

Omniscience

pitch end excerpt translated from French by André Ourednik

« At the end of the century, they created Omniscience: a basin of liquid data; made up of atoms of facts. Those who wish to remember dive in, connect atoms and weave their memorial threads. Some people remain at the bottom of Omniscience. »

The setting of Omniscience is situated in a near future, in which all written human knowledge is stored in a data lake materialized in a pool of liquid memory called “omniscience”. Specialized divers explore the pool, employed by a ministry, evocative of Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* or Kafka’s tribunals adapted to the taste of New Public Management. The divers’ role is to weave narrative threads in the pool, using Turing-machine like reading/writing devices. But from the onset, narrative threads of former divers, classified under the archive file E#26, raise questions of existential order.

By following the parallel stories of a dozen characters, Omniscience explores the very current issue of data, their future and their involvement in the constitution of individual and collective memory. Punctuated with striking scenes and carried by a writing nourished with references and symbols, this text questions individualism and offers a portrait of the civilization of data.

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1. A flaw in the diving suit

[Goan Si, Laje Com]

Omniscience was still infiltrating through a joint of the suit. He could feel the naughty one. It was running down his spine. Sending back flashes of his sister sitting in a white room, her green eyes staring at him. Guilty of something, the sister; what, he could not tell. The image only flashed in a loop: her look and the clean room. He was following the thread. The operator's voice crackled in Goan Si's earpiece with the tone of a breaking news announcement from the afterlife.

– So what about this E#26?

– It's going well, Laje Com, I'm following the thread.

He was aware that she was recording. Mentioning the flaw was out of the question; he needed time to understand more about it. The *OfMem* loathed direct contacts between divers and Omniscience. He knew they wouldn't hesitate to organize a reframing committee for him alone if they became aware of it; even to transfer him.

– How's your suit, Goan Si?

– I'm fine.

– Report any contact with the Medium. You know that the authorities are watching.

– It's a fact.

– I know you know it, she said.

Goan Si knew.

Goan Si's name wasn't Goan Si but Ancel Gompo, from the "Service of Immersions". They've fabricated his function name by combining the first letters of his real name and those of his unit. They called this a *uanid*, which meant *unique anonymous identifier* to the nerds but just "youneed" for the overwhelming majority of those who forgot

the meaning of the acronym. In the old databases, already, table rows were numbered with such identifiers. Information contained in each row could be retrieved and connected to data from other tables. Thanks to his *uanid*, now, anyone could become a servile bag of data, ready to open on request. Some appreciated that – it relieved them of responsibility for their own content.

Everyone had a *uanid* in the Office of Memory. Some called the place just “Memory”, which was more classy and easier to pronounce. Others insisted on calling it *OfMem*. Real tensions arose from the question of use of either this or that term in public, but not only: some would insist on saying *OfMem* everywhere, even in the intimacy of the office’s walls. Goan Si had laughed about it when he entered his functions. After a month, he found out that they were serious. Many intended to dedicate their lives to the official nomenclature of the tribe of civil servants and to its God, the time clock, and regarded this aspiration as a universal one. The newcomers resisted at first; defiant or pouting during the introductory tour of the sections and services, convinced that they would make the difference. Later, realizing that they would not, they gave way to dreams of giving up everything and becoming musicians or osteopaths. At that point, they still persisted at greeting others with their human names.

Then, as time went on, they ended up calling each other by these *uanids*, even as they were talking in the corridors, even when they touched each other in the secrets of the old stores, in a constant environment of sixteen degrees Celsius and 30% humidity.

Laje Com’ name, for example, was not Laje Com but Jessica Landberg, from the Internal Communication. She loved the rows of Compactus brand mobile shelves, discovered during a guided tour where her department was invited and about which she had been thinking ever since, while facing her computer monitor. She depicted the triple

