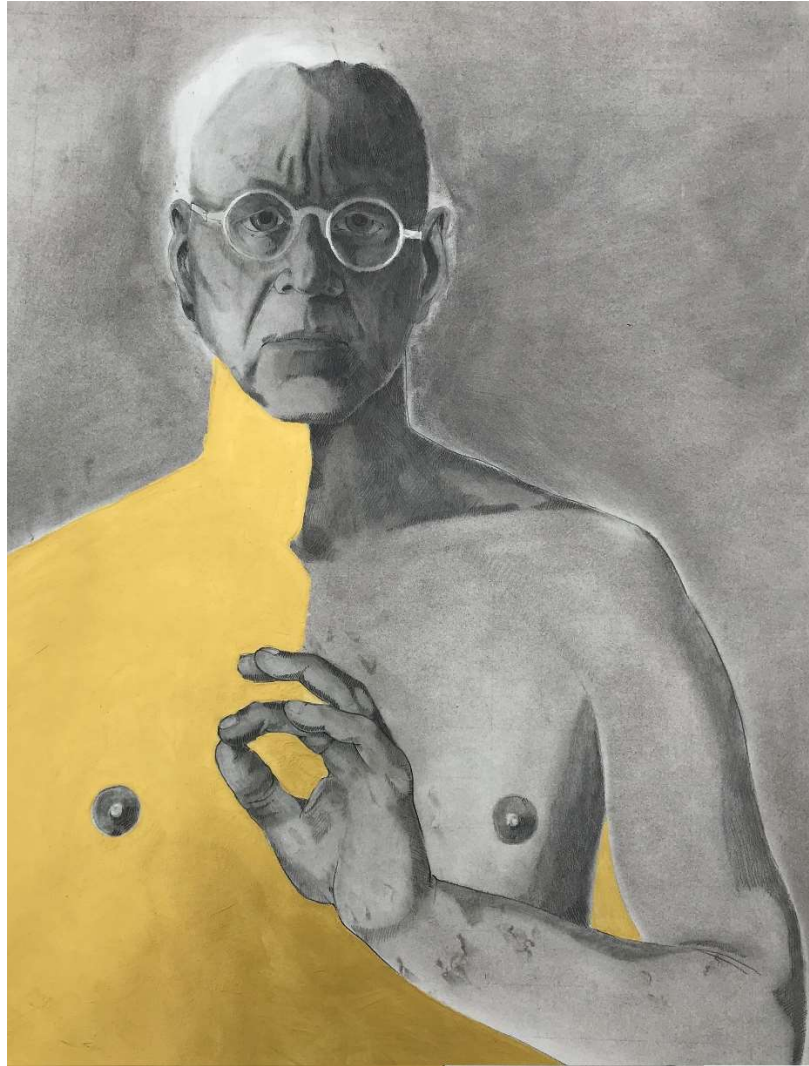


4THNESS

Frank Mullen

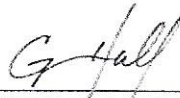


Submitted to the faculty of the Herron School of Art and Design, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art in the Herron School of Art and Design, Indiana University, May 2020.

4THNESS

by Frank Mullen
Master of Fine Arts

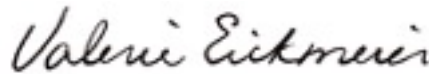
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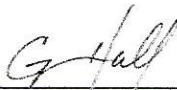


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05 / 14 / 2020

Date

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Act One	1
Bibliography and Illustrations	i
Appendix	ii

MOMMY: Daddy! Look at Grandma; look at all the boxes she's carrying!

DADDY: My goodness, Grandma; look at all those boxes.

GRANDMA: Where'll I put them?

MOMMY: Heavens! I don't know. Whatever are they for?¹

4THNESS

A ONE ACT PLAY

Frank Mullen

¹ Edward Albee, *The American Dream*, Coward-McCann, 1960.

ACT ONE

Charlie Gordon hung a box. It was mounted on the front of his house, next to the door, narrow and painted black and oddly proportioned, like a talisman, like a ovate refugee from Easter Island. He hung it there so deliveries of large, flat boxes could be put safely inside, protected from the weather in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, United States. They never did it though, the FedEx people, and UPS, the Postal Service. They always left them on the porch floor, under the box, in front of god and everyone, and this was a great annoyance to Charlie Gordon, the star of our show.

See how that worked?

Charlie Gordon lived in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, lived and worked in his smallish row-house on the southern edge of town, where the Latinos lived, shoehorned into the rustle, the blap-blap-blap of the cars, the Chevrolets, the Cuban Pop and all, Jesus candles and bright floral skeleton stickers on the front doors and barbeque grills, so lively and strange. When he recognized that this mail delivery problem might never be solved, he hung a piece of black canvas from the bottom of the box, to provide a little protection to the stranded packages. He was an oddity in that largely Mexican neighborhood, on the busy streets headed south toward Frederick and Baltimore. He made too much money, more money than they did, most of them, which wasn't saying too much, and here's how:

He owned that house, had an office in the front where he conducted his graphic design business, as a contract graphic designer for Raytheon, the world's largest producer of guided missiles and other sophisticated tools of annihilation. To balance the perceived evil in that, and since Raytheon paid him so ridiculously well, he also provided pro-bono design service to the International Street Dog Foundation, which is run by high-minded people, of course, not by the actual dogs.

His desk faced the big window in the front of the house, looking out through the porch and the little tree, out at the sidewalk and his neighbors as they carried brightly-colored sacks from the little market down the street. Day after day Charlie Gordon sat in an office chair, a really good

one from Steelcase, Incorporated, the SILQ chair, which is “a breakthrough in seating design,”² according to Steelcase. And day after day he received packages from vendors of Raytheon, proofs of print materials awaiting his approval. And he updated the dog site, each time they were looking for a home for an otherwise desperate feral dog in India, or the Middle East, or what-have-you. They were flown to the United States, accompanying willing passengers as pets, through layovers in Amsterdam or Frankfurt, Kix, on to Chicago or New York. The contradiction in this arrangement was not lost on Charlie Gordon. He recognized, and sometimes joked at parties when he seldom went, that if you gathered a hundred-thousand street dogs into one place, Raytheon probably manufactured a bomb big enough to kill them all in one crack³.

Sitting there on his desk was a carved wooden head of Jayavarman VII, the God-King of Cambodia during the Khmer Empire, who commissioned the construction of all those temples, and invented Theravada Buddhism. He found it at a flea market in Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania. The man thought it was the Buddha – even argued the point with Charlie Gordon. Other than that, there was a \$9,000 laptop, too big to be truly portable, and a plastic coaster from the gift shop at Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Everything else had been gradually consigned to a closet, as it only added to his confusion. The top of the desk was painted flat black, flat like velvet, like a theater curtain. The front of the house was so dark, shaded by its front porch, hemmed in by row-houses on either side. And there was a dog, who had been rescued from a roadside shack in Haryana, India by the International Street Dog Foundation. Charlie Gordon named her *Lamb of God*, or *Lamb* for short, I mean if he needed a quick reaction, like if the little flea-bag was chewing on his backpack, and by *little* I mean her dry weight was less than 100 Imperial pounds.



Charlie Gordon was teasing the deep end, slipping into a futile headspace that wasn't what you could call 'tethered to verified reality'. Over the course of his days there in that row-house, he

² <https://www.steelcase.com/products/office-chairs/silq/>

³ <https://www.raytheonmissilesanddefense.com/capabilities/products/paveway-bomb>

had begun to look too deeply at every single object in his experience, until his brain was so overwhelmed by the torrent that it started to kind of *twitch*. When he plugged something into a wall outlet, for instance, he saw the plastic covers with the patterns of holes forming their little surveillant faces. He saw the devices inside, made in China or Honeywell, with wires wrapped around colorful screws, the silver and brass, the designated green. He saw the wires inside the walls, stapled to old hardwood, the transformers on the poles lining the alley, the men in the big white trucks, and the uneducated children of the linemen at the union hall.

When he turned his gaze elsewhere, it was met by something equally complex, like a slatted wooden heating vent cover, notched and framed so delicately by a machine, the tree it came from, the people who might have planted it or didn't, the Sierra Club and the rain. Above it, the exposed brick of the wall, laid a hundred years ago by a man long dead, his newsboy cap soiled with sweat and mortar dust and yellow mustard, dangling between wooden planks before the advent of the Scaffold and Access Industry Association, which has, since 1972, “strived⁴ to make the workplace safer by being the professional voice of the industry.⁵”

It got so bad he knew he had to leave, just like in the Wayne Newton song *Daddy Don't You Walk So Fast*, which was a smash hit in the same year as the formation of the Scaffold and Access Industry Association, topping out at #4 on the Billboard Hot 100. This trend of ascribing too much relevance to pointless things had been, truth be told, a part of his world view for decades. That Wayne Newton song was completely forgettable to everyone on Earth, except Wayne Newton's mother, and *Charlie Gordon*.

Where did all those people come from, and where were they now? Why, when you flipped on a light switch, didn't the man who manufactured it appear and comment on the quality of the light? Why didn't the heat from the floor register smell like the woman who had assembled it, somewhere along the tracks to Ardmore? Out of all the things in Charlie Gordon's house, he couldn't draw a connection between a single object and another human being. He couldn't see the cow who produced the cheese, the Native Americans who had plodded the earth above

⁴ The past participle form of *strive*, in this published instance, should have been *has striven*.

⁵ <https://www.saiaonline.org/history>

gypsum they had no use for, the railroads. The air inside his house had become communicative with the air inside the Susquehanna Mall, with its never-ending expanse of delicate brassieres and vibrating recliners, its lavender-scented candles shaped like Bob Marley, and so on. The spectacle of life, almost no matter how you lived it in America, had become a reality unto itself, a monstrous astral projection from which there was no clear escape.

He had been doing some research, trying to find a way to continue living in so sodden a world as this, browsing through libraries and universities, looking for like-minded people, for a solution. In the end, he found a curiously-titled research paper called *4thness*, written by a graduate student in Fine Arts in the Midwest. Its author, Frank Mullen, was old by grad school standards, but he was similarly troubled by his spectacular life, and at his age he had nothing to lose by trying to find an escape hatch, since his *forced* escape was comparatively imminent. This merciless thesis paper was 43 pages long, and claimed to provide instructions for the building of a *transcendence machine*. Charlie Gordon took the paper to a print shop in town and had it bound with an anonymous grey cover. The same shop produced a rubber stamp that said *4thness*, which he himself printed on the front, kind of like the White Album, only darker, more ghoulish. This thesis document, when referenced throughout this story, is called the *paper*, written in italics like that, sometimes to indicate syllabic stress in the sentence and sometimes not, and that literary contradiction, admittedly, will be a source of irritation for some readers.

