

(WEB 1) SENSU / G O S A G A I:

M A S C L E C O N C E A L E R

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;) — Let's start . . . Like this I would usually roundly pinch my thumb and its fingertips with my palm up: It's the shape of a shrub apple. Rose on yellow, crunchy, and juicy shrub apples over which run purple and pink fiber and mineral patterns when they snuggle glossy leaves deeply enmeshed in their green shrubs can in my mind flow as simmering cleats or slivered tears from sugar-dough painted with egg, a crust separating into lengthy shivering flakes that submerge in charred fruit, yet only to suck as from a blunt spout disintegrating peels that slither through apertures in a dumpling or an enveloping pie before fruit flesh and hardy stem flecks pour forth to surround a new moist dough, always again my personal and conceptual turnover, an enlightened teacher's singular gift of riddling forms I conjure on brown slabs of fire to relax, but you are welcome to it too, and a good object fixed in my mind's envisionment like the invaginated tip of a mirrored hollow cone. That's my technique, and I'm getting hot, obsessed with my outfit on the way up to

Bulbun Monastery, and I'm hot, bending the hectic s-bike like a heavenly-embodied paint drop along mud settled concrete grates until the gears' chains synchronize and the bike's chunky tire-treads are turning deep — like me ;) — before the pace quickens on raked dirt trails through long grass, me totally engrossed with structuring my feelings in choices that will knot the trip in my mind so I can tell it, now drinking coldish water or lemongrass, citrus peel, and ginger tea, now mentally cooling off in a big tee and cool teal-peach orca markings blob suit under a puffy coat, clothes and yellow gloves I can slide on in my mind as a means of future return.

That's my technique, and I'm sweating, I squeeze off the bike's clutch with the mutable notches of my clog heels by curling my ankles forward to make the final spiraling incline yet can't, for reasons I won't understand until later — discussing charms on my bracelet with the abbots' circle; being assigned a jump zone and the ultralight glider mecha; threading a long flower stem I

had been gifted by Paige onto the vehicle's heraldry grid — get present.

Then I meet my co-pilot ;)

Naomi, ☺, an incredible fellow amuser and my new friend, I'm thinking then, but later I will ask and you tell me, slips a supple and sporty thumbs-up into my peripheral vision, waggling the 'free form' sign or what gliding instructors used to call the 'for fun' sign, among other things, like 'fatal fatal', something one still finds blue-chalked on double graves, and I see in Naomi's glove's modern green ringlets of chain-mail a series of little smiles — hoops cut by hoops receding around the form of their hand — so I smile and squeeze open the ultralight's pressure brake at real tempo, feeling the grip's internal aero-barre doing lateral spins in the instrument barrel, and Namoi is, first, alarmed and surprised, their response floating up in jokey affect squiggles punctuating the glider's mask-based check-in grids (CIGs), then almost scarily focused as they parse rapidly accruing data artifacts sprung

by happily functioning primary emergency systems into their visor, symbols and facial-forms separating into vertebrae and liquifying fats as the refreshing squiggles partly scarily close in on their panic variants, our rig suddenly cooling in the eternal moment — the only one of us calm — my mouth is shaped like I'm tasting great hot coffee, I mean I just love gliding, then Naomi surprises me by lifting the manual/cancel bracket from their pilot's ring and starting an athletic talk with their hands over the free and open air . . . we dive, I'm thrown bowing over the flaring eggplant and jade hash of twenty-six clicky and expressive console keys, squeezing both gloves trying to read the grip, aero-barre going so wild with the speed of free drop blood rushes into my cheeks and ears and I see my own seriousness register in the CIGs over dormant shame lines, lol, then see Naomi's lines fuse into a jellyfish crystal (their icon) which intercedes on materializing air tokens (a focusing sequence), each of these navigating complex decision-making trees . . . but the

interface dims, and I see the real shivering air like Dien's invisible vipers' trails, very blue and mapping the sky: we're in trouble, and our bad exposure signal pops . . . and shudders roll through my aspect of the system, I hear the mini-rotors' thin drill tones go wide . . . and get stunned into a consonant drone, throwing off a bready scent that decays as my visor clicks back on with rapidly alternating bouquets over chilling metallic blood flavors, but Naomi issues a blunt swoop . . . and we're gliding, nose up, then flatly coasting, and the air's warmer here, I get a big wash of passionate joy through my face and sinuses, dig my thumbs into the parallel push-bars to finally relock artificial-pilot, and go hands free, Naomi smash-slots the bracket, then I'm wiping my brow, laughing out into the slithery wind, fresh liquid tearing from my eyes, I'm crying laughing, I put it all on the line and had fun, and Naomi is laughing and patting my forearm on the center console . . . before the moment passes and they relax their shoulders into the seat's gel cush-

ions to fret pure balance into high-end instruments they had zip-tied around us on the raw struts of our glider, a contemporary equivalent to the stickered Happiness Mk 1 model most amusers had access to through urban resource libraries before licensure normalization for j-class vehicles. From our jump zone off the Sulbu coast, where, wreathed by true and semi-professional j-class vehicles and other ultralight glider mechas sporting and winking the hoop-and-lancing league's balloon-animal colors, Naomi cracked jokes on the week's festivals and big games, we had drifted south and then west, then flicked on and flown like a teal splattered lemon dolphin decal at the sleek craft's maximum altitude over soft space and open, sparkling water, Naomi pulse-modulating the wing-sets at the peak of our flight and pushing our little engine into the pink zone to slice through cross-currents, impressive moves which were, over an additive series of subtle occasions, concretizing the seriousness of a holographic Aries seal I had noticed molded into the

subsurface of their slotted contractor's license, a designation I heard about when I was making deliveries — before, that is, contracts for my and my friends' ceramics atelier set me up to do things like, I don't know ;), take a handshake trip to three suppliers in the imperial city for arts and culture, a place I never dreamed I'd see in person — and now, descending first through a pale haze, then fresh, salted clouds which smooshed aside like white putty, I shamelessly gasped into the headset, alone for a beat with my first sighting, a sprawling prize, of the astonishing New Benthos, city of ten thousand faces . . .

Plus one . . . :)

From thick canopies of layered forest along the island's eastern coastline — an undulating emerald strip split by flashing water from an urban core I knew I would be stunned by: building upon building familiar from the serialized videos and games that constitute and elaborate amusers' governing language and story media — the cap

of a falsely-sloppy pyramid lazily protrudes, changing in columnar diagonals of sun that open paths in hazy aerated tree oils and mobile arches of color wavering through atmospheric vapors, fecund sign of the island's health and delight. Naomi had switched on the maps, and a glittering topographic model webbed in potential trajectories piled into a rotating form on the dash, a bubbly loaf split as if by refraction into rough bulks shattered into what in reality constitute hundreds of tight islands, rich with folds like a brain and cut by snaking salt water. On the ocean below, countless vessels — though I'm sure they count :) — could be traced along the vortices engendered in slow, expanding paths, watery triangles licking out into shapes like helical twirlers' ribbons that stream from two pleasure ports on the island's southern quadrant: a matrix of bars, clubs, and hotels extending onto the water through sculptural constructs and floating bridges registered on the map as plates of glassy chain, dashed lines and regular geometries bobbing into

tortoise-blue horizon . . . I was having a moment; some of the most advanced dance music is happening right there. Naomi reached out into the map's semi-liquidity effects to circle a landing site with their index finger, so I hit them with a thumbs up, then tapped the headset:

“Let’s take a loop?” I could tell Naomi just loved gliding, and their smile through the riled up transitioning visor’s lens lit me up as a friend.

“Let’s, ☺,” and they shifted their weight in the seat, pulling up the lever, their bicep relaxing and tightening in the sun as the glider rolled.

Now New Benthos crisped into a wide curve in the frontal frame, and I could easily picture, as is suggested by a Dien poem, my and Naomi’s spines and skulls as two flexible eyes on stems like eels, our mouths split with wonder at the taking in of our own smile curling before us. I saw too, with needless surprise considering the heavy orders of figural ceramics and fine and free pottery and dishes my handshakes were in-

tended to formally promise, that recreational zones in the south are twinned in the north by rugged industrial ports, coupled or approached by immense freighters, known (by me, through Steph's family) for their statist ocean worker cooperatives and hardcore bands. Naomi indexed a site tucked into a dip on the northeast and took the slow, tricky pass into airspace over a sprawl of instantly recognizable ruins, collapsed stones overflowing a knotty cliff face where foam laces the eroding columns of a genuinely ancient water castle, a site whose artifactual layers one can find preserved across New Benthos between simple gates wrapped in carefully maintained arrangements of rigid gray, brown, and white vines peppered with evergreen buds. Having sat neglected and half-nested for centuries in surf, this temple of water became a kernel object of the city's refreshed (aka Web 1) Sensu/Go Network, an interfacially negotiated and imperium-maintained virtual architecture in which the entire island's topography has been doubled at one to one

scale and where the water castle, a magnificent work of designer ancient studies, now stands anew, sprawling and gleaming as the iconic heart of this sensuous, figure-bound ecosystem, a local information network which can only be accessed on the island or in its pervasive waters, the latter entirety of which, it is perhaps too obvious to relate, could have earned designation as a 'key concern' or imperial city through natural sublimity alone had revelations about the original Benthos not necessitated the act — I mean sorry, but it's exciting for me ;)

