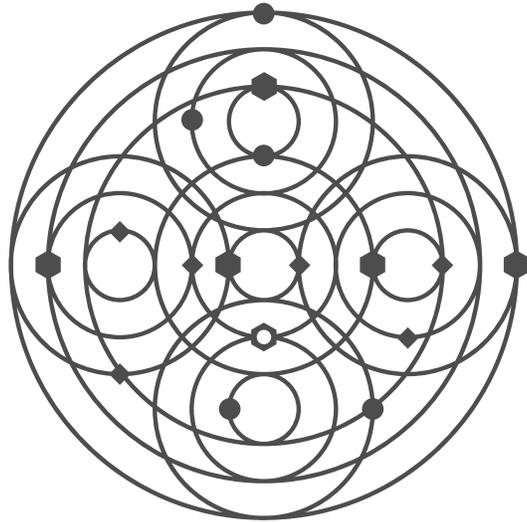


GUSTAVO
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CHRONE

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CHRONE

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by J.E. Passeron-Lavac
Letter I: On the Nature of the Universe
Letter II: On Time and Its Perception
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

1. ON THE TITLE OF THE BOOK

The title of this compilation of stories and essays, *Chrono*, is quite unusual—but why is this so? In the languages that I speak that allow a gender for time, the latter has a masculine form and it is usually understood as an immutable linear sequence of events. For example, in ancient Greece, Chronos (not to be confused with Cronos or Saturn) was the representation of time which later led to that which is known as Father Time.

What I intend to do is to give a different representation of time, one that I consolidate in the form of a woman, hence the title of this book. I did not name this book Chrona because there is a character named Crona in Atsushi Okubo's manga *Soul Eater*—first, I never knew if they were a boy or a girl, and second, it gets on my nerves every time I see it in the manga or the anime for that matter (with no disrespect to Mr. Okubo).

I then chose the title of *Chrono* by merging Chronos with the Greek term *techné*, which to me has always had a feminine ring to it and is usually translated as “craft” or “art.” Later I realized that the word has a long history, being commented upon by philosophers such as Socrates and Aristotle, with the latter understanding it as the representation of the imperfect process that is humans' imitation of nature, while the former understood it as the practical application of an art; there is a little bit of those aspects in the name, as I want to offer to the reader a view of time that might be applied to practice as well as good fiction.

Finally, a curious instance of feedback occurred when finishing the last story of this book: I had come up with the name Chrono in the middle of the development of the compilation, and as I got nearer to the last story—which I had intended to be a Rashomon-style narrative—I realized that it was more appropriate for a compilation of stories about matter. I had no idea then of what to write for the ninth story, as I finished “Tenben Chii” which was my eighth, when I saw an image on the Internet that inspired the character of Chrono Gaia III. So the book is not named after the character, but the other way around, with the latter being a manifestation of the idea that the former represents.

2. ON THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The stories will be grouped around three essays disguised as chapters of a fictional book—*The Flow of Time*—that is referenced in “Time Travelers.” One functions as a general introduction in which I give a quick analysis on what the universe is; in the second I will give my thoughts on the idea of experienced time vis-a-vis measured and biological time; and in the last essay I will address reincarnation. These essays will explain time

by using a mixture of quantum physics, cybernetics and philosophy that will be presupposed by the stories that follow them. They are not fantastic literature nor are they scientific fiction; in short, the essays will set the rules of the game and the stories will relate to their development.

In *Chrono*, time is a fragment of the totality of the universe, which is a continuum of changing consciousness. She will speak of time in a flexible, nonlinear fashion in a reality that is external to it, but also exists as a construction of the observer; she will not speak of time as an objective, relentless and infinite line. This text is not meant to be a comprehensive and thorough study of time, but neither is it to be dismissed as mere fiction. Regarding the short stories, a note has to be made as to their relation of time: not only will they deal with it in their substance, but their form (some of which delves into hypertext literature) will deal with a linear narration of events, as well as nonlinear forms.

3. ABOUT THE STORIES

Six of the nine stories that are presented to the reader have a nonlinear narrative. In “Time Travelers,” there will be two narratives, one of which will be an upside down version of the other, and when the reader finishes reading one, they just need to turn the book upside down to read the other. This is a circular narrative very loosely inspired by Mark Z. Danielewski’s *Only Revolutions*—his was a very symmetrical affair, but mine, not so much. The narrative structure used in “SamSara” is similar, but instead of using a circular approach, it resembles more of a set of parallel lines, as the two narratives in this story take place in different timelines, even if the characters are the same.

In “A Day in the Life of Her Holiness Chrono Gaia III, Restorer of Life and Lover of Big Dogs,” the story is divided into three parts, which start from the ending of the story and finish at the beginning; it can also be read in a linear way, and its component parts can also be read at random. In “Tenben Chii” the parts that form the story can be ordered in several ways as they are two parallel narratives that can be read separately or together (with such a conjunction having a couple of ways of being structured); this was inspired by Julio Cortazar’s *Hopscotch*.

In “The Mysterious Twilight of Dawn” there are three endings that can be chosen at will by the reader and each one is canonical. Finally, in “The Terrible Machine,” the reader will be given the option of deciding the actions of the protagonist and the options taken will lead to different endings. The narrative structure of these two stories was inspired by the idea that conscious observation and choice can affect reality: the reader has several alternatives from which to choose and whatever the outcome is, it is the result of the collapse of the possible into the actual.

Of the three stories that are nonlinear, “The Woman Who Talked to Herself” stands out because it uses different colors to address the main character at different ages. Thus, time is emphasized through form, even if this is not shown in the narrative structure.

4. INFLUENCES

Music was a great influence in the development of this compilation of short stories and also of the ideas behind it. First and foremost is The Mars Volta and also the solo material of its guitarist and co-founder, Omar Rodriguez Lopez. “A Day in the Life of...” was written while listening to *Noctourniquet*. Deftones’s *Koi No Yokan* was crucial when writing about human cognition and the universe as a transcendental system. John Frusciante’s solo discography, Red Hot Chili Peppers’ *By the Way* and *I’m With You*, Ximena Sariñana’s *Mediocre* and her collaborations with ORL, Chvrches’ *The Bones of What You Believe* and Warpaint’s discography were of importance as well.

Two authors are of utmost importance to the development of the essays: Henri Bergson and Amit Goswami. The latter is not referenced because his work on quantum physics, spirituality and consciousness was developed after 1982, the year of the publishing of *The Flow of Time*; however, I make a fictional version of him as G. Ravichandran. I should note that several of the illustrations on the first letter/essay stem from Goswami’s book *Physics of the Soul*.

Cybernetics is a big part of my life and a major influence on this whole book; authors like Heinz von Foerster, Humberto Maturana, Francisco Varela, Stafford Beer, Gordon Pask, Edgar Morin, and many others were a big influence. I should also note that some other illustrations in letter one were taken from Principia Cybernetica Web, an online encyclopedia on the subject, which is an obligatory reference to those willing to delve into what I fondly call the weirding way (emphasis on weird).

Another unlikely influence was Chiren Boumazaa, also known as Athene, whom made a video about his take on the concept of time (among other things), which provoked my thought in several ways. I should also make the note that the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy was also a useful reference in researching Bergsonism and McTaggart, however, I cite not this source because it came after 1982.

Borges has had a strong influence on this compilation of stories. “The Woman Who Talked to Herself” is my take on self-observation through time, which is a phenomenon that Borges accounted for in his story “The Other,” but in a different way; “The Final Victory of Johann Muller” is almost a rip-off of his story “The Secret Miracle,” with the difference being that I took most of my inspiration for the character of Johann Muller and his overall life from German jurist Hermann Heller, and that I make use of the idea of mental projections and archetypes.

Finally, my story “When Immortals Make Toasts” is a curious attempt at transauthorial fanfiction, as I create a conversation between an immortal in the style of Jorge Luis Borges’s “The Immortal” and Héctor Germán Oesterheld’s *Mort Cinder*, in order to expound the nature of immortality and its relation to time; I apologize to the spirits of both authors for my clumsy and amateurish execution.

THE FLOW OF TIME

(LETTERS TO ANNE MARIE)

J.E. Passeron-Lavac

TO MY BELOVED

LETTER ONE
ON THE NATURE OF THE UNIVERSE

Dearest Anne Marie:

I write to you—too late, I know—as my words reach out but cannot touch you. I realize now the mistake that was not to tell you all this and I hope that one day you will read them. I will explain to you what you always asked of me and that at the moment I did not know how to deliver: the way I see and feel the universe in which we are all embedded, and I will focus on your favorite topic, that of Time.

As you know, since I was a child I have always rebelled against the education system and what it tried to put inside my head; I disliked the idea of causation as a mere cause and effect that has a definite beginning and end, the idea that things are the sum of their elements and above all, the idea that matter is the fundamental element of reality. I have always thought that part of mankind's problem is the idea that it organizes itself in an atomistic-materialistic fashion that is reinforced through individual and collective ego.

These letters are my attempts to create an idea of time and the Universe that are based on consciousness, that take into consideration the idea of feedback and that consider things more than the sum of their parts (holism). To do all this, I will explain briefly concepts that arise from disciplines such as quantum physics, cybernetics and philosophy.

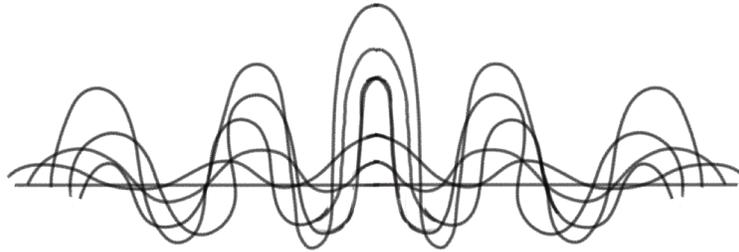
1. QUANTUM PHYSICS

Also known as quantum mechanics or theory, it is a subdiscipline of physics that delves into the understanding of physical phenomena at atomic and subatomic scales. The word *quantum* (plural *quanta*) derives from Latin and translates to “how much,” and it is used in the context of the observation made by Planck that some physical quantities can change only in discrete amounts and not continuously, as it was stated by classical physics. These changes are known as quantum jumps.

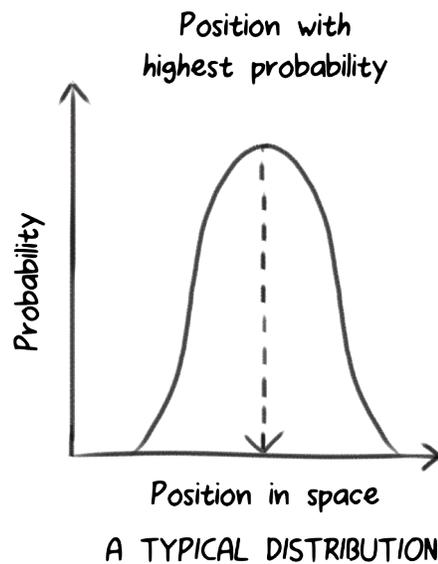
It was suggested by Einstein that light exists as a quantum, something that is now known as a photon, and has wave and particle properties. When it is seen as a wave, it seems capable of being in two or more places at the same time, as is the case with diffraction patterns¹; however, when it manifests as a particle it shows up in a single place. De Broglie extended the particle-wave duality to matter by extending it to electrons, and he demonstrated the electron's wave nature through an experiment where a beam of electrons was passed through a crystal and photographed, resulting in a diffraction pattern.

Electrons waves are probability waves, as they indicate probabilities: where wave disturbances are strong one is most likely to find the particle, whereas where amplitude is weak, the probability of finding the particle is small. Furthermore, electron waves can be conceived in wave packets, which are also packets of probability, as the square of the wave of the amplitude—the wave function—at a point in space gives the probability of finding the electron at that point. This probability can be represented as a bell-shaped curve.

¹ *Diffraction is a phenomena that takes place when a wave encounters an obstacle.*



Superposition of many simple waves produces a typical localized wave packet (Adapted with permission from P.W. Atkins, *Quanta: A Handbook of concepts*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974)



A very important principle in quantum mechanics is that of uncertainty, which was postulated by Heisenberg: one cannot simultaneously determine with certainty both the position and the momentum of an electron. To measure one blurs our knowledge of the other, and thus, the classical concept of a sharply defined trajectory in a particle is untenable, as the initial conditions calculating a particle's trajectory can never be determined with precision. Whenever it is measured, a quantum object appears at a single place in particle form and the probability distribution identifies the place(s) where it is likely to be found when measured; when such activity is not carried on, the quantum acquires a wave form and exists in more than one place at the same time.

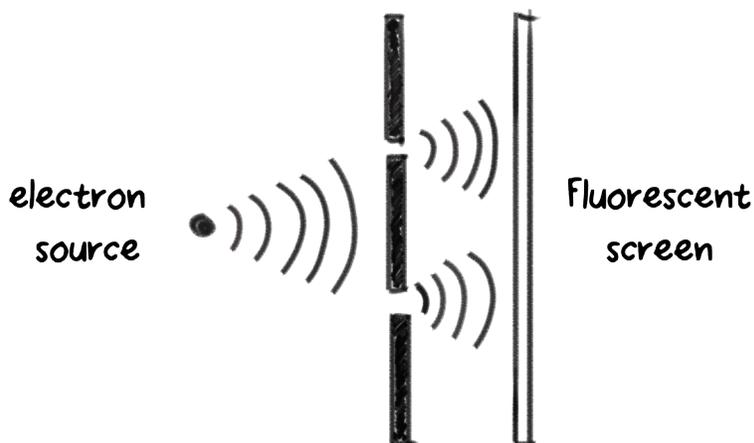
The wave and the particle natures of the electron are complementary; that is, they both are inherent in the electron and only an aspect can be measured at any given time, with a particular aspect of the wave (wave+particle) observed by the choice of experimental arrangement. This principle was stated by Bohr, and was also argued by John von Neumann in his book *The Mathematical Foundations of Quantum Mechanics*, where quantum mechanics allows for the collapse of the wave function to be placed at any position in the

causal chain, from the measurement device to subjective perception. This idea of a chain of correlated systems, where the values of one system are linked with that of the following system, is known as the von Neumann Chain.

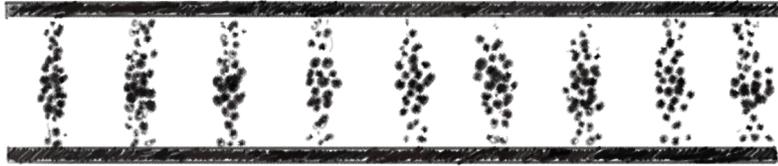
Regarding the nature of observation on the collapsing of the wave function, my friend G. Ravichandran told me that if initial conditions do not determine an object's motion forever, then every time we observe there is a new beginning and the universe is creative at its most basic level. I will come back to this idea later.

Summarizing, a quantum object has the following properties: a) it can be at more than one place at the same time (wave property); b) it cannot be said to manifest in ordinary space-time reality until it is observed as a particle (collapse of the wave); c) it ceases to exist in a place and simultaneously appears in another, but it cannot be said that it went through the intervening space (quantum jump); d) its position and momentum cannot be determined with accuracy (uncertainty); e) its wave and the particle natures are inherent within it, with only an aspect being subject to measure at any given time with an experimental arrangement (complementarity) f) its manifestation, caused by observation, simultaneously influences its correlated twin object- no matter how far apart they are (quantum entanglement); g) talking about a quantum object without discussing how to observe it is ambiguous because they are inseparable; and h) for massive macro objects, quantum mechanical predictions match those of classical physics.

The most well-known experiment in ascertaining the wave/particle duality of a quantum object is the double-slit experiment, which consists of a beam of electrons passing through a screen that has two narrow slits in it. As electrons are waves, the beam is split into two sets of waves by the two-slitted screen; these waves then interfere with one another, and the result of the interference shows on a fluorescent screen.



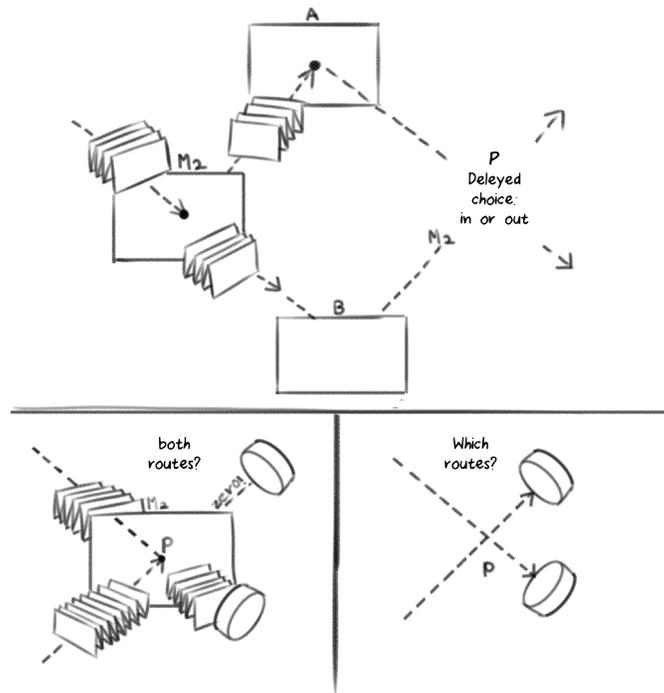
The double-slit experiment for electrons.



The interference pattern of flashes on screen.

Complementarity is confirmed in this experiment when losing the information about the electron's momentum is the same as losing information about its wavelength. Furthermore, the particle aspect of the electron is revealed when it is localized by finding out which slit it goes through; when this is ignored, the electron passes through both slits and its wave aspect is found.

An important variation of this experiment is proposed by John Wheeler in the delayed-choice experiment; in it, the method of detection used can be changed after a photon passes the double-slit, so as to delay the choice of whether to detect the path of the particle, or its interference with itself. He states in his thought experiment that the act of observation ultimately determines whether the photon will behave as a particle or wave.



The delayed-choice experiment. Lower left: the arrangement for seeing the wave nature of photons. One of the detectors never detects any photon, signifying cancellation due to wave interference. The photon must have split and traveled both routes at the same time.

Lower right: The arrangement for seeing the particle nature of photons. Both detectors click, although only one at a time - signifying which route the photon takes.

2. MACHINES

Cybernetics originates from *kybernetes*, the Greek word for steersman; it is concerned with the functioning of systems, which can be of any type. It originated when the Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation sponsored a series of interdisciplinary meetings which lasted from 1944 to 1953 and reunited noted post-war scholars like Norbert Wiener, John von Neumann, Warren McCulloch, Claude Shannon, and Heinz von Foerster, among others. Wiener was one of the primary participants of the conferences, as his work on servomechanisms and artillery target mechanisms during World War II sparked his interest in feedback and purpose. In 1948 he published his book *Cybernetics*, in which understood it as “the scientific study of control and communication in the animal and the machine.”

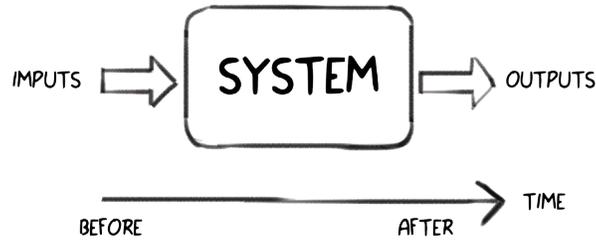
Ashby defines “machine” as “a system whose behavior is sufficiently law-abiding or repetitive for us to be able to make some prediction about what it will do” and states that the subject matter of cybernetics is the domain of “all possible machines,” meaning all repetitive, law-abiding systems whose behavior can be cognized by an observer and which can then be ordered, related and understood through the consideration of the possible behaviors that the studied machine can produce.

Machines can couple with others to give way to larger ones, and Ashby says that this is a fundamental property of machines; they are information processing systems as they transform information from one form to another. First-order information processing systems are allopoietic, meaning the information they receive is transformed into something else.

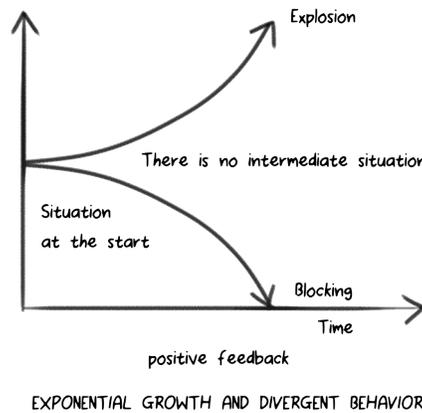
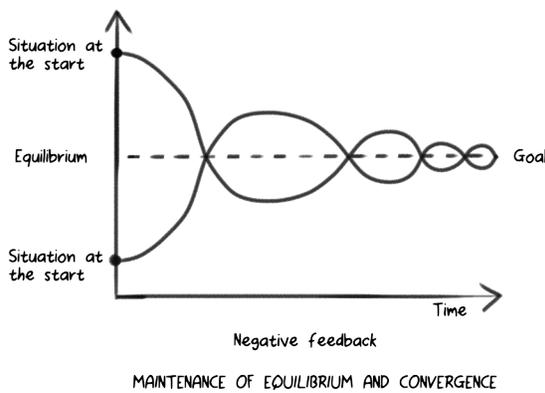
An information processing system possesses four basic elements: input, which is the information that is to be transformed; a processor, the part of the information system that is to perform the transformation; storage, the place where all information will be kept; and output, the resulting transformed energy. In a broad sense, any object can be an information processor if it receives information from another and in turn changes the information before transmitting it; this includes all types of systems, such as simple biological systems, human systems, social systems, and the universe itself.

As I said before, causation tends to be understood as a process where a cause is followed by an effect and has a clear beginning and ending, which is a linear causal process; however, cybernetics understands this relation in cycles, where the cause is controlled or affected by its own result. Feedback processes are circular and are a fundamental feature of cybernetics, as information processing entails a circular action; in every feedback loop, information about the result of a transformation or an action is sent back to the input of the system in the form of input data.

The idea of feedback presupposes time; that is, for information to be sent back to the input of the system, there is a time lapse. Because human beings are directed in time, the systems that they perceive follow the same mechanism and thus, information processing systems in first-order cybernetics operate on the basis of an irreversible time.



Feedback processes can be of two types: positive, when new data allows and accelerates the transformation of input to output in the same direction as the preceding results, thus having cumulative effects and deriving in exponential growth; and negative, when new data produces a result in the opposite direction to previous ones, stabilizing the system and maintaining an equilibrium.



By means of its cumulative effects, positive feedback left unchecked can lead to the destruction of the system; this is to be controlled by negative feedback. The latter leads to adaptive, or goal-seeking behavior, which can be of two types: teleological, where the goal of the system is set by an observer, and teleonomic, when the system produces its own purpose by interacting with the environment.

3. HUMANS AS INFORMATION PROCESSING SYSTEMS

As time passed, there was the introduction of the first wave of cybernetics (which had been consolidating in computer science); it is also referred to as the first order of cybernetics among practitioners, and its approach towards its subject matter was objective and detached. It started to enter a crisis when a new wave, focusing on self-organization, cognition and the role of the observer in modeling a system arose in the 1970's, which became known as second-order cybernetics. The distinction between first and second-order cybernetics was made by Heinz von Foerster in "Cybernetics of Cybernetics," stating that "the cybernetics of observed systems we may consider to be first-order cybernetics; while second-order cybernetics is the cybernetics of observing systems."

Before proceeding any further, I must make a clear difference between first and second-order cybernetics. First cybernetics deals with systems that are observed and teleological, meaning their goals are set by an observer. Second cybernetics deals with living systems, which are those capable of cognition and thus can observe and set goals for first-order systems—these types of systems are teleonomic, as they react to their environment, rather than having a purpose set upon them.

Now, the main feature of all living systems is autopoiesis, which is understood as the capacity of a machine to produce its own components and occupy a space in which it carries out its processes; all living systems are capable of cognition and Maturana ties up this mess very nicely:

A cognitive system is a system whose organization defines a domain of interactions in which it can act with relevance to the maintenance of itself, and the process of cognition is the actual (inductive) acting or behaving in the domain. Living systems are cognitive systems, and living as a process is a process of cognition. This statement is valid for all organisms, with and without a nervous system.

Second cybernetics, as I said before, differs from the first because it acknowledges that no system can be studied objectively and that the observer plays a crucial role, so a definition of second-order cybernetics must have within itself the idea of an observer. There is a big mess in asking what the properties of the observer are, as any observation made entails another act of observation of said observation and it leads to a problem akin to the Liar's Paradox. Von Foerster addresses these deficiencies by using Pask's ideas of orders of analysis and comes to the conclusion that an observer enters the studied system by stipulating its purpose, and by stipulating his own purpose on the observed system. This brings forth Humberto Maturana's famous theorem: "Anything said is said by an observer."

This is also relatable to quantum physics, where the double-slit experiment shows that observation affects physical phenomena. If you add the von Neumann Chain, where conscious observation is said to cause the collapse of the wave function, and then the delayed-choice thought experiment, you could come up with two theorems that can summarize the interception of quantum physics and cybernetics: "Anything that happens, does so before an observer," and "Anything that happens, does so because of an observer."

Maturana's theorem and these theorems take into consideration the observer by means of self-reference, as the observer accounts for himself within his observations of other systems. This entails two things: first, the observer is part of the observed system, and second, by being part of this dynamic, the observation made changes to the system.

One last difference between first and second machines is that the former are heteropoietic because they produce something different from themselves, by means of human design; the latter are autopoietic because they are able to produce their own components.

