

12:12. "We will glorify war—the world's only hygiene."

There are too many dead from the new flu pandemic, and the earth-movers bring bodies by the tons. One never thinks to consider a human population in tons: the weight of geological formations, of the Huns, the Visigoths, the Million Man March, the weight of knowledge that bears down on the shoulders of Western gods.

Every hundredth body that arrives to be broken down in this Cryogenics Lab, the video monitors change lenses and take slow-motion thermal video of the sonic ruin. I must review these videos as my position requirements dictate, no matter the level of inadequacy.

This time the video runs even slower. Frame after frame I watch the still-life body of a woman become crystals in space, and I am reminded of Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Notice the fracturing of time, how the person has been smeared across the staircase; she doesn't really exist in one place at any one time, just like quantum mechanics describes the electron. *Clothed Standing until Detonation*.

I stand, walk to the room's one bare wall and press the one green button. On a tray, hot chocolate pours out into a Styrofoam cup. It's the little things, the human moments. *Bewildered Drinking His Spirits*.

12:41. "We intend to exalt aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the racer's stride, the mortal leap, the punch and the slap."

It's Tuesday. Work on the dead continues. This lab is below the world's surface and I have not seen the sun for eight months. But in this small sanctuary there is a cot and an instant hot chocolate dispenser and an over-the-shoulder sense that someone else is taking stock of the situation. The city of Drammen, the University of Oslo, Norway's President Gunvar Haldor, der Fuerher, they spare no expense for the Cryogenics Lab. I am a division of a division in Sector Quad of the Jotne/SB Verksted, additional funding provided by the ATLAS Organization—bald, birthmarked men who fear how they will die more than Death itself. They do not want their pale skin to sag off, their eyes to go agape. But I hunt Death here, I the young lion, Death in black fur and pale crosses, running before me under the violet sky ceiling, palpable and living. Death's cold sense comes from the blast chamber I monitor through the one window and into the control panel that whirrs awake in my hands. LEDs flash in coded patterns, tell the time in green, and catalog the laser's diamond cells. Every two-stage He-3 Cryostat cools radiation shields, heat switches, and the superconducting magnet system connected by OFHC thermal copper wire. All for the love of the engine. I have been culling this love for years, ever since Uni and my studies in comparative mythology, art and technology, the history of contemporary Father Italy.

From my chair, I freeze the dead and shatter their frost bones with high frequency waves, searing enough to make dogs bleed from the ears. I redistribute radiation and sound sensor orbits. I match temperature gauge readings in the WRONGSCAN handbook to Kelvins sensitivity: absolute zero. Another body comes and I take comfort when I press the "Commence to Atomize" button. The laser looks phallic. I name it ADAM. Private Ansgar, out.

10:58. "Art, in fact, can be nothing but violence, cruelty, and injustice."

By dumb waiter, meals always arrive on a wax plate with plastic forks and knives. It is always green beans, sauerkraut and pan-fried moose on Wednesdays. Fridays are surprises, but surprises imply security breaches. They use plastic because they are afraid of exposing the metal to beta particle radiation.

Today, a telegram comes on its own wax plate. The yellow paper resembles crude library cards (if there are any left in the world) and it reads: "Ansgar. Position: redundant. Humanoid Robot LIO-7 Prometheus to resume control of Cryostats for absence of error. Replacement: effective immediately." The telegram means human error—the kind is that expendable.

Your odds of dying in a fireworks discharge: 1 in 340,733; in accidental electrocution: 1 in 9,968; in an air/space incident: 1 in 5,051. By falling: 1 in 218. Suicide: 1 in 121. Down here, the odds are equal: 1 in 1. My own death is certain, and so my name is no longer vital. Names are traceable. Out.

4:17. "We intend to sing the love of danger."

Ancient life was all silence; sounds were attributed to gods. Here, the Liquid Argon and Nitrogen tanks sing to me. I do not speak, but follow the erratic strike of keyboard keys, blips on a radar module. Words in the manifestoes I read between deliveries: F. T. Marinetti, Umberto Boccioni, Giacomo Balla. And when my brain tells me my retinas are burning up the way particles do on re-entry to the atmosphere, even I, the futurist, must break down and find beauty in the speed of a pencil tip.

