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Image of a Counterfeit

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There are those who still try to remember, the deviant ones, the off-switched, the electrically disengaged: those who make self-conscious loneliness and impractical, silent contemplation their uncivil hobby. They rest in their darkened unplugged houses, breathe as if purposefully, and sometime before catapulting themselves to sleep, when they're hopeful and aware that the imagist fantasy of their dreams must come from somewhere, and perhaps from somewhere real, they'll tap into some half-reliable circuit of memory – maybe a radiation from ancestral memory or a radiation cosmic – and they'll remember. For him it was the melt of clouds detonating in the old streets, with so many perfectly scattered globes of rainwater rolling and kneading the dust off streets made black and oily. He made it as far as seeing droplets by their surface tension halting in psychic formation across the obsolescent tar... before dozing and forgetting, never mind the compact pad of paper kept bedside for the purpose of remembering.

The next morning he reconnected – he has to because we all have to if we wish to keep our pronouns plural – and caught up as best he could with the world and all its

divorces. He automated himself clean and matched his morning images with yesterday's portraits (allowing for the natural percent of slump) before rendering himself to work on time again, an archivist of Prime First United. While last night he was a disconnected, breathing, dreaming closet hobbyist and thinker, this morning he immediately and without consideration injected himself into the morning program, cataloguing images, watching baffling numbers grow in unnatural geometry, recording and filing phrases and casual details into the master memory archive. Every bit of the world goes there, so vast and accessible that the trouble with remembering anything, of rust, of blood, of the odor of mud, or of anything, is no longer a trouble.

However, this morning – and occasioning this filing – would be a memorable one. Indeed for its sublime irregularity it would churn and froth up matter for a hundred or so of his agitating dreams. For just outside – which is to say outside the blue tinted windows of Orchard Grove's geometric thicket of glass offices, residences, and narrow privies of worship, where dusty glass buildings mirror dusty glass buildings in infinite regression, where buildings compress to images of buildings, all tinted blue to satisfy only the prevailing public whim and not for any

sense of realism, or even, for all everybody remembered, any historical reference, but just because, blue... Outside in the unfiltered air, there walked a man.

Each of those four words would shock any citizen of Orchard Grove. There in the yellow open and unfiltered air, where junk particles from the physical era scatter and lath the fuming and visibly yellow air, left long ago to the sole custody of the world remainder, there walked: not just steps to translocate one's optic nerves, but such as salty beasts had walked and unfathomably regularly across long arcs of the curling planet, a long time since. There sucking in the particle air there walked from afar a – which is to say, singular, alone – A man: not mankind, not us or what we've become in our great evolutionary defiance (together and always connected, we swear, We Shall Not Leave Us Behind!), but “a man,” not mankind, but a man as a simple taxonomic or mortician's tag: outside the blue tinted but impervious shimmering capsules of Orchard Grove, there walked a man, naked, but for a man's clothes.

Our dreamy archivist within the safe margins of Prime United knew nothing of this creature of course. He had stopped filing images and was making his own – dreaming,

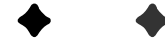
contemplating, breathing in the dark – or near dark enough of his flimsy filmy eyelids: for it was just two days ago he'd watched a film of rotating portraits sparkling with testimony, with truth or the likeness of it, speaking of the real absurdity of when they were young and hearing "real live birds" singing outside their windows: when for fact and for the crude measure of a long time passing they themselves had to have seen the same film of rotating portraits sparkling, testifying to the flamboyance of birdsong. It was out of this, the archivist's fantastical historical reverie, that the man – *the man from out there* – walked up to, and then pounded on the glass.

Heads went up.

His colleagues, glimmers to each other until a freak occurrence of a shared stimulus but never as sizeable as this, abruptly looked at each other, right into the horrible reciprocity of their eyes. The outside man pounded again.

In fact, they could see chrysalises of fist-prints accumulating on the blue glass: grimy yellow prints of fists marking the glass and spreading. They remained [their remains] looking. And then looking at each other like degrading

facing mirrors, their reflexivity stunted for all this time looking at each other and doing nothing.



