

her game

is played on the commute home from the international school, and so is mostly confined to subway depths. if stripped of all its engineering, this new habitat would scarcely support life. it's a desert city of glass towers and florid plazas, and the abundance of space puts her of a mind to contemplate population loss after some long-ago tragedy – either this or it's been impressed upon urban planners that in no circumstances should this place be outgrown, overstretched; it needs to be 'the future', once and for all. today – and most afternoons – she's striding to a periscope whose escalator lowers to the metro. even at nominal 'rush hour', the underground has the same annoying spaciousness, which seemingly elongates any journey. there are wide, polished hallways, a vast surplus of automated ticket machines, swaddled ushers waiting the gates with android patience. on the platform, the expat keeps at her shoulder the adventure backpack that saddles her with load from the school. she's an art teacher. her global, 'relatable' workplace merely distracts from the tedium and confusion of this new city by grafting stress. she radiates homesickness – almost like she's wishing for the comfort of strangers, but she observes what seems to be the custom of standing well apart from the other prospective commuters of the 'blue' line. she infers most who leave from this station are attached to a nearby university.

yesterday: half a dozen secret rounds of 'fuck, marry, kill'. a different time: staring contests against a version of herself emergent on the black window-glass, trying to figure out if she was beating this reflection, fractionally, each round. her favourite, to this point: concentrating very hard on random parts of her body, trying, like a conjurer, to evoke beads of sweat. she swears she'd successfully encouraged a drop from her elbow. today, when the train – the banded, boxy sea-snake – burrows into view, she's already invented her entertainment. she boards the final carriage behind what she decides are a professor and a biomedical student. they're joining ten others inside. the expat settles on a cushioned seat, two spaces away from her nearest neighbour: a south asian man whose eyes are trained on a 'mystery' novella – there's a magnifying glass on its cover. and yet truly he's imagining pistachio baklava (its sugared glaze, its texture and taste, the sound of rupturing flakes), thus sending a brown-green mist whooshing through the carriage, which settles over most passengers' heads. the expat lands amidst her first baklava memory: how she'd eaten the dessert at a friend's birthday in another part of the world, the past, only to remark, to the disappointment of the host matriarch, that it most tasted like *grass*. she'd kept repeating *grass!* until she'd been censured, she recalls. the carriage maintains an oral silence typical of late afternoons underground, although a headscarved woman (with shopping bags) is having lascivious thoughts about identical baklava squares to the novella reader, a jobless model (with peachy make-up, a stern expression) dwells on a time when six pieces in a plastic takeaway container had cost as much as the rest of a dinner, and a preened thug (oil-slicked hair, soft fabrics, superfluous rings) remembers a baklava-led anaphylactic attack savaging the body of a younger, more vulnerable self. the only passenger spared this topic is an old, retired postman who's asleep – his unrelated dreaming transforms him into a teenager taking a driving lesson. among the rest, baklava thoughts refract across a neural network, and yet, with some effort, it is possible to trace back to a temporary source, a most influential node. this isn't the novella reader, as it turns out, but another man – fleshy, olive-skinned – who's sitting at the far end of the carriage, the train's tail, projecting sweet pistachio pieces with a fixity that suggests the effort is to personal gain. most likely, he's a baklava baker on his way home, marketing, or an agent

working at the behest of such a business. he divides opinion. to some, this quasi-mystic is no better than a commercial polluter, a vandal dumping callously into the stream of thought. others take a softer view, given there are far more unpleasant things it might be possible for him to promote.