And by the way – the author of this thesis paper, the graduate student, is calling it a machine so as to assign considerable responsibility to the participant, in case it's all hogwash. If it doesn't work, if Charlie Gordon turns out to be only a blip on a spreadsheet tabulating how many Americans die on their front porches, then the author will have *you* to blame. And by that I mean you, the reader of this impudent university requirement.

So at any rate, he left home, to the only place he could afford to live that wasn't his house. He moved onto his front porch, took some things out there, some tools and outdoor furniture, a lamp, a giant aluminum bowl four feet across, his copy of the *paper*. And Lamb of God, a few kitchen utensils, a sack of dog food. He set up a tubular aluminum-framed, green fabric-

webbed chaise lounge, which could otherwise be described as a lawn chair, if it weren't a chaise lounge. A blue plastic Parsons table. A small table lamp, which wasn't rated for damp locations like a front porch, a couple of yellow highlighters, and a large folding knife with an Olde English inscription in its wooden handle that said *Come to Poppa*, for reasons that are largely unimportant in the context of this story.

Among the things he forgot to bring with him were his mobile phone, his razor and shaving mug, and a coffee table book called *Way To Go, Raytheon!*, which he was expected to approve for publication sometime in the near future.

NARRATOR: (Exhales) Do you think the readers are actually going to accept that this guy decided to live on his front porch, and he refused to go back inside *his own house*?

AUTHOR: (Looks up dismissively from the keyboard) Doesn't matter. This is a work of absurdism. I could say he lived *under* his porch, and it would mean the same thing.

NARRATOR: If any situation is as believable as any other, then why bother writing *anything*?

AUTHOR: (visibly annoyed) Look – you don't actually even exist. So if you don't mind, let's keep the—

MAIN CHARACTER: So if the narrator doesn't exist, as you say, then I don't have to do anything he tells me to do. Or you. You tell me to. To do, I mean.

NARRATOR: And what's more, how are you so sure that *you* exist? Who's to say that *I'm* not the one writing this narrative?

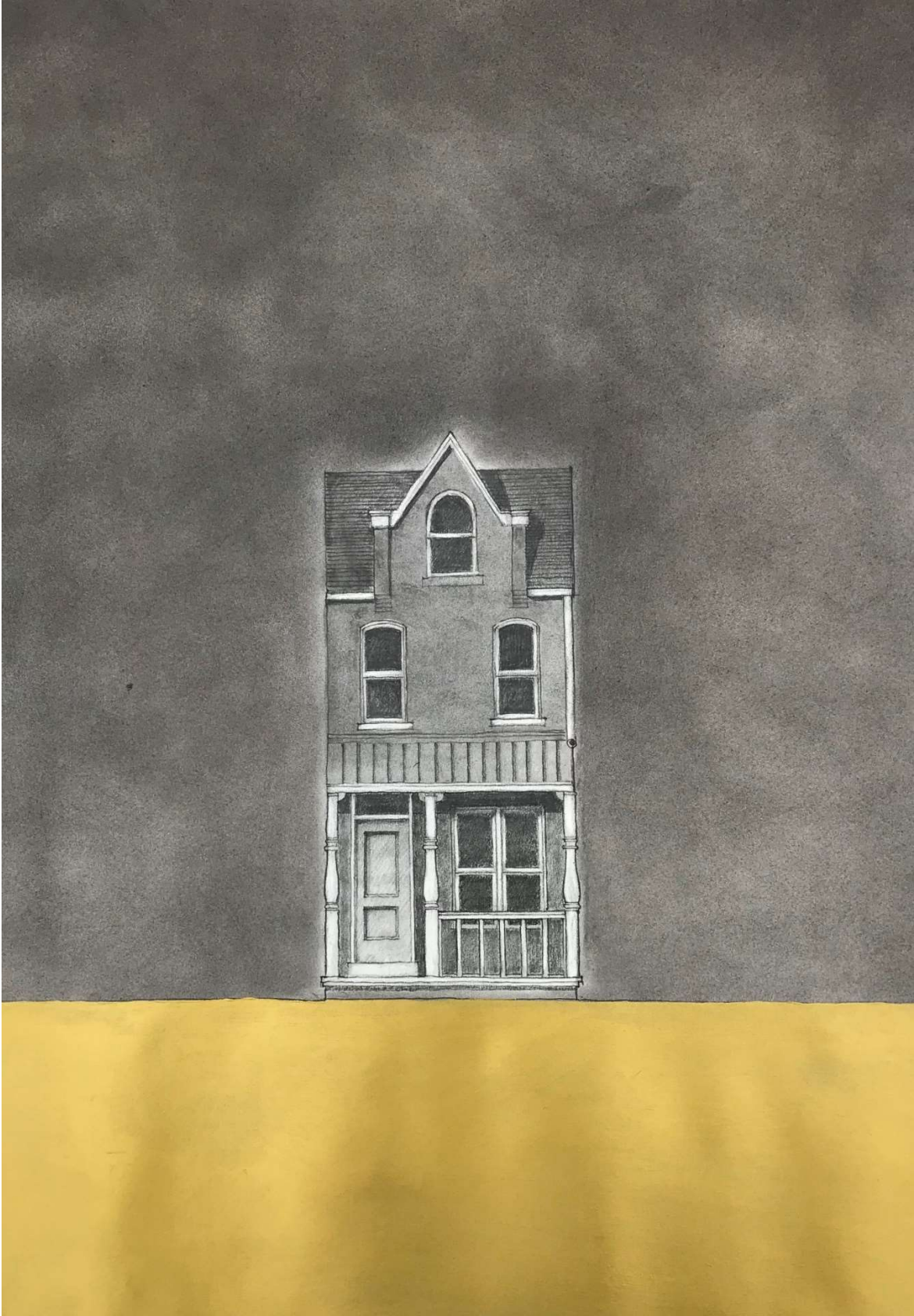
AUTHOR: Because I could delete you, and might, by hitting a key half the size of a postage stamp.

MAIN CHARACTER: Postage stamp?

Charlie Gordon appreciated the simplicity of the porch. There was only one electrical outlet, one seat, one table, one giant bowl. His neighbors would one day say he lived on that porch for the better part of a summer, reading that *paper* over and over, scrawling esoteric things in the margins. He intended to stay there until he could figure out a way to convert the noise into some kind of transcendence, because that's what he really wanted, what he expected to find out there on the porch, what is the fairly urgent topic of this "research paper" cum tragicomic fiasco.

He sat in that chaise lounge every day, or paced the floor of the porch. It wasn't much of an aerobic or ceremonial walk, given the narrowness of rowhouses in that part of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. There on the little table he brought from inside was the lamp, with a maroon ceramic base and a shade that flared at the bottom, illuminating the whole tabletop and lifting a circle of light onto the beaded boards of the ceiling. This whole escape thing was kind of a crazy idea, were it not for Superflat Theory, which he had inadvertently read about while he was waiting at the copy center for them to make the rubber stamp.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Let us say he was looking for a way to dissolve a spectacle.



In the early morning of his first day on the porch, after a fitful night listening to the souped-up cars, the rustling of grocery bags, and the drumming of boots on the public sidewalk, Charlie Gordon started reading the *paper*. It began by defining the transcendence being sought, and it sounded a lot like the one for which Charlie Gordon was searching. He mouthed the words as he read it silently, to Lamb, who was not yet stirring:

*The condition in which you experience the universe as a whole and singular thing, devoid of constituent parts.*⁶

Donald Judd, the *paper* offered, agreed with Frank Mullen, because both were correct:

*...when you start relating parts, in the first place, you're assuming you have a vague whole - the rectangle of the canvas - and definite parts, which is all screwed up, because you should have a definite whole and maybe no parts, or very few.*⁷

“That’s plain-vanilla secularized Buddhist enlightenment,” Charlie Gordon said to the dog. And the dog, who had no appreciation of Latin-based languages, and was actually still asleep, said nothing in reply. The *paper* elaborated on the definition, citing Michael Pollan, who studied and experimented with psychedelic substances like LSD, psilocybin mushrooms, and exotic toad excretions. He described it more in the terms of ego dissolution, and less in those of perception, but the concept was similar enough. Charlie Gordon pursed his lips:

*And then I looked and saw myself out there again, but this time spread over the entire landscape like paint, or butter, thinly coating a wide expanse of the world with a substance I recognized as me.*⁸

And this:

Consider the case of the mystical experience: the sense of transcendence, sacredness, unitive consciousness, infinitude, and blissfulness people report

⁶ Frank Mullen. *4thness*. Little Circle Press, 2020.

⁷ Michael Fried. *Art and Objecthood*. University of Chicago Press, 1998 (originally copyrighted 1967).

⁸ Michael Pollan. *How to Change Your Mind*. Penguin Press, 2019.

*can all be explained as what it can feel like to a mind when its sense of being, or having, a separate self is suddenly no more?*⁹



Some people say you can get transcendence through meditation, orgasm, death, precarity, and Modernism. The *paper* lurched into a brief discussion of each, unnecessarily, as a Midwestern hack of a science writer would naturally do. Here we go: Meditation:

*“Merely wishing I take refuge in the Primeval Cosmic Deity is not enough. Man must seek internalization, by withdrawal of senses into the mind, and keeping the intellect in the self. Uphold disinterest in pain and pleasure, likes and dislikes, remain free of want, anger, greed, pride, possessiveness and jealousy, to reach the deathless essence in the kutasha. Having arrived at this Indestructible Eternal Substance, Man lives in Stillness always,” Krishna answers.*¹⁰

Orgasm is a bit more reliable, and therefore more popular than meditation. Here’s proof, from the inventor of the currently resurgent personal flotation tank, Dr. John C. Lilly:

*Once one can achieve these goals, one can see how flexible sexual energy really can be. One can shift it, as it were from the basic biological substrate and the very narrow railroad-track program of the usual sexual encounter, to something for more complex – almost abstract and quite mystical. For some persons caution should be used in dealing with unknown energies.*¹¹

Well put, Dr. Lilly. Well put.



⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Sneh Chakraburty, *The Origin of Mediation*, New Age Books, 2009.

¹¹ Dr. John C. Lilly. *Simulations of God*, Ronin Publishing, 1956.

Saint John Neumann Catholic Church was named after the first United States bishop, and so far the only male U.S. citizen - which is somehow redundant, I guess - to be canonized.

As an altar boy at Saint John's, Charlie Gordon learned early how to shake down the faith. When there was a funeral in the parish, the service required at least one attendant, and the whole ordeal, the mass and burial with the incense and the electronic pipes and the shiny black limousines, took half a day, and unlike truancy, this service was both condoned and celebrated. But better still, Charlie Gordon could skip those classroom lectures by lay teachers, the women in steely pastel blues, wreaking of Tussy, chattering nonsense about the licentiousness of John Updike.