While the man pounded outside, let this record try to record their formation. Long ago in the flush of birdsong, when the wind might have carried the voices of cowboy, Indian, or conquistador children over glassy blue waters, we might have called them herd-like. Like a herd: with their wet nostrils agape and throbbing for the twitch of a muscle of predator or prey: that is, we would have said that with the man pounding on the glass outside they stood there like a herd once stood captive by the possibility of a siege. They themselves have seen images of such a thing, so the comparison might not pass too far over their heads (such as would the odor of the man about to enter their space). They themselves have seen the post-historically archived images of the great herds of blue wildebeest grating the sands of the lost continent: images of bellowing muzzles of flat, black-mane bucks on their knees and thrusting horns into one another between the territorial dung heaps: now cut to images of more ferocious thrusts in quick video jump cuts, and now the opening of the beasts' smooth exoskeletons, multiplied in the multiplex of their black,

blank compound eyes, and now to images of their antennae twisty-tied, roped together, and now images of their great stingers wagging behind them and searching the open, leaky wounds, now perforating their mighty outspread wings, exhausted, resting dovelike and brooding in the stick of their ethereal nectar: these would be the images of their archived memory: fleeting, disengaged, one into another, edited, mashed in montage. This is as much as they would know and in fact can take in large doses from the image archive. They watch constantly, but they do not weigh, or consider, or synthesize. They watch. And so with the anchorless metaphor lost upon them, they're free, untethered by any sort of introspection or self-awareness, to pose in the image of a herd.

They listened to the man still pounding. With yellow fist prints dirtying the glass before them.

Luckily, though, there's a protagonist. Perhaps because he had been dreaming, the archivist in seconds understood what to do, and that was to answer the ferocious pounding at the door. What horrifying marvel it was to have seen him walking toward the man pounding on the other side of the glass: precariously tilting his head past the vertical axis

of his tapering base and slowly, with measured steps, falling forward. In this motion, in walking, some might have admired a leftover and endearing trait of his species: falling forward, just keeping the balance.

He did this by himself, alone, and all the way until he was standing just in front of the man – and the man was standing in front of him – with only the skinny glass to separate the two.

We might at this moment guess what the man's eyes might have seen through the glass, but because the glass from the outside was just a reflection, we can only suppose the man saw a man: symmetrical and woolly, covered with dirty fist marks.

The door, obviously, was just decoration, like so many shutters they'd seen on images of historic houses, but because the archivist was a dreamer he tried it anyway, and to their horror it opened.

The man walked inside.

In the man's fist was a document.



In the blue light the man walked slowly and continuously to what the man must have supposed was a chair or bench. The man's scent, the man's alien interjection, or just the disconcerting undeniability of the man's being there, inside, displaced them around the man into what looked like an ancient cinema or musical venue, where primitive people in conscious proximity would have blown golden flares, strummed metal and beat leather to the hop, thrust, and wag in the warm slick of their spirited nectar.

Observers always, but now in something like a combined audience, they registered a man sitting right in front of them: the irregular symmetry of a man's face, the unnatural spherical form of a man's eyes capable of absorbing a full half of a room without the pan or tilt of a man's turnstile neck. The lace and filing of a man's hair on a man's head and face, the parentheses, spokes, and creases on a man's skin. They were entranced, fascinated, repulsed, horrified, and a full half minute passed between them...

Of course, their suspension could not last: fact is, the man did not move and the man did not emit light nor

soundtrack nor even cut to close-up, so a half a minute of fascination pushed the outer limit of their range. They were about to return to the private consolation of their digital feed when the man suddenly – suddenly! Like this whole time the man possessed the ability and initiative to hinge forward and blur their faces – the man suddenly unwrapped a filthy fist and let loose the document. It expanded by the uncontained rigidity of the paper, and laid there in full view.

This report will record it as a ten million dollar bill. [Later this report was amended to read “a crudely drawn ten million dollar bill.” Later still was added the modifier “counterfeit.”]

They didn't know what to make of this. Here was a man who smelled like a man. And even though they'd seen images of such a thing, the scent layer to those files had first been deleted for lack of space in the archives, and then, when space became infinite, for lack of desirability. And what were they to do about the crumpled ten million dollar bill? Some felt embarrassment, some even shame, even though both of those emotions were evolutionarily discontinued for lack of use, deemed indulgent in a post-

public, post-empirical era. Perhaps, though, with the opening of the outside door there had escaped, or entered, a sense like the air of an archeological sarcophagus – they'd seen images, archeologists covering their hairy faces with terry cloth – an extraordinary sense that made them wonder, almost like empathy, what the man could possibly be thinking behind that ten million dollar bill.