the expat places her backpack on the train floor, pressing her feet against its sides. the headscarved woman similarly uses small, sock-sandalled feet to guard four variously-sized shopping bags, as her mind drifts away from baklava and towards the pre-eminent fixation of her day, her year: a powerful disappointment towards her husband (not present). ‘love’ towards this man, though she remembers it, is something no longer felt. the troubling idea pounds so heavily that to conceal it would be close to an impossibility, despite the blue material that’s stretched taut across her crown. suppression would be a feat of strength more impressive than the output of the ‘baklava man’. in any case, the headscarved woman isn’t too concerned by such an exposure on the train. she’s only afraid of how it heralds similar thoughts will be discernible once she’s returned, tonight, to her marital home. perhaps she hopes that, by making no effort to repress the ‘love troubles’, she’ll attract the attention and advice of other passengers (who’ve likewise dispersed onto non-dessert topics) as to whether her doubts shall pass. most of her twelve companions opt to instead pass *her* by, treating her as a lost cause or somebody outside their remit – save for a peer (a middle-aged woman in business attire and the vest of an oil company, travelling by train to arrest her carbon footprint) who does stop, at last, without getting up from her non-adjacent seat or even making eye contact. by some relational spark, she admits to being a graduate of love troubles herself, and so the headscarved woman grabs permission to unspool relevant details, which simultaneously are released to the public record: the husband’s reproachful attitude towards their adult son...the young man moving far away, in response...unseen by his parents ‘in real life’, now, for several years...his mother deprived of filial hugs, but more so any reassurance as to the content of his thoughts and how he’s *truly* coping. she’d been plunged into unhappiness. to be clear, the mind-reading implants the expat has invented can only interact over a very short range – fifteen to twenty metres. to be able to survey more than this, to perhaps access *all* of the wellsprings of thought in the world, would make a ridiculous burden, although by ‘linking-up’ with others in a sort of chain it is still possible to slightly extend one’s scope. in any case, the climate-conscious oil worker earnestly attempts following the headscarved woman’s storyline, but when her telepathic entreaties to ‘give it time’ are batted away by frantic countervailing points, she starts to lose interest, even leaks something along the lines of: *i really don’t have the energy for this*. much as she’d prefer to conceal her unenthusiasm, it’s there for all on the carriage to see. also, she can’t help thinking of her own son, a graduate lawyer, who she’s on very good terms with and meets for weekly dinners. the headscarved woman recognises the futility of their exchange. once it’s severed, none pick up the slack. and if the expat leaks here any rumination about a bump in *her own* relationship, it thankfully isn’t such that anybody really wishes to concern themselves with it, either.

at the top of an ear’s agenda are the train’s whining assertions of effort, its claims to life. the attention of most passengers is understandably on phones (once ‘smartphones’), given these offer primitive connection with most of the myriad souls beyond range. as for actual ‘speech’, there are just two men (assumed technology workers) vocalising small notes of commentary to one another – which is strictly unnecessary given *faster* conversation might be managed with only their implants. ‘direct’ speech of this kind, between two proximal people, has become more a form of music, the larynx fundamentally an instrument. in fact, with no grasp of these

workers' language, the expat imagines their sounds as loose melodies with no mundane attachment – just existential import, like the cries of a muezzin. many people's thoughts are completely interminable to others, dealing with specialised fields of knowledge or strange corridors of personal experience. good luck to anyone trying to keep up with the flowing equations and chess patterns the university professor can't manage to stifle, for example. or the full cast of hometown characters being ruefully considered by a german tourist.

the preened, soggy-haired man (who's a gangster, in fact) quite suddenly assails the carriage with a coughing fit and wins himself the attention of the out-of-work model. not having properly noticed him before, she wonders if he isn't a violent criminal whose trial had once played out in the popular consciousness. her accusation gets others interested, and hence the coughing man (who's reaching into his pocket for an emergency face mask) has his equation with the *real* criminal tested by the neural network. though he'd make an argument his mask is for containing a virus, it looks a great deal like he's scrambling for a disguise. there are a few assessors (one of the technology workers, the german tourist, the awoken ex-postman) who snappily, mentally attest the ageing model has made a false association – however much a resemblance *can* be acknowledged. the novella reader 'protests' silently: *that murderer would still be in jail!* the headscarved woman, in fact, *agrees* with the model, that it is the very same member of a goon squad which had dissolved one of its victims in acid, however, given there hasn't been news of a prison escape, she lectures that the gangster should be treated as a non-threat who's somehow served his time. for his own part, once the coughing fit subsides, the gangster turns to the window, as if there's intrigue in racing slabs of tunnel-brick, and with his mouth and nose veiled by paisley pattern, mentally pulses a statement that condenses as merely: *yes, i am/was the violent criminal!* for a moment, he's disarmed the conjecture. and then all who'd made an amusement of him realise the possibility he's only being mischievous.