I started snapping pics to send to Steph, who was also going to freak, continuing to instinctually twist the camera's power band after every shot to preserve energy for our landing systems, a precaution I realize is probably out of date :)~ One of the first pots ceramicists new to our workshop are asked to throw is a copy of Pot C, a work recovered (as seen in Exploration) from the water castle, and they're usually asked to tag it with C's sentimental face icon. Steph must have

made ten thousand of them during instruction, and I was getting overwhelmed looking at the original's niche through a telephoto lens, but then pelicans had undertaken our carriage, and I lost myself in iridescent lines at play along the face-like uppers of their wings, their mutating formations of overlapping symmetries suddenly and unmistakably receiving the gestalt of a powerfully mobile octopus, that trembling symbol of old Benthos, and as I greedily gathered into my eyes the auspicious sign it crumbled over tidal swamp lands into the smoothly individuated flights of truly wondrous sea birds, one of whom, anonymous and presumably long reabsorbed into the island's vital cycles, perhaps served as model for the irrepressible Suwa, one of my favorite figures: Suwa, who helped me realize then that I had been up very early and was fading out fast without a great piece of toast or a fruit. Naomi luckily caught my eye through layers of face-mask as my mind wandered across the landmass, contour maps dipped like a pair of loose shades across their cheekbones,

so I pointed down, towards the ocean cliffs, making a harsh angle with my wrist and one finger, then I pointed to the place on my wrist where a watch would be, though mine truly was there under my loose mesh sleeve, an object I had picked up as a way of copying someone I liked, and I could feel it smoothly move along my wrist bone like a piece of secret water. Naomi tapped their vividly marbled cream, gold, and purple headset, nodding and very interested:

“The hotel has us. Let’s confirm an approach?” Coalescent winking and smiling affect squiggles hesitated on the CIGs as Naomi glanced over and turned us towards the urban core through slickly materializing wisps of cloud and zephyrs, me catching Naomi’s shocking profile over colossal city units and the tumbling green dice of forests being divided into further grids and abstract volumes, a destination of resplendency carved by dazzling, reticular waterways; what could I say?

Thumbs up . . .

MEETING 1

Soft, balmy rain, fresh and sporadic, passed us on descent, and as it cleared anew the landing crisped: Big Face-style tile-work on the intended building's roof disfiguring under grippy translucent pads scoured by use depicted a happy Hydro the Amuser lifting into air the very flower they are said to have looked past to see into their own future. I stepped out into the flat cup artisans had lain down as the figure's rightmost eye awed, seeing for myself the delicate blue edging that marked Hydro's inevitable and teary laughter.

"M. Kelia Dar?" I turned to address the voice; this was M. 'Purple Citron' Diuielu, M. Gess Zahn's representative. I had been asked to expect them at the hotel.

"Of Talent Baby Ceramics," I nodded, carefully unfolding the firm's reputation in front of me like an impersonalizing banner; but thick winds staggered my voice. We had landed at two-hundred meters and my response, I thought then, had probably gone completely unregistered beyond the circumference of my own mouth's cheeks. Purple

Citron remained very still. I removed the outers on my indigo flight gloves as I stepped forward into an entrance canopy to take their hands, which were heavy with exo-skeletal powered-armor folded back to their elbows, and I looked into their eyes, an amuser's sacred wells. Faces we may see in an eye, it has been said, return to address us in dreams, and I wondered who Purple Citron would expect to greet this evening.

I love meeting new people, but they replaced their sunglasses, so I retrieved my bag, still blown away, formulating questions about the tile-works at our feet, and then was being hustled off the deck so I waved to Naomi, very cool programming our vehicle to loop the island on drone mode, and they laughed, waving, and I was mouthing like 'cool, see you later' because they have family on New Benthos and we were going to link back up in two days for a glide back to Sulbu. Two soldiers in baggy, tropical-marine jumpsuits cinched with sleekly woven loops of cord and spring-loaded clasps at the wrists and waist shared

hushed sarcastic jokes and a rudimentarily rolled cantaloupe cigarette at the entrance to a service elevator which, I would find, had been swept out and keyed to hold, and their exhalations were as rough lilac bundles that fissured into whip-like lines of smoke across the landing. A third soldier spoke with Naomi, unloading their set of cute duffel bags.

“M. Cail, please remain on the roof and expect my call,” Purple Citron began, and the first soldier smushed their papery joint through a mesh mouth on the wall, showering their checkered glove with fumes and sparks. “Building Controller M. Silic has assured me that M. Zahn’s helicopter has exclusive permission to dock for the duration of our stay. See that it remains true.”

M. Cail nodded and tapped the barrel extension of an assault-rifle-type weapon they were carrying with their opposite hand.

“Our apologies for the additional security M. Dar; you must be quite anxious to engage Sensu/Go.” Purple Citron had turned

to address me as I was smiling over their shoulder to M. Cail, whose twist of the lift key prompted the pieces of its massive doors to silently collapse outwards, gradually spilling a neutral scent and mauve light from the elevator shaft. “M. Lancs,” they nodded to the second soldier, “will accompany us for now.”

I smiled to M. Lancs. I was not ‘anxious’ to enter the the Sensu/Go Network, as had been stated, however naturally elated I of course had been at the opportunity, and however much I continued to be, then, of course.

After traveling several floors we left M. Lancs in the elevator, and I followed Purple Citron into a shallow, well-furnished suite perfumed by unkempt privets in loosely figurative pink and white pottery. On the western wall, several meters of floor-to-ceiling window permitted an awesome view to the sea, hovering like an airbrushed squiggly of sun, sky, and beach between Wheel District mega-buildings I knew to be enclosing four of New Benthos’ most prominent

production houses. My favorite, still, *Après-Mesh*, whose saturnalian approach to color had been mellowed at this time by rebukers of ex-director M. Mugdalene, sat occluded by the austere House Dozo, and I made up a little story as a mental note to catch the former structure's famously animated facade from the artificial hills where Demand was filmed.

"I'm informed that M. Zahn has the privilege of joining you on your opening excursion to our *Sensu/Go* Network?" Purple Citron had tied a small curtain back from brown smoked glass, where a small individual in an extremely fine suit contentedly reclined on a lounge of plush orange straps looped across a fluidly-sculpted mirror-aluminum frame. At hand on a round glass table smoked a short cigarillo, and flowerless orchid stems lay woozy lines of shadow across foreign equipment I nonetheless recognized to be high-end by its simplified forms. "M. Zahn, I'm pleased to introduce M. Kelia Dar of Talent Baby Ceramics. M. Dar, please feel welcome to speak at a nor-

mal volume.”

I stood clasping my hands together, somewhat overwhelmed, and large, fast groups of sea-birds passed pseudo-shadows along the surf of my periphery. The figure rose and gently bowed towards the divider, so I copied them.

“M. Dar,” M. Zahn began, as soft as a fresh fine paintbrush, and I instinctively stepped closer to the glass, though, as Purple Citron had noted, the room itself carried their amplified voice, “I’m certain that M. Diuielu has explained the need for these dreadful layers of security. On behalf of the firm, please accept our warmest welcome to New Benthos.”

“M. Zahn,” I began, but paused at M. Zahn’s wavering palms.

“Colleagues in the arts address me by the name drafted to me in my second firm; please feel welcome to call me Gess.”

Nodding, I began again, self-consciously smiling, only halfway into a bow: “M. Gess, your invitation has delighted every member of Talent Baby Ceramics, and it is my honor

to present you with a token of our appreciation for your interest.” I removed from my bag my collective workshop’s sole museum-grade gel-cloth, an exquisite piece of functional material, and from this extracted a plain, globular cup, to which Purple Citron politely gasped.

“Oh — my!” M. Zahn appeared truly moved and had by now nearly pressed their forehead to the glass. “M. Dar, your firm’s reputation proceeds you,” they said, turning their head on their neck and ducking to get a better look through reflections I couldn’t see, “. . . I am now certain it will follow.” They addressed me with their eyes: “But let us enter the Sensu/Go Network; I would be pleased to speak to you with greater intimacy.” They were motioning with both hands to the equipment on their table. Purple Citron had drawn out a slab from the wall, assembling a simple interface from instruments I hadn’t seen them extract, finally wiping down the touch-points and stepping back.

“M. Zahn will demonstrate the simplest

entrance; when you are comfortably outlined, please feel welcome to engage this link," said Purple Citron. "I will be outside." They stepped backwards nodding and, I noted, newly serious with their eyes closed, first looking to M. Zahn and then to myself, as they slid the woody-grass weave on the room's door shut.

M. Zahn smiled: "We will be quite safe, I assure you." I remained unclear of their concern but was emotionally unprepared to inquire at this stage of our introductions, and I tried to not squint with my lips open. They sat back into their recliner, and I molded my spine onto the single-curve chaise longue that accompanied Purple Citron's display of light-weight equipment, following M. Zahn's putting on of each piece with objects that appeared most equivalent on my end while trying not to embarrass myself, feeling a stimulated hunger biting into my attention.

I then felt a slippage, something like green time, piece upon piece, twisting open to pass with a blush into fruit, being

crushed underfoot into rank wine. I perceived the lights shift, and I sat up on the chaise longue, momentarily weightless with confusion. The room itself, as well as the few finely crafted objects within, had remained still, yet the entire structure and design had almost certainly undergone an alteration in proportions, and a dimmer on the picture window, I then believed, had flicked over to an obsidian opacity setting.

“May I enter?” I turned to see that the partition between my and M. Zahn’s rooms had vanished, and the executive, whose hand I intended to shake, last seen supine in their chair, now hesitating on a single line of freshly instantiated pinkish brick, a threshold at which, it now came to my consciousness like an emergent bliss, I saw not only M. Zahn, but, in truth, an enlarged, translucent figure of Belicio in light armor and an exquisite cloak, mapped like a gestural puppet to M. Zahn’s every subtle movement, a gauzy body of light in primary colors suspended perhaps ten centimeters out from M. Zahn’s tan suit at every point. I

understood, and for the first time, it can't be overstated, that within the Sensu/Go Network, M. Zahn, a stranger who I knew to have met moments ago, and Belicio, a close mental friend since my childhood whose video and game work I and most of my peers had absorbed through focused, always entertained, study, were co-present. Belicio's cloak — I finally recognized the reference — was itself a costume referent: Belicio's role as Diertich in House Dozo's stage production of the epic Strangler.

