

The future used to be unwritten.

We live in it now.

*A*s I am finishing my work for the day, I start noticing a group of voices slowly raising in the distance. They build up in crescendo. I turn up to see what it is, and see a group of clueless men, swarming around a parked car. Amongst them, a woman. It's plain to see, they're clueless as of how to open the driver's door. So as to get in. The owner of the car, looking specially oblivious, suddenly cracks, delivers a hard kick to the front door and walks away from the group, cursing. He heads towards a nearby building. After quickly skimming the façade, he locks on to one of the ground floor windows and, without flinching, jumps inside.

The rest are still shouting. The woman diverted her attention to interact with a hand-held device, that was buzzing in her pocket. Another handful of souls that is unable to use a machine conceived by our elders. I feel inclined to help them, of course. And I could, it'd be easy. But situations like this are ubiquitous, like wild weed, blooming all over with the arrival of Spring. It's pointless, really. The battle has been lost on a much deeper level. At this point one is only able to apply palliatives, the cause will always be there. Society has been a victim of its own sophistication.

II

I have found fulfilment. That is, I figured out how I could be perfectly satisfied, cool as a rail. I have yet to find a way to achieve this ideal lifestyle, but the path is now clear to me. And let's face it; it's really all you need. A clear idea of what is it that you want for yourself. That's the real challenge.

Well, like I was saying, I got it. I find fulfilment in my tiny room, where I am able to stop time. Whenever I create, all I need is ideas, inspiration. The creations just flow naturally. With no soul in sight to disturb me, I am free to roam my creative universe, like a drunken Oneironaut.

The long hours spent in the solitude of my chambers would be incomprehensible to any of the outside idiots. The sheer beauty of the final result alone should be enough to drive a sensitive man to tears. But it's not. Alas, my drama. My curse. My cross. To perpetually inhabit the desert island of aesthetics. Across the ocean are nothing but brutes. I have single-handedly carried all these years the legacy of the masters before me. Drawn from the great classics that built civilization in the past, to achieve sublime works, with the highest levels of sophistication.

In my insistence to strive for pure beauty, I was left alone. I tore all previous links I had with society. I dream with finding another soul that would grasp the content of my oeuvre, in any way. Oh, what unrivalled joy that would bring, what significance it would have on my miserable existence. Meanwhile, I linger on. Making it day by day, consuming this pleasure and gratification that is presently only known to me. How bittersweet the feeling of being stranded in paradise, without another soul with whom to share the highest forms of bliss.

III

Another morning, and I must rush to work. Earning a living, being able to pay the bills. Ah, the ultimate pointlessness of it all. Be brave, H. T. Roti, soon you'll be off that silly task, and with a sketchbook filled with juicy ideas.

People's movements are ultimately predictable. From a seemingly chaotic crowd, where each individual is going about her business, one can draw patterns along the trajectories they follow. To the extent of being able to predict them. However, by sampling each of these trajectories at random rates (by marking it with a dot, for instance) one ends up with an organic, bi-dimensional mesh that holds the key to human History. All the wars, failures, joys, achievements, all of those individual stories happening throughout the ages end up converging there; the discarded chewing gum, stuck to the street floor.

Yes, that's right ladies and gentlemen, the only useful task society found for me has been to scrape people's disposable, left-over gum from the public pavements. What a treat, I'm sure you'd agree. Anyhow, there's beauty in these structural patterns. In rather surprising amounts. Doing my work as a collector and a scavenger, I search for a higher place that provides me with a vantage point and, in the last minutes of light of the working day, I draw. I connect the dots of this ever-changing disposable constellation. One month of these unlikely collected sketches would suffice to keep a small army of creative minds busy for years. They fuel my creativity and - oh, how I wish I could share it with you - are transmuted into small pearls of visual poetry.

IV

The way back home is blunt and desolated. Nothing but thrashed urban landscape. Litter and degradation. The end game for civilization, illustrated. Shit, this is getting real sad, real fast. I'll go for a detour, try to get away this depressing desolation.