Turning the crank on the clattering stainless steel machine used to lower caskets into holes, Charlie Gordon focused on the futility and expense of it all, when transcendence had irrevocably occurred, and the body, the satin lining, the indigenous hardwoods, were then worthless. This transcendental exercise was of little use to Charlie Gordon, since he would have to wait his entire life for it, and when it finally arrived, it would be of no consequence to his mortal self. According to the Gospel of Matthew. Loosely.

Unless you believe the universe is built out of giant blocks of unbelief, as might an orthodox pragmatist or Christopher Hitchens, you'll never come to a thoroughly satisfactory explanation of the place where you're headed, so your investigative time might be better spent elsewhere. Charlie Gordon needed to find a vehicle for transcendence that he could survive, so even if he didn't get Bodhi-grade enlightenment, he could at least use his invented path to transcendence for momentary escapes.



At a personal scale, precarity is like the moment when you trip on the sidewalk, and for an instant it's unclear whether you'll regain your balance or face-plant into concrete. In that moment, your awareness of the consequence of your life evaporates, and everything in your perception is directed at this gruesome uncertainty. There's a measure of transcendence in that moment, although perhaps not one Charlie Gordon could build a contemplative practice

around. You'd have to walk around all the time blindfolded, like a person who is blind, of which there are 15 million in India alone, more than the population of Pennsylvania, United States, of which Lancaster is a part.

At a societal scale, precarity works in a similar way. Here's a clip from *Emergent Precarities and Lateral Aesthetics*, which was published by the Minnesota Review. Minnesota is a blue state:

In particular, with its sense of interim, partial, in-process formation, such an indeterminacy recalls what Berlant terms the "impasse," in which subjects and their behaviors are not paralyzed or stuck, let alone complicit, but instead float in a "holding pattern" or "unfolding" and exist in "a state of animated and animating suspension" with their material and social surroundings.¹²

Entire populations of people live in desperate conditions for generations, in black neighborhoods in South Chicago, along the commuter tracks connecting the airport to central Rome, in Port-Au-Prince, in New Rochelle. Precarity at a global scale was certainly on the horizon, Charlie Gordon recognized, what with sea levels rising, and everything on fire in California, and Greta Thunberg and all.



And the mail deliveries? They kept coming. The people who drove the trucks kept bringing proofs for Charlie Gordon's approval, came onto the porch and saw him there, when he wasn't down the street at the little Mexican grocery. They said hello, and if Charlie Gordon wasn't in a state of rapture over some esoteric metaphysical escape valve, he would return the greeting. Then the driver would lean the package up against the box with the canvas draped beneath it, and disappear into the diaspora.



¹² Elizabeth Adan and Benjamin Bateman, *Emergent Precarities and Lateral Aesthetics*, Minnesota Review 85, 2015.

You can move toward a transcendent state through the arts, through Modernism, the *paper* recommended. Charlie Gordon had studied the Fine Arts while in graphic design school, on his path to Raytheon and the International Street Dog Foundation. Back then he found that if he focused in front of a Rothko painting, or a Pollock, a Frankenthaler, sometimes a Kline, he could lose awareness of everything else, and find himself in a pre-cognitive place. His present quandary was the attainment of that place, in the context of his ridiculously complicated Postmodern life, where minimalism, as a pattern of thought, was inapplicable.

It doesn't matter. That it doesn't matter is perhaps the point of this entire treatise, and many others. This whole thing, this Sisyphean nightmare, this Rube Goldberg contraption we call humanity, is flat-out stultifying.



Postmodernism is a natural pollutant. It feels better, and it has found massive purchase in our fiduciary culture. We ask our commercial shakers to feed us candy and cigarettes, and they do that, because they are us.

It's possible that the universality which accrued to the works of Rothko and Kline could have continued into Postmodernism, but this pursuit was jettisoned in favor of Pop and Op, Neo-Dada and Photo-Realism, identity politics, Superflat, and dozens of others. In the absence of the elitism of speculative thought, museum and gallery audiences have greatly expanded, even as the metaphysical guidance which the visual arts had for a time provided, has all but evaporated into the spectacle.

NARRATOR: Is this part of the *paper*, or is this some fourth-wall editorial by the author? I mean, you have to maintain *some* literary structure if you want—

AUTHOR: *You* said all that, as the narrator, because I told you to.

NARRATOR: I don't even *like* contemporary art. I'm more of a NASCAR guy. Why don't you say the *paper* said all that, or put it in the introduction? And why would a two-bit philosopher work for Raytheon?

AUTHOR: There is no introduction. If it'll help, I'll write something about Dale Earnhardt when we get to the part about the Spectacle. Let's keep this story moving. I have a deadline, in case anyone cares.

The practice of shrinking oneself so as to enter through a small and unfamiliar portal, and then expanding oneself once inside, has been a fixture in philosophical inquiry since bipedalism, which allowed us to gaze more squarely into the sky. The urge to connect with the elemental nature of one's humanity is central to our existence.

Postmodernism had dominated the visual arts for Charlie Gordon's entire life. By its definition, it allowed for the incorporation of all things corporeal or otherwise, and as such, there could be no end to it. Even a return to classical Abstract Expressionism could be seen as just another phase in Postmodernism's development, on the same conceptual scale as an emoji in a Takashi Murakami lithograph, or your reflection in a stainless-steel bunny rabbit. There isn't much difference, really, between Andy Warhol and Michael Rotondi. Both succeeded at radicalizing our fixation on the incidental.

As surely as abstract painting did it, Charlie Gordon thought it possible that Postmodernism, at some unknown density, could also catalyze the kinds of experiences that are native to paintings like Pollock's *Number 5*.



Postmodernism largely rejected abstraction, even while wallowing in its groundbreaking techniques. It rammed a hole in the representational sanctuary with the theoretical equivalent of a bulldozer, and all the vouchsafed images of common birds and insects were turned into predators again, and they devoured the crop, which was Modernism.

MAIN CHARACTER: That's clever. Did you write that?

AUTHOR: Shut up.

MAIN CHARACTER: I mean it's kind of redund—

AUTHOR: Shut up.

“I should be able to generate a modernistically transcendent experience using a fully postmodern expression¹³,” Charlie Gordon had said into the bathroom mirror, angrily almost, just before he left the house, turned the latch for what could have been the last time. All that noise, the thoughts about the manufacturing of plastic kitchen utensils in Malaysia, the multi-colored shipping containers, the Memali Incident¹⁴, was as dense as any Rothko. They were at opposite ends of the semiotic spectrum, yet they had such similar potentials, if you asked Charlie Gordon, and you did. He was determined to stay out there in the safety of that porch, free from the noisemakers, the things inside the house, for as long as it took.

Charlie Gordon thought about all that, thought and thought and thought, until Lamb slunk onto the floor, stood up. It was time for her walk, the first of two, which she had received every day of her roughly three-year life, about 2,000 times if anyone’s counting. It was a curious relationship, the one between Charlie Gordon and Lamb of God. Her pedigree was of a wild, mongrel variety, and yet she clung to her human man as if he was the supplier of oxygen, followed him wherever he went, except for the occasional trips to the corporate headquarters of Raytheon, of course. She walked with him each day without a leash, and not once did she stray from his side.

AUTHOR: This is fortuitous, since when I wrote the earlier part about what he brought with him onto the porch, there was no mention of a leash.

MAIN CHARACTER: Figures. Who are you talking to?

¹³ The thesis statement of this paper, maybe.

¹⁴ <https://blog.limkitsiang.com/2014/04/06/memali-families-still-seek-answers-want-closure-after-30-years/>

That morning they walked to the Mexican grocery down the street, where Charlie Gordon bought some coffee, some empanadillas for the two of them, and a half-dozen cans of coconut water. Each time Charlie Gordon and Lamb entered the store, the owner would call out from behind the counter, “Heyyyy, Charlie – is that a service dog?” because he was required by Pennsylvania law to verify that animals brought into his food-vending establishment were legitimate. And each time, Charlie Gordon would turn to the dog and say, “¿Eres un perro de guia?” Then Charlie Gordon and the Mexican fella would laugh and laugh, both of them recognizing that Charlie Gordon spoke almost no Spanish.

Later on the porch, he laid back in the lawn chair, looked up at the beaded ceiling. The *paper* had offered a good enough definition of the thing he hoped to find, a place where there were no electrical outlets because there was no electricity, because electricity was a separate thing. He set the *paper* aside, and draped his arm off the lounge, stroked the heel of his hand into the furrow between Lamb’s ears, one of the places on her body she couldn’t reach. As evening fell, it started to get chilly. Charlie Gordon retrieved a couple of blankets he had shoved into the mailbox, since it apparently had no other purpose, wrapped himself in them, and fell asleep.

Cars, yes. The buzzing of Cicadas and transformers. The distant sing-song of ambulances to Lancaster General. The soft rustling of the splayed-open *paper* in a light morning breeze.

He could have spent a few days contemplating nothing more than the definition of transcendence, and some of his neighbors would say he actually did. He was acclimating as best he could to this new venture, to life on the front porch, without a razor or shaving mug, waiting for something that rhymes with Samuel, of which there is nothing.

When he reopened the *paper*, he began reading what was a seminal concept in the thesis, the extrapolation of a recipe for transcendence from the writings of Charles Sanders Peirce, after which the *paper* was clumsily named. Peirce conceived of a structure to the stages of perception, and maybe reality, which he captioned *Firstness*, *Secondness*, and *Thirdness*. The *paper* struggled to explain Firstness, perhaps because the author wasn’t as educated as he claimed to be, and didn’t truly understand it. The simplest explanation offered by Peirce is that:

*First is the conception of being or existing independent of anything else.*¹⁵

The classic example is the conception of the color red, before anything in the universe had yet been red. It's a clean state, one in which there's no relationship between perceiver and perceived, nothing approaching a supposition. That means there are no electrical outlets, or at least not the occasion of them.

When Charlie Gordon first read this definition, he thought of Firstness as a habitable state, but he came to recognize its ongoingness. First, Second and Thirdness were simultaneously roiling in the linear time of his existence, constantly imbricating, like the overlapping shingles on a roof that goes on in every direction forever. There's no reprieve from it in an average moment.

Secondness and Thirdness were inherently peripheral to the supposed path to transcendence. They concern themselves with relationships that are either too complicated for Firstness, or too uncomplicated for 4thness. Mr. Peirce raised his hand:

*Second is the conception of being relative to, the conception of reaction with, something else. Third is the conception of mediation, whereby a first and second are brought into relation.*¹⁶



As the author of the *paper* had warranted, Charlie Gordon lived on the edge of a knife. Michael Fried clarified that on the edge of reality in that place between the truth and a lie, opportunities for the contemplation of the singularity of existence are heightened, if only because there's so little time, no actual present, to contemplate what has, by the time of your awareness of it, already vanished:

... if all the world were annihilated, he wrote, and a new world were freshly created, though it were to exist in every particular in the same manner as this

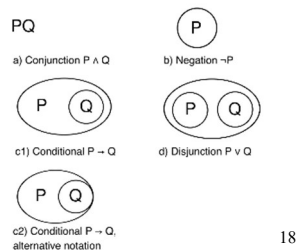
¹⁵ Charles Sanders Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, edited by Justus Buchler, Dover Publications, 1955.

