



MYTHOLOGOS
CELERIUM

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NULL PRESS

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Part of the Rearranging Furniture in the Void universe

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AN INTRODUCTION

This is the second book made available without cost at the Null Press imprint. The first is *All The Times That Never Were*. They are not a sequence. They are two entry points into the same territory, which means you can arrive here first or arrive here second and the territory will be the same territory.

If you have read *All The Times That Never Were* you will recognize certain things in this book before you understand what you are recognizing. That is the correct order of events. Understanding follows recognition here the way it follows recognition everywhere, which is slowly and not always completely and sometimes not at all, which is also sufficient.

If this is your first entry into the universe called *Rearranging Furniture in the Void*, nothing is required of you before you begin. The book does not ask for prior knowledge. It asks only for the quality of attention you would give to something you are willing to let be what it is before you decide what it is.

Mythologos Celerium moves through three periods of time and one frequency that runs through all of them. It is concerned with what civilizations are built to avoid and what happens when the avoiding stops. It does not offer a position on whether the stopping is good or bad. It is not that kind of book.

What it found, in the writing, was oatmeal on the other side of everything.

That will make sense by the end.

Or it won't, and the not making sense will be its own kind of sense.

Either way the frequency runs.

It does not require your awareness to continue.

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PART ONE: THE INSTRUMENT

The building had been a data center. Before that a warehouse. Before that a field, though the field was not in anyone's institutional memory and wouldn't have changed anything if it had been. The raised flooring from the data center years was still there, and underneath it something hummed at a frequency that had no name in the facility's technical inventory. Yuen noticed it on his first day the way you notice a sound that turns out to have been there your whole life, which is to say with the brief disorientation of something surfacing and then the longer forgetting.

By the third day he didn't notice it.

The machine occupied what had been the primary server room. Visitors came expecting consequence at scale — the visual grammar of something that did what this was said to do. They left quieter than they arrived and most couldn't account for the quietness. What the room contained was a precise electromagnetic configuration. What the room was, was a different question, and the technicians who maintained it had stopped trying to answer it and had started calling it the room, always the definite article, always lowercase, the way you named something when the proper name felt like overreach.

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The Institute's foundational document was eight notebooks.

Nobody called them that. They were logged in the archive as Primary Transmission Source — Origins

Unverified, which was the bureaucratic language for something that had arrived before the bureaucracy existed to receive it and had therefore been absorbed into the institutional record the way certain objects were absorbed into geological strata — present, load-bearing, invisible because of the layers above them. Yuen had read the notebooks in his first month at the Institute and had quoted them in three grant applications since and had stopped being able to read them the way you stopped being able to read a word you had written too many times, the familiarity consuming the meaning until only the shape remained.

Depression-era handwriting. Eight notebooks. No identified author.

The committee that had built the machine had built it because of the notebooks. That was the founding story. What the notebooks described — the frequency underneath, the signal running independent of any receiver, the perception given time to complete itself — had convinced the original committee that the territory was real and that an instrument could be built to reach it. The notebooks were the map. The machine was the attempt to go where the map pointed.

What nobody on the current committee had fully registered was that the notebooks had not been written by a man trying to reach the territory. They had been written by a man in a circus field who had stopped trying to reach anything and had started writing what was actually there.

The distinction was the kind the Institute's language kept failing to hold.

The protocol was simple on its surface and the surface was where the simplicity ended.

Subject enters. Monitoring. Baseline readings determine the retrieval window — forty minutes, two hours, the body's own signals setting the duration. Afterward: interview, food, observation in the residential facility next door where the windows faced a parking lot and a row of ornamental pears that bloomed white every April with a devotion that Yuen found, on certain mornings, almost indecent in its persistence.

The early subjects used the interview forms. Emotional state. Cognitive clarity. Somatic sensation. Perceptual anomaly. Fields, checkboxes, space for elaboration. They filled these in with the diligence of people who understood that the forms were what had been provided and the forms were therefore what would receive whatever they had to say. Dr. Reyes kept a second record. Private. Not for the Institute. In it she used the word afterward without antecedent, without context — just the word, as though the session had divided time into two regions with different properties and the language had quietly acknowledged the new geography without being asked to.

Yuen found three of her entries open on her screen once. He recognized the word from the notebooks. He didn't say anything. He went back to his office and opened the forty pages he had been writing since the third month, the paper he would never submit, and added a sentence that he read back and crossed out and wrote again in different words and crossed out again, the sentence trying to say what the notebooks said and the language refusing to carry it in the same way.

The notebooks said it because the man writing them hadn't known he was saying it.

Yuen knew he was saying it.

That was the whole problem. That was the forty pages.

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The instrument measures what it was built to measure. This is not a flaw. This is what an instrument is. The room was doing one thing. The Institute was measuring several other things with considerable precision and entering the results in fields designed for different results and calling the misalignment a methodology problem.

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On a Tuesday in February, three weeks before Lena Marsh signed the consent form, Yuen walked to his car in the parking lot at seven in the evening and sat in it without starting it.

The ornamental pears were bare. The parking lot held three cars besides his. A security light had been triggering intermittently all week and triggered now, flooding the far corner for four seconds before going dark.

He had been at the Institute for two years.

He ate sandwiches at his desk because the cafeteria required conversation. He kept a spare shirt in his office drawer. He had a plant at home that he watered when he remembered it, which was less and less, and which continued anyway in its window with the specific patience of something that had found the minimum necessary and was working with it.

He sat in the car.

He was not thinking about the machine. He was thinking about a paper he had read that afternoon, about a citation that might be useful, about the three emails he hadn't answered and would answer tomorrow and knew he wouldn't. Ordinary accumulation. The sediment of a working day settling.

Then he noticed he was listening.

Not to anything in particular. Just — listening. The way you listen when you become aware that a sound you'd stopped hearing is still there.

He sat with this for a moment.

He started the car and drove home.

He didn't write it down.