I take out an old E.T. lunchtin from under the counter and place it in my lap. (I salvaged it from the stiff hands of a young American lad.) Inside the tin: 4 X 4 foot sheet of high-resolution, professionally bleached paper folded into squares of 1 X 1, a Number 3 Pencil (tip sharpened with ADAM—an after-hours success), a planchette of cedar set on casters, and the forthcoming hours. Between atomization of a Ukrainian nationalist with no legs below the knees and an Indian woman whose belly is swollen with twins, I take readings from the crude wooden tool shaped like a heart. I slide the pencil down into the center hole, unfold the paper, and place the planchette on top. Even this simple machine has a sound. The cedar creaks, the uncoiled ball bearings whine, and the graphite drags.

Step 1: Close your eyes.

Step 2: Place both hands on opposite sides of the planchette.

Step 3: Receive a Question from the back of your brain and do not speak it. The medium is aware.

Step 4: Open your eyes.

I sometimes do not remember the question. Words it has provided before: "Aleph," "Nadir," "Extra Fine," and "Vituperation." I look down at the paper now and the word "Break" stares back at me. The pencil's graphite is cracked and I cannot breathe with that word in my head. Reset ultra-low-noise IF amplifiers to ultra-low DC Power. The secondary air purification system for the primary air purification system kicks on with the chug of a man choking on salt water. 76.5% Nitrogen, 22.4% Oxygen, 0.00433% Carbon Dioxide, 0.0018% Neon, 1.09387% Lime Scent. Death is domestication; someday I will die and something new will steal my carbon; "Prometheus" is the word I am inundated by in this No Man's Land. Prior to his arrival, will I program this installation

to freeze my bones and shock me into shards?

Addendum: Who else waits for technology to take their place? Do birds?

3:49. "Time and Space died yesterday."

Friday. The phrase "Abysmal Water" will not leave my mind. It glows in bright blue neon strips; electricity is a blue thing. My ears have begun to bleed on the hour, every hour, to the extent that I use my government-issued nylon sleeve to soak up the streams. Another telegram arrives by way of dumb waiter and it reads the same as the previous message, except that my position has now been downgraded to: "inadequate."

I am Sysphysian in dexterity and Dionysian in gall.

I watch the video monitors. Three are trained on the body in the blast chamber. One monitor looks on me. I cannot see my eyes and that instills a fever in me. Most dead we receive here in Drammen still have their eyeballs, and I am reminded of how I once saw the photo of a young hibakusha onto whose iris an infinite image of the Father Bomb had been burned, grafted, cut and sealed like a newly minted coin from the planchet, a coin meant to commemorate the outnumbered survivors.

7:48. "Why should we look back, when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the Impossible?"

Twenty-six separate ice ages have occurred on Earth and I am ushering in the twenty-seventh with the repeated press of a button. Today is the day I lose count of how many times I press that button and it is the same day I begin counting how many times I blink. The average man blinks at five second intervals and each blink lasts one-third of a second; the eyes are closed for four seconds every minute. I do not like that I neglect the monitors for a total of ninety-six minutes every twenty-four hours. That's ninety-six minutes during which Prometheus may arrive, and I cannot afford to even blink when he comes through the one locked door and bleeds dry what human moments are left. Prometheus, I assure you, finds a certain salvation in firm number averages. My survival is as unlikely as Heracles passing by Mount Caucasus on a second course. Prometheus is coming and he has no liver upon which I may set an eagle to devour.

I take out the lunchtin again and use the pencil's broken end to write a number on the bleached paper. The digit looks strange when made by a human hand, even one that is surely my own, so strange that I cannot discern where it sits on a number line. The Egyptians once used a decimal system of seven symbols. One is a single line. Ten is the drawing of a hobble for cattle. One hundred, coil of rope. Ten thousand, a finger. One million is the figure of a god with arms raised above his head. Perhaps I have not drawn a number here on the white paper, but rather an arm, an arm whose fingers are so tiny that they escape the sharpest eye. I crush the paper into a ball before putting it back in the lunchtin. This many-fingered god is what I imagine Prometheus to be, and man has not yet eaten god.