Cognition is, as I said, a feature of living systems, but it is also what explains observation and gives way to it; this allows living systems to create a repertoire of representations of what surrounds them in order to interact with them. This means that the purpose of cognition is the sustainment of the living system, as it allows it to interact with its environment; this entails a communication process with constant teleonomic feedback, and therefore, cognition is information processing.

In the context of information processing, an autopoietic system first makes the distinction between itself and its surroundings, which fits the self-referential schema that I mentioned before. What these systems handle as information is the differentiation of one thing from another (what Bateson called "a difference that makes a difference") and then the assignation of a meaning to that difference, both of which are arbitrary in nature, meaning they depend on the system that makes the observation. Both animals and humans share a basic cognition where the observing system processes information with what surrounds it, with the purpose of sustaining itself. Let's call this lower cognition.

Humans have this type of cognition, but they take it further as they are able to have reflective self-observation; that is, a human being is fully self-conscious and observes itself, and it can set its own purpose, which is tempered by the interaction with the environment. A fully self-observing system—unlike other cognitive systems—is both teleonomic and teleological whereas animals have only a limited degree of self-observation and are thus only teleonomic. Let's refer to human cognition as higher cognition (although sometimes I think the name is not appropriate).

One of the shortcomings of Maturana on his position of autopoiesis and cognition is that he presupposes the existence of consciousness, or internal, qualitative, subjective states; in a basic sense it is a state of sentience and awareness, and when related with cognitive machines, it is the unification of the existing information that different mechanisms in the brain utilize to perceive the surroundings of the subject.

Most scientists correlate neurological processes and consciousness, and thus, the explanation as to how neurobiological processes in the brain cause subjective states of awareness and the way in which they take place in the neural structures is known as the problem of consciousness. To me, this problem is solved by a panpsychistic position: the view that all matter has a mental aspect, taking experience as its point of departure, for it can help in the understanding of physical phenomena.

Even though I side with panpsychism, there is a biological side to consciousness: as a brain function, it is the coordination of other brain functions and psychological states that unifies them, but at the same time keeps them from conflating in a way that allows stable internal observation (both in animals and humans) and adaptive action.

Our good friend Ravichandran states four aspects of consciousness: a) awareness as the parameter in which conscious action develops; b) objects of consciousness, such as thoughts and feelings, that take place in the latter; c) the subject of consciousness, be it an experiencer, a witness, or both; and d) consciousness as the ground of all reality. The first, second and third aspects comprise biological and psychological aspects of consciousness, while the fourth implies panpsychism.

4. BERGSONISM

As you know, Henri Bergson is probably my favorite philosopher and he has greatly influenced my thoughts; you could even say that my ideas are a refurbishing of his by means of cybernetics and quantum physics. To him, consciousness is an ever-changing, creative and constant flow; to him, time is not a measure, but subjective experience, which he calls *duree* (duration), and he equates consciousness with time. The idea of *duree* is one of the main tenets of his scholarship.

Duree is an indivisible convergence of many subjective consciousnesses and one main one from which they emanate and of which they form part of; it is a continuous and fluctuating temporal flux of awareness. Subjective existence is a form by means of which *duree* is manifested within the overall flow. Because of this convergence of many and one and because consciousness is a seamless continuum that does not have a definitive beginning or ending, you could say that the experience of consciousness is unique.

Measured time differs from subjective experience: as it is a uniform, external process that can be measured and distinguished into definite and distinct units that follow one another in a linear succession, it is quantitative. To Bergson, time is not unified, as there is a multiplicity of subjective temporal plains; that is, subjects all experience time in a distinct way within the overall flow of consciousness.

Because of his idea of consciousness as a continuum, matter has to have a similar property to duration, so the external world is not split into separate parts, but rather is part of the flow; in short, space and time are subsets of the overall consciousness. Bergson states that the physical universe is made by images—a form of virtual consciousness—configured in the aforementioned flow. These images are the substance that forms our perceptions of the external reality.

In the face of a universal flux of information, an observer adapts to it by selecting (by means of cognition) those qualities of the environment that it considers relevant and ignoring the rest of it, creating its own environment by differentiation; to Bergson, perception occurs when from the whole of information a part is extracted and disengaged by the cognizing system.

Bergson calls pure perceptions (those lacking a superposition of memory) those that are formed when we subconsciously filter out most of the images of the universe, so we can pay attention to a tiny fraction; this constitutes the basis for our particular consciousness. Concrete perceptions are those pure ones that are infused with memory. Because it is information processing, consciousness depends on memory, although the vast majority of memories are inaccessible to it and they need to be so, as they would overwhelm the embodied conscious system and not allow it to function; memory helps to temporalize and synthesize a succession of images and moments.

5. PEIRCIAN COSMOLOGY

Philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce was one of the founders of semiotics and contributed to logic by creating the concept of abductive logic, but he also did a theory of the ultimate categories of cosmology, which resonate nicely with the concepts that I have been handling. His point of departure in accounting for the universe is chaos, which he conceives as a mass of potentiality (much like a wave form) “where there was no regularity... in which nothing existed or really happened”; it was an absolute, with no determination of any kind, no habits or laws. It was pure feeling.

Chaos became definite by means of observation, in something akin to hypothetical inference, and pure feeling and arbitrariness gave way to habits and laws. From this primary chaos, his three categories—feeling, habit and regularity—came to be, cosmologically as chance (tychism), evolutionary love (agapism), and continuity (synechism).

Peirce defines tychism as “the doctrine that absolute chance is a factor of the universe”; chance arises from pure possibility and permeates through the universe, although the other categories are present to some measure. Peirce gives four arguments for the existence of chance: a) the general prevalence of growth, which seems to be opposed to the conservation of energy; b) the variety of the universe, which is chance, and is manifestly inexplicable; c) law, which requires itself to be explained, and like everything which is to be explained must be explained by something else—that is, by non-law or real chance; and d) feeling, for which room cannot be found if the conservation of energy is maintained.

Agapism accounts for what Peirce calls evolutionary love and which he understands to be the one supreme law of the universe; to him, evolution is growth in the widest sense and though not providential, it works to achieve a definite end, which fits with the idea of teleonomy as adaptation. Synechism is founded on the idea of continuity, and the universe transitioning from vague to definite by means of habits and laws that exert control over things; continuity involves circularity (and feedback), and thus, the principal feature of the universe is that it is ovate.

6. THE UNIVERSE AS A TRANSCENDENT INFORMATION PROCESSING SYSTEM

Let me correlate all these topics into a single thread by crafting a small theory on how the whole thing comes to be: Peirce accounts for the beginning of the universe by stating that it arrives from chaos, an absolute potential, made of pure feeling and no habits, laws or regularity of any kind; order as actuality rose out of chaos by means of observation and thus became definite, with habits and laws. The three cosmological categories apply: chance (tychism), teleonomic growth (agapism), and continuity (synechism). Furthermore, by becoming actual, the universe became differentiable and thus, subject to cognition.

The universe is then created by means of an observing system that collapses its wave function into actuality; now, imagine if the whole history of the universe, from its Big Bang origin to its expansion is but one eternity in an unending succession of such phenomena, where the infinite future of each matches the Big Bang of the next via infinite change of scale.

This can be interpreted to mean that the universe comes to be as actuality when it is observed, creating a Big Bang and a history through retrocausality, and when there are no more observers becomes potentia again until a new observer arises and collapses the wave function, which, through retrocausality, creates another iteration of the same universe in an unending cycle. This means that the universe comes to be and ends in infinite cycles of observation and collapsing wave functions. The universe expands and retracts like the beat of a heart or like the filling and emptying of the lungs.

This means that the universe endures by changing constantly, both between cycles and within them, and Bergson accounts for this when he speaks about two opposite movements of the universe:

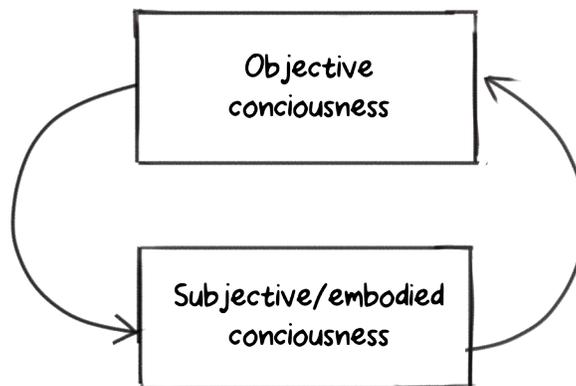
The universe endures. The more we study the nature of time, the more we shall comprehend that duration means invention, the creation of forms, the continual elaboration of the absolutely new. The systems marked off by science endure only because they are bound up inseparably with the rest of the universe. It is true that in the universe itself two opposite movements are to be distinguished... "descent" and "ascent."

To reprise, the foundational matter of the universe is consciousness and this works in two respects: i) conscious observation brings forth reality by means of the collapsing of wave functions, but at the same time, what becomes actual, along with the history that was retro-caused by the collapse, is a ii) total information processing system that functions on quantum entanglement, nonlocality and coherent emission/absorption of photons, that stores information in a plane that exists outside time and space (to be explained when I talk about memory).

Following Bergson, a third form of consciousness can be stated as the way in which this information processing system is manifested: by a condensation of consciousness into a definite vibratory frequency. This third form of consciousness interacts with the first form because the latter is what gave way to the former and what keeps it cohesive, and with the second because the information processing system is carried out in a physical system of matter made by coalescing consciousness.

Consciousness functions as a loop: when the observer collapses the wave function he does so by means of aware observation which is information processing and brings forth an actuality constituted of information, but at the same time, the observer that brings forth the actuality is part of an information processing system made of condensed consciousness, besides being one processor himself that was part of the potentiality that collapsed into actuality.

Consciousness is then a continuum of interconnected information that flows through circular causal processes and is the convergence of many and one, one consciousness manifested in a multitude of biological information processing systems, ranging from microorganisms to humans, which observe and collapse wave functions. All of the above-stated cycles reinforce Peirce's idea that the universe functions in circular causal processes and can be shown to work as follows:



All of this translates into the idea that the universe is a transcendental system, meaning one that goes beyond space and time, but also one that surpasses the reaches of individual human cognition. It is a system that is mutually and self-observing at the same time. It is self-observing on two levels: 1) living systems are information processing systems that by means of their cognitive processes create information which allows the universe to experience itself from a subjective perspective; and 2) the universe is formed in part by self-observing systems. It is a mutually observing system on two levels: 1) some of the living systems that form part of it mutually observe each other by forming social systems; 2) from the perspective of the observer, he collapses the wave function of the universe that turns possibility into actuality and thus brings forth reality.

The universe is a continuum of information stated as potential and actualized by aware observation; time and space are habits formed by the universe, which in cognitive systems manifest as perceptual mechanisms that allow spatial and temporal reference as a survival mechanism. In sum, time and space are habits of general consciousness they manifest in varying configurations in different cognitive systems in order to give a reference frame to information processing and self-organization through teleonomy. This resonates with Bergson's idea of duration (or *duree*) as subjective time and how the latter was the basis for the universe.

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LETTER TWO
ON TIME AND ITS PERCEPTION

1. DEFINITION OF TIME

a. Basic understandings of time

As you know, my love, the idea of time has been the subject of endless debate among philosophers, writers, physicists and such, all throughout human history; it is an idea that is presupposed by common culture, but at the same is constantly challenged and amended as new forms to study and understand what surrounds us are created and developed. Two common notions of time can be given: the indefinite and continuous progression of events in the past, present, and future regarded as a whole; and a point of time as measured in hours or minutes.

This means that it is considered as a linear progression of events that are not reversible after they come to be, and it is at the same time a unit for measuring such a flow of events; in physics, time tends to be considered as a measure of what a clock can read and it is both a scalar and fundamental quantity. It is the former because as a physical quantity, it is not changed by coordinate system rotations in classical physics or by Lorentz transformations in relativity; it is the latter because it is a measure of physical quantities from which other units can be created.

b. McTaggart on the unreality of time

Philosopher J.M.E. McTaggart argued in 1908 that there is no such thing as time, as the appearance of a temporal order is merely an appearance; he begins by distinguishing two ways in which positions in time can be ordered: 1) positions in time can be ordered according to their possession of properties, which can be called “A series”; 2) positions can also be ordered by two-place relations, which are called “B series.” Simply put, the A series understands the present as the only real time, as the past is gone and the future is a probability, and thus not real; the B series understands present, past, and future as coexisting, with the distinction between them being an illusion of consciousness.

McTaggart argues that the B series alone does not constitute a proper time series, and thus the A series is essential to time; this is because change is essential to time, and the B series without the A does not involve genuine change, as the former are fixed, while the latter are in flux. He also argues that the A series is inherently contradictory, as its properties are incompatible with one another; this contradiction is not solvable as it leads to an infinite regress. As A is contradictory, but there can be no time without it, McTaggart concludes that time, as both A and B series, is not real.

c. Biological and social time

Biological time is the way in which organisms establish a sense of time. This can take place in three ways: by temporal oscillations in organisms by means of rhythms established in cellular cycles; by a temporal transfer of information by chemical signals propagated by a cell in a surrounding medium, which leads to pattern formation; and by the duration of the mind of an organism—that is, the sense of time that an observer has.

Now, sociological time is the meaning that a culture intuitively attaches to time; this includes the fact that

the measurement of time is the result of a cultural consensus, which explains, for example, the existence of more than one measure of quantum time. The fact that time is studied and measured as something external to an observer does not mean that there is only one way to measure it. Therefore, the adoption of measures and also the way that culture as a cosmovision conceives and reacts to time is the product of a consensus.

The measurements of time used in the International System of Units are the product of a consensus between different groups and countries to create an uniform measure of time; however, as time measurement is used in relation to the orbit and particularities of planet Earth, I am curious about the way time would be measured, had humanity started on Mars, Venus or any other planet in the solar system.

d. Different conceptions of time

The idea of time can be expounded from different viewpoints, of which the following will be sampled: Newtonian time, Einsteinian time, quantum time and Bergsonian time.

Newton's notion of time implies one that is absolute and independent of an observer, one which can be mathematically described; Newtonian time is a manifestation of time as a linear progression of events in which physical phenomena occur, but at the same time, it allows for the creation of measurement units. This type of time is still of use in classical mechanics. On the other hand, Einstein's theories of relativity, both general and special, state that time is relative to the observer in the sense that it depends on the position of the observer in general and with respect to others; Einsteinian time is constrained by the speed of light in such a way that what one observer experiences as the present is not the same for another and also, mass can distort time. Because of these reasons, this model of time is a useful depiction of reality at a macroscopic scale.

Reprising what I said in the prior letter, *duree* is a series of states of consciousness that flow, and experienced time that cannot be measured, but felt; the latter is a measurement of a uniform, external process that can be measured and distinguished into definite and distinct units that follow one another in a linear succession. Measured time is quantitative; *duree* is qualitative.

Bergson understands physical reality as a constant, durational pulsation that varies in rhythm, meaning how much of the past has been condensed into a temporal moment. The notion of a universally valid time that is homogeneous and measurable is to be criticized: From a Bergsonian perspective, time is not unified as reality does not take place within a single dimension. There is a multiplicity of them manifested as planes of experience and levels of reality that possess unique and changing temporal rhythms.

This means that time is felt and processed differently not only from one person to another, but among levels of consciousness; that is, the individual and the overall universe process information differently, and if time and space are frames of reference for information processing, the way that these are perceived is different from the level of observation, and thus, the individual observer and the universe process time differently. Furthermore, from the individual subject to the universe there are other levels of information processing. Both humans and the individual are condensed forms of consciousness by means of conscious observation;

it is then possible that there are levels of information processing that exist in wave form and parts of it condense occasionally into the conscious.

Two examples of this can be found in Jung's interpretation of the unconscious, which he divides into *personal* and *objective*: The former is a body of information that was once conscious and later became unconscious, and when in this state, the unconscious is not only an actual body of knowledge, but also the possible variations that it can have, which can later return to the conscious with modifications. The collective unconscious, the most profound level of consciousness, contains inherited psychic structures and universal meanings found in all human structures (archetypes); the latter are not only actual information, but also all its possible iterations, both in the present and the future.

This means that the information processing in both the individual and collective unconscious is different to those condensed forms and thus, in all these different levels of consciousness, time is perceived in a different way.

In summary, like consciousness, *duree* is the indivisible convergence of many and one (self-observation and mutual observation) in an ongoing and changing temporal flux of awareness; it manifests in a cyclical and self-referential way because it is consciousness condensed in stable forms, but at the same time it is manifested through subjective observation of the Universe (both living and human systems in general) and through mutual observation between these subjective systems (subjective consciousness). This means that both relative and quantum time are observer dependent, and their only difference is that they grasp different aspects of the observer: relative time tends to the position of the observer and quantum time to what qualifies as an observer, as it is the beholder of the frame of reference.

2. CAUSATION AND RETROCAUSATION

Causality can be understood as the relationship between a phenomenon and a set of factors; they all have a temporal nature as they presuppose an irreversible succession of events. There are many types of causality. Simple linear causality is when there is a sequence between beginning and ending; the effect can be traced back to one cause. Complex linear causality is similar to simple linear causality, but it can have branching forms and an effect can become the cause, so there are direct and indirect effects.

Cyclic causality, which I have spoken of before, is one that may not have a discernible beginning or ending unless its sustenance stops; that is, it is nonlinear, for actions are connected into a loop. A cause can also be an effect and vice versa; feedback perpetuates the cycle. Mutual causality entails one relationship or process, and there is a blurring of causes and effects in that each causal agent is affected; it is bidirectional.

A concept that complicates the way causality is conceived is that of backwards causality or retrocausality; that is, that current events can affect what are perceived to be past events. This has been a

thought experiment and also the spark of several stories regarding time travel, which is quite a popular topic in the Western imagination. However, you can explain retrocausality to a degree if you relate it to quantum entanglement, a state where two particles remain intimately connected, even when separated over great distances; this state is not necessarily bound in the present, as I intuit that two particles could be entangled and interact in time, and thus, the present can influence the past, and vice versa.

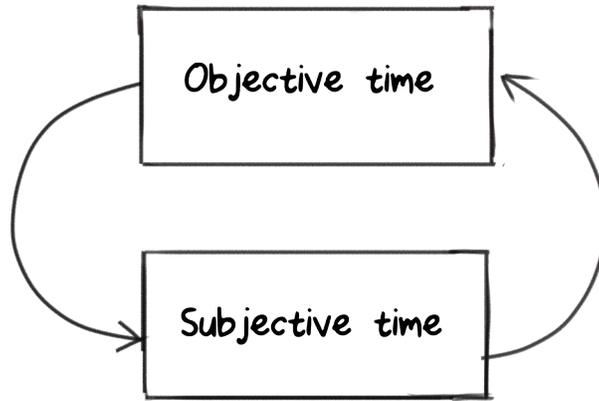
Every type of time that was reviewed in the previous topic can be related to a specific type of causal relation: Newtonian time is linked with linear causation as it follows a strict cause-effect progression; Einsteinian time is cyclical as it entails feedback between the position of the observer and the way measurement comes about. Bergsonian and quantum time are also cyclical, as they entail a feedback between condensed consciousness and its perception; retrocausation, being a part of quantum time is related to mutual causation, because quantum entanglement allows cause and effect to happen at the same time, and thus there is a simultaneous quality that relates it to this type of causation.

3. TIME AS TRANSCENDENCE

Bergson makes no distinction between the contents of consciousness and *duree*; time is experience, while *duree* is subjective time. He conceives the mind as a constantly changing, self-creative system which is rooted in and akin to memory; it is related to *duree*, because the latter is ceaselessly changing and recreating itself. Consciousness in its ceaseless emergence is not the product of the sum of a set of elements, like neural interaction, culture and institutions; it is the product of constant creation and change.

I have been told that consciousness is not something that is in space and time, as it has no location and that the inability of scientists to localize it raises the same methodological issues as Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. I differ slightly from this position: it is not that consciousness does not have a location, but if reality is a vibratory condensation of *duree* and because of this everything has a protomental quality, then consciousness does not have a physical location because it is everywhere. In this case, one would have to look for concentrations of consciousness, or degrees of consciousness.

Reprising from my last letter, the universe is a self-observing/mutually observing system of which time is a part; this system is made of condensed consciousness. As the universe is subjective and objective at once, like time, this also means that it is manifested cyclically and self-referentially as it is condensed consciousness (objective time) but is also the result of observation (subjective time):



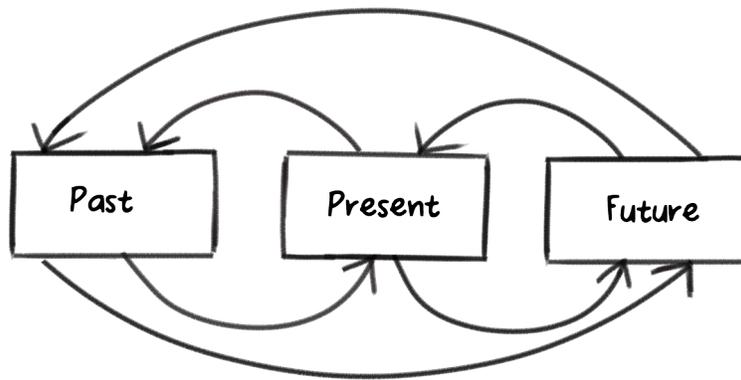
An interesting thing about the study of time is that it is both information that we construct and filter through perception and cognition, and information that we generate by cognition; how humans understand time is a byproduct of their biological makeup and their culture. Also, a necessary point to make is that matter and time are not independent from one another, as they are both elements of the universe as a transcendental system and thus consciousness condensed; however, as humans observe and cope with their environment, a distinction was made between them for epistemological purposes, and although they can be addressed and studied independently, they are not independent from one another.

This being said, the purpose of physical theories—and of epistemology in general as it is a form of conceptual organization—is to structure and interrelate human experiences as they interact with an environment. Both of which cannot be understood in isolation, as only their interrelation constitutes reality, thus reinforcing the point of the universe as a transcendental system. Concepts like mass, energy, quantum and wave function, distance and time are no more than organizing strategies that humans create to deal with the overload of information that passes through their environment.

To further ascertain the nature of time, it is useful to return to McTaggart's arguments on the unreality of time with the A series understanding only the present as time, with the past gone and the future a probability; the B series understands present, past, and future as coexisting, with the distinction between them being an illusion of consciousness. Again, he argues that the B series by itself does not constitute a proper time series, while the A series is inherently contradictory, as its properties are incompatible with one another, which leads to an infinite regress, which then leads to the conclusion that time is not real.

The reason why McTaggart argues that the A series is inherently contradictory is that no time can be both future and past; that is, past, present and future are mutually exclusive, but they must possess all of the different A series properties. He anticipates the argument that claims that t was future at some moment of past time and will be past at some moment of future time; to him it fails because the additional times that are invoked in order to explain t 's possession of the incompatible A properties must themselves possess all of the same A properties (therefore leading to an infinite regress), so the original contradiction is not resolved.

A response to this idea is that McTaggart is thinking about time in a linear causal way; so to address this problem it is necessary to think about the relationship of past, present and future in terms of cyclical causation,



or that the past was a future that became present and future will be present and past, thus feeding back into each other. The other solution is to think that past and present and present and future can happen at the same time by means of retrocausation by quantum entanglement.

This means that time is real, subjective and objective, but there is another feature of time that needs to be explored; time is transcendent because it goes beyond the scope of human cognition to understand it as a thing, and it is also so because it is objective and subjective at the same time, and consists of their interplay.

Time is also transcendental because it is what allows the ceaseless and constant change in the flow that constitutes the universe; objective time is the background of observation, which is done by subjective systems that experience the present and actualize probability space into their own reality by acting as such. The past and the future can be understood to exist simultaneously as several branching timelines of events existing within probability space (a mathematical construct that models a real-world process consisting of states that occur at random) as a container of the information generated by observing systems of all kinds, which is updated continuously outside of space-time.

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THE WOMAN WHO TALKED TO HERSELF



HOW TO READ

Due to the particularities of the main character, Hanni Lundstedt, different versions of herself are distinguished from one another by means of assigning each a color. This arrangement is expressed as follows:

Five years.

Twenty years.

Twenty-seven years.

Forty years.

Sixty years.

It was a beautiful afternoon in San Francisco, California: sunny, windy, but not too much so. As of late, spring had been downright schizophrenic, with one day being warm and windy, the next one windy and rainy, and the one after warm and humid and so on, without any semblance of predictability. It was in this pleasant setting that I, Hanni Lundstedt, was having some drinks in a book bar with Dagoberto Clemente Ascencio, after having some mussels in a French seafood restaurant near the Montgomery BART station. I was drinking white wine and he was drinking some rum.

Dago had his home and recording studio in San Francisco and I was just visiting town, taking a vacation after concluding a European tour. We were both established artists: his first break was with a legendary post-punk band that disbanded at the height of their success, which led him to a successful career in a band called Techne Jupiter. I had a well-known solo career as an electro-funk-folk act; critics said that I “had a penchant for constant though unpredictable change” and touted me as the next Bjork or something.

We had met some years ago through mutual friends and I had opened for him a few times before. Recently, during a Skype conversation, I had casually mentioned that I wanted to take some vacations and he offered to host me at his house in San Francisco. The conversation in the restaurant had been pleasant but I felt there was something else.

He’s onto something.

I, too, had an ulterior motive.

“I want to start a band,” we both said at the same time.

