you and I, me, me! being forced to inhabit boundaries, comfortable and unexciting, how am I ever supposed to change the world while imprisoned in a clear box? There can be no mystery here, not when every turn is visible, not when I forget just as easily as I remember. I am not surprised, you say, that in every chamber there is nothing for us even though we fit, there can be nothing here for us that is not just given to us; we are in a place where we can take nothing, we can design for no more, where we suffer mistakes only at the hands of our captors.
You thrash and scream about confinement and restraint and you start talking about oceans and blue rings and fearsome devil fish and I can barely hold on as the water splashes and rocks the tank. But soon I don’t know you and I panic that the waters are too rough and feel my grasp slipping, slipping as the water splashes up, splashes out and I don’t know if I breathe air or water or why there is an octopus near me, and there is no evidence you can answer my questions, you who are too busy freaking out and flashing colors, you whose beak is secreting venom and whose suckers are clinging and releasing all kinds of debris all over the tank, and one of us tells the other this: they keep watching.
The Elephantine Assembly

In North Hollywood, there is a store full of tchotchkes and antiques that one can see easily from the street, whether driving by in a car or bus, usually, because white people do not walk in Los Angeles unless they walk to their car or ride the bus to delineate an ironic use of public transit. Taxis in this city are all but unusable because they charge by the mile as the city sprawls out. The footfall of the people who use the sidewalks as primary mode of transit may on a whim, perhaps the same whim that takes the white people into the shop, mark the occasion of passing time and seeking wonder. Between the small pink flowers and the white metal cage that holds the identity of the baubles, piles of books, the edges of desks and dressers, the plain shades and blank screens of abandoned electronics, all peek around security and foliage to observe the passersby. I am here looking for a gift to show my appreciation for being invited to a dinner. Something small would be nice, a trinket or object with small animation. A bobbling head or a glittery desk ornament would be appropriate. In the doorway is a mannequin posed as winged Nike, with purple sequin pasties. And in front of the store sits a large ceramic elephant, posed in triumph. With a store so front-heavy in victory, I cannot not help but feel like, from my car, there can be anything but success housed in the store.

I park and walk towards the shop. At the entrance, I stand and look over the elephant into the windows peeking between the bars and vines. That is when the smooth ceramic trunk wraps around my wrist.

I worry for a moment; the panic of suddenly being grabbed while my attention is drawn tenses up my back and starts me at grinding my teeth. The elephant’s trunk
tightens as I try to pull free. I flail and tug at my arm, and equal and opposite, as far as inertia allows, the elephant reciprocates. We rock back and forth and we tilt past the tipping point, casting us to the ground, but we don’t hit concrete - - we brush past its aggregate body. We fall right through the dirt, through the crust, the mantles, the core, the mantles, and the crust clear of the other side, until we are falling through the troposphere, the ozone layer, the stratosphere, the mesosphere, the thermosphere, and as we fall the sensation of descent begins to feel normal, especially after we depart the solar system. Hours later, the plummet stops. The valiant elephant shatters, the body clanging together, a clattering cymbal symbolizing something… and we never left the sidewalk. I remain with the decapitated, unarmed Nike, wondering what victory has been marked.

There is nothing so important in the store.

Without a gift I decide not to go to dinner.

I pull into my driveway, I walk to my mailbox. Amongst the junk mail and bills and offers to have future bills there is a bubble wrap envelope, and I think that I ordered a book online but I am not confident. I walk inside, I put the mail down on the entryway table, I sit with the lone package. And inside is a brown ceramic hunk, a long, conic mass, a parabola - - a tusk.

I dream the elephant all night into being, I magnetize the world that brought me across the elephant. I find a skin plate in bed with me. While making coffee in my morning rituals for the day, I reach for a stir and read one of the magazines while I wait for bread to toast, and pull out a tail and dab it on a napkin. Each bit manifests with trumpet fanfare, they announce the arrival of some kind of victory. A shoulder props up a book on display in a library; a quarter-torso comes upon me in a bathroom stall; my lunch
is served on an elephant ear. When I go to watch television, make dinner, and sleep, my remote, my salt shaker, my pillow are replaced by a trunk, a foot, a foot.