I take random roads, that only get me slightly closer to home. I drift. The pattern keeps coming back; cracked walls with barely anything left from the original paintwork. Wild weeds growing amok, pretty much everywhere you turn. Unused trash bin holders, testimonies of the day public services existed. Windows are black holes, no glasses, curtains or frames. Waste piles up on every corner. I'm greeted by the occasional stray dog. The eye's attention is drawn to the swift movement of the urban rat. You know that every household hosts its population of cockroaches. Bed bugs. Termites. The idiots have won, and so have Man's parasitic species.

It never ceased to bewilder me how we have allowed ourselves to reach this low. It seems so unreal that just two generations ago we were a thriving, technologically driven society, full of innovation and flare. I guess we got blinded by our own progress. We adored machines to such an extent that we started to resemble them. Technology came to symbolize Good, and thus we stopped asking questions. The same way the invention of maps in ancient times hindered people's capacity to heed to the geology and detail of the surrounding world for orientation, so has the infinite processing powers of machines rendered us stupid. Once we understood that the storing capacity of networked machines was boundless, we started relying on them for the tiniest of intellectual tasks. We've stopped using our fundamental mind skills; memory, reason. The more sophisticated the engines became - engines that were built by people just like us, top-notch wizz-kids, them too mesmerized - the more superficial and primitive we became. We witnessed regression on a large scale. The intellectual foundation of society collapsed, and so did our deepest cultural heritage.

Still, we live today in this tragic-comic state of affairs: surrounded by mind-blowing technology that we don't even know how to operate, let alone improve on. The engineers of the near past knew what they were doing, and got

through the issue of stuff breaking down. The latest tech repaired itself, and is permanently usable. The sad - dare I say hilarious - fact is it was built for their contemporaries. Who had a high level of understanding of how things worked, and how to interact with machines. Simple, healthy common-sense. The designers never accounted for - they couldn't have accounted for - a generalized intellectual regression.

So now we're left with abandoned factories (massive areas of industrial grounds no one even dares get near), health machinery piled up to the tons in what used to be hospitals, computers used for levelling tables and hold doors ajar, cars that are undriveable. It's like living in a museum of the Future. The future that is actually the past, as we have no future. We live in a perpetual present, the ultimate dead-end nightmare. No hopes, just escapes. Vice, sex, short life-spans. Stupidity and backwardness have triumphed. We have become more primitive than our primitive ancestors. Artificial Devolution.

V

I've been threading these empty streets for quite some time now. With the daylight virtually gone, and the neighbourhood pretty much unknown to me, this is definitely not the best idea. There's a reason why the streets are this empty; weary people started a self-reinforcing positive feedback loop by staying away from streets at night. And who would blame them? Cowards find their haven in darkness, where they can more nonchalantly exert their violence.

At this point I am just moving forward, pretty much oblivious as to the direction I am heading. Adrenaline starts taking over, as I clench my fists in silence. I feel my own wet palms. The heart is beating heavily and loudly, as if producing the only audible sound that pierces the night. I feel myself slowly becoming more aware. The animal instincts, hitherto buried deep within multiple layers of accommodation and conditioning, start coming afloat, like the corpse of a seaman days after the wreck. Those very same instincts tell me to find a shelter, a hideout. Without hesitation, I proceed towards an ancient, abandoned building, no doubt an forgotten public construction, complete with a rose garden and all. I race inside.

