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RESEARCH ESSAY

## Rooftop Meditations

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### INT. SLEEP POD, LOBBY – NIGHT

We are in a secluded part of the lobby. Lights dim, warm, tranquil, reflected in large dark windows. In the space, an office sleeping pod stands off to the side. A pair of legs sticking out from inside the pod. Women suit pants and expensive shoes. CLERK 1 is sleeping in the pod. Her arm is visible on the armrest, but shadows render the rest of her tenebrous. A bottle of Fiji-water and a neatly folded business jacket lies on the floor next to the pod. On top of the folded jacket, a smartphone, screen black. We linger with her for an extended period of time.

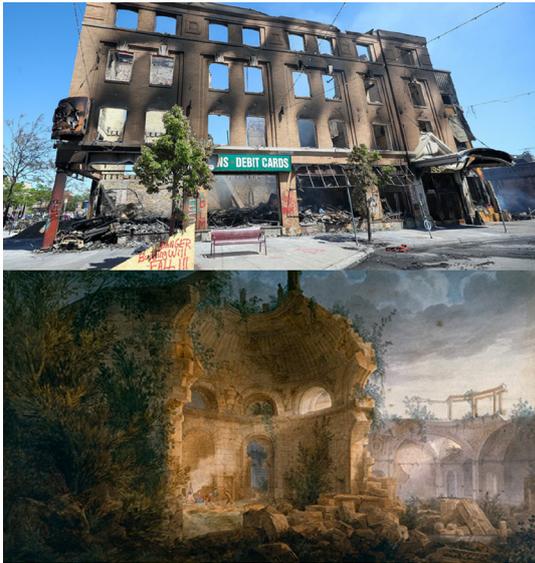
### INT. INSIDE SLEEP POD – NIGHT

CLERK 1 has her eyes closed. She is in the dark. (High ISO grain freckles the shot.) In her ear a white airpod blinks a minuscule green.

MEDITATION (V.O.): *I want us to try something else. Imagine that you are in there. Young, enthusiastic. A go-getter. You're wearing a newly pressed three-piece suit. Your hair is in that slick back comb-over. A handsome young man. You've been in it all morning. Your feet ache, you should be starving but you don't register. It has been hectic, to say the least – all day. Everybody pushed to his or her utmost limit. Trying to keep up. Clerks darting to the booths to phone in orders. Dust clouds of chalk form around the blackboards as pricing shifts. In the massive rumble of bids, you're trying to make your gestures heard. You find yourself almost inaudible through the insane chaos of waving hands and slips of paper. You raise your voice. Even louder. Until you realise that you're yelling at the top of your lungs. The crowd pushes in on the pit. The surge leads you with it in and you drop a step. Almost losing your footing. Another step down. Into the pit. It's the Jennings trading pit design of 1878, two more steps and you'll be down in the centre of the octagon depression. Someone steps on your foot. A hand pulls at your sleeve, bending your arm backwards. Nobody hears anything now. You tuck at your lapel with your right hand – signalling 'May'. Your finger on your eyebrow – 'quantity 10'. Arms raised, both hands up, palms open – 'Sell'. A paper slip, summersaults in the air in front of your face and sticks to your lips. Your breath is a panting now – like the rest of the wolfs, bulls, killer apes, lions and cougars. Your sell order is a fleck in a dust storm. Everybody's selling, and everybody's buying, nothing is pushed till May. Everything is happening now. And way too fast. Someone grips your collar, there is a tearing sound and your heels click on the steps behind you as you are dragged up. Only to be pushed back in. The stink of it. All these hormones, all this testosterone, the anxiety sweat. Someone catches your eye. Some man with a moustache. His finger on his eyebrow – yes 'ten'. His hands rising, palms away from you – 'buy'. A clerk scribbles something on a paper slip. He reaches in above the crowd, almost letting himself fall onto the crowd in the pit below him. Outstretched. Note waving between his fingertips. You reach out. You reach out for the slip. The bid. To close it. Another wave in the crowd, this time accompanied by a roar, more violent than anything you ever heard. Something just got up on the board. Something turning the pit into a frenzy. The hand with the paper slip sails away as the crowd swivels and folds in on itself. Avalanching. Someone just punched another floor broker in the face. Counterattack misses its target. Lands in the shoulder of a scalper. Now a scuffle breaks out. In the midst of ongoing bids. Faster now, the word is sell. The word is sell and ear-splitting is its roar. Where's the slip of paper? Where's the bid? Someone scratches your cheek, as he falls into the claws and bites of the pit.*