Dago told me that after a decade or so of being a dictator, establishing the exact outcome of each sound in such a meticulous way that his listeners often thought that his records were constructed by means of a series of improvisations, he just needed to come to terms with inner neurosis and compulsions and let go. I just wanted to collaborate to go beyond my usual limits, and also because I wanted to exorcise a series of thoughts and emotions into a concept album.

I don’t know about this, the secret might get out.

I think not, people are not willing to believe that what happens with me takes place in materialist reality.

Dago might suspect me, and what happens then?

I don’t think that there is anything wrong with him knowing...

Well I said the same of Mom, didn’t I? And that turned out to be a fun experience.

Relax, go along with it. Trust me.

Dago and I agreed to the idea of playing with concepts and ideas in his home studio for a week. On the second day, I had the courage to tell him my idea for the concept album.

“Imagine a man,” I said with a bass on my lap, “that acquired the ability to talk to himself through time due to a burst aneurism.”

“Much like Borges’s short story ‘The Other,’” Dagoberto said.

“I don’t know such a story,” I said. “I’m an avid reader, but I don’t know much about Latin American literature.”

“It’s about the author as an old man talking to his younger self,” he summarized.

“Well, in my story it’s a middle-aged man who can talk to himself as a child, a teenager, a young adult and as an older man. Sometimes he can see them and other times he just talks to them; to his younger versions he explains aspects of himself and nurtures them like a father would. With the younger adult and the old man he even exchanges ideas and points of view, which makes him understand the inception of some of his earlier ideas.”

Dago—well known for his insight with and without DMT—was impressed by the idea, but not puzzled by it. He explained to me why, while having a glass of rum and a cigar:

“To me, time is consciousness, it is something that we distinguished from other things and to which we gave a meaning, but ultimately something that is better understood when it is felt.”

“So, to you, time is a human invention,” I said, trying to follow.

“Yes! Exactly! Both time and death. Everything is consciousness condensed in different vibratory frequencies and flows and changes constantly. To me, finite and infinite are fallacies of a relative psychic system—things were not or will not be. They simply are.”

I always enjoyed his weird monologues.

I always enjoyed his weird monologues.

“But how do you explain past and future?”

“Past and future are perceived as such by relative systems, but for the absolute, the whole, there is only now, because everything is just one thing. Let me ask you one thing: Is time fixed and set for your character?”

He’s onto something.

He's just insightful. Calm down.

“No,” I said. His decisions affect his future self, but there are a couple of fixed events that take place anyway; some aspects of time are fixed and some are in flux.

“Also, what’s so special about this guy’s aneurism? How come he can talk to himself in such a fashion while others that had one can’t?”

“I think that it wasn’t the aneurism—I think that he always could do that, and it’s just that society made him forget how.”

“Of course,” Dagoberto said, enthralled in his reflection, almost talking to himself, “by having people pursue material ambitions and goods, society traps people within their own ego and has them neglect the awareness they have of their own consciousness.”

“You mean then that potentially everyone could do this, right?”

“Yes,” he said after lighting another cigar. The aneurism made him reconnect to his own self-awareness.

What Dago did not know (or maybe he did...) is that I could indeed self-observe in time, and that this conversation was helping me talk about this to someone (other than myself) and to get it off my chest, even if I had to do it through a fictional example. My head had not burst with an aneurism, but rather a car accident eight years before (when I was 19) provoked a head injury, a broken arm, ribs and a punctured lung. It also gave way to five or six instances of cardiac arrest.

To this day, I do not know if the head injury or the heart stopping and restarting so many times was what provoked me to reconnect with myself; **my younger self sides with the head injury theory, while my older selves go for the heart thing.** What I later did realize is that I had always been able to.

When I was 5 years old I was always talking to this woman with bright blue eyes, raven black hair, with some scars on the left side of her hairline and thin nose, to whom I could always confide my fears and wants even better than my own mother. After my injuries had healed, I saw myself in the mirror and realized that the woman in question was me; **all these years I had been talking to myself.**

Feeling desperate to reconnect with myself, I started to research meditation and other ways to channel my energy and focus my consciousness towards myself. The iteration of myself with whom I first reconnected was **my five-year-old self**, whom I comforted and helped, thus fulfilling the prophecy, so to say. After that, I reconnected with my 28-year-old self, which is my current iteration, and my 40 and **60-year-old selves.**

I reckon that I was very stressed in my early 20’s, as I did not know how to handle the idea of temporal self-observation. Mom sure didn’t know how to: She was a strict scientist and psychiatrist that with pills and

stern behavior curbed such deviant behavior out of my younger self. Such harsh treatment later came back with a vengeance during my teenage years, where I rebelled completely against her oppressiveness and until this day we are estranged.

On the other hand, I have an increasingly improving relationship with myself, as I share ideas with my **younger** and **older selves**, in order to mature them faster, as we are in the end one person tackling the same problem. In turn, I get **homework handed out to me by my forty-year-old self** and **sometimes I get my opinion asked by my sixty-year-old self as to how I would go about doing things**.

We all have an agreement to help each other in music and songwriting and whatnot, but not to interfere with the freedom to make decisions, although there might be an exception or two here and there, as we all act for the benefit of the same person, and that in the end forces us to be more selfless.

“We could even do a movie about this,” Dagoberto said excitedly.

He was an amateur filmmaker and did all the videos for Techne Jupiter. He also wrote poetry and essays- a poster child of well-directed ADHD. I started to imagine a black-haired, blue-eyed man talking to a five-year-old version of himself and then to significantly older iterations. It did not sound like a bad idea—there are probably one or two films or television shows that handle this idea to some extent. I refuse to believe otherwise.

“That’s a very interesting idea,” I said, buying into his enthusiasm. “We could do a concept album, but I don’t know about a film. What would the story be about? I mean, the feature of the main character is there: temporal self-observation. But how would this play out in a story?”

“Well... I don’t know,” he said after racking his brains for a second. “You tell me, you’re the one who came up with the idea.”

“Maybe you should try a short film first and then we can try to develop it into something larger if things go well. We can even give it away for a deluxe version of an album or something.”

“And what would the short film be about?”

“Well, you could do it on the origins of the guy’s ability. For example, you could talk about how he used to have an imaginary friend with whom he talked about everything when he was five or something and how, after the aneurism and a coma, he realized that he was his own imaginary friend, as he discovered that he could talk to his younger self.”

“That sounds nice.”

“Then you could develop it into a series or something.”

“Imagine putting in other characters that had other types of abilities...”

“Like what?”

“Imagine a guy that could insert or remove himself from someone’s memory.”

“That sounds interesting for a second album.”

That sounds like a confession to me.

You need to stop being so paranoid.

“Imagine those two and maybe a couple of more living in a house. Like a regular guy’s X-Men or something.”

“Returning to the first character, do you have any suggestion for the title of the album?”

He stopped for a few seconds and immersed himself in deep thought, almost as if something had frozen him in time. He had long wavy hair that he had tied in a samurai bun. His eyes were inky and slightly slanted, and his eyebrows were a bit thin, and his skin light brown. After being completely still for a couple of minutes, he slowly came back from the confines of his own mind with a suitable title, which he said in a very low, almost hushed voice:

“The man who talked to himself.”

THE FINAL VICTORY OF JOHANN MULLER



After courting Death for some years in my youth, I became engaged in a duel against it, having a heart affliction brought forth by the stresses of life at the front of the Great War where I served in an Austro-Hungarian artillery regiment. I struggled to finish what I considered to be my greatest work, my *Staatslehre (Theory of the State)*, working at a daunting pace, not knowing if I had a day, an hour or a decade.

That is what I thought until Death caught up with me in Madrid. While giving classes at the University of Madrid in 1934, I felt a really intense pain in my chest and a lack of breath; I broke out into a cold sweat, felt vertigo, and started to stumble. I had plans and hopes for the future: after finishing my book in Madrid I would teach at the University of Chicago, where I had been offered a position (I also declined an offer for one at the New School for the Social Sciences in New York).

My stay in Madrid came to be due to the Nazis creating a statute that deprived Jewish academics from their positions; knowing what life in Germany would entail enduring persecution, I decided not to return and have my family come to me. At 42 and having lived a good and intense life, but being far from home and with hopes for a better future, Death had caught me with my guard down, despite fearing that my time was close.

I had almost finished and was expecting to experience one of the greatest moments of my life, but it was probably not going to take place as the piercing pain in my heart worsened and I began to fall, overtaken by a sensation of vertigo, with the surprised faces of my students as audience and witness. Despair took me as I fell- I just need one more month to finish the chapter on sovereignty, I said to myself with what I thought was the last of my strength.

You have the month you have requested, said a voice in almost a whisper.

My fall ceased and my students froze in their place- however, my chest pain did not. It took me a while to realize that time was frozen as I could not move my body; having read Bergson's "Time and Free Will," I came to the conclusion that the month that I had to finish his book was one of experienced time. To escape his pain, I envisioned myself in my office in Frankfurt, crafting my chapter by means of a typewriter.

Luckily for me, my study on sovereignty was implied within my idea of the State as a system of domination and as such, I could prescind much of the need to read more material. Along with mentalizing a typewriter, I also imagined the bibliography that I had used so far so I could do citation work in an orderly fashion.

To keep track of the time, I also imagined a solar cycle that could be seen from the windows of my mental office; likewise, I invented a clock much like the one I used in my house and kept a calendar on my desk. Because it was all a mental dimension, I had no need for sleeping, although I had a couch for resting my mind when I could not put my ideas together or when I needed further reflection to put them on paper.

Little by little, the initial efforts of my study on sovereignty started to take shape, despite lapses of concentration brought forth by the continuous cardiac pain. Because the typewriter was a mental construction, I soon realized that I could correct mistakes and move paragraphs from one place to the other without having

to retype the pages. I could also delete paragraphs without leaving a mark of their existence on the pages, and I could also remember everything that I had written so far- which included my current book- in order to copy and edit parts of previous texts I needed to ensure the coherence and structure of my masterpiece.

“Working as always, my dear Johann.”

That voice. I was entrapped within the confines of my mental dimension. To hear her was not possible.

“It’s not really me,” she said with a tinge of frustration, “but a projection of a portion of your own subconscious that has taken the form of Charlotte Liebe, your lover, in order to ease subsequent interactions. This is much like talking with a Jungian archetype. You are so logical sometimes... I wonder why I fell for you in the first place.”

“You always said I was too much fun... for a lawyer.”

“That is true.”

“Not to be a rude host to myself—archetype or not—but could I ask you for the motive behind your visit?”

“Not at all, my dear Johann. I am here because you want to make amends with your actions before dying.”

“How Dickensian,” I said. “I suppose I am chastising myself not so much for taking you as a lover, but for leaving you behind with our daughter. I fear this current regime is not very kind to Jews and their descendants.”

“I think so too,” she said, looking at me with those big, doe eyes, framed by her short hair.

Such a fine woman. Very intelligent and well-versed in many disciplines, and much could be said of her vocation of poetry and literature. Not very graceful, though. I think my wife is better at that. I suppose I will be getting a visit from her soon.

“I suppose this issue is solved. If so, please leave. I need to keep working.”

“Most of it, yes. I shall now leave you to your work—as always.”

After Charlotte left me, I kept working. By that time a week had passed and I had made satisfactory progress, but much remained to be done. After another week of work I was visited by another ghost, and this time it was Rudolf Gottlieb, with whom I did my habilitation in Kiel. We both courted Death during the Kapp Putsch, an attempt to overthrow the Republic that took place in March of 1920, which was supported by parts of the military and other conservative forces. The coup took place in Berlin and the legitimate government was forced to flee the city, but it ultimately failed when a large part of the population followed the government’s call for a general strike.

When such an event took place, Gottlieb and I joined workers who were part of the general strike, occupied the Kiel imperial shipyard and were looking to arm themselves. We attempted to negotiate a ceasefire with the military commander in Kiel, Rear Admiral von Levetzow. We were captured, imprisoned and sentenced to death. However, as the coup failed we found ourselves free and Gottlieb, attempting to contain the ire of the workers, gave the funeral eulogy for 25 victims of the coup at the Eichhof cemetery. This made him highly respected by the social democrats, and started his political career.

“I suppose you represent the archetype of the teacher.”

“That is correct,” he said.

Sometimes stern, but mostly a thoughtful and warm man, he stood before me with the dignity that he always had. He was bald, and had a big moustache; he looked younger than how I remembered him, much like when he sat on the Reichstag from 1920 to 1924.

”Are you here to lay a claim against me, good sir?”

“More like a reminder. As men of science and law we always struggled to make a difference in the lives of others, but we often forget that we also need to make one within the hearts of those closest to us.”

He did not give me time to reply. After his warning he just disappeared into thin air, his words echoing in my ears, or more likely, the subconscious thought reverberating in my conscious mind. I briefly wondered who would be next, before committing my full attention back to my work.

Another week passed and I was now closer to finishing- I had a draft that needed revision and perfecting. This time, an unlikely ghost appeared before me, that of Fritz Langer. Before my exile, I represented the state of Prussia (which was dominated by social democracy) in the very well-known case *Prussia contra Reich* in which the constitutionality of the dismissal of the local government by the right-wing von Papen government was tested. On the side of the Reich was this very talented and sharp mind that had very unfortunate political inclinations. The eminent Austrian jurist Archibald Kuhn gave an opinion on the judgment which was later published officially; the competent Court was the *Staatsgerichtshof*, which was established by the Constitution of Weimar to solve conflicts between the federal government and the Lander.

This was a hotly debated case in which I fought vigorously with Langer and also the Court, which was constantly annoyed at my insistence that the case was not a purely legal controversy, but a life-and-death political conflict. Ultimately, the case was won by Langer when the court ruled in October 1932 that the Prussian government had been unlawfully suspended, but the Reich had the right to install a commissar. This led to an eventual de facto destruction of federalism and democracy in the Republic, which until now I had been watching crumble from afar.

Again, I was taken aback by seeing a former rival, whom I admired for his intellect and skill, but with whom I contended in political views and with whom I did not have a personal relationship.

“I suppose that you represent the archetype of the antagonist.”

“You could say that, yes.”

Although we disagreed in several forums and instances, we had expressed our admiration for one another. Although one thing about him struck me...

“I always found you to be very arrogant,” I said.

“I could say the same thing about you,” he said in his ever-contained and cool demeanor.

More than an antagonist, he was a mirror of myself: a man of similar skill and intellect to my own, with different leanings in the political realm, but alike to myself also in my limitations. A foil through which I would realize that sometimes my vanity, especially regarding my intellect, had gotten the best of myself and isolated me from others.

After this revelation about myself, I strove to finish the revision of my final chapter, ever engaged in a battle against Death; finishing my book would be my final victory, even if I was the only one to contemplate it in the end. I just needed to do one more revision for my work to be complete, for my endeavor to finally be finished. Just then, she appeared before me.

“I am always around at the least opportune moment, aren't I, my love?”

“Not at all,” I said. “You are the one with the biggest claim for my attention.”

“I resented your affair with that woman, but sometime during our marriage, I realized that I had wedded a man who was taken. Work was your wife, and Charlotte and I were only your mistresses.”

I did not know what to say, to be honest. Rudolf was right that in my obsession with consolidating my scholarship, perhaps intuiting that I was to have a short lifespan, I had forgotten those things that were closest and dearest to me: my wife, Trude, and my three children.

Trude Adler, graceful and beautiful as always—a dancer above all things—stood before me not with anger, but with a faint sadness that I could never detect as I was always enthralled with my work, attempting to perfect it, to disseminate it as much as possible.

“You always worried about your legacy,” she said. “Perhaps such a stress is what ultimately killed you. That would be the mother of all ironies, if you ask me.”

“I don't know what you want from me.”

“I am a part of you. What do *you* want?”

Again, I did not know what to say.

“Your true legacy lay not within me, but within the children that you left behind now that your mortal coil is soon to become earth. How much time could you have devoted to your children instead of your work, without sacrificing the latter? In fact, if you see your ‘draft,’ you will realize that you are already finished, and you have nothing to add, but in fact, your need for further revision is just a hidden anxiety, a fear of Death. All your life you had this fear in you and it was seeping into those who you love, affecting them. It is time to let go of such fears. No one will know that you did finish your work, but you will know that you made peace with your fears.”

I then realized that my final victory lay not within the fact that I had finished my work, but the fact that I recognized my fears and faced them before leaving this life. Now that I had finished, I felt something pull me from my imagined chair and so, I, Johann Muller, finally fell to the floor of my classroom at the University of Madrid, to never get up again.

TIMETRAVELERS



HOW TO READ

This story is comprised of two narratives, one pertaining to Johnny and the other to Giovanna. One is upside down from the other and her story begins where his ends, and thus there is no proper ending to it because when one story is finished one can simply turn the book upside down and keep reading. This also means that one does not necessarily have to begin with Johnny's story as one could begin with Giovanna and then go on to him. I offer the reader three ways to read this story:

1. Read Johnny's story and then proceed to Giovanna's.
2. Read Giovanna's story and then proceed to Johnny's.
3. Read in the way of Option 1, and then read according to Option 2, or do it the other way around.

JOHNNY

Poker night at my house was always an entertaining affair. Someone would bring some decent wine, cheese, olives, maybe even some dates, and of course, stories about time travel. We travelers are like cats that enter and leave timelines whenever we please and so, it is never common to see everyone at once. Lanfranc had brought some wine made in his abbey and Bergson some Camembert. Our fourth was missing and was supposed to bring tobacco and sweets, and although theoretically one could never be late if they arrived through time travel, our lot was not exactly the most punctual.

We had yet to reach a long-term consensus on the currency to be used in games, so we usually improvised. This time we were playing with rare books. To ensure fair play and ultimately avoid fist fights, Mort, an immortal to whom I rented one of the upper floors, acted as a croupier and also ensured that the books being used were near in value, as he had worked for years in an antique shop. In return, he got a small fee from the totality of the books used, and some wine and cheese.

I had just won a very tense game: at stake were a first edition copy of Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*; Bergson's own *Time and Free Will, Matter and Memory*, and *Creative Evolution*, all signed by the author; and Jean Bodin's *Six Books of the Commonwealth*. I had a royal flush while Lanfranc, my mentor in time travel had a full house. I was in the process of basking in my victory, to

Having finished my training, Johnny and the Spaniard bid me goodbye as I was now free to return to my daily life in Buenos Aires, having mastered the rare art of time traveling. I was free to roam here and there, yesterday and tomorrow, much like a leaf on the wind. I would also bump into other time travelers and maybe train others like Johnny had done to me. I also realized that I could visit all types of architectural wonders, even if they did not exist in the present anymore—this would give me an unparalleled architectural education, as impossible things would become firsthand knowledge.

When I returned to Buenos Aires, my mother immediately noticed my physical changes and I had to lie and say I had been training for a marathon for several months and that I had told her about it once or twice, and she must have forgotten. My father and my friends eventually asked me the same but swallowed the lie anyway. To keep up my physical training, I kept running and got a membership at a nearby gym for weight training. I figured my grades would go up as I could always “make time” to study.

After a month of catching up with everything and everyone, I went to France to buy the goods that the Spaniard had told me about. I was somewhat nervous for my first time traveler poker game, but I knew that everything would be fine. I saw the date that the Spaniard gave me and after dressing up in a waxed cotton jacket and a decent pair of jeans, and the same Damned t-shirt that I was wearing when I met him, I went and knocked on Johnny's front door. He opened it and looked at me with a baffled expression.

Lanfranc's annoyance, while Bergson remained polite and calm, when I felt a disturbance that made me shiver. There was a very familiar meowing sound from afar.

"I feel a disturbance in the force," I said.

Lanfranc took a long puff and closed his eyes, trying to verify my claim, and so did Bergson.

"I feel it too," Lanfranc said.

"So did I," Bergson concurred. "I think a new member of our brethren just traveled for the first time. Tradition dictates that he who first felt the disturbance is the one to train the new member, with our blessing and support, of course."

New time travelers usually made their first subconscious jump under a surge of strong emotion—during sex, a car accident, grieving, etc., and of course such an occasion meant a sloppy jump that was felt by other travelers across the universe. Bergson and Lanfranc and some others had mentored before, and now it was my turn.

"The timing kinda sucks, doesn't it, old man?" I said to Lanfranc.

"Not to worry, child," he said, still sore about his loss. "I shall wait for you and recoup my losses,

"Look, it was what felt best, and was not necessarily the most logical of arrangements."
"So you travel by feel..." I said.
"Yes," he said, "and I think you will travel more by intelligence, not intuition."
Now that my visualization training was done, we started to train performing the jumps. At first, the training was daunting: every time I took a step it felt like I was doing it with a 60-pound backpack. Luckily, my physical training kicked in and it became easier to do what I practiced. After consistent practice I realized that the size of my infinite staircase could be adjusted depending on the type of jump I was to do—a larger one for traveling decades, a shorter one for hours or days. When it came to incredibly short jumps, I wouldn't even need to advance a step, only to move sideways from where I was standing.
I kept practicing until walking through time was easier for me than walking in real time. I was ready to return home. The Spaniard told me that there was a measure of telepathic communication among time travelers, which explained how they coordinated to play poker. He also told me that when I felt ready, I would take his place in the poker game that Johnny, Lanfranc and Bergson had before my training started and which he was too busy to attend. He gave me some francs and asked me to buy the dates, honey and cardamom he would bring to the party in France in the 1920's from some very specific places he knew.

and finally take your valued copy of *The Leviathan* from you.”

“You wish,” I said.

“Off you go, lad,” Bergson said.

Mort waved at me after taking a sip of wine. I went to my room to grab my coat and some supplies that I put into a backpack, which would be needed for the trip, chiefly among them a book that a time traveler that I had never met called Trent made for use by others and which he published in the 1980’s under the name J.E. Passeron-Lavac. I was pretty sure it was in one of the drawers of my desk, which was made of fine oak by an excellent Mexican artisan in 1812.

But the book, *The Flow of Time*, was nowhere to be found in my desk. I stood still for a moment and thought hard: I had a queen-sized bed, which I just made and I knew it wasn’t there. It wasn’t on my bookshelf either, which incidentally was made by the same craftsman. I remembered that I had played a bit of guitar, using my 1962 Telecaster and my analog pedals, which were in a corner of my room, next to my desk and a wall covered in posters of Minor Threat, Radiohead, Dubliners and Los Tigres del Norte. I looked in that corner and next to my fuzz pedal I found the little paperback.

Now that I had everything I needed I closed my eyes and visualized the universe, as one does in time travel. To each traveler, the universe has a different shape and dynamic; because

reduction was needed and I would have to center on the behavior of the universe.
I centered on its flow and change for the second day, realizing that a system that experienced itself objectively and subjectively at the same time, where subjective units interacted with each other in mutual observation as social arrangements, could only be explained in paradoxes. Therefore, I had to represent the universe as such. The third day, thinking about what paradox would suit time travel and my own inclinations best, I decided to go with the Penrose steps- that is, the infinite staircase. I could travel infinite spacetime by walking up and down those steps and as such it would be a practical and heuristic schema.
I came out of my isolation and Johnny was there to receive me, and rejoiced when I communicated to him my success. I took his hand and showed him the Penrose steps.
“An infinite staircase,” he said. “Very nice.”
“Now show me how you see it.”
It was very surprising to me that his representation of the universe was a giant *maneki neko*, one of those Chinese/Japanese cats that move their paws back and forth.
“What the fuck, man?” I said.

time is consciousness, and this was a necessary reduction to be made in order to travel through time. To me, the universe took the form of a giant *maneki neko*, that Chinese cat that waves its paw back and forth, and it sometimes meowed to communicate something to me, which in this case was the location of the traveler I was going to train.

The reason why this image of the universe differed so much from person to person is that because the universe is a self-observing/mutually observing system, to observe and understand it, we had to do that with ourselves first. Thus, time travel is internal and external at the same time. I started walking to the position, as time travel also involved movement in space (although to me they were both sides of the same coin) and as I got closer I felt an increasing sense of distress, much like a frowning man makes ripples in the water. This was normal and even characteristic of a first time travel, as people suddenly found themselves in a new time period altogether.

I found myself at the top of a hill from which vast grassy plains could be seen. There was quite a good deal of wind and dust and as I looked for something outside of the ordinary, I saw a girl in her early twenties with short, pixie-like hair, dressed in jean shorts, black tights, rollerblades, and a purple Damned t-shirt. She also had a scraped knee. She spoke to me in Spanish, with an Argentinian accent.

“Donde estoy?”

exercises and Kundalini yoga. The first month my muscles hurt like I was being tortured in hell. Johnny gave me massages and the Spaniard treated me with acupuncture sessions. I consoled myself with the fact that if I mastered this, I would be able to view the architecture of any city at any time in person, instead of going through insipid archival footage and sketches. They also lent me books to read in my scarce leisure time. In time, training paid off and became less difficult—even fun—as I learned to focus my thoughts and clear my mind of trivial ones. When this became easy for me to do, Johnny started to give me classes on how to make communion with the universe. The first step was visualizing it, with the most important lesson being that to understand the universe I would need to understand myself, as I was an extension of said continuum. When the time came for the visualization to start, Johnny transported me to Lanfranc's monastery, where with three days' worth of food and water I isolated myself from everything in order to create my representation of the universe. The process reminded me of a Jedi building his lightsaber. *How do you represent an infinitely complex system?* I asked myself. I divided my meditation into three cycles of 5 1/2 hours, with half an hour to eat a morsel of food and 6 hours to sleep. How do you represent a system in which no heartbeat or element repeats itself exactly the same way—that is, where everything is unique and unrepeatable? I came to the conclusion that a certain

“En el sur de Italia,” I said, *“yo diría que unos 200 y algo años antes de Cristo.”*

“Pero que me decís boludo,” she said, amazed, *“si yo estaba en Buenos Aires en 2012.”*

“You speak English?” I said.