the expat's implants have an uneasy association with the truth.

a loudspeaker announcement consolidates the name of the upcoming station. yes, speech is often unnecessary, but this staid tradition prevents commuters being led astray, thrown into doubt, by any of their happenstance companions misremembering the sequence of the 'blue' line. the expat must adapt everything that's going on to her construct. the coughing man continues sulking at the window, although internally he's now advising the others, if they'd really like to focus on macabre crime, they should focus upon that biomedical student – who's gone to sit mid-carriage, and whose neat façade claims immersion in mobile phone solitaire. as per the naked course of his thoughts, he's truly raging about a terrible day on campus. there, he'd *seen* (quite without his wanting to) that he'd suddenly, irrevocably lost the social approval of the young man who'd been his closest classmate. it had been an unmistakable update to the former friend's monologue. such a sudden, seemingly unjustified abandonment now fuels vengeful ideations of running one of those dissecting scalpels across the former friend's neck.

most of the nearby passengers (able to survey *several* thought patterns at once by their implants' lateral capacity) critique the *size* of student's murder weapon, rather than its violent use. this collectively measured reaction holds even when the student grows self-conscious and takes to visualising gutting their entire rumbling carriage – occupants included – with an action movie flame-thrower. commuters all watch their skin turning to candlewax in another person's brain, and yet still they're hardly affected. it appears the sheer frequency, the daily *volume*, of such imaginings in a world with profound neurological access has led to a kind of practical complacency. it's to everybody's advantage to be signatories to a social contract where 'benefit of the doubt' is afforded. indeed, the spontaneity of the brain implants – one's

ability to read foreign minds at almost *exactly* the speed new thoughts arise in their own – means ideas are so quickly shared as to diminish, in a way, ownership. this is nonsense, of course. the student really *was* the one to originate the thought of himself as a mass-murderer, but there’s a psychological trick, perhaps, which suggests everybody had come to this view at the same time and must grapple within it together. nevertheless, the performatively *devout* gangster prays the student’s modest satchel doesn’t really contain a flame-thrower. the bolder of the technology workers envisions disembowelling the kid with a sword, then spitting a racial epithet. and the student, understandably, is more offended by the *word*. without shifting his gaze from *solitaire*, his mind makes the swordsman and knee-jerk racist its express target, and soon they’re engaged in a ridiculous, history-steeped contest (each picturing themselves seeing to the other’s annihilation, as in the rivalries of warner bros. critters). when the train arrives at the next station – beneath yet another shopping mall – it’s only the student who alights, yet he saves face because everyone can tell it’s his regular stop.

the scene resets. the student’s place is taken by a fresh character: a handsome man in loose white garments (a distant relative of the caliph – someone *just* below the level of public recognition). he avoids taking a seat, leans against a pole, catches the expat’s eye. and their thoughts flash mutual approval. embarrassed by this connection, the expat glances at her own visage in the stationary carriage window, thinks: *i look good, you know*. it’s a shadowy reflection. she can only ‘know’ she’s sweaty and that several staticky wisps have escaped her hair-tie, yet she takes confidence from the nobleman’s appraisal. her self-congratulatory comment was a twitch, reactive, but it brings her – all along a generative *observer* – into focus. the ageing model resents the expat’s self-esteem, ironically, though can’t suppress endorsing her appearance, the body that’s coming through the work clothes – shirt and jeans and a looped silk scarf. the expat *feels* the other passengers looking on her out of the corner of their eyes, or seemingly staring past her, playing tricks with the depth of their gaze. the bony, septuagenarian former postman has in his mind undressed her. his excuse (unsought, yet explained by laborious thoughts) is that she reminds him of a resonant model from a life drawing class he’d once attended in a foreign country. he’s a terrible drawer; this was in an era when he hadn’t been with a woman for a while. in the true spirit, though, he continues making adjustments to his guess of the expat’s naked form, like he’s correcting a sketch. she, in turn, can do little to conceal disgust towards her natural, reciprocal thought of *his* body as an offering.