“I can see,” M. Zahn and Belicio said, “your recognition of my mask — an auspicious choice, isn't it?” Their eyes heaved like gigantic, mutable tear drops, and Belicio's floppy smile hit that crooked line of seen-it-all bemusement I had always known them to exhibit. I was sliding and realised I was sat up at an odd distance from my chair. I looked at my hands, turning them at the wrists, and saw there, too, slightly enlarged hands of high intensity light in primary colors.

“Please do come in . . . I am . . .” I was

dazed.

“I know who you are . . . See for yourself,” they began, striding forward, their right palm landing on a place slightly higher than where I perceived my left shoulder to have been with a feeling akin to tactile information I had to interpret instead of the innately legible embodiment and warmth of muscle on muscle. “You’ll quickly adjust.” Their other hand, palm up and goofily big, nearly bobbling in Belicio’s ‘trick’ chain-mail glove, directed me in a strong curve to the dark window panel, where I now saw in reflection . . . myself . . . in a mask of Giacomo(!), dressed in a grayish suit for casual business, my body and the shell of light in instantaneous response. I could truly do nothing but gasp at the vision, to which M. Zahn replied, laughingly trimming the moment:

“Amusers familiar with the fracture of our great houses’ media output — and especially skilled technicians such as yourself, M. Dar — are often surprised when they encounter a figure’s masks in *Sensu/GN*.” They

let go of my shoulder and waved their hand and their mask's glove's fingers around like effusively dedicated puppies nosing up the lids of so many big reed baskets, but abruptly dropped the act. "Ours have been set to a low opacity for your benefit; the effect can be sickening for an experienced wearer, though some amusers of course prefer it."

I could feel the arc of Giacomo's legginess at my hips and knees as I bounced, and M. Zahn turn away as I started to smile, getting a sense of self.

"My experience," they continued, clinking their mask's hands together with their own hands visibly gripping a squishy negative artifact in the area where they attempted to meet, an action I immediately assayed to bead the sensation onto my experience's necklace, picturing Sola's inquisitive face as they placed my story along their own collarbones and struggled to tie off its clasp, "suggests that low opacity masks — their ubiquitous blue, yellow, and red panels and beads, that is, set to be at least partially see-through — assist with an amuser's first en-

gagements with our imperial city's famous system of discourse, and, moreover, I'm certain a psychological explanation could be found." They looked to me as if perhaps I had been waiting to reveal it.

"I'm . . . Giacomo," I started, but it was too much, and I felt an old wooziness assert itself like a parent returned from the world. No figure could mean more to me than Giacomo.

"Not at all, of course," they stated with some alarm.

I dopily swayed into the silhouette of my new shape, uneasy for M. Zahn to continue — however much their intonation had attempted to signal the completion of their thought — and I watched the mask's bunched clothing wobble in the wall's ebony gloss.

"The eighteen figures that constitute our imperium's 'core' referents exist as has so often been said, 'fully' in the Sensu/Go core. I can assure you of this. Over the course of a figure's recurrent durations, one mask is exactly pulled at a rate of, say, n times per second depending on external factors.

Amusers like yourself living outside the imperial cities — but please do correct me if I am mistaken, as I will be extremely interested — know our figures from their appearances in the great houses' media productions, where 'myth is played and law declared'; but their birth in this form, it may surprise you to hear, was associated with the automated production of masks necessary to interface with the first Visual/Go Network, which no one alive can truthfully claim to have experienced. Nearly all meaningful expression on Benthos, and certainly all official discourse, occurs inside of the network, just as we are now . . . Stop me if I'm going too quickly."

I looked at M. Zahn in the reflection, first through my own Giacomo, then through their Belicio, focusing hard to see M. Zahn once again as the individual I intended to impress. "We're at the hotel?"

M. Zahn lightly laughed, but I could tell they now wished to move on. "You haven't advanced from your chaise longue, M. Dar; I can ask, with your consent of course, my

associate M. Diuielu to send an image of your person, at rest in the room in which you sit, into the Sensu/Go Network?"

They held up and were wiggling a device which would have presumably sent such a request, or received such an image.

"As a topographic double of New Benthos, the Sensu/Go Network's spatial plasticity is highly circumscribed, you understand. New Benthos' amusers say that we enter at an 'equivalent' point; we are therefore 'in' the hotel's network-based geographical equivalent, which in this case shares a name. Infrastructural and architectural alterations are made digitally in Sensu/Go, of course, no less than materially on New Benthos; but our worlds are fixed by a principled dance of relative determinism."

I had many questions, but wished to exploit the spirit of balanced concreteness I had anchored to my renewed desire to represent my workshop with seriousness and respect. M. Zahn went on:

"See for yourself." They touched the wall and, as our reflections faded with the win-

dow panel's opacity, I had to shield my eyes from daylight. I looked out on the same city I had giddily consumed minutes ago and slowly became worked up anew: although broadly recognizable, it contained dramatic differences, none more so than the construction of the four production houses, which now enveloped vastly expanded structures and nearly blocked my sightline to the water. I kept trying to catch my breath, but each tableau in the conic fire of my vision touched me as if with the waterfall's kiss, and I melted into the rising vapors of enjoyment. This was the New Benthos I knew; but I jumped as something in my pocket began to vibrate, eliciting a look from my host.

"Your firm's contact would have been logged in the City Directory when you applied for entry; perhaps another client?"

I said I didn't know, admiring the little hands-free communication device's pulsing and chimes in my hands.

"They'll leave a message." My head was swimming, and I strongly felt the need to maximally and competently push through

the interrupting moment's impact.

“M. Zahn, I’m so happy to have had the opportunity to speak with you.” I was being genuine. The schedule of M. Zahn’s firm’s order for pottery would demand a continuous dribble of labor for the next two seasons, and this patronage could alone keep our studio afloat for the contract’s duration, depending on how we carried ourselves. “I expect to remember this moment, forever. Allow me to confirm your work order with a handshake.” I took their hands, or my Giacomo took their Belicio’s hands, my hands hovering slightly away from their palms, still visible through the mask, and I peered into M. Zahn’s smiling eyes through Belicio’s face, in complete agreement.

“Thank you, M. Dar, for your time. As my schedule allows me to reserve only one day per week to meet with artists and manufacturers, I will leave you.” They gazed out the window. “M. Diuielu must collect your equipment, but see that you check your messages before retiring the mask, which I hope you have enjoyed.”

“Thank you, again,” I said, attempting a slight bow as I turned to them; but the continuing, oddly psychological weight of my Giacomo mask carried me forward into a full, stumbling step.

“Do take care,” M. Zahn said, smiling, patting both of my arms. “And please remember that this is New Benthos — we don’t repeat ourselves, anymore.” They exited the room with a small laugh, an amuser through and through.

I inhabited for a moment my being, which I experienced as enhanced, alone, gazing at the door, then turned again to take in this second New Benthos from the vantage afforded by the room. Something strange occurred to me, then, some residual confusion about Sensu/Go, and I slid open the door, looking both ways down the hall, which was empty except for a series of acrylic paintings on large paper adorning either wall. I was naturally intrigued by absolutely everything but unsure how long it was intended that I remain alone, so I recused my strong impulse to explore the

building. Back at the window with the door sealed, I removed the coms device from my pocket and folded out the headset with a bud and eye-piece: at first it reminded me of a glider's CIG, but far more ornate iconography began to populate the scene, perhaps accounting for my feeling-states, I thought, and the mask's momentous references? I realized I couldn't place the Giacomo, and thought for the first time that my and my colleagues' knowledge of the figures' stories must be very incomplete.

I accessed what I took to be the equivalent of a gold torus that had appeared on the device's surface when chiming and it opened, facializing beneath two tear drop eyes like a figure's, and a long, slim ribbon for a mouth began to wiggle as an audio file played back: "M. Kelia Dar? This is M. Datari Justine." A well-known ex-member of the guild from which Talent Baby had sprung. They had, following a friend, applied through the imperial offices for relocation to New Benthos four years ago and hadn't been heard from since, a not unex-

pected state of affairs given the necessarily restricted out-going communications of imperial cities, nearly all of which contained official appearances from figures as managed by large production houses, the mechanics of which I was, finally, with some euphoria, beginning to understand for the first time. I was happy to hear from M. Justine, but surprised. “I saw Talent Baby Ceramic’s ID ping when you were registered as a representative entrant to New Benthos — I would love to ask you something. What are your plans? I’ll be at Nightclub C, soon and later. Please come through, or . . .” Then the message stuttered and closed, and the icon’s facial features slid into the apparently infinitely deep hoop at their center before the icon popped up on its rim and rolled back like a goopy wheel to where it had been situated.

I was, of course, flattered and worried. M. Justine had outlined some of the collective’s original pedagogical charter, something I respected them for as a distant peer.

I followed M. Zahn’s procedure to retire

my mask: thumb to the palm pad below my pinky, thumb to lowest pinky segment, thumb to middle pinky segment, to top pinky segment, to palm pad below my ring finger, etc., counting down from sixteen, and I found myself back in the real chaise longue between the seven and eight count, slightly wet around my temples and armpits but very relaxed. The room was how it had been, perhaps dimmer. I looked towards my watch, but I hadn't seen the time beforehand, and the light outside was approximately . . . the same. M. Zahn's equipment remained steady behind the partition, and, standing, I saw, behind my own reflection, their body lying still in the shadows of the executive cell. I heard a tap at the door.