“Yes, I do. My mother is Scottish and my father is Argentinian.”

“Ah. Curiously, my father is Irish and my mother is Mexican.”

“I’m Giovanna.”

“Johnny,” I said as I offered her some of the water I brought.

“Thanks,” she said, and took a long drink.

“You’re drinking it too fast,” I said. “Your body won’t take it nicely.”

As if on cue, she started to vomit.

“Told you,” I said. “There doesn’t seem to be any danger, so we can rest a bit. Here, eat these bars. Slowly. And drink some more water.”

“If we’re not in danger, man,” she said in a Scottish accent, “what do you call that?”

“I can’t tell you yet. I don’t want to pollute your conception.”

He gave me a couple of days to rest before starting physical conditioning and I used it to visit Temple Bar and St. Stephen’s Green, which were not that far away from his house. The first day of training, the Spaniard, who must have been in his fifties and Johnny, in his late twenties, were before me without their shirts on. They looked like that Ryan Gosling guy, all muscle and no fat.

“If you are not at this level of fitness,” said the Spaniard with a thick Castilian accent, “you are not suitable for travel.”

“Wait, what?” I said in protest. “You guys look photoshopped! It’ll take me forever to be that fit.”

“Eight months,” Johnny said. “If we go easy on you. And I may, but he won’t.”

For six months I trained endlessly with Johnny and the Spaniard. The former woke me up at 6:00 am for endless running around Dublin and St. Stephen’s Green, no matter if it was windy, raining, or snowing. The Spaniard would bark at me during weight training, which Johnny sometimes did alongside me in order to inspire me to go with it. This continued into the afternoons, where Johnny taught me meditation techniques, breathing

That would be, judging by the formation and composition of the troops and time we found ourselves in, the Battle of Cannae of the Second Punic War.

We had front row tickets to one of the biggest military triumphs in recorded history, or the massacre of 60,000 people or more (counting both Romans and Carthaginians). The Romans had an army of 80,000 strong (historians differ) and 6,000 in cavalry. The Carthaginians had an army that was half that of the Romans, but almost twice as many in cavalry, that was comprised of Numidians, Gauls and Hispanics. I explained this to Giovanna.

“You can distinguish one side from the other,” I said, “not only by their size, but also by their formation. The Romans are that clunky three-line formation and the Carthaginians are that C-like formation that protrudes towards the center of the Roman line. The commander of the Carthaginians is Hannibal Barca, who is leading at the center at great personal risk. You can actually see his massive testicles from space.”

“Why are we seeing this?” she said. “It’s obvious that those on the right side are going to get butchered.”

“For many reasons—to teach you that numbers aren’t everything, and that time is not ruthless, but people are. In fact, time is a human invention, and we distinguished it from space and gave meaning to it. Also, you were the one who brought me here. I was killing some time travelers in a game of poker. I

“We can’t understand the inner workings of the universe because it’s so massive and always moving and to analyze things we separate them from the continuum and merge them with others into concepts, because we are language-based creatures and language is static. It doesn’t change, but we do and when it happens we change it. “So, we can’t understand the exact contents of the universe, but we can have an intuitive idea of its behavior. To travel in time, you need to visualize the universe and its behavior. Each traveler has their own way of seeing the universe and each way is right because it represents a different aspect of something that is in continuous movement, and wrong because they cannot grasp the absoluteness of it.”

“And how do you see the universe, Johnny O’Grady?”

will give you a lift home and train you so you can control it.”

The wind was blowing very hard and dust was flying everywhere. The Carthaginian cavalry charged the Roman equivalent and thus enticed the Roman infantry to attack, with the Carthaginians slowly backing down, leading them on. Giovanna was looking much better, less pale and scared and was eating and drinking as I had instructed her to. I took out a first aid kit to address her scraped knee and her other minor injuries.

We kept watching in silence as the armies clashed and thousands died before our eyes like a mass snuff film. I was probably a coldhearted bastard for letting her see this carnage, but she came here for a reason. First jumps always happened for a reason and we had to derive knowledge from them.

“How old are you, by the way?”

“19. I’m studying architecture at *la UBA—la Universidad de Buenos Aires.*”

“What do you get from all this?” I said, in a way starting the training.

“That people don’t know how to appreciate life, be it their own or that of others.”

“Not bad,” I said.

“Fine.”

“I’ll come back in two weeks’ time, again at 6.”

And with that he disappeared, leaving me with a logistical nightmare, as I didn’t have an inherent sense of social organization. My aptitudes all went into my designs and architectural ability. Without my parents knowing, I bought the required gym clothing and a briefcase to contain all I would need for my training, because if I didn’t cultivate this, who knew where I would travel next and if I would have someone to help me.

As he had promised, he appeared in my room at 6, and making me close my eyes again, we traveled to his home in Dublin, Ireland, to the year 2013. Apparently he inherited the house from his grandfather and rented the spare lodgings to other travelers and unusual people. He lived on the first floor where he also had access to the living room and the kitchen.

On the second floor lived Mort, an immortal who was friendly with the time travelers, and the Spaniard, another time traveler. I haunted the third floor which had an extra room to spare and on the fourth floor they had a fully conditioned weight room, which they all used to keep fit.

Before attempting to travel I had to exercise to arrive at my peak physical condition,

unmade; a large desk where a lot of papers and models were located; a large, generic, wooden closet where many different and quite outlandish garments were found; and a guitar rack where a Stratocaster was next to some pedals.

“You can open them now,” I said.

“You’re good,” she said. “I barely felt it.”

“Well,” I said, “I expect you to be better. I’ve never seen someone travel for that long on their first jump. I’ll come by tomorrow to start your training, so start reading this.” I gave her *The Flow of Time*. “When can I visit?”

“Six.”

“Perfect. I’m leaving now. I want to continue killing at poker.”

“Good luck,” she said as I jumped back to my room, some five minutes after I left.

I opened the door and Bergson, Lanfranc and Mort were chatting amicably.

“You took your time,” said Lanfranc.

“Where were you?” said Bergson.

It taught me a lot of things. For example, that the universe is consciousness (*duree*) manifested in different degrees of vibration, interacting and converging in different patterns, all of which are part of the substance that forms our perceptions of external reality. The experience of the universe was unique, as it was the convergence of many and one at the same time. The universe as a continuum has no separations, divisions or gaps, no beginning or end, and it was best described in terms of paradoxes. This being said, the universe is best understood as a system that is self-observing and mutually observing at the same time.

They were lessons that were hard to assimilate, but when he arrived at 6:05, I had come to understand some of the basic tenets of Passeron-Lavac, and we started to discuss them. He told me that in reality, the book was written by another time traveler called Trent.

“Consciousness is everything,” Johnny explained. “The fact that we cannot understand it or perceive it doesn’t mean that it isn’t there. There’s a protomental feature in all existing objects, because they’re condensed consciousness. Physics can’t come up with a way to conciliate the quantum realm, atomistic classical physics, and the realm of the very large (special and general relativity) because they don’t attribute this quality to it. They have a ‘dead’ theory of things. The four fundamental forces—gravity, electromagnetism, and weak and strong nuclear forces—are all bound by consciousness, as well as everything else. Consciousness binds everything into a living

“Cannae, 215 B.C.”

“And where is the traveler from?” asked Mort.

“Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2012.”

“Holy Father!” exclaimed Lanfranc. “That is quite the jump. Probably the longest first time I’ve ever heard about.”

“Yes,” I said. “I’ll have my hands full training her.”

“It was the same thing I thought about you, lad,” said Lanfranc reassuringly. “You are ready. You will do fine.”

“Any news from our fourth?” I said.

“It was supposed to be the Spaniard, but he’s still not here.”

The Spaniard was a time traveler from 16th century Spain, who was a soldier in Her Majesty’s tercios and who was immortalized in El Greco’s painting, *Caballero con la mano en pecho*. I rented him a room on the second floor along with Mort.

“How strange. He never misses one of these games.”

to me that I was in South Italy, at the Battle of Cannae held between the Carthaginians and Romans and that in my distress I had jumped in time to this period.

He started to explain the battle and the way things were going to unfold, with the smaller army performing a flawless strategy that would result in the carnage of more than 50,000 people. He also told me that time was just nature unfolding and that it was a human invention, and that time was not cruel per se, but merely a process, with people being cruel to each other. This battle was a prime example.

As I drank water and ate some energy bars, Johnny was fixing my knee and we both saw the way the battle proceeded. He told me that first time jumps have their reasons for coming about and that one must learn from them. Once the battle was over and I was feeling better, he gave me a lift back home, but made me close my eyes. Unlike my clumsy jump that felt like a freetail, his felt more like having a gentle wind on my face.

Before leaving me in my room he gave me a small book called *The Flow of Time*, by some guy called Passeron-Lavac, that I needed to read as soon as possible. We agreed that he would come back the next day at 6 to start my training. Luckily for me, that day was Saturday and it allowed me to sleep well and devote myself to the required reading. Despite being a slim volume of 150 pages, it was astonishingly dense, but at the same time easy to read and understand.

I heard a knock at the door.

“That’s probably him,” I said.

I went to answer the door and to my surprise, I found Giovanna, looking slightly older, with longer hair and a grey, waxed cotton jacket, skinny jeans, the same Damned t-shirt, and some Converse.

“The Spaniard sends his apologies for being unable to attend. Here are some dates, honey, and cardamom. Now there’s something I never expected- you being surprised. First jump?”

“Yes,” I said after a hard swallow.

“You’ll do just fine,” she said. “Help me put this stuff in the kitchen.”

I was roller skating back home from school as I usually did, when in my absentmindedness I almost hit some old lady, and in my attempt to avoid her I forgot to brake, and was about to be hit by a Mercedes Benz. Instead, I felt as if someone yanked me away by the back of my shirt, and I felt like I was freefalling. The next thing I knew, I was falling face first on this hill, feeling like I had run two marathons in a row.

I had a mean scrape on my knee, and felt tired, hungry, and dehydrated. Before me, two armies were preparing to fight one another, which made no sense to me, not because of the pointlessness of conflict or bloodshed, but because I should be at home in Buenos Aires, playing the guitar to unwind after a busy day at school.

I don’t think more than five minutes had passed when a tall, redheaded man arrived amidst wind and dust, looking like a crossover between a burned out gumshoe and a hipster—he had stylishly cut hair, a long, bone-colored raincoat, black skinny jeans, a tie, and black dress boots. His nose was long, like his facial structure, and his eyes were honey-colored, although they had some yellowness in them that sporadically appeared. We talked in Spanish and then in English. He identified himself as Johnny O’Grady and gave me some water, and just as he warned me not to drink it too quickly, I started to vomit. He explained

GIOVANNA

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF HER HOLINESS CHRONE GAIA III,
RESTORER OF LIFE AND LOVER OF BIG DOGS

HOW TO READ

This story is divided into four parts:

Holy Fields: 19:00 – onwards

Field Rehabilitation: 11:30 – 19:30

Houses of Healing and lunch: 8:00 – 11:00

Awakening and classes: 5:00 – 8:00

This is the primary order of reading it, from the end of the day to the beginning. The reader can also choose to read it in a linear order—that is, from beginning to end. They can also choose to read the segments in a randomized order.

HOLY FIELDS: 19:00 - ONWARDS

After she performed such a miracle she was exhausted. I picked up her equipment and started to walk towards the Holy Fields, which were a couple of miles from here and were outside the city limits. This was a place she visited when she needed to meditate or to recover from physical exertion. This place—she explained to me once—had a higher concentration of consciousness and communing with the universe was easier.

The sun was slowly setting as I approached these hallowed fields. Entrance was forbidden, but there were no guardians, and people simply refrained from entering because they knew they ought not to. There was a small cabin where she usually would rest, and in it there were a couple of hammocks, a well and a fireplace. There were some bushes with edible berries and trees that always bore fruits, and it was an evergreen valley that offered solace to wounded animals, where predators would not dare to enter out of respect.

As the guardian of Her Holiness Chrono Gaia, I have had the privilege of staying here many times before. She usually came here after cleansing land, and becoming too tired from her work, I would bring her by means of a horse. I noticed that small wounds heal faster or completely in this place, and my scars grew thinner over my several stays; my dreams were much more vivid and easier to remember when I was here, and this was also an ideal place for watching the stars.

It was almost nightfall when we arrived at the cottage. There was some wood stacked in the cabin, so I lit up the chimney and set up one of the hammocks where I lay her to rest as I made some broth and tea. Sometimes I wondered what it was like to be her, how she saw the world, which due to her higher awareness of the universe must have been radically different from how the rest of us saw it. Once, in a moment of trust, she tried explaining it to me.

“You see the world in four dimensions—a set of solid objects in a linear, causal progression. I see the world in five—of each object I see its past and probable future, and of the whole I see the same, including points in time that are fixed and others that are in flux. That is, things that will certainly happen and other things that might or might not be. Regarding myself, I can talk with myself from the past and future, seeing fixed points and those in flux.”

I tried very hard to understand this perspective, and every time I found myself overwhelmed. How could she function like an almost normal person with such an enormous amount of information being processed by her brain all the time? If it were me, I would never be able to get out of bed.

I wondered—what did she see when she looked at the stars? Did she see their whole history, would she see the birth and death of the universe from the vantage point of Earth? What did she feel when she talked to people? Did she feel bored or condescending when she spoke with us, the same way we would feel when trying to speak or interact with an animal? Did she feel lonely and misunderstood because we were one notch below her in our awareness and we couldn't fully understand her?

All this made me understand why she was so dreamy and seemingly distracted. It's not that she wasn't paying attention—it's just that she was paying attention to *everything*.

The tea was ready and I prepared a cup for Her Holiness as she woke from her sleep. She was a little feverish, but the tea always made her feel better. I also put a cloth with cool water on her forehead and lips, and as she started to improve I gave her her glasses. The broth was almost ready: it was a thick mixture of squash and several types of mushrooms, the same way they did it in the monastery where she was raised and how she liked it. She took a deep breath, the bowl in her hands.

"My favorite," she said. "You look tough, but you always pamper me, Little Magnus."

She had taken a liking to calling me that and I didn't know if she considered me inferior, if she saw my past form or if it was just because it was my family's nickname for me. Her glasses fogged as she blew the cup to cool it, instead of manipulating it through time for a few seconds to do the job. I thought she sometimes did things "manually" to remember that she was a human like everybody else, just with more responsibilities than others. "The more we know and the more we can do, the more responsible we are to put such capacities in the service of others to render them good deeds," she always told me.

I had been her guardian for eight years at that point. More than a bodyguard, I served as her butler, reminding her of things that she easily forgot, but also serving her in moments of weakness such as these, when she was too tired. I enjoyed my current position very much, although old friends and former colleagues felt that I renounced my calling in the military. Like her and unlike her, I was a strategic prodigy, being inducted in the defense forces when I was 16. Although there was a world nation that had the purpose of rehabilitating Earth, there was a military that was charged with assisting with natural disasters and maintaining a defense perimeter around the planet in case a pilgrim ship returned with hostile intentions. This was the case of the "Warhammer Conflict," where three such spaceship-nations returned to Earth to colonize it.

This took place 13 years ago and lasted for 3 years; it resulted in our victory with the annihilation of two of such ships, which did not care for truce, peace offerings or the like. I started as a colonel and rose through the ranks to reach that of general and was the one who orchestrated the strategy of the Third Battle of the Firesky, where we achieved total victory and the invaders fled. At 35, being a renowned warrior and war hero, I renounced that life in order to enter the service of Her Holiness Chrono Gaia and to redeem myself from bloodshed through the assimilation and practice of her teachings.

During my first years in her service, the nightmares that had haunted me since the war diminished and eventually I did not have them anymore. When dealing with the military I advised her on how they think and act, so she could always make them understand her viewpoint and they could work better together. All the years we have travelled together tending to the wounds of the Earth and its people have been a great privilege.

In this post-pilgrimage Earth, selflessness was the basis of social organization, and as such, the notions of government and ruling have been discarded because they entailed the domination of one group over another

and also unending competition through games of government. We organized in the form of decentralized coordination and cooperation as a world system and Her Holiness was one of the ten capable of temporal manipulation, and tasked with helping with the rehabilitation of planet Earth, which after 700 years of effort was nearing 40% of its capacity. These men and women were not religious figures per se, as they did not take vows of any sort and could marry and procreate, but their ability was so rare and they used it in such a generous way that people in general considered them holy.

Feeling much better, Her Holiness grabbed a couple of blankets and put them outside where she proceeded to watch the incredibly bright heavens that laid quite the show for us in the Holy Land. She seemed to be transported to another dimension when she stared at the sky; she looked dreamy and cute, lost in her contemplation.

“You’ve wondered what I see when I look at the stars, haven’t you, Little Magnus?”

“I have, Your Holiness.”

“Let us sleep outside,” she said as she discreetly held my hand. “I will do my best to explain it to you.”

“Thank you, Chrono.”

FIELD REHABILITATION: 11:30 - 19:30

We had arrived at our destination, a heavily polluted field that had a caustic and hostile scent. Life had long ago renounced this place but today, we would kindly ask it to come back and forgive us. This field was very close to the hallowed lands, so it wouldn’t be difficult for Magnus to take me to the cottage if I overexerted myself. He took out the map and all the equipment that I would need to accomplish my purpose. This extension of land had been very resistant to all techniques of rehabilitation, and thus I was called to tackle it, as time manipulators always take the seemingly lost causes.

Using the map as a reference, I traced the extension of land I would rehabilitate and started writing the equations and calculations needed for my temporal manipulation. I brought out a set of quartz crystals which I placed around me that would amplify and disperse my energy along the perimeter. The idea was to take this extension of land and manipulate its time and make it age to an extent at which the pollutants would be assimilated and thus become able to bear life again. This was one of my duties as a holy woman.

Once the preparations were finished, I started my breathing exercises and soon I entered a meditative trance. Magnus, my guardian and assistant, followed suit but of course he did not have my abilities or training, so he put his thoughts on a similar frequency to mine so as not to interfere with the whole process. Bluntly put, he took himself out of the equation. Because all things were consciousness on different degrees of vibration, I

took my frequency to a higher vibratory degree to “be one” with the field; because inanimate objects are not living, but have a protomental quality, I did not feel the pain of the field, but visualized the latter as a whole and started to move it in time, taking it from one state of consciousness to the other.

Little by little I saw how the place started to change, with bacteria injected previously by engineers living and dying at an accelerated pace and the field aging several years per minute until grass started to grow anew. As this happened, Magnus stopped meditating to quickly plant a small tree he brought with us and the latter grew in size until it reached a couple of meters. This whole process took me ten hours of measured time.

The planting of the tree was a test to see if the land had truly been rehabilitated, as the tree bore fruits and Magnus analyzed their chemical composition for pollutants by means of a special probe and a laptop that ran the tests. He then deemed the field rehabilitated and I started to come back from my trance, feeling very exhausted as I opened my eyes.

Magnus took me in his arms and offered me a bit of water and honey to make up for the dehydration and the energy spent. I told him that our job was done and that he was to take me to the hallowed grounds to rest and recover. He lifted me and started to carry me back, and I began losing consciousness.

As my body was weakened, my mind started to drift, seeing several points of my past: my discovery as a time manipulator by an elder peer and my training with him and with monks until the age of 16. I was not taken from my parents, so they were a great support for me as I grew up and became comfortable with my abilities.

I mostly resembled my mother, with her thin lips, elegant nose and her wild, wavy hair that flowed in every direction. My eyebrows were as thin as my father’s and my eyes were also his, as he had chocolate-colored eyes (although I would have liked my mother’s grey eyes instead). I was taller than my mother and closer to the height of my father, 1.70m, and was also lanky like him and did not inherit my mother’s curves or charm. As for intellect, I inherited from both of them, as my mother was an engineer and my father a professor of literature, and both fostered in me a thirst for knowledge.

I also saw my little Magnus, my caretaker and my protector, a very handsome man who was a general in the Warhammer Conflict. Over the years I saw bits and pieces of his life from his childhood as a chess prodigy, to his meteoric rise in the ranks of the military as he had an unparalleled sense of strategy for rescue operations and contingency plans in the case of natural disasters. I saw him in his blue uniform on a spaceship, coordinating a fleet of ships advancing towards a battle; he was tall, blonde, with sparkling blue eyes, and a powerful face that looked chiseled.

When I met him I was wary of him, as I sensed great bloodshed in his actions. He had entered the military because of his taste for strategy in rescue and logistics, but as conflict touched the Earth anew he became disenchanted with the position and thus wanted to enter into my service. As I saw that his intentions were sincere he became a trusted friend and advisor, and I have made my best effort to console him and help him

find peace. However, there was something that was troubling me: little by little I started to fall in love with this man of the world, but I feared that he would forever see me as the lanky teenager he met eight years ago.

Even I, who knew that our bodies are an ephemeral container of our essences and who knew that what mattered were actions and feelings, felt lonely sometimes because no man would approach me, as I was always “Your Holiness.” The one or two who did were scared to death of Magnus. It was easy to feel lonely and detached from everything as I saw the world in a wholly different manner—but sometimes I, too, wanted some romantic companionship. Nothing overly sexual in the beginning, just someone to kiss and to hold hands with and of course, eventually sex would follow. Maybe one day I could have children, as some of my peers have had, and a family of my own.

I knew these were trivial wants and fears, things that probably should not dwell in the mind of somebody with my knowledge of the universe and with my responsibility, but as any other human being, I was not exempt from feeling them. I started to drift again to some problem I had laid out to my students in my quantum cybernetics class. I had foreseen that only 3 out of 75 would find the solution by this Friday, when I would see them again.

I woke up a bit when we entered the Holy Land, and felt its restoring embrace, which nurtured me little by little and had always held me strong when I needed it the most. I also felt the even walk of Magnus as he carried me. He was quite strong to carry me for so long, even if I was a tall sack of bones and skin. The sun was setting and the stars were bidding me welcome to the hallowed grounds, and they shone brightly, dispersed throughout the heavens.

Magnus set me on the floor as he put together the hammock. He also made some tea and broth which, judging by the smell, was my favorite recipe from the monastery. As I lay within the hammock I fell asleep a bit more and felt feverish, as my mind travelled through time and space and I saw the origin and end of constellations and nebulae at the same time. I also saw the Earth before its poisoning and most of humanity’s pilgrimage to other systems to plunder and poison, as their selfish ways could not yield other results.

As I was cradled softly in my hammock I saw a blonde boy, some five or six years old, who looked like Little Little Magnus—his eyes, however, were very different. They were not bright blue like Magnus, but rather they were grey like my mother’s. He approached my hammock as I lay there all feverish and sweaty.

“Hi, Mommy,” he said.

“Hi, Little Little Magnus,” I answered without thinking.

HOUSES OF HEALING AND LUNCH: 8:00 - 11:00

After my usual class at the university, I also went to the adjacent hospital for an hour or so to help the physicians with their labor. There were many uses for a woman who could manipulate time: sometimes I could stall the growth of tumors, help patients to heal wounds by accelerating them in time or even make them go backwards and deny them in time (this could only be when it was a wound or illness that was not too complex). It was only “sometimes” because there are ailments that are fixed points in time; that is, they are things that must happen and cannot be prevented from happening. With those I manipulated the flow of time and also probabilities.

All of my classes took place from 7:00 to 8:00, from Monday to Saturday. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays I gave a course on quantum cybernetics and on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays I gave a course on philosophy of time and metacybernetics. After that I would make a short walk to the hospital of the University where they waited for me at 8:10 to see patients and work on them.

At 10:30 I usually finished my morning duties and would come by the hospital for my afternoon rounds whenever my schedule allowed it. I had lunch at 10:40 at a nearby restaurant where they tended to my nutritional needs by preparing my meals according to Magnus’ specifications. He, having an extraordinary logistical talent, was the one who organized my days and weeks in order to maximize the usage of my talents for the benefit of others.

At the hospital I was given an average of six or seven charts to work on, and they were mostly postoperative patients who required good cleanup work. As for them, I saw their possibilities of infection and if low, I advanced their wound in time to a more healed state. These types of patients required a nutritional serum devised by a fellow time manipulator to help them endure the stress of temporal healing. Of those patients, on that particular day, I had three.

That day, there was a much more complicated case of lung cancer that had been unresponsive to treatment and that I had been tending piecemeal, as these instances had far too many variables to treat in one go. As I headed to the postoperative patients, their family came to me begging for aid: “Your Holiness,” and “Princess,” they said. I could usually see fragments of their lives in relation to their loved ones and I could also see who was sincere. Their intentions notwithstanding, I treated every patient to the fullest extent of my abilities- what they did or did not do with their lives did not concern me. I also felt no concern for what they might do with the time that was granted.

The mother of the lung cancer patient approached me, a loving mother of a grateful and good son. The prospects of her son were not good as I had been treating him, and that day I would find out whether his illness was a fixed point, or in flux. Sometimes there were curious mixes of both and those patients got to live, but with some complications due to the illness. This woman did not talk to me—she knew she did not need to. I gave her a hug to comfort her and I saw more scattered fragments of her past.

“Today we will see,” I said. “I will do my best.”

“Thank you, Your Holiness,” she said.

As I saw the afflicted man named Martin, son of Winona, I visualized his body and illness with the help of diagnostic media, and I started seeing his possibilities: 85% chance of death in 4 months’ time, 10% chance of death by the end of the year, and only a 5% chance of survival. As I delved into the survival percentage to see if it was manipulable, I hit the obstacle I dreaded, but expected: a fixed point. I finished my rounds and told Winona the bad news. I told her how death is unavoidable (even for me) and that it is merely a change in vibration in consciousness, much like water can have solid, liquid and gaseous states.