*The finger of an elderly hedger snaps as it is yanked close to your ear. You can almost feel the heat of the pain on your earlobe. A torn flap pocket, a ripped sleeve. A fountain pen spilling, smears exchanged. Who dropped their waistcoat in the middle of this? This brutish tussle. The clerk sinks into the crowd, down the centripetal eye of suction. You see the piece of paper, as he loosens his grip. You see it slip from his fingers and twirl above the crowd. Suspended in air. You see its descent into the carnivore spectacle. You jump at it, into the crowd. And you as well are instantly pulled down. All the way down. Your face flat to the floor. All the two-tone wingtip perforated lace up dress shoes coming down on you from above. I want you to know that nothing has fundamentally changed. The algorithms perform the same avalanching violent behaviour, as the pit traders on Black Thursday – the same emotionally driven erring, as they were so zestfully claimed to be exempt from. They are irrational agents despite the rational of their code. They merely act and influence each other a lot faster. And come out.*

#### INSERT – SMARTPHONE ON FOLDED BLACK FABRIC – NIGHT



#### INT. STUDIO SPACE – DAY

Something's still lost in the edit. Referring here to the edit of text documents, of course, and not the editing of video material. (Though, they seem to follow a somewhat similar work process, the two; the throwing up of sequences in succession onto a linear plane proposing a succession of ideas that together and in some order, not yet materialised, promises a coherent read, and then the fine-trimming of these sequences of time and gestures, leading to replacements, displacements, shifts, saturation or extraction, ultimately resulting in a manipulated, crafted and made up composition somewhat far removed from any initial idea and with visual stimuli, timing influences and subconsciously motivated rhythmic and tropic decisions proposing connections never actually intended.) Here in the text edit the narrative composition is still misplaced. The sequences still merely float around out there (or in here, in the text document) as island scenes not yet forming the archipelago that would constitute a coherent narrative – form an epistemic learning curve. They remain discomposed scenes taking over from one another without the digital glue of the full picture. The voice over of meditation, MEDITATION (V.O.), struggles with the identity crisis of being commentary and narrative plot driver in one and same two-tongued mouth, resembling the schizoid tongue-tied quality of the Artistic Researcher thinking through practice (or practicing through thinking?). And all the while the small rectangular handheld device on the writing desk unrelentingly "pliiings" its feed of randomly condensed absurdities from the outside world into the thickening *meme-ory* of the *feltual*. It INSERTS itself into the logic that is trying to take form. The whole thing then really reads as jump cuts, fragments and sequences piling up on a virtual cutting room floor. One of the key qualities of the horror genre is its sure embrace of a condition of topsy-turviness, the state in-between the moment where up and down is dismantled as sure concepts and the moment when they are refigured into a new horrible reality to be accepted by the experiencing body. You hold on with all your strength until you realise that what you're holding onto is actually fastened to nothing at all. Perhaps read this as horror.

## INSERT – SMART PHONE ON CHIPPED WINDOW SILL – DAY



## EXT. FINANCIAL DISTRICT, BROAD ST. 50, ENTRANCE – EVENING

The street is pretty much empty now. Occasionally a passerby descending into the Broad St. metro station. When the parasites return to their commutes this part of the city is left hollowed out carcass, haunted and eerie, gaping wound. A cable guy drags a coil of fiber optic cable behind him – left to right through the frame – putting in overtime. The entrance is still there.