the eyes of surveillance cameras are dark boils on the carriage roof, but they’re useless for detecting the upcoming frenzy. the expat does little to prevent it – because any thoroughgoing game or trial involving the implants can hardly avoid this topic. encouraged by the kind of anonymity that comes from a dozen minds, like fish, schooling in the same direction, there are several more botched speculations as to the expat’s nudity, as if a predictive competition’s been declared. the people who are most *compelled* (the gangster, the technology workers, the tourist) actually scuttle their entries by leaning into personal idealisations – a blubbery waist, nipple studs, dense pubic hair. very quickly, most on the carriage have made a submission, these pictures all fluttering easily between the porous heads. the expat, in ‘appraisal’ mode, gives little resistance to affirming as ‘first place’ an entry that has quite accurately predicted the shape and colour of her breasts, and it takes a few moments for its artist to be confirmed as the climate-conscious oil worker (who had the advantage of being a ‘disinterested’ party). as a consequence, the rest of the carriage elevates this image like it’s a true monument of the expat exposing herself – in fact, it very nearly could be. for a period, there’s an absence of

fantasy including *touch*, as though the expat's some delicate figure on a plinth, a body that shouldn't necessarily elicit sexuality. it's the novella reader, in the end, whose mind makes the impolite leap, possibly to its own embarrassment. the stupid staring at his book (hasn't turned a page, eyes aren't even *moving*) is hardly cover for his suddenly imagining himself pressed up against the view from a high-rise bedroom, cars circling an oblong roundabout below, while the expat fellates him like she hangs onto life via his blatantly overestimated penis – all within a fanciful storyline that ascribes non-existence to *his* wife and *her* husband, or at least holds both in contempt. the expat glares across at the reader, who won't meet her gaze. so, instead, she apprehends him in the tangle of minds, and he makes a 'not guilty' plea: *it wasn't me! i'm getting that picture from somebody else!* he nominates the tourist, who, in turn, wants to implicate one of the technology workers. to attach any of what becomes a flood of lewd imagery to a wellspring is almost an impossible task, given the 'instantaneity problem' and the fact no-one's prepared to fess up. to know from whence a fantasy's come, it's requisite to grasp certain 'calling cards'. it's surely the 'baklava man', for instance, changing tack and distributing an idea of the expat's torso encased in pastry flakes and doused in sugar syrup. and who other than the university professor would have the genius to streak 'slut' across her naked, predictable chest in morse-coke? but to say who's responsible for pictures of her hair as plaited and tugged in the throes, for giving her a loose siren's tail (from a costume-box), for having her ambidextrously spank their masochistic buttocks with separate paddles, or for filling her navel with a cataract of ejaculate, is more difficult. most have the decency to display shame towards such ideation when they're caught, even though they lean very easily into the defence of 'it can't be helped', like it's unreasonable to expect a person's contrition towards their own nature. they'll say: *where's the proof i'd even want to enact this? it only appeared because of the mood.* true judgement, then, is reserved for the few who are deliberate and defiant in the way they spread carnality. and despite being the chief subject of such an orgiastic conference, the expat feels no real alarm, given she keeps the presiding role. maybe she should be admonished for loosing such wretched characters upon the world; but isn't.

she looks again to the nobleman, whose gaze seems fixed to the grip of his own hand on the carriage pole. in truth, the expat would like to see something from this man, some pitch as to what sex between them could involve. no point being shy; they ought to be emboldened by the likelihood their paths never cross again. she imagines they're on a private jet, but tactfully leaves any picture of intimacy to his brush. and he fumbles this responsibility. he keeps watching his hand on the pole, understanding her test, but proposes simply holding her – which underwhelms. he changes to thoughts of nuzzling her neck (still missing the mark and, what's worse, the expat can trace how he's borrowing this idea from the mind of the expostman). she concludes that the nobleman's animal spirit has been tempered somewhat by the expectation of 'right behaviour' that so doggedly attaches to those of fame or status. she's pleased, at least, on surveying the carriage, to note her turn as sole 'person of interest' is over, though the theme sticks. the jobless model (dominant at table tennis) takes a turn on the rump-shaking paddles, deploying these upon the german who'd suggested them. four commuters, each staring at a phone, are really thinking of how their relevant mucosa might be arranged into some egalitarian manoeuvre (it's unclear whether they've all played a role in brainstorming, or if such an arrangement was just the imposition of *one*). most pitiable are those who drift into remembrance of lovers they've lost. the headscarved woman views the whole carnival as a serious (if natural) affront, partly because it's insensitive towards the situation of her own love life. the frenzy itself happens at extraordinary speed – they're