Some hazarded to look at each other again, some went to consult the images, but most quickly lost themselves to the breaking news of Miss Elentine's visible knees [per completion of the record, this was the fourth to last broken engagement of the mostly avatar celebrity. She had been the ascendant star of the wildly popular "Touch" series, where characters play out vaguely familiar but addictively entertaining scenarios of human engagement, mostly tragic. On the day of the man's breach of the image archive in Orchard Grove and the man's deposit of the [crudely counterfeit] ten million dollar bill, Miss Elentine had by accident or poor decision shown a crook in her left hanging appendage, which some took to be a knee. The resulting break-up of her engagement to a disgusted Donald William Habersham III went on to become the year's biggest story – which goes far to excuse, if not to vindicate, or even

demonstrate the prescience of those at Prime First United who had the perspicacity to turn their attention away from the man with the ten million dollar bill]. For those few who consulted the archive, they sought out images of representations of symbolic signifiers of wealth: fibrous or metallic with the oddest funny illustrations of temples and funny profiles of faces with big funny noses printed on them, too. They didn't know what to make of it all, so they went searching for more images of the things, until, that is, and perhaps because of his dreams, the archivist stopped them. He said, quite with the intention of being heard, "I'll handle this."

He said this by his own volition, of his own accord, without the cue of music or even close-up. He said this independently and in the imitation of conviction, and it may be suggested that they would have listened if they had not already faded and collectively in private turned over their entire silent reproach to the visible knees of Miss Elentine.

There was, however, the gap that still had to be crossed between the man and him. The man sat there in a man's musk, awkward and impatiently brooding over the patience

of a ten million dollar bill. But there was this gap between the two, and for the gamble of his dreams and the recorded glory of his secret society (his motivation, which he will soon admit to) the archivist tipped forward and teetered on until he was quite there.

We might imagine the embarrassing awkwardness of the meeting: think when Miss Elentine in her contiguous skin had bulged up a knee, think of the images of tragic Habersham and we might imagine the shared embarrassment at the irregularity of this attempted exchange. The man across what the man supposed was a desk nudged the bill his way. To match this, but before he could evaluate or rehearse a response, he said, “you must understand, we’ve –” and here he corrected himself to diminish, or enhance the pronoun – “I’ve never seen such a thing. You understand, I hope, what you have there?”

The man with the spherical eyes just watched the unfisted bill. “Might I ask,” the archivist asked, now gaining confidence for the actuality of having a conversation, “where you came in possession of this?” The man looked up and cough or spat, and then after that wet prelude uttered an ancient dialect of audible symbols [i.e.,

deliberately ordered representations of mostly forgotten physical objects, creatures, actions, and directions, all supplemented, it’s thought, by curious gestures of the upper limbs – a dialect rarely used but for scholars, hobbyists and trained entertainers, and one of the few left into which this report is translated.] The archivist didn’t understand a word or gesture. But by the wildness of the limbs and the odd motions to the mouth, he guessed that the man had concocted some wild and fantastic alibi. “I understand,” he stopped the man to say, “and I understand that to come in possession of such a –” and here he selected his words carefully – “*thing*. . . would naturally involve any number of scrapes and misadventures. And I should suspect,” he continued, emboldened by the now advanced likeness of a two-way conversation, “that even some extra-legal liberties had been taken to produce this bill.” He turned nervously to his colleagues, only to see that they were still turned away from him, and came flickering in a completed revolution back to the man. “But disclosure,” he said, “is unnecessary in this case, and, really,” he thought about it, “it’s uncalled for. . . I should apologize. It’s just that I find this all to be so, so unbelievable.”

This report should take a moment to impress upon the viewer the relative ease of our dreamer and his handling of the man and the ten million dollar bill. To be certain – such as when a heroic recovery of one’s body from falling over precedes the swift, nauseating infusion of anxiety at the happening – he would not be able to sleep or dream this night. But presently his fascination at so profound a thing and the bold, rash action that brought it in, was very real. That he did not seize dramatically in fits might first be reasoned by the surreal ordinariness of the transaction, and second by dim grittiness of the object, wholly absent of halo or godly oscillation: it just laid there before him, inert and without flourish or apology, a crumpled ten million dollar bill. He must have thought that this must be what it’s like to discover a thing, and he must have wondered at the gritty terrestrialism of any mysterious object, historical artifact, or relic. He thought, perhaps, that across the clavicle of a saint or two there must have been a smear of candle soot, or on lost scrolls some grimy waxen fingerprints, or on old paper books some coffee rings; maybe in the holy grail a shipping dent, and some disagreeable thermal fissures in a party punch bowl. And what of that thin black hair caught in a shroud or in the mechanical zipper of a pair of trousers? How does one, he