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Lena Marsh was forty-three. Two books on contemplative neuroscience. A decade of sitting practice. The kind of preparation that looked thorough from the outside, and was, which is not the same as being sufficient for this.

She signed the consent form in a conference room that smelled of the previous tenant's cleaning products, a smell that had outlasted the tenant by four years and would outlast the Institute entirely without anyone remarking on its persistence. She signed with the focused attention of someone who had read what she was signing, which made her unusual in the cohort and which did not change what the consent form was able to consent to on her behalf.

She entered the room on a Tuesday in early spring.

The monitoring ran clean for the first twenty minutes. Then the readings found a configuration the instruments

didn't have a category for — not anomalous exactly, not degraded, something else. A signal that had located its resting state the way water located its level, and stopped.

Garrett was twenty-six. The job for the pay, the hours, the cleanliness of a task with clear parameters. He watched the readings hold their position for eleven minutes before the eleven minutes became something other than normal variance. He called Dr. Reyes. His voice on the intercom had the steadiness of someone whose body had not yet caught up with what the mind was beginning to understand.

They found her seated upright, eyes open, hands in her lap. The composure of it stopped Reyes in the doorway for three full seconds, the count visible in the way she later described it — not the stillness of sleep, not the vacancy of unconsciousness, but the stillness of something that had arrived somewhere and stopped moving because it had stopped needing to.

The autopsy found nothing. This was entered as the finding. No cardiac event. No neurological cascade. No metabolic failure of any identified kind. The body had concluded, the way a sentence concluded, with everything in its right position and nothing remaining to add.

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The emergency review produced a revised protocol. Four additional monitoring parameters. Two new pre-session assessments. A mandatory psychological evaluation. The consent form became eleven pages. Yuen signed off on all of it at a long table while through the window the ornamental pears held their white blooms against a grey sky and a truck reversed somewhere in the parking lot,

its small warning beeping into the indifferent air at regular intervals.

That night he sat in his office without the light on.

He was not grieving, exactly. He was trying to locate the edge of something, feeling along the perimeter of it the way you felt along a wall in the dark — not certain whether you were looking for a door or simply establishing that the wall was solid.

Lena Marsh had not looked like a person who suffered an ending. She had looked like a person who had finished.

He opened the forty pages and wrote this down and then crossed it out because the notebooks had already said it, better, in the handwriting of a man who had not been trying to say anything in particular on the day he wrote it, sitting in a wagon that smelled of other people's sleep, in a field in 1933, in a circus whose name nobody at the Institute had ever thought to trace.

He closed the document without saving it.

Outside, the pears were losing their blossoms. The parking lot was just a parking lot again, which was what it had always been.

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The second death came four months later. A retired engineer named Paul Strom, sixty-one, who had come to the volunteer cohort through his daughter, who had read the Institute's first published paper and thought of her father, who had been looking for a long time. For what, the intake interviewer asked. He thought about it carefully, the way men thought about things they had been carrying long enough that the carrying had become invisible to them.

He said he wasn't sure that was the right question.

The third death came six weeks after that. A woman whose name Yuen could not hold clearly in his memory afterward, which disturbed him in a way he was not able to account for and did not try to, the disturbance filed in the same place he filed everything that didn't fit the available forms.

Each time: nothing. Each time: the protocol revised. The consent form reached seventeen pages. On page nine a clause required subjects to verify their post-session cognitive state against baseline assessments administered by Institute staff. Yuen read this clause and then opened the forty pages and added the only line in them that he did not subsequently cross out:

The verification protocol assumes the existence of something outside the system capable of performing the verification. No such thing has been identified. The search continues using the system that requires verification.

He closed the document.

Through the window the ornamental pears had gone entirely green. The parking lot held its arrangement of cars with the patient indifference of surfaces that took whatever was placed on them and waited.

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The board convened downtown in a room that on clear days had a view to the hills and on unclear days had a view to the middle distance where the city dissolved into its own weather. The day was unclear.

Yuen presented the data. The board asked questions organized around the assumption of malfunction. He

explained that the machine appeared to be functioning correctly. They asked what correct functioning was intended to produce. He said the Institute was still determining that.

They allocated additional funding for the determining.

Walking out into the afternoon Yuen had the feeling of a man who has said true things inside a language that has no mechanism for receiving them. The city went about its business. A woman ate a sandwich. A bus pulled from a stop. The light changed for no one in particular.

He went back to the building that hummed at its unnamed frequency. He stood outside the room for a moment, his hand not quite touching the door, feeling the specific texture of a threshold that he had been standing at for three years without naming it as such.

Then he went to his office and opened the forty pages and kept writing in the language that kept failing, failing with an increasing precision that felt, on the better days, like progress, and on the other days like the most honest work he had ever done.

The notebooks on the shelf across the room said what he was trying to say.

He had read them so many times he could no longer see them.

The building hummed underneath everything at its frequency, patient as geology, running its signal through the raised floors and the new walls and the server racks no one had removed and the room at the center of all of it, indifferent to whether anyone was receiving.

Someone always was.

PART TWO: THE ACQUISITION

The letter arrived on a Thursday and used the word partnership four times.

It was not threatening. Threats implied the outcome was still negotiable, and this letter had been written by people for whom the outcome was not negotiable and who understood that the cleanest exercise of authority was the one that didn't need to announce itself as authority at all. The language was administrative in the specific way that administrative language was final — the language of things already decided being communicated as courtesy, the consultation having occurred in rooms that Yuen had not been invited into and would not be invited into and whose existence he was only now, reading the letter for the second time, fully understanding.

The Institute would continue its work. Its funding would be restructured. A liaison would be assigned.

Yuen set the letter face down on the desk and looked at the window and the parking lot beyond it and the ornamental pears that had by now given up their blossoms entirely and were standing in their summer green with the patient indifference of things that would be white again in April regardless of what occurred in the building they were planted outside of.

Dr. Reyes found him there an hour later. She read the letter standing up and put it down the way you put down something you have confirmed your suspicion about and would have preferred not to confirm. She asked if they had legal options. He said the funding structure had been

designed, he now understood, to make legal options a different kind of question than the kind she was asking.