As I met Magnus in the restaurant I greeted his uncle Petr-Magnus, who was a retired general in the Earth military and whose nephew served with him as a peer in the Warhammer Conflict. He was a pleasant man who took my class and with whom we agreed to have lunch. When I arrived, I was told by the staff that my food would be served in five minutes, as Magnus and Petr-Magnus had ordered their food in my absence.

“Your Holiness,” he greeted me.

“General,” I said, “set an example for your nephew and address me as *Chrono*. People insist too much on being formal.”

“Only if you repay the kindness by calling me *Petr*.”

As we sat, we talked a bit about today’s class, and then the subject changed towards Magnus, my assistant, who was a general before he entered into my service. His family called him Little Magnus because his father and two uncles (Soren-Magnus, Petr-Magnus and Sven-Magnus) and his brother and two cousins (Alexander-Magnus, Gudvard-Magnus and Karl-Magnus) were all taller than him. Little Magnus measured at 1.87 meters, significantly smaller when compared to their heights, which ranged from 1.95 to 2.08 meters. I used his nickname as well for two reasons: after all those years I considered him part of my family, and I had been trying for a long time to get him to call me Chrono, instead of my title.

Petr told Little Magnus that everybody missed him since his honorable discharge and also of how happy he was to see him more after his retirement, because as he never wed or had children, he considered him to be the closest thing he had to a son. Now, I knew for a fact that Magnus had no intention of returning even in a non-belligerent capacity, because he had bad memories about the time of the War.

He was the one who devised the strategies that won the conflict, but a miscalculation in the implementation of the plan caused the invading starship nations to be destroyed (resulting in millions of deaths) instead of the vessels being crippled as he had intended. Some years ago, he tearfully told me that if he had had me on his side, with my probability manipulation skills, such a tragedy could have been prevented—but I know very well that “could have” is a fictional construct.

As our food arrived, Petr regaled me with humorous stories of Magnus's childhood, which made the hardened soldier blush and stutter as I laughed hysterically—and I could swear he almost called me Chrono. To change the subject, I told Petr and Magnus the story behind my title: “Your Holiness Chrono Gaia III, restorer of life and lover of big dogs.” For one, my maternal grandmother was one of the first temporal manipulators who came to be one hundred years ago. Her daughter was also called Chrono Gaia, but did not inherit her skills. I was also given that name and—surprise—I was found to be a temporal manipulator. “Restorer of Life” was given to me because I had a penchant for restoring sterile and polluted fields by means of temporal manipulation; the “lover of big dogs” is a bit obvious to explain, but as I was 11 when my title was created, I insisted on adding that bit.

In fact, today we were going to restore a particularly difficult field, which was the last contaminated piece of the land in the region and which was close to what was informally known as the “Holy Land” or “hallowed fields.” It was the first field my grandmother cleansed and inexplicably had a high concentration of consciousness. Such a place was ideal for me because I could recover much faster when tired, and it also enabled deeper meditation and analysis of my skill. The idea that we had was to drive to the Holy Land and then walk back and forth from our target.

As we approached dessert (an apple and soymilk for me, and coffee and cake for the Magnuses, the former of which was forbidden to me as half a cup gets me extremely hyper), we talked about the task at hand and I explained to the general the way in which we would cleanse the field. It was in part an explanation, but also a reprise and warm up exercise for me.

AWAKENING AND CLASSES: 5:00 - 8:00

I woke up two minutes before the alarm sounded at 5:00 am, and took a quick shower and got dressed. As I exited my room I saw that Magnus was up and running, making preparations for the rest of the day, which I found a bit strange as we usually woke up at the same time.

“Nightmares?” I asked.

“No, I just happened to sleep earlier than usual.”

I saw into his immediate past and saw that effectively, he slept one hour before his usual time.

“Happy?” he said.

“Yes,” I said. “How did you know?”

“You have a very subtle tell when you see into other people’s timelines, Your Holiness.”

“Interesting,” I said. “I did not know that.”

Ifigenia, a nice lady who tended to the house when I went on my travels, joined Magnus in the house activities and prepared breakfast for me as I went outside to the patio to feed my dogs. I had three labradors (two white and one black) and two golden retrievers. Their names were Pilín, Camacho, Beto, Enrique and Agustín Lara. I had a penchant for naming things in an unconventional manner and my mother dreaded the day when I would have children and get to name them.

After feeding and petting all of them I went back to the house to eat my breakfast before Magnus drove me to the university to give my philosophy of time and metacybernetics class, as today was Tuesday; tomorrow’s class was canceled due to a holiday. Magnus packed all the things we would need for the day and honked as we were getting late. I stuffed the rest of my breakfast in my mouth in an unladylike manner that made Ifigenia frown, and as I hugged her goodbye I left breadcrumbs on her blouse.

I ran to the truck, and my dogs chased after me and then the vehicle. In a world that was recovering from generations and generations of relentless and reckless exploitation, it was discovered that because we are all consciousness in different degrees of vibration and thus connected to the Universe, we could harness some of its energy and store it in crystals- so everything now ran on a non-physical, “spiritual” energy of sorts.

As Magnus took me from the outskirts of the city to the university that was at the center, my mind drifted like that of a child viewing the landscape, one that I had seen almost every day for years, but never ceased to amaze me. I saw it for what it was, what it had been and what it could be at the same time, so I guess that to me, it was never boring. We arrived at a packed classroom of 150 people just in time and I started to explain the topic of the day. Most of the people there were in their 30’s, 40’s and 50’s. Some of them were old enough to be my father and yet they were puzzled and amazed by a 25-year-old woman who had been teaching the class since she was 17. I always tried to explain slowly and concisely a topic that most people found too complex: time.

I did my best to explain it to them in terms that they liked: with numbers and equations, something that from time to time was more difficult than it should be as certain knowledge is to be felt, not analyzed as a pattern. Time is both subjective and objective, although the latter was not how people thought about it or wanted it to be, and both conceptions were essential. Biological time is merely an adaptive mechanism of biological systems to the environment; measured time is the process of social convention on the observation of natural phenomena. Time and space are constructs that are separated from each other for epistemological purposes and from a larger thing: consciousness.

After auditing my class for several years Magnus now acted as my teaching assistant, and he used my classroom time to keep track of chess on the Internet as he was a former child prodigy and a grandmaster-level player. He would also keep track of my teaching and whenever I would drift off to an unrelated topic or just get lost in my own head (a very common thing) he would put me back on track by saying, “Your Holiness.”

At half-class I would get the first volleys of questions: some were very interesting and others were off track. Half of the class would struggle to understand what to me was basic stuff; this was in part because I could manipulate time of a specific spatial dimension (an object, or even a person) and I saw things in five dimensions instead of the usual four. I had a higher awareness of the universe than most people and to explain things and how I felt was a lonely endeavor as people would never understand, despite my best efforts.

I tackled the subject of consciousness and its perception: the way we understand things is by separating them from the flux of the universe, distinguishing them from others and giving them a meaning. Thus, as we classified things we would see them as patterns (Order) with a proportion (Balance) that could be combined into a viable configuration (Harmony). Because these classifications were made by an observer, they would be relative in nature and some of them could be persuasive enough to generate a consensus, and thus epistemological projects such as science and religion were generated.

Whatever the instrumentation, human knowledge is relative, thus fallible and perfectible; it has no discernible foundation, and it cannot be used to reduce the universe into a series of specific objects acting according to set laws. The universe as a thing is a transcendental system—that is, one too complex to be understood in its entirety by humans, although we could aspire to divine some of its behaviors.

The universe is a system that is mutually observing and self-observing at the same time; therefore, somebody like me, with a higher perception and awareness of it and its behavior could interact with it in a different way than anybody else. For example, as people still raved about parallel universes and multiverses, to me it was only one. In the end it was all a matter of perspective; what others viewed as paradoxes, to me were simple interactions with no mysteries or contradictions. In the universe there are no contradictions, just different forms of perceiving it; for all I knew, on a different level of awareness $2+2=4$ could be the greatest paradox ever.

As I got the third “Your Holiness” of the hour, no doubt a personal record in concentration as I usually got something like 7 or 8, class came to an end and Magnus and I started walking to the university hospital for the next appointment of my busy schedule before people caught up to me and asked me things. I had office hours sometimes, although I conducted most interactions through email, as there were just too many people to tend to.

This hectic lifestyle reminded me of my grandmother, who had my mother at the age of 40, who in turn had me at the same age. My grandmother lived long enough to see me being discovered as a peer and to give me lessons about temporal manipulation. She was a tough old lady who took shit from nobody and who had a penchant for cursing. She passed away when I was 12 and I wished she had lived just a bit longer so she could advise and train me further. She was the one who taught me that paradoxes are relative and that it was all a matter of how you saw and ultimately felt the universe.

FINAL LETTER
ON REINCARNATION AND MEMORY

In these letters I have explained and concluded that time is transcendental because it is part of the universe as a self-observing/mutually observing system, which enables the flux of constant and ceaseless change by being subjective and objective at the same time. The latter is the setting for observation which is carried out by the former. The past and the future exist simultaneously as several branching timelines of events existing within probability space as a container of the information generated by observing systems of all kinds, which is updated continuously outside of space-time. This means that the universe is also transcendental because it entails an exchange of information that encompasses all living systems, not just human systems.

In this setting, I will tell you what I think about Life and Death, especially my argument for the idea of Rebirth as the perpetuation of a cycle of observation and communication.

1. LIFE AND DEATH

The way in which humans understand the world is by distinguishing its elements from one another and giving them a specific meaning, and this has the purpose of ordering and correlating the experiences of higher cognitive systems as they interact. Life and Death are constructs that are created by individuals and collectivities to deal with experience as a biological, subjective system that observes the universe.

A standard definition of Life could be the property that distinguishes animals and plants from inorganic matter. This includes processes such as growth, reproduction, functional activity, and continual change before Death. The latter would be the fact of dying or being killed, or the end of Life. To Maturana, *autopoiesis* is the defining feature of living systems, as it is a series of processes in which a system maintains itself by creating its own components, constantly recreating itself. Another important concept is that of *viability*, advanced by Stafford Beer—the capacity of an organism to survive in a particular environment. Viable systems are teleonomic because their goals are set by their surroundings; the viability of any system consists in maintaining its identity separate from its surroundings.

When interacting with its environment, a system seeks to have regulated variables in order to remain stable and constant in its internal conditions (homeostasis) and to achieve such a state it must deal with the possible states of the system (variety). This means that a system must amplify its own variety or attenuate that of its environment in order to have a similar level and thus achieve homeostasis.

Life is then the conjunction of autopoiesis and viability; that is, a biological system is alive when it produces its own components and it is capable of distinguishing itself from its environment by means of the adjustment of variety in order to reach homeostasis. A system is dead when it is no longer capable of producing its own components and thus, no longer capable of distinguishing itself from its environment and interacting with it.

All matter is a condensation of consciousness and has a wave/particle duality; as a system loses viability, the segment of consciousness that was seated in the biological system changes its vibratory frequency into another state, and also, the biological system changes its vibratory condensation as it decays. This also means that living biological systems are of a specific vibration of consciousness, which changes as a system stops being viable and autopoietic. A visual example of this can be found in water, which can change from a solid, to a liquid, to a gaseous state; in the same way, a wavelength of consciousness could change from a state where it is condensed within a physical form to another where it is not, and potentially it could return to the former state.

2. REBIRTH

Reincarnation can be defined as the rebirth of a soul in another body. The notion of reincarnation can be understood in the context I have given you as the transition of states of consciousness from an embodied state to a non-embodied one, and then back to an embodied state. I will not discuss the possibility of reincarnation from man to animal and vice versa and only contemplate that of human consciousness manifesting in different bodies at different times.

Now, reincarnation is somewhat hindered by the idea that consciousness and memories are contained within the brain; my approach locates both outside the human brain, with the network of neurons being only a container for both.

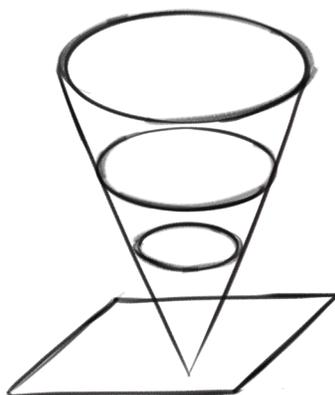
a. Memories

Memory is what generates and maintains the interactive process between a subjective observer and the world, where the former flows as a continuum of information and the latter discriminates those of practical importance, which allow it to retain its integrity. Memory is the catalyst of this process because it allows the possibility of choosing the information; it is also what binds one moment of experience to another by bridging the past to the present. It also operates as specific recollections of prior events or as bodily reflexes; it shapes consciously and unconsciously the present experiences of the cognizing subject.

Memory in this configuration tends to interweave itself with pure perception in a way that is not easily distinguished; because of this, Bergson says that present experience tends to be recreated in the total sum of the past, and thus perception is covered by a layer of memory. Perception differs from memory because rather than an internal state, it is the point upon which objective reality is contacted by the subjective system. However, although they can be distinguished because of their function and role, perception and memory are rhythms of *duree*—that is, they are different structures made of the same material.

Bergson illustrates memory as an inverted cone that rotates (for it is a rhythm of *duree* and the latter is in perpetual motion). At the top of the cone, “pure memory” is located. It is disconnected from ordinary existence, and in it, every detail of the observer’s past is virtually available—that is, it is not a concrete memory image (or memory information). As one goes further down, memory is further condensed into individualized

memory images, and then general quotidian memories are further down, nearing the tip. Every level of condensation is interwoven in a vast virtual network of linguistic associations.

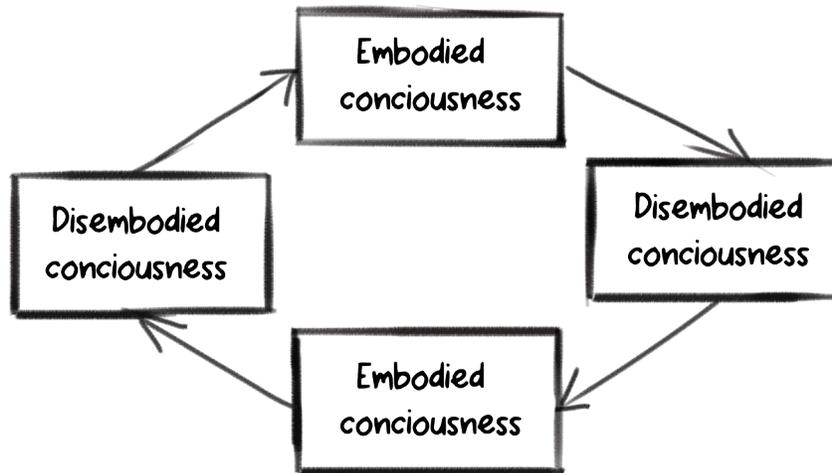


Bergson argues that when something is forgotten, it does not happen because memory is severed from the present and the flow of consciousness, but because attention might be centered elsewhere. Memory is always present; to Bergson, the past still exists, even if it does so unconsciously. When accounting for memory loss, he states that memories are not stored within the brain, and therefore, memory loss is in reality a physiological difficulty in accessing or expressing memory.

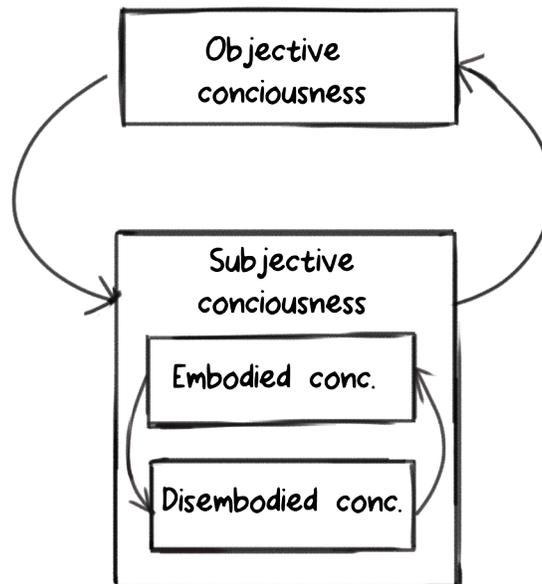
b. A model of reincarnation

Now that I gave you a quick view of memory, I can build a small model of reincarnation: First, there is a physical universe with a set of laws that serve as a backdrop for the action that will take place; there is a biological system that observes the environment that surrounds it and distinguishes itself from it, and it engages in cognition and interacts with it. Second, this observing system is self-observing and interacts with other systems that bear the same qualities by means of mutual observation. Third, the self-observing system interacts with time in the following way: a) the continuation of its condensed form of consciousness has a set period of duration, b) it responds biologically to time in a specific way due to an evolutionary mechanism and c) it conceives and measure times in different ways which can vary from individual to individual and which is the subject of the creation of consensus.

Fourth, reincarnation could be seen as two cyclical, causal mechanisms: a) one in which a consciousness was embodied, as after a period of time the biological container would lose viability and autopoiesis, and the consciousness would change vibration to a nonphysical state and then it could be condensed anew; b) one in which consciousness could be seen as a non-embodied vibration of consciousness that would be embodied, and then after autopoiesis and viability would return to its non-physical state. The following can be visualized as follows:



Fifth, reincarnation would be part of a larger scheme of communication within the idea of the universe as a self-observing/mutually observing system. Memories and information created by human psychic systems acting as observers would feed back into the universe and be stored; potentially, a human psychic system could retrieve information and memories from past lives. This can be expressed as follows:



This is my last letter to you, and I have made my best effort to explain myself to you in the clearest way possible. You always wanted to know how I saw things, and in general, you also wanted me to open up. I never did when I had the chance and now I probably never will. More than having these letters in a physical medium where you might happen to read them, I probably wrote them to come to terms with this situation and to try to find some peace.

Regarding that last part, I must admit it is a very recent development—I think I came up with it because I want to think that somehow I will see you again and we will meet without my mistakes weighing upon us. Somewhere peaceful and somehow new.

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TENBEN CHII



HOW TO READ

This piece is comprised of two storylines—the main storyline contains seven parts, and the secondary storyline contains three. They can be read separately or together. I will suggest the following structural arrangements to the reader, although they can proceed as they like:

Form 1: Sun vs. Moon

Fukasaku
Akira
Ageha
Takashi
Mizue
Tomoe
Toshiro

Form 2: I'm going to the Moon

Fukasaku (minus last paragraph)
Toshiro (flashback)
Akira (flashback)
Takashi (flashback)

Form 3: Moon vs. Sun

Fukasaku
Akira
Toshiro (flashback)
Ageha
Takashi
Akira (flashback)
Mizue
Takashi (flashback)
Tomoe
Toshiro

FUKASAKU

I don't know if the movies of the 20th and 21st century where corporations—zaibatsu, if you will—took over everything were warning us of this possibility or trying to get us used to the idea, but the fact is that they did and in the end they ran the Earth ragged, and when it became uninhabitable, they took to space in search of new worlds to terraform and colonize.

Technological advances that were purported to bring forth wet computing, or the creation of a network with which we could connect Matrix-style brought forth the idea that we were already connected together and that the universe was consciousness condensed. This also meant that we could tap into its energy by means of plugs that were installed into people and thus, great energy costs were diminished. Some people could tap in better than others and get more energy, so yoga and meditation became basic and Buddhist monks became very sought after.

Zaibatsu ruled over spaceships and their inhabitants and to keep them separated, entertained and fighting, created various events and televised bloody sports where representatives from spaceships would compete for valuable resources, such as food or medicine. The most popular of these was Capture the Flag, where two teams with three people each were put into a maze that had two bases or camps where there was a flag, which the enemy must appropriate.

The maze would be created out of nothing and sustained temporarily by monks who manipulated reality with a technique they called *Tenben Chii* (Heaven and Earth Paranormality). In such places people that were killed would be brought back to life or “respawned” in their base or at random points of the map, their bodies restored, but with the memories of their death intact. This involved the manipulation of space, but also of time as those that respawned were in the form in which they entered the maze.

I, Fukasaku, have trained many men in the art of killing others and capturing the flag in order to nurture the inhabitants of our ship-nation, Amaterasu, but none have brought me more satisfaction than the Noyamano brothers, whom I also raised as my foster sons when their father, my best friend, died as a result of the stresses related to this sport.

And now my children, after defeating the team that represented the spaceship nations of Izaagi, Izanami and Susanoo, now faced against those in Tsukyomi in a bid to secure food and medicine for three years.

AKIRA

Stakes were higher than ever now that we were facing the ever resourceful team of the Tsukyomi for the final event where a lot of food and medicine was at stake. After a bad season last year, we regrouped and came back with full strength, decimating our competition and keeping our people fed and healthy.

We had been memorizing the map which the monks created for the finals and watching footage of the enemy and their methods: two of them were very good close range fighters (firearms were forbidden) but what worried us the most was Ageha, the long distance fighter who decimated her rivals with unparalleled usage of bow and arrow and who could take us out one by one if we were not careful. This already happened to other teams on their way to the finals.

We were three close-range fighters that used teamwork and speed to get the flag from the enemy camp to our own. Old man Fukasaku had devised a strategy to handle Ageha and I was not at all comfortable with it: the idea was to concentrate on killing her as much as possible in the most gruesome way in order to break her psychologically and thus incapacitate her. To do so, it also meant we would incapacitate but not kill her teammates in order to stall and pick her up; everyone had at their disposal a revolver with two rounds which they could use to kill themselves to respawn when incapacitated in order to rejoin the action. Our teammates could also kill us when this happened and we were out of rounds. I felt like a monster for what we were about to do (she was 19), but I had a higher responsibility to my people and my family, and so did she.

Two nights before the finals we had a ceremony where a monk blessed us and our weapons—we talked about this thoroughly not only to strategize, but also to help each other psychologically. I also prayed for Ageha, and we agreed that if we won, we would give an economic compensation to her family.

When the match started (an event of three flag captures) we were ready. The monks materialized the maze and we got into action. I first bumped into Mizue, a knife specialist like myself, and as we fought I managed to cut the tendons of her knife hand, although she dealt a couple of cuts to my chest and ribs that almost hit vital points.

We were all connected via microphone and Takashi, who was more keen on blunt weapons told us he surprised Tomoe, their sword specialist, and broke her neck without killing her, immobilizing her from the neck down and also stabilizing her so she would not accidentally choke and then respawn. Toshiro was not so lucky and was killed by Ageha. I got the upper hand against Mizue and cut her other hand's tendons and then proceeded to cut others without severing veins and arteries.

Now we were ready to deal with little Ageha.

AGEHA

To me, being a flagger was a bit of a blessing and a curse. Sometimes I would be grossed out with killing people, but other times I would find it pleasurable, almost to the point of sexual arousal. However, what I hated the most was dying and respawning. Every time it happened to me I would feel a little bit of my humanity chipping off of me. As time passed I enjoyed killing more and felt disgusted less, and this made me think that maybe one day my mother and sister would look at me and no longer recognize me. I would be there physically, but my essence would be nowhere to be found.

A great responsibility was placed on me, as the Noyamanos were all close range fighters and in this bout I would support Mizue and Tomoe, who would look for the flag. I would try to find the higher ground and kill the Noyamanos on sight.

I soared to the heights like a swallow, which was my namesake, and readying bow and arrow I killed their sword specialist Toshiro by shooting him in the neck. I waited for another victim and found it in Takashi, the rubber man, who was very skinny and tall and had an afro, and who fought with a baseball bat like the cartoons, as he was made of rubber. I shot him in the heart.

As I started to feel the familiar warmth in my stomach that denoted my pleasure in killing, I stopped hearing Mizue's voice, but Tomoe told me through the microphone to run, as the Noyamanos had incapacitated her and surely were coming for me. She didn't even finish her warning when a couple of hands grabbed my ankles and dragged me down. I fell to the floor and managed to shoot him in the shoulder—and it was Akira. Toshiro cut my bow with his sword and took my arrows from me.

Takashi started to beat my face with a headband that had a lock in the end; some of my teeth were on the floor and the three of them stood before me with grim and saddened faces and Akira, the eldest, said: "We're really sorry for what we have to do."

Over the next hour they killed me over and over again in the most gruesome and horrible ways, in a fashion befitting a Dario Argento movie. I lost count after eight. I soon realized that they were trying to incapacitate me psychologically, which was the reason for their apology. I understood perfectly—they were doing it for the same reason we were. They needed the food, and honestly, I would have done the same.

After a while, pieces of me stopped chipping away and I started to feel deep ruptures within me. Soon enough, I fell apart like a demolished building. I was not there anymore.

TAKASHI

We had accomplished what Grandpa Fukasaku had strategized: Ageha was psychologically incapacitated. She had fought bravely and killed us four more times: 1 on Toshiro, 1 on Akira and 2 on me. Eventually Mizue and Tomoe respawned to assist their teammate but we managed to deal with them. They even managed to steal one flag. However, as Ageha was cradling herself back and forth in some forgotten corner of the ship, her teammates forgot about the flag and decided to kill us in the most violent ways in retaliation. We soon adapted to the change in strategy and made our first score, to be even at 1.

As I fought for my spaceship-nation I thought about our family. We had two smaller brothers who were studying to be a doctor and an engineer, opportunities we didn't have- they would eventually get out of the slums and get Mum out. I wondered which of us would be a burnout like Dad, who could not tolerate killing and chose suicide. Who would turn out to grow old and bitter like Fukasaku-sensei and train yet another generation for the slaughter?