¹⁶ Ibid

*world, it would not be the same. Therefore, because there is continuity, which is time, 'it is certain with me that the world exists anew every moment; that the existence of things every moment ceases and is every moment renewed.' The abiding assurance is that 'we every moment see the same proof of a God as we should have seen if we had seen Him create the world at first.'*¹⁷

Charlie Gordon imagined his motion, walking not along a single blade, but perpendicular to many, with his path swirling between Firstness and Thirdness and Secondness and the past and future and the parallel universes and the collective conscience, if there was one, and some other stuff that relates to the insalubrious abandonment of reality.

Firstness was at best a splinter from a much bigger log of an idea, so Charlie Gordon kept going. And by the way - Peirce never said there was such a thing as 4thness - he would be amused to learn that some goober later proposed to add it to his canon. He was, after all, a lecturer at Johns-Hopkins University, who came up with provocative stuff like this:



It was late in the evening when Charlie Gordon finished that tongue-lashing in Peircean Semiotics, and he set it aside. *Something Happened*¹⁹.



The traffic on Prince Street was light that evening, being a work night and all, but occasionally someone would drive past, looking at him through convex glass, sometimes slowing down to

¹⁷ Michael Fried. *Art and Objecthood*. University of Chicago Press, 1998 (originally copyrighted 1967).

¹⁸ By Poccil - from PNG file of the same name by GottschallCH, CC BY-SA 3.0,

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1129242>

¹⁹ Joseph Heller. *Something Happened*. Simon & Schuster, 1974.

see if it was really true, that Charlie Gordon, already a neighborhood curiosity, had moved onto his front porch and was sponge-bathing in the plain sight of Perseus and Hydra. An Oldsmobile stopped dead in front of the house that night, and the passenger window squealed as it was manually rolled down, with an actual crank handle, which was invented in the 5th century BC, and has since been updated with die-cut stainless steel and colorful plastics. A woman, probably an inhabitant of Scotland prior to the Norman Conquest, based on her tartan-patterned flannel shirt, leaned out, her long hair draping across the oxidized maroon-colored paint of a 20-year old car that should never have been built, was never new, and she hoisted a stream of vomit from her mouth, impressive in most every respect, considering her physical stature. Then she flung a beer can onto the ground, and recoiling upward, she saw Charlie Gordon on the porch, seeing her. She shrieked at him, with rising intonation such that the word ‘beer’ was a metal grinder, “You want to have beer?” It was a curious grammatical structure, missing an indefinite article, but the answer was still no, so Charlie Gordon said it: “No. Thank you.”

Lamb of God barked her disapproval at the commotion, stalked the top of the stair leading down to the public sidewalk, hackles up, nose way forward of her chest. She was capable of a menacing presentation, readily summoning the demeanor of a third-world dog whose ancestors had been so deeply offended, and whose pack was now threatened. The woman in the Oldsmobile didn’t know that, or care. She was all liquored-up, and purposefully on the wrong side of town.

“Really, Baby?” and she paused, creating one of those moments where the silence accentuates white noise. “You like Rob Roy?” What a bizarre thing this event was turning into, even for a graduate thesis paper like this one. Why would a woman in a 20-year old American sedan in a Mid-Atlantic town would offer a Rob Roy as the antipode of beer? And what exactly is a Rob Roy?:

2 ounces of scotch

¾ ounce of sweet vermouth

Stirred, served over ice

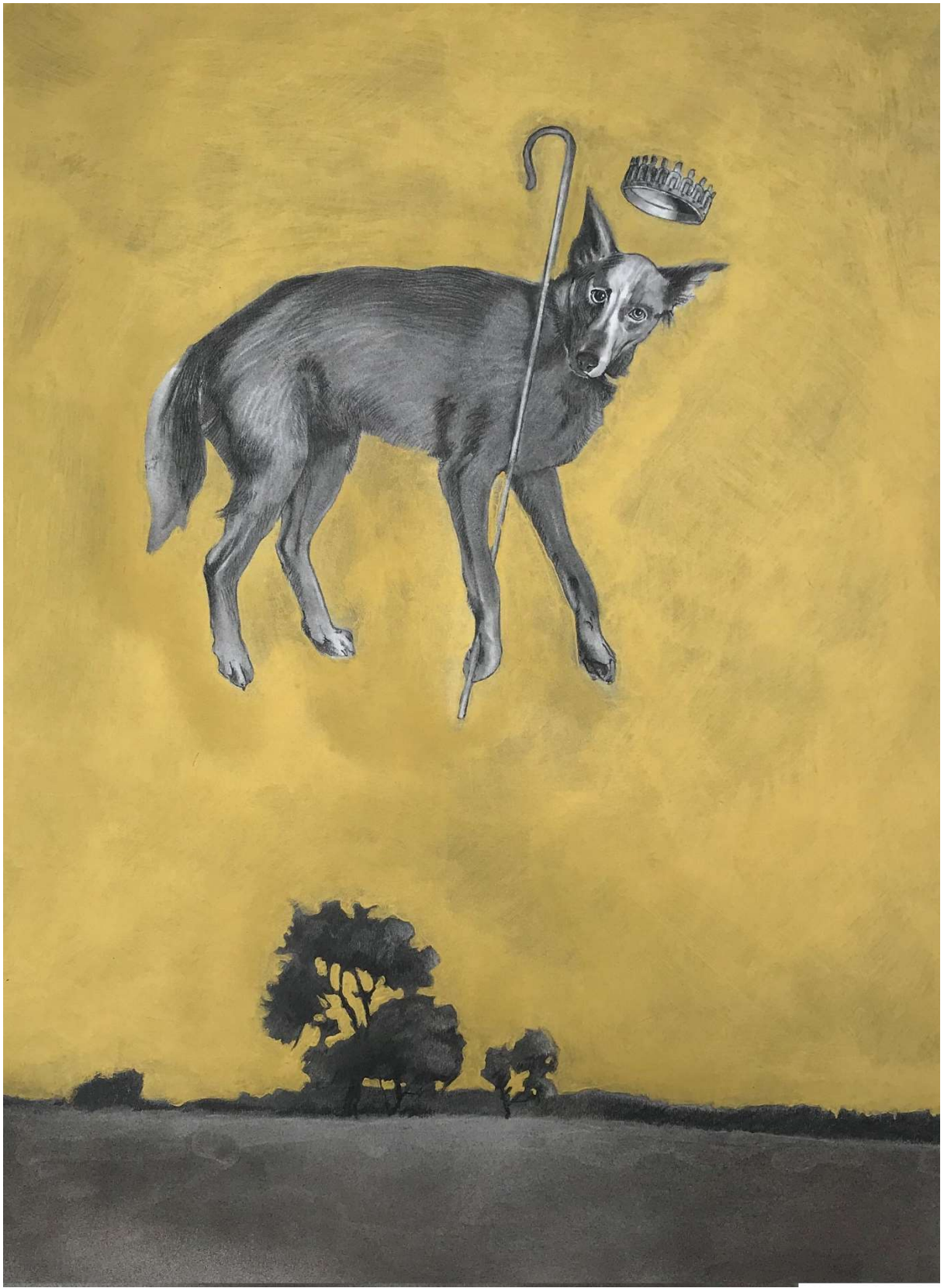
Garnished with a maraschino cherry

The car squealed away as the other passengers could be heard whooping it up at Charlie Gordon's indirect expense. He saw moonlight reflected in the puddle of vomit, which appeared as a galaxy a million miles deep, sparkling so very pretty, as vomit naturally would from that distance.

He spread his legs wide on the chaise lounge and pulled Lamb of God into the clear space at the bottom, draped a blanket over them both, and that's how they slept that night. That chick in the sedan had kind of creeped them out. Lamb of God laid there quietly, in fulfillment of Proverbs 4:6:

*Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you.*²⁰

²⁰ Author unknown, *The New International Version Bible*, New York Bible Society, 1967.



The sun came late, after burning its way through a grey cotton sky, and shone onto a scene unchanged, except that the dog had claimed a little more space than she had been originally offered.

He looked out over the railing to the sidewalk, and saw that it was still there, the puddle of vomit, only it looked more like a rubbery mucous, now evolved into a part of the physical world, all flesh-toned and heather. It was time for a walk, not because Lamb was ready, but because for the first time, that porch was starting to feel like a cell, with too much solitude so close to a free town. He needed to talk to another person, about almost anything. He went through his brief toilette, with a toothbrush and paste, and a half full bottle of Evian water, which had “naturally occurring electrolytes contributing to the taste nature intended.”²¹ He spit the water onto the little tree growing next to the railing. That tree was very useful. If you crouched behind it just right, you could take a leak more or less privately. He didn’t shave, hadn’t shaved. His equipment was inside the house, as I said.

“Giddy-up, Lamb of God!” Charlie Gordon said, as he stood there with his breath and his billfold. She stood up, arched her back and yawned. She walked over to the bowl of water near the railing, and jingled her tags against the aluminum as she lapped a morning’s cup. Then she strode to the steps and sat there in a perfect dog-triangle, expectantly.

“We’re going down to the store,” and he clamored forward with a lilt in his step, like he was going to pick up his date, without knowing where she lived, or even if she existed, and there would be no entertainment in the town that day, as had been the case so many times before. He sauntered down to the market, passing and saying “No hay Dios!” to the people on the sidewalk. Someone had told him it meant “Good Morning!” in Spanish, and he had been saying it for years.

Charlie Gordon stepped into the room of the little market, and there were a few kids in there eyeing the *Kranky*, a Mexican confection that had a cartoon character shaped like the letter K, the 11th letter in the alphabet, on the front of its brightly colored plastic wrapper. “Hey, Charlie!

²¹ <https://www.evian.com/en>

Good to see – is that a service dog?” And Charlie Gordon replied, according to the transcript of this research paper, whose author speaks no Spanish, “¡Si Señor!”

The man’s name was Jorge, Charlie Gordon knew from the business license taped to the glass case next to the cash register, a lavender iPad® with a chip reader. He never called him by name, because he suspected his pronunciation would be embarrassing. But he needed to air some things to someone, and Jorge wasn’t all that busy, except for the kids. “They say you’re living on your front porch, Charlie. Some people told me you’re bathing out there, in a big metal bowl, naked as night. They say you’re reading some *paper*.”

MAIN CHARACTER: Wait. You’re telling Charlie to have this discussion about a hopelessly esoteric topic with a guy who runs a Quickie Mart in Pennsylvania?