The pieces seem to always be alone, which is to say, I discover them one by one. It takes a week of amassing elephant ephemera to convince me to reassemble the pachyderm puzzle stalking every activity. And sitting down in my living room, I take the mound of elephant parts and begin the labor of adding all the material together. I sort and count the collected pieces: two ears, a tail, four legs, half a torso, two tusks, a trunk, a trunk. I wonder about the twin noses, and take stock of my stock, working to figure out the redundancies, to assemble it true. I have right ears. And it is impossible to put a single best foot forward when they are all back left feet. The proportions are even uneven. I come to the conclusion that there is more than one elephant dissembled in my pile. Without a leg to stand on, I decide to amass material until I have enough elephant to produce a reasonable facsimile.

On the way home from work one day the following week, I take the long route in the slow lane of the 101 N to buy some time in wasted gas. While on the freeway and too deep in my head, I run over something large enough to thump my head against the roof of the car and stop me in my tracks. I pull to the side of the road to calm my nerves; cars pass wildly around me. And in the middle of the lane, about a hundred yards off, the mysterious offender watches me watch it from the shoulder. It is a large, grey hunk of concrete. I trigger my hazard lights and sit and watch traffic avoid confronting the lump in the same way I managed to. For awhile this is enough. When someone finally stops to ask if I need a ride or some help I decline and call AAA for a tow because I am done driving for the day.
When the tow truck driver asks if something fell off my car, watching me watch the gray hunk watching me, I lie with my index finger, the hunk. So he stops traffic in the slow lane, pulls the car up on the ramp of his truck with the giant chains, and puts the rock in my trunk. Before the trunk latches I recognize the hunk as a foot.

Mercifully, the tow truck driver is quiet as he delivers me to my house, and then my car to me. The silence is broken only by the clinking of the release of chains as my car rolls into my driveway. I turn in for the evening, and when I wake up the next day, it is with the resolve to quit my job and take up my coincidental collecting full time.

I collect parts for a year and categorize them; I build storage. I create a tag system that corresponds to a catalogue that I keep meticulously. I sketch every entry. I look back every so often at old illustrations and think it funny that I had such terrible line work at the beginning, and become thankful that I bought elephant anatomy books and took drawing courses, and even when it dawns on me that I can take pictures and put them on my computer and use technology to generate a photographic index that would be easily searchable, the habit of spending time with each chunk feels permanently more appropriate. As my collection grows, I rent space to house it.

I read a lot about pottery. I read dozens of blogs, which I am surprised to find are all preoccupied with assembling other ceramic animals. One in China, lion dogs; one in Argentina, cows; one in Germany, doves. On one blog is an article about a Japanese custom where broken pottery is reassembled with gold patching. The patchwork increases the value of the ceramics since the object becomes imbued with experience. I discuss it over lunch with my yet-to-be dinner friend who suggests that these shattered elephants seem like the ideal candidate for this kind of preparation. I go through the troves, I pick
up segments and try to combine them. I try to find limbs posed in sympathetic positions, matching clay bodies to form elephant bodies, try to match glaze work and patterning. I find that not a single piece in the rented warehouse corresponds with another; an additional problem is that the number of parts would be countless if I had not been numbering them as they entered the collection. I consider frankensteining an elephant together out of parts more or less in proportion, but the idea of creating a monster haunts me.

Then, the winged Nike mannequin comes to visit me one day out of the blue. It just appears on my doorstep in the late afternoon, unexpected. I invite it in for tea. It hovers over me as I sit at the table because it does not have an articulate waist. It is exceptionally quiet because it has no head. And it lets the tea go cold because the Nike mannequin has no arms to pick the tea up with, much less still having no head. In noir fashion, the mannequin asks me to find a head and arms for it. I confess that I cannot be much help; tailoring is out of my discipline. Now if it were made of elephant parts, maybe. But I respectfully decline the diverted course and thank the Nike by sending the mannequin, purple sequin pasties inclusive, out.