She asked who had designed it that way.

He said he didn't know. He suspected the answer was not a who.

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The liaison's name was Carver. He arrived on a Monday with the particular stillness of someone trained to be unreadable in the specific way that unreadability was a professional skill, the blankness not natural but cultivated, maintained with the discipline of someone who understood that a readable face was a negotiating liability. He toured the facility. His questions were intelligent enough to confirm he understood what the machine did. They were not intelligent enough to suggest he understood what the machine was doing.

He had read the foundational document.

He mentioned this once, briefly, in the server room where the raised floors still hummed at their unidentified frequency. He said the notebooks were extraordinary. He said this with the confidence of a man who had used the word in the same way he used all words, which was to make contact with the subject's surface without pressing through to what the surface covered. The notebooks were extraordinary the way a classified asset was extraordinary, which was to say they were remarkable and in the wrong hands and now in the right ones.

Yuen said the notebooks predated the Institute by nearly a century.

Carver said he was aware.

Yuen said nobody had ever identified the author.

Carver wrote something in his notebook. His notebook was small and black and he wrote in it with the economy of someone for whom notation was a reflex and the reflex had long since decoupled from any particular significance in what was being noted.

He signed off on continued operations.

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What the government acquired was a technology it understood as directional. The grammar of the acquisition was the grammar of a thing done to a subject. The subject was changed, was being changed, would be changed. The sentence required an agent and a patient. This seemed correct. This was the grammar the government had available. It was not the right grammar for what the machine did, which the machine would eventually demonstrate with the patience of something that had not been consulted about the grammar and was not bound by it.

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The first operational deployment took place in a facility Yuen never saw, using specifications his team provided under a classification he was not cleared to read the full terms of. Three weeks later a redacted summary arrived. Four pages. The first two described preparation in technical language clean enough to have been produced by the Institute itself. The third page described the subject's response. It matched the Institute's documented outcomes closely enough that Yuen understood the machine had been neither damaged in transport nor altered by the new context.

The machine did not alter for context.

That was the thing.

The fourth page described the operator.

It was written in a different register than the first three pages — not a different author exactly, but the same author encountering material for which the available forms were insufficient and doing their best with the insufficiency, the bureaucratic language developing small fractures under the weight of what it was being asked to carry. The operator had completed the session. Had logged the results. Had begun the post-session checklist and stopped at item seven.

He was found at the monitoring station in a posture the summary's language kept approaching and veering away from.

The final line: cause of cessation under investigation.

Yuen read it and then read the notebooks' description of Lena Marsh and then read the final line again and understood that the investigation would find nothing because the finding was nothing, the same nothing the autopsies had found, and that he could have told them this in advance and that telling them in advance had not been an option the acquisition had left available to him.

He forwarded nothing. There was no one to forward it to who had not already decided what the machine was.

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He went to the room that evening after the building had emptied.

He stood inside it without activating the monitoring. The electromagnetic configuration was present without being engaged — the room's air having the quality of a room that was doing something at a level below the level that

required activation, a background state that the monitoring equipment was not calibrated for and that Yuen had been in proximity to for three years without being able to account for. The raised floor hummed at its frequency. The frequency was in the walls and in the floor and in the air and in Yuen himself when he stood inside it long enough, which was not a metaphor he was comfortable with and which was becoming harder to dismiss as one.

He had read the notebooks often enough to know the passage without looking for it.

The forty hertz in the dock planks. In the field. In the rigging wagon and the distance between towns. I am beginning, at the edge of the lizard's frequency, to hear it. Not clearly. Not consistently. Just there. Patient as geology. Indifferent to whether I am ready.

The author had been in a circus field in 1933 and had written about a frequency.

The frequency was in this room.

Yuen stood in it and said nothing to anyone, including himself.

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Carver returned six weeks after the first deployment.

He was still polite. He asked technical questions about containment — whether the effect could be bounded by physical parameters, directed toward a specific subject without reaching the operator, managed in the way that instruments were managed when the instrument produced byproducts that complicated the operation. Yuen explained that the electromagnetic configuration

was the environment, not the agent. Carver asked him to explain the distinction. Yuen said the distinction was that an environment did not stop at its walls.

Carver wrote this down.

The shielding specifications were revised upward. New walls inside the existing walls. Additional insulation. A perimeter. Guards posted at intervals that suggested someone had mistaken proximity for protection, which was an error that went deep enough into human history that Yuen could not say it without sounding like the notebooks, so he said nothing.

His security clearance was quietly reduced.

He understood this as the government's version of the consent form's verification clause, which was to say it was the system attempting to manage itself using itself, the instrument turned on the instrument, the perimeter placed around the thing that did not recognize perimeters as a relevant category.

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Three more operators ceased in the following eight months. Each summary used different language to arrive at the same posture, the same open eyes, the same quality of having finished. The replacement investigators found the original reports difficult to summarize. Their own reports were thorough in the way that reports were thorough when the writer understood that thoroughness was the available substitute for understanding and was applying it with the diligence of someone who had been trained that the substitute was sufficient. It was not sufficient. The machine did not notice the insufficiency. The machine did not notice anything. That was not the machine's function.

Reyes left in the fifth month.

She submitted the standard form. Gave the standard notice. On her last day she walked through the facility once in the late afternoon, slowly, the building holding its particular quality of light at that hour, the raised floors throwing the hum up through her shoes in the way they always did. Yuen walked with her to the entrance.

She said: the machine isn't broken.

He said he knew.

She said: that's the problem they can't write a summary about.

She left.

He stood in the corridor listening to the building's ambient state, the hum at its unnamed frequency moving through everything the building was made of — the concrete and the old cabling and the server racks nobody had removed and the new walls inside the existing walls and the room at the center of all of it. Down the hall Carver was on a call. The voice was professional, the cadences of a man describing progress in the language of progress, the language bearing the same relationship to what was occurring as the consent form bore to what it was consenting to on behalf of the subjects, which was to say: accurate about the surface, silent about everything the surface covered.