AUTHOR: You don’t know enough about this guy to be dismissing him as a common shopkeeper. As it turns out, Mr. Raytheon, Mr. Drone-Huckster, Mr. Bomb-Decorator, he’s better educated than *you* are. He has a masters in philosophy from a university in Mexico City. He had to move his family to the States to escape successive crop failures in his hometown, and he fitted out this little market from scratch. And there you sit on your front porch whining about how—

MAIN CHARACTER: Got it. That’s still not very believable, but what in this story actually *is*? Just tell me this. Does this guy speak English very well? I mean does he even know the meaning of the word *semiotics*?

AUTHOR: Better than you do.

NARRATOR: It doesn’t do much good for you to trash-talk each other. The only way this story is going to end is if we finish it, and frankly I’m tired of these pointless delays. I’m applying for a gig in an autobiography about Kyle Larson. Did you know his parents took him to his first NASCAR race a week after he was born?

AUTHOR: Oh my god. Do you even know who Charles Sanders Peirce *is*?

NARRATOR: Well, from the sound of it, I'd say he never drove a stock car at 150 MPH.

AUTHOR: The verb form should be *has never driven*. If you're going to keep narrating this story, at least don't trample the English language in the—oh my god.

MAIN CHARACTER: Were you going to tell me about the philosophy degree at some point? I mean I feel like a circus animal in this god-damned story.

AUTHOR: Let's just keep this thing moving. The Narrator is right. This will never end if we don't stop bickering about it. I'll try to give you a little more information in the future, but you're never going to be omniscient. You're supposed to be *surprised* by what happens. Jesus. Start talking to Jorge. And it's pronounced *HOHR-heh*. Soft roll on the R.

Charlie Gordon walked up to the counter, with Lamb at his side. He looked down into the glass case, at all the birds and the giant bricks of cheese, looked up at Jorge. "Jorge, I need some help. Yes, I'm living on my porch. Yes I'm reading a *paper*. Yes I haven't shaved in days and days because I forgot to bring my razor out with me. Yes I—"

"I have razors. They're on that rack next to the Kranky."

"I have this problem with the things in my life taking over my indigenous human perceptions, and replacing them with an anonymous stream of the *appearances* of things, rather than the things themselves. I can't stand living in this metaphysical construction, and I'm looking for a path to transcendence. So I got this *paper* that says it has a design for a transcendence machine, and I want to build one. But I'm afraid that I don't really understand the thing I'm trying to escape, and I don't want to just create a different version of it."

Jorge rocked back on his heels a little, and then leaned forward, eyes pointed down at a crack in the Linoleum[®] floor, which had been there for roughly 25 years, well before his tenure there.

He stood like that for longer than a comfortable silence, a serious candidate for that *ch-ch-ch* sound people make when they need to fill a gap in a conversation. He looked across the glass case, out past the turquoise iPad[®], opened his mouth.

NARRATOR: Lavender.

AUTHOR: What?

NARRATOR: The iPad[®]. On page 19 you said it was lavender.

AUTHOR: What difference does it make? This is a work of absurdism, so I can –

NARRATOR: Look – you can pretend all you want, but this isn't absurdism. It's more like indolence. You have no idea how to get yourself out of this morass you've created. You have no theory of the *subject*. You're conflating absurdism with abdication. Do you really think people won't be able to see that?

AUTHOR: Shut up. I'm writing this paper, and you're –

NARRATOR: Dream on, Quixote. Let's get back to your little fairy-tale. I believe Jorge has something to say.

“I think what you're talking about is ‘the Spectacle’. You can read about it yourself, maybe later in that *paper*. It's described in a piece called *Society of the Spectacle*, written in the 60's. In the beginning it talks about exactly the condition you're struggling with, and later it shifts into political theory. It has a French Socialism bent to it. I have a copy back in the stockroom. Hang on.”

NARRATOR: Really? He just happens to have a copy in the—

AUTHOR: Yeah. It's back there with the Kyle Larson memorabilia. You got a better idea?

Jorge came back out with a tattered copy in hand, with lots of yellow tabs stuck to the pages, staggered so they could all be read simultaneously. He flipped to one of them, introducing it as a good general description of the construct. He said, “This is a good general description of the construct:”

The spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible. It says nothing more than “that which appears is good, that which is good appears. The attitude which it demands in principle is passive acceptance, which in fact it already obtained by its manner of appearing without reply, by its monopoly of appearance.

“Does it suggest that the Spectacle has an existence independent of the things that comprise it?”

“Well, sort of. I mean, it’s hard to say that television, for instance, loses its materiality when it gets absorbed into a broader expanse of mechanized noise, but it does kind of get subsumed into television-ness, at least. Here’s maybe a better way to put it.” He read from one of the tabbed pages:

The obvious degradation of being into having...a generalized sliding of having into appearing, from which all actual “having” must draw its immediate prestige and its ultimate function.

And from another:

Where the real-world changes into simple images, the simple images become real beings and effective motivators of hypnotic behavior.

Charlie Gordon lit up. He thought he had it all figured out. “So if you wanted to retreat from the Spectacle, it seems like you could go back to a simpler place, before capitalism – I assume he’s talking about capitalism – corrupted the human relationships that were used to provide purpose to a society. Like some ancient culture, long before ‘civilization’.”

Jorge shook his head, kind of in a swirling motion, not clearly a yes or a no. “That might seem like a perfect answer to the question, but the Spectacle is not as romantic as that, and it’s much older. Here’s something:”

The oldest specialization, the specialization of power, is at the root of the spectacle. The spectacle is thus a specialized activity which speaks for all the others.

Charlie Gordon was disappointed to hear that. He stared at the floor, at the same crack in the Linoleum[®], only on his side of the counter. “It’s as old as humanity, Charlie. There is no golden age of pre-Spectacle. It’s just denser today than it’s ever been, and it’ll be even denser tomorrow. I imagine that your *paper* isn’t pointed at the antithesis of the Spectacle. It’s pointed at *proto-humanity*. And the only reason it’s *proto-*, not *pre-*, is that you can’t fancy perception without a perceiver.”

“So how is this helpful? I mean, if I’m overwhelmed by all the actual stuff, not the power and anonymity, not the amalgam of eye-candy, not the global cacophony, how does collecting it all under the heading of the Spectacle make it any easier to transcend?”

Unbeknownst to either of them, Lamb of God had discovered a bag of low-hanging tortillas, and she was having her way with them, yes she was.

“Charlie, a thing is not a *state*, and transcendence *is* a state. You’re not trying to erase all the stuff, unless you’re ready to die, and maybe you can’t do it even then. Transcending the Spectacle is going to require that you reposit the transceiver that’s channeled through your ego, so that the spectacle can continue unrecognized and unabated. And by ego I don’t mean the thing that makes you have an opinion of yourself. I mean the metaphysical gatekeeper. The thing that creates awareness and relationships, in response to random presentations.”

“So the transcendence machine this research paper keeps crowing about – how would it work? I mean how would it actually work? How do you actually *do* that?”

“Hmmm – well, I’ve been around, Charlie, and here’s what I think. Have you ever heard of Superflat Theory?”

MAIN CHARACTER: Wow. You’re also introducing Superflat Theory using this guy at the Quickie Mart?

AUTHOR: It’s not a Quickie Mart. Just listen. I think this is going to be important.

MAIN CHARACTER: You *think*? You mean you don’t even *know*?

NARRATOR: Holy Mother of Bristol.

AUTHOR: Alright. I’ll save Superflat for the *paper*. Or maybe I’ll just nix it. With the addition of the Spectacle, I’m not sure it’s really necessary any more. You’re going home now, Charlie. And take that thieving street dog with you.

“I’d love to have that conversation, Jorge, but my author expects me to go home now.” Jorge cocked his head to the side, and wondered aloud, “What do you mean, your *author*?”



Back on the porch, Charlie Gordon picked up the *paper*, and turned to the appendix where the construction drawings for the transcendence machine were. The part in the middle, the part Charlie Gordon was never going to actually read, was just a lot of flim-flam. There was a section, for instance, that discussed Superflat Theory, the brainchild of Takashi Murakami. Murakami’s work presents a spectacularly dense *element* of the Spectacle, but even Charlie Gordon, who had only recently been introduced to the theory, could see that it wasn’t an allegory of the *entirety* of the Spectacle. Murakami disseminates his work persuasively, using the mediums of the Spectacle, even as he criticizes the moral chaos that allows the Spectacle to proliferate. That’s a *Society of the Spectacle* kind of move, if an oblique one. But the rest of it - the cartoon flowers and dystopian teddy bears? Charlie Gordon could live without it.

MAIN CHARACTER: Thank you. I was hoping you'd find a way to kill it.
(looking off into space, flings his arm upward) Superflat is bullshit.

AUTHOR: Watch your language. This is a research paper. And don't forget
– Murakami is a world-famous artist, and you're a bad version of Casper the
Friendly Ghost.



The *paper* described the transcendence machine as a thing that was inanimate and perfectly still, appealing only to the visual sense. That was comforting. Charlie Gordon wasn't much of a mechanic. The material list was pretty simple, including only plywood, paint, and some fabric. The construction was also simple. It was a box that hung on the wall, deeper than it was wide, and tall enough to create a narrow presentation, in these proportions: 1.0W x 3.0D x 10.0H. Affixed to the bottom of the box was a piece of fabric the same size and shape. The *paper* explained how the machine would operate, how it would work:

The fabric is an allegory of the Spectacle. It seeks a critical mass of decoration which clearly exceeds any imaginable purpose for whatever that expressive use is. It has to have a thousand times the shock value of a woman working in a coal mine in a square-dancing dress, where the dress is so drenched in sequins and lace that she can barely carry it. And on top of all that, of course, she's working in a coal mine, trying to keep it clean. And then there's a mining accident.

For a more relatable, less ridiculous, example, consider this description of de Kooning's work:

*His art is not abstract, just relentlessly abstracting. Memories of depiction cling to every stroke. They contribute to a fabulous complexity that, as you look, can supercharge your capacity to maintain disparate thoughts simultaneously.*²²

²² Peter Schjeldahl, *Hot, Cold, Heavy, Light*, Abrams Press, 2019.

And Jackson Pollock:

*Interwoven high-speed skeins in black, white, dove-gray, teal, and fawn-brown oil and enamel bang on the surface while evoking cosmic distances.*²³

Mondrian:

*But looking at Mondrians was like throwing myself off a cliff and being caught by a trampoline. It made me high. It still does, to my surprise.*²⁴

That's what 4thness feels like.

MAIN CHARACTER: (Arms folded across his chest) Is that actually in the instructions, or what *is* that?

AUTHOR: Of course it's in the instructions. Where else would it be? We're no longer talking art theory here. That part is over. You have to actually *build* one of these things.