For a long time I forget I live in Los Angeles; the whole city becomes a ceramic elephant graveyard to me. Skeletal remains of my castings are spread over everywhere as would a well worn glaze. My attentions are held only by the quest. And I am okay with that. I learn that not all that glitters is gold. Sometimes it is a hunk of elephant. And my collection, while drawing my attention from the city draws the city to it.

The story circulates. I get ceaseless letters from zinesters and then art students who want to document the space. It becomes a kind of hipster thing to wear what is
purported to be elephant parts around the neck or wrist like a charm. After the DIY culture comes and goes, Huell Howser phones me and asks about filming an episode of *California’s Gold* in my warehouse, but I tell him that it is not a gold collection; these are painted fragments of manmade stone. I turn them all down. I am unable bring myself to cast the spotlight on my personal collection.

I can’t help but think this is the labor of elephants, each piece never forgetting its origins.

My auteur persona only encourages Angelenos to try and participate in my work. They send fan letters to the collection, and some letters have elephant segments sealed in awkward and lumpy envelopes. With each addition, I interrogate the bit. I take it out, weigh it in my hand, and figure out if it is elephant or not; I get good at calling pieces by sight. I send other animal parts to their corresponding collectors. In the case that I find an unknown part, I lose it in the city, assuming someone will find use for it and that it will turn up eventually where it belongs. I reason the shape and orientation of those parts that are for certain elephant.

I take another year to find innovative ways to maximize my access to the collection. I hire guys to cabinets, shelves, cubbies, and specimen drawers to store haunches, eyes, toenails, teeth. I take a few carpentry classes on my off days at the Home Depot to begin facilitating myself. I soon take over the building jobs. I make racks and aisles and center islands, the place a honeycomb of elephant activity. When I can no longer lift the books that house the records, and the shelves literally moan complaints of being at bursting capacity, I attempt to eliminate pieces from the collection that are least
likely to fit with other, more purposeful saves or ones that too closely resemble redundant selections. The collection enterprises unique pieces exclusively.

And so I let the people in and they pick up fragments that I tried to use with other fragments to assemble complete set elephants, utilizing the mass to force combinatorial play. But, as before when I was on my own, the task force cannot make a compelling case that any two pieces belong together, that they are part of the same hypothetical elephant. The iron content of one piece is too high or low compared to the copper content of another, or the style and tooling required of two pieces do not match. The glaze is too pure or crazed or ran in ways that fell out of style long before the technological methods of getting the surface so geometrically smooth circulated. Without this option, again, we try to come up with a way to deal with all these partial pachyderms.

The Nike mannequin comes to visit in the middle of this. It brings me gifts: a photograph of an infinite hallway, a wax hand emerging from the lid of the closed box, and a hug and kiss with a new arm and head. We have a standing lunch date. It tells me of all the many heads it tried on, looking for the lost one, the arms it slipped on one by one. It is hard, Nike says, to find what you are looking for to complete you if you are only looking in a thrift shop.

I revisit the old mission when the Nike leaves, to find that ephemeral ideal elephant that grabbed my arm so many years ago, even through through the exercise of assembling elephant approximates and failing. I thumb through the books I collected, looking for some new system to resolve these boundaries. I take a break, I open the hand box, and discover a book in there. In the book, in the box - - the technique of Japanese object-mending Barbara Bloom on a whim describes. She says “When the Japanese mend
broken objects, they aggrandize the damage by filling the cracks with gold. They believe that when something's suffered damage and has a history it becomes more beautiful.” And I believe her in that these fragmentary elephants need mending, since from their inception they have seemingly only ever been part of a greater elephant that they never knew. And suddenly aware of the meticulous nature of my catalog it makes no sense. I begin to focus on the aesthetic pleasures of putting the pieces together as I see fit, regardless of how they might form and inform the concept of the unified whole. To do so is to give up on the idea of tracing the origins of the piece and the hypothetical elephants they came from and instead to embrace the elephants instead they might be with the resources and access I have managed to discover in this warehouse space. Only the gold lining stands out as marking a piece as distinctly different from any other piece. The assembly, then is not grotesque for no reason, it is grotesque because it reveals our innate need for what Aristotle called a unity of form; let no elephant part fall outside the boundaries of that elephant.