"M. Dar?" It was Purple Citron; I slid open the panel.

"My meeting with M. Zahn is complete," I said. Purple Citron glanced at the brown glass as if I had done something wrong. "They stayed in," I started, realizing that I had no sense of what should be conveyed. "Additional meetings, I believe." I looked

over at M. Zahn, copying Purple Citron, who had moved on.

“I trust that your experience was satisfactory? M. Zahn is a knight and has been introducing visitors to this form of our Sensu/Go Network for many seasons.”

I considered the right questions. “Please,” I finally said, clumsily attempting to fold and wind the interfacial equipment, remembering that I had not seen Purple Citron unpack while they watched my hands. “Feel welcome to call me Kelia.” I paused to address them with my eyes, passing the misshapen equipment housing at a pace that deliberately prompted their acknowledgement of the gesture.

They smiled and nodded. “Allow me, M. Kelia Dar, to demonstrate the simplest packing technique for transporting this interface: M. Zahn has indicated that you are welcome to use it for the duration of your stay.”

I said nothing as Purple Citron folded the wires into their small keeper-case, barely retaining the imagistic information as a

growing enervation widely faded up my body.

I thanked Purple Citron again and therefore said my goodbyes, partially finding my way and partially being escorted to a hub from which I would be transported, while snacking on green grapes with seeds, which I spat into a fine shallow bowl — maker-stamp Sap, a reference Paige would like — and a blood orange, an additional distance to the section of the hotel — completely unlike, however equally well appointed — that contained my residential suite. The entire complex, I noted, counting as I pulled my finger across a map embossed on the wall, probably encompassed a shocking four urban units.

Wow, so eventually I picked up sparkling water from the common area on the way to my room and then stretched out, slathered my face with normal water, and drank some normal water and sparkling water, and then I switched my outfit out for the clothes in my bag because I wanted a differ-

ent look for a solo venture into the Sensu/Go Network, still uncertain of how a mask's opacity settings could be altered or how it would be set. Then I was just sitting there for a second, taking it all in, and in my room there's lots of early afternoon sun from a skylight on these kind of plush, fern-green couch cushions nesting in a walnut frame with mirrored leg cups, so I folded the voluminous cream-colored sweatshirt I hadn't put on up into quarters and took a quick like five minutes nap, really just letting my eyes flutter and my body warm up, and then I drank more water and put my hair back and drank cold tea. The hotel had provided a second complimentary link and I had chosen while booking the trip, not really knowing what I was doing, the amuser Carelle's mask from the time they found that big leaf, partly as a reference to an old Talent Baby 'big leaf' design which everyone always thinks is so funny and insists on getting before changing their mind, and it's like I breathe in a little bit deeper with the equipment over my face and I'm still in the

same room, but in a different, even nicer chair, layers of intricate weaving, in the same spot I was sitting. This time I'm assigned a 'world guide' by a lobby menu I wasn't expecting and, surprised to be prompted by a selection animation, choose the creature Yamah because their fur reminds me of the truck color of an amuser who used to sell my cousin pseudoephedrine putty . . .

I don't really need to go on about my own excitement but, really, for me, this was it. Independently logging into the imperium's Sensu/Go Network? You can imagine: I recognize so many places along the way, because I had engaged widely and with a huge appetite so many pieces of media developed by the big cultural production houses, all of which develop pieces in Sensu/GN before releasing static works through various real-world communications platforms, and in addition there are so many amusers logged in that afternoon; everyone is wearing one of the eighteen figures' masks (Giacomo, Carelle, Dien, Hydro, Elise, Suwa,

etc.); and every mask is a reference to the iconic stories these awesome figures have acted out. It was amazing, and Yamah, who was very funny and friendly like a clumsy and jokey puppy, and who loved my Carelle mask and thought my little story about it was amusing too — pointing out that the look on Carelle's face when they see the big leaf is the basis, in a highly reduced form, for one of House Dozo's insignia, which I didn't know — brought me right to the spot M. Justine had outlined, on time, an area only slightly distant from the nightclub action I always craved and naturally sought out or leaned towards. I was loving everything though, including my happy and friendly fellow amusers, their fun and interesting virtual masks, and the ambient mixture of music pumping from corridors and staircases leading to different zones in this place. I mean just getting there was, for me, so insane because Nightclub C is in one of the network's most heavily populated tourist areas . . . but let me go on.

M. Justine, who I instantly recognized

because they were dressed and wearing their hair in the precise manner they had described for this purpose behind a very transparent Elene mask, walked right up smiling and handed me a soft, faux-leather envelope, rolled once and bound with double-wide elastic. I could feel a semisoft data gel inside the pack resettling into its parallel grilles with an uneasy consistency: Would I relay this hello back to Talent Baby, a series of notes and observations on our recent work, and express how happy they were to meet me? Steam from a tempura restaurant exhaust rushed up my neck and into my hair. I thought they would want a catch-up on the state of the studio and we could eat some noodles, but M. Justine was immediately being so heavy. They looked sick.

“Nice to see you,” they said, with a long wink, and their face froze and slid open into curved planes like a rose, cloudy shivering droplets at the core of their skull in a diminishing sphere.

“Rude,” Yamah said, turning, “they disconnected . . .” I looked at them as they

pawed into the vanishing salutation. I didn't know what to say.

"I'm sure its fine."

"What did they give you?" They were getting their eyesight level with the bundle, bopping the bottom to get a sense of its weight. "Let's see."

I snapped the purple band against the neon yellow fabric, almost certainly cut and sewn by M. Justine, I guessed, from some exotic material laying around their current studio, insofar as I believed then that they had moved here to construct virtual objects, but ultimately I really didn't know. They didn't seem like they wanted to talk, and of course I had known other artists who are complete social freaks, one way or the other, plus I figured it was an info package for Talent Baby as a whole, some kind of depersonalized version of the catchup I had probably unfairly over-imagined.

"Um, not here."

Yamah looked at me. "If it's data-based, it will download to the mobile card with which you logged into the interface."

“Thanks,” I said. “Let’s go eat.”

“Hold on.” They were looking over my shoulder and down into the courtyard of a casino area. “I have to go take care of this.”

I wanted to object, to whatever extent that was allowable, but they were moving off towards a group of other world guides slotting into a table set under three potted palms. Jir, I now know, a green serpent as wide as a tenor recorder, spotted Yamaha, and the two were in each other’s faces before I knew what was happening. A couple came over to the dyad, laughing, and Jir broke off to consult with them. Yamaha turned back to me as I hustled over, still moving oddly in the continuously unexpectedly large Carelle mask — continuously unexpected because Carelle moves with, in my opinion, very restrained manners; large because that’s how all masks, I had learned, sit on the body.

“Let me see what’s in your bag, dude.”

I hadn’t really taken a look.

“I bet these tourists spent some money.” Yamaha moved some double-triangles sunglasses and took from my Carelle’s bag a

crayon-like stick of dense grass; they crumbled it up with three little fingers into their palm, exposing two teal pods, then met my eye. "This is a stimulant."

"What can I do to help," I offered, confused.

"If you want to make a bet, log it through your card now. They probably sent a request."

I looked up at the other amusers; one of them wore the generic mask of a Stim-Ram, and one wore Bobbu in the throes of death, a discovery that absolutely shocked me and turned my stomach. My card had indeed begun to glow, orange and green, and I saw their "10k assface >:)" message scroll past. I had no sense of this sub-game. "Yamah, can we just go," I whispered.

"Ha ha, no way."

I frowned. "What do I do?"

"Bump the number and don't worry about it," they said, looking back towards the other guide. "I'm going to beat their ass." They punched their open palm, left to right.

I sent an updated bid, just an absurd bump I thought, hoping to avoid the game, and the couple stopped and chatted it over for a second.

I called over to them: "What's going on?" Jir was slithering with what looked like genuine aggression. I turned to Yamaha. "Do you want to talk about this?"

They put the seeds they had exposed under their tongue and turned around. Bobbu, their eyes rolling back in their head as foam caked on their bangs, confirmed the bet. A small crowd had gathered, some on drinks from the vegan burger shop. I tucked the envelope M. Justine had given me into my jacket and zipped up as the world guides kind of circled each other. Jir whipped out their snake buttocks such that their tail clubbed Yamaha right in the forehead, and, bewildered and upset, I had to be held back by the crowd; but then something must have happened because Yamaha went to work. They hit low, then high, feigned one way or another, then delivered an astonishing uppercut that demolished Jir. They whispered

something in Jir's ear, then came back over.

"Fuck dude," I sort of said, but they just dug out a water carton from the bag, laughing and sweating. The crowd had already dissipated, patting my or Yamah's head with laughter as they went.