MAIN CHARACTER: On this porch? Where am I going to get all that wood and fabric? I mean, I have a circular saw and a drill and some brushes out here, but I don't have a *sewing machine*, because why would I? Look, if you knew you were going to want me to actually build something on this porch, the least you could have done is – look, woodworking doesn't just happen to itself. You need actual *tools*.

AUTHOR: This is a fictional story, and no one is ever going to see how well this thing is constructed. They're going to rely on my description of it, and give your building skills the benefit of the doubt. I'm going to run you through the paces of building an exceedingly perfected object, and then you're go—

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

NARRATOR: Does that mean you don't need me anymore? You could "run him through it" directly, without using a narrator as a middleman. There's a really good special about Talladega on Netflix. Better than *this* crap.

AUTHOR: No way. Let's just try and get through the rest of this story. We're on page 27, and that's more than twice what the university requires. I'll spice it up with an event. Shake a leg, Narrator. Here it comes:

MAIN CHARACTER: Somebody going to puke?

Charlie Gordon needed Jorge again. The description of this so-called *transcendence machine* was nonsense. It was as if the guy who wrote this thesis paper was trying to use the Spectacle as a fly-strip. You could guess from the arrangement of the two parts, the wood piece and the fabric, that you were supposed to be able to succumb to the allegory, to enter into a state of *Athness*, and then be jettisoned into the upper mind-sink. Charlie Gordon vowed to go back to the market in the morning, and he started preparing for a night's sleep.

Yes he did, he unfurled a garden hose from the front of the house and filled the giant aluminum bowl with water and pearlescent bath soap. At something like 10:30 PM on a Wednesday in the summer, he stripped naked and crouched into the bowl. Cold at first, then ingratiated, he draped himself in dippers of water, immersed his face and his hair, crouched low in the bowl, made himself into a clam. He stayed there, his face just above the lathery surface of the water, and thought there was a chance that this whole transcendence thing wouldn't actually work, that he would get no relief, and when the weather turned cold in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, he would freeze to death. He hung there, suspended high above the place where he was, until he could feel his fingers taking on cataract wrinkles. His body was aimed in just such a way that, like part of a sundial with lamentably no sun, the crack of his ass was pointed directly at the city of Port Stanley²⁵, The Falkland Islands.

²⁵ The capital city of the Falkland Islands is actually "Stanley", not "Port Stanley", but it just sounds better, so I did it anyway. Apologies to the Queen of England.

He hung his towel to dry, wrapped a blanket around himself, scootched over enough to allow Lamb of God to split the chaise lounge, big enough for one or the other but not both, and he slept, wearing that blanket as did the newborn King of Nazareth, so many years ago.



The morning came too early, when someone could be heard approaching, heels pattering on the stair leading up to Charlie Gordon's front porch. Lamb of God leapt to the stair, then pivoted 90° precisely, like they do at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Washington, DC, United States, and then stood there, hackles up, present in the moment in a way that humans can scarcely imagine. It was Jorge, at 7:42 AM, and his shop opened at 8:30. "Jorge! My god what a privilege!" Lamb of God, realizing that this was the man with the low-hanging tortillas, adjusted her demeanor, and sat quizzically.

"Charlie, we had to cut off that talk yesterday, and all night I kept thinking we should have finished it. It's almost like some *force* was bearing on the rest of the conversation, trying to push it to this morning for some reason." Jorge sat down on the railing, the short one next to the stair.

Charlie Gordon didn't offer a response to that. He didn't want to open up the can of worms about the author and the thesis paper and the narrator and literary fiction and so forth. "Do you think anything different about it this morning? Did you bring any coffee?"

Jorge sat there in the uniform of Lancaster County, except for a large, colorful scarf draped across his shoulders and thrown back, like he used to wear at university. It was the first time Charlie Gordon had seen him in the round, not inside the market, behind neither glass nor paradigm. He looked so much larger, and was, with his gangly sanguine-brown legs stretching to within a foot of the street dog's nose, if measured vertically, that is.

"Charlie, I can only say this once. I have to open my shop in 46 minutes, now that it's 7:44, two minutes after I got here, or possibly one minute plus a fraction of another. I don't know. If you build this thing, there's a good chance that it won't work, or maybe it will only work for you, and no one else will get it. There's a tradition of building these talismans in Mexico, and

the people who make them are apprenticed for years, tuning them to the people and the Ayahuasca. If they don't work, that's one thing. But if they're not done carefully, you can get some very unfortunate blowback." Jorge looked haltingly around the porch, and settled on the giant aluminum bowl. "Is that the thing you use for—"

"The bath. After dark, of course. I mean, yeah, after d—. And I got that little tree. What's Ayahuasca?"

"You know the Spectacle has always been an aspect of human existence, in my case since Monte Albán, and in your case since the Susquehanna Mall. That was a joke, Charlie. I know you're trying." Jorge shifted on the railing, leaned to one side to relieve the torment of too narrow a seat. "What you're looking for is pre-cognition, not proto-cognition, not a more palatable cognition. You have to allow yourself to be drawn into the Spectacle, be completely consumed by it, so you can climb onto the rocket ship to," he squinted at the ceramic lamp, "nowhere." "And that nowhere, in *this* talisman, is as elemental as Pythagorean theorem. It's something that would exist whether you made it or not - conceived of it or not. The only way to get beyond the Spectacle is in a vehicle shaped like one of the amaterial, mathematical components of the universe. There aren't many solid shapes you could call elemental, in the most abstract of senses. The sphere is good, but what a bitch that would be to try and build one out here on this porch, am I right? The pyramid. Same deal." He shifted again, ran his index finger sideways under his nose, sniffed as a section break. "The rectangular solid."



"Donald Judd had a big studio out in West Texas, you know, and sometimes we would go there and stay in the concrete tubes, and listen to the aluminum, tapping on itself in that giant artillery shed," said Charlie Gordon.

MAIN CHARACTER: The, uh, that dialogue is inauthentic as hell. Look, I think generally you should do something about the mountain of ambiguous references you're creating. Poetry doesn't work in theatrical prose. Even *Shakespeare* knew that. This paper is a mess.

AUTHOR: I don't think you appreciate the gravity of this situation. If I have to finish this story by doubling up on poetry and prose, to save time, that's a necessary Faustian bargain. They're not going to give me an MFA until this thing is approved by my committee, and somehow I managed to cull from the faculty only its most argumentative, target-averse members - then I assembled them in a closed room with no food. Look, Charlie. I get it. I know that part was a little stilted and implausible. But this is *absurdism*, which is an actual literary genre, and I have a *deadline*. Get back to work.

Jorge seemed to be reaching for a conclusion that would get him to the store on time. "That's all you can reasonably do, out here on this porch. You have to build a perfect rectangular solid. Stick to the author's proportions. They may not fit you exactly, but they're probably a good place to start. Who wrote this paper?"

"Frank Mullen."

"Is he the guy who presented at GCAS last year on Badiou's *Theory of the Subject*?"

"No, he's from Indiana."

"Hmmp. Well, just follow the instructions. You'll be fine. But you have to start building right away. Summer in Lancaster won't last forever, and you don't want to be sitting here postulating while your shoes fill up with snow."



The ceiling of the porch was nine feet high, and Charlie Gordon imagined the transcendence machine needed a little breathing room, say a foot top and bottom. At seven feet overall, the wooden part would be 3½ feet tall. He scratched out the math:

$$3.5 \times 12 = 42$$

$$42 \div 10 = 4.2$$

$$\text{Height of box} = 42'' \quad \text{Width of box} = 4.2'' \quad \text{Depth of box} = 12.6''$$

“Where am I going to find a piece of wood big enough for *that*?” Lamb of God pointed her nose up at Charlie Gordon, slightly bobbing it, sniffing some delicate, invisible thing.

MAIN CHARACTER: Where am I going to find a piece of wood big enough for *that*?

AUTHOR: I’ll send someone. Just wait for it.

MAIN CHARACTER: And another thing: you haven’t done such a great job of explaining how the Spectacle relates to the whole Firstness thing. This paper is *named* after it, and you just dropped it like third period French. If you don’t fix that problem, I’ll fix it myself.

AUTHOR: You can’t do that. You’re a character, and I’m the au—

Charlie Gordon looked at the street dog, the acute right triangle of her body, the Hope of the World, and said, “It must be true that 4thness is the same thing as the Spectacle, and that in this conception of Peircean semiotics, the progression through the states of perception is circular, not linear. In other words, the launching mechanism is the juncture between the lower representation of 4thness, and the upper representation of Firstness. If you can burrow into the Spectacle, let it have you, use it as a Zippo® to set yourself on fire, then you’re headed toward the next thing presented, which is an allegory of objective truth, or automaticity, or transcendence.”

“It seems risky to expect this will work, especially out here on this porch, with all these imaginary distractions”. Charlie Gordon also said that.

And lo, just then, a truck rattled up Prince Street, loaded with construction materials headed for the north side of Lancaster, where restoring a front porch to its original detail was an option. About 30 feet down the street there was a pothole, and not a small one. The truck’s wheels dropped hard into the hole and the truck shook violently, careening momentarily toward Charlie Gordon’s porch, and when it did, half a sheet of birch plywood, $\frac{5}{8}$ ” thick, chucked itself from the bed, rattled and flopped onto the pavement and came to a stop, propped up on

one end by the curb, panting. The driver of the truck gave no reaction, singing along as he was to Julio Iglesias and Willie Nelson, who were seated beside him in the truck, Willie straddling the shifter, belting out:

The winds of change are always blowing,
and every time I try to stay,
the winds of change continue blowing,
and they just carry me away.²⁶

Charlie Gordon walked down to the public sidewalk, looked up the street as the doppler effect perverted the song, lowering Willie Nelson's voice and making it more compatible with the growl of the truck's engine. The song had just started when they hit the pothole, and it's a 3 minute, 31 second song, so Charlie Gordon stood there waiting out the roughly three minutes before they might realize what had happened and circle back. He looked down at the plywood, which was remarkably unharmed by the launch, and started doing the math. 42" times four pieces, roughly 34" wide, could be extracted from this piece of wood, so he stepped to the curb, watching in the distance for the truck to come back, but it never did. He picked up the plywood and said, "Let's go, Lamb. If the author of this story can make a sheet of plywood magically appear like that, there's no telling what else he could do to us." They walked it up to the porch, and leaned it against the railing, facing the street, next to the giant bowl. "That's a pretty good privacy screen."

That evening the sky turned orange and red, behind the row houses on the other side of the street, and then it got dark, as it would. Charlie Gordon waited there, passing the time, wondering if Charles Sanders Peirce had an explanation for why this story was so out of control, so mislaid and preposterous. He pushed the bowl up next to the plywood and filled it with water and the bath soap again. It wasn't late in the evening when he stepped into the bowl, his privacy partially assured by the four-foot high barrier, coming up to the bottom of his sternum or so, and he knelt.

