

Lohren Green

Present Now

It's early morning and Jackson is refreshed in the shower: a running free fall, rush and oasis in the dry, quotidian routine that habitually follows. Here he is in the flow, a unique individual inside what is, as part of what is, currently considering the thought that everything gives and receives itself through time. "I am this, to me," he observes, stepping out and seeing his reflection in the mirror. He towels himself dry before applying calcium-enriched pastes to teeth, scents to armpits, softeners to skin, and then, standing in front of his wardrobe of clothes, putting together his ensemble: blue-jean pants paired with a pullover drawn atop an undershirt. His breakfast, sundering the night's going without, consists of toasted bread, and two liquids in two glasses: a fruit juice in one, caffeinated coffee in the other. And today—as on other days when he has appetite for more—cereal. Despite the selfsameness of the meal, there are always subtle nuances of distinction in it: the doneness of the toast, the sweetness of the nectar, the craft of the brew.

At the threshold he feels the change from indoor to outdoor air as he bolts his lock and walks with paced steps through his gateway to the car sitting in park at the curb. The instant the car starts the news is informing him: China's government, exerting its authority to control through regulation, has barred use of the word "censorship." Climate change is altering weather patterns. The supreme court is hosting oral hearings on binding contracts. An obscure philosopher speculates on the chances that everything is a digital simulation. There's high pressure over the Rocky Mountains.

And so attuned to the regional radio broadcast, Jackson is carried in his vehicle to another place: Cocoda where he is a debugger of the quality assurance software that the company sells to software professionals. One would think that with such a team of experts working at their expertise, there would be no room for gaps in the code, but the dynamics of development always generate something new. A cynic looks down on bugs as pesty bothers born of errors bred by flaws. Whereas an optimist sees an excess that is something more, and, drawing us forward through analogy to a more positive picture, might express it thus: it is like a chorus singing a rondo in an amphitheater with an echo, every moment an abundance spilling forth to extend the present to another.

Jackson always means what he says, and is looked upon with high regard for speaking a mantra that is both simple and oft repeated, by himself and by others: “it works, or it doesn’t.” The functional selfsameness of this his mantra’s response to every practical matter reinforced the team’s collective stance on his group standing. He repeated it again and again, as his father Jack had also frequently done before him, yet it always meant something a little bit different depending on the surrounding situation and his vocal intonation.

II

Jackson loved another named Amanda. He was contrary to the opinion that opposites attract, and his own attraction to her held closely to this point. Their meeting was felicitous, ordinary and unforeseen: the happy occasion of chance at a pedestrian intersection. No, they did not bump into one another. He was too careful, she too adept, for such a clumsy encounter. But approaching each other from a spaced distance they did recognize in one another something they thought they knew — and something they thought they would like to know again. And so as they came face to face, thinking forwards and backwards about themselves vis-à-vis this other, it crossed both their minds both to move on and go back. Some might think it could have gone either way but in fact they both did both as the lights signaled change in the passing moment. They each went their way that day, but as we’ve said they remarked on one another so that the next time they met each other they

found themselves together engaged in conversation and some months later leaving their separate apartments to cohabit in a condominium.

She created synthetics that had profusely productive properties generating abundance for the many who owned them: the shareholders of a company — a company that included the subsidiary she contributed to — who received some of their distributed value in the form of company shares and some in quarterly dividends. She had in the past and after long study with a classically trained researcher made a substantial impact on the science of materials through a medium capable of translating precise external impingements into meticulously retained impressions. She left that behind as her trajectory then carried her into her current workstreams: evolving the physics of fluid dynamics as applied to transient plasmas. It is a specialty that might be just a passing fancy of hers as her musings shift from lasting material outcomes to the momentary experience of the journey — and there are constantly changing points of view being expressed all around her as to whether her improvisations will spring new revenue streams for the enterprise endeavoring to adapt to changing times.

Jackson and Amanda text each other messages. Cryptic, on point, and without deviating into error, so they avoid cliché (not their style) and flaw (either). For example, in one instance when she was simultaneously away and in his thoughts, he corresponded to her: “There is a place you are inside our embrace.” That Friday she typed “rendezvous repast” and so they met again at the same place they ate the week before. Their hunger grew with appetizers, and then they had the main course together, family style, generously providing one another with ample servings from large, shared plates of food. Though the meal merited dessert, and the two-tiered double chocolate Genoese cake split twice by two layers of chocolate mousse appeared to both as a completely fulfilling conclusion to lunch, they jointly discussed deferring — whenever their waiter returned from his break — the dessert to another day.

That night, in the dark, cushioned in the couch, they consummated the end of the week together, intertwined. Then they slept there, dreaming fantastic occurrences as their closed eyes scanned imagined figments and their bodies sometimes twitched in the quiet stillness of the passing time, the bed lying dormant a room away.