11:11. "A typewriter is more architectural."

The overhead fluorescent bulbs have turned off. I miss their humming that once sounded so much grander than a field of crickets. The lights in the blast chamber, the tracking stroboscopic patterns around the Argon Tanks remain on; I must continue the work. Another fine mist of ice falls to the chamber floor like snowflakes which science has discovered are not all atypical, but there must be some flaw in the prismatic rainbow that arcs across the room, a pattern which tells me more about Prometheus' arrival and my departure.

I cannot recall what letters make up my name—I will sign with three coils of rope and a dove's tail over a broken window.

Also: my ears have stopped bleeding, but that means I have finally been hemorrhaged dry. The dumb waiter dings. The third telegram I read by barium glow:

"Do not drink the hot chocolate. Continue Atomization as needed. LIO-7 en route, en masse. Prepare for transportation."

The dumb waiter door shuts and I swear laughter echoes from the ceiling, though it is only the conveyor belts' hydraulic engines high up in the facility.

The first thing I do is press the one green button on the one blank wall for a fresh Styrofoam cup of hot chocolate. This is my third since midnight. Even the most human of moments become mechanistic in sequence. I look up at the dark ceiling and drink. I have outlived a use, and it occurs to me, with hot chocolate in my mouth, that we do not have an initial use. We exist to make more exist, to one day transport ourselves away from ourselves. I swallow. I order a fourth cup.

Of special note: other definitions of "transport" that appeal to me more: to send to a penal colony overseas, or a state of overwhelming usually pleasurable emotion.

0:00. "Injustice, strong and sane, will break out radiantly in their eyes."

The lights have not turned back on and the green digital clock has reset and not begun again. A man in corduroy pants and a leather jacket torn at the shoulder stands in the focal array zone of ADAM, and I refuse to press the "Commence to Atomize" key. His clothes are too familiar to disintegrate. I'm afraid the man looks like me, pallid and hopeless, though I have not seen a mirror's reflection in over one year. At one point in his life, he too wrote down a number he did not recognize and threw it all away.

Abysmal Water. The Great Possession. The Cauldron. The Clinging.

These phrases boom through me. For the last time, I open the lunchtin and place the planchette on the control panel. I make a fist, hold it down against the wooden tool, and then raise my arm above my head and smash the heart-shaped implement into pieces.

The splinters I pull from my hand grab at the wrinkles and pull the inside out before all feeling slips away. Pain is an adaptation that keeps us alive through nerve stimulation: mildness, localization, distress, debilitation, agony. This is a good kind of hurt, a human hurt, as if more is learned about the body and soul by the reaction to acute mortality. I do not want Prometheus to find me in this injured state, so I uncrumple the wad of paper and wrap it around my hand like dressing a wound. The frozen man in the chamber assures me

that someone is definitely watching.

0:00. "We want to hymn the man at the wheel."

My own desperate mission to build a Prometheus. Fourteen Styrofoam cups stacked on top of each other to make a Styrofoam figure, the removed splinters hold the arms and antennae together, a stiff old cosmonaut. The white pile of rounded ribs glows in the dark. They make brittle bones, but bones nonetheless.

Again, I turn around to face the camera that once captured the back of my head. I pause the monitor's feed and return to the front screen: my features I can only describe as humanoid, no longer flesh and blood. The laugh lines are ninety-degree angles. The broad forehead is a solar panel. The intersection of royal nose, pencil-thin eyebrows, and ridged skull in pale crosshairs follow the limits of the Golden Mean. All beauty is mathematics, the Greeks pronounced, and all beauty has been reduced to a ratio: 1.618 to 1. The Man Alive to Dead and Frozen and Dusted: 1 to Omega. Even the dimensions of my clenching teeth are based on Phi, not even a whole digit. By fundamental laws, we are base equations, and as perfection comes at the highest price, my squinted eyes tell me the cost is not worth the vastness. I turn the monitor off, shiver in my seat, and slowly pick at the holes in my hand. This is a quiet room.