VI

*Bouncing off the wall
Bouncy yellow ball
Flying high
Almost touch the sky
With you around no kid shall sigh.*

*Ride, race, push and pull
Blue lit tricycle
Go so fast
Never be last
Lift all sorrow off our chest.*

*Tough as darn
Big red barn
We hide, we seek,
Come take a peek!
Our joyful lands never look bleak.*

*I hang upon thee
Lusty green apple tree
As long as you stand
And feed off the land
Not one of us shall ever repent.*

I don't feel safe. Beholding the impenetrable darkness, I feel desperately small and lost. I used to sing this nursery rhyme whenever I was playing hide and seek with my older cousins, and felt terrified with the inevitable encroaching of one of them, that would ultimately lead to spotting me behind some defaced bush. It comes back to me. A defence mechanism, as it were. I sit down. It's working, I feel calmer. Reason slowly comes back to me, I start thinking clearly again. As my eyes start getting adapted to the black pitch dark, I notice that I am in a sort of big hall, with a very high ceiling, and cold, tiled floor. The stone wall stands vertically the test of time, testimonies of gone by days of prosperity. Across from where I am sitting, I see a huge passage way, where no doubt there once was a big, double door. On my right, a white, marble staircase, barely distinguishable from the background. I head slowly and carefully towards the big archway passage, each step echoing through the building.

At first, it eluded me. Then, and after I began to think more clearly, it struck me. There was something peculiar with the way the sound of my footsteps reverberated. It wasn't just ripples of each step, mixing to form a decaying aftermath of the original dry sound. No, I could distinguish the exact replica of the tick, moments after. I laid my foot on the ground once more. Later, the echo. Whatever the place I was in, it had to be massive! A quick calculation told me it must have been half a kilometre wide. What place could display such breath-taking breadth? Only a cathedral, I thought. Turns out I was half-right.

VII

Despite the fact that I can barely see around me, I move forward. Pushed relentlessly by a growing curiosity. After passing the big archway, I feel the ground below my feet starting to creak. I am walking on squeaky, wooden floor. The air feels dry, and there is a pervasive scent all around. A scent that somehow equates with History, that reminds me of my grandmother's big wooden wardrobe. Different, nonetheless. Heartier, sturdier, more concrete. A scent that makes sense. That makes you feel at home, safe, like a newborn in her mother's arms.

Clunk! Bzzzzzzzz ...

In a split second, it all switched. I hit the dull corner of a wooden table, and felt this sharp, needle-point pain. Suddenly, there was light. Two seemingly never-ending rows of computers turned themselves on, one by one, producing this eerie flooding light, accompanied by a steady and uncanny buzz. Revealed before me was a sight I shall never forget.

VIII

Before the technological downturn of civilization, people used to spend large periods of time in seclusion, isolated from their fellow human beings. Away from any distraction, they were able to focus, to organize their thoughts and experiences, to introspect. This used to be seen as a fundamental part of becoming a fully mature, sentient member of society. During these periods of self-inflicted isolation, people would take to the task of reading books. This process would serve as a further catalyst to the mental process of discovery and self-improvement. Reading made you a better person. Books can still be found around these days, but because their content is largely unintelligible, no one actually reads them.

H. T. Roti, of course, being the old outcast that has long ago diverged from the herd's path, still reads them. As a matter of fact, he cherishes them, and those who wrote them. Dearly. The people before me, mesmerized by the shiny screens that promised permanent updates on the status of reality, as a mean to understand it, perished. Slowly, they started consuming tiny, disposable snippets of information that conveyed nothing. This shallow consumption led to an adaptation to the brief and immediate, an overall impoverishment of peoples' cognitive faculties.

Before me, as a monument to the transition years, and to the fall of our civilization, there is a colossal room, whose walls are packed with bookshelves, raising high as the sky, and whose centrepiece table is neatly lined up with sleek computer monitors. Before me, the great metaphor of the befallen Man; the prophetic machine pushing the Book to the sidelines.

IX

I must have stood on the threshold of that chamber for at least 10 minutes, while the pain and the perplexity faded away. I now realized I was inside what once was a vibrant centre of knowledge and study. An abandoned library.