must have thought, look past the rust of a code ring and imagine it new like the re-mastered archive images have it? Think on it: does the oxidization of a long buried hard drive or gas pedal or the colored sedimentary deposits in a fossilized tire print detract from, or does it authenticate, those curious pieces of lore? He must have wondered, Will the fistful crumple of this ten million dollar bill validate its physical reality or pose an unfortunate flaw? Or is the soot, the print, the filth and fracture, or the wrinkle as much the miracle as the object itself? If an object is just an object, is the rust and crumple the record of its romance?

The man flicked the bill nearer and again gestured curiously to the man’s open brown mouth. The archivist stopped wondering then and then swiveled his mass around to check the improbable attention of his coworkers, now entirely smitten with the artificial humiliation of Donald Habersham III. He completed his wobbly pirouette and leaned – precariously leaned! – toward the curiously gesturing man. In the safety of mistranslation he confided:

“I will tell you that I belong to a society. A secret society.” He lowered his voice, surprised at his admission. “Face to face we meet at regular intervals, in intimate spaces, and

share casks of secret drink. We speak and we read words like symbols and codes and keep for our review printed histories, all in the vacuum of a deliberate, a hallowed hush. And we do our members favors. Yes, the favors are important – access and promotions – favors given exclusively, given generously, given in investment, given to each of us for the elevation of us, and for the nourishment of our society.” He looked at the man, who remained kind or desperate enough to frown as if listening. “But what keep us really together, what keep us rumored, and even feared, what keep us closed and whole – that is, what keep us exclusive, are our secrets: they make us, they keep us.”

The man frowned. The man really did mean it; now it was a look of genuine pain. So the archivist leaned – he precariously leaned! – closer to the man, and because he was speaking to a man, and because he knew that a man can never really understand a concept without the aid of a physical thing, he knew he would have to provide examples. So he thought, and – to explain the role of narrative in philosophy, of metaphor in understanding, of physical things in keeping faith – he mustered from the folds of his dreams and from the minutes of his secret society meetings some examples:

“How,” he began, “can we believe that extraterrestrials dropped by, and bequeathed us the plans for our microchips and the ingredients of our anesthetics, if we didn’t keep in boxes the rumor of their charred parts, their elbows and pinchers, deep in subterranean hollows? Or how do we know that God so loved the world without the crack-proof encasement of His wardrobe? Or how do we know,” and he leaned toward the man even further, “or, better, how do we hope that senses like love and empathy will ever return to us reconstituted if not for the salt-streaked handkerchiefs that we store in pressured lockboxes underneath this very building?”

He leaned further. The man in what he supposed was a chair or bench shifted, baffled. “I’ll do you a favor,” the archivist said, and he swept up the man’s ten million dollar bill and faded from sight.



The man sat there, baffled. Alone in a man’s stink, the man looked around. We can’t be sure what the man might have been contemplating, but reflecting in the man’s rotary eyes

were [the counterfeits of] men in reverse amphitheater, a crowd privately entertained by moving images of Habersham and Ellentine, of bugs and wildebeest, of abstraction in pretty bands of light, of skyless oceanless blue in a gap of cosmic radiation. It all bothered the man's eyes and offended the man's mind, so the man looked down. And contemplated. The man seemed tired.

It was then the man might have realized that this was not a table, and this not a chair, and these not really people in this not a place, when in the fade-in of an awakening the archivist reappeared to say It's done.

"The bill," he said, "is in a most hidden, secret vault. I will present it to my society, and we will try to make sense of it, and think on it, or try to remember what it might have stood for, or been a part of, or how it was used. But whenever you wish," he said, he reassured, "whenever it pleases you, you may come and feast those wild eyes on it. Whenever you please.

"But before you leave," and at this the man sensed he was to leave, "I want to give you something in gratitude, for the very real favor you've done for our society," and he handed

the man that something, a palm-sized picture of the ten million dollar bill.

Now with the copy of a [counterfeit] bill crumpled in the man's hand, the man walked back out through the ornamental door, back into the particles of air and back into the outside mirrors of Orchard Grove. With nothing else the man walked, alone in a man's reflections.

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{File under oddity; key words: mankind, history, thing, curio, Ellentine}