Why has humanity always organized itself around all these forms of conflict, bloodless or otherwise? Would fighting ever stop? Was it in our nature and if so, would we be able to change it? The old man trained us to pose these questions, not only to fight and kill. I had hope that one day these would be widespread and perhaps people would think of cooperation and coordination instead of governing and ruling (and thus dominating).

Soon enough, after deciding to evade them and confront just when necessary, we managed to grab the second flag and take it to our encampment. I thought about what I would do when all this was finished: I would send Ageha's family some form of compensation. I would ensure that our people would not waste the resources obtained so dearly in order to honor the memory of our victim—and perhaps even convince someone in the spaceship-nation to rename a school after her.

As I had managed to support Toshiro, carrying the third flag against Tomoe, we encountered Mizue and we fought. I gained the upper hand, but she managed to knife my right eye. After disarming her I was on the verge of killing her. She asked me why I had not killed myself in order to recover my eye, as Toshiro was about to win the match, and if I didn't I would never get it back. Injuries like these were almost career-ending.

“This,” I said, “is the price I pay for little Ageha.”

MIZUE

I was appalled to see what the Noyamano brothers did to Ageha- not with the action itself, but because they are the gentlemen of the sport, never using excessive force or incurring in unnecessary violence, or incapacitating people moments before the end of the match, without the possibility of respawning (this is known as crippling). They were, however, desperate as the Amaterasu has had a two-year famine and was in dire need for resources, but I had personal reasons to doubt Fukasaku.

My team, informally known as the Harpies, which represented the spaceship-state of Tsukyomi, had a reputation for roughness. We have crippled and burned out many players, and they call me Demon and Blade Goddess for a reason. I was 35 years old (ancient, as most players retired before 30) but when I was Ageha's age I crippled Fukasaku's eldest nephew. He never retaliated, but perhaps this time he did.

As we fought the Noyamanos, we decided to focus on killing and maiming instead of going for the flag. Ageha was like a little sister to me and Tomoe and she was now crippled. I felt for the first time what others did when I incapacitated and maimed their relatives. As I fought Takashi moments before his little brother Toshiro carried the last flag home and he renounced his right eye as payment for what he did, I cursed at the Noyamanos for being honorable even when villainous.

Perhaps it was time to retire and renounce this life of violence, that even if it was in the name of the greater good it did not cease to be such, and this tainted any selflessness in our acts. Maybe there was a way to purify my actions and retribute myself for my misdeeds, so I could go to a more decent hell when I finally died for good.

As Takashi told me about the price he would pay, I decided not to surprise him by pulling out my spare knife, and killing him by gutting him like a pig. I would renounce now my life of violence and devote myself to the service of others and to take care of Ageha, in whatever state she would be after this ordeal.

Takashi and I stood there as the sound of the final flag arriving at the Noyamano camp erupted through the maze. I suddenly found myself with Tomoe and Ageha, who was in a catatonic state. She seemed to recognize us, but did not move. Tomoe and I held her, and cried and begged her for forgiveness as we had dragged her into this life and taught her how to kill.

As I saw the Noyamanos from afar, ashamed at their actions, it dawned on me that in conflicts there are no winners or losers. There are those who lose more and those who lose less.

TOMOE

As I faced the rubber man, feeling quite sure that I would kill him as his staple baseball bat was at a disadvantage against my katana, he showed me the degree of skill, training and experience that he had by breaking my neck, but not twisting my spine as to kill me. He then immobilized my neck to prevent me from choking and thus dying and respawning.

As I lay there limp and useless my mind started to wander off: First, I started to see footage of the Noyamano brothers who we had assimilated to prepare for the bout. All of them wore suits—Akira was wearing a black suit and tie, and a white shirt. Takashi had a light grey suit with a burgundy tie and handkerchief, and Toshiro had a light blue suit with a black tie and handkerchief. Although they had the same intense eyes, they could not be more different.

Akira was always wearing a fedora. He was of medium height and well built but not muscular; Takashi was very tall and slender, with a messy afro; Toshiro was taller than Akira but much more muscular and handsome, with his hair slicked back. Among all teams, they were the most coordinated, as they almost read each other's thoughts in combat.

On our team, Mizue was the veteran, with 35 years of age. Her hair was short and pixie-like, and she sometimes dyed it different colors, but now she had it all black. She also had several piercings in her eyebrows and ears. She was of medium height, slim, and very muscular. I was nearing 30 years, with shoulder length hair and a piercing in my nose. My mother was Caucasian, so my face was a curious mixture between Japanese and European features that men find exotic. I also inherited her green eyes. Ageha was the youngest and smallest of us, with hair as long as mine, with very delicate features that could have assured her a career in modelling, and in fact, helped us to get sponsors from fashion firms.

As for the dress code, Mizue always wore leather pants and punk clothing (sometimes a leather jacket). I favored black denim, t-shirts and a jacket, while Ageha would wear a schoolgirl skirt, sometimes with tights, sometimes not, and waxed cotton jackets with white sneakers.

I also remembered my childhood, my mother and how I got drafted into being a flagger, my training with Mizue and my learning kenjutsu from a noted master in the Tsukyomi spaceship-nation. Before I could drift any further, Mizue stood before me and shot me in the head with her revolver and I respawned, free of injury.

She told me through the microphone that we had to look for Ageha as she feared that the Noyamanos were raping her. As we looked for her, I could not believe that they would do such a thing, as they were known for their gentlemanly behavior despite the circumstances. We found her huddling in a corner, rocking herself back and forth, whispering something. I reached out to hear what it was:

“Death, death, death...” she kept saying.

TOSHIRO

With Ageha out of the way, winning the rest of the game was much easier and although I was focused on winning, my thoughts kept returning to what we did to her—things that I thought I was not capable of doing and things I thought I'd never see my brothers do.

Mizue and Tomoe were drunk with anger and went all out on us, more focused on vengeance than victory. Akira and I were beheaded and Takashi lost several fingers a couple of times to Mizue's knives. We decided to avoid them and go for the flags, fighting back only when extremely necessary—otherwise they would be taken out fighting each other instead of capturing the goddamn flag.

After we captured the second flag, Akira was fighting Mizue and Takashi made a run with the flag, with me as backup. Akira joined us later, and he had a gash on the right side of his head. As we got closer to the base Tomoe tried to surprise us but Takashi disarmed her and I beheaded her.

We avoided the surprise thanks to some techniques that Fukasaku taught us, which comprised what he called *Senrigan*, or clairvoyant eye. In reality, they consisted more of a manipulation of the perception of time, more than an ocular technique, and because they were commonly known as such, people tried to blind us in competition all the time. I've had my right eye gouged at least five times.

The first technique, Buddha's Treasure Perception, consisted in prolonging one's perception of time in such a way that everything moved in slow motion and by perceiving the little details in such a state, we were able to predict and anticipate the enemy in battle. Because of this, we had the lowest mortality rate in the League. The second, Heavenly Analysis Technique, was a meditative state in which information processing was heightened to such a degree that we were able to predict enemy actions to a range of six movements. We could use these techniques for limited lapses of time and we usually did in extreme cases of hand to hand combat.

We got into the enemy base despite five attempts made by Tomoe and Mizue and we decided that I was going to do the run back to the base with my brothers acting as support. This final run would vindicate our actions, my mother would be fed, as well as my brothers who were studying at the University. Maybe we could even get them out of the slums. Our people would have a long respite from the famine that we recently had.

As I made the run, Takashi separated to contain Mizue, Akira, and Tomoe. I had no obstacle in my way and I ran as fast as I could in order to end this nightmare. As I got to the base and put the third flag in its place, the horn indicating the end of the match and our victory sounded. We had achieved supreme victory—our people would be fed for a record three years, after enduring two of extreme hunger. We had achieved our goal... but at what price?

TOSHIRO (FLASHBACK)

“Shiro-chan,” said Takashi, “come help me out with the beer.”

Despite being on the team for three years, both Takashi and Akira still treated me like a child, but I didn’t actually mind, as they did it out of fondness. Today we were celebrating our victory against the spaceship nation of Izanagi, which meant beer for me and Fukasaku, Suntory whiskey for Akira, and Ramune with vodka for Takashi.

We were celebrating in the apartment where my elder brothers and I lived, as Fukasaku, my foster father, lived with my mother, his nephew and my two younger brothers. Here we could get drunk more comfortably and the first to pass out (Father didn’t count) had to do most of the cleaning.

The first part of the celebrations consisted in watching the match all over again to determine what we did wrong, what we did right and what things could have been done differently. This of course was done with drinks in hand and cracking jokes when somebody fucked up. As I carried the beers and Takashi the vodka, Suntory and Ramune, Akira arrived with some dinner: *ramen* with extra pork for me, *tonkatsu* for Takashi, *teriyaki* for Akira and *sukiyaki* for Father. The latter arrived to find everything ready, and we had dinner together before we started viewing the match and engaging in serious drinking.

Father was around 65 years old but despite this, he was in top physical condition: his arms and pecs were very lean and he almost had a six pack (he once did), but slowly he was giving in to my mother’s cooking. All his hair was white and he had balded considerably, although he still had a small tuft of hair on top. His face was wrinkled, his eyebrows were very white and bushy, and his expression was always stern.

After dinner we watched the match and we saw how we dominated from the beginning, scoring two times in a row and then getting one done on us. One of the highlights of the match was how Takashi stole back our flag after smashing the face of Hanzo in some elegant boxing moves with his iron knuckles.

“Look at that combination... 1, 2, and 1,2,3,4. Beautiful *kozo*,” said Fukasaku, a former boxing champion.

We raised our glass to celebrate Takashi and drank to his health. The match continued as we did the last run, despite having a flag captured at the very, very end. Of note was a move I did acting as Akira’s support: Hanzo was reaching out to him, knife in hand in order to kill him and steal back the flag, thus preventing him from winning the match. I arrived at the last minute and severed the offending arm, and then dealt a second cut to the gut, almost severing him in half. It was all done in a swift, flowing movement. This ensured our victory.

“Look at little Shiro go!” shouted Akira with pride.

They all raised their glasses as we were now going to the grand finals. Father was crying in an almost impossible display of emotion.

AKIRA (FLASHBACK)

We had defeated Izanami 3-1 and Susano 3-0, and we needed to defeat Izanagi next time to go to the grand finals, which would most likely be against Tsukyomi, who were favorites and had two 3-0 victories in a row. Our chances were very good and we felt ready, and old man Fukasaku was racking his brains trying to find a strategy against Tsukyomi. Izanagi did not worry him that much. Susanoo was a piece of cake, although we had moments in which we were close to getting scored on. As I lay in bed, while Toshiro was with his girlfriend and Takashi was at the movies, I reflected quietly on what took place in that match, which happened the day before yesterday.

Our rival squad has had a good season. They comprised a sword specialist, Takamine, a spear specialist named Torune and Shunshui, a blunt weapons expert who was also their team leader. The spear guy was annoying, so we had Toshiro tag him and contain him all the time, as he was the one with more range within the team, even if he was at a disadvantage.

My kid brother did an excellent job as he became the shadow of a spearman, occasionally killing other players he encountered. Takashi scored the first flag by doing an undetected solo run that shook enemy morale and gave me and Toshiro the chance of organizing another run, which was unsuccessful, but constant aggression had them contained in playing defense.

After three unsuccessful runs, Takashi managed to score again with my assistance and from these our next run became the last one as we obtained the third flag and finished the game. We played a great game, with almost no mistakes or flaws, but there was something that was unnerving me: Toshiro.

During the game, as he killed enemy players again and again, I saw him become increasingly stressed in a way that I had heard about from the old man before when talking about Dad. “Haunted eyes”—“dark eyes,” said the old man, and I saw that in the kid. It worried me because Dad couldn’t take all the killing, even after he retired. Even though it was rare for someone to wind up dead, all of it had taken a toll on his mental health and he ended up killing himself.

I didn’t want this to be happening to Toshiro. Mom couldn’t take it, and if not for Fukasaku, she would have killed herself as well, as she and Dad had been very much in love. He became our foster father, even if only Toshiro calls him that and Takashi and I call him “old man.” This had been keeping me up all night, and even if he didn’t end up like Dad, veterans of the sport rarely ended well. We all had a rough road ahead of us.

TAKASHI (FLASHBACK)

As the horn sounded to indicate our victory over Izanami, we headed to the showers, although not before thanking the audience and celebrating our victory in the arena. We had just advanced to the quarter finals and we would have to face Susanoo in three weeks, which unnerved me a bit because they had a spearman and we were an exclusively close range team.

In the locker room we took our suits off and took a well-deserved shower. As the hot water calmed my exerted muscles I found myself craving a beer, which was unusual for me as I liked to ingest vodka with sweet, fizzy soft drinks. It would be too late to steal one from Toshiro tomorrow as I knew the fridge was completely empty, as tomorrow was shopping day. I would have to ignore the craving until it disappeared, as tomorrow we would celebrate with some beer, vodka and whiskey as was customary for us for championship bouts like this one. Regular matches were a no-no because of alcohol scarcity.

As we got out of the showers, old man Fukasaku gave us a speech on how well we did. We embraced as a group and I kissed his balding, white head, as I always did to annoy him, but also to show him affection as he was a father figure to me. We then went to Mom's where she pampered us with food and my kid brothers raved about the match, and my cousin Ren, Fukasaku's nephew, who was crippled by Tsukyomi's Mizue looked at us with a mixture of longing and regret.

Mom, being loving and caring, never watched the matches as she could never stand to see her children die over and over. She could barely watch us train. She never watched Dad's matches either and was repulsed by the idea of Akira entering the sport, then with me and later Toshiro. Need pushed us into this, but now my smaller brothers, Mom and Fukasaku's kids, could go to college on a scholarship because they had the brains that we didn't.

Mom brought me a bottle of Ramune, this incredibly sweet and fizzy drink that I enjoyed so much that they sponsored our team and I did some advertisements for them, as I was a famed sportsman. My brothers laughed every time they saw me giving the thumbs up on a colorful and stroboscopic background that was close to giving anyone a seizure. I didn't care because I honestly enjoyed that damned thing.

Toshiro, Akira and I helped to store leftovers and wash the dishes as she did too much already by bringing us into the world and raising us, even when we were always a handful (Akira and I, that is. Toshiro was always docile). I didn't mind cleaning up when Mom cooked, as we ate tasteless protein pastes when we were training. There was nothing like real food.

As we headed back home I thought about how great my family was, how they were worth dying over and over for. One day I would get Mom a house in a nice part of town, where she could be without having to worry about food shortages.

THE MYSTERIOUS TWILIGHT OF DAWN



HOW TO READ

The reader has a choice of three endings, and all of them are canon. The reader can either read the story three times with a different ending each time, or they can choose to read the story once and read the three endings; or they can choose one and ignore the others.

It was a groggy Saturday morning, around 7 or 8 o'clock, and by this time my mother ought to have woken up, but apparently this was not the case. My dad nor my pest kid brother were awake either. Usually I wouldn't be awake before one in the afternoon, but a nightmare woke me up and I wasn't able to go back to sleep. Faced with such a futile endeavor, I decided to go to the living room and play *Halo 3* on low volume, so I wouldn't wake up Mom and get chewed out.

At these hours it seemed like nobody worth a damn was playing. I wasn't a pro player but I took pride in being a decent one and beating most of my friends, with my best friend Sebastian being the only one who could stand up to me. It was a shame that he wasn't awake.

Now that I had turned 18, I had a lot of things to look forward to: I had just been admitted to Cal, where my intention was to join the Haas School of Business, and maybe pursue a master's degree and create my own startup. I also wanted to travel to Europe and Latin America, knowing other cultures, gastronomies and whatnot. Sebastian was also admitted, and he wanted to major in political science and then do his Juris Doctor at Boalt.

After pulling off a no-scope headshot and earning a killing spree I felt a shiver along the back of my neck. I turned to see a very handsome blond man with greenish-blue eyes, maybe in his mid-30's. He was wearing a black suit and tie, with an elegant and shiny pair of shoes. I didn't know why, but he looked very familiar.

"Don't mind me," he said. "I'm very entertained by this display of skill."

"Who the fuck are you?" I said, obviously alarmed by a man who broke into my house and sat next to me without my noticing.

"I'm Death," he said casually, extending his hand for a shake.

I didn't dare trust him with a handshake.

"That happens to me all the time," he said with a small laugh. "Look, if I was going to kill you immediately, I could have done so a couple of times without you noticing."

"Stupid question," I said, "but what do you want?"

"Obvious answer," he said, "but I came for you. Your time is up."

"Why, goddamit? I have so many things to look forward to."

"I'm sorry, dear, but these things happen all the time. Besides, you've had a great life—a family that loves you, great friends, beautiful experiences and memories—and overall, you've been healthy."

“I know, man, but look—this is just a job to you, right? Is there any way I could fight you for an extension?”

“How about a nice game of chess?” Death said enthusiastically.

“No, I barely know the rules,” I said. “It wouldn’t be a fair contest. Besides, ever since Bergman’s match against Death, chess is such a passé way to stall your ass. How about a game of *Halo 3* instead? Sebastian has my *Halo Reach* because his disc got busted when his Dad sat on the couch.”

The guy thought about it for a second and then agreed, cracking his back and knuckles.

“Deal,” he said, excited. “It’s been a while since someone offered me resistance in *Halo*.”

“How do you want to play it?” I asked.

“How about three games of 25 kills? I want to make the most of this.”

“Sure,” I said. “Any map in particular?”

“Make it random. I really don’t care,” he said.

As I was setting the whole thing up, I thought that making small talk with Death would not be boring nor a bad idea.

“How come Death looks like a white guy? Why not a Latino, or a woman like me?”

“It’s not that I have a definite shape,” he said, “or a gender. I usually take an appearance that will be soothing for my subjects, based on their experiences. For instance, I took my current form from a Heineken commercial that you liked. You thought this man was ‘fucking hot.’”

“How about some Gael García?” I asked.

“Sure,” he said as he took his form. “Hell, let’s make it more interesting. How about the form of the protagonist of your favorite television show?”

His hair turned dark brown and very stylish. His chin became longer, and his eyebrows very thin, almost disappearing. His eyes turned brown and his frame became thinner, David Bowie-thin, and his suit adjusted to the changes of his body.

“Impressive,” I said.

“I know,” he said in an elegant voice that made me swoon.

“Say it,” I said.

“What?”

“You *know* what.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“*Really?*”

“Say it. *Now.*”

“Fine,” he said, visibly annoyed. “...I’m the Doctor.”

“Say it like you mean it.”

“I’m the Doctor,” he said, looking exactly like his TV equivalent.

“Good boy,” I said, patting his head. “The game’s ready—but wait, we forgot to create a character for you.”

“Look at the screen,” he said.

The username R34PER appeared magically.

“This means that we’re ready to go?”

“Indeed we are, Dawnie,” he said in a very casual manner.

“Only my family calls me that,” I said, slightly pissed.

At first both of us were measuring each other, to catch a glimpse of what the other was thinking. The map was called “The Pit”; he made the first mistake and I managed to kill him three times in a row, but then he made a comeback and killed me two more times. His way of playing reminded me of Sebastian’s, so I played like I did with him and to great success. He was looking slightly angry, but he was always three kills behind me.

“How come you’re such a decent player, Reaper?”

“Well,” he said casually, “I’ve killed my share of *Halo* players, and besides, I get bored from killing so many people. It’s a very unrewarding job.”

“So you distract yourself from killing real people by killing fake people and aliens?”

“Pretty much.”

“Well, it looks like you’re out of prac—”

I hadn’t even finished that sentence when he snuck up on me and beat me down.

“Someone thinks they’re smarter than they are...” Death said in a singsong tone, calling out my humiliation.

We were very even, but I was taking the lead; at the 12-kill mark we became even, but as quickly as possible I got the lead back. This guy wasn’t playing similarly to Sebastian—he was playing exactly like him, with some kills resembling his best moves. This also reminded me of some of my most memorable ones. It was a very outstanding game.

“You’re very good, child,” said Death. “It’s been a while since I had this much fun.”

Strangely enough, despite the weight of fighting for my life and dreams, I was enjoying myself as well.

“I’m having some fun as well,” I said as I killed him with the Battle Rifle.

I had just hit the 20-kill barrier in the game, but he was trailing behind me with 18. This set was easy, maybe too much so, for I imagined this *vato* to be overwhelmingly good, not just excellent—but I shouldn’t get too confident. I needed a strong finish with my last five kills.

As I killed Death for the 25th time in this set, with obvious dominance (25-21), he didn’t appear to be too affected—actually, he was looking giddy and excited.

“My, I feel so alive,” he said. “Ironic, I know. But now that I have an idea of how you play and think, I think I should start to get serious and take off the ‘kid gloves,’ as you youngsters say.”

At first this didn’t make much sense to me—how much better could you get? He looked very focused on the first game, like he was making a serious effort. But then he started to dominate, really dominate—the map was “Guardian” and I was getting my ass handed to me 5-0.

He wasn’t playing like Sebastian anymore. He was duking it out like a damn pro, or more likely, like a bunch of them: the first three kills were like the ones I saw Ogres do in a tourney, the fourth one

was like a no-scope Walshy did in 2010 when playing with Carbon. Furthermore, he didn't look excited anymore, but bored, like he was barely making an effort. As if he was doing paperwork or some other thing that he didn't want to do.

Things couldn't be worse: he was hitting the 15-mark, while I was at 5. There was no way in hell I was going to win this one, and if he was playing this well, he would probably win the third one hands down.

"Come on, Dawnie, you're barely making an effort," he said, disappointed, but without intention of mocking me. "I'm not even breaking a sweat."

It dawned on me (curious choice of words) that if a miracle didn't happen, I was very likely to die and be robbed of a future, of a sea of maybe's and could have been's—things that you presuppose in your plans for what's ahead. I would never hug my parents or pester my brother, play with my friends, rehearse with my band or hang out with Sebastian. What would happen afterwards? It was all uncertain... Death was heading the count with 22 kills versus 12 of mine. I was barely making an effort to seek him out, and instead, I spent my whole time avoiding him, trying not to get killed as fast. Of course this tactic was pointless, as I was just postponing the inevitable.

Slowly, as this realization seeped through me and overwhelmed me like an infection, I felt a tear slowly form and course down my right cheek, and then there was another on my left. First it was slow, and then it overflowed. I broke out into sobs and cried as the Reaper completed his 25th kill. Instead of laughing or rejoicing like Death did in the movies and on TV, he looked very angry and grabbed me by the collar of my shirt.

"No, no, no! You don't get to give up, you silly brat—you don't get to cry like a spoiled baby, Dawn Rivera! You asked for a chance to fight and that's what you'll do even if you don't win. You don't fight for the life that you think you're being cheated out of, or the hopes and wishes you have for the future you feel entitled to. You fight for the people that took you to this moment, those that have cared for you and supported you all through your life. For them and nothing more! Not for your selfish wants and needs! You're not entitled to a future, only to a present with which you try to make the most of," he said as he shook me. "*Boo hoo, why me? Why? I had so much to do!*" You don't cry if plants die, or if a drop of water falls into the ocean and loses itself to it. Life and Death are just a cycle of nature, a process mankind distinguished from others and gave meaning. It happened to you and it will happen again to somebody else. Get over it!"

Strangely enough, he was right. I was just being a crybaby, not even taking advantage of the chance to fight back, and I had done so initially out of selfish reasons.

"Fuck you," I said.

"Mmm, I'm not feeling the conviction," he said.

I don't know what possessed me, but I gave him a slap, a really strong one.

“Fuck you!”

Instead of looking offended or cross, he looked back at me and said, “Yes! That’s more like it! Feisty! Now you’ll put that spunk into the game, and the best of us shall win.”

“Fuck yeah,” I said.

For the third game, we played the map called “Narrows.” Fighting for my dignity, I made a strong statement by making the first two kills, before I got an answer from Death. Despite him fighting like a pro, I felt like I was competing at his level, completely devoid of my fears and with my favorite song “Via Lactea” by Zoe playing over and over in my head.

I fought for my loving parents, who were always strict with me because they wanted me to be my best, for my kid brother who loved me so deeply and for whom I would do anything, even if sometimes we drove each other crazy. I fought for Sebastian, my best friend, my support and the person who loved me the most and whom I...

“Oh, fuck!” I said.

“And she finally realized,” Death said, knowing before I did. “You know, dear, for being so quick with the controller, you can be pretty slow.”

“Oh my fucking God! I’m in love with Sebastian.”

Y en la alfombra de tus sueños, soy el rayo vagabundo, que desmaya y dolence, pero no se apaga...

Death was beating me by 3, but this sudden realization spurred me to even the score to 13-13, before a slip up gave him the lead. All the times we could have had... no, all the time we will have.

As the game dragged on, I felt devoid of fear and uncertainty for the first time in my life. We were evenly matched: I would take the lead and he would tie, he would get ahead and eventually I would get even. As I was unnervingly calm, Death looked like he was having fun, and equally calm as me.

Finally, with both of us tied at 24 kills, we decided the outcome of this match with a Battle Rifle encounter. In the end, he won by mere chance: my character was killed just as his ran out of shield. One shot more and he would have been dead as well. Death had won the encounter, but instead of impending doom, I still felt the calmness that had overtaken me in the last leg of our match.

Without moving from the couch I asked the Reaper: “Now what?”

“Now we have a red pill moment,” he said as he changed his appearance to match that of Sebastian.

“What do you mean? Why did you change your appearance?”