"Let's eat :)"

"Wait," I think I said, but at that point I must have really fallen asleep, like for real, because I remember what Yamah had told me on the way to the nightclub to expect if that were to happen: I would hear, as I then did, Droso the bone breaker clicking a new set of oblong game pieces into their vertebrae, a sound which gathered ornamental flourishes as it echoed up from the sphere of my perception. Nobody beats Droso, I understood, though strategies existed for surviving the first waves of gameplay into early, non-REM sleep, something I knew from lore around the simplified version that had become popular as rapid slapping cards. It isn't safe, supposedly, to hit deep sleep while entertaining Sensu/Go, so Droso's function

is necessary, and when they beat you, you know they're doing it to protect you: I would notice in my short time on New Benthos that etched expressions of gratitude to Droso or oddly proportioned statuettes of the entity, as popular as any figure, preside as carvings over many exiting doorways. Across the Sensu/Go Network, one will encounter sleep-gamers slumped in the streets, fruitlessly battling a Droso whose deep, delicate tactics and skillful maneuvering reaches out, night after night, to protect their brains from damage, these amusers' increasingly gauzy masks losing weight and form as an inevitable lose is blue-chalked into their public book. These brief spectacles bind up clusters, I was happy to find, of symbiotic street photographers and air-brush taggers, the painters' layers and gestural volumes modulating in real time on the digital bodies as Droso partakes their squares. I was instantly thrown by Droso's opening game scenario and decoupled from the GN, coming up to myself on an oversized couch stuffed with flower fleece; but

then I ate a small bowl of brown rice in a thin, spicy tomato broth with tahini and toasted sunflower seeds mixed through, regretting not absorbing more of the experience. Yamah had seen Droso once, apparently, as the double bed of two coffin-like trunks bound with braided ropes to steel rings along a truck frame, wearing an unknown mask as translucent as the fleshy and blunted cups of the leathery succulents that line New Benthos' streets in sandy basins. Their friend's friend, a snail-like world guide's amuser, had fallen asleep and lay slumped against their work, unmoving, for an increasingly surprising duration; they had sprayed a large R, Yamah told me, commenting without prompt that it stands for 'revenue share', on crinkle-cut sheet metal bolted over a service window cut into tan bricks, some of which crumbled around their steel pins, then had laid crisp mask characters over the squishy letter-form's soft edges, which bled from beneath the emotive faces. Letter-mask adoption had rapidly complicated street photographers' tasks,

Yamah had added:

“The old rivalries are breaking down,” they said. “I can feel new dynamics cascade through this profound double-writing, and perhaps a royal road to more clever and fashionable styles.” They were very interested in street art, which makes sense for a creature tasked with navigating ‘M-Web’, as I kept hearing Sensu/Go’s iteration of New Benthos being called, more intimately than most. Then I pulled close the heavy and kushy cloth shades, and I went to sleep for maybe twenty-five minutes :)

MEETING 2

Groggy, I woke up very and hungry, straightened myself, and went out of the room following signs with a plate. On the long wooden platform visible from a flight of double-wide steps dramatically set with hundreds of naturally rosé, peach, and mint-green streaked stone 3/4 scale figure statues, I was surprised to see the young soldier M. Cail walking with Purple Citron. They carried new, yellow–brown–blue gradient backpacks, Purple Citron’s powered-armor was fuming at the seams as if it had just been used, and they were wearing their sunglasses even though the wooden platform looked very dim, all things I just noticed very quickly in the moment of perception, which naturally instantly transpired. I arrived to the dining room and ate an omelette that had been cooked on browned black pepper, garlic, and cashew in evoo, as well as a grapefruit and kale salad. I then ate a shrub apple turnover, my taste for which is obviously the basis for my relaxation meditation, because why wouldn’t it be, and the whole time I had been drinking

probably two to three coffees. This was at about sixteen hours; I had been up since before sunrise except for two little naps, and I hadn't eaten anything but the grapes and a blood orange and my brown rice bowl since the breakfast circle at Bulbun Monastery where I had been provided stunning tea, herbal broth, fish skin whisked through candle-flame, and a second equally good tea.

As my second meeting was scheduled to begin, I hustled back to my room, digging the aesthetic of everything. I hadn't even left the hotel complex, but my experience on New Benthos had already made me feel like I had absorbed a material sense for objects, spaces, and data-types I had only ever encountered through serialized media productions, something which of course could have made me feel closer to the figures than to my own friends, but at the time I thought quickly enough to worry about how I would change only if such change took place, to quote sweet Bobbu in Dilemma.

I engaged with the interface I had ac-

cepted from M. Zahn, it being preferable to the hotel's, but at the threshold of the Sensu/Go Network I found myself accepting, happily but outwardly studiedly coolly, a 'rare' Giacomo mask from the highly made-up (and, I should add, wearing a dazzling, water gem studded necklace and a bracelet with two charms which featured on my own wrist) M. Felicity, who, so obviously competent as to become a parody of the concept, introduced herself as being part of M. Aoma Desski's team of assistants in a very gradually amalgamating Dien mask.

When I finally stood up in M-Web, still in my room, I found that the Giacomo mask had been tagged with a locator, and I answered the door to two more of M. Desski's assistants, who did bits of Giacomo scenes with me — the first individual wearing a Jill mask, the second wearing an Aalee — as I was escorted to what I took to be M. Desski's waiting suite of cars in an underground parking structure. I and the driver, another Jill, traveled silently through several further underground structures, some of which con-

tained variously modulated volumes of flowing water, before arriving to a gate for a manicured forest leading up into a building patrolled by imperial guards in curiously adorned Balt and Aalee masks at low opacity. One Aalee walked up to my window, and the driver buzzed it down.

“M. Dar?”

They wore a beautiful mask instance, but I wasn’t given an opportunity to respond.

“I am sorry to inform you that M. Desski is unable to attend today’s meeting.”

I looked around, confused, trying to convey myself with an attitude appropriate to the sick vehicle in which I was being unexpectedly carried. Beyond its outlying forest gardens, the stone and glass building rose up into the sunlight in steady chunks of increasing thickness, and I could feel that the excitement in the air, charged by M. Desski’s assistants’ gazes, which emitted from fellow amusers all, I reminded myself, was of a far less colloquial nature.

“They have asked a personal friend to

step in on their behalf. If you'll follow me, I will be happy to make the necessary introductions." They were smiling a lot.

My car door opened, so I slowly got out. This Aalee, who I eventually worked out was M. Felicity, duh :)~ walked me through grounds surprisingly leading away from the building; thinning out groups of Balts and Jills pointedly ignored us, and we eventually came to a silent clearing with an exquisitely constructed pavilion. An interface had been developed into the wood, which made me deeply unnerved — but M. Felicity smiled, so I sat down near the equipment, following their gaze.

They stepped back from the platform as I arranged myself, and they clapped their hands in front of them, stepping back again with a very sweet smile:

"Giacomo will see you now."

Giacomo turned to me in stride, and I took the hand that they had let bounce up to me open as they led me quite unexpectedly onto the water. Staggered woodblocks had been lain in a subtle path across the marsh, and, as we shifted against their sluggish turning with every step like bouncing dice, I following Giacomo until our heels clicked in unison against the glittering mineral surface which formed an irregular ring around their cottage's small island, I couldn't help but recall, with tears in my eyes surely approaching the droplet shapes of my mask's own flouncy eyes, what I had heard of the difficulty of their birth and troubled teenage years, which I had then, as now, felt related so deeply to my own, the basis, in fact, and I do mean to be honest, for choosing their local icon when I seek out a place of focus and respite away from my work. You may be interested to know that I recognized the mask that M. Felicity had offered when they unexpectedly greeted my attempt to link up with Sensu/Go as being part of an infamous expulsion episode, and needless to say I

could sense through onlookers of my mask, even those as professional as M. Desski's assistants, a high anticipation of the following scenario, drawing as it would from a face-form pulled at the crest of Giacomo's second epiphany. As if my lotto id had registered a hit, I suddenly felt sure I would use my appointment with this core Giacomo exploring that moment in their life, a moment like something I had always taken it to be — the realization of great inner peace following terrible troubles — but as the sunlight fell through cloudy checkerboards, now upon the wildflowers Elise had sown, now caught up in the web of mists developing along the odd, bumpy hills that situate their cottage, above which could already be seen the familiar tassels of greasy smoke moving in ecstatic spirals — the twinned aromas of an herbalized hot spring which sits in the easterly rock beyond the cottage, and a garlic, parsley, tomato, and fish stew no doubt — Giacomo turned to me, smiling, and I could see that my expectations were misplaced, that this beloved figure could offer

me nothing beyond their many truths, as has always been said of the figures, and as has been said of the wearers, which now includes me, who don their many masks. In truth I felt my face flush, but Giacomo laughed with friendship, a sequence I and my friends had attempted to imitate with little success, owing in part, I would learn, to the effects interfaces available to the great production houses underlying most amusers' experiences of Giacomo's essential birth, presence, and decay processes, as M. Zahn had intimated. In the here and now, it felt different.

"Don't be nervous my child; we haven't much time together. They told me you would wear a mask from my youth, but even I hadn't been prepared for such an auspicious set. Most wearers, I find, prefer the fun. Something grand, however, is on it's way for me, then, and you now, isn't it?" Giacomo winked, and brushed their forearm through the grasses along the path, sending hundreds of purple seed-heads into the air around us. "Have you tasted this

grass? It's so daisy-like." They licked pollen from their palm. "Careful though, lest you fall asleep," they said, rolling along the slanted jumbles of a flowering bush, falling into a new topography of infectious laughter.

I had stopped being so aware of myself, and could suddenly enjoy the electric excitement I had been suppressing in terror. "Giacomo," I said: "I'm speechless!"

They were balling up a bunch of flower petals, looking at me with anticipation, and I slowly recognized the exaggerated gesture as a reference to the moments which led to the very mask I wore, when Giacomo had squished the fabric of their ruined uniform together, attempting to drain it of salt water and sand. "Then laugh!" They let the petals into the air and the mass twisted around me into a billowing face, Giacomo's own, in the form of an epiphany mask!

My face, and so my mask of Giacomo, was wet with joy, and I saw Giacomo backhandspringing into the mists before the cottage footpath. I ran after them through the

smooth, soft air, and they caught my hand in a low high-five at the door, pushing open its grid of wooden sticks with their other hand.

“You’re going to do great,” they said. “Let’s have a bite to eat, then go standup paddleboarding. M. Desski has assured me that you will have much to tell me about developments in your and your colleagues’ ceramics workshop?” They paused in thought at the threshold, that classic Giacomo processing in which you can almost hear the wheels turning. “Perhaps I can even add a note to your mobile card for delivery to Talent Baby Ceramics? I believe I detected room on a hefty semisoft data structure when you entered — your firm must have many friends on New Benthos.”