handles on the sides of the shelves, spinning in the darkness, opening and closing corridors of facts, driven by invisible hands of desire. She imagined Laje Com's body, that is, her own body in the absolute abstraction of her administrative function, compressed against Goan Si's body, compressed and crushed between shelves, bare-chested on Goan Si's chest, pressed and flattened to the point of suffocation, to the apotheosis of the painful fusion and finally the archiving of their skins in the Compactus, now hermetically sealed like a romantic sarcophagus because imagined, by Laje Com, in the pathos of eternity. Jessica Landberg, for her part, lived with her husband and their precocious blond twins, in a dormitory town forty minutes away by train from Memory. Many envied her for living there. The impassive surface of a suburban lake reflected the smoke of barbecues and deckchairs, narrow gravel streets, rows of yew trees and country flags hanging along with the masts. In the mirror of this lake, dark mirages and islands of black fantasies inevitably formed after dark. Jessica Landberg wouldn't have been able to explain to anyone the appeal of compacted death, but she thought about it several times a week, with varying partners: sometimes Goan Si, sometimes others, preferably divers, whom she depicted sweating in their suits at the bottom of Omniscience. All were unaware of their morbid hobbies in the mind of Laje Com. She never imagined her husband in the mobile shelves, on the other hand; the darkness of this destiny was reserved for her co-workers. The profession, where Jessica Landberg became Laje Com each working day, was the perfect counterpart; it made possible the bright family life on the edge of the lake, whose light was fed, precisely, by the income generated by her internal communication tasks. In other words, salaried work not only provided for the needs of light; it also sponged away the gloomy ideas.

The Medium was shining blue around Goan Si, crossed by sporadic flashes of lightning that caused scientific controversy in the memorial circles. Some compared them to the electrical signals that propagate between neurons along axons. From their point of view, the whole basin thought, that is, thought *itself* and, in doing so, thought the universe.

The E#26 thread stopped again. Goan Si checked the fixation of the reading head. He attached the tracking beacon to the end of the thread. He lit the light, swam downwards about ten meters, and turned around to check that the beacon was still blinking. Gusts of red light illuminated the misty indigo of the Medium and marked his point of return:

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More than two hundred meters above, near the ceiling of the pool, was flashing the exit beacon:

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Behind the double doors of the immersion chamber, on the upper floors of the old building, awaited the furniture of white plywood panels held by twisted stainless steel tubes and colleagues arranged in seated or standing positions in various working sessions. Goan Si checked the time. A drooling halo of pixels displayed on the visor of his suit reminded him of the external reality in a: “5°C, 10:05”. By now, individuals with ready smiles were certainly rushing through the corridors above, motivating their fellow men to take the morning break. Others were already outside, perhaps, chanting the immortal mantra of train delays and mortgage prices. Goan Si closed his eyes.

He thought of the weaver of E#26 who never came back from his dive. Without leaving anything behind, not even his *uanid*, he had woven this thread and then disappeared into the alveoli of the porous structure somewhere below, in those depths of which no one

had a map. They ended up calling him by the name of his thread:
E#26.

It came to Goan Si that a secret exit was perhaps hiding in a dead end of Omniscience. E#26 had destroyed his identity papers, erased all files containing his name, or swapped *uanids* with many others. They found the sheets of his binders replaced by unrelated newspaper clippings, user manuals of domestic appliances and advertising brochures.

- What are you actually looking for? sizzled the earpiece.
- We're reconstructing the recordings of the first divers, Laje Com.
- Is that the E#26 file they talked about at the morning session?
- E#26 is one of the files, so only one diver, at least in principle.
- How, in principle?
- Maybe there are several authors of the same thread, that's what we're trying to find out.
- Is he dead?
- Maybe.
- What do you mean?
- He's disappeared.
- Nothing goes missing with us!
- *He* did; a stroke of genius.
- Is that why you're patching up?
- I don't know, Laje Com. The orders come from above. I just dive and patch.
- Is it difficult?
- It's unusual.
- In what way?
- Well, normally, each thread is signed by its weaver, right? We get a mandate, sometimes funding if the client is a private company; I'm asked to dive and that's what I do. I signed B2#32, for instance: the Customs Office wanted a summary of the relationship between our

government and Libya during the Maghreb cyberwar. Our response translated into two hundred threads that cross paths and form a network. But each thread of the B2 series has its weaver: Aber Si for B2#1 to 17, Wisa Si for 18 to 29, me for 30 to 51, etc. But no one knows the weavers of the “E” series.

– What you’re telling me is that someone created these folders without saving the name of the weaver?

– Yep.

– But the order form doesn’t allow you to leave empty fields when you save it to Mercury! The computer won’t let you.

– They didn’t bother to fill out forms, Laje Com. As far as I know, there was no order, no warrant, nothing. They’ve just dived in and made threads.

– That’s impossible!

– But likely.