Of course, that exact moment charts the beginning of the decline of the project, and the scarcity of the segments, the fall of the industry, and the rise of the winged Nike, as it happens often enough in Los Angeles. I never managed to make it out to those dinner plans, and I never explain why to the hosts.

For some reason, I’m the better for it.
The Fox Hunt

Chapter I

The Late Afternoon

In the golden hours of the day, on the bank of the river, the fox, quick and brown, jumps over the lazy dog while chasing after a white rabbit for just a taste of its hind legs. But so long as those legs hold out, they remain lucky for the rabbit and they bestow an advantage that aids its yearning to continue to be attached, to continue to be whole. The fox persists, regardless of the rabbit’s desires, mostly for the thrill of the hunt. Even as the rabbit runs through the rabbit hole, down into the dark tube system that is filled with china cabinets and mason jars loaded with preserves and compotes, the fox is convinced that it will eventually catch the rabbit. It is not until the white rabbit disappears from sight that the fox begins to worry that its dinner has escaped the meal. The fox still has a sense of the scent trail, and follows it feverishly since it is the only mode of orientation available in the lot of vertical antiques the rabbit disappeared into. What begins as a slight decline transitions into a full-scale freefall and the fox wonders not if it will survive the plummet, but how long will it last.
Chapter II

The Bottom of the Burrow

When the fox comes to on the floor of some cylindrical room, it realizes this whole time it has also been a girl with flaxen hair. And she is thirsty. And above her there is a huge glass table. The fox notices on the other side of the table a hanger holding a blue dress just the size to fit her girlish body and slips it off the hanger and slips it on, and then returns to the table where snacks engraved with instructions rest. How did I not notice the snacks, she thinks, how did I not notice the table, but realistically it does not matter either way for she follows the command: eat me, which is inscribed on the cookie and she is made small by the hunger and the obedience she does not recognize in the confection. Only after she takes a bite does the fox realize the change in her size, and through the bottom of the glass table she spies a key to open the door that she is now just the right size to pass through. But the key is so high yonder, the fox thinks, how will I ever get to it? She runs in circles around the table, cutting corners and howling with rage at her predicament. The fox collides with the table at every turn, rocking the glass table back and forth until it falls and shatters, relinquishing the key and giving the fox a space to pursue an exit.
Chapter III

10,000 Monkey Shakespeares

The fox enters the next room which is full of what she estimates as ten thousand monkeys, each sitting at a writing desk and working hard. She wonders what is it they do while they chatter over the clatter of typewriter keys. But the room is so large and the monkeys are so intent on finishing whatever it is they started that they don't look up for a second to scan the girl as she moves through their space. Finally the fox is so curious of the place that she has to ask one of them what is going on. A monkey turns to her and the fox asks, what is your aim here and the monkey says that they hack the typewriters all day making the buttons clack and the reams of paper ring at the end of each line because if we keep at it the Unicorn says that we can all produce that great literature everybody wants to read. And if the Unicorn believes in us and our work, then we must do the work because the belief is mandate enough, because while some poetry is original, no original work is producible at will. And how, the fox asks, would you recognize the great literature once it is produced, to which the monkey replies its greatness would be self-evident. And what, the fox asks, would you do with the great literature once you have produced it, and the monkey says that we’d need one hundred of us to produce the literature and to be aware of the production, and that after one hundred of us knew about it then we all would know about great literature because the information would spread like the knowledge of washing sweet potatoes. When the fox knows that this is probably all the information that she is likely to get, she brushes her golden locks behind her pointy ear with her paw and curtsies. At this, the monkey offers a friendly palm and off the fox goes, exiting into the wilds beyond the workspace.
Chapter IV