They turned and picked up their pipe from the bookshelf just inside the door, and I could see Giacomo sense the question arising in me, even as my eyes had yet to adjust. “I know I shouldn’t, but I do smoke in the house now. It will come out when new masks are released to the amusers, but let’s

keep that our secret for now,” they said, winking again. “Do you like parsley and fish stew?”

I was laughing: at every posture, and at every delightful twist in their discourse. “Only if it’s heavily seasoned,” I said, quoting Elise.

This quickened their smile. “Then you’re going to love it.” :)

That night, swimming in one of New Benthos’ omnipresent natural pools, which, here, had been cut into a common area of the hotel, I was contemplating the nirvana I had recently experienced when the mobile card on my towel lit up and I saw that Naomi had texted me. They asked me to meet them at a nightclub as soon as possible, and to bring another ceramic sample in the workshop’s gel-cloth, that they had talked to a hotelier they know, and that the name was an entity they thought Talent Baby Ceramics would like to impress.

I was hyped, ;)

I called the garage from my room, and

when I arrived to the slot number (I won't articulate it, but it was not a number that made me happy — think the 'death' number, and I looked around thinking it had to be a joke) the automatic operator had communicated, a new e-bike, hot green and orange wherever blocked metal, rubber, or pastel grips gave way to panels, emerged from the polished concrete in a vertical parking block, whereupon narrow lights clicked on beneath a translucent layer in the body, which was smooth, shapely, and fattened like double ducks' breasts. I programmed the standard windscreen, rimmed with blue-in-yellow like Beth's manicure, to render a simplified city grid and told mapping the name of the nightclub, then I tied my hair off into a short pony with a green band and tucked on the helmet, which filtered out the smell of new construction sand that seems to accompany underground fluorescent lights, and a door slithered open on the far side of the garage. Drums under discordant synth drones faded up into my helmet's earbuds, piped from the card reader,

and I rolled out into the midst of a street festival, heavy with pedestrian traffic, that went all hours at the foot of the building, semi-permanent carts and pseudo-structures locked into tight arrangements along six levels of the older wooden shopping and eating labyrinths that stretched for fourteen urban units in all directions. When I wasn't dodging partiers and shoppers, some of whom placed a stray hand on the bike or, high, kissed the side of my helmet, shimmying their shoulders or jumping in place to music from the trucks, or yelling up into colder air that tried to descend past their street steam — all of which I thought maybe I'd dig into later, but didn't — the temperatures visible on amusers' exposed shoulders confirmed by instrument readings populating like temporary bows at the periphery of my HUD, I amused myself with the game of differentiating shops, which were as densely situated as the layered webs of mammalian, avian, and insectan life-webs that make of a tree its complete lifeworld, the most prestigious retail spaces clad in markings that cut

false shapes into the structured mass. Parrots and passerines popped through strata of wide-leaf foliage which seemed to emerge from every available space and, when one creature unlookingly leapt into a shadowy place, a group of others would inevitably emerge in a swarm, percolating with a sound like laughter. I was finally turned out of the district, and as I slotted my feet on the bars, the bike hummed up from the leg-kicked roll I had subjected it to for kilometers, illuminating the mist that had rolled in from one of the minor waterways found everywhere on New Benthos: a city of bridges and grates, beneath which flow water, mud, and a variety of life, none more significant than its iconic, apparently pre-historically-derived eel, the symbol beneath which city parents bear and raise their children. I went around a ring of piled rocks near the shadowy water, then onto a wide elevated freeway heading north.

Naomi hailed me from a hazy platform of steps near the edge of Club Mids as I ap-

proached on the bike, and they crossed their first and middle fingers and kissed their tips before unwinding them into a peace sign seen from the back of the hand. I pulled into a concrete slot and logged the bike, which would cycle its platform into an adjacent underground parking structure, and Naomi winked over their shoulder to me as I was exchanging my helmet for the blue and orange rope and chain-mail ceramics bag in my carry, which I then ditched for its inner-bag, feeling the gel-cloth's expensive mush take a protective form around the cup beneath. They entered through an archway crusted with pinecones the wide wooden path over water that preceded the club, so I followed them, losing sight when they passed a group jokily doing a synchronized dance I didn't recognize and entered a lightless bridgehouse gate. Throbbing industrial bass had been building as I approached, and at the gatehouse fulsome synthesizer chords emerged within an increasingly aggressive ecology of percussive scraps and hollow, rhythm-breaking slaps, waves of

dance humidity suffusing my sinuses, ears, and lungs. I passed through a long, low hallway edged with dancing bodies into a dark room with high ceilings; at the center, sudden rainwater fell through a circular puncture in the roof to an ornate mesh surrounded by the club's primary dance floor, an extensive board of thick, transparent tiles stunning with dancers and amusers making out. Under the floor, I saw, while green and orange criss-crossing laser-lights fluttered and Naomi's silhouette slipped towards me from a trio of bodies, was ocean water, mobile with ringlets and foam from the slow twirls and coils of immense and serpentine eels, tearing into large fish and crabs amidst braided weeds and coral that fingered through the clouds of guts and blood.

I now know that the pervasively-captured electroreceptive fields of these terrifying creatures, whose brains are the sole naturally occurring objects to appear in both New Benthos and its Sensu/GN, in fact provide the latter's low-level software architec-

ture with its otherworldly plasticity, and that, in M-Web, as in life itself, appearances by such eels are understood to be meaningful or to constitute events: figures themselves are understood to represent familial lines and other groupings, mythical and otherwise, of the oldest eels. At this time, however, I only knew to be awed, totally struck . . . and to heavily lose myself in the scene . . .

Later :), sweating, I followed Naomi into a hallway and they spoke for the first time, directly into my ear through cupped hands:

“Did you bring it?”

I touched the waterproof bag I had twisted the gel-cloth and ceramic in, which was tied across my shoulder and torso.

“Follow me,” they mouthed, scooping air towards themselves with their hands and theatrically panting.

We descending into a series of caverns, some of which contained groups of people unconcerned with newcomers in the dark, stepping out into a room which contained a

glass wall and low couches. At this point I could recognize the gear through its modifications — four Sensu/Go interfaces.

Naomi helped me into the gear, laughing, but as I wondered what mask the terminal was set to populate I saw an enormous green shape spiral towards the glass through silver and brown water and schools of fleeing fish, before the shadows of the space changed, and murky rock became bioluminescent regular geometries, the glass wall vanishing as a truck-like eel rolled forward and stepped down into the elaborate body of a very large figure — one I had never seen! I fell backwards onto my ass, quickly trying to press myself up on my fingers and wrists as this figure moved towards me.

“You . . . ,” someone else whispered, to my absolute surprise, interrupting the force of my vision as they unfolded a wide and slow step like a turtle from watery shadows behind the first figure: “Kelia”

I was nervously laughing. “Naomi?” But I knew it wasn’t them.

They shook their head. “You are lost.”

I scrunched into my core and pushed up my body with fear, struggling to get to the balls of my feet. This second entity wore an abnormally marred elder Dien mask, the occasion from an inscrutable episode, and a wide mushroom grew from the side of the figure's head. I was very scared, and, trippingly counting backwards on the pads of my fingers with my thumb, I immediately wished to leave; but the unknown figure who had stepped from the glass took my hand with powerful strength, looking down into my eyes. "This is my maze," they said.

I peered up into their iridescent expression, then to the approaching Dien, trying to be mutually polite, but sweat was breaking out of my and my unknown mask's pores — what I think now to have been a middle-period Balt based on the movements of my clothing's fabrics — and I quickly spoke to the mysterious figure, sensing in them, perhaps due to their tranquil demeanor, or their immense size, the innate force and connection of a powerful friendship: "Unknown amuser," I said: "Uh, can I

... be harmed in Sensu/GN?"

The figure lifted their glance up, into the ethereal space lit with algae lamps, and I thought perhaps I could sense Naomi moving beyond my line of sight as Dien crept closer. I lost myself in the moment, and they set their attention down onto my face, completely unaware, it seemed to me, of what I took to be my high-opacity mask: "Sensu/Go Network interfaces must transfer an enormous volume of information to generate and maintain an amuser's sensuous experience," they said, speaking with a unexpectedly sonorous double-voice: "An amuser's fear, therefore, should be rapidly-induced trauma-based hypnosis."

I looked with panic to Naomi's Giacomo, which expertly kickboxed into view, then appeared to be having some kind of problem or disruption, their figure mask mutating and dissolving in a manner akin to Droso's ritualistic devourment, and I considered for an instant what I would become should the earth return to liquid fire.

"Cousin," Mushroom Dien said to Gia-

como, and I tore my hand away from the large figure, who smiled stepping towards me as I tapped down and came up to myself tucked neatly onto the nightclub interface. I looked to Naomi's couch, and nearly fell to the floor scrambling backwards — a water scorpion had been partially cinched into the headset — and I turned to see a massive creature twist away into the darkness of water, but the pale flame of an explosion blew through the room's entranceway, toppling twinned statues of Elise and Suwa at swordplay, and water rapidly began to fill the chamber, stopping at my knees as I ran from fire unfurling along the roof towards the other door, which led to a series of unknown caverns, perhaps further into the nightclub's architecture. I sloshed along the rocks, tripping and slapping at the dark stone blocks that shaped the space, hearing confused and worrying shouts from the club behind me. An incredible resonance and popping ran through the stone as glass deep within the transparent wall began to visibly fissure, and eels' scream-like chirps rico-

cheted through my head. I pulled up a fellow amuser that had fallen in the dark, their clothing heavy with water, and pulled them along the walls as ambient purple and orange lights flickered through the tunnels.