– Oh, my God! They probably had problems after that. (Let us specify that Laje Come feared *problems*, these undefined plural perils. She saw them as hydras advancing in the fog, endowed with a formidable sense of smell; depending on the mood of the problems, their many faces borrowed from the heads of the schoolmasters, the president of the country, random superiors, her aunt, Godzilla, or talk-show hosts. Goan Si appreciated Laje Com’s to some extent, but he had no doubts that she would denounce him, denounce anyone out of fear of *problems*.)

– Let’s say that the divers of the “E” series followed their own whims, he explained. Out of a desire to test the potential of the Medium or just to take a bath, what do I know! It gives you random threads. In two meters, you jump in a completely different narrative, apparently disconnected from the starting point. Did you know they only wore simple rubber suits and oxygen masks?

He couldn't hear if Laje Com did because a rivulet of Omniscience ran down his back and a new flash of foreign memory invaded his mind. Fish, this time, with long mouths similar to electrical pliers, with grey and black striped bodies; Precambrian beings; living fossils engaged in this choreography of the primordial ocean where nothing had yet been decided. They were swimming back and forth by spasms in salt water.

- Goan Si? Are you all right, Goan Si?

- Yes, I'm fine. Say, Laje Com, I need to focus on the thread.

- All right, Goan Si.

Twenty meters below, the thread drowned in a tangle of caves and cells, twisted corridors and dead ends. The pool's bottom looked like a gigantic sponge of poured concrete, set in cold oil, with grey and smooth walls. Goan Si dived into the first corridor and a series of images ran through his mind:

> marauding morays,

> memory worms,

> the blackout monster whose scales are as many mirrors and the stomach a black hole,

> the whale that swallows Jonah to spit him out on the riverbanks of Nineveh.

A warning light appeared on the visor; he was breathing too fast.

With only 30% of oxygen left in the tank. He grabbed hold of the narrative thread by instinct, in search of guidance. He preferred not to think about how he could deal with its interruption over several meters? Or if it just stopped!

Right now, it was branching off.

And again.

He progressed with apprehension, accompanied by the humming of the small motor of the reading head. Other threads waved nearby moved by the flows of Omniscience; their serial numbers ran in

light-blue letters across the visor of the suit. H3#5 and H3#8 crossed HX#25 and continued in a straight line, carrying its discourse from some end of the pool to another. A video interpretation of the current section of E#26 displayed in front of Goan Si's left eye. The headset emitted frequencies mixed with sounds impossible to attribute to either living beings or machines. Thicker and thicker red and yellow lines disturbed the image. The narrative seemed encrypted. Then an image formed again. Goan Si switched to full-screen view. He increased the volume of the earpiece and the intensity of the current running through electrodes stuck to his skin. Total immersion. The exit beacon was out of sight.

2. Second life

[E#26]

You wander, shy, in an abandoned bubble of the noosphere.
Anonymous people erected these brilliant facades. These palm trees.
These pink waterfalls. These storefronts, never closed, that line up
on Main Street and sell polyhedra. Second Life is a persistent space:
if you leave Second Life, Second Life remains. Messages on
advertising boards flash in several languages for all to understand;
each one his own. A hundred avatars are progressing under a slimy
sky, without leaving a trace in the dust of pixels.

You dare not say anything to anyone, hidden away from the image
you made of yourself like anyone else, slightly taller, with finer
features – confused coquetry of sexual beings in front of their fellow
creatures. At times, their frozen faces at the end of their heads turn
in your direction. The wind of an equation raises the residue of a
package.

Who is there? Who's drifting?

Who's rambling?

Who animates the bodies?

Are there ghosts in the shells?

You're looking for looks behind the pupils.

A green-haired woman addresses you; she introduces herself as
Eliza; you suspect her of being a chatbot. You're talking about this
ghost town, now, about this non-place of your dreams. She wonders
what Gaia had planned for the human species.

– All creatures serve a purpose, she says. Bacteria have made the
atmosphere. For a while, I thought we were here to warm it up, you
know, to protect life from the next glaciation. Now, I think that

we're more of some... great translator: life is too fragile with its bodies of carbon and amino acids. For that, we translate it into metal structures that shall survive on their journey through the interstellar void.

You live together on a motherboard, in a memory allocation on a virtual server. Your neighbours: a million porn shorts in MP4 format and invoices of an insurance company. Across the river of the flowers, the Instagram profile of a teenager sorely missed by her family and friends. You take a few steps back.

There you go! You just walked through a human, didn't you? Walked right through him like through a mirage. You were expecting *something else*, you say?

Don't cry, now, there's no thirst here.