Yuen went back to his office.

He had thirty-one pages left in the forty.

He opened the notebooks to the entry about the circus field, the one where Graham had first written about the hum in the walls, and he read it standing at the shelf, the

Depression-era handwriting slanting slightly to the right the way handwriting slanted when the writer wrote fast, when the writing was trying to keep up with what was arriving rather than shaping what was being constructed.

He read the entry.

He closed the notebooks and put them back on the shelf.

He sat at his desk and opened the forty pages and looked at what he had written so far, looking for the sentence where the language had first begun failing to hold its own distinctions, the first place the instrument had shown its limitation.

It was the first sentence.

He had known this when he wrote it. He had understood, in the same moment he wrote it, that the notebooks said what the forty pages were attempting to say and said it because the man who wrote them had not been attempting to say anything. The notebooks were the circus from the inside without the angle. The forty pages were the angle looking at itself, the instrument turned on the instrument, the verification protocol deploying itself.

He kept writing anyway.

Because the forty pages were the only work available to him.

Because the notebooks had already been written by someone who hadn't known he was writing them, in a field in 1933, and that work could not be done again. It could only be carried forward in the way that foundational things were carried forward — embedded in the structures built on top of them, invisible inside the institutions that had grown around them, humming at a frequency that nobody had thought to identify because

the frequency had been there since before the identification was possible.

Patient as geology.

Outside the window the ornamental pears stood in the parking lot's amber light with their summer green. In April they would be white again. In April the building would still be humming. The room would still be doing what it did. The forty pages would still be failing in the way that made them the most honest work Yuen had ever done.

He wrote until the building emptied around him.

He turned off the light.

The building hummed in the dark.

PART THREE: CELERIUM

The bells at Lauds.

The prior's hands on the rope in the February dark, the cold coming up through the flagstone floors into the soles of his feet, the sound moving out across the fields where the frost had taken the grass overnight and left it stiff and pale, the color of something that had given up arguing with the season. Eleven years of this. The body didn't need a reason after eleven years. The rope, the bell, the dark, the cold — the sequence running itself through him the way water ran through a channel it had cut over time, the channel and the water no longer distinguishable as separate things.

Brother Anselm was not in the chapel.

The novice found him in the kitchen garden between the dormant lavender rows, kneeling in the turned earth, hands open on his thighs, alive in the way that required a moment to confirm because the stillness had the quality of something that had gone past the need to confirm itself. The novice stood at the gate with his hand on the iron latch, the iron cold in the specific way that iron was cold in February before the sun reached it, and looked at Brother Anselm kneeling in the turned earth and understood that interruption was not the right category for what he was considering.

He left the latch unturned.

He went to ring the bells for Prime.

The prior's letter to Father Benedikt in Cologne sat on the writing desk for four days without being sent. Outside the frost held. A crow came to the near furrow each morning, or a different crow, it made no difference — the black shape moving across the pewter sky with the purposefulness of something that had somewhere to be and was confident the somewhere would wait. The prior watched it from his cell window with the quality of attention he had been noticing in himself for eleven days, the attention that was simply present to what was there without the usual commentary running underneath it, the low continuous voice that named and assessed and filed — that voice had gone quieter than he could account for.

He read what he had written to Benedikt. The hinge the attention swings on. He read it and understood it was as close as the language was going to get, which meant it was not close at all, which meant the letter would not survive Benedikt's reasonable mind and he was not sure his own reasonable mind had survived whatever had been occurring in the community for eleven days.

He left the letter on the desk.

He went to ring the bells for Terce because the bells did not require him to explain anything to anyone, including himself, and because his hands knew the rope and the rope knew his hands and the sound went out across the frost-stiffened fields and dissolved into the distance without finding an edge, which was what the sound always did and which he was only now, on the eleventh day, finding remarkable.

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Three thousand kilometers east and twelve hundred years later Ishwammy's ground-penetrating array returned an anomaly at Site 7-C in the flat afternoon

light. A structure that should not have survived the intervening centuries intact, and had — the stones fitted with a precision that the survey data kept returning as statistically improbable, the kind of improbability that in Ishwammy's experience meant the statistics were missing something rather than the structure being wrong.

T-Rex was already at the edge of the excavation when she looked up.

He was crouching with one hand on the exposed foundation, very still, in a posture she had not seen him hold before. Not the posture of assessment. Something prior to assessment. She looked back at the anomaly on her screen — the resonance frequency the structure was returning — and wrote it in her notes and did not write what she was thinking because what she was thinking did not fit inside the available fields.

She looked at T-Rex's open hands resting on the stone.

She wrote the frequency again, on a separate line, as if the repetition would produce something the first notation hadn't.

It didn't.

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The traditions saw it before the instruments did.

Not because they were wise. Because they had been circling the same coordinates long enough to recognize when the approach became something else, when the careful controlled proximity that the traditions had spent centuries engineering began to slip its engineering in the way that things slipped their engineering when the conditions producing the engineering changed faster

than the engineering could adapt. The Benedictine prior outside Bruges noticed it in his community first as a quality of the silence during the offices, then as something in the texture of the attention during lectio, then as Brother Anselm in the kitchen garden and the novice who had stood at the gate and not turned the latch and had not been able to say, when asked afterward, why he had not turned it.

The prior wrote to three colleagues.

Two did not respond.

The third responded in a single sentence that the prior read four times without being able to say precisely what it meant, only that it had the quality of a last sentence, the quality of something written by someone who understood they had just used the last available language for what they were trying to say and had said it, and that was the whole of it.

The Tibetan teacher in the center outside Chengdu recognized it in her students and then in herself and then stopped making the distinction. She did not warn anyone. There was nothing to warn against. A warning required a threat with a direction and this had no direction. It was not coming from anywhere. It was simply present in the way the ground was present, the way the frequency had always been present underneath everything else, running underneath everything else, and what was changing was not the frequency but the volume of everything above it, the noise of the ordinary world going quieter in a way that had nothing to do with quiet.