Before me was my love, with his dyed blond hair that gave him that surfer aura (even though he sucked at it), ruffled as always, and his delicate features and chocolate brown eyes, giving him a boyish charm that reminded me of Kris Roe of the Ataris.

“I changed forms because this one is best suited for what follows: you are dying. Apparently you have an aneurism that just burst while you were sleeping. The whole ‘encounter with Death’ thing is a way to deliver the news and help you cope with it in the best way possible.”

“Then who the fuck are you?”

“I’m you,” he said. “This whole thing is a dream I designed to help you cope with it all. I built it from your memories—why do you think that some of the kills you made were similar to those you’ve made before? Or those of pro footage you’ve seen a million times? Like old school Final Boss, I am your ‘subconscious,’ if you will, the part of you that is directly connected to the universe, and you are just a part of me that is developed through subjective observation and self-observation. Here is the truth that I hold: from the perspective of a higher awareness there is no difference between you, me or the universe. We are all one thing.”

“Then Death is a cosmic joke.”

“Kind of. The fear of Death is what mostly comprises the joke. Death and time are an observation of phenomena from a subjective perspective: you separate them from the flow of the universe and give it a meaning. From a higher awareness, Death is a change of state in consciousness—you still exist even if your body doesn’t.”

“What do you mean by ‘change of state in consciousness’?”

“Like water passing from liquid to a gaseous state, so will you, after ‘Death,’ continue your existence in a non-physical form. Just because something isn’t measurable doesn’t mean that it can’t be felt.”

All this weird new age-y stuff was giving me a headache... so in the end Death is an illusion and it, along with time is an invention of a lower perceptual viewpoint. And all this me vs. Death thing was just a dream.

“Do you want further proof that this is a dream?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Kiss me.”

“Like *kiss you*, kiss you?”

“Yes. I’m a projection of Sebastian, but you’ve never kissed the real one. If this is a dream, you won’t feel anything.”

I leaned in to kiss him, eyes closed, but I felt nothing because I had never kissed Sebastian’s lips before. There was no memory that my subconscious could use to simulate a kiss.

“What now?” I said.

ENDING A

Having indeed had a red pill moment and realized all these things about time, Death and the universe, I decided to let go of my anxieties and take the required step. This was very difficult, because even though I came to know all these things, I still felt a measure of attachment to earthly matters. I knew I wouldn’t be able to touch things and people, although I would keep existing. Maybe I would get to reincarnate or something.

It dawned (hah!) on me that if we were all subjective parts of the universe, even if my physical absence would be perceivable by those around me, ultimately we would never be apart as they were me and I, them—but also because they lived within me as memories and feelings that I had for them and all that we shared and lived while I was alive. With this in mind I felt at peace.

As I felt my heart stopping and my body become completely still, I felt like I was slowly floating upwards, leaving it little by little, much like water becomes steam when it is being boiled. All the things that weighed on me and my attachments were disappearing as I started this process—it was not that I did not care, but that I knew that they did not belong to me anymore. The more I let go of things, the more I could see the wider perspective that my subconscious had told me about. Human subjectivity can be such a focused and narrow thing and we can get so carried away and overwhelmed by our emotions if we do not pay enough attention to the wider picture.

For example, my family and Sebastian would be devastated by my departure, but this could not be changed. They would have to learn to deal with my absence and, who knows, maybe I could come back to them in my spirit form or whatever to help them out a bit sometime later. When my parents face the same problem that I did, I could come to their aid and let them know the way to continue instead of anchoring themselves to the illusion of material reality.

My consciousness had now changed from something focused, tied to the operation of my physical body, to existing still in the physical realm, but dispersed—it was much like that wave/particle thing they taught us in science class in high school. I had now changed form and continued onwards, devoid of fear and attachments to take my place in the Universe, whatever that may be—to be one with that endless flow that is sometimes measurable and sometimes felt.

I’m ready.

ENDING B

Despite some of those things that “I” said about the universe, I could not make amends with the idea of Death, be it real, invented, or whatnot. If this was a dream, I could manipulate it and make it work to my benefit in order to wake up. It didn’t matter what state I would remain in—I would survive at all costs.

I forced Death to change back to its previous avatar as I couldn’t bear to do what I had in mind to Sebastian, even if it wasn’t really him. I grabbed him by the neck and started to squeeze really hard. It didn’t matter how much it moved—I didn’t relent until what I wanted was done. As this action was taking place, I started to feel a tingling, cooling sensation on the top right side of my head, and then there was this sensation of pleasure, like when you do something you know is bad but it doesn’t matter. It started to intensify and spread all over me until it climaxed into an almost sexual feeling when the reaper stopped moving.

“Dawnie, you’ve changed,” I said to her.

“What do you mean?” She said without looking at me, as she was getting ready for work.

“You became different after the aneurism. You lost weight out of vanity, which never mattered to you before. In college you stepped over those who were in your way, Adderall-ed through it, got drunk all the time and did reckless things that you never would have done before. When you got your job you continued to step over others and rose through the ranks with a reputation for cunning and ruthlessness, and after all those years I’ve followed you, taking your abuse and loving you in the best way I could. I think that part of you died in that dream, not just the mobility and feeling of your right hand.”

“You’re talking and talking but I don’t get the point. I’m going to be late for work.”

“I think that your essence died in that dream, that you killed yourself and what survived is just a shell of the Dawnie I always loved. You’re both dead and living and over the years you’ve killed, slowly but effectively, the part of me that loved you. I’m sorry, but I can’t go on.”

“So you’re dumping me?” She said while putting on her stilettos.

“It’s not the only reason.”

“Look, you’ve been a liability for me the last couple of years, one that I’ve held onto because of some sentimentality I can’t explain. I’m leaving and I don’t want to see you anymore. You’re dead to me. Lock the door when you go and slide your key under it. I’m late.”

ENDING C

As I explained to my conscious self the basic details about the nature of the Universe and the transition to be made, I realized that she would try to evade this and I was proven right when she exited the door of the house. This was something that could not be avoided, and this whole *Halo* ordeal that she just went through was an expansion of experienced time. What would follow was the fact that she would experience her last day over and over in a loop until she assimilated what I said and became ready to take the next step.

During these loops I would try to intervene to help her further assimilate reality and then take the next step, devoid of fear and attachment—otherwise, she/I could be stuck in her physical body or the physical realm in general, and wouldn't move onwards to the next stage of our existence. This was something I did not want to happen. Dawn must realize all this, understand the lesson that we learned during these brief years and also the things that we did not, in order to continue.

“It's been three months since your coma, Dawnie.”

I said this as she lay there with all these tubes and wires going in and out of her body.

I've seen you in my dreams. You're in distress, holding on when you should be moving forward, I suppose. I should have told you I loved you when I had the chance, even if you didn't feel the same way. I've always loved your energetic way, how you would rub headshots in my face, your sense of humor, your café con leche skin, and your wavy hair that seemed to have a life of its own... your hourglass body, your full lips, your unpredictable fashion sense that could range from the 80's to borderline chola, to hipster, to everything in between.

I see you suffering in my dreams because you don't want to let us go but I think this sad place, which you brightened with your presence, no longer deserves you. I've never conceived of life without you, but I'll have to because it pains me more to see you suffer when you shouldn't. You should be free—not chained to me.

I love you.

I drew closer and put my head next to hers, and when nobody was around I kissed her lips. A single tear fell from her right cheek and onto her neck.

It was time. She was ready.

WHEN IMMORTALS MAKE TOASTS



CHICAGO, 1958

It was almost six o'clock, a bit too early for *Corinth* to be open. It was my day off too—I worked as a trumpet player for the club's house band—but my new boss wanted to see me. The tables were all empty except for one, where a handsome and well-built man, fitted with a navy suit and tie, caramel shoes and a silver tie-pin was sitting, nursing a glass of scotch. His hair was black and his eyes were pistachio-colored, and he had the appearance of a movie star. He looked straight into my eyes, signaling for me to join him, and said:

“Please take a seat, Mr. Cinder.”

Beneath that elaborate façade of an elegant, young businessman, I saw very old eyes that had lived through centuries of countless wars and other instances of life and death, eyes that were much like my own: the eyes of an immortal.

“My name is Matthew Bontemps and I hail from New Orleans. My true name, however, is Anthony Titus Philomenus. I was a military tribune for the Roman republic when my military expedition got ambushed, and losing my way culminated in me drinking from a polluted stream and becoming something like you.”

“You're a direct man, Mr. Bontemps. Usually people of our kind would delve into pleasantries first before revealing such information.”

“Does it offend you?” he said with a smirk, sipping his drink.

“Not really,” I said.

“Could I offer you some single malt?”

“That would be nice, thank you. I take it with a touch of water.”

He made a signal to the bartender to come and serve me a glass. It was quite a good one, very smooth and oaky, and very familiar... it's been a while since I had this particular drink.

“It comes from a small distillery...”

“McLeod, 21 years. I worked there for a decade or so some time ago.”

“Precisely.”

Upon further observation, I realized that despite being immortal, he and I were different. I had met a couple of guys like him some 30 years ago in Istanbul, a Marcus Flaminius Rufus and some other fellow who claimed to be Homer.

“A dear friend of mine, Marcus Flaminius Rufus, told me that I could come to you for advice.”

“Ah, yes. I was thinking about this fellow and the last time I saw him in—”

“—Istanbul. I know.”

We had a couple of sips in silence.

“Well, how can I help you, Mr. Bontemps?”

“When I drank from that stream and got lost in a city of nightmares that defied all sense of logic and reason, my body changed. I cannot receive injury, feel pain or die, and I just need to eat a plate of food and drink a couple of glasses of water, and get some six hours of sleep to sustain myself for the month. Allow me to demonstrate.”

He pulled out a switchblade and ran it through his left hand without flinching, and without a single drop of blood emanating from the wound. He withdrew the switchblade and put it on the table.

“By tomorrow morning this wound will be closed, without scarring of any kind. However, your immortality functions in a different manner, isn’t that right?”

“Yes,” I said. “Unlike you, I feel pain, I bleed, I need continuous sustainment and I can die. My problem is that I don’t remain dead. I always come back from it.”

“I understand,” Bontemps said. “My problem is that when I became immortal my life lost meaning—that is, people put meaning into their actions because they know that their stay in this world is limited and its end unpredictable. To me, nourishment is irrelevant, like pain, fear and all those things that tinge human existence with importance. But you, you need all those things, but you know that you will never die. How do you infuse meaning into your existence?”

“It’s true that you’ve never died and I’ve done it so many times, but I never know if the next time I die will be the last one, and so I walk through existence like any mortal man. One thing strikes me: I’ve always thought of the universe as a symphony with varied and ever-changing arrangements, with changes in timing, multiple instruments and whatnot. Within that understanding, you would be the equivalent of a sustained note and I would be a set of notes that are repeated over and over.”

“I like that analogy,” he said. “It’s very accurate.”

I heard some footsteps behind us, tiny heeled feet that walked with some regularity peppered by random stumbling here and there. That way of walking could only belong to Mammie Rivers.

“Hey, boss,” she said.

“Mammie,” he answered politely.

“Hi, Mort,” she said in a singsong tone, like a schoolgirl talking to the professor she was infatuated with.

“Hello, Mammie dear,” I said as I took her hand and kissed it, making her blush.

“We’re going to rehearse a little,” she said to Bontemps. “Today I’m singing only with the piano player.”

“I know, dear.”

She left us to our conversation after giving me a brief kiss on the lips. Mammie Rivers had a beauty that appealed to me in different but not unwanted ways from most women I met during my extended life: her face looked like that of a 16-year-old girl, even though she was 24, and her body looked like that of a teenager’s, not exuberant or rounded as was the taste at the time. She had a bad case of myopia, which required her to wear these clunky grandmother-like glasses, even onstage, and to top it all off she never quite learned how to walk in heels, making her more accident-prone than was normal. She had such charm and confidence, though, that it turned her liabilities into assets, and she sang like an angel.

“Take Mammie as an example,” I said. “To you she’s an employee and just one woman out of many that you’ve met in your life. You and I have both have seen faces like hers throughout the years, but I added meaning to her life after some spic kid broke her heart, and she added meaning to mine with her warmth and quirks, treating me sometimes like a lover and sometimes as a father figure. I’m not exactly her boyfriend, but I give her what she needs and that makes me happy. One day I might not be able to do so and she’ll move on, but a part of her lives in me now. That is, perhaps, the main difference between you and I: you sustain the same note, but in my repetition there’s room for certain improvisations and enrichment of the existing pattern. I also think that you and I, in our roles, have an important function as part of the song—that is, we’re not anomalies, but simply a long-term function of the melody.”

Mammie had finished warming up her voice and was singing some traditional Italian songs the mother of the previous owner had taught her. Mammie’s father was British and her mother was Spanish. Both died in a car accident and she was taken care of by the previous owner, Giancarlo Dellamorte, who had died recently and whose son, out of great grief, sold the club.

“I understand,” said Bontemps. “The reason I have been asking you all these questions is that some twenty years ago, Rufus found the river that takes away immortality. Before dying recently, he conveyed its location to me, and I procured some of that water.”

He produced a small metal canteen and poured its contents into his glass, which was now empty. The water was clear and crisp looking. My thoughts drifted back to the lovely Miss Rivers by remembering the

purity of the water—she was singing *Volare* in perfect English and Italian and I was thinking about how last night I held her warm, naked, teenage-like body in the cold Chicago night. I thought about the closeness of our flesh and the flowery smell of her wavy brown hair spreading across the pillow.

“I wanted to be entirely sure of this decision,” he said, “because even if I have been yearning for this moment for centuries, I wanted to ensure it was the right choice with the correct motivation. I needed you to remind me of what it felt like to be mortal and I will be grateful if you stayed for a while to show me how to live. Again.”

“It would be my pleasure, Mr. Bontemps.”

“Please. Call me Matt.”

He signaled the bartender to fill my glass anew and I asked for a clean hand towel, which he eventually brought.

“What shall we drink to?”

“To Life,” I said.

“To Death,” he said.

“To the joy of the ephemeral,” I said, looking at Mammie and raising my glass in her honor, and she bowed in response to the gesture.

We drank and I gave Matt the towel to put around his left hand. At first he was puzzled as to why I was doing it, but then a sharp pang of pain and a generous amount of blood explained my action. He started laughing but had a rictus of pain in his hand, affecting his expression—this was the first time he had encountered the feeling, with such intensity and duration, in a thousand or more years.

“Welcome back to mortal life,” I said as I helped to stop the bleeding.

SAMSARA



HOW TO READ

Like Time Travelers, this story contains two parallel storylines, one upside down from the other, that can be read in the following way:

1. Sam first, and then Sara
2. Sara first, and then Sam

Follow Option #1 first and then #2, or vice versa.

Dating Sara Ackland was an extreme sport: she had a short fuse, a bad temper, loved to drink, got drunk fast, and remained in that state forever. She hated 45% of my music, had little patience with things and people in general, smoked like a chimney and loved to drink whenever her budget allowed. In short, everything I didn't want in a woman, and yet, I felt attracted to her.

Although not quite Helen of Troy, I was pretty sure she could launch 8,257 ships in any direction. She did have her virtues: she could recite Shakespeare (her mother was an English teacher), Kerouac and Comenius by heart. She was a very talented guitar player (she had classical training, which she denied whenever she had the chance), and she was very learned and intelligent.

It wasn't her looks or hot body that compelled me. Her negative traits had given her a reputation of not being "worth the effort," and besides, my prior girlfriend, who was as hot, pretty, and bitchy (in a different way, though) was also a musical savant. I suspected that it didn't have to do with my mental health or some inherent masochism, despite my upbringing at the hands of a sex-addicted father and an alcoholic mother who were independently rich beyond measure and who stayed married because they were richer together. A psychologist once said that I was a "miracle" and a U.S. president in comparison to those two.

As I said, not masochism—I dated Sloppy, my last girlfriend, because she looked good and

gained the upper hand and disarmed Arno. Arno sheathed his sword, looked at me briefly, and with loving eyes bidding me goodbye, gave his sword to the king.
"I am sorry I failed you. I love you, my brother. I kept my promise—now keep yours."
The king unsheathed his sword and in one clean strike beheaded my love. What followed after was bitter fulfillment of my duty: the king annexed my territories, and I bore him many sons and daughters and loved and ruled over my people, seeing to their happiness. Eventually my youth abandoned me and when my eldest son was fit for succeeding his father, guaranteeing the stability of my kingdom, I took my life by means of poison, with the hope of reuniting with my love so that we could be damned together.

I put up with her because she fucked even better, and was the best drummer I ever played with. She was also in my last band. Golden rule: don't crap (or fuck) where you eat.

I wasn't a model citizen, but I wasn't a complete asshole either. Unlike Sloppy, I enjoyed Sara's company in a less shallow way. She was very pleasant and a great conversationalist when she wasn't pissed off. She was an English major and was going for her PhD in English here at Berkeley. She was also a punk. I, Samuel Weston, did a double major in political science and economics at UT Austin and came to Berkeley to enrich my CV, my culture, and to put a healthy distance between myself and the emotional train wreck I called my parents.

As I said, I didn't know what force put us together, a preppy kid with tinges of hipster and a foul-mouthed, temperamental punk woman. Such is the extension of my bewilderment that when we first met she had a mohawk (something I always thought was a deal breaker, but apparently not), colored red and blue, and tall as fuck. We were hanging out with two different groups of people that happened to cross the street in Oakland and somehow we ended up talking to each other, separated from our crews, coming from two different worlds. We looked at each other as if we had met so many years ago and had been searching for each other ever since.

We bonded over our love of music and literature. She was a very renowned, local guitar player and had been a part of many different bands since she was 19. I've had bands as well, for different types of music. I started to learn bass when I was 17 and I had been playing ever since, although I

After we made the fateful decision to be together, we had 65 days of rejoicing and loving each other. After that my lord husband furtively returned and found us embracing and kissing in the orchard. Furious, he unsheathed his sword and attacked with the intention of killing us both. Amund parried the hit with his own weapon.

"I know you are furious," Amund said, "and for failing in my duty, I forsake my life, which you can take. However, if you kill her, everything you struggled for will fall apart and you will find yourself in yet another war. So let me offer you the following: let us cross swords as we did when we were younger. If I disarm you, you will spare the queen, and if you disarm or kill me, you will have us both."

He thought about it for a moment and then nodded and got into a fighting stance. My lord husband is well known for his almost uncontrollable fits of anger. Amund knew this and had the advantage of intimately knowing the fighting style of his rival and of being able to keep his cool. They started to fight in the orchard with no one else as their witness but me. Both of them were extraordinary fighters with unparalleled reputations as men of war. The king had such killing intent that even I, untrained in fighting, could feel it.

At first, it looked like Amund was overwhelmed, but as the king raved in his anger, I realized that he was tiring quickly and soon he became unable to maintain his fighting pace. On the other hand, Amund was wise in defending and keeping some of his energy left, so after a while, he

had stopped playing in public a couple of years ago. Although most people idolized Flea (I did as well), my role model as a player was Juan Alderete of Racer X and The Mars Volta: great skill, always made a great rhythm section, and had unparalleled pedal work.

Sara and I had been together for about six months. We more or less got along with each other's friends—I flirted with punk for a while, so I knew my music, although when I went out with them I tended to tone down my outfits, leaving the dress shirts, nice shoes, and fancy jackets at home. On the other hand, Sara knew how to handle my pretentious, Derrida-quoting hipster friends with whom she often had intellectual battles, because to her it was a good sport to kick their asses. Sara lived in Oakland with her dad, as her mom had died of cancer when she was 16, which was when she found solace in the intensity of punk music and its lifestyle.

I had met her father, a mechanic and owner of a car repair shop, who I got along fine with and who—Sara told me later—approved of me as her boyfriend due to the fact that she had a tendency to date muscled idiots that belittled her and made poor life choices. I tended to bed dressy, spoiled, entitled girls whose defensive attitudes I would override by means of the teachings, budget, and training provided by Papa Weston, so I guess we were even in the bad choices department.

Going back to my dysfunctional family and weird childhood, the only discipline I had as a kid came from Hortensia, our cooking lady, who basically reared me and taught me Spanish. Dad,

devoted his time to training to regain his physical condition. He sparred with others and also went hunting, which was beneficial for me as he brought me back some fine pelts. He also spoiled me with food and with floral essences, and composed me poems.

With time he confided to me that he also had a heavy burden: within him was a penchant for killing, an animal that rejoiced when he took a life in combat, not for the sake of carnage—as he was known for almost bloodless kills that earned him the name “Drykill”—but for the surge of power that came with overpowering and seeing the life drain from those before him.

This animal—he suspected—had passed down through generations of Blackhands, all of them renowned for their superb skill in battle. This was what made his haunted eyes, as I suspected, and we were both damned souls in a merciless world that would undo us at the first chance. Maybe we would find happiness with each other in another world, perhaps with different bodies.

We continued to meet furtively in the orchard and in his chambers, talking, eating, and exchanging much needed affection together. I attempted to fix a broken warrior that had seen too much conflict and blood, a man who sometimes had terrible nightmares, waking up screaming, and he loved a teenage queen who had an overwhelming amount of unwanted responsibility for which she did not feel fit or prepared for in any way. It was a perfect match. Two broken persons trying to fix each other in a spurious relationship that entailed forsaking their duties and betraying the people that depended on them.

seeing something valuable in that, enrolled me in Spanish classes with private tutors that hailed from Spain, as he didn't want me to speak the language with a "beaner" accent. My last tutor was this lovely young woman that came from Barcelona and with whom I popped my cherry when I was 16. I remember her wavy hair and generous breasts. Joanna was her name.

Whenever he could, Dad took me on his travels and had me partake in all these exotic foods (and women). He taught me his ways for "conquering" women with the word being used to denote trickery and manipulation of preferences, rather than making a true connection. This was part of my nature, a part of me I had been fighting in order to maintain a healthy relationship with Sara. It was a part of me I secretly loathed, as I knew that there was a day where my parents did love each other, and Dad's vices helped throw my mother into the abyss.

I realized how much I liked Sara because it made me recognize this problem in the first place. Maybe my parents weren't that different from Sara and myself. I had an inkling that Sara had been fighting herself as well- without me telling her anything she cut back on the drinking and smoking, and was more patient in opening up to me, confiding more things about her life, especially about her mother, her influence, and her death, which still haunted her to some degree. Maybe she didn't know it, but she talked in her sleep and when that happened we had very honest conversations.

"You know," she said to me once, "I think you're almost what I need."

I closed the distance between us and kissed him. It was the first time I had ever kissed a man, as the king had only done it once during the ceremony as a mere formality, and without feeling. Amand gave me a warm one that became very passionate. After this happened, I did not see him for a couple of days, and I tried to convince myself that I had to forsake my feelings in order to fulfill my duty. I tried very hard, but to no avail. Most of our time together was spent in conversation, holding hands in the orchard and kissing chastely when nobody was around. I finally felt like someone my age, and not the ruler of a country at war. One night he managed to surprise me when he brought a luscious dinner to my chambers. By the fireplace, on top of some pelts, we ate together and then made love, slowly and passionately, with him tending to my wants and needs, instead of fornicating with me quickly like an animal, as if it were some formality to be overcome. "Rekke," he said into my ear as he caressed my hair. "My sweet little Rekke. If your father and brothers had lived, I would have fought for your hand."

"Things never go as planned," I said. "Uncertainty is all I know."

I did not want to know what would happen if Arno caught us or if I became pregnant now after such a prolonged absence. I felt damned for turning my back on my duty for my feelings and passions, but at least I had somebody to be damned with. With his would fully healed, Amand

“Fuck you,” I said. “I’m just what you need. You just don’t want to recognize it.”

“Yeah,” she admitted. “Good point. Besides, you fuck sooo good. I only wish you had a bit more muscle. You’re too skinny.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” I said.

“Okay,” she said before she started to snore.

I’m very tall, say, six feet, and I had never needed to exercise much as I inherited my mother’s metabolism. Sara was of medium height, about 5’8”, and had a much better metabolism than my own, as she ate all this crap and never gained weight. Once a week I took her to eat food outside her usual intake in order to broaden her culinary horizons, something my dad did for me and for which I was grateful. Although initially reluctant, this was something she grew to like because it was awesome food and she didn’t have to pay for it. We had paella and fideua at a Catalan restaurant, some rabbit with red beer at a microbrewery over in El Cerrito, and mussels in coconut milk at a French seafood restaurant. I loved that she wasn’t afraid of seafood and I hated that she burped coconut milk mussels in my face to piss me off.

One thing that struck my attention was that when we visited this Scandinavian restaurant she ate gravlax with such joy, as she had not eaten her favorite food in a very long time. We even had to order an extra plate because she couldn’t have enough of it and for a moment, it was as if she

As events unfolded with this new war and the way my life was, I could not say that I was happy or that I had been. I barely knew my new husband, but he was fighting this war out of convenience, as my kingdom would be annexed to his and our sons and daughters would be its rulers. I wanted to be happy, to tell him that I was. But I felt attracted to him, and had increasingly felt this way since he saved my life. I opened my mouth to respond that I was happy, and to strike him for such insolence.

None of that happened. Five years ago I was so happy—I had a family and not a single worry in my life, and now I was waging a war and struggling to keep my country from falling apart. I had to look strong although I sometimes felt overwhelmed. I opened my mouth again to say that I was happy but my voice broke halfway and I just started sobbing. I felt deeply sad and exhausted.