I wandered across the room in bewilderment, still letting its overwhelming projection steep inside me. The interiors matched the solemnity of the archived tomes. Yes. All was made out of beautifully carved cherry tree wood. The windows were high and wide, certainly to allow enough light to enter. Between them deep-red velvet pillows,

decorating the walls. A now empty desk was repeated every 50 metres, the working place of a handful of deceased committed librarians. What a monument! And how remarkably well conserved it was, as if frozen in time. I felt a surge of excitement climbing up my spine as I proceeded further down the room.

The light oozing from the screens was barely enough to allow for the reading of the plaques used to categorize the works. Aesthetics - Architecture - Art History - Biography - Biology. I slowly let myself drift along the sea of ideas (Gardening and Homesteading - Hellenic World - History of Science) very much in a schizophrenic fashion. Recreational Drugs led me to Shamanistic Rituals that helped me discover Rocket Science that in turn introduced me to South American Literature.

I decided (did I?) to turn to further explore this section of the library. I began perusing the impressive list of the great South American authors of the past. Here, they're sorted by time period, starting from the 'contemporaries'. Roberto Bolaño, Fernando Vallejo, Vargas Llosa, Amado, García Márquez, further down the hallway such ominous names as Cortázar, Benedetti, Neruda, Quiroga, Gironde. Ah, it feels good down South. How rich and plentiful the harvest of Iberia's heritage. Taking a language, a culture and re-shaping it, re-thinking it. Use them as tools to produce something else, resembling the original, while significantly diverging away from it. The fascinating blend of ideas, of attitudes. The derived crossbred accents. The rough, tainted voice of Borges sounds in my head, "En aventuras de ésas, he prodigado y consumido mis años". It's as if I could actually hear his voice, reading his own words. Suddenly, it hit me. I shake my head in disbelief, I *am* hearing a voice. No, can't be. Is this a dream?

I instinctively search for the source of the words. They're coming from the shelf that bears the name of the great Argentinian poet, "No me parece que inverosímil que en algun anaquel del universo haya un libro total." Slow, sharp, melodic. Timeless, and still carrying the weight of the ages. As I move towards the shelf, the sound mounts, "Si el honor y la sabidoria y la felicidad no son para mí, que sean para otros." Now clear, loud, almost tangible. As I grab one of Borges's books, I notice a light emanating from behind the bookshelf, and peeking through the hole I glimpse the great man himself, reading to a silent and most unlikely crowd.

X

"Que yo sea ultrajado y aniquilado, pero que en un instante, en un ser, Tu enorme Biblioteca se justifique." The ethereal voice comes to a halt. Slowly, Borges turns to me and speaks. "Seais bien venido, hace mucho tiempo que esperavamos por vos." He then makes a spinning gesture with is finger, telling me to circumvent the bookshelf.

I felt as if arriving at a Christmas dinner, when everyone has already settled in their seats and there is this irreproducible atmosphere of familiar warmth in the air.

A man in his late 60s, with a poignant, child-like stare and a generous moustache, wearing what seemed to be a 19th century outfit, turned to me and said "He who searches, finds, my friend." It seemed fairly likely that I was talking to Mr. Mark Twain himself. "You arrived just in time for the ever-oneiric act of our dear Carroll. There will be time for introductions, no need to worry." I glanced timidly at the suspended crowd, all their friendly stares resting on me. Many of the faces seemed familiar, and I thought I spotted the likes of Pessoa, Tolstoy, Virginia Wolf and Beethoven amongst the crowd. "Anyhow, our good friend Carroll just conjured up a new verse, in what seems to be a palindromic structure, whose nature I am sure you'll appreciate." A younger man stood up, and coming towards me added "Fair enough, Allow me to show you your room." With a wide grin and a open hand, he concluded "Hi, my name is Vonnegut. I trust you found your way here easily."

"Remarkably easily." I nodded, while shaking his hand.

"Getting here is easy. Your troubles begin once you grow tired of us." A general laughter reverberated throughout the chambers of knowledge, and as I followed my guide up a wooden staircase, I managed to catch a glimpse of the author of the heavily accented remark; the cinematic hero Werner Herzog.

Dan Ashcroft, Paris 2010