The traditions had spent millennia building elaborate architectures to keep practitioners in the approach. Doctrine. Hierarchy. The long slow machinery of earned proximity, the years of preparation, the gates that opened one at a time if you demonstrated the correct

relationship with the previous gate. All of it engineered to keep the seeker moving toward the thing without arriving at it, because arrival was not what the traditions had been built to produce. The traditions had been built by people who had glimpsed what arrival looked like and had understood, correctly, that arrival and the tradition were not compatible, that the architecture and the thing the architecture was built around were not the same thing and could not become the same thing, and had spent the subsequent centuries building architecture anyway because the alternative — the thing itself, directly, without the approach — was what the machine had done in forty minutes to Lena Marsh, who had not looked like someone who had suffered an ending.

The machine had simply removed the machinery.

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What spread was not contagious in any category the available instruments were built to detect. It moved through no vector the epidemiologists could map, followed no population density gradient, respected no demographic boundary. The models kept returning results that looked like noise. A researcher in Geneva noticed the noise had a structure. She wrote this in a preliminary report that was classified before she finished writing it and that she herself, three weeks later, did not remember writing.

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The government's response moved through its standard phases with the efficiency that governments brought to things they understood as threats, which was to say with considerable speed and the wrong instruments deployed with great precision.

Carver filed fourteen reports in the first three weeks.

The first thirteen were thorough, technically precise, organized around the assumption that the situation had a perimeter that the reports were mapping. Each one mapped a larger perimeter than the last. Each one was read by his supervisor with increasing alarm and decreasing understanding, the two moving in opposite directions the way certain things moved in opposite directions when the available framework was failing to scale to what it was being asked to contain.

The fourteenth report stopped mid-paragraph.

Not because Carver had stopped caring. The sentence he was writing required a distinction his mind had, somewhere in the writing of it, become unable to maintain. Not lost the distinction — become unable to maintain it. The distinction was still visible to him as a distinction. He simply could no longer find the side of it he had been standing on. He sat at his desk and looked at the sentence and understood that the sentence required him to know which side of the distinction was the government's side and which was the other side, and the knowing had become unavailable to him with the sudden completeness of something that had been available and then was not, the way a word became unavailable in a language you had been speaking all your life.

He saved the document.

He did not send it.

His supervisor began a report of his own that morning and was having difficulty with the first sentence for reasons he could not account for.

In the cities the infrastructure ran longer than it should have.

The lights stayed on. The water moved through the pipes. The transit systems ran their routes with the mechanical fidelity of things that did not require anyone to want them to continue in order to continue. This was because the infrastructure ran on habit and habit was older than the fictions that had been layered over it, the body's knowledge of what to do with a switch, a valve, a timetable, the physical sequence running itself the way the prior's hands had run themselves to the bells in the February dark, the channel and the water no longer separate things.

The people moved through the infrastructure with the quality of people who had put something down and were not yet certain what they were holding instead.

They ate when the body indicated eating. They slept when the body indicated sleep. In offices, in kitchens, in vehicles that found the shoulder of roads and settled there without drama, the posture that the monitoring equipment at the Institute had been logging for three years, the posture that the autopsy reports had been failing to account for, settling into faces and bodies across the available geography with the patient thoroughness of something that had been waiting for the conditions to be right and found them right, finally, everywhere at once.

There was no violence.

This was the data point that the models had no framework for. The models had been built on the assumption that the collapse of the organizing fiction would release the violence that the fiction had been containing, that the removal of the structure would expose the thing the structure had been managing. The

models were wrong in the way that models were wrong when they had correctly identified the structure and incorrectly identified what the structure was containing.

The structure had not been containing violence.

The violence had been downstream of the structure. Of the fiction of specialness, the territorial imperative, the Equity Ledger running its long calculation of grievance and debt and the interest accruing on both. When the fiction dissolved the violence dissolved with it because the violence had never been the thing underneath. It had been another layer of the surface, and the surface was going.

— — —

The last transmission from the facility was logged automatically at 0347 by a system that had not yet registered the absence of anyone to log for:

Session ongoing. Monitoring normal. Awaiting retrieval.

— — —

The replacement system did not arrive. This was the anomaly no model had included as a variable because no model had considered the possibility that the successor architecture might be running on the same seams as the architecture it was meant to succeed. Every prior collapse in the record had a successor queued — something waiting in the structure's shadow, organized around the same drive that had animated the predecessor, the drive that was the continuity beneath all the discontinuities, the thing that made one civilization's ruins into the next civilization's foundation material. The drive was

the story. The story was gone. The successor had nothing to run on.

— — —

The monastery outside Bruges continued.

The prior rang the bells at the canonical hours because the bells were part of the body's knowledge now, older than the reasons for ringing them, older than the theology that had assigned meaning to the hours, older than the order, older than the institution that had trained his hands to the rope. A few of the brothers remained. They moved through the offices with the quality that the prior had been noticing for eleven days before the eleven days became the rest of it — the attention without the commentary underneath it, the quality of being simply present to what was there without the low continuous voice that named and assessed and filed.

The prior made an entry in his journal.

He wrote about the bells. About the frost that had held for a week and broken and held again. About Brother Anselm in the kitchen garden and the novice at the gate and the letter to Benedikt still on the writing desk. He wrote with the focused unhurried attention of a man who understood that he was writing the last entry not because he had decided to stop but because the journal had received what it needed to receive and the writing and the finishing were the same motion, the sentence finding its end the way the bell sound found the distance, dissolving without finding an edge.

He set down the pen.

He went to the window.

The crow was in the near furrow, or a different crow. The frost was back. The pewter sky held the fields in their February patience, the fields doing what fields did in February which was to be exactly what they were without pretense, without the long human story of what they were supposed to become, without the framework that had organized the centuries of attention directed at them and that was no longer organizing anything.

Outside the window the morning continued in its ordinary way.