III

At the edge of the couch in the middle of that Saturday morning night he woke from sleep dislocated for a reason that can't be explained: it wasn't the weekend, or the couch, or him. Now looked at in retrospect, one wonders if it was what we think we feel when we do things like knock walls, garble articulations, forget reminders, or bite our cheek: a string of local disruptions run through a greater, off-kilter order. Some say it's one's stars, which literally doesn't make sense, but could be true as a metaphor, or instead understood as a straightforward case of entanglement with some disruly corner of our cosmos. Others see it as a random glitch in fate's reckoning. And then: what role a recalcitrant will, or fragmenting identity? Whatever the wherefore, when Jackson woke again, late morning, though on in intention yet he felt off. Working steadily to shake it, he ran a quick, straight jog through an urban park. He then veered from an errand to pause for tea in a café before continuing back the way he came to the store whose shelves it turned out did not hold the ingredients he needed. The plan no longer outlining what was to come, Jackson improvised a menu using recipes that he had already made, returned to the shelves to gather the originally unforeseen provisions, paid with credit, and then entered the outside again.

Finding his empty, partial-zero emissions vehicle in the packed lot, he clicked the key fob to unlock the auto door, swung into his seat, and heard a 30 second ad capturing the freedom of a lifetime that's to be found in a river cruise. The host then recapped the news in an emotive (grim to gay) sequence: the right-to-lifer who had bombed an abortion clinic and killed a nurse is given life in prison. The money in Argentina is worthless, and the minimum wage in the US is not enough. A well-known writer is releasing his complete works, including his uncollected stories, in four slim volumes. The season's most anticipated movie turns out to be an unpredictable tragicomedy that critics applaud. And, finally, a fun fact: the most common street name in the U.S. is Second Street (presumably because First and Main split down the expected leader into two runners-up).

He backed out to head home, and passed by the Liberty Safes store that made present the memory of a long-time acquaintance and ungenerous spendthrift from his past. There's an anecdote about that man that would make one with schadenfreude think justice is poetic: he exhausted his savings in the reckless purchase of a masterfully designed safe that caught the fancy of carjackers and was stolen, with his car, from the orderly striped parking lot through which, afterward, the rattled man meandered, slowly propelled by his flagging adrenaline. Driving away Jackson arrived at the thought: "Sometimes people do things, and sometimes things happen to people. The puzzle is the fit." The freeway took him straight past the verdant Skylawn cemetery and turned his distracted attention to the dead lives there: all the vital, varied vicissitudes of each now identically filed in neat dirt rows of defunction. "What, of what they did, was actually done..." he entertained with seriousness, "...and what undone?" he went on before suddenly slowing to a stop necessitated by an accident ahead — an accident that had caused, through a sequence of chance happenings compiled upon a passive driver, her fatality.

That evening, now at home, the day still felt uncanny. Jackson was deep into preparations for the meal, but while, for example, the box grater did smoothly grate, yet it didn't feel right. He quit working so his mind could engage the tool: a set of identical planes variously perforated to create four logics of unraveling, all aggressively awaiting external inputs. Broken down in his thought it was a holistic form both solid and hollow. Constructive and destructive. Functional and unnecessary. This inertly resonant thing brought to mind the artificial intelligence that the engineers were starting to play with at work. Solid but hollow. Constructive and destructive. Functional and unnecessary. Still nestled in his hand, the grater. Pondering this mundane implement in the grand scheme of things, things felt, essentially, superfluous. And he himself, wasn't he, if differently, the same? In the mornings he regarded himself in the mirror, toasted his toast, and passed time securing the performance of quality assurance software. It is true, yes, in his own eyes, he was often present in the moment and generally content, without wants. But now he looked at this his ordinary state from an alien place. He rested to work and worked to rest, and his significant other Amanda did the same vacuous thing. They consumed energy to expend

it, indeed even expended it to consume it, and everyone and every thing did as well in their own way, and would do so ceaselessly until their end, each evolution an irrational logic of unraveling that accomplishes something and means nothing. This present thought-space, he's aware, is an isolating downer incompatible with the group's upcoming festivities.

IV

That descended night Amanda's sister Carolyn was mixing cocktails for the party of couples: Amanda and Jackson, Carolyn and Alice. Like her sister, Carolyn was productively adept, though in a different if distantly related field: an art of collage that gathered materials, subjects and forms of varied affinities into pieces of multivocal expression. Through their evolving yet contiguous traits, these artworks assembled an oeuvre, the parts of which were distributed through the living and dining rooms of overlapping circles of friends and family to more distant acquaintances and kin, achieving through these placements the connections that propagated a small measure of respected recognition through a loosely formed local community of three degrees of separation.