My sobbing developed into mournful and sad crying that came from deep within me. I was just 17. My crying did not last long as I felt two strong arms hold me and contain the sorrow I had kept inside me for so long. I just lay there, sobbing and crying and holding onto him. He didn’t say a word, but his actions spoke to me in a way that words could not. After a while I raised my head and looked at him, and his eyes were not burdened as before, but calm.

“Are you happy?” I said with a broken voice.

“I am now,” he said.

was a different person, but at the same time, herself. An image came to my mind of a redheaded girl with very bright hair, freckles on her face, who was about 16 years old. She had iron gray eyes, a round face, was short of stature, and had a slightly plump figure that gave her beautiful, round breasts, along with generous hips.

That image started to haunt my dreams, along with a name. *Rekke*. I dreamed about us lying on some animal furs before a fireplace in a medieval castle. In those dreams I stroked her long red hair that shimmered in the firelight, and I held her in my arms, feeling happy, much in the way when I was with Sara. I woke from those dreams to see skinny Sara Ackland in the same posture, blonde hair in the dark, back bare, with her mother's name, birthdate and death date tattooed on her right ribcage. Her right arm was tattooed from her right shoulder down to the mid-forearm. She was aiming slowly for an entirely sleeved right arm. I found it so strange that such different bodies were inhabited by the same essence.

Sometimes she stayed and slept at my house, which was halfway between her house and school. She even had an extra outfit in my closet for when she stayed over. For being born in a rich family, I never really liked the luxuries of my home and getting away from Texas meant comfortable but not luxurious lodgings, and not having a car. I lived in this vintage cottage that had a small garden, a living room, and kitchen colliding head to head, with a bed accessible by means of a ladder, a small laundry room and a restroom. I was in the process of whipping up some

explained to me the formations using objects that were around, like medicine bottles and one of my hairpins. "I lost a lot of blood," he continued, "and I thought I was dying. I started to hallucinate and I suddenly saw you, my queen, sitting by the castle orchard, caring for the garden as you do in your free time." "There was an uncomfortable silence between us. "You lived to see me tend my garden again," I attempted to joke. "Time for which I am grateful," he said as he held my hand. Another moment of silence. "It pains me that you have inherited such a heavy burden as such a young age, Your Highness," Amund said. "You carry it with dignity and distinction." "I carry it gladly," I said. "I do not want to see my people engulfed in civil war. I will give my kingdom an heir and along with my lord husband I will see to their safety and prosperity. I want them to be happy." "Are you happy?" he said. "Who will see to your happiness?"

breakfast when she interrupted my thoughts, as she usually did.

“Who the fuck is Rekke?”

“I don’t know, Sara.”

“You talk in your sleep,” she said.

“So do you,” I countered.

“You called me Rekke in your sleep.”

I told her what I knew about this shy, quiet, young redhead who appeared increasingly in my dreams. We later found an obscure Scandinavian legend about this teenage queen who fell in love with a lord that acted as her advisor and bodyguard while her husband was waging war. When discovered, the Lancelot-type guy offered his sword to the king for him to behead him with. Once dead, the young queen gave the king several heirs and when the survival of the royal line was assured, she took her own life.

This explained many things about how we got together, how we struggled to be together over the years despite the adversity, our personalities and idiosyncrasies. She insisted, however, that maybe I mistook something in my

“It happened on an open field battle. My cavalry managed to flank the enemy,” he said as he if not for his armor he would have been dead.

His chest and back were filled with many scars. His most recent one crossed his chest four fingers above his nipples. It was healing well and soon it would not need bandaging, but it looked like quite a deep gash, and icking to the patient when he was feverish and to change his dressings as his scarring was not entirely finished. taken care of. Sadly, I had learned to nurse a person from my mother’s illness, but I used this skill to give medicine to the patient when he was feverish and to change his dressings as his scarring was not entirely finished.

Whenever I had time, I visited Lord Blackhand in his chambers to make sure that he was being properly supposed to.

instrument of the realm, and that one should not be grateful to a hammer or a needle for doing what they’re the least I could do for the man who had saved my life. He said that it was his duty and that he was merely an full health. He was grateful to me that I was taking so much interest in his well-being. I told him that it was my father and brothers in the war, examined him and told him that with some rest he should be able to regain horse. He was able to walk, but got tired easily. My personal physician, a wise old man who had looked after

Sometime later, Lord Blackhand arrived, looking pale but in well enough shape to ride slowly on a ensure his full recovery, as he probably would be unfit to take part in the rest of the campaign.

he was severely wounded. I had my people bring him here to have my physician look after him and

dreams and I was actually the teenage queen, and she the bad ass warrior.

The strange revelation helped us to overcome some unaddressed stress in our relationship and also strengthened us. It gave us a romantic story to live by, even though I thought that romanticism was the stuff of fairytales and she was almost incapable of romance at all. “Closer” by NIN was a sung explanation of how she understood romance, and “You’re So Physical” an example of our courtship.

As we neared our first anniversary, we were uncertain about how to celebrate it, although I was certain it would end in a two-day fuck fest, so I discreetly stocked the fridge in advance. However, shit eventually became complicated.

After a fistfight onstage with her last bass player, Sara’s most recent band, Clusterfuck, was struggling to find a suitable replacement. I usually sat in on the rehearsals because Butcho (the drummer) and Cliff (rhythm guitarist and vocalist) were friends I made through Sara. I decided I would help them get a decent bass player, which was nowhere to be found as the only guy who more or less fit the bill had no chemistry whatsoever with the band.

As Sara and Cliff were bickering over whose fucking fault it was that the last guy jumped ship, I lost patience and grabbed a bass guitar they had lying around and laid out a riff. Butcho caught my drift immediately and played along. Cliff and Sara were still fighting when

As the king rode to war, I continued administering the country as I had done since I took power. Blackhand sat in my council and also informed me of the training and state of my army, which he was busy getting into fighting form. As time passed, a thought increasingly started to take space in my head: the haunted eyes of Amond Blackhand. I had plenty of affection and respect for my king, who made my cause his and aided me in maintaining my kingdom in the face of insurgency and war, but there was something sad and tragic, yet intense that drew me to his most trusted man.

It was something of a mystery as to why, at 34 years, he had not yet taken a wife. He was a very handsome man who was often the subject of discussion by all the noblewomen in his (as well as my) kingdom. He was a very tactful man who liked to hunt and read in his spare time. Other lords drank mead and bedded harlots, but he preferred the aforementioned activities to the point that vicious tongues doubted his sexuality. News from the field arrived steadily, all of them communicating success, but a final victory was out of reach. Lord Blackhand told me that the army was ready for engagement and he marched north with a section of the reserve, with another part remaining with me to defend my kingdom and its borders.

Two months passed after Lord Blackhand’s departure and I had not received any news from him or the front, until one day I heard of a massive victory brought by his cunning. However,

they suddenly realized that they had a rhythm section. My retirement from playing in public was over. As we headed to my house, we negotiated the terms of my tenure as bass player. I was too soft in the proceedings and she realized it too, but played nice.

Another collaboration that Sara and I did was her dissertation project. She had an idea she wanted to develop into a novel and an audiobook, with the difference being that it would be scored and some parts would be sung. She would do the guitars and drums (Butch was teaching her) and I would do the bass. This, however, did not entail the aforementioned complication, as my dissertation project on the history and consequences of the Black-Scholes formula was going very well.

Shit went down when I got a call from my dad saying that he was visiting San Francisco for a couple of days, just before our anniversary, and he wanted to meet my girlfriend. By some stupid blunder I had disclosed that I had a girlfriend who was working on her PhD in English, a very smart and cultured woman. When I told Sara about the visit, we both felt like cracking open the bottle of Jack I had lying in the cupboard. After getting drunk and feeling that the world was going to end, she grabbed my hand and we held each other, feeling comforted without saying a word.

After that we passed out in the living room.

We decided to get our shit together and face this. I took Sara to a couple of fancy shops and bought her a couple of evening dresses. One of them was a black and frilly piece that had caught her eye. The scene struck me as a very surreal thing, as I had never seen her remotely near a dress, or a pair of heels, for that

He would have been successful had it not been for Lord Blackhand, who stood before me and took a small wound to the left arm. He wounded his aggressor before he had another opportunity to react, disabling him, but not wounding him fatally. There were a lot of incentives for my death: I was the last of my line and my absence would lead the country into a civil war, with a faction attempting to join my virulent and relentless neighbors.

Blackhand effortlessly put the would-be assassin on the table and the king gave the order for his death, as he well knew his precedence and motives. Without hesitation, Blackhand put his sword through him as if he were completing a boring chore and then came to see if I was unharmed. His eyes changed: they were piercing, relentless, intense, and went through me, and instead of feeling a traitor, I was attracted to him. My heart was beating loudly for a man who saved my life and who butchered my aggressor on the very table where I had my marital feast.

“My queen, are you unharmed?”

“Thank you, Lord Blackhand,” I managed to say.

The king was in great anger and full of ire, and immediately started preparing for war, while I slept in a heavily guarded room. We marched to my keep where he finally bedded me in the royal chambers, taking my virginity and making the union official. Lord Blackhand stayed to advise and protect me.

matter. It was like the Catholic Church opening a gay bar or something. She also bought some dominatrix-like boots/heels/whatever the fuck they were called that reminded me of Anne Hathaway that time she was caught at a premiere not wearing panties. That shoe and dress combination gave me an erection, but at the same time struck fear into me, at some primal part of my being.

We waited for my dad at his favorite Catalonian restaurant, where he was received like a king by the staff, with whom he communicated in Spanish. He even talked in Catalan with the owner. Sara and I realized that everything would be fine. Dad would see that difference between Sara and the other girls I had introduced him to. Sloppy was really fucking hot, but with my dad being a sex addict, he had never liked her.

Dad arrived in grand style, as he always did, and behaved like the charmer he was when I introduced him to Sara. Her found her to be a sharp, intelligent woman who was not to be fucked with, exactly the type of woman I needed in life, whether I went into academia or the family business (as he still secretly hoped).

When getting acquainted, she disclosed the fact that she was a punk and Dad surprised me by talking to her about the subject in a very knowledgeable and thorough way. It turned out that he met Mom when they were both punks rebelling against parental authority and expectations in New York in the 70's. My parents had never told me how they had met (I always thought it was an arranged

life as a seemingly drunk guest tried to kill me with a dagger.
the first time). As we headed to his chambers in order to have our wedding night, an attempt was made on my
Many delicacies were offered: gravlax (my favorite), boar, rabbit, horse, and plenty of wine (which I had for
I traveled back to my king's city in order to celebrate the marriage, where a grandiose feast took place.
train my army into a suitable reserve.
would ride north to deal with the threat, and Lord Blackhand with his staff would stay to counsel me and
attack would be necessary. We decided to make the union as soon as possible, and afterwards, King Arno
wage war anew in the hopes of annexing my territories and resources. To deal with him with a preemptive
was not as disciplined and prepared as I would like. Also, we found out that our neighbor was preparing to
We talked about war: I had a decently sized army, although I did not have many strategies left and it
"Your Grace," said Lord Blackhand as he bowed before me.
"My queen," said King Arno, kissing my hand.
great master.
ent from his father: his hair was smoother, he did not have his father's crooked nose or his massive beard, but
his eyes were as blue as his, although they looked haunted, not haunting. Still, Blackhand the younger was as
fierce and cunning as the old man, and he had proven himself in battle over and over, having learned from a

marriage of sorts) or even that they had been punks.

The latter fact hit me as something strange, as in my house there was an immense hatred for punk music. I even remembered the times I got grounded when I flirted with punk. Taking advantage of a moment where Sara went to the restroom, Dad told me that he sincerely hoped that I wouldn't repeat the same mistakes that he made that led him to a life filled with regret, my mother's regret, and empty, self-destructive fucking. Another first, as Dad had always endorsed the pimp life.

After acing dinner with Dad at the restaurant, we got to our first anniversary a couple of days later with a renewed sense of hope. In the end, we decided to skip the formality of dining out and just drank a bottle of fancy champagne that I had bought for the occasion, and later had a gift exchange and lots of sex.

I was born and lived in uncertain times. Ceaseless war took the life of my lord father and the lives of my elder brothers. Sadness and illness separated me from my mother and left me in a position that was never intended for me to fill: queen. I took power at age 14 and looking to solidify my position in light of my hostile northern neighbors, I offered my hand in marriage to King Arno, my neighbor to the south. I expected and received an affirmative answer from him as my land was productive and fertile, and my stock was always brimming with grain. He had a large and experienced army, with good smiths, and it was an alliance that would keep him fed and me protected.

I remember when he arrived with a small procession of advisors and warriors in order to formalize our alliance and make the necessary arrangements for the wedding, which would happen soon, as my first blood had arrived recently. It would probably happen a week or two after my fifteenth birthday. My soon-to-be lord husband looked like a man that deserved his reputation: he was tall, strong, handsome, blond-haired and bearded, with piercing grey eyes. He was fierce and fearless, and still young. He had just turned 40.

Along with him was his right hand man, Amund Blackhand, son of the great warrior and general Arild Blackhand, who had also been a good friend to my father as his lands were close to my own. I knew him, although I had never met his son. The elder Blackhand had a scraggly beard, many scars on his face and blue eyes that told terrible stories.

THE TERRIBLE MACHINE

Dr. Pierre-Simon Ogbu was a famed researcher in the areas of neurobiology and neural networks at the *École polytechnique* in France, at the *Centre de Recherche en Épistémologie Appliquée* (CRÉA). He had a very happy life: he was in his late thirties, with no health problems, a successful man with a beautiful and thoughtful wife, who inspired and complemented him. All of this changed, however, when Louise, his beloved, died when both were returning home from a party. They were struck by a drunk driver and despite having her seatbelt on, she fractured her head when the brute force of impact smashed it against her window. She had been driving.

This left Pierre-Simon a broken man, and not even his parents, relatives or friends could help him cope with the fact that he would never see her inky eyes again, caress her coffee-scented hair or kiss the constellation of freckles that graced her face. They had talked of having children, but he had been too busy with work, and though they had finally agreed to do it, it would never happen now.

He went to specialists of all kinds and took varied medications, but they did not help. Alcohol did not provide any consolation either. He wanted her back, and it seemed to him that a world without her was just an illusion. When he took some LSD at a friend's house during a party, it was then that it hit him: he would build a time machine and change the past, and subsequently, the future.

Although far-fetched, the idea had its merits. He had always been a Bergsonian, although conventional neuroscience was at odds with the idea that consciousness and memories are not entirely within the brain. Assuming that memories were not entirely within the brain but scattered throughout the Universe and that somehow we could retrieve them by means of quantum entanglement, and also assuming that death is a change of one's state of consciousness, it could be possible to create a machine that by means of hypnotic suggestions could make you travel to prior points of consciousness within current or different incarnations.

Time travel was possible, although not in the way that mainstream science had desired. The question now was: *should* he build such terrible machine?

· YES (*continue reading*)

· NO (*go to Ending A*)

Pierre-Simon read as much as he could on hypnosis and suggestions, and also studied meditation and the idea of a self-imposed trance. He worked on his machine during his free time and soon, whatever was left of his thriving social life disappeared. He was obsessed with the possibility of time travel as hopping between states of consciousness.

His first breakthrough came when he was able to put himself in a trance and make a general account of all the times he had been alive before. He had reincarnated six times before: he had been a Mayan scholar, a

pirate, and a soldier during World War I, among others. The next step was to achieve a time jump, a small one, and then refine the method until such movements could be done with accuracy.

He also realized that because the jumps depended on him, the better his physical condition, the more things he would be able to do. He stopped eating junk food, imposed upon himself a strict regime of diet and exercise, and started seeing improvement when his subconscious told him more about his prior lives.

His first jump consisted in traveling two days into the past, which made him realize two things: the first was that there were events that could be changed and those that were fixed. For example, he decided to see a film instead of working on the machine, but his watch, which had broken one of those days when he dropped it while doing the dishes, broke when he tripped on his way back from the movies. The second was that despite reliving past events, he kept the memories from prior timelines.

When he did his first jumps, they were like taking naps, although he discovered that he had dreams when the jumps were longer than a week. Mostly his life's memories would appear before him, sometimes even those of his past lives, in languages that were both familiar and foreign to him. He saw patterns and swirls of colors and faces that were now scattered across the Earth.

He relived the month of August and the year 2012 in order to gain the practice and technical finesse in order to jump several years into the past- seven, in fact. A curious thing about this year was that CREA would be shut down by the end of it, and he would join some other laboratory at the Polytechnique. If "now" was seven years since the death of his wife, he was in his mid-forties and years of obsessive dedication had taken their toll on his face and body.

He looked several years older and despite healthier nutrition and regular exercise, sleeping only two or three hours a day at best made him thin and sickly. He also had joint pains and a stress-induced heartburn which began during his PhD and was now a full blown ulcer that fired up at the most inconvenient of times. Preparations were almost finished for the seven-year time jump that would lead him back to his beloved in order to prevent her death and have this whole ordeal appear as a vague memory of a bad dream.

When the moment came, he programmed the machine for a seven-year jump, with the specific date. The machine in question was a box that had light bulbs that lit up in a certain way and some small speakers. When plugged into a laptop and run with a program of his own invention, it would force his subconscious to relive a certain day in time, and the box would be placed on his head as he laid down on the floor.

As he activated the machine, the now familiar flashes of light and music started their patterns and he felt his body become increasingly lighter, until he couldn't feel it all and the hallucinations started. He had discovered that certain pieces of progressive and avant-garde rock were useful for inducing trances due to their complexity and thus, his jump started when the solo of "Noir" by Omar Rodriguez Lopez kicked in, and swirls and flashes of color and childhood memories overtook him.

He woke up with a slight headache, as if he was hungover, and when he turned to his bed, his face brushed against the long brown hair of his wife. When his brain started to process and understand his success, he jumped out of his bed full of joy and happiness and went to the restroom to see his face. He looked much younger and healthier. His wife, startled by what was happening asked him if he was alright and he, happy beyond words, started to kiss her passionately, touching those lips with his after being denied such pleasure for several years. That morning they made love and he convinced her to call in sick, as he did.

Explain things to Louise?

- YES (*continue reading*)

- NO (*read II*)

Over breakfast, he explained to her that today, on their way back from Pauline's party, they would be rammed by a drunk driver and she would die and that he, unable to cope with her absence, invented a machine that made him travel in time up to the moment where they woke this morning. His sudden surprise and strange behavior was due to the fact that his time travel had been successful and that after seven years he had finally seen her again.

After he explained with precise detail the workings of the machine he had invented, Louise believed him. "Your mind is a terrible machine," she said jokingly. To prevent her death from happening, they decided to stay in the house all day. She called Pauline to excuse herself from attending due to an unexpected emergency and not wanting to risk eating outside, he went alone to shop for groceries in order to prepare their lunch and dinner.

Despite the fact that if everything went according to plan she would be safe, Pierre-Simon tried to enjoy her company as much as he could. Having lost her once, he was more aware of the uncertainty and frailty of human existence. There was something that started to unnerve him: he started to see the unravelling of the fixed points in time. Louise had lost her favorite earrings; he had hurt a toenail when he accidentally slammed his foot into the lunch table, and his watch broke.

The first time, he had hurt his foot first, and broken his watch later (he had a well-known penchant for breaking things) and finally Louise had noticed the loss of her earrings while dressing for the party. This second time, however, she noticed the absence of her earrings in the morning, he broke his watch after lunch and nearing dinner, he slammed his foot. The immutable points in time, the existence of which he was well aware of, were bothering him because deep down he feared that Louise's death would be one of them, and thus, inevitable.

Dinner was a pleasant and uneventful affair. He told her about some of the things that would happen in the future and she laughed about how ridiculous some of them were. Pierre-Simon was a very accomplished cook, and feeling festive, he made some rabbit in mustard seed sauce for dinner, as he felt that death was going to be beat and Louise would live to see another day. After finishing dinner, he bussed the table and in a

moment of carelessness, Louise, who had been standing on top of a chair in order to put some plates away on a shelf that was too high, tripped and hit her head on the edge of the dinner table and the floor.

Despite Pierre's best efforts, she died before the ambulance arrived, and again, it was due to a cranial fracture. All those years of work, and he had managed to see her again only for her to die in his arms. This universe had ripped her again from him. The question, now, was whether he was going to build the machine anew and try to prevent the tragedy once more.

Build the machine?

- YES (*go to Ending B*)
- NO (*go to Ending C*)

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Pierre-Simon had decided not to tell Louise about his ordeal and the time machine. Despite this, he was still resolved to prevent her death without her knowing. Because both had called in sick, they spent the day together enjoying Paris as they rarely had the chance due to his overwhelming work schedule. Lunch caught them in the 11th arrondissement where they found a bistro called Le Verlain, where they had some rabbit in mustard seeds, a recipe that Pierre knew how to make, but had not cooked in a long while.

They returned home and made love again, and then started to get ready to attend Pauline's party. He got to the shower first and then noticed that her earrings were missing. She was wearing a beautiful green dress that enhanced the beauty of her silky hair and some black heels; he was wearing a black jacket, a blue shirt and black dress pants. Nothing out of the ordinary.

He was increasingly nervous about going to Pauline's party as he knew that explaining time travel to her would not yield good results, but he had to avoid the fateful event that would take place on their way back. Over the course of the day he had tried to dissuade his wife from attending the party, but as he did not have a reason by which logic could abide, she did not heed his petition.

As he had remembered the first time, Pauline's party was pleasant and ordinary. He had conversed with a colleague from Normale Supérieure about epistemology, constructivist to be exact. He also talked about Paris Saint-Germain and Barcelona and how they decimated at every event they attended. Louise talked with some friends, but flirted with him at a distance, smiling and looking as beautiful and elegant as he had remembered her. How much he had longed for her and finally she was again with him, which by itself was a blessing- he got to caress her again, to kiss her and to make love.

As time passed his heart rate accelerated, as he knew that the drive back was close and he feared that her death would be a fixed point in time. He started sweating and looked a bit sick to the point that his friends asked him if he was alright. As he and Louise said goodbye to the host and they got to the street, his heart was racing and his mouth was dry. This was the crucial moment.

Going out. Drive?

- YES (*go to Ending D*)
- NO (*continue reading*)

Louise asked Pierre-Simon if he was drunk or if he felt ill. She said that maybe she should drive, and as he tried to convince her not to an empty cab passed by and he hailed it, telling her that he would come back for the car early in the morning. She found the proposal strange, but yielded to it nonetheless. He thought that the driver would take a different route and thus they would evade the drunk driver and Louise would be safe. He told the driver to steer clear of the streets in which the accident took place, proposing an alternate route.

The ride went without incident and Pierre-Simon felt victorious; soon, he thought, they would be home and his last seven years would indeed be a bad dream he had once due to the stress. This feeling was soon shattered as the cab was hit by the same drunk driver, now on the other side of the car, and Louise, as she was on the right side this time instead of the left, hit her head and fractured it on the other side, but in the same fashion. All had been for naught, and she died in his arms yet again. Seeing her fade away was a punishment for his cheek and daring.

Build machine?

- YES (*go to Ending B*)
- NO (*go to Ending C*)

ENDING A

The idea of building a time travelling machine was so ridiculous that Pierre-Simon realized that she would never be coming back. He wanted to make it happen, but he would just be denying reality and engaging in a cycle of madness. He realized that he needed to make peace with the idea that death was something that happened all the time, and it was not fair nor unfair. However, the fact that she was not coming back could not obscure the fact that she had been here.

Eventually, he moved on with the help of his family, whom he realized he was hurting by isolating

himself from them and by not coping with his pain. In due time he came to appreciate the chance of having seen his beloved Louise, after losing her for the first time and then incurring in so many years of madness.

Pierre-Simon eventually continued his research and helped to improve the understanding of the human brain by means of what he learned, and tried to advance innovative, albeit unconventional approaches to the study of memory and cognition.

ENDING B

Even when he traveled all the way to the past just for death to take her away from him for a second time, Pierre-Simon's obsession to save her came back. With all the knowledge he had accumulated over the course of his seven years of research, it took him only one to find the components and build the software from scratch, with time to spare to make some improvements. He tried again and again, no matter the cost.

And thus Pierre-Simon damned himself to an endless loop of time travel, where he would forever attempt to change the past and keep his future stunted. The world moved on without him, as his time traveling trance put him in a coma that ended in his death.

ENDING C

Having managed to travel through time and relive that fateful day, having had the chance to be once more with his beloved and having her die in his arms again made Pierre-Simon understand that there was no purpose in building another machine and attempting to save her, as it would happen yet again and he would be trapped in a loop from which he might not be able to escape. It was also not fair to his wife or to himself to do this.

Playing God was tempting, but he would give up on the idea of time travel—he would not run his body ragged as he had done before, and he would always attempt to get the most out of life and to give more to others. He would be a better person, because that would have been Louise's wish. She would have been pained to see him fall into an endlessly masochistic loop.

He eventually remarried and became the father he had wanted to be with her. Her spirit lived on through his actions and the teachings he gave to his children.

ENDING D

Pierre-Simon had a sudden realization that death was a fixed point in time, but it did not necessarily mean that it would have to be hers. He would drive and make sure she wore a seatbelt—he had had the blessing of seeing her again and now he was saying goodbye on his terms. He knew that, unlike him, she would cope with his absence and not do something as foolish as threading in time. She had always been the better person.

He knew that she would mourn him, but that eventually she would remarry and have a family and a happy life as they never could. Her children would inherit her essence—her curiosity, her will to live, the way she gave her best to everyone—and the way she lived this passionate, intense life.

This thought made him happy and helped him to finally cope with death, even if it was his own.