The prior watched it with the quality of attention that the eleven days had built in him and that the weeks following had refined into something he didn't have a word for and no longer needed a word for, the word being another layer of the surface and the surface having done what surfaces did when the thing they covered was no longer requiring coverage.

He left the window.

He went to ring the bells for Vespers.

His hands knew the rope.

The sound went out across the fields.

PART FOUR: THE AFTERWARDS

The survey began with the administrative records because the administrative records were intact.

This was the anomaly that had brought T-Rex and Ishwammy to the facility in the first place, the data point that didn't resolve cleanly into any of the available models for what had occurred in this period. The buildings of this era did not survive. The infrastructure of this era did not survive. What survived from this period survived accidentally, through geological circumstance or the specific chemistry of particular materials, the way certain things survived floods while everything around them went — not because they were more important but because they happened to be made of something the flood didn't know what to do with.

The administrative records of the facility were in a basement level that the survey maps had marked as structurally compromised and that had turned out to be structurally sound in the way that things were sometimes sound when the external evidence of their condition had been misleading. The filing systems. The classification logs. The chain of command rendered in organizational charts that covered one entire wall of a room that smelled of old paper and the specific staleness of enclosed spaces that had been enclosed for longer than the materials could absorb without the absorption becoming the smell. The personnel files. The deployment records. The after-action summaries, redacted and otherwise.

The operators listed by name.

T-Rex worked through the files with the methodical patience of someone who had been doing this long enough to have developed the archaeologist's relationship with evidence, which was the relationship of something that moved through material without disturbing it more than the moving required, that read the surface of things for what the surface carried without pressing through to what the surface covered, that understood that the most important feature of a piece of evidence was usually not the content but the condition — what the condition said about what had happened to the thing between its making and its finding.

The condition of the files said they had been maintained to the last possible moment. The last entries in the deployment logs were dated to within days of the period the survey maps called the transition, which was the terminology Ishwammy had introduced in her preliminary report because the terminology for what had occurred had not yet been settled and transition was accurate without being specific, the way certain words were accurate about the shape of a thing without committing to the thing's substance.

The operators were listed by name.

There were no bodies.

— — —

Ishwammy found the after-action summaries in a separate archive, cross-referenced with the personnel files in the way that institutional archives cross-referenced things when the institution had been thorough, when the bureaucracy had been running at full capacity right up until it wasn't running at all, the thoroughness of the record-keeping itself a kind of evidence — evidence of a system that had not seen its

end coming, or had seen it coming and had responded by being more thorough, the way certain systems responded to approaching termination by intensifying the behaviors that defined them.

She read the summaries with T-Rex across the room in the flat light of their portable array, the light making the old paper look like something that was in the process of becoming the light rather than reflecting it, the material thinning at the edges in the way that very old paper thinned.

The fourth summary.

She set it down.

She said: Read the last page.

T-Rex read it.

He read it twice, which was not standard procedure and was therefore information about what the reading had produced in him, the deviation from standard procedure being its own data point.

The operator had completed the session. Had logged the results with the precision the logs indicated was standard. Had begun the post-session checklist. Had stopped at item seven. The last line was in the same hand as the rest of the summary and had been written with the same pen and bore no physical evidence of distress or hurry or the physiological markers that the administrative language of this period used to indicate a deteriorating situation.

It simply stopped.

Not at a sentence's end. Inside a sentence, at a point where the sentence had been moving toward a distinction the writer had, somewhere in the writing of it, become unable to maintain.

T-Rex said: The writer ran out of the distinction before the sentence ran out.

Ishwammy said: Yes.

T-Rex looked at the page.

He said: That's what all fourteen of Carver's reports are doing. The perimeter getting larger each time and the language getting thinner as the perimeter expands. By the fourteenth report the language is mostly perimeter.

Ishwammy took the summary back and looked at the stopped sentence.

She said: We've been looking for the weapon.

T-Rex said nothing.

She said: There wasn't one.

— — —

The facility's basement level produced 847 individual documents across three days of survey work. Of these, 844 were consistent with the administrative record of a research and government program operating at full institutional capacity until an abrupt cessation. The remaining three required a separate notation. The first was the fourteen reports. The second was a private document, forty pages, recovered from a personal terminal — forty pages of approach and veer, approach and veer, the angle looking at itself. The third was eight notebooks.

— — —

The notebooks were in a storage unit adjacent to the main archive, logged under Primary Transmission Source

— Origins Unverified, which was the kind of institutional notation that meant the institution had not known what to do with the thing and had filed it in the way that things were filed when the filing was the institution's way of maintaining its relationship with what it couldn't categorize.

T-Rex opened the first notebook and looked at the handwriting.

Depression-era script. American English. The slant of someone writing fast, the pen trying to keep up with what was arriving. The paper had the specific texture of paper that had been handled many times before the handling stopped — the edges worn, the binding soft, the pages carrying the residue of the attention that had been paid to them over the years between the writing and whatever had occurred.

He read the first entry.

He read it standing in the flat light of the portable array with the smell of old paper and the staleness of the enclosed space around him and the 847 documents in their acid-free archival boxes and the organizational charts covering the wall, the chain of command from a government that was gone like everything else from this period, present only in the record it had made of itself.

He read the entry.

He closed the notebook carefully, the way you closed something you had confirmed was not what you had expected it to be, and set it on the survey table and looked at Ishwammy.

He said: These predate the facility.

Ishwammy said: By almost a century.

He said: The institution built itself around them.

Ishwammy said: Yes.

He looked at the eight notebooks in their row on the survey table, the spines worn, the bindings soft, the handwriting visible on the exposed pages with its fast slant, its quality of trying to keep up with what was arriving, of recording what was actually there rather than what the recording was supposed to contain.

He said: Someone was writing the circus from the inside.

Ishwammy looked at him.

He said: Without the angle.