MEDITATION (V.O.): *You get excited and a bit freaked out when you get there. This is not a monument or protected site that has its own brass plaque with historical facts on it. The entrance is simply left as it has been, the letters [ISLAND] engraved into the stone. You had not imagined that you would be rewarded in your search. You had pictured a non-descriptive classic office entrance – no narrative trace to write home about. But here it is. A site indeed. Vertigo from the realisation that most passersby would never recognise it as such. Just a word in stone. They wouldn't recognise it as the gateway into the brainchild of one Joshua Levine, nor the birthing place of the predatory algorithm. When did you first hear about Joshua Levine? About his company Island ECN and how he was among the very inventors of high frequency trading? How he in the mid-nineties was the first to develop a computer system that would bypass the middlemen of Wall Street and let buyer buy directly from seller – with the push of a button? Or how the Island offices were always in a state of disarray, a literal mess? And come out.*

## INSERT – SMART PHONE IN HAND, BROAD ST VISIBLE IN BACKGROUND – EVENING



## INT. BROAD ST. 50, ISLAND – DAY

The offices of *Island ECN* on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor of 50 Broad St. are, here on a normal workday in the mid-nineties, indeed a mess. Small office cubicles crammed into adjacent office spaces. Extra desks and office chairs crammed into every cubicle. Small foldable camping tables packed with PC computer towers, clogging the hallways. There is literally trash everywhere. Pizza boxes, crushed soda cans, piles of computer magazines and data books, and cables, cables everywhere. All computers interconnected by a cable mesh. All of them blinking manically – creating the sort of frantic pulse associated with working in the trading business. In a corner, a large American Iguana slumbers in a pile of discarded cables. An inflated kiddie pool accommo-

dates a group of live turtles. This place, resembling a data-mining den operating in a testosterone dormitory, houses the ultimate avant-garde of high frequency trading.

*MEDITATION (V.O.): It is a horror, not of the monster here to kill you, but rather the inevitable prospect of that death residing within you. This constant state of rebooting is killing you. You just know, in your heart, that everything will happen again. And it is the sure coming of this that fills you with horror. This is not to be confused with the imagination of things to come or grim visionary outlooks into the future. It is completely imbedded in the now. It is not concerned with what may come. Its only concern is the always-present condition of living with prospects of or anxieties about the future. That is the true political potential of horror – it is always describing an instantaneous now – the hurt of being in that moment that forewarns things to come. Be they utopic or dystopic.*

*THE DRONES ARE MAKING THE SOUND OF AMPLIFIED INSECTS*

*YOUR HEART SANK THAT TIME YOU MISTOOK THEIR BUZZING FOR DRAGONFLIES*

*It has no imagination about where a crisis may lead us. It only knows the slow death that gives the crisis a body. It sits with you, this notion that horror wants to do things with your body. Away with speculative anthropomorphism, freedom in singularity or anarcho-naturist/anarcho-primitive afterlife in the post-apocalyptic – there is only the way it feels to be experiencing this now, the way it feels to actually get to all those places. The horror of this condition. Instead of anticipating the climactic concrete moment where horror manifests itself as a physical monster to battle head on, the gaze is directed towards the extension of the horror scenario – its condition. It has to do with an emotional experience of 'the horror'. Not some horror-caricature, but really the strenuous, strange and uncomfortable nature of horror. Where the monster may evoke an idea of an event (to come), the horror in its slow unremitting advance far more takes on the characteristics of a quasi-event or, in other terms, slow death or slow harm. This continuous and ominous harm does not find its manifestation in the monster or other fable-like appropriations, but in the sensitive realm drawn up by the sense of horror. It is not strategic it is survivalist. And come out.*