“Stay with me,” I begged, as a wall of liquid hit our chests, but a bulk slammed past my hips in the water, and, as we were separated, the stranger clipped their head on the round edge of the tunnel’s stone archway, pinned against the wall by gushing fluid. I got my hand onto a ladder, a band of light falling across my eye from another level, far above, but as I went for a grip onto cloth that had balled onto their chest, their eyes came alive and they screamed, the shared water gone sickeningly hot; I watched frozen as their torso fell into the severing jaws of an eel whose mass began to flood the space, bumping me up from the water. In violent shock I kicked off its side onto the ladder and clawed up, farther, higher, as further screams issued from the nightclub’s underground, and I shouldered the grate up, panting and spitting. I

emerged into legs, tightly packed, and was pulled out into a thunderous crowd, marching to multiple live bands while whirlers and whistles shrieked out into the open air, each reveler in a baggy Giacomo mask, some heavily modified — a parade — the Fool's Masquerade. I yelled out into the space above me, seeing I was somewhere outside Club Mids, grabbing the nearest marcher by the shoulders, but was churlishly turned back into the flow by four partiers, singing out, reeking of hard liquor, and matching my incoherent energy. Behind the crowd, I could see smoke beginning to pour from Club Mids. Giacomo masks were thrust at me by further laughingly masked Giacomos, their cloth and ribbons fluttering down from low adjacent roofs, and I escaped by stumbling horizontally into a narrow enclave, pushing my way against the crowd towards an access point for the hotel's e-bike, my heart racing as the vehicle emerged from parking.

I blew my horn and revved the engine hard, squealing around a startled group

who, turning, started the panicked wave of seeing the stone and wood structures around the club complex collapse into water. I shot away, starting to cry, and as soon as I was far enough from the crowd I burned the engine's two mini-hypers back out onto the north-south freeway which curled like a strand of foam up over the area. I saw that fires were burning across the industrial zones, and tanks sped past me in the opposite direction, followed by heavy jeeps of armored soldiers. Low sirens began to sound as I swear I saw through green lightning on the ocean's horizon an impossible sight: the silhouette of our imperium's navy, which hadn't docked in New Benthos since the three years war. Two micro-jets streaked overhead, presumably scanning everything, as toxic anxiety notched my mind-guts — our glider was freely circling the island. I thumbed the visor's HUD to the mecha's informational stream, which should have been keyed into my mobile card, then realized I couldn't extrapolate it on the bike's equipment beyond

raw numbers suggesting curious activity. I was squinting as I sped back and devoured a dish of chickpea and tomatoes before taking a long hot shower. Stoned, I received assurances from the hotel and, per my visitor status in an imperial city, the government itself: "Take the night off, and relax indoors," was the primary message.

I popped back into Sensu/Go, where amusers were buzzing with the nervous energy of confusion and rumor, and I read a torus notification from representatives of the firm I was scheduled to meet in the morning, which asked that I expect an update on the location of our meeting.

Naomi wasn't responding on their mobile, and there was no more information to process, so I eventually passed out.

MEETING 3

I opened my eyes feeling quietly peaceful before dawn, finding myself carefully guiding emotions away from the startling ideas and images introducing novel centers of gravity in my mind. I had dreamt of a figure waiting for me at a finely set table, or of myself awaiting a figure, slow and playful in their approach; as I walked nearer, or they approached me, our jacket, bright like a citrus rind, bobbed into and out of view through an azure glass which the restaurant was known for.

I would be summoned, I learned, to my third contact's temporary offices in the eastern forests, where I arrived to find, to my intitially delighted surprise, the award-winning designer M. Dario Xenia themself, bustling through documents and blueprints with their team. They stopped to hail me as I approached, directing one of the partners of their firm to the spot where a set of bound papers and graphs should be set:

“M. Dar, thank you for joining us so far from our originally agreed upon place.”
Two individuals — M. Pauline Rach and

the silent M. G. Veronika, both of whom I quickly judged to be amusers, of course, in their own way — were zippering up mobile cases, and they followed M. Xenia out onto the trail to meet me. The hotel had sent me out in a jeep after early breakfast, and I had extracted a miniature quad from the vehicle's trunk for the final, gorgeous trail; but I couldn't relax. "If we really are to confirm our manufacturing agreements," they went on, not really talking to me it seemed, "why not accomplish such a deed during an excursion to our Sensu/Go Network's most sacred water castle?" They walked past me and bopped my hands, glancing over my eyes and laughing.

I didn't have a reply to such a non-question and so numbly followed the group to another building after picking up my ceramic sample from the soft dirt I had set it on, Talent Baby's precious gel-case having been destroyed or lost with any number of amusers in the chaotic violence of last night. I was tensed up, trying to maintain myself, and feeling bruises that hadn't asserted

themselves until this morning; double doors led us into a conference room.

“I understand that this will be your first Fool’s Masquerade,” said M. Rach, happily continuing the rhythmic patterns of M. Xenia’s discourse, “so you may choose, then, a second mask to pull over your true mask.”

I considered the implications, watching my hosts. “Can an amuser . . . wear two masks at once,” I settled on asking, momentarily squinting at the group’s faces with a sincerity I was made to find retroactively disturbing when they laughed at my question, M. Veronika throwing back their head to such a degree that their hair fell out of shape and had to be rearranged after they dabbed their eyes with their sleeve.

M. Xenia spoke for the group:

“M. Dar, you’ll remember that Hydro the Amuser has issued us the following three truths:

First, that a mask cannot be distinguished from a figure’s true face; at real opacity, that is, and as I hope you have already discovered, you’ll find no difference

between a mask in the Sensu/Go Net and its original instantiation as an experiencing face in an imperially distributed figural medium.

Second, that a mask can be retired, but not replaced; masks are destroyed upon removal.

And third, to answer your question, that masks cannot be stacked, of course; only one mask can be worn as an interface to our network. The ‘second mask’ M. Rach has referenced, what all amusers wear at the Fool’s Masquerade in Sensu/GN, is simply a ring mask: a baggy facsimile, that is, that will be entirely, obviously false.”

I looked to another individual who had entered without a word and was climbing onto a chair.

“Yet isn’t it true, M. Xenia,” they said, with a tone of having continued a long-simmering conversation, “that the amuser Suwa has held in its scooped mouth a fourth truth?” M. Xenia’s personal assistant M. Giorgio addressed the group, but directed their question as a statement to me,

snappily darting a single wink. “That for each of Hydro’s rules, that is, there is rumored to exist an amuser who has broken the rule, or an amuser in the future who will break it?” I did not like these amusers.

I closed my eyes and entered Sensu/Go as M. Xenia responded, their voice following me between New Benthos’ worlds, and the language foggily emerged from the mouth of a highly made-up Giacomo wearing a baggy Belicio ring mask, now sat in M. Xenia’s chair.

“There are some, M. Giorgio, who would hear in an argument like the one you offer a wholly dissident modality . . . Given recent developments, that is, and during such a significant season, shouldn’t we err on providing guests to New Benthos with the most avowed impressions?”

Although M. Xenia’s passion had sounded authentic to me, the group, with the exception of M. Veronika, who appeared to have had their fill in an Elise mask and Hydro ring mask, laughed in response, while M. Giorgio smiled with their arms

behind the back of their head in a fabulous Dien mask adorned with a baggy Giacomo ring mask, nodding to the window behind me. “Welcome, M. Dar, to our Sensu/Go Network.” Through the window, shards of light reached us from an adjacent structure: an immense water castle towering over a kind of oceanic substance that washed through its complex and ornate foundations, obviously heavy with pottery and statues that reproduced or commented on well-known pieces which would have been originally present in the vast artificer’s real world correlate. I stumbled against the window, once again losing control of the difference between my mask’s body and my own, quietly stunned and exhausted, before quickly standing again, generating a performative instant in which I could complete my intended task.

“M. Xenia,” I said loudly, consuming the room’s behavior, “Thank you for the opportunity of your presence, as well as your invitation to this most treasured feast.” I went around the group, holding each

amuser's figure's hands in turn, looking into their eyes, mask, or ring mask, three active and funny surfaces, and as I arrived back to M. Xenia I was surprised to catch a glimmer of Elise in their moon-like eyes through the sheen as they turned, their face obliterated behind their masks. I continued: "Talent Baby Ceramics will be delighted to present you with the requested work."

M. Xenia nodded, and looked to the members of their firm's board, who smiled as well, their ring masks bouncing and sliding around on their masked heads as they bobbed. "And I, or shall I say we, are presented to delight you." The room took a beat, each catching each other amuser's eye, before exploding with laughter at the expertly crafted conflation of phrases attributable to M. Xenia's true and ring mask figures, a discursive invention, for me at least, that furthermore functioned as an ironic analysis of the episode-specific events those figures could have been experiencing, but in reverse: the ring mask's apparent reference undercut by an expression the real

Belicio would have been making at the same time, and the Giacomo mask elevated by what one could imagine would be a ring mask's caricatured misreading of their experience of those events. I considered this as we exited the building and were escorted through the crowd, and I continued to consider it throughout the night, as I perceived further discursive lines through the masks of the gathered amusers, some of whom, I noticed, were among the most acclaimed designers of New Benthos, and some of whom were such intimately connected members of the imperium as to possess no reputation at all. I joined in the dancing and laughter through hours of bright, afternoon sun as the walls of the unbelievable castle shone and glittered, but as I was finding myself again willing to gather up into my senses structured memories I could exchange for laughs with my studio friends, the room began to dim and a murmur rushed through the crowd, followed by such shouting that our juke and trance music spun down to a concerning silence. Someone pushed by in

the crowd, running.