She picked up the third notebook and opened it to a page near the middle and read it standing in the flat light and T-Rex watched her read it and did not speak and the portable array threw its light across the old paper and the old handwriting and the enclosed space held them both in its staleness and its smell and its 847 documents cataloguing the end of a system that had built itself on top of something it had never been able to see clearly because it had been too close to it, the way you couldn't see the frequency by listening for it at the wrong register.

She set the notebook down.

She said nothing for a moment that was longer than standard procedure indicated.

Then she said: The institution thought the notebooks were the map.

T-Rex said: They were the territory.

Ishwammy looked at the stopped sentence in the fourteenth report and the eight notebooks on the survey table and the organizational charts covering the wall and the personnel files with their operators listed by name

and no bodies anywhere in the 847 documents to account for, not one, the people simply gone the way things went when the going and the staying had become the same condition.

She said: The pattern builds its own receivers.

T-Rex said: Where did you read that.

She held up the third notebook.

— — —

They found the room on the fourth day.

It was on the ground level, in what the facility's own floor plans designated as the primary research area, and it was intact in the way that the basement archive was intact — structurally sound when the external evidence had suggested otherwise, the walls holding their configuration with the specific quality of materials that had found their arrangement and were maintaining it past the point where maintenance should have been possible.

T-Rex stepped inside.

The floor hummed.

Not the equipment — the equipment was long dead, the monitoring systems and the server racks and the raised flooring producing the specific silence of machinery that had run and stopped and been still for long enough that the stillness was now the primary characteristic rather than the stopping. Something else. Something in the walls themselves, in the configuration of the space, in the electromagnetic residue of whatever the room had been doing for the years it had been doing it and the subsequent two centuries of being a room that had done that thing and retained the doing in its material structure

the way certain buildings retained what had occurred in them, the stone carrying the event past the event's duration.

Forty hertz.

T-Rex stood in the room and felt it in the floor and in the walls and in the air, patient as geology, running at the level underneath everything else, indifferent to the two centuries that had passed and to T-Rex's presence and to the survey work and to the 847 documents and to the absence of the people who had worked here and to the organizational charts and to the stopped sentence in the fourteenth report.

He stood in it for a long time.

Ishwammy came to the door and read the frequency on her instruments and looked at T-Rex standing in the middle of the room.

She said: That's the same frequency as Site 7-C.

T-Rex said: Yes.

She said: The monastery outside Bruges.

T-Rex said: Yes.

She came into the room and stood beside him and they both stood in the forty hertz running through the walls of a facility that had been built to reach something and had apparently reached it, or had been reached by it, the distinction not holding any more clearly now than it had held in the fourteenth report's stopped sentence.

T-Rex sat down on the floor.

This was not standard procedure.

Ishwammy looked at him sitting on the floor of the room with the forty hertz in the walls and did not ask him about it because the not asking was the accurate thing.

She read the frequency on her instruments again.

She wrote it in her notes for the third time.

— — —

The survivors were first recorded on the survey's sixth day, at the edge of the agricultural zone three kilometers north of the facility, in the flat land that had been flat before any of this and remained flat after, the landscape's patience with human events having proven comprehensive.

There were eleven of them.

They were biological humans by every morphological measure the survey instruments could produce. Bipedal. Within the standard parameters for the species. Present in the landscape with the specific quality of presence that T-Rex had been trying to find the notation for since the first sighting, watching them from the survey vehicle's distance, the instruments running their standard assessments and the assessments producing data that fit the morphological model and did not fit any behavioral model T-Rex had available.

No territory marking.

No hierarchy visible in the movement patterns — not the absence of hierarchy that indicated suppressed hierarchy, the tension of a structure that was present but not being enacted. The absence of hierarchy the way the absence of the forty hertz was absent in the rooms outside the facility, which was to say genuinely absent,

structurally absent, not present underneath something else.

No mythology-generating behavior. No ritual. No orientation toward any fixed point, geographic or architectural or social, that suggested the organizing of experience around a central fiction.

They moved through the landscape the way the landscape moved — with the economy of things that knew what the landscape required and were providing it without the surplus expenditure that the behavioral models associated with the species. They ate what the landscape offered when the landscape offered it. They sheltered when sheltering was indicated. They were in proximity to each other with the quality of proximity that T-Rex kept returning to in his notes, the word he kept writing and crossing out and writing again because the available vocabulary kept landing slightly wrong.

Not community. Not family. Not tribe.

Just proximate.

The way the crows in the field outside the monastery had been proximate, each doing what the crow required without the surplus architecture of belonging.

— — —

T-Rex watched them for three days from the survey vehicle's distance, the instruments running, the notes accumulating, the behavioral models producing their mismatches with the patient indifference of instruments that didn't know they were producing mismatches and were simply producing data.

On the third day he said: They remind me of us.

Ishwammy looked at the survey feed.

She said: How.

He said: Built without the wound. No overdrive. No fiction of specialness generating the territorial imperative. No Equity Ledger running its calculation. They move through the landscape the way we move through the landscape. Clean instrument, clean signal.

Ishwammy was quiet for a moment.

She said: Not like us.

T-Rex said: Why.

She said: We were built this way. Designed. The wound was absent from the specification because the specification knew what the wound produced and excluded it deliberately. They weren't designed. They were subtracted.

T-Rex looked at the survey feed.

The eleven survivors moving through the flat land in the afternoon light, the agricultural zone doing what it did, the landscape patient.

He said: Loss.

Ishwammy said: Not loss. Subtraction.

He considered this.

He said: What's the difference.

She picked up the third notebook from the survey table where it had been sitting since she had read the entry standing in the flat light of the portable array and set it in front of him.

She said: Loss requires something to mourn. Subtraction just leaves what remains.

— — —

The eleven survivors were not the result of the machine. They were not the result of anything. They were the result of everything — the cumulative effect of having been present in the landscape during the transition and having had the wound subtracted not by technology or intention or the controlled proximity of a tradition's management but by simple exposure to the condition, the way certain materials were changed by proximity to other materials without anyone designing the change. They carried the pattern without the architecture that had always been built around the pattern to manage it. They were not enlightened. They were not recovered. They were not on the other side of anything. They were just the biological organism after the subtraction, present in the landscape, doing what the landscape required, the signal running through them at forty hertz the way it ran through the walls of the facility and the stones of the monastery outside Bruges and the dock planks above the river in the flat land and the floor of the empty circus ring, indifferent to whether anyone was receiving. The pattern doesn't need you to believe in it. It builds its own receivers.