Some Kind of Madness

The fox comes up on a table in a clearing set for a tea party which she invites herself to. The fox has never been invited to a tea party, but from afar they have always looked fun. She pulls up a seat with a complete place setting and hopes that the tea is as good as she has frequently imagined and the food is as satisfying as the rabbit’s leg will be if the fox ever comes back across it. Out from the wild growths comes a poisoned man, a mangy hare, and up pops a dormouse that apparently resides in a teapot on the table that she only just notices is in front of her. While she has no interest in socializing with the emergent forest population joining the party, the fox is keen on conversing with the mouse, who seemed not completely aware of the strange guests that came to sit at its table. It begins the dialog on the fact that it never daydreams because it never wakes up long enough to be able to tell the difference, and in such a place one could not be so certain anyway. When the fox reaches for some pastries sitting on the table, the mouse declares authoritatively on historical facts and poetry, reciting them with what would appear to be equal facility; some of the facts are not accurate and some of the poetry is not properly attributed, but at the same time, there can always be the hope that the errors are merely prophetic and not outright falsities, and so the babble continues on as the dormouse remains essentially dormant in the teapot. Before she can get suckered into a conversation with the two other vagabonds at this party and find herself infirmed along with them, the fox hikes up her skirt and flees through the undergrowth that the sickly guests emerged from without even getting half a cup of tea.
Chapter V

At the Shoreline

After cutting through the dense underbrush, through everything that is dark and overgrown, the fox muses on the sound of crashing waves audible from off in the distance. She can smell the salt in the air, as well as a specific melancholy: each crest seemed to carry sorrow from distant shores. And it is only affirmed by the mauve color of the tides that wash over what appear to be abandoned beaches. Then right as she decides to turn away, a procession of birds and fish and crustaceans and small mammals march out of the sea foam playing instruments of all kinds. They set up a gigantic bonfire and dance and sing around it, with birds on woodwinds, fish and crustaceans on percussion, mammals playing strings. While they circulate their impromptu camp, the girl hesitantly crawls, trying not to scare them; the dress throws them off their guard, and the blonde hair does not threaten them. But the fox only has one thing in mind. She still has not eaten anything besides the cookie, and after having been tempted by the party, she is ravenous. And the salt in the air is exaggerating her dehydration. So she crouches low, assumes a predatory stance, and the rest of the animals take it as a dance; they all crouch low, they all stalk each other. With everyone sneaking, everyone is obvious, and the girl cannot hunt. So she pricks up her whiskers and points her little black nose down in defeat, settling on the possibilities of scavenging. The scent of oysters draws her away.
Chapter VI
The Mock Turtle Dishes

She follows the scent all the way up to the craggy cliff face that overlooks the festivities happening on the beach. The fox discovers there are no oysters so high up, but there are a lot of discarded shells. There were oysters up here, she deduces. She sits and watches the moon rise and the flames of the bonfire die down, and the fox strains her ears to listen to the sounds of the tide overtake the last hurrahs of the beach critters as they return to the ocean. Her paws fiddle with her dress; at some point she has become filthy. Just as she is beginning to let her ears down, the scene is broken by the appearance of what was once a turtle. It shambles over to the cliff edge the fox is sitting at with its fake shell dragging behind. I am going to do it, it shrieks, I am going to launch myself again. In the moonlight the girl can see the Mock Turtle’s shell drags behind him, and in his arms, a book. She asks the Mock Turtle if he has any reason to stay up there with her, and the turtle confesses that there are plenty, but none of them could be found in the book he was reading. What book is it, the fox asks, hoping for a familiar tale shared amongst her fellow vixens. The mock turtle says that he has no idea. He confesses to carrying it about in his shell, and to taking it out at leisure times, to puzzling over the riddles which composed it- to holding it in different positions and at different distances, till at last the meaning of some hopeless scrawl would flash upon him, but he never had such luck, so he became despondent. The monkeys, the fox says, it may just be the monkeys. The turtles, he says, are supposed to be wise here, but I just don’t have the capacity for this kind of thing; if I were as wise as that I’d have a headache all day long. So he says goodbye to the fox, tightens up the slack of his shell, and dives into the soup.
Wandering down from the cliff, the fox marvels at what just happened. It occupies her mind for most of the walk back down to sea level, in the moments between stomach growls. She has always had elaborate fantasies of being honored with a funeral; foxes rarely are afforded the luxury. Sometimes they die, and sometimes they are eaten by larger animals or smaller insects. Mostly, the carcasses are discarded. There is a savagery with which all non-web-spinning creatures conduct themselves. Spiders catch their prey, tuck them in, inject them, and put them to sleep, she thinks, and caterpillars, too, spin, but only manage to catch themselves in the midst of magnificent transformations. A cotton tail flashes in the moonlight, but the fox is too tired to give chase. In the morning, she thinks, the first thing I will do is get some water.
Chapter VIII