²⁶ <https://genius.com/Julio-iglesias-to-all-the-girls-ive-loved-before-lyrics>

He crouched into it, waving his fingers in the water, working through the dimensions, converting decimals to fractions, adding them together to make sure it could all be cut from a four-foot width. And then looking up, he recognized Alnitak and Anilam, two of the stars in Orion's Belt, about 3½ quadrillion miles from each other. This was useful information at Raytheon – they used the heavens to calibrate guidance systems on hypersonic weapons. There was a picture of one in the book on Charlie Gordon's coffee table. It could deliver a ballistic payload from Lancaster, Pennsylvania to Mexico City in about half an hour, in the unlikely event the government chose to actually *do* that.

“Lamb, I'm afraid,” he said to the sleeping dog. “If this thing actually works, if it's really a *transcendence machine*, what if I'm haunted by the thing on the other side more than I am by the Spectacle? I might *never* make it back into my house.”

AUTHOR: I'm thinking about having the dog actually speak to Charlie. I mean, she's not named Lamb of God for nothing.

MAIN CHARACTER: Don't do it. There's a fine line between absurdism and baloney. I realize this story could use a serious infusion of wisdom, but once you cross that line, nothing is implausible. You'd have to give me a cape and let me fly over to Philadelphia for lunch. It's bad enough you got Willie Nelson riding around in a pickup truck belching plywood. Let the poor dog sleep.

NARRATOR: That piece of plywood only covers the *front* of the porch. You said there were row-houses on both sides – I mean they practically *share* porches. So how is it he can be out there naked all the time, and nobody seems to notice? Here's the picture I'm using. His is the one in the middle, the one for rent:



27

MAIN CHARACTER: See? Now you got *your own narrator* questioning this nonsense. Jesus. This is never going to end.

Charlie Gordon stood up, suds to his ankles, for the longest time. He knew he had to get busy and build this machine, or he might further destabilize his spiritual health. He got out of the bowl and stood there, dripping dry in the summer, and then he went about collecting up the tools he would need to cut the wood. He laid it all out along the edge of the porch – a circular saw, a long straightedge, a measuring tape, a couple of clamps. “First thing in the morning,” Charlie Gordon whispered, as he pulled Lamb of God in close, and they slept there under a blanket and nothing.

❧

27

<https://www.google.com/maps/@40.027425,76.3057689,3a,55.5y,89.48h,94.85t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1smYS3HCBNY7fzpxGiJvOdqw!2e0!7i16384!8i8192>

37

He got up early and started by laying the plywood on the floor of the porch, striking lines on it, and laying it diagonally across the corner of the railing. He got out his circular saw and made the cuts. Then he put it together with clamps and wood glue, and drove screws along the edges. The edges weren't perfect enough, and he remembered well what Jorge had said on page 30. He went about sanding it, and then filling it with wood putty, and sanding again and filling, until it was a perfect rectangular solid. Then he retrieved a can of paint that was left over from an earlier project, and he painted it until it was black.

He leaned back into the chaise lounge and looked at it, wondering where on earth he was going to come up with the fabric, and then how he was going to sew it together if he did. But he recalled how the author had convinced a Country-Western star to deliver a sheet of plywood while belting out *To All the Girls We've Loved Before*.

A day or two later, Charlie Gordon was sitting there looking out at the street, wondering if he should just cut some pieces out of the clothes he had brought onto the porch, but he knew it wouldn't come close to the description the *paper* had given him. So he waited. He waited until the day when the church up the street was having a wedding ceremony, and a woman walked past his house wearing a traditional Mexican dress, the kind that can be gathered up into a parachute and swirled riotously in time with her dance. Hers was black, uncommon for this type of costume, which made it all the more perfect. Charlie Gordon bolted upright. She looked over at him and smiled, in a manner that might put you in mind of a brochure for an all-inclusive resort on the Yucatan peninsula, all festive and alluring, like in a romance novel, maybe. He smiled back, staring at her, at her dress as she carried it up off the sidewalk, swaying in time.

“How am I going to get her to give me her dress, Lamb? She's going to that wedding, and she'll be walking home the same way when it's over. I got to think of something.” And so he thought.

Good god, then, Charlie Gordon fell asleep, in the chaise lounge whose green webbing was starting to fray from too long a story. And when he woke up a few hours later, there she was on the sidewalk, heading toward his house, laughing alongside another woman whose dress

was brightly colored and therefore unusable. Like a bat out of Hell, he jumped up and ran down to Jorge's market, and pushed open the door, assaulting the sleigh bells that were intended to announce the arrival of a customer, not an invasion by a disheveled graphic designer and a street dog. "Jorge! It's here! The fabric is here!" And then the two women walked into the market and over to where the Kranky was displayed. The one in the black dress turned to Jorge – "¿Tienes algún hominy?" Charlie Gordon was fixated on her dress, in a way that was probably unsettling. Jorge too was looking incredulously at her dress. The woman in the brightly colored dress was looking at them both, trying to figure out what they were looking at, and she, the subject of this episode, the one in the black dress, panning all three of them, said, "¿Por qué miras mi vestido?"

There was then a lengthy conversation in Spanish, of which Charlie Gordon understood exactly nada, and when it was over the woman walked to the little back door next to the counter and disappeared. "What's that about?" Charlie Gordon whispered to Jorge. "Never mind, Charlie. Just wait." Soon she emerged from the back room, or whatever, wearing a green dress, with the black one draped over her arm. "You owe her \$210.00 and two cans of gold hominy. And some Kranky for her kids."

"Two-hundred dollars? Jorge, I didn't –"

"Two-hundred *ten*. Charlie, have you ever lived outdoors during a winter in Lancaster? The deal is done. You know where the ATM is." As it happened, the women's English was impeccable - they were coworkers of the bride, working as paralegals at a law firm in Coatesville. But despite Jorge's assurances in that long conversation in Spanish, they wanted nothing to do with Charlie Gordon.



The dress was perfect for the bottom part of the machine. The diameter at the hip was 34 inches, and could be trimmed to fit without much effort. The length was also good, with just enough extra to be folded around a little frame he built to hold the fabric at the bottom edge of the box. It was an easy fabric to cut with the knife, the one that was inscribed *Come to Poppa*,

and then tear in a line straight with the weave. There was a swirling, silvery-black pattern to the fabric, with overlapping layers trimmed in black lace, and little black beads suspended from the tips of dangling flowers and succulent leaves. Oh my god it was like Sagrada Família. So beautiful.

The next morning he mounted the transcendence machine to the front wall of his house, next to the door. He hung it with a French cleat, which is not an easy thing to make with a circular saw on a porch, but lord knows we don't want to start talking about French cabinetry-building techniques, or anyone else's, this late in the story. Lamb of God barked at the thing, and said nothing. "Let's go find Jorge, Lamb."

Jubilant and wary, Charlie Gordon and the street dog walked down to the market, and found Jorge there in front of the counter, putting up bags of white rice. "Jorge – I finished it last night. I want to show it to you." There was some distance in Jorge's demeanor, a vacancy that Charlie Gordon had never seen before. "I used that black dress. It's perfect. I mean, I could do it better in a real workshop, but it's pretty g–," he clipped. Jorge kept at it, stacking the bags, reaching, not looking up. Then he bent upright, pressing his knuckles into the small of his back, wincing at the door to the street. "Charlie, I'm worried. If this doesn't work, then you'll be stuck out there trying to solve your problem in some other way, and winter is coming. You'll freeze to death, you and your dog. People say you're crazy," and he handed him a package of razors from a shelf, turned back to what he was doing, stacking the rice.

Charlie stood for a moment and watched Jorge, looked at his great, knobby fingers, a philosopher's fingers long ago pressed into commerce. His sleeves were lightly tattered at the cuffs, mocking the hair on his arms, so black. His eyes, even though turned away, were the darkness around which the City of Lancaster was organized. "Buena Suerte, Charlie. Is that a service dog?" He inhaled tensely, and they stood there in a brief, restive silence.

"How much for the razors?"



Lamb of God walked alongside Charlie Gordon, her nose pointed straight up at him, sniffing. She was there – she heard the part about them freezing to death on that porch. She was a smart dog, and Jorge’s comportment said as much as his words. “We’re not going to freeze to death, Lamb. If it doesn’t work, we’ll have to just figure out how to live in the front room for the winter, and then try it again next spring. I don’t know. The god-damned *paper* doesn’t really offer much instruction for after the thing is *finished*,” and they walked home together apprehensively, Charlie Gordon and his only friend, in the early part of autumn.

*The most earthly life thus becomes opaque and unbreathable. It no longer projects into the sky but shelters within itself its absolute denial, its fallacious paradise. The spectacle is the technical realization of the exile of human powers into a beyond; it is separation perfected within the interior of humankind.*²⁸



They ambled up the steps to the porch, both of them riveted to the talisman, to its fabric moving gently at the end of the diurnal wind. When he arrived at the top, he had an impulse, for the first time in so long, to walk to the door and turn the lever, listening to see if the latch retracted. The door was unlocked – had been unlocked the whole time, but now he was arrested by the transcendence machine, hanging so close to it. He moved the chaise lounge to the edge of the stair, pointed it at the machine, and laid down. And so there he convalesced, Charlie Gordon coalesced.

“First thing in the morning, Lamb. We’ll try it first thing in the morning.”