0:00. "There was nothing to make us wish for death, unless the wish to be free at last from the weight of our courage!"

The bell chimes, the door opens, the fluorescent lights turn back on. But there is no man nor humanoid nor even a complete thing:

1. scalene triangle for hat
2. blue pipe of a nose
3. a head no more than a large washer turned on its edge—the hole facing me
4. a barrel body of faded red wood and a waist carved into a bulky skirt—three holes bored through the chest like lobotomies gone awry
5. a vague avian nature to every angle—the albatross around my neck
6. this machine stands seven feet tall on one peg leg

No Golden Ratio commands this creation. I cannot look away. With two arms that have no hands, it carries a 200-watt flashlight and a green toolbox.

"Are you Prometheus?" I ask.

He says nothing. He blocks the one way out.

"Are you my replacement?"

In a motion that is anything but fluid, a mouth opens in its chest with the sound of small gears turning, this pale jaw lowering like a drawbridge at the helm of a thousand tiny fingers. The hole in its head is cold, black. Its blank stare is far worse than any frozen man's face. This, of all things, is my surrogate, and I am desperate to shrink and disappear. But instead of

reciting a preprogrammed command or a string of Euclidean distances or an inventory of spare parts and services, the chest's electrolarynx reads vibrations from its internal systems and speaks in low pitch: "Beat."

"Beat?"

"Beat." And this is all it can say. "Beat." The one phrase that booms through that head, body, and heart. Seventy-two in one minute. This is how it keeps its heart rhythm constant, and the same as counting blinks, blinking every time I count the next one. But where the number of blinks may vary in a minute, this machine's consistency is inhuman and perfect and beautiful, and I do not know whether to throw myself at its feet or slam the door on its lowered jaw.

I say, "You cannot count any faster or slower."

"Beat."

"And you have one task to fulfill."

"Beat."

"And you cannot swerve from that task."

"Beat."

I face the maker, Codename: Cloak and Dagger, and realize that the only important pattern is the lack of pattern. Not even the dumb waiter or the cups of hot chocolate fit into a meaningful sequence. The lights go off again and Prometheus turns the flashlight on. The light is jarring, as if it indicates an oncoming train, and so what Fascism did to Italy's rail system, Prometheus will do to our cryogenics facility by flashlight. Perfect time keeps my atomization process on schedule. I remember how my face looked in the video monitor, how my name is now distant, and I feel the eagle at my own liver. I babble to the idol:

"Weather balloon. Dual currents. Pitchfork. Water fountain. Caldera. Speaker magnet. Cutlass. Kanji dictionary. Hair trigger. Phase diagram. Wand. Convolution integral. Camera. Harpie. Flywheel. Tower crane. Turntable. Scylla and Charybdis. Follicle. Resonant frequency. 3/8 inch drill bit. Oslo. Carabiner. Abstract. Dynamic. Extremely transparent. Brightly colored and extremely luminous. Autonomous. Transformable. Dramatic. Volatile. Odorous. Noise-creating. Explosive."

On impulse I say these words and even then, I find myself describing Prometheus as a god. We futurists give skeleton and flesh to the invisible, the impalpable and the imperceptible. We find abstract equivalents for every element, and combine them to make our world more pleasurable. These dissimilar words, these are the human moments I've been looking for, and in this once dull white room, I find comfort in speaking because my voice is my own, still full of lifts, drops, and errors.

"Beat," says Prometheus.

"Camelia blossom. Disguise. Atomic mass," I say. Via ADAM, Prometheus and I have already scattered a thousand treasures of force, astuteness, and raw will-power; with fury, we've thrown them impatiently away, carelessly, unhesitatingly, breathless. Let it be proclaimed that the word "Norway" shall prevail over the word "Freedom." Look at us! We are still untired because we do not ever stop.