INSERT – SMART PHONE ON IVORY BLACK TABLETOP SURFACE – DAY



INT. CONFERENCE CENTER RESTROOM – NIGHT

A bright marble restroom with a number of sinks, mirrors above reflecting a number of restroom stalls. The room is glossy lit and the whole scene has a porcelain feel. In the reflections of the mirrors numerous film lamps and a camera crew are visible. CLERK 3 bursts into the space. With the weight of his body he forces the door shut as he fumbles for the lock. Manages to lock the door. Out of breath he goes to the faucets, supporting himself on the marble sinks. Catching his breath. Turns on a faucet, letting the cool water run through his folded hands. He dashes his face with water. Looking into the mirror he fastens the top button of his baby blue shirt. Pauses. Auto-eye-contact.

CLERK 3: *Candyman... Candyman... Candyman... Candyman... (beat)... Candyman...*

Nothing happens. CLERK 3 grabs a towel from a rack and gently wipes his face. He digs out a set of airpods from his business jacket. Inserting them into his ears, he opens an app on the phone and a voice is heard.

MEDITATION (V.O.): *I want us to go somewhere else. Let's go to California. An amphitheater out in Monterey. Boots with singing spurs and chewing tobacco that eats away at the teeth. Six shooters and pocket watches. "A bear has been caught near the woods. A lasso noosed around every leg. From horseback dragged at full speed until he is fatigued. Now secured and tied up he is drawn in triumph to the scene of action. By this time, he is exasperated to such frenzy, that they are sometimes obliged to throw cold water on him, to moderate his fury; and dangerous would it be, for horse and rider, were he, while in this paroxysm, to break his bonds. A wild bull, of the fiercest kind, which has been caught and exasperated in the same manner, is now produced; and both animals are turned loose in the arena of the small amphitheatre." (The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, 1837) You're in the tribunes. Ecstatic. Outraged and disgusted. In awe and excitement. The Bull and Bear Fight. These two hefty creatures pitted against each other in a perverse death match that will later form the perfect allegory for the fluctuations of the financial market. The bear will strike down the market with its heavy paw, while the thrust of the bull's horns will lift the curve again. The crowd cheers. It is by now pretty obvious that the bull will win this one. Foaming from nostrils. Into brown thick fur. Thrusting forward with a hiss and a gasp and a moan. The dark red turns black in the tangly hair. The bear lunging in, its paw shoving through the air. Whoosh. The claws again digging deep into the pelt – into the spine. But the left horn of the bull is buried deep into the bear's gut now. Its curvature a barb. Not letting go. Only works its way in, deeper. Every throw of its massive head moving the spike of bone and keratinized skin further up through muscle tissues. Perforation of the abdomen. Blood turning runny. A ghastly smell. The bear launches a final attack. The opaque black glass of the bull's eye gives away, as the claw hooks the skull cavity of the eye socket. The orbit ripped as bone fractures. A bellow escapes the bull. Relinquishing its gravity for a moment – fluids pouring out. The fur a dark clot. Another paw jammed into the temple. The skull threatening to give. Hind legs scuffling in the dirt. Last lift. The bull presses on. Upwards. Ascent. Rise. Upturn. A drowning howl. The bear sunk. Its tongue melted and paper-thin. Draped across the teeth. The market will rise again. And come out.*

INSERT – SMART PHONE ON SINK, CORNER PROTRUDES OVER THE EDGE – NIGHT



EXT. MOUNTAINSIDE, FOREST – DAY

JOSHUA LEVINE is climbing an adverse incline. His suit pants tangled in the scrub. The trees close in around him and he must use his hands to scale large rocks. His business suit is pristine and he is wearing a motor helmet, opaque visor pulled down. He gets to the top of the incline and is out in a clearing. Helmet still on, he walks on a trail gnawed into the rock. He is at a viewpoint now, the city of Bergen stretching out below him. As he moves to the edge of the cliffs a CGI-rendered blue rectangular shape comes into view forming an augmented platform extending the mountain plateau.