In that fitful night, facing with his vulnerable head toward the street, Charlie Gordon wrestled with a dream. In it, Lamb of God spoke to him, delivered—

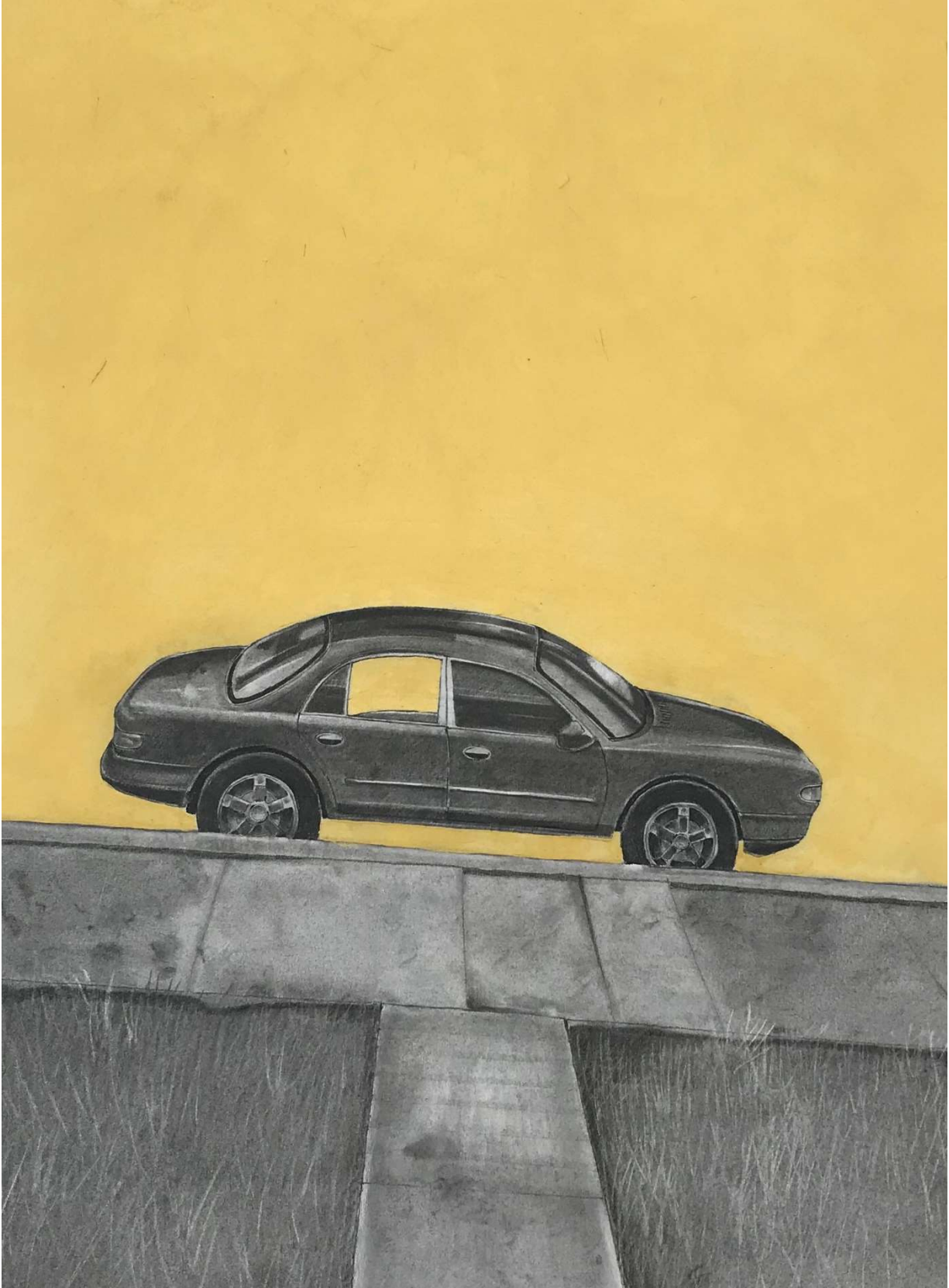
²⁸ <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>

MAIN CHARACTER: Don't do it. I'm telling you, I have my reputation to protect. I'm not interested in a story about a talking dog. It's already been done. It's called *CLIFFORD, THE BIG RED DOG*.

AUTHOR: Reputation? You have no need for a reputation. You're a one-off, and when this thesis paper is over, so are you.

MAIN CHARACTER: What. You never read *Flowers for Algernon*?

Lamb of God watched quietly from the floor, while Charlie wrestled with his dream. In it, he was seated in front of the transcendence machine, and the woman from the maroon car, the one who had vomited so intimately in front of him, walked up the steps and stood there next to him, also focused on the machine. She was dressed the same as she had been on that night, wearing the tartan flannel shirt, her long, corpulent hair unrestrained. She looked a little older in the dream than she had on that earlier night, but it was dark back then, of course, and her gastronomical eruption was the unremitting subject of that experience. She spoke: "You thought I said 'Would you like *a* Rob Roy?' But I actually said 'Do you like Rob Roy?' I'd been studying 17th century vigilantism, and I was hoping you could add something on the topic, what with your self-inflicted precarity and all. Anyway, I came here with some directions for you. They're from Frank Mullen."



“The first thing you have to keep in mind,” she continued, “is that a response to an allegory, even if it results in the generation of a force, is not necessarily mechanical, so to call this thing a *machine* is misleading. This talisman will never take you anywhere. It will allow you to take *yourself*, but you have to be prepared for it, because the Spectacle is ruthless. It’s like ten-million Raytheons.”

Charlie Gordon: “You know, that woman in the black dress wouldn’t even *look* at me.”

“Well, for context, you ran down the street ahead of her and crashed into the neighborhood market, asking for help in getting her to give you her dress. Don’t lose sight of the goal here, Charlie. The fabric part, if you built it correctly, will allow you to meditate your way into the Spectacle. You have to let it have you. Don’t just *let* your mind race – *force* it to. You’re looking to affix your spirit to the metaphysical overlay, so that the individual components of it become invisible. Think of the Spectacle as a translucent membrane, or a frosted window pane, or a windshield on a rainy day. When you look through it, you’re not actually seeing the environment out there – you’re looking at a co-opted *depiction* of it, on the surface of the glass. You got to stick your brain to that glass. Here:”

*It is not a supplement to the real world, an additional decoration. It is the heart of the unrealism of the real society.*²⁹

You’re already inclined to burrow deep into the circumstances of your existence. Just jack it up a notch. To the point where you don’t know if you’ll live or die, if you’re living or dead, singular or plural. Then, if you’re attentive enough, and with that pure rectangular form waiting above, you can kind of tweak your coordinates, and you’re *in*.”

“That’s transcendence? I thought it would involve aromatherapy or hermeticism. I’ll try it, as soon as I—”

“You can’t wait, Charlie. Didn’t you feel that breeze this afternoon? You’ll freeze to death out here on this porch. You have to do it *right now*.”

²⁹ <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>

“What’s your name? In case I want to call you and talk about this some more. I mean if it doesn’t work—”

By the time he finished saying that, she was already down at the sidewalk, turning south toward Baltimore and Frederick, like everyone else. A couple of row-houses later, and she was gone forever. The dream was over.



Still asleep, and now at the start of the *next* dream, Charlie Gordon thrashed on the chaise lounge, to the consternation of Lamb of God, who watched nervously from the floor. Charlie Gordon remembered the woman in the black dress, the way she was all dolled up for that wedding, gathering the cloth and cinching it upward so the showy fringe floated above the public sidewalk. He saw the scratchy little tag inside, stiff enough for offset printing, so sharp against her skin, made in Cambodia, or whatever, the colorful and stalwart containers full of dresses like that. He studied the floral details, in layer upon layer of lace, all of it curly and black, and shimmering as if wet. It was made from the dress worn by Mary when she appeared to Juan Diego in Guadalupe, five hundred years ago:

At the time Our Lady appeared to St. Juan Diego on a hillock in central Mexico in December of 1531, Spanish attempts at evangelizing the native population had borne little fruit. In fact, there was little human reason to hope for Christianity taking root in the new world according to the newly appointed bishop of Mexico. Within months of our Lady of Guadalupe’s apparition to this humble Christian, millions were baptized and the faith would spread throughout the Americas among the native peoples.³⁰

Millions of people live on the south side of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Millions of people worship at the Hispanic church down the street from Charlie Gordon’s house. Millions of people work in that little market – the one with the Kranky. Millions are waiting at the border,

³⁰ Mother of the Americas Institute, *About Us*, MAI, 2020, <https://mainstitute.org/about-us>.

hoping to be counted among “the least of my people.”³¹ Millions of us will not have them, fearing the theft of privilege. Millions of pounds of shiny fabric and lace went into Mary’s costume when she appeared before the unwitting Mr. Diego, a Mexican, but not an entirely aboriginal one, as they had all been convinced to slaughter each other for the benefit of the Conquistadors. 😞

The company who sold her the dress had taken out a small business loan from J.P. Morgan Chase and Company, a global economic powerhouse whose 2019 profits were more than 36 billion dollars³², roughly a hundred dollars for every living person in the United States of America, including children, and comatose people on life support, and federal prisoners, and what-have-you. Of course they didn’t get all that loot from America. Some of it came from Mexico. The little company defaulted on the loan, and was forced into bankruptcy when the bank directed the government to garnish the wages of its proprietors, indefinitely. So 20th century, man. But what a lovely dress, I mean for the money.

Charlie Gordon studied the whole surface, looking for its reproduction on the plane of his experience, the membrane, the window pane, always vertical, always perpendicular to his line of vision, even though the world was pitching and roiling before him in colorful delirium and four dimensions, extending onward into apparent limitlessness. His awareness appeared to be moving, but it was really only *displaying* movement, all flat. He pressed on it with his mind, pressed on it hard near the top of his periphery, and saw that the plane it could be laid down, laid parallel to his vision of it. Where he saw the edge of the plane, there was an auroral light, like a raging, bright light projected through the edge of a sheet of glass 5,000 meters wide, roughly three miles, and he raced out unhindered across the flats, as had Michael Pollan on page 46 of this ‘research paper’. When he did that, he saw the unitary plane of the Spectacle, and he saw the space above it, like a sky with no depth and no color, a void, enough like a black rectangular hole, or a hole of any shape, a black one. He hung there for a while, for an instant or an afternoon. He was momentarily in Firstness, like she had said he would be, the woman in the tartan flannel shirt.

³¹ Willard F. Jabusch, *Whatever You Do*, Oregon Catholic Press, 2015.

³² <https://www.foxbusiness.com/markets/jpmorgan-chase-4q-earnings>



The sun leaked through a gap between the row-houses across the street, and shone onto Lamb of God, and then onto Charlie Gordon. He opened his eyes, saw the talisman still there, its drapery wafting in yet another Lancaster breeze. He remembered the dream, and the woman who was gone, as they all were, they all were gone, and he stood up.

He walked to the door, reached out haltingly and pushed the lever down, releasing the latch, not so recondite a thing as he had imagined. The hinges moaned as the door swung open, and in a shaft of light he saw the museum, with everything as he had abandoned it too long ago, and he walked into the front room, stood next to the book for a moment, the one with the futuristic portrayals of hypersonic weaponry and scientists. He turned around and faced the open door.

“Lamb! You coming in?”



“Lamb?”

THE END

∩

NARRATOR: You said you would mention Dale Earnhardt. You never did.

AUTHOR: Sorry. How 'bout this: He was tailgating at 160 miles an hour.
Guess what?

MAIN CHARACTER: Lay off it, man. You're such a jack-ass.

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Illustrations

1. Frank Mullen, *4thness*, 2020, carbon pencil and paint on paper, 22 x 30 inches
2. Frank Mullen, *The Spectacle*, 2020, carbon pencil and paint on paper, 22 x 30 inches
3. Frank Mullen, *Lamb of God*, 2020, carbon pencil and paint on paper, 22 x 30 inches
4. Frank Mullen, *Aurora*, 2020, carbon pencil and paint on paper, 22 x 30 inches

Appendix



4thness, 2020
Wood, paint, fabric
120" x 96" x 18"