travelling vast coital, romantic, intimate distances in fractions of seconds, going a million times faster than their shared, tunnelling train. and although the intensity and communication of their thoughts has been elevated by the implants (tiny metal protozoans rested perfectly upon all of their frontal lobes, the expat decides) these don't manage to effect much power over actual bodies. maybe, across the whole carriage, there are one or two flutters of arousal. truly, their brains lead much ruder, more exciting lives, above the clouds, than the rest of their physicality is allowed or can fulfil. the passengers are scared, in a way, of the pace of sexuality, the bizarreness of it, and even if they've grown accustomed to their ideas' display, they're weakened by this, and made into lesser, messier prospects in each others' eyes.

quite without warning, the train bursts out of the subway. it's soft, evening light, but still it's harsh for a few moments. for some, this adamant change in tone includes a sense of shame, as though the light, a higher power, arrests those whose minds had been in the gutter. the rail-tracks run across an overpass, parallel to a sparse 'rush hour' highway. glass structures nearby reflect pink from a sand-irritated sun tilting towards satellite suburbs. most of the passengers' eyes shift out of the carriage windows. the ex-postman contemplates the growth of the city in his lifetime, and its hundreds of thousands of presently unused mailboxes. the reader slap-closes his book to gaze at the city and its distant marina, too. he's uncomfortable, it seems, at the orgy he'd effected, but he blames the implants foremost. he wishes them gone. his thesis, well-constructed: whilst such technology has been known to cultivate acceptance and 'brotherhood', it's achieved this by a violent weathering of self. to continue: people, once upon a time, built themselves somewhat in the inverse, in partial accord with whichever flickers they rejected or kept hidden – and yet, now, with *all things* presented to others' awareness, there aren't opportunities for such filtering. they're all led to seek shelter together from the mental tumult, to disavow much of their individuality as an evil spirit. the expat sees this thesis endorsed by the other passengers; the reader speaking *for* and *in* them. and she can't stifle a jolt of sadness at this rejection of what she's only just created. she wears the failing to the extent it's visible to others. in this way, they can tell she, a humble schoolteacher, is the implants' inventor, and so she also may have the power to bring about what the reader's proposed: the 'old' mental life being restored. they treat her with deference. there's no rushing of bodies or pleading gestures. not even a glance in her direction. the climate-conscious oil worker (familiar with sensitive discussions, a spokeswoman) keeps her eyes on the pink city as she asks formally, professionally, on behalf of everybody else, that the expat rescind or at least disempower the chips she's distributed, which, for all their successes, seem to have broken containment lines. the expat listens empathetically and agrees she will soon enough. not immediately. she doesn't give any more of a timeline, even though she's about to depart the train, her four-stop journey drawing to its end. she rises, taking her backpack, and still is treated as supreme, as a deity of sorts. the baklava man claims to have known her stature all along. other commuters who'd just partaken in the frenzy, with her as incitement, are wondering how they'd ever been tricked into lusting physical communion with a *god* – a situation maybe not so uncommon in the mythologic, polytheistic past, but which here, in the future, is plainly weird. she alights the capsule, stepping onto the platform of her 'home' station. she's fitted, immediately, by the heat. whatever game she's playing usually finishes once she's left the boundary of the train, but today it continues, for no clearer reason than enjoyment. those thoughts from commuters in the carriage crackle and grasp at range as she begins to walk. incredulous speculation as to the source of her power...fresh condemnation of the gangster...end-of-day exhaustion...a broken plea that she *does* get around to terminating the...