Flora / Khôra

The girl awakens and climbs out of the ball she slept in, reaching arms out in front of her and arching her back, only to bounce down at the shoulder and rock at the hip. The fox asks the flowers around her where she can find water but they only know about the water beneath the surface, and the fox just doesn’t have time for that. Thirst and hunger preclude much of the patience she’d otherwise have. The fox insists that the flowers know about water; plants are chiefly experts on the movement of liquids. Only aquifers, she thinks, are more conversant on the subject of subterranean water. And they refuse, regardless of the fox’s protests, to divert their conversations to the paths that would send her in the right direction. This is irritating to the girl because the scent of water is everywhere and notes of rabbit trail underneath. To the flowers, talk of the sun is paramount. And when some small shrub brings up the fear of the dreaded herbivores, all conversation becomes wooly, since none of the plants have ever seen one personally, though they are known to exist. And the fox tries again to ask, to get a simple answer to her problem. After all, they tell her, like the monkeys say in their new volume: it is as much what we are talking about as what we are not. With that, the berries whortled, the dragons snapped, the willows wept. And the fox walks off in the opposite direction, hearing behind her the flowers asking: wasn’t she a queer little vegetable?
Chapter IX

The Reasonable Lobster

She comes upon a dry riverbed. Surely this leads to at least one of my goals, the fox thinks, or at least it has in the past. The fox chases the bends with the ghosts of currents, her skirt tracing behind her, until she stops abruptly upon spying a lobster sitting on a rock in the middle of her path. Well, you aren’t fording this river, the lobster says, so you must be swimming it. The fox introduces herself with a curtsy and says that she was following the path to try and find water to sate her thirst so she can find the rabbit and sate her hunger. I haven’t seen anyone run this river since that school of salmon came through here, the lobster states, and in order for them to run, they needed water; since there is no water, you must be swimming. The girl furls her muzzle. She asks if it knows how long the water has been gone. The lobster says that it has been gone all day, and offers to host her until the river returns in the evening. The fox wonders how long the river will be out, and the lobster says it will come back when it tires and wants to go to bed, to which the fox asks if that means it will be back early. And the fox rolls its eyes when the lobster says that no reasonable creatures expect impossibilities. The girl asks where the next body of water is and the lobster lifts a claw to gesture just further upstream. As she rounds the corner and sees the pond the lobster referenced, she hears the river get home. The lobster continues, you see, no lobsters are unreasonable.
Chapter X

The Lesser Weasel

The first lap the girl takes of the pond hydrates her long tongue before it rinses over her fangs. And the second lap rejuvenates her parched throat. After several more moments of gulping water, the fox notices that she is not alone. A cagey rodent was staring at her from across the little pond; it too was drinking more than a passing sip. I am not going to eat you, the girl says, you are not nearly meaty enough to be worth the effort. Good, the rodent says, for I am the lesser weasel. Why are you the lesser weasel, the girl asks, and the weasel replies that there are weasels out there that are lesser than he, so he is not the least weasel, and probably not by far. It is a good thing you are not going to eat me because I, he continues, can kill a rabbit more than five times my size if I can catch them. The fox’s eyes widen and they are both aware the other is stalking the white rabbit. The girl brushes her fur from her forehead, she crouches low, her ears roll back, her snout scrunches a little…
Chapter XI