Carolyn stirred the blend of rye whiskey with an herbal vermouth and spiced bitters. As she finished the cocktails by placing into each first ice cubes and then a taut cherry drawn from ruby syrup in a wide-mouthed jar, she connected the anticipated taste of the plump fruit to the thought of the dessert ahead that would also conjoin sweetness with acidity in a pie. That pictured piece of pie connected next to a foreglimpsed montage of moments flickering through her imagination: aged cheese wedges next to sea salt crackers, smiles subtly curled by dry humor, rearranged seatings from kitchen island stools to living room couch to dining table chairs, and, finally, now plated in dramatic presentation, that flaky crusted fruit pie — topped by an elegant dollop of whipped cream — and bracketed by a thin crescent of orange sauce doubling the plate's contour at the edge of the composition.

Also there was Alice, sitting on a low bookshelf near a socket in the wall. She looked at a photograph of the ocean, thought about Wednesday, rubbed her earlobe, and then noticed that Jackson, sitting still in his chair, looked shaken. She had heard fragments of his accident account – a Ford, blue sky, crying, a billboard. She sought some lure to pry him from his brooding: pancakes, boots, viruses, Hungarian, algorithms. Then she talked about what she wanted to. Then about what she heard a friend say yesterday. Catching on to her conscious efforts to detach him from his unwitting worry, he tried to get her take on political action but left off, feeling disengaged from the conversation after he suggested that commands aren't compelling and she responded with a theory of dark matter.

Carolyn returned from her crossover car — its hatchback perfect for the ingress of artworks — with a new construction on canvas of colored, textured surfaces that she proudly leaned on display against the tan leather arm of a wingback chair. Jackson's eye went first to a reddish knot of material that was off-center and projecting some three inches forward from the board that held it. He experienced the string of thoughts “open heart bouquet disheveled gift bow” as his eye followed the looping turns of this enigmatic node that led left to a valley or perhaps oval bowl or sea shell, painted a mottled purplish crimson and fringed on its sides with a small scree cascade of round brown buttons. This oval closed back to photographs embedded in wax in the corner, encased images of a time gone by, her friends in one linking arms in a game or whim at the beach, then, older, their hands clasped in the midst of a casual walk near a lake, then, older yet, fingers twined around some herb sprigs next to a handmade mug from which rose barely visible wisps of steam. Next and last was a square photo, it alone emerging out of the dull, semi-transparent wax. It was a printed social post from today of Carolyn's face just in front of a blurred sculpture of a woman's head in the background — a roughly worked bust fashioned it turned out by her mentor — and Carolyn's form a focused, fleshed out echo of this bust's more inchoate humanity behind. Carolyn's expression in the photo radiated a vibrant intelligence barely tethered back by the fine crows lines in her skin at the outside corners of her flashing eyes, these lines in turn leading into black threads forming a web of semi-geometrical pattern stretched over the underlying board, a web that looked like a cartographer's markings or neural network or circuitry scheme running from her face back over and up to the

reddish knot, the whole diagramming some integral of her individuality as it flowed through an improvised system animating her life in time. The look she had, both immediate and intent, reminded him of her striking expression one day the year before after she had jumped from a creek's far rocky bank, to a sandbar, to a mid-stream stone, to the pebble shore on which he stood, her aspect briskly triumphant.

Still meditating on Carolyn's improvised ensemble, Jackson was for a time at peace there in the silence all around them. And then presently becoming aware of himself and the others in this situation, he spoke articulately and with grateful appreciation for her hard-won work. His elan increasingly inspired by the creative energy of her artistic expression, he became more positively animated, and started to talk about the art of lively conversation, engaging the others with recounted tales of the legendary Oscar Wilde whose storied wit carried many a memorable night. Amanda rejoined genially with famous quips from the dialogues in Wilde's plays as Carolyn had a sip of her cocktail, selected a triple cream truffled brie from the platter, and took the topic from wit to wordplay to riddles to enigmas.

V

The day after next, Monday, was another day entirely, and Jackson was feeling like himself again. He repeated his accustomed routine, commuted to work in his vehicle, heard of current happenings in the news, and arrived at his destination with a productive focus on his work priorities. In a recurring weekly meeting, he collaborated with colleagues on a joint project, and, the short summit successfully concluded in a single hour, he looked at his calendar to see the schedule of the day's events, first noticing, and second confirming, that he was double-booked at 2:00.

Rather than cycle again through the mundane workings of his professional routine, let's put a stop here. For having now gone on and on, aiming at what is beyond us, at least, at a bare minimum, yes, we can confirm: there's a fine line between manifest presence and useless redundancy, a generative creation and a frivolous trifle. But, yet, and also, there's something curious about all this that might make us wonder: where does significant meaning come from, and, in closing, could this story have been written by code?