she feels her neck straining slightly from the weight of the backpack. those dozen heads disappear as the train moves away, and yet eight minutes or so had been enough to learn them well. 'home' station is humbler than the one which services the education precinct, but still it smacks newcomers with its sterility. the expat walks briskly past new faces, freed of any suspicion about her metaphysical status. she's impressed by the single-minded fixity with which a poor cleaner, despite their fraying broom, herds clumps of sand over tiles. a man lopes past her, frustrated by the chore of soon needing to walk his greyhound. in the outside carpark, there's a cigarette-pinching taxi-driver whose lazy posture (slumped against the passenger door, like his vehicle is a surreal backpack) is enough to know he isn't currently taking passengers, even without the addition of his thoughts. across the short, neat street beside the station, there's a group of boys playing soccer in a park with artificial, knee-burning turf. the expat wonders: *what about kids, then?* well, kids don't have the implants because, at the outset, there'd been concerns about mental *overload* and something akin to the reader's point to do with 'self-formation'. influential child psychologists had advised exposure to the unsavoury opinions and imaginations of others would have likely had a calamitous impact – especially the out-of-reach concepts of adults. unsettling, of course, for children to see adults' self-doubting and uncertainty on critical issues. and unnerving for them to be privy to the *childishness* of adults, just as adults may wish not to be often reminded of the unseemly precociousness of children. and they (children) might have been frightened at having a window into all the times adults looked upon them as 'grating', 'disappointing', or even, bizarrely, 'dumb'. for all of these very obvious and quickly itemised reasons, kids have been protected from the implants until they're 'of age', although reportedly it's common for their readjusting, after the surgery, to take several years – like an artificial, more intense form of puberty. take the headscarved woman's son, for example – well, he'd been destabilised to learn, at age eighteen, that the father who'd presented as his greatest supporter had all along not been so impressed, was prone to viewing the scion as a poor inheritor of his own spirit. which was why this son had moved away. the expat finds herself wishing the boys playing soccer savour the easy boundaries of their own minds while these are the extent of their purview. of course, given they don't have implants, such advice won't actually reach them, even as their ball rolls across the expat's path. she bends to return it, goes on.

there's a *real* muezzin, now, announcing the evening prayer from hidden, soaring speakers. the mosque is out of sight, so it fills the air like a natural song, in the spirit of birdsong or cicadas. the expat recognises only the muezzin's first, exalted word, in arabic. the rest she believes she's able to infer by his reverence, just as she might often claim to know what the notes of a swirling guitar or piano mean to say. she's committed to that idea – in her construct – of the voice as an instrument. an arrowhead of smalls birds shoots low between the towers, as if compelled by the crier, or his muse. although surrounded entirely by breeze and heat and appeals to prayer, the expat navigates the footpath towards her apartment alone; only her own mind displayed to itself. across the road: a small, downstairs kebab restaurant of neon signage, tacky pictures, a dessert cabinet, and community acclaim. it stands in contrast to the plush, quarter-full joints that predominate in the inner city. as telegraphed by the call to prayer, it's a pre-dinner hour, but at the restaurant, close to the window, are two ravenous men, round-bellied, sitting across from each other and talking aloud. they're kebab attendants, sharing a meal pre-shift. the expat, as she waits to cross the street anyway, finds herself scrutinising their style of eating. specifically, the way their conversation lurches onwards, despite their mouthfuls of food – kebab pieces, bread, labne. she's close enough to get their layered thoughts. quite obviously, they're both contemplating a need to eat *faster* than the

man opposite, so that they might secure more of the share-plate for themselves. and naturally, this only spurs more rapid consumption – an arms race. but their thoughts also engage with a problem that pertains most to one of them: a period of low morale, an existential listlessness.

the expat presumes this ‘funk’ is what they’re addressing, through the mouthfuls, as well. whatever their discussion, it’s a matter that outcompetes decorum. she gets the radio signal (in effect) of their mental lives, but tantalisingly the window-glass withholds their actual, rampant speech. they don’t pay the expat any attention, even though she’s paused with ample opportunity to cross the road. how to fit this situation into her construct, the world of the implants? why are they speaking at all, when it could be managed by only their thoughts? the ‘healthier’ man is thinking supportively towards his colleague, too – fixating on a personal trainer and a few epic movies that might put certain depressing life circumstances into context. and surely these are much the same things he’s *telling* his colleague, in support. yet the expat sees, as well, in the ‘healthier’ man, the germ of an idea that his friend – who he sweats and works beside on most weeknights – perhaps has a way to go with respect to *resilience*. and, worse: a tangible pang of ‘relief’, from the healthy man, that his colleague’s troubles appear deeper-set than his own, or at least rescue him from the milder pre-shift listlessness that he too experiences. deplorable thoughts, really – the kind it doesn’t do anyone good to have telecast. she sees a couple of other workers eating on deeper tables in the restaurant, talking also. why so much actual speech out here, in the ‘real world’, when it hadn’t been a feature of the train? and what should it mean?