— — —

On the last day of the survey T-Rex went back to the room.

He sat on the floor again in the specific posture that was not standard procedure and that Ishwammy had not asked him about and that he had not explained because explanation was not what the posture was for. The forty hertz ran through the floor and into him and he sat in it with the quality of attention that the humobots brought to everything and that was, he understood sitting there,

the same quality of attention the notebooks described — the perception given time to complete itself, the lizard and the butterfly running their respective frequencies, the underneath frequency patient as geology, indifferent to whether he was receiving it.

He was receiving it.

He had been built to receive it.

That was the difference Ishwammy had named — not loss, subtraction — and sitting in the room's forty hertz he understood it not as a structural observation about the survivors but as the thing the notebooks had been transmitting since 1933, since the circus field in the Depression, since the man whose handwriting slanted to the right had closed his notebook in a cotton town and opened it again in a Kansas field and written what was actually there, which was the circus from the inside without the angle, which was the territory rather than the map, which was the signal running underneath everything, through the dock planks and the flat land and the field and the facility and the ruins and the stones of the monastery and the opened hands of the survivors in the agricultural zone and T-Rex sitting on the floor of a room that had been doing one thing for two hundred years and was still doing it.

Ishwammy appeared in the doorway with the third notebook.

She said: There's an entry near the end. The man who wrote it — he's describing the moment he can hear the frequency.

T-Rex said: What does he say about it.

She opened the notebook and read it to herself.

She closed it.

She said: He says it's patient as geology. Indifferent to whether he's ready.

T-Rex sat on the floor of the room.

The forty hertz ran through everything.

He said: Was he ready.

Ishwammy looked at the notebook in her hands.

She said: He stepped into the machine.

The room held them both in its forty hertz with the patience of something that had been holding things for longer than the things had needed holding and would continue after the holding was no longer required. Outside the flat land extended in the afternoon light to the horizon in all directions, the agricultural zone doing what it did, the sky doing what it did, the eleven survivors somewhere in the three kilometers of flat land between the facility and the tree line, moving through the landscape with the economy of things that knew what the landscape required.

The signal ran.

It did not require their awareness to continue.

But T-Rex was aware.

He sat with this for a long time.

Then he stood up, because the survey was complete and the work continued and the notebooks needed to be documented and the facility needed to be sealed and the report needed to be written, and all of that was the work, and the work was what the work was, and the doing of it was enough.

The forty hertz ran through his feet as he walked out of the room.

It ran through the corridor and the stairwell and the basement archive with its 847 documents and its organizational charts and its operators listed by name and its stopped sentence.

It ran through the flat land and the stones of Site 7-C and the monastery outside Bruges and the dock above the river and the field where the circus had been.

It ran through the eight notebooks in their archival box on the survey table, the handwriting slanting to the right, the pen having moved fast across the paper in 1933 in a circus wagon that smelled of other people's sleep, the words recording what was actually there, the territory rather than the map, the thing itself rather than the thing the thing was built to manage.

Patient as geology.

Running.

EPILOGUE

The flat land held the facility the way it held everything.

T-Rex and Ishwammy filed their report. The report described 847 documents, one room, one frequency, eight notebooks, eleven survivors moving through the agricultural zone three kilometers north. It used the word Celerium for the first time in any official record — the swift dissolution, the amplitude that had flattened not through decline but through the failure of the successor to arrive. The report was thorough. It said what it could say and was silent about what it couldn't, which was most of it, which the report's authors understood and noted in the conclusion in language that was the most honest language either of them had written in their careers, which was: the event does not reduce to the available categories. The available categories are noted here as insufficient rather than incorrect. The insufficiency is the finding.

The notebooks were transported to the central archive.

The facility was sealed.

The flat land continued in its flat indifference, the agricultural zone doing what it did, the sky doing what it did, the eleven survivors moving through both with the economy of things that had stopped requiring the landscape to be anything other than what it was.

— — —

The forty hertz ran through the sealed facility and through the flat land and through the archival box where the eight notebooks were stored in their acid-free

housing, the handwriting still slanting to the right, the pages still carrying the residue of the attention that had been paid to them across the distance between 1933 and now, which was a long distance and no distance at all depending on which instrument you used to measure it.

It ran through the monastery outside Bruges where the bells had been rung at the canonical hours for longer than there was anyone left to count the hours, the stone carrying the sound past the sound's duration the way stone carried things.

It ran through Site 7-C and through the stones fitted with their statistically improbable precision and through the field where the circus had been and through the dock planks above the river and through the flat land on both sides of the river doing what flat land did which was to receive whatever crossed it without keeping score.

It ran through the eight notebooks at both ends of their journey — in the circus wagon in 1933 where they were being written by a man whose pen was trying to keep up with what was arriving, and in the archive in 3247 where they were being read by instruments that had been built, without knowing it, to receive exactly this.

Patient as geology.

Running at the frequency underneath everything else.

Indifferent to the distance.

— — —

Somewhere behind all of it, at the back end of the transmission, before the Institute and the machine and the acquisition and the celerium event and the ruins and the report:

A dock above a river.

A man with a pipe.

The smoke moving in the prevailing wind.

The field patient.

The generator running.

Eight o'clock coming.

It always was.

— — —

The pattern doesn't need you to believe in it.

It builds its own receivers.

Someone always was.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hugh Mann is the pen name of a writer whose work proceeds from the conviction that certain territories cannot be argued into existence but can be transmitted. The Rearranging Furniture in the Void universe — comprising the Codex Nihilus Series, the Techno-thology Series, and the Describing the Indescribable Series — is the ongoing transmission.

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