To my right, I saw a small group gather around a partier who had seemed to have had too much of something and, passing out, now apparently traded game pieces with Droso. The crowd gasped, some in confusion or nasty elation, but others, apparently sleep-gamers, though you wouldn't have guessed it, with an understanding that something was deeply wrong: Droso's play was vague; and they were losing. At the rose window of the water castle, I saw a bright, star-like form pulsate — a sculpted gift from Dien — and saw within it a Droso-like form, hovering in confused anger and being pulled apart into goo. My arms were grabbed by the amusers around me in terror and astonishment, and I saw other amusers begin to drop and undulate, foaming from their orifices.

I came to on the chaise longue I had selected, surrounded by others in M. Xenia's company who sat comfortably in their obviously fine chairs. Naomi had apparently is-

sued an external command and rapidly brushed the interface from my face and hands as they pulled me to my feet, patting my arms, waist, and jacket. I was confused. I saw M. Veronika begin to wake from the Sensu/Go Network in a physical rage, clawing at their interface's elements, and as they reached for their communications device they spit at us and issued a series of cruel admonishments, some of which arrived in New Benthos' most elite tongue, our language's harshest steed.

"Something is wrong, " I started to say, but I was frightened, stepping backwards, and I looked to Naomi, who surprised me by pressing Talent Baby's gel-cloth into my chest and arms to put both hands on the assault-rifle they had slung, I now saw, around their top, lifting it into a fine stance and accurately firing into the sputtering bodies of M. Xenia's immediate guards, each coming up to themselves in the midst of death. Shocked, I heard an instant of scuffling movement along the outside wall before Purple Citron kicked through a region

of the doors, slicing through a guard's torso with a small, curved sword as they entered, and I saw M. Veronika and M. Rach erupt into fiery vapor in a large blue beam which blinked from Purple Citron's hand; but Naomi was pulling me through a picture window by the gel-cloth I now tightly gripped out onto a roof, where I heard amusers cry out from the damaged wing of an adjacent meditation center, then down onto the surfaces of vehicles parked outside, and finally back out into the forests, where I blindly followed them through an overgrown trail descending towards the coastal water. We broke into a clearing, and I looked back at the shadowed tip of the complex, then slowed on foot as I turned to find myself among the most stunning stones, suddenly back in my body and intuiting the necessary turns through an ancient structure I knew by heart.

As I ran into sparkling splashes on the crumbling platform that lies at the real water castle's ruined center, new water rushed over its notched surface and I tripped, see-

ing in an instant that the gel-cloth's rope had been hooked on a heavy shell lifted across the massive stone altar by foaming ocean water, and that the cloth was spilling a surprising and exceptionally precious cargo out into the surf: eel eggs. I started to turn back for the bag, which slipped beneath the surface of the water, but saw our glider mecha slice from the opaque cloud of salted mist and slide onto a flat rock at the edge of the platform.

"Get in!" Naomi had already locked the drivetrain over their lap, water falling from their clothing across the panels.

The glider shot forward and elevated as soon as I had one hand on the containment seat's bar and one clog heel clicked on the under-bar's claw. I pulled myself into the co-pilot's slot with Naomi's arm hooked around my own, fighting the air. We circled up into the clouds, and a feathery light settled over our craft through the ocean's fragrant suspended droplets.

"Where are we going," I called into the glider's CIG, holding it up to my mouth like

a water bowl, and murky squiggles coursed through the viewfinder. We were light, and it occurred to me that if Naomi had trafficked equipment during our entry flight — arms, I now guessed, based on the precision of their earlier actions — it had been left on New Benthos, along with my work bags.

Naomi disconnected their visor and the coiled cord sprung back into the dash. I was ready to hear almost anything and surprised to find myself so primed. They leaned over and tapped my day-jacket's breast pocket with the back of their hand, calling out close and hot on my ear as the speedy glider swayed and shook:

“Load up Giacomo; let's find out.”

I felt the mobile card in my pocket with horror — Giacomo?

“Woo!” Naomi was screaming out into the open air with their arms up, wiggling in their seat. “Woo-Wooooo!” They playfully shoved at me, so I smiled.

I plugged the card into a simple interface that folds out from below the console keys. From a wobbly model piling into a rotating

dish of virtual clay on the dash, a bubbly small Giacomo came into being from smoking fissures, smiling, and they wore powered exo-skeletal armor over their simple cream-colored suit. They pointed at Naomi.

“Giacomo,” Naomi began, with a happy fatigue, but the glider’s pilot seat popped from its metallic fingers and Naomi, catching my eye with a bemused look of resigned terror, was ejected out over the ocean, disappearing up into a blue haze. The glider began to turn.

I looked to Giacomo with horror, who returned my gaze:

“Don’t be afraid my child.” They pointed down to the water castle, where I could see pulpy eggs breaking apart in sea foam, and dozens of eels worming from the stone platform into the open ocean water. I looked back at Giacomo, who had touched their forehead and was now shedding a single tear from each goofy eye. “Droso has been sated,” they began, but they paused with their eyes closed, listening, before addressing me anew: “But your amusers’ castle has

been destroyed.” They flashed images of fresh ruin in this most awesome structure, collapsing virtual stone amidst the bodies of brain-dead amusers in their flayed figure masks, withering and puffy, above which roiled an octakaidecagon of crushed ring-masks in a droplet of fire within Dien’s hovering sculpture, and I saw through these projections on the glider’s dash down onto the sea, where florid sun showed on the roughened surface of water how young eels had spread in different packs, drifting out like ocular spheres far from the borders of New Benthos. They disappeared into the thick, green ocean as we turned along a trajectory course set for the Sulbu coast.

“Giacomo,” I started, but finally simply laughed, which they appeared to appreciate.

“Listen very carefully to me M. Dar, and I will describe for you a special piece of pottery . . .”

I squinted my eyes and brow, and pushed my lips together tightly; they had my attention. The pots they described were

detailed, and they provided exacting numerical proportions for every curve, which I repeated, fashioning the objects in my mind, but halfway through I found tears beginning to involuntarily swell along the lipped edges of my eyes: this was a beautiful collection, and its forms spoke of the whole of our amusers' history, the depicted scenarios articulating a synthetic eschatological argument regarding an amuser's spirit which I could feel beginning to crescendo. I took furious notes in my head, tying the information to sensory data I had drawn up for use in the telling of my trip. But Giacomo suddenly slowed, and I saw them turn towards imminently turbulent clouds.

"Please continue," I said, leaning my elbows on the controls to get closer to the tiny figure.

"I," they turned to me with their foolish face, which I had observed with interest and pleasure ten thousand times, but the glider went white with an enormous flash of lightning and I felt the chain of electrical breakers through the seat padding clack like

a tail of game pieces along the length of my spine as I was jostled onto the controls. My head had slipped into the hologram, but Giacomo was frozen, and their form slid away in layers like an infinity of masks, desiccating their life-form from sensuous existence. I closed the ultralight's pressure brake, but the vehicle's systems were down, and the mecha's shuddering body went into an air-slide with the entire volume tilting. My smoking mobile card popped from its interface into my lap and, as I descended out of the clouds and saw ocean water crushing the Sulbu Coast at a great distance, I instinctively batted the molten object out over the open water, imagining the sizzling it would make as it struck waves far below. I rolled the manual/cancel bracket to the side with my hands as my energy faded, and I nosed the mecha towards what I took to be the mountain from which we had jumped. I saw the water, and I can remember my longing for the beach, not far off, as my glider sped along towards the ocean, one final memory, I guessed, of my trip to New

*Benthos, and some of my friends came to
mind . . .*

Then I opened my eyes, feeling quietly peaceful. I had stirred, it now seems, when low voices from the medical facility's television piped through my room. I had been in and out of consciousness and sleep for two days, and I soon discovered to my horrified confusion that I had been totally out of it for an additional day prior. On screen, a new production featured, to my delight and surprise, Giacomo, here welcomed on stage to receive an award. It was unclear, and I was on painkillers: They were giving a speech, something about movement and change. As they were walking away, however, and only for an instant, as they were moving their right hand back down from a wave, they seemed to casually glance over their shoulder with their first and middle fingers apparently accidentally crossing, and as they returned their head to the direction they were walking, it appeared to me that they they kissed their fingertips in passing before unwinding them into a faint peace sign which could be seen by a camera directed at the back of their hand.

An exhibition of paintings and ceramics inspired by my trip to New Benthos — excluding, naturally, any mention of Giacomo, whose designs I had carefully attributed to the group as a whole — was extraordinarily popular during the following season, with an official congratulations delivered to my hand by an imposing courier on our opening night. I sliced open the imperial crest's heavy green wax with a knife at the bar, laughing when Steph set another drink down at my wrist and widely opened their eyes with an impressed smile, a move I admire for its capacity to say it all. The imperium has always desired a production house on the continental landmass, we read, through a style of suggestive affirmation: Would Talent Baby Ceramics, with executor M. Kelia Dar elevated to Low Knight in service of an immediate imperial affiliation, serve as the kernel institution of this venture?

I peered into the chilled, pale purple bubbles encircling my glass flute like a placidly notated melody, and I looked at the

crowd of friends and ceramic readers at peace in the choral song of art, face upon face newly materializing through thick curtains hanging over the gallery's portal and smile upon smile flashing and winking in the social ebullience we had interpolated, of course terribly wishing instead to be laughing . . . until I saw a fellow amuser I thought could be my friend, and froze:

Naomi . . . , ☺

Feeling dizzy, I took a loop through my emotions, changing my mouth and brow again and again as I leaned into a new idea becoming rapidly entertained:

I didn't know how happy to be ;)