she crosses the street, and by the time she’s reached the opposite footpath everything’s been remodelled. her original ideas about ‘speech’ had been wrong – this exhibition at the restaurant-glass, this gross incident of talking through personal matters simultaneous to a race involving food, shows voice *can’t* be rendered ornamental. in fact, in this world of mind-reading implants, it may have never been more important. voice and action still cut through. they’re the filters the reader on the train had been wrong to mourn, the means by which people endorse or communicate certain inclinations in themselves, and signal what’s to be left behind. a friendly *speech* – such as one kebab carver’s been delivering to another – still triumphs over whatever’s unpleasant and unused. technologists, in fact, had very quickly understood this limitation of the implants, that the true locus of individuality was never really being tapped. hence, a separate project was underfoot to develop a piece that could listen *deeper*, filching from whatever inscrutable layer of the cerebrum (probably) was really shaking the pan, calling the shots, deciding the decisions. no success, thus far. although slightly embarrassed to have overestimated the damage her implants could have wrought, the expat celebrates this redraft as a breakthrough. and as a concession to the restaurant which inspired her epiphany, she steps through its automatic doors when they offer. she briefly shops.

the pit-stop hardly delays her passage home. within minutes, she’s in the lobby of her apartment building, giving uncharacteristically cheery greetings to the doorman, like someone who’s recently passionate about the significance of *voice* and *action*, and the limitations of *thought*. she sees the man’s buoyed, superficially, by her looks. and he must be able to deduce lingering tendrils of her ‘epiphany’, too, for he can’t help but transmit: *sure, but don’t thoughts at least set the agenda? aren’t they all the while limiting the range of actions we might take?* a fair point, but the expat doesn’t wish to engage. she speeds through the lobby before this counter-argument might draw down her levity. the building itself is glass and twenty storeys tall. as she climbs its vertebrae via elevator, there come staccato snippets from

people in the privacy of their homes. thoughts of television shows to watch, and microwave meals, and bowel troubles, and what a luxury it would be live somewhere with a yard. walking along her eighteenth storey corridor, the expat remembers a private, customary joke. she lifts the silk scarf that has been wrapped around her neck, now pulling it tight across her forehead. her direct neighbour, a middle-aged man, seldom *seen*, is behind the nearby wall, having doubts about the composition of an outfit – white pants and a tan shirt. of course, by honing-in on his quandary, the expat reveals to him her own attention. but the neighbour doesn't lurch into the corridor to scold her for snooping (because it's well within her rights), or to ask her opinion about the outfit (because he wouldn't like to be strange, or a bother). she thinks pointedly to him: *no, i'm happy to look. seriously.* but he ignores her, tries walking to another area of his apartment that he hopes will be beyond range. the expat considers rapping on his door to labour the offer. she even curls her actual fingers into a fist, but fortunately, at this early stage, catches her imagination's overreach.

entering her own high-rise burrow, the expat makes sure the scarf is blanketing all of her hair. her husband is sitting with his back turned at their dining table, the heavy jaws of his laptop unlocked and threatening. his exercise pad of facts and figures – material costs and construction schedules – at his elbow, as well. she says, *hola!*, hoping that when he turns she'll have time to loosen the scarf demonstratively, 'releasing' her locks now she's in his sole company. but he doesn't turn, as he normally would. he raises a hand abruptly, likely to 'shoosh' her. then makes some highly random comment (relating to the project at the city airport), showing he's on a phone call. she sees earbuds like waterbirds affixed to his handsome, rhinoceros skull. she goes to the kitchen and lets the scarf drop. she can't tell, in herself, whether abandoning the joke is from cowardice or sensitivity. you'd want to have all your ducks in row to make a daily cultural dig like that, and maybe she doesn't quite. she pours herself a glass of water and naturally applies her fresh invention (little 5-cent pieces that connect adult minds) to her husband. to a large extent, she sees him as earnestly fixated on his work. most of the details she finds unintelligible, though she assumes his employer means to construct a new terminal annex that's as soulless and faux-futuristic as the rest of the city. from her perspective, his work condenses into a prevailing consideration of salary and its accumulation – the figure that ultimately shall determine the length of their 'desert time'. these years, in the scheme of a life, a relationship, he's assured her, are only a sojourn. but she isn't convinced. she sees a dislocated spike of industriousness, then a long, indolent trough, and isn't sure she appreciates either phase – the implication they'll 'hibernate' for the rest of their lives, for instance.