*MEDITATION (V.O.): You find him again. And you get kinda obsessed with him, you know Joshua Levine. The fact that he never wanted to be CEO of Island ECN, his weird shorts and Hawaii shirt dress code. How he started out wanting to free information, give autonomy to the people, and how the algorithms surpassed his wildest dreams, and created a predatory life of their own. And how he disappeared in history, never really credited for the monster he had created. He was the spearhead of the kings of plumbers, those that understand to bank on the very plumbing facilitating the transaction of the stock rather than the stock it self. And it was from the very offices of Island ECN that high frequency trading was conceived, leaving its distinct mark on the future of economics. A new form of trading outmanoeuvring human faculty, the speed of every micro transaction weaving ever-new threads in an opaque unstable neuro-network of hyper-connected currents. Where traders used to shape their practice according to the market, the traders would now shape the markets themselves. You find him online. An old blog of his from when his first text-based front-in The Watcher was already changing the rules of the trading game. The blog intrigues you. It is an eerie site if there ever was one. Strangely void of content. You almost can't find any images of Josh out there. He is a ghost really, profoundly anonymous given his impact on the business. You don't remember how but you manage to find a second, active, blog. And when you realise, that this blog is indeed the blog of one Joshua Levine, founder of Island ECN, your obsession only grows. You learn that he still exists, out there. No figure from some deep cut research into history. He is actually there. Breathing still, sharing his ideas. It changes everything. Your relationship is not a one-way exploitation, now you are accomplishes, even if Joshua still does not know. That he will be entering you. That you will form this troubled monstrosity together. This weird body. In one post on February 11, 2018, Joshua Levine writes: 'Roller coaster meets skydiving meets white water rafting down the grand canyon. I've been dreaming of jumping off the top of the Grace Building since I was a little kid. It always seemed like the curve would catch me like the hand of god. I'd love to build a giant stainless steel parabolic curve. Really giant, like hundreds of feet tall. The curve would be vertical at the top, gently becoming horizontal by the bottom. It would "catch" you by directing your downward motion into forward motion. At the top you would be in free-fall, at the bottom you'd be on the fastest county fair slide ever. The joints of the panels would be stainless steel and lapped like roof shingles. [...] Everyone would wear a full coverage Tyvek suit and a motorcycle helmet so no part of you would ever touch the surface. Ideally, you would want to build this against the face of an existing cliff. It would be wide enough that lots of people could all use it at the same time [...] At the top, you would run as fast as you wanted to, towards the edge... and jump off into oblivion. Besides the thrill of repeatedly jumping off a cliff without a parachute, I think this monumental gleaming mirrored curve in the middle of a landscape would be a thrilling spectacle just to look at!' A 3D sketch of the giant steel parabolic curve is included in Joshua's blog post. A small inserted figure stands a top a large blue sloping 3D shape. A gradient tool attempts at the illusion of the vertical slope curving out into the horizontal. The blue shape is moulded onto a straight box, surface covered with a texture pattern the dusty color of sand, uniform and repeating as floor vinyl. This cubic representation of the natural landscape resonates with the synthetic quality of the fantasy it self. This would be how Smithson would have sketched his land artwork "Asphalt Run", had he owned amateur 3D sketching software. And come out.*

INSERT – SMART PHONE IN MOSS ON ROCK FORMATION – DAY



EXT. ROOFTOPS WALL ST. (MONTAGE) – DAY/NIGHT

Conclusions absent we're served with a montage sequence of those cinematic Hollywood money-shots of white-collar workers standing on the ledge, necktie dancing in the wind, contemplating the jump – a cultural trope really, undoubtedly holding a space in our collective imaginary. A collective visual imaginary, romantic to the point that it almost seems as if the banker suicide holds a kind of honourable reverence.

MEDITATION (V.O.): *We are heading to the roof, that's at least where we were meant to go. When these things used to take hold of us that is where we used to go. To the roofs, to the window ledges, to the bridges and riverbeds. To jump. And come out.*

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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