Caught

…and she really is a fox after all.
Chapter XII

Journey to the Surface

Once the fox is full and exits the burrow, after a series of victories and parades, it seeks out its nest and crawls in for a long rest. The sun, still golden, still hangs in the sky. Tomorrow, the fox thinks, tomorrow I will return. Tomorrow I will be crowned. I will pick up my trophies, I will mark my territories, I will sentence my adversaries, I will feast again. I will tell my tale and my kingdom will listen. I will talk of turning tables, of moving past monkeys, of reflecting the dreams of others, of inventing a dance, of swallowing schadenfreude, of creature meditation, of flowery conversation, of crustacean logic, of friendly foes, of nostalgia, of the pain of the return home. And as the fox drifts to sleep, questions cross its mind: what is the use of a story without pictures or conversations? Or the use of a crown? Gilding, she thinks, yes, gilding.
Foreword

The Modern Response Narrative

A Brief Commentary of the Use and Function of the Genre of Literary Conversation in an Age of Intense Romantic Naturalists and their Detractors

In an age of imitation, I can claim no special merit for this slight attempt at doing what is known to be so easy. In one respect, this story is an experiment, and may chance to prove a failure: I mean that I have not thought it necessary to maintain throughout the gravity of style which scientific writers usually affect, and which has somehow come to be regarded as an ‘inseparable accident’ of scientific teaching. In part, this is a matter of function; primarily this story seeks to challenge the stakes higher education has placed in the development of the natural science while recasting the endeavor of plumbing the depths of the human spirit as the goal of perpetual novices. In part, this is a matter of pride; this story seeks to prove that an argument that is just as invested in the historical understanding and potential futures of our race and its identity as the human animal can emerge from this genre. These subtle difficulties seem to lie at the root of every Tree of Knowledge, and they are far more hopeless to grapple with than any that occur in its higher branches.

It is certainly, a most bewildering and unsatisfactory theory: one cannot help feeling that there is a great lack of substance in all this shadowy host—that, as the procession of phantoms glides before us, there is not one that we can pounce upon, and say “Here is a Proposition that must be either true or false!”—that it is but a Barmecide Feast, to which we have been bidden—and that its prototype is to be found in that mythical island, whose inhabitants “earned a precarious living by writing each others’ writing”!
Pitying friends have warned me of the fate upon which I am rushing: they have predicted that, in thus abandoning the assumed dignity of a scientific writer, I shall alienate the sympathies of all true scientific readers, who will regard the book as a mere \textit{jeu d’espirit}, and will not trouble themselves to look for no serious argument in it. But it must be borne in mind that, if there is a Scylla before me, there is also a Charybdis—and that, in my fear or being read as a jest, I may incur the darker destiny of not being read at all. In view of this painful possibility, I will not (as I might) appeal indignantly to my other writings as a proof that I am incapable of such a deed: I will not (as I might) point to the strong moral purpose of this story itself, to the theoretical principles so cautiously inculcated in it, or to its noble teachings in Literary History—I will take the more prosaic course of simply explaining how it happened.

The writer's intention was to embody in each Knot (like the medicine so dexterously, but ineffectually, concealed in the jam of our early childhood) one or more critical questions—in Narratology, Historicism, or Queer Theory, as the case might be—for the amusement, and possible edification, of the fair reader. Following this practice, the writing emerged over the course of a great many days. And thus it came to pass that I found myself at last in possession of a huge unwieldy mass of litterature—if the reader will kindly excuse the spelling—which only needed stringing together, upon the thread of a consecutive story, to constitute the story I hoped to write.

Having, then, distinctly stated that I challenge no attention in the following little story to its merely mimetic stance, I must beg the candid reader to confine his criticism to its treatment of the subject.
Begin at the **beginning**, and do not allow yourself to gratify a mere idle curiosity by dipping into the book, here and there. Don’t begin any fresh Chapter until you are certain that you **thoroughly** understand the whole story *up to that point*, and that you have worked, correctly, most if not all of the examples which have been set. So long as you are conscious that all the land you have passed through is absolutely **conquered**, and that you are leaving no unsolved difficulties **behind** you, which will be sure to turn up again later on, your triumphal progress will be easy and delightful. Otherwise, you will find your state of puzzlement get worse and worse as you proceed, till you give up the whole thing in utter disgust. If these prescriptions are beyond the practice of the reader, they are free to delineate any path through these chapters, though it is outside the intended use of this text and possible results of continuing on in this manner are unanticipated.