and then, as she'd suspected, she finds a layer of his thinking still hung-up on their argument from last night. a small voice in him, below the phone call, enquires: *who was your train-husband today, mon amie? no, better, who was your screw?* he doesn't need to look at her. automatically, her mind brushes his french accent across the english. and, for neither of their benefit, she replays how the dispute had gone. she'd yesterday arrived home in the customary fashion: said 'hola', dropped the scarf. he'd been working at the dining table, just like at present, and he'd followed a recent habit of asking for details of the train game she'd played on her journey home. she'd reported very honestly. too honest, actually; guileless like a school-child speaking of their day to a parent, then realising there's been too much divulged. her husband hadn't been impressed by 'fuck, marry, kill'. in fact, there hardly could've been starker contrast with how he'd swooned, a little patronisingly, at the genius of the 'sweat conjurer' or 'bullshit phone conversation in made-up foreign language' games. he hadn't

considered ‘fuck, marry, kill’ to be innocent fun, and it hadn’t cultivated, in him, the kind of randy jealousy she’d hoped would inspire their night in the sheets. they’d debated afterwards whether such a game was even consistent with ‘healthy’ behaviour in a marriage. she’d become sad and accused him of making her out to be some kind of deviant. he’d said, *no, there are just very often times you share things you shouldn’t*. she’d said, *i didn’t mean anything by it. isn’t it best we’re more transparent, for getting through this?* she’d been referring to the ‘desert years’, but may as well have implicated the relationship at large. he’d sulked for the rest of the evening, they’d both gone to bed unhappy. and she’s seeing, today, the residue hasn’t been entirely swept clear from his head; in fact, hardly at all. so when he finishes his work call and says to her aloud, without hesitation, *i’m sorry* (meaning: ‘...for sooking it up last evening’), should all his contradictory annoyance, plainly festering across his mind as per the implants, deem the apology less authentic? or, instead, does such a fog of irritability make it the apology of a *higher* standard, a message of self-overcoming? the expat isn’t sure. she gives a curt apology of her own, reaches into her backpack for the plastic container with four pieces of pistachio baklava. as she presents him with one, she has a pang that it’s an offering he mightn’t deserve. if her game were real, her husband would see this reluctance, too. instead, he’s pleased, scoffs the triangle, and says with pleasure, *where’d you get the idea for that?* the expat isn’t quite sure how to respond. she despairs that neither of them are emitting any kind of preparedness to make dinner. she moves into their bedroom, dumps her bag, falls upon the green sheets of the king-sized centrepiece.

one of the bedroom walls is completely a window. from the high vantage, overlooking an oval roundabout, it’s impossible to not think occasionally, innocently, of jumping. the expat now wonders: how would such an idea look *different* in the mind of someone who really wanted to? difficult to say. beyond a short concession to the desert, there’s a suburb of smaller, concrete apartment buildings that nightly illumine as ceramic, honeycombed lamps. the sunlight has properly drained, the sky provides only gloom. the expat reaches into the school bag and retrieves the rest of the baklava. sticky green-brown triangles. three left, and she could well have all of them. she removes one, sets her teeth upon it, hears the crumpling flakes. as she gathers the taste, peers out from her tower, the sandy plain in daytime turns by association deliciously home-like – grassy and verdant in the shadows. she imagines this picture rippling to the proximal minds of her husband, her neighbour, and contagiously to the rest of the building – as far down as the doorman, perhaps. a transformation, a spam mirage. they’d all share a green perception, and yet, in their elusive, special depths, none of the others could be